

THE PROBLEM OF IGBO IDENTITY IN CHRISTIANIZED NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss on the problems of Igbo Identity in Multi-religious society like Nigeria and also identified the cause of these problems in Nigeria that is one of the political states of West Africa that has been Christianized. Scholars in humanities blamed Igbos for the lost of their identity hinging the problem on illiteracy, but through this article I use analytical approach via Smart's suggestion to argued that the problems were caused by the instrumental motives of the earlier Christian missionaries of the orthodox and protestant churches who invaded various Igbo communities between 18th and 20th century. The articles also identify several factors that affected the ethnic identity through the Christian movement, an as a result the traditional practices of Igbo Land have been predominantly Christianized and westernized. And in the conclusion, suggested strategy is recommended to help preserve the Igbo identity in any society with Multi-diverse religious praticsies.

Introduction

When an early Portuguese visited the southern coast of Africa, he saw no religion in the assumption that there would have been church buildings, priest, and perhaps sacred scripture (Newell S. Both, Jr. 1977). When he returned to Europe as a European he reported that Africans have no religion and culture because he saw no identifiable religious and cultural buildings, no distinctively traditional practices and functionaries, and certainly no scripture from the Christian perspectives as he assumed. Perhaps in ancient Igbo land, further contact by the Portuguese may have instilled great fears at the sight of the structures of shrines decorated with scary statute and carved images dedicated to different deities, traditional ritual practices like the commonly identifiable practice of pouring libation with incantation when offering Kola nut, personality differences of the Igbo religionist at a close relationship, and other ritual practices that may look fetish. The recognition of traditional identity was among the challenges the Igbos encountered with the earlier Christian missionaries when they invaded African society prior to independence like Nigeria. In fact the attitude of the Missionaries was that "all things European were superior to all things African". Missionaries like David Livingstone and Fabri of the German Missionary Society in Namibia for example believed that once Africans will be colonized by the European countries they would be more likely to leave their traditional practices, education, and religion to seek after Western Education and Christian religion which they controlled. It was their mission to do anything necessary to convert Africans as a whole who were viewed as uncivilized and barbaric. Missionaries often failed to distinguish between Christian principles and those of the colonialists. They misused biblical passages to further the causes of their colonial friends. And with this, they altered the original traditional identity of the Igbo race.

Having seen Igbo traditional practices as fetish from the Christian perspectives, the westerners with their western dominance believed that Igbo man should see no value for his identity. But with the western religious and academic dominance in Nigerian could one really

say the Igbos have no identity? Some scholars in humanities and in African religion argued that the tradition of Igbo land was Christianized, as its evidence in Aladura church. If actually the Igbo identity is lost, let take a closer look at the problem of misunderstanding Igbo identity in the modern Christianized society as some have generally misunderstood.

Locating the problem

The first missionary outbreak in Black Africa is seen as a venture to rescue souls from the devil for God. This instrumentalist motive in bringing Christianity into Africa engendered conflict between Christianity and African culture. This misconception brings to memory Hegel (1956) philosophy, “there is an ontological distraction which the Negro is as yet bereft of which cannot yet beyond himself; beyond his instinctual behavior and posit the existence of a being and theoretical conceptualization” (p.93). Levy-Brull (1867) queries about “how an untutored African could know God” (p.1). These ideas suggested that African culture is opposed to the gospel. There is nothing good in the culture of the black man, since he is regarded as fetish, barbaric and uncivilized. To this extent, he has nothing to offer as a cultural or spiritual basis for the gospel. Maslow (1994) rightly points,

“the western judgment or attitudes on Africa have been based on mere cultural bias which gradually grew into a formidable two project historical reality: slavery and slave trade on the one hand and academic expression on the other hand” (p.1).

The early mission planters in Africa lost sight of the essence of the message entrusted to them. They failed to look for means to bring home the message and make it relevant to the people. And this attempt has made the gospel message to be superficially received and seen as foreign. The Europeans generally detest anything Africa, her culture, identity, religion and Igbo Ethic identity. The concept of Identity, self awareness, or self consciousness is vast in African Igbo culture and can be used interchangeably to the extent that they nurture the belief that the idea of God as a supreme being is foreign and unknown to the people. And these pre-occupied belief systems about Africans have made Europeans to completely deny Africans their peculiar identity in Christianity, because the black man is seen as backward, mentally uninformed and morally backward. In this regard, the Igbo man is expected to see the western culture as normative for all, a pure and authentic means to commune and worship God. And therefore should not contribute anything in terms of liturgy, doctrine, and ethics of the church. Even the official judicial and legislative document of the church did not for see any aspect of the cultural practices like puberty rites, naming ceremony, bride wealth and other traditional beliefs like realities of *llouwa* (taken to be reincarnation), and “*imeburu onye nwun anwu ihe*” (rites of passage for [he dead). Such practices and beliefs are expressly condemned as evil, immoral and sin in the western lens, The Igbo culture therefore stands no chance or has no useful identity in world Christianity, since the theology and philosophy of the church is European based. The state and forth of the Igbo traditional religion in the Nigeria society legal status.

African Identity before the whites

Before the advent of Christianity in West Africa, Igbo land has several traditional practices that were identified as religion which served as their way of life known as “*Odinani*”. For decades people thought of African traditional life as religion only from the perspective of its relationship to Christianity or Islam, or perhaps from a western concept. Any serious consideration of traditional African religion focused primarily on ancient Egypt, which many scholars intellectually removed from the rest of Africa. The comparisons with Christianity were not flattering, as many people viewed African religion as somewhat primitive. Serious scholarship on African religion began in the 1960s and 1970s, but this work still had

problems, perceiving a number of separate African traditional religions, rather than witnessing the uniformity across the continent. African traditional religions predated Christianity and had a number of characteristics that all shared. These cultural practices served as the basis of community life and helped African societies through turmoil. In terms of natural resources, Onyeocha (2007) states that “Africa is blessed with a wealth of natural and mineral resources, diamond, gold, silver, tin, columbite, aluminum, uranium, and the almighty petroleum called black gold” (p.16), but she still suffers a distorted personality before the imperial masters because of cultural differences. The whites paraded superiority complex before Africans and at such demanded obedience from the African people. Cliff (1976) dubs this stinker delivered by Sir Samuel Baker to Ethnological society of Arts London in 1866:

“Without any exception is without a belief in a Supreme Being. Neither have any form of worship nor idolatry, nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is a stagnant as the morass which forms its Puny world.” (p.2).

Besides, Christianity became extension of subjugation and preaching European ideas and way of life. In Owerri for instance, it was obvious that Reverend Father Feral and his European team-mates rejected Igbo names as Christian or baptismal names. A native whose name is Nwadiuto can exchange for lippolitus, Casmir, and Bonaventure as names. The skillfully injected fear, trepidation, and inferiority complex among the natives who answered the Christian call. Again, the conversion preached by Christianity was interpreted as the abandonment of the values and meaning that hitherto informed natives. The white culture became the only culture good enough to mankind. According to Mbefo (1996)

“Where the impulse to theological investigation was felt, being a Christian in the world came to be seen as in moralizing terms. Religious practices, namely, receiving the sacraments rightly, keeping the commandment of Curl and the laws of the church hijacked the fullness of the church’s self-definition”, (p.22).

By these calculations, Africa identity was passive before the European interpretation. Onyeocha (2007) reveals that “it is such prejudices that daily obstruct the mind’s way to proper knowledge and a balanced judgment of issues and events” (p. 12). Professor Obilor a catholic priest of Owerri Archdiocese discloses before his students in class that he is not surprised to hear that some of the cardinals in medieval age Europe were slave merchants. In 1791, the French National Assembly debated the issue of ending the slave trade and giving freedom to the slave colonies. Bishop Maurey’s historical contribution to the debate in the House was very open, he opines,

“If you were to lose each year, more than 200 million lives that you now get from your colonies, if you had not the exclusive trade with your colonies to feed your manufactures, to maintain your navy, to keep your agriculture going, to repay imports, to provide for your luxury needs, to advantageously balance your trade with Europe and Asia, then I say it clearly, the kingdom would be irretrievably lost” (2005, P.15).

At this time, the French used to say the colonies have been created for the metropole by the metropole. Colonialism was not peripherally a system of exploitation, but one whose essential purpose was to repatriate the profits to the so called mother country. In this regard, African personality paid enormously.

Research Methods

In this study, I employ analytical approach using Smart's phenomenological patterns of studying religion to enable us identify the root of the problem of Igbo Identity. By analytical approach, I mean the use of formal analysis to break a problem down into the elements necessary to solve it. In the first place, this method calls for a comparative study with the use of Ninan Smart's Dimensional theory (1989). Using smart's Dimension of studying religion to analyze Igbo culture, we will discover that several traditional practices that are significant with Igbo culture are not identified with the modern Igbo culture and not found within the context of foreign religion like Christianity due to external driven forces which serves as factors that have affected African modernity. To understand Igbo culture properly, one need to see clearly the ancient practices and its historical values, and by "historical" religion can be studied empirically. Here, it takes us into the realm of belief, concepts, and practices and requires dialogue and participation. In fact, Smart (1968) argued that since the study of man is in an important sense participatory – for one has to enter into men's intentions, beliefs, myths, desires, in order to understand why they act as they do – it is fatal if cultures including our own are described merely externally, without entering into dialogue with them. In this article, those factors that affected Igbo Identity will be analyzed into four major factors namely ⁽¹⁾ Impact of western civilization on African culture, ⁽²⁾ Christianity and cultural synthesis in Igbo Land, ⁽³⁾ Western dominance in world Christianity, and ⁽⁴⁾ the problem of ethnicity.

- **Impact of Western Civilization on African Culture**

The western world partitioned African in Berlin conference in 1885 into colonies for colonial interest and to increase the focus in random dominance of the world. Through this means, western civilization engulfed African continent in various means and ways, and religion is one of the ways. Ekwuru (1999) states:

“in the first place, with the condemnation of the traditional Igbo Religion, the missionaries presented Christianity as the alternative new religion. Generally, to enforce the effective replacement of die old religion with the new one, the missionaries attempted by all possible means to dismantle the old indigenous religious cultural dispensation”. (p.45).

The truth remains that the west in their proselytization dismantled and dethroned the traditional belief system in exchange instituted European cultural Christianity as a normative and only useful standard of relating to God, This made Africans aliens and new corners to God, even in their own native soil. The traditional man was fold to abandon his traditional religion that was cosmocentric, localized within the cover of his private shrines, to a new religion that is theocentric and less enjoying. Besides, the secular education via school system is another western civilization technique which impacted on the lives of the natives and propelled them to reject their personality. Ekwuru (1999) reports that “this obviously became the major instrument adopted by the missionaries to effect a rapid transformation of the traditional man and his society”(p.47). Besides, every colonial package was design to exploit the colonizers and at such education was not a different package. Furthermore, Ekwuru (1999) earmarks that such education was motivated by a morbid interest meant to exploit every bit of the human resources for the benefit of foreign capitalist interests. Africans learnt European culture, dressing, and western mannerism at the expense of their personality and identity. However, the political system introduced in Africa, especially in Nigeria, did not recognize the already political system in various communities. The colonial master championed the political system that put them in absolute control. The native of traditional political system in Igbo culture was kick aside and warrant chiefs who were responsible to the imperial masters were inaugurated. And through this means African goods

were transported into foreign lands, without adequate remuneration and commensurate pay. In this regard, Roodney (1972) laments “colonial Africa fell within that part of international capitalist economy from which surplus was drawn to feed the metropolitan sector” (p.162). This amounted to consistent expatriation of surplus produced by African labour out of Africa resources. In the course of this enterprise, Africa Lost completely before the European powers and the Igbo man identity was badly affected compulsorily.

- **Christianity and Cultural Synthesis in Africa (Igbo)**

Onyenechie (2008) affirms that “apart from the multi-cultural outfit of the traditional African society, foreign cultures seen to be overwhelming the people of Africa too. In most cases those foreign cultures are adjudged ideal and superior” (p.202). There have been so many efforts to localize Christianity within a culture and make it to rhyme with the people’s aspirations and needs. Rastafarianism, Ethiopianism and several theologically owned evangelical movements have tried to up lift the face of Christianity to be home grown in Africa. There are several key words like Enculturation, Acculturation, Adaptation, Accommodation, Contextualization, Africanization to actualize this dream in the present dispensation till the age of Indigenization and Inculturation, Igbo identity in world Christianity is still a utopia and a mirage. Ideas change the world, and the present Africa is at the crossroad of ideas because of the challenge from the post-modern developed Christian world. And Africa has struggled to belong Onyenechie (2008) states that “Christianity, which claims to be the custodian of reality or the truth from God, is expected to rise up to the ideological challenges of modern Africa” (p.203). Since the political gain of independence, there have been enormous challenges to incorporate African ideas into the Christian system of worship and teaching. When Garrick Braide was confirmed by Anglican assistant Bishop James Johnson in 1912 in Bakana he allowed the use of local dialect among his converts, he was seen as an eye sore among the Anglican group. He was rejected as an intruder and side kicked by many who claim to pay undivided allegiance to the Anglican doctrine.

Several African independent churches, have integrated some cultural practices in their profession of Christian faith. When Ezeugo Ekewuba started his Overcomers mission in 1985 in Owerri, he embraced African style of worship, like clapping, singing, without hymnbook and dancing in the church, mainstream churches did not welcome that. Inyama (2007) maintains that “a spiritual revival that hit young people from secondary school to universities. They surged out to preach the gospel and exhibited all manners of charismatic gifts”(p.98). In spite of African measures to create impact in the Christian faith the west has rejected with zeal and every vehemation, the contribution of Africans, Igbo race in Christianity. Several evolution of cultural synthesis of African to create a Christian faith that can serve as a equivalent to European breed of Christianity has been rejected.

- **Western Dominance in World Christianity**

In all ramifications, the western influence in Christianity cannot be questioned. At the expulsion of Christian faith from the Jewish soil, Christianity found accommodation within embrace and became a European affair, where its doctrine, ethics, philosophy and theology was formed and shaped holistically. The intrusion of imperial masters and the missionaries into the African soil was seen as a means to extend western form of Christianity to African continent. The moment the Arabs conquered the early North African, Christianity became solely a European heritage, where the church was coated to look white, in style and taste. To this extend, in the world today Europe is seen as a symbol of Christianity. That whenever Christianity is mentioned, it is synonymous with Europe. In the mainstream churches, the creed, canon and official documents in the church are foreign based none has African attention or background. The philosophy of the church is such that, European concept and ideology is the totality of its formation. The conclusion and be drawn from the premise. In

Roman Catholic Church today, the immediate past pop Benedicte XVI through his official teaching introduced a pure European cosmology into the church even in this post—modern time.

Before this era, the priest blesses the congregation, the lord be with you. And this expression agrees with the Igbo culture, where you relate to the body, soul, and spirit, and are inseparable, but the newest injunction is the Lord be with your spirit. There by creating a distinction between the body, soul and spirit of the Igbo man. The Igbo man is divided into tripartite layers. Peter (1975) averts that Christianity is still European in almost everything, way of worship, belief architecture, choir robe, prayer structures, etcetera. Archford (2008) Clarifies Peter (1975 pp.322-328) “in essence, Peter is saying that Christianity had not taken cognizance of the different context where it found itself in. Most times it has remained the same just as the missionaries brought it into Africa” (p.40). By these calculations, priests easily counted their success or failure on the number of confessions and baptisms through church marriages.

Even in African soil, priests and pastors to be receive training through documents and encyclicals layed down by the European scholars and in higher priestly studies, European scholars learn the scripture, doctrine and pass through Christian education through the measures set in place by the western people. Since the foundation is western bend in practice. The Igbo identity is expected to remain silent.

- **Problems of Ethnicity in African Christianity**

The diverse ethnic structures in African setting are another problem Christianity is seriously facing in Africa. Onyenechehie (2008) establishes:

“Africa is a complex society. Apart from multi-ethnic groups, which numbers over 1000 different tribes, representing different cultures, Africa is pluralistic in religion also. These different religions, which are different, indeed in tenets, are often opposed to each in matters of philosophy and practice” (p.198).

The challenges this structure is posing to Christianity in Africa lies in what make the Christian church foreign in many cultural contexts. James (1989) clearly airs that:

“Religion can only be rightly understood if it is placed in its proper cultural setting and viewed as a spiritual force holding society together and growing out of necessities of life . . . it provides a system of values relative to the fundamental and community” (p.33).

In Nigeria, the situation is not different. The domineering Pentecostal churches like Redeemed Christian church of God, Deeper Christian life, and Winners Chapel and so on, which are founded by Nigerians do not recognize Igbo identity in their style of religious profession. The method of child naming ceremony, thanksgiving, philosophy and ideals are that of the culture of the founder. No regard is given to Igbo culture, even Igbo people parade the highest number of Christian worshippers. Worst still, when the church is established in Igbo land, the treatment is meted-out in the church of Sacred Order of cherubim and Seraphim, The native culture of the founder Pa Moses Orimolade is the superior and superseding culture. It is the language of liturgy, theology, philosophy, and worship. It has no room for Igbo identity. The reason for the problem of ethnicity in the world is rooted in man’s pride. And the problem of ethnicity has continued as Christianity has continued to expand in the world.

Igbo Identity in the Christian Profession in the World

Like every other identity which desires not to be forgotten in the scheme of things, Igbo culture craves for such recognition. Igbo identity represents all the system of ethos, norms, values of Igbo culture, and belief systems that are compatible with Christian religion. Igbo as

a tribe has a rich cultural values, modus operandi that can perfectly blend with Christian religion, and as well enhance the spiritual dimension of the African (Igbo) people. Peter (1959) reports the comments which James Johnson made after a visit to Onitsha:

“One could not help observing how strong the English element is at Onitsha. The people who know no language but the English, it might be delightful to hear parts of the service read in correct style of in that language and hymns sung just as in English churches; but I hope we bear in mind the fact that the Christianity of Onitsha will grow weak and sickly and that it will be devoid of all inherent vitality, if English be allowed to supersede the native tongue,” (p.9).

Igbo identity is one delicacy the church should not chased-out into a dc-growth. Rather, it is a language that has respect for the sacred, mundane and religious belief. It is a rich instrument for worship, writing and instruction using some native Igbo instruments like drum, flute, gong, bell, as well carved piano during worship. And also Igbo ideology can be admitted into the Christian church to garnish and fertilize Christian religion in Africa and world all over.

It is quite unfortunately that the number of people practicing Igbo religion had decreased drastically in the 20th century with the influx of Christian missionaries under the auspices of the British colonial government of Nigeria. In some cases Igbo traditional religion was syncretised with Christianity, but in many cases indigenous rites were demonised by Christian missionaries who pointed out the practice of human sacrifice and other cultural practices that were illegal under the colonial government. Earlier missionaries referred to many indigenous religious practices as *juju*. Igbo religion is most present today in harvest ceremonies such as new yam festival (*iwá jí*) and masquerading traditions such as “mmanwu” and “Ekpe”.

Remnants of Igbo religious rites spread among African descendants in the Caribbean and North America in era of the Atlantic slave trade. Igbo *òbìà* was transferred to the former British Caribbean and Guyana as obeah and aspects of Igbo masquerading traditions can be found among the festivals of the Garifuna people and jonkonnu of the British Caribbean and North Carolina (Rucker, Walter C. 2006)

Recommendations

From all that have benne studied, the analysis revealed that four factors contributed to the loss of Igbo identity in Christianized society like south eastern region of Nigeria namely the Impact of western civilization on African culture, new cultural synthesis through Christianity in Igbo Land, Western dominance in world Christianity, and the problem of ethnicity. Igbo identity needs to be given recognition and acceptance in world Christianity. This is because the Igbo nation parades a large number of Christians who are faithful to the faith. Judging by their number, their contribution to the success of the religion in Africa, and beyond they deserves a place in the world Christianity either through practices that can be syncretized or through an orthodox system of worship. Some of their peculiar situations, problems should be recognize and interpreted by the code of canon, Vatican council document and church practices. The idea behind this is to make them see Christian religion as a home grow and not foreign. By way of preserving and promoting African culture within the religious context to maintain and preserve the Igbo identity, I recommend the following;

- Organization of religious practices blended with the traditional festival as a way of maintaining the culture within the context of Christianity
- Use of native and indigenous clothes for religious services
- Maintaining the native names of adherents and using Igbo Language for worship
- Translating and transliterating the sacred texts and songs of foreign religion into Igbo language

- Use of Igbo proverbs to convey several metaphorical meaning for teaching during religious sermoning

Conclusion

Since Christianity recognized European culture at various setting it find herself Igbo identity should as well be accepted in the face of acclaimed dynamism of Christian faith. No culture is adamant of response to the gospel, spiritual challenge, and influence of the religions and culture of its counterpart. In fact religious studies are properly concerned with responses to modernity, to globalization, foreign culture as well as trends towards religious eclecticism. Religions should increasingly borrow from one another and that a global consensus on the value of religion in society would evolve in other to preserve the identity of a particular religion. In his interview with Scott London, Smart said:

I ... believe we are moving toward a global ideology that has a place for religion and recognizes the contributions of the different traditions. Hopefully, it will have an overarching view as to how we can work together for the promotion of human values and spirituality (Scott London, 1999).

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