

THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIANITY WITH IKA CULTURE: A REFLECTION

Banwune Ejime D.

*Department of Christian Religious Studies,
College of Education, Agbor
Delta State, Nigeria*

Email: ejimebanwune@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines the interaction of Christianity with Ika culture: A reflection. The method used in this study are historical and oral interview. The paper discovered among other things that prior to the introduction of Christianity in Ika land that the Ika people were traditional practitioners that is; they practiced traditional religion like their counterparts in Africa where worship is directed to the Supreme Beings. It also discovered that the people have a rich cultural heritage. Some of these cultures are crude and inhuman while others lead to human development and can be sustained side by side with Christianity and are meaningful to human race. This paper while acknowledging the effort of the Christian missionaries for their laudable achievements in Ika land. It also recommends that Ika traditional come cultures should be preserved for human value.

Keywords: Christianity, Traditional religion and Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

This paper examines the effect of Christianity in Ika traditional culture as a vital means of reconciliation between Ika traditional culture and Christianity among the Ika people. The geographical entity known as Ika today is made up of two Local Government Areas viz; Ika South and Ika North East. Ika nation is located roughly between longitude 90° and 600 North and it occupies North East sensational district of Delta State overlapping West of lower Niger. Ika shares a common boundary in the North East with Igbanke and North West with Abudu both in Edo State. It is bounded in the South with Ndakwa and in the West with Aniocha South Local Government Ares of Delta State respectively.

As a result of its position in the rain forest, the people are predominantly agrarians cultivating cash crops and revising domestic animals. Such as goats, dogs, birds and so on. Admittedly, the introduction of Christianity in Ika land like any other African state has contributed to the opening and development of this region that were prior to the coming of Christianity traditional

practitioners with unrefined culture and full of superstitions of all kinds including human sacrifices.

Religious Setting

African Traditional Religion

Onyeodu, (2001:20) observed "originally, this was the primal, primordial, and native religious experience of the people of Ika before the coming of Christianity. It has no known founder. Rather, it was a collective heritage of the people from their ancestors. African traditional is polytheistic and culture bound. It is unwritten religion rich in rites and symbols. The adherents regard it as a part of their culture and way of life in which they are born into. Traditional religion permeated the day to day activity of the people from the cradle to the grave.

Worship of Supreme Being

In Ika traditional religion, God is given priority in all life endeavors. This accounts for why prayers are said to him first in the morning by the eldest man in the family on behalf of his household. Other prayers may be said occasionally. Hence Parinder (1972:34) observes "But individual prayers are widely practiced especially in time of exceptional necessity. God in the resort of the desperate when all else has failed. Then, despite his greatness and distance, he can be appealed to directly without special formulas or intervening priest or godlings". Continuing, he opines that the belief in prayers to names and myths about God shows clearly that all Africans do 'conceive of God" so do Ika people of Delta state.

Among Ika people, the Supreme Being is worshipped through lesser gods or intermediaries, that is to say that the traditional religion in Ika combines the idea of one Supreme Being or God with the belief in worship of many environmental deities. Unlike the causal observers, Ika traditional practitioners do not see it as a contradiction in the belief system. To the people, minor gods or deities are created by the Supreme Being and delegated or assigned them to take care of mundane activities of man while the supreme is the final superintendent and overseer. Thus in Ika worldview like any other African community prior to the coming of Christianity, the lesser gods could be seen as intermediaries between man and God. They act as messengers, agents, servants, deputies and monitors of the supreme being. Hence Onyeidu (2001) observes "a minor god is but the mouthpiece of the supreme being, a servant acting as intermediary between creator and creature.

All these gods are symbolized in carved wooden or metal images and shines through which they are venerated by the chief priests and diviners. In Ika land, each kingdom has a local deity by which the community is known, feared and respected. In Agbor it is called Nwobu, Mbiri Alagba, at Owa it is Odele, Ute Okpu Aja, Owerre Qiubor it is Edofi while Qtilokpo Nze and Umunede Akpai. These divinities are regarded not only as protectors of the village as a whole but also as a guardian of morality and oath. In the days of tribal warfare, they are carried like Arks of the Israelites to war. The people attribute their creation and earthly existence to the Supreme Being or God. In his attributes, the Supreme Being is regarded as the creator, sustainer, ruler and final judge. To demonstrate the unalloyed respect for the Supreme Being as the Almighty, no human being in Ika living or dead is described by any of his names or attributes.

Belief in Minor Gods or Divinities

Ika people belief in these minor gods or divinities which they regard as the intermediaries between than" and the supreme being because the supreme cannot be reached directly. Prominent among these minor gods found in Ika are "AU" or Ani (Earth goddess) the 'Olokwu' water goddess idigwu, fajioku (gods of agriculture), ofo which is symbol of justice, ikenga, man's gallany etc. Hence Welton in Onyeidu (2001) observes "A mind god is but the mouth piece of supreme being, a servant acting as intermediary between creator and creature ". All these gods are symbolized in carved wooden or metal images and shrines. While the Supreme Being in Ika like the God preached by he missionaries is far away and little is known of Him, the idols and deities are near at hand and must be propitiated and sacrificed to, if evil is not to come.

Occupations in Ika such as farming and hunting have their pation deities. For example, Ifejioku takes care of farming and crops: Ogun according to Mr. Nwaokoro is the patron god of iron and metal. Some of the farms I visited during my field trip have cutlasses which are a symbol of ifejoku placed at the entrance or path leading to the farm while idigun shire is usually at the main entrance leading to the house of the worshipper. These are so because it is believed among Ika people that there deities are watching over the farm and homes of the owners. Prior to the coming of Christina missionaries, the traditionalists of Ika pay more attention to these minor gods on whom they depended for their daily need and protection than the Supreme Being. They receive unallowed attention and daily prayers. They have shrines, temples, dedicated animals, priest and cult objects which the Supreme Being do not have.

The people believe that their life and security is at stake if these minor gods are neglected. They are not gods but regarded to be greater than man. Sacrifices are offered to them with such common items ranging from crops, and animals as well as human beings hence Onyeidu (2002:31) observes 'Human beings were immolated during the coronation and burial of kings and title men and when cleansing the land for grievous abomination and also in order to avert wars and reduce the scourge of an epidemic disease human beings were used as the last resort'.

The Ancestral Cults

The traditional practitioner in Ika land like elsewhere in Africa, believe in the existence of ancestors. To them there is no boundary between the dead and the living. The ancestors are believed to participate in all the activities or affairs of the community they pour libation and drop piece of food to the ancestors before eating or drinking. However, in spite of the organized traditional belief system, Christianity has made an important inroad with critical changes in the cultural values and life style of the people. Christianity therefore has become more than a belief system but has introduced new ways of life into the people. This tends to produce various cultural imbalances and make ups. However Ika people still retain their identity, characteristics or life pattern, value system child rearing habits and manage system despite the influence of Christianity.

The Advent of Christianity in Ika Land

Onyeidu (2003:1) cites (Matt. 28:19) Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always to the close of age". The above quotation was the great commission given by Jesus Christ to His disciples. It was in response to this commission that the disciples embarked on their missionary work as documented in Acts of the Apostles and letters of St Paul, The church like the parable of the mustard seed began with a handful of believers but today Christianity has become a universal faith. The coming of Christianity to Ika was in three phases. The first was the Anglican missionary society (CMS) which dates back to 1903, followed by Roman Catholic Missionary Church (RCM) in 1906 and that of the Pentecostal in 1970.

Source

In an interview with Mr. Akpu, the assets that it was Idumuje-Ugboko that provided the main base from where the gospel came to Ika land. This view

corroborates Onyeidu's opinion (2003:4) who opines that by 1903, Anglican mission activities have reached Igbodo with tremendous response. Where from the mission extend its activities to Ekwuoma in 1903 and Umunede in 1904.

Onyeidu (2003:18) observes that the Obi of Owa then like the Obi of Otolokpo, encouraged the settlement of Christian agents in the town from Owa Oyibu, the missionary work spread to Ute Okpu in 1919 with tremendous converts as noticed in Igbodá. However it must be bore in mind that the spread of Christianity in Ika Land could not be devoiced from colonial factor. In short it is the colonial masters feeling places to control that pared way for the coming or advert of Christianity in all parts of Africa like Ika land of that period. Hence Ijeoyi (1983) observes "in 1906, there was a serious uprising at Owa Alisime protesting against the presence of the white colonial masters.

The Roman Catholic Missionary activities like the church missionary society came to Ika Land from Ilah through Fr. Zappa. However in all the towns, the numbers of converts were low initially as Nzemeke (1968:17) observes,

The first converts in Asaba an environs were few in number and this is precisely what makes their tenacity in the face of what one calls a cultural prosecutions that naturally arouse from their compatriot all the more heroic For to become a Christian was equivalent to declaring oneself a social outcast..."

This he opines was responsible for the low number of converts at first. However, the catholic missionaries having consolidated their stand at Ilsh later, Nzemeke (1968:24) report that; "by 1989, contact had been made with Agbor, Umunede and Ubiaja in the present Edo State which lie on the outskirts of Issele Uku Diocese. Arimokwu in Nzemeke (1968:38) reports that by 1903, durin9 the reign of Obi Gbenoba 1, a group of catholic priests led by Fr. Zappa on their way from Ilah to Sapele made a brief stop at Agbor obi and informed the obi their intention to Christianize Agbor-Obi.

Consequently, this request was granted and a piece of land was mapped out for the new station new the Obi's palace which served as a worshipping centre and a base to reach out for the neighboring towns in the hinted land including Boji-Bojo urban.

Contact and Interaction between Christianity and Culture

Christianity in ka land is seen as agent of socio-cultural change. This is because religion and culture are inseparable: Prior to the coming of Christianity in Ika, the traditional religion formed the basis of moral, social and cultural behaviour and identification. However the coming of this new religion brought not only plurality of religions but also social and cultural changes. As a result of this, there was a cultural conflict or a clash between the western cultural vessels brought about by Christianity and Ika culture. In addition, Christianity changed the values, customs and institutions of the people. It also brought some modifications in the culture and traditional life of Ika people. For example, in the area of religion practices such as celebration of some traditional festivals, performance of some aspects of funeral rites, marriage system, death and burial ceremonies, oath taking, witch craft, Necromancy (ima ozu) sanctions, taboos, reincarnation and ancestral cults.

In this regard, Christianity taught the converts not to worship idols and to forbid charms, traditional rites and sacrifices. Both religions however received reciprocal shock but ka culture received it more hence Christian is seen as agent of change. Agha (2004:11) observes "like all known religions of mankind, Christianity is an important agent of social change. Its evolution from the beginning to the present has been reforming. Whenever it has been introduced and accepted in any given society, transformation follows the life of the people. The effect of Christianity on Ika culture made some of the cultural values disappear, others changed while some were reinforced.

Overview of Ika Traditional Culture

Ika people are endowed with valued cultural heritage. Some of which include

- Life after death and second burial
- Worship of supreme being
- Ancestral worship
- Necromancy
- Reincarnation
- Taboos, sanctions
- Oath faking
- Witchcraft,
- Human sacrifices
- Child marriage
- Polygamy
- Widowhood

Before the advent of Christianity and even at present, Ika people had strong belief that life continues after death of the physical body. For them, life continues' in the spirit world as it is in the present physical world of space and time. This explains the reasons why the dead were given full burial rites and were well equipped to enable them live successfully in the spirit world and to facilitate their peaceful return to the physical world where they were expected to be reborn among their relations. Behind this belief was the elaborate first and second burial in the past, firing of guns during the burial and giving of clothes as the last parting gift to the dead.

Second burial in Ika among the non-converts involves an elaborate merriment, dancing and visitation as well as presentation of gifts to the celebrants the second burial is often associated with the very senior elders. Significantly it is believed that the second burial ushers the dead into the ancestral cult and enables the hovering spirit to have a resting place. However, Christianity has made remarkable changes here Christen converts were indoctrinated to disbelieve this concept of second burial ceremonies which they referred to "dum body". Until date, Christians in Ika kept to their missionary instructions not to have anything with second burial.

Worship of Supreme Being

Traditionally, Ika as other Africans believe in the supreme being (God) which they call various names in most the kingdoms that make up Ika nation like Osonubua', "Chukwu" etc Ika believe in the supreme being to be the creator of all things including the divinities that serve under His majesty. Just as the Christians believe in God (The Father) Jesus Christ (The Son) and the Holy Spirit and the Angel. A careful examination of the traditional religious heritage of Ika shows that there are many elements in it that are basically Christian at least in general concept.

Some of these according to Ezeanya (1976:31) include "The idea of life death, reward for good behaviour and punishment for bad behaviour, the idea of priesthood and sacrifices, prayer as a means of showing our creatureliness in the face of an Almighty God and his powerful spirits the relationship between morality and religion acceptance of basic principles of morality".

Festivals: prior to the advent of Christianity in Ika land, traditional festivals are widely celebrated at various times of the year, these festivals vary from kingdom to kingdom for various reasons. Onyekpeze (2003:70) observes that "festivals are the only means with the exception of religious worship, whereby

the Ika people have sought from time to time to express their joy or happiness or sorrow openly. Festival marks the history and life of Ika people as many beliefs are associated with them".

Significantly, festivals illustrate historical events, such as harvesting of crops, the appeasement of various gods to worth off their wraths and supplication for protection against enemies or evils and epidemic disease and so on. Festival also serves as an occasion to thank god or deity for fruitful harvest and for saving them in time of trouble or epidemic. It offers Ika people the opportunity to exhibit their hospitality and rich cultural heritage in dancing arts crafts etc. Ayeni et al. (1975:14) identify some Ika festivals thus; Igweh festival, Iwaji, Ogbalegbe and Osoezi festivals. He further stated that at the peak of the festival celebration, age grades mainly youths dance and sing in their numbers derisive and derogatory songs against members who commit abominable acts such as stealing, sex scandals etc. They even mention the names of the people involved in the act. In this way the song serves a means of check and balances of moral individuals in the society.

One of the most important features of our contemporary society is the proliferation of churches in an increasing rate. All these churches be it orthodox or mission founded churches as well as the new religious movement variously described as Pentecostal or spiritual churches having emerged on the scene in the full force have reoriented their follower to by cut these traditional Ika festivals which they see as pagan practice and worship of idols. Thus the excitements that formerly accompanied this festival have faded away.

Necromancy

This is a common feature in Ika specifically among Agbor, Owa, Idumuesah, Ute-okpu and Abavo as the custodians of this culture, Onyekpeze (2002:22) observes:

"Necromancy takes place when the death of a person is suspected to have been caused by the witches or a wizard. Necromancy is a means through which the spiritualist discovers if any person in the family, lineage village is the cause of the death".

In all cases, this takes place when someone dies suddenly under mysterious circumstance.

According to my informant, Eboigbe during my tripe to Owa on a tact finding mission, he opines that this questioning of the corpse is a skill specially reserved for a particular group of the clan that practices it. The uninitiated member cannot explain it and it is referred to (Ima ozu).

According to my informant Mr. Eboigbe; He asserts that the corpse carriers or bearers are subjected to oath taking which is meant to avoid personal influence on the movement of the corpse. He said that a kind of undisclosed leaf used as a charm is placed on the heads of the corpse carriers in a coffin while the medicine man questions the corpse to ascertain the cause of the death. In this process whoever the corpse hits is said to be the killer of the dead person and a witch. Therefore the suspected person is subjected to oath taking or trial by ordeal to further prove himself innocent or otherwise.

However, Christianity has strongly challenged this act. The missionaries preached to the practitioners that death is an act and will of God and that no creature has the power to question the divine will. This is why this act is gradually phasing out and has completely been phased out by the Christian faith in some towns in Ika like Otolokpo and Umunede etc.

The Killing of Twins

In keeping t and customs of the people, the birth of twins was an abomination. Such children were exposed to die in the evil forest. Hence Martey (1998:38) asserts that "the history of African culture, like any other culture, has been a long tale of injustice and discrimination against fellow human beings". There was no convincing reason given to qualify such birth as an abomination. One weak reason given by the practionalists was that the early human beings came into the world single and that only animals could be delivered double. This shows that fellow human beings in the Ika primal society have not been treated equally.

This traditional claim was debunked by Christianity-adherence to natural laws implies to God's law and forbids the killing of human being. So the Christian missionaries wedged relentless war against this crude culture which they won and abolished it.

Human Sacrifice

Prior to the advent of Christianity human beings were used as sacrifices for various reasons and occasions. Such occasions as to atone for the sins of the community. Other occasions for human sacrifices include the burial of a title holder or king or a very elder person in the community. In any of these cases,

human being notably a slave descent" was buried alive with the deceased who according to tradition will serve as a servant to the dead in the spirit world. Again Christian Missionaries attacked the practice and stopped it.

Oath Taking

Oath taking in the primal society was an effective method of social control and means of maintaining discipline and norms of the society prior to advent of Christianity according to Nmoye Ira society control and means of maintaining discipline and norms of the society. Oath prior to the advent of Christianity in Ika according to Monye (2005) was administered to detect thieves, witches and other offences in Ika. It was also used to seal agreements pacify warring communities and maintain friendly relationship with one another. Objects used in the administering oath include images of gods or God or symbols of and ancestors with kola nuts. In this respect, Christianity preached against oath taking.

Witchcraft

This was another aspect of traditional belief and practices which was challenged by Christianity. To the Christians, it was a mere superstitious belief but to an Ika man, the act is real. The Christians instructed their converts not to believe it because it does not exist. Hence Ekechi (1977:6) observes "Elsewhere in Nigeria, attacks were directed to human sacrifices, twin murder, slave trade traditional Igho culture all these were being denounced in language too pointed and with persistency somewhat to uncomfortable". In line with Ekechi's observation in Igbo land, Onyeidu (2003:15) reports from Igbodo of Ika thus "the Christian were accused of upsetting native customs or interfering with communal rights.

Consequently they were charged to native courts". This situation in Igbodo in 1914 promoted the elders to adopt measures to bring the converts to their senses. Leading to the destruction and setting church buildings ablaze sacred places, shrines were desecrated, sacrificial objects such as eggs, fowls were either eaten, destroyed by the converts on the ground that they were paying respect to traditional religious practice. This was indeed an inconceivable abomination in the pre-Christian Ika society.

Polygamy in Ika

In the encounter between Christianity and Ika cultures, perhaps the most thorny issues have been generated by Ika form of marriage is includes practice of polygamy and conduct of marriage in stages. In Ika culture as elsewhere in

Africa, polygamy is the practice of one man having many wives legally married to him at the same time. This practice of marriage is not only tolerated but also often desirable system of marriage under many circumstances in Ika. This type of marriage is protected by law in Ika and through out Africa unlike America or Europe which sees it as a crime. To Ika people, polygamy is a tradition and represents commitment to life and to the propagation of the race.

It is a form of social security for women and children and safeguard against prostitution and concubinage and more acceptable alternative to divorce in case of barrenness. George (1991:234) observes polygamy is an insurance against the infertility of woman and preventive one for widowhood. He opines that marriage in Ika as elsewhere in African is most and that it is a religious obligation which Ika race owns as a duty to the ancestors and to the society to get married and procreate or get children.

The approach of the main line Christian churches to the problem of polygamy among Ika people as elsewhere in Nigeria has been very negative and callous by their approach Christian missionaries has locked the door of Christianity against many Ika people because of their marital status. Thus in condemning polygamy in Ika society the missionaries in this mistake for the institution served positive moral and economic functions. The question is what type of marriage did the modern scriptures allowed monogamy or polygamy? Karl Bert (1991) asserts "we can hardly point with certainty to a single text in which the polygamy is expressly forbidden.

The European missionaries in this regard were even crucial when the forbidden pattern of behaviour was not expressly prohibited in the Bible... Reacting to the missionaries' decision on prohibition on polygamy, Biyo (1991) asserts:

"There is not a single explicit text which condemns polygamy. This does not mean that the deepest sense of Jesus' teaching does not lead monogamy as the only form of marriage which pleases God. But this message probably not excludes different degrees in the understanding of marriage according to difficulties to different Christian communities in different times and cultures".

Indeed, plurality of wives in fitted more into the cultural and economic institutions of the people. Being primarily agricultural, many woman and children were needed in the various jobs in the farms. Later when Christian missionaries

brought cassava, cocoa, maize seedlings and plantations, polygamy was further encouraged.

From the forgoing therefore this paper suggests a new approach to the evangelization of Ika marriage which will consider the historical, cultural, social and economic context while seeking to elevate them to the status of Christian ideal. However, polygamy itself is gradually becoming unpopular among Ika people of all creeds as the whole social structures which supported the system are gradually undergoing rapid transformation. Therefore the ideas of an adult wishing to be converted to Christianity and sending the wife away is condemned as injustice.

Preserving the Good Elements in Ika Culture

It is obvious that Christianity is not in dispute with valuable aspect of Ika culture. Therefore, while the converts should try to skillfully reject: abandon some of the cruel cultural elements such as killing of twins, human sacrifices, slavery trial by ordeal etc; we should as well try to preserve those valuable and cherished cultural heritage. To achieve this, it is therefore necessary to introduce the teaching of African culture in general and Ika culture in particular in our educational institutions. Ecclesiastical' students should in their education and professional disciplines be taught to appreciate African cultural heritage as well as its preservation and further encouraged to use what people have in their culture in communicating the gospel message.

Hence Ezeawya (1976:18) recalls Pope Paul via address to the churches and people of Africa thus:

"while these values which have been handed down ought to be respected as a cultural legacy from the past, there is less a duty to give them new meaning and expression in the face of modern civilization, however, it is sometimes necessary to know how to discriminate, to asses critically and eliminate those deceptive ones which will bring about a lowering of the human ideals and to accept those values that are sound and beneficial in order to develop them alongside with their own genus".

Conclusion

Since religion and culture are inseparable, effort should be made to integrate the good aspect of Ika cultures with Christianity for a healthy growth. Christianity should try to refine those negative elements of Ika culture.

Recommendation

This paper is of the view that the customs, cultures and traditions of the people should not be condemned by the Christian churches. They should rather be respected and allowed to coexist with the new social order, so the traditional African Ika music and singing as in cooperated in the church worship should be upheld and encouraged.

Since culture has the basic ideological function of preserving the well being of the society and ensured by institutionalized cheeks and to reduce tension in any society, Ika cultures, customs and tradition should be molded to act as cheek and balance society devices to resolve the conflicts that characterize at each stage of history. Christian leaders should be given sound theological educations to enable them distinguish between good and bad cultural elements. Religion whether Islam, traditional or Christianity should be used not abused. Its fruits are peace, joy, brotherhood, neighborliness, life not hatred non fratricides.

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