

THE POSITIVE IMPACTS OF CHRISTIANITY AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN EZINIFITE TOWN, 1970-2006

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Abstract

The European Christian missionaries came to Africa with a misconception that African traditional religion is fetish and primitive. The penetration of these Christian missionaries into the interior territories through the east of the Niger, beginning from 1857, saw the disruption and relegation of African traditional religion thereof. Christianity came as foreign religion in Ezinifite town. It brought Western ideas with it which conflicted with the rich cultural and traditional practices of the people. Thus, the socio-cultural life of the people witnessed great changes and transformation, and has continued to do so. The study focuses on the positive impact of this influence. The study adopts the historical research method which employs the qualitative and thematic approach, to document the activities of Christian missionary enterprise in Ezinifite from 1970 to 2006. It highlights the original culture, tradition, and belief system of the people and also examines the positive impacts brought by Christianity and modernity in Ezinifite. However, this study shows that Western Culture clothed in Christianity to bring disruption, in Ezinifite traditional norms and values. The difference between Christianity and traditional religion is more of cultural difference.

Introduction

The study aims at providing information on the influence of Christianity on the traditions and customs of Ezinifite people and its lasting social change. Before the advent of Christianity the most common aspect of worship among the Ezinifite people was the traditional religion. This has to do with the belief and worship of God in their own traditional ways. They held strongly to their beliefs, customs and traditions until colonization flushed it out with Christianity. Just few years into the second half of the 19th century, Christianity was introduced to Igbo land through the activities of Church Missionary Society (CMS). Niger Igbo Mission that included Rev J. Taylor who was an Igbo ex-slave, The Niger Mission brought the gospel down to Igbo land amidst numerous hindrances. Onitsha was chosen as their base of operation for their missionary work. They arrived on July 27, 1857 and by 1916 Christianity had spread to almost all parts of Aguata, including Ekwulobia, Oko, Uga, Ezinifite and Agulu; among other places. The Christian missionaries in Ezinifite introduced new belief that conflicted with the culture, custom and norms of the people.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) came into Ezinifite the same year. The CMS came down from Ekwulobia to chief Umejiaku compound in January 1916, it was from Chief Umejiaku that CMS packed down to Ogbugbogu in 1917, but the RCM came down from Igbowkwu to Chief Umennaiké's compound in the same Aku village in July 1916 before packing down to their permanent site in 1919. The Christian denominations had to be hosted in different Warrant Chief's house at the initial stage because of some security reasons. Christianity was a foreign religion in Ezinifite Town. It was a fearless

movement with strong backing from both parent body in Europe and administrative body in Nigeria.

The new converts welcomed the new faith with excitement. The church was quite young when the first influenza of 1918 breezed in. The members of the Christian sect were accused of causing the disease. This unfortunate coincidence brought hatred for Christianity. The Villagers were instigated against the members of the new faith. As a result of this, majority of the people didn't accept Christianity until the middle of the 20th century when a lot of social change started taking place. The Christian missionaries criticized a lot of traditional practices and cultural beliefs of the people. By 1950, the new converts enjoyed too much privilege which earned the admiration of majority of the villagers. The converts were exempted from the prevailing labour conscription just like the warrant chiefs and very elderly persons in the community. The Christian religion accommodated every class of people in the community especially the outcasts and the oppressed. Such classes of people very quickly joined the new religion. Some of the Christian converts took cover under the canopy of the church and did whatever they liked, for instance, they killed snake and even ate the forbidden python, the rigorous rituals or traditional stages which the youth of those days went through before they were initiated into manhood frightened some of the youths and pushed them into joining the Christian faith. Such undue privileges attracted a lot of people to the Christian faith.

The growth of Christianity in Ezinifite has had significant impact on culture, education, politics and many other facets of social life. As the predominant religion before the advent of Christianity, African traditional religion faced stiff opposition and criticism from Christian missionaries. A lot of traditional practices were declared taboos and irrelevant by Christian missionaries. Based on this, a lot of social changes started taking place which affected the social life of the people, customary practices, feeding system, clothing, language, medicine and a host of other areas. The missionaries frowned upon some traditional practices such as blood pacts, oath swearing, oracles, vows, divination, traditional dances, masquerade system, funeral rites, taboos, and title taking amongst others. Many traditional practices were stopped, polygamy which had been an integral part of traditional heritage, was prohibited by Christianity while monogamy was encouraged and upheld. An example of such influence was exerted by Mary Slessor a Scottish missionary who worked tirelessly for women and children's rights, and halted the practice of killing twins.

Besides ending barbaric practices, Christianity began to be deeply engrained in the way of life of Ezinifite people. Official gatherings sometimes begin and are rounded off by short prayers whether in private or public sector. Christianity also provided a platform for the establishment of western education in the community. Western ideas of individualism and rationalism began to replace traditional values of communal living and existence. In schools, people were introduced to new ideologies which spanned across different areas of human existence. Many of these ideologies portrayed African traditions as backward and uncivilized. It can be argued that a couple of traditional practices may have been barbaric; however, the introduction of Christianity and subsequently western education did set biased standards that overshadowed some rich cultural practices.

However, the traditional ruler and his cabinet became lenient with traditional rules and practices that guided the throne and seat of authority as a result of converting to Christianity. Social behaviour was also impacted by Christianity. Traditional clothing was ditched for western dresses, and in areas of architecture, the influence of western ways contributed to the

use of new materials in building construction. Today, you would hardly find houses still being constructed with basic materials such as mud, sticks and raffia in Ezinifite. Language, an important element of culture was influenced by the growing popularity of English language. This influenced traditional ways of communication and interaction. As Christianity brought western ideas with it, the rich culture and traditions of the people were either destroyed or carted away by foreign missionaries. The history of traditional practices and culture in Ezinifite gradually faded and continued to do so till today.

Geography and People of Ezinifite

Ezinifite is one of the most important towns that makes up Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State in Nigeria. It is a town with a wealthy historical background. Ezinifite town lies between Longitude 7 and 7.02 E and latitude 6.50 and 6.520N. Thus Ezinifite town lies completely within the tropics, it can be inferred that Ezinifite is the last town in Aguata Local Government Area in the South-Eastern and South-Western ends before one gets into some other towns-Unubi (S.S.E.) and Ekwulu-Mili (S.S.W) all in Nnewi Local Government Area.¹

Political Boundaries

Towns that share common boundaries with Ezinifite includes- Ekwulobia, Nkpologwu, Uga, Unubi, Ekwulumili, Igboukwu, and Ikenga. Ezinifite has a common boundary in the north with Ekwulobia town; in the North-eastern side with Nkpologwu; in the Eastern side with uga; in the South-Eastern side with Unubi; in the South-South western side with Ekwulu-mili; (Unubi and Ekwulu-mili are in Nnewi local government area of Anambra state) Ezinifite shares a common boundary with Igbo-ukwu in the western side. She also shares a common boundary with Ikenga on the north-western side. Ikenga serves as a buffer town between Ezinifite and Isuofia. It can be inferred that from the Ekwulobia-Ezinifite boundary line to Ezinifite-Ekwulu mili boundary line which is regarded as the length of the town is roughly seven kilometers, while from Uga-Ezinifite boundary to Ezinifite- Igboukwu boundary which is regarded as the breadth of the town is about six kilometers. The town has a very large land area.²

Traditional Religious Belief

The early European visitors to Africa gave the people all over the world the impression that the Africans of those days were nothing but atheists-people who know no God. In other words, they tried to give the impression that the Africans had no religion before the arrival of the Europeans to any part of Africa. That impression was rather misleading.

Ezinifite people, though Africans by origin, had their own belief system from where their religion stemmed right from time. In other words, Ezinifite even before the coming of the missionaries worshipped God their own way. The real fact remained that Ezinifite people were not Christians as at then so the European saw them as people who had no belief system and so had no religion. Belief system means the general beliefs of the people which include their religion. It would be correct here to express the opinion that a people's belief system influences their religion. It is however natural for some people who do not share personal experiences.

Believe in Supreme God: Ezinifite people believe in a number of things. The first is the concept of the Supreme Being (Chi-ukwu) meaning 'Big God' who was represented by various deities and divinities who ministered to him almost all the people of Ezinifite were traditional worshippers. They were aware of God's wonderful creation and supremacy over all other beings. They had to practicalise and translate what they had in mind into reality. Just like the Jews of the old, people of Ezinifite wanted a visible God. That was why they had several gods

and goddesses which were normally referred to as deities. Those deities served as intermediaries or representatives of the Supreme Being.³

Deities: Some major deities worshipped by Ezinifite people includes; Ulasi, Onwa, Ojukwu, Akwali, Okpensi, Nwaolie, Udo, Ogwugwu, Uhiejioku, Chi, Ndi-Ichie, Ana, Nwaoji, Nwafor, Mbilimbibia and Ofo. Ulasi Obuekwe and Ulasi Ohanine are the major deities worshipped by the Ezinifite people. Those deities were usually represented in turn by carved or molded objects which people refer to as Ngwu, Umu alusi, Ikenga and Oda. Most of these idols were carved out of sacred trees like Ngwu, Ogirisi, Abosi.

The worshipping citizens were always aware of the fact that those deities were omniscience, omnipotent and sacred. That was why the worshippers carved those bushes and forests, there were always some shrines (okwu alusi), small shelter, where a number of those carved object and molded images were safely stored. Sometimes, the sizes and decorations or ornamentation around the deities in question depicted how powerful or respected the deities were. Some of the deities were accommodated within the compound of the chief Priest-In-Charge (mediators) of those particular deities. Assorted colored pieces of cloth (especially white and red), pieces of native chalk, feathers, pieces of iron, 'omu' (young palm leaves) and various carvings and moldings were placed in the alter meant for the deities either within the premises of the chief priest or in the shrine of the deities within the bushes and the forests. Sometimes, the pythons, snakes and some rodents inhabit the shrines. They were always respected because they were regarded as the agents of the deities. The different deities were always held at high esteem. At least, a day within the year was always set apart for the celebration in honor of each of the deities. Whenever the celebration period approached, elaborate preparations were made by the chief priests and the followers. 'The surroundings of the deities' abodes thoroughly tidied up by youths-young males and females who possess the necessary qualifications in terms age and physical capabilities. Heavy sacrifices were offered to the deities. It was very common for those deities to come out to the market squares or to some other chosen open grounds, village hills or some other public places during the time the feast were going on in their honor. The chief priests and their always carried the carvings or moldings ('ukwu', 'nwa alusi' etc.) which represented the particular deities to the intended places and then back to their shrines or their places of abode after the celebrations. The town-criers, trumpeters, fluter, wooden and iron gong-beaters, and happy singers always accompany the processions. On other days or time when the feasts were not holding, the worshippers especially the chef priests and priestesses could go to the shrine to worship the deities at will. They usually offered prayers with kola nuts and drinks.⁴

Ancestral Spirit: The concept of ancestral spirits was another strong belief of Ezinifite people. They believe that the spirits of the departed hovered around them. The good spirits could do good things for the living. But bad spirits could do evil things like troubling the living (Ije Ugwa). 'Mblimbibia' is a deity that represented the good spirit. Earth bound people who retaliate.

Ogbange: Ezinifite people had the concepts of 'Ogbanje'. The people believed that there are some 'spirit-children' who belonged to a form of secret cult or society. Such 'spirit-children' would come into the world as babies. They could be delivered as normal babies. After a short time in the world, they disappeared by death. They then re-entered their mothers' or other women's wombs for a re-birth. Such spirit-children could come into the world and go away at any age or many times as possible

Reincarnation: Another strong belief among Ezinifite people was the concept of re-incarnation (inuo-uwa). Most of the people of those days consulted oracles to know whenever babies had come to life again. That ancestor's name would then be given to the baby. Departed ancestors usually re-incarnate in the homes of their favorites who treated them well when they were alive. And that was a big blessing.⁵

Lineage System: From that concept of re-incarnation, Ezinifite people developed another belief-the concept of lineage (agbo). Many of them believed that there was the good lineage and the bad lineage. No parent ever liked any ancestor from a bad lineage to re-incarnate into his/her home. No man or woman liked to marry from a cursed lineage. People always talked of copying a good lineage. Genetic inheritance is important in times of friendship, marriage or association of any.

Ancestral Worship: Another outstanding characteristic feature of the religious organization of the people of Ezinifite before the coming of the Europeans is the belief in ancestral worship. Ezinifite people believed that their departed for-fathers still hovered around them in form of spirits and those spirits had the power of mediating for them before the supreme God. In other words, the ancestral spirits and the deities were always accepted as the messengers or ministers of 'the Supreme Being'. This was why the traditional worshippers always offered some part of the foods and drinks before them to their ancestral spirits who were represented by 'Okpensi', 'Uhieejioke' and 'mbilimbina' whose habitations was the mother earth-'Ana'.

When a traditional worshipper swore by touching the earth, himself and then pointed upwards, what he/she has done was simply calling on the ancestors (the dead, inside the earth connecting them himself as the representative of the living and then called the deities and the Supreme Being' above. And that is really one of the greatest oaths in the world. Ezinifite people had an enviable religious system before the coming of the Europeans. Their belief and trust in their deities and ancestral spirits who were but the ambassadorial ministers or messengers of God, greatly influenced their social and political lives, their religion emphasized on 'justice', love' 'peace' and unity' for all.

Social and Cultural Practices

Before the advent of Christianity, Ezinifite people had so many customs which they cherish dearly and believe in. These include Cult initiations, Festivals, Title taking, Funeral Rites, Taboos, Births and Child upbringing, Folk tales and stories, Marriages and a host of other.

Cult Initiation: Sweedlum opine that "man everywhere live in a group and that constitutes a society and these group relationships also partly determine the social characteristics which develop as people live together for common purposes."⁶ Ezinifite people have a lot of traditional activities which kept their social life lively before 1950. Ezinifite people were known with their masquerading system. They had many types of masquerading such as ogbagu, oke muo, omenikoro, odogwu anyamiri, njegene e.t.c. masquerades are kept secrets to a woman and non-initiates, they believed and still believe that masquerades are the spirits of their departed ancestors and they come from the land of the dead. The "njegene" restricts movement of everybody, especially thieves and sorcerers at night. In fact, this is the most dreaded masquerade. Masquerades also feature as spirits of the ancestors during funeral rites. They are believed to lead back home any person who is morally upright when he dies.

Feasts and Festivals: Ezinifite People have variety of festivals. One of these festivals is the new yam festivals which portrays a very rich culture to the Ezinifite people. During the New

Yam festival, all the priests of different gods in the village that make up Ezinifite organize their people with different dances and match to Afo Ezinifite where the ulasi is installed.

Taboos: A number of things are regarded as taboos and abominable acts in Ezinifite. For instance, women on menstruation must not have sexual relations because she is unclean. It is a serious crime if she does it. If she breaks the rule, she must undergo cleansing rituals to be performed by the chief outcast (onye isi osu). Obidiegwu notes that “there is a rule that a woman after birth should menstruate before another conception”⁷ it is also a taboo to have intercourse with a widow in mourning and where it happens, the person does not become clean until purification rites are done by the chief of Ezinifite village. A child is regarded as an outcast if he develops the upper incisors the lower incisors. It is very abnormal for a woman to give birth to twins.

Ofo: Ofo was usually a piece of sizeable stick/ club fashioned from the Ofo tree, apparatus for the worship of the gods/deities and performance of some other religious, social, traditional or customary ceremonies. For instance, it features prominently during taking of oaths, breaking of kola nuts and so on and so forth. It is used as symbol of justice and authority. The blood of sacrificed animals, feathers and so on were poured on the ‘Ofo’ and left to dry on it. Sometimes, the blood was rubbed on the wood until it dried. The fatness or the blackness of the Ofo showed how old or how far it had served in its life time. ‘Ofo’ was accepted by the generality of the people within the town, villages or kindred/families as a “staff of office” or an authority which symbolized “the collective will” of the entire people are sanctioned by the people’s ancestors. The Ofo was a transferrable “staff of office”. One ‘Ofo’ could serve very many descendants and for as long as life continued. One could carve one or two “Ofo” and in addition inherit the ones by his predecessors.

They also use the ‘Ofo’ as a symbol of truth and authority e.g. somebody offended will say. “Ejim gi ofo” (I am innocent of your accusation). It is forbidden for a woman to touch the ofo let alone possess one. Ofo also holds the group together to ensure that the proper norms of the lands are observed especially with regards to a high standard of moral chastity.

Use of Kola nut: Kola nut is honoured in Ezinifite and much importance is attached to it. Before Ezinifite man does anything in a gathering like naming ceremony, funeral e.t.c, the first thing that will come up is the breaking of the kola nut, the oldest man prays by starting with “Ala bia taa oji” before asking other things like protection, long life and prosperity from the gods. A woman is forbidden from breaking kola nut when a man is there, if there is no man there, she had to give it to a boy no matter his age to break for her or touch it if the boy cannot break it, she will then break the kola nut.

Oath Taking and Divinity: Ezinifite people believe in swearing oath. They use oath-taking to detect criminals. The new Encyclopedia Britannica, defines oath as a “Statement of assertion made under penalty of divine retribution for intentional falsity”.⁸ Divinity is also used to detect the ills facing the community example, to detect a person who has poisoned somebody or one that has infected another person with disease, to identify a notorious thief in a community, to find out the measures to be taken against drastic epidemic in the society, a seer or native doctor is consulted who performs a divination to find out solutions.

Birth and Child Upbringing: Ezinifite people have an informal educational practice. They believe that the upbringing of children is not a prerogative of only the parents. Everybody has a role to play. It is like a division of labour. The father of the family has a different responsibility

from that of the mother. The sex of children is taken into consideration while the girls are taught domestic work at home, the boys are taught how to farm and other outdoor jobs like hunting, fishing e.t.c. Upbringing of children starts as soon as the child is born until he or she is an adult. At an early age, the child is taught how to fetch firewood, how to greet, they are taught how to climb trees, how to collect fodder for the goats, sheep and cow by their parents and other older children and adult around. This implies that upbringing of children is not the responsibility of the parents alone but relatives and playmates also. Children go around from one palm tree to other picking palm kernels.

Folktales and Stories: Parents and other household members gather after supper to tell traditional stories and imbibe some moral education. From the stories, every child is groomed to learn the basic daily chores to enable him develop socially, morally, physically and economically because Ezinifite people recognize that sooner or later the child will attain maturity and would like independent life.

Marriage Celebration: Marriage was a source of unity among Ezinifite people. It was strictly contractual. There were mutual checks or inquires about taboos like malignant illness or social stigma by either party. If no impediment was discovered, the necessary rounds of bargaining take place after which the young bride is handed over to the husband with blessing by the bride's parents.

Burial Rites: When an elderly or wealthy man dies, he is accorded full burial rites. Series of celebration including certain sacrifices and religious rites were performed in honour of the dead. There were firing of guns and canons, drumming and singing of funeral songs. The burial was often commensurate with the wealth, dignity and social status of the dead. Certain signs of honor and respect were also approved for the dead in accordance with their social status.

Title Taking: Ozo-title is one of the most significant titles in Igbo land that had stood the test of time. Ezinifite been one of the well-known ancient-towns of Igbo-land had consciously or unconsciously inherited this long standing institution. Ozo title comes with great honour, social prestige and status. Wealth is the chief passport to this society, although good conduct was highly demanded. The holder of the title was respected by the village men and women. He is regarded as the upholder of truth and justice. A lot of taboos surrounds his behaviour, for instance an ozo titled man should not fight, steal or commit any crime against the land. No Osu, Ohu or even a person of questionable character is allowed to take the title. Ozo title is an exclusive right of only the male citizens. After the advent of Christianity, Various Christian denominations setup cultural issues committee to scrutinize the activities of the institution and it was done in such a way that Christians can participate.⁹

Positive Impacts of Christianity as an Agents of Social Change in Ezinifite Town

The advent of Christianity in Ezinifite had some negative impacts, yet it can be proved beyond every reasonable doubt that the arrival of Christianity and modernity in Ezinifite brought a lot of positive impacts to the town. It brought a new and entirely different teaching about Jesus Christ, the only son of God, the Almighty Father. The new philosophy was quite different from what the people used to know. It gave new life to the people. Some of the areas Christianity impacted Ezinifite Town positively include:

Stopping O Obnoxious Culture: As soon as Christianity reached Ezinifite, it did not waste any time over waging serious fight against some indecent and inhuman practices that existed

among the people. Christianity aided the abolition of most of the obnoxious traditions and customs of the people. The gradual and long term social effects of Christianity on Ezinifite became broader on its efforts in combating and eradicating social evils that had pervaded all facets of the people's life. Christianity in Ezinifite made serious efforts by bringing to an end the belief in the practice of some fetish custom like: killing of twins, the throwing away of people who suffered from unfamiliar disease, offering of human beings as sacrifices to idols; burying of wealthy personalities with slaves, selling of some irresponsible persons into slavery; the disregard of the Osus and the orus and many other abominable things and unnecessary taboos among the people of Ezinifite. Apart from that, it was an abomination for a baby to come out with feet first during birth as it was for a child to grow the upper teeth first, also for a woman to put to bed while still single and a man to die of swollen stomach or leprosy. Again, a leper was not, allowed to live with other people and whenever people saw him coming they run away. A person suffering leprosy is excommunicated and he lives in the evil forest.

Human sacrifice and slavery were both regarded as a way of life recognized by the people. No free born is allowed to associate with the outcaste either in marriage or in anything. They were ostracized and alienated from the society. Sometimes, outcaste is sold into slavery or used for sacrifice to some deities in the pre-colonial era. The people of Ezinifite considered eating of python an abomination because they believe that python was a sacred animal designated to deity. Whoever kill or eat python attract curse for himself and his family.

Women were liberated and were helped to acquire higher status in the society. They were also delivered of twin babies and those under their period were no longer isolated and socially intimidated but were protected and taught the basis of personal hygiene. Traditions like burying important titled men with heads of fellow human beings were also discouraged and nudity became a thing of the past. All these gave Ezinifite a new face thereby opening doors of development in the town.

Western Education: The missionaries built school where they trained the people as catechist, interpreters and lay readers. Most of the established schools known as mission schools, which were responsible for the making of the pioneer elites some of whom have risen very prominently as religions leaders, eminent educationist, eminent civil servants, businessmen, politicians, government officials, legal practitioners and able community leaders. Most of these notable products have in their various capacities contributed outstandingly to the development of their own Ezinifite. Formal education was a valuable legacy which Christianity and modernity gave to the people of Ezinifite. The two main denominations in Ezinifite, the Church Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Mission gradually built up many schools. Today Ezinifite is one of the towns in Nigeria that has produced prominent successful men and women in different fields of human endeavour. Without the church, there is no way eastern Nigeria could have made the stupendous progress it has recorded in education, especially from 1945 when the Second World War came to an end Ezinifite town inclusive.¹⁰

Health Care and Health Facilities: The provision of healthcare delivery system was done extensively by the Catholic Mission. The Health centre which they built still provides healthcare services to the community for both Catholics and non-Catholic alike. Thus, this played a very prominent role in the development of the town, as it brought a general awareness of good healthcare delivery system making them available to the people until other bigger health facilities started springing up. E. A Ayandele asserts that "health institutions and welfare services attracted people to various missions. These institution no doubt provided a most useful

and necessary need at that time, and the people were generally unrestrained by cultural inhibitions in their patronage of them,”¹¹. However, Onyiudo asserts that health care was also a means of propagating the gospel¹²

Good Etiquette and Moral: These early missionaries inculcated good etiquettes on the people’s culture which included method of salutation, dressing and the use of white man’s language. The idea of men covering only their nakedness and women their breast has been waved out by the missionaries who provided clothes as substitute to the so-called “akpukpa-agu” the lion’s skin. To this end, it is essentially good to opine that the people of Ezinifite indebted its modernization or civilization to the missionaries’ activities which began in gradual form before influencing all aspects of the people’s culture¹³.

Conflict Free Environment: with the introduction of Christian religion, social and political conflicts between Ezinifite people and her neighbors came under control. Colonial government provided law and order for the protection of lives and property. However relative peace was achieved. Any person or group of persons who violets such standing order were dealt with seriously by the government. All these brought admirable security and conflict free environment. Mrs. Bessie remarked that relative peace was achieved. Inter community wars disappeared and inter-group relations improved.¹⁴

Development of Agriculture and Commerce: Agriculture and trade were the main stay of the economy of traditional Ezinifite society. The missionaries developed agriculture and legitimate trade. They brought about the introduction and adoption of exotic crops into Ezinifite. Such new crops and plants include pineapple, paw-paw, onions, oranges, Mango, cashew, cassava, melon, guava and rice especially the upland variety. Furthermore, the introduction of cash crops in the economy has forced the people to take greater care of the oil palm trees which used to be kept as a forest tree. There are now palm oil plantations at various villages of Ezinifite. This trade on palm oil and kernel engaged a lot of Ezinifite indigenes as a source of employment. Finished products like clothes, tobacco, knives, mirror and alcohol from European companies in urban cities of Onitsha, Aba and coastal areas found their way into the town through the activities of the local middle men. All these activities brought reasonable development to the town and beyond¹⁵

System of Exchange and Modern Currency: Another significant influence of Christianity on the trading activity of the people is the introduction of modern currency which as a medium of exchange has replaced the use of cowry’s shell and the barter system. Its characteristic light weight and divisibility has enable Ezinifite people to travel to Onitsha and other neighboring town’s market centers to buy articles of merchandise including supplementary food items.¹⁶

Transport and Communication System: Christianity has brought enlightenment to the people of Ezinifite in the areas of transport and communication. They now enjoy and appreciate the role of good transport and communication in the town. Christianity helped in the facilitation of efficient transportation of products like oil palm from Ezinifite to other communities. Originally, Ezinifite People use the traditional means of dispatching message through errand boy, or local town crier. Today Christianity modernized these traditional methods with the introduction of new system of communication. Such new systems include the postal services, the Radio and the television. Both the literate and illiterate people of the town use these modern communication medium not only for enjoyment but also for getting information and

acquainting themselves with the day to-day happening not only in Nigeria but also in the world at large.

Conclusion

Nwadiakor in “The Christian Church and the Quest for Cultural Revival in Nigeria”, defines culture as body of stored knowledge, characteristic way of thinking and feeling, attitude, goal and ideals.¹⁷ The culture of people to a large extent determines and tells everything about them. No culture is superior to the other. Religion as part of culture is the bedrock of a societal existence. A People without any religion is like a man without purpose. The people of Ezinifite before the coming of Christianity acknowledged a creator whom they consider as the owner of the whole universe. Evidence of this fact can be seen in their names which emphasized the existence and supreme power of God.

The work examined some aspect of the people’s traditional religious belief, social and cultural practices and how the impact of Christianity has positively affected these practices. Christian religion and modern civilization were social change agents that impacted Ezinifite community in positive and negative ways although the study focuses more on the positive impact. Our traditional religion was seen as non-religion at all, as the Missionaries tried to make it sink into the consciousness of the people that the objective symbols of the realities of their beliefs were idols (wood) which is not worthy of their worship. However, they condemned the traditional belief, social and cultural practices of the people. Based on the forgoing, they created a wrong impression among the people that whatever that is customary is also uncivilized or even fetish. For this reason, some interesting aspects of the people’s culture which are not really bad are treated with levity. These include traditional dances and masquerade systems.¹⁸

The coming of Christianity in Ezinifite led to its radical incorporation into a religious system with tenants that countered what it used to be. Christianity implied social change. It implied a new world for Ezinifite community irrespective of individual position within the new religion. With the coming of Christianity in Ezinifite, things took a different dimension, the political system, social life, economic life and religion of the people witnessed radical change.

Christianity flourished the way it did because people were getting fed up with the old order; a society where one openly doubts the gods, queries the customs, traditions and social cultural practices. People were secretly tired of the practices such as killing of twins, outcast system, marginalizing of women and apparent domination of the society by gerontocracy. Christianity gave these aggrieved but silent ones the opportunity and power to break free of the barriers of the past. Chinua Achebe fictional presentations of Nwoye’s silence agitation over this religion and Obierika’s unspoken querying of the rationale for the slaughter of twins amply represents such a situation!¹⁹ Christianity flourished in Ezinifite in spite of opposition from the traditionalist. With the outbreak of civil war, Christianity moved from its powerful but marginal to the centre of the people’s consciousness. The heroic roles of the faith’s pace setters in Ezinifite were amplified by the active efforts of Christians between 1970- 2006. By the year 2006, Christianity had become a defining feature of Ezinifite community. Obviously, some aspects of European civilization have been very positive in reshaping the people’s general development for better. Wearing better clothing instead of tying strings of apron around the lions or even going naked, accepting twins as God special gift instead of throwing them away to the evil forest, going through surgical operation instead of tearing human flesh with knives at the highest level of pain, all these are element of western technology which followed European civilization and which had their place in our culture today.

From the research carried out, it was observed that with the advent of Christianity, a great number of Ezinifite people changed to the new faith and many more became a monstrous combination of the faith in many gods and the faith in one God through his son Christ. It is obvious that Christian doctrine and traditional practices, cultures and ideals of Ezinifite are in conflict. Presently the people of Ezinifite are living with the two. Their choice of which to use is being determined by the circumstances around. But we must emphasize that the Christian doctrines are still making waves against the traditional practices, cultures and ideals of Ezinifite people. It has been observed that Traditional religious belief and social pattern remain attractive even to Christians. Instances were encountered during field interviews where Christians join in using masquerades as entertainments in burial of relations and in visiting non-Christian friends or relations with gifts when they take ozo title

Recommendations

This research work is significant to the people of Ezinifite and beyond as a solution to critical questions raised on social change brought about by the advent of Christianity in their town. However, they should know that change is constant and social change is eminent. Therefore, the study recommends that they should positively admit the change as fate since there is nothing they can do about it. It also recommends that since they are in conflict of culture each should go ahead and practice the one they consider fit for them. In the worship of God, He is still the Supreme Being therefore whatever method you employ in worshipping Him make sure the method is right through your moral judgment.

However, the early missionaries condemned everything from the traditional belief system of the Ezinifite people inevitably their followers copied this attitude. The helplessness of the traditional system in the face of direct onslaught and the destabilizing civil war years harden this mind set. But many Ezinifite Christians could not bring themselves to a wholesome rejection of the ways of their ancestors though an open advocacy will bring down the wrath of the church on them. The study therefore recommends that the leaders of the churches in Ezinifite should carefully acculturate Christianity in the peculiar environment of its adherent if excuses for this could be found in the days of early missionaries because they were foreigners and lacked knowledge of the people's culture. Such excuses cannot be made for contemporary clergy. They are indigenous clergy. Therefore, they should take the challenge of propagating the Christian gospel in their peculiar milieu. However, this would call for a change in mindset on the part of clergy and laity. It is a universal issue that encompasses all of Igbo land and indeed all of Africa where imported religion are riddled with contradiction because of the nature of their incursion into pagan society. This study recommends that acculturation will lead to reconciliation between Christianity and Igbo culture²⁰

It is therefore clear that in spite of the fact that Christianity and modernity did well to remove some of the evils in traditional Ezinifite, they did nothing to improve or promote the culture of the people. Their educational system was carefully organized to satisfy their own selfish ends. It has now become the duty of the present day educated Christians to see that all the good aspects of Ezinifite culture are revived and taught in the school. In other words, the study of the people's culture should be vital in the present society.

The ritual observance of people of Ezinifite during sacrifices, festivals and entertainment are things we cannot deny notwithstanding our westernized orientation, but since the greater number of our people are now Christians, these rituals can still be done in patterns that befit the traditional culture. Christian rituals for instance, Holy Communion can be done with palm

wine. Traditional music, songs and dance can be introduced in these rituals, while other traditional institutions should be upheld, respected and encouraged.

The study also recommends that traditional entertainment which is an aspect of social life should not be jettisoned. Every society bearing its cultural traits in mind devices varieties of methods to free man's mind from fatigue, stress, tension anger. In Ezinifite the masquerades fulfill this unique role.²¹ Therefore, masquerades should not be seen as fetish but as a means of entertainment.

Endnotes

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