

THE APPEAL OF ETHNOCENTRIC CHRISTIANITY: APPRAISING THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF OBERI OKAIME CHRISTIAN MISSION IN IBIBIOLAND-AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The penetration of Christianity into African societies came with the christening of the religion as a “Whiteman’s Religion.” This undoubtedly placed the Christian Mission as superficial to Africa. As the evangelical activities of the missionaries garnered momentum, African cultures became fertile for the seed of the Christian faith. The Oberi Okaime Christian Mission in Ibibioland, Nigeria, is a typical example of how the Christian faith interacted with Ibibio culture. Hence, adopting historical and descriptive methods, the study appraises cultural and doctrinal factors that engendered the emergence as well as the evolution of the Mission since its inception in 1927. Archival data and oral history reveal that God ordained the OberiOkaime Mission for emancipating Ibibioland from malevolent attributes. Furthermore, the desire for Ibibiocentricness in worship gave impetus to the emergence of the Mission. However, despite persecution through flogging, imprisonment by the native courts, and executions by the provincial court, that however did not deter the expansion and spiritual growth of the Mission up to date. The study concludes that the OberiOkaime Mission is a reflection of Christianity’s evolution in African culture. Its importance is the adaptation of Christianity to Ibibio Etaha market Day as their worship day instead of Sunday and the invention of the mission’s official language, Medefaidrin close to Nsibidi, an old African sign language, the Ibibio counting system among others, byso doing, endears Christianity to Ibibio people.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture as the totality of a people’s style of life is critical to a people’s existence and is adjudged to give them identity and a template through which the world is perceived. The way the people eat, dress, dance, worship the Transcendent Being and reflect the universe constitute the body of their culture. To get the attention of Africans and have a deeper understanding of how and why they think and act the way they do, one needs to have a grasp of their culture. Anything, be it another religion, technology, and foreign cultural practice introduced in Africa without interaction or synergy with the indigenous culture are bound to breed a polarized society where cultural crises or crises of identity are inevitable. This, therefore, brings to bare the essentiality of contextualization as a process of subsuming an element (in this case Christianity) of a foreign culture into an indigenous African- Ibibio culture.

Moreover, Christianity and African culture is a typical example of successful contextualization. This is not a hypothetical situation as the Christian faith has over the years since the successful contact with Africans in the 18th century evolved tremendously in the multifarious sub-cultures of Africa. One of the subcultures of Africa that Christianity has been contextualized is the Ibibio culture. The Ibibio culture is the indigenous pattern of behaviour of the Ibibio people. The Ibibio first established Mission, The OberiOkaime Christian Mission now known as the 1927 OberiOkaime Christian Mission (Free Gift), is a clear example of the contextualization of the Christian faith in indigenous culture. Its miraculous establishment in the year 1927 was due to the rain of the Holy Spirit in what was known as the Spirit Movement of

1927. The immediate seizure of some of the Ibibio by the Holy Spirit in churches dominant in the area at this period, the subsequent divine healings, and frictions with the government authority were extraordinary issues that demand proper elucidation. Hence, adopting the historical and descriptive approaches and guided by the Coherence Theory of Truth with bearings on evidence from primary and archival sources, the study appraises the historicity, evolution, impact as well as the challenges facing the 1927 OberiOkaime Christian Mission in Ibibio, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

THE IBIBIO AND ETHNOCENTRIC RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL BELIEFS

The Ibibio people live in the southern region of Nigeria bordered by the Igbo people to the northwest and Ijaw and Ogoni to the west and southwest of Nigeria. To the east, Ibibio settlements are bordered by Ekoi, and Bight of Bonny (formerly known as Bight of Biafra) forms the southern boundary. In numerical strength, the Ibibio are generally regarded as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after the Hausa/Fulani, the Igbo and the Yoruba. The Ibibio people are Afaha people whose original home was at Usak Edet in the Cameroons. Eka (2004:91) maintains that upon leaving the Cameroons, the Ibibio seem to have migrated to their present locations in two major directions. One group reached Nigeria perhaps by an overland route and settled at Ibom in Arochukwu probably about 800 B.C where they established the famous shrine now known as Long Juju in Arochukwu. It was from Ibom that the

Ibibio moved to their present location. The Ibibio live mostly in the Old Calabar Province of Nigeria.

The Ibibio people believe in the Supreme Being (God) who is Almighty and is traditionally referred to as Abasi Ibom or Abasi Enyong a name that connotes the Supremacy of God. There is also the belief in other intermediary deities with their specific roles and efficacies being recognized and invoked during libation and traditional invocation or benediction. Deities and totems of various clans and groups are usually invoked in addition to the Supreme Being, whom the people believe dwells in the sky (Enyong) and other gods who live on earth close to people. Abasi Isong, are representatives of the Supreme Being who have specific roles to play, although they are under the control of the Supreme Being-Abasi Ibom. The intermediary deities are believed to be nearer to the people on earth and they played specific roles and carry messages to Abasi Ibom, for example, the god of fertility, the god of harvest, and gods of other purposes.

In addition, the Ibibio people believe in the ancestors, spirits, divination, witchcraft, magic, and mysterious powers. The traditional religious belief of the Ibibio people encompasses the cardinal principles of submission to the supremacy of Abasi Ibom whose nature entails justice and equity. Belief in Supreme Being, Abasi, is general, the name is being used despite conversion to Christianity. Abasi is a Supreme God, regarded as the Creator of humankind. There is no specific cult, priesthood or place of worship for Abasi in Ibibioland

Veneration of the ancestors (forebears) is prominent and sacrifices are offered at the ancestral shrines, which are kept in the house of the eldest members of the lineage and consisted of wooden stakes, two to four feet high, driven to the ground. The word “Ekpo” was used in reference to the dead only; a disgruntled Ekpo may wander about harming human beings until the ceremony of “Obio Ekpo” was performed and he would enter the land of the dead. There is also the belief in a great variety of spirits known as “Ndem” associated with animals, sacred places, objects etc. Each local group has its special collective ndem, certain for prohibition being observed in connection with it. The custodian who is responsible for the care of the group Ndem is called OkuNdem. Among the Eastern Ibibio, Oku Ndem is always chosen from one particular village, and performed ceremonies as well as makes sacrifices to the NdemIsong (god of the Earth) at the beginning of planting and reaping seasons. In Ibibioland, there has been in force before the advent of Christianity four cardinal sacred relationships held sacrosanct, namely: Abasi Ukot, Abasi Imaan, Abasi Eyeyen, Abasi OwoInuaesiet— these sacred relationship protects the in-laws, clan friendship, grandchildren and strangers respectively.

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN IBIBIOLAND

The contact of Ibibio people with Christianity finds explanation in the expansive missionary activities of the Church of Scotland Mission in Calabar (1846), Ikotofiong and Itu, the Methodist Church in Oron, Samuel Bill’s work in the Qua Iboe area and the Catholic Church Mission through the Ikot Ekpene axis. But, with particular reference to the pioneer mission, the Church of Scotland Mission, now the Presbyterian Church and her missionary activities which gathered momentum around Itu and Ibiono during the late 19th century forward had tremendous impacts on the indigenous culture of the Ibibio people. The historical work of Abasiatai (1990:226) gives insight that the Christian Missions’ role in social change was however a double-edged sword; it was built probably as much as it destroyed. However, the contribution of the Scottish missionary, Mary Slessor on harmful African cultural practices such as twins killing and human sacrifices as well

as other practices inimical to the human healthy relationship has an overwhelming effect on whatever evil associated with the Christian mission in Efik/ Ibibio in particular and Nigeria as a whole. It contributed to the outbreak of the “Spirit Movement” in the year 1927 as well as the subsequent formation of The OberiOkaiame Christian Mission in the 1930s.

The period of missionary enterprise from 1906 to 1960, witnessed the pervasive expansion and consolidation of Christian missionary work in the area by pioneers, and numerous new missions. Abasiatai (1990:224) asserts that expansion involved an increase in the area and population reached or influenced by the missions, the number of missions and missionary personnel and resources operating, and the diversity and complexity of missionary operations. There was an increase in the participation of indigenous agents in the formation of independent churches formed by African Christians on their own or breaking away from foreign missions.

Furthermore, by 1935, almost every village in Ibibioland had at least one Church; and most villages had from two to six different Churches with a large number of Christians. It became apparent, therefore, that Christianity’s relentless advance could not be halted or reversed. Hence, non-converts who continued to practice Ibibio Traditional Religion could not tolerate the new faith, which helped to diminish but did not eradicate conflict (Abasiatai, 2008:224). It is important to note that communities in Ibibioland, upon receiving Christianity for the first time, experienced more or less the usual conflict between Christian converts and the missionaries on the one hand, and the chiefs, Ndem priests and secret societies, particularly Ekpo nyoho and Ekpe, who bitterly opposed Christianity on the other hand. Among the first converts were the outcast and the underprivileged like slaves and twin mothers among whom Christianity found ready ears. The situation of conflict largely prevailed between 1900 and 1910, when the pioneer and several new missions expanded over much of Ibibioland. In many instances, the real conflict came to exist between the Christian denominations as they competed to control particular areas, villages or schools in Ibibioland.

But by the late 1920s, the Ibibio themselves had become crucial factors in the expansion of the missionary enterprise as different classes of African clergy and teachers took the initiative to build churches in their villages and otherwise promote the missionary cause. It was perhaps, this scenario that facilitated the visitation of the Holy Spirit in what was known as the “Ibibio Pentecost of 1927” which started first in Ibiono Ibom, later spread to other parts of Ibibioland and subsequent expansion to different areas of Nigeria.

THE OBERI OKAIME CHRISTIAN MISSION IN IBIBIO CULTURE

The Emergence of OberiOkaiame Christian Mission

From oral tradition and books published by core, ordained members of the OberiOkaiame Christian Mission, the “Ibibio Pentecost” (The Spirit Movement) is said to have taken place in different parts of Ibiono Ibom at different locations, places or abodes such as homes, roads, shrines, schools and churches, in the year 1927. In the words of one of the founding fathers of OberiOkaiame:

It was in the year 1927 that we received the Holy Spirit. It descended to us in our homes just like on ‘Pentecost Day’. Many of us in various villages did not know one another, but not until later on, we began to know one another led by the Holy Spirit. In the same year, the man I saw in my vision appeared again by the vision before me, this time he spoke to me and said, “I am Angel Gabriel and from today your name will be called Richmael”, he

disappeared away. Spirit caught nearly every man and woman and so many of them had various visions, some prophecy. I never knew some of our brethren are also caught by the Holy Spirit, about eight miles away from Edem Urua. We were led by the Holy Spirit with the help of Mr Philip a native of IdidepUsuk- Itu, to go and join them. There I met Rev. Aikeld Ukpog in Itu. We take him to be our leader. Rev. A. Ukpog and I then went on our journey to Itam, Ididep, and Uruan areas where we opened new stations. The people over that side received us as well. God also inspired them, and they all received the Holy Spirit. We did not mind moving even hungry to do this tremendous work. Even today, we are still in a penury state (Ekit, 1964:3).

Moreover, Abasiattai, Jones et al (2008:15) also add that there were many cases where people were suddenly affected without any signs of human interference. In these cases many were at home going about their ordinary business - they were not under Christian influence, nor had been in the habit of attending Church – when they were suddenly arrested by the Holy Spirit. They at once gathered up their idols, ran to the Church and had them burnt. The revival services organized by churches encouraged converts to publicly confess their sins such as witchcraft and adultery, and burn their family's or village's artefacts – sometimes forcibly. The services also encouraged deep spiritual and emotional experiences and sometimes lasted all day and into the morning hours of the next day.

Another historical source NAC (nd), cites that, it is very hard to know how the Spirit Movement began. According to this source, in about the month of June 1927, a new thing occurred in various churches in Qua Ibo Mission in Uyo District. This new thing affected many people... It entered a Church, affected many and never affected anyone in another Church. In another Church, it affected half of the people and never affected some at all. It affected people in various forms. Then from what happened and the way it affected people, they said this thing comes from the "Holy Spirit" and it is called the "Work of the Spirit", and those inspired by the Spirit are called the Spiritual People.

The study conducted by Etim (2010:23) reveals that OberiOkaieme is said to be an indigenous movement of the Ibibio stock, started firmly in 1927 after Christianity had been firmly established in Ibibioland by early Missions. Its origin was traced to the revival services conducted in Uyo district from mid-1927 by Rev. J W. Westgarth. It was not on physical signs and symptoms of human malady this time. It was rather ethical and spiritual. Originating from revival services held in Uyo, the Spirit Movement or OberiOkaieme soon became a moral and spiritual force in Ibibio Christian piety.

Based on evidence gathered, the Spirit Movement started in the year 1927 in Ibiono Ibom with participants mostly from the prevalent European Orthodox Missions predominant in the area at the time, such as the Church of Scotland Mission (Presbyterian Church), Catholic Church, Methodist Church, as well as from Ibibio Traditional Religion. The orthodox Missions through biblical teachings laid the foundation for its outbreak. The Movement was made up of men and women with deep spiritual, and emotional outlooks. According to Ekit (1964:3), "This church was founded in 1927, when the Spirit descended upon people here at Ibiono Ibom area, Itu, which later spread to Mbiabet, Itam and Uruan area.

Ime Inyang (Pers. Comm., 2024), sums up that it so happens that in the year 1927, came the day of "Ibibio Pentecost" where Ibibio sons and daughters encountered the Holy Spirit in different locations at different times and places, without the actual knowledge of the presence of the Holy Spirit in other places. They

got to know each other through the help of the Holy Spirit who brought them together in one accord, settled first at Ikot AndemItam, and established a Church known as The Spirit Movement Church (Free Gift) in the year 1930 and later, Messifident HolySpiritual Church in the year 1932.

Evolution of the OberiOkaieme Christian Mission

Evolution connotes changes and growth of phenomena over time. Through a period of persecution and prosecution of members, the Spirit Movement Church evolved and expanded because it offered solutions to indigenous problems. The Movement that started in Ibiono, a part of the mainland Ibibio territory spread to Itu District (Itam and Ibiono where Ikot AndemItam and Ibiono became the strongholds). The movement attracted members from virtually all the Protestant denominations, and to a lesser extent from the Roman Catholic Church. Some adherents or "Spiritmen" (men and women who speak in tongues) as they were called, continued to operate in the Mission Churches and were later expelled from the orthodox Missions by the authority of the Missions. Other Spiritmen erected their churches and prayer houses, often in secluded places or worshipped in private homes. Abasiattai Jones et al (2008:6) maintain that the Movement became the first mass religious movement and as far as ascertained, the first independent Church in Ibibioland. The Church was known as "Spirit Movement Church", until 1936 when the name changed to OberiOkaieme.

According to Ekit (Pers. Comm., 2024), at Ikot AndemItam in the same year, the Movement faced perhaps their biggest challenge – opposition, persecution and humiliation from the colonial government, members of the Ibibio traditional religion as well as the indigenous chiefs from Ikot AndemItam following the nature, attributes or characteristics of the Movement – their bodies shook violently, they spoke in tongues or prophesied, they sang, shouted aloud while clapping, stared with their eyes and shouted: "Yes, Yes". The Spirit Movement became known as Mbon Spirit nyek idem (Abasiattai, Jones et al 2008:108-109). With this approach, they were accused of threatening the peace and order of the society by their actions, and their mode of attracting members, particularly women from their homes, following the wondrous "Works of the Spirit", which led to a series of misunderstandings in different homes (Ekanem, Pers. Comm., 2024).

Abasiattai, Jones et al (2008:109) posit that the movement became characterized by witch-hunting; forced confessions; the tying and torture of confessed witches, several of whom died in the process; destruction of traditional religious shrines, bushes and trees; faith healing and general pandemonium unleashed by clapping, shaking, singing and prophesying by the Spiritmen. At this point, it attracted government attention and hostility from the native courts and chiefs in the council of the communities. It also faced antagonism from the orthodox missions and colonial masters. Consequently, members of the movement, including their leaders were arrested, flogged and punished with hard labour. Chiefs and elders who were custodians of traditional religion aimed to stop the desecration of traditional religious artefacts; the colonial masters intended to maintain 'law and order'; and orthodox missions were interested in controlling the drift of their members to the Spirit Movement Church. So, large numbers of Spiritmen were arrested at orders of the native courts or the district officer, arraigned before the native courts for "conduct likely to cause a breach of peace", and sentenced to flogging, imprisonment with hard labour or to pay heavy fines.

However, the Spiritmen were resilient in bearing their trial and punishment. They held that whatever they did had been inspired by

Seminant, the OberiOkaim name for the Holy Spirit, whom they could not disobey and whom the authorities could not consume. Imitating the Biblical Apostle Paul and Silas, they sang while in prison (till their chains were miraculously loosened – as one of their leaders, High Priest Richmael Ekit, (Pers. Comm., 2024) recounts, while being flogged, or while labouring as convicts at road making, their faith was seldom shaken.

Richmael Ekit (1964:4) reported that when the spirit event took place again in December 1927 at Ibiaku, Ibiono, people received the Holy Spirit among whom were Ikwon Udo, Bassey Akpan, Akpan Umoren, Udofia Ekpenyong from Ikot Essiet, Ibiono and several other natives. On receiving the Holy Spirit, these men began to engage in the works of the Spirit until they were forced to disperse by Ibiaku Chiefs and authority. They went back to Ikot Essiet and later to Ikot Udom to preach and pursue the work of the Spirit as commanded by the Holy Spirit. In the process, some witches, evildoers and idol worshippers tormented by the Holy Spirit lost their lives. It was this occurrence that attracted the colonial government, to charge Akpan Umoren, Bassey Akpan and Ikwon Udo Ebu (who were the leaders at this time) for murder. These men were arrested, condemned and hanged to death. Church buildings at Ikot Essiet and Ikot Edung were burnt down. Ekit (1964:46) posits that:

As the work developed upon, murderers, thieves, witches and wizards revealed themselves openly by the rage of the Holy Spirit for so much that some of them ran and let themselves into the lavatory, some hanged themselves and committed suicide, and some committed suicide by throwing themselves several times on the ground and died. For that reason, our fathers sent policemen to come and have us arrested. The policemen arrested us and put us in jail; because the light of God had condemned the devil and the wicked men were annoyed about what God has done among us. They fire the Church at Ikot Essiet and Ikot Edung, UtitObio, Itu. When they reached Edem Urua, they wanted to burn the church building but our town's chiefs did not allow them to do so... They burnt Church buildings, and gave us heavy uncountable strokes. On December 11, 1927, the three men mentioned below were condemned to death because they did not want to deny God as they were threatened to do so:-Late Bassey Akpan, Late Ikwon Udo and late Akpan Umoren. All were natives of Ikot Essiet, UtitObio, Ibiono No.2 Itu; they were falsely condemned to death.

Ekanem (Pers. Comm., 2024) hints that these events discouraged the continuous works of the Spirit by the Spiritmen for the fear of punishment from the authorities. The movement witnessed a serious setback and tribulation. For these reasons, they began to disperse to their different villages, and worshipped in secret, in their different homes while praying for the intervention of the Holy Spirit for security and freedom of worship. Therefore, by the beginning of 1930, "shaking" and exuberant mode of worship had declined, and most Spiritmen worshipped in private homes and not in "Spirit" churches or prayer houses. Thus, when the acknowledged "leader" of the movement, Michael Ukpung Udo of NtanMbad, attempted to revive the movement sometime in 1930, he was imprisoned for one year by the Ibiono Native Court (Iyere) on a charge of "establishing Spirit Movement to create disturbances within villages".

On December 24, 1931, as Abasiattai, Jones et al (2008:111) explain, Ibiono and Itam Chiefs resolved at a joint meeting that all Spiritmen concentrated at Ikot AndemItam who were non-indigenes of the village should disperse to their villages. The decision was reaffirmed on April 21, 1932, and enforced by June of that year. To further repress the Movement, the Itam Native Court sentenced Michael Ukpung to two years imprisonment on

April 21, 1932, for trespassing on a piece of land at Ikot AndemItam which some spiritmen had begun to clear for building a Church. District Officer, Major Sealy- king, nullified the sentence and freed Ukpung because the said land was legitimately granted to the Spirit Movement by the Village Chiefs and elders and the court Chiefs were motivated by the fear of the Spiritmen. However, by freeing Ukpung, Sealy- the king, like other colonial officials in the region, was not condoning the movement. Indeed, he felt the movement's "general teachings and activities with particular reference to the inclusion of women in the new Movement. Hence, he advised the government to watch out as opposition to the Movement might result in clashes and violence.

It is important to note, as highlighted by Ekanem (Pers. Comm., 2024) that soon after the killing of the three Spiritmen by the authorities as earlier mentioned and other trials of the Spirit Movement- burning and the destruction of the Spirit Movement Churches; its property and the humiliating dispersal of its members, one of the renounced leaders of the Spirit Movement, Rev. Richmael Ekit received a message from God to observe a sacred prayer that will put an end to all the trials and tribulations faced. To this, he obeyed and did as instructed and the OberiOkaim Christian Mission as it was later called in 1935, suffered no humiliation from the authorities up to date.

With this assurance and the dispersal of the Spiritmen from IkotAndemItam and other areas as instructed by the village chiefs, there was a rekindling in desiring and going after the wondrous works of the Spirit. Ekit (Pers. Comm., 2024) explains that the demolished Messifident Holy Spiritual Church (The Spirit Movement Church) as known and named by the Holy Spirit (Seminant) was rebuilt into what became known as The OberiOkaim Christian Mission in the year 1935 as well as its subsequent change of name to The 1927 OberiOkaim Christian Mission recently (2019), following some internal crisis.

The dispersal from Ikot AndemItam served ultimately to reinvigorate the Movement. For the dispersing Spiritmen, now bolder, revived their old centres (Michael at NtanMbad, other "Spirit men" did the same at Obot Ekom, Ikot AndemItam and Ididep), or they created new Churches. By December 1932 many "Spirit Churches" had again gone up, now collectively...And the chiefs, the native court were again bringing charges and convictions against the "Spirit men". There were other charges against the "Spirit men" following the formation of the Medefiadrin language, letters, numbers and words by the Holy Spirit through the leaders such as Michael Ukpung, assisted by Ete Tom (MakretaAbonny) while praying in solitude at IkpaIkotObio Edem, Ibiono, in the year 1932, after dispersing from Ikot AndemItam. At Ikpa Ikot Obio Edem, the Spiritmen lived in absolute purity: the women lived separately from the men and at the onset, the Spiritmen never engaged in adultery, fornication or in the chastity of any kind because the Spirit is Holy (Holy Spirit) and do not manifest through impure vessels. Furthermore, Ekit (1964:175) has it that,

The Chiefs and Supreme rulers began again to arrest us, and the voice of God reached me again saying at me, gather all my fellow party who can pray hard and tell them to stop doing their work for eight days and sit down for fasting, that all the troubles will stop too. All these arresting us here and there for this new handwriting and language would stop. I did so, we fasted eight days and nights until Rev. Aikeld Ukpung came and join us in that prayer. All the aims of our enemies scattered, they did not do as they thought. God advised me that we must keep that day too as a special day of prayer forever.

Abasiattai, Jones et al, 2008:113) highlight that as with the earlier charges, the district officers who reviewed the native court cases upheld most of the convictions. But, they also began to insist that convictions be made not merely because people were Spiritmen or ran “Spirit Churches” but because they constituted public nuisance or behaved in a manner likely to cause a breach of peace, or committed other offences. With this more tolerant attitude of the colonial rulers and the fired determination of the Spiritmen not to succumb to repression, the Movement survived through 1932 and henceforth could not be exterminated. Actually, many welcomed the Movement’s crusade against witchcraft and evil men (mme Ifod). Some warrant chiefs, therefore, failed to report on Spirit activities (for which several of them were deposed or suspended from office by the colonial government); while other chiefs were secretly members of the Movement.

God granted the Church victory over all tribulations from the Chiefs and Supreme rulers (Colonial Government), through prayers, fasting and supplications. Spirit Churches that were demolished got rebuilt with the founding of new branches where Spiritmen worshipped in spirit, truth and conducive, as well as accommodating atmosphere without any fear or threat from any angle. By this liberation, the Church was renamed, The OberiOkaim Christian Mission by the Holy Spirit in the year 1935, meaning “Free Gift”. Today, the “Spirit Movement” now the 1927 Oberi Okaim Christian Mission (Free Gift) had spread all over Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Uruan, Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, Arochukwu in Abia State and Eniong in Cross River State (Ekanem, 2024).

Challenges of the OberiOkaim Christian Mission

The Mission, established about 1927 seemingly by barely literate or starkly illiterate folk, but actually by the Holy Spirit, went on to achieve the incredible feats adumbrated however, Abasiattai, G I. Jones et al, (2008:) explain that the Church is still struggling to overcome material penury, adverse economic environment, and lack of appreciation of its achievements, partly arising from relentless, debilitating persecution that it had undergone for many years. Years ago, several sympathizers did render some assistance to the Church; notably, Miss. K. Hau, an American lady, corresponded with the leaders of the Church in the late 1950s and sent some sewing machines and tropical seeds (for planting). In a personal interaction with Ekit (Pers. Comm., 2024), more help financially is needed by the church to drive evangelism to new areas.

The new language of communication namely, Spirit Language (Medefaidrin) in the church through a gracious gift from God constitutes a challenge. The slow pace of evangelism and church growth is attributed to it, new converts find it difficult to communicate in Medefaidrin language. Besides, its doctrines are incorporated with the Medefaidrin language, which many find difficult to digest.

The ibibiocentric approach is inevitably conscripted into the operational system of the church. Participant observation confirms that about 90 percent of its membership are Ibibio. Hence its methods, liturgy and exhibition follow Ibibio ethno-culture, therefore, quite unattractive for none Ibibio converts. This contributed to a greater measure of the malfunctioning of some of the Mission’s branches outside Ibibio land particularly Arochukwu in present-day Abia State.

The inability to re-establish the OberiOkaim School persecuted by the Colonial Government’s Education Department for running an illegal school in the year 1936 was one of the challenges faced by the Mission. Since the demolition of the Mission’s school the

same year, it was established, the Mission’s management board had been inept in the trajectory for its re-establishment due to financial constraints, demised of some of those conversant with the language, internal disagreement on its management and lack of interest in learning the Spirit Language (Umoh, Pers. Comm., 2023). The Mission had no special prayer or creed in the Medefaidrin language used during their liturgical worship. It was equally discovered that none of the OberiOkaim adherents who speak Medefaidrin (even the teachers) was competent speakers of the language. It seems their competence is quizzical because the language itself is a difficult one, let alone elicit glosses of morphemes in the language. It looks like the Nsibidi sign writing, an age-long African language understood by only the initiates of a particular cult.

Enyi Udoh (1996:38) asserts that the worship on Ibibio Etaha day was one of the major challenges of the Mission. The Ibibio Etaha day as conceived, was said to be a day of sacrifice in the Ibibio calendar. But, with the introduction of Christianity, constant prayer and fasting by the OberiOkaim Christian Mission and the emergence of many churches (orthodox or spiritual) whereby, forests which housed the gods in shrines had been overtaken by church buildings. Therefore, Ibibio Etaha day ceased to be known as a day of sacrifice, seclusion, merriment and relaxation, thus, a normal working or market day in a week or weekends. With this switch, it became quite difficult for members to fully comply with the Mission’s main day of worship (Sunday to other Christians), which can fall or be situated on any day of the week. For example, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.

Furthermore, in the year 2019, the OberiOkaim Christian Mission faced one of its biggest challenges; crisis, disagreement, power tussle and indecision within the Mission. From several oral narrations, the arrival of Pastor Aniekan Umoh from Lagos to Akwa Ibom State in the year 2019 due to the instruction he claimed to have received from the Holy Spirit, steered up a crisis within the Mission. With his idealist approach towards the reformation of the Mission, the “Spiritual Mission” for the first time in its history was thrown into a period of confusion, fight, enmity and legal battle over the leadership, management, and reformation of the Mission. Aniekan’s approach seems displeasing to the governing board of the Mission. Who had not received such instruction from the Holy Spirit (Seminant) – the founder of the Mission. Umoh (Pers. Comm., 2021) hints that these imbalances in ideals led to the destruction of some church property, arrest and immediate closure of the OberiOkaim Christian Mission, Ikot AndemItam (ObodEkom), Itu Local Government Area.

Umoh (Pers. Comm., 2023), explains that clergy from Ikot AndemItam with an average educational background had spent over 30 years of their life in Lagos as clergy. He founded the Apostolic Sanctuary of Liberation in the year 2008. With the leading of the Holy Spirit, in the year 2017, he changed the name of the Church to OberiOkaim Christian Mission, after the performance of a ceremony of receptibility in the same year by the leadership of the Mission dominant in the South-south, South-east Nigeria. Pastor Aniekan was ordained to be in charge of the Mission’s assembly in Lagos. Soon after this, the Lagos assembly experienced a decline in membership as the environs were not familiar with what the name “OberiOkaim” stood for. For this reason, through prayer and fasting, Pastor Aniekan received instruction from the Holy Spirit to relocate to Akwa Ibom State for a reformed OberiOkaim Christian Mission Worldwide. Upon his arrival, he was appointed by the Ministers of the OberiOkaim Christian Mission, Akwa Ibom State Chapter as one of the Apostles of the Mission, in charge of Obot Ekom branch at Ikot

AndemItam. Here, he began to institute his reformatory ideals. On getting to understand the shortfalls of the Mission which includes the worship on Etaha day, he made a bold step in addressing such issues hindering the growth/ progress of the Mission. It was at this juncture that issues threatening the peace and harmony of the Mission broke out. It metamorphosed into a legal battle, internal crisis and the sudden change of name of the Mission from The OberiOkaiame Christian Mission to The 1927 Oberi Okaimy Christian Mission in the year 2019 due to these imbalances.

In an interaction with one of the ordained members of the Mission in Ibiono Ibom, he insinuated that Pastor Aniekan approached the issues hindering the Mission wrongly. According to him, Aniekan claimed to be the only exposed and qualified individual to institute impactful changes in the Mission. He added that, with Aniekan's so-called self-acclaimed exposure, he had no respect for and considered the leadership of the Mission from the Hierarchy inept and criticized every step taken. The informant who did not disclose his name sympathized with Aniekan's present predicament and legal battle with the Mission which had landed him in more trouble than he bargained for. He concluded that Aniekan should have seceded from the Mission and established his own Oberi Okaiame in affiliation; a path which many had embarked on.

ISSUES OF ETHNOCENTRISM AS IMPACTS OF THE OBERI OKAIME CHRISTIAN MISSION

Ethnocentrism here wishes that Christianity should be perceived in the light of African Culture. Byang Kato employs the term contextualization to address the superficial tendencies of Christianity in Africa. For Kato (1975:1217), "contextualization is the making of concepts or ideas relevant to a given situation. About Christian practices, it is an efforts to express the never changing Word of God in ever-changing modes for relevance." Tienou (1990:29) explains that in the discussion of Christianity and African cultures, African theology and contextualization spring from the desire and attempt to make Christianity more relevant to the African situation. Culture as an anthropological concept is inseparable from religion whether indigenous to a people or acquired through contact. Any religion that wants to thrive does so through the agency of a people's culture. The situation is glaring in the case of Christianity and African Culture mirrored by the OberiOkaiame Christian Mission in Ibibio culture.

Despite how miffed the Movement appeared to be, particularly to the traditional religious worshippers, it was generally agreed afterwards to be a profound blessing to Ibibioland, Ibiono Ibom in concrete disposition. It entails God showcasing His immense love towards the Ibibio tribe through the inundation of the Holy Spirit on Ibibio sons and daughters, due to their craving spirits towards the things of the spirit. This was in accord with the missionary foundation laid by the European Missionaries of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian Church), Catholic etc., dominant in the area at this time. These attributes conform to the novel cultural manner of worship in Ibibio society before the advent of Christianity. The people embraced this way of worship – Clapping, shaking, singing and shouting which was indigenous by nature (Inyang, Pers. Comm., 2024). Abasiatai (nd:6) supports that OberiOkaiame is "specifically Ibibiocentric" – It specifically seeks the glory and progress of Ibibioland and its people, and sees the Ibibio as people specifically marked by God for progress and to rule.

Inyang (Pers. Comm., 2024) explains that the Movement ran "Spirit hospitals" where some of their leaders such as Michael Ukpog of NtanMbat, Richmael Ekit of Edem Urua and Udo Inyang Akpan Afia of Ikot Udom were reputed for sheer healing

powers; prayed, fasted, anointed, blessed, cured the sick and made the barren fertile for free (Ono kemfon). The healing prowess of the Movement attracted members from the "Orthodox" Churches, which fueled opposition of the "Orthodox" Church leaders to the Movement. The "Spirit Men" were equally reputed for the interpretation of dreams. The dreams revealed coming evils, methods of cure and warnings to believers against evil.

Moreover, another impeccable culture of Ibibio practice is the counting system. The OberiOkaiame numerical system was based largely on the Ibibio counting system. Following the Ibibio numerical system, which was "a vigesimal system of counting" (in the twenties). 40 was two 20's, 60 was three 20's, 80 was four 20's and 100 was five 20's. One counts by units through 19, by '20s through 380 (19 times 20) and then by 400's to 4,000. 400 equals one "sabbod". The sum of 1, 2, 3 and 4 "sabbod" was equal to "paridsabbod", which equals 4000. Abasiatai, Jones et al (2008) explain that the importation of the Ibibio counting system serves as a great impact on the "Spirit Mission".

Furthermore, Ekanem (Pers. Comm., 2024) hints that the observance of the Ibibio eighth day as the Mission's Holy Day of worship, instead of the usual Sunday worship as observed by other Missions (orthodox and spiritual), served as one of the issues of ethnocentrism and outstanding impacts of the Mission. By 1933, the Movement switched from the observance of Sunday as their Holy Day of worship to that of the Ibibio eighth day, Ata-Etaha or Etaha. Hence, the Movement became known as Etaha by other Christians. On Etaha day, farming or outdoor labour was prohibited for all practitioners of the Ibibio Traditional Religion. Sacrifices were offered to deities, spirits, and ancestors by African Religious priests, chiefs and elders who were eligible for these tasks. In Ibibio of 1927, this was what Etaha day stood for; a day of sacrifice, sensation, merriment, fear and sorrow – A day of intense vibration. To put an end to all these, due to severe prayer and fasting by the Mission, an instruction came from Seminant (Holy Spirit) in the year 1933 for immediate switching and observance of the Movement's Holy Day of worship from Sunday to Ibibio Etaha day. In obedience to this instruction, Etaha day ceased to represent its initial encomium. Peace, love, equity and morals came into exhibition, as the Holy Spirit would not hesitate to punish the guilty in society at this time. The outcome of that event was the freedom and peace experience in Ibiono Ibom, Ibibioland, Africa and the world at large to date.

Another outstanding impact is the rise of OberiOkaiame language and writing, the medefairinin the year 1933. The Movement's emphasis on the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues implies the usage of strange utterances and eventually words, which occurred in the experience of the "spirit men" during "spirit seizure" or visions. With this development, some "spirit men" reputedly wrote down these words in strange characters on sheets of paper, leaves or barks of trees, without comprehending their meaning initially. It was in 1931 that Seminant began to reveal to several leaders of the Movement, the meanings of the words and scripts. Eventually, two "spirit men" (leaders), Michael Ukpog (S. M. Aikeld Abony) and Akpan Akpan Udofia (T. M. Jakeld Abony), at the bidding of the Holy Spirit (Seminant), went into seclusion at Ikpa, Ibiono Ibom for four years and four months – Starting probably from 1933, in order to perfect the "spirit language" and writing. They are completely cut off from women or unnecessary visitors and distractions. Ukpog received the language from Seminant while Udofia wrote it down. It is important to note that, both men formulated some of the Movement's doctrines, liturgy and hymns while in this seclusion. They were equally directed by Seminant to name the Spirit Movement Church, OberiOkaiame (Ono Ke Mfon)

– meaning “Freely given Church” in the year 1935 by the divine direction of the Holy Spirit. For the first time, the “Spirit Language” used in “speaking in tongues” was actually “delivered” to the Church by the Holy Spirit itself and recorded in a new “Spirit Language” (Medefidrin) complete with its alphabets and numerals, including their “spirit language” names. This was a far cry from the brief utterances “in-tongues” usually interjected in speeches or sermons during church service or prayer in other churches. The Medefidrin language was once extensively used in worship and church business and is still used somewhat today. (Abasiattai, Jones et al 2008).

Based on the accounts given regarding the myths and mystique surrounding the Spirit Language (Medefaidrin) of the OberiOkaike Christian Movement, it could be stated that the language came to be a divine revelation. As a result of the coming of the Spirit to Ibibioland to establish the OberiOkaike Movement, there arose the need for a language of communication in the new and unique Church. The Spirit had already started putting this language into the mouths of those who had spiritual experience or “seizure”, which they uttered without knowing the meaning. In the early 1930s the Spirit (Seminant), sent Mr Michael Ukpog and Akpan Akpan Udofia into seclusion inside a bush in ObioIkpa where they stayed for 4 years and four months, got the language revealed to them and written down. They documented greetings, counting, names and speeches in the medefaidrin language (Etim, 2010:65). The words of the OberiOkaike which were special to them were often used during their worship and praises.

Etim (2010:66) highlights that the Medefaidrin words were used in their prayers, songs and creed just as they were in the situation/setting used. They were emotionally affected by the words used in their worship services because they imply more than the common, conceptual meaning. The people took the words revealed by the Spirit just as they were. They repent from their sins if for instance, the speaker of the words in tongues or the person used or possessed by the Holy Spirit talked about a sinful act committed by a member or a group of people, that is, he or she would have to confess and repent of his or her sins. In their worship songs, the words stood for expressions used to make submissions to God in the Church. The songs touched the members very expressively, and emotionally and enliven their Spirit when rendered because they believed in the words of the songs, Creed to be true as far as their relationship with God was concerned. The words of the Creed represented what they wanted to be and wanted from God; therefore, they recited them with the utmost emotions and seriousness, getting them registered in their subconscious and believing them to be true.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Ibibio first established Mission, the Oberi Okaike Christian Mission now known as The 1927 OberiOkaike Christian Mission (Free Gift), had been carefully assessed. Its miraculous establishment in the year 1927 due to the rain of the Holy Spirit in what was known as the Spirit Movement of 1927, where an extraordinary phenomenon occurred - the immediate seizure of some of the Ibibio by the Holy Spirit in churches dominant in the area as at this period in question. Some of the Ibibio were seized at the shrine, markets, homes, farms and even on the road by the Holy Spirit with attributes such as shaking, uttering an unknown language, burning idols, climbing and the destruction of barbaric trees and structures.

The Movement grew into a Mission known as the Free Movement Church (Free Gift) in 1929 with branches all over Ibiono, Itu, Uruan, Arochukwu, Ikono, Ikot Ekpene, Uyo, and Eniong in

today's Cross River State. As the first indigenous Mission in Colonial Nigeria, it faced opposition ranging from Colonial authority, European established Missions (who lost membership to the new indigenous Mission) and the Indigenous Chiefs who practised and were conversant with Ibibio Traditional Religion, the opposite of what the indigenous Mission represented/ still representing. Despite its persecution which resulted in the loss of lives and imprisonment, the Mission survived to date as led and prophesied by its earliest prophets. With its distinguished characteristics such as shaking, clapping, shouting, singing, prophesying and praying, they became known as Mbon Spirit nyek idem.

As could be gleaned from the forgoing, it could be safely concluded that the OberiOkaike Christian Mission is a type of African Christianity. It endears itself to Ibibio- African Culture. Its worship on Ibibio Etaha Day, the use of African music, drums and other local gestures like African dance styles, and the employment of the Ibibio counting system notably in twos, and fours, or twenties, and forties proved its Ibibio origin and antecedent. As a Mission, it had achieved and contributed to the development of its environment. Its greatest achievements are the emergence of the Spirit Language, the Medefaidrin in the year 1932. The Medefaidrin language to some extent has some semblance with Nsibidisi language of African origin. With the language, the Mission acquired its phenomenal name, the OberiOkaike Christian Mission in the year 1935. Therefore, the peculiar nature of the religio-cultural milieu of the Ibibio forms the yardstick with which the OberiOkaike Christian Mission emerged as an indigenous Christianity.

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