

**CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AJALLI
AND THE SOCIAL CHANGES; 1927-2023**

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Abstract

Catholic Church one of the Christian denominations brought by the European Missionaries. It officially entered Ajalli community in the Present Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State officially in 1927. Ajalli community is one of all the communities in Orumba North and South Local Government Areas and the first community to accept the colonial masters; hence the community attained the status of colonial headquarters. The presence of the colonial authorities brought amenities, which acted as pull and push factor to the Catholic mission, which prompted them to move from Akpu to Ajalli. The presence of the Catholic mission had altered the traditional social values of Ajalli. These alterations have both sides of the coin-the negative and positive. The most negative and protracted of the changes had continued to be on the relationship existing between Ajalli community and her closest neighbor Akpu community. The two communities had continued to live in protracted enmity fuelled by the interest of the Catholic Church hence a contrary to her teaching of “love”. Historical method which employs the sourcing of data from oral and published materials was used in the paper. The finding shows that the coming of the Catholic mission in Ajalli, though had some commendable social changes, had also negative changes which underscored her preaching of “love”. This is evident in the lingering enmity existing between Ajalli and her closest neighbor Akpu community. Therefore, following the observation of Anyandele, Ajalli, Akpu and Catholic Church never hanker for spiritual dispensation.



Key words: Catholic Church, Ajalli, Mission, Changes, Community.

Introduction

The coming of the catholic mission into Ajalli was facilitated by some Ajalli indigenes who in their trading ventures in early 1900 encountered the Catholic missionaries and some of their converts at Onitsha. The Catholic mission's activities appealed to them more than that of the protestant denominations which had established in Ajalli at the advent of the Colonial Authority. These new converts to Catholicism never established the church in Ajalli but were attending church activities with some Akpu indigenes whose traditional ruler in the quest to gain relevance in colonial sphere had invited the catholic mission to establish in his domain in 1915¹.

The early Ajalli converts to Catholicism however terminated their attendance of Catholic mission activities in Akpu in a few years. They relocated to Ajalli and were holding their activities in the palace of Eze Nwafor Nwosu not until their re-location to Ugwu-Omagha and to another portion of land acquired from Mazi Onwumere on which the Church officially stamped its presence in Ajalli in 1927. From 1927, the Church grew in converts, the early and new converts from Akpu community had to abandon their own Church to join the Ajalli converts at Ajalli. Mission school was established and the number of pupils admitted in the school continued to grow that there was need for expansion to more suitable locations. With the expansion and growth of the Church activities, social situation of Ajalli community and their immediate neighbor continued to be impacted upon positively as well as negatively. However, the quest for independence that rose after the World War II, pushed the Ajalli's nearest neighbor Akpu community to start claiming ownership of all the facilities established in Ajalli by the Colonial masters to belong to them. This have occasioned a protracted litigations from one court of law to another between Ajalli community and Akpu community. It continued to generate a protracted hatred between the two communities that up till the time covered by this paper,



the two communities do not marry from among themselves. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church had continued to take sides thereby exacerbating the condition. In arriving to this observation, this paper, adapted historical method by sourcing material from oral and written document as its tool.

Ajalli Community, Location and People

Ajalli community is of Aro stock; presently, it is the headquarters of Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State². They migrated from Arochukwu and settled in their present area at about 1660 AD³. During the colonial era, it had the status of a district headquarters, it was the next colonial administrative center after Awka District, all in the defunct Onitsha Province⁴. Ajalli community is bounded in the North and East by Ufuma community in Orumba North local Government Area, in the South and West by Nawfijah and Akpu communities respectively in Orumba South Local Government Area. She has a Population of over 13,000 people⁵.

The advent of the colonial masters consolidated their itinerant long distance trading and farming as they exchanged slaves with European goods. Their religion which was traditionalist changed to Christianity, syncretic and traditional at the advent of missionaries. Arochukwu culture both material and non-material were carried by Ajalli to this location. Igbo culture is an embodiment of political, social, economic and religious life of the people. It encompassed of marriage, festival, judicial process, birth of a child, burial of the dead and others. Marriage in Igbo land before the arrival of the white was characterized by polygamy. The Aros are no different from this, but chooses all their wives mainly from Aro indigenes. However the practice of choosing wives mainly from Aro indigenes was not sustained as they chose their first or head wife from Aro and others from non Aros.

The Advent of the Colonial Masters

A marital problem between Okoro Ijeoma of Ndikelionwu and his erstwhile wife Nwovuaku, prompted the coming and settlement of the

colonial master in Ajalli. The marriage between Okoro Ijeoma and Nwovuaku begat two children, a male and a female (Nwabeke and Uduekwesi). Nwovuaku later eloped with Nwangwu Oji of Ajalli and their marriage was blessed with male children. Later she Nwovuaku ran over to Oji Nwangwu of Ujari and begat; Ezeana, Job, Oji and Joe Nwangwu.....⁶

Okoro Ijeoma not happy that Nwovuaku eloped and with intent to erase the memory of the marriage” willed” that the two children begat for him by Nwovuaku be killed and their head used in his burial on his death. However the execution of the “will” prompted the invitation by Uduekwesi of her half-brothers (Ezeana and Emesiama) from Ajalli for her rescue because Nwabeke had been murdered. On their arrival, the rescue party from Ajalli were held in hostage by Ndikelionrou people. As the desperate efforts made to release the hostages failed, one of their brothers Oji Nwangwu went to Awka to secure the help of the British expeditionary force who were at Awka to quell an “inter clan war between Aguru and Amaikwo Awka”⁷.

Indeed, the British force secured the release of the hostages as it was observed that “leading citizens of Ajalli headed by Mazi Aniche Otti...went to Ndikelionwu to witness the release and negotiate for peace with the expeditionary force and to accept British sovereignty⁸. The expeditionary force would have settled at Ndikelionwu, but unhappy about their invitation, requested them to follow Ajalli people that invited them. The force having settled at Ajalli, nursing the fears of attack by the indigenous people; the commander of the force trickily collected the Dane guns from the people and the surrounding communities with the promise and pretense of improving upon them. However sensing that much of the Dane guns had been collected, destroyed them on a place named Ugwuntigiegbe “a hill on which guns were destroyed”⁹ The Ugwuntigiegbe later became the headquartes of Ufesiodo Parish which was later re christened Akpu Parish.



Arrival of Catholic Church

The coming of the Catholic Church in Ajalli was facilitated by some Ajalli indigenes who in their trading ventures in early 1900 had come in contact with catholic missionaries and their converts at Onitsha. The Catholic Mission's activities appealed to them more than that of other denominations which had established in Ajalli at the advent of the colonial master. The new converts to Catholicism however never established their Church at Ajalli as they were attending the Church activities at Akpu whose traditional ruler in the quest for recognition by the colonial master had gone to Adazi to invite the Catholic Church to his domain in 1915¹⁰.

The new few converts from Ajalli though were attending Catholic activities at St. Peter Church Akpu initiated several moves at founding their own church in Ajalli. They started holding their meetings at Eze Nwafor Nwosu's Palace, from where they re-located to Ugwu Omagha and further re-located to more tabled land donated by one of them Mazi Onwumere in 1917¹¹. R.N. Arukwe had noted, "This was the year the first few converts from Ajalli stopped attending Church services at St. Peter Catholic Church Akpu and Catholic Mission at Umuagu Ufuma¹². He went further to observe that;

After attending masses and services at Akpu for some years, there arose a dissension between Ajalli and Akpu Catholic (over using masquerades to attack them). This incidence led us to break away from St. Peter's Akpu so as to come home and established our own Catholic Church¹³.

The increase in the number of the converts that herald the founding of Catholic Church in Ajalli was unprecedented. What occasioned this among others were the existence of the presence of the colonial masters in Ajalli that had established some infrastructure such as Dispensary and Maternity which occasioned the influx of people who needed the services of the infrastructure who also wasted no time in joining the church. Furthermore, the Ajalli converts included the



exhibits of unity, self-denial and incessant prayer¹⁴ as their modus operandi. Also they offered fervent prayer for the people, visiting the sick and helping them, they build houses for the very poor people especially the widows, the orphans and aged, occasionally the old members called small children together and feasted them¹⁵. This was almost a replica of the method used by Bishop Shanhan “the brave Irish priest reputed to have moved from village to village on foot, ate people's food, share the same shelter with them and spoke to them in the language they understand¹⁶.”

Apart from the above reasons, the Catholic Missionary held the notion that converting the Ajalli people and Arochukwu stock would not only aid in their gospel spreading but would destroy the belief by the Igbos of the dreaded and famous long Juju Oracle of Arochukwu hence the observation that

Whatever lingering influence...the Aros...commanded, father Shanhan pointed out would be obliterated by Christianity. Little by little, the influence of the Aros will be destroyed. We count on doing this chiefly through our school¹⁷.

The Church Missionary society also held the same view for they were said to believe that “The Umuchukwu people are dominant race in Ibo country formerly they ruled through their oracle at Arochukwu, now they will rule through their superior intelligence and it is for us to see that it is directed Godward”¹⁸. These no doubt must have prompted the efforts by Catholics to stay in Ajalli.

Consolidation and Achievement of the New Church

By 1929, construction work at the portion of land donated by Mazi Owumere was completed. The design of the Church altar made the move to name the church St Paul; hence the observation;

By this time, our great artist and designer... Mr. Paul; Onyejeri ...spent much time designing the mud altar of our Church and printed the name” St. Paul Catholic Church Ajalli and place the



board in the front of our Church before Rev. Father Geriod arrival. After blessing...and celebrating holy mass, he said that our Church should be named St. Mathew's Catholic Church because that day was St. Mathew's feast day¹⁹.

By this time, the Akpu converts and the Catholic authority had abandoned the Church at Akpu to join the one established in Ajalli. From this site, the church was relocated to another new site called Upata site and by this period, St. Mathew's Catholic Church Ajalli had enjoyed the services of three (3) official catechist. However due to the fact that the Church was yet to be elevated to a Parish Status, coupled with the paucity of the priests, the Church continued with the services of visiting priests from Adazi. The early official catechists were Richard Nwakobi, 1929-33, Albert Obiora, 1934-37 and Victor Okeke, 1938-39²⁰. Each of were credited for one achievement or the other. Richard Nwakobi who was said to be blessed with a special gift of tongue and pleasant method of approach²¹, contributed greatly to wining of converts. Formal education was introduced in the Church during the stewardship of Albert Obiora. On this R.N. Arukwe said "A land mark was created in the history of our...Church during Albert tenure... in 1934 when a Catholic School was first established²². The founding of school no doubt contributed for the re-location of the Church to Upata site.

However the major reason for the re-location was the need for the school to be near a major road and market. The issue of the Church building being close to a major road was contained in the requirements which any community that wanted a Catholic Church and school must satisfy. Hence section "D" of the guideline required "a road to the market or to a neighbor road... to link the Church²³. By 1930 during the tenure of Victor Okeke as the Catechist of St. Matthew's Catholic Church Ajalli was transfered to Upata on the land donated by Umunwano family of Ajalli²⁴. Also by 1940, the Church's school had grown to standard 5 class with many teachers, pupils and converts²⁵.



The last location of the Catholic Church in Ajalli was from Upata site to Ugwuntijiegbe²⁶. This movement was occasioned by the desire to have Ufesiodo parish. Also on the relocation, Arukwe observed;

...We transferred to the fourth site at Ntjiegbe but it was not our plan...we were satisfied after fixing our building near major road. Unfortunately, external forces were responsible for this movement. All Catholic Stations in Ufesiodo area were to be united into a parish and Ajalli Catholic Mission was not an exception. A central place for the parish headquarters was looked for. The general question in Ufesiodo was, where would that central place be?...²⁷

The above incident according to Mazi P.S Nwajagu came to fruition when a “committee headed by Arthur Nwankwo of Ufuma which was commissioned to select a site for Ufesiodo Parish center on March 1945 at Umuagu Ufuma²⁸. The colonial presence and the amenities put in place by it, pushed and pulled the committee and even the Church authority to choose and approve the citing of the parish center in Ajalli. Little wonder, in a letter written to Archbishop of Onitsha some years after read in part, “when it was definitely sure that the parish would be granted, the Ufesiodo Catholic Union on March 12th 1945 at Umuagu held a meeting to determine the Centre for the parish. This topic was deliberated...and all...take Ajalli as the ecclesiastical centre...as it is both the political and educational center of the area”²⁹.

The approval for Ajalli to be parish headquarters was given by father C. Liddane the then parish priest of Adazi from which Ufesiodowas carved out hence the observation that Liddane preferred Ugwuntijiegbe to become the administrative center of Catholicism in Orumba...³⁰

The birth of Ufesiodo came with the establishment of a female school; for the female child who had suffered neglect in terms of education. In this school, the female child was taught how to make home, reading, writing, arithmetic and scripture.



Social Impact of the Church

Ajalli was in about 1905 infected with the virus of British imperialism. While the virus has caused malady in the lives of the people, it also served as a tonic. Eddy. O. Eragebe has noted that centuries of contact with European turned out to be one of mixed blessings³².

The aim of the Christian Mission in Nigeria was to Christianize the people and preach against the evils of slavery and slave trade. "Their hope was that the social order would be replaced with new ones"³³. The British secular arm had established in Ajalli some amenities such as school, dispensary and maternity. The school however admitted more male children than females; but the missionary not only built school but boosted the number of the female children admitted. It is no surprise that this became the situation because "the missionary were ever preoccupied with the question of education which she considers as strictly connected with her mission..."³⁴ Thus the after effect of this type of education was tremendous as the extent of the spiritual achievement of the mission will never be known, socially the process of disintegration continued, culturally the indigenes and Europeans continue to jostle together mixing in a way that defies analysis³⁵. Nonetheless the Christian mission were more than destroyers, they were builders as well and to some extent preservers³⁶.

The after effect of the Catholic Mission as regard to Western education on Ajalli could be summed up in the words of Anyandele who said that

...even to this day, the great majority of... leaders in politics, in medicine, in law, in civil service and education itself owe their beginnings and their positions in ... society to their education in a mission school³⁷.

The Catholic Mission dented the religious belief of Ajalli people. Prior to the advent of the (Catholic Church), traditional religion was held tenaciously by the indigenes. As in all other Igbo communities, Ajalli people believed in the existence of a supreme being which they reached

through an intermediary. However, this was preached against and these gods usually carved, molded objects and at times trees were destroyed by the converts, thus subjugating of the people religiously. The Catholic Mission penetrated Ajalli and having noticed that what ... Ibo religion wanted was not destruction but transformation;³⁸ hence they allowed the indigenes to retain their native names and also introduced new names which has no meaning. These names were used interchangeably with native ones. The naming of a child with event surrounding the birth was thrown overboard. Some overzealous converts' even naming ceremony which traditionally takes place after twenty-eight (28) days of birth of a child became adual event as there was traditional and Christian naming ceremony. The elderly converts were baptized with names such as Gaius, Deogratias, Marcel and others lacking indigenous valve. Marriages and institution were also affected with the advent of Catholic Church in Ajalli. The Polygamous practices were preached against. The converts who had more than one wife were forced to denounceall but one. The moral decadence that surface in the community was unprecedented. These denounced wives in attempt to carter for their children started indulging in unmoral acts such as prostitution; not only was this, the communal unit and other traditional practices in Ajalli set in disarray. Catholic regulation and principles threatened the traditional society, hence preposterous regulation that polygamist who wanted full membership of and privileges of the church must first disown all wives but one³⁹. There regulations were made without due regard to fact that;

...indigenous...society was...communal...; Every members of the group, village or tribe from the highest to the lowest was more than a unit in a n organic whole controlled by an non bonded code of duties, taboo, and rights on the faithful performance of which every individual, the cohesion, order and welfare of the group depended⁴⁰

Even the traditional marriage rites were held to be very defective. The converts were taught believe that marriage became completed and real



after church wedding. Wives of the converts weeded in the Church were given Christian and English title to designate their new status.⁴¹ “Mrs” took over the traditional title Oriaku,⁴¹ which was used to designate the status of married woman.

It was to the credit of the Church that discarding and disposing of twins at birth came to an end in Ajalli. The agonies of a family through away their God given children ended and it became a blessing rather than a curse.

The Catholic Church also aided in the cessation of the practice whereby some dead (Corps) were not accorded normal burial as they were thrown into a designated evil forest. This brought to an end the spread of diseases occasioned by improper disposition of corpses: On this, Eni observed “those who died clean or with active ulcers or with enlarged livers (afo-otito) were thrown into bad bush⁴². Further, the traditional funeral rites which shortened to last for a about some few days. This debunked the widely belief by the people that the spirit of a deceased never rest peacefully in the next world without according an elaborate and expensive funeral rites. The entertainment accorded by masquerades during burial rites was replaced with the playing of brass band introduced by the Catholic mission in 1930s⁴³.

The Ikeji festival, which was purely a traditional feast was infested by the penetration of the Catholic Church as those masquerades entertaining during the festival no longer wear and carry charms; even women can watch them perform.⁴⁴ On this, J.A. Otti posited that ‘in the olden days before the advent of the missionaries, women dare not come out openly to watch masquerades perform⁴⁵. Missionary activities like singing brought fame on Ajalli as the Catholic Church Choir was recognized and respected throughout the district. It was noted that in “Church affairs, Ujan (Ajalli) Church Choir drew its members from both ordinary Church memebers”⁴⁶.



The greatest legacy of the Catholic Church on Ajalli had been on her neighbor Akpu. Akpu community and Ajalli community has been in various litigations and counter-litigations over the ownership of Ugwuntijiegbe land, a land in hillock⁴⁷

Early 1940s triggered off the self-consciousness of the Igbos for agitation for self-government against European domination. Eni has observed this situation this way, “the 1940s saw the wave of self-consciousness and agitation for self-government against European domination in Igbo hinter land, he went further to observe that the conscious awakening of the peoples of this country released tremendous forces that needed wise guidance and restraining⁴⁸. In this period, Akpu community under the umbrella of Enugwu-uno league⁴⁹, asked Ajalli community and white man to leave their vicinity. They mandated the Catholic mission to re-name Ufesiodo parish to Akpu parish. To press further this demand, they extended it to the colonial government to re-name the Government School Ajalli founded in 1911⁵⁰, the Native court as they claimed that Ajalli being ticklish and cunning managed in those days to monopolize the names all institutions, to wit, N.A; Government school and Dispensary etc⁵¹. This was to buttress the claim that they own Ajalli land in which Ugwuntijiegbe land on which Ofesiodo parish headquarters was established. The litigation and counter litigation commenced in 1948 and ended with the judgment of 1953 delivered by the West African court of Appeal (WACA). The judgment which favored Ajalli community in part reads;

Think however that it should be made clear that the appellants do not require to obtain any further permission from the respondents in connection with the houses already erected upon the land by them or in connection with land in the area in dispute which they were farming upon the date when this section (sic) was instituted by them, that is to say the day of May 1948⁵².



Before this judgment, the Catholic Mission acting on the judgment passed by a lower court earlier in favored of Akpu community had entered into negotiation for a grant of perpetual lease of Ugwuntijegbe land. On 29thSeptember, 1948, the legal adviser to the Catholic Mission in his Correspondence to Rev. Fr. Lehane raised and notified the Church of the reasons why a lease application submitted to the lands Department by their Surveyor shall not scale through.

The letter in part reads;

I forward the enclosed deeds of lease for execution by the parties before District Officer and for subsequent submission to Monsignor Anyogu for his signature too. It will be awkward to delete Ufesiodo and Ajalli as that will conflict with the original plan already file with lands Department by the Surveyor⁵³.

The Catholic Church has not adopted the neutral position to end the crisis that had continued to tear the two communities apart; all their support had continued to be on Akpu community. Their interest no double has been that Akpu community was first to invite them to the area; also the fear that Ajalli community having been the first to welcome the Anglican in the area might refuse the granting of the lease Ugwuntijegbe land; hence a continuation of ever acrimonious competition that exists between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church in Nigeria. On this, one may not hesitate to toe the line that Akpu, Ajalli and the Catholic Church did not hanker after spiritual dispensation...⁵⁴. Also that the advent of Catholic Church widened the rift between⁵⁵ Akpu and Ajalli. Socially, Akpu and Ajalli has failed to realize that prior to the advent of Catholic, they had been living in a relative peace.

Conclusion

Catholic mission brought upon the Ajalli community good and bad socially. The most protracted of the negative has been on the relationship existing between her and her closest neighbor Akpu community. This continued to manifest in litigation and counter



litigation with the animosity that accompanies the litigations .The Catholic mission had not ceased taking side with the Akpu community.

Endnotes

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