

THE DEPRIVATION THEORY OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN IGBO LAND: A CASE OF CONVERSION OR ADHESION

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Abstract

The religious change that took place in Africa and Igbo land obviously brought in changes in all aspects of people's lives. Many scholars have been trying to explain this phenomenon of religious change that happened so fast in the lives of Igbo people and Africa in general. The two world religions (Christian religion and Islamic religion) that invaded African nations influenced them quickly and tremendously. The case with which the Igbo people abandoned their traditional religions and culture, left one to ask what is in this Christian religion? Not only the religion but all aspects of their lives were abandoned, hence some people concluded that the gods are on retreat only to come back in a later time. In the deprivation theory, Ifeka-moller tries to explain the cause of this religious change in Igbo land. She suggested and claimed that the social-structural factors are mostly responsible for religious change found in Igbo land. This paper tries to see if this religious change is real conversion or adhesion or in another way a syncretic practice we see today in most of the Igbo land. For conversion is a lifelong experience as explained and understood by many religious experts. From all indications, the practice of Igbo traditional religion is coming back to its original form though in a refined and stronger perspectives. The deprivation theory when looked wholistically, one understands that it may have helped to explain the religious change in Igbo land and Africa in general but one factor alone in its essence cannot vividly explain the phenomenon of religious change that took place in Igbo land. This paper argues that the deprivation theory has only helped to explain some aspects of religious change especially the increase in mass movement from traditional religion to Christian religion.

Keywords: Religious Change, Deprivation Theory, Igboland, Conversion, Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Africa and indeed Igbo land is radically changing in all spheres of their lives

with colonialism, secularism, globalization, of course with the coming of the two religions of the world (Christianity and Islamic religions). These two religions especially, Christianity, has invaded all areas of Igbo traditional religious practices. In fact, it has alienated its people and their cultures from its original form. Hence, we keep saying that the identity of Igbo man or African man has been affected. This is sure indication that something has happened or there is a crack in the identity of Igbo man. So there is need to recover this identity or traits about the Igbo people. Indeed, a lot has happened in the past that necessitated the above question of identity or cry of something being lost. Here we agreed with Kalu (1985) that the retreat of the African gods is rather obvious and that the impressions left by some missionaries, travelers in Africa or colonial administrators that the defeat was a total rout seemed to be true, considering the pattern of the impact of these external religious change-agents, and mass drift from Igbo traditional religion to Christian religion.

Though the religious change witnessed in Igbo land has its merits and demerits. In fact, its resilience is what sustains it today, but many people (Igbo) are having the feeling that the traditional religion or its practices are being swept out. It is this resilience that made Kalu (1985) notes that “in spite of the vast changes, there has been a persistence of traditional religious beliefs and practices S.N. Ezeanya called it endurance of conviction” (p.11). Still commenting on the endurance and resilience of Igbo traditional practices, Oguejiofor (2010) captures it beautifully when he remarked that:

Its resilience entails the eroding of certain features by globalization, but that will not make it to cease. Daily life in Igbo land will thus not be the same as it used to be. The changes and the influences that affect it are continuous, and these are often so strong that one may not recognize many features of the same paradigm over the passage of few years... the strong culture is not the one that is unable to accept influences from external culture but the one that is able to integrate it and perhaps create a new, better, more useful and more adaptable reality. It is to the extent the Igbo culture is able to do this that its paradigm remains resilient. (p. 25).

From the various models of interpreting religious change in Africa and Igbo land, many things or insights emerged as aggregate of variables which can explain the mass drift or adhesion or conversion from Igbo traditional religion to world religions. In the case of deprivation theory which is the thrust of this paper, the proponent of above theory believes that it is deprivation suffered structurally by some people or axis in the Eastern part of Nigeria that made them to adopt Christianity as alternative to compensate what was lost initially or being gained by other cultural areas of Igbo land.

Many theories of religious change have tried to explain this mass movement from Igbo traditional religion to Christian religion in different ways,

each seeing the change of cult or affiliation from different angles. The very big question hanging in each models of interpretation borders mostly on whether the change of cult or affiliation is a real, permanent or ordinary change. That is abandoning everything about the previous cult or religion completely. In the religious sphere, this is regarded as conversion. But conversion itself does not occur in one day or within a specified space of time or moment. For the individuals or people concerned live in a society with their own religion. And religion entails a kind of social evolution, which evolves with the society in which it found itself, with every other thing found in that particular society (Kalu, 1985). This means that religion or religious practices keep evolving in so far the society in question keeps existing. In this sense, conversion to another religious cult seemed impossible because it is something that is continuous just like Oguejiofor (2010) observed earlier.

The dualistic typology model of religious change believes that the dominant culture or religion displaces the dependent religion or culture upon which it found itself. This model of change is fittingly good to describe or to study the colonial masters and dependent Igbo indigenous religion. When the Europeans or the missionaries came to Igbo land, they introduced many elements or things into the stable religion or culture of the Igbo people. This necessitated some changes in the land which even led to the silence of the gods. This is because the dependent culture or religion was serving the newly arrived religion which came with many dynamic elements into the already stable society. The impact of dynamic external changes or factors was a complete or near completed displacement of the traditional structure. This according to Okonkwo (2005) explains certain unstable behavior in many Igbo Christians.

In relation to Igbo traditional religion, this also accounts why from outset, missionaries taught the Igbo people to regard their traditional religious practices as ungodly practices, fetish, that must be avoided. This is ironically telling the Igbo Christians to forget their essence or identity. Ejizu (1985) pointed out that the missionaries also forgot that it is in that society that the Igbo Christian have been living and carrying out their daily activities, hence it is already a form of direct expression of their dominant beliefs. The displacement here can only be temporal, judging from the manner and frequency with which many Igbo Christians patronize Igbo traditional religion in times of festivity or crises.

Empirically, one can say that religious change does not occur by displacement of dependent culture or religion as suggested by dualistic typology model. But clearly, this model initiated a systematic study of religious change in Africa and Igbo land, through field work upon which deprivation theory has its thrust. In all, we are trying to suggest that in the interpretation of religious change many dynamic elements are involved, no single factor is the cause or drift from one religion to the next especially when it concerns traditional Igbo religion.

Deprivation Theory: A Social Structural Approach to Religious Change

The deprivation theory of Ifeka-Moller among other things is a reaction against the intellectualist explanation of religious change by Horton. In his monolatric hypothesis according to Ifeka- Moller (1974) Horton asserts that conversion from African (Igbo) traditional religion to Christianity or spiritualist church (Aladura) has been facilitated by changes in traditional beliefs. The major change in traditional cult is the transition from the worship of many lesser beings to the worship of one Supreme being. According to Ifeka- Moller, Horton insists that there is a strong attachment to traditional system of explanation, prediction and control of the universe which crumbled with its introduction to a wider society.

The author of deprivation theory argued vehemently that Horton's monolatratic hypothesis is by all angle logically weak and impossible to verify empirically. Ifeka-Moller (1974) again argued that intellectualist approach could not provide or give convincing arguments in the case of Eastern Nigeria which is her place of investigation about its irregular distribution of converts to Christian religion from traditional cult.

Against this back-drop of intellectualist theory, Ifeka-Moller (1994) came up with the deprivation theory, to logically and empirically explain conversion from traditional cult to Christian religion or even to Aladura. The deprivation theory also explains the irregular conversion found in Eastern part of Nigeria.

To understand generally, according to Ifeka-Moller, the complex process of religious change, she opted for a socio-structural approach. This approach is more logical and empirical to investigate, since religion starts from known realities to unknown realities. This known reality coincides with Kanu (2015) and Idowus' (1976) three elements constantly found in the definition of religion which are belief, cult/worship and morals.

The deprivation theory tries to portray that new religious beliefs and the rate of conversion to Christianity are a function of the continuous interaction between the main factors of social change. These factors of socio structural or socio economic change was underestimated or neglected by intellectualist approach of Horton in explaining religious change that took place in Igbo land. Supporting the above view, Ifeka-Moller (cited by Metuh, 1985) argues that socio-structural factors are the most fruitful field of research rather than ideas and values which form the core of a belief system. He went further thus:

For if a cosmology is embedded in a social order, as were indigenous cosmologies in eastern Nigeria and as Aladuraa belief is today, then we can only appreciate the extent to which ideas have shaped such new religious forms as Aladura Churches if we focus on change in the social order. (p.18).

The deprivation theory of religious change credited itself for ability to account not only for cases of easy conversions from traditional cult to Christianity. But it

also accounts for cases of resistance to conversion as seen in Onitsha – Awka area of Igbo land.

Using and analyzing the official census figures for conversion from traditional cult to Christian religion in Eastern Nigeria for 1953, Ifeka-Moller observed that Onitsha-Awka area of Igbo land has a case of poor response to Christianity in spite of a strong exposure to missionary work done by many missionaries. According to Obi (1985) :

The first Catholic missionaries to eastern Nigeria were the Holy Ghost Fathers who landed at the Onitsha Wharf on December 5, 1985. With Onitsha as a base, the missionaries under very difficult circumstances spread the good news, sometimes testifying to its truth with their lives. By the eve of 1985, the mustard seed of the faith planted by these few, simple and financially ill-equipped soldiers of Christ, has grown into twelve dioceses that made up the Onitsha Ecclesiastical province. These dioceses are Onitsha, Calabar, Ogoja, Owerri, Umuahia, Port-Harcourt, Enugu, Ikot Ekpene, Abakaliki, Awka, Orlu and Okigwe. (p.i).

Having seen Christianity in these areas, Ifeka-Moller (1974) observed that 1953 census figures show that Christians in Onitsha constitute 26% of the total population of the area while Owerri and Calabar have 64% and 77% respectively. Though Horton (cited by Metuh, 1985) objected to Ifeka-Moller's use of the census returns which lumps together Onitsha Urban and surrounding rural districts.

According to Ifeka-Moller (cited by Metuh, 1985)

Factor which account for massive conversion in Owerri and Calabar areas include rapid social change, and a growing frustration among the inhabitants at the failure to reap the rewards promised by an acceptance of radical changes. They turned to Christianity which promised a new kind of power, identified with the power of the white man, which people could use to discover the secret of this technological superiority. (p. 18).

With coming of Europeans, in their bid to explore the African and land, with their trade and missionary activities, changes started taking place in Igbo land. The Igbo people who were of course known for their desire for survival, tried to be like the white people through their struggles. This is why the author of deprivation theory tries to show that in eastern Nigerian, the higher number of conversions is historically linked to factors of economic, political, educational and religious changes. From the above, one can vividly say that economy and other social changes

play a very important role in the religious change that took place in Igbo land. This is contrary to the views of Horton's intellectualist theory or approach to the religious change in Africa. Ifeka-Moller (1974) confirmed that it should be noted that independent missions and churches have had their greatest success in the central oil-palm belt. In this region, the long standing export of palm oil, the experience of British repressive expeditions and the intensive activity of fundamentalist missionary churches have undermined the traditional order early. It is distinguished today by its high rate of literates and converts. Elsewhere in Nigeria, in the Onitsha and Awka districts in the northwest of the central oil-palm belt regions, the direction of religious and social change has taken a different direction. In these regions, an elite has been gainfully occupied with the high positions of the administration. The people have benefited from the economic benefits of this elite. The level of literacy is high, but conversions to missions and independent churches remained slow during the contemporary period.

The above view explains the idea of deprivation theory on high level of religious change and low level of religious change found in the most places of Igbo land today.

The low level of religious change or conversion found in Asaba and Onitsha was also affirmed by Afigbo (1981) thus:

The method of converting Africans through their kings and chiefs adopted by the missionaries for the greater part of the nineteenth century was unsuitable for Igboland where there were no kings and chiefs powerful enough to drag their people along with them into the Christian fold. In the event, nearly half a century of Christian enterprise in and around Asaba and Onitsha, did not succeed in carrying the Christian message into the heart of the land. When father Shanahan came to the field in 1902, he described the catholic mission among the Igbo as consisting mainly of a few handfuls of slaves bought by the fathers at 2s:6d each from slave ships passing down the river. (p.339).

But the above condition, gave rise to conversion explosion in other axis of Igbo land like Owerri and Calabar. That is urbanization and missionary work which they found as an alternative to the deprivation which they suffered earlier.

Though, uneven distribution of Christian converts seems to have been a persistent feature of religious change found in Igbo land. Ifeka-moller (1974) avers that:

There is, however, another major variation in conversion rates. The available evidence suggests that during our period converts to mission and Aladura

churches were heavily concentrated in a few divisions of Owerri and Calabar provinces. (p. 65).

Through her analysis, she went on to distinguish social and cultural factors which seemed to have acted as more general conditions of conversion from the traditional cult to Christian religion. Ifeka-Moller suggested that “a major and sufficient condition for conversion in eastern Nigeria is the search for some kind of power on the part of people who would not otherwise control significant materials resources” (p. 65). These factors include colonial rule, negative economic change, political change, inter-denominational rivalry, education, literacy, biblical knowledge, relative deprivation and poverty of resources among others. Among these factors of religious change, inter-denominational rivalry was most fierce among the Ibo division of Aba, Owerri and Bende (Owerri province). Here missions were busy competing for dioceses and the largest number of converts, this strong rivalry led Owerri and Calabar provinces to an even greater effort to establish schools that would win the battle of the mind and of the soul. Though, it has its serious effects on the mission itself. This serious effect is what Mbiti (1969) called the scandal of division. According to him, every set and domination in Europe, Britain and America came to Africa for missionary work. The result was that Africa does not have a single image of Christianity but several. Different church structures and traditions have been imported from overseas, and African Christians have inherited them without even understanding their meaning and background. This is made worse by the fact that missionaries brought and propagated a divided Christianity and were proud of their denominational founders and traditions, hence the rivalry among them.

In conclusion, the deprivation theory has tried to show that Horton's intellectualist theory cannot handle the general problem of unevenly distributed religious change in eastern Nigeria. Social structural factors rather than intellectual factors explain why conversion to Christianity and Aladura has been so extensive only in Owerri and Calabar provinces. The acute competition for scarce material resources and exclusion from the rewards of political and economic power which is the deprivation suffered by triangular areas (Aba, Owerri and Bende) necessitated a mass conversion to Christianity and Aladura which served as alternative to white power/secular power they were deprived of initially.

Religious Change in Igboland: A conversion or Adhesion?

From the above analysis of deprivation theory of religious change some ambiguous issues or questions came up. The questions or issues like, is a change of religious cults, a true change of religion? One can also ask, is it a true conversion or adhesion, that is only a change of cult? Is it a question of combing the elements of two religions? Or does it mean syncretism which is a modern trend in Africa today (Ezenweke and Kanu, 2012).

Generally, religious conversion may be or is the adoption of new religious beliefs that differ from the converts previous beliefs. It can involve a new religious identity or a change of identity which is always the case. Conversion requires internalization of the new belief system. To put it in another way, it means the cooking of Christianity in African pot. Conversion implies a new reference point in one's identity.

In religious change, many scholars have different meanings for conversion, and that it is something that continues throughout one's own life in the society. There is, of course, an extensive literature on the psychological and theological aspects of conversion. From the theory of deprivation, conversion can be understood in different perspectives. Again conversion can be distinguished from religious and non-religious causal factors. However, Ifeka-Moller (1974) clearly stated that “I take conversion to mean a change of affiliation from cult to church, or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist church” (p. 57). In her explanation of the above, she agreed that she left aside the problems concerning the extent to which a move from one kind of religious group to another is associated with changes of attitude and behavior. Hence she used these criteria for conversion in Eastern Nigeria: Church attendance figures, statistics on baptism and communicants and number of building claimed by a denomination. Strictly speaking her model is not conversion because it explicitly excludes changes of attitude and behavior but a movement from traditional cult to another religion or from one religion to another (Metuh, 1987).

Again, adhesion is a way most historians describe the process that is involved in conversion to Christianity and conversion to Islam from traditional cult. Sometimes, adhesion is inter-changed with a syncretism or with other processes of conversion. Adhesion or hybridity is when a person or group adopts new beliefs and practices alongside the old beliefs. Nock (cited by Metuh, 1987) referred to “adhesion” as when “people stood with one foot on either side of the fence, adopting the new worships as useful supplements” (p.19). From the analysis of Ifeka-Moller, conversion and adhesion is used as a mere change of membership or affiliation. And change of membership can be from traditional cult (religion) to a mission church, or from mission church to an independent African church, and Metuh added “or even a lapse back to Traditional Religion” (p.19). There by completing a circle which, is the new trend in Igbo land today. People are now fully going back to Igbo traditional religion taking the necessary ingredients or supplements of the new religion (Christian religion) into it.

The Implications of Socio-Structural Religious Change in Igbo Land

Religious change as a socio-religious phenomenon has a social as well as religious dimensional causes. This means or shows that conversion in Africa is a multi-causal phenomenon. According to Metuh (1987) Ifeka-Moller suggested the following as causal factors of religious change: desire for white power,

deprivation, denominational rivalry, education, literacy and knowledge of the bible. There are other factors of conversion in Igbo land. These factors of conversion at the same time are found to be problems regarding the way Igbo people see or understand the new religion though it has its own positive effects. The religious change that took place in Igbo land was full of rivalry as we noted earlier. This brings about unhealthy competitions among the mission churches. No one knows exactly the real Christ being preached to the Igbo people because each mission church came with different theologies. These were deposited in Igbo land without proper teaching and guidance. Hence there was a kind of confusion in the gospel message being preached in Igbo land. The mission churches without knowing it, misrepresented the name of God in Igbo traditional regional as inferior god. It also gave the worship of God negative names in Africa traditional religion. According to Ekwunife (2012) the curtain raiser in the naming of African Traditional God include the factors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, missionary factor, colonial factor, educational factor, political factor. Ekwunife is of the view that “supreme” should be removed from God in all cultures and religions because it carried with it racial and ethnocentric biases and controversies. Until it is removed (the Supreme God) controversies will continue to create supreme culture and supreme religion for no culture or religion is supreme above the other.

Sequel to the rivalry from the different Mission churches, this today breeds many types of Independent African churches. Mission churches were known for their charitable work but many Independent African churches are known for their quest for money and falsely acclaimed miracle centers. Though they try to combine the ingredients of traditional religion with the foreign religions. The off-shoot today is Pentecostalism that is seen virtually in every corner of Igbo land and rest of the African continent. According to Achunike (2009) “Pentecostalism is an extension of African traditional religion” (p. 14). The religious change transformed churches into money venture rather than saving of souls and charity to the poor. It created many false prophets and prophetess for sake of enriching their pockets. Ever body claims to be pastors in a culture where traditional priests are known and selected by God. According to Agazue (2015) every television is saturated with miracles of pastors and testimonies of miracles performed in his/her church, through this way the pastors, continue to develop wining formulas for church members. Through this way, a lot of pastors make money in the church, and everybody today wants to be pastors. This alone can account for the kidnapping of pastors and priests in the Igbo society today. The religious change that took place in Igbo land encourages syncretism in various areas including morality. This is mostly practiced by the African independent churches which were founded as a consequences of resentment over missionary and colonial control. Ezenweke and Kanu (2012) aver that:

These churches try to reclaim some of their traditional beliefs and practices which had been rejected by missionaries. These beliefs and practices are inserted into Christianity without any criticism, this is expressed in their

songs, dance and rituals especially. Sometimes, these elements are placed side by side to the gospel and sometimes exalted above the Christian tradition. (p. 78).

The innovations brought by missionaries displaced most of the culture and traditions of the Igbo people without replacing them. This also accounts for increase in the number of African independent churches movement in Igbo land and Africa in general. For they provide for the people the traditional needs which are lacking in the Mission churches.

The Igbo people are known for their great traits and spirits of competition, emulation, community living. The religious change experienced by the Igbo people brought about change in their identity. Nwadiolor (2014) observed that:

The Igbo are notorious for hankering after seductive cultural traits of other peoples, even when such traits appear unintelligible. They love to speak in foreign tongues. They fall for models in dress and ornamentation from Europe and America. An Igbo youth would give anything for a short, singlet, gown or cap blazoned with such exotic titles as London, New York, California and so on. (p.277).

Today many people have observed the type of spirituality or type of Christian living among the Igbo people, it is found out that the low standard of morality in the society is perceived everywhere despite many years of practicing the new religion. Some agree that virtue or morality is low today compared to the time when traditional religion is the only religion practiced by all in Igbo land. With churches in every nook and cranny in the society, the crime wave is going high every day. Hence Obiefuna (1985) lamented that after hundred years of Christianity that Christian religion has not really taken root in Igbo land. People combine traditional religion and Christian religion as if to say that they are compatible in every way. It therefore created a mixed religion in Igbo land.

The religious change without saying it has its positive aspects on the life of the people. But this paper dwell more on the negative aspects due to high increase in wave crime among the people begging for its solutions. One of the good fundamental aspects of religious change in Igbo land is, bringing the Igbo traditional religion among the religions of world. For no religion or culture is greater or inferior to the other religion or culture. It is well understood today among scholars that no or coming (new) culture or religion can out live or face out the indigenous culture or religion. None is supreme to the other rather all go through the process of acceptance and rejection or modification.

Conclusion

Obviously, with deprivation theory religious change in Igbo land can be viewed from many angles. From the angle of syncretism which persists today,

this of course cannot be called conversion in the real sense. Today many old and young educated men are going back to the traditional religion in one way or another, of course taking the ingredients of new culture and religion to strengthen Igbo traditional religion.

Again a survey from other explanations of religious change shows that a conversion or religious change is a multi-casual phenomenon. There are other variables which contribute to religious change, Ifeka-Moller (1974) posited that conversion was less in Onitsha area because they were already exposed to European contact, but Nwosu (1982) in explaining how Bishop Shanahan succeeded in Onitsha made mention of educational method which yielded fruits in converting so many people. Also the deprivation theory accounts for the old saying that *echekwem n'uka kpu ewu*, because the deprivation suffered by the indigenes necessitated most of them seeing Christianity as a means to success or to possess the white power. When they discovered it is not means to possess the white power many left and returned to traditional religion. Hence the Gods are coming back to take possession of the land.

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