

CHRISTIANITY: ITS INFLUENCE ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ORGANIZATION OF THE EKPEDO PEOPLE.

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Abstract

This work examines the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people; It discusses the advent and the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people. The historical, phenomenological and evaluative methods were used by the researchers to achieve the objective of the work. The historical method discusses the brief history of the Ekpedo people, the phenomenological and evaluative methods discuss the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people. These rely on the primary and secondary sources. The primary source of information has to do with personal observations and oral interview while the secondary source of information is the use of library relevant textbooks, journals, internet and unpublished materials. The work discovered that, the people of Ekpedo had their own ways of life which were highly valued and respected before the advent of Christianity. Evidence from this work helps to draw the conclusion that Christianity has influenced the socio-cultural organization of the people of Ekpedo positively and negatively.

Introduction

Before the advent of Christianity in Ekpedo, the people had their own ways of life which were valued and respected. But since the advent of Christianity and Western education, the society has been more complex. There has been a great intensification of modern influence on the society and it has been observed that the white man's or foreign political, religious, social and economic organizations and other factors have shaken the foundation of traditional community life. These factors have led to the wide spread of disintegration of bonds and sanctions of the society (Mair, 1969).

The influence of cultural contacts with foreign Nations clearly manifests in both social and religious belief of the people. Western education has introduced other dimensions into the socio-political and religious lives of

the people. Christianity has also had adverse effect on the traditional beliefs of the people (Agidigbi, 2003).

The socio-cultural organization such as marriage, religion, education, festival, naming and burial ceremonies among the people of Ekpedo are no longer what they used to be as a result contact with Christianity and Western culture. According to Awoniyi (1977), when the white men came to Africa, Africans became loyal to the tradition of the foreign culture and the white man therefore sought for the acceptance of their own culture. This change has given rise to the cultural disorientation and problem of identity by the Africans.

The researchers employed the historical, phenomenological and evaluative methods to achieve the objective of the work. The historical method discusses the brief history of the Ekpedo people. The phenomenological and evaluative methods discuss the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people.

A Brief History of Ekpedo

The origin of Ekpedo like other pre-literate people is yet a bickering issue among historians. The popular position of Edo historians is that Ekpedo people migrated to their present habitat from Benin. The possible date of this migration is however, yet another unresolved problem. According to tradition, Ekpedo was part of a group of Uneme people who migrated from Idunwigun – Benin before 1481 (Egharevba, 1966). Ekpedo is situated on the Northern – most part of Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State. The town is about thirty-five kilometers North of Igarra, the administrative headquarters of the Local Government Area.

Ekpedo is a border town between Kogi and Edo States. It is one of the nine towns of the Uneme people who constitute a segment of Northern Edo. The Uneme people are located in inhabit nine towns spread across the two Local Government Areas of Akoko-Edo and Etsako in Edo State of Nigeria. Ekpedo is made up of five kindred locally called *Unowa*, with an estimated population of about three thousand five hundred inhabitants thus giving a population density of about fifty-eight persons to a kilometer (Bello, 2007).

Ekpedo has an undulating topography interspersed with high conical hills, situated between the rain forest region and the Guinea Savannah. The natural vegetation is wooded Savannah type. There are river-lets which serve the water needs of the people. Ekpedo is a foothill town which is relatively dry during the dry season and wet during the rains. Ekpedo people are predominantly blacksmiths and farmers; they are the manufacturers of iron implements for warfare, agriculture, hunting, house-hold and other social uses for their neighbours. The people also weave baskets and make brooms. The

women weave cloth which is promoted by the local production of cotton (oral interview with Bello, 2016).

The Advent of Christianity in Ekpedo

Christianity is a religion based upon the teachings and miracles of Jesus, the anointed one from God the father who came to this world to fulfill the Old Testament laws and prophecies who died on the cross and rose from the dead physically (www.carm.org/what-is-chritianity Retrieved October 22, 2016).

The advent of missionaries had always been an important event in the history of many Nigerian communities and Ekpedo was not an exception (Bello, 2007). The Portuguese voyages of the fifteenth century brought Christianity with them (Nwankiti, 1965). Christianity arrived Ekpedo at about 1900 when the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) penetrated the area from Ekiti, Ekiti State. This was later followed by the Roman Catholic Mission which penetrated from Kabba, Kogi state and then Christ Apostolic Church penetrated Ekpedo in 1935 from Ikare, Ondo state.

Ekpedo was evangelized by different evangelical denominations which led to the establishment of the different denominations like the Saint Andrew's Anglican Church, Saint Patrick's Catholic Church, Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic church, Gospel Mission Bible Church, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Celestial Church of Christ among Deeper Life Bible Church; (oral interview with Fabunmi, 2016). According to Gibbs (1965), over the last several decades, the missions have fostered the development of comprehensive network of community churches.

The activities of the Christian missionaries in Ekpedo took many dimensions. The missionaries realized that it was necessary to provide certain social services in order to enhance the acceptability of the new faith thus education, health facilities and other welfare gestures were provided. The first major problems of the missionaries in Ekpedo were the shortage of priests, catechists and interpreters. In order to overcome these, the Church Missionary Society for example established an elementary school at Ekpedo in 1916, in which English Language, Arithmetic, Catechism, Writing and Vernacular were taught. The Roman Catholic Mission followed suit establishing her own school at about 1920. As a result of these activities, different missionary churches and schools were established. These include Saint Andrews Anglican Church and primary school, Ekpedo (Bello, 1988).

There was persecution of Christian adherents in Ekpedo, Christianity was vehemently attacked by adherents of traditional religion because they regarded the Christians as heretics who had utter disregard for the religion of their forefathers. Native doctors, fetish priests and other traditionalists all bore grudges against the Christians.(oral interview with Arowosegbe, 2016). Community labours were fixed on Sundays in a bid to prevent the Christians

from going to church for worship. This was a device of expressing the community's indignation over the new Christian religion. Any of the adherents who defied this order was punished by the payment of some fines.

The adherents of the new faith suffered all forms of persecution in the hands of their own people. The opposition to the new religion of Christianity got to the climax when the village cleaners locally called *Ogbelughere* burnt down the small thatched church hut during the Easter celebration which coincided with the *Iruami* festival. It was the culture of Ekpedo people to make sacrifices to their ancestor to appease the gods of the land at that same time. The reason for burning down the thatched church was that the Christians rang the bell and drummed which were against the tenets of *Iruami* festival during its celebration (Oral interview with Longe, 2016). The incessant struggle between the traditional religionists and the Ekpedo Christian adherents was ameliorated in 1935 by the introduction *Aladura* sect called Christ Apostolic Church. Many Ekpedo people liked the *Aladura* sect. This sect attracted many followers to it because it is more African. And more also, that they possess the power to see visions and solve human problems spiritually (oral interview with Fabunmi, 2016). Late Abraham Ontogun, Joseph Alonge, Jacob Arowosegbe and Emmanuel Daodu were the first Christian converts associated with the spread of Christianity in Ekpedo because they had become converted to Christianity during their stay in parts of Ekiti, Ekiti State and Kabba, Kogi State between 1908 and 1910 (oral interview with Bareke, 2016).

The Influence of Christianity on the Socio-Cultural Organization of the Ekpedo People.

The socio-cultural and belief system is the total way of life of a people, the values, norms and all the guiding principles of the institutions which form the basis of the society (Bello, 2015). Ekpedo is a place rich in cultural heritage which they practiced without external influence before the coming of the white man's Christianity. The new religion and its attendant Westernizing influences, has introduced remarkable changes in the socio-cultural life of the people of Ekpedo. The influence of Christianity in Ekpedo is tremendous and permeates the socio-cultural life of the people.

Before the coming of Christianity to Ekpedo, traditional religion was a very significant aspect of culture in the history of Ekpedo. The people strongly believe in and recognize a hierarchy of spiritual powers culminating in the unseen Supreme and Omnipresent Being called *Osokhurun* or God, whose representative on earth was *Oheode* with a typical shrine at Ekpedo. The people practiced the traditional religion in which sacrifices were offered to the divinities either individually or collectively on special days marked out for that purpose. Christianity has disrupted this aspect of the traditional religion and regards it as paganism.

Several festivals were done in Ekpedo at different times of the year to mark the planting and harvesting seasons and to ensure peace. Some of the festivals are *Ogun* festival celebrated every year to appease *Ogun*, the god of iron which brought fertility and fruitful harvest. It is also believed that *Ogun* controls the forces of man's use of all iron implements in all his daily activities. Another festival is *Ukpe* which marks the beginning of the traditional year among the people. It also marks the beginning of the planting season. *Arinmi* is another festival, a festival of masquerades regarded as ancestral being from heaven. *Iruami* festival, a festival of making sacrifice to the ancestors to appease the gods of the land. With the advent of Christianity in Ekpedo, these festivals have lost their values; the Christian converts no longer have regards for these them. For example the *Ogun* festival used to play an important role in the lives of the Ekpedo people. During the festival initiation took place and elders attained the highest age grade in the community and the participants must not possess any harmful medicine or charm; they must also be men of good behaviour and must not commit adultery. There was always peace everywhere in Ekpedo town during the festival; also there was a display of how any celebrant had human public relations. The wives, children and relatives of the celebrants danced round the town for seven consecutive days. Friends from neighbouring villages, visitors from far and near traveled down to Ekpedo to enjoy the merriments and amusements of *Ogun* festival; sons and daughters of Ekpedo abroad would be at home during the celebration. Friends and well-wishers were invited during the festival. There was always exchange of food especially pounded-yam. People ate, drank and chatted freely with one another. All these have changed as a result of Christianity (oral interview with Longe, 2016).

The observation of Christian celebrations such as Christmas and Easter celebrations, have conflicted with the activities of traditional festivals. For instance, *Ogun* festival which was seen as paying homage to the gods of the land has been condemned as a devilish act by Christians. Christian adherents no longer observe the prohibitions of the various festivals. For example Christians ring bells and beat drums when giving praises to God during the *Iruami* festival. Such act used to be a taboo.

During the *Ukpe* festival days, *Ere Khu Ukpe* especially the first and the last days, when men used to offer sacrifices to their ancestral fathers and it was forbidden for anyone to go to the farm for any labour. With the advent of Christianity, this has changed as adherents of Christianity now go to farm to work on *Ukpe* festival days. According to Bello (1988), the impact of Christianity as a religion on this festival is that, those who imbibed the Christian religion could go to the farm and stay, working till dusk on these two days. This has caused a lot of problems between the Christian adherents and the traditional religionists in Ekpedo.

Christianity has also influenced the traditional marriage of the Ekpedo people. The various indigenous marriage systems which were practiced in Ekpedo prior to the advent of Christianity have gone through some modifications and changes. In traditional Ekpedo, marriage was not a mere personal matter between a husband and wife but rather the business of both families. It brought them together. The Western idea that marriage is the union of two people drawn together by love has had some influence on Ekpedo traditional marriage especially on Ekpedo indigenes that stay in the cities. Modern life has distanced the people from their traditional rural kinship groups. Men and women in urban areas are becoming more likely to insist on their personal wishes in arranging their marriages, although they may still seek the approval from their family members in the village (Bello, 2015).

In Ekpedo, marriage was the duty and vocation of everyone. One was regarded as a boy or girl and immature, if one was not married and so there was pressure on single persons to get married. But today Christianity has changed this concept. According to Attokum (2010), noticeable historical fact in Africa is the stress on the necessity of marriage and the resulting pressure on single persons to get married; this pressure was partially lifted only under the influence of Christianity which at least for some time, found a special virtue in celibacy.

In traditional Ekpedo, virginity rituals meant a girl to lose her virginity on the night of her marriage. Virginity was a demand by the man's family. The more virtue a girl had, the more the celebration even after her marriage ceremony. This created a social balance and girls protected their virginity. Today as a result of modernity which is an offspring of Christianity, pre-marital sex relations are now common. Pre-marital conception is on the increase. Sex after marriage has been vulgarly abandoned in the favour of promiscuity. This is not only a moral and cultural issue, but it is also a health issue because lack of commitment to marriage is increasing abortion and Human Immuno Deficiency Virus/Acquired Human Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

Mair (1969), stated that Africans themselves point to the curtailment or abandonment of the traditional instruction at puberty, others are general increase in the freedom of young people from authority; the refusal of girls to submit to examination by the old women where this used to be the custom, the prolongation of the betrothal period necessitated by the high cost of marriage payment.

Bride wealth popularly called bride price is one of the cultural heritages among the Ekpedo people during marriage ceremony. It was twenty five cowries before the advent of Christianity, but today it has increased to thousands of naira this is as a result of modernity, one of the offspring of Christianity. Also, money has taken the place of some of the items of the bride wealth list as some families in Ekpedo now substitute some of the items of the

bride wealth list for money instead of the bride wealth items. The substitution of cash for some or all the items or the gifts or services included in the marriage formalities, has often had consequence on introducing mercenary element that was not present in the olden days. (Mair, 1969).

Polygyny, which is the marriage of many wives by a man, was one of the features of traditional marriage in Ekpedo. This is because polygyny enlarges a family and increases its ability to work and earn a living; it demonstrated the power and status of the head of the household. Another reason for polygyny in Ekpedo was that, the number of children one had, determined his economic and social importance in the community. Children were a form of wealth, a family with more children was considered to be more powerful and it was also part of a way of building an empire. The missionaries discouraged polygyny and taught the Christian adherents to marry only one wife, at the same time. Those who had many wives were instructed to disown some of them and be left with only one if they would be baptized. With this, the idea of the number of wives and children as the determinant factors of one's wealth and power in the society became a thing of the past. Instead money, cars political achievements determines one's power and wealth. After the colonial era in Africa, polygyny has started to be perceived as a taboo, (www.polygamy.com/polygamy-in-africa... Retrieved February 14, 2015).

Another influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people, was the introduction of Western education. Before the coming of the white man's Christianity which brought about Western education, children were taught to respect their elders as well as their parents. They were taught folk-tales, traditional dances, and local songs and so on. Children through traditional education given them at home gained a lot: such as good behaviour, preservation of their customs as well as values and norms in the society.

The boys learnt from their fathers the methods of blacksmithing, farming hunting and how to process palm fruits. The girls on their own part learnt domestic work like cooking, sweeping and how to nurse babies. The coming of Christianity and its resultant Western education has reduced all these. Traditional education was a functional system which combined physical and intellectual training with character building and performance of manual work. It was functional because it was relevant to the needs of the society (Okojie, 1960).

The first elementary school Saint Andrew's Anglican school Ekpedo was established in 1916 by the Church Missionaries Society. Missionary education was meant to meet their own man power needs such as interpreters, catechists and messengers. Essentially, the basic aim of missionary education as at then was to meet the needs of the society. The arrival of Western education at Ekpedo has been of great benefit to the community socially, economically culturally and politically. In the social circle, there are many

Ekpedo indigenes who have made great impact on the progress of the town by virtue of their achieved academic status such indigene have used their position to attract government amenities to Ekpedo. Economically, Western education has helped to enlighten the people of Ekpedo, both male and female adults are capable of diversifying their economic activities by investing in various trades. On the political scene, Western education in Ekpedo has produced many illustrious sons and daughters who are contributing immensely to the political progress of the town (Bello, 1993).

The schools established gave rise to the growth of educated elites who formed the new class of enlightened people in Ekpedo and with this, people are able to hold some important posts in different offices such as teachers, headmasters/mistresses of primary schools, principals of secondary schools, accountants, engineers, medical doctors and so on. Culturally, parents no longer enjoy full control and utilization of the young ones for domestic errands as it used to be the people's tradition as a result of socialization and enlightenment through Western education.

Christianity has played important role in child bearing in Ekpedo. Clinic and maternity homes were built to help pregnant women and sick people. Before the advent of Christianity in Ekpedo, infant mortality was rampant: this was attributed to *Ibiohu* or *Abiku* in Yoruba language. The spirit of born to die or the wrath of the gods or the handwork of enemies, but the coming of the white man's religion and their health care delivery has put an end to all these.

Naming ceremony is one of the most affected aspects of Ekpedo culture by Christianity. The people, especially Christian parents have ignored its significance and accompanying ceremonies. The prevailing practice is now to taking babies to the church for christening on the eighth day after delivery there upon, Christian names are given to them and these names are invariably foreign and European. Parents themselves adopt European names during church baptism therefore de-emphasizing our indigenous names which are pregnant of meanings (Bello, 2007). It is very common to find people bearing names like James, John, Moses, Stephen, Daniel and so on. Such people are easily offended if one mistakenly calls them by native names if they have any.

Furthermore, the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people is in the area of political administration, before the advent of Christianity, the chiefs and elders in council exercised the political administration in Ekpedo. The council of chiefs and elders settled disputes and their judgments were binding on everybody, they were the final arbiters. With the coming of Christianity to Ekpedo, some Christian converts now ignore the authority of the council of elders. Some Christians believe that the council no longer have any executive power over them and found no need to take any chieftaincy title. The council of elders now misses some of the meaningful contributions from the Christian members of the community;

some Christians believe that most of the decisions taken in the council run counter to the doctrines and belief of Christianity.

Conclusion

This work has attempted to discuss the influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural organization of the Ekpedo people. The premise from this work has helped to conclude that Ekpedo people had a good cultural heritage which they practiced without external interference before the coming of Christianity to Ekpedo and the cultural practices acted as a unifying factor in the life of the Ekpedo people.

Some of the interview respondents admitted that traditional religion is fading away in Ekpedo and that traditional religious celebrations are now less regarded than the Christian festivals such as Easter, Christmas and other Christian celebration. The respondents emphasized that the festivals which were celebrated in Ekpedo especially the *ogun* festival celebrated every year for fertility and fruitful harvest and initiation into adulthood which also served as a unifying factor in Ekpedo is fading away.

As a result of findings in this work, Christianity has influenced the marriage system of the Ekpedo people as it now finds virtue in celibacy, virginity was held to a high esteem in traditional Ekpedo but today, pre-marital sex is on the increase, the bride wealth which was formerly twenty-five cowries has increased to thousands of naira, some families now substitute some of the items of the bride wealth list for money. Polygyny which was one of the marriage systems in Ekpedo is now a taboo as a result of Christianity.

The advent of Christianity brought about the building of maternity home, dispensary or health centres and infant mortality has reduced as a result of orthodox medicine. Western education which is a direct offspring of Christianity forced foreign culture into the life of Ekpedo people by adulterating their culture and destroying some of the important aspects of the culture of the people.

Before the advent of Christianity Ekpedo people had a form of education called informal education. As a result of the findings in this work it is recommended that cultural studies and history should be taught in both primary and secondary schools so that pupils, students and the people can be knowledgeable about their origin, customs, tradition, norms and cultural values. This paper is also in the line of providing and keeping such knowledge in extant. Christians should be involved in communal work like clearing, sweeping of the streets and market square, construction of roads or paths and forming themselves into different humanitarian groups, this will make them to have a spirit of belonging to the community as well as co-operation. Parents should give their children meaningful local names instead of the foreign or English names.

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