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ETHNOHISTORY

## The Story of the First Igbo Bible: *The Untold Legacy of Rev. J.C. Taylor and Simon Jonas, Igbo Ex-Slaves and Their Contribution*

By Chuka Odike

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**THE STORY OF THE FIRST IGBO BIBLE**

# The Story of the First Igbo Bible: The Untold Legacy of Rev. J.C. Taylor and Simon Jonas, Igbo Ex-Slaves and Their Contribution

By Chuka Odié · Ethnohistory · Ozikoro.com

**T**he translation of the Bible into the Igbo language is a significant milestone in the history of African linguistics and missionary work. While Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther is often associated with early Igbo Bible translations, historical interrogations by Historians and Scholars highlights the main contributions of two free Igbo ex-slaves, Simon Jonas and Rev. J. C. Taylor, in creating, writing, coding and translating of the first Igbo Bible Primer.

01

## The Role of Missionaries and the Language Challenge

In the mid-19th century, European missionaries realized that effective evangelism in West Africa required mastery of local languages. They assembled a team led by missionary Schoen to translate Christian texts into Igbo. However, their understanding of the Igbo language was limited, as they relied on dialects spoken by freed Igbo slaves in Sierra Leone, such as the Isuama dialect.

Simon Jonas and Rev. J. C. Taylor, both of Igbo descent, played a pivotal role in this endeavour. Their unique linguistic skills allowed them to bridge the gap between the European missionaries and the local Igbo-speaking communities. Together, they compiled an Igbo

primer in 1857.

02

## Ajayi Crowther's Role as a Publisher

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a renowned Yoruba linguist, polyglot and the first African Anglican bishop, was responsible for publishing the Igbo Primer. His involvement in the project has led to misconceptions, with many believing he was the primary translator. However, his main contribution was facilitating the publication and ensuring the distribution of the text.

As the head and Bishop, Crowther's work primarily focused on publication and distribution of the Igbo Bible Primer. He couldn't even speak Igbo before the completion of the full Igbo Bible translation, which did not occur until almost two decades later.

03

## Challenges with the Translation

The primer faced challenges upon reaching Igboland. The Isuama dialect used in the text was not widely understood by native Igbo speakers, leading to confusion. This highlighted the complexity and diversity of the Igbo language, which consists of numerous dialects.



04

## Legacy and Recognition

Despite these challenges, the efforts of Simon Jonas, Rev. J.C. Taylor, and their collaborators who were all of Igbo descent laid the foundation for subsequent translations of the Bible into Igbo. Their work remains a testament to the importance of African agency in preserving and promoting indigenous languages.

The contributions of these individuals deserve recognition, as they represent a critical chapter in the cultural and linguistic history of the Igbo people. Their story underscores the importance of accurate historical narratives and the acknowledgment of Igbo contributions to global heritage.

05

## Conclusion and Summary

The first Igbo Bible Primer was written and translated by Rev. J. C. Taylor and Simon Jonas, both free Igbo ex-slaves. Their linguistic expertise enabled them to bridge the gap between European missionaries and Igbo communities. While often credited to Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, his role was primarily as a publisher and distributor, NOT a translator. Completed in 1857, the primer initially faced challenges due to its reliance on the Isuama dialect, which was not widely understood in all of Igboland. Despite this, Taylor and Jonas's efforts laid a crucial foundation for future Igbo Bible translations and African linguistic preservation.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Chuka Odi

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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