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**Christianity and Antagonistic Challenges in Igbo Land of
Nigeria: A Reflection**

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Abstract

This paper assessed the challenges of antagonism among Igbo Christians. The problem is not planting Christianity in Igboland, but the method of which depended basically on denominationalism characterized by envy, hatred, jealousy, wickedness and covetousness by which the missionaries carried out their evangelism. This in turn had adverse effect on the moral and spiritual growth of the church in the midst of the people they described as the mundane (Ekechi, 1971). The antagonism was often within and without the denominations. The church mission society (CMS) along side the Royal Niger Company was working hand in hand against Roman Catholic interests whose aim is to win the confidence of the people by establishing agricultural

settlements, hospitals and vocational schools. At times the rivalry was among the personalities in the same denomination (Nmah, 2008).

Introduction

The antagonism is often within and without the denominations. The Berlin Conference of 1885 determined for the European powers the area of the influence which conditioned also the theme of the missionaries in Igboland. This hostility or rivalry is seen in the areas of economic, political, mixed marriages, socio-cultural, level of civilization among others.

In the Acts of the Apostle the tensions lie beneath the surface but Paul's letter to the Galatians bring them into the open. The antagonism was between circumcision party, and uncircumcision party. Paul was angry with those who were still trying to make Gentile Christians believe that they needed to be circumcised-furiously angry.

The objective of the author is to create the awareness of this ugly situation in Igboland. This paper intends to identify some of the factors involved in the antagonism in Igbo Christianity. The strength of this paper is that it generates information that can enlarge the contemporary Christians in Igboland on the causes and remedies of antagonism among the Christians in Igboland and beyond.

Conceptual Framework

In this subheading, I shall be dealing with the definition of certain words used in this research work.

To begin with, antagonism is defined as an opposition or resistance, hostility (Greek antagonisma, rivalry) (Webster, 1997). For the purposes of this research work, antagonism that denotes bitter opposition, hostility or rivalry should be appropriate for this article.

Christianity as a noun connotes Christian faith, religion, being a Christian character or the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ (Summers, 2000 and Lea, 2010). Christianity refers also to the history of Christianity that is a history of salvation (Achunike, 1996). It is a way people or ethnic group exhibits or practices its Christian faith.

Denomination can be defined as the religious or sect that rejects the social environment, norms or virtues in which it operates or exists (Quarcoopome, 1985). It is a religious conflict society or group which has arisen in

opposition to an institutionalized church (Agunwa, 2008). Denomination can also be seen as exclusive religious group or sect politically motivated because of social economic and emotional reasons. It is a kind of protest against established churches. Denominations refer to a congregation of Christians in a region who have united themselves to work and worship together. They have a pattern of organizational work that they are to do, and funds they are to do this work. In the Bible, the Christians were not just members of the universal body of all saved people, but they associated themselves into local churches or denominations. It is a group of congregation that are joined together under some governing body that effectively serves to distinguish and divide them from other congregations. Martin (1993) defines denominationalism as an act of denomination; name designation especially a general name for a class of things, a religious body comprising a number of congregations.

The Igbo: A Sketching Ethnography

The Igbo culture group occupies the south-eastern form of modern Nigeria (Nwaezeigwe, 2007). Their land is located roughly between latitude 5 and 7 degrees north of the Equator, and longitude 6 and 8 degrees east of the Greenwich. Igboland is bound by a host of other culture groups with significant cultural and linguistic interfaces. These groups include the Edo-speaking and related groups, such as the Bini to the west, Esan to the north west as well as the Urhobo and Isoko to the south west. Other groups include the Igala, Idoma, Igede and Tiv lying to the north, the Ekoi speaking groups of old Ogoja province to the east, the Ibibio speaking groups to the south east and the Ogoni, and Ijaw speaking groups to the south.

The Igboland area falls also within five main vegetation belts namely: mangrove forest, fresh water, swamp forest, rain forest, derived savanna, and guinea savanna (Nmah, 2007). The Igbo are by far one of the most travelled enterprising groups in black Africa. They are notably the most widely dispersed and travelled single culture group in the present day Nigeria. The Igbo have characteristically been compared to the Jews and Irish, as well as such peoples as the Kivu and Kikuyu of Kenya, the Chagga of Tanzania, the Ewe of Ghana and Togo, and the Bamileke of Cameroon (Nwaezeigwe, 2007).

As the dominant culture group in the east, they inhabit the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Unlike the Yoruba and Edo of Nigeria or the Ashanti of Ghana, the Igbo are the only ethnic group of their size and the

status in the West African sub-region that have no centralized state. Each village or clan has considerable local autonomy based on patrilineal descent-group arranged in various ways and segmented internally on association groups like age-grades, secret societies and title associations such as Nze, Ozo, Ofo and Ikenga.

Some areas, however, have developed a relatively centralized monarchy such as Onitsha, Niger Igbo, Oguta among others. Nwabara (1977) and Nwafor (1973) argue that the Igbo are a compendium of paradoxes, but their greater asset is a copious supply of versatile common sense and the unique capacity for improvisation. Today, the word, "Igbo" may be used in three senses namely to refer to Igbo territory, to the domestic speakers of the language, and to the language spoken by them (Uchendu, 1965).

Christianity and the Causes of Antagonism Problem in Igboland

In this subheading, I shall be considering the causes of the Christian antagonism in Igboland. Among these causes may be noted, first, those which are economic. The riot of Ephesus, when the teachings of a foreigner threatened the trade of the silversmiths, is an incident to which parallels may be found in every tribe, country and age. Demetrius averred, "Sirs, you know that from this business we have our wealth" (Acts 19:23-29), struck a note that can stir men to fury. This may be roused by the fear of economic competition. It illuminates the complex working of human motive and suggests how economic interests may influence and colour people's spiritual friendships and aversions.

In Igboland and especially in Anambra, Imo and Enugu states, the denominations vie to win the influence of those that are rich at the detriment of poor and marginalized. These rich men and women became emergency knights and ladies and are more often than not brought to bear their wealth on the churches through building gigantic Cathedrals and pro-cathedrals, halls among others notwithstanding the sources of their wealth. At times many bishops and priests become unsolicited chaplains, counsellors and political advisers to the president, governors, parliamentarians, permanent secretaries and the like, not to feed them spiritually, but for their egocentric material gains. This in turn encourages more corruption among some of the parishioners who will like to get wealth by all means in order to be relevant to the system.

Denominational antagonism, as people find it existing among the so called Christians today, may, in the second place be due to political cause (Oldham, 1924). The tension between Catholics and Anglicans and Protestants in Anambra, Imo and Enugu states is largely created by the difficulties inherent in alien ecclesiastical rule. On one side the exercise of power and the sense of belonging to a privileged caste or social stratification is apt to breed an attitude of superiority or inferiority complex, arrogance and disdain which provokes resentment.

The desire for political influence or spiritual independence is however, quite distinct from feeling connected with the physical and mental differences of the parishioners, though these may colour and intensify the denominational feeling when it has been aroused. Further illustration of the part played by political causes in determining denominational likes and dislikes is furnished by the changes which have passed over the feelings of a particular denomination towards other churches in recent years. Their emotional attitude towards the different denominations has varied from time to time according to the political action or aims of each were judged to be friendly or the reverse.

In the third place, denominational antagonism may arise from spiritual differences in denominational temperament and character, doctrine and dogma. Some denominations like or dislike a certain type of denomination(s), and whether the cause be an innate difference in disposition or the moulding influence of social tradition, they find it actual experience a much larger number of the type they like in their denomination, and of the type they dislike in a different denomination.

Fourthly, difficulties may arise from differences in civilization. Civilization is something quite distinct from denomination, but since the two often coincide, they are apt to be confused. Differences in civilization are not necessarily repellent. They may attract and stimulate. The periods of greatest progress have often followed on the contact of two different civilizations and their mutually stimulating effect. Foreign customs frequently fascinate and are eagerly imitated. But while Igbo are often ready like any other African ethnic group to borrow foreign ideas and foreign fashions, they do this only of their own free choice. They are at other times resolute to resist any change in their inherited customs and familiar ways such as traditional burial rite in Awka versus the Catholic Church. The same believe is applicable to the other denominations.

The difference between peoples in denominations, traditions, customs, social conversions, and consequently in habits of thought and feeling, are so great that the surprising thing is not that they should give rise to difficulties in inter/intra-denominational intercourse and understanding, but rather that these difficulties should in so many instances be overcome (Oldham, 1924). There is, to being with, the barrier of denominational language, which seldom completely surmounted. For instance, the Catholics in Igboland will greet, “*Otito diri Jesu*” (Glory be to Jesu Christi). And the response will be, “*Na ndu ebighi-ebe=Life eternity*”. To the Anglicans, it is, “*Tonu Chineke-Praise God*”. The response will be, “*N’ihi na ruo mgbe ebigh-ebi ka ebere ya di-God’s mercies endure for ever*”. The Methodists will greet thus, “*Nwaturu Chineke kwesiri inara otuto-worthy is the lamb*”. The response is, “*Haleluya-Hallelujah*”. Every one is familiar with the difficulty of intimate intercourse with a person who is deaf, imperfect mastery-of a foreign language is a similar barrier to effective denominational intercourse. When this has been overcome there remain the differences in the background of experience. Men naturally feel most at home with those who, as the result of similar experiences from childhood onwards, instinctively respond to a given situation, in ways similar of their own. The sense of the unfamiliar prevents people from feeling at ease.

Fifthly, a very fruitful cause of denomination bitterness is found in the feelings of superiority complex in certain areas of influence by any denomination on the one hand, and of inferiority complex on the other hand, which are apt to be engendered by the existing political and economic predominance of these churches from the west. This attitude, while it is one of the most fruitful causes of irritation, is not, strictly speaking, racial. It is the expression in the relation between different races of a temper which has commonly characterized the possessors of social advantage. Aristocracies have almost always jealously guarded their privileges and prided themselves on the blue blood which they alone possessed.

Again, there is the question of intermarriages or mixed marriages. In the view of much repugnance to intermarriage is the fundamental cause of denominational prejudice. It is often difficult for an Anglican and other churches to marry a Catholic and vice versa. When such occurs the parties (couple) along side their parents are either excommunicated, suspended or they relocate to a more neutral church. According to Chiegboka(2009), “Where Catholic parents give out their daughter in to non-Catholic, they incur the penalty of suspension from the sacraments unless they show non-

cooperation by not taking dowry and accepting wine” (p.16). In practice, this denial of sacraments extends to denial of funeral Mass. Again,, parents and those taking the place of parents, who hand over their children to be baptized or brought up in a non-Catholic religion, are to be punished with a centure or other just penalty. This shows also the degree of intolerance among the Igbo Christians.

The Berlin Conference of 1885 determined for the European powers the area of influence which conditioned also the thinking of the missionaries in Igboland. Christian missionaries wished to save the souls through propagating the gospel of Christ while the traders sought to make gains by selling raw materials acquired through cheap labour and free native lands. The diplomat engaged in signing paper treaties with the local chiefs for the purpose of extending the imperial power of their country over the Igbo nation. In each case both the missionaries; the diplomats and the traders cooperated with each other in their efforts to attain their respective objectives.

Rival philosophers, like the missionaries, offered deliverance from this world, its fables and its superstitions, but they were elitist-the stoics too aloof from human emotions, the Platonists too high in the realm of pure ideas, the Epicureans too sure that if gods existed they cared nothing about the earth, and the Cynics too keen to destroy all conventions. And groups which did speak of divine saviours in emotional terms which non-intellectuals could understand spoke through the myths and rituals of the mystery religions, offering initiations into unions with Greek and Egyptian divinities, not offering an agreement with anything said by any philosopher (Edwards, 1998).

In the Acts of the Apostles these tensions lie beneath the surface but Paul’s letter to the Galatians brings them into the open. The antagonism was between circumcision party and uncircumcision party. Paul was angry with those who were still trying to make Gentile Christians believe that they needed to be circumcised—furiously angry. He was angry that he had still been obliged to argue with Peter who took meals with Gentile Christians in Antioch, but changed his mind and kept himself aloof when rebuked by envoys from James in Jerusalem. In the early Christian history, there were a variety of teachers each on his own theology. Such include Eusebius, Origen, Marcion, Montanus, Augustine, Tertullian, Justin, Arius, Athanasius, Martin Luther, John Calvin and among others.

Ayandele (1966) observes that the only man who discerned from the beginning the palpable danger of Christian missions to the social and political heritage of Southern Nigeria, and who spared no efforts to destroy the new-fangled faith was king Jaja of Opobo, the greatest political figure in the Bights of Benin and Biafra. The destruction of the Arochukwu oracle by the British expedition under Lieutenant Colonel Montanaro from December, 1901 until March, 1912 opened up the whole of Igboland to British rule that both the Roman Catholics and Church Missionary Society (CMS) joined the scramble for land and area of influence.

In such inter-denominational rivalry, all tactics were used. Schools, hospitals, skill acquisition, war of words and material gifts became veritable tools for making Igbo converts and evangelism. The Igbo converts with their inter-and-intra-village competitiveness exploited this rivalry to the fullest. For many people especially the outcasts, slaves, twin mothers and their babies, captives, etcetera, the church provided shelter.

The Roman Catholics generously distributed medicines thereby upsetting the CMS by this use of alluring temporal advantages to win converts. The Anglicans applied same in Enugu State. Notwithstanding that CMC was already well established thirty years before the Catholics came from Gabon, the latter are today as much established in Igboland as the Anglicans (Kalu, 1978). Not minding that Crowther gave Father Lutz land, it was the Anglican opposition that constituted the most formidable obstacle to Catholic expansion. As the Holy Ghost Fathers were French, their incursion into British sphere of influence implicated the missionary antagonism in the imperialist scramble.

Among the Protestants, the most aggressive mission body was the Primitive Methodists. From Ikot Ekpene, the Methodists moved to the interior of Igboland within two decades covered Ariam, Ndoro and Bende led by Christie and Rev. F. W. Dodds. Their expansion into Igboland was much influenced by the construction of the railroad at Ovim, Umuahia, Uzuakoli, Enugu and Aba.

The roots of denominational antagonism and at times violence go back to the history missionary era. Historical analysis of denominational conflict, its causes and preconditions, has been highly contentious in character. Nmah(2008) argues that there is more continuity between past and present, extending backward at least to the early eighteenth century upward. The emergence of independent churches in Igboland did not settle the differences

between Anglicans and Catholics or the other denominations, but rather aggravated the rivalry. It is similar to the experiences of the Christians and Muslims in northern Nigeria or the one between the Northern and Southern Sudan or the one between the Irish Protestants and the Catholics.

As much as religion is a common historical foundation for the rivalry, it has also been a source of animosity and many have sought to downplay the aspect of religion. This antagonism is usually seen also in Church owned institutions such as schools, hospitals, hostels, cottage industries, and in governance. Because this rivalry includes at times “Church versus State” dimension, many fans of these institutions use them as forums to vent deeply held feelings and perceptions. Through these perceptions, the thrill of victory and the sting of defeat are magnified.

Modern Strategies that Promote Denominational Antagonism among the Igbo Christians

The concept of using influential people notwithstanding their spiritual status such as governors, public officers, title holders, business moguls, academics, corrupt politicians coupled with the provision of schools and employment opportunities served very much effective tools for conversion (Nmah, 2008). The recent return of schools to missions by Anambra and Abia states is another means of resuscitating/reviving the antagonism. The selling of recorded cassettes of messages of miracles, prosperity, speaking in tongues and healing; olive oil, holy water, relics, stickers, clothes with biblical inscription and literature constitute in itself a conversion strategy.

There are also preaching that are backed up with personal testimonies that often make them very relevant to particular situations by others hearing similar experiences in Christianity in Igboland. Sheep stealing is not avoided. This could be done often by awarding knighthood, provision of employment opportunities, giving temporal materials as gifts, criticizing other rival churches as dead churches through oral theology, and so on.

The programmes in Pentecostal and mainline churches are given various names to attract membership as we hear today of cross over night service, anointing service, run for your life crusade, prayer retreat, miracles convention, Holy Ghost service, breakthrough service, miracle basket service, God of Abraham, Divine enthronement, restoration night and the likes. Prosperity gospel is the very popular and appealing message often heard today. The proponent of this theological concept may not be aware of

the suffering of God's people, being poor, and Peter saying, "Silver and gold have I none" (Acts 3:6; Rom. 8:18, 35-36; Jn 15:18-20, 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12; 2Cor. 6:10). Those who trust in Christ will prosper spiritually (Eph.1:3). They are able to be rich in Him (2Cor 8:9). But God never promised robust physical health and material, financial prosperity in this life for his children.

There is also bitterness among members of the same denomination on the basis of "born again" and the conservative. In Anglican Church, it is the Evangelical Fellowship in Anglican Communion (EFAC) versus the conservative members. In the Methodist, it is the Methodist Evangelical Movement (MEM) versus the traditionalists while in Catholic; it is between the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria versus the practicing Catholics.

Conclusion

At this juncture, the conclusion reached in this research work, is that Christianity and antagonistic challenges in Igboland of Nigeria: A reflection, are at bottom moral rather than denominationalism. If it were true, have important practical consequences. Whenever tendency on both sides to regard denominational antipathy as something inexplicable and sinister, a deeply important instinct, against which it is vain to struggle. Men feel themselves to be in the grip of mysterious fate. It is of no small consequence if it can be shown that this is not the case. An important first step has been taken towards the alleviation of denominational animosities when it is seen that they have their roots in moral causes, and it is recognized that what is required is to deal with the social misunderstandings, suspicious, hatred, jealousy and injustice out of which they arise.

As the major religious traditions acquired their canonical expression in pre-modern culture, they do not to any great extent deal with a thought-out response to the major factors or key values which characterized contemporary culture of human relations. Thus the first factor challenges the traditions to re-think attitudes to moral rules and values as taught by Jesus Christ, and to hierarchy. The second factor calls upon religious thinkers and leaders to be proactive in dialogue with the religionists, scientists and knowledge acquired thereby.

One response to these changed conditions of society has been to remove religion and religious beliefs altogether from public debate. This is again framed solely in terms of individual human rights and the values of equality and tolerance. In the absence of any foundation for these rights and values,

this framework might itself seem, however, arbitrary and imposed, in particular in global situation of the interaction of more developed with still developing cultures and economies. A purely procedural democracy and ethical framework might disallow real dialogue on substantive values or with persons. Religious fundamentalism, for its part, sees no possibility of such dialogue. The endeavour to promote understanding and co-operation between different denominations becomes part of the universal task of establishing peace on earth and goodwill among men within and beyond Igboland of Nigeria.

First, the Christians business is to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). He is dedicated to the service of a God who is overflowing alive and who has a definite moral purpose for the world. Consequently, in the light of that commanding, universal purpose of righteousness and love, natural or denominational differences which exist among men become insignificant. Moral values are supreme. "Whoever shall do the will of God," Jesus said, "The same is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt.12:46-50 cf. John 17: 20-23), thereby making the basis of the society which he founded independent of men's physical origin and natural affinities. God has no favourites. In every nation, as the early church quickly realized, a man who worships God and orders his life aright is accepted by him; and what God approves, man dares not reject (Acts 10:35,15). The partition wall which separated Jew and Gentile was broken down. On this issue St. Paul fought a lifelong battle and would accept no compromise, for in it, as he saw, the whole Christian faith was at stake.

Second, God's love for men gives to each human personality an inestimable worth. It is true that it is to the spiritual nature of man that Christianity assigns this transcendent value and that in anticipation of a speedy end of the world the early Christians looked on temporal conditions, including even the institution of slavery, as matters of comparative indifference.

Third, since God loves men and seeks their good, Christians are dedicated to the service of their fellow men. The love of Christ becomes a constraining motive. Life becomes a mission, a call to uncalculating service. This love, since it is divine, surmounts all barriers.

These principles of conduct by which the attitude of Christians must be governed – the supremacy of moral values, reverence for human personality and the dedication of life to the service of mankind – are, we may thankfully recognize, accepted today by many who do not profess and call themselves

Christians. Large numbers outside the Christian church share the conviction that in the more determined application of these conceptions to the life of the world lays the only hope of saving human society from complete collapse. But it makes an immense difference whether we look on these conceptions as expressing merely our own aspirations there is something in the universe which corresponds and desires, or whether we believe that there is something in the universe which corresponds with them and lends them support. Christian morality is a challenge to those tremendous cosmic forces by which, as science tells us, human life was brought into existence and given its form and shape.

Oldham (1924) citing Jacks opines that Christianity assures us that our ideals are not simply our ideals but the purpose of God. Before calling us to work for them it bids us find them in the heart of the universe. The Christian religion is the spirit which perceives itself to be not alone, but lovingly befriended and supported, extending its intuition to the heart of the world, to the core of reality, and finding there the fellowship, the loyalty, the powerful response, the love, of which the finest fellowships and loyalties of earth are the shadows and foretaste.

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