This article fills in a placeholder blurb in my dissertation (§4.5, pp. 304f.). The Ìgbò 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. 177f., I proposed in passing that the Ìgbo nouns for 'reincarnating spirit double' and 'day(light)', both of which are pronounced chì, 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. Igwe'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 a usage a cultural commentator as Òlùyọ̀n Chííñá Òchẹ̀bẹ̀ ventures otherwise, in his famous 1975 essay "Chì in Ìgbo cosmology." Moreover there can be no doubt that the 'day(light)' meaning of chì 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 Ódà dictionary for the analogous noun òjì: "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. Alamaa), and on supporting evidence cited there, I suggest that the ìgbò noun for 'reincarnating spirit double' is historically identical to the noun for 'day(light)' thanks to a trivial etymology of a thing to its canonical context, motivated by an assumption which was originally made by Northcote Thomas (1914, 19) and which can scarcely be doubted by anyone who has compared the two neighboring civilizations, to the effect that the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 chì and ìgbò chì are remarkably parallel. The analogy is further demonstrated at ìgbo ('Agbor'), the intermediate border kingdom with strongly bicultural Ìgbo and Èdó leanings, where chì appears in countless personal names in the same 'slot' in which chì is found in the eastern ìgbo counterparts, to all appearances synonymously, e.g. Èhì edù wà Chì nà—a'dò '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' (Uché 1965, 58; cf. Basden 1921, 57f; 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 ìdàdu communal taboos (lit. 'things prohibited by the earth'), including birth omens, operant at Nri well into the 20th century (Owúwújìwú 1981, 52f). 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, 134f.), 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 Cameroon communities speaking Bembe–Kwa (so-called wide Bantu) languages, terms rendered in English as "single twin" are ritually applied to biologically singleton births by orachists seeking to interpret 'individual and social problems in terms of the behavior of disincarnated ancestors' (Diduk 1993, 552, cf. Argenti 2011, 283, 286). Extending the idea to ìgbò, hypothetically the chì 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 chì. If so, then a twin birth could not lead to further reincarnation. This conjecture awaits relevant evidence pro or con.


Basden, G. [1921]. Among the ìgílós of Nigeria; an account of the curious & interesting habits, customs & beliefs of a little known African people by one who has for many years lived amongst them on close & intimate terms. Seeley, London.


--- [2001]. Twinship and juvenile power; the ordinariness of the extraordinary. Ethnology 40, 29–44.


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 Igbo initiation. These analyses receive independent support in proliferating interpretative consequences in many semantic domains across the Igbo-speaking area and in the nearby Gbe- and Yoruba-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 Igbo 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 Igbo believe that . . .", "the Igbo worship . . .", "the Igbo offer sacrifice . . .", we are not giving concrete descriptions either of the psychological states, or of the ritual practices,

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 anthro-
pologists is Turner's doctrine (1969: 14) of symbolism, which starts from
an empirical dilemma: 'The Ndembu have a paucity of myths and cos-
modal 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 func-
tion 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, dis-
covered by 'equating a symbol's meaning with its use'; and *positional or
textual* 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 naïve 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 never-
theless 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 rela-
tively 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 "il-
locutionary 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 prac-
tice 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 cosmolog-
ological 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 *Éhugbó* 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 be-
tween 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 deities.’

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. […] Present 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 the analysis of the study by Walinska de Hackbel (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 Greco-Roman 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 Igbo-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). 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 Igbo 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 Igbo translation) with an ontological 'token-identity' (à la Fodor 1981) comprising 'distributions of ideas' across populations. But first things first.


Éhugbó is one of the last Igbo-speaking communities where obligatory male initiation still occurs in a nonperfunctory way, and hence where Igbo 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 Igbo 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 Igbo-speaking area was access to the colonial wage sector via English literacy. The proximate reason that Igbo-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 Ágbọ and Àhala (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 guerrillas were called 'Ekumeku'. Ekechi (1972: 166) compares [Ekumeku] to Àyāka 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], Àyāka and similar organizations apt for guerrilla warfare, and ripe for eradication.

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

4. Ojahike 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. Ónwujọjọgiwọ's remark that [Ekumeku] is interpretable either as 'prairie wind' (pronounced ëkumékù from the L tone root -kà 'blow' which also underlies the nouns ikuku 'breeze', ëkùpe 'fan' and ikú 'wing'; or else as 'no talking', perhaps pronounced ëkámékù derived from the H tone root -kà 'speak' (= Standard Igbo -kwá) which also occurs in the noun òk(w)ù 'speech'. The pun is closer in those dialects, including the Anjócha and Ágbọ 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 mask performances in most of the Igbo-speaking area are now either affairs of the elderly or else secular, ‘folkloric’ entertainment—what literate Nigerians call ‘culture’ and confine to the prosenium stage. Ugonna (1983) refers to the desacralization process when he characterizes the mask category of mmonwu as an innovation starting in 19th-century Ègbemà Ozuibiri on the left bank of the Niger. Mmonwu eventually displaced other masked performing groups in the so-called ‘central’ area around Ìlà [Orlu] and Èlàhà. In mmonwu, collective ancestors are not portrayed, although every character represents a mmojù, a human ancestral ‘spirit’.

Igbo 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 mmonwu. 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 mmonwu is that what some Igbo call mmonwu others do not. For example in Òba areas Òyàk is regarded as mmojù but in what I have called the mmonwu area, Òyàk is simply seen as a masked human being. In the Ozuibiri tradition of masking the only mmonwu is Nwàezênogwu, the “maskless mask”, the “death that kills the uninitiated” (Ugonna 1977: 7).

Generalizing across the Igbo-speaking area, he adds: ‘In cultish masking traditions, the Nwàezênogwu, Òkoko and Èkppe traditions, for example, masked figures yield enormous political influence’ (ibid.: 17).

Ugochina’s description is consistent with Boston’s (1960) observation further north, in the Èmèmàbala [‘Anamba’] basin, that Igbo masked dance performances are mainly ancestral. Some are not, but a categorical denial like that of Nzewi (1983) is unfounded. Nzewi holds that mmojù afùyà ‘market spirit’ masked dancers do not represent specific ancestors, rather they are ‘embodied spirits’ escorting the [generally invisible] wrath 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 Ugochina’s mmonwu type (including Òyàk) is founded on the concept of ancestry. Other categories of mask may, of course, have other functions, for example:

‘Through the masking performance, the Igbo 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 Igbo masking types do not deal with direct personalization or being forces [...] of characterization” (Aniakor 1983: 176, 185 sq.)

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

This pattern holds across more of the Igbo-speaking area. In Òweré, Aluah (1983) reports two coexistent categories: noneasonal masks, some representing specific ancestral individuals, and masks limited to one point on the ceremonial calendar, denoting abstract or nonpersonal forces (agù ‘leopard’, èbula ‘ram’, ìjọr ‘year’, ègbè ‘gun’, ènyo ‘mirror’, ìkwu ‘armed’, ìgú ‘crippled leg’, ĝùr ‘ámadí ‘disease is bad’...). An explicit ancestral impersonation on the right bank of the Niger is the ègùwu masked dancer who appears in the Èhàba final funeral ceremony, materializing the deceased before the journey to òtí mmadí, the ancestral sphere: ‘The initiated were to act as if the ègùwu 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 Èhàba 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 ègùwu publicly urges her to nominate her next husband. After the ègùwu rejects many intentionally unacceptable candidates, he names a person previously arranged with her consent by the lineage elders, and ‘the ègùwu affirms this name by solemnly repeating it in its distinctive spirit-voice’ (ibid.).

If all ancestral (ie 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 Ègbà ègù ómùn ‘initiation play’ called Èkórò mè was apparently secular. Furthermore, consistent with Igbo title systems, not all initiations—not even all those for youth—were obligatory, ie constituting age grades. Ìwàsù (1989) describes a voluntary, mystical ordeal in the Òweré vicinity: youths are secluded for four nights behind a screen of ìmú palm fronds where they receive a long incision on the right hand, arm and chest and observe temporary ‘ascetic’ prohibitions, (eg 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

5. As I observed in the maximal lineage of Ìràjì, Ènrì 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 Ènrì town hall.

6. MANFREDI 1991: 42-45. It was composed by the late Èbù Èfion 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 Ònjìa, 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 (ànì ìmòọ). By age 15, he legitimately learns the actual mask secrets, to be revealed only on pain of death, thus becoming a nwà èkòloboja who can establish his own ikèngà 'right hand' shrine and join an ògbọ 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: 'The [ììàà] are [...] the highest and supreme authority [...] From the Court of the [ììàà] there is no appeal' (Strong cited in Henderson 1972: 364).

Obligatory, sacred ancestral mask initiation proceeded quite differently, as Basden (1982: 238 sq.) and Meek (1937) describe in Òka and Ònjìa. The initiands learned an argot (of 'secret or fancy words' è g ṇkponkpo ite, 'useless pot' to denote young initiand, [ibid.: 73]), though they knew some of it already, because Ònjìa had a pre-Ayákà preparatory group for very young boys (Meek calls it 'kindergarten'). Final initiation into möọ (=ììàììà) proceeded in two stages: pre-pubescent were allowed to follow masked dancers but not know their identity; post-pubescent males, who actually dance, underwent ikpụ añi [mọq] 'crawling descent [into the spirit world]’, also called ìmà mọq ‘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 Igbo-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 itú 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' (Nwogua 1984: 54).

'To 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 patrilineal shrines. One òhụgbọ shrine, Òmà-àli (‘Earth-embrace’), regulates female sexuality and reproduction (menstruation, clitoridectomy, childbirth) as well as noninitiates’ ‘Earth-prohibitions’ (ǹsọ àli). Another shrine, Nṣi-òmùmù (‘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 (mù) to mortality. Part of the answer is pragmatic: nṣi-òmùmù is served out at the shrine as part of the annual Ìkò Nri Nṣi ‘Feast of the Medicated Food’. This feast ends with a chant Mkpụkụ, nkpụkụ, mpụkụ kà ńka! ‘Initiated seniory is better than longevity’. In other words, the effect of the medicine is not on reproduction (mù) but on genealogical transmission. Finally, the shrine called Má óbá ‘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 Igbo 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.

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7. The apical political position of Èzé Nri as a ‘living ancestor’ (Onwujekwe 1981) follows logically—a point which Henderson (1972: 369 sq.) appreciates. See also fn 11.

8. The same anomaly occurs in Ògbọ in the term égu ìmùmù ‘initiation dance’. This expression occurs in the first line of the Òkóró mè story as told by Èbú Èdíon (Manfredi 1991: 43).

9. ‘Òkiri’ Chùkwu Ikpọ lead this event in Èzé Ukwu, Kpoghirikpọ, Òhụgbọ, on Àho-Friday 4 March 1977. Ogbaru (1981: 147 sq.) reports a closely similar enactment in the Òlù area. I take the root of nkpụkụ to be the verb kpụ ‘mould’ which prototypically describes the activities of both potters (ò-kpụ-ite ‘pot moulder’) and iron smiths (ò-kpụ-ìzu ‘anvil-moulder’). In opposing technicized Bildung to kà ‘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 Éhugbọ 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 Igbo.

Orthography

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

I cite all Igbo words with tones, or state that the tones are unknown. In the tone orthography of Welmers and Ñwáchukwu, 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 Ọ nágu ifu mmá (Standard Igbo Ọ nághị ifu mmá) 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 ọkpụ mmá ‘the dregs’). Even less helpfully, Ottenberg glosses both èrụsị (Standard ụlụsị, perhaps cognate to Òyùbụ ọrịsị) and mà (Standard ìmmù) as ‘spirit’, thereby eliding the difference between supernatural forces and human ancestors. According to ONWUEJEUGWÚ (1981), the Èzè Nri kingship title was unique in combining the statuses of ìmmù and ụlụsị. At least four major ụlụsị of the Èzè Kingdom, studied by Onwuejeugwu, are recognized at Èhugbọ (with some dialectal differences):

(Ajá) Ana Earth (Sacrifice) In Èhugbọ: Àli (cf. Ágbọ jà ànu ‘cut up meat’)
Ìzù Market-Week (cf. ù ‘be complete’)
Ágwụ Herbalism/Divination’ (cf. ìgwụ ‘medicine’)
Ife-Ji-Okó Cult-of-Yam-Fertility In Èhugbọ: Njokà (cf. ị ‘worship’, ọkụ ‘make leafy growth’)

However, instead of the Èzè oracular ụlụsị ịaemîli ‘Pillar [i.e uphill] source’-of-Water, perhaps the main oracle at Èhugbọ is the riverbank shrine of the èrụsị Èkweté which is said by OTTENBERG (1958) to derive from Ànụ-Chàkwụ.

13. See for example fn 15.
14. WELMERS and WELMERS’S (1968) Igbo tonemarking was modeled on CHRISTLÈR’S (1875) tone orthography for Àkàn, whose prosody is very similar. Apparently, ÑWÁCHUKWÚ (1976) rediscovered the same principle independently. The second major system (used by WILIAMSON and EMÈNÌANO) 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 Q gààlà àṣà Òlù mọ gàà lìpà ‘s/he has gone to market’ (with two downsteps), they write Q gààlà àṣà . . . 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 Èhugbọ text for a non-Èhugbọ audience demands full tonemarking.

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthographic</th>
<th>Phonetic</th>
<th>Colonial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ônicha</td>
<td>[ônicṣa]</td>
<td>ONTSHA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ôweré</td>
<td>[ôwɛrɛ]</td>
<td>OWERRI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Èbirịba</td>
<td>[èbirịba]</td>
<td>ABIRA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Èhugbọ</td>
<td>[èhugbọ]</td>
<td>AFIKPO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthographic</th>
<th>Phonetic</th>
<th>Colonial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ñsúkà</td>
<td>[nsúkạ]</td>
<td>NSUUKA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñnèéwì</td>
<td>[nñèéwì]</td>
<td>NEWI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phrasal tone in the Èhugbọ dialect shows other effects, including rightward shift and final total downstep. Both peculiarities are very striking, and often remarked by other Igbo 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
definitely an Ēhugbò 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 Ēhugbò 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 childhood qualities or simply as lacking adulthood (cf. Ariès 1962). Eventually Ottenberg admits that, prior to Westernization, Ēhugbò 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 acknowledges 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’ 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 Ēhugbò counterpart and a rich nomenclature for various substages:

**Freud**

1. pre-Oedipal stage (0-3 yrs) --- 1. (nwa) [nseiriri] ‘nursing infant’ (0-2 yrs)
   (ibid.: 19)

   **named substages:**
   - nwaa ṣiṣáhá ‘new child’
   - ikó ṣiṣú ‘sitting’
   - igbé iṣe ‘crawling’
   - igbà ngí ‘standing’
   - iṣiṣi iṣe ‘tooth-producing’
   - ịji ‘walking’
   - igbá oso ‘running’

**Ēhugbò**

1. 2. Oedipal stage (3-6 yrs) ------- 2. ['not marked by a special Ēhugbò 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 Ēhugbò term' (ibid.: 59)]

   **correlated activities:**
   - isi uló ọbu, 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 Ēhugbò consciousness (‘vernacular psychology’). But there are reasons for doubt. For example: ‘Unlike American children, who are often confined to their own world, Igbo children grow up and participate in two worlds—the world of children and the world of adults. Igbo children take an active part in their parents’ social and economic activities’ (Uchendu 1965: 61).

Ēhugbò is weakly consistent with stages 2 and 3. If Oedipal (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 Oedipal. But an Oedipal characterization of toilet training does not hold, on Ottenberg’s own description (1989: 35), since at Ēhugbò that activity is ‘non-traumatic’. As for latency (stage 3), it is defined negatively, by suppression or absence, so it applies only by default.

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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 unheeded use of the term ‘vernacular psychology’ helps him to treat indigenous thought as effectively beneath or beside serious intellectual inquiry.

16. Ottenberg mislabels (igbá oso) as ‘fire-gun’ (which is of course ịgbe 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 ifije (able to walk) and a little later igbá oso (fire-gun), when it runs and moves well, meaning that it is now capable of being assertive (Ottenberg 1989: 19).

17. The lack of an explicit name does not mean that a category can’t be expressed in Igbo, 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

4. genital stage (117 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 Êñ overwhelm terms and activities which he regards as constituting stage 4, insofar as they can be thought to express a genital preoccupation.

ôke nwokè (‘big male’), ‘an adolescent [. . .] initiated or not’ (ibid.: 59)
obì ogò (‘commons shrine’ activities by the village ‘secret society’ (9-13, 15+ yrs) (ibid.: 62)
ogò umìg ènà (‘commons of non-initiates’), formal, secret mask-dances (9-18 yrs) (ibid.: 75-81)
inter-village wrestling grades (ibid.: 83 sq.) mkpùlfì nìgba ‘breaking into wrestling’ (15-18 yrs)
isì ogùgù ‘following the palm frond’ (18-28 yrs)
kpò ‘iron clapper-bell’ (28-30 yrs)
isì jì (‘head of yam’) prestige initiation for first sons, inaugurating a seven-year cycle (ibid.: ch. 5)
isì òbhùbù (‘head of òbhùbù’), the second stage in the male initiation cycle, for all sons (ibid.: ch. 6)
isì òbhùbù Èdhà (‘head of òbhùbù of Èdhà’), 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 Èñ overwhelm. 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 Igbo 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 nà nà nzere ‘longevity and fulfillment’.

To demonstrate Freudian content in stage 4, requires evidence that the activities of Èñ overwhelm adolescent initiation are genital. For example, one could describe pervasive genital symbolism in Èñ overwhelm adolescent initiation rituals. That Ottenberg wishes to do this is clear. For example, with respect to the term isì ogùgù which names the intermediate wrestling grade, he suggests that ‘[i]he implicit reference may be to the growth of the penis’ (1989: 84 sq.). Ogùgù may denote a construction of palm fronds tied around a wooden bar, carried in the initiation dance. Having seen this object (in late March, 1977), I can understand what is meant if someone describes òghùgù as phalic. However, the validity of such an aperçu remains in the eye of the beholder.

I don’t know the Èñ overwhelm word òbhùbù, which occurs in the names of two initiations. My best guess is that it means either ‘navel’ (cf. Standard Igbo òthùbù) or else ‘a type of calabash’ (in Standard Igbo, one kind is called nìbùbù). 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 Èñ overwhelm initiation rites; and, as a corollary, I propose etymologies for two cosmologically important nouns: ìwà and ìchì.

What is a Parent?

Partly because of Ottenberg’s 1968 monograph, Èñ overwhelm (along with Òñfì yì and other Igbo-speaking communities on Èñdùm—the Cross River) is famous in the anthropological literature as being governed simultaneously and separately by patrilineages (ìmùìñà) and matrilineages (ìkùwù). If, as he reports in the 1989 book, two ancestral spirits (ììù) are believed to correspond to every individual, then the two mà might conceivably represent one’s ìmùìnà and one’s ìkùwù. 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 (ììù) and the [male] child’s personal spirit ìwà [. . .] form the Òzìpàl triangle in spirit form: father, mother and child’ (Ottenberg 1989: 27).

Ottenberg’s own data, however, suggest several problems in identifying Èñ overwhelm mà, mà, ìwà with this Holy Trinity. First, Èñ overwhelm 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 bê ‘cut’, as occurs in labial or velar environments (òtù for òtù ‘manner’, nwòkò for nwòkè ‘man’), but also in other context (isòn for isèn ‘five’), cf. WARD (1941: 40-42), MANFREDI (1991: 60); or else bò is an ideophonemic element denoting round shape.

19. Ottenberg’s spelling varicimates between mà and mìà; 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 mà truly represent the individual’s two lineages, this by itself does not gender them male and female. The Èhùgbò matrilineage is more ‘female’ than the patrilineage only at the level of kinship ideology. In practice—at the level of individual biology—one’s ᴵkwù is no less dominated by males than one’s ụmụnà is. As recognized in Ottenberg (1968), an ᴵkwù is a landholding corporation of men related through their mothers. Demographically, one’s ᴵkwù may contain no fewer males than one’s ụmụnà does. Thus, absent any evidence that one of a male individual’s two mà 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 (�kwù vs ụmụnà), 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 Èhùgbò personal names shows that patrilineages in that community are constructed not so much by filiation (as implied by anthropolological kinship grids) as by reincarnation across alternate generations. The euroucentric assumption is that the crucial role of the first son is to ‘replace’ his father (ibid.: 188), but the Èhùgbò naming system shows otherwise. A first son Chúkwú Ikpo’s essential role is to reincarnate his grandfather Chúkwú, whose second name was predictably also Ikpo if it happens that his father bore the name Ikpo Chúkwú (i.e. as a first son, cf. ibid.: 18). Put another way: Èhùgbò lineage ideology suggests that the father’s obligation to sponsor at least one boy in the isi jì rites comes from his duty to let his own father (the boy’s grandfather) reincarnate. This would explain Ottenberg’s recurrent observation that ‘isi jì 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 (isi jì), but not the initiation of subsequent sons (isi ìbụ̀bu)?

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

The Meaning of ìwà and chì

As just noted, Ottenberg (1989: 24) reports an Èhùgbò word we can spell ìwà, meaning ‘male personal spirit’, analogous to chì in other Ègbo-speaking communities. 20 To my recollection, the tone is LL, making it homophonous with the pan-Ègbo word ìwà ‘world’. 21 Since at present knowledge the meaning of ìwà as ‘male personal spirit’ is unique to Èhùgbò, one is naturally curious whether this is an Èhùgbò idiosyncrasy, or if it has any wider relevance to Ègbo studies as a whole. My tentative answer is the latter. On formal and semantic grounds, an Èhùgbò noun ìwà ‘male personal spirit’ could come from the verb meaning ‘arrive home’, which in Èhùgbò is pronounced wà. 22 Consider the following cross-dialect table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ònicha</th>
<th>Àgbò</th>
<th>Èhùgbò</th>
<th>Òwèrè</th>
<th>Èhùwùdù</th>
<th>Ètèlè</th>
<th>Other dialects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>return</td>
<td>nà</td>
<td>lá</td>
<td>lá</td>
<td>lá</td>
<td>lá</td>
<td>yá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrive home</td>
<td>nò</td>
<td>lùà</td>
<td>lùà</td>
<td>wà</td>
<td>yò</td>
<td>lọṣì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>house/home</td>
<td>ụnọ</td>
<td>ụnọ</td>
<td>ìbì</td>
<td>ìbì</td>
<td>ìbì</td>
<td>ìbì</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word “ègérò” (in his pre-1961 transcription) as the female counterpart of ìwà. Even if “ègérò” is not a compound, so that it obeys vowel harmony, it could be either ègérò or ìwà; and since Ègbo permits eight or nine trisyllabic tone patterns, “ègérò” is nearly twenty-ways indeterminate. (More, if it is a compound!) 21 Among the ingredients for a 1977 ceremony were flat, three-pointed iron bits called òpa ìwà. At the time, I misgessed òpa ìwà as ‘carriers of the world’, assuming the ordinary meaning of ìwà and deriving òpa from the verb pà ‘carry [in the hands]’. In retrospect, òpa are old iron currency, whose use with the shallow pot (òjù) representing the male personal spirit (ìwà) 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, Alagbotu & Uguru 1962: 478), and there are many other examples of weak H-tone verbs forming nouns whose root bears L: hádà ‘come’ → óhàdà ‘visitor’; jì ‘walk’ → jìfìjì ‘journey’; lù ‘defile’ → ìlù ‘abomination’; lù lù ‘arrive home’ → ìlù ìlù ‘home’; ụ́ ‘produce’ → ìrù ‘flesh, profit’. (The reverse also occurs: là ‘tell [tale]’ → ìlu ‘tale’; ụ̀ ‘send’ → ọ̀zì ‘message’, cf. Williamson 1972: XXXIX-XXXIIX.) The proposal chi (azù) ‘(return) → chi ‘returner, i.e reincarnating spirit’ would be like zì → ọzì, with the complication that the noun chi lacks an overt prefix. However, the rising tone preceding chi in a phrase like uchë chì chi’s memory may reflect an abstract prefix (absent, for example, in Chìkè: thus ‘Chìkè’s memory’ is uchë Chìkè, not *uchë Chìkè). Synchronously, 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 Ègbo by Halle, Ihonu & Manfredi (1995). 23 Clearly, nà ‘arrive home’ underlies the greeting ìnòbi! ‘Welcome!’, just as Àgbò lùà underlies the counterpart greeting Àlà àlà?

20. Though this meaning of ìwà escaped my notice, I recall a probable cognate Èwà (a male personal name). By contrast, chì has no gender. Ottenberg cites a
If Ńhụgbọ ụwa ‘male personal spirit’ is morphologically related to Ńhụgbọ 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 (àlì mmọ) to the visible world (èlu ụwa) as a coming home ((íghọ ụwa), while the return journey from the visible world to the invisible world is described as a departure for home (ígha mmọ). 25 A predictable exception to this nomenclature is the shamancic journey of the diviner (dịghọ agha), whose round trip spiritual journey to the ancestors does not follow the path of reincarnation, and is described as íghja mmọ. 26

Additionally or instead, the item ụwa ‘personal spirit’ could be related to ụwa in its ordinary, pan-Ịgbọ meaning of ‘world’, as in the expression ẹlu ụwa 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 ụwa, but before the Ịgbọ 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, Ịgbọ. 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 Ịbọ and Ịgbọ (in the present Delta State, on the right bank of the Niger) the verb is pronounced lọa, or perhaps lọa. The complex syllable structure (CVV) may be understood in one of two ways. Perhaps the final vowel -a in lọa lọa is not part of the root but rather an affix, namely the open vowel suffix (OVS). Some Ịgbọ verbs possess this affix inherently (bià ‘come’, rito ‘beg’), other verbs are incompatible with it (gà ‘go’, pà ‘go’ ‘exit’), but verbs take it optionally, in an appropriate syntactic context (dàkà ‘fall’, rite ‘eat’). (cf. Nwachukwu 1976: 75). Alternatively, the final vowel -a in lọa may be the modern outcome of a historic compound lọ + wá. If the OVS analysis is correct, no implication follows for ụwa, but more mysteries are created, such as why the verb root lọ (or nó) 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 Ịgbọ word ụwa ‘world’.

As already noted, Ottenberg draws the obvious parallel between the Ịgbọ noun ụwa ‘male personal spirit’ and the roughly synonymous (though gender-neutral) Standard Ịgbọ noun chí. Unfortunately, the meaning of the latter is unclear. Anyone who discusses the noun chí with literate Ịgbọ 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-Eké (‘the chí who shares/creates’), they were pillaging existing lexical items, respectively: the name of the Chí Ukwu oracle in the hegemonic town of Arj, and the dually paired supernatural beings Chí ná Eké ‘Chí and Eké’. 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-Eké—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 (o-gbú nikú ‘wood-cutter’ from gbú ‘cut’) or lexically (n-ri ‘food’ from ri ‘eat’), or whether unanalyzable (aka ‘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 inanimate. 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 Ịgbọ ụwa (‘male personal spirit’ from Ịgbọ wá ‘arrive home’ leads to a further suggestion: that the etymological source for the cosmolologically analogous, pan-Ịgbọ item chí is the verb chí (a) ‘(re)turn’. The parallel is strengthened by the association of this verb with nó lọ / yọ ‘arrive home’ (whose Ịgbọ cognate is wá) in the compound verb lọghachi / yọghachi ‘come back again’ (Igwe & Green 1970: 155). In this way, the analytic meaning of

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24. Edó ọwa ‘house/home’ may be cognate to Igbo ụwa; but any cognation between Igbo chí and its Edó counterpart chí is much less likely, or less direct.

25. I owe this point to C. Aṣogonye. In Òka, Thomas (1968, II: 73) has nó ụwa / nó agi ‘be reincarnated’ and Williamson (1972: 323) has the phrase nó nimadí ‘to reincarnate someone’.

26. For example, the Ịgbọ diviner Èchọ Agha—who spoke the text in the Appendix—liked to be addressed as Ôjé-Ila-mmọ ‘He-who-comes-to-the-ancestors-and-returns’.

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 Igbo: ji ‘yam’ and di ‘master’. Both of these have a onongra consonant, a high front vowel and a H tone. Predictably, ji and di show the same tonal evidence for an abstract prefix as chí does, when they occur in phrases (cf. fn 22): üchéè ji ‘memory of yam’, üchéè di ‘[a] master’s memory’.
the noun *chị* 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 Ēhugbọ 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 *tisi jị* ‘head of yam’. However, a phallic interpretation for this term is not inevitable, as he admits:

‘The term *tisi jị* has various interpretations at Ēhugbọ. 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 Ēhugbọ. Yams are also liberally employed in the considerable feasting during this initiation; they are the major Ēhugbọ ceremonial food, grown largely by men.’

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 Ēhugbọ’, 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 *tisi jị*. I will argue that a view of boys as the ‘reincarnating’, re-growth portion of yams is both well founded in the Ēhugbọ 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 [Ēbụ Mbè, literally ‘Tortoise Songs’]’ (ibid.: 191).

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 page before [ibid.:169]), though without comment. Thanks to ‘Ọkiri’ Chukwu Ikpọ, the Ėkweteni oracle priest of Ėzi Ukwu Kpoghirikpọ, and my host Ichë Nkama Okpáni, I witnessed the Ėhugbọ New Yam feast at Enóhia Nkálu in 1977. As in Ottenberg’s (undated) photo (ibid.), the adolescent girls (umụ ìgboghọ) of that village emerged in a line from the grove behind the ọghọ (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 Nkama Okpáni parsed it for me—stated ‘We are yams’ and the ĝěrị jị (‘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, ĝěrị jị 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 ọghọ in all directions and scurried along the village paths towards the yam storage sheds (ọba) 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 Igbo concept ọba ‘self-multiplying wealth’, as opposed to ọkwu ‘accumulated property’—the latter being inanimate or inert. In many Igbo-speaking communities (though not in Ėhugbọ, to my knowledge), a wife is described (indeed praised) with the agent noun ọhụ-ọkụ, ‘consumer of accumulated property’. This counts as praise, not reproach, because a wife is also the source of ọbá in the form of children; hence nubile girls, like yams, are ọbá.

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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).

30. Bridewealth is literally ọkwu nwàanyị ‘woman’s wealth’ where the genitive is to be construed as objective and not possessive. The prototypical ọkwu consumed by a wife is cloth. The generic Ėhugbọ word for ‘cloth(ing)’ is ọkwu (Standard Igbo åkwu), and this could indicate that etymologically cloth is wealth par excellence. It may also explain the Ėhugbọ proverb: Ọnye wètère ọhụ, wete
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 ịsị jì bush area, and cook it and eat it there’ (ibid.: 184). The same restriction holds for ịsị obụ bu initiation (ibid.: 210). What does Ottenberg make of all this? No surprise:

‘It is my interpretation—and not that of the Ėhugbọ [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 Ėhugbọ 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 Ėhugbọ 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 Igbo context, this materialist thesis makes an important agro-nomical 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 (ịsị jì, 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—ili, ‘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 ịsị jì applies to the initiation of first sons: it is the first son (ọkpara) who must bear the paternal grandfather’s name, in the Ėhugbọ 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).
This passage suggests that Igbo 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: ‘Igbo 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).

Igbo initiation: phallic or umbilicus

‘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 isi ọbụ́bu 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 [isi ji] 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 Igbo is, as in other Igbo-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 Igbo ritualist, Èléje Aghá (the full text is reproduced as an appendix to this article).

The story describes an ọgbàńje named Nwáta-nwá-má-ríne, ‘Little child that knows its mother’. An ọgbàńje 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 ọgbàńje are portrayed as greedy nonhuman ndí ká ọbá ‘gourd-people’ who steals 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, Èléje Aghá says that the stomping of a gourd by the birth mother represents the breaking of the ọgbàńje 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

[ìzò 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 Òedipal 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 isi ji 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 Òedipal concerns on the part of the boy. Yet the mother continues to feed the boy’ (ibid.: 176).
expresses ritual auto-aggression moments after successfully birthing a child. But if the aim of initiation is to ensure reincarnation, then Élëje 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 ọgbáñe, and she is free to bear another son with a distinct reincarnation (ụwa). Thus the first stomping ritual (at birth) is a form of medicine designed to bar the return road to any ọgbáñe, while the second stomping ritual (at initiation) fulfills the promise of the first one, answering the mother’s prayer by ‘proving’ performatively that the son is not an ọgbáñe.

Ottenberg’s tale of misogynist aggression is belied by Élëje 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’: ‘[The suggestion is that the five Ìtím villages which took on [isi òhụbu Èdèhá] were moving toward greater central authority until modern times stopped this process.’

‘What was beginning to occur at Èhùgbù 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 Èhùgbù, with [...] its greater concern with the culture of childhood.’

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

31. To forestall misunderstanding, I should note that Élëje 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 Òtì Ùchê, a young bilingual. Apart from the closing comment which is effectively a just-so punch-line, Élëje Aghá never commented on this subject in my hearing. Thus, he did not undertake the role of an indigenous ethnographer comparable to Ogotemmelli (for Griaule), Gedege (for Maupoil), Mushona (for Turner) or Ñnàchì Ènwo (for Ottenberg). Although adolescent initiation was a recurrent topic and activity during all my stays in Èhùgbù, the significance of Ñwá Aghá’s story for initiation became clear to me only in reacting to Ottenberg’s book.

Igbo Evidence Outside Èhùgbù

A range of evidence from the wider Igbo-speaking area shows that my umbilical reanalysis of Ottenberg’s material is not idiosyncratic to Èhùgbù, or indeed to any Èhùgbù elder (Élëje 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 Igbo 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 Òka 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 Èhùgbù sixty-six years later. There is a problem with the name of the child which Thomas transcribes Ònò àbwù and renders ‘Calabash leaf’. It may be Ònù 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 ágbọghọ, ‘adolescent girl’, would be by hypothesis be a nominalization formed from ágbọ, ‘generation’, plus H tone ‘who’, plus -ghọ, ‘change/develop’, thus ‘someone (nwá) who is developing to reproductive age’.
‘Gourd daughter’, another version from near Òka, is given only in English summary (Okeke 1971: 95-97). The farmer’s reaction to childlessness—‘What have I done to my chi?’—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 Òtùò, ‘Umbilicus/Navel’. It is unclear if this metaphor underlies the cognition of nìbùò, ‘calabash’ and Òtùò, ‘umbilicus/navel’, or conversely has been suggested by it. Òtùò sings (in English paraphrase): ‘Although I’m home-born, támangwe, my home is the wild, támangwe’.34 This corresponds to the idea that a journey in either direction, birth or death, is conceptualized as a ‘return home’ with a perspectively appropriate verb, respectively lá and ló.

Support for an anti-ògbàńje reading of the gourd smashing comes from Ògu 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 (ábù omù́ìwá nwá) (Nwachukwu et al. 1986: 56):

\[\text{Nzọtú n’ọtú?} \quad \text{Trampling! Trampling! Did you stomp on a child?}\]
\[\text{Nzọtara nwá n’ọtú.} \quad \text{You stomped a son into existence.}\]
\[\text{Nzọtara nwá n’ọtú.} \quad \text{You stomped a daughter into existence.}\]

There is ample evidence that the umbilicus is viewed as the route of reincarnation. Úchendu (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—ágwá—in her right hand, the midwife, pretends to cut very close to the base of the cord, asks “Do you want me to cut here?” “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 ọdà—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 Igbo who cannot point to the burial place of his navel cord is not a dìlà—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 nkώ alù m (“my taboo palm tree”). This palm belongs to the child. It cannot be alienated. Not only is it a symbol of dìlà status; it is the foundation for the socially ambitious.’

In the same vein, Nwała (1985: 105) cites an Igbo equivalent of the English proverb ‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater’: I wèrè nwá, tìfùì iṣí [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 Ògàtì, a physical bridge (ôgwè, 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 nóm élù nków, ‘someone at the top of an oilpalm tree’—i.e. at the edge of the visible world (élù ìwá). Èlù nków is the place where ìwá grows, the new palm shoot whose name is derived from the verb má ‘give birth’. ‘Reincarnation is called “changing world” [ọnụnwọ̀ ìwá]’ (Thomas 1968, I: 30).

Why should the basic meaning of chi as an agent noun ‘returner’ divide between ‘daylight’ and ‘reincarnator’? The second meaning exploits a grammatical property of kin terms, thus chi onyé, ‘someone’s chi’ is an inalienably possessed noun (like ‘hand’ or ‘mother’). As a kin term,35 The endogamous corporation dì àlà is literally ‘master of the soil’, i.e. headlandline citizen, canonically distinguished from ósì which is a serf bound to the land of a community shrine. A synonym of dì àlà is ìmài, literally town-master (cf. ìmà, ‘street, public space’), note the same, exceptionally head-final word structure which occurs in the Ògbà term nèdì, ‘father’, literally ‘master of the mother’ (‘mother-master’). Úchendu (1977: 24) apparently derives ìmài from the name Àmàdò̀fà, the divinity of thunder, but the reverse direction is more plausible, which would make Àmàdò̀fà a praise epithet meaning ‘master of all the people (òkhá).’
it has a reciprocal counterpart (like ‘child’ is the reciprocal of ‘mother’ or ‘father’): (nwà) agú. 36 Thus, at Ahaba, “[T]he agú is believed to be the reincarnation of the chi” (ibid., IV: 190); a reincarnation is ọnye bálu agú, literally ‘someone who entered his agú’ (ibid., II: 115). At Ububuru, ‘a living man is chi’ and the dead man is called ọnye bi[ta] uwa, the one who comes to the world’ (ibid., IV: 20). Furthermore, Williamson (1972: 11) glosses agú 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 chi 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 chi from her father’s house, often as soon as she has borne a child. If she becomes a widow the object representing her chi is discarded and a new one is made in the house of the next husband’ (Thomas 1968, I: 29). In Ọnicha, the pot representing chi contains four ọkpünsi (lengths of čgbú tree) for the ancestors plus a fifth ọkpünsi for the ọgbọ-ná-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 inhabit a single space. An initiate, with the ability to ‘see’ the masked performers (mmanwụ) representing incarnate dead (mmbog), 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 ese and ükó (male and female funeral music) in Ìbílú-Ezinhite Mbaísén (Nwoga 1983: 5): Ọnye nwa tiri bara ụbà (Someone buried by her/his child is rich).

Similarly, the youngest Ọnicha 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, agúwá, described by Uchendu (1977) in the lengthy quotation directly above.

37. Similar terminology seems to occur in Fm (Mercier 1954: 227), where the ancestor returns to the lineage as [410] and at the same time remains an invisible ‘guardian spirit’.


regarded as a kind of [alá] ‘abomination’, but degrees of violation are distinguished […] Any child who dies young, but has ‘encouraged’ a junior sibling to be born after himself […] nwà sólù nwà […] is buried with a proper two-stage funeral ...’ (ibid.: 177).

Along the same lines, an ancestor who cannot reincarnate is viewed as being cheated. Uzochukwu (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 collinear’s wife was old and childless, walking on a long road. When he died in infancy, thus proving to be an ọgbọ-ná, he carried all his relative’s wealth with him ‘like an Ọnicha taxi’. The moral of the story was sung as follows: Mkpo ọlu ná-achú ari chi iwé yá n’ọzu (‘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 Ifesime (1979: 97): Ọnye a mi ọhụ amụ ji ügwọ ọmụmụ (‘Someone who was procreated owes a debt of procreation’). In addition, assuming the ambiguity of ọmụmụ 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 ụsọ ọnị: twins (multiple births), conception before first menstruation, foot presentation, a child born on the ground (ie 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 [ụsọ ọnị].’ ‘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 chi of an animal, an interloper, an ọgbọ-ná, 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 Eke sacred masks in Ọhụnụn and Nghwà (Ikeokwu 1984: 71, 74, 14-17). The songs of these masks describe an ancestral space, literally outside of time, where the visible and invisible worlds (elu ụwa and alá mmbé) 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.
these refugees resembled their hypothetical present-day descendants, since the resource/inheritance function of the respective lineages is opposite: Forde describes the Yakọ matrilineage (yajina) as the repository of rights in domestic and movable property, while the patrilineage (kepun) controls only farmland; the Èhugbọ situation is the reverse, with åku 'treasure' the preserve of patrilineages (umunà), and matrilineages (ikwu) controlling most farmland. We are then challenged to view Èhugbọ not as some aberrant borderland with an 'additive' hybrid kinship system, rather as manifesting principles of Ègbo lineage systems as a whole. Why farmland is inherited through females in Èhugbọ I cannot say, but it is true throughout the Ègbo-speaking area that àli ànà齿轮àlààna the earth force (aìsì) is conceptualized as female. Thus the problem may be inverted: to explain why farmland is inherited through males elsewhere. 

Slightly further east of Èhugbọ—just beyond the Upper-Cross group—four texts cited in English by Talbot (1969: 133-138) attest elements of the 'Nwàta-nwà-mà-fine' 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 'ebuya' 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 (Etnyang) 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, Iko). By themselves, these motifs do not link the ogbanje 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 Ègbo 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 Èghẹ-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 Ènu pantheon, the image of the king and the administration of Ègbòmè kingdom all into a twin pattern. Abimbola informs me that Èfi literary corpus recounts the shift

These Èkpe texts also address the meaning of ìwà: not the intersubjective time-space continuum of physics, but the subjective 'life-world' of experience. Thus, ìwà ajọọ is not 'a bad world' in the English sense, but rather 'a life of frustration and hardships'; ìmu àchú àlà-èdu ìwà is not 'those whose èchú leads the world' but rather 'those whose experience is controlled by their respective èchú' (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 Ègbo internal analysis.  

The centrality of reincarnation to descend concepts invites reexamination of another aspect of Èhugbọ ethnography, namely double unilineal descent. Ottenberg (1968: 29) speculates that Èhugbọ acquired its landholding matrclans when it hypothetically expelled indigenous non-Ègbo matrclans (speaking languages of the Upper-Cross group of Benue-Congo) from the right bank of the Cross River. However, this seems unlikely if
from negative to positive valuation of twins. When Edun, the male of the first pair of ibéji to have been spared, knocked on the door of Qlófin’s palace, the door opened for him by itself, thus he became the owner of doors’ which could be an epithet of Esù. Gates (1988: 15 sq.) notes the association of Edun with Esù in Afroculba and Afrobrasil as well as Nigeria. Abraham (1958: 266) cites a proverb Esù ní ẹhin ibéji (‘Esù 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 ńbíkú, and threaten the road of reincarnation. Negative value on twins of the Igbo 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 Igbo-speaking area (as described by Uchendu 1977) but the same knowledge is ‘taboo’ for the Yorùbá and ‘believed […] to lead to instant death’ (ibibami 1982: 108). For all that, burial of the placenta is no less obligatory in the Yorùbá context.

In the Gbè-speaking Fon 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 Ejaghah (Walbot 1969: 130) and in the Igbo-speaking area. Finally, the enfant terrible attribute of ọgbáṣe is linked to the navel in the Fon kingdom in the character of Légbá (compare also Esù Efègbára in Yorùbá):

“Legbá” is the hidden companion of every individual, a sprite [ '_lit_' in ‘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.”

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo Initiation: PHALLUS OR UMBILICUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ìsù</td>
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<tr>
<td>óṣù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>óṣùká</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>óṣùmàngi ẹsùmàngi</td>
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<tr>
<td>óṣùpà</td>
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<tr>
<td>óṣùwọ́n</td>
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The e/o backness alternation exemplified in the item for ‘rainbow’ is indeed widespread in both Yorùbá and Igbo noun prefixes, as in the following examples (Bamboše 1972, cf. Ward 1941 for similar Igbo facts).

| òmù ẹnìyì | ‘today’ |
| òmù ẹnìyì | ‘person’ |
| òrì ẹrì | ‘head’ |
| oruku leruku | ‘dust’ |

Taken together, the two data set open the possibility that the name Esù is directly cognate to the word óṣù, 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.’ In this way, umbilical symbolism in the Fon and Yorùbá-speaking areas indirectly supports the account of Igbo initiation proposed here. To be sure, some sculptural and poetic representations of Esù and Légbá have large erect phalluses (e.g. Herskovits 1938), but this is arguably related to a different attribute, not generation but potentiation (alábèṣè) then, requires evidence that this feature is important not just in the mind of the ethnographer, but in Fon and Yorùbá minds as well.

Ritual vs Semantics

Augé (1988: 140) has recently emphasized the cognitive dimension of sacred symbols: “The fetishists”, 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 ìsù ‘yam’. However, no historical link between M and L in Yorùbá has been proposed to date (cf. discussion in Manfredi 1995).

44. A likely Igbo cognate is éjù, ‘coiled head-pad for carrying loads’, cf. also éjù àlì ‘puff adder’—a snake known for coiling, literally ‘the éjù of the ground’.

45. Cf. also Ìdòwù (1962: pl. 12). The attribute of roundness does not only refer to the hair-style of Esù images or priests. Sàngó priests wear round hair tufts called, precisely, ọsù ọ̀sàngó.
Abstracting from the details of Igbo 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 localized 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.

Boston University, African Studies Center.

APPENDIX

Nwátá-nwá-má-áñíne 46

Ọzó? N kwuüjè e bò.
Bùù nwanjì, ewogù nwa, wùrù nri jege ubì.
Mgbè ó nọ n’ubì, ya nọrì arù orù.
Ákùkù ó kùrù n’alì, ndì kà óbà, pàvùrù jè erì jè yà, jè rìe n’ó bù, ràchà ohe.
Ègu agùta nwanjì jìrì ubì, ya sì na ọ jè erìenjì n’è.
Ya garì chọrù n’i m, bìa orùnì, kà oọ huṣì n’ì.
Ya kwa ekwa, kwa ekwa, kwa ekwa.
Ya jù “Onye riri n’i nì m e?
“Ìbe mú ñìwogù nwa, ëwogù m nwa, ònyè gài rìe rìe m n’ì m e?
“O nọ chì n’órù m, chìe m?”
Ya da ilì è, vurù na-áìa.
Mgbè ó l’arù úlò è, wú nri òzò, jegènì ubochì òzò gàra agà,
yà pàvùkwe rìe yè ya a, íbe ò nọrì orù.
Ya bìa kwa kwa ekwa abalì òtò. Ìnye dibie sì a,
“Èjì chìjì uwèlì, wùjì e n’abó a, gí wèrì mmà, wùjì e n’abó a, gúàmmì ógù.
wùjì uwèlì, mmà òsà òjì chìjì a jìe, na ndì m na-ènì gí ní jè ènyò ndì jì.”
Ya rù è, èwèrì ní ndì óbà, chìjì mmà òsà wùjì, chìjì uwèlì òsà wùjì, ya nòrù arù orù.
Ndì na-èrikìwì ní m bìa orùnì è.
Ya sì a nà “O bù ìnyè i gídehì m jà bù nwa gí. Nkè i gídehì amàjì abi nwa gí.”
Wò rige ní ríduwò e, rìe wùjì naï,
ìnye aànjì sì “O dìkwagì mmà na áí èmèndègì, Chì ná Èkè.”
“Aì erìduwò nírì nwanjì aà isù mbù, aì rìe ní ì isù èkìo, aì rì è nìè ètò.”
“O díjì mmà ái èmèndèkwegì ì orù. O nò n’ànì ógù aà lìa.”
Wò kwè, wò chìjì, wò ru na-arù, na-àrù , na-arù,
nwànnì yì aßù onìwàwàí chì m, nò ògìboù adì bùù òbà.
Ya ègìde ìmù na ó bùù òbà.
Ya ègìde ìmù na ó bùù òbà.

46. Recorded 19 June 1977 from Êleje Aghá (Ndí Uché Òrò, Kpóghirikó, Èhugbò). Transcribed and translated jointly with Òtì Uché (Èzí Ukwù, Kpóghirikó, Èhugbò). I will send an audio recording of Nwá Aghá’s rendition of the story to anyone who requests it.
47. Cf. fn 38.
Ya eje a ya a ya a, "O bù j m miri m nso m asp, ma gi jirin m rue ezi."
Ya si a, "Mi agbọra, mi gị gị! Enwogu m nwa!"
Ya si a, "Ihe j jik m bu Oba-nwa-ọma-ene. Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene. Ekwụkwụ m ihe ọzo!"
Ya ekwe.
Ya laje ma-alà, ya si a na o mogu oje-ọka, na ọka j i adu a.
Ya si a, "Gị ejekwe!"
"Gị j ihe ohi, na o digi mma m gị nigụ ekwụkwụ m ọzị!"
"Na o bù ihe ọzi ọba ezi j ekwu m bu Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene, ma-nma.
"O bù nke wo j na-eku m."
À na-eku e ya.
Nwanyi e paturu j agha ọhu, j debere e, si na "O jekwe ọka!"
Ya ta ejege ọhu ọdụ ọdu, si a "Ekụkù ọba! Ekụkù ọba! Ekụkù ọba!"
Ya kwejì e.
Ọ kudueri e ya.
Mgbọ o kudueri e ya, ya nọri ubi, Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene si a.
"Gị ọjọ ọjọ m bọ, n j wụ ehu, na adị m inyi."
Ya si a, "Kaaaa! Gị a nwa ọba nta ja eku m cu ma amụrụ m bu ịba baa!"
"Esimeri m mma!"
Nwata gaba ulọ ja chiri ihe e, si "O bù uzu m la.
Ka ihe o kuduru nne e, na o bù gị ọmụ nọdị a n'ihu.
Ya ejiụta ogọ, nidi leche ụche jegide e.
Ya si cha, "Uche ụche, haka nwa! O bù m bu Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene!"
Wo pari a, tukwasi a, "Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene, n bu nji nji m nni gị?"
Ya si a, "Ọhu ụnọlu eku m Õgbogho-m-kpata-ọnu-ogoye!"
M-kpata-ọnu-ogoye! Echama Dibe n laje ịla! Ibe n jijerị ịnweta, n ji nje m, jekere ịjụma ịme, ịjelele ịme!
Ya ọba j cha cha cha, ụffụ ụnọlu, na ile ndiri ohi watajie nj.
Wo si a, "Nwata-nwa-ọma-ene, i meri aga n'iri e?"
Ya si a, "Ọhu ụnọlu eku m Õgbogho-m-kpata-ọnu-ogoye!
M-kpata-ọna-ogoye! Echama Dibe n laje ịla!"
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?”
“Is it trying to chase me away from my work?”
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 apprenticeship construction in which the possessor of the object (e.g., ‘3sg’), in context the hypotethical child who might legitimately eat the food, is referentially distinct from the antibeneficiary (‘m ‘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 Igbo 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 captured 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, -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 grumpy.”
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 Òchama Dibe!
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 Òchama Dibe!
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 Òchama Dibe!
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 Òchama Dibe!
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].

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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 Ñri elders, ONWUEJEGWU (1980: 49) distinguishes nso 'taboo' from ìlù 'abomination' as principle vs action. This logic has a clear etymology. Nso, from -só 'avoid', is a ritual prohibition. ìlù, from -lù 'pollute', is definite which results from violating nso. Major nso and ìlù are qualified with the word ìnìa 'earth', indicating that such defilement can be cleansed only at the collective earth shrines. Òzé Ñri controlled the cleansing of ìlù for each nso, by exercising a monopoly over the earth cult (àjì ìlù) and hence over abomination-cleansing sacrifices (ìpù ìlù 'covering over the abomination'). ONWUEJEGWU (1980: 52-54) details an Ñri classification of 105 nso, major and minor. Some apply to specific categories of citizens (married women, non-titled men, ìnìa-titled men. Òzé Ñri. Sixty-three nso still remained in force at Ñri 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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ARIES, P.

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AUGÉ, M.

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ABSTRACT

Ottenberg’s phallic, Freudian reading (1989) of Igbo adolescent initiation lacks empirical support. An alternative analysis, taking its cue from Igbo oral texts and Meillassoux’s materialist view of reproduction (1981), interprets Igbo initiation as semantically umbilical. Igbo initiation expresses, not Oedipal conflict, but preventive therapy of failed reincarnators (Igbo ogbaction, Yoruba abikā). Beyond the Igbo-speaking area, umbilical denotations suggest symbolic links with cognate Yoruba and Fon traditions, e.g., in the figure of Esu/Legba (cf. Augé 1988).