Research Article

THE MISSIONARY TWIST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IGBO IDENTITY: THE DIALECTICS OF CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

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Abstract

Every society, in order to have any stability and meaningful development, peace and orderly progress, usually requires that its members adhere to an articulated set of values which provides a sense of group identity for them. For the Igbo, as in many parts of Africa, it is religion, albeit traditional religion, that provides most of the bases for the values and stands them out with a distinctive identity. There is no doubt that the traditional religion on which the Igbo societies were based gave meaning and significance to the lives of people in those societies. But those values have been thoroughly affected by historical factors, by encounter with Europeans and their Christian religion with its accompanying new systems of living. Howbeit, if a new religion has assumed major significance in the lives of a people, then it is very necessary to assess the nature of its activities and progress in order to establish the genuineness of its predominance and to see how far it has allowed itself or otherwise, to fulfill the requirements which the people demand of their religion. Assessing the impacts of Christianity on Igbo societies, historians inevitably tend to concentrate on manifestations of change, rather than on continuities. However, to understand Igbo society in the missionary era it is essential to understand that for many, perhaps most Igbo, life was not changed very fundamentally. The extent of the Christianization of Igboland is a question of depth and sincerity as well as a question of change and continuity in social identity. The first generation of Igbo Christians often displayed an apparent ambivalence. On the one hand, they were enthusiastic and fervent Christians, but on the other, they frequently embraced practices which the Churches condemned. Nevertheless, this type of eclecticism does not reflect insincerity. On the contrary, it reflected the reality of the supernatural world. This study, therefore, looked at the extent to which missionary enterprise has brought changes in the identity of Igbo people and how the Igbo responded to its new challenges vis-à-vis problems and opportunities.

Introduction

The question of Igbo identity is one that has occupied the minds of the Igbo people especially since the end of the era of slavery, the beginning of the missionary and colonial era and the emergence of Negritude, pan-Africanism and nationalist movements in Africa. This is particularly so as Ilo (2008) avers that "people who are not self-conscious and who cannot define where they stand culturally, from a human point of view, cannot really and concretely take control of their fate and future in the historical process" (p. 39). Ozigbo (1985) adds:

If there were no people to constantly recall the attention of a people to the life-route they have travelled, and are currently walking, they might never hit their rightful goal. A good understanding of the past is indispensable for a proper appreciation of the present; he who does not learn from history is doomed to relive it. (p. xiv).

A loss of identity creates cultural bereavement, leaving a people with fragmented systems, a vague sense of right or wrong, a lack of direction and imprisonment in immediacy and selfishness. This weakens the people's ability to work together and build a better society.

There is probably no doubt that, looked at in terms of the total scale of Igbo history, missionary enterprise could be discussed in terms of the degree of changes which it induced in the life and culture of the people and hence their identity. It is an event of far-reaching importance because the issue of continuity and change of Igbo identity under the influence of the missionaries is one that has interested many scholars of Igbo society who have debated with great skill the explanation for the relative ease or otherwise, with which the Igbo embraced, or were made to embrace, new languages, culture, religion, fashion and so forth. Furthermore, the issue of identity is important in Africa because many people numbering in their millions were forcibly removed from their homes by the obnoxious trade in human beings and sold hundreds of miles away or even shipped across the oceans, so to have identity going back several generations is to declare oneself free-born with rights and privileges attaching thereto. Furthermore, the search for one's identity may take other forms than tracing one's lineage back several generations. In consonance with this line of thought, Etuk, (2002) states that for a whole people or race who had suffered one form of rejection and denigration or another, it may take the form of seeking to return to certain practices and customs which are seen as having served as bulwarks to the survival of that society in the past and which hold the key to their continuous existence as an independent people in the future. More often than not, the desire to return to the past may consist in no more than turning ones back on everything that is considered foreign, exotic, imposed or imported.

This work is therefore an attempt to investigate the extent to which Igbo identity changed as a result of Christian missionary propaganda. The thrust of the investigation is the question as to whether the Igbo has lost their identity as they acquired a new religion, language or new styles of living and social organizations. It tries to discover if the Igbo lost their identity with the introduction of formal system of education or acquired new tools and artifacts.

The Catholic and Protestant churches in Igbo land from the on-set, through such agencies as schools, medical services and social welfare services and of course, through the examples in life and work of some of the missionaries and through its own structure and organizations, had generated a set of values, some of which merely reinforced the old traditional values of the Igbo people. Thus, the missionaries encouraged self-reliance, competiveness and enthusiasm for social and community welfare services. It was these values which are marked features of these communities that the missionaries greatly harnessed in their expansion drive. This is so because any attempt to build a strong and healthy local Christian community that plays down the local cultural heritage cannot be germane because the very concept of local Christian community implies an admission of cultural diversity and the need of the Christian community to adapt itself to the various cultures of humankind.

Admittedly, there was a high level of cultural intolerance and discrimination among the ranks of European missionaries in Igbo land especially the pioneers. To what do Igbo Christians attribute this attitude? Certainly it is not doctrine, for the Igbo Christians are at least as orthodox as the Roman Catholics and the Protestants and much more orthodox than the Pentecostals. The present research believes that the reasons were mainly two, one of which was the fault of the expatriate missionaries, the other due to the shortcomings of the Igbo people themselves. In the first instance, the rank of the missionaries was dominated by the concepts and modes of thought against which they have struggled for half a century in Africa, the fact is that most European missionaries were unable to emancipate themselves from the cultural, emotional and social frame in which they were used to live and express their Christian life; they tended to identify Christianity with the European civilization. It is, however, important to note that there was good effort made to study the languages and culture of the native people. The French clergyman, Charles Martial Allemand Lavigerie, who founded the White Fathers which was a missionary group spread across Africa was even credited with the program "Transforming Africa by Africans" which aimed at giving basics training to locals who in turn gets into active evangelization. Attesting to the efforts of Lavigerie, Pawliková –Vilhanová (2007) averred:

> Missionaries were therefore asked to adapt themselves to the Africans, to strip themselves, as much as possible, of the cultural elements peculiar to them, of their language in the first place. It was believed that without effective and active communication it was impossible to pursue the conversion of the Africans. Missionaries were requested to overcome language difficulties by devoting their spare time to the study of local African languages and by approaching Africans in their own language to minimize cultural misunderstandings and distinctions between themselves and their potential converts. (p. 254).

However the reach of this distinguished group was so limited that their peculiar style may not stand as a model; they did not come to Igboland. At the same time, the question remains as to the extent their trainees remained African at graduation. Secondly, Igbo Christians were aware of their own shortcomings. They belatedly discovered that it is not enough to propagate the gospel in their own local sphere, to worship in spirit and in truth, to lift the fallen, tend the sick, and minister to the poor. They must also - to use a nasty modernism - project their image. Their failure to do so originally results in missionary hostility to Igbo culture and identity. Inevitably, therefore, the task of marrying the essence of Christianity with acceptable customs of the Igbo in order to re-affirm Igbo identity, rested on Igbo Christians themselves as they woke up from their cultural slumber. A respect for tradition and the restoration of Igbo identity then meant much for the first generation Igbo Christians. They evinced a stronger attachment to Igbo culture; and more self-assured and sophisticated, they do not consider that this implies a breach with the Christian fold to which, in any case, many were less profoundly attached.

Theoretical Underpinning

For a better understanding of change and continuity of identity with the establishment of Christianity in Igboland, the theory of cultural diffusion is employed. Cultural diffusion involves the borrowing of cultural items from other societies. It is the process by which an item of culture spreads geographically from its source of invention. Culture may be diffused between individuals, between regions, between nations between religious groups or indeed between members of any spatially separated groups. The form of culture-normally material items is diffused much faster than ideas or ideologies. Hence the Igbo man has been much quicker to adopt the dress and technology of western nations than their religious systems. Western religious system as adopted by the Igbo man became tailored to reflect the traditional worldview of the Igbo people. It is to be noted further that in the process of cultural diffusion, a conquered people are often meant to submit to the wishes of their masters, and the extent that western culture had power of over Igbo culture determined the degree of coercion with which western culture was imposed on Igbo people. However, research has shown that the adoption of a new practice or culture is not always directly correlated with the usefulness or the advantage the innovation may have for the adopters. This accounts for a recoiled movement by the Igbo people when it became obvious that the adoption of western culture was a disservice to Igbo cultural values. This recoiled movement originated when a considerable number of the Igbo became dissatisfied with certain cultural developments resulting from feelings that inequalities exist as well as feelings of insecurity and frustration. Such feelings represent the first stage of the reaffirmation of Igbo identity after the Igbo encounter with Christianity and western culture.

The Establishment of Christianity in Igboland

Missionary enterprise in Igboland began in the middle of the 19th century when the pioneer missionaries to Igboland – the British Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) - claimed to have chosen Africa as one of the spheres of its apostolic work, and the Negro race in particular, out of commiseration for wrongs which the slave trade had wrought upon them, and thus they accompanied a British expedition in 1841 for the exploration of the banks of the Niger with the aim to establishing Christianity and legitimate trade along the Niger as a sure way of dealing a death-blow to the protracted and obnoxious trade in human beings. One of the prominent exponents of the 1841 expedition – Thomas Fowell Buxton- believed that the "Bible and the Plough" hypothesis would serve the course of civilization and Christianity. And so with the aid of this hindsight, 1841 could now be regarded as a turning point in the life and identity of the communities which ultimately came to be called Igbo ethnic group. The first Igbo town that the expedition landed was Aboh, J.F. Schon, a German linguist and the leader of the C.M.S. team that accompanied the expedition, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave and Simon Jonas, a liberated slave from Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage, were able to forge a personal link with the King of Aboh, Obi Ossai with Simon Jonas acting as an interpreter. Here the missionaries succeeded in preaching the gospel message to the king and his people. During the encounter with the king, Jonas was asked to translate the Beatitudes into Igbo. As he translated the gospel, the

king was said to have been so impressed with his eloquence and apparent erudition. This is how Ekechi (1972) reports the incidence. "Obi Ossai exclaimed, you must stop with me, you must teach me and my people. The white people can go up the river without you, they may leave you here until they return, or until other people come" (p. 2). That a white man could read and write was a matter of course, but that a Black man – an Igbo man – a slave in times past should know these wonderful things too, was more than he could ever have anticipated.

A careful analysis of the king's response to the Gospel message reveals an interesting dimension in the interaction. The king was impressed that his countryman could master the 'magic' of the Whiteman. During his short stay at Aboh, Jonas made a remarkable progress in forming a Christian group among the people. This initial breakthrough, at least at the official level, convinced the missionaries that the Igbo were not only responsible but quite receptive.

On April, 1846, another group of missionaries of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, headed by Hope Waddell arrived at Duke Town, Old Calabar. According to Amucheazi (1986) "the missionaries were warmly received by Chief Eyamba of Duke Town, who offered them a beautiful piece of land on a hill overlooking the town and the river" (p. 11). In 1857, the C.M.S. finally came to establish a permanent station in Igboland with their headquarters in Onitsha after making a brief stop-over at Aboh.

Towards the end of the century, there came an interface in the Christian wave. 5th December 1885, Roman Catholic missionaries arrived the shores of the River Niger and found safe havens in Onitsha. The Roman Catholic missionaries were led by French Reverend Fathers Lutz and Horne and Brothers John and Hermas. The Obi of Onitsha readily received them and the C.M.S. missionaries ceded a piece of land originally given to them by the rulers of Onitsha to the Roman Catholics (Kanu, 2011) and as earlier reported by Abernethy (1969): "… in fact, the Catholic's first mission site was on land donated by the Obi of Onitsha to Bishop Crowther, who in turn gave it to the Holy Ghost Fathers" (p. 49). The French were soon after replaced by Irish personnel apparently for political and language considerations.

Two years after the Catholics arrived, other Protestant missionary bodies also were established in the Region. The Qua Iboe mission (1887) which derived its name from a local river of the same name. It was established by a Northern Irish missionary, Samuel Alexander Bill, who wanted a Protestant non-denominational mission. It made Etinan its headquarters, and the Primitive Methodists (1893) based first at Oron but latter in 1920, were moved to Uzuakoli and Umuahia.

From these various headquarters the Protestant missions advanced into the interior, establishing among themselves cordial functional relationships. Between 1909 and 1932 they held a series of conferences for the delimitation of their respective spheres of influence. These arrangements have been fairly faithfully respected. Broadly speaking, the respective areas of

influence are today as follows: the Presbyterian confines themselves to the eastern side of Cross River, in the Efik-speaking area, but in the north they have the imaginary line between Ubum and Abakaliki as the western boundary. The C.M.S. occupied the largest area from the sea coast and along the Imo and the Niger rivers and extends to the Udi area. The Methodists control from Aba through Uzuokoli to Umuahia and is bounded by the C.M.S. and the Presbyterians (Amucheazi, 1986).

Meanwhile, in 1902 a phenomenal personality arrived who was to revolutionize the Catholic approach to evangelization, and who will become the most dominant and prominent figure in the history of missionaries and founders of Christianity in Igboland. As Nwosuh (2012) wrote about him:

> A man who is really great, who must rank with the greatest missionaries of all time....A man of vision and creativity; of faith and foresight; of courage and humility; of energy, talent and abilities, Shanahan's missionary insights, initiatives, dynamism, and pragmatism indelibly re-wrote the religious history of a race and people the Igbos of Nigeria. (p. 6).

With his base at Onitsha, Father Shanahan (Later Bishop Shanahan) carried the Catholic Church into the entire Igboland through a formidable educational strategy. Okochi (2008) referred to this period as "the golden period of the early missionary activities in Igboland" (p. 41) due to the educational programs of Shanahan. Underlining the approach of Shanahan, he wrote:

> He made decision to concentrate on education as a means of evangelization. During his headship of the missionary team there was some rapport between the missionaries and the British colonial masters. He ensured the multiplication of Catholic schools of his area of jurisdiction. In 1920 he was consecrated bishop. Shanahan appreciated education, not only for the purposes of evangelization, but also for every aspect of human existence. He made sure that people were not discriminated against on any grounds when it came to education .(p. 42).

He exercised such dominance in Igboland that the British even referred to the area as the "Shanahan Country" and named the mail boat from Onitsha to Asaba "The Shanahan". One other interesting aspect of the Christianization of Igboland was the indigenous missionary factor. These indigenous missionaries were mainly ex-slaves from Sierra-Leone whose return from exile was a major factor in the evangelization of Igbo country and the adaptation of the Christian religion with the acceptable Igbo cultural practices. It is to the return of these Igbo ex-slaves that we shall now turn our attention.

The Return of the Exiles and the Dawn of Igbo Identity Consciousness

The traditional homeland of the Igbo people lies between the Niger and the Cross Rivers, though a substantial minority live to the west of the Niger. Like other groups whose limits are defined by obvious natural boundaries, they tend to merge into neighbouring people. However, our concern in this section of the study is the Igbo in Diaspora, the thousands of men and women who went as involuntary emigrants to the New World in the era of the slave trade. A few of these victims were recaptured from the slave ships and were resettled in Sierra Leone, where they formed, in the 19th century, a flourishing community with a strong sense of Igbo consciousness and from where they returned as missionaries and civilizers to their fatherland. Okeke (1994) confirms that there were ethnic loyalties among the liberated Africans in Sierra Leone, and while attempts were made to weld them together, there was continuity of old values. These gave birth to the scientific study of native languages and adaptations of traditional instincts to the new development. These ethnic loyalties became real with the heightening of inter-ethnic rivalries.

A movement to emigrate into the Igbo country had started in Sierra Leone in 1853 after the Yoruba group in Sierra Leone had migrated to the Yoruba country, and had started the evangelization and civilization of their own people. So the Igbo in Sierra Leone expressed their desire to the C.M.S. parent committee to return to their fatherland. They contended that wonderful things had been taking place in the Yoruba country and that it would be equally delightful to see that the Gospel was working mightily among the Igbo too. In this way God has implanted in the Igbo mind a powerful love for home and home associations. Years of separation, intervening seas and land, did not prevail to its extinction. Okeke (1994) reports that when John Christopher Taylor, himself of Igbo parentage, was chosen as the titular head of the volunteer native missionary group, there were signs of racial pride among the many men and women of Igbo origin in Sierra Leone. It was of special joy to them that an Igbo man was to be the leader of the missionary group to break open the fellow ground, and to sow the seed of a future bountiful harvest among the people of their fatherland. In an ecstasy of Joy, one of the old men in the crowd exclaimed as preserved by Ekechi (1972) thus:

> Thank God, thank God! Go, my son, and tell the happy news to our country men-oh, is this word true, that our children too can go out like white men and preach the gospel? If anyone had told us this word in bygone years, who would believe it? Lord, send plenty of our children more. (p. 5).

Taylor was well received at Onitsha on his arrival in July 1857, perhaps because he was of Igbo origin. Many of his countrymen surged around him and expressed their delight that he had come back home again. In general, all the missionary agents were well received, possibly because they were Africans. When Taylor preached in Igbo without an interpreter, the psychological effect was magical. More and more people were attracted to the missionary circle. Crowther had earlier counted on the achievements of Simon Jonas at Aboh in 1841 and 1853, and suggested to the C.M.S. that future missionary work in Igboland should be left to the natives themselves.

It is often said that the crucial reason for appointing indigenous people as missionaries in their native country and to lead their Churches is to enable them to adapt the Christian religion to the genius and culture of their people. Writing about this, Pope Benedict xv observed that "linked as they are, by bonds of origin, character, feeling and inclination, they (the indigenous missionaries) possess exceptional opportunities for introducing the faith to the minds of their own people" (Ozigbo, 1985:39).

In the area of catechesis, the role and responsibility of the indigenous missionaries are inestimable. In the process for adaptation, there is a limit beyond which, a foreigner cannot go. Our expatriate missionaries, particularly the pioneers, did their best, but as shall be soon pointed out, their best was not good enough regarding the preservation of Igbo identity. Hence, the responsibility of sustaining Igbo identity and marrying acceptable Igbo cultural practices with the Gospel message rested on the indigenous Christians.

Missionary Tools that Endangered and Jeopardized Igbo Identity

Religion: The early history of Christianity in Igboland reveals that it was marked by waves and waves of iconoclasm in which invaluable works of art and culture were destroyed by the expatriate missionaries. Now it is not unlikely that some of the ferocity of this iconoclastic campaign can be explained by reference to the social class of many of the early missionaries. Afigbo (1981) notes how one of their members stated that "there is nothing in Igbo culture to be proud of" (p. 34). The fact is that most European missionaries were unable to emancipate themselves from the cultural, emotional and social frame in which they were used to live and expressed their Christian life: They tended to identify Christianity with the European Civilization. The pioneer missionaries did not, through patient inquiry and dialogue, discover the authentic values which animated the lives of the people to whom they have come to evangelize, so that where necessary, these values and ideas could be elevated, purified and infused with the right spirit of the Christian gospel, that way Christ would have been brought to the Igbo people, not as a total stranger but as one whom they have always sought for without knowing.

Social Disposition: In the context of Igbo culture, conversion to Christianity was not just a question of taking on new ideologies in place of the old; it also involved exchanging one form of social life for another. Remarkably, the later may have dominated the reason for the Igbo quest after Christianity; the elevated social status it afforded its adherents not any ideology or world view it may have deemed preferable. So unaware of the many implications of missionary propaganda, the various Igbo groups were eager at the outset to accept the new religion and the new identity it confers on its adherents. The Igbo spirit of competition, emulation and rivalry were also significant forces in the eventual bringing about of missionary penetration. Ozigbo (1985) identifies a factor responsible for the rapid change in Igbo identity in the missionary era as what he describes as "the strange Igbo craze for the exotic" (p. 35). According to him, the Igbo are notorious for hankering after seductive cultural traits of other peoples, even when such traits appear unintelligible. They love to speak in foreign tongues. They fall for models in dress and

ornamentation from Europe and America. An Igbo youth would give anything for a shirt, singlet, gown or cap blazoned with such exotic titles as London, New York, California and so on. He prefers the European Cuisine to his African food. He proudly wears the Hausa cap and the Yoruba *agbada* even when the Hausa or Yoruba would have nothing to do with Igbo traditional wrapper or cap. Curiously, Igbo takes to these things as prestige symbols. The missionaries, on the other hand, exploited the Igbo inclination for status and achievement to promote their own work. If missionary activity in a town was the criterion for measuring progress and civilization, the Igbo vied with each other to acquire this new status symbol. Ekechi (1972) echoes Crowther's observation in the following way:

> From all I could gather by observation, the Ibos are very emulative: as in other things, so it will be in book learning. Other towns will not rest satisfied until they have also learned the mystery of reading and writing, by which their neighbours may surpass or put them in the shade. (p. 7).

However, the relation between the missionaries and the indigenous Igbo people took a new turn after a sizeable number of conversions had been made. Basking in the euphoria that the conversion of the Igbo to Christianity involved a change in their whole social existence, the missionaries began, consciously or unconsciously to induce their converts to shed all the symbols of their traditional life. Converts were encouraged to sever their ties with the rest of their family because they were still "unransomed". Above all, the new converts were strongly advised not to make any further local contributions for fear they might be used for heathenish purposes. From all appearances, it looked as though the social fabric and the basic identity of the Igbo were breaking asunder while a third race that could at best be described as hybrid was gradually emerging.

Nihilation: This is a philosophical concept adapted from 'Nihilism'. It is employed to describe the missionary attitude towards African indigenous society structure especially religion. It underscores the fact that these missionaries understood African religious symbols and systems, social structures and stratifications, commerce and industry as nothing perhaps in comparison with the sophistication of Europe; a kind of consciousness they schemed into their African converts. It was clear that the missionaries were eager to overthrow the social order and hoped to replace it with a foreign and Christian structure and identity. Thus, they induced their converts to break the laws and customs of the society. In response to instructions from the missionaries, many of the Christian converts began to violate local customs with impunity. Some of them, in fact, turned out to be spies and tale-bearers for the missionaries at the expense of communal security. It was therefore natural that the local rulers came to view missionary propaganda with intense irritation, and consequently they took steps to prevent the breakdown of the entire social order and the schemed effacement of the identity of the Igbo race. But in spite of local protest, the missionaries pursued their drive for change. And as shall be shown soon, education became the most important medium for change and new identity in Igboland.

Education and the Schools: The introduction of formal education by the Christian missions was determined by local circumstances rather than by a clearly defined policy. The missionaries severally regarded themselves as essentially preachers rather than teachers. But in the Igbo situation where the populace was illiterate, it was realized that the school system would be in essence, the most important mechanism, for detaching the young from their tribe, from the whole complex of conventions and beliefs in which they have been brought up. This will give the enabling environment to re-engineer their minds and re-orientate their understanding of that tribe. It also afforded the missionaries the opportunity to inculcate in them their understanding and version of the tribe. This method has been termed 'miseducation' by Chinweizu (1978) and described by Onyewuenyi (1994) as one of the "failures of western civilization" (p. 7). On the one hand, the process of missionary education begins by distorting the traditional Igbo identity as the pupil takes on a new identity which he/she is initiated into believing that he/she is making a giant stride from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from damnation to salvation, from being uncivilized to being civilized, from primitivity to modernity. Okpalike (2014) had decried the consequences of this western education thus:

> At the heart of Western Education is the isolation of the individual into the conditioned territory of training. The extent of the social gap created between such an individual and the rest of his community is directly proportional to his level of education. Consequent upon this, the educated Africans are worst-off in the scheme of Africa development because they are no longer in touch; they have been caught-up in the quagmire of elitism. (p. 184).

These individuals form a class of hybrid Igbo whose white minds have been programmed to denigrate and reject their black bodies and environment. They confirm the extent they have imbibed this training by the extent they regard their former identity with repudiation and disregard. Therefore in the process of changing the fundamental basis of society, the school played an important part because it was the instrument for mobilizing support for Christianity and by the same token for withdrawing support from the old social order. This role was the more crucial because those recruited for Christianity through the school were by and large children, not fully induced into the culture and lore of the society. The result was that they brought to Christianity fewer trappings of the indigenous culture than would have been the case if most of the early converts were elders who had become the embodiments of the tradition of their fathers.

Negligence of the traditional Social Order: Another point related to this is the fact that at the same time many of those first sent to school, and therefore to Church, were either slaves or *Osu* (outcast). These were people who, because of their social disabilities, had a grievance against traditional Igbo culture and society. They saw the new Christian body which was forming as an alternative means of social identity to the Igbo society whose constraints they were happy to escape. Most often the *Osu* and *Ohu* social status have been viewed in such a catastrophic light that it would seem they are entirely depraved and lacking in contributing to the moral and political evolution of the Igbo. Beyond being a system which marginalized and isolated the individual, it is

rife with moral lessons and conscientiousness which could have been explored and improved with the new learning. Rather the white missionaries swept such practices under the carpet of the prejudicial judgment of Africa as barbaric, primitive and devilish. Ekwuru (1999) lamented this devaluation of Igbo traditional social order thus:

> Certainly, in these few decades, a lot of socio-cultural changes have taken place. Some of them have been observed to be too sudden, total and devastating, while others happened so gradual but equally corrosive in their cultural impact. Within a short time after the colonial conquest and invasion, most of the cultural forms and modes that constituted the nucleus of the traditional communal life have been observed to have vanished. The pristine social network that promoted brotherly love within the kinship structure of extended family system has been severed and dismembered. The village commune of the political structure that guaranteed a type of republican form of democratization has been deformed and repudiated. (p. xi – xii).

Urbanization: Another outcome of the missionary enterprise which served as an instrument of social change was urbanization. Urbanization was unknown in pre-Christian Igboland. The people lived in villages, village-groups and clans. There was also hardly anything like living in anonymity or living an individual existence to the extent that is possible today in urban centres. But in urban conditions of existence one is released from all these intricate and intimate links which tend to hinder the development of rugged individualism. It was by introducing these conditions that urbanization proved such a potent instrument of social and identity change in Igboland. In these urban centres Igbo elements found themselves compelled to adopt styles of life quite different from what they came with from the villages. Invariably those who went to the towns were young men, some of whom had been to school and so embraced Christianity of sorts; through these sons abroad, as through the teachers in the rural mission stations the new fashion of social identity filtered into Igbo villages.

It should not be assumed, however, that the missionaries conquered the entire Igbo country with swift ease. On the contrary, there were series of factors that limited the missionary influence in Igbo society and served as bulwarks for the survival of the basic elements of Igbo culture.

Factors Limiting the Missionary Quest for Social Change in Igboland

Missionary enterprise into Igboland was launched along three main axes – the River Niger, the Opobo-Bonny and the Cross River axes. Of these the Niger axes was the earliest but for one thing the Niger was not, for 19th century Europe, so much a highway of advance into Igboland as the Southern gateway into the central Sudan (Hausaland) which was the loadstar of European adventure for much of the 19th century (Afigbo, 1981). The missionaries in the 19th century did not seek to expand to the interior, penetrating no further than some outposts along the coast, and it was not until the 20th century that British trading firms were reluctantly persuaded to establish on

the interior and the missionaries followed suit. The mission agents always hoped to use the Delta as a springboard to the Igbo interior, but were prevented by the hostility of the coastal chiefs, who feared the undermining of their middlemen role. Missionary work in the interior was to be the result of the initiatives of the local people themselves.

There was also the fact that the method of converting Africans through their kings and chiefs adopted by the missionaries for the greater part of the 19th century was unsuitable for Igboland where there were no kings and chiefs powerful enough to drag their peoples along with them into the Christian fold. Not being powerful enough, however, is not as a result of incompetence and unpopularity of the kings or chiefs but that the culture of the Igbo people does not admit or contain the idea of a monarch who wielded the kind of power and influence that could be found of such like them in northern or south-western Nigeria. The word 'King' loosely translates as '*Eze*' in Igbo language and according to Okpalike (2008):

> It should be noted that *Eze* in Igbo society is not merely 'king' in the sense of Western or Eastern monarchies, but 'he who excels'. *Eze* is a title given to one who excels in an industry of little aspect of life and conscientiously struggles to exercise an unchallengeable influence wherever he finds himself. (pp. 97-8).

Eze could also be like *Pater Familias* of the old Roman culture better understood as custodians of tradition and ancestral authority, in which case the concept of Okpara (or any of its nuances) could be more appropriate. The kind of Eze or kings found in the present-day Igbo society derives from the political arrangements of the colonizers and cross-cultural influences from northern and south-western Nigeria. The second level of the argument as observed by Afigbo (1981) is that for the eastern Igbo area the fact that the missions settled first at Onitsha would also appear to have been a handicap, for Onitsha had a long tradition of conflict with most of her neighbours. Apparently, nearly half a century of Christian enterprise in and around Onitsha did not succeed in carrying the Christian message into the heart of Igboland. On the Opobo-Bonny and Cross River axes the missions were more eager to obtain toe-holds before going into Igboland. By the time this was achieved Igbo attitude to the white men had hardened as a result of unhappy encounters with the political and military arms of British interest. Consequent upon this, penetration along these fronts had to await the military conquest of Igboland.

There were also such places as Nsukka, Abakaliki and Afikpo, where the rate of missionary expansion was much slower. Here part of the explanation lay in the fact that the area came largely within the sphere of influence of the Presbyterian Church which never had a dynamic expansion programme. The Catholics had also penetrated the area but their progress was slower than what was experienced in the rest of Igboland.

Meanwhile education has been, characteristically, the missionaries' chief means of effecting social transformation and it was to be so, later among the Igbo, but educational work had made little progress by the 1880s. This was partly due to the lack of trained personnel, but mainly

due to fact that Igbo people themselves had no incentive, at this time, to welcome European education for their children. Their own society provided amply for the moral and vocational training of the young, and they had no reason for seeking European-type skills until these skills became saleable; this did not come about until the beginning of colonial rule.

As if the schools were not isolating enough, the Catholic mission in Igboland at a point experimented creating and maintaining an artificially protected environment because they needed their own environment where certain cultural practices may not be enforced and where some cultural prohibitions may be disregarded without sanctions; a society uncontaminated by the Igbo culture they judged as opposed to Christian demands. This idea was pioneered by Michael Tansi an indigenous Igbo Catholic priest from Aguleri. He founded the Christian village of Aguleri, with its members drawn largely from the poor which led a co-operate religious life of almost monastic regularity. Ozigbo (1985) adds that:

> The converts were induced to build their houses in and around the Christian village so as to cut themselves off, as much as possible, from the influence of their traditional society. The conversion of the individual person was not seen within the larger perspective of the conversion of the entire traditional community. The Christian village, in effect, became a ghetto nurtured in monastic principles. It produced apparently pious Catholics who became culturally warped and disoriented. Many of them later revolted against the system and deserted the Christian village. (p. 7).

However there were no replications of this scheme in the rest of Igboland which could suggest that it failed to impress the Igbo mind as a means of evangelization. Thus, despite the sacrifices of many missionaries, both black and white, Catholic and Protestant, who had laboured and died in Igboland, the missionary enterprise had on the whole achieved singularly little success in changing the basic identity of the Igbo people.

The People's Movement and the Resurgence of Igbo Traditional Values

While some people, however, were prepared to accommodate the new religion and social change that came with it, others were determined to maintain or to restore the purity of Igbo traditional life and religion. The period of euphoria, indeed, proved deceptive. Beset by internal conflicts and disorientated by the imposition of an alien culture, some of the converts started to backslide. The early Christians were suspended between two world views, two sets of religious techniques, promising different but not mutually exclusive benefits. Traditional religion offers techniques for avoiding evils and attaining temporal blessings. Christianity offers blessings in a world to come. Early Christians felt that the Churches had deprived them of a set of efficient methods of limiting the role of chance, and controlling or limiting misfortunes, and above all, they saw themselves as people who had lost all sense of original identity and traditional heritage in pursuit of an alien identity that would never be achieved, so that they seem to go sheepishly in a

sea of vicissitudes. Ekechi (1972) cited Father Francis Aupiais of the Roman Catholic Church as saying that:

> Christianity tends to stifle or extinguish the characteristics culture of the Africans. In the name of so-called progress they will lose the original qualities of their race; they will be so many *deracines* on whom we shall build an uncertain Christianity and from whom we must expect an appalling reaction when they sense an imperious need to go back to their own tradition. (p. 21).

The drift of the Igbo Christians to their traditional setting was an attempt to regain their identity and social prestige. On the other hand, this might be seen as an attempt to reconcile Christianity with Igbo way of life. According to Isichei (1977), in 1864, some seven years after the establishment of the first Christian mission in Onitsha, a prophet arose in the Onitsha hinterland called *Odesoruelu*, which the missionaries translated as Restorer of the primitive style. His emissaries visited a number of towns within a ten-mile radius of Onitsha. *Odesoruelu* protested against the rise of food prices which they alleged the foreign presence on the Niger brought. The small pox epidemic of 1864 gave an added point to their appeal for a restoration of the old way of life. The emissaries of the movement warned people of impending doom unless an effort was made to return to the good old days. This people's movement was a call to regain touch with their traditional culture. The Igbo were exhorted to study the institutions of the traditional society and seek, as much as possible, to cast off the European life style and live according to Igbo traditions.

On the issue of *Ozo* title, Tasie (1996) states that J.C. Taylor made personal researches and concluded that it was a way of distinguishing one's status in the society, for which Taylor saw nothing essentially wrong or sinful about Christians taking the *Ozo* title to mark their status in the society. On May 12, 1914, a conference was held at Onitsha by the Anglican Church to consider many aspects of the confrontation of Igbo customs with Christianity, the *Ozo* title was fully discussed and it was classified as political custom that does not diminish the Christian practice. This was a victory for the people's movement; this was a victory for the Igbo in their struggle to regain their identity in the face of missionary onslaught.

What it means is that the Igbo did not simply surrender themselves to the new and enticing ways of the new way of life in abandonment of their traditional customs and social identity. On the contrary, they carried to this new way of life those aspects of their village or traditional cultures which could be accommodated with the demands of the new environment. Even in the urban centres, the Igbo began to form lineage organizations which provided them with the bases for organizing group activities. The Catholic Church was more cautious on this matter. They were aware that the *Ozo* title is not the same in all the communities of Igboland. The Church issued a general template for the title-taking which rejected every traditional religious practice associated with *Ozo*. Any Catholic community which accepted this template signed it and joined *Ozo* in the local community. This gave birth to the idea of *Ozo ndiuka* (Christan version of *Ozo*) and *Ozo Obodo/Omenala* (traditional version of *Ozo*) in various communities.

Isichei (1977) gives an important reference when she states that the workers in early 19th century England, who left their villages for the first time during the Industrial Revolution and went to live in big industrial cities, very often, joined together in clubs, friendly societies or Masonic type secret societies. They did so in an attempt to find friends and a sense of identity in the desert of individuals, and in an attempt to guard against at least some of the dangers and insecurities of their new life by providing a small measure of social security and mutual aid. The Igbo who left their villages for the first time responded in exactly the same way. They formed associations, bound by a high sense of group identity, meeting regularly and providing a network of benefits and obligations. It was this form of informal organizations that blossomed into the formal patriotic and improvement unions which became so popular among the Igbo even in present days. Missionary activities thus seemed, to some extent, to have brought ideological and quasi-political unity to the Igbo in the Igbo State Union.

Conclusion

The advent of the missionaries and the Christian religion was loaded with potentials of social change in Igbo societies, but in the long run, the Igbo were able to resist a change of identity to a great extent. The people of Igbo interior knew, probably with some precision, the nature of the alien presence on their borders and did their best to resist the tempting opportunities it tended to offer. If, therefore, Igbo identity did not collapse on the morrow of missionary enterprise, it follows that Igbo avidity for Christianity did not derive from a crisis of social identity as submitted by Ekechi (1972). It is more likely that the Igbo became Christians not so much because they felt they needed to change their old identity, as because they found themselves in a world in which the old identity was no longer enough and they sought to supplement it by acquiring aspects of the identity of their Christian visitors. This would help to explain the fact that Igbo life under the influence of Christian missionaries was in some aspects a happy synthesis of the old and the new – a situation which the British found disquieting. Afigbo (1981) echoes Mrs Sylvia Leith Ross's observation in 1939 thus:

> Such a tremendous load has been suddenly put upon shoulders not yet ready to carry such a burden, that is no wonder the bearer falters, turns back, or rest a while in the familiar world of his own customs before resuming the Christian path. The only real surprise is the fact that he does not seem to know that he is doing so, so that with no strain nor conflict, he can attend communion and believe in medicine', keep, until he is found out, a 'Church' wife and several 'native marriage' wives, tie up preciously in the same corner of a handkerchief his rosary and the shaped bit of iron for 'juju' made for him by an Awka blacksmith, plant side by side in the garden round his new cement and pan-roofed house the hibiscus of civilization' and the *ogirisi* tree of 'pagan' family rites. (p. 349).

This situation described nearly five decades ago had not changed much, except in so far as more and more of the old culture is being revived and incorporated into the bit of already imbibed

Christian and western culture. Thus while talking of the Igbo having embraced Christianity and westernization with enthusiasm; one must not mistake this as meaning that they did so at the expense of their own identity by deserting their ancestral culture in all its forms.

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