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Debunking the Myth: *The True Origin of “Bekee” in Igbo Language*

By Idenze Ezeme

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DEBUNKING THE MYTH

Debunking the Myth: The True Origin of “Bekee” in Igbo Language

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Before closing these remarks on language exchanges attention may be directed to the Igbo word *Beke* and this opportunity taken to dispel the idea that this Igbo word, to describe a European, is of English origin. The word has no connexion with the explorer, Dr. Baikie, who travelled up the Niger in 1854. A form of this word was used by Captain Hugh Crow who, from about 1790, frequented Bonny for some ten years while engaged in the slave-trade. In a small English-Eboe (Ibo) vocabulary compiled by him he gives:

spirits	<i>mya becca</i> (foreign wine)
cocoa-nut	<i>acco becca</i> (foreign nut)

To-day, in Igbo, *mia* means palm-wine from the *raphia vinifera* and *aku*, a nut (palm-nut), so that in 1790 *becca* meant a European.

Bèkè seems to have been recorded here which brings the theory that it originated from the Scottish explorer William Baikie into doubt. Westermann, Smith, Forde (1932). Oxford University Press.

Originally, “bekee” referred only to Dr. Baikie. Over time, the meaning of the term expanded. The Igbo people came to use “bekee” for all white people, particularly those Europeans engaged in missionary work, trade, and colonial activities on their land. As many of these interactions were conducted in English, “bekee” became associated with English.

Of all factors, the spread of Christianity and Western education contributed most to language and culture change. The missionaries brought in English and imposed it as the main language of conversation, schooling, and prayer. Because of their status as representatives of “Bekee” (white people), English naturally earned

the nickname “bekee.”

When the colonial government started in the early 20th century, it used English for its work. Over time, the word “bekee” became a regular part of the Igbo language. It came to mean not just English but also Western culture in general.

Adopting “bekee” as a term for English reflects the broader cultural shifts that occurred during the colonial and missionary periods.

It shows how the Igbo people included foreign ideas in their language and way of thinking while maintaining their own language and culture.

Even today, “bekee” is commonly used in Igbo-speaking areas, especially in everyday conversation.

The word “bekee” is not just a change in language; it is a sign of history that shows the interactions between the Igbo people and Europeans. From Dr. Baikie’s journey to the arrival of Christianity and colonial rule, “bekee” represents a history of cultural exchange and change that still influences the Igbo language and identity today.

People believed it was from Baikie, but extensive research and evidence show that bekee is a Southern Igbo axis word for foreign, while the Northern axis uses oyibo.

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The True Origin of ‘Bekee’: Debunking the Baikie Myth

The idea that the Igbo word “bekee” comes from Dr. William Balfour Baikie has been proven wrong. Evidence shows that “bekee” was already used in the Igbo language to describe foreign things long

before Baikie arrived in the region. Here's a clearer explanation:

The Real Origin of “Bekee” in Igbo Language

The word “bekee” existed in Igbo long before Dr. Baikie's time. Historical records and older writings show that Igbo speakers used the word to describe anything foreign, especially things from Europe.

1. Evidence from Igbo Words

In 1830, Hugh Crow wrote about two Igbo terms:

- myabecca – mmányá bèké: Foreign wine (referring to spirits brought from Europe).
- accobecca – ákú bèké: Foreign kernels (referring to coconuts).

These words prove that “bekee” was already part of the Igbo language in the early 1800s, well before Baikie arrived in the 1850s.

English.	Eboe.
a large ship	owba coocoo
a small boat	ewba wanta
pig	asa
goat.....	agoe
monkey	waka
fowl.....	ocuceoe
parrot	eacha
fish	asoe
dog	ecotta
beef.....	annoe
bread	achecha
yam	gee
water	menney
spirits	myabecca
cocoa nut	accobecca
palm oil.....	mano
salt	ownoe
pepper.....	usoe
cold	oyee
death	awawo
surprise	awamea
tub	athasa
a severe beating.....	pem pem coocoo
a moderate beating.....	pem pem wanta
sleep.....	owry
large.....	coocoo
small or little....	wanta
bad.....	gorranjoe
good	adeema
warm.....	oeo
no	ofurry
look.....	laguana
get up.....	lecota
go below....	gemalla
give me.....	wetta
come here	beca

Igbo Ubani (Bonny Island) dialect word list by Captain Hugh Crow, a British slave trader between Africa and the West Indies, in *The Memoirs of Captain Hugh Crow* (1830).

The word “bekee” (or similar versions) also appears in Creole languages spoken by African communities in the Americas before the 1800s. This shows that the term was widely used in West Africa to mean “foreign” or “European.”

3. Timing Doesn’t Add Up

Dr. Baikie was born in 1824 and didn’t visit Igboland until the mid-1850s. But “bekee” was already in use by Igbo speakers in the early 1800s. So, the word couldn’t have come from his name.

4. How Igbo People Use “Bekee”

The Igbo language often uses words to describe new or foreign things. For example:

- mmányá bèké: Foreign wine.

- ákú bèké: Foreign kernels (coconuts).

Similarly, “bekee” was used to describe Europeans, their culture, and their language.

Why the Baikie Story is Wrong

Some people believe “bekee” came from Dr. Baikie’s name because he was a well-known European who worked with Igbo communities. But the word was already in use long before he came, so it cannot be connected to him.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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