

# **CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF NKWERRE BLACKSMITHING TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE, 1913 – 1960**

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## **Abstract**

The advent of Christianity paved way for colonialism in most parts of African communities. These two external variables – Christianity and colonialism – have in no small measures, transformed the communities they traversed. The advent of missionaries and the spread of the Christian faith were accompanied by colonial manipulations. Thus, Nkwerre, a small Igbo community with tradition of blacksmithing technological culture was caught up in Christian and colonial webs. The promising doctrines of Christianity, colonial legislations and the integration of Igboland into a capitalist economy stunted Nkwerre blacksmithing technology. Therefore, the paper appraises the role of the Siamese twin of Christianity and colonialism in the gradual disintegration of Nkwerre blacksmithing technological culture. It argues that African communities should be cautious to embrace Western culture. The data for this paper are derived from primary and secondary sources which include archival materials, journal articles, books and oral traditions. The methodology is narrative, thematic and adopted multidisciplinary approach.

Keywords: Christianity, Colonialism, Nkwerre, Blacksmithing, Technology, Culture

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## **Introduction**

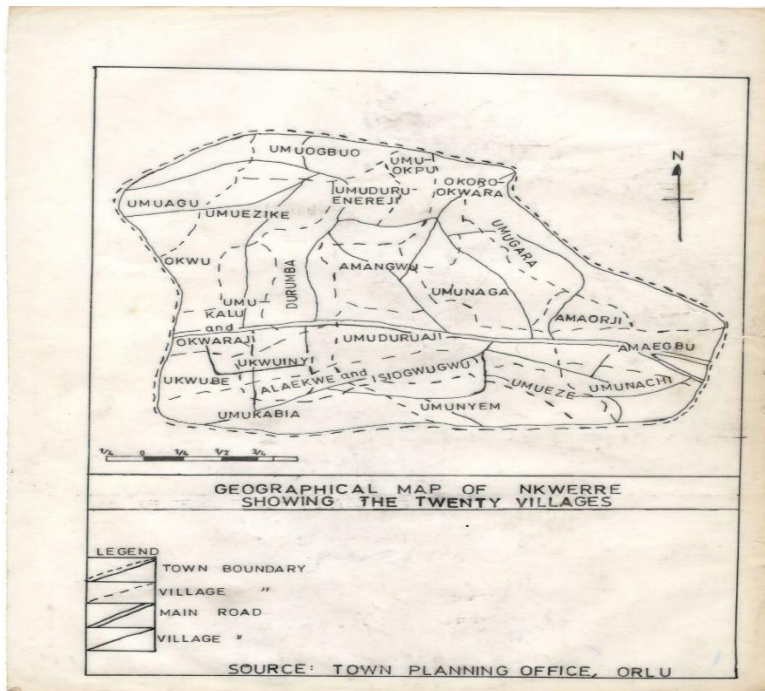
*Nkwerre* blacksmithing technology was acknowledged to have evolved from the manufacture of simple farm implements such as cutlasses, hoes, staples, among others farm and household equipment to gun production. As a result, *Nkwerre* town was usually addressed with the sobriquet, *Nkwerre – Opia Egbe* (*Nkwerre*, the gun manufacturer). As Isichei remarked that, “*Nkwerre*, in southern Igboland was a famous town of blacksmiths and traders; its smiths in gun manufacture gave the town the name *Nkwerre Opia Egbe* (*Nkwerre*, the gun manufacturer).”<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, pre-colonial *Nkwerre* traditional technology in blacksmithing stagnated in the face of Christianity and colonialism. The advent of European explorers, traders, and missionaries in the nineteenth century were gateways to colonial conquest. By the 1850s, Christian activities had gradually found a place in Igboland. In 1857, the first permanent mission in Igboland was established at Onitsha, under the leadership of the Reverend John Christopher Taylor, who was born in Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage.<sup>2</sup> Between 1902 and 1920, the missionaries moved into Igbo hinterland. They established churches and won new converts in *Nkwerre* in 1913.<sup>3</sup> One major factor responsible for the quick spread of Christianity was colonial conquest. By 1902, the British forces had launched a devastating military expedition against the ‘almighty’ Aro people whose influence had hitherto traversed Igboland with their *Ibini-Ukpabi*, a deity which they nursed from obscurity to an oracle of Delphic status.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, like other communities in Igboland, *Nkwerre* capitulated to the power and authority of British imperial government.<sup>5</sup> The British administration employed the services of the Siamese twin of Christianity and Colonialism to undermine traditional blacksmithing technology. One of the measures taken was to put legislations in place that encumbered the growth of indigenous technology. For example, indigenous gun manufacture was made illegal and blacksmiths were criminalized.<sup>6</sup> In addition, like every other Igbo economy, *Nkwerre* was constrained to operate under a colonial capitalist economy guarded by unequal trade exchange.<sup>7</sup> Measures such as loan advancement were put in place to encourage expatriate firms while indigenous traders never had

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access to loan from banks. The above analysis was corroborated by Basden who averred that “smithing was a source of great profit to the smiths, and they stand to lose considerably under changed condition of affairs brought by colonial restrictions and legislations.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while colonialism served the purpose of military and political subjugation against the practitioners of blacksmithing, the doctrines of Christianity were infused to alienate prospective apprentices not to associate with the cultural routine common with blacksmithing. As a result, most converts never allowed their sons to participate in the yearly traditional rituals associated with *Nkwerre* blacksmithing. It is the aim of the paper to appraise the role Christianity and Colonialism played in the gradual disintegration of *Nkwerre* blacksmithing technological culture.

### **Geography and Influence of the Environment**

*Nkwerre* is located in Imo State in southeastern Nigeria. It was the administrative headquarters of *Nkwerre/Isu* local government. It lies between latitude 5<sup>0</sup> and 6<sup>0</sup>N of the Equator, and on longitude 7<sup>0</sup>E of the Greenwich Meridian.<sup>9</sup> The town is situated astride the *Orlu-Anara-Owerre* trunk B-road at about forty kilometers North-east of *Owerre*, the capital of Imo State. *Nkwerre* is about twenty square kilometers in area. It is bounded on the North by *Amaokwara* and *Eziama*, on the South by *Umudi* and *Owerre-Nkwoji*, on the East by *Isikenesi* and on the West by *Amaigbo*.<sup>10</sup> *Nkwerre* lies on the southern part of the *Awka-Orlu* upland sand and topographically stands on a rugged local relief with both its highest and lowest part at *Umugara*.<sup>11</sup> The town is drained by one main stream, *Iyibeke*, which rises in the North-east and flows to the South-west. Some east-flowing tributaries of *Orashi* River also form small streams which meander through the Northern and Eastern parts of the town, forming natural boundaries at some places.



**Figure 1:** Geographical Map of Nkwerre  
**Source:** Town Planning Office, Orlu, Imo State

The geography of an area influences and stimulates human activities and conditions. Geography determines agricultural and other forms of economic engagements and pursuits. Limited land size as well as the challenges of soil erosion and acidity in Igboland conditioned the people’s specialization and interest in other businesses besides agriculture. Furthermore, *Nkwerre* geology is within the *Bende-Ameke* formation. The rocks are composed of lignite seams, clay, gravel, and minute particles of iron stones.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that these stones were of great use to the people, particularly the blacksmiths in pre-colonial period. The climate of *Nkwerre* is typical of the rainforest belt commonly found in Igboland. It has an annual rainfall of about 203.2centimeters (80 inches) and a temperature range of between 70<sup>0</sup> and 90<sup>0</sup>F.<sup>13</sup> The

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primary rainforest has given way to secondary forest. Perhaps, due to extensive bush burning and prolonged land usage which has resulted in soil exhaustion.<sup>20</sup> The situation had helped to condition the economic orientation of the people.<sup>14</sup>

The limited land size for farming activities in Igboland was further compounded by physical loss of land through constant soil erosion and deterioration. More so, the situation became more worrisome by population explosion and increasing number of people who needed land for farming.<sup>15</sup> This was as well compounded by constant use of land which led to diminution in space available to individual farmer. The effects of limited land were rightly captured by Dike when he remarked that:

Ibos [sic] pressing against limited land resources had, of necessity, to seek other avenues of livelihood outside (and inside— my emphasis) the tribal boundaries. In the nineteenth century and earlier the growth of a large non-agricultural population in areas where the land was too small or too poor to sustain the people gave rise to some measure of specialization among sections of the tribe.<sup>16</sup>

Responding to the challenge of land shortage *vis-à-vis* population explosion and pressure, Igbo people turned to other measures of specialization in non-agricultural sector. Thus, out of necessity to seek for means of livelihood other than land dependent, *Nkwerre* people engaged blacksmithing business— which in itself, required innovativeness and hard work.

### **Blacksmithing Technology in *Nkwerre* – Origin and Growth**

The beginning of blacksmithing in *Nkwerre* has varying narrations. This is because of the complexities of different traditions of origins in respect to the metal industry. Be that as it may, it is generally recognized that smithing was a renowned profession practiced among *Nkwerre* people in pre-colonial and colonial Igboland. The fact that the people of *Nkwerre* were renowned blacksmiths and learnt the act of guns making was referenced in the report of J.

Cook, the Assistant District Officer at *Orlu*.<sup>17</sup> *Nkwerre* oral traditions and existing literature have also sustained the argument.<sup>18</sup> Differing views on the origin of smithing in *Nkwerre* are discussed and synthesized in subsequent paragraphs.

There are many myths that surrounded the beginning of blacksmithing in *Nkwerre*. One of the myths explained that *Chukwu Okike* (the biggest *Chi* that creates), sent *Ogadazu* (the *Nkwerre* god of Iron and blacksmithing) to *Okato* forest in *Umunachi, Nkwerre*.<sup>19</sup> According to the myth, *Ogadazu* was instructed to teach any son of *Okwaraeshi* – the legendary founder of *Nkwerre* – the art of blacksmithing. It was narrated that *Ogadazu* roamed round *Okato* forest for four days (*Eke, Ori, Afor* and *Nkwor* – name of days in Igboland worldview) before he met a man called *Nachi* who became the father and founder of *Umunachi* (sons of the divine smith and ruler).<sup>20</sup> On *Nkwor* day, *Ogadazu* met *Nachi* in *Okato* forest where the latter was gathering fruits. *Ogadazu* provided *Nachi* with a sledge hammer, an anvil and a pair of bellows – basic paraphernalia of blacksmithing. He taught *Nachi* the knowledge of metallurgy and how to turn iron ore into iron and use the iron in forging any metalware he wanted. *Nkwerre* blacksmiths eulogizes *Ogadazu* thusly:

*Ogadazu*, the god of iron and smithing in *Okato*, we eulogize you for your marvelous knowledge of metallurgy and in making us know how to turn lumps of ironstone to iron for cutting and forging smithing. *Ogadazu*, the god of iron and blacksmithing that drinks the blood of dogs, you perform wonders in the smithing and enables us your apprentices to turn ironstone into liquid iron and recreate the iron into metal wares such as machete (*nmaoge*), ritual staff (*oji*) hoe (*ogu*), panga (*nkpurunma*), spike (*ngugo*), razor (*aguwa*), iron gong (*ogele*), kitchen knife (*nmaekwu*), rattling gong (*ikpo*), hook (*ari*), spear (*aro*) fishing spear (*ube*), bracket (*nja*), raffia, palm knife (*efengwo*) and above all, the blacksmith who

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handed this divine knowledge to *Nkwerre* people. We shall always remain loyal to you.<sup>21</sup>

*Nachi* collected the sledge hammer, the anvil and the pair of bellow from *Ogadazu* and began the art of creating products from iron and metal through divine intervention. By continuously working with metals, *Nachi* got close-up image of the transcendental – the sacred – that went beyond matter. *Nachi*, the first *Nkwerre* blacksmith established his first forge near *Okato* forest, the abode of *Ogadazu*. From thence, blacksmithing passed from one family to the other and from village to village. Gradually, clans in *Nkwerre* family had its own forge and blacksmiths.<sup>22</sup> As the first *Nkwerre* blacksmith, *Nachi* occupied the *seat of the deity* and the pinnacle of importance. His knowledge of spiritual realities was from *Ogadazu*. *Nachi* became a diviner, an interpreter of oracle, and a transcendental link between the heavenly or spiritual.<sup>23</sup> He was not only a technician but a scientist who transformed iron into useful metalware. In *Nkwerre*, *Umunachi* village was recognized and celebrated as blacksmithing technology per excellence.

Another version of the tradition held that it was *Okwaraeshi* who introduced smithing into *Nkwerre*. The traditional ruler explained that it was the natural intelligence of *Okwaraeshi* that made it possible for blacksmithing to thrive.<sup>24</sup> Thus, through village contacts, the art of blacksmithing reached almost all the villages that formed *Nkwerre*. According to this view, blacksmithing started at *Onusa Nkwerre* where *Okwaraeshi* resided. *Okwara* explained that the exact time blacksmithing began in *Nkwerre* could hardly be dated in history. However, he claimed that this was prior to colonial rule, and in fact, perhaps when the people migrated from Egypt.<sup>25</sup> This tradition asserted that the *Nkwerre* people brought the knowledge of blacksmithing technology and molding pattern from the Egyptian civilization. For instance, in building the pyramids, the irrigation systems, et cetera, the roles of blacksmiths were required. Hence, as the people migrated from Egypt, they carried with them the knowledge of blacksmithing into their present abode. As they trudged along, they

made spears, knives, hoes, cutlasses, and traps for animals as well as cultivated and tilled the ground.<sup>26</sup> This tradition was also supported by Aloysius Onyejiaka when he remarked that *Eshi*, the father of *Okwaraeshi*, as a hunter must have learnt the craft before he migrated to the present *Nkwerre*.<sup>27</sup> It is acceptable in the people's tradition that through transmission, *Eshi* passed on the art to his son *Okwaraeshi*, and the latter continued the process.

Another version maintained that *Umukor* people originated blacksmithing in *Nkwerre*.<sup>28</sup> According to this tradition, the knowledge of blacksmithing spread to other contiguous villages through extended relations who became apprentices to *Umukor* people. From oral traditions, *Umukor* clan had the most populous smiths who traded their metalware far and wide in Igboland. The influence and presence of *Umukor* in blacksmithing technology in *Nkwerre* cannot be doubted. They were among the best blacksmiths in *Nkwerre* and were noted for producing quality products like hoes, knives, and all types of *erefere*, *egbe-cham* and double barreled guns. It was remarked that *Umukor*'s ingenuity led to the highest development of smithing activities to the extent that if *Nkwerre* smithing gained prominence in Igboland, it was because of the skills of *Umukor* smiths.<sup>29</sup>

Still, another version of the tradition asserted that the first man who practiced blacksmithing in *Nkwerre* was *Igwe-ojo* from *Umunubo* quarter.<sup>30</sup> He was a man of inventiveness and magnetic personality. Oral traditions explained that he introduced smithing by trial and error. *Igwe-ojo* mined and smelted iron ore independently at *Ugwu Aba* in *Nkwerre*.<sup>31</sup> He achieved this feat by breaking blocks of iron stone into gravel which he heaped in a mud-furnace with a groove at the side with some wood forming the base. He then heated the entire system for at least four days. The iron slag settled on top of the pure iron and striking the mass with a hard object, the slag detached from the real iron. This was the iron that *Igwe-ojo* used for blacksmithing.<sup>32</sup> Although, this account was not a popular one, nevertheless, one would tend to regard this view to be true because the *Umunubo* comprising *Duruaji*, *Amaegbu* and *Amaoji* villages had excelled in the art of blacksmithing. Just like *Umukor* people, they produced well designed guns and war



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implements like *egbeokwa*, *egbeugori*, *aroandmmampata*. For another thing, the god of smithing, the *Ogadazu* shrine was located within this quarter at *Nweke-Nkwerre*.<sup>33</sup> This quarter also contains *Eke-Agha* market and its god was *Ogadazu*.

In pre-colonial Igboland, *Nkwerre* people assembled at *Eke-Agha* before going to war with any town. At the end of every war, victories were also celebrated there. It was believed that *Ogadazu* which *Nkwerre* people worshipped led them to victories. In the eyes of the people, the location of *Ogadazu* is of great significance because European expeditions to *Orlu* district area ended there. Not surprisingly, it was from this *Umunubo* quarters that all the villages and individuals who practiced the profession allegedly got the power and blessing of the arts. When this art started is not known, but tradition has claimed that it was from immemorial time (*Kamgbe Eshi*).

Apart from the fact that *Nkwerre* traditions claimed independent origin of blacksmithing, there were theories and speculations that *Nkwerre* must have learnt the art of smithing either from *Awka*, *Abiriba*, *OhuhuorAguluUmuma*. In the absence of archaeological evidence, it is not easy to determine which of these towns learnt blacksmithing from the other and even from where in Igboland the technology started. Impressed by *Awka* blacksmithing, some scholars tend to derive *Nkwerre*-smithing from *Awka*. Rev, G.T. Basden wrote, “the *Awka* smiths practically dominate blacksmithing and they hold the leading place in the profession throughout the Ibo country and in many places beyond.”<sup>34</sup> Basden would appear to have his observation on the enormous extant literature that abounds on *Awka* blacksmithing. Added to this, Basden’s observation was based on the fact that he was the longest resident missionary in *Awka*. Even eminent scholars like S.C. Ukpabi maintains that “*Awka* may well have been the home of iron working ... and had introduced the trade to several parts of Igboland.”<sup>35</sup>

These assertions have been refuted by Njoku, in his work *Awka and Early Iron Technology in Igboland: Myths, Probabilities and Reality*.<sup>36</sup> He narrated that in the distant past, *Udi* smiths had maintained intimate relationship with *Nri* ritualists prior to when

*Awka* established the same. He stressed that *Udi* smiths had made bronze items for *Eze Nri*, the spiritual potentate of *Nri* people ahead of *Awka* smiths.<sup>37</sup> Njoku, therefore, concludes that before the emergence of *Awka* as smithing centre, it seems *Udi* smiths had been the primary suppliers of ritual and ceremonial metal products to the *Nri* court and priest. According to him, iron technology seems to be so ancient to *Udi* that its origin has been completely lost in oral traditions. As the iron industry took roots in *Awka*, the smiths began to supply *Nri* monarchy and priests with some of their needs and in due course, went on to relegate *Udi* smiths to a secondary position. The proximity of *Awka* to *Nri* coupled with the enterprising spirit of *Awka* smithing industry could have come later than that of *Udi* smiths.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the claim by some scholars that *Nkwerre* must have derived their smithing knowledge from *Awka* cannot be substantiated. In the meantime, it could be deduced that *Nkwerre* blacksmithing technology might have developed almost the same period with *Awka*. Perhaps, the proximity of *Awka* to *Nri* court might have promoted *Awka* smith more than *Nkwerre*.

In spite of all these speculation, *Nkwerre* oral traditions strongly support independent and indigenous origin. In his testimony, Joe-Kwes Onwukwem stressed that blacksmithing in *Nkwerre* began long ago.<sup>39</sup> This statement was reinforced by other informant like Ugochukwu Ihekwoaba, Kenneth Ihekwoaba, Osuala Chijioke Ajunwa as well as Nze Ojukwu Samuel who collectively asserted that the *Nkwerre* did not learn blacksmithing from anywhere rather that it was autochthonous.<sup>40</sup> The people claimed that the idea of blacksmithing emanated from their ingenuity and any attempt to explain the origin of the art in favor of outside influence cannot be sustained with substantial evidence. Besides, the claim of independent origin may have arisen from the fact that iron technology started at such remote antiquity that the people have forgotten how it came about.

With regard to the development of gun smithing in *Nkwerre*, *Eze* Dr. C.J. Okwara IV maintained that the people learnt gun smithing technology following their contact with the *white men* at the coast.<sup>41</sup> They achieved this by dismantling the European guns which they had obtained through trade at the coast and then

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assembled them back. This view is supported by Frank Ihekwoaba who argued that *Nkwerre* exchanged articles of trade, particularly slaves for gun and gun powder with the Portuguese, the Spanish and the British Sea Captains as well as traders at the coast.<sup>42</sup>

Blacksmithing in *Nkwerre* and *Awka* might have interconnectivity as a result of trading activities, claims of origin and migration, however, certain similarities and differences existed in the organisation of the local industry (blacksmithing) in *Nkwerre* and *Awka*. For instance, smiths in both towns went on occupational tours and left about one third of their population to look after the home while the rest were away. *Nkwerre* *Ogadazu*, the god of blacksmithing performed similar functions as *Awka*'s *Akputakpu*.<sup>43</sup> Smiths in both areas also maintained apprentice called *Nwauzu*, who took charge of the bellows.<sup>44</sup> Apart from these similarities, *Nkwerre*-smiths manufactured and repaired such items as *egbecham*, and *erefere*, while *Awka*-smiths produced agricultural implements like hoes, and knives. The appearance of fire-arms was a recent development in the history of blacksmithing. Some have used this fact to point out that blacksmithing was of recent development in *Nkwerre*. But this argument is untenable because as *Nkwerre* traditions rightly pointed out, the repair and manufacture of guns does not in itself indicate that the art of blacksmithing was of recent origin. In addition, to the above, *Nkwerre*-smithing was an individual affairs while *Awka*-smiths were organised in guilds. The *Awka*-smiths comprised the *Uzu-ike* (those working mainly on iron), *Uzo-alo* (those forging gun parts), *Uzo-ona* (brass and bronze smiths).<sup>45</sup> It was also maintained that the *Nkwerre* apprentices never made any payment to their masters while learning the trade but those of *Awka* paid a stipulated fee. In fact, in the field of specialization, organisation and recruitment of apprentices in *Nkwerre* and *Awka*, there were obvious differences. Thus, in Igboland, the study of iron-working raises problems of origin, diffusion of technique and ritual and routes of diffusion have so far proved indeterminable.

In conclusion, therefore, there is a general consensus among majority of the sources that blacksmithing technology in *Nkwerre* began a long time ago (*kamgbe eshi*). The challenge

associated with documentation or oral history in most fragmented and non-literate societies has posed difficulties in providing exact timeline when the technology started. More so, the people believed that through gradual process, the people perfected their manufactures and spread the art to other contiguous villages. The knowledge of gun production evolved after their contacts with the European merchants at the coast.

### **Missionary Presence and Doctrines in Nkwerre: A Brief Survey**

The first permanent Christian missionary activities in *Nkwerre* began in 1913. One remarkable factor for the penetration of missionaries into the interior of Igboland was the British conquest of Igboland. Following the Aro Expedition, Igbo hinterland was 'opened up' for missionary evangelization. Key among the factors for the Igbo acceptance of Christianity was the close association between the mission and education. Western education was tied to mission schools and offered escape route from the petty tyranny of Court Clerks and Warrant Chiefs who abusively employed colonial authority to exploit and extort the people. In addition, colonialism created opportunities for paid employment which in turn could only be achieved by Western education. Therefore, education offered opportunity to work in colonial establishment as well as for expatriate firm and to pay taxes. Another factor responsible for quick conversion to Christianity was through mission medical provision provided by missionaries. Other reasons for the spread of missionaries in the twentieth century included communication and technology.<sup>46</sup>

The first permanent missionary activities in *Nkwerre* began with the advent of Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1913. CMS activities spread to *Nkwerre* through the efforts of *Nkwerre* traders who transacted their business within the coasts of Rivers, Bonny and Opoboland.<sup>47</sup> While carrying out their businesses in these areas, a good number of them came in contact with European missionaries and got converted. There was the story of Nwakanma Aneke Ohagwa (christened Johnson) of *Umunachi* and Onwuka Ehirim (baptized Jacob) who settled in Opobo and Bonny respectively where they learnt carpentry and engaged in other

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businesses. After their conversion, they returned to *Nkwerre* where they assisted one Mr. Moses Olusanumba Ibeto who was posted to *Nkwerre* as the first stationed teacher from Nnewi.<sup>48</sup> Olusanumba got the support of Reverend J.E. Ibeneme who came as an Anglican priest from *Aronduogu*. The new converts began their worship in the sitting room of Olusanumba's compound. By 1918, the first permanent church structure of Saint Paul's Anglican Church (CMS) was completed at *Mbara Nwakpa*.<sup>49</sup> It was a sacred grove surrounded by *Akwu* tree and considered to be a meeting place of fairies and evil spirits. The community chose the site for the location of the Church in order for the converts to face the wrath of the evil spirits. By 1920, the headquarters of Okigwe Ecclesiastical District was moved to *Nkwerre*, thus, the gradual growth of the Anglican Church began in *Nkwerre*.<sup>50</sup>

The presence of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) in *Nkwerre* started with one Jeremiah Nwalozie Mgbemere of *Onusa Nkwerre* in 1917. Mgbemere was sold as a slave to a Bonny slave merchant who later sold him to one Mr. Eze Okoye of *Amichi*. Mgbemere acquired Western education provided by Christian missionaries. Subsequently, and in accordance with Christian doctrine, he got baptized as Jeremiah. After his primary school, he was employed as a teacher and posted to various areas within the parish in *Amichi*. As a leading elite in the Church and civil matters, he became the secretary of the Church. In the course of his duties as secretary, he clashed with *Amichi* hotheads who taunted him with his 'stranger' antecedent. Hence, Mgbemere sought ways to discover his true identity. Eventually, he arrived *Nkwerre* and was warmly welcome by his kith and kin. As a teacher in the Roman Catholic mission at *Amichi*, Mgbemere introduced Catholicism in *Onusa, Nkwerre*. Thus, the first permanent structure, Saint Thomas Catholic Church was established at *Onusa Nkwerre*.

The establishment of Saint Paul's Anglican Church and Saint Thomas' Catholic Church encouraged the growth and spread of other Christian denominations. Dominic Onyejiaka narrated that some members of the extant denominations broke away from the existing denominations to establish their own kind of Church. One major reason for this was usually not unconnected to leadership,

succession disputes or financial misappropriation. Among the emerged denominations are:

- The First African Church Mission, 1936
- Seven Days Adventist Church, Ukwuinyi, 1936
- The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah Witness, Umunachi, 1940
- Assemblies of God Church, Umugara, 1952
- The Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, 1958.<sup>51</sup>

Generally, the intensive period of evangelization in *Nkwerre* like in any other Igboland was in the first half of the twentieth century. With the imposition of British rule, Christianity got rapid penetration into the interior. The establishment of colonial administration led to the opening of several roads. The existence of better roads, correspondingly helped in the spread of Christianity. Bicycles and motor transportation were deployed to cover distant location in short time.<sup>52</sup>The missionary were enthused by the advent of transport revolution.

### **Christianity, Colonialism and the Challenges of *Nkwerre* Blacksmithing**

With the Aro Expedition completed, the British authority introduced various measures to ensure control in Igboland. This was possible through three mutually reinforcing phenomena – administrative policies, Christian missions and the merchant capitalists. These were different wings of the same brigade. The central aim of British imposition was economically designed to exploit the raw materials in Igboland. More so, the British authority aimed to transform Igboland into a protected market for British manufactured goods. In order to achieve imperial policies, indigenous technologies and industries were not spared. Hence, traditional metalworking in *Nkwerre* contended with colonial administration, the Christian missions and the merchant firms.

### **Colonial Administrative and Economic Policies**

Colonial resident officers had acknowledged the skills possessed by *Nkwerre* smiths in metal works. In addition, they

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accepted the near perfection in various war implements, especially gun production among *Nkwerre* smiths. Colonial administration foresaw the possible danger the metal industry portend. Therefore, to allow metal industry to flourish portends danger for colonial invasion. By 1893, fortune of traditional/indigenous metal works began to change when the Protectorate Administration placed a ban on the importation of arms and ammunitions into the Bight of Biafra.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, importation of gun caps tumbled from an all-time high of 278,286 in 1892 to 12,000 in 1893, a sharp drop of approximately 93%.<sup>54</sup> One implication of this was that gun production in Igboland presumably declined since the demand for guns was to a large extent predicated on the supply of ammunitions such as caps and gun powder.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, the awaited and delayed military invasion of Igboland began in December 1901. The ban on importation of guns caps was further followed by a more stringent arms and ammunitions proclamation.<sup>56</sup> The proclamation prohibited the sale of all precision arms which included machine guns, cap guns, magazine guns, revolver and snider.<sup>57</sup>

Colonial administration allowed local people to possess flintlock guns, *egbecham*, to the detriment of the user. John Adams had observed that the flintlock was a very inferior quality gun. Flintlock was not among guns banned for local people to use because it was never a threat to colonial forces. In fact, oral sources of various Igbo communities showed that the flintlock guns often misfired, claiming the life of its user and other people around. Nevertheless, colonial authority compelled conquered communities to surrender all kinds of guns in their possessions. These arms were publicly destroyed in the assembly grounds of the communities in the full glare of the people.<sup>58</sup>

The inferiority of the flintlock guns brought out innovativeness of smiths. *Nkwerre* smiths' contacts with the European at the coast enabled and enhanced their ability to convert flintlock to percussion cap guns. The percussion cap guns were more effective and safer weapons to use. With abundance of flintlock in colonial warehouses, many local people rushed to

European factories to purchase flintlock gun. They had the indigenous blacksmiths to convert the flintlock into cap guns. As a deterrent, colonial authority deployed severe punishment against the local blacksmiths for the conversion of flintlock into percussion cap guns. In order to further enforce restriction of the use of guns (especially conversion by local blacksmiths), in 1930, a more stringent legislation was enforced. Chapter 32, Section 8 of the Arms Ordinance stipulated that gun buyer or users must produce a license for a cap gun. Meanwhile, colonial administration devised means to ensure denial or non-availability of licenses. Therefore, possession of cap guns was further made a criminal offense. And to enforce this, severe Inquisition was adopted. Not only the police but also court messengers were mandated to arrest offenders. In *Nkwerre* for example, an itinerant smith, Agugua was arrested for trading in gun, He was reputed to have owned about 105 guns which he rented to Ogoni hunters and made substantial profits from the deal a few times.<sup>59</sup>

Consequent upon colonial legislations, metal works, as well as gun production and blacksmithing in general suffered a severe decline. Some smiths abandoned gun production, restrained themselves to the manufacture of traditional items such as hoes, axes, hinges, door staples, brass and iron staffs. But this was by far a less lucrative line than gun production, repair or conversion. Worse still, imports of cheaper substitutes from Europe further rendered the production of these items less remunerative. Some smiths, not wishing to face the constant harassment by the law-enforcement agents and attracted by other but less economic opportunities, abandoned their occupation entirely. Consequently, by the 1940s, less than a third of the males were engaged in the blacksmithing craft.<sup>60</sup> Meek reported that *Nkwerre* smiths abandoned the profession in preference for trading.<sup>61</sup>

As already noted, imposition of Imperial rule was to ensure that economic opportunities were explored and exploited. Therefore, in order to serve colonial purpose, road and motor transportation was introduced. The construction of road and vehicular transportation was designed to convey cash crops from the area of production to points of export. In other words, road



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transportation was a mean to an end. Hence, colonial firms and other private expatriate enterprises were stationed in strategic and emerging cities such as Aba, Umuahia, Uzuakoli, Onitsha, Afikpo, Ihiala, Abakiliki, among others, for exploitation. These firms were designed to perform two main complementary functions: the distribution of imports from Europe and the collection of export produce bound to Europe.<sup>62</sup>

With modern means of transportation, Industrial Revolution, mass production and standardization of European good arising from precise instrumentation, European imports such as textiles, iron monger, products, liquor, etc found their ways into direct competition with local products. In a real sense, the competition was unequal. Despite all the advantages enjoyed, the firms coerced the colonial government to adopt policies that favoured imports while discouraging local crafts. For example, it was observed in the nineteenth century that English cities such as Birmingham and Sheffield were centres of political lobby for the exports of British manufactured products like hinges, staples and locks to colonial Africa.<sup>63</sup> The mass importation of these goods gradually displaced local products. Regrettably, the technology of the European products were no better quality than local manufactures produced by indigenous blacksmiths. The Secretary of the Gold Coast government noted the inferiority of imported goods to West Africa thusly:

there is reason to fear that the fine craftsmanship of the African will soon disappear in the face of competition from cheaper mass-produced and not infrequently inferior imported goods.<sup>64</sup>

### **Racial Ideology of the Christian Missions**

Established on racial ideology of European superior culture over African milieu, Christianity and the activities of missionaries spread to the interior of African communities. It was aimed to disabuse the peoples' mind set towards African culture for European religion. As rightly observed by Njoku,

the missionary came to Igboland with firmly fixed preconceptions of the superiority of their religion over that of the local people. Indigenous Igbo religion was, from the missionaries' perspective, pagan, and paganism, they assumed, pervaded every aspect of the people's life, work as well as leisure.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, the Christian missionaries deemed it their responsibility to save Igboland from 'paganism.' But it is pertinent to emphasize that the penetration and success of Christian missionaries was achieved under the weight of colonial administrative policies imposed on conquered Igbo communities. Between 1842, when Christian missionary ideology was set in motion and 1902, when Igbo communities came under colonialism, activities of Christian missionaries were limited to major trading and coastal towns. Afterwards, colonial administrative policies stimulated the spread of Christian missions into the interior. Incentive facilities such as mission schools, mission health care services, among other proselytization gift items were used to entice the local people who had been tagged 'pagans. In fact, the local people were discouraged from attending traditional vocational school such as blacksmithing which was considered to be "heathen". Christians who practiced blacksmithing were urged by their mentors to renounce the ritual practices associated with it. Apprentices who were Christian were warned not to participate in the annual celebrations of smiths' ritual and religious ceremonies of *imaotutu* – the passing-out or graduation of an apprentice.<sup>66</sup> One of the implications was to discourage master smiths and apprentice from reaffirming their commitment to uphold the ethics of the profession.

With seemingly ideological conviction of European superior religion over Igboland, and having won some indigenous converts to aid the spread of the message, Christian missionaries supported by colonial enactments and policies attacked physical objects and products from indigenous blacksmiths. The burning of traditional religious objects and the renouncing of titles were

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encouraged. More so, objects of art produced by blacksmiths, which purely served decorative purposes were regarded to be tenanted with devil and associated with idol worship. Consequently, all the traditional and decorative objects were destroyed. Meanwhile, ancient pagan practices was still in practice in England and were zealously maintained by Christian people.

It must be explained that the Christian missionaries had through their activities introduced modernity in Igboland. Therefore, they deserved the credit for the introduction of mission school, modern educational system and the provision of health care services. Consequently, and particularly through the mission school, Igbo youth pursued western education in order to secure employment with the European firms. In addition, the Public Works Department (PWD), the Marine and the Coal mines and the Railway needed categories of skilled and unskilled workers. And in virtually all this employments, some modicum of literacy was needed.<sup>67</sup> Added to the employment opportunities created by western education, the emerging urban centres was another factor that attracted young and able individuals away from rural areas. Blacksmithing, like all rural crafts was badly affected by these developments. Boys who would have joined the guild of blacksmithing flocked to the mission schools and thereafter to urban centres. Consequently, the number of apprentice in the local craft drastically reduced. And without apprentice system, it is impossible for blacksmiths to replicate who will succeed them.

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous technology was common in precolonial *Nkwerre* prior to the advent of Christianity and colonialism. Through the craft of blacksmithing, *Nkwerre* people exhibited advancement in traditional technology in Igboland. Some reasonable height of societal organizations were achieved through the skills and craftsmanship of blacksmiths. Though, the people's knowledge in blacksmithing could not be dated to a particular time due to paucity of written and distortion in oral transmission. However, it is believed to be time immemorial (*kamgbe eshi*). The knowledge of blacksmithing spread to other parts of *Nkwerre* villages through the

apprenticeship system. Their contacts with other blacksmithing communities in Igboland and European traders at the coasts advanced blacksmithing technology to gun production. However, the advent of Christianity and Colonialism posed threats to the survival of the indigenous technology. Christianity introduced ideological toxins which disorientated and alienated the people from the tenets and traditional beliefs associated with blacksmithing. In fact, blacksmithing craft and the practitioners were painted ‘pagans’ and discouraged new converts from associating with the business of blacksmithing. More so, colonialism triumphed on the premise created by Christianity. Through various colonial policies and infrastructural proselytization, especially the mission schools and quests to secure *white collar* jobs in cities, able-bodied young men rejected being apprentice to “master-smith” in the rural areas. Furthermore, the arduous nature of blacksmithing and the health challenge it posed as well as societal attitude aided the instrumentalization of colonial policies to stagnate the growth of the traditional technology. By the eve of independence, *Nkwerre* blacksmithing as in other Igboland was on the verge of extinction.

**Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> Isichei, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Uzoma S. Osuala, "Missionary Activities in Nkwerre L.G.A., Imo State, 1913 – 1960" (B.A. Project, University of Nigeria, 2006), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Onwuka Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Enugu: Magnet Computer Services, 2001), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Aloysius Chinaka Onyejiaka, "Origin and Development of Blacksmithing in Nkwerre to 1945" (B.A. Project, UNN, 1977), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Onyejiaka, "Origin and Development."

<sup>7</sup> Onwuka Njoku, "Trading with the Metropolis: an Unequal Exchange," in *Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or Development?*, ed. Toyin Falola (London: Zed Books Ltd), 124 – 141.

<sup>8</sup> George T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Lagos: University Publishing Co., 1982), 174.

<sup>9</sup> Uzoma Samuel Osuala, "Indigenous Technology in Igboland: Blacksmithing Industry in Nkwerre up to 2000" (M.A. Thesis, UNN, 2009), 5.

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<sup>14</sup> Osuala, "Indigenous Technology", 5.

<sup>15</sup> A.T. Grove, "Soil Erosion and Population Problems in South-East Nigeria," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.117, No.3, (September 1951), 291 – 304.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830 – 1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 28.

<sup>17</sup> National Archive Enugu, Report on Nkwerre: OkIgwé Division, CSE, 1/8/4149 (1931), 6.

<sup>18</sup>Walter I. Ofonagoro, *Trade and Imperialism in Southeastern Nigeria, 1881 – 1929*, (New York: Nok Publishers Ltd., 1979), 44 – 45.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Joe-Kwe Onwukwem, born 1948, Civil Servant, Umunachi, 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Onwukwem

<sup>21</sup> Osuala, “Indigenous Technology”, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with C.J. Okwara, 1944, Traditional Ruler, Umunubo, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Okwara.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Okwara.

<sup>27</sup> Onyejiaka, “Origin and Development”, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Ugochukwu Ihekwoaba, 1946, Commercial Motorcyclist, Ama-Uju Market, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ihekwoaba.

<sup>30</sup> Osuala, “Indigenous Technology”, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Onyejiaka, “Origin and Development”, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Basden, *Among the Ibos*, 171-2.

<sup>35</sup> S.C. Ukpabi, “Nsukka before the Establishment of British Administration,” *ODU, Journal of West African Studies*, No.6, (1971), 108.

<sup>36</sup> Onwuka Njoku “Awka and Early Iron Technology in Igboland: Myths, Probabilities and Reality,” *ODU, Journal of West African Studies*, No.33, (1988), 133 – 145.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Onwukwem.

<sup>40</sup>Interviews with, Ugochukwu Ihekwoaba, b.1946, Commercial Motorcyclist, Ama-Uju Market on ‘March 3<sup>rd</sup>’, 2009; Kenneth, Ihekwoaba, b. 1957, Civil Servant, Umukor, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009;

Osuala Chijioke Ajunwa, b. 1967, Trader, Umukor, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009 and Nze Ojukwu Samuel, b.1937, Farmer, Ukwube, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Okwara.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Ihekwoaba, *Nkwerre Aborigines Union, 50 years of Self-Reliance for Development, 1939 – 1989* (Nkwerre: Durueze Books, 1991), 3 – 6

<sup>43</sup> Onyejiaka, "Origin and Development", 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 – 19.

<sup>45</sup> G. I. Okafor, "The Awka Blacksmiths in History" (B.A. Degree Project, UNN), 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Damian Ojukwu, b. 1938, Businessman, Umunubo, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Osuala, "Missionary Activities", 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 – 50.

<sup>51</sup> Osuala, "Missionary Activities", 55.

<sup>52</sup> J.O. Ijoma, "Igboland: A Historical Perspective," in *A Survey of Igbo Nation*, ed. G.E.K. Ofomata (Onitsha: African First Publishers Ltd., 2002), 50.

<sup>53</sup> Walter I. Ofornagoro, *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria, 1831 – 1929* (New York: 1979), 257.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>55</sup> Njoku, "Awka and Early Iron Technology", 61.

<sup>56</sup> Ofornagoro, *Trade and Imperialism*, 258.

<sup>57</sup> Njoku, "Awka and Early Iron Technology", 61.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Ofornagoro, *Trade and Imperialism*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Njoku, "Colonialism and the Decline", 64 – 5.

<sup>61</sup> Onyejiaka, "Origin and Development"

<sup>62</sup> Njoku, "Colonialism and the Decline, 66.

<sup>63</sup> J.E. Flint, "Economic Change in West Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" in J.F.A. Ajayi and M. Crowder eds., *History of West Africa II* (London, 1974), 380 – 401.

<sup>64</sup> N.A.E. ORDIST 3/1/396: Secretary, Gold Coast Government to Secretary of State on School of Arts and Crafts, Achimota: May 1942.

<sup>65</sup> Njoku, 'Colonialism and the Decline', 67.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 69.