Ìgbo initiation: phallus vs. umbilicus

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This article fills in a placeholder blurb in my dissertation (§4.5, pp. 304*f.*). The Ẹ́hụgbò text on pp. 195–201, copied *verbatim* from the dissertation pp. 343–48, had been originally transcribed with more attention to content than to dialect–particular inflectional morphology and consistency of orthographic word division — both issues in need of reconsideration.

Significant correction: On pp. 177*f.*, I proposed in passing that the Ìgbo nouns for 'reincarnating spirit double' and 'day(light)', both of which are pronounced *chí*, share a common root which is still productive in the language as a so–called 'verb extension' meaning either 'repeat' or 'return'. This idea is however disproved by one simple fact which I should have checked at the time, namely that the predicative root in question has an aspirated onset consonant in all Ìgbo dialects which include this phonological feature, whereas the two nouns do not (cf. pp. 110 and 119 of Rev. Ígwè's 1999 *Ìgbo–English Dictionary*). Hence it is impossible for that predicative root to be historically connected to either of the two nouns, and so an alternative explanation is required if the nouns are etymologically linked to each other at all. (Of course the null hypothesis is also possible, that 'day(light)' and 'reincarnating spirit double' are accidental homophones in Ìgbo, but as astute a cultural commentator as *Òdógwu* Chínụ́á Àchebé ventures otherwise, in his famous 1975 essay "*Chí* in Ìgbo cosmology".) Moreover there can be no doubt that the 'day(light)' meaning of *chí* is ancient, indeed it is reconstructed by Mukarovsky (1976, 146, 152) all the way back to a stage close to the ancestor of the entire Niger–Congo language family, therefore it would be highly unlikely for an etymology of this word to be still recoverable Ìgbo–internally. Accordingly, a new proposal is made in the final section of this manuscript, taking into account a cosmological comment in Melzian's Èdó dictionary for the analogous noun *ẹ̀hi*: "It is believed to be 'with a man all the day' " (1937, 51). Based on this remark (which is probably attributable to Melzian's primary consultant, Mr. H.G. Amadasu), and on supporting evidence cited there, I suggest that the Ìgbo noun for 'reincarnating spirit double' is historically *identical* to the noun for 'day(light)' thanks to a trivial metonymy of a thing to its canonical context, motivated by an assumption which was originally made by Northcote Thomas (1914, 19) and which can scarcely be doubted by anyone who has compared the two neighboring civilizations, to the effect that the cosmological pragmatics of Èdó *ẹ̀hi* and Ìgbo *chí* are remarkably parallel. The analogy is further demonstrated at Ágbọ̀ ("Agbor"), the intermediate border kingdom with strongly bicultural Ìgbo and Èdó leanings, where *ẹ̀hi* appears in countless personal names in the same 'slot' in which *chí* is found in the eastern Ìgbo counterparts, to all appearances synonymously, e.g. *Ẹ̀hi edú = Chí nà–edú* 'the reincarnating spirit–double leads'.

UPDATE 23 April 2014: The standard assumption that twins infanticide had economic utility, reducing investment in offspring of lower life expectancy, still begs a *cultural* explanation for a widespread but far from universal precolonial practice. Ethnographers may paraphrase local opinion about "uncanny" (Thomas 1913, 12) or "unnatural" births: "For a woman to bear more than one child at a time was regarded as degrading humanity to the level of beasts" (Úchèńdù 1965, 58; cf. Basden 1921, 57*f*, Thompson 1971, 10, 79), but vague sentiments of aversion, potentially reflecting "secondary reasoning and reinterpretations" (Boas 1910, 67), fail to address intricately stratified legal–cosmological codes like the 100–plus *ǹsọ́ àla* 'communal taboos' (lit. 'things prohibited by the earth'), including birth omens, operant at Ǹri well into the 20th century (Ọ́nwụejìọ́gwù 1981, 52*ff.*). Schapera dismissed the "obvious explanation" of generic abnormality as circular, seeking instead "the meaning of the various customs related to twins" in indigenous ideas such as the "occurrence of two individuals with identical personalities" (1927, 134*ff.*), but despite this advice the most influential 'theory' of the matter merely rephrased the commonsensical account in elevated terms like "paradox", "anomaly", "dilemma" and "structural contradiction" (Turner 1969). In two adjacent northwest Cameroun communities speaking Benue–Kwa (socalled *wide Bantu*) languages, terms rendered in English as "single twin" are ritually applied to biologically singleton births by oraclists seeking to interpret "individual and social problems in [terms of] the behavior of discontented ancestors" (Diduk 1993, 552, cf. Argenti 2011, 283, 286). Extending the idea to Ìgbo, hypothetically the *chí* could have been regarded as the individual's twin, and conversely one member of a biological twin birth — but *which* one?—was therefore the other one's *chí*. If so, then a twin birth could not lead to further reincarnation. This conjecture awaits relevant evidence *pro* or *con*.

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Victor Manfredi

Ìgbo Initiation: Phallus or Umbilicus?*

On the Translation of Symbols

Description of a ritual event faces a problem of compositionality: explicating pragmatic entailments of a text, in a contextual scenario, in terms of the literal meanings (denotations) of its component statements. It is not a matter of reducing the symbolic to the literal, so much as of establishing the difference (Gazdar 1979, Levinson 1983). This paper aims to show that philologically-informed, literal translations lead to semantic analyses of categories and propositions in Ìgbo initiation. These analyses receive independent support in proliferating interpretative consequences in many semantic domains across the Ìgbo-speaking area and in the nearby Gbè- and Yorùbá-speaking area. Some of the similarities may reflect local influence ('borrowing'), and others are accidents or mistakes, but the remainder may attest a prehistoric, common heritage of Niger-Congo speakers (or a large subgroup like Kwa or Benue-Kwa), comparable to the large-scale etymological nomenclatures reconstructed by Benveniste (1965) and Dumézil (1968-73) in the Indo-European area.

Conversely, if we ignore denotations in interpreting ritual, only confusion results. A proximate example of such confusion is Ottenberg (1989), whose account of Ìgbo initiation is doubly Freudian: intentionally attributing Freudian motives to African minds, and unintentionally turning African ethnography into Euro-American psychodrama. As Nwoga (1985: 8) aptly cautions: 'When we write or say: "The Ìgbo *believe* that . . ." "the Ìgbo *worship* . . .", "the Ìgbo *offer sacrifice* . . .", we are not giving concrete descriptions either of the psychological states, or of the ritual practices,

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or of the objects of those states and practices, until we work out the valid circumlocutory phrases, the contextual taxonomies, to which our words belong.'

To begin, let's go shopping for a semantic framework. There are several on the market.

Mentalist or Behaviorist

Before the Freudian *ego* there was the Cartesian *cogito*. But if appeals to tacit mental representations are indispensable to formal semantics in the Fregean tradition (Bach 1989), they are exotic to classical ethnography (with the honorable exception of Lévi-Strauss). More familiar to anthropologists is Turner's doctrine (1969: 14) of symbolism, which starts from an empirical dilemma: 'The Ndembu have a paucity of myths and cosmological or cosmogonic narratives. It is therefore necessary to begin at the other end, with the basic building blocks, the "molecules" of ritual.'

Adapting theory to circumstance, Turner seizes on the referential function as an expedient stand-in for denotation. More exactly, he elides the difference between the two types of interpretations (Turner 1962: 42): 'Each major symbol has a "fan" or "spectrum" of referents (*denotata* and *connotata*), which tend to be linked by what is usually a simple mode of association.'

This step is behaviorist because it removes tacit knowledge (denotation) from the picture, leaving three residual types: *exegetical* meaning, found in 'interpretations of my Ndembu informants'; *operational* meaning, discovered by 'equating a symbol's meaning with its use'; and *positional* or *contextual* meaning, revealed by 'a symbol's relationship to others in the same complex or *Gestalt' (ibid.)*. None of these corresponds to the intensional semantics of analytic inference which—though indispensable in understanding sentences—is largely or totally unconscious.

Turner's chosen example is an object named *chising'a*, a 'ritually prepared' forked stick which is placed with other items at the center of a hunters' 'ritual of affliction'. For Turner, *chising'a* has literally scores of 'referents', over twenty at the exegetical level alone, including kinship categories, abstract qualities and emotions. This analysis is said to show the truly 'mighty synthesizing and focusing capacity of ritual symbolism' (*ibid.*: 56).

The difficulty of Turner's program may be gauged by a more prosaic example, the ordinary English noun *book*. If the exegetical meaning of *book* is its naive definition (a bound collection of pages), its operational meaning is any book we wish to mention, while its positional/contextual meaning is anything associated with books: not just printers, shelves and readers, but also schools, churches and police stations, as well as betting

parlors *(bookies)* and Hollywood producers *(You read the book, now see the movie)*. Not scores of 'referents' but infinitely many, which nevertheless pose no cognitive problem since we tacitly know what a book is independent of these associations. Referring to a *book* does not normally require a fluid, situational negotiation of so many potential referents. The indeterminacy arises only in context (*e g* we need to supply enough background information to know whether 'Ann lost a lot of sleep over her book' means the book she wrote, the one she was unable to write or the one she was unable to find). Fortunately, this problem affects relatively few items in a sentence at a time. You can't start a conversation by saying 'The same thing happened again on the other side'. Referential ambiguity is not a matter of meaning *per se*, but rather of certain factors which converge on a performance setting where context supplies the associations.

Bourdieu (1982: 132) makes an analogous point in berating those 'linguists who, following Austin, seek in the words themselves the "illocutionary force" which they may contain as performatives'. Rather, it is the 'linguistic market' which is responsible for the practical effects of promises and threats. Similarly, for initiations, Bourdieu locates the practice elsewhere than the alleged transformation of the initiates *à la* van Gennep; instead, he maintains that 'a rite of institution [. . .] fits properly social oppositions like masculine/feminine into the logic of cosmological oppositions [. . .] which is a very effective way to naturalize them' (*ibid.*: 123).

It is an ethnographic commonplace that initiands already know some 'secrets' before learning them officially (Bascom 1944; Abimbola 1973: 43, *pace* Goody 1987: 296). But if Ẹ́hụgbò females teasingly sing mask songs which 'belong' to male initiates, they can't carry off this speech act unchallenged because they lack gender-political credentials (Miller 1982).

The more general point of these examples is that the distinction between meaning and action is lost in a behaviorist framework.

Semantic or Encyclopedic

Granting tacit knowledge of denotations, we can ask how it is internally structured. Returning to our prosaic example, a *book* as defined by the US Postal Service necessarily has a table of contents, but this typical feature happens to be lacking in many acceptable *book*-tokens (diaries, bibles, books of stamps . . .) and conversely it is present in some non- or quasi-books (newsletters, catalogs . . .). Even sound recordings count as books in some postal categories, which would make the concept non-medium specific. In this way, *book* is a fuzzy set, a network of partially

ordered semantic features. Furthermore, the mental representation of *book* probably contains other more or less idiosyncratic information which distinguishes it from related nouns like *magazine*, *pamphlet*, *manuscript*, *libretto* etc. It is an open question how many of these attributes are encyclopedic—as opposed to definitional—knowledge; whether human lexical storage assumes closed sets of semantic properties; and to what degree speakers of a given language differ in their choice of properties. Some defining attributes are presumably shared by all speakers, but the cut between *essentia* and *accidentia*—and hence the analytic/synthetic distinction—is less than sharp (Quine 1963, Putnam 1986, Fodor 1987).

One approach to the fuzzy set problem invokes semantic prototypes (Rosch 1975) instead of truth values or attribute-features. MacCormack (1985) suggests that prototypes can rescue literalist semantics from the extreme reliance on metaphor espoused by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). 'Metaphor all the way down' risks circularity, as they implicitly acknowledge by distinguishing 'literal metaphors' from 'figurative' ones. Prototypes, though abstract objects, nevertheless provide a cognitive mechanism for the literal pole of the dichotomy to connect with concrete experience. As with the mentalist postulate (see *supra*), it is enough for now that a literalist semantic framework is viable, pending consideration of some ethnographic results which it makes possible.

Synchronic or Diachronic

The synchronic question of literal *vs* metaphor recurs in the diachronic domain as the problem of etymology. It may seem obvious that the relevance of etymological meaning to present-day speakers is nil, because they have limited access to older stages of the language, not to mention cognate languages. Gramsci (1971: 450) was not the first linguist to remark that: 'Language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilizations. When I use the word "disaster" no one can accuse me of believing in astrology, and when I say "by Jove!" no one can assume that I am a worshipper of pagan divinities.'

On the other hand, there are ways that the historical evidence of linguistic fossils may still have contemporary relevance. Gramsci continues *(ibid.)*: 'These expressions are however a proof that modern civilization is also a development of paganism and astrology. [. . .] [P]resent language is metaphorical with respect to the meanings and the ideological content which the words used had in preceding periods of civilization.' Since not all metaphors have historical roots in every language, the set of true etymologies may favor certain metaphors—*e g* those linked to social institutions of long standing. Folk etymology shows this, why else would people bother with it? Another loophole in learnability—the

constraint that synchronic relevance is limited to positive data which occur during language acquisition (a few years of infancy)—is if some etymologies come 'for free' because they are implicit in grammatical structure.[1] The latter point is stronger if not just genetic information (the initial state of the mind/brain, including computational capacity) but also supra-individual (public) memory, including all lexical items, contribute to Universal Grammar (Chomsky 1986, Koster 1988). In this respect, the fact that most of us are unable to articulate most of the etymologies in our mother tongue may simply indicate that etymologies are like tacit knowledge of other domains, *e g* phonology and syntax, which would not make them cognitively inert.

Patristic, Philological or Postmodern

A fourth metasemantic parameter concerns critical ideology. Todorov (1978) contrasts 'patristic' interpretations—*e g* Freudian, Christian, Marxist—with 'philological' ones carried out by authors as diverse as Spinoza, Lévi-Strauss and Ruwet. The former use textual analyses to 'illustrate' a certain thesis 'teleologically', while the working style of the latter group is relatively more open, less committed to an outcome in advance. A third interpretive stance, which Todorov ascribes to Nietzsche but which is nowadays more familiar in ethnography and literary criticism under the postmodern banners of Foucault, Derrida and Voloshinov, denounces both sides of the opposition: all analyses are teleological since any system of analysis imposes a tacit teleology.

In Todorov's terms, Ottenberg's book is patristic, and this essay belongs to the philological camp. Postmodernists made a splash critiquing ethnographic data (Crapanzano 1977, Dwyer 1979, Rabinow 1985, Clifford & Marcus 1986), but they have no monopoly: there is also a mentalist critique (Sperber 1982). Elsewhere (1991, 1992b, 1997b) I have opined that some postmodern energy in ethnography is an artifact of literate anxiety towards oral cultures. But these apprehensions can be met by pedestrian criteria of observational adequacy and plausibility, following an anthropological tradition from Boas and Sapir to Greenberg and Abimbola.

A Null Hypothesis

Taken together, the foregoing analytical choices identify a framework for the interpretation of ethnographic symbols which can be paraphrased as

1. A recently prolific example of tacit etymology in syntax is denominal verbs as studied by WALINSKA DE HACKBEIL (1986), HALE & KEYSER (1993) and STIEBELS (1996).

follows. Successful description/translation of a ritual event is ruled out in advance unless the 'target' language and object language share principles of statement structure (a syntax) and of information flow (a pragmatics), as well as a theory of possible meaningful items (a lexical semantics). Period. The null hypothesis is that ritual semantic descriptions need no extra assumptions beyond those required for nonritual communicative acts in the Gricean sense. Whatever ritual does beyond the reach of ordinary grammar is, as Bourdieu suggests in the above quote, ascribable to institutional power, and is not necessarily or desirably analyzed in the semantics.

The rest of this essay tries to show that extant ethnographic records of the Ìgbo-speaking area support two negative/null claims: there is no 'ritual meaning' at all, *i e* no special 'fans' of interpretation *à la* Turner and no privileged, nonempirical symbolic domain like the Freudian teleology (see *supra*).[2] To refute either claim requires genuine counterexamples: cases where translation semantics plus institutional pragmatics fail to describe a ritual event. Otherwise, the behaviorist or Freudian framework is no alternative at all, just an embellishment, an intellectual hood-ornament; the point is how far you can drive through the 'forest of symbols' without one. I remain agnostic about the other two issues: the cognitive salience of etymology and the epidemiology (in Sperber's sense) of mental representations (see *supra*).

The Problem

Descriptively, one needs to know what happens in Ìgbo male adolescent initiation: what is said and what is done, obligatorily and optionally. As to analysis, the problem is compositionality: how the observed statements and events add up to constitute this form of action. At a second analytical remove, one would like to provide an observational basis for technical, metasymbolic terms like *initiation* (Who initiates who into what?) or else replace them by more transparently appropriate ones. In Sperber's (1986) phraseology, the second task is to provide a term like *initiation* (or its Ìgbo translation) with an ontological 'token-identity' (*à la* Fodor 1981) comprising 'distributions of ideas' across populations. But first things first.

2. In both respects, my discussion repeats some classic arguments of SPERBER (1975). It would be unjust to pick on the Freudians exclusively. An entertaining critique of Marxist teleologies in ethnography, exemplified by Godelier among others, is given by CLASTRES (1982). ARINZE (1982) propounds a catholic reconstruction of Ìgbo culture which is its own parody. HORTON (1984) gives an acute 'diagnosis' of Christian bias in African and Africanist ethnography.

Ẹ́hụgbò is one of the last Ìgbo-speaking communities where obligatory male initiation still occurs in a nonperfunctory way, and hence where Ìgbo religion can be studied in action. In most other areas, obligatory initiation of adolescents has been suppressed by three combined disenchantments: missionary conversion, formal schooling and wage-labor migration. The three factors were institutionally linked from the 1880s to 1960, when mission schools were secularized and Christian conversion ceased to be the *sine qua non* for wage employment and English literacy. Any fragments of Ìgbo religion and age-organization still standing by the end of the 1960s (after Ottenberg's fieldwork) received the *coup de grâce* in the Nigerian Civil War.[3]

The motor of Christian conversion in the Ìgbo-speaking area was access to the colonial wage sector via English literacy. The proximate reason that Ìgbo-speakers are today more Catholic than Anglican, despite British colonial patronage of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), is that Irish Catholics—*i e* Shanahan's Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) on the left bank of the Niger, not Zappa's French Société des mission africaines (SMA) on the right—cornered the English literacy market (Ekechi 1971, 1977). But before the prod of colonial taxes could fill the pews, military force was required. From the 1880s until at least 1911, at the formal request of both CMS and SMA missionaries, Royal Niger Company and British Army troops burned houses and crops in the area between Ágbọ̀ and Àhaba [Asaba] (Ekechi 1972: 165-75; 1977). One goal of the attacks was to proscribe 'secret' (*i e* initiation-based) age-groupings which had offered armed resistance to missions as well as to the press-ganging of forced labor. On the right bank of the Niger, the guerillas were called '[Ekumeku]'.[4] Ekechi (1972: 166) compares [Ekumeku] to Àyáka on the left bank; both belong to a specific subtype of ancestral mask society whose activities were restricted to nighttime. Such masks were to be heard but not seen—a particularity which made [Ekumeku], Àyáka and similar organizations apt for guerilla warfare, and ripe for eradication.

3. In the Cross River basin, the nearest missionary presence to Ẹ́hụgbò before the 1960s was the Presbyterians, who reached Ụ̀nwara ['Unwanna'] in 1888. 'Tiger' Ǹkáma, a Sunni convert, built a mosque in Ẹ̀nọ́hịa, at the boundary with Kpóghiripkó, in the 1940s. Today, of course, no part of Nigeria is free of American (or American-style) evangelizers.

4. OHADIKE 1991. Square brackets indicate that I don't know the tones. Two tone patterns may have been possible or relevant, as suggested by M. A. Ọ́nwụejíọgwụ̀'s remark that [Ekumeku] is interpretable either as 'prairie wind' (pronounced *èkumékù* from the L tone root *-kù* 'blow' which also underlies the nouns *ìkuku* 'breeze', *àkupe* 'fan' and *ǹku* 'wing'; or else as 'no talking', perhaps pronounced *ékúmeku* derived from the H tone root *-kú* 'speak' (= Standard Ìgbo *-kwú*) which also occurs in the noun *ók(w)u* 'speech'. The pun is closer in those dialects, including the Àníọ́cha and Ágbọ̀ areas on the west bank of the Niger, that have no *w* in 'speak'.

Mask-initiation having been efficiently suppressed in the colonial period, and daily life further disrupted by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), Alutu (1985: 380 *sq.*) remarks that masked performances in most of the Ìgbo-speaking area are now either affairs of the elderly[5] or else secular, 'folkloric' entertainment—what literate Nigerians call 'culture' and confine to the proscenium stage. Ugonna (1983) refers to the desacralization process when he characterizes the mask category of *m̀mọ́nwụ́* as an innovation starting in 19th-century Égbemà Ọ̀zụ́bùlụ́ on the left bank of the Niger. *M̀mọ́nwụ́* eventually displaced other masked performing groups in the so-called 'central' area around Ụ̀lụ́ [Orlu] and Íhíàla. In *m̀mọ́nwụ́*, collective ancestors are not portrayed, although every character represents a *m̀mụ́ọ́*, a human ancestral 'spirit'.

'Ìgbo masks can be broadly classified into two: sacred masks and secular masks. By sacred masks we mean those masks that are believed to be spirits. These are called *m̀mọ́nwụ́*. They have cults into which members are initiated. These masks have power of life and death and are revered as potent spirits. The problem with analysing *m̀mọ́nwụ́* is that what some Ìgbo call *m̀mọ́nwụ́* others do not. For example in Ọ́ba areas Àyáka is regarded as *m̀mụ́ọ́* but in what I have called the *m̀mọ́nwụ́* area, Àyáka is simply seen as a masked human being. In the Ọ̀zụ́bùlụ́ tradition of masking the only *m̀mọ́nwụ́* is Nwáezènọgwụ, the "maskless mask", the "death that kills the uninitiated"' (Ugonna 1977: 7).

Generalizing across the Ìgbo-speaking area, he adds: 'In cultish masking traditions, the Nwáezènọgwụ, Ọ̀kọnkọ and Èkpe traditions, for example, masked figures yield enormous political influence' (*ibid.*: 17).

Ùgoǹnà's description is consistent with Boston's (1960) observation further north, in the Ọ̀máḿbala ['Anambra'] basin, that Ìgbo masked dance performances are mainly ancestral. Some are not, but a categorial denial like that of Ǹzewí (1983) is unfounded. Ǹzewí holds that *m̀mọ́ọ́ afyá* 'market spirit' masked dancers do not represent specific ancestors, rather they are 'embodied spirits' 'escorting the [generally invisible] wraith of the deceased, who is being accorded ancestral status' (*ibid.*: 58). However, though these masks may not be 'ancestral', their performance still *includes* ancestors. *A fortiori,* initiation into masked performing groups of Ùgoǹnà's *m̀mọ́nwụ́* type (including Àyáka) is founded on the concept of ancestry. Other categories of mask may, of course, have other functions, for example:

5. As I observed in the maximal lineage of Úrùójị̀, Ǹri at the end of December, 1976. At the same time, it was striking how much moral authority and practical effectiveness remained with the elders who literally threw an electric guitar band and their audience out of Ǹri town hall.

'Through the masking performance, the Ìgbo village seeks to project onto the dramatic plane, the social ideal of achievement, which is also an artistic display of the economic fruits of the soil.' [. . .] 'The size of the mask is thus a measure of the economic as well as social status of the village that owns one [. . .] Because of this, the Ìgbo masking types do not deal with direct personalization or being forces [. . .] of characterization' (Aniakor 1983: 176, 185 *sq.*)

But the nonsacred aspects of Ìgbo masked performance—now ascendant—do not efface the ancestral dimension of certain masks, for which initiation is the *sine qua non.*

This pattern holds across more of the Ìgbo-speaking area. In Òweré, Aluah (1983) reports two coexistent categories: nonseasonal masks, some representing specific ancestral individuals, and masks limited to one point on the ceremonial calendar, denoting abstract or nonpersonal forces (*ágụ* 'leopard', *èbulu* 'ram', *áfọ* 'year', *égbè* 'gun', *ènyo* 'mirror', *ụ́kwụ árụrụ* 'crippled leg', *ọ́rya ámá mmá* 'disease is bad' . . .). An explicit ancestral impersonation on the right bank of the Niger is the *égwugwu* masked dancer who appears in the Áhaba final funeral ceremony, materializing the deceased before the journey to *ànị́ mmọ́,* the ancestral sphere: 'The initiated were to act as if the *égwugwu* was really and truly the spiritual essence of the dead man, while the uninitiated should simply believe it and not merely act it out' (Isichei & Njoku 1983: 361).

Every maximal lineage in Àhaba has at least one mask, so each mask has a genealogical link to the individual whose materialized spirit it represents. During the final funeral of a man who leaves at least one widow, the *égwugwu* publicly urges her to nominate her next husband. After the *égwugwu* rejects many intentionally unacceptable candidates, she names a person previously arranged with her consent by the lineage elders, and 'the *égwugwu* affirms this name by solemnly repeating it in its distinctive spirit-voice' *(ibid.).*

If all ancestral (*i e* sacred) mask performers were recruited by age grade initiation, the reverse is not true: not all age grade initiations constituted sacred mask groups. For example, the Ágbọ̀ *égu ọ̀mụmụ* 'initiation play' called *Òkóró mẹ̀* was apparently secular.[6] Furthermore, consistent with Ìgbo title systems, not all initiations—not even all those for youth—were obligatory, *i e* constituting age grades. Nwáósu (1989) describes a voluntary, mystical ordeal in the Òweré vicinity: youths are secluded for four nights behind a screen of *ọ̀mụ́* palm fronds where they receive a long incision on the right hand, arm and chest and observe temporary 'æscetic' prohibitions, (*e g* not to eat palm oil or sit on a chair). The next day, they stand in the plaza extending the wounded arm while an herbal mixture is spat into their eyes, until involuntary tremors

6. MANFREDI 1991: 42-45. It was composed by the late Èbú Èdíọn in the 1920s, and fragmentarily revived in 1976.

drive them uncontrollably and blindly through the town, incited on by verses chanted by the priests. Thereafter, each adept prepares a shrine to his right hand.

In bygone Ọ̀nịcha, Henderson (1972: 355 *sq.*) reports a two-stage initiation: at 9-10 years, a boy is escorted to the mask enclosure, 'protected' from threats by an aggressive ghost, and marked with earth while sleeping. On waking he is told that he has just returned from the non-visible world *(ànị́ ḿmụọ)*. By age 15, he legitimately learns the actual mask secrets, to be revealed only on pain of death, thus becoming a *nwá òkólobìa* who can establish his own *ìkéǹga* 'right hand' shrine and join an *ọ̀gbọ́* age-set. The first collective act of this set is to organize a dance entertainment at which to announce its name. The ancestors stood at the top of politics as well as genealogy; government *was* the masked ancestors:[7] 'The [*m̀mụ́ọ́*] are [. . .] the highest and supreme authority [. . .]. From the Court of the [*m̀mụ́ọ́*] there is no appeal' (Strong cited in Henderson 1972: 364).

Obligatory, sacred ancestral mask initiation proceded quite differently, as Basden (1982: 238 *sq.*) and Meek (1937) describe in Ọ́ka and Ọ̀nịcha. The initiands learned an argot (of 'secret or fancy words' *e g ńkpọ̀nkpọ ìte,* 'useless pot' to denote young initiand, [*ibid.:* 73]), though they knew some of it already, because Ọ̀nịcha had a pre-Àyáka preparatory group for very young boys (Meek calls it 'kindergarten'). Final initiation into *mọ́ọ́ (=m̀mụ́ọ́)* proceeded in two stages: pre-pubescents were allowed to follow masked dancers but not know their identity; post-pubescent males, who actually dance, underwent *ị́kpù anị* [*mọọ́*] 'crawling descent [into the spirit world]', also called *ị́má mọọ* 'knowing [the] mask' (*ibid.:* 67). In this gradual transfer of knowledge, the role of secrecy cannot be simple copyright protection for oral intellectual property. Rather, it is constitutive of male power. In this regard, contrast the following quotations from male and female observers of various Ìgbo-speaking communities:

'The adolescent rituals are directed specifically at preparing young people for their roles in life. For young men, the rituals kill them to the life of children and "open their eyes" to the life of meaningful participation in the affairs of the community. In some places [. . .] the initiation is called *ị́tụ́ anya* and actually involves, both in name and in action, the use of drugs injected into the eyes as part of the awakening. [. . .] In all cases, the initiates are tied, for the rest of their lives, to keep secrets from all those who have not gone through the same initiation process' (Nwoga 1984: 54).

7. The apical political position of *Ézé Ǹri* as a 'living ancestor' (Onwuejeogwu 1981) follows logically—a point which Henderson (1972: 369 *sq.*) appreciates. See also fn 11.

'[T]o maintain control over women both in descent groups and in associations [. . .] the most important means was through supernatural sanctions' (Miller 1982: 87). As examples of control over women, Miller cites restrictions on food and movement during seasons of obligatory adolescent sacred mask initiation. These restrictions display the authority of patrilineage shrines. One Ẹ́hụgbò shrine, *Ọ́má-àlị* ('Earth-embrace'), regulates female sexuality and reproduction (menstruation, clitoridectomy, childbirth) as well as noninitiates' 'Earth-prohibitions' *(ǹsọ́ àlị)*. Another shrine, *Ńsi-ọ̀mụmụ* ('Childbearing-medicine') is said by both Miller and Ottenberg to avert 'infant mortality', but if so it is an example of semantic noncompositionality as discussed in the introduction: in this case, a shift from birth *(mụ́)* to mortality.[8] Part of the answer is pragmatic: *ńsi-ọ̀mụmụ* is served out at the shrine as part of the annual *Ìkó Nri Nsí* 'Feast of the Medicated Food'. This feast ends with a chant *Ḿkpụ́kpụ, ḿkpụ́kpụ, ḿkpụ́kpụ kà ńka!* 'Initiated seniority is better than longevity'.[9] In other words, the effect of the medicine is not on reproduction *(mụ́)* but on genealogical transmission. Finally, the shrine called *Má òbú* 'Ancestral spirit of the patrilineage altar', is accessible only to male initiates, and is said by Miller to protect patrilineage males against adultery.

Miller's insight—that male initiation entails gender subordination—points to a convincing range of examples, but it still requires explanation, if for no other reason than its mechanism of symbolic effectiveness is not explicit. I contend that a successful semantic theory (a translation) of Ìgbo adolescent male initiation is one which supplies the links which are logically necessary to this mechanism. To improve the chances of success, I will reanalyze the fullest available description: Ottenberg (1989). Unfortunately, despite an explicit intention to separate interpretive judgements from the facts, Ottenberg so thoroughly mixes observations with attributed mental states that his data cannot be presented without simultaneous philological critique.

8. The same anomaly occurs in Ágbọ̀ in the term *égu ọ̀mụmụ* 'initiation dance'. This expression occurs in the first line of the *Òkóró mẹ̀* story as told by Ẹ̀bú Èdiọ́n (Manfredi 1991: 43).

9. 'Òkiri' Chúkwu Ìkpọ́ lead this event in Èzí Ukwu, Kpóghirikpó, Ẹ́hụgbọ̀, on Àhọ-Friday 4 March 1977. Ogbalu (1981: 147 *sq.*) reports a closely similar enactment in the Ụ̀lụ́ area. I take the root of *ḿkpụ́kpụ* to be the verb *kpú* 'mould' which prototypically describes the activities of both potters (*ọ̀-kpú-ìte* 'pot moulder') and iron smiths (*ọ̀-kpú-úzụ* 'anvil-moulder'). In opposing technicized Bildung to *ká* 'grow old', a spontaneous process, the chant seems to be asserting something like 'Nurture is more important than nature'. (E. O. Wilson take note.)

Reconstructing the Ẹ́hụgbò data

In keeping with the aphorism that 'Social criticism begins with grammar and the re-establishment of meanings',[10] and with the above assumptions and arguments, my method for recovering information from Ottenberg's published work (1989) will be to collect and analyze the terminology of male initiation. In tandem, I will use Ottenberg's interpretations as a foil for my own. Since all this takes place in a written medium, the first step must be agreement on how to write Ìgbo.

Orthography

Even in quotations, I correct Ottenberg's 'Afikpo'—an egregious colonial spelling (as he knows, *ibid.*: 215)—to *Ẹ́hụgbò*. Also, I automatically convert the 1929-vintage 'New' (F. G. Adams) orthography to the post-1961 (Ọ́nwụ) orthography (Ogbalu & Emenanjo 1975). Not only is Ottenberg innocent of tone (*ibid.*: XXIV), his transcription of Ìgbo vowels is unreliable[11], and some of his word glosses are blithely inaccurate[12] or just bizarre.[13]

I cite all Ìgbo words with tones, or state that the tones are unknown. In the tone orthography of Welmers and Nwáchukwu, both high and low are marked, but any mark is restricted to the first of the maximal sequence

10. V. G. Belinsky (1811-1848) quoted by GORDIMER 1985: 146.
11. See for example fn 19.
12. *E g* OTTENBERG (1989: 270) renders *Ọ́ ńúgụ ihu máị* (Standard Ìgbo *Ọ̀ ńúghị́ ihu mánya*) incoherently as 'one who faces palmwine'. It means 'S/he didn't drink the palmwine's face'—*i e* its first draught (as opposed to *ọ̀kpụ́ máị* 'the dregs'). Even less helpfully, Ottenberg glosses both *ẹ́rụsị* (Standard *álụsị*, perhaps cognate to Yorùbá *òrìṣà*) and *má* (Standard *mmúọ́*) as 'spirit', thereby eliding the difference between supernatural forces and human ancestors. According to ONWUEJEOGWU (1981), the *Ézé Ǹri* kingship title was unique in combining the statuses of *mmúọ́* and *álụsị*. At least four major *álụsị* of the Ǹri Kingdom, studied by Onwuejeogwu, are recognized at Ẹ́hụgbò (with some dialect differences):

(Àjá) Àna	Earth (Sacrifice)	In Ẹ́hụgbò: *Àlị* (cf. Ágbọ̀ *jà ánụ* 'cut up meat')
Ízù	Market-Week	(cf. *zù* 'be complete')
Ágwụ	Herbalism/Divination'	(cf. *ógwụ* 'medicine')
Ìfe-Jí-Ọ́kú	Cult-of-Yam-Fertility	In Ẹ́hụgbò: *Ǹjọ́kú* (cf. *fè* 'worship', *k(w)ú* 'make leafy growth')

However, instead of the Ǹri oracular *álụsị* Ìdéḿmili 'Pillar [*i e* uphill source]-of-Water', perhaps the main oracle at Ẹ́hụgbò is the riverbank shrine of the *ẹ́rụsị* Ékwetèni which is said by OTTENBERG (1958) to derive from Árụ-Chúkwu.

13. See for example fn 15.

of syllables on the same pitch throughout a word or phrase. This system aims not simply to economize marks, but to approximate the mental representation of pitch contrasts.[14] The following trisyllabic place names need one or two marks each:

Orthographic	*Phonetic*	*Colonial*
Ọ̀nịcha	[ọ̀nị̀chà]	ONITSHA
Òweré	[òwèré]	OWERRI
Ẹ́bịrịba	[ẹ́bíríbá]	ABRIBA
Ẹ́hụgbò	[ẹ́hú̩gbò]	AFIKPO

By the same convention, an orthographic sequence of two high tone marks indicates a downstep beginning at the second mark (the phonetic downstep symbol being a raised exclamation point). This can be seen in the following place names:

Orthographic	*Phonetic*	*Colonial*
Ǹsúká	[ǹsú!ká]	NSUKKA
Ǹnééwi	[ǹné!éwí]	NEWI

Phrasal tone in the Ẹ́hụgbò dialect shows other effects, including rightward shift and final total downstep. Both peculiarities are very striking, and often remarked by other Ìgbo speakers, but neither one needs to be represented orthographically, since they are predictable.

What is a Child?

The book (Ottenberg 1989) begins with two general propositions on which the whole argument rests. 'Despite the lack of a specific term, there is

14. WELMERS and WELMERS's (1968) Ìgbo tonemarking was modeled on CHRISTALLER's (1875) tone orthography for Àkán, whose prosody is very similar. Apparently, NWACHUKWU (1976) rediscovered the same principle independently. The second major system (used by Williamson and Éménanjọ) marks each low-bearing syllable individually, leaves all high-bearing syllables unmarked, and puts a macron on the first high tone after a downstep juncture. Unfortunately, many students interpret the macron as a 'mid' tone. This works well enough until they encounter a sequence of downsteps, which then becomes a 'garden-path tonemarking' situation (cf. MANFREDI 1982), so that for *Ọ gāālā ahyā* 'S/he has gone to market' (with two downsteps), they write *Ọ gāālā āhy* . . . and then they have no way to mark the final syllable. A third option—favored by D. I. Nwoga—is to mark individual tones 'only where needed for disambiguation', but the application of this functional maxim is necessarily relative to both the text and the audience. Certainly, an Ẹ́hụgbò text for a non-Ẹ́hụgbò audience demands full tonemarking.

definitely an Ẹ́hụgbò concept of childhood as a period when one is dependent on family, unknowledgeable, sexually immature and lacking a full sense of social responsibility' (*ibid.*: 20). 'There is a pretty good congruence between the Ẹ́hụgbò framework [of maturational stages] and the Freudian one' (*ibid.*: XXIII).

Both true statements, perhaps, but no direct evidence is offered for either one. As to the first claim, an indigenous 'concept of childhood' might be presupposed by the fact of obligatory adolescent initiation, but the substantive question is whether pre-initiates are viewed as having intrinsic childlike qualities or simply as lacking adulthood (cf. Ariès 1962). Eventually Ottenberg admits that, prior to Westernization, Ẹ́hụgbò lacked 'a very rich distinctive culture of childhood, as compared to that of adults', a culture which arose in medieval Europe 'as a consequence of Christianity, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the growth of schools' (1989: 317 *sq.*). He acknowleges that the second claim is purely subjective, appealing to 'my sense of how human beings behave' (*ibid.*: 315). Any attempt to ground the claim in observations are thwarted by the author's dichotomy between 'the vernacular psychology and a psychology of the unconscious' (*ibid.*: 131). In effect, 'vernacular psychology'[15] refers to all indigenous discourse, texts and lexical items.

Ottenberg gives the Freudian scheme as a sequence of four maturational intervals. He says that the first of these has a named Ẹ́hụgbò counterpart and a rich nomenclature for various substages:

Freud	*Ẹ́hụgbò*
1. pre-Œdipal stage (0-3 yrs) -------- 1.	*(nwá) [ngịrịrị]* 'nursing infant' (0-2 yrs) (*ibid.*: 19)
	named substages: *nwá ọ̀hụ́hụ́* 'new child'
	ịnọ ọ́dụ 'sitting'
	ígbé igbe 'crawling'
	ígù úzọ mpị 'standing'
	ífụ̀télé ezé 'tooth-producing'
	íjìje 'walking'
	ígbá ọsọ 'running'[16]

15. I find the term *vernacular* offensive in this context. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* derives it from Latin *vernaculus* 'domestic (servant)', ultimately from *verna* 'slave born in the household'. Ottenberg's unhedged use of the term 'vernacular psychology' helps him to treat indigenous thought as effectively beneath or beside serious intellectual inquiry.
16. Ottenberg misglosses *ígbá ọsọ* as 'fire-gun' (which is of course *ígbá egbè*). Despite this lapse, he manfully tries to save his 'gun' by defining *running* and *shooting* as 'assertive' activities! When it is about one year old it is *íjìje* (able to walk) and a little later *ígbá ọsọ* (fire-gun), when it runs and moves well, meaning that it is now capable of being assertive (OTTENBERG 1989: 19).

In setting this equation up, however, he elides the fact (mentioned elsewhere, *ibid.*: 228, 310) that the nursing period is much longer in the Ìgbo-speaking area than the Western European average.

For the next two stages, putative Ẹ́hụgbò terms are not even nameable:[17]

Freud	*Ẹ́hụgbò*
2. Œdipal stage (3-6 yrs) -------- 2.	['not marked by a special Ẹ́hụgbò term' (*ibid.*: 33)]
	correlated activities:
	gradual 'weaning' and 'toilet training' (2-5 yrs) (*ibid.*: 33-35)
	"move to the [male resthouse]" (4 or 5 yrs) (*ibid.*: 47-50)
3. latency stage (6-11 yrs) -------- 3.	["no single Ẹ́hụgbò term" (*ibid.*: 59)]
	correlated activities:
	ísi uló óbu, play emulation of adult secret society, organized at the level of the lineage compound (5-9 yrs) (*ibid.*: 62)
	informal intra-village wrestling (5-15 yrs) (*ibid.*: 83)

The absence of indigenous terms can't invalidate the Freudian schema, since it is invulnerable to Ẹ́hụgbò consciousness ('vernacular psychology'). But there are reasons for doubt. For example: 'Unlikle American children, who are often confined to their own world, Ìgbo children grow up and participate in two worlds—the world of children and the world of adults. Ìgbo children take an active part in their parents' social and economic activities' (Uchendu 1965: 61).

Ẹ́hụgbò is weakly consistent with stages 2 and 3. If *Œdipal* (stage 2) describes the events of weaning and quitting the mother's house, it is just if any loss of physical access to the mother counts as Œdipal. But an Œdipal characterization of toilet training does not hold, on Ottenberg's own description (1989: 35), since at Ẹ́hụgbò that activity is 'non-traumatic'. As for *latency* (stage 3), it is defined negatively, by suppression or absence, so it applies only by default.

17. The lack of an explicit name does not mean that a category can't be expressed in Ìgbo, simply that a special term has not yet been coined or widely accepted, as far as present knowledge goes.

Thus, the Freudian schema offers no special insight into the first three maturational periods, either individually or as a group. The remaining stage is the fourth:

Freud	*Ẹhụgbò*
4. genital stage (11? yrs) --------	4. (no corresponding terms or activities cited)

Here, Ottenberg's argument is implicit, but explicable. From Chapters 3 to 7, I have culled a list of Ẹhụgbò terms and activities which he regards as constituting stage 4, insofar as they can be thought to express a genital preoccupation.

óke nwoké ('big male'), 'an adolescent [. . .] initiated or not' (*ibid.:* 59)
òbí ogó ('commons shrine') activities by the village 'secret society' (9-13, 15+ yrs) (*ibid.:* 62)
ógó ụmụ ẹnà ('commons of non-initiates'), formal, secret mask-dances (9-18 yrs) (*ibid.:* 75-81)
inter-village wrestling grades (*ibid.:* 83 *sq.*) *m̀kpúfú ḿgba* 'breaking into wrestling' (15-18 yrs)
ísó ògugu 'following the palm frond' (18-28 yrs)
ìkpọ́ 'iron clapper-bell' (28-30 yrs)
ísi jí ('head of yam') prestige initiation for first sons, inaugurating a seven-year cycle (*ibid.:* ch. 5)
ísi òbubu ('head of *òbubu*'), the second stage in the male initiation cycle, for all sons (*ibid.:* ch. 6)
ísi òbubu Ẹdḥà ('head of *òbubu* of Ẹdḥà'), a compressed, alternative male initiation (*ibid.:* ch. 7)

It is easy to agree that elaborate initiations and secret techniques, like those mentioned in this list, usher in a conceptually distinct maturational stage at Ẹhụgbò. More interesting is whether this stage is anything but (incipient) adulthood, and hence whether it can be characterized as 'genital' beyond the obvious sense that maturation entails physical growth. As to adulthood, Nwoga (1984) argues that in the Ìgbo context it is not a homogeneous span; adolescent initiation is simply one in a long sequence of adult titles extending throughout one's life with the ultimate goals of *ńka nà nzere* 'longevity and fulfillment'.

To demonstrate Freudian content in stage 4, requires evidence that the activities of Ẹhụgbò adolescent initiation are genital. For example, one could describe pervasive genital symbolism in Ẹhụgbò adolescent initiation rituals. That Ottenberg *wishes* to do this is clear. For example, with respect to the term *ísó ògugu* which names the intermediate wrestling grade, he suggests that '[t]he implicit reference may be to the growth of the penis' (1989: 84 *sq.*). *Ògugu* may denote a construction of palm fronds tied around a wooden bar, carried in the initation dance. Having seen this object (in late March, 1977), I can understand what is meant if someone describes *ògugu* as phallic. However, the validity of such an *aperçu* remains in the eye of the beholder.

I don't know the Ẹhụgbò word *òbubu,* which occurs in the names of two initiations. My best guess is that it means either 'navel' (cf. Standard Ìgbo *ótùbo*) or else '[a type of] calabash' (in Standard Ìgbo, one kind is called *ḿbùbo*).[18] Either meaning would, as it happens, support the 'umbilical' semantic hypothesis of this paper, in different ways.

Ottenberg's fullest remarks in support of the genital hypothesis are found in chapters 5 to 7, which make up over half the book. Two genital motifs receive the most detailed attention, and may fairly be called crucial to his argument. These are *1)* that yam tubers and maize ('corn') cobs are phallic symbols, and *2)* that a smashed calabash is a uterine symbol. For each motif, I will adduce indigenous evidence which contradicts these interpretations (see *infra*). Beforehand, some preparatory points are needed. In the following subparts I make a *prima facie* case that reincarnation ideas are crucial to Ẹhụgbò initiation rites; and, as a corollary, I propose etymologies for two cosmologically important nouns: *ụ̀wa* and *chí.*

What is a Parent?

Partly because of Ottenberg's 1968 monograph, Ẹhụgbò (along with Ọhọ́fyá and other Ìgbo-speaking communities on Ényòm—the Cross River) is famous in the anthropological literature as being governed simultaneously and separately by patrilineages *(úmùńnà)* and matrilineages *(íkwu).* If, as he reports in the 1989 book, two ancestral spirits *(má)* are believed to correspond to every individual, then the two *má* might conceivably represent one's *úmùńnà* and one's *íkwu.*[19] But without citing any evidence, he assumes that they are gendered, and furthermore that they correspond to three specific individuals: 'Thus the two reincarnated spirits *[má]* and the [male] child's personal spirit *ụ̀wa* [. . .] form the Œdipal triangle in spirit form: father, mother and child' (Ottenberg 1989: 27).

Ottenberg's own data, however, suggest several problems in identifying Ẹhụgbò *má, má, ụ̀wa* with this Holy Trinity. First, Ẹhụgbò doesn't have nuclear families: 'Children soon learn that any grownup can rebuke them and has authority over them. Thus not only is there a baby-mother or

18. Besides their reduplicated structure, these two words share the root *bò* which, while unattested in the lexical collections available to me, has two plausible alternative etymologies. Either *bò* is a back-vowel variant of *bè* 'cut', as occurs in labial or velar environments (*ótu* for *étu* 'manner', *nwókó* for *nwóké* 'man'), but also in other context (*ìsón* for *ìsén* 'five'), cf. WARD (1941: 40-42), MANFREDI (1991: 60); or else *bò* is an ideophonic element denoting round shape.

19. Ottenberg's spelling vacillates between *ma* and *mma*; no difference seems to be intended.

two, and older siblings, in the lives of small children, but, in a sense, all adults are parents' (*ibid.:* 35).

Second, even if the two *má* truly represent the individual's two lineages, this by itself does not gender them male and female. The Ẹ́hụgbò matrilineage is more 'female' than the patrilineage only at the level of kinship ideology. In practice—at the level of individual biology—one's *ńkwu* is no less dominated by males than one's *ụ́mùn̄nà* is. As recognized in Ottenberg (1968), an *ńkwu* is a landholding corporation of men related through their mothers. Demographically, one's *ńkwu* may contain no fewer males than one's *ụ́mùn̄nà* does. Thus, absent any evidence that one of a male individual's two *má* is regarded as female in *gender*, Ottenberg (1989) is left in the paradoxical position of appealing to what he calls the 'vernacular psychology' of ideological gender *(ńkwu vs ụ́mùn̄nà)*, in order to support an 'unconscious psychology' of biological gender in the universalizing, Freudian mode (mother *vs* father).

Third, whereas the Freudian family locates the main bond of relationship between a father and his son(s) who 'carry on his name' (as Euro-Americans say), the pattern of Ẹ́hụgbò personal names shows that patrilineages in that community are constructed not so much by filiation (as implied by anthropological kinship grids) as by reincarnation across alternate generations. The eurocentric assumption is that the crucial role of the first son is to 'replace' his father (*ibid.:* 188), but the Ẹ́hụgbò naming system shows otherwise. A first son *Chúkwu Ìkpọ́*'s essential role is to reincarnate his grandfather *Chúkwu*, whose second name was predictably also *Ìkpọ* if it happens that his father bore the name *Ìkpọ Chúkwu* (*i e* as a first son, cf. *ibid.:* 18). Put another way: Ẹ́hụgbò lineage ideology suggests that the father's obligation to sponsor at least one boy in the *ísi jí* rites comes from his duty to let his own father (the boy's grandfather) reincarnate. This would explains Ottenberg's recurrent observation that '*ísi jí* is as much an initiation for the father as it is for the boy' (*ibid.:* 139, cf. 145). Why else should the boy's father be so directly involved in the initiation of his first son *(ísi jí)*, but not the initiation of subsequent sons *(ísi òbubu)*?

The centrality of the reincarnation concept is further supported by etymologies which it suggests for two Ìgbo words which have been thusfar obscure as to origin and meaning.

The Meaning of *ụ̀wa* and *chí*

As just noted, Ottenberg (1989: 24) reports an Ẹ́hụgbò word we can spell *ụ̀wa*, meaning 'male personal spirit', analogous to *chí* in other Ìgbo-speaking communities.[20] To my recollection, the tone is LL, making it

20. Though this meaning of *ụ̀wa* escaped my notice, I recall a probable cognate *Ẹ̀wa* (a male personal name). By contrast, *chí* has no gender. Ottenberg cites a word "*ɛgɛro*" (in his pre-1961 transcription) as the female counterpart of *ụ̀wa*. Even if '*ɛgɛro*' is not a compound, so that it obeys vowel harmony, it could be either *ẹgẹrụ* or *egero*; and since Ìgbo permits eight or nine trisyllabic tone patterns, '*ɛgɛro*' is nearly twenty-ways indeterminate. (More, if it is a compound!)

homophonous with the pan-Ìgbo word *ụ̀wa* 'world'.[21] Since at present knowledge the meaning of *ụ̀wa* as 'male personal spirit' is unique to Ẹ́hụgbò, one is naturally curious whether this is an Ẹ́hụgbò idiosyncrasy, or if it has any wider relevance to Ìgbo studies as a whole. My tentative answer is the latter. On formal and semantic grounds, an Ẹ́hụgbò noun *ụ̀wa* 'male personal spirit' could come from the verb meaning 'arrive home', which in Ẹ́hụgbò is pronounced *wá*.[22] Consider the following cross-dialect table:

	Ọ̀nịcha	Àbọ́	Ágbọ̀	Ẹ́húgbò	Òwerí	Ẹ̀hwúdà	Éleèle	Other dialects
return homeward	ná	lá	lá	lá	lá	lá, yá	làá	
arrive home	nọ́[23]	lúa	lúa (?lọ́a)	wá	yọ́	lọ́sị	[?]	lọ́ta (Íhiàla)
house/home	ụ́nọ̀	ụ́nọ̀	ólọ̀	úlò	úyọ̀	úḍọ̀	ọ́rò	ụ́nwọ̀ (Ọ̀ba) úrọ̀ (Àzúmịnị) úlùọ (Ìsúóchi, Águatá)

21. Among the ingredients for a 1977 ceremony were flat, three-pointed iron bits called *ápa ụ̀wa*. At the time, I misglossed *ápa ụ̀wa* as 'carriers of the world', assuming the ordinary meaning of *ụ̀wa* and deriving *ápa* from the verb *pá* 'carry [in the hands]'. In retrospect, *ápa* are old iron currency, whose use with the shallow pot *(ńja)* representing the male personal spirit *(ụ̀wa)* is a monetary sacrifice. OTTENBERG (1989: 28) reports that such a pot is placed on the ancestral altar for each young boy and, '[w]hen the owner dies, [. . .] [it] becomes an ancestral spirit pot'.

22. There may be no tonal difficulty in this derivation. The H tone of the verb *lá* is weak (SWIFT, AHAGHOTU & UGORJI 1962: 478), and there are many other examples of weak H-tone verbs forming nouns whose root bears L: *byá* 'come' → *ọ́byà* 'visitor'; *jé* 'walk' → *íjè/ǹje* 'journey'; *lụ́* 'defile' → *álụ̀* 'abomination'; *lọ́ / nọ́* 'arrive home' → *ụ́lọ̀ / ụ́nọ̀* 'home'; *rú* 'produce' → *úrù* 'flesh, profit'. (The reverse also occurs: *lù* 'tell [tale]' → *ílu* 'tale'; *zì* 'send' → *ózi* 'message', cf. WILLIAMSON 1972: XXXIX-XLIX.) The proposal *chì* (*azụ́*) '(re)turn' → *chí* 'returner, *i e* reincarnating spirit' would be like *zì* → *ózi*, with the complication that the noun *chí* lacks an overt prefix. However, the rising tone preceding *chí* in a phrase like *úchèé chí* '*chí*'s memory may reflect an abstract prefix (absent, for example, in *Chíké*: thus '*Chíké*'s memory' is *úchè Chíké*, not **úchèé Chíké*). Synchronically, I should note, it is conceivable that the verb root is derived from the noun, rather than the reverse, consistent with the syntactic theory of argument structure illustrated for Ìgbo by HALE, IHIONU & MANFREDI (1995).

23. Clearly, *nọ́* 'arrive home' underlies the greeting *Nnọ́ọ̀*! 'Welcome!', just as Ágbọ̀ *lúa* underlies the counterpart greeting *Àlúà*!'.

If Ẹ́hụgbò *ụ̀wa* 'male personal spirit' is morphologically related to Ẹ́hụgbò *wá* 'arrive home', it could be an agent noun meaning 'home-arriver'.[24] Semantically, this derivation coheres with the description of the journey of one's own spirit from the invisible world of the ancestors *(àlí mmọ́)* to the visible world *(élu ụ̀wa)* as a homecoming *(ílọ́ ụ̀wa)*, while the return journey from the visible world to the invisible world is described as a departure for home *(ílá mmọ́)*.[25] A predictable exception to this nomenclature is the shamanic journey of the diviner *(díbyà áfá)*, whose round trip spiritual journey to the ancestors does not follow the path of reincarnation, and is described as *íjé-la mmọ́*.[26]

Additionally or instead, the item *ụ̀wa* 'personal spirit' could be related to *ụ̀wa* in its ordinary, pan-Ìgbo meaning of 'world', as in the expression *élu ụ̀wá à* 'this world that we inhabit'. A potential semantic path is clear: the subjectively experiential, visible world is the one into which one reincarnates *(wá)* from the invisible, non-experiential world of the ancestors. I know no other etymology for the 'world' meaning of *ụ̀wa*, but before the Ẹ́hụgbò verb *wá* can be accepted as a plausible candidate for the root, there is the obvious difficulty that *wá* meaning 'arrive home' is apparently restricted in the present day to just one community, Ẹ́hụgbò. This problem would go away if we knew that this phonetic shape of the morpheme was more widespread at an earlier stage of the language. Though slightly technical, such supporting evidence does exist.

In both Àbọ́ and Ágbọ̀ (in the present Delta State, on the right bank of the Niger) the verb is pronounced *lúa*, or perhaps *lọ́a*. The complex syllable structure (CVV) may be understood in one of two ways. Perhaps the final vowel *-a* in *lúa / lọ́a* is not part of the root but rather an affix, namely the open vowel suffix (OVS). Some Ìgbo verbs possess this affix inherently (*bía* 'come', *rí̩ọ* 'beg'), other verbs are incompatible with it (*gá[*a]* 'go', *pù[*ọ́]* 'exit'), but verbs take it optionally, in an appropriate syntactic context (*dhà[á]* 'fall', *rí[e]* 'eat') (cf. Nwachukwu 1976: 75). Alternatively, the final vowel *-a* in *lúa* may be the modern outcome of a historic compound *lọ́ + wá*. If the OVS analysis is correct, no implication follows for *ụ̀wa*, but more mysteries are created, such as why the verb root *lọ́* (or *nọ́*) absolutely repels the OVS in all other known dialects. But if the compound analysis is correct, it follows that the original distribution of *wá* was greater than at present, which is to be expected if the verb *wá* is the root of the ordinary Ìgbo word *ụ̀wa* 'world'.

24. Ẹ̀dó *òwá* 'house/home' may be cognate to Ìgbo *ụ̀wa*; but any cognation between Ìgbo *chí* and its Ẹ̀dó counterpart *ẹ̀hì* is much less likely, or less direct.
25. I owe this point to C. Àzụ́ónye. In Ọ́ka, THOMAS (1968, II: 73) has *nọ́ ụ̀wa / nọ́ agụ̀* 'be reincarnated' and WILLIAMSON (1972: 323) has the phrase *ínọ́ ḿmadụ̀* 'to reincarnate someone'.
26. For example, the Ẹ́hụgbò diviner Éléje Aghá—who spoke the text in the Appendix—liked to be addressed as *Ò-jé-la-mmọ́* 'He-who-goes-to-the-ancestors-and-returns'.

As already noted, Ottenberg draws the obvious parallel between the Ẹ́hụgbò noun *ụ̀wa* 'male personal spirit' and the roughly synonymous (though gender-neutral) Standard Ìgbo noun *chí*. Unfortunately, the meaning of the latter is unclear. Anyone who discusses the noun *chí* with literate Ìgbo speakers encounters two levels of semantic difficulty. First, as explained by Achebe (1975) and Nwoga (1985), when Christian missionaries translated their divinity as *Chí Ukwu* ('great *chí*') and *Chí ná-Ékè* ('the *chí* who shares/creates'), they were pillaging existing lexical items, respectively: the name of the *Chí Ukwu* oracle in the hegemonic town of Árụ̀, and the dualistically paired supernatural beings *Chí nà Ekè* '*Chí* and *Ekè*'.[27] As a result, anyone for whom the Christianized, written version of the language is conceptually salient is virtually constrained to perceive the meaning of the single morpheme *chí* on the basis of the missionary translations of *Chí Ukwu* and *Chí ná-Ékè*—even though these second-hand coinages are morpho-semantically opaque. This awkward situation yields metaphysical absurdities like 'personal God' and 'guardian angel' as translations of *chí*.

A second level of difficulty, shared by literates and nonliterates, is *chí*'s lack of an overt prefix. Almost every noun in the language, whether formed syntactically (*ò-gbú ńkụ* 'wood-cutter' from *gbú* 'cut') or lexically (*ń-ri* 'food' from *rí* 'eat'), or whether unanalyzable (*áka* 'arm/hand'), has a prefix, composed of a vowel or syllabic nasal. Besides distinguishing nouns from verbs categorially, a prefix may provide lexical-semantic information, such as whether the noun is animate or agentive. Hence, the lack of an overt prefix in the noun *chí* forms an obstacle for a speaker who is trying to interpret its meaning—even though it is the consensus of the linguistic literature that the noun *chí* has a phonetically null prefix.[28]

Difficulties aside, the derivation of Ẹ́hụgbò *ụ̀wa* '(male) personal spirit' from Ẹ́hụgbò *wá* 'arrive home' leads to a further suggestion: that the etymological source for the cosmologically analogous, pan-Ìgbo item *chí* is the verb *chì* (*azụ́*) '(re)turn'. The parallel is strengthened by the association of this verb with *nọ́ / lọ́ / yọ́*, 'arrive home' (whose Ẹ́hụgbò cognate is *wá*) in the compound verb *lọ́ghàchi / yọ́ghàchi* 'come back again' (Igwe & Green 1970: 155). In this way, the analytic meaning of

27. The missionary translations are found, *e g* in WILLIAMSON's Onitsha dictionary (1972: 77 *sq.*).
28. The exceptionality of *chí* is not completely irregular, as witnessed by the only two other monosyllabic nouns in Standard Ìgbo: *jí* 'yam' and *dí* 'master'. Both of these have a nongrave consonant, a high front vowel and a H tone. Predictably, *jí* and *dí* show the same tonal evidence for an abstract prefix as *chí* does, when they occur in phrases (cf. fn 22): *úchèé jí* 'memory of yam', *úchèé dí* '[a] master's memory'.

the noun *chí* would be an agent noun 'returner/reincarnator'. From there, it is but a small step to the cosmological meaning of one's 'reincarnating personal spirit', and thence to the related meaning 'dawn' as in the return of daylight.

When a Yam is just a Cigar

Back to Ottenberg's main argument that Ẹ́hụgbò male initiation—the core activity of his putative fourth maturational stage—is genital in character. In support of this claim, he cites one clear bit of evidence: the name of the first, prestige male initiation is *ísi jí* 'head of yam'. However, a phallic interpretation for this term is not inevitable, as he admits:

> 'The term *ísi jí* has various interpretations at Ẹ́hụgbò. One is "head-yam", meaning that this is an important event, it is like the head of the yam, its growing portion. The term is also a metaphor for the boy as a growing yam, and for his growing penis and awakening sexuality, since the yam often symbolizes the male organ at Ẹ́hụgbò. Yams are also liberally employed in the considerable feasting during this initiation; they are the major Ẹ́hụgbò ceremonial food, grown largely by men.'[29]

Because this is the only actual candidate in the book for the phallic symbolism of yam, it deserves careful consideration. Elsewhere, Ottenberg (1989: 13) claims that, because yam is 'the major male crop at Ẹ́hụgbò', it is 'symbolic of the penis', but that's no evidence, just a restatement of the premise. To his credit, Ottenberg mentions alternative interpretations of *ísi jí*. I will argue that a view of boys as the 'reincarnating', re-growth portion of yams is both well founded in the Ẹ́hụgbò conceptual system, with no reference to male genitalia, and also sufficient to explain the semantics of initiation.

Ottenberg (*ibid.*: 175) presents no evidence that yams are phallic other than in his own mind, but there is no lack of assertions to this effect (see also Miller 1982): 'Unfortunately, I gathered little information on the songs. Some praise farmers [. . .] who raise plenty of yams; their names are given. This, of course, is the yam harvest season and yams play a major role as food in the initiation feasts and sacrifices, and are also a phallic symbol.' '[T]he yam [. . .] is explicitly a symbol of the penis, as is evident in the songs of the feast of the Tortoise [*Ẹ́bụ́ Mbè*, literally 'Tortoise Songs']' (*ibid.*: 191).

29. Ottenberg 1989: 140. Miller (1982: 83 fn 5) likewise employs circumstantial reasoning in saying that 'yams [are] a symbol of human welfare, a male sex symbol, and traditionally a form of wealth used in ceremonial transactions such as title taking and the payment of bridewealth'. 'The yam [. . .] represents human welfare and virility and is a male sex symbol' (*ibid.*: 90).

There may be ample phallic evidence in his collected Tortoise Songs, but the only description of these songs in the book (or elsewhere in print) is long on sex but short on yams: 'There is a good deal of aggression in the songs, for women proclaim men's sexual foibles and attempted and completed feats and men sing that women are unfaithful and deceitful in sexual matters' (*ibid.*: 287).

Faced with such weak evidence, one could persist in the phallic analysis were it not for strong counterevidence—of which Ottenberg is doubtless aware since he depicts it (the third to last plate before [*ibid.*:169]), though without comment. Thanks to 'Òkiri' Chúkwu Ìkpọ́, the Ékwetèni oracle priest of Èzí Ukwu Kpóghirikpó, and my host Ìchíè Ǹkáma Ọkpáni, I witnessed the Ẹ́hụgbò New Yam feast at Ènọ́hịa Nkálụ in 1977. As in Ottenberg's (undated) photo *(ibid.)*, the adolescent girls *(ụ́mụ́ ágbọghọ̀)* of that village emerged in a line from the grove behind the *ógó* (village commons), and formed a dancing circle next to the shrine where new yams were boiling on a tripod. These girls were said to be *costumed as*, and *impersonating*, *yams*. Apart from the camwood covering their breasts and rounded hairstyles, and the rich cloths padding their waists and hips, the dramatic image of heavy yam tubers was achieved by lumbering dance steps. Just in case the point was lost on anyone, the text of the girls' song—as Ǹkáma Ọkpáni parsed it for me—stated 'We are yams' and the *éleri jí* ('yam-eating priest') who led the ceremony also addressed the girls directly as yams. After asking them what medicinal ingredients they required in order to be 'born' or harvested out of the earth, *éleri jí* tossed these same items (all counted in sets of seven, recalling the 'seven months' during which yam tubers proverbially grow to maturity) inside their dancing circle. At that moment, all the yam-girls burst out of the circle, dashed from the *ógó* in all directions and scurried along the village paths towards the yam storage sheds *(ọ́ba)* in individual domestic compounds.

If yams are a phallic symbol, how do these girls qualify as phallic? On the contrary, the symbolic link between yam and pubescent girls is fertility, the Ìgbo concept *ụ̀bá* 'self-multiplying wealth', as opposed to *àkụ* 'accumulated property'—the latter being inanimate or inert. In many Ìgbo-speaking communities (though not in Ẹ́hụgbò, to my knowledge), a wife is described (indeed praised) with the agent noun *ò-rí-àkụ*, 'consumer of accumulated property'. This counts as praise, not reproach, because a wife is also the source of *ụ̀bá* in the form of children; hence nubile girls, like yams, are *ụ̀bá*.[30]

30. Bridewealth is literally *àkụ nwáànyị* 'woman's wealth' where the genitive is to be construed as objective and not possessive. The prototypical *àkụ* consumed by a wife is cloth. The generic Ẹ́hụgbò word for 'cloth(ing)' is *èkụ* (Standard Ìgbo *ákwà*), and this could indicate that etymologically cloth is wealth *par excellence*. It may also explain the Ẹ́hụgbò proverb: *Ónye wétere ọbyà, wetere*

This brings us to the other candidate phallic symbol: maize ('corn'). This crop's role in initiation is a negative one: '[A] boy is forbidden to touch or eat corn until his initiation is completed [. . .] In some cases the son assiduously sweeps the floor, ceilings, walls and shelves of his mother's house to remove any corn, for she will cook for him before and during the initiation, as she normally does. She may have contact with corn outside of her home but not when cooking for her son' (*ibid.*: 155).

'If the mother of an initiand violates the corn taboo [. . .] initiates rush to her compound and demand money from her. With this they purchase a laying hen, touch it to the woman's body, sacrifice it at the *ísi jí* bush area, and cook it and eat it there' (*ibid.*: 184). The same restriction holds for *ísi òbubu* initiation (*ibid.*: 210). What does Ottenberg make of all this? No surprise:

'It is my interpretation—and not that of the Ẹ́hụgbò [people]—that the corn cob stands for the penis, the kernels for sperm. They are symbolically denied the boy while in the bush. The corn taboo applies to both mother and son, symbolizing the link between them through childhood affective ties and latent sexual feeling. It is the Ẹ́hụgbò women who grow corn, as well as vegetables' (*ibid.*: 230).

Why is one phallus (maize) denied to the boys while another phallus (yam) is emphatically theirs throughout the initiation period? Unless this puzzle can be solved, the only logical conclusion is that phallic symbolism is irrelevant to initiation, since it would have both the effect of prohibition (maize) and that of mandatory consumption (yam).

Now, any analysis of Ẹ́hụgbò male initiation needs to explain the central roles of yam (positive) and maize (negative). Meillassoux (1972, 1981), drawing on Engels's theory of the family, analyzes social reproduction in agricultural society as an economic contract between elders and youths. His thesis deserves to be quoted in detail (Meillassoux 1981: 47):

'Reproduction of the agricultural cycle involves a necessary and practically permanent *solidarity* between the producers who succeed each other in the cycle. The notions of *anteriority* and *posteriority*, which define the positions of producers in the agricultural cycle, preside over the social hierarchy between *elders* and *juniors*, protectors and protected, adopters and adopted, hosts and strangers from the moment that they are placed in these relationships [. . .] "Father" does not in fact mean *genitor* but *he who nourishes* and protects you, and who claims your produce and labour in return. In fulfilling his functions of regulating social reproduction the "father" is also *he who marries you.* [. . .] The family, the cell of production, becomes the locus of the development of an ideology and ritual in which respect for age, cults of the ancestors and fertility, all in different ways celebrate the continuity of the group and strengthen its hierarchy.'

In the Ìgbo context, this materialist thesis makes an important agronomical distinction between yam—the ancient, indigenous, prestigious and prototypically male crop—and maize, a female crop of relatively recent origin. Ottenberg sees both yam and maize as phallic, but the two botanical foodstuffs differ conspicuously in reproductive biology (cf. Okigbo 1980). Yam propagates via its living skin, a part of which (*ísi jí*, the 'growth end') is planted along with a bit of tuber, to produce a vine and a new tuber. For most species, it takes two seasons to produce one large tuber. In year one, a bit of the growth end is planted, and the harvest is a small yam, replanted in year two to obtain a large yam for consumption. In effect, the ratio of harvested tubers to tuber stock is 1-to-1, not counting the intervening season during which the seed yam undergoes a kind of 'gestation'. The ratio for maize could hardly differ more: each plant contains several cobs, and each cob contains enough seed for dozens or a hundred complete plants, in just one year's time.

Applying Meillassoux's economic analysis, yam is the crop with the greatest dependence of youths on elders for seed stock, while maize is at the other extreme. In this way, the positive focus on yam in male initiation represents the youths' economic dependence on their male elders, while the negative focus on maize makes exactly the same point. Furthermore, there is a sense in which the initiating youths *are* yams symbolically: they grow to replace the tuber from which they are reproduced. It may be relevant to observe that the verb which describes the planting of a seed yam—*ílì*, 'to bury'—also applies to the placing of a human corpse in a grave. But notice that it takes two seasons to replace one yam, so if yams correspond to people, the initiating youth is replacing his grandfather, two generations back. This may explain why the name *ísi jí* applies to the initiation of *first* sons: it is the first son *(ọ̀kpára)* who must bear the paternal grandfather's name, in the Ẹ́hụgbò naming system, assuming that the father is also a first son.

Meillassoux's model is not limited to economic botany; he demonstrates the link between control over agricultural surplus and control over women, in two forms: control over women's horticultural labor through the 'domestic mode of production', and control over their reproductive power through marriage. This cartel-like system accounts for the evident sexual (though, *pace* Ottenberg, not 'genital') alienation which youths feel towards their male elders: 'Older males, the very males who "own" the [initiation] bush, have most of the sexual partners, for girls marry older men at adolescence in arranged unions, often set by older males' (Ottenberg 1989: 231).

ẹkụ ('Whoever brings a visitor, brings cloth'). Pragmatically this may mean that visitors are potential in-laws. An Ìgbo personal name is *Ụ̀bá-kà* '*Ụ̀bá* is pre-eminent' but to my knowledge there is no corresponding name *Àkụ́-kà* '*Àkụ* is pre-eminent'.

This passage suggests that Ẹhụgbò youths' aggressive feelings do not focus on their biological 'fathers' in the Freudian way, but rather are directed against the whole class of elder males. Having trod on this insight, however, Ottenberg ignores it and restores the Freudian paradigm by allowing himself a reductive rhetorical elision of the facts: 'For the son's part, his being distant from his father is symbolized by the attacks he may make on senior men [. . .] This appears to be aggression against a symbolic father . . .' (*ibid.*: 188).

In this way, obsessive fixation on the Freudian father eclipses age-based conflict. This blindness is particularly ironic, since Ottenberg already has the essence of Meillassoux's analysis: 'Ẹhụgbò is a gerontocracy [. . .] [T]here is some stress involved in responding to the contradictory social messages of this gerontocratic society: the pressure to achieve, combined with constraints that keep the young men dependent on their fathers and other older males' (*ibid.*: XVIII, 304).

Ịzọ ọbà, 'the Stomping of a Gourd'

Some long passages of mixed ritual description and interpretation constitute the main justification for Ottenberg's claim that initiation involves Œdipal aggression against the mother. The first ritual occurs in the context of birth:

'Mother and child move to her residence. Then a ritual is performed [. . .] by the midwife or another female to make the milk flow and to take out any bitterness in it. Before entering the house this woman breaks a calabash on the ground in front of the dwelling. Symbolically, this seems to mark the end of the uterine period, for the gourd resembles the uterus or vagina. The rite also signals the end of sexual activity for the mother during the long nursing period; her uterus and vagina become dormant' (*ibid.*: 5).

The second ritual occurs in the midst of the *ísi jí* initiation:

'On [. . .] the day after the boy has danced for the first time, he returns to his mother in the compound with a helper, bringing his calabash food dish and spoon that he has been eating from. His helper puts these on the ground. The boy breaks them with his feet and goes away without a word. [. . .] It is a clear symbolic statement of the separation of mother and child. The symbolic rejection is twofold, of the mother's food and of the mother herself, as producer of the son, for the calabash symbolizes the uterus or vagina, as we have stated. The act also represents the mother as a sexual being, as symbolic turning away from Œdipal concerns on the part of the boy. Yet the mother continues to feed the boy' (*ibid.*: 176).

'When the son comes to her after the first few days in the bush and breaks his calabash dish and spoon in front of her, this act symbolically negates his dependency upon her, as does his subsequent collecting of fruits to feed himself and even feed his parents. The breaking of the calabash, a symbolic uterus or vagina, marks the hoped for end of his psychological dependence upon his mother' (*ibid.*: 189).

The second ritual occurs for all sons at an analogous point in the *ísi òbubu* initiation:

'After masquerading, the initiand in both initiations breaks a calabash with his foot in front of his mother's house, marking the separation from her womb or vagina, and symbolically becoming free from her as a feeding mother and as a sexual being. The two initiations each bring the boy under his father's authority, and by extension under the adult village males, while rejecting dependency on the mother and any covert sexual interest in her' (*ibid.*: 228).

Naturally, Ottenberg remarks the parallelism between the two instances of gourd-stamping: 'The *[ísi jí]* rites replicate some of the events of the earlier birth rituals. There is [. . .] the smashing of the gourd on the ground in both; there is the birth in one and the rebirth in the other' (*ibid.*: 193).

However, just pointing to a metaphor means little, unless all cultures conceptualize being 'born again' in the same way. I argued above that the ideological context of birth in Ẹhụgbò, as in other Ìgbo-speaking communities, is reincarnation. There happens to be direct evidence that the idea of reincarnation is involved in the parallel gourd-stompings. That evidence is textual: a story about childlessness, personified gourds and stomping that I was told by a famous Ẹhụgbò ritualist, Éléje Aghá (the full text is reproduced as an appendix to this article).

The story describes an *ọgbáńje* named *Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne,* 'Little child that knows its mother'. An *ọgbáńje* is a child that dies before reaching adulthood, in a context of high infant mortality, who is said to return again and again, tormenting its mother with repeated passages through her womb. The *ọgbáńje* are portrayed as greedy nonhuman *ńdị kà ọ́bà* 'gourd-people' who steal the food of hardworking mothers but will not remain with them unless they are lavishly indulged.

In a spontaneous comment at the end of the story, Éléje Aghá says that the stomping of a gourd by the birth mother represents the breaking of the *ọgbáńje* cycle. Given this information, added by the storyteller as a kind of 'just so' moral and not in response to any question about initiation, consider the repetition of gourd-stomping, in his mother's presence, by an initiating son. If it is aggression against the mother, as Ottenberg would have it, then it cannot have the same meaning as the mother's own stomping, unless we subscribe to the bizarre idea that she

expresses ritual auto-aggression moments after successfully birthing a child. But if the aim of initiation is to ensure reincarnation, then Éléje Aghá's alternative theory applies without further ado. From the father's angle, a son must be initiated so that a grandfather can reincarnate; from the mother's, once a son is initiated he can no longer be an *ògbáńje*, and she is free to bear another son with a distinct reincarnation *(ùwa)*. Thus the first stomping ritual (at birth) is a form of medicine designed to bar the return road to any *ọgbáńje,* while the second stomping ritual (at initiation) fulfils the promise of the first one, answering the mother's prayer by 'proving' performatively that the son is not an *ọgbáńje*.

Ottenberg's tale of misogynist aggression is belied by Éléje Aghá's text and commentary.[31]

Whose Meaning?

At different points in the book, Ottenberg (1989: 248, 318) implies that the fate of African culture has become inextricably bound to the Euro-American project—what social scientists fondly call 'modernity': '[T]he suggestion is that the five Ìtim villages which took on *[ísi òbubu Ẹ́dḥà]* were moving toward greater central authority until modern times stopped this process.'

'What was beginning to occur at Ẹ́hụgbò in the 1950-60 period when I carried out research was that [. . .] children [were moving] toward a more Western European experience. [. . .] The period that I have been describing in this book thus can be seen as a transitory one between that of the last century, with its particular demands on childhood training, and the 1980's at Ẹ́hụgbò, with [. . .] its greater concern with the culture of childhood.'

The second quote, in my opinion, provides the book's only valid justification for the Œdipal analysis, which can be more revealingly restated in the form of a syllogism:

31. To forestall misunderstanding, I should note that Éléje Aghá did 'interview' me once or twice during social visits to the house of my host, before inviting me to his house—in the other, feuding moiety of the village—to record some stories. However, I never discussed the interpretation of these stories with him, and the only commentary by others was a session transcribing and translating the tape with Ótì Úchè, a young bilingual. Apart from the closing comment which is effectively a just-so punch-line, Éléje Aghá never commented on this subject in my hearing. Thus, he did not undertake the role of an indigenous ethnographer comparable to Ogotemmeli (for Griaule), Gɛdɛgbe (for Maupoil), Mushona (for Turner) or Ńnàchí Ènwo (for Ottenberg). Although adolescent initiation was a recurrent topic and activity during all my stays in Ẹ́hụgbò, the signifiance of Nwá Aghá's story for initiation became clear to me only in reacting to Ottenberg's book.

• *Premises*

The Œdipus complex is essential to Euro-American childhood.

By the 1950s, Euro-American childhood had already become part of Ẹ́hụgbò reality.

• *Deduction*

By the 1950s, the Œdipus complex had already become essential to Ẹ́hụgbò reality.

In this sense, Ottenberg's Œdipal analysis actually becomes more 'true' with each passing year, as the Nigerian countryside becomes increasingly westernized through agencies of foreign church, national state and global market. Over time, most theories are increasingly vulnerable to disproof, but some lucky social science practitioners are exempt from this fate.

In its undeniable dimension as practical activity, Ottenberg's well-subsidized book—his fourth and longest on Ẹ́hụgbò during three decades of academic writing—is itself a part of the westernization process. The intellectual resources of a dominated people are expropriated and reshaped, the better to fit them into a New World Order where 'phallic' and 'uterine' are the only shapes that count.

Ìgbo Evidence Outside Ẹ́hụgbò

A range of evidence from the wider Ìgbo-speaking area shows that my umbilical reanalysis of Ottenberg's material is not idiosyncratic to Ẹ́hụgbò, or indeed to one Ẹ́hụgbò elder (Eléje Aghá). If it were, then we might be in the presence of 'operational' or 'contextual' meaning in Turner's sense, a set of connotations attached to some performances of certain Ìgbo initiations, as opposed to phenomena on the order of denotations. But if, conversely, I can show that the umbilical meaning has a necessary character, then there is still hope for the 'null hypothesis' that the semantics of ritual are not inherently different from the semantics of ordinary natural language. Once we look, the evidence is overwhelming.

An Ọ́ka version of the reincarnating calabash story (Thomas 1968, III: 76-81), probably collected in 1911, is very similar in structure and content to what I was told in Ẹ́hụgbò sixty-six years later. There is a problem with the name of the child which Thomas transcribes *Onò ábwò* and renders 'Calabash leaf'. It may be *Ọ́nụ́ àgbọ,* 'Mouth of a growing calabash' (cf. Williamson 1972: 13), but note a possible second meaning: Thomas's (1968, V: 2) gloss of *àgbọ* as 'seed/stock/generation', corroborated by Williamson, would let the phrase translate as 'pathway/gate of generation/reproduction'.[32]

32. The related expression *nwá ágbọghọ̀,* 'adolescent girl', would by hypothesis be a nominalizaton formed from *àgbọ,* 'generation', plus H tone 'who', plus *-ghọ̀,* 'change/develop', thus 'someone *(nwá)* who is developing to reproductive age'.

'Gourd daughter', another version from near Ọ́ka, is given only in English summary (Okeke 1971: 95-97). The farmer's reaction to childlessness—'What have I done to my *chí?*'—sees reproduction as a contract with reincarnating ancestors, who can refuse to return.[33] There is explicit comparison of children's protruding navels (*i e* umbilical hernias) to the necks of growing wild gourds; the gourd child in this version is actually named *Ótùbo,* 'Umbilicus/Navel'. It is unclear if this metaphor underlies the cognation of *ńbùbo,* 'calabash' and *ótùbo,* 'umbilicus/navel', or conversely has been suggested by it. *Ótùbo* sings (in English paraphrase): 'Although I'm home-grown, *tụ́mangwe,* my home is the wild, *tụ́mangwe*'.[34] This corresponds to the idea that a journey in either direction, birth or death, is conceptualized as a 'return home' with a perspectivally appropriate verb, respectively *lá* and *lọ́.*

Support for an anti-*ọ̀gbáńje* reading of the gourd smashing comes from Ọ̀gụ where, a month after a successful birth, 'The husband [. . .] provides a feast for all the young children of his kindred. Each child brings a potsherd, which the husband fills with soup. Each is also given a cooked yam. [. . .] When they have finished [eating] they break the potsherds to pieces by stamping on them. It was said that the intention of this rite was to induce ancestral spirits to be reborn' (Meek 1937: 293).

Stomping is also the theme of a birth song *(ábụ̀ ọmụmụ́ nwá)* (Nwachukwu *et al.* 1986: 56):

Ǹzọtọ́ ńzọtọ̀! Ị̀ zọrọ nwá n'ọkpà?	Trampling! Trampling! Did you stomp on a child?
Ị́ zọ̀tara nwá nwoké.	You stomped a son into existence.
Ị́ zọ̀tara nwá nwaànyị.	You stomped a daughter into existence.

There is ample evidence that the umbilicus is viewed as the route of reincarnation. Uchendu (1965: 58-60) gives a vivid account:

'The severing of the umbilical cord is a dramatic event. A small native blade, triangular in shape and sharpened at the base, is used. With this blade—*ágụ̀wá*—in her right hand, the midwife, pretending to cut very close to the base of the cord, asks "Do you want me to cut here?" "No? No? No!" is the shouted reply. The midwife continues to ask this question and receives the same answer until she touches the right place, about six to eight inches from the base [. . . .] While the mother and her babe are in their seclusion, the child's umbilical cord is tended with care until it falls off. The fall is hastened by the application of an oily matter into which *ụ́dà*—a local herb [meaning "instrument of falling"? VM]—is added. When it falls off, in about four days, its burial is delayed until the child is named. [. . .] The burial of the umbilical cord is not marked by an elaborate ritual but its social significance is great. It has given rise to a social institution which may be called "the navel complex". The Ìgbo who cannot point to the burial place of his navel cord is not a *díàla*—freeborn.[35] A child whose navel cord was not buried is denied citizenship. For its burial, the mother selects the most fruitful oil palm tree out of the many that her husband may indicate. At the foot of this tree the umbilical cord is buried. In time, the child is led to build around his "tree of status" such sentiments and emotional attachment which are embodied in the phrase *ńkwụ alụ ḿ* ["my taboo palmtree"]. This palm belongs to the child. It cannot be alienated. Not only is it a symbol of *díàla* status; it is the foundation for the socially ambitious.'

In the same vein, Nwala (1985: 105) cites an Ìgbo equivalent of the English proverb 'Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater': *Í wère nwá, túfụ́ọ́* [*ichi*]. 'You took the child and discarded the placenta'.

Even where no calabash or navel symbol is involved, ceremonies to reunite a birth mother with the living after delivery share a common presupposition that she has been on a journey away from the visible world. In Águatá, a physical bridge (*ógwè,* lit. 'a log bridge across a stream') is constructed in the form of a board-platform raised off the ground outside the mother's house, where she and the child recline in seclusion together (Nkwoh 1984: 65). During the seclusion period after delivery, she is greeted 'Welcome!' (*ibid.:* 66). Again, a pregnant woman can be described as *ónye nọ̀ n'élu nkwụ́,* 'someone at the top of an oilpalm tree'—*i e* at the edge of the visible world *(élu ụ̀wa). Élu nkwụ́* is the place where *ọ̀mụ́* grows, the new palm shoot whose name is derived from the verb *mụ́* 'give birth'. 'Reincarnation is called "changing world" [*ònwunwó ụ̀wa*]' (Thomas 1968, I: 30).

Why should the basic meaning of *chí* as an agent noun 'returner' divide between 'daylight' and 'reincarnator'? The second meaning exploits a grammatical property of kin terms, thus *chí onyé,* 'someone's *chí*' is an inalienably possessed noun (like 'hand' or 'mother'). As a kin term,

33. Similarly, in Okeke's English version (1971), the farmer refers to his *chí* when he upbraids the slave who mocked the lazy child and threatened to send it back to the forest: 'I see you want to hasten my death, but you are not my *chí!*'

34. The refrain *tụ́mangwe* (in other dialects, *tụ́manje*) may be literally translatable as 'continue on the journey'—exactly describing the co-temporal action of the character who utters it. Perhaps the modern verb *jé* derives via *gwé* from a compound *gá-we,* 'continue to go'. This is attractive because most dialects have two 'go' verbs, *gá* and *jé,* which are mostly interchangeable.

35. The endogamous corporation *dí àla* is literally 'master of the soil', *i e* landholding citizen, canonically distinguished from *òsú* which is a serf bound to the land of a community shrine. A synonym of *dí àla* is *ámadí,* literally town-master (cf. *áma,* 'street, public space'), note the same, exceptionally head-final word structure which occurs in the Ágbọ̀ term *nẹ́di,* 'father', literally 'master of the mother' ('mother-master'). Uchendu (1977: 24) apparently derives *ámadí* from the name Ámadíọ̀ha, the divinity of thunder, but the reverse direction is more plausible, which would make Ámadíọ̀ha a praise epithet meaning 'master of all the people *(ọ̀ha)*'.

it has a reciprocal counterpart (like 'child' is the reciprocal of 'mother' or 'father'): *(nwá) agụ̀*.[36] Thus, at Àhaba, '[T]he *ágụ̀* is believed to be the reincarnation of the *chí*' (*ibid.*, IV: 190); a reincarnation is *ónye bàlụ ágụ̀*, literally 'someone who entered his *ágụ̀*' (*ibid.*, II: 115). At Ubulubu, 'a living man is *chí*' and the dead man is called *ónye bí[a] ụ̀wẹ*, the one who comes to the world' (*ibid.*, IV: 20). Furthermore, Williamson (1972: 11) glosses *ágụ̀* as 'namesake', which is consistent with an alternate-generation naming pattern (as discussed above).[37] As 'daylight', on the other hand, the non-relational meaning of 'returner' is in play.

A *chí* shrine is 'not usually' established by a man or woman 'until he (or she) marries or becomes a parent' (Meek 1937: 56). 'The woman brings her *chí* from her father's house, often as soon as she has borne a child. If she becomes a widow the object representing her *chí* is discarded and a new one is made in the house of the next husband' (Thomas 1968, I: 29). In Ọ̀nịcha, the pot representing *chí* contains four *ókponsi* (lengths of *ẹ́gbụ́* tree) for the ancestors plus a fifth *ókponsi* for the *ọ̀gbọ́-nà-uke*[38] 'contemporary associates' [lit. 'age set and age grade'] of the reincarnator (Henderson 1972: 112). This suggests that initiation, as enrolment in an age grade, brings the initiate closer to the ancestors to the point that they cohabit a single space. An initiate, with the ability to 'see' the masked performers *(m̀mánwụ́)* representing incarnate dead *(m̀mọ́)*, is thus to be 'accepted as their genuine descendant' (*ibid.*: 346) and to be able to communicate with them on behalf of the living. Further evidence along these lines concerns the order of death, as expressed in *èse* and *ùkó* (male and female funeral music) in Óbízì-Ezínìhite Mbàisén (Nwoga 1983: 5): *Ónye nwa lìri bara ụ́bá* (Someone buried by her/his child is rich).

Similarly, the youngest Ọ̀nịcha age grade sang a prayer which translates: 'On the day you die, your mother won't know, your father won't know' (Henderson 1972: 355). In Henderson's abstract parlance, this song 'emphasize[s] independence from filiation' but concretely it is the same issue of reincarnation: one should not die before the previous generation: '[A]ny death which violates seniority order in the patrilineage is

36. Possibly this word forms part of the term for umbilical knife, *ágụ̀wá*, described by UCHENDU (1977) in the lengthy quotation directly above.

37. Similar terminology seems to occur in Fɔ̀n (MERCIER 1954: 227), where the ancestor returns to the lineage as [jɔtɔ] and at the same time remains an invisible 'guardian spirit'.

38. *Pace* WILLIAMSON (1972: 407), *ùke* here cannot be the Ọ̀nịcha word 'misfortune', as Henderson seems to admit, citing JONES's gloss (1962: 192) '[age-]association'; *ọ̀gbọ́-nà-uke* has the dualist form of many other abstract Ìgbo expressions: *àkhụ-na-ụ́bá* 'wealth' (lit. 'treasure and generative increase'), *èzí-nà-ụ́lọ̀* 'household' ('yard and house'), *ík̀wu-nà-íbè* 'immediate community' ('maternal kin and neighbors'), *Òkééke-nà-Ọ́kàáfọ* 'everyone' (cf. every Tom, Dick and Harry), *Chí-nà-Ékè* 'totality of the person' ('reincarnation and destiny'), cf. GREEN (1947), ACHEBE (1975), NWOGA (1985).

regarded as a kind of [*álụ̀*] 'abomination', but degrees of violation are distinguished [. . .] Any child who dies young, but has "encouraged" a junior sibling to be born after himself [. . .] *nwá sòlụ nwá* [. . .] is buried with a proper two-stage funeral . . .' (*ibid.*: 177).

Along the same lines, an ancestor who cannot reincarnate is viewed as being cheated. Ụ́zọ̀chúkwu (1983: 67) quotes a funeral poem addressed to an only son who was buried with neither cloth nor mat. He refused to reincarnate until his collineal's wife was old and childless, walking on a long road. When he died in infancy, thus proving to be an *ọ̀gbáǹje*, he carried all his relative's wealth with him 'like an Ọ̀nịcha taxi'. The moral of the story was sung as follows: *Ǹkpọ́ ólu nà-achụ́ arịrị ònwé yá n'ozu* ('A genealogically stranded person pursues his/her rightful benefice from the grave [lit. the corpse]').

From the complementary generational perspective, the same idea is found in a proverb cited by Ifemesia (1979: 97): *Ónye a mùlụ amụ́ jì úgwọ ọ̀mụmụ* ('Someone who was procreated owes a debt of procreation'). In addition, assuming the ambiguity of *ọ̀mụmụ* as mentioned *supra*, this last word of the translation of this proverb is alternatively 'initiation'. Another matter clarified in a reincarnation perspective is birth taboos which lead to infanticide. These are richly described in the literature, if for no other reason than the fact that they were cited by missionaries to justify coerced conversion to Christianity. Thomas (1968, I: 60) reports a high incidence of infanticide before 1911 for births which violated certain *ǹsọ́ ànị*: twins (multiple births), conception before first menstruation, foot presentation, a child born onto the ground (*i e* with no one to catch it). Less severe were other categories: a child born with teeth, a child who walks or talks before cutting teeth, a child which has not cried twenty-four hours after birth.

'The reincarnation of those who violated taboos is usually said to be inauspicious. They are born either feet first or with teeth or as members of a twin set—all of which are in themselves taboo *[ǹsọ́ ànị].*' 'The mother [of a taboo birth *e g* twins] was isolated and the children were destroyed. The navel cords were not severed' (Uchendu 1965: 102, 58). A prohibited birth of this kind was regarded as having the *chí* of an animal, an interloper, an *ọ̀gbáǹje*, rather than that of a person, a relative (Meek 1937: 291, 297; cf. Ugonna 1983: 15). Hence, it was killed.

The proximity of mask-initiates to their ancestors is presupposed by the orature of Èkpe sacred masks in Ọ̀húnhụn and Ńghẹ̀wà (Íkeokwú 1984: 71, 74, 14-17). The songs of these masks describe an ancestral space, literally outside of time, where the visible and invisible worlds (*élu ụ̀wa* and *àlá mmọ́*) merge and establish an equilibrium of wealth between living and dead. The idea of equilibrium is important, given Meillassoux's analysis of the debt of reproduction (in both senses) which binds younger generations to their elders.

Ébe mụ yọ̀rọ ụ́wá kà. [. . .]	Where I returned to the world is the best. [. . .]
Ágà m ífụ́tá ụ̀wa, jú̧ọ chí ḿ.	I'm going to come out of the world and ask my *chí.*
Ó wú̧ òtu í mèere ńnà ghí, *Méeghe yá tuutuu kaa ishí.*	It is how you did for your own father, and kept on doing till [your own] head became hard [with old age].
Ó wú̧kwanị ùgbú àwá, a chọ̀rọ ghí, *à hú̧ghị́ ghị,* *Ó wú̧ oshishi fùó,* *otù yá anọ̀chí yá.*	It is now that you are being sought but not seen, When a tree is lost, one of its kind comes to stand in its place.[39]
Ànyí la-érí, ànyí là-enyékwe unù ó.	If ever we are eating, we are giving you [a share].
Ó wú̧ àkhụ́ únú kpàtara akpáta dowe.	It is the wealth you accumulated and stored.
Ó wú̧kwa ǹga ányị mìghịrị́ áka *na-ènyékwe unù ke únù.* *Ányì shị́ áfọ́ ọ́zọ, ḿmajị́ mmajị́ ìrí.*	Where we dipped our hands to give you, too, your share. We say that next year it should be doubled tenfold.

These Èkpe texts also address the meaning of *ụ̀wa*: not the intersubjective time-space continuum of physics, but the subjective 'life-world' of experience. Thus, *ụ̀wá ọ́jọ́ọ́* is not 'a bad world' in the English sense, but rather 'a life of frustration and hardships'; *ú̧mù̧ú chi lá-édu ụ̀wa* is not 'those whose *chí* leads the world' but rather 'those whose experience is controlled by their respective *chí*' (cf. Egudu & Nwoga 1971: 71, 57).

Wider Comparisons

As argued by Sperber (1975), long-distance comparisons have more than antiquarian interest: they amount to 'predictions' which are confirmed by independently attested data. Thus, the speculative interpretations collected in this section add conviction to the Ìgbo internal analysis.[40]

The centrality of reincarnation to descent concepts invites reexamination of another aspect of Ẹ́hụgbò ethnography, namely double unilineal descent. Ottenberg (1968: 29) speculates that Ẹ́hụgbò acquired its land-holding matriclans when it hypothetically expelled indigenous non-Ìgbo matriclans (speaking languages of the Upper-Cross group of Benue-Congo) from the right bank of the Cross River. However, this seems unlikely if

39. Note the root *chí* in the verb *á-nọ̀-chí* 'stand in place of'.
40. A reviewer notes that anyone proposing speculative, long-distance comparisons risks producing 'howlers' of mistaken etymology. If this outcome leads eventually to howl-less alternatives, it will have served its purpose.

these refugees resembled their hypothetical present-day descendants, since the resource/inheritance function of the respective lineages is opposite: Forde describes the Yakɔ matrilineage *(yajima)* as the repository of rights in domestic and movable property, while the patrilineage *(kepun)* controls only farmland; the Ẹ́hụgbò situation is the reverse, with *àkụ* 'treasure' the preserve of patrilineages *(ú̧mù̧ńnà)*, and matrilineages *(ík̀wu)* controlling most farmland. We are then challenged to view Ẹ́hụgbò not as some aberrant borderland with an 'additive' hybrid kinship system, rather but as manifesting principles of Ìgbo lineage systems as a whole. Why farmland is inherited through females in Ẹ́hụgbò I cannot say, but it is true throughout the Ìgbo-speaking area that *àlị́ / ànị́ / àla / àna* the earth force *(álụ́sị́)* is conceptualized as female. Thus the problem may be inverted: to explain why farmland is inherited through males elsewhere.

Slightly further east of Ẹ́hụgbò—just beyond the Upper-Cross group—four texts cited in English by Talbot (1969: 133-138) attest elements of the 'Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne' story in the Ejagham-speaking area (in the southern Bantoid group of Benue-Congo, south of Ikom on the Upper Cross River, straddling the Cameroun border). Story 1: A childless women collects a son from a flower at the root of a crop she plants in her farm; public mention of the child's origin is forbidden. Story 2: A girl emerges from a *'mbum'* fruit, cooks food for two hunters, bears a child for one of them and stays until his sister calls her a 'fruit'. Story 3: An *'ẹbuya'* fungus, found by a childless man, turns into a daughter; she is given an attendant, but this slave taunts her as a fungus, so she returns to the forest. Story 4: The home of an old, childless woman is visited, while she is out farming, by four root-herbs who become girls and eat her food before her return. She surprises them and begs them to stay as her daughters, which they agree to do until the day they are fed their namesake herbs. When they mature, one (Etinyung) is married off to a prince, who is enjoined not to allow her to work, but his jealous co-wives conspire to feed her the *'etinyung'* herb, so she flees to the forest with her three married sisters (Etigi, Etidut, Ikọ). By themselves, these motifs do not link the *ọ̀gbáńje* idea to the navel or its hypothetical symbol the calabash—not, at least, until the species named *mbum* and *etinyung* are identified. Talbot (*ibid.*: 130) does report an Ejagham prohibition of eating 'gourd or pumpkin' leaves during pregnancy. However, there is a major difference from Ìgbo reincarnation ideas: twins are valued positively in the Ejagham area (*ibid.*: 121). This is of interest, because of the *communis opinio* that twins lost taboo status and acquired positive value in Yorùbá- and Gbè-speaking areas during the past two centuries. Le Hérissé (1911), Maupoil (1988), Herskovits (1938), Mercier (1954), Palau Marti (1964), Verger (1973) describe the recasting of the Fɔ̀n pantheon, the image of the king and the administration of Àgbomé kingdom all into a twin pattern. Abimbola informs me that Ifá literary corpus recounts the shift

from negative to positive valuation of twins. When Ẹdun, the male of the first pair of *ibé.jì* to have been spared, knocked on the door of Ọlọ́fin's palace, the door opened for him by itself, thus he became 'the owner of doors' which could be an epithet of Èṣù. Gates (1988: 15 *sq.*) notes the association of Ẹdun with Èṣù in Afrocuba and Afrobrazil as well as Nigeria. Abraham (1958: 266) cites a proverb *Èṣù ní ẹ̀hìn ibé.jì* ('*Èṣù* follows the birth of twins') as linked to a belief that 'if no child is born after twins, this may render the mother mad'. He adds (*ibid.*: 698): 'The birth of two male twins is a sign of untimely death for their father, while that of two females is [. . .] for their mother.' Thus twins are prototypical *àbíkú,* and threaten the road of reincarnation. Negative value on twins of the Ìgbo type was not really reversed in Yorùbá culture, but a positive valuation was added thereunto.

Another symbolic reversal which needs more study concerns knowledge of the burial place of one's placenta: this is socially obligatory in the Ìgbo-speaking area (as described by Uchendu 1977) but the same knowledge is 'taboo' for the Yorùbá and 'believed [. . .] to lead to instant death' (Ibigbami 1982: 108). For all that, burial of the placenta is no less obligatory in the Yorùbá context.[41]

In the Gbè-speaking Fɔ̀n kingdom, the breaking-water stage of birthing delivery is described as resulting from contact between the two worlds, which are themselves separated by a calabash (Mercier 1954). This suggests a plausible interpretation for the obligatory showering of a newborn with water cascaded off the thatched eaves, which is described both in Ejagham (Talbot 1969: 130) and in the Ìgbo-speaking area. Finally, the *enfant terrible* attribute of *ọ̀gbáǹje* is linked to the navel in the Fɔ̀n kingdom in the character of Légbá (compare also Èṣù Ẹlẹ́gbára in Yorùbá):

> '"Legba" is the hidden companion of every individual, a sprite *[lutin]* "ever prone to some kind of trick or even to worse misfortunes" but quick to be moved to feel mercy by prayers and sacrifices. He lives in the navel *(Hon)* "from where he gladly causes anger to explode". He is "perturber of the navel" and "owner of rage". Although the phallus which decorates his statues has caused him to be compared to the ancient [Roman] Priapus, his attributes are not limited to fertility. [. . .] But in this role he is linked to the mother of the head [. . .] and to the bloody cudgel [. . .] to fertility as well as to accidents of pregnancy and birth.'[42]

Furthermore, I am beginning to believe that Èṣù's umbilical property is not accidental but essential. Some evidence for this view is provided by Abraham (1958) and Bamgbọṣe (1972: 30), who cite a set of Yorùbá nouns containing the root *ṣù* 'be round':

41. 'W. Abímbọ́lá, personal communication.
42. Augé (1988: 119, 126, 131) quoting Le Hérissé (1911: 136) (translation is mine, V.M).

ìṣù	'anything globular'[43]
òṣù	'a round tuft of hair'
òṣùká	'head-pad made from coiled cloth, use for carrying loads'[44]
òṣùmàrè / èṣùmàrè	'rainbow'
òṣùpá	'the moon, literally that which is round and bald'
òṣùwọ̀n	'calabash or [round] basket used in measuring out commodities'

The *e/o* backness alternation exemplified in the item for 'rainbow' is indeed widespread in both Yorùbá and Ìgbo noun prefixes, as in the following examples (Bamboṣe 1972, cf. Ward 1941 for similar Ìgbo facts).

òní / èní	'today'
ònìíyọ̀n / ènìíyàn	'person'
òrí / èrí	'head'
oruku / eruku	'dust'

Taken together, the two data set open the possibility that the name Èṣù is directly cognate to the word *òṣù*, such that the defining characteristic of this supernatural being is a type of roundness. Indeed, Abraham (1958: 166) reports: 'Another form of representing him is a pot with a hole in the middle sunk into the ground.'[45] In this way, umbilical symbolism in the Fɔ̀n and Yorùbá-speaking areas indirectly supports the account of Ìgbo initiation proposed here. To be sure, some sculptural and poetic representations of Èṣù and Légbá have large erect phalluses (*e g* Herskovits 1938), but this is arguably related to a different attribute, not generation but potentiation *(alá.ṣẹ)* then, requires evidence that this feature is important not just in the mind of the ethnographer, but in Fɔ̀n and Yorùbá minds as well.

Ritual *vs* Semantics

Augé (1988: 140) has recently emphasized the cognitive dimension of sacred symbols: '"The fetichists", one says with amazement, "worship wood and stone." But they have no choice: they think'.

43. For obvious reasons it is tempting though premature to extend the comparison to the toneless (*i e* M-toned) word *iṣu* 'yam'. However, no historical link between M and L in Yorùbá has been proposed to date (cf. discussion in Manfredi 1995).
44. A likely Ìgbo cognate is *éju,* 'coiled head-pad for carrying loads', cf. also *éju àlị* 'puff adder'—a snake known for coiling, literally 'the *éju* of the ground'.
45. Cf. also Idowu (1962: pl. 12). The attribute of roundness does not only refer to the hair-style of Èṣù images or priests. Ṣàngó priests wear round hair tufts called, precisely, *òṣù u Ṣàngó.*

Abstracting from the details of Ìgbo ethnography, and their comparative context, my theoretical argument is that the denotational aspect of semantic representation may well be sufficient to describe, and hence translate, much of so-called 'ritual'. But that step is impossible unless cognition is distinguished from praxis. This conclusion seems like old news, especially when one reads analyses of African religion such as the following:

'By symbol we understand sometimes a simple relation of representation between a symbolized thing or being and the thing or being that symbolizes it. [But] the relation of the *vodun* to its priest is not one of representation, but rather of mutual dependence, or at least it is presented as such. [. . .] This *vodun* which represents, identifies and unifies a group is the same *vodun* whose existence introduces several distinctions within the group. [. . .] Initiates are distinct from non-initiates. The hierarchy of gods entails a hierarchy within the college of priests. Oppositions of sex and generation are of course created whenever the cult is practiced. In sum, the practices which sustain the massive and localised presence of the *vodun* provide the chance both to express the system of social differences and to put it into operation' (Augé 1988: 33, 39-41).

The African ethnographic literature is full of rich symbolic descriptions in need of philological critique. This paper has considered just one small domain; as another, kingship springs to mind. Perhaps we can anticipate further results which will put to rest both exoticism and facile universalism in African studies.

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APPENDIX

Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne[46]

Ọ̀zọ́? Ń kwuyi ẹ ẹbọ́.
Bụ́rụ nwanyị́, éénwogụ nwa, wụ̀rụ ńri jẹ́ge ubíi.
Mgbe ọ nọ̀ n'úbì, yá nọ̀rị́ árụ ọrụ́.
Ákụkụ ọ kụ̀rụ n'alị, ńdị kà ọ́bà, pávuru jẹ erie yé yá, jẹ rie nri ọ bụ, rácha ohé.
Ẹ́gụ agúta nwanyị́ jẹ̀rị ubíi, yá sị́ na ọ jẹ́ erieni nrí ẹ.
Yá gàrị chọ́rụ nri ẹ́ m, bịá oriri, kà ọ́ọ́ hụsị nri.
Yá kwa ẹkwá, kwá ẹkwá, kwá ẹkwá.
Yá jụ "Ònyé rìri ńri mu e?
"Íbe mụ eénwogu nwá, énwógu m nwá, ònyé gàarị be ríe ḿ nri é?
"Ọ̀ nọ chọ́ n'ọ́rụ m, chụ̀ẹ́ ḿ?"
Yá dà íhi ẹ́, vúru na-àlá.
Mgbe ọ làru úló è, wụ nri ọ̀zọ́, jẹ́gẹnụ ụbọchí ọ̀zọ́ gara agá,
yá pavukwe rìrié yé yá á, íbe ọ nọ̀rọ̀ ọ́rụ.
Yá bịa kwa kwa ẹkwá àbalị ẹtọ́. Ónye dibie sị́ á,
"Gị́ chịrị ùwele, wùyí e n'abọ a, gị́ wèrí mmà, wùyí e n'abọ a, gụá madụ̀ ọ́gụ,
ùwele ẹsáà, mmà ẹsáà chịrị á jèé, nà ńdị m na-éri gị nri jè ényò ńdị gị́."
Yá ru ẹ, èwerí nrí ndị ọbà, chịrí mmà ẹsáà wụ́sị, chịrí ùwele ẹsáà wụ́sị, yá nọ̀rụ árụ ọrụ́.
Ńdị na-èríkwe nri m bịá oriri ẹ́.
Yá sì á nà "Ọ́ bụ́ ónye i gidèri m já bụ nwá gị. Nke í gídegi amági abụ̀ nwá gị́."
Wò ríge nri riduwo e, rué wụ ụlá,
ónye aánị sị́ "Ọ́ díkwagi mma nà ái èmèndegí, Chí nà Éké."[47]
"Ài eríduwo nri nwanyị́ áà izú mbụ, àì rie ńri ẹ ìzu ebụ́ọ́, àì rí ẹ́ nké ẹ̀tọ́."
"Ọ́ dígị mma ai èmèndekwegi ẹ́ ọrụ. Ọ́ nọ̀ n'ánọ̀ ẹ́gụ aà lá."
Wò kwé, wò chíri, wò rụ na-àrú, ná-àrụ , ná-àrụ,
nwáànyị áà bó ọnwaà chí m, nọ́ tọ́gbọrụ àlị bụrụ ọ́bà.
Yá egíde ọmụ̀ na ọ́ bùrụ ọ́bà.
Yá egíde ọmụ̀ na ọ́ bùrụ ọ́bà.

46. Recorded 19 June 1977 from Éleje Aghá (Ńdị Uchè Ụ́rọ̀, Kpóghirikpó, Ẹ́hụgbò). Transcribed and translated jointly with Ótì Úchè (Èzí Ukwu, Kpóghirikpó, Ẹ́hụgbò). I will send an audio recording of Nwá Aghá's rendition of the story to anyone who requests it.
47. Cf. fn 38.

Yá egíde ọmụ̀ na ọ́ bụ̀rụ́ ọ́bà.
Yá egídege wo ẹ̀sáà, ọ́ kwà náànị nke ó gìderi, gíderi ẹ́ ẹ̀họ.
Yá ètí ẹ́: "Áaaa, ẹ́họ mụ ọ! Áaaa, ẹ́họ mụ ọ! Hábúzoe ḿ, ágbálasigị m!"
Yá sị̀ á, "Nà ị́ kà eje gbala kà ńdị kè únù."
Yá sị̀ á, "Ágbálagị m!"
Yá jíge yá, yá sị̀ á, "Ọ́ bụ ị́ mígị ma ǹsọ́ ḿ asọ, mà gị́ jiri ḿ rue èzí."
Yá sị̀ á, "Ḿ asógụ a bụ gíní?! Énwógụ m nwa!"
Yá sị̀ á, "Íhe i jì kú m bụ Ọ́bà-nwá-mà-ńne. Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne. Ékúkwe ḿ ihe ọ̀zọ́!"
Yá èkwé.
Yá laje ma-àlá, yá sị̀ á nà ọ́ mọ́gụ ọ̀jé-ọ́kụ, nà ọ́kụ jẹ adụ á.
Yá sị̀ á "Gị́ ejékwe!"
"Gị́ yị́ ihe ọ́bụ̀là, nà ọ́ dịgị mma mà gị́ nịduyekwe ḿ ozi!
"Nà ọ́ bụ íhe zárí ọ̀ha ezí jà ekwú ḿ bụ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne, mà-ńnà.
"Ọ́ bụ nke wó jẹ́ ná-èkú ḿ."
À ná-èkú ẹ́ ya.
Nwányi è pávuru jà agbá ohù, jẹ́ débéri ẹ, sị̀ na "Ó jékwe ọ́kụ!"
Tá ya ejege ohú ọ́dụ́dụ ọ́dụ, sị̀ á "Èkúku ẹ́ ọ́bà! Èkúku ẹ́ ọ́bà! Èkúku ẹ́ ọ́bà!"
Yá kwéyị ẹ́.
Ó kudueri ẹ ya.
Mgbe ó kúdueri ẹ ya, yá nọ́rụ úbì, Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne sị̀ á,
"Gị́ bịa siberị ḿ mini, ḿ jà wụ̀ ụ̀hụ́, nà ádị̀ m ínyi."
Yá sị̀ á, "Káaaa! Gị́ á nwa ọ́bà ǹtà ja ekú mu e mà ámụ̀rụ mụ́ bịá baà!
"Èsímerigi ḿ mini!"
Nwátà gábà úlò ja chíri ihe ẹ́, sị́ "Ọ́ bụ ụ́zụ mụ́ lá."
Kà íhe ọ kàdúru nne ẹ́, nà ọ́ bụ gém bú ǹsọ́ dị á n'ụ̀hụ́.
Yá èjéfùtá ogó, ńdị léche uchè jegide ẹ́.
Yá sị̀ chá, "Ùke úchè, hàkwá nwà! Ọ́ bụ ḿ bụ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!"
Wò pári á, túkwasị á, "Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne, ọ bụ ngíní méri gí?"
Yá sì á, *Óhù n'úlò ekú ḿ Ụ́gbọ́ghọ̀-ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó!*[48]
Ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó! Èchama Díbe ń laje ńlaje!
Íbe ń jijè ńjije, ń je nje ḿ, jeleke ètụma nje, ǹjelekè è!
Yá gba ḿ chá chá chá, báfụ n'ụ́zọ̀ úbì, ná-èlé ndị ubì wátaje nị̀.
Wò sị̀ á, "Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne, ì meri agáá n'ibi è?"
Yá sì á, *Óhù n'úlò ekú ḿ Ụ́gbọ́ghọ̀-ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó!*
Ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó! Èchama Díbe ń laje ńlaje!

48. In Ọ́ka, THOMAS (1968, III: 78) recorded *ọ́nụ agbọ a kpàta n'ágụ́* 'calabash leaf that is gathered in cultivated fields'.

Íbe ń jijè ńjije, ń je nje ḿ, jeleke ètụma nje, ǹjelekè è!
Yá hekwárì ńdị ubì.
Yá jẹ ntutù, jà kpọ́rọ nne ẹ́ ihu wátaje ubì.
Nne ẹ́ parị abọ́ tuhe, jà báyeri ẹ́.
Yá sì á, *Ńne é, ńne é, kùbénụ ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!*
Ọ̀ha ezí èkú ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!
Ọ̀ha ógó èkú ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!
Yá búrụ ohù n'úlò ekú ḿ Ụ́gbọ́ghọ̀-ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó!
Ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó! Èchama Díbe ń laje ńlaje!
Íbe ń jijè ńjije, ń je nje ḿ, jeleke ètụma nje, ǹjelekè è!
Yá he nne ẹ́.
Yá àgbá ntutùtutututu.
Ńnà á vunwe ọ́gụ wátaje.
Ńnà á kaduma ẹ́nya dụ á, yá parị ọ́gụ túhe ẹ́.
Yá sì á,"Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne, ọ bụ ngíní?"
Yá sì á, *Ńnà á, ńnà á, kùbénụ ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!*
Ńne é, ńne é, kùbénụ ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!
Ọ̀ha ezí èkú ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!
Ọ̀ha ógó èkú ḿ Nwátà-nwá-mà-ńne!
Yá búrụ ohù n'úlò ekú ḿ Ụ́gbọ́ghọ̀-ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó!
Ḿ-kpàta-ọ́nụ-ogó! Èchama Díbe ń laje ńlaje!
Íbe ń jijè ńjije, ń je nje ḿ, jeleke ètụma nje, ǹjelekè è!
Yá àhụ́e nnà á, gbákwarị rúe n'ubì já dọrụ bùrụ ọ́bà, kè ńdị kè wó bụ.
Ọ́ bụ á mèri, yọ́ bụrụ sị̀ na emédueri zuchata á n'ézí,
gị́ amụ́gụ nwa, gị́ meduwo é, jà kọ́a ọ̀bà n'úbì, ná wó bùrụ nwá gị́.
Ọ́ bụ a dị́ a mèri, ndị nwanyị́ mụá nwá, wó rute n'ụ́zọ̀ úlò, átúgbụgụ oke ògoro ọ́bà,
kà wó aàgábugè úlò.
Á nè jụ́ta onye bu ụ́zọ̀ bịá n'ulò, kà wó eèkwé akarị únù.
Ọ́ bụ nsọ́ wó.
Ázójagị a, íke adígị a zọja ọ̀bà, á nè jụ́ta onye bu ụ́zọ̀ bịá n'ulò, "Kà ị́ ma àgábataje."
Yá kwénogụ àzója, "Nà ị́ nọm nọ́ n'ụ́zọ̀ úlò ka ị́ wụ́rụ."
Ọ́ bụ ka yá ọ̀nwa garị.
Ónye kwúru okwu è bụ íhe ị maarị: "Òjéla-muọ́!"

Little-child-that-knows-[its]-mother

Another [story]? Let me tell him a second one.
[There] was a woman, [who] had no child, [who] prepared food and set out for the farm.
When she was at the farm, she was working away.
The crop she planted, things like gourds, got up and ate it on her, went and ate that food and licked up all the stew.
Hunger had affected the woman who went to the farm, she said she would go eat her food.
She went and looked for that food of hers, came to eat, [but] she didn't see food anymore.
She cried, and cried, and cried.
She asked, "Who ate my food?"
"Since I have no child, I have no child, who would go to eat its food on me?"[49]
"Is it it trying to chase me away from my work?"[50]
She packed her things, carried them on her head and started for home.
When she reached her house, prepared more food, and started off after another day had passed, it [*i e* the gourds] got up and ate it [the food] on her, since [*i e* while] she was at work.
She came to tears for three days. The diviner said to her,
"If you get some hoes, put them in her [*i e* your] farm basket,
if you get some machetes, put them in her [*i e* your] farm basket,
count the number of people, seven hoes, seven machetes, collect it and go, that those people who are eating the food on you will turn into your people [*i e* family]."
When she would reach [the farm], collect seven machetes and spread them out [on the ground], collect seven hoes and spread them out, she would stay working.
Those still eating the food came to her feast.
He [the diviner] told her that "It is that one which you catch who will be your child.
The one you don't catch, won't be your child."
They were eating the food, finished eating it, reached [the time] to leave, one [of them] said,
"It really isn't right that we don't help, [by] Soul and Destiny! We ate up this woman's food the first week, we ate her food the second week, we ate it the third one. It's not good that we don't even help her with her work. She's going home hungry!"
They agreed, picked up [the tools and] worked, working, working, working [until]

49. This is an antibenefactive applicative construction in which the possessor of the object (*ẹ́* '3sg', in context the hypothetical child who might legitimately eat the food), is referentially distinct from the antibeneficiary (*ḿ* '1sg'). The syntax literature (*e g* BAKER 1988) often assumes these two roles to be necessarily coreferent, in conformity with a possessor-raising analysis.
50. The Ìgbo word order goes: 'Is it seeking from my work to chase me away?' In nonterminative aspectual constructions, object shift to the left of the verb is widespread throughout the Kwa languages (cf. MANFREDI 1997a), but this example of a shifted PP is thusfar unique.

the woman surprised this one and picked it up, [but] it slithered out, it fell down and was a calabash.
When she caught this one, it [fell and] was a calabash.
When she caught that one, it [fell and] was a calabash.
When she caught another one, it [fell and] was a calabash.
When she continued catching all seven, she caught one which she held, held it on the stomach.
It shouted to her, "Aaah, my stomach! Aaah, my stomach!
Let me go and I'll not run away again!"
She said to it that "You will still run away like the rest of you [did]!"
It said to her, "I'm not running away!"
She continued to hold on to it, it said to her "It's that you won't know how to respect my taboo, if you carry me back to the settlement [hold on to me until you reach the settlement]."
She said to it, "What do you mean not respect it?! I have no child!"
It said to her, "What you will be calling me is Calabash-child-knows-mother.
Little-child-that-knows-mother. Don't call me anything else!"
And she agreed.
When she started heading home, it said to her that it would not go near fire [*i e* to cook], that fire would pierce it.
She said to it, "You won't go [near]!"
[It said,] "If you give anything at all, it's no good if you assign me any chore!
That the appellation that the people of the village will call me is Little-child-knows-mother, or -father. That's what they'll be calling me."
And they were calling it that.
The woman got up and bought a slave, went and kept him/her,
[and] said that "It [*i e* the gourd] shouldn't go to the fire!"
And she was constantly admonishing the slave,
saying "Don't call it Gourd! Don't call it Gourd! Don't call it Gourd!"
S/he [*i e* the slave] agreed.
She finished telling him/her.
When she had finished telling him/her, and she [the woman] was at the farm,
Little-child-knows-mother said to him/her [*i e* the slave],
"You come start heating water for me, I'm going to bathe, because I'm grungy."
S/he [*i e* the slave] said to it, "That does it! You tiny little calabash presume to call me, someone who was born, to come in [and work]? I'm not heating any water for you!"
The "child" went inside the house to collect its things, and said "It is my intention to leave"
The thing it had enjoined its mother, was the only taboo in its [entire] body.
When it was coming out into the village commons, the watchkeepers went to catch it.
It said to all, "Watchkeeper age grade, let go of me!
It's me, Little-child-knows-mother!"
They picked it up, and accosted it,
"Little-child-knows-mother, what's the matter with you?"
It said *The slave at home called me*
Gourd-leaf-that-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!

That-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
I'm off on my return to Ẹchama Díbe!
To where I'm going, where I'm traveling, going far on a long journey, going so very far!
It ran on and on, came out onto the farm road and saw the farmers on their way coming home.
They said to it, "Little-child-knows-mother, what are you up to here?"
It said *The slave at home called me*
Gourd-leaf-that-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
That-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
I'm off on my return to Ẹchama Díbe!
To where I'm going, where I'm traveling, going far on a long journey, going so very far!
It broke away from the farm people.
It went away and met its mother face to face, as she was returning home from the farm.
She lifted down her farm basket [from her head], to [be able to] grab it.
It said *Mother, mother, started to call me Little-child-knows-mother!*
The people at home called me Little-child-knows-mother!
The people in the village commons called me Little-child-knows-mother!
[But] it was the slave at home that called me
Gourd-leaf-that-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
That-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
I'm off on my return to Ẹchama Díbe!
To where I'm going, where I'm traveling, going far on a long journey, going so very far!
It jumped past its mother.
It ran along farther and farther.
Its father was just carrying a hoe on the way home.
When its father caught sight of it, he cast his hoe aside.
He said to it, "Little-child-knows-mother, what's the matter?"
It said *Father, Father, started to call me Little-child-knows-mother!*
Mother, mother, started to call me Little-child-knows-mother!
The people at home called me Little-child-knows-mother!
The people in the village commons called me Little-child-knows-mother!
[But] it was the slave at home that called me
Gourd-leaf-that-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
That-I-collected-at-the-gate-of-the-village-commons!
I'm off on my return to Ẹchama Díbe!
To where I'm going, where I'm traveling, going far on a long journey, going so very far!
It jumped past its father, ran on until it reached the farm to become round and be a gourd,
[just] as those [other] ones were.
That is what caused it to be the case that,
[even] if you have done everything and been well-trained
at home, if [nevertheless] you don't procreate a child,
if [then] you do everything to plant gourds in the farm, that they [will] become your child[ren].

That is also why, when women give birth to a child, [and] they reach the doorway of the house, if you don't put down a big empty gourd, they won't [be allowed to] enter the house.
You ask the [name of the] person who first entered the house that they don't want to tell you.
It is their prohibited action.[51]
If she doesn't smash it with her foot, if she is too weak to smash the gourd, one asks
the [name of the] person who first entered the house, "if you want to go inside".[52]
If she doesn't agree to smash [it],
[she is told] "You stay there in the doorway of the house, you stand still."
That's how [far] this one goes.
The [name of the] person who pronounced this text is what you [already] know:
"He-who-goes-to-the-ancestors-and-returns!"

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51. Paraphrasing Ǹri elders, ONWUEJEOGWU (1980: 49) distinguishes *ǹsọ́* 'taboo' from *álụ̀* 'abomination' as principle *vs* action. This logic has a clear etymology. *Ǹsọ́*, from *-sọ́* 'avoid', is a ritual prohibition. *Álụ̀*, from *-lụ́* 'pollute', is defilement which results from violating *ǹsọ́*. Major *ǹsọ́* and *álụ̀* are qualified with the word *àna* 'earth', indicating that such defilement can be cleansed only at the collective earth shrine. Ézé Ǹri controlled the cleansing of *álụ̀* for each *ǹsọ́*, by exercising a monopoly over the earth cult *(àjá Àna)* and hence over abomination-cleansing sacrifices *(íkpù álụ̀* 'covering over the abomination'). ONWUEJEOGWU (1980: 52-54) details an Ǹri classification of 105 *ǹsọ́*, major and minor. Some apply to specific categories of citizens (married women, non-titled men, *ọ́zọ*-titled men, Ézé Ǹri. Sixty-three *ǹsọ́* still remained in force at Ǹri in 1972, immediately after the Nigerian Civil War.
52. This condition is virtually impossible to meet, hence it has the force of a negative injunction.

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ABSTRACT

Ottenberg's phallic, Freudian reading (1989) of Ìgbo adolescent initiation lacks empirical support. An alternative analysis, taking its cue from Ìgbo oral texts and Meillassoux's materialist view of reproduction (1981), interprets Ìgbo initiation as semantically umbilical. Ìgbo initiation expresses, not Œdipal conflict, but preventive therapy of failed reincarnators (Ìgbo *ọ̀gbáńje*, Yorùbá *àbíkú*). Beyond the Ìgbo-speaking area, umbilical denotations suggest symbolic links with cognate Yorùbá and Fɔn traditions, *e g* in the figure of Èṣù/Légbá (cf. Augé 1988).

RÉSUMÉ

L'initiation igbo: phallus ou ombilic? — L'interprétation phallique et freudienne qu'Ottenberg donne de l'initiation des adolescents igbo manque de support empirique. Une analyse différente reposant sur des traditions orales igbo et sur une conception matérialiste de la reproduction telle qu'elle a été développée par Meillassoux fait de l'initiation igbo une institution sémantique centrée sur l'ombilic. Selon ce point de vue, l'initiation igbo exprime non pas tant un conflit d'ordre œdipien qu'une prophylaxie dirigée contre des réincarnations ratées. Au-delà de l'aire linguistique igbo, les dénotations liées à l'ombilic suggèrent des liens symboliques avec les traditions fon et yoruba telles qu'elles s'expriment notamment dans la figure d'Esu/Legba.

Keywords/*Mots-clés:* Nigeria/*Nigeria,* Ìgbo/*Igbo,* initiation/*initiation.*