

CHRISTIANITY IN IGBOLAND: THE PLACE AND IMPACT OF SOME SELECTED MISSIONARIES (1800-1920)

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Abstract

Christianity in Igboland did not emerge out of vacuum, there were certain personalities such as Simon Jonas, J. C. Taylor, Joseph Shanahan, Mary Slessor among others who sacrificed their comfort, time, resources and so forth to ensure that the light of Christianity illuminates Igbo territory. There are volumes of literature written concerning Christian missionary enterprise in Igbo of Eastern Nigeria however, much have not been done in pin pointing some distinguished personalities and their respective contributive efforts towards the planting and growth of Christian religion in the Eastern geographical territory of Nigeria. Thus, this research is an attempt to bring to limelight the salient labours of some Christian missionaries whose contributions led to the growth and development of Christianity in Igboland. The finding of this research is that some Christian missionaries were zealous and resilient to the fulfilment of the Great Commission. This resulted to their enormous contribution in the growth and development of Christian religion in Igbo territory. They made positive impacts in Christianizing and civilizing the Igbo nation as today, a greater population of Igbo people are Christians. The research



recommends that present indigenous Christian missionaries should endeavour to impact meaningfully to the sustenance of Christian religion in Igboland and Nigeria at large.

Key words: Christian, Missionaries, Growth, Development, Christianity, Igboland

Introduction

The Christian religion is a religion which started in the Jewish territory. This was as a result of Jesus Christ who commanded his followers to take the gospel to various parts of the world. Coming to the advent of Christianity in Igboland it did not emerge out of vacuum as Adiele maintains that the evangelization of the Igboland is not an isolated event¹. There were some key personalities that made the evangelization of Igboland possible. For instance, Ayika and Ekebuisi² opines that the first expatriate missionary to step his feet on Igbo soil was James Fredrick Schon who was a German but based in Freetown, Sierra-Leone. He was the leader of an evangelistic team sent out by the Church Missionary Society to accompany the commercial expedition from Great Britain to the Niger. However, others who joined the 1841 expedition include: Ajayi Crowther, Simon Jonas amongst others. With time, other Christian missionaries from different missionary bodies joined in the evangelization of Igbo land, such as: J. C. Taylor, Joseph Shanahan, Mary Slessor and others too numerous to mention. It could be said that, the footprints of St. Paul was emulated by some Christian missionaries who carried out an Apostolic work in Igbo land. Some missionaries such as Simon Jonas, J. C. Taylor, Joseph Shanahan, Mary Slessor amongst others just like St. Paul, were zealous to obey the Great Commission by taking the gospel to Igboland which was formerly an area which was not fully developed. Although there are numerous Christian missionaries who joined in evangelizing Igbo

territory, this research would focus on selected few amongst them in order to examine their respective and collective efforts to the development of Christian religion and transformation of Igbo land.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Mission

The concept of mission could be drawn from Christ's last command to his disciples. According to Oranusi³, Christ commissioned the church to evangelize the world. This command is popularly known as the Great Commission and it is a mission mandate. According to Sutherland⁴, the word mission comes from the Latin word *mitto*, which means "to send". It is the equivalent of the Greek word *apostello*, which also means "to send". This means that a missionary is a person sent out for evangelism-oriented work. Mission aims to bring people into relationship with Christ and this could be achieved through evangelization. For Bevans and Schroeder:

The terms mission and evangelization are interlinked. Mission, which is the mother of church, is viewed as a great task given to the believers that binds them together, provides them with nourishment, focuses their energies, heals their sinfulness and provides them with challenge and vision⁵.

The best way to carry out the mission mandate is through evangelism as through it, Christians could be able to make converts of many. However, evangelism is not only by preaching the gospel just as Bevans and Schroeder said that words alone are not enough. In its practical way, evangelism means to teach and to humanize. Humanization, therefore, should be considered a cardinal aspect of mission, since it is the primary means of recognizing the innate value of an individual in preaching the



message of Christ. Thomas⁶ earlier referred to this when he connected the conceptual framework of *Missio Dei* (mission of God) such as mission as the dynamic relationship between God and the world with mission as participation in the humanization of the world.

Humanization in the words of Oranusi⁷ implies recognizing the dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. Thus, engaging mission as humanization makes the humanity of those to be evangelized a central part of the missionary consideration. In this, such, one acknowledges the human condition and needs of others, and helps them realize as well as makes it possible for people to actualize themselves. Mission as humanization progresses from the person to be evangelized first as a human being then as a spiritual being. That is a movement from the temporal to the spiritual sphere. It entails human kindness, awareness of human existence, and respect for human dignity. Therefore, mission as humanization radically manifests in the act of mission itself, bearing the humanity exemplified in Christ that formed the origin of Christian mission.

Concept of Christian Missionary

A missionary is a person sent to teach the Christian religion to people who are ignorant of it⁸. According to Fuller⁹, a Christian missionary is sent out both by the Lord himself and by the body of believers, the Church¹⁰. The message a missionary carries is how people can be reconciled to God. The missionary leaves his or her own place to go somewhere else. This could mean travelling to a far distance to minister to people who are far away from his own people both in language and culture. A missionary shares the good news and evangelizes just as the apostles in the Acts of the Apostles did. A missionary often renounces everything



about himself/herself and devotes his life to the service of people. According to Oranusi¹¹, by becoming poor, the missionary prepares for the gospel, overcoming attachment with the world, thus enabling him/her to be available to those served, thus bringing them Christ, the Saviour. Preaching the gospel and promoting its values are the evangelizing tasks of a missionary, which is to be done with effectiveness and commitment to the service and promotion of God's kingdom. It is important at this point to emphasize the place of the Holy Spirit in missionary activity which is evangelism oriented. The Holy Spirit occupies an important space in evangelization because His presence and activity do not only affect individuals but also the society, history and people's cultures and religions¹². The Holy Spirit is the active and vital principle in mission and humanization of which is the primary goal of missionary enterprise.

On the qualifications and character of a true Christian missionary, Fuller¹³ remarks that the missionary must be truly born again. This means he or she has turned away from sin and has received the new life in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her life. The person must be very sure that Christ has really saved him; and other people must be able to see that his life is godly, obeying God's word. Also, a Christian missionary must be filled with the Holy Spirit as he plays vital role in missionary and evangelism. The fruit of the Spirit needed most by missionaries is love. Missionaries must be able to love and do good to the host community even when the host community pay them back. A Spirit-filled missionary will have a burning zeal to win souls for Christ despite all odds. This will keep her or him going whether he is enjoying or suffering in the missionary work. Missionaries need to have some spiritual gifts for missionary work. The Bible says there are gifts of teaching, evangelism, helping, administration, wisdom, miracles, healing and others



which missionaries can use in carrying out his/her activity in the host community.

Moreover, a missionary must be prayerful. Even Christ never neglected prayer as well encouraged his followers to pray always, not give up nor faint. As missionaries whose aim is to win souls for Christ, missionaries need to be able to pray against the powers of Satan, so that the people can be set free to receive the message of salvation. A missionary must be humble and portray a servant attitude. Christ was humble during his earthly ministry. Christ said that he who wants to be the greatest in God's kingdom must be the servant of all. This means that a Christian missionary will also have to be a servant to the people he goes to preach to. The missionary's humble character could attract the attention of host community to his message and through that means could convert them. Summarily, the missionary must be disciplined, humane but thorough, kind, polite, humble and be ready to sacrifice all to win souls for Christ.

Theoretical Framework

For the anticipated missionary enterprise to Igboland and by extension West Africa to be successful, Thomas Fowell Buxton and Henry Venn proposed what this research calls Theory of Missionary Strategy. Thomas Fowell Buxton formulated the Bible and the Plough ideology. According to Okpalike and Nwadiakor¹⁴, Thomas Fowell Buxton believed that the “Bible and the Plough” hypothesis would serve the course of civilization and Christianity. Rev. Henry Venn accepted wholeheartedly Buxton's idea thus, formulated a missionary strategy of self-extending, self-sustaining and self-governing Church in Africa.

According to Dike¹⁵, Rev. Henry Venn became the secretary of the C.M.S. from 1841 till 1872. His period of office coincided with the foundation of the Niger Mission. He had passionately advocated



that to build a native pastorate in which missionaries were to be students of the language and culture of the people so as to reach the inner recesses of the host communities and to be handmaids in building a Christian community which will be left to the indigenous people to nurse. Anyabuike¹⁶ had noted that Venn was a real missionary who believed in the ability of the African to carry out an evangelical programme, and whose feelings for Africa helped to make the missionary expansion in West Africa successful. Venn's idea was for the CMS to recruit committed African Christians who will be dedicated to the work of evangelism and ensure that Christianity stand firm in their country home. Thomas Fowell Buxton's and Henry Venn's missionary strategy could be said to be the master plan for evangelization and transformation of the Igbo territory.

Advent of Christianity in the Igbo Territory

The history of Christianity in Igboland started when a British missionary body called the Church Missionary Society (CMS) came to Aboh. Okpalike and Nwadiakor¹⁷ opines that the first Igbo town that the expedition landed was Aboh, J. F. Schon, a German linguist and the leader of the C.M.S. team that accompanied the expedition, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave and Simon Jonas, a liberated slave from Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage. According to Ekechi¹⁸, Simon Jonas, spent three weeks at Aboh, and preached to the children who flocked around him. CMS left and returned again in 1854, this time, Simon Jonas was left in Aboh to continue evangelism, the rest of CMS team moved to Asaba in October 1854¹⁹. Later, the CMS joined the 1857 expedition and this time resettled in Onitsha. The first permanent mission in Igboland was established at Onitsha in 1857. Anagwu²⁰ comments that, Rev J .C Taylor laid the foundation of the first Church in Igbo land in 1867. According to Nwosu²¹, in 1885 there was a change in the missionary work in



Igboland. Two Catholic congregations came to Igboland; the Society of African Missions, with their headquarters at Asaba, and the Holy Ghost Fathers with their headquarters at Onitsha. Onwuegbuchulam²² has it that by 1890s, Onitsha and its neighbours had been fully captured by the missionaries, and attention was then directed to drive into the interior. The Methodists and the Presbyterians also found their footings in Igboland in the nineteenth century. Christianity was brought by the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) to North Eastern Igboland from Unwana (Unwara) the home of Ezeogo Akanu Ibiam (late) in 1888²³. It was from these missionary bodies that Christianity spread to other parts of the Igbo territory.

Selected Missionaries and their Contributions to the Growth of Christianity in Igboland

This research studies some selected missionaries such as Simon Jonas, John Christopher Taylor and Joseph Shanahan amongst others.

Simon Jonas

Simon Jonas was among the first African and a member of the CMS that accompanied the 1841 expedition to Igbo territory. It could be said that he was chosen to play the role of interpreting the gospel message to the host community. This is because, the European Christian missionaries found out that missionary effort yields less fruit when there is a language barrier²⁴. Hence, the place of an interpreter cannot be neglected. According to Ekechi²⁵, Simon Jonas, an Igbo who had been sold into slavery and was rescued and resettled in Sierra Leone. He became a Christian and was among the CMS contingent/party who joined the 1841 expedition to Aboh. Simon Jonas was a Catechist. During the Aboh mission, Simon Jonas served as an interpreter. He was able to form a close relationship with the King of Aboh,



Obi Ossai more than other of his colleagues. He invested much time teaching Obi Ossai and his people the gospel in vernacular. This made Aboh people to be highly interested in the gospel. Okpalike and Nwadiakor²⁶ affirms that Jonas made a remarkable progress in forming a Christian group among the people. The CMS later left Aboh. When the CMS returned again at Aboh in 1854, Kalu²⁷ remarked that Simon Jonas stayed back as a Bible teacher as the party moved to Asaba in October 1854.

To further elucidate the significant roles played by Simon Jonas in the Igbo missionary enterprise, Okeke²⁸ observes that Simon Jonas assisted other members of the CMS while they travelled through the Igbo portions of the lower Niger basin. As soon as the expedition moved into the non-Igbo speaking areas, Jonas was sent back to Aboh, where he continued his evangelistic dialogue with Obi Ossai, King of Aboh, and his people. He was there until the party returned. Simon Jonas' impressive contributions to the 1841 and 1854 expeditions, especially in terms of interpretation for effective communication of the gospel to the indigenous people could be the reason why he deemed it fit for the voyage to the Banks of the Niger. This 1857 expedition which nursed and grew the seed of Christianity already sown in Igboland around 1841.

Furthermore, Simon Jonas played a vital role as he assisted Ajayi Crowther in the production of the first Igbo primer which they came with, during the 1857 expedition at Onitsha. Simon Jonas' interpretation of the Bible helped to spread the gospel. Despite that Simon Jones was not directly engaged in translation of the Bible into Igbo language, his early contribution to the interpretation of the gospel message into the indigenous language of the host community however set the foundation for the need for Igbo Bible translation.

It could be said that without people like Simon Jonas, the indigenous people could have heard the gospel message but could not have understood it. However, with the presence of Simon Jonas in the CMS team, the indigenous people did not only hear, but understood the gospel. Furthermore, the indigenous people showed much interest to the Christian message. This is affirmed by Ekechi²⁹ who stated that, during the 1841 expedition at Aboh, the Obi Ossai, asked Jonas to translate the Beatitudes into Igbo. As Jonas translated the gospel, Obi Ossai was so impressed with his eloquence and apparent erudition. Moreover, Obi Ossai exclaimed, you must stop with me, you must teach me and my people. The white people can go up the river without you that they may leave you here until they return, or until other people come. Obi Ossai's response to the gospel message portrays that him and his subjects have warmly and gladly received the gospel message.

John Christopher Taylor

John Christopher Taylor was part of the CMS team who accompanied the 1857 expedition and evangelization of Igboland. According to Ogunewu³⁰, he was born around the year 1815 in Sierra Leone of Igbo parents (an Isuama father and an Arochukwu mother), who had earlier been sold into slavery from the Igbo country of present Nigeria, but were later rescued and settled with other freed slaves in Sierra Leone. He studied at the Charlotte primary school and at Fourah Bay College, Freetown. Having grown up in Sierra Leone, Taylor was tremendously influenced by its Christian environment. This led him to a strong commitment to the Christian faith which eventually culminated in the ordained ministry of the church. He served first as an Anglican catechist in the Temne mission, and then was pastor of Bathurst Church, Freetown. He was also a schoolmaster for



sixteen years, and was subsequently ordained as a priest by the Bishop of London in 1859.

J. C. Taylor was appointed to sail together with others for the 1857 expedition. According to Ekechi³¹ the CMS came to Onitsha on July 26, 1857. The mission at Onitsha was under an African Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who later went to Rabba, the Nupeland capital in Northern Nigeria. J. C. Taylor, therefore, headed the Onitsha mission. Accompanying Taylor was Simon Jonas, an expert in expeditions in 1841 and 1854, and was called the first apostle of the Igbo because of his missionary achievements in Aboh. When Crowther left, Taylor now the leader of Onitsha mission according to Dike³² who observed that Reverend J. C. Taylor kept himself busy preaching, teaching, visiting, building, healing, settling quarrels, studying the language and writing journals. While Simon Jonas, the catechist, assisted Taylor in his missionary works. Anagwu³³ comments that, Rev. J .C Taylor laid the foundation of the first Church in Igbo land in 1867. As reviewed from his diary, one of the services held by Taylor, as Dike³⁴ notes, expresses Taylor's surprise on the number of people, about 500 to 600 souls, that turned up for the afternoon service and the orderly conduct of the adults. Taylor later opened a school as one of the important tasks in his mission and a week after, twelve children enrolled in the school. In the words of Okeke³⁵, for the C.M.S. represented by Taylor, nothing short of a comprehensive education was advocated and contemplated. The curriculum produced by Taylor and the responses by the Igbo were dictated by the contingencies of need and opportunity. J. C. Taylor made sure that in the mission schools and church activities, vernacular was used in teaching the students, preaching and teaching catechism for deeper understanding. It further gave sense of belonging to the indigenous peoples.

The British system of education introduced by the CMS under the leadership of Taylor, no doubt resulted to the evangelization and civilization of the indigenous people. The result was that it produced a literate Christian laity who in turn served the missionaries and colonial masters as catechists, teachers and clerks in colonial offices. Indigenous people who were educated, got employed and this improved their standard of living. Also, J. C. Taylor was committed Christian who was so engrossed with daily studying of the Bible and wanted the converts to do likewise. This made him to attempt translating the Bible into the Igbo language. This was for the indigenous people to have unrestricted access in studying the bible. According to Mordi and Ajiboye³⁶, the first translation of the Bible was made into Onitsha dialect or the Upper Niger dialect by Rev. J. C. Taylor who was the first Igbo Bible translator. He translated the Gospels, Acts, and some Epistles of Paul between 1860 and 1868. Hair³⁷ notes that in terms of translation, the outstanding exception among them however, was John Christopher Taylor his major interest was in the Isuama Igbo dialect and he translated portions of the New Testament, the Liturgy, a primer for Igbo at Akassa in the Niger Delta, Dr. Watt's First Catechism, some prayers and hymns, the Ten Commandments and an extensive Igbo vocabulary in the Isuama dialect.

Okeke (2006) observes that Taylor's labours in translation introduced the Igbo to the art of reading. This in turn enabled them to master English language and opened up for them the immense wealth in literacy. Tasie³⁸ views that the attention now being paid to the languages of the Upper and Lower Niger Delta especially Igbo language as a subject for serious academic study and research was in a sense pioneered by Taylor. It is indubitable that following his linguistic sagacity, a primer for Igbo language was attributed to Crowther in 1857, but the monumental



contributions of J. C. Taylor to the development of Igbo literacy and vocabulary cannot be relegated to the background. Okeke³⁹ observes that the gigantic task of reducing Igbo sounds into syllables, words and sentences was entrusted to him. Taylor's translation of some parts of the Bible into Igbo language, played vital role in the development and preservation of Igbo language. Taylor's evangelistic works spread across other towns in Igboland, Taylor wisely concentrated on his pastoral works and made numerous successes. He applied effective missionary strategies such as respect for others, tolerance, love and care which yielded the desired result.

Joseph Shanahan

Father Joseph Shanahan, C.S.Sp. is an Irish priest, who belongs to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans). According to Okafor⁴⁰, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was founded by Claude Francois Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and Francis Mary Paul Libermann (1802-1852). Just like J. C. Taylor, Shanahan did not come with the first RCM team that evangelized Igboland rather he came in 1902. After his arrival, Father Shanahan succeeded Father Lejuene and in 1920 he was consecrated bishop. Before his consecration as bishop, he spent years carrying out his missionary activities in the Igbo territory. Okpalike and Nwadiakor⁴¹ describe him as a missionary with insights, initiatives, dynamism, and pragmatism. Shanahan displayed a host of innate and special qualities through his character; he showed remarkable physical strength and his intellectual vigour was unimpaired. He was humanistic and evangelism oriented in his missionary work in the Igbo territory.

According to Oranusi⁴², his closeness to the locals created a sense of warmth and acceptance that portrays the true value of the African concept of *Ubuntu*. In turn, their friendliness with



Shanahan and his acceptance, promoted free entry into the region. His discernment helped him see the internal devastation caused by their antagonism towards each other. He also noticed their depression which was caused by both systems of governance, colonial and the slave masters. Consequently, he filled the vacuum in their lives created by their surrounding circumstances. This gave the indigenous people a sense of belonging, and created a strong bond between him and the host community. Hence, they were receptive to the gospel message. Father Shanahan (later Bishop) as the head of the Spiritan Mission in Igboland linked the school apostolate with a true and healthy Christian evangelism. According to Omenka:

A report from the Onitsha town mission in 1906 clearly highlights the intentions of the Spiritan missionaries as regards the Catholic schools. Our objective would not be to train clerks or employees for commerce or for the Government. Our aim especially in this big town (Onitsha), which is like a gate to the interior is to form future catechists and future school masters for the Igbo country. In accordance with the strict demands of the government education regulations, the pupils are scrupulously drilled in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English composition, and some elements of science, however, the emphasis is on religious instructions, catechism, church songs, and the Scriptures. Finding this strategy very useful and in the bid to expand the mission frontiers, Father Shanahan began his drive into the interior, establishing teacher/catechist stations with schools wherever possible⁴³.

Shanahan was extraordinary in applying these novel strategies in his mission work. He adapted these strategies and impinged on

them his innate view of the human mind and dignity. He was sure that Western education would not only create job opportunities for the converts rather it would also serve as a vital tool for evangelism. Therefore, he immediately plunged into implementing his plan by utilising personnel, finance, and land, as well as gaining the support of the village chiefs who were already eager to ensure the establishment of both church and school in their respective towns.

With his base at Onitsha, Father Shanahan (Later Bishop Shanahan) carried the Catholic Church into the entire Igboland through a formidable educational strategy. Okochi⁴⁴ observes the educational programmes of Shanahan and documented that he made decision to concentrate on education as a means of evangelization. During his headship of the missionary team there was some rapport between the missionaries and the British colonial masters. He ensured the multiplication of Catholic schools in his area of jurisdiction. Shanahan appreciated education not only for the purposes of evangelization but also for every aspect of human existence. He made sure that people were not discriminated against on any grounds when it came to education.

Father Shanahan's evangelism and education drive during his missionary work in Igbo land yielded fruitful results. Okafor⁴⁵ reports that twenty years after he became the Bishop in 1925, the schools that were barely 22 in 1906 had risen to 1,190 in number in the whole Vicariate. Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) remarks that Bishop Shanahan revolutionized the Catholic approach to evangelization, and was the most dominant and prominent figure in the history of missionaries and founders of Christianity in Igboland. He exercised such dominance in Igboland that the British even referred to the area as the Shanahan's country.

Bishop Shanahan handed over the mantle of leadership to Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. (later Archbishop) in 1932.

Conclusion

The advent of Christianity in Igbo territory was never an accident as it was divinely orchestrated. However, certain personalities made enormous sacrifice to ensure that the light of Christianity illuminates Igbo geographical territory. They left their comfort zones coming to Igbo land, they spent their time, resource and so forth to ensure that the gospel message stood firm in the hearts of the indigenous people. Thus, the selected Christian missionaries made impressive contributions which were vital to the growth and development of Christianity in Igboland. Presently, greater population of Igbo people profess the Christian faith.

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