

AN ENCOUNTER WITH RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN UBOMA LAND

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.23433.67684

Abstract

The theory of evolution proposes that human cultures (including religion) go through a process of development beginning from the lower or simple to the higher complex form. As part of a larger Igbo society, the clash of missionary religions and Western culture left Uboma with some continuity and discontinuity of their traditional practices. Some of the basic questions this research work had attempted an answer are, was the effect of religious change felt in Uboma land? What are the agents of such religious change and how the Uboma people react to such menace? What has remained of Uboma after the so-called clash of the cultures?

Introduction

Uboma is one of the two communities that make up the present day Ihitte/Uboma Local Government Area of Imo State. Uboma is made up seven(7) autonomous communities with each autonomous community having her own traditional ruler as a mark of its autonomy. The people are predominantly farmers of subsistent nature majoring in yam, cassava, palm produce, and local production of rice. It is here that we have an Igbo dialect known as Uboma Isu.

Egbucha (2007: 87) argues clearly that the process which resulted in a rapid religious change could be characterized as complex and long. According to him, the Islamic religion had its own strategy of spreading the religion. This included building of Islamic schools where Arabic language was studied, the use of jihad of the heart and finally the use of jihad of the sword. Motivated by the mixing of Islam with traditional practices, the jihad of the sword became necessary to convert people to the worship of original Islamic morals. This process of jihad became an effective process of converting the local population. In addition, Arabic language schools were established to indoctrinate the children on the religion of

Islam. To become a Muslim came to be identified as a pre-requisite for political entry into high offices.

In similar manner, various Christian mission groups evolved different strategies, which they considered most appropriate to their work. These various approaches and methods ultimately culminated in a revolution. The more popular of these methods according to Egbucha included the freedom and rehabilitation of slaves and outcasts, establishment of Christian settlements. Within such colonies, Christian way of life became the norm. Some adopted the method of open-air preaching and home visitation as was the case with the Evangelical Church of West Africa/ Sudan Interior Mission (ECWA/SIM) now Evangelical Church Winning All in Uboma land. The missionary methods of teaching and preaching were looked upon as mystical and powerful. This involved the demonstration of miracles of healing and living in the evil forests without problems. Achebe (1958:105) throws more light on the issue. From the deliberation of Umuofia elders on the issue we read: "they want a piece of land said Uchendu, we shall give them a piece of land...let us give them a portion of the evil forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battle field in which to show their victory...they offered them as much evil forest as they cared to take".

In Uboma land this was also the case. When many inhabitants from various villages of Ikperejere and Uboma started to join the worshippers at Umuduru village, and towards the close of 1922, a new site was chosen for the people. That site was "a thickly forested juju land where demons/evil spirits/burial site for the undesirables etc were supposed to inhabit. That 'horrible' and dreadful site was given to the church for her abode. That forbidden land was near Orié Ohuru market square", (Building Committee, 1988:11).

Then when days passed and nothing happened to them, many people developed the opinion that their magic powers were greater than those of the Africans. Some then opted for this power. It is against this background that Nwosu (1996:1-13) observes that the view that Africans looked for mystical powers in the mission churches appears in the literature of church history in Africa. But it has been proved adequately that the response to Christianity was influenced by this search. Some scholars have explained a three-stage approach in the mission effort or attempt to change religion and culture. The first stage was described as the era of experimentation marked mainly with caution. The second phase has been referred to as the era of radical iconoclasm and finally the stage of cultural revival marked by religious adaptation, syncretism, and inculturation. The era of experimentation tallies with what we saw in Things Fall Apart and in Ikperejere land where the

Christian mission was given the evil forest. This period covers about the first 50 years. The missionaries were naturally cautious when they arrived. Some of them enjoyed the backing of colonial masters; they were able to control some aspects of the cultures they saw as barbaric like human sacrifice and the killing of twins.

The era of radical iconoclasm was necessitated by the increase in the number of converts coupled with developments like the first and second world wars. With the success of European colonialism, many missionaries and their individual converts began to adopt many more radical methods. For example, the Igbos witnessed a great conversion explosion between 1912 and 1918 and in Uboma land it tallied with the coming of Christianity in the land from where it spread to other areas with the community. Another reason for the massive response to the new faith was the ability of the missions to destroy the shrines of divinity without any harm to members. A power many would want to possess. This was similar to the spread of the message of Garrick Sokaro Braide and his movement in Southern Nigeria between 1919-1937. All these amounted to religious change in Uboma land. The effect has led to the proliferation of different churches in Uboma today.

The third stage in the process of religious change is cultural revival. With independence and re-emergence of black culture, many people began to question the attitude and actions of Christian missionaries towards Africa. People began to question whether African traditional religion was as devilish as painted. Complaints even in the main-stream churches were growing wide. Against this background, Christian mission groups began to admit elements from African religion. Some religious founders began to mix up elements from the two religions. This early stage was marked with religious syncretism. The establishment of educational institutions, hospitals and rehabilitation centers by the missionaries marked another process of religious change in West Africa.

In relation to this view Onwubiko (1991:127) observes, "The effect the desired change in culture, they thought it was better to start with the children, the fathers and adults of tomorrow. The attention paid to children was motivated by the fact that missionaries clearly saw that the adult Africans were men and made according to traditional standards and principles. They were traditionally religious to the core and to Christianize them in the light of the Christian religion was difficult. They were forced to turn to children who were still tender, impressionable, minable, uninitiated and therefore pliable".

Education therefore became an avenue of demolishing the children's idea about traditional religion in West Africa. Also, in Uboma land soon after the church was established, the urge for the ability to read, write and calculate numbers was

irresistible. The people were thrilled to see their teachers sing from books and hymn, read the bible, write and interpret letters and vital documents. And gradually many men, women and children abandoned the worship of idols as well as other abhorrent heathen practices. The use of medical services was another effective method of religious change adopted by the missionaries. As Ekechi observes, right from the time they arrived, it was observed that Medicare, which Roman Catholic Missionaries gave to natives, was by no means without ulterior motives. Onunwa (1990:219) relays what Ottenberge who has a close contact with the Igbos said "the Igbo are probably most receptive to culture change and most willing to accept Western ways of life than other groups in Nigeria".

It will be important to conclude by citing the request of Rev. J.C. Taylor for more hands in his missionary work in Igboland. As he puts it "may many come willing to labour in the pulling down the strongholds of Satan's kingdom for the whole of Igbo District is his citadel" (Crowther and Taylor, 1968:325). This request implied a move to destroy the traditional religion of the people. Our survey has shown that both Christian and Moslem missionaries adopted strategies in which they achieved the objectives of their missions.

Consequences of Religious Change

Metuh (1986: 13) argues that the responses of the different religious communities in Africa to religious change is another interesting but complex theme. The Maguzawa, are pockets of Hausa communities which have for centuries resided Islam. The traditional beliefs which they still hold today show signs of Islamic influence. The Muslim name for God, Allah, has displaced the traditional name for God, which according to Goriawala, is now lost. Some Muslim spirits, "al-jinn", have been adopted and added to the ranks of the traditional spirits, "Iskookii", while the Bori cult, a therapeutic spirit-possession cult, practiced by the Maguzawa attract clients from Hausa Muslims.

Egbucha (2007:95) writes that the forces of technology, Christianity, Islam and colonialism have extensively precipitated religious change in Africa. This revolution is total, affecting all aspects of life. This may have made Mbiti (1969:217) react this way "Africa is caught up in a world revolution which is so dynamic that it has almost got out of human control. Now a new and rapid rhythm is beating from the drums of science and technology, modern communications, cities and towns...the man of Africa must get up and dance, for better or for worse on the

arena of world dramatic image of himself and the universe is disrupted and must make room for the challenging universe and not simply the tribal man”.

Ubrurhe (1992:19), reasons that there is no society all over the world which experiences cultural control without its being acculturated. He also highlights that in the process of acculturation, the values of such society are affected through modification or entirely changed by deliberate actions. He observes too that change as notice in Nigerian society is brought by Western education and Christianity. To him moral value is the most affected aspect of Nigerian culture and this has led to disregard for other societal values including human life and property, there by hampering development. Okoye (1990:7-13) looks at religious change in Africa from a different perspective. His view is from the reaction to colonial policy of France in her colonial territories. This policy of assimilation was aimed at stripping the indigenes of they possessed and thereafter absorb them to Frence race. Then, the emergency of negritude which objected unequivocally to the attempt to strip Africans of their Africanness in order to make them artificial French people, pointed to the fact that this policy assimilation was succeeding. Okoye asserts, “This policy of French government distablised the socio-cultural organization of her territories. Religion, which remains the major constituent of culture, was affected”.

Continuities

According to Ejizu (1986:148-153), there is no doubt that Igbo traditional religion is down, but not out in contemporary Igbo religious scene. In spite of the devastating effect of Christianity and western culture and civilization, the traditional religious culture is far from being an anachronism. Rather, it continues to be the potential factor and a living institution for the faithful remnant and even some devotees and adherents of other religions in the system. There is therefore a number of developments in today’s religious history of Igboland and indeed Uboma which conspicuously indicate the continued vitality of elements of the tradition. For a good number of the Uboma population comprising largely of illiterate dwellers of this rural area and a even those dwelling outside the area, the full force of the traditional religion described in this thesis is very much experienced in their daily living. This category of people includes both the young and the old contrary to the suggestion of Isichei (1970:212) that today “the traditional religion is the preserve of a small aging minority”.

In Uboma today just as it is in other rural areas of Abakiliki, Afikpo, Awka, Agwu, Ngwa, Udi, and other districts, Igbo traditional religious beliefs and practices especially the fear, reverence and recognition of the existence and powers of the traditional deities still thrive in much the same way as in the period that could be referred to as the golden age of the Igbo traditional culture, notwithstanding the presence of the Christian religion and western education in this area. The vision of the world which prevails among this Uboma population, as well as the basic control devices Ejizu (1986:149) argues, are principally the time-honoured religious models handed down by the Uboma forbearers. The gods and deities acknowledged in the respective villages and communities with their shrines and cults and symbols are in the keep of traditional priests and custodians. Where they are lost in antiquity, they are still in the minds, hearts and feelings of the people. Regular sacrifices and festivals continue to be offered and held in honour of these deities, besides other private acts of worship, howbeit discretely. Likewise, ancestral symbols of 'ofò', 'ikenga' and others still occupied their reserved corners in the homes of the faithful adherents, priest and elders of the traditional religion.

The annual liturgical calendar continues to be strictly lived out from cycle to cycle, with a good number that had joined Christianity participating in certain instances, like new yam festival, mbom-uzo festival, iwa-akwa ceremony, divination, oracular consultation, chrams and other protective ritual performances associated with the major events of life are practiced to maintain the harmony that is believed to exist between the world of men and the spirit-world. Human life together with the various beliefs and practices deriving from its conception among the traditional Uboma, continue as the primary motive force of all activity for this section of the Uboma.

Even in Igboland generally, Ejizu (1986:152) points out that the two major Christian groups- the Church Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Church, appear to have at last lived through the problems of back-sliding which confronted Christianity in its early years. The conflict is far from being over. Open strives erupt now and again in places as a result of crises which still mark the encounter of the two religions. He gives an example with what happened in Awka where a membership of a major Christian group was torn into two warring factions over traditional ritual practices connected with marriage known as 'okuko onye uwa'; at Ede- oballa in the Nsukka area, it was the 'omaba' masquerade and practices connected with it which triggered off the acrimony. Like incidents could be multiplied in hundreds from various parts of Iboland which support the continuity of traditional practices in Uboma and the entire Igboland.

Egbucha (2007: 100) posits succinctly that with the coming of Christianity, science and modernization, the ancient faiths did not disappear as expected. This points to the continuity of African traditional religion in different parts of Africa irrespective of these influences. Fashole-Luke et al (1978:5), point out how the traditional world view persists in the Christianity of the SothoTswana. Irrespective of many years of the exploits of orthodox Christianity in this area, traditional beliefs and customs are still very much alive. Waliggo points out in the same book the unfavourable relationship that existed between the people and Catholic mission. This results in many people leaving Catholic and returning to African religion, while those who remained, mix the two conspicuously. According to him, "the villagers of Kirumba refused to send their children to the Catholic mission schools of Matale and Kirumba itself, the 'whiteman' declared Kabumbi of Nkoni can never teach real knowledge to our children. They do not make them wise; we do those ourselves". This assertion portrays dramatic return to African way of life.

Ayandele (1966:96) also identifies individual conversion to Christianity as a disruption to the family system, which in turn disrupts the tribal system. To him, individuals are parts of the society and the society or tribe regulates the moral conduct of individuals. When an individual leaves this system and becomes converted to Christian religion, eventually the tribe is destabilised. Anyandele also identifies some people who left their tribe to other places as carriers of change when they come back. As he puts it; "Between 1892 and 1893, 3,000 Yoruba left for the Congo, while in 1901 alone, over 4,000 Nigerians left for the Goldcoast to build railways. They returned with a new set of ideas and outlook on life, and an implacable contempt for the traditional religion".

Johnstone (1993:36) takes a statistical view of the growth of Christianity in different parts of Africa. To him, only three countries in Black Africa still have majority of those following traditional religions-Benin, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. All these observations point to the continuity of traditional religious practices despite the effects of these agents of change. Awalalu and Dapamu (1979:283) give eight directions of religious change in Africa stressing that the indigenous religion is so deeply rooted in Africa that they find it difficult to sever connection from it. Many adherents of other religions including highly educated Christians and Muslims owe allegiance to both the new religions and traditional religion. Aguwa (1995:120) admits limited religious change in Igbo traditional religion. To him, change has not eroded all allegiance to Igbo traditional religion. This is because this religion is so deeply entrenched in the hearts of the people that they are not easily replaced by the teaching of Islam, Christianity or any other modern religious

systems. He puts it this way “while changes go on, the effort by many to protect and promote socio-cultural practices is open and persistent. For example, there are traditional institutions such as ozo, okonko, odo and mmonwu over which Christians and traditionalists have had little agreement in the dialogue to discover if their elements are irrevocably opposed”.

Metuh (1987;281), opines that generally, the Supreme Being in traditional religion has been identified with the Christian God and has assumed most of his characteristics. According to Metuh, when Horton suggests that with exposure to the modernizing factors, the deities are in retreat, it will be incorrect to take this to mean that belief in their existence and powers are dying out. The average Nigerian Christian will still pronounce curses in the name of deities. In extreme cases, offerings could be made to the deities for children, for good fortune, or to avert a threatened misfortune. Above all, the deities are still invoked as agents of divine wrath on undetected criminals. Very serious disputes are still settled by oaths sworn on the shrines or emblems of some deities. An elder, a traditionalist at Atani community in Igboland, was said to have revealed how he recovered seven pieces of family land sold away by his extravagant nephew by offering their buyers the option of swearing on a local deity known to be ruthless in killing perjurers and keeping the land, or relinquishing the land. They all chose the latter because they did not buy the land in ‘good faith’.

According to Metuh, the belief in evil spirits is rampant. The belief in and fear of witchcraft are still very strong. Individuals still make charms to ward off witchcraft attacks and communities sometimes organize witchcraft hunts. Often confessions are extorted from the accused. In Nigeria, beliefs in ‘Ogbanje’ or ‘abiku’ (evil spirits which reincarnate repeatedly in children) are still firmly held. Rituals to exorcise them are openly made by Christian and traditionalists, the educated and the uneducated alike. Consultation of oracles and divination are widely practised especially to discover causes of deaths of relatives, causes of illness, and to identify thieves, witches and sorcerers.

The observation of Sylvia Leith-Ross (1965:293) is hereby presented:

an Igbo attends communion at the same time as he believes in the potency of traditional magic; he ties up in the same handkerchief the rosary and the traditional talisman and plants side by side in the garden round his new cement and pan-roofed house the hibiscus of civilization and the ogishi tree of pagan family rites.

Although this observation was made since 1965, it remains very valid and relevant till today as far as the Uboma is concerned.

Discontinuities

It is Mbiti's (1969: 216) view that:

Africa is caught up in a world revolution which is so dynamic that it has almost got out of human control...the man of Africa must get up and dance, for better or for worse, on the arena of world drama: his image of himself and of the universe is disrupted and must make room for the changing 'universal' and not simply 'tribal man.

Ayandele (1973:126-127) in an Article Review with the startling caption "the collapse of 'pagandom' In Igboland", tried to lend credence to the facile conclusion that the demise of Igbo traditional religion is a fait-accompli writes:

... The Christianization of the Igbo was nothing short of an epic. Not even in Ijebuland, similarly physically conquered by the British invaders and where the gospel achieved an amazing success, were the walls of pagandom to collapse Jericho-wise as in Igboland... This picture of the defeat of the gods in Igboland remains substantially authentic, notwithstanding the nostalgic desire of Mbonu Ojikes for the traditional religion in the forties and the continued prevalence of Jujuism belief in the ancestral spirits portrayed in the work of Igbo novelists like Chinua Achebe and John Munonye.

To Ayandele, the walls of Igbo pagandom have collapsed Jericho-wise (Bascom & Herskovits, (1959:5). It is not in doubt therefore that with the clash of two different world- views, many peoples of Africa have been converted to Christianity. It is against this background that David Barrett (1982:17), observes:

In Africa Christians have mushroomed from 1. 9 million in 1909 (0.06% of world population then) to 203 million in 1980 (4.7%). The recent net increase in Africa is 6 million new Christians a year, i.e. 16,400 a day, of which 1.5million are not converts (minus defections and apostasies).

Many writers and authors have pointed out howbeit correctly that the phenomenal success of the Christian missionary enterprise in Igboland is largely due to two main actors:

- a. The success of the British arms with which missionary campaign was for some length of time closely associated, and
- b. The magic of the Western- type of education which the Christian missions pioneered and capitalized on as a most effective instrument of evangelization.

Amongst those practices of Igbo traditional religion which gave way were the human sacrifice, killing of slaves as a part of the final funeral rite of certain notables, killing of twins, oracular institutions, especially the more notorious ones at Arochukwu, Umunoha and Awka. Because of their evident brutality, these negative practices had to give way, to the superior might of the joint campaign of the missionaries and the colonial administrative devices. One John Samuel Okosi of Onitsha and Chief Idigo of Aguleri (C.M.S Journal, 1903:117) were to lead many of free born and well-placed citizens in the movement to the new religion. Of John Samuel Okosi, it was entered in the C.M.S journal for November 1863 that he brought all his idols in a bag and handed them to the missionaries at Onitsha. He was also reported to have deposed that: "Ike agum (agwum) na osisi na, oku (okwu) Tsuku (chukwu) Obago na Obim ubua (ugbua) ubotsi (oge) izizi abum onye nkafie (I am tired of these sticks. The word of God enters now into my heart once I was foolish)" (Metuh, 1986:147).

In the above manner also, many traditional shrines of the formerly popular deities and the cults connected with them were betrayed. Furthermore, the traditional strong belief in the intricate link between the three-tier structure of the cosmos, as well as the continual flow of activities between them to which deaths, fatal sicknesses, and the failure of crop, infertility and so on, were formerly attributed, have been greatly undermined by the success of the various gadgets of missionary efforts and Western cultural civilization in contemporary Igbo society. With this, there became an obvious diminution in importance of traditional Igbo aids of explanation and control of space-time events-divination, oracles, ritual sacrifices, charms and magic. Finally, loss of many vital cult symbols, death and non-succession of many traditional custodians of a number of important traditional Igbo rituals and religions institutions, equally accelerated the discontinuity of

many traditional Igbo religious beliefs, and practices which were wholly dependent on oral means for preservation and transmission.

In sum, there has generally been a serious disruption and discontinuation of the formerly unilateral picture of the situation of Igbo traditional religious society. Igbo society has since the intrusion of the forces of change at the dawn of the 19th century, been undergoing a tremendous socio-religious transformation which has led to the disappearance of a lot of the features of the traditional religion, the modification of the cosmological ideas and values and attitudinal orientations of the greater majority of the Igbo population including Uboma. Citing Ejizu, Metuh (1986:148) posits:

The continuing confrontation of Igbo traditional religious elements and Christianity in many parts of Igboland today... as well as in the lives of a good number of the 80% baptized Igbo Christians, have unleashed new tensions and crises on the contemporary Igbo religious scene. Against such a background, any sweeping generalization on the religious picture of Igboland today, could only but pass as a gratuitous assertion.

Indeed, nothing could be more truthful than this position.

Conclusion

Religious issues, object, rituals, liturgy and worship in line with the need of every human society must continue to adjust to agents of social and religious change either from within or from without if they must perform their societal functions. I stress for purposes of emphasis that every institution has its own internal mechanism for change irrespective of externally induced forces. The African traditional religion has not been left out in this regard.

This is evident in the philosophy of the Igbos in reaction to a deity that refuses to perform. Two proverbs confirm this position. 'Agbara nawa unara, e zi ya oshishi e jiri tuo ya' (when a deity becomes recalcitrant, it would be shown the tree from which it was made). The second is "if a god becomes indolent, its worshippers will abandon it at the cross-road". At the end, in reaction to the forces of change, there must be elements of change-some practices will give way for the new (discontinuities), while some practices will also remain (continuities). The

traditional Igbo land witnessed the two in relation to their traditional religion and deities in particular, Uboma land was indeed not left out.

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IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 2. (2021)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

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