

THE SON OF MAN DEBATE AND THE TRANSLATION OF *HO HUIOS TOU ANTHRŌPOU* (THE SON OF MAN) IN IGBO BIBLES

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Abstract

The Son of Man is an important Christological Title. The debate around this expression in the New Testament centers mainly on its meaning in its self-attributive use by Jesus. I contend that one of the principal meanings of this title relates to the vulnerability and humanness of the one it refers to. Igbo language has an expression quite close to this idea and that expression was largely ignored in its translation in Igbo Bibles. I make a different proposal regarding its translation in this paper. I shall trace the basic outline of the Son of Man debate in the New Testament in order to underline the Christological questions involved in the debate. My choice of a Christological import of the expression will inform the choice I make of the Igbo expression 'nwa mmadu' as a translation of the Greek expression 'ho huios tou anthrōpou'. My conclusions will also include a recommendation of greater attention to the original languages in local Biblical translations.

Keywords: The Son of Man, *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, *ben- 'ādām*, *nwa nke mmadu*, *nwa mmadu*

1. Introduction

As more and more Africans are becoming trained in Biblical studies and now have access to Biblical original languages, attention must continually be focused on the finer details of Biblical translations in order to render the word of God more accessible to its people. Subtle semantic issues in the process of interpretation should no longer be considered interpretatively banal for African interpreters who now, mostly have the theoretical resource to deal with them. This article focuses on an aspect of Biblical interpretation in an African language: Igbo. The issue is eminently specific to the expression *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, Son of Man (henceforth SM) in English. Its interpretation in

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Igbo could have an implication for the way the local speakers of this language comprehend the Christology inherent in the expression.

This title SM is an important Christological title of the New Testament (NT henceforth). Its importance relates to the Christological weight of the title in its self-attributive use by Jesus. I find its current translation in Igbo *Nwa nke Mmadu* defective because the translation does little credit to Igbo language which already contains a semantic vehicle that captures the Christological import of the expression when rendered correctly.² I shall propose the expression *Nwa Mmadu* as a better translation because it sits more at home with the linguistic universe of the language and further renders the Christological aspects of the expression more accessible in this local language. The article shall begin with an examination of the SM debate because it is necessary to establish the Christological breadth of the expression and to decide which of them appears more likely as an idea contained in Jesus' self-attributive use of the title. I shall, in the second part of the article, explain why Igbo language contains linguistic resources that could help in the translation and how the current translation in Igbo Bibles does not reflect this.

2. The SM Debate in the New Testament

The title SM is the only Christological title that Jesus used to designate himself. The use of this title is so frequent and profuse in the Gospels and in the mouth of Jesus, that there could be little doubt regarding its authenticity as an *ipsissima verba*. Of the 82 verses where the expression SM occurs in the New Testament, only three of those cases occur outside the Gospels (Acts 7:56; Rev 1:13; 14:14). The remaining 79 cases are all contained in the Gospel and most of the time in Jesus' self-designation. The frequency of this title naturally makes it a theme of interest for Biblical interpreters whose interests range from its meaning as a Semitic idiom to its application and use by Jesus as a Christological title. The SM debate has raged for decades and scholars are far from a consensus.³

² See instances of SM translation for instance in *Baibul Nso* (Africana Fep Publishers, 2006) considered among the latest Igbo Catholic translations.

³ For a general outline of the views regarding SM's application to Jesus see Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 107; Cambridge: Cambridge

Delbert Burkett broke the different views down to three fundamental classes: (a). genealogical interpretations, (b). The SM as a reference to Jesus' Humanity, (c). The SM as an apocalyptic and Messianic reference to the person of Jesus. In what follows, I shall give an overview of these arguments with the merits and the weaknesses that relate to each.⁴

Genealogical Interpretation of "the SM"

The Genealogical interpretation represents one of the earliest views of SM in reference to the person of Jesus. The basic thesis of this view is that the expression simply means what it says: Jesus is the son of a person. There are basically two different understandings of the genealogical interpretation of SM: one which viewed the genealogical reference to a god and another that viewed this reference to a human person. In the early centuries of Christianity, the former had generally circulated most frequently in gnostic circles. According to Delbert Burkett, "in certain Gnostic sects, such as the Ophites and Valentinians, "Anthropos" (man) was the name of an "aeon" or god.⁵...in various Gnostic writings, a second god emanated from this first man. This second god is identified as Christ and designated SM, i.e. son of the god Anthropos".⁶ Therefore the Gnostics understood "Man" in the expression SM as a reference to a god rather than a human person. Hence, in saying SM, Jesus was identifying himself as divine.

The Gnostic stress on the divinity of Jesus morphs into an emphasis on his humanity in Patristic authors whose genealogical interpretation prefers to see "SM" as a reference to Jesus' humanity, expressed in the notion that he was engendered by a human parent. This interpretation is

University Press, 2003); Walter Winks, *Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); Frederick Bosch, *The Son of Man in Myth and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1967).

⁴ This overview is a sketch summary of a debate which is much wider than what is presented here. The sketchy breath of presentation here serves the purpose of this article which is rather focused on the SM translation in Igbo.

⁵ On this see Hans-Heinrich Schenke, *Der Gott "Mensch" in der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoech & Ruprecht, 1962); Frederick Borsch, *The Christian and Gnostic Son of Man* (London: SCM, 1970), 58-121.

⁶ Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate*, 6.

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found as early as in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, Tertullian and Irenaeus etc.⁷ This interpretation, in most patristic authors referred “Man” to Mary the mother of Jesus, since the word *anthrōpos* is generic in Greek. This interpretation continued down to the Middle Ages and even the Reformation.⁸ Following the criticism of Erasmus who noted that the Greek expression stressed that Jesus was the son of Adam par-excellence, authors immediately after the reformation claimed that this expression referred to Jesus as the son of Old Testament (henceforth OT) Jewish patriarchs and figures. Others had also identified the genealogical import of the expression as referring to Joseph.⁹

Assessment of Interpretation

These genealogical arguments keyed into the theological debates of the period regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus. The arguments are not fed by a serious desire to understand the linguistic and historical background of the expression as a Semitic idiom or linguistic feature. However, the Christology of the period needed to be fed by a profound understanding of the linguistic and historical roots of the expression. The genealogical arguments placed the linguistic and historical import of SM at the service of Christological assumptions about Jesus, instead of the other way round. The danger with this method is to interpret the

⁷. See Ignatius of Antioch. *Epistle to the Ephesians* 20.2. Also see *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100. Similar arguments have also been postulated by Isidore of Pelusium, *Catena at Matt* 16.13; Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations*, 30. See this in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations*, ed., Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954).

⁸. Ammonius Saccas, *Catena on John* 1.51 in *Johannes-Kommentare aus der Griechischen Kirche*, ed. J. Reuss, (TU 89; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966), question 55; Ambrose, *Ennarratio in Psalmum* 39, MPL 14.1115D; For the period of Reformation see for example Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol 23: *Sermons on the Gospel of St John*, Chapters 6–8, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St Louis: Concordia 1959). The interpretation of “SM” as a reference to Mary was however, criticized during the Reformation by Erasmus of Rotterdam. See Erasmus Desiderius, *Novum testamentum, cui in hac editione, subjectae sunt singulis paginis adnotationes*, In vol. 6 of *Opera omnia* (Lugduni-Bavorum: Vander, 1705).

⁹. Pseudo Justin, *Quaestionum et responsionum ad orthodoxos*, Quaest. 66. See in Wessel Scholten, 155-156.

expression out of context. No serious inquiry into the use of this Greek expression is possible without a recognition of the extensive occurrence of its Hebrew and Aramaic versions in the OT: *ben-'āḏām* and *bar'ēnāš* respectively. Genealogical interpretations of SM fell out of favor because it failed to underscore the underlying Semitic import of an expression which appears in the New Testament as *ho huīos tou anthrōpou*. Moreover, a simpler but logical criticism of genealogical interpretation was proposed by Scholten in 1809.¹⁰ It is to question why Jesus would so frequently emphasize that he was born of a human being when none of his hearers had any doubt of this?

The “SM” as the Apocalyptic Messiah

The interpretation of SM from the apocalyptic/messianic perspective represents one of the attempts to link the use of this expression by Jesus to its occurrence in the OT.¹¹ Scholars have long identified Daniel 7:13 as significant in understanding its use by Jesus in the NT. A few texts from the Synoptic Gospels contain striking parallels with Daniel 7:13. Mark 13:26 (also cf. Matt 24:30; Luke 21:27) speaks of SM who will be seen coming in clouds with great power and glory. This is reminiscent of the notice in Dan 7:13 which speaks of one “like a SM” (כְּבָר אֲנָשׁ: *kēbar 'ēnāš*), coming to the Ancient of Days on the clouds of heaven. According to Burkett, Jewish interpreters close to the time of Jesus identifies the Danielic figure as the Messiah.¹² It is quite plausible that NT authors followed a trend of interpretation among their Jewish peers in identifying the Danielic SM as Jesus whom they see as the Messiah. In

¹⁰ Wessel Scholten, *Specimen hermeneutico-theologicum: De appellatione τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, qua Jesus se Messiam professus est. Trajecti ad Rhenum* (Paddenburg & Schoonhoven, 1809).

¹¹ Oscar Cullmann was among the earliest to have reflected on the SM as pointing either to Jesus' earthly working. See Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, transl. S. G. Guthere – C. A. M. Hall, (London, 1971), 155-164. Also see Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man*, (Minneapolis, 2002), 63; J. Borg, “From Galilean Jew to the Face of God: The Pre-Easter and Post-Easter Jesus”, in *Jesus at 2000*, ed. Idem (Boulder: CO, 1997), 7-20.

¹² Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate*, 23.

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the early period of Christianity, this interpretation of the SM in relation to Jesus is already present in some Church Fathers.¹³

Again, while Dan 7:13 acts as a principal OT witness to the SM as an apocalyptic messiah, there are other extra-biblical texts that appear to support the figure of the SM as an apocalyptic figure. In 1 Enoch, Enoch sees a human figure in heaven who is identified as “the SM to whom belongs righteousness” (1 Enoch 46:3). Other apocalyptic images are also associated to this SM which links the figure to the Spirit of wisdom, creation and God’s (heavenly) throne. In 4 Ezra 13, Ezra reports of a dream in which a human figure ascends from the seas and flies with the clouds of heaven.¹⁴ Though 4 Ezra is dated to the end of the first century CE, it may not directly be significant for a SM debate relating to Jesus since the NT text were composed in the first century. It might, however, suggest that there may have been a tradition linking the SM to the celestial realm, that is, if we assume that 4 Ezra is itself not influenced by the NT tradition.

Assessment of Interpretation

The Apocalyptic import of the expression “SM” is extensive in NT.¹⁵ Its extensiveness may suggest that it relates to Jesus’ self-understanding. However, it also appears that the apocalyptic use of this expression in the NT could be a later interpretation of Jesus’ messianism when Christian theology has developed firm Christological positions on Jesus as the divine Son of God. Any one of these is entirely possible. There is however, another extensive use of this expression which does not appear to be the fruit of Christological reflections relating to Jesus’ divinity. We shall consider that in what follows.

¹³. Tertullian, Adv. Marc. 4:10 (ANF 3.359). Also, *De Carne Christi* 15 (ANF 3.534). Interpreters of the period view the figure of Daniel as the pre-existent Logos or Christ.

¹⁴. Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate*, 22.

¹⁵ Cf. Matt 16:27; 19:28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; Mark 13:26; 14:26; Luke 12:40; 17:24, 26; 18:8; 21:27; 22:69. Many occurrences of the SM in John’s Gospel is also of the apocalyptic type.

The Vulnerable Human SM

One of the most significant occurrences of SM in the Gospel is in contexts of Jesus' announcement of his passion or positions of vulnerability as a human person.¹⁶ This links the title SM to an emphasis on those attributes which Jesus shares in common with the rest of humanity. This interpretation represents another effort to recognize an underlying Semitic idiom in the expression *ho huïos tou anthrōpou*. Some think of this sort of interpretation as referring to Jesus' earthly work as different from passages where SM is used as a way of exaltation for his person.¹⁷

Assessment of human SM

Burkett believes the interpretation of the human SM failed because it made the title superfluous: Jesus had no need to emphasize his simple humanity, since it would have been apparent to all. However, this reasoning plucks this title away from a possible Semitic background where what is assumed to be a title would have been a linguistic category that relates to the vulnerability of its user or referent. Moreover, when we say that it refers to the humanity of Jesus, we must not assume a self-conscious decision on the part of Jesus to designate himself a human person in a way which is separate from a linguistic-cultural context. The humanity expressed in SM comes from an inherent semantic value embedded in the language, and not from a self-conscious decision by Jesus to create a new linguistic category of self-designation. There is a cultural logic – which is by far not superfluous as Burkett prefers to believe – of expressing humanity through SM which Jesus taps into. This idea is apparent in some OT texts. For example, many biblical interpretations render Ezekiel's *ben-’ādām* simply as “mortal!”¹⁸ Jesus'

¹⁶ cf. Matt 12:40; 17:9, 12, 22; 20:18, 28; 26:24, 45; Mark 9:12, 30; 10:33; 10:45; 14:21, 41; Luke 9:43; 9:57; 22:48.

¹⁷ Oscar Cullman, *Christology*, 155-164. Also see J. Borg, *From Galilean Jew*, 63. Andries Van Aarde makes this distinction with his coinage; the Little Tradition and the Great Tradition. Andries Van Aarde, “Jesus and the Son of Man: A Shift from the ‘Little Tradition’ to the ‘Great Tradition’,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 80 (2004): 423-438.

¹⁸ See section 2 of this article for more argument.

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self-designation in contexts of his passion, therefore, points to his vulnerability which relates to his humanness or even mortality as man.

Synthesis of the SM debate in the New Testament

It is wrong, as some critical scholarship suggests, that we should dissociate this title from Jesus himself and attribute its literary origins wholly to the early Church. The bulk of the occurrence of this title is found in the Gospels: 79 out of 82 cases. If it is an attribution of the early Church, it would not retain such currency within the Gospels and not as extensively in the writings of St Paul or other apostolic letters of the NT. This suggests SM was attributable to Jesus himself and early sources on the life of Christ preserved this tradition that found its way into the Gospels. There is no reason why the early Church would decide to retain this title exclusively as a self-designation of Jesus if indeed the title was a literary product of the early Church. It could as well have been used as a third person designation like “Son of God” which would be extensively represented in apostolic letters. The title SM would have been more diffuse and more extensive throughout the NT if it were an early Church literary creation.

The question however, still remains as to why Jesus used this title to designate himself. The extensive use of the title in an apocalyptic sense is significant but it is equally significant that Jesus was not always inclined to proclaim his divinity. On the other hand, Jesus’ self-understanding as the Messiah incorporates a profound sense of his vulnerability as one who could be handed over and be put to death by his adversaries. Therefore, while the apocalyptic sense of SM is never to be discountenanced, the vulnerable SM is clearly contained in Jesus’ self-designation with this title. In fact, it is probably true that the apocalyptic SM is somewhat tied to the humanness of Jesus which is a vital element of his messianism. Therefore, when Jesus spoke of the SM who comes from in glory, that same SM is one who suffered for his glorification.

3. *ho huios tou anthrōpou* as a Translation of The Hebrew Expression *ben-’āḏām*

Even though our understanding of the SM comes from the Greek *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, it is nevertheless true that this is a Semitic idiom *ben-’āḏām*, found in Hebrew (and Aramaic). Therefore, appeal needs to

be made to this Semitic root in any search for semantic depth that helps modern Bible translations. The sequence of translation is:

Hebrew —————> Greek NT —————> Modern Languages (English, Igbo)

בן אדם <i>ben- 'ādām</i>	υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου <i>ho huios tou anthrōpou</i>	Son of Man, Nwa Nke Mmadu
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4. The Theological Significance of *ben- 'ādām* in the Hebrew Bible

Even though in Hebrew, the expression *ben- 'ādām* in general means “a single man” or “human beings”, its theological weight does not admit a simple meaning that renders *ben- 'ādām* simply as “man”.¹⁹ This expression in Hebrew makes reference to the vulnerability of a human person to whom it is referred. In the words of H. Haag: “it cannot be denied that this expression points to the weakness and frailty of man. For in almost all passages where *ben- 'ādām* occurs, it stands in emphatic contrast to God”.²⁰

With regard to the book of Ezekiel where this expression occurs most frequently, Haag notes that “the strangeness of this address is to be seen in connection with the one-sided emphasis on divine transcendence which began with Ezekiel”. Still, because *ben- 'ādām* in Ezekiel is to be seen in connection to the transcendence of God in the book, this expression therefore creates a contrast between Ezekiel’s mortal nature as “man” and God’s transcendent nature as a divine being. For this reason, versions like the NRSV translate *ben- 'ādām* in Ezekiel simply as “mortal”. Therefore, the Hebrew expression *ben- 'ādām* is theologically related to the physical and moral weakness of man. Hence, God works wonders among *bene- 'ādām* (Ps 107:8, 15, 21, 31) and the *bene- 'ādām* take refuge in the shadow of his wings (Ps 36:8). Since the Hebrew expression underlines a contrast between the divine and the human, we must inquire if those instances in which the SM is used by Jesus to speak

¹⁹ Haag, H., “בן־אדם”, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, II, 159-165.

²⁰ H. Haag, “בן־אדם”, 162.

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about his passion point to his nature as man in contrast to his divinity. Since the passion that Jesus announced while using SM relates to his death (mortality), the theology of SM, in these instances, points to Jesus' self-understanding as a person capable of suffering and death.

5. The Case for *Nwa mmadu* as a Translation of *ho huios tou anthrōpou*

I have largely settled for the idea that in many cases of the use *ho huios tou anthrōpou* in the Gospels, especially in the announcement of Jesus' passion, it refers most probably to the vulnerability of Jesus as a man capable of dying. Without prejudice against other connotations of SM, if there are Igbo expressions relating to *ho huios tou anthrōpou* which communicates this vulnerability in expressing Jesus' self-understanding and designation, then such expressions should be preferred in translations. In what follows, I shall make the case that *nwa mmadu* instead of *nwa nke mmadu* captures this element in rendering this expression in Igbo. Before I do this, I shall point out a few affinities between the Hebrew use of the word *ben* (son) and the Igbo use of the word *nwa* (son or child) in order to underline a useful semantic similarity that already exists between the both languages.

Affinities between “ben” in Hebrew and “nwa” in Igbo

The Hebrew expression *ben* with the meaning “son of” has strong affinities with the Igbo use of the word *nwa* (son or child). In the Hebrew Bible, this expression “son of” refers to someone's familial progeny with patronymic connotations.²¹ In this construction, *ben* took on a patronymic connotation which saw the individual in an organic, living connection with the family and the tribe.²² When for example we find the prophet Jonah introduced in the book as “son of Amittai” or Jeremiah introduced as “son of Hilkiah”, we understand primarily that they were begotten by Amittai and Hilkiah respectively but also that Jonah and Jeremiah belonged to a family whose father and head are Amittai and Hilkiah respectively. This patronymic connotation is more apparent in the case of Jeremiah whose introduction included an extra detail: Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, *of the priests who were in Anathot, in the land*

²¹. H. Haag, “בֶּן”, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, II, 145-159.

²². H. Haag, “בֶּן”, 150.

of Benjamin. This suggests that Jeremiah was not just being introduced as a man begotten by Hilkiah but that this progeniture makes Jeremiah part of a line of priests of whom his father was a member, probably by virtue of his birth. The expression *ben* in Hebrew does not just speak of progeniture but also of a lineage that suggests membership of a family that identifies the subject more properly.

The Igbo use of *nwa* also has a connotation which is similar to the Hebrew. When an Igbo elder sees a young man or woman whom he does not recognize, the question usually asked in a village setting is: “*nwa onye ka i bu?*”. This question, which means “whose child (son or daughter) are you?” is another way of asking “what family do you come from?”. In fact, when someone elderly asks this question, the curiosity about your parentage is by far not always the principal interest. In most cases, the interest, though not exclusively, lies in knowing who the father is. Your parents, as important as they are in that question is meant to provide a clue to your *Umunna* (the clan) that properly identifies you within that cultural space defined by a sense of community. There is, therefore, already a semantic affinity between the words that render sonship in both Hebrew and Igbo. The following section will be dedicated in showing that such an affinity could be extended to the concept of SM. I shall look at how the concept of *nwa mmadu* relates to the Hebrew *ben-’ādām*.

Construct Relationship for Genitives in Hebrew and Igbo

Like in Hebrew, genitive relationships in Igbo are also established by a juxtaposition of two nouns and do not have any genitive-indicating preposition “of”. To give a simple example with a well know Biblical noun “Bethlehem”, we could look at how modern languages render this Hebrew word. Bethlehem comes from two nouns: *bayit* (construct form: *bêt*; meaning “house”) + *lehem* (meaning “bread”).

The English translation would be rendered thus:

bêt + lehem = house + of + bread – *house of bread*

However, the Igbo translation would be rendered in this manner:

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bêt + lehem = *ulo* (house) + *achicha* (bread) – *Uloachicha*

Hebrew

Igbo

The preposition “of” is absent in the Igbo translation and in this way, there are stronger linguistic affinities between Hebrew and Igbo in the way genitive relationships are established. In the genitive relationship, the possessed noun is usually followed by the possessor noun as in Hebrew. It remains surprising that the Igbo translation of SM does not follow the grammatical rule which is natural to Igbo language, i.e. to remove the preposition “of” in the translation. Rather the translation we have in Igbo Bibles till today is: *nwa nke mmadu*. The translation *nwa nke mmadu* captures a preposition, “of”, which does not exist in any of the original Biblical languages. It captures rather a preposition which exists only in the English translation of *ho huios tou anthrōpou*. The Igbo translation *nwa nke mmadu* is, therefore, flawed and I will make a proposal for a translation that jettisons this English preposition, precisely because it is unnecessary to retain it when you can avoid it.

Nwa Mmadu as an expression of Vulnerability in Igbo

The Igbo expression “*nwa mmadu*” has a semantic range which is considerably varied. Generally, this expression is used in situations where a human subject is shown to be weighed down by the limitations imposed on him by his vulnerability. The expression *nwa mmadu* is never used for a subject who is not in an instance considered a victim. For example, one of the most commonly used expressions that feature this phrase is:²³ “*Nwa mmadu o ga-egbu onwe ya?* – Will he/she (SM) kill himself? Igbo speakers will immediately understand that the person in question must have been the victim of some kind of suffering or trial: malice, bearing of excessive burdens etc. In other instances, people may

²³. Kay Williamson’s Igbo dictionary has a curious proposal on how to understand the expression *nwa mmadu*, the dictionary makes the entry that sees the expression as a “well-behaved person”. This connection is not obvious though. Kay Williamson, *Dictionary of Onichà Igbo*, 2nd ed. (Ethiope Press 2006), 218.

use the expression to express a disapproval of undue demands made on people or an unfair exertion on a person: “*Nwa mmadu atagbuo onwe ya n’afufu*” – He/she is dying of suffering. To demand freedom from such exertions, expression like the following could also be considered normal: “*Biko hapu nwa mmadu aka*” – Please leave him/her alone

The striking similarity in the equivalence of SM to a personal pronoun both in Igbo and Hebrew is apparent in these translations. It is significant that in both cases SM refers and can be translated either with the pronoun “I”, “he” or “she”. In those instances in which Jesus uses this expression to speak, it can conveniently be replaced with an “I”, and though a nuance is lost, the meaning is never completely sacrificed. Hence, “the SM will go to Jerusalem to suffer” can be rendered “I will go to Jerusalem to suffer”. The shade of vulnerability contained in SM may be absent in the latter translation but this translation never completely rescinds the meaning relating to the subject (Jesus) as one who goes to Jerusalem to suffer. The same thing happens in the Igbo use of the expression “*nwa mmadu*”. In every case in which *nwa mmadu* is used in reference to a human subject, this expression can be replaced with a personal pronoun “he”, “she”, “him” or “her”. When such happens, again the nuance of vulnerability contained in the expression is lost, even if the principal meaning is not. The expression *nwa mmadu* may not be a perfect fit in translation for *ho huios tou anthrōpou* or *ben-’ādām* but it contains striking lexical and semantic categories that cannot be ignored in modern biblical translation for the Igbo language. To have lexical equivalents like *uios – nwa*, *anthropos – madu* is significant. It is even more so, when the semantic notion of vulnerability inherent in *ho huios tou anthrōpou* (*ben-’ādām*) is also found in the Igbo equivalent *nwa mmadu*. Considering the significance of *nwa mmadu* in Igbo, that expression is linguistically meaningful within the semantic field of suffering or victimhood, something which is clearly not the case in the use of *nwa nke mmadu*.

Some possible Objections

For two different languages, we would always expect differences even in very similar linguistic concepts. This is even more expected in the case of two languages with vastly different linguistic roots. Semantic

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similarities are, however, always possible in spite of the differences. It is fairly easy to notice the sometimes subtle but significant differences in the use of *ho uios tou anthropou* by Jesus and the Igbo *nwa mmadu*. The most significant of these is its use in attribution to persons. In the NT, it is usually seen in 1st-person usage in the mouth of Jesus, while in Igbo, it occurs as a third person attribution in a sentence. This means that in Igbo, the expression *nwa mmadu* usually does not substitute the first-person pronoun “I” as in its use by Jesus. In Igbo, *nwa mmadu* usually substitutes the 3rd-person and usually not the 1st-person or the 2nd-person.

However, the question is if this difference is enough to discard the inherent semantic value of the expression *nwa mmadu* in Igbo as a way to render *ho uois tou anthrōpou*. If the argument is that it is never used in the first-person attribution in Igbo, we need however, to make recourse to its Semitic versions of the OT in order to establish that even Jesus was using it in self-attribution in a derived sense. One thing clear about its use in the OT is that it is not person-exclusive in the OT. We have uses of this mainly in the 2nd-person and the 3rd-person in the OT. For example, the Aramaic כְּבַר אֲנָשׁ (kēbar ’ēnāš), of Daniel 7:13 (Aramaic) which presents an apocalyptic figure of the subject is in the 3rd-person. Though the usage in Igbo is usually not of this apocalyptic sense, it is significant that we have examples of its Semitic use which is in the 3rd-person as in Igbo. In Ezekiel where the Hebrew version *ben-’āḏām* occurs the most in the OT, it occurs generally in a 2nd-person imperative in the mouth of YHWH in reference to the prophet Ezekiel. The 1st-person usage in the OT is in fact, difficult to come by. It appears that Jesus Christ adapted (to the 1st-person) a semitic idiom (common in 2nd and 3rd-person) in order to express a theological reality relating to his Messianic mission. However, from the Greek translation, it does appear that Jesus retained the expression in this adaptation.

This should inform our translation of SM in Igbo too. We could equally adapt a pre-existing idiom in Igbo – *nwa mmadu* – instead of creating a new one. Such adaptations help the local speaker of the language assimilate concepts better because of the semantic resource they provide. We are not supposed to create a new linguistic expression, especially when our language already provides us with the linguistic resource to avoid it. On these grounds, the expression *nwa mmadu* which is closer to

the Semitic idiom *ben-’ādām* should be preferred over the expression *nwa nke mmadu*. It mirrors the expression in the mouth of Jesus better both linguistically and theologically. The use of *nwa mmadu* in the 3rd-person in Igbo could be linguistically analogous to its 3rd-person usage in the OT which was adapted by Jesus mainly in the 1st-person in *ho uios tou anthrōpou*.

6. Conclusions

“SM” in the Mouth of Jesus

Though we underlined the difficulty of a consensus in the SM debate, it is also apparent that Jesus used this expression with different theological shades in the Gospels. However, the substantial portion of its usage in the mouth of Jesus mirrors his humanness and the vulnerability inherent in this notion. This, from my opinion, is the reason this expression occurs in the announcement of his passions in the Synoptic Gospels. Therefore, translations into a different language that captures this theological notion will appear richer in the mind of the local reader who is given a theological insight into Jesus’ messianism. Again, it is significant that even in apocalyptic notions of this expression, the same Semitic expression was used in the NT. Therefore, Igbo translations could retain the same notion *Nwa Mmadu* that renders the vulnerable human Jesus in expressing the apocalyptic Messiah as expressed in different NT passages.

The Choice between Nwa Mmadu and Nwa nke Mmadu

Nwa mmadu may have its short-comings but it is a better translation of *ho uios tou anthrōpou*. First it mirrors a linguistic affinity noticeable in genitive relationships between the Hebrew *ben-’ādām* and its Igbo translation. Secondly, the theological weight of the expression in the mouth of Jesus when used in the expression of victimhood as part of his messianic mission is captured in *nwa mmadu*. The current translation *nwa nke mmadu* ignores the linguistic affinity between Igbo and the Semitic roots of this idiom in the way genitive relationships are established. It also ignores the Christological dimension inherent in SM. The reward in *nwa mmadu* as a translation for SM in Igbo far outweighs the shortcomings it presents.

EZEOKEKE: The Son of Man Debate and the Translation of *Ho Huios Tou Anthrōpou* (The Son of Man) in Igbo Bibles

Translation of the Bible in Local African Languages

The translation of *nwa nke mmadu* is closer to the English translation “SM” than it is either of the Greek *ho uios tou anthrōpou* or the Hebrew *ben-’ādām*. This raises the question regarding current African Bible translations. Are the current Bibles we have in African languages translated from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek or are they vestiges of earlier attempts to translate from the language of our colonial masters, European languages? The African continent is now blessed with a plethora of Biblical scholars who are extremely capable. However, new Biblical translations do not require only an intellectual know-how, even if it is the principal resource needed. It also requires enormous financial and ecclesiastical support which can be engendered through Ecclesiastical authorities. The case of one of the most famous translations in the Catholic tradition remains an example.²⁴ Jerome’s *Vulgate* was not just the effort of an intellectual but was also the fruit of an Ecclesiastical support in Pope Damasus I who needed a revision of the *Vetus Latina*. For the Bible to retain currency among Africans, we must continue to revise our translations, especially from the original languages, in order to not only remain faithful to the word of God but also to bring this word as close as possible to us as Africans.

²⁴. Generally Ecclesiastical authorities give Imprimaturs to new translations. Of equal importance is also moral and financial support which has severally been given for local translations. This was the case with *Baibul Nso* (Africana Fep Publishers, 2006). It is fruit of Igbo Bishops’ meeting in Onitsha in February 1991. That translation was also possible through financial supports from the Archdiocese of Onitsha and Owerri.