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Understanding the Meaning of “Okwu na Ụka” in Igbo Language

By Idenze Ezeme

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The Igbo phrase “okwu na ùka” is a common expression that combines two words: “Okwu” – meaning “word,” “matter,” or “issue.” “Ùka” – which traditionally means “conversation,” “argument,” or “discussion.” Modern usage can also mean “church” or “Christianity.” Together, “okwu na ùka” can be translated as “matters and arguments” or “issues and conversations.” It was...

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Together, “okwu na ùka” can be translated as “matters and arguments” or “issues and conversations.” It was used for situations involving disputes, debates, or discussions.

The meaning of “ùka” evolved particularly with the arrival of Christianity in Igboland in the mid-19th century. When Christian missionaries, like Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther and John Taylor, introduced Christianity to Igboland (starting in Onitsha in 1857), the word “ùka” began to be associated with church activities because it was seen as a place where people gather for discussions on the Christian God. Over time, it became the Igbo word for “church,” “Christianity,” or the Christian Sunday in Igbo language.

Historically, “ùka” had broader meanings, such as:

- “Conversation” or “dialogue” (as used in phrases like *ikparịta ụka*, meaning “to converse”).
- “Argument” or “dispute” (as in *okpukpọ okwu na ụka*, meaning “to argue or debate”).

With the introduction of Christianity, the word “*ụka*” was adapted to describe the new faith and its practices. For example:

- *Ụlọ Ụka* – “Church building” (literally “House of Ụka”).
- *Mbọsị Ụka* – “Sunday” (the main day for Christian worship).



Gustaf Bolinder captured an Igbo public space for learning and recreation, likely a school, in 1930–31.

Some scholars suggest that the adoption of “*ụka*” for Christianity may stem from early missionary efforts to “reason” or “dialogue” with Igbo people during evangelism. Others argue that the word might have referred to the overzealous nature of early converts, often seen as troublesome (hence, “*ndị okwu na ụka*” – “those who argue”).

Interestingly, in some Igbo dialects, such as those of the Izii people in Ebonyi State, “*ụka*” means “lies” or “untruths.” This diversity in



meaning highlights the complexity of tracing the exact origin of the word’s modern usage.

In conclusion, the phrase “okwu na ụka” reflects the duality of Igbo expressions—rooted in tradition but influenced by external changes, such as the advent of Christianity. Whether used to describe arguments or issues, its meaning connects the old and the new in Igbo culture.

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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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