SEVEN VARIETIES OF AMBIGUITY:
SOME PATTERNS OF IGBO* RESPONSE
TO CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

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Anyone who writes in brief compass on a theme of this kind is immediately confronted by a number of difficulties and pitfalls. The most obvious is the danger of abstraction. Can one meaningfully reduce the almost infinite variety of responses in a society as various as Igboland, to a phenomenon as complex as the missionary impact, to any shorthand which bears a meaningful relationship to reality? To adapt the words of a recent sensitive essay on the same theme in the Chinese context, one must recognise "the danger of reducing a great variety of responses to a few that are highly visible and easily labelled" and "the temptation to regard responses as specifically Igbo when they may have been shaped by supracultural ... factors." 2) To reflect too much on problems of this kind is to put oneself in the position of the centipede who was paralyzed by "considering how to run." Nevertheless, it is as well to begin with the caveat that Igbo responses to mission teaching were conditioned by a whole variety of factors — age, sex, status in the community and the nuances of the individual personality among them — and that no analysis can even begin to mirror this variety and complexity.

This paper discusses the Igbo encounter with Christianity as an episode in the history of ideas, accepting that Igbo responses were largely conditioned by sociological factors. This emphasis is open to the criticism that conversion is an emotional or spiritual reality which cannot be properly discussed in the language of intellectual dialogue. This may well be so — the heart has its reasons, which the historian knows not of. But the two aspects of the encounter are not mutually

*) The spelling 'Igbo' has been adopted in this article since it is customary in this JOURNAL; elsewhere I use the commoner form 'Ibo'. E.I.
1) A revised version of a paper presented to a Conference on the History of African Religions at the University of Dar es Salaam, June 1970.
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exclusive, and to concentrate here on the intellectual dimension, where analysis seems possible and appropriate, is not to deny the existence of other and less measurable dimensions.

It is difficult to describe an intellectual encounter without prefacing it by a description of the ideas and assumptions of the protagonists. The salient characteristics of Igbo religion have been described in a number of places 3) and need not detain us here. Indeed any précis of Igbo religion as a system of ideas does violence to its nature, to which theological discourse is essentially alien. The background and world view of the missionaries is another complex theme which cannot be adequately treated in brief compass; 4) all one can do here is mention a couple of salient characteristic. The Catholic missionaries who worked in Igboland from the 1880s on, and the evangelical Englishmen who supplanted the Sierra Leoneans of the Niger Mission at the same time 5) shared a surprisingly large number of assumptions. These included a romantic and self-immolatory view of the missionary vocation, and the conviction that the religious message they taught was objectively and exclusively true, and that these truths had eternal consequences. Both evangelicalism and post-tridentine Catholicism shared a strongly eschatological frame of reference, which stressed the dangers of hell. The mission field was a battlefield against the forces of paganism, which endangered the soul. The first C.M.S. missionary to Igboland — a Sierra Leonean of Igbo parentage — wrote “May many come willingly to labour in pulling down the strongholds of Satan’s kingdom, for the whole of the Ibo district is his citadel.” 6) The founder of the Holy Ghost Fathers Igbo mission warned his nephew that “All those who go to Africa as missionaries must be thoroughly penetrated with the thought that the Dark Continent is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of the devil.” 7)

3) They form the major theme of my article, Ibo and Christian Beliefs: some aspects of a theological encounter, African Affairs, April 1969, 121-134. This also discusses the Igbo critique of theology, mentioned below.
4) It is discussed more fully in my The Ibo People and the Europeans (forthcoming).
5) The Sierra Leoneans who had staffed the Niger Mission previously were also evangelicals who shared many of these views. (Cf. the quotation which follows below. But they — in common with many of their European evangelical contemporaries in mid-century — laid more stress on the transformation of society through education, cotton growing etc.)