

THE MEETING OF TWO CULTURES: IGALA TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY IN INTERACTION

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Abstract

When Christianity was introduced in Igalaland, the impression was given by the missionaries that it must not be mixed with Igala traditional religious practices. The Missionaries interpreted the interaction between Christianity and Igala traditional religious culture as highest degree of syncretism. Towards the end of 19th century Igala traditional religion regain its importance as a result of awakening of black consciousness, there arose the awareness among the Igala that respect for them as a people could not be divorced from their cultural heritage, including their religion. Igala people realized that Christianity and their ancestral religion had a lot to offer for the benefit of each other. For this reason African Independent Churches emerged and commenced the policy of indigenization of Christianity among Igala people which lead to cross-fertilization of ideas. This paper through historical research method examines the interaction between Christianity and Igala traditional religious culture.

Key words: meeting, Igala, traditional, religious culture and interaction

Introduction

Cultures are in the continuous influx of interactions and each time there is an encounter between two cultures, there must be cross-fertilization or interaction of ideas, concepts and beliefs. Such cross-fertilization consciously or inadvertently results in borrowing, adaptations and appropriation of ideas. The appropriation that takes place is usually a two-way affair, though one of the partners has to remain the senior or dominant element in the exercise (Alana 2009). This is true of the encounter between Christianity and the culture of the Igala people of Kogi State and beyond.

The missionaries did not want Christianity to mix with Igala traditional religious practices. The missionaries interpreted the interaction between Christianity and Igala traditional religious practices as the highest degree of syncretism and were thought to be infested with paganism. And so the

missionaries seem to keep the entire Igala cultural heritage at bay. To this end, Nduka (1965) observed that;

To make matters worse, virtually everything else in the native culture was regarded as bad. More often than not a policy of complete Europeanization with a view to replacing the native culture was adopted. Not only native names and costumes but also native songs and dances, folk – lore, arts, systems of marriage, were to be consigned to the scrap-heap. It was altogether a revolutionary demand. (P11-12)

According to Alana (2009:2) “The encounter could as well be interpreted as nothing but a good case of the principle of “Give and Take” in practice, in which case both religions stands to gain from each other”.

Through historical research method, this paper examines the history of Christianity in Igala land, their culture before Christianity and the influences of Christianity on Igala culture. The aim is to search out some positive Igala traditional values that are worth preserving for our fast decaying society.

Definition of Terms

In order to avoid ambiguity there is need to define the concept of Christianity and culture. Christianity according to Hornby (2007) is religion that is based on the teaching of Jesus Christ and the belief that he was the son of God. Christianity is also defined as the religion founded by Jesus Christ, who through his paschal mystery established the community of believers on earth who ceaselessly announce his gospel message in words and in deeds.

Culture according to Chuta (2008:7) is derived from the latin word “cultura” which means “cultivation” or “tend”. The word to “cultivate” mean “to improve and develop by education or training (a person, manners and faculties) and “to improve the growth of, devote oneself to the advancement or development of an (art, science, sentiment etc) all of which culminate in ‘a process”, which also imply development and change”. What all these mean is that culture cannot and should not be static. Taylor (1871) defined culture as that complex whole of mans acquisition of knowledge, morals, belief, arts, custom, technology etc, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation.

Igala land before Christianity: Their Religious Culture

The name Igala refers to both the people (*Abo Igala*) and the language (*Ichi Igala*). *Attah* Igala is the father of all Igala. According to Ogba,(2007) the name Igala was given to the people and their language as a result of the invasion of the land by the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. The patriarchal leader of the people was called Ogala and the invaders refer to the

people as Ogala people, though due to foreign influences, the Ogala people took up the name Igala people. The Igala people inhabit between latitude 6⁰ and 8⁰ and longitude 6⁰ and 7⁰. They occupy a total land area of about 13,665 square kilometers. (Okwoli in Egbunu, 2009). The 2006 Federal Government census puts population of Igala people at 1.6million.

The culture of the Igala people is very similar to the culture of most other Nigerian people, especially those from the geographical middle – Belt, South wards, to the coast. Cultural practices such as kingship, funeral ceremonies, beliefs, marriage, masquerading, mode of dressing, body adornment etc are similar to those of other Nigerians in the sub-region mentioned above. For instance, the *Egwu* masquerades of Igala are similar and indeed are related to *Egwugwu* or *Nmanwu* of Igbo land, *Egwugwu* of Asaba (Delta state). The *Alekwu afia* of Idoma, the *Ekud* of Ebira, the *Gunu* and the *Udeako Gboya* of the Nupe but for some slight differences. The *Ogani* festival performed at Idah and Ankpa are also celebrated in the southern parts of Plateau State, especially in the Umaisha and parts of Nassarawa Areas (Miachi 2009:4).

The Igala people believed in the existence of the Supreme Being they referred to as “*Ojo*” *Odobogagwu* (Almighty God) or *Ojochamachala* (God who owns everything) *Ojokinyi* (the creator) *Ojoanemagedo* (God of great courage and power). He is also known as *Ojokinuma* (God of wisdom). *Ojo-agogba-gubi* (God who sees front and back). He is believed to be omniscient both in the past, present and the future. And he ostensibly ranks supremely far higher than any of the deities or spirit beings in Igala religious imagination (Egbunu, 2009: 17-18).

Igala people generally believed in the existence of spirits and other gods. Igala people believe the spirits dwell in trees, springs, wells, stones and mountain. Special and unusual events were considered to have divine character. According to Egbunu, (2009:18) “the traditional worldview of the Igala is expressed in their beliefs, myths, legends, proverbs, rituals, symbols and festivals”.

Igala people believe and revered the ancestors. Their belief in the existence and influence of the departed fathers of the family is very strong. Igala people always revered the ancestors and held them (ancestors) in high esteem. They are believed to come next to God in spiritual realm. They are believed to know more than the living. Igala people offer prayers to the ancestor through libation. Among Igala people food must be cooked in every compound every night because it is believed that ancestors come around at night to eat and visit kinsmen.

Polygamy was the common, valid and cherished form of marriage among Igala people. A man would take more than one wife and thereby raise a large family that will help the man in performing his agricultural operations. The man and the male children till the ground, the women and the female

children took part in the weeding of the farm and harvesting of the crops. Through this way, the family was maintained. Thus Igala religious culture was fully developed before the advent of Christianity in the land

The Igala community like any other Nigerian community is a dynamic society hence susceptible to changes. Christianity had an indelible impact on the cultural practices of Igala people in particular and Nigerian society in both positive and negative ways.

Advent of Christianity in Igala land

Christianity as a religion first came to Igala land through missionary activities. The church missionary society (C.M.S.) was the first missionary group that came to the area. The C.M.S. penetrated into Idah, the royal seat of the Igala, by 1857 and succeeded in establishing a mission station there. As a result of misunderstanding between the missionary agents and the local rulers the station was later closed down (Okwoli, 1973).

The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) was the second mission that came to Igala land. According to Usman (1999) the missionaries arrived in Dekina between 1903 and 1904 from their station in Onisha through the handwork of Rev. Fr. Joseph Shanahan. It is germane to state here that Roman Catholic Church made great impact in Igala land through their educational and medical services.

The Qua Iboe mission penetrated Igala land in 1931 when the desire of the Igala people for salvation was made known to QIM missionaries. In 1931 Jim Wesgart and John Nelson of QIM mission were sent from Calabar to explore the possibility of reaching the Igala with the gospel message.

After the consultation with the *Atah*- Igala, the QIM sent Reverend David O'Neil to work among the Igala where he first settled in Ugwolawo. In 1932 another mission station was opened in Odoru and in 1938 the base was shifted to Idah the royal town. (Usman, 1999).

Interaction between Christianity and Igala Religious Culture

Changes occur through conscious and unconscious activities. One culture influences the other and it is equally influenced by others. The Igala culture was rich and intact before the advent of Christianity, but the growth of Christianity and education in the area introduced religious and social changes which affected the people positively as well as negatively.

One of the positive impacts of Christianity on Igala culture was the abolition of killing of twins. Before the advent of Christianity, the Africans and Igala in particular considered it uncultured and an abomination to give birth to more than one child at a time. According to Ugwu (1999:58) "this was done because they felt that it was an abomination to the earth deity and the ancestral spirits". With the effort of the missionaries and Mary Slessor in particular this obnoxious practice ended in Nigeria and Igala land.

The eradication of human sacrifice was another positive impact of Christianity on Igala culture. This was normally carried out in form of atonement when there was an abomination in the land leading to a breach of harmony between the spirit world and the communities. A good example can be demonstrated with the burial of chiefs along with slaves who would serve them as chiefs in the underworld. This act of man's inhumanity to man was stopped only with the advent of Christian religion (Ugwu, 1999:58).

The Christian missionaries also provided health delivery services. For example, Grimad Hospital Anyigba, Immaculate Heart Maternity Dispensary, Awo-Akpali. Ikah Christian Hospital Ikah, Holley Memorial Hospital Ochadamu to name but a few were their hand makes.

The traditional Igala buildings were *Unyi-ikete* (mud houses) with *ojokwunyi-egbe* (thatched roofs) but through the work of the missionaries and development, such locally constructed houses have given way to solid cement walls, rectangular in shape with corrugated roofing sheets to match. (Egbunu, 2009)

Reformation of widowhood practices is another positive impact of Christianity on Igala culture. If a man died, the wife automatically became a widow. "*Oya okwu-oko*". In Igala land immediately the man dies the wife removes all the good clothes and jewelries on her body, she is confined in one place for three months. She is not allowed to talk loud, She sits and sleeps on the mat, She takes bath only at night, She wears black cloth as mourning attire. She is expected to be wailing between 5 and 6 am for seven days. In some parts of Igala land the widow is expected to feed the women in the deceased husband room morning and evening for seven days. The deceased husbands' brother can inherit the widow and take her as a wife "*oya ogwu*". The advent of Christianity has put an end to this. The number of days the widow is restricted is reduced significantly, and widows now wear white attire especially Catholics in place of black one.

Christianity introduced western education which improved the status of those who received it. For the Igala people western education was mainly focused on men. Fathers regard female children as other mans property and need not to spend money on them. This was why Denis a missionary in Onyeidu (2004) observed that;

The customs of the country were such that very little indeed could be done for women. They were not free to come to school as the men and boys did. Their lives were filled with marketing, cooking and tending their babies. (p48)

Today, women have been emancipated. Educational opportunities have been extended to girls. They now go out to take up jobs like their male counterparts. However, the evil of this emancipation according to Agha

(1996:39) “is moral laxity among the female folk which was not the case before the advent of Christianity

On the other hand, ancestral veneration (*ote Abegwu*) has been neglected as a result of the influence of Christianity in the area. This *Ote Abegwu* according to Odiniya (2011):

was a religious festival, which marked the people’s belief that the dead continue to live after passing away from this life. The dead were for this reason entertained from time to time at the feast. From Hades the dead continue to visit the earth, guiding and protecting the living especially their relations.(p58)

He further stated that “*ukpokwu* masquerade believed to be the dead come back to life to feature mainly at the feast of the dead. They were believed to regenerate from Hades to varnish into nothing, the underworld, after outing” (p 66). The Igala people believe that the ancestors according to Okwoli (1996: 85) are called *Abogijo Igbele* – people of old who are intermediary between them and God. They (Ancestors) are also believed to be capable of protecting and defending them. This was why Quarcoopome (1987: 130) stated that “they act as guardians of family affairs, properties, traditions, ethics, and activities they act as invisible police force of the families and communities They are unseen presidents at the family meeting. They (ancestors) can inflict pain or enhance life. This belief has been dropped/discarded with the arrival of Christianity. This was why Buti (2011) stated to support the above viewpoint that:

Faith in God as the all powerful father, as the all-merciful mother, as the creator and foundation of all being, has dethroned the ancestors from the human-made pedestals. The belief in the power of the ancestors to inflict pain or to enhance life, the belief that they can control the destiny of human beings, has been radically adjusted. Their gods like status as super human beings has been reduced to the status of deceased human beings (p2).

The dwindling in the ancestral veneration made the ancestors not to function well as before the advent of Christianity. If a man plans evil against any member of his/her family or a married woman seduces another man in her life he/she must face the wrath of the ancestors. To buttress this fact, Sinanu and Vincent (1976) in their commentary on the poem- vanity written by Birago Diop they observe that;

The poet is concerned to promote the necessity for Africans to remember their roots, to maintain close relationship with and learn from the wisdom of our ancestors. It is because we

have neglected the warnings, advice and values of our forbears that we have been left rudderless and defenceless. Because this has been a wilful act it is needless and in advisable for us to bemoan our fate or indulge in self-pity. It is our vanity – typified by our empty pride in European ways which we do not quite understand and disregard for our ancestral voices – that has led to our misfortune (p34).

In view of the above Anyanwu (2002) stated that it has made ancestral religion a junior or minority religion to Christianity.

The type of marriage Africans and Igala in particular engage in is polygamy; by this a man will take more than one wife thereby raising a large family who would help the man in cultivating the arable land and harvesting of crops. In this way the family was maintained. Christianity came and condemned polygamy. This was why Ayandele (1966:335) observed that “polygamy remained one of the African institutions on which Christian missions have up to date refused to compromise”. In tandem with the above, Parrinder (1950) also observed that:

The general tradition of orthodox Christianity, eastern, western and reformed, has been against polygamy and in full and unhesitating of monogamy, not only in Europe, but throughout the whole world. Modern biblical study has made it increasingly clear how deeply rooted this doctrine is in the New Testament. (p61-62)

Today, the African culture of polygamy has given way to monogamy. In fact today, the educated Igalas feel that it is shameful to have more than one wife. The implication of this according to Ilogu (1974:96) is that “the emphasis of the church on one man one wife has also added to the number of women who remained unmarried. Some of these in despair would also go into the towns as prostitutes”.

Another negative impact of Christianity on Igala culture is name bearing. The Igalas just like the Unwara people of Afigbo in Agha (1996) bear the name of the ancestors because they claim to have close relationship to their name sake that is believed to have reincarnated. The name helped to identify people with their compounds and parents, the native Igala name helped to identify events that occur at the birth of a person. Adamo (2005) also observed in respect with the above that;

Among the Africans, names are symbolic; they represent the totality of what persons are. The Yoruba people of Nigeria regard names as having special power. Names are chosen with great care because such names may represent one’s prayer to God and to the divinities. It may also be expression of faith in the existence of God (Orumbe), Gods

goodness (Chukwu dima), Gods providence (Yiopese) and Gods love (Olufemi). Names may represent the parents experience in life or during birth. Most of these names are not just given without meanings. (p36-37)

Today, Igala Christians have refused to take Igala names at sacraments like baptism insisting that such names could not be part of Christian heritage. Foreign names like Theophilus, Daniel, Maxwell, Roseline and many more are preferred to our native names such as Ifiene (in the regime), Atuluku (he who bare seed does not die), Ikani (may be alive), Okoliko (on the farm), Ojonoka (God is a strategist), Ocholi (iron) to name a few. This is the most dangerous cultural change that is taking place in our society. Agha (1996:44) stated that “one cannot estimate correctly the havoc that will be caused to our culture in the next hundred years if the practice continues”.

Africans and the Igala in particular believe that the gods give impartial judgment because they are the custodian of public morality and upholders of truth. And that the gods are ever ready to defend the innocent. Liars, dishonest persons and those who swear falsely are punished. Because of this the Igalas take oath or swear by *Okwute* (sacred staff). This oath taken has been discarded with the arrival of Christianity. Christianity preaches against oath taking. If they are to take oath they take according to their religious inclination. This was why Ezeogu (2000) observed that;

My father could not read or write, yet he owned a Bible. In fact, he owned the only Bible in the village, an enormous red-edged book. Nobody ever read my father’s Bible. It was not acquired to be read like ordinary books. No my father’s Bible was always carefully wrapped in white cloth and kept under lock and key in a wooden cabinet in which my father kept things he particularly treasured. Whenever you saw my father open the cabinet and bring out Bible you know that there is a big palaver in the village. There must be certainly a dispute which had defied the ingenuity of the village elders and the only way to settle it would be for one of the contending parties to swear an oath. And for this, my father’s Bible was the most reliable means. For those first generation of Christians my father’s Bible had replaced the sacred staff (of) of the traditional religion as an object of oath taking. (p1)

In tandem with the above Ugwu (1999:56) stated that “this undoubtedly has provided room for moral decadence and other vices in our

social system". What this means is that people hide under the cover that Christianity did not permit oath taking to commit one evil or the other.

In the past the junior and the young greeted the elders with great respect by kneeling down or prostrating. But today, the educated elements greet the elders standing. They only show their respect by removing their hats from their heads and bowing a little. That salutary aspect of African culture of kneeling down and prostrating is now regarded as primitive, uncivilized and servile (Exam success. Undated)

Igala styles of drumming and dancing has also been influenced by Christianity. According to Odiniya (2011) Igala drumming and dancing is divided into four. They are (1) Royal Music such as *Odechi* and *Ukaga Onu* (2) Entertainment or social music such as *Ichabada*, *Ugwolo*, *Olele*, *Agbaka* and *Agale* (3) the cleansing and ritual music are *Ogba*, *Iyogwu* and *Oye* and (4) The dual music. These are the ones that can feature on different occasions such as *odechi* which can feature at traditional second burial etc. He further stated that the *odechi*, *ogba*, *Iyogu* and *Oye* have lost most of its profit to Christianity and Islam.

It is a common knowledge that Igala girls are highly valued by their people. This is because they observe chastity before marriage as a moral value. Observation of chaste life before marriage is highly treasured and appreciated by Africans. This was why Mbiti (1985) attest to the fact that;

both the girl and her relatives have preserved the sanctity of human reproduction. Only marriage may share this sacred blood for in so doing it unlocks the door for members of the family in the loins to come forward and join both the living and living- dead. Virginitly symbolizes purity not only of the body but also of the moral life; and a virgin bride is the greatest glory and crown to her parents, husband and relatives (p141).

As a result of great emphasis given to the virtue of virginity in many African societies, so many gifts are showered on the virgin and her parents for her chaste character. In this respect Daramola (1967) observes that;

A faithful woman who is discovered to be undefiled at marriage is considered a good ambassador of her family hence symbolic items depicting chastity are sent to her parents. The traditional symbolic items include a keg of palm wine, a box filled with matches, a white stained cloth used in the process of coition (p40 – 41).

Today, these Igala traditional boundaries of sexual chastity are being removed by western civilization and new morality of sexual freedom. People who still

cherish virginity, chastity and self-control are regarded as old-fashioned moralist (Hans, 1976:82). In support of this, House etal (1988) observes that;
Sexual mores have taken a cultural shift over the past100 years, but the vestiges of this transition are still with us today.... In the past times couples were guilty if they went to bed before marriage. Now they are made to feel guilty if they don't (p29)

Africans and Igala people in particular cherish communal life and brotherhood. There are morals concerning social, economic and political life of the people. Everybody in the community is expected to help one another in times of need and also show hospitality to relatives, friends and strangers. This was why Mbiti (1975:177) opined that "it is held to be a moral evil to deny hospitality, even to a stranger". The practice of hospitality manifests itself in many ways such as friendly exchange of gifts, sharing of food and shelter through which peace and harmony are achieved in what would otherwise be a chaotic world. This development brings about the establishment and maintenance of cordial relationship that promotes human welfare. (Abah, 2011).

In the extended family system older relatives such as cousins, uncles, nephews, brothers, sisters and aunts are expected to be catered for by their relatives that are well- to- do. They in turn bless and pray for God's blessings upon them. Indeed things have fallen apart with the arrival of Christianity. This was why exam success (nd) observes that;

The idea of extended family is African. By this a man regards as a member of his family his cousins, uncles, nephews, brothers, sisters and aunts. They bring their problems to the well-to-do member of their family. The able man also regards it as his duty to help them from their financial problems. Christianity has brought to West Africa the idea of one person catering for his immediate family only, that is, your wife and children. The extended family system is therefore giving way to the limited family system among the educated Africans, especially, those educated in the Christian mission schools. (p51)

Igala traditional religious culture also influences Christianity. For example, Christianity opposes polygamy which was a valid and cherished form of marriage in Africa. The mission based churches rejected polygamy as incompatible with Christian standards. Some of the African independent churches like the Cherubim and seraphim, Celestial church of Christ and Christ Apostolic church does not forbid polygamy, It is regarded as a normal African way of life. These African independent churches adopted polygamy

because they believe that polygamy does not contradict any Christian principle (N.T.I. 2000). To this effect Agha (1996) observed that;

What we see among some African Christians, is an insidious campaign in favour of polygamy. In fact, it is no longer a hindrance to becoming a full member in some Christian churches. Consequently, a few church members are involved in polygamous life without any form of punishment (p31)

Some of the Igala music and instruments such as drums and *ukelegwu* are adopted by Christian churches during their worship. Igala language is employed in singing Christian hymns and worship in churches. Churches have different Igala hymn books. Example of such Igala hymn books are; *Otakada eli katolic* by Rev. Fr. Sunday o. Umoru and *Eli abolojo* published by Ika Christian press.

Traditional Africans hold the ancestors in high esteem and accord them all the reverence and honour due to them through offering them food and drink, naming them in prayers, naming children after them and by consulting them during any rituals and misunderstanding. According to Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) "Africans implore their ancestors, their own holy ones, who had lived and passed over to other world, to pray for them". (p75) This reverence accorded the ancestors has been employed by Christianity. Christians give special honour and respect to martyrs and Saints and implore them to pray for them. Mary the mother of Jesus is also given special honour and respect. The veneration of ancestors is not peculiar to African Traditional religion but to Christianity as well. In view of this Awolalu and Dapomu (1979) observed that;

The Christian church (especially Roman Catholicism) faces this same problem when she attempts to distinguish between worship and veneration with the saints and the cult of Mary in particular. Holy Mary is constantly being invoked to pray for sinners. And when one attends a Roman Catholic Church, one may find that there is more genuflection before the symbol of Mary or Peter or any of the other saints than before the symbol of Jesus. Yet people claim that they worship only God but venerate the saints. (p65)

Recommendations

From the above discussion, the following recommendations are put forward

Oath taking should be encouraged among Igala people. Through oath taking, the truth, integrity and reliability are better determined and morality enforced.

Igala people should maintain their native names and be proud of it. The native names help Igala people to maintain their identity.

In order to reduce the number of unmarried women and prostitution in our land, churches should accept polygamy as an ideal marriage life pattern among Africans and Igala people in particular. Provided wives and the numerous products of polygamy will be adequately taken care of.

Every family should endeavour to teach their children the spirit of respect for elders. If this is done discipline would be instilled into the young ones. It will bring cooperation between the elders and the youths.

For Africans and Igala in particular to understand the message in the Bible properly preachers should take the culture of the people into consideration when interpreting the Bible just as some of the African independent churches are doing. This was why Adamo (2005:109) stated that “indigenous African Christians should recognize the fact that God’s revelation at all times has never failed to take the culture of the people into consideration in order to make them understand the message”.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is obvious that Christianity influenced Igala culture positively in the areas of abolition of the killing of twins, eradication of human sacrifice, provision of health services, reformation of widowhood practices and women emancipation. On the other hand ancestral veneration has been neglected, polygamy has been condemn, name bearing has been affected, oath taken has been condemn and there is no more obedience and respect for elders. The Church activities led to the extinction, or decline of indigenous religions, customs and culture. The Church damaged our cultures and led natives to acculturation. The Igala culture must be treated with respect as a legacy. The Igala cultural heritage should not be regarded or seen as obscure. Igala people should believe and appreciate themselves and their cultural heritage.

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