

“Teamwork in Bible Translation”, the Abakaliki Example

A keynote address presented by the ALTT Coordinator and Translation Consultant, John Ovuoba, on the occasion of the Dedication of the Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa Bibles otherwise known as the Abakaliki Bible Cluster (ABC) at the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, St. Peter’s Cathedral, Kpirikpiri, on January 31, 2015

Ladies and gentlemen; I stand on an already established protocol.

Today is a special day in my life. Today is a special day in the life of the Abakaliki Literacy & Translation Trust. Today is a special day in the history of Ebonyi State.

It is a special day in my life, because three months after I joined this work in January 1973 (I was still in my early teens then), I was attacked by a serious high fever that lasted for two weeks and resisted any type of pain-relief drugs. At the end of the two weeks, one morning, as I stood up to go and urinate, I fell down and soon discovered that the legs with which I stood up were both dead. I spent the months that followed in the hospital and on my sick-bed. The questions that followed were not whether there will be Bible dedication. Rather, people were asking, “Will he survive?” “And if he survives, will he be useful?” But the dedication of these Bibles today may be giving a clue to the answer.

Today is a special day in the life of the Abakaliki Literacy & Translation Trust (ALTT). When it began, it began like a baby whose parents are well-to-do and was loved by them. He never lacked anything and did not know that in ordinary life, you don’t always have what you want. But, if anything happens and the baby loses both parents, he may come to know that life can be difficult. That was what happened to the (now) ALTT when her first missionary parents, Paul & Inge Meier, left Nigeria. However, it is encouraging that despite all the challenges from all angles, ALTT lived like a tough politician who never believes that he can lose an election. Despite all the odds, ALTT remained resolute, so that even when pastors decided neither to respond to their phone calls, nor reply to their letters, they were bent on moving ahead. Today, her three Bibles are being dedicated. Isn’t that a success story?

Today is a special day in the history of Ebonyi State. For while a few people have been working and working to see the success of this dedication, a larger percent of the people are desperately running around, doing political rallies – even when they themselves are not contesting for anything. The truth is that the Bibles that are being dedicated today will out-live all the political contestants and their parties. Parties may collapse and individual politicians fed out, but these Bibles that are being dedicated today will continue to live. And no word in any of them will come back void.

Rev. Samuel Nwibo Iyoku once told us of how Bible Translation began in Izii. He said that during the colonial era, the then District Officer (D.O.) in Abakaliki Province, noticed that the Izii man had a language problem and needed an interpreter everywhere. He needed an interpreter in the court. He needed an interpreter in the school. He needed an interpreter in the market. And he basically needed an interpreter anywhere he had to communicate with a non-Izii person. When the D.O. went back home, he approached the Wycliffe people and requested them to come to Abakaliki and help the Izii man to develop his language as well as translate the Bible into his local language.

In 1964, a young Swiss couple, Paul & Inge Meier, under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and the Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT), arrived in Izii land and began the process of studying, analyzing and bringing out the orthography of Izii. The ultimate goal of the couple was to translate the New Testament into Izii language, so that the people may hear what the Jews heard during and after the ministry of Jesus as recorded by the New Testament writers. The Meiers began the project by learning to become Izii themselves. They lived with two Izii families – first with Ezeogo Mbam Nwode and later with Ezeogo Echiegu Ogalegu. During the time, they learnt not only the Izii language, but also their history, culture and tradition.

While they were learning to speak the language, they were also learning to analysis it. At the home front, they were assisted by two young Izii boys - Samuel Nwibo Iyoku and Anthony Echiegu etc. Interestingly, the two boys later became ordained ministers of the word – Rev. Samuel Nwibo Iyoku with the Assemblies of God Nigeria and Rev. Fr. Dr. Anthony Echiegu with the Catholic Mission. In the mission front, the Meiers were assisted in the language analysis and orthography establishment by Dr. Ken Pike, Dr. John Bendor-Samuel and Dr. Katy Barnwell. Dr. Barnwell was later to serve as the corner-stone of both the New and Old Testament Projects in Abakaliki.

During the Nigerian civil war (1966), the Meiers had to move to Kano where they stayed until the end of the war (1970). Then they returned back to Izii and relocated to Ikwo at the Rural Improvement Mission (RIM), Ndegu Echara. At that point, they were approached by two Presbyterian leaders – Dr. Akanu Ibiam and Rev. Dr. Akanu Otu – and requested them to include Ikwo and Ezaa in their program, so that the two sister languages may also have the New Testament translated into their languages. After due consultations, the request was approved and work began in earnest in the study, analysis and translation of the New Testament into all the three languages. The languages worked independently, but also as a team. It was from this team that the term “Teamwork in Bible Translation” began. The work is also called the “Abakaliki Bible Cluster (ABC)” or “Abakaliki Project.”

In 1976, the then Nigerian Military Government under Gen. Murtalla Mohammed, decided to expel all the SIL/WBT missionaries working in the country. Each of the three languages worked hard, so that by the time the Meiers were leaving, a duplicated draft of the New Testament was available in each of the three languages. As the Meiers (like the other missionaries) were packing out, so also were the Nigerian members of the Team. At the end of the day, only John Ovuoba was left to coordinate what was left of the work. That was at the Abakaliki level. But at the national level (in order to save Bible translation work in Nigeria), the LORD, through the then Head of State, Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, retained Dr. Katy Barnwell from among all the SIL/WBT missionaries. Through Dr. Katy Barnwell, the glow of Bible Translation remained in Nigeria and have grown and grown over the past 39 years.

Back to the Abakaliki side, the LORD brought Arc. Justin Ogodo, who came to do his National Youth Service Corp in Jos. Arc. Ogodo had been part of the Izii team; only that at a point, he stepped off for his University study at Nsukka. As a Youth Corper, whatever time, he had, he spent at the Nigeria Bible Translation Centre where he worked with John Ovuoba until the three New Testaments were completed. Note that at this time, we had lost our Ezaa colleague, Daniel Nwigwe Eze, so that even though neither John Ovuoba nor Justin Ogodo was Ezaa, the LORD “taught them Ezaa” and they were also able to prepare the Ezaa New Testament for publication. And no fault has been found in the Ezaa NT until date. The first editions of the Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa NTs were published and dedicated in 1980.

Soon after the publication and dedication of the New Testaments in 1980, the denominational heads in the Abakaliki area saw the need for them to have the complete Bible. They started praying, seeking for help in that area. In 1985, another young couple, Dr. & Mrs. Reinier de Blois (this time from Holland), came under the umbrella of the Sudan United Mission (S.U.M) to begin the translation of the Old Testament in Izii. Again, at the request of the Church, Ikwo and Ezaa were brought on line. Dr. de Blois first took time to also study and understand the Izii language. After a period of time, some translators emerged from Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa. Among them was Joseph Itumo from the Ezaa front. In 1988, the new translators were sent to the Nigeria Bible Translation Centre, Jos, for training. At the end of three months, the translators had been trained in the Introductory Course in Applied Linguistics (ICAL). When they returned, translation work began in earnest.

In 2002, the “Test Edition” of the Izii Bible was published and dedicated. In 2004, the “Test Edition” of the Ikwo and Ezaa Bibles were published and dedicated.

Since we are not in a Bible Translation Workshop, we will not go into the details of all the technicalities used. Yes, during our work, we had to consult with some Greek,

Hebrew and English versions. But even though interpretations sometimes varied from the receptor culture, we were not dependent on one English version. And, even though our work has come up as a Teamwork, none of it has depended on the other. What we have in this work is “Bayiburu Izii”, “Bayiburu Ikwo” and “Bayiburu Ezaa” as stated at the cover of each work. Each of these Bibles is a version of her own work.

Because of the team nature under which this work began, the outside world tended to see and code all the three languages as “Izi”. But towards the end of the work, we thought we should put the ethnological value of each language in their proper perspective. At the early page of each Bible, you will see that each language is now coded properly. Details are as follows:

Izii = [izi]
Ikwo = [iqw]
Ezaa = [eza]

(For those of you who might want to do some analysis of any of the languages, when you go to the ethnologue, those are the codes you might be looking for.)

As we were rounding up the typesetting of these Bibles in Jos in 2013, I had to look at the **Wycliffe Global Alliance – Scripture Access Statistics**. There, I saw that Nigeria has about 532 languages. But among those languages, the ones that have the complete Bibles are very few. Ours are among those few and they came out in this order: Ikwo Bible (20), Izii Bible (21) and Ezaa Bible (22). Note that these numbers refer more to languages that have the complete Bible. In the whole of Africa, our own Bibles are numbered as follows: Ikwo Bible (181), Izii Bible (182) and Ezaa Bible (183). And in the whole world, our Bibles are numbered as follows: Ikwo Bible (512), Izii Bible (513) and Ezaa Bible (514). If we look at it from the Nigerian perspectives, you will see that we still have a lot of work to do in the translation arena.

After typesetting our Bibles, we thought it will be good to have our Bibles decorated at the edge like some other English Bibles. This was accepted by Heidi Rosendall who helped us in the typesetting. But many months later when it was discovered that we were not forthcoming financially, we were informed that the “gilt edge” (or gold edge), we asked for will not happen. Heidi reminded me that “no Bible in a Nigerian language ever came with the gilt edge”. When the argument of “no money” came up, we were made to keep quiet. But with the intervention of Dr. Katy Barnwell, we were given the privilege of having one thousand (1,000) copies each from the Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa Bibles beautifully painted with the gold edge. If the argument is true that no Bible in a Nigerian language ever came out with the gold edge, then we can only say a special “thank you” to our mother, Dr. Katy Barnwell, who made our own Bibles to be the first among Nigerian languages to be so beautifully painted.

With the help of our sister, Heidi Rosendall and brother, David Rowbory, our Bibles have gone internet. What this means is that with **altn.ngbible.com** you can download the Bible and can even put it in your handset just as you can, with the English Bibles.

I don't know whether there is another language cluster in Nigeria that has been able to work together as the Abakaliki Cluster did. Yes, there are lots of similarities in the Abakaliki cluster, but there are sharp differences too which, if one is not careful, can easily be misunderstood. The problem is that each of the three languages are tonal in nature. Spelling may be the same, but meaning may change by the tone. Yet this cluster has worked as a team over the years in love and appreciation of each other. I believe that ours has become a success story today, because of the unity, love and appreciation among the team. We recommend it to any other such language cluster in Nigeria.

One more thing; in spite of all that ALTT has gone through over the years, we are happy that with the help of The Seed Company, we have been able to raise two Bible Translation Consultants – Joseph Itumo and my humble self, John Ovuoba. Two more people are on the pipe line also as Bible Translation Consultants. They are Jonathan Nwoji and David Oken. And still to follow that batch, God willing, are James Ogada and Patrick Igwe. If I should look at it as it affects me as a person, I can confidently say, “I have helped present the Bible to the people of Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa. Furthermore, I have raised people who can take over from where I stop.

If that is the case, what else should I be asking the Lord to do for me? Should I speak like the Simeon of Luke 2: *“Lord, now latest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation..?”*

No, I will not say that. There are still some **unfinished tasks**. One of them is the Deuterocanonical Bibles for our Catholic friends. For even though the regular Bible is complete in each of the three languages, we still have to get out the Catholic version. It was our dream to be dedicating both the regular and the Deuterocanonical versions of the Bibles in all the three languages today. But that is not the case. We have the Deuterocanonical Bibles in each of our computers, and have worked hard on it in each language, but our Catholic priests have not really been coming forth for us to move forward. The Catholic Bishop of the Abakaliki Diocese, Dr. Michael N. Okoro, has given his approval for us to move on, but those he assigns to us never really come with the necessary zeal. When that zeal is raised among the catholic priests, we will have the Deuterocanonical versions in the Abakaliki Bible Cluster.

Literacy: One of the good things the then Ebonyi State Government, along with the then Ebonyi State Primary Education Board (SPEB) did for us was that they gave us 52

Pilot Schools to teach mother tongue education. The 52 pilot schools were selected from Izii, Ikwo, Ezaa and Mgbolizhia language areas. With a help from the Oikonomos Foundation, we printed primary school books (from Primaries 1 – 3) worth millions of naira. The books were distributed to all the affected primary schools across the Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs). The agreement was that ALTT should train the teachers. And that none of the teachers should be transferred out of his/her pilot school until the program gets to Primary 3. At that time, we will evaluate it, and if successful, continue to the Junior Secondary School (JSS3). We were very enthusiastic and went ahead and trained more than 400 teachers. But no sooner than we trained the teachers than they were all transferred out from those schools. And not even one of the seven LGEAs involved has been able to refund us for those books.

Our prayer to the Ebonyi State Government along with SPEB, now Universal Basic Education Board (UBEB), is to revisit that project and help us get back to the schools again.

It is also our desire to take our literacy work back to the Church as we did in the early eighties. It is that effort that has caused a significant number of our adult mothers and fathers to be able to read the mother tongue in the Church and at home.

Use of the translated Scripture: As we want to resume our Literacy Program, we also want to encourage the Use of the translated Scripture. One of the ways of doing it is to record the Jesus Film in Izii, Ikwo, Ezaa and Mgbolizhia whose documents are ready and are waiting. From our experience in the past, there are people (even educated ones) who may never learn to read and write the mother tongue. There are others who, for some health or age problems, may never learn to read their mother tongue. For such people and the general public, we want to have the hard copies that are being dedicating today recorded on the audio version, so that such people can also hear the word of God in their mother tongue. Izii has started such recording; we are praying that the others may have the necessary support to follow suit.

There is the case of people with visual impairment. Part of our program is to embark on the Brail Bible (or part of it, thereof), so that such people can also read the Bible.

Mgbolizhia: Mgbolizhia is a Project of the ALTT. Their New Testament work started (1988) when the OT work began in Izii, Ikwo and Ezaa. But due to the repeated loss of staff (not necessarily by death), the Project has suffered delays. However, we are happy that at the time of this address, only one book, Revelation, is the only one remaining to be checked by the consultant. What is our expectation? We are expecting that by this time next year, we may be dedicating the Mgbolizhia NT in Ohaukwu LGA.

New Projects: Mgbolizhia is not the end of our plan. We have been talking with the Kori people. And we have been talking with the Ntsobo people. We have also been talking with the Ezillo people. These people have shown their interest in having the word of God translated into their mother tongue.

But how can we do that? One of the words that came into the Bible Translation world some years ago (1979) was the word “ownership”. The ownership theory (Dr. John Bendor-Samuel) is a concept where the community or the people in the receptor area can “own” the project. This means that they see it as “their” own project. That is necessary, because if they contribute ₦10 to the project, they will also see to it that the ₦10 achieves the purpose for which it was put there and do even more. Ownership is also necessary, because whatever support is coming from the west is only for a time. If the people “own” the project, such a project will be able to continue even when the western support stops. There is also the pride that this is “our project”.

Incidentally, that concept is seen here by some pastors as part of their own “share” from, say, proceeds from the Bible sales. It makes them not to see Bible Translation as part of the Church Ministry.

But actually, Bible Translation should be a Ministry of the Church. When the Church begins to “own” the Bible Translation Ministry, ALTT will be more able to realize her aims and objectives and the Church will grow numerically and spiritually. Then, I will not speak like the Simeon of Luke 2. I will rather speak like Paul: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim 4:7,8).*

At this point, we want to request or as we say it here “pray” as follows: (1) The Chairman, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Ebonyi State Branch: That you declare a day or even two in a year when all the Churches in Ebonyi State can pray for the ALTT and give us a 2nd Plate Offering as part of the Church “owning” the translation work. That way, there will be continuity in the work. (2) The Seed Company and other donor/grant agencies. We believe we have a good vision for this work. Can you continue to help and give us sustenance in the work, so that even when the Church shows a lukewarm attitude, that we may still reach the ordinary people who need the word and literacy in the mother tongue? (3) Ebonyi State Government. The previous Government approved that a piece of land be given to the ALTT to raise an Office and continue her work. But the officials in the Ministry of Lands & Survey then sat on the order and it was never realized. Currently, we are using a rented office which does not give us

enough room for training and conferences. We are praying Your Excellency, to revisit our file on the land issue as well as our mother tongue education in the schools.

In closing, we want to thank all of you who have given us your time on this occasion. When we talk of “ownership”, I think that the Assemblies of God Nigeria, Abakaliki District, is one Church that has tried to “own” the work of Bible Translation in Ebonyi State. For more than 10 years now, that Church has unfailingly kept ALTT on her payroll, so that at the end of each month, ALTT goes there with joy to get her pay. Ebonyi District, also of the Assemblies of God Nigeria, is another District that is following the steps of the Abakaliki District. It is in Ebonyi District that we met with Rev. Dr. Simon Abba, who single handedly also put ALTT on his own personal pay-roll. Rev. Abba, we are grateful! We want to appreciate the Catholic Bishop of the Abakaliki Diocese for his general help in our work and his special help towards this dedication. Our thanks also go to the Anglican Bishop, Abakaliki Diocese, Rev. Monday Nkwegu also for his support towards this dedication. When we first started asking for help from the Churches towards this dedication, the Nigeria Reformed Church (NRC) was the first to respond. We want to say a special “thank you” to Rev. Johnson Ebeke, the NRC President. We cannot forget our Brother, Rev. Nte Igwe, Moderator, The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, Ikwo Presbytery, for his contribution towards this dedication. May the Lord bless all of you in a big way.

We want to appreciate our friends who have come all the way from Jos – The Executive Director of the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust, Dr. Yakubu La’ah, with whose efforts these Bibles are here today. We are grateful. We thank our friends and colleagues from SIL Nigeria, the EthnoArt Dept. and the Luke Partnership. Thank you for giving your precious time to us today. We want to thank the Wycliffe Bible Translators who began and completed the New Testament Project, the Sudan United Mission (S.U.M.) who began and brought the Bibles up to the “Test Edition” level, The Seed Company (TSC) who provided training and support in all angles when it looked as if all doors had closed, the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) who came in just at the right time when we were having crisis with funds for printing the Bibles. In addition to her annual grant, the PCC stepped in when our Bibles were just sitting in a South Korean drawer. Then came a US Donor whom we do not know, neither do we know how much he/she contributed. We thank the Sunday School Class in Hillcrest who shared their 2013 offerings to the printing of these Bibles. Most of those children may never come to Ebonyi State. Yet they were willing to support our work. We thank you, kids. We want to thank our Publishers for paying the 50% cost for the publication of our work. Heidi Rosendall; she did the typesetting of the three Bibles. Whatever you will see when the three Bibles are dedicated, presented and made available to the public is the handiwork of Heidi, a very great woman! We want to appreciate her. (Her daughter, Hannah fell sick in 2013 as she was working on our books. That development forced the Rosendall family to rush the girl

to the US. She has not fully gotten well since. I honestly request this congregation to pray for her. Thinking like an African, I believe that the health problem of Hannah is not an attack on the Rosendall family; it is rather an attack on the Bible Translation work in Nigeria generally. For if Heidi is in Nigeria, she will be better able to guide, encourage and strengthen other translators as she did to us when we were doing our own typesetting. That is the more reason why we should pray as a people for Hannah’s quick recovery.)

Our Publishers: Let us put this in a chart form.

Publisher	Language	Date
IBS/NBTT	Izii New Testament	1980, 1986, 1989, 1992, 2001
IBS/NBTT	Ikwo New Testament	1980, 1985
WBT/NBTT	Ikwo New Testament	2001
BLI/NBTT	Ezaa New Testament	1980, 1992
BLI/ALTT	Izii (complete) Bible	2014
OneBook/ALTT	Ikwo (complete) Bible	2014
WBT/ALTT	Ezaa (complete) Bible	2014

The ones that published our complete Bibles (2014) is the reason why we are gathered here today to celebrate this occasion. Thus, with our hands all lifted up, we salute these organizations in a deep appreciation of heart. Thank you, Lord, for using these people to remember us.

Paul & Inge Meier: During my health crisis of early 1973, they rushed “home” from Switzerland. (I don’t know if anybody phoned them; for there was no telephone in the area at the time?) But they came and on arrival, cleaned me; dressed me; fed me and took me to the hospital. We never knew how much the hospital bills were, but we know that they never asked for any fund-raising in Ikwo to pay the bills. Yes, I **survived** because they worked to realize it. It is the survival that made people to begin to think of my future. At this point, I remember other friends like Renzo & Rosli Mueller and many more in Switzerland who were concerned and cared for me in those difficult years – a period when many doubted my survival.

Dr. Katy Barnwell. I am what I am today through the help of Katy Barnwell. My education (starting from the GCE level), my exposure, training, experience and position in the world of Bible Translation are the results of her handiwork. Outside of John Ovuoba, Katy Barnwell, is synonymous with Bible Translation the world over: The Seed Company, Wycliffe Bible Translators – you name it. In 1976, when Gen. Murtala Mohamed was directing the expulsion of every Wycliffe Missionary in Nigeria, the Lord foresaw today (January 31, 2015) and what Katy Barnwell can do in order for us to

gather like this here today and ordered General Olusegun Obasanjo “not to touch His anointed Katy”. Part of what the Lord retained her to do in Nigeria is what we are celebrating here today. Katy, we are grateful.

To all our friends who have come to share in this joy today, we say, “thank you!” And to many more who contributed in this work, who are not here today and whom we do not know and may never know, we say “thank you!”

To you, Oh Lord, be the glory!

Humbly delivered,



John Ovuoba
(Coordinator, ALTT)

Abbreviations: *BLI* = *Bible League International*
IBS = *International Bible Society*
NBTT = *Nigeria Bible Translation Trust*
OneBook = *One Book*
WBT = *Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc.*