

***ADA WOJIEWHOR ERINWO AND THE MAKING OF
MISSIONARY HEROINE IN IKWERRELAND¹**

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ABSTRACT

The planting of Christianity in Ikwerreland was phenomenal. It remains the success story of a heroine in a male chauvinistic society. This paper explores how Ada Wojiewhor Erinwo overcame patriarchy, harmful traditional beliefs and practices against women in a period when the visibility of women in mission and political discourse both in Africa, and elsewhere, was unthinkable. What were her struggles, strategies and resistance? How significant were her efforts in negotiating the gospel message within her socio-cultural contexts, thereby making the planting of Christianity in Ikwerre "her-story" and not "his-story". Utilizing ethno-historical and emic perspectives, the paper contends that the story of the Anglican Church in Ikwerreland is an indigenous discovery of Christianity; that is, the history of how the "ordinary people" - slaves, traders, artisans, ex-convicts, and "Bible women" shaped, appropriated, and reinterpreted Christianity among the Uvuawhu (Ikwerre) communities. The paper concludes that Ada Wojiewhor Erinwo images an icon of womanhood and heroine in the receptivity and growth of Ikwerre Anglicanism.

Key words: Anglicanism, African Christianity, Ikwerreland, Native Agency.



INTRODUCTION

In African Christian history, there is a significant body of literature on the role played by native agency in the establishment of Christianity. African Independent Churches (AIC's) have a fair share of the record of notable African women whose exploits cannot be forgotten. However, until recently, such records among the mainline churches are in piecemeal. Hence, scholars have grappled with issue as this, considering the subjugated role which the African traditional culture bestowed on the woman. Some scholars and theologians believe however that the role of African woman in spirituality against violence, poverty, underdevelopment, and political instability is a call for Christianity to document the role of woman in the salvific work of the gospel (Oduyoye 1986; Bowie 1993; Hoehler-Fatton 1996; Gbule 2011, pp. 227-218).

If there is an exception to the Christian male historical dominance, the story of Wojiewhor Erinwo remains the success of a heroine in a male chauvinistic society. How did she overcome patriarchy, domesticity, harmful traditional beliefs and practices against women in a period when the visibility of women in mission and political discourse both in Africa, and elsewhere, was unthinkable? This paper understudies Ada Wojiewhor Erinwo's success in planting Christianity in Ikwerreland, from an ethno-historical perspective. She was not just a success in this endeavour, she demonstrates the importance of womanhood in African Christian Historiography.

BACKGROUND

From inception, women have played prominent roles in the establishment of Christianity, and its consolidation over history. However, the story of the establishment of Anglicanism in Ibaa and Evekwu is truly intriguing. It is the role played by "Bible Women" in the history of Christianity in these communities, and particularly, in a male-dominated patriarchal society. It was *her-story* that these women defied all odds to the gospel message in



communities that sported the most obnoxious traditional practices like human sacrifice, killing of twins and their mothers, weird widowhood rites, and the observance of sacred days for the local deities (Gbule 2011, p. 120).

Ikwerre indigenous religion is premised on the worldview that there is a Supreme Being *Chiokike* (the Creator God), the divinities (*renewu* or *agbara*) ancestral spirits (*rukani*), magic and medicine, and man. *Ali* is considered the guardian of the peoples' morality and the sustainer of social cohesion and solidarity (Wotogbe-Weneka 1996, pp.143-146). Religion for the Ikwerre is the whole life and provides them with the survival kit to combat the vicissitudes of life. Just as Idowu (1973, p.5) observes about the Yomba, "in all things they are religious."

In this socio-cultural area, the place of male dominance over the female is voraciously envisaged. The woman in the traditional Ikwerreland, more or less, belongs to the man. She is allowed to be appreciated by the husband "in low tone". Her praise is not echoed; rather as the "property" of the man, her prowess and exploits are ascribed to the man. To further subjugate her to the whims and caprices of the man, a wide range of issues that dealt with her were shrouded and regulated under the arms of religion. Indeed, the invisibility of women in the cross-cultural process of Christianity in Africa, and indeed elsewhere is common place. The story has always privileged male agency to the utter neglect of women. According to Fiona Bowie (1993) the women were regarded as "adjuncts to men rather than as historical protagonists in their own right" (p. 1). But the bigger picture is that women as missionaries, wives, "Bible women", teachers, nurses and doctors were crucial in the historiography of World missions (Kalu 2007; Hodgson 2005). For example, not only here in Ikwerre land but also in Isoko, African women played important roles in the foundation of Christianity in their communities (Akama 2000). Writing on the evangelistic zeal displayed by Madam Erinwo Wojiewhor to bring Christianity to Uvuawhu clans, Ckwo Somba (1980) avers that "her story will be told in Ibaa for a long time" (p.168).



The Planting of Christianity in Ikwerreland: The Indigenous Factor

Tradition has it that Madam Erinwo Wojiewhor introduced Christianity into Uvuawhu in 1901 through her trading links with Abonnema in Kalabariland. Sources cannot ascertain Madam Erinwo's exact date of birth. However, she was born to Wojiewho Elenwo, a wealthy farmer, and ardent of African Traditional Religion, from Omuobizu family in Ibaa. She had no formal education, but developed a spiritual revulsion for her father's idols and charms, quite early in life. She refused to participate in, nor ate things sacrificed to these idols. Even the pressure from her father to accept the traditional religious practices did not make Erinwo change her stance (Orlu1990, p.54).

Later, Madam Erinwo married one Ewhonwo Echeke, also a rich farmer from Omuikea village in Ibaa. In her new home, she continued to violate traditional beliefs and practices, such as idol worship, killing of twin babies, human sacrifice, trial by ordeal, and the sanctions forbidding people to weed grasses or crack palm kernel nuts on the traditional *ekhe* days. The Omuikea people were reluctant to punish her because of her father's reputation and her husband's social status. While still young in the marriage, her husband died without giving her a child. The people of Omuikea evicted her from her marital home as a deterrent for her defiance against indigenous beliefs and sacred objects. Then she returned to her parental home. But before then, her influential father had also died. Through farming and trading in oil palm products, Erinwo became prosperous, and was able to establish commercial contacts with some traders in Kalabariland. In Abonnema, in particular, Erinwo established a strong business base with Mr. Charlie Briggs of Young Briggs family. It was at Abonnema that Madam Erinwo first heard the Gospel message from the Anglican Church of the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) which had established its presence at Abonnema about 1891 (Orlu1990, p.54). Erinwo was inspired with great missionary zeal (Somba 1980, p.165) and returned with the same to Ibaa. On return to Ibaa, Madam Erinwo



intensified her campaign against idolatry, fetishism, charms, and other obnoxious practices such as slave owning, and the killing of twins and babies who cut the upper teeth first. Oral testimony notes that she had to emancipate all her father's numerous slaves (*Owhu*), on account of all these obnoxious practices; and for the move, she was greatly persecuted by the traditional religionists who considered her activities to be an affront to their social and cultural ethos. But Madam Erinwo refused to be deterred spiritually.

About 1901 a land case was instituted against four of her brothers—Messrs Eleru, Okwem, Kocha and Wocha at the Isiokpo Native Court (Somba 1980, p.165). The act was that when Erinwo's father, Wojiewhor Elenwo, died, the family farm lands reverted to Owghoda, the next eldest son of Elenwo as was customary. But Wojiewhor's sons were determined to rescind the custom, and so Owghoda went ahead to share out the farmland during the farming season (Orlu 1990, p.54). To demonstrate their disapproval of this existing custom, Wojiewhor's sons pinned their mourning cloth (*onunu*) and the young raffia palm fronds (*omu*) round the entire farmland; and thus declaring it a disputed area (Nyenke n.d.). They were arrested and arraigned before the court clerk, Mr. Karibi Bob-Manuel who summarily sentenced them to 18 months imprisonment each. While these convicts were being taken to Degema (the District headquarters), to serve the jail term, they escaped and ran home. The court clerk reported the incident to the District Officer, Mr. P.A. Talbot. Realizing the grave consequences of her brothers' action, Erinwo took them to her trader-friend, Mr. Charlie Briggs at Abonnema. She pleaded with him to help secure the release of her brothers. Mr. Briggs was not in position to do this, so he introduced them to Rev Merriman, the Anglican Minister at Abonnema. Rev. Merriman agreed to help if they would renounce idol worship and embrace the Christian faith. They did. Rev. Merriman then appealed to the District Officer, Mr. P. A. Talbot to pardon the convicts because they were being victimized for their Christian faith (Echeonwu *et al* 1997, p.iii). When the District Officer received the petition, he suspected the



affected persons were the runaway prisoners about whom he had received a report. He ordered that they be brought down to his office at Degema. The men were taken to Degema, accompanied by Rev. Merriman and Madam Erinwo. After some interrogations, the D.O. sent the men back to Isiokpo with a letter to Mr. Karibi Bob-Manuel, the court clerk, ordering their release.

In appreciation of Rev. Merriman's efforts at securing their freedom, Erinwo and her brothers went back to Abonnema with gills of yams, goats and wine to thank him. In turn Rev. Merriman blessed them and gave them a bell with which to call people to daily prayers (Somba 1980, p.166). They returned to Uvuawhu as Christian converts and not convicts, holding daily prayers and services in open places, private homes, and individual halls, and thus making many more people to accept Christianity. That same year, 1901, Madam Erinwo and the small Christian community were able to build the first Church hall in Ibaa under the Niger Delta Pastorate Anglican Communion. This event marked the beginning of Christianity in Uvuawhu clan.

The pioneer members included Madam Erinwo Wojiewhor and her brothers. Others were Okala Onwuka, Wobisi Obodo, Marcus Azu, Amesi Winike, Elendu Amadi, Elechi Ohia, Woka Woko, Owhuo Wecheonwu, Madam Oyia Wikpo, Madam Jida Wechonwu, Madam Mbata Anuwuhuo, and Ada Wedegu (Echeonwu *et al* 1997, p.113). In 1905 Madam Erinwo asked Rev. Merriman to send them a Christian teacher to guide the infant Church. In response to the appeal, Mr. Festus Abibo from Okrika was posted to take charge. Mr. Abibo was a thorough and conscientious worker. During his tenure, the conduct of Church services began to assume the proper Anglican procedure. He preached in the open air at village squares. He established a day school to teach the children how to read and write, and also Bible stories. In 1909 Rev. Merriman and other Church personalities from Abonnema visited Ibaa and formerly dedicated the Church as St. Agnes (Anglican) Church. Also in the same year, Mr. Tamaele, an Anglican agent succeeded Festus Abibo as the Catechist. Church membership rose from a humble beginning of 18 to 30 persons. Many of these



foundational members were prominent in the community, whose opinions on public issues were respected. These included Ogbonda Wojiewhor, Chukure Elenwo, Tasie Nwabueze, Chief Nyenke Owho, Chief Wejinya Uruahand, and Chief Egbunne. The effect was that the Church was no longer for the marginal elements of the community (i.e. women, slaves, children), but the elite (Kolapo2000, p.94). Because of this persecution of the converts was reduced to the barest minimum.

From Ibaa, Erinwo extended her evangelistic activities to Isiokpo, Elele Alimini, Omudioga, and other towns in the North-Western part of Ikwerreland. She became a pillar of support for Christianity in the area. For example, she donated a cow for the entertainment of guests during the official dedication of St. Peter's (Anglican) Church, Nkarahia Isiokpo, established in 1907. It is also instructive to note that before this time Christian converts from Isiokpo such as Jeremiah Wodu and Amos Assor attended divine services at St. Agnes' Ibaa (Tasie 1999, p.107).

In 1910, Rev. Merriman once again visited Ibaa to assess the growth of the Church. He was quite impressed that even though the progress was slow, it was steady. On this occasion, he conducted the first baptism in Uvuawhu clan, involving three adults, the only female being Madam Erinwo, who was christened Deborah.

However, in 1918 St. Agnes' faced its initial problem that shook its very foundations. The cause was the religious mass movement of Garrick Braide and his Christ Army Church. The teaching of Braide moderated the Anglican principles of holy matrimony, baptism, and Holy Communion. It allowed polygamy, practised baptism by total immersion, and allowed such practices as the treatment of illnesses by the use of "holy water and clay". Partly as a result of this development Madam Erinwo died heartbroken from influenza in 1918. She was buried at the Church cemetery at Omadie village. Somba (1980) has attributed the relative backwardness of Anglicanism in Uvuawhu to the confusion caused by Garrick Braide movement (p.167).



Evangelistic Strategies Adopted by Madam Erinwo

Ogbu Kalu (1979, p.19) has observed that missionary strategies in Africa primarily included pulpit ministry, court alliance, door-to-door canvassing, Christian villages, trading companies, schools, hospitals, use of indigenous languages and agents. These strategies and others were employed in the evangelization of Uvuawhu communities, and merit a brief explanation.

Door-to-door Preaching

Madam Erinwo and her Christian band usually moved from house to house campaigning against pagan practices (Ohaka 1984, p.17), especially during the traditional rest days (*Ekehihieri*).

Destruction of Idols and Charms

The practice involved the burning of cult objects, shrines, and charms. This act is locally referred to as "*Okpogbuagbara*" (meaning the destruction of evil spirits). The method was usually undertaken with the approval of the new converts as a show of their enthusiasm to abandon their old unchristian ways for the new faith. Madam Erinwo was inundated with requests from new converts to come and destroy their shrines and other objects of traditional religion and introduce Christianity. Erinwo usually carried out the burning of idols and charms "singing inspiring Gospel choruses in local dialects" (Ohaka 1984, p.20). The opponents thought that she would die and did little to stop her. But when this did not happen some of them renounced the worship of idols and declared for Christianity. Between 1905 and 1918, the years of Madam Erinwo active career, the strategy proved very effective. Many people declared for Christ and Church members increased significantly.

Court Alliance

The strategy involved the conversion of the elite such as the Chiefs and influential members of the communities. It was hoped that their conversion or patronage would make the rest of the population to declare for Christianity.



School Apostolate

Perhaps the most important strategy and method, which accelerated the growth of Anglican Churches in Uvuawhu clan was education. In Uvuawhu as in other Niger Delta communities education was welcomed as a gateway to a secure future (Epelle 1955, p.121). Furthermore, the use of education as a means of evangelism was to destroy the citadel of Satan in Africa (Ekechi1972, p.237). As early as 1905 an Anglican teacher was posted to Uvuawhu and he began a day school and a Sunday school. He taught the pupils the 3R's in order to appreciate the Bible stories. Indeed, Anglican church took advantage of the establishment of schools to evangelize the people. As a principle of the churches, church attendance was made compulsory for all pupils. Pupils who failed to attend Church on Sundays were publicly beaten on Mondays by the head-teacher. So to avoid being beaten every Monday, pupils had to attend Church services every Sunday. The effect was an increased number of children inquiring for baptism. Generally speaking, schools were regarded as "the nursery bed of the infant Church" (Ajayi 1965, p.33). For instance, the first indigenous clergy of Ikwerreland, Rev. Canon Nyenwe (Rtd.), was a product of the Anglican School, Ibaa.

Use of Native Agents

It is to be noted that the beginning of Anglicanism in the community is traceable to Madam Erinwo and her brothers – Eleru, Kocha, Okwen, Wocha, who became converted at Abonnema in Kalabari land. The native agents provided the facilities with which the new mission out-station took off. There were yet others who served as interpreters, guides, and aides to the Kalabari missionaries advancing the work in the communities. They proved to be the strong pillars on which Uvuawhu Anglicanism was built.

Open-air Preaching

The open air preaching attracted many people, and eventually many were converted to Christianity. The preaching was usually carried out in village squares, open places, and under shades of big



trees. Much of the preaching in Uvuawhu took place at the famous village square called “Ahia Elenwo” in Omuobizo. The approach was considered important, because it did not require elaborate procedures and organizations. Besides its simplicity, it was the easiest way to reach the mass of the population with the Gospel message. Madam Erinwo and her little converts exploited this method to the fullest. They preached the renunciation of idols, fetishes, and charms by exhorting the converts to depend wholly on God (Ohaka1984, p.90).

House Fellowship

As we have noted elsewhere in this work, Kalabari Christians Christianized the early Uvuawhu converts. On their return home they decided to extend the Gospel message to their pagan relatives. They held regular morning and evening devotion in private houses and halls (*oviri*). It was these house fellowships that were later to form the nucleus of the early Anglican community in Uvuawhu. Madam Erinwo and her brothers conducted house fellowships before they were able to build a Church hall in 1905. Also, persons like Owbo Echeonwu and Madam Jida Echeonwu held house fellowship, which later metamorphosed, into St. Mark’s (Anglican) Church in the 1940s.

Trade Evangelism

Trade was also used to promote the work of Anglicanism in Uvuawhu. Riverine traders frequently visited the Ahia Ekeh market from Okrika, Kalabari and Brass. These traders took along with them the Christian faith as they bought and sold. If the trade fell on the Sabbath day, the Kalahari traders observed the holy day by preaching to their host communities. They also demonstrated high transparency in their trade deals as a mark of the new experience in Christ. Trade therefore became a medium of evangelism.



The Peoples' Response to the Evangelization of Ikwerreland in Erinwo's time.

During the early days of Anglican mission in Uvuawhu, Christian missionaries were severely resisted. The greatest opponents to the Christian religion were the traditionalists, embracing the *dibias*, priests, diviners, rainmakers, healers, and titled holders, such as *ele-oha*. For instance the *dibias*, priests and the diviners fulfilled significant social and religious roles in the communities. Therefore, naturally, they constituted the missionaries' chief opponents because the missionary praxes destroyed their means of livelihood and denied them the social influence of the host communities (Ekechi 1971, p.17). Hence they regarded the missionaries as subversive and dangerous religious and cultural innovators. They took steps to check missionaries' evangelization of Uvuawhu villages. The case of Madam Erinwo was instructive. Inspired by the missionary teaching that the indigenous religious concepts were inferior to Christianity, she began to defy cultic objects and burn down shrines. The traditionalists were appalled at such affront. So when her father and her husband died, the Omuikea people forcibly evicted her from her marital home for carrying her defiance of traditional religion too far. Also in 1901, the land dispute built against her brothers and, their subsequent imprisonment at Isiokpo, was to distract her from preaching the Christian religion (Somba 1980, p.166). Others who could not confront her physically resorted to magic manipulation. In fact, according to Elder Monday Nyenke², when she died, her death was attributed to the effect of the gods, whose shrines she burnt. Even her childlessness was attributed to retribution from the gods (Ohaka 1984, p.25).

It was clear that the Anglican missionaries were eager to overthrow the social order and replace it with a foreign and Christian structure. Thus they incited their converts to defy traditional laws and customs. Some of the Uvuawhu Christian converts disregarded the law prohibiting the weeding of grasses

² One of my informants



and the shelling of kernel nuts on traditional sacred days (*nkwo-ehieri*), because they felt that they were days set aside for worship of a local deity. Others refused to join in the traditional “*oghurukwe*” (masquerade) pageants, labeling it as fetish. For this course, some of them were ostracized and denied farmlands. In fact, the Christian converts were victims of their own zeal. Because they had estranged themselves from the traditional society, the people persecuted them. In some cases their property were either stolen or deliberately set on fire. This was the case of Worewhu of Omeuhekke in Obelle. But in all these cases, the converts stood firm and regarded their persecution as a trial that would lead them to the promised eternal life.

Uvuawhu people also resisted Anglican missionaries because of the double standard lives some of them exhibited. Some of the Anglican teachers were irresolute and debased in their lifestyles. These provided the worst advertisement of the Christian gospel preached. A case for reference was Mr. R.K. Tamaele, the African teacher posted to St. Agnes in 1909. In 1919 Mr. Tamaele committed adultery with Sybel Azu, the wife of Benjamin Azu, an influential member of the Church. This brought serious problem to the Church. Some members of the Church Committee insisted that Mr. Tamaele should be transferred, but others maintained he should be made to pay the customary charges in relation to the offence. In the fight that ensued much of Church property was destroyed. Mr. Tamaele, himself narrowly escaped being lynched (Ohaka1984, p.49). There is no doubt that Mr. Tamaele's action was inconsistent with the teaching he espoused. It was very difficult for the indigenous people to reconcile such practices of the teacher with a religion that preaches neighbourly love. Such episode is not limited to Uvuawhu, but characteristic of missionary experience in the Niger Delta (Ajavi 1965, p.78).

The wave of hostility and resistance against the evangelization of Uvuawhu by the Anglican missionaries was short-lived. By the first decade of the twentieth century both the opposers and those who wavered had coalesced into patrons of the missionaries. The reason was that there was no spectacular



wholesale conversion to Christianity at Uvuawhu as was the case at Bonny, Opobo, Kalahari, and Brass (Tasie 1978, p.325). In fact during the early days, the evangelization of Uvuawhu was slow. The quality of converts confirms the view that Christianity at these initial stages appealed mostly to the marginal elements (Ekechi 1971, p.12; Ajayi 1965, pp.99-101). Hence some of the converts were mostly domestic slaves, ex-convicts, women and children.

In all, the relationship between the missionaries and their host communities during the later part of the twentieth century was, in addition to religious factors, also for political and economic considerations. It was in most cases non-conflictual. However, this does not suggest that Uvuawhu people converted massively to Christianity. Generally, the people did not accept Christianity because it was superior to their religion. Their religion is still deeply ingrained in their minds and lives (Ekechi1971, p.17). As Mamman Daudu and Ndidi Gbule (2000) had observed that by accepting Christianity, African societies, including Uvuawhu, were only demonstrating their religious tolerance and pluralism (8).

CONCLUSION

The impact of Christianity and indeed Anglicanism in Ikwerreland can be seen in the social, moral, educational, economical, and religious spheres. The story may have been told from different dimensions as “his-story”. The pioneer role played by Ada Wojiewhor Erinwo makes it “her-story”, a story that is deeply coloured by the exploits of a heroine. She stood against the male chauvinism of the time; she dared the obnoxious and dehumanizing traditions of the time; and she demonstrated her prowess in business to be the channel through which the gospel was introduced into Ikwerreland. Erinwo’s remains a pioneer native agent for the introduction of Christianity in Ikwerreland. As Gogo Somba avers “her story will be told for long time”.



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- * This paper is culled from my Masters Degree work Ndidi Justice Gbule (2003). "One Hundred Years of Anglicanism in Uvuawhu Clan". Unpublished MA Dissertation submitted to the Graduate School, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

