

Religious Movements in Igbo Land: the Place of the Modern Woman

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the changes that have taken place in the religious sphere among the Igbo people South East Nigeria from the pre colonial to the modern day Nigeria and how this has affected the Igbo woman's socioeconomic life and the impact of all these on the moral and spiritual life of the people. The area of study is the five Igbo speaking states of South East Nigeria. Stratified random sampling technique is used to sample four women, (two young -one educated and one not so educated- and two elderly- also one educated and one not so educated), two men (one elderly and one young), two clergy men and two traditional religious practitioners (twenty seven in all) from the three representative states of Anambra, Ebonyi and Imo from the research area. The data are gathered using electronically recorded structured oral personal interviews. The analysis is done using descriptive and inferential methods of analysis. In our findings, there have been three major religious movements in Igbo land over time: Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR), Orthodox Christian Religion (OCR) and Penticostal Christian Movement (PCM). Igbo Traditional Religion was the religion of the Igbo people prior to the coming of the Europeans. In that dispensation, women did not feature in any prominent way in formal worship. Socially, the men took all the decisions on behalf of the women either as their fathers or husbands. With the coming of the White man, the Orthodox Christian Religion was introduced to the Igbo society. The lot of the Igbo woman improved greatly with the introduction of Christianity and the accompanying western education. The early 1970s saw the introduction of a new wave of Christian worship known as Christian Penticostalism. It brought a great degree of liberation to the Igbo woman. Many restrictions and inhibitions against women that were prevalent in ITR and OCR were removed to a large extent. Women could participate fully to any capacity in formal worship, church administration and hierarchy. Socially, women attained a level of freedom that allowed them to take decisions of their own. Improvement in civil law also empowered women to own property, file for divorce or seek redress in court of law if they adjudge they have need to do so. The impact of the Christian religion on the life of the Igbo woman is improvement in the overall lot of women in terms of financial empowerment and social upliftment but the overall effect of these on the society is general moral decay and erosion of the Igbo cultural values and tradition of humane living and obedience to elders.

Keywords: religious sphere, Igbo people, Christian Penticostalism.

INTRODUCTION:

The Igbo occupy five states east of the Niger as well as parts of Delta and Rivers States of Nigeria. Apart from the unifying factor of language, they also share a lot of cultural and religious identity. Traditionally, the Igbo practiced ancestral worship. Nearly all aspects of the life of the people were influenced by their religion. According to Isichei [1], "the Igbo were nothing if not religious, and all accounts of their life reflect the fact". Also Schon [2] in Isichei [1] states; The Igbos are in their way a religious people. The word 'Tshuku'- God- is continually heard. Tshuku is supposed to do everything...- Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respects, correct, and their manner of expressing them striking. 'God made everything: He made both White and Black', is continually on their lips. Some of their

parables are descriptive of the perfections of God. (p.24)

That is why the Chief Priest in many Igbo traditional communities exercised power and influence that many traditional rulers did not enjoy. A decision which affected the whole town, such as a decision to make war, would normally be put to the people (that is to an assembly of free adult males). Crucial decisions of the community as a people were usually taken at the confirmation of the Chief Priest as the representative of the gods after the men had deliberated on the issues. The Chief Priests in most of these communities were men. As such, the women had no contributions to the decision making process and were normally expected to live by the dictates of any such decisions by the men. It was largely a man's world.

As reiterated in Isichei [1], the interaction of the Igbo with different cultures especially of the Western world, first with the French and Portuguese traders and later the missionaries who came with their cultures and religions brought about a change in the religious as well as other aspects of the life of the people. The women and other less advantaged groups in the society such as the *ohu* (slaves), *osu* (outcasts) and others whose life circumstances predisposed them to some harsh reactions and verdicts from the society were the most attracted to the new religion for obvious reasons: they had a chance to acceptance in the OCR and respite from the harsh treatment offered by ITR. Looking at the position of the Igbo woman in the present dispensation compared with her lot in the ITR, she has come a long way. Also, the current rift between the acceptable moral standards of the ITR and the observable conduct among the Igbo people in modern day Igbo society leaves a lot to be desired. This work therefore interrogates the role that the various religious movements that had been introduced to the Igbo society over time played in the changing of the social and economic life of the Igbo woman and the society at large.

Objective:

It is the objective of this paper to look into the religious life of the Igbo from pre-colonial to colonial and to the present day to find out the different major religious movements that have occurred in the land and the changes that these have brought into the life of the Igbo woman socially and economically and on the social life of the Igbo society as a whole.

METHODOLOGY:

The research area for this paper is the core Igbo speaking communities in five states in South East Nigeria namely; Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi. Stratified random sampling is used to sample four women, (two young -one educated and one not so educated- and two elderly- also one educated and one not so educated), two men (one elderly and one young), two clergy men and two traditional religious practitioners from each of the three representative states of Anambra, Ebonyi and Imo from the research area. Structured oral personal interview is used to elicit information from the respondents while the interview is recorded electronically. Methods of analysis are the descriptive and inferential methods.

Religion and Human Society:

Many people view religion from different perspectives depending on their motive. For the purpose of this work, we define religion in line with that of American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language [3] as “the belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers, regarded as creating and governing the universe”. Religion could also be seen as the method by which a group of people approach their

god. Igbo Traditional Religion as many other African religions is a way the people traditionally approach their god. Religion permeates every sphere of the existence of the Igbo man. According to Awolalu [4], when we speak of African Traditional Religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans. The religious life of any people cannot be successfully removed from their everyday life. So it has been with the Igbo society. But with the coming of the Europeans, formal education and the White man’s religion and culture into Igbo land, the overall life of the Igbo has never been the same. These brought about changes in all other aspects of their lives. This work looks at these changes as it touches the Igbo woman socially and economically. Also the effect of all these changes on the Igbo society as a whole is given a consideration.

Religious Movements in Igbo land:

As mentioned earlier, there are three major religious movements so far in Igbo land namely; Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR), Orthodox Christian Religion (OCR) and Penticostal Christian Movement (PCM). This section discusses these movements in terms of origin, their major peculiar tenets and the level of influence on the culture of the people.

Igbo Traditional Religion:

This is the indigenous religion of the Igbo people. It is difficult to give a date to its origin as it is assumed to be as old as the Igbo. In Onwuejiogwu [5], the ITR is called *Odinani* and to the ITR practitioner, the cosmos is an endless space of visible and invisible beings. It is divided into four complex constituents; *Okike* (Creation) *Alusi* (Supernatural Forces or Deities) *Mmuo* (Spirit) and *Uwa* (World).

Awolalu [4] opines that traditional religion is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present. *Odinani* hinges on the sanctity of *Ani*, the earth deity. According to Onwuejiogwu [5], Igbo philosophy is sacred, spiritual, and socioenvironmental. The Igbo attitude toward *Chineke* is unlike that of Euro-Christianity: *Chineke* has no form that humans can conceive nor perceive. Those who follow the teachings of Christian churches and Muslim mosques soon find out that the fundamentals of *Odinani* are unwavering in every Igbo community. ITR is anchored on the visible that is invariably controlled by the invisible *Ani* Deity.

Odinani is about doing the right things. The Igbo believe in the personal god, *chi* who is the providence that oversees the affairs of every individual

to ensure the attainment of the individual's destiny. If the individual is at peace with his chi, he is on his way to achieving his destiny. On the other hand, if he fails in doing the right thing thereby encurring the wrath of his chi, his destruction will be inevitable. At death, the man who was at peace with his chi becomes a good spirit joining the body of his ancestors or else he becomes a bad spirit manifesting in forms of evil spirit, (ajo mmuo), the trickster spirit (agwu) and the like. If the person is a woman, it returns as ogbanje the spirit that torments the parents, the entire family or the society at large or it manifests as amuosu, the blood sucking vampire.

In ITR, there are two types of worship; formal/public worship and the private worship. Formal/public worship may be regular or occasional. The regular worship is the type that comes periodically such as the weekly, monthly or annual worships which are designated to be carried out at appointed times. It could take place at different levels in the society like the family, kindred, village or community groups. These may be ordinary regular worships marking the beginning or end of the week, month or year as the case may be or to commemorate a past historic event in the community. Occasional worship comes up when there is an unusual occurrence such as famine, outbreak of natural disaster or disease, communal offense against the gods or as a demand from any of the deities. These are usually carried out to either placate or appease the gods or to solicit their help and intervention.

The priest of the deity that is being worshipped usually officiates in the formal worship of the god. In most cases, the priests are men but in exceptional cases we find a priestess in charge of a deity. Every other man in the congregation performs roles as assigned to him by the priest or priestess. The younger men or male children may be assigned to fetch water, firewood or other worship items while the women are assigned to cook the sacrificial meal. In some cases however, the women are not even allowed to neither partake in the worship nor cook the meal. In such situations the males do the officiating and the cooking as well. The women who attend worships which they are permitted to attend usually keep a respectable distance from the priest and the men.

However, in many Igbo communities, there were women who served as priestesses and custodians of sanctuaries for the deities especially for the earth and/or fertility goddess. They functioned in the full capacity of the priest offering sacrifices prescribed by the 'dibia afia' (diviners) and served as 'bridge' between the people and the gods. They communed with the gods and relate the mind of the gods to people and vice versa. In such cases they wielded enormous power

and enjoyed the respect from both males and females in the community.

The ITR demands a lot of observances for the woman especially in relation to her monthly period and childbirth in addition to other regulations about different conditions in the life of the woman such as widowhood. A woman in her monthly period '*no na nso*'- she is sacred. She should be in seclusion and avoid touching anything or anybody throughout the period. When she puts to bed, she is confined indoors for seven Igbo weeks (28 days) during the traditional *omugwo* period for proper care of both the mother and her new born child.

In most Igbo communities, widowhood used to be a condition of pain and humiliation for the woman mainly because of the regulations, observances and sometimes physical torture she is subjected to. Usually in some communities such as found in areas that fall under present day Anambra State, it was an abomination for the widow to see the corpse of her husband. Even if she happened to be there alone with him and witness his death, she must under no circumstance admit that she saw it. She must run from the house and call the attention of a close relative who would then announce the death of her husband. If she fails in this, throughout her mourning period and even after, none of her husband's relatives would enter her house talk less of assisting her to perform so many tasks in the society which only men were allowed to carry out. These may include tasks that no woman could cope without such as cutting down of palm fruits from the tree (palm produce was a major source of income), chopping of firewood and so on.

Not only that, she stands the risk of facing accusation of killing her own husband. In that case, to prove her innocence, she would be made to drink the water with which they washed her husband's corpse, force her to cry for hours on end by the '*uma ada*' (the daughters of the family) while she is rough handled as all the hairs on her body and head would be clean shaved. Moreover, for the one year mourning period, she would not be allowed even a moment out of the sight of her husband's relatives even when answering the call of nature. These and so many other practices made life a torture for the widow in ITR.

Socially, the woman is meant to be seen and not heard in the ITR. She never raises her voice for any reason. It is the worst type of woman that talks back at or answers back at her husband harshly. Vulgarity is a taboo for the Igbo woman. She cotes her language with euphemisms and discussions on issues bordering on masquerades and matters considered exclusively in the man's world are taboo to her. She respects and obeys her husband in all things and at all times without

questioning. It is her duty to cook and serve the whole family. All the menial and odd jobs are the duties of the woman and her female children. In summary, the woman exists to serve the purpose of the man.

Economically, the Igbo woman had no right to ownership of landed property. This is because she did not inherit property from her parents and as a married woman; every property acquired by her and her husband belonged to him and his male children. At his death, if he happened not to have any male children, his brothers or some other close male relative inherited his property. Nonetheless, women engaged in a number of economic activities such as farming, fishing, trading, craft making, processing of farm produce such as palm oil, cassava and the likes. According to Basden [6]: Practically, the whole of the trade in the Igbo country is in the hands of the women, and they are extremely capable. The more expert a woman proves herself to be, the more she is appreciated by her husband. Ability in this direction is always a desideratum in a man's choice of wife. (pg 90)

Also, the tradition demands that the children receive training in the home in accordance with their gender. According to Udechukwu [7], 'Mothers trained their daughters on some crafts and trade to equip them very well for future in their husbands' houses and this made them to be respected.'

However, the scene began to change sometime at the end of the 1890s [1] when a new religious movement was introduced to the Igbo society through the missionaries who came with their religion and education on one hand and commerce on the other. Thus they introduced the Orthodox Christian religion which later became a movement.

Orthodox Christian Movement:

This was introduced to Igbo land with the coming of the Europeans. Two major denominations, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches were the pioneers followed by others such as the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches. These belong to the group known as the orthodox churches in church history. Orthodox Christianity means different things to different people. The term is used in this paper to refer to the denominations that did the pioneering work of evangelization of the Igbo people mainly the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and the Methodist churches. These denominations basically share a lot in their core beliefs. Basically they all believe in Christ and call themselves Christians.

The word Christian comes from the word Christ which means 'anointed one' in Greek. According to Christian Apologetics Research and Ministry, one who believes in Christ is a Christian. The word was first

used in the Bible in Acts chapter 11 verse 26 'the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch'. Christians have core tenets of their belief which are; there is only one God in all existence, God is a Trinity, Jesus Christ is God in flesh, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, Jesus died on the cross, and Jesus rose from the dead in a glorified, physical body. The different denominations have degrees of peculiarities in their beliefs but these mentioned tenets are core to the group that is classified in church history as orthodox churches.

The word "orthodox" essentially means conventional so, the Orthodox Christians hold to conventional Christian beliefs as mentioned above. However, in some literature the Roman Catholic Church is not counted among the orthodox churches but in this work it is conveniently classified as one.

Christianity in Igbo Land:

The entrance of Christianity in Igbo Land brought about a lot of changes in the religious life of the people and invariably on all the other aspects of their lives. We will look at the changes that occurred in the social and economic spheres.

Socially, the lives of the people were affected in many ways; they then had the option of remaining as ITR worshippers or becoming Christians. Becoming Christians entailed a change in life style in the areas of going to church on Sundays dressed differently; not in the traditional mode of dressing but in the white man's attire. Some had to also attend school on school days, abstaining from ITR worships, ceremonies, festivals and community rituals and observances. It meant that rituals which involved spending large sums of money and materials would be avoided. Also some rituals involving human sacrifice which some of them would have been victims of were averted. The church therefore became especially attractive to some groups in the society like the slaves and the outcasts.

Most importantly, it meant that women who turned to Christianity also changed their life style in line with their new religion. They no longer had to be in seclusion during their monthly period, went to church for thanksgiving after the usual one month of omugwo instead of the ritual on the market day. The subjugation of maintaining their distance from the men and the actual ceremony during worship was not obtainable in Christian worship as they sat alongside the men and participated in the activities during worship. They also had opportunity to attend school like the men if they wanted to. This gave them a level of boldness and confidence that the church attracted more females than males at that early stage. Many of them who were ostracized for one offence or the other found solace in

the church. Women who gave birth to twins ran to the church to save the lives of their babies.

Economically, there were also some benefits that attracted the people. In the maiden synod speech of Ajay Crowder in 1866 he said "When we arrived Onitsha in July 1857, we met the people in a state bordering on poverty and starvation. The introduction of cassava sticks by the zealous church teachers was a temporal blessing to the people" (Uwe [8]). Cassava planting then became a preoccupation of the people especially women as it was not regarded as prestigious as yam cultivation which the men prided themselves in. It boosted the natural enterprising nature of the Igbo woman who is known to be hardworking and very resourceful. According to Aliyu [9] in Ettoe [10] "a woman who was without a craft or trade, or who was totally dependent on her husband, was not only rare, but was regarded with contempt" in the traditional Igbo society.

Formal western education was also introduced by the missionaries and many of the new converts embraced it especially the men. These were the people who were given jobs by the white man as interpreters, teachers and clerks. They received monthly wages which was novel to the Igbo man at that time. They thus became rich and influential among their mates. Some of the women also embraced western education and were employed mainly as teachers initially and later into other positions in government offices and in the health sector as nurses. This earned them prestige and respect among their fellow women and even among the men. Thus the introduction of Christianity in Igbo land brought with it a level of liberation to the Igbo woman both socially and economically.

Pentecostalism:

The early 1970s ushered in a new movement in Christian worship known as Pentecostalism. The term Pentecostal, comes from the New Testament experiences of the early Christian believers on the Day of Pentecost. On this day, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples and tongues of fire rested on their heads. Acts 2:1-4 describes the event. Pentecostals include Protestant Christians who believe that the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are alive, available, and experienced by modern-day Christians. Pentecostal Christians may also be described as "Charismatics." Pentecostals believe in the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues. The power to exercise the gifts of the spirit, they claim, comes initially when a believer is baptized in the Holy Spirit, a distinct experience from conversion and water baptism. Pentecostal worship is characterized by emotional, lively expressions of worship with great spontaneity.

The Pentecostal churches brought an even greater level of radicalism to the Igbo woman. Many of the practices in the orthodox churches were in line with the demands of the ITR especially in the area of modesty in speech, appearance and human relationships especially within the church and family. Though the orthodox churches allowed participation of women during worship to an extent, they did not permit ordination of women into priesthood though some of them lately changed their stance in this respect. Women could participate in bible reading, leading in prayer sessions or even hold positions in church administration. However in pentecostal churches, women could be ordained as pastors and priests. A few of them even have female bishops. All these have given the woman a level of liberty which paved the way for her attain onto self assertion and actualization of her aspirations and dreams in all areas of human endeavour.

The social and economic life of the Igbo woman has improved greatly under the dispensation of the Pentecostal Movement. The inhibitions that the era of ITR and OCR placed on the woman were removed in the PCM so much so that the Igbo woman could operate in all spheres and at all levels in the circular society and in the church. In governance, the Igbo woman now holds administrative as well as political posts. There are instances of women who have functioned in the capacities of gubernatorial candidates, Deputy Governors and Acting State Governors.

Effects of Religious Movements on Igbo Society:

The religious movements in Igbo land have brought development in all areas of human endeavor especially as it concerns the Igbo woman.

According to Attoe [10], during the colonial period, education was functional. The curricula emphasized religious instruction and clerical skills for boys and domestic science for girls. Technological and scientific based education was not encouraged. The curricula for girls enabled them to become good housewives, and possibly also income earners. The woman thus received additional skills that enabled her broaden her chances of improved personal income and invariably her influence and relevance in the family and society at large.

A number of women who had opportunity of acquiring formal education also attained enviable positions in governance and civil service becoming school teachers, principals, head mistresses, nurses and even medical doctors and pharmacists. In governance today, women have functioned as gubernatorial candidates, deputy governors, acting governors, senators, state house of assembly members as well as federal House of Representatives members. The likes of Mrs Chinyere Ekwunife of Anambra State was once a

gubernatorial candidate, Dame Virginia Etiaba also of Anambra state was a Deputy Governor and at a point was also Acting Governor during the first tenure of Governor Peter Obi in Anambra State. Professor Dora Akunyili also from Anambra State rose to be the Director, National Drug and Food Agency of Nigeria, NAFDAC for many years and later was a Senator representing Anambra Central Senatorial zone at the National House of Senate and finally she was appointed the Director National Orientation Agency of Nigeria. Many women have become achievers in their different chosen academic careers so that today there are innumerable Doctors of Philosophy and Professors in higher institutions both in Nigeria and internationally.

The Igbo society in general received tremendous change occasioned by the advent of the different religious movements. Education brought a level of enlightenment that banished many superstitions and oppressive practices among the people. According to Onwu [11], Christianity made tremendous achievements. They abolished slave trade and slavery, human sacrifices and twin killing, introduced education, built hospitals and charity homes. They destroyed some level of superstition, increased human knowledge that brought about improved human welfare. (Pg 1)

However, this has brought a number of societal problems in human relationships especially in the marriage institution and general moral values of the Igbo society.

In spite of all the benefits of these foreign religious movements in the lives of Igbo people especially the women, it also brought along a number of societal ills that have bedeviled the society and is threatening its very existence; the liberty on the part of the woman has given her an illusion of freedom above the norms of the society. Many a time when an Igbo woman is well educated, makes a lot of money in business or becomes the major bread winner of the family, she begins to overstep her bounds. Many of such women no longer accord their husbands and the marriage institution due reverence and respect.

The ITR hardly permits divorce and all the religious movements preach against divorce but today's women see it as a mark of civilization to abandon their marriages as long as they are no longer comfortable with their marriage situation. They therefore many a time take to divorce as a solution to the challenges of married life contrary to the Igbo tradition obtainable in the ITR which prescribes that all available avenues be explored to prevent divorce in marriage and in most cases only permit divorce when there is a threat to life.

Immodest and improper dressing has become rampant among Igbo women contrary to the dictates of

the ITR or even OCM that required that women dress modestly covering their bodies in a way that sensitive parts are well covered and the head covered during worship or formal gatherings like meetings. The traditional Igbo woman's attire of tying two wrappers with blouse and big head tie are no longer popular. Time was when the Igbo society frowned at females putting on trousers and children booed anyone who dared to do so. This has so changed that even grandmothers put on body hugs, leggings and very tight trousers that fit like gloves without birthing an eye lid. Many churches especially pentecostal ones do not border about women attending church with their hair uncovered. It is no longer possible to identify an Igbo woman by her attire. This situation exists in spite of the fact that all the religious movements including ITR preach against immodest dressing. The women simply dress as they deem convenient.

Since the advent of these new religious movements and western education, the Igbo woman no longer has the interest, time or pride in training especially her daughters in the core moral and cultural values of her people. Her preoccupation in business and career pursuits have so occupied her time to the extent that negligence of family responsibilities of child care and training are the order of the day and families now produce children that lack virtues for which the Igbo pride themselves.

CONCLUSION:

The different religious movements that the Igbo society has experience so far has given rise to improved life style and standard of living as a result of increase in social and economic aspects of life. However, the overall effect of the new dispensation on the society is general moral decay and the erosion of the Igbo cultural values and tradition of humane living occasioned by indiscrete rejection of all that is Igbo yet not embracing the totality of the virtues of the different Christian Movements that the people have experienced. On the average, the religion that is practiced now is neither totally ITR nor completely Christian in line with the dictates of any of the Movements but that of convenience. We therefore conclude that the Igbo woman's life has seen tremendous improvement both socially and economically but the society is not better off as a result of it both morally and spiritually.

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