

AN APPRAISAL OF IFEKA-MOLLER'S DEPRIVATION THEORY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN IGBO LAND

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Abstract

The write-up studies or investigates the sociological variables found in the religious change that took place in Igbo land or eastern part of Nigeria, as it is being explained by deprivation theory of Ifeka-Moller. With the coming of Christianity and Muslim religions in the shores of Africa and later to the Eastern part of Nigeria, there was a mass exodus to Christian religion by the traditionalists or votaries of African/ Igbo traditional religion. Ifeka-Moller's derivation theory was an attempt to explain the reason for the mass exodus of traditionalists into Christian religion from Igbo traditional religion. The deprivation theory gave or explained some reasons why conversion or movement into Christian religion was fast in some places while in the other areas it was slow in conversion. Again the main purpose of the deprivation theory is to point out that the socio-structural factors are the main reasons for conversion to the Christian religion. However, the uses of thematic and sociological approaches were adopted to study the above theory. From the comparative analysis, it is found out that no single factor can account for conversion into Christian religion in the Eastern part of Nigeria and that most of the votaries of traditional religion are going back to their traditional religion.

Introduction

Religious change in Igbo land and Africa has been explained and analyzed by scholars in many ways and from different point of views. Yet no explanation seems to exhaust considerably what took place in Igbo land or Africa in general in terms of this religious change because every day new factors keep coming up that necessitated the change of religious belief in many places. What necessitated religious change in one area may not be the reason for change in another area. Hence theories of religious change multiply every time with different people and in different places or areas. Hence Metuh (1985) grouped the causes of religious change in Africa into two factors- religious and non religious factors. Religious factors according to Metuh refer to impulses of change generated by religious convictions and activities. These activities include missionary work, revivalism, syncretism, proselytism and so forth. Non religious factors include urbanization, socio-structural factors, globalization, education, conquest and so forth. Though when critically viewed or examined, one will notice that religious and non religious factors overlap with each other in the process of religious change.

Evidently most theories of religious change emphasize more of non religious factors. Some sociologists like Fernandez (1964) believed that social-structural factors are vital in the emergence of new religion or religious change itself. Trimmingham (1955) attributed the mass movement from the African traditional religion to Christianity to the collapse of the structures of traditional African societies and African world views which he called shattered microcosm theory. This simply means that the impact of

globalization, industrial economy and education and so forth upset the social cohesion of African structure which is based on tribal or ethnic structures and African subsistence economy (Metuh, 1985). Some intellectualists like Horton (1971) argued that since religion is above all a system of beliefs and ideas about the world, unknown realities and God, innovations in cultic practices and movement from one religious cult to another will be explained from results of people attempting to make intellectual sense of new and old systems of thought. The thought systems of Horton and Trimmingham are almost the same thing except that Horton cast or built his own argument on the intellectual frame work.

But Ifeka-Moller (1974) in her theory of socio- structural factors or deprivation theory explained that it is the deprivation and disillusionment suffered by accepting social change with its unfulfilled desire among the people of Eastern part of Nigeria that made them to accept new religion, which they saw as alternative source of power and development. This can be understood because those who accepted social change before them developed fast and gained control of power in everything. Hence Christian religion becomes another alternative to be where others are in terms of development, education, urbanization and power control. With the above aim in mind in embracing new religion, the question arises thus, can Christian religion alone offer these powers and developments, and sustain them through this age of technological advancement or globalization? Obviously traditional religion could not give them that power and development needed at such moment. Hence migration to new religion became necessary so that the Igbo traditional society or the Eastern part of the Nigeria will be in the same pedestal with other parts of the African countries, which have gained this power and influence.

In this write-up, we are going to look into the socio-structural factors enumerated by the above theory of deprivation. Conversions in Igbo land from traditional religion to Christian religion involve a lot of changes in their cultural, value and attitudinal outfits. These changes in values and attitudinal behaviors resulted from the encounter with new religions and cultures. These encounters are noticeably in every facet of Igbo people: economically, socially, politically, and culturally. This religious change and its effects can be understood from the recent effects of corona virus disease (COVID-19) that took place in the world. The pandemic brought a lot of changes in the life of people which may or may not be permanent. The resultant effects of this religious change have been a direct and indirect introduction of new values seen in the traditional societies today, where many people are resorting back to their original or traditional religion and culture. The above view seems to revert back the famous saying that the gods are on retreat. This accounts to the reason of syncretism or revival of traditional religion today. Hence the gods are coming back to take possession of their land after being on retreat by the initial impact or force of urbanization, globalization and technological advancement that tried to pull down the tribal or ethnic structures. This indicates that no one factor can account for religious change found in many places or do any religion still remains the same after encounter with other religion or culture.

This write-up also examined the social structural approach or deprivation theory of Ifeka-Moller in the religious change that took place in Eastern part of Nigeria and how the structural factors facilitated the different rates of conversion of people from Igbo

traditional religion to Christianity. Again we see Ifeka-Moller's critique on Horton's intellectualist explanation of conversion to Christianity which is the off-shoot of Ifeka-Moller's write-up. And to evaluate how deprivation theory stands the taste of time as of today and its relevance in explaining the religious change today.

A Social Structural Approach of Ifeka-Moller (Deprivation Theory)

Ifeka-Moller (1974) started by disclaiming the Horton's claim that his intellectualist approach to religious change in Africa facilitated the clear understanding of conversion from traditional religion to Christianity. Ifeka-Moller responded to this claim of Horton when she said that:

There is, of course, an extensive literature on the psychological and theological aspects of conversion. Nevertheless, neither Peel nor Horton spell out clearly what they mean by "conversion". I take conversion to mean a change of affiliation from cult to church, or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist church. I leave aside problems concerning the extent to which a move from one kind of religious group to another is associated with changes of attitude and behavior. In Eastern Nigeria the only objective criteria of conversion are church attendance figures, statistics on Baptisms and communicants, and the number of buildings claimed by a denomination. (p. 57).

Ifeka-Moller in her theory analyzes the causes of conversion to mission Christianity, and the growth of Aladura churches in eastern Nigeria from 1921 to 1966. This she did by focusing on social structural factors as the main cause of conversion from traditional cult to Christianity. This is in line with non-religious factors which Metuh (1985) enumerated as one of the causes of religious change in Igbo land. The social structural approach according to Ifeka-Moller (1974) will help to tackle general problem with religious change everywhere. The theory will also answer why some communities resisted conversion entirely, while in other villages large numbers of people went over to the missionaries and then to Aladura churches. Ifeka-Moller (1974) assumed:

Therefore, that social structural factors are the most fruitful field of research, rather than ideas and values which form the core of a belief system. For if a cosmology is embedded in a social, as were indigenous cosmologies in east Nigeria, and as Aladura belief is today, then we can only appreciate the extent to which ideas have shaped such new religious forms as the Aladura churches if we focus on changes in the social order. It is, then, changes in the fabric of society, and of the local community, which provided the old cosmology with the raw material for rearticulating its premises. Likewise, old social forms associated with the little community sustain a personalized, spiritual, world view... (p. 61).

Ifeka-Moller explained that the mass conversion to Christian religion and Aladura was a consequence of social changes like incorporation into the new world economy, the imposition of new political roles under the colonial system, and a growing realization among the inhabitants of communities around the oil palm belt. These communities failed to obtain the rewards promised by acceptance of these radical changes. Hence Christianity on its own promised a new kind of power, the power of the white man, which people could use to discover the secret of his technological superiority. This of course resulted in mass movement of villages which experienced intensive changes went over rapidly and in large numbers, to the mission churches.

The deprivation theory of Ifeka-Moller explained that the hypothesis posited, has a heuristic value since it was able to handle both the norm and the significant exceptions found in the religious change in Igbo land. Having taking Eastern Nigeria (Onitsha-Awka area of Igbo land) as a test case for social-structural approach in religious change, where Christianity has advanced slowly, and people have been strongly exposed to mission contact, urbanization, and social mobility within the western imposed occupational hierarchy since the early twentieth century. This means that the people in these districts have experienced much the same kind of social changes as people in other villages where conversions have occurred on a massive scale. But the communities of Onitsha and Awka districts have not, as yet, undergone extensive conversion to mission Christianity. Ifeka-Moller (1974) explained the above phenomenon by arguing that:

In 1953 the Ibo divisions of Onitsha and Awka were recorded as having high literacy but low Christianity ratios. The town of Onitsha, too, is a place where conversion is less pronounced than in the triangle. It is a town of some commercial and semi-industrial importance on the river Niger, which consists of a new riverside settlement and an old, traditional, quarter. The old town of Inland Onitsha has been exposed to Christian influence since the mid-nineteenth century. But the population is by no means all avowedly Christian. In 1955 some 21 per cent claimed to be uninterested and uninvolved in any Christian denomination... a number of families in Inland Town and to a lesser extent in such adjacent village-groups as Ogidi, Oba, and Nnobi have gained a pre-eminent position in the Nigerian elite over the years. Onitsha men and their families achieved an early ascendancy among east Nigerians as native court employees, government clerks, Anglican clergymen, teachers, doctors and lawyers. Entrepreneurs from Onitsha and the nearby town of Nnewi were among the first to establish a substantial stake in tin mine contracting at Jos and in gold prospecting at Minna, both in Nigeria.... Therefore, many families in Inland Towns were already obtaining some kind of share in economic and

political power in colonial Nigeria by the nineteen twenties. (pp. 69-70).

From the above quotation, it shows that Onitsha-Awka areas have experienced much development in terms of social-structural factors that is why conversion to Christian religion is minimally slow. This showed that it was deprivation suffered by people even when they have been exposed to technological advancement of the white men that made them to choose Christianity as compensation to them in other parts of eastern Nigeria. Crowder (1964) reiterated that the reactions and resistance to the white man's presence in the Onitsha area seems to have been most intense during the latter part of the nineteenth century, before the colonial rule was imposed. This in effect means that pressures on traditional culture in Onitsha-Awka areas have been contained through selective adjustment over a long period of time. Changes have come about gradually on its own though with social-structural developments, hence traditional setting had its ample time to adjust to new changes like modern commerce, literacy and Christianity. This explains the situation of Onitsha in those early years that people there have not been pushed by the suddenness of changes, and non-fulfillment of new goals, to reject the new order. According to Henderson (cited by Ifeka-Moller, 1974):

Onitsha people have created a 'mini-welfare' state in their community; they have the resources to support the elderly, the poor and indigent. Internal cleavages based on differences in the distribution of wealth and power have, therefore, been contained in Onitsha. (pp. 70-71).

All these above indicate that in the Onitsha-Awka towns the principal general condition of mass conversion to Christian growth was absent during the period being examined by Ifeka-Moller. And that religious change was slow which suggested that everything about modernization was important but not a sufficient condition for rapid and large-scale conversion. Such factors like literacy and modernization are only effective to general changes which are negatives in themselves. Above all, while Onitsha province did not grow in number in conversion at that time, Calabar and Owerri provinces grew rapidly in conversion due to promised fulfillment by white power /Christianity.

Differential Rates of Conversion to Christianity in Eastern Nigeria

Here Ifeka-Moller tried to differentiate between the general and proximate conditions that led to conversions in different zones in Eastern Nigeria. She enumerated colonial rule, negative economic change and political change as the general conditions that led to conversion to Christianity. Again on the proximate conditions, she enumerated inter-denominational rivalry and education as conditions that led to conversions more than any other condition in Eastern Nigeria.

General Conditions

Colonial Rule: Though it has been known that military might have helped the missionaries from the Europe to propagate their faith or conversion to Christianity. Afigbo (1981) affirmed that colonial conquest involves more than military defeat. It includes the successful control and use of the political and religious institutions of the militarily conquered places to meet some of the needs of the colonial power. The success gained by the British Masters helped them in the administration of the eastern

people. Hence it is believed that in the Onitsha area, people are said to have believed that conversion would provide them with immunity from government as well as protection from the consul men or thugs who maltreat villagers. So it will not be out of place for villagers to migrate into the new religion to escape maltreatment and to have access to the mainspring of Whiteman's technological power. And this in essence is not really conversion that will really be a cause to change of religion hence Ifeka-Moller (1974) called it general condition to conversion.

Negative Economic Change: With the changes in inheritance laws, distribution of wealth and political institutions that were so much in evidence by the early twentieth century, when palm-oil became increasingly valuable, the villages in the oil-palm belt like Aba, Abak, Owerri, southern Bende and Okigwe were known to be maltreated, denied their rights because of economic policies introduced newly by the colonialists. Ifeka-Moller also pointed out that the Aba riots of 1929, which spread throughout parts of Ikot-Ekpene, Opobo, Abak, Owerri, and Bende divisions were believed by the colonial administration to have reached explosion point in villages surrounding palm-oil factories and ports. Their discontent and plain confusion at the depressed trading conditions, aroused mobs of angry women traders to even more violent attacks on the property and offices of the hated colonial administration. This again necessitated the influx of villagers to new religion.

Political Change: The British administrators extended its control over the southern part of Nigeria by setting up native authorities and native councils. It was here that the creation of warrant chiefs, appointees of the colonial government, aroused most resentment. According to Afigbo (1981):

They were Warrant Chiefs for two reasons. Firstly each of them was given a paper of recognition, the warrant, to distinguish him from any pretender and to leave his people in no doubt that he was the local representative of the government. Secondly, they all exercised artificial powers, that is the much of the power they exercised derived from the fact they had this warrant. Even those of them who were traditional political leaders came, because of the warrant, to exercise more powers than would have been possible for any man under the traditional political system. Because the power these men enjoyed was not rooted in their people's culture, the administration had to make it a policy to support them as much as possible. (p. 17).

This led to anti-British activities when some people wanted to drive the white man into the sea while others like those involved in the spirit movement of 1927 which spread rapidly through Abak and Uyo divisions expressed their unhappiness and displeasure through spirit possession. Though the British colonial administration sought to undo the harm believed to have been done to indigenous society in the era of warrant chiefs, this led to reviving the peoples' traditional system of government and administration by council whose members were the delegates of the different lineage

segments. From the above, it is observed that certain general conditions supporting large-scale conversion to mission Christianity were clearly seen among the communities of Calabar province and Owerri province.

Proximate Conditions for Conversion

Inter-denominational Rivalry: Ifeka-Moler (1974) showed that competitions among the various denominations, Catholic and Protestant scrambling for followers were most fierce among the Owerri and Calabar province. This, they did through many humanitarian activities for the people so that they can gain many Christian followers who were originally adherents of traditional religion. This also made the two rivalries to establish schools in different places which enable them to gain more followers to their new church. Obi (1985) reported that Shanaham used the same method (school apostolate) at Onitsha to gain or attract more followers when he noticed that missionaries before him had done most work of evangelization through other means and people were already exposed to western advancement.

Education: Most historians of the religious change in Eastern part of Nigeria believe strongly that it was the desire for education coupled with the competition between the denominations rather than the ambition to embrace the new faith that led to the rapid spread of Christian churches or religion in Igbo land. Abernethy (1969) affirmed that:

The African acceptance of education was clearly linked to employment opportunities created by the colonial presence. The British administration needed literate young men to fill minor positions; the mission needed teachers, business (such as the United Africa Co. Ltd., and John Holt's Ltd.) needed accountants, produce buyers and salesmen. Very soon funds spent to educate the young came to be regarded quite explicitly as an investment in future employment that would yield high and steadily increasing returns. (pp. 63-64).

This educational expansion accounted for mass conversion in Owerri and Calabar provinces which Ifeka-Moller (1974) referred to as triangle. She explained further that there is not however a complete correlation between high literacy rates and large scale conversion. For Onitsha division which lies outside of the triangle, had a high literacy rate but one of the lowest recorded percentages of Christian converts in 1953. Ifeka-Moller (1974) later affirmed that:

While the direction of change in Onitsha division led towards a materially rewarding participation in the colonial system, the general conditions which prevailed in the triangle resulted in people searching for an alternative source of power- the sacred. Thus, the sufficient condition of massive conversion was not operational in the Onitsha-Awka area. (p. 66).

This in the final analysis showed that the rapid and mass conversion that took place in Calabar and Owerri areas which stemmed from education and missionary rivalry did

not affect or push conversion in the Onitsha area. Again conversion to Christianity from traditional religion has different factors depending on the area concerned. But deprivation suffered in one area more than any other thing necessitated conversion in the triangle areas.

The Implications of Socio-Structural factors in the explanation of Religious change in Igbo Land

In this age of globalization and technological advancement, one can easily ask: is this theory still relevant in explaining the religious change in Igbo land or Eastern part of Nigeria? Or has this theory solved the problem of religious change in Igbo land completely? According to Gray (cited by Metuh, 1987) “any thesis that claims to provide an overall causal explanation of a phenomenon as complex as conversion in Africa is a suspect” (p.23). A survey through the various explanations of religious change shows that conversion is a multi-causal phenomenon. Most of the researchers have enumerated various factors of religious change in Africa. This means that the process of conversion in Africa varied from one part of Africa to another. Ideally Ifeka-Moller (1974) stressed this fact that there were places of rapid conversion and places of slow conversion when the same factor of conversion is applied indifferent areas. So one can assert fully that there is no mono-causal explanation to religious change in eastern part of Nigeria, talk more of African continent.

The explanation of religious change in Igbo land seen above has thrown up series of reactions and has many implications. First Ifeka-Moller’s definition of conversion to mean a change of affiliation from cult to church, or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist church, leaving aside problems concerning the extent to which a move from one kind of religious group to another is associated with changes of attitude and behavior has a little problem in terms of real conversion and the practice of morality today. For her the only objective criteria of conversion are church attendance figures, statistics on baptisms and communicants, and the number of buildings claimed by a denomination. The definition of conversion seemed to be the same with what Fisher (1973) considered to be only change of affiliation and change of attitude. For change of affiliation could be from any domination meaning that all churches are the same in terms of its ethics, liturgy, and so on.

Ifeka-Moller’s deprivation theory supports fully the emergence or the proliferation of churches found in every corner of Nigerian societies. This situation of having many churches everywhere has not solved any problem in the society. Rather all manners of crimes keep breeding in the society in the different forms. The situation proliferation of churches in Nigeria and Africa is awful, with much religious worship or centers, many crimes which range from kidnapping, thuggery, banditry, and bank fraud by young people are order of the day in a society where worshipping centers are many. Opening up of one worshipping center or another, in fact are seen as a way of making money in the society or in Nigeria, hence people are deceived and they fall prey to many abominable ritual sacrifices. This accounts for people belonging to many denominations and at the same time going back to the traditional religion or combining both in their religious practices.

Explaining the impact of opening religious houses in every corner in Nigeria or Africa, Ndiokwere (2019) expressed that Christianity in Africa is already in trouble because it has nothing to achieve both morally and structurally. According to him:

The impact of the new religious movements on Christianity in Africa is tremendous. Shying away from the realities of this phenomenon can only lead to disillusionment....Likewise, any superficial and hasty conclusions drawn about their successes will not resolve any problem, but will rather lead to more complications. Therefore some responsible theological investigations have become imperative, and more so, at this stage of crucial discussion and debate concerning the successes and failures of missionary enterprise in Africa. (p. 7).

Though, the above problem can be traced back to the partition of Africa by the colonial masters, where the early Christian missionaries followed their respective national governments to the shores of Africa for evangelization. This caused the influx of missionaries with their different religious outlooks in the countries of Africa which are prevalent in Igbo land today. According to Ndiokwere (2019) the acrimony created by such divisions has continued with the establishment of thousands of churches in Africa. Hence in Africa today, Igbo land (Eastern Nigeria) not exempted, have self-made or proclaimed prophets of various religious churches. False prophecy and divination have now taken the order of the day in most religious houses where wealth and progress have become the theme of preaching by most self-acclaimed prophets.

With this trend of opening churches in every corner of the Igbo land, it leads to proper lack of inculturation. The cry of incarnating the gospel messages in the life and culture of Igbo people will continue to be a mirage because the propagators are not interested in improving the lives of people through the gospel messages. They are more interested either in money or being the overseers of churches. This continues to weaken the message of the gospel where it ought to build up and strengthen up among the people. This accounts for the type of preachers and gospel messages being preached by them. Once the message of the gospel does not relate with ways of making people to be rich and not about prophecy, the preacher will fail and remain alone. This has become a serious challenge to incarnate the gospel message in Igbo land and effects of proliferation of churches. Hence a serious attention is needed to overturn the status quo for proper evangelization in Igbo land. If not checked it will continue to breed evils and materialism in the society, again there will be continuous threats and religious conflicts among the adherents of different religions of the world like Judaism, Islamic religion and of course among the votaries of Igbo or African traditional religion.

Though Metuh (1987) argued that the reasons for mushrooming of churches are many and varied. According to him:

The intolerant attitude of many Christian missionaries towards traditional beliefs and practices was an important factor, but not the only one. The translation of the Bible, which provided “an independent standard of reference” to legitimize African

grievances, was also a potent factor. In many cases independency was a protest against colonialism and the control exercised by foreign missionaries. (p. 24).

The responses to conversion differ greatly from one culture to the other. This is in sharp contrast with the deprivation theory posited by Ifeka-Moller (1974) which attributed social-structural factors as the main cause of conversion in Eastern Nigeria. Roland and Crowther (cited by Metuh, 1987) argued that:

The process of Christian conversion has varied from one part of Africa to another over the past 100 years; in some areas, such as Buganda (Uganda), entire populations accepted the new faith quickly; in others such as most of the traditionally pastorists areas, there were only a handful of converts. In some areas, such as most of southern Africa, the chiefs were the first to be converted, in others such as the Akan kingdoms of Ghana, they were the last; in some areas mainly women have become Christians, in others both sexes. (P. 24).

Again Horton and Peel (1976) refuted the claim that Christianity promised a new kind of power, the power of the white man, which people could use to discover the secret of his technological superiority. According to Horton and Peel, she is asking us to believe that converts saw Christianity on the one hand as an alternative to secular power, and on the other hand as a means to such power. For them one does not have to be an intellectualist to find the attribution of such mutually inconsistent views unconvincing. Explaining further Horton and Peel (1976) state that:

...more serious attention to the way in which converts see Christianity shows that they hold neither of the views which Ifeka-Moller attributes to them. Thus, on the other hand, there is no evidence we know of that converts in Eastern Nigeria or elsewhere in West Africa see Christianity as an alternative to success in the modern world. Rather, they see it as the means to such success. As such, it is relevant, both to the deprived individual who sees it as means of narrowing the gap between current reality and aspirations, and to the successful individual who sees it as a means of accounting for success in the past and of sustaining success in the future. (p. 491).

From the above argument, Horton and Peel have pointed out that Eastern part of Nigeria viewed Christian religion as an efficient means of tapping the universal power of a Supreme Being whose existence they already acknowledged and have been worshipping earlier. But the means used by the votaries of Igbo traditional religion to worship their Supreme Being were poorly developed or termed fetish by the Europeans. It was true that the Europeans came with more elaborate and developed liturgies of worshipping their Supreme Being, but it was the technological advancement, economic

superiority that suppressed the Igbo traditional religion rather than the desire to worship the European God.

Conclusion

The above analysis of Ifeka-Moller has enlightened us on the religious change that took place in Africa in general and how the socio-structural theory or deprivation theory explained the conversion that took place in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Non religious factors played more roles in the conversion of Igbo People. As we have noticed the issue of conversion is a multi- dimensional phenomenon as against the view of some scholars who tied the issue of conversion to one factor. The interaction of traditional religion with the world religions and social factors really created a difference in the life of the traditional people or simply put in the Eastern part of Nigeria. This brought about displacement of values and reinforcement of some values. From there, we have off shoot of many types of religious groups which is the aftermath of this great encounter which Ifeka-Moller (1974) called the white power. With Ifeka-Moller's view on conversion to mean a change of affiliation from cult to church, or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist church, this phenomenon at hand leads to proliferation of churches everywhere and these churches tend not to propagate the message of salvation but for gains that comes from being a prophet or being an over seer of a religious group.

Ifeka-Moller should be applauded for raising the status of traditional religion in the same parlance with the other world religions, the worshipping of Supreme Being is done in traditional religion but not with the same ritual process. This is also confirmed by Horton and Peel (1979) who pointed out that the only difference is that one is universal more than the other. This accounts in a way the going back of people to the traditional religion in solving their basic problems and even worshipping of their ancestral gods and at the same time, accommodating other forms of ritual processes in the worship of supreme being. The social factors or the economic factors also play important role on the emergence of churches today in the soil of Africa when properly viewed as Ifeka-Moller posited in the deprivation theory.

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