

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE ON RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN IGALALAND, KOGI STATE – NIGERIA

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Abstract

Igala land is an ethnic group in Kogi State, Nigeria where Christian faith has been well established. The various Christian denominations that worked in Igala land of Kogi State, made valuable contributions to the religious institutions in the area despite their neglect of some cultural practices considered not inimical to the Christian gospel. The aim of this work is to uncover valuable contributions of the different Christian bodies that worked in Igala land. The work found out that Igala people before the advent of Christianity, despite their lack of co-operative attitude, were not living in a religious vacuum. The people had organized religious values and systems. Their religious world views like sacrifices and offerings helped in no small way in their understanding and acceptability of Christian beliefs and tenets. The work suggests that since Christianity has influenced the people's way of life positively and negatively, aspects of the people's culture not inimical to the Christian gospel, should be incorporated into the Christian religion, as patient and systematic teaching could have probably addressed the spiritual and moral issues involved in Igala traditional practices. Above all, early church leaders should have taken into consideration that every human being has his/her own culture to avoid resistance to the gospel. The approach is historical and descriptive in nature.

Keywords: *Christian, missionary, Igala land and its people.*

Introduction

The main Christian bodies that worked in Igala land of Kogi State, Nigeria are the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic, the C.M.M.L as well as the Qua-Iboe mission. Efforts made by the different bodies in Igalaland deserves commendation. History reviews that different missionary bodies that worked in Igalaland made valuable contributions to the civilization and development of the area. The early Christian missionaries that worked in Igalaland, employed the following methods: open air preaching among the people, the use of education as a tool for introducing Christianity to the people, language development, native pastorate aimed at training the Igala people to be clergies in order to evangelize their fellow natives, strategy of setting up health centers, as well as making Igalaland to be self-reliant as they introduced the bible and the plough policies (Abalaka, 2018).

It is believed among the academics and lay members of the Igala traditional society also that prior to the advent of the early European missionaries on the soil of Africa, Igalaland inclusive, the people had their way of life which they cherished and celebrated. And when Christianity came into the land through the efforts of the missionaries, the people accepted all that came

with it. They thought and practiced its doctrines and lived the way it dictates. Little did they know that the religion would change almost everything in their society (Akwu, 2020).

Christian/Christianity

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. A simple definition of a Christian is like a person professing a belief in Jesus as the Christ or in the religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. The word “Christian” is used 3 times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26-28; 1 Peter 4:16). Followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians” in Antioch (Acts 11:26) because their behaviour, activity, and speech were Christ like. The word “Christian” literally means, “Belonging to the party of Christ” or A “follower of Christ”.

A true Christian is a person who has committed faith and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, including his death on the cross as payment for sins and His resurrection on the third day John 1:12 tells, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”. The mark of a true Christian is love for others and obedience to God’s word (1 John 2:4, 10). A true Christian is indeed a child of God, a part of God’s true family, and one who has been given new life in Jesus Christ.

Concept of Missionary

A Missionary is a member of a religious group which is sent into an area to promote its faith or provide services to people. Such as education, literacy, social justice, health care and economic development. The word mission originated in 1958 when the Jesuits, the members of the society of Jesus sent members abroad, derived from a Latin Missionem (or Missio) meaning ‘act of sending or mittere, meaning to send’ (Abalaka, 2019).

A missionary is someone who crosses cultural barriers to preach the good news about Jesus and make disciples. It also means a person who leaves his other engagements behind and goes to serve the Lord in a foreign cultural context and share his/her love for Christ with others”. In a nutshell, in the traditional sense the term missionary has been reserved for those who have been called by God to a full-time ministry of the word and prayer (Acts 6:4) and who have crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries (Acts 22:21) to preach the gospel in those areas of the world where Jesus Christ is largely, or not entirely known (Romans 15:20).

Igalaland and its People

Scholars working on the Igala people are interested in knowing where they came from, they wonder whether the Igala people were the aboriginal of the area where they occupy or whether they came from somewhere else, and how they have been living in the present location. Furthermore, there is a question about origin and development of Igala language of which Ebu (a language of the Ebu of Oshimili North Local Government Area of today’s Delta State) is a dialect (Miachi, 2012).

Igala history is shrouded in myths and legends. Historical origin of Igala people remain a controversial issue due to absence of written documents. The origin of Igala people according to Abalaka (2018), is not quite certain. However, several traditions and claims have been

advanced to provide answers to the question of their origin. The author also noted that the late Attah Igala Alih Obaje in 1964 said that the first wave of migration into the country (Igala) seems to have taken place around the 12th century C.E and was led by Amina, a Zaria Princess and warrior who fought her way through Idah with her Hausa and Nupe invaders.

The questions who the Igala are and what is their ethno-genesis should readily be answered by all Igala children. This is because, if you cannot identify or say where you came from, nobody will take you seriously. Simply put, Igala are the people ruled by the Ata (of course there is only one Ata in the world). Usman (2015) added to this that the progenitor of Igala were present at the tower of Babel in the present Iraq where God had confused human language because of their attempt to build a tower to reach heaven. The author concludes that those who could understand themselves moved out in groups and Igala moved to the neighboring Yemen. From there, made their way through Ethiopia, Central Africa Republic and Cameroon and finally entered Nigeria and stayed on Jukun land briefly. Therefore, Igala people are a group of people who inhabit the confluence of rivers Niger and Benue and formed the nucleus of the North Central Region of Nigeria. The unique and sublime name “Igala” refers to the language of homogenous ethnic group with a lot in common language, culture, tradition, history, and territory.

The Igala people are currently occupying the Eastern flank of Kogi State with over 3 million native speakers of the language (Adegbe, 2015). Egbunu (2011), lays credence to the above as he states that Igala people are dispersed all over with Idah, Anyigba and Ankpa, more densely populated than other places. Igala people are also sparsely found in Edo, Delta, Anambra and Enugu States. But the bulk of the people are concentrated in Idah, Ankpa, Dekina, Olamaboro, Ofu, Ibaji, Bassa, Lokoja and Ajaokuta respectively.

The people could be said to be a sort of terminus because they are located strategically at the natural crossroads in Nigeria. As a result of this, the people have been influenced both positively and negatively by trends of events as it is pulled in different directions. By and large, it has enjoyed some degree of encounters with the Yoruba, Edo (Benin), Jukun, Idoma, Nupe, Igbo, Hausa, Igbira, Bassa Kwomu and Bass-nge. This experience naturally left certain imprints on the tradition or culture of the Igala people. As Oguagha cited by Egbunu (2011), puts it, oral traditions would seem to indicate that Igala people are essentially an amalgam of various Nigerian ethnic groups and that the Igala people have been in contact with their various Nigerian neighbours”. According to Abalaka (2018), the view of Egbunu could be said to be to some extent correct because central positioning of the people’s location accounts for why the land has been considered a melting pot, yet it might not be quite true to conclude that Igala is totally a conglomeration of other ethnic groups. It could, therefore, be admitted here that the people existed as an entity on its own before other cultures were assimilated into its mainstream.

In Igala kingdom, some dialectal differences are noticeable, yet people are not divided. There are Idah dialect, central dialect, Dekina dialect with Bassa/Igbira influence, Ankpa dialect with Idoma influence. With the coming of the colonial masters cum missionaries, the use of English language as official language was established. The use of English language has been adopted

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in every nook and cranny of the land, and even at some level Pidgin English. The villages in the land are a conglomeration of houses whose first settlers founded because of good farmland, rich fishponds, and favourable hunting expedition. But in most cases people live according to clans (Olopu); thereby giving way to circular style. In certain cases, land disputes, incessant illness, death of children, war, epidemics, marriage, and banishment could occasion relocation. The buildings were traditionally mud walls with thatched roofs (Egbunu in Abalaka, 2018).

From the foregoing, we can affirm that from time immemorial, Igala people lived in their usual traditionally mud walls with thatched roofs, but it is worthy to note that today, owing to development, the locally constructed houses with thatched roofs (Unyiegbe) have now given way to solid cement walls rectangular in shape with corrugated roofing sheets to match in Igalaland.

Practices and Impact of Christian Missionary Enterprise on Religious Institutions in Igalaland

Christian missions have played a significant role in the transformation of African societies. The transformation of African societies, Nigeria inclusive, through various missionary activities has become a major contribution of Christianity to modern social history of Africa. The theory and practice of Christian missions which affected social transformation can be summed up in humanitarian ministries and services such as educational programmes and institutions, medical services, literature work, building of mission stations and ecclesiastical bases and so forth. Igalaland is one of the areas in Kogi State, Nigeria where the Christian faith has strongly been established. The earliest Christian missionaries that evangelized Igalaland of Kogi State made valuable contribution to the development and civilization of the land. (Galadima cited by Abalaka 2018).

Christian Missionary enterprise in Igalaland is still associated with Europe and America. The earliest Christian Missionaries that worked in Igalaland came from these places. The Anglican where the first to have arrived and worked in Igalaland in 1857 (Okwoli, 1984). The researcher lays credence to the above as he notes that Christianity in Igalaland came through different bodies. These missionary societies made valuable contributions to the civilization and the development of Igalaland as they employed different methods such as open-air preaching, education, language development, native pastorate among others despite their neglect of some Igala traditional practices considered not detrimental to the gospel.

Christian Missionaries that worked in Igalaland, were also impressed with the obligation to fulfil the Lord's commission to go into the world and preach the gospel as commanded by Jesus Christ. Prominent among these missionary societies are: The Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Christian Missions in Many Lands (C.M.M.L), the Catholic Mission and Qua-Iboe Church (Q.I.C). Babalola in Akwu (2020), attest to the above that, despite some negative impacts of the missionary enterprise in Africa, they is no denying the fact that their positive impact surpassed the negative ones, in his explanation, the establishment of western education and vernacular education is said to be the greatest impact of the early missionaries. This according to the author, is very true about the missionaries that came to Igalaland. It was their

efforts in the establishment of educational system that exposed the people to more awareness of themselves and their outside world.

The changes that came through Christianity affected the culture of the people positively and negatively. For instance, before the advent of Christianity in Igalaland Christian and non-Christian traditional rulers performed certain purification rite such as dipping of feet into *Idu-Okoliko* river as a sign of cleansing before ascending the throne. With Christianity and Western Civilization, traditional rulers came to realize that they are to be precautious of traditional practices that are not in consonance with their faith, thus, avoiding all that are suggestive of idolatry and superstition (Abalaka, 2012).

Today, keeping of idolatrous Insignia of office has since been abandoned by the Christian chiefs and no traditional feast is permitted after the investiture ceremony. For example, no food is offered in sacrifice to idols or spirits and emblems of office are sanctified with Christian prayer. The liberation of people accused of witchcraft has brought about sense of belonging, unity, peaceful co-existence, harmony as well as mutual understanding in the society.

The tradition of parents to search for a husband or a wife for their children among Igala people has been the practice of the people before the advent of Christianity. Akwu (2020), sees the discouragement of inter-tribal marriage in the past among the Igala people as a bane to national integration. According to him, the missionaries broke the barriers, and consequently, Igala people are now happily married to people of their choice. The missionaries based their teaching on the need for freedom among the people, as individual or as a people. He concluded that through Christian mission, Igala sons and daughters are now liberated from the traditions, most especially as they choose who to marry by themselves.

Education was the most potent tool for the transformation of African societies and the most effective form of evangelism. More Igala people were converted into Christianity through the mission ministry of education than any other means. Turaki (2001) and Okwoli (1984) supports the above that educationally, Igala and Bassa people had shown a great interest in church and education work since 1895 even before the reopening of the Anglican Church in Ankpa and Dekina respectively. Continuing, he notes that in Dekina Division, the Anglican (C.M.S) established seven full primary schools with many other junior primary schools in various locations in Igalaland. To absorb the primary school leavers, it became necessary to have secondary schools and in January 1969, the Bassa-nge Anglican Secondary School was opened with Mr. Ohi Babalola as its first principal.

With the advent of Christianity in Igalaland, Igala Catholic teachers were trained under the English priests in St. Francis College, Oturkpo which is now a secondary school. Igala boys also attended Aliede Secondary School near Oturkpo. According to him, the coming of the Canadian priests marked the opening of Anyigba Teacher's Training College (TTC) in 1957. St. Peter's College, Idah in 1963; St. Clement College, Akpanya in 1964 and St. Charles College, Ankpa in 1967 (Okwoli 1984).

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In addition to the above, Okwoli 1984 also notes that by 1954 Rev. Mother Philip and Sister Regina started work on the Holy Rosary Primary School, Idah. According to the writer, it was a boarding school at first. The importance of this school lay in the fact that it was the nucleus of girl's education in Igalaland. By 1962, girl education in Igalaland took a different turn. The Rev. Sisters felt that they had stimulated enough interest in women education with establishment of the Holy Rosary Training College and with Mother Philip as the first principal. He concludes that the Catholic Church endeavoured to encourage and train the indigenous people in the religious and social administration of their affairs and so the expatriate missionaries now play subordinate role and no longer leaders of the church. The Catholic Church in Igalaland has produced its first set of education officers, who have since been given posts of responsibility.

The C.M.M.L missionaries made valuable contributions to its religious institutions. The C.M.M.L missionaries (the grosses) lived and worked side by side, travelling from place to place, and preaching the gospel. The missionaries struggled to teach their host how to read and write in their native language. To achieve this, vernacular schools were set up and some portions of the Bible, especially the New Testament, were translated into Igala as reading materials. By 1924, Mr. Hewstone had already translated the Gospel of John into Igala. Due to fire disaster in Akpacha, he moved to Ejoka where he remained until 1962 when he died. Before his death, he had labelled his ministry as "Ejoka Bible Mission" beyond church planting. (Ahmed 2011)

Among other achievements, Mr. Gross carried on the ELWA radio programme until the interruption by the civil war in Liberia, now aired in Radio Kogi Ochaja in Dekina Local Government Area, he established vernacular Bible school at Anyigba designed to provide leadership skills for church elders to function in their local assemblies. Usman (1999) also notes that Paul himself was fluent in Igala. He translated Genesis, Ruth, to Igala. As a manager, he supervised seven Christian Missions in Many Lands elementary schools located at Anyigba, Egume, Ikpakpala, Olowa, Elubi and Agbeji. Christian Missions in Many Lands missionaries have risked their lives and made valuable contributions to its religious institutions in order to bring the gospel-light to Igalaland, not minding unfavourable climate, opposition from the natives, killer disease, strange food as well as cultural differences hence, Usman affirms that their greater step of faith and obedience has given birth to many primary schools, secondary schools, Bible college and a printing press at Ika in 1924.

The Qua Iboe Missionaries were not left out in their bid in making valuable contributions to their religious institutions. Achimugu (2015), states that, both Qua-Iboe mission and the Roman Catholic mission established schools almost at the same time. He also notes that Rev. O'Neil started evening classes at Ugwolawo there, the QIM now (UEC), educational work is believed to have started. The aim of the missionaries was to teach the natives how to read and write so as to enable them to read the Bible with understanding. In addition, Rev. O'Neil and Dickson did not waste time in establishing vernacular and English school at Ugwolawo, Odolu, Idah, Ogugu, Ankpa and Okula-Ameji. He concludes that between 1933 and 1940, they were 14 Q.I.M primary schools with only three, Ugwolawo, Odolu and Idah reaching standard four (i.e infant I and II, standard I and II and standard III and IV).

The work of education spread despite difficulties, such as shortage of staff and opposition from Muslim and Pagan parents. Meanwhile, they got teachers from the south mainly from the Ibibios and Ibos, and some Igala teachers who were educated at the government school, Idah, before it closed. Abah (2004), asserts that from this humble beginning the Qua-Iboe mission education in Igala grew to what it is today. He further notes that in 1940 an education officer in Kabba Province, Mr. Ducker, visited the Qua-Iboe school, Idah and was very impressed by the progress made. In his report Mr. Ducker commented “there is no doubt that the Q.I. mission has made the Igala become education-conscious”.

On medical ground, the missionaries also helped in the establishment of the modern health care system in Nigeria and Igalaland inclusive. Akwu 2020, states that before activities of these missionaries, the people were only used to traditional medicine as there only means of curing diseases. According to him as good as this traditional medicine was, it was not without some hitches. It was reliable, but in another way round not reliable. It has no dosage, not hygienic and not well preserved and packed. Apart from these, they excited many other diseases that had no traditional medical solution such as leprosy. He concluded that in trying to give solution to these problems, the missionaries showed through their involvement in medical work that they care for human being and therefore expressed their Christian love in action.

The Catholic Church uses its education and medical works as a means of converting people to Christianity. But medical institutions like hospital, dispensaries, and maternity homes are not as effective as missionaries’ schools in the field of evangelization. Usman 1999, opine that the medical work of the Catholic Church in Idah Diocese could be divided into two phases. The first phase according to him, was when the Catholic Church had not yet built either hospital, dispensaries, or maternity homes, but co-operated with the government in running Idah General Hospital by providing staff. The second phase was when the church started building her own medical centers in the Diocese. The first attempt by the government to get the church to participate in medical work in the area was in 1934, the European medical officer in Idah General Hospital resigned in June 1934. The government invited the Catholic Church to take over the running of the general hospital provided the mission could supply the doctor. Unfortunately (at this period) the Church was not in the position to assume responsibility for the hospital and the request was turned down. This according to the above author was due to lack of staff. The Church did not get involved in medical work in Igala until the arrival of the Holy Rosary sisters in Idah in 1951.

In addition to the above, sister Theresa Gilifyle and sister Barbara became nursing sisters in Idah General Hospital. Also, sisters Monica, De Montfort and Chrysostom worked in the General Hospital in Igalaland as patients from all over Igalaland were brought to Idah for treatment. According to Egbunu 2011, the sister’s presence in Idah General Hospital was a means of contact with the people. It was a means of building up confidence in the Catholic Church. Through the people’s contact with the sisters in the hospital, many of them decided to send their girls to the Holy Rosary Primary School, otherwise known as sister’s school. In this aspect, the medical work of the sisters helped the educational work to grow.

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The Anyigba Medical Center (now known as Grimard Hospital) started as Anyigba Maternity Dispensary by Bishop Delisele in 1960. It was first managed by Canadian secular nursing sisters. At this period, the center had a mobile dispensary which served the surrounding towns and villages. In addition, 1968, Monsignor Leopold Grimard began to develop the center to a full-fledged hospital. It was because of this work in the hospital that in his retirement in 1978, the hospital was named after him. With the huge success recorded at Grimard Hospital Anyigba in 1978 another health care center was opened by the Roman Catholic Missionaries in Egume in 1979 with the co-operation of the local people. The health center did not only serve the people of Egume as it also served the communities surrounding Egume. People no longer had to travel long distance to Anyigba to receive medical care (Abalaka, 2019).

Furthermore, (Akwu 2020) also notes that the practices of the Qua-Iboe mission led to the establishment of a medical center at Ochadamu in Ofu Local Government area of Kogi State. Their medical services included creation of medical awareness through seminars, publications and writing of books on issues of health. Their medical treatments among other benefits gave relief to the people as most medical attention were gained free of charge. The medical attention has helped in wiping out some dangerous illness, diseases such as leprosy and it's like.

Mr. Gross being talented in bricklaying, carpentry, mechanical and electrical works was able to combine these abilities and built a durable house which exists to date at Ojuwo Anyigba and has since the early 1930s served as the C.M.M.L mission station in Nigeria. At his death on October 3rd, 1970, Mr. Gross missionary labour had given birth to the establishment of many C.M.M.L churches.

The first Igala Catholic prayer books and hymn books were produced by a German Rev. Father Kirstein in the late 30s with the collaboration of the Ibo teachers, who had then mastered the Igala language. But the prayer and hymn books seemed to be an interpretation of their Ibo counterparts. A Canadian priest Rev. Bouthief working with Mr. Moses Ibrahim therefore, improved upon the work of the Great German Rev. Father and produced a standard of catechism, hymnal, and prayer books in modern Igala language (Abah 2004). Messer O'Neil and Dickson are remembered for their pioneering works under Qua-Ibo Mission (QIM). Both according to (Abah 2004), worked on the revision of the Igala New Testament which its first translation work was done by Mr. R.T. Dibble. The finished work was printed by the British and Foreign Bible society in 1948. He concluded that the legacy of the Qua Iboe missions include a medical center at Ochadamu (Ofu LGA) and Peter Achimugu Theological College at Ankpa. Some of the products of these schools later became teachers in the mission schools while others found employment in government departments as well as private sectors.

Conclusion

History reveals that various Christian denominations of Christianity in Igalaland made valuable impact to its religious institutions and the society at large even though missionaries that came to Igalaland were not happily welcomed. Some Igala people were not happy to have white men in their locality. This is because, they never thought of humans who existed with colours other than black. Despite the above, they were able to achieve a lot in the areas of

educational services, medical services, printing press, translation of the Bible and Hymns, eradication of dangerous diseases, carpentry work and others.

In a nutshell, despite the contributions of the various denominations of Christianity to the development and civilization of Igalaland as earlier indicated, the incursion of the missionaries affected the culture of the people negatively. They regarded the Igala culture as evil or fetish instead of examining the practices of the two cultures in the light of the scripture.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby made:

1. Since Christianity has influenced the Igala people culture positively and negatively, aspects of the people's culture that are not unhygienic to the Christian practices, should be incorporated into the Christian religion such as traditional music, bearing, and maintaining of Igala native/traditional names etc.
2. Patience and systematic teaching could have probably addressed the spiritual and moral issues involved in Igala traditional practices rather than condemning some traditional practices the indigenous people consider not inimical to the gospel.
3. In ensuring cooperation between Christianity and Igala culture, church leaders in Igalaland in interpreting the Bible should take into consideration the people's culture. These according to (Adama 2015), is true when he said that the "indigenous African Christians Igala (inclusive) 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".
4. Parents' investigation about the health status, parental background and the character of young men and women before marriage are very essential since this can be done without rituals.
5. Overall, it is the responsibility of Igala Christians to identify those lost customs of theirs and enculturate them into "Igala Christianity" particularly those that are not outrageous to the essence of the Christian Gospel.

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