

## EFFECTS OF MISSIONARY ENTERPRISES IN IGBOLAND

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### **Introduction**

With the introduction of Christianity in Igboland, people began to witness developments and neglect in certain areas. With the movements developed between the rural villages and the mission houses, people came to sell to the strangers or to answer the clarion call of the gospel and its accompanying material benefits. As time went on a few of the local people came to settle close to the mission stations to be better able to exploit the economic opportunities they offered. Christianity effected serious changes on indigenous Igbo societies. This paper therefore studies the effects of the activities of the missionaries in Igboland, taking into consideration there areas of exploits.

### **The Missionaries and Urbanization in Igboland**

Afigbo (1999) observed that apart from the educational and economic revolutions, the missionaries in Igboland also made their impact in the urbanization of the Igbo nation. Until the coming of the missionaries, most of the Igbo people lived in rural communities. But the arrival of the missionaries ushered in the development of urban centers amongst the Igbo people. Most of these started as mission centres. Being nearly always strangers, these men had to depend on the surrounding rural population for their livelihood. They also made use of rural labour to build their houses and maintain their surroundings. However it came about, urbanization proved a powerful catalyst among the Igbo people, ranking only second to formal school as a means of educating and enlightening people. Many who had no opportunity to go to school or who went to school but dropped out prematurely went to the new urban centres where they became enlightened by what might be called on-the-job training. It was these men who started the movement for the formation of town and village unions. These village unions has served as a channel through which the Igbo people in Diaspora brought to their villages the desirable new things they had heard and seen in the urban towns.

### **Igbo Language Studies**

The missionaries devoted a considerable attention to the study of Igbo language, and since this is one of the areas in which they made their greatest contributions, it will be necessary to look at it in some details. According to Westerman (1929), the scientific interest in the study of the Igbo language began quite early in the 19th century in missionary circles in Sierra Leone where

knowledge of African languages was seen as a necessary tool in the bid to evangelize the continent. Tasié (1999) added that the study of Igbo language, as far as available evidence shows, was begun by John F. Schon, the German linguist and missionary, who for his linguistic achievements was in 1884 to receive the D.D of Oxford. He had reduced Igbo to writing in 1841 for the use of the famous expedition of that year. When Schon retired from West Africa, Samuel Ajayi Crowther continued the investigation from 1857 in Sierra Leone, and with the help of his Igbo assistants, Crowther discovered what came to be regarded as the standard Igbo. By the middle of the 19th century this interest had come to take deep root. Between 1852 and 1900 over ten works had been published in the language, mainly by missionaries and their aides.

Afigbo (1981) noted that most of these were primers and grammars, a few were word list and collections of proverbs, while the remainders were translations of sections of the Bible into various dialects of the language. This trend continued, or rather broadened out, with the increase of evangelical work which followed in the wake of the new political settlement. By the first decade of the 20th century when Igboland was thrown open to the missionaries and scholars, various primers and grammars and word list had been published in the peripheral dialects of the language and thus, the language began to acquire new prestige. It also developed the new ambition to become the literary language of the Igbo peoples. Meanwhile, on Taylor joining the Niger mission in 1857 Crowther encouraged him in the study of the Igbo language for which he probably must have noticed that Taylor had considerable interest, and he delivered his manuscript to Taylor to be improved upon. There might have also been at Taylor's mind that his Igbo constituency needed a lingua franca in the scheme for realizing a solid Igbo nationalist consciousness. The bulk of Taylor's work in Igbo sometimes show traces of some sort of an amalgam of the major dialects of Igbo, especially the Onitsha, Isuama, and the Igbo spoken in the Niger Delta also known as *Mbammiri* Igbo. The presence of the *Mbammiri* Igbo might, however, suggest that the traces of amalgamated Igbo in his translations were not by accident but a conscious attempt by Taylor to produce a more widely acceptable Igbo. Taylor thus was the first known scholar who attempted the evolution of a more widely acceptable. There is no gainsaying, that as perhaps best illustrated by his many translations, Taylor certainly was the most remarkable single contributor, in the 19th century, to the literature and study of the Igbo language, a position which he held without rival until the work of T.J. Dennis appeared in the first decade of the 20th century. The gigantic assignment of marrying a multiplicity of Igbo dialects to produce a national literary dialect was given to T.J. Dennis, whose linguistic efforts resulted to the formation of the "Igbo Esperanto" known as the Union Igbo. The really staggering aspect of the assignment was that the dialect was going to be created in the process of translating the entire Bible from English into it. The work began in 1905 and was completed in 1912, the Bible being issued in 1913. For that in fact for anytime, this was a great achievement, an everlasting monument to T.J. Dennis as a linguistic scholar, a theologian and a missionary.

Obviously, an amazement and admiration of the union Igbo is preserved in the words of Westernman (1929) added that, "what Dennis did is not essentially different from what happened in the European languages, where out of a number of dialects, one written language evolved, which bore and bears features of more than one dialect" (p. 340). It must be conceded that the missionaries especially the C.M.S. rendered remarkable services to the development of Igbo language through reducing it to writing, through their numerous evangelical tracks in the vernacular and, through the manufacturing of the Union Igbo. And as Ekechi (1972) has said,

“there is no question that as a result of the C.M.S insistence on the use of the vernacular, graduates from Anglican schools were far better grounded in the Igbo language than their counterparts from the Catholic schools” (p.192).

### **Western Education**

Afigbo (1999) noted that the missionaries changed indigenous Igbo society much more radically than either the government or the traders did. This they did by insisting that the Igbo people and their neighbours could not actually become good Christians or attain salvation unless they modify their societies drastically along prescribed western lines. They offered western education, highly attractive bait which indigenous religion could not offer. Since the Igbo people were anxious to acquire the Whiteman's irresistible magic and knew this could only be done through going to school, they in time sent flocks of their children to the schools, soon, political, economic, religious and social life came to be dominated by the natives who had acquired the Whiteman's magic. In retrospect, all these could be seen as the birth pangs of the new society in Igboland. This postulation is supported by Alagoa (1999) as he noted that “Western education had been identified as probably the most important motive for the acceptance of Christian missions” (p.250). Right from the 1840s, various missionary bodies have done a lot not only to evangelize different parts of Igboland, but also to bring about educational development. By doing so, Christianity has therefore played an important role in the making of an Igbo nation even without intentionally doing so as a matter of policy. It is a fact that meaningful missionary enterprise which resulted in the making of an Igbo nation began in 1857, spearheaded by the C.M.S. and the Roman Catholic Churches (1885). According to Uruakpa (1996), “It is quite clear that these missionary bodies had common aims, and especially shared in the philosophy of education as a sharpest instrument for effective and result oriented evangelism” (p.123).

Education became necessary for the missionaries for obvious reasons. First the missionaries considered it easier and rightly too, to achieve their aim of conversion using the school when the children had not become fully involved in traditional beliefs of their various cultures. Secondly, through the schools, they aimed at producing indigenes that would assist in propagating the gospel in the vernacular languages among their people. Besides, the development of colonial government and the expansion of mercantile houses required that the people be educated to occupy certain positions like clerks, messengers, church teachers, cooks, etc. Hence, for the first time, education was seen as the gateway to economic opportunity by the Igbo people themselves. They realized, as they never did before that knowledge is power, and that it commands economic security and social prominence. Western education offered an escape from the petty tyranny of court clerks and warrant chiefs during the colonial era as the products of the local mission schools began to compete with them, the commercial advantages of education became universally evident. The emphasis on competitive achievement applied not only to individuals, but to towns. Onitsha appeared the paradigm of a town which had prospered through education and association with the missionaries.

According to Isichei (1977), the first notable educational institution was the station built by CMS in 1903 at Awka. It eventually evolved into training institute for teachers and catechists was transferred here, where many notable Igbo people were to obtain their post-primary education. The special glory of the Presbyterian lay in its medical work. Accordingly, the outstanding son of the mission proved to be a medical missionary, Francis Akanulbiam. The C.M.S. was the first

body to provide any form of post primary education. In the late 19th century it established a training school for catechists. This was held first at Lokoja (all the pupils but one were Igbo), and then moved to Asaba, to Iyienu, and finally in 1903, to Awka. In 1913, the Catholic followed suit, established a combined training college and seminary at Igbariam. These mission training colleges played an invaluable role in Igbo education and the emergence of new Igbo elite. The distinction of opening the first secondary school in Igboland belongs to the Methodists who founded a school at Uzuakoli in 1923. The C.M.S. established D.M.G.S. Onitsha and Government College Umuahia in 1925. The Catholic opened C.K.C. Onitsha in 1932, Queen of the Rosary Enugu in 1942 and S.P.C. Asaba in 1944. It was no doubt, from these mission founded schools that the Igbo people who spearheaded the revolutionary changes in Igbo societies emerged. Hence, Uruakpa (1996) submitted that through missionary education, the Igbo educated elites became whatever they were – whether traders or teachers, clerks or catechists, politicians or true nationalists.

It is necessary to distinguish the new elite in Igboland and the old, and to specify that we are concerned here with the emergence of only the new elite. In the traditional Igbo communities there was emphasis on social stratifications and it is possible to speak of a ruling class possessing special status and political, military, economic and religious functions that were often used for the oppression and suppression of those who did not belong to any of those classes. The *osu* system and *ohu* domestic slaves were cases in point. In some communities also, they were the priests and witch doctors respected for their ability to cure diseases and control the fortunes of men and forces of nature.

Ajayi and Webster (1999) were of the opinion that:

In the rise of this new class the most important single factor has been education, particularly secondary and higher education; in turn, the development of education has to a large extent been dependent on missionary activities. (p. 149).

With the introduction of Christianity and its accompanying benefits in education, urbanization and technical training came the emergence of new Igbo elite. At first the new elite comprised a disproportionately large number of natives of Onitsha. Her early access to mission schools, her later concentration of secondary schools and a training college, gave her unique advantages which no other Igbo community could equal. It is no accident that the first Igbo C.M.S. bishop, the first Igbo Catholic bishop, and the great nationalist leader Azikiwe were all Onitsha men.

Hence Isichei (1977) observed that “the people of Onitsha considered themselves the aristocracy of Igboland” (p. 190). They were followed by those from the areas around Onitsha; towns such as Nnewi, which had shared many advantages, and from Asaba, across the Niger, from Awka and from the Owerri area. These were areas notable for their playing host to the 19th to 20th century missionaries in Igboland. The first generation elite were nearly always Christians. These new elites had two uncomplicated ambitions – to educate their families to the highest possible standard; and to erect the largest possible houses in their home villages. Many of the first generation elite were primary school teachers. They were often more than school masters; they were leaders and models for the communities in which they lived, the first bringers of civilization to the town. Most of these early teachers lived by what they taught. Teachers

therefore became objects of hero-worship. Ijire (1965) notes that parents who sent their children to school had no other job in mind for them than teaching.

Achunike (2002) observed that the key to social change in Igboland lay in an appreciation of the fact that the pre-colonial Igbo polity was a community in which the worldly and the other worldly, the political and the religious were closely bound together. As a result political, social and economic lives were underpinned by a religion centered on the worship of a pantheon of deities and the veneration of the ancestors. In the process of changing the fundamental basis of society, and the emergence of a modern Igbo nation, the mission schools played an important role as Afigbo (1981) observed. "It was the instrument for mobilizing support for Christianity and by the same token for withdrawing support from the old social order" (p. 340). This role was all the more crucial because those recruited for Christianity through the school were by and large children, that is the younger generation who had not yet been fully inducted into the culture and lure of the nation.

Furthermore, Christianity effected serious changes on indigenous Igbo societies which was the instrument through which a lot of the younger generation of Igbo men were indoctrinated against the obnoxious practices inherent in the traditional Igbo societies and tended to withdraw them physically from participating in those celebrations and social process by which the values of the group were transmitted from generation to generation. So while time and death thinned down the ranks of the defenders of the old order, the ranks of the Christians were progressively being augmented. Therefore, slowly but steadily the new trend became observable and gained dominance over the old. This is a point which hitherto had not always been stressed in discussions of the spread of Christianity in Igboland. Another point related to this is the fact that at the same time many of those first sent to school, and therefore to church, were either slaves or *osu* (outcasts). These were people who, because of their social disabilities, had a grievance against traditional Igbo culture and society that had subdued them. They therefore saw the new Christian order which was forming as an alternative to the Igbo society whose constraints they were happy to escape. And what was more, it did not take time before the value of the missions as means of getting ahead in the new world ushered in by the colonial rule, was proved beyond all reasonable doubt. They were soon employed as clerks, messengers and the likes in the government and commercial firms and as teachers and agents in the schools and missions. In these jobs they acquired a new economic power and social status far beyond the wildest imagination of the elders, and thus became objects of admiration and envy.

### **The Missionaries and the Igbo Nationalist Consciousness**

For the first thirty years the missionary work in Igboland was dominated by Igbo agents of the C.M.S, who worked within the framework, not of colonialism, but autonomous Igbo nation. The near proverbial Igbo nationalist consciousness is one of the areas in which the Igbo agents of the C.M.S, many years ago sowed the seed. The missionary teaching of equality and brotherhood of all men before God had the effect of generating self consciousness in the recipient and this in turn made them nurse the ambition for self expression and self government as a corollary to the philosophy of equality. Such personalities as NnamdiAzikiwe, JajaNwachukwu, J.O.J Okezie, MbonuOjike, R.I. Uzoma and Sam Mbakwe just to mention a few, were all products of missionary education, and they all acquired virtues of leadership that enabled them to be reckoned with as builders of a modern Igbo nation in variety of ways.

The development of Igbo tribal consciousness coincided with the age when the slogan “Africa for the Africans” was very popular and carried much weight in the C.M.S. scheme of evangelism. For Tasié (1996) the strongest factor that prompted the interest of the Igbo agents of the C.M.S. to be enlisted in the Igbo mission was their nationalist zeal. They believed that the Igbo states must be regenerated by Igbo indigenes themselves, especially by the emerging generation of new elite, born and bred under better conditions than most other Igbo people. Although Taylor believed in the slogan “African for Africans” he was possibly also one of the first as far as available evidence shows, to realize too that in implementing the slogan, people should be careful to take seriously into account the heterogeneity of Africa. One might therefore conclude that the C.M.S. Igbo agents thought quite differently from most of their contemporaries on the matter of nationalism. Their nationalism was exclusive and tribal based. It is against this background that we can partly appreciate their extraordinary zeal for the Igbo nation. The missionaries emphasized that it would be impossible to convey the gospel message effectively to any people unless the evangelist himself was able, not only to master the local tongue of the people but also to understand their thought and value systems. It is possible that these considerations caused them to press upon the C.M.S. repeatedly on the importance of producing literature and teaching material in the vernacular. The chronicle of the evolution of Igbo nationalist consciousness cannot be complete without taking into account the role of the Igbo language, its *Lingua Franca*, as one of the uniting factors which favoured this evolution.

According to Ilogu (1967), considering the unifying effect which the Union Igbo has had, not only among the various Christian groups who speak dialects but also among non Christian Igbo speaking peoples, the work was doubtless worth producing. Tasié (1996) added that “Although, the union Igbo was first produced primarily for evangelistic considerations, it has also had considerable positive effects upon the making of an Igbo nation” (p. 90). Central Niger now corresponds to the Imo and Anambra states, the Niger Delta now corresponds to almost the entire Rivers state, and extends to parts of Delta State; and the South-east now corresponds not only to the Cross River state but also the Igbo in Imo State. Bowen, cited in Adiele (1996) illustrated the significance of the translation among the Igbo speaking people when he states:

Of all who have succeeded in making any impression on Ibo life and thought, Archdeacon Dennis must be counted the greatest. He has made an Esperanto of Ibo that has caught on with the masses, thereby giving to this people, the third largest of West Africa, a common vehicle of expression and a language of literature which has widened the tribal consciousness. (p. 100).

According to Mgbemene (1996), the Igbo primer “*Akwukwoogugu Igbo*” popularly known as “*AzuNdu*”, identified the Igbo in these words, “*Onitsha na Asaba na Aboh na Owerri na Ahoadana Bonny na Opobo na Awka na Aba na Awkwukwu na Bende na Udi no otutu obodo ndi ozo na asuotu asusu*” (p. 367). The literature of Igbo esperanto made it possible for the Igbo-speaking people to be more cohesive as a unit of Nigerian society. It provided a *Lingua Franca* for the Igbo people.

### **Change in Economic System**

The abolition of the overseas slave trade was probably the most dramatic factor for a change of the economic system of the Igbo people in the 19th century. It is on record that the activities of

the missionaries and the official treaties with the local chiefs on the banks of the Niger were the initial steps in the stoppage of the slave trade. The desire to effectively stop the slave trade led to new initiatives on the part of the British traders and officials and to new relationships with the local rulers. The abolition further led to the switch over to legitimate trade in Igboland especially in palm oil. This was the prelude to the commercial prominence of Igboland, a status that is held positive across the length and breadth of Nigeria. It is no doubt, for this that Alagoa (1999) concluded that the abolition of slave trade and the increasing missionary presence were the most dramatic factors for a change of the economic status of the Igbo nation. The change in the economic system provided challenges to the old trading establishments and their controllers, and opportunities for the emergence of new men. The slave trade declined almost to a point of vanishing completely, its position being taken by the oil trade. The latter attracted many young men and it required little capital and no elaborate organization like the oracle systems associated with the earlier trade. This new economic system which entails free participation by all and sundry was the foundation for the free enterprising nature of the people of the new Igbo nation. According to Afigbo (1981) the impact of this development on Igbo society was quite far reaching. It vested a new value on raw cash as such and the Igbo came to say '*ego bekenakwuokwu*' the white man's money talks. The fact is that hitherto people made money and accumulated wealth in order to marry wives, raise a large yam barns, and buy admission to the revered title and secret societies since it was from these that prestige and status derived. But with the new development money came to have value for its own sake and to convey status even when not invested in the purchase of status in the traditional manner. Initially the rulers of Igbo states always welcomed the missionaries for economic purposes. To this, Achunike (2002) noted that the 1841 missionary expedition arrived at Aboh and they were well received by Obi Ossai, the king of course not perhaps without motives for material and commercial gains". (p. 43).

Onitsha in 1857 was a poor state and welcomed the missionaries in hope of increased prosperity. Onitsha's rapid rise to affluence in subsequent years seemed to justify this expectation, and provided an object of lesson for the rulers of other Igbo states. Isichei (1977) preserved a correspondence of a missionary to bishop Crowther in 1879 thus:

This earnest desire for missionaries which many of the chiefs I visited showed was in great measure owing to a belief current that missionaries will bring merchants with them, or if they are there already they will not easily be removed should missionaries be there also. Onitsha was always brought as an example to prove this. (p.101).

Even in the late 1850s, other Igbo towns were quick to recognize the long-term significance of the new development. In discussing the impact of the missionaries in the making of a nation, the declaration of a missionary as preserved in Ayandele (1999) is instructive:

My object is two-fold, to preach Christianity to you and your people believing it to be the greater power to raise and strengthened a people and as being the power which has made the European nations generally great and to educate your children so as to fit them to take high place in the advance state of society which I hope will be found in the not distant future in your country. (p. 375).

In the “Bible and the Plough” slogan as the basis of the mission to Igboland, the plough represents agriculture and industry. The missionaries' interest to foster the two among the people cannot be gain said. Crowther cited in Mgbemene (1996) was quoted as saying in 1860 that “A missionary should be a jack of all trade and master of all; one ready to put his hand to work and to do so in a legitimate way, anything that might lead to advance the cause of Christ” (p.409). Basden (1996) also noted that in the Igbo country, missions founded the first school of carpentry in the eighties-nineties. With regard to industry the C.M.S. set up an Onitsha Industrial Mission (O.I.M.) 1900-1903 to train and educate young and capable Christian youths in various traders – carpentry, sewing, brick-making and tailors.

The aim was to put into their hands a handicraft, which enables them to take their position in the world as good and profitable citizens. Some Igbo young men underwent O.I.M's training and came out as carpenters, tailors and sawyers. Thus the ministry of the O.I.M not only demonstrated the dignity of working with one's hands but also opened the eyes of the not-well-educated to the possibility of using their hands and becoming self-reliant and successful Christian citizens. The missionaries' concern for the development of agricultural skill of the Igbo people, exemplified by including rural science as a subject on the primary school curriculum, is an indication of their concern to uplift the people from primitive subsistence and ignorant scratching of their soil to higher and more enlightened ways of using it. It was to take their attention away from taboos and superstition associated with primitive subsistence agriculture. It was an attempt to introduce the people to mechanized agriculture and a call to them to return to their land. It was the hopeful beginning, no matter how distant time, of an enlightened Igbo nation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper discovered that, there is substance in the saying that civilization in Igboland started around the mission houses. A few examples, like the mission house at Onitsha, the Christian village at Aguleri and the leprosarium at Uzuakoli would suffice. Missionary activities introduced, however, new values, new ways of acquiring status and imitability in Igboland. The class of people who had imbibed them most became the elite that have been so crucial in the development, modernization and the making of an Igbo nation

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