THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY ON RURAL AREAS: CASE STUDY OF THE OGONI’S

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Christianity on rural areas with direct reference to Ogoni traditional religion in every way would be better appreciated when one takes the mind back to the conflicting experienceencountered by the earlymissionaries and the colonial masters, who had a lot to do to convince their victims to drop their basic traditional worshipping for Christianity.

This paper shall dwell on the positive and negative impact of Christianity on the Ogoni traditional worship with respect to rural areas where all other forms of traditional worshipping thrives not just the Ogoni.

Religion, Christianity, traditional worship and Ogoni traditional worship are some of the major concepts covered in this paper.

Keywords: Religion, Christianity, Traditional worship, Ogoni traditional Kingdom etc

INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of colonialism and coming of Christianity and Islam to Nigeria in particular and to Africa in general, indigenous religions existed.

Traditional Religion in Nigeria is practiced by Nigerians in Nigeria. Nigerian Traditional Religion is still in existence.

Though the impact of the Nigerian traditional religion is not felt until issues like land disputes, environmental pollution, traditional festivities et cetera that directly affects these worshippers occurs.

Traditional religion can be said to be as old as the mother earth itself especially when major continents of the world like Africa and Asia are brought into consideration.

This according to sociologist may be attributed to man’s feel of sub-ordination and need for stronger meta-physical powers to which it could ascribe its fortunes, success, frustrations and ambitions to.

The Ogoni Traditional Religion adumbrates the culture of the extended family system. The extended family system makes it possible for the adherents to see inter-relatedness of people whether from the father’s side or the mother’s side or both. This is because the nuclear family system is foreign to Nigeria. Much of the unfriendly attitudes Nigerians demonstrate to other. Nigerians are due to the emphasis of nuclear family system. It has led to unfriendly attitude found among cultures cultural clashes in recent times. These clashes are struggle over portions of land, resources and positions in government. Although communal clashes are part of human existence, they are prevalent in Nigeria in recent times. This is so because nuclear family system gives attention and preference to the father, mother and children only. Ogoni Traditional Religion, recognizes the extended family system, which is anchored on the principle of ‘Live and let live’ or ‘Be your brother’s keeper’. This is embedded in a community spirit, which emphasizes living and doing things in common.

This paper highlights the positive and negative impact of Christianity on Ogoni Traditional Religion with direct reference to the rural areas where Traditional religion is most practised.

CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

[Christianity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity) is one of the two main religions in [Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigeria), Christians make up 48.2% of the population.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-4) Nigeria has one of the largest Christian population in Africa with over 70 million persons in Nigeria belonging to the church. The ecclesiastical provinces of the [Church of Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Nigeria) are: Lagos, Ibadan, Ondo, Benue, The Niger, Niger Delta, Owerri, Abuja, Kaduna and Jos.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-Site_of_the_Church_of_Nigeria-5) Its primate is most rev, Nicholas Okoh.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-Site_of_the_Church_of_Nigeria-5) The Church of Nigeria has about 15 million members.

The [Nigerian Baptist Convention](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_Baptist_Convention) has about three million baptized members.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-7)

The Archdioceses of the [Roman Catholic Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Church) are: Abuja, Benin City, Calabar, Ibadan, Jos, Kaduna, Lagos, Onitsha and Owerri. [[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-8) It has about 39 million members in Nigeria. [[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-9) Cardinal [Francis Arinze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Arinze) is a Roman Catholic Cardinal from Nigeria.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nigeria#cite_note-10)

There are about 380,000 [New Apostolic Christians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Apostolic_Church) in entire Nigeria.

The majority of [Christians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christians) are found in the south East and South-South and Middle-belt region. An increasing number of mission stations and mission bookstores, along with churches serving southern enclaves and northern Christians in the northern cities and larger towns, are found in the Muslim north. Christianity in Yoruba area traditionally has been Protestant and [Anglican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican), whereas Igboland has always been the area of greatest activity by the Roman Catholic Church. Other denominations abounded as well. [Presbyterians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterians) arrived in the late seventeenth century in the [Ibibio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibibio), [Annang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annang) and [Efik](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Efik) land and the [Niger Delta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger_Delta) area and had missions in the middle belt as well. The works of the Presbyterian Church in [Calabar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calabar) from Scotland by missionaries like Rev Hope M. Waddell, who arrived in Calabar 10 April 1846, in the nineteenth century and that of Mary Slessor of Calabar being examples. Small missionary movements were allowed to start up, generally in the 1920s, after the middle belt was considered pacified. Each denomination set up rural networks by providing schooling and health facilities. Most such facilities remained in 1990, although in many cases schools had been taken over by the local state government in order to standardize curricula and indigenize the teaching staff. [Pentecostals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentecostals) arrived mostly as indigenous workers in the postindependence period and in 1990 Pentecostalism was spreading rapidly throughout the middle belt, having some success in Roman Catholic and Protestant towns of the south as well. There were also breakaway, or [Africanized churches](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Africanized_church&action=edit&redlink=1) that blended traditional Christian symbols with indigenous symbols. Among these was the [Aladura](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aladura) movement that was spreading rapidly throughout Yorubaland and into the non-Muslim middle belt areas.

### MISSIONARY WORK AND CHRISTIANITY

Apart from [Benin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benin) and [Warri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warri,_Nigeria), which had come in contact with Christianity through the [Portuguese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portugal) as early as the fifteenth century, most missionaries arrived by sea in the nineteenth century. As with other areas in Africa, Roman Catholics and Anglicans each tended to establish areas of hegemony in southern Nigeria. After[World War I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I), smaller denominations such as the [Church of the Brethren](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Brethren) (as [Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekklesiyar_Yan%27uwa_a_Nigeria)), [Seventh-day Adventists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church) and others worked in interstitial areas, trying not to compete. Although less well-known, [African-American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American) churches entered the missionary field in the nineteenth century and created contacts with Nigeria that lasted well into the colonial period.

THE OGONI PEOPLE

The Ogoni are of the Ijaw extraction that occupy a large land mass in present day Rivers State. They have a common culture and religion with very minor variations. They are grouped according to culture groups, such as Khana, Tai, Eleme and Gokana all of which amalgamated into a federation called the Ogoni Diversion during the colonial period. The Kingdoms in Ogoniland are five, Babbe, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo Kana and Tai, while their languages are Kana (Khana) Gokana, Eleme and Ogoi, (Ejere and Williamson, 1989). Today (2013) these group can be found in three local government areas – Khana, Gokana and Tai.

The Ogoni rose to international attention after the massive public protest against shall oil led by the movement for the survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) led by the playwright and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa Oral Tradition holds that they migrated from Ancient Ghana down to the Atlantic Coast and eventually found their way into the Eastern Niger Delta (Alagoa,1972). Efere and Williamson (1989) dates the linguistic relations of the Ogoni to the period before 15 BC, making it the oldest settlers in the Eastern Niger Delta region. This has been confirmed by oral traditions and Radiocarbon dating from sites around Ogoni land.

They are mainly an agricultural nation, keeping livestocks and herds and fishing to supplement that food diet. Salt making, palm oil cultivation arts and craft, trade are some of the economic activities the people engage in.

Oil exploration had been going on in Ogoni land since oil was discovered in commercial quantity in 1958. In a study that covered 1976 – 1991 it was discovered that 2,976 oil spills of about 2.1 million barrels of oil in Ogoniland accounting for 40% of the total spills of Royal Dutch/Shell Company worldwide. In an assessment of over 200 location in Ogoniland conducted by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) it was established that 50YP oil exploration in the area has caused environmental degradation. Oil spills, oil flaring and waste discharge, the alluvial soil of the areas is no longer viable for agriculture. This however, is not the focus of this paper. It is religious life of this great people that we will explore briefly.

NATURE OF OGONI RELIGION

There is no doubt that before the advent of Christianity and Islam there was an indigenous religion. (Atanda, 1989:44). Our examination will focus mainly on the Ogoni traditional society.

The Ogoni believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, they call Bari who is the creator of the universe and everything within. He is also the giver of the laws that operate in the universe, and for fear of being punished, people try to observe the taboos of the land. This implies total obedience to the Supreme Being and his agents.

VALUES OF OGONI TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Mbiti in Atanda admits that Nigerians, like their counterparts in other African countries are naturally and culturally religious (Atanda, 1989) and this makes for the high sense of the sacred seen in the lives of the people. That is, divine interpretations are offered for every phenomenon.

This in turn engenders fear, respect for elders or fellow man obedience to the spirits and careful observation of the ‘dos’ and don’t as their taboos stipulate.

The values very much uphold the good life or character, of charity, hospitality to friends, folks, strangers, kindness and generosity, truth and honesty, etc. The traditionalists believe that the exhibition of the above good qualities brings blessings in several forms – children, wealth or money; and wade by people of misfortunes in the form of sickness, bareness, death, etc., follow bad characters exhibited (Amponsah, 76 – 80).

The feature of inter-relatedness of the people is demonstrated in their corporate activities remarkable and note worthy. The community sees to the regulation of the people. That is, it is expected to obey the norms and behave properly, otherwise he will be termed non-conformist or deviant, capable of threatening the survival of the society. There is no individualism because of the people’s nature and culture of togetherness. Individualism means being selfish, self-centered, self-sufficiency, etc.

The Ogoni like other Nigerian Traditional Religion is a religion of love and tolerance. The Ogoni Traditional Religion practitioners allowed Christian and Islam to settle in Ogoni society without any problem. Today, some of the traditionalists still do not see anything wrong in the existence and survival of the other religions alongside theirs. Discrimination is not in the character of the traditional religion. To this end, Onwejeogwu (1989:51) states:

Traditional Religion has the capacity to co-exist and sustain itself with Islam and Christianity; because it created the socio-cultural environment in which Islam and Christianity are now shinning… it has the ability to imitate. Above all, it has the ability to remain independent in the face of assault by highly bureaucratized

religions. This is because it links the past and present with the future… Nigeria Traditional Religion tends to play the role of the umbrella religion in Nigeria. In spite of all these the government pays very little or no attention to Nigerian Traditional Religion in Nigeria. The government of Nigeria has often neglected Traditional Religion in which cultural values of tolerance are embedded.

Nigerian Traditional Religion cannot be said to be unimportant. It has helped in the development of the spiritual lives of Nigerians, either through itself or by tolerating the existence of other religions – Christianity and Islam, which some people now erroneously see as the only religions capable of shaping the moral lives of people. But morally, good lives were shaped and are being shaped by the indigenous religion.

Adherents of Christianity and Islam have over the years been fighting each other and themselves.

Most people have argued and concluded rightly that Christian – Moslem antagonism in Nigeria has nothing to do with the faiths. Rather, the antagonism has political undertones. In the face of this, Nigeria Traditional Religion, unlike Christianity and Islam, has refused to be manipulated by politicians and economists. It has refused to allow Christianity and Islam to hide under its canopy or their selfish, ethnic, regional, sectional, and tribal interests. This explains why have not been known among traditional religion adherents.

Religious adherents in Nigeria need to be tolerant because the ultimate object of worship in the religions (Islam, Christianity and Nigerian Traditional Religion) is ‘Allah’, ‘God’, ‘Olodumare’, ‘Akwa-Abasi Ibom’, ‘Chukwu’, etc. Different people have different names for the object of worship but the central idea about the object of worship is that he is the supernatural, the creator, etc, from whom blessings, and punishment come. He does not command hatred, discrimination and intolerance. Religious tolerance is needed in Nigeria because all religions stem from the fear of man’s insecurity and terminate in the search for perfection or unity with the ultimate.

Religious tolerance is necessary in Nigeria Mahatman Gandi (Floyd, 1956) argued that: Mutual respect and tolerance of the devotes of the different religions is that we want… i.e. unity in diversity. The soul of religious is one, but it is one used in a multitude of forms.

No one religion is self-sufficient; religions of the world need to co-exist, learn and imbibe good qualities of other religions to achieve the necessary truth. In short, this a calls for ecumenism.

This is a clear indication that no single religion can claim absolute knowledge of truth and that a lot can be gained from other religions. Believers with different opinions and convictions are necessary to each other. Here the emphasis is still on tolerance and/or togetherness for further achievements. The belief that makes a religion a worthy religion, is the belief in a God of all people not selected people. In Nigeria, Nigerian Traditional Religion is looked down upon, yet it possesses a mark very vital to both individual and collective progress.

OGONI RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCEReligious crises do not augur well for the sustenance of democratic governance in any given society because they constitute cogs in the wheel of progress. Religious intolerance hassled to the misuses of religions by many Nigerians which has led to ugly riots and lost of lives and properties such as in the Kafanchan riots, Kaduna, Kano and Jos riots. When such bloody riots occur, it is the masses and their children who suffer, such conflicts often over-shadow the gains derivable from religion, thereby making it appear more dysfunctional than functional. The inherent conflicts arising from religion in a plural society seems to suggest Coser’s reason for opposing Durkheim’s solidarity theory of religion.

In Nigeria, Religion has served many divisible functions. Many fanatics have used it to magnify trivial differences or matters, to religious boiling points. Christianity and Islam are now at the neck of each other. They have almost succeeded in dividing the entire citizenry.

Formulation and integration of national identity in an atmosphere of religious prejudice arising from negative effects of religious pluralism. This problem was foreseen by Smith (1974) who states that “Pluralism poses a serious challenge to national integration or nation building in the sense of creating a national identity which all citizens share”. The nation seems to have seen indirectly divided into two broad religious zones. Islam controlling great majority in the North and Christianity in the South. This picture does not argue well for the unity of the nation. Instead, it causes a lot of disharmony among the citizens and contradicts the idea of national cohesion.

Fortunately, Ogoni traditional religion has not been associated with any kind of intolerance whatever, and this must account for the peaceful relations existing between adherents and other religious adherents in Ogoni society. One can safely conclude that Ogoni religion is indeed religion of tolerance.

CONCLUSION

Traditional religion can be said to be as old as the mother earth itself especially when major continents of the world like Africa and Asia are brought into consideration.

This according to sociologist may be attributed to man’s feel of sub-ordination and insecurity as well as the need for stronger meta-physical powers to which it could ascribe its fortunes, success, frustrations and ambitions to.

Ogoni Traditional Religion has a mark of tolerance, which has been exhibited by the adherents over the years, and it is worthy of emulation by other religious adherents. Tolerance is a hallmark of democracy and unless tolerance, becomes our watchword there can be no true democracy in Nigeria. This is true because poor relationships bring disharmony, etc., which breed disunity. In the light of the above one can discern that the fundamental question of Nigerians’ lives can come from the very nature and culture of the people of Nigeria. In effect, Nationality can only be ensured when the spirit of togetherness has been planted, nurtured, grown. This is possible only when Nigerian have learnt to do the right, speak the truth and become their brother’s keeper.

This draw people towards the truth, honesty, accountability and responsibility and the result will be integration. Adherents of Ogoni Traditional Religion relate well with people across the board because of the extended family system. This is so because they feel that mankind is one.

Traditional Religion is borne out of the fact that the adherents see themselves as either related from the paternal or maternal side or both. This creates a kind of network of inter-relatedness among the people. Ogoni Religion is emulated by the adherents of other religions violence will be ameliorated.

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