

Elizabeth Afu and the Mother Ministry in Bukaolum Boki - Cross River State: a Discourse on the Paranormal
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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate how religious experience of an individual can be a veritable catalyst to change in the lives of people and in societies. Such was the case at St. John's Catholic Parish Wula in which Mrs. Elizabeth Afu was a member in good standing, participating in the sacraments as well as in the parish Choir in her own out station Bukaolum, a village very close to Wula, the Parish centre in Boki L.G.A. of Cross River State.

Elizabeth, a maiden from Olum in Boki L.G.A., with little primary school education is married to Afu from Bukaolum. They wedded at St. John's Church Wula.

Elizabeth's religious experience in the course of a Parish Choir competition at the Parish centre in 1991 transformed her there and then into an ecstatic mood that made her to prophesy and speak in tongues at the utter surprise of her local group and the other members in the competition. Initially the Parish Priest then, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Odey welcomed her new state but when, with time, she started uttering prophecies and statements that ran contrary to Catholic doctrines and traditions, the romance between her and the Parish Priest began to crack, a situation which climaxed in court litigations and final breakaway of Elizabeth from the Catholic Church to form her own Church, called the "Mother Church", attracting to the new church, some members of the parent Catholic Parish. She later built a small worshipping house near her family compound in Bokaolum. One interesting thing about the new Church was the fact that the church had in its membership some banana merchants, some medical doctors, lawyers, teachers and ordinary folks in the community and its environs. One wonders why Elizabeth, a local house

wife with little education, could command the loyalties of these men and women of worth in her membership.

This paper among other things attempted to proffer answers to this question. Specifically tried to (1) Describe Elizabeth's Religious Experience at Wula. (2) Unravel the basis of the emergence of the "Mother Ministry" in Boki L.G.A. (3) Describe the mode of operation of this movement. (4) Examine the implications of the ministry to in cultururation process

The data for this work were gathered through various means, namely: consultation with Elizabeth herself and some of her prominent members, as well as eyewitness account on the day that Elizabeth had her religious experience. The data collected were interpreted using the Socio-Religious approach.

Elizabeth's Religious Experience

Elizabeth Afu, a simple house wife with a little education was a member of the catholic choir in Bukaolum out-station in St. John's Catholic Parish Wula, in Boki L.G.A of Cross River State. In a parish choir competition in 1991 at Wula Central Parish, her station choir lost out in the competition to St. Benedict's out-station Okwabang which got the first position. When the result of the competition was announced there came a loud protest from the Bokaolum group led by Elizabeth. (K. Madu, personal Communication, 08/10/07)

In her protest, according to Madu, she started prophesying and speaking in tongues at the utter surprise and wonder of all in the Church. It was reported to the researcher that the Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Emma Odey was in his house when Elizabeth prophesied more and more and spoke more in tongues. According to Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Odey, the Parish Priest, who is a personal friend of the writer, his initial reaction to the situation was that of excitement and joy that a member of this Parish could experience

the fire of the Holy Spirit declaring the mysterious utterances of the Holy Ghost through her. At this initial stage, Elizabeth was still a bona fide member of the Catholic Church, working hand in hand with the Parish Priest and members of the Parish. This according to Elizabeth herself and Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Odey continued for about six days until she declared that she had a special revelation from God in which she had burning bush experience like that of Moses, in which it was revealed to her that the entire St. John's Parish Church premises was a holy land just like the burning bush of Moses and therefore all those who should place their feet therein must be holy.

This revelation opened up a new phase in her prophetic utterances detrimental to the survival of the Catholic tradition in Ogoja Catholic Diocese generally and the Wula Parish in particular. These utterances touched on virtually every facet of the parish administration and even on the Church leaders and members of the Church.

Elizabeth's Prophetic Utterance

As already stated above, the Parish compound entirely, according to her, was a holy land and therefore should exclude anything profane including humans. And as she claimed this was a revelation from God, she continued prophesying as follows: That people should not wear shoes in the Church premises as well as in the Church building; that anything black, whether inner wears or outer wears should not be worn into the Parish premises since black connoted profanity. This made Elizabeth to confront even the Parish Priest, Emmanuel Odey for wearing shoes in the Church premises.

She also saw many people as witches and wizards who must be destroyed. According to her, witches and wizards were/are responsible for the underdevelopment of the area. One would understand and appreciate the implications of these utterances in a community that is infested with the

fear of evil forces, of witches and wizards, principalities and powers that harass and torment the people to their marrows. In a society where people believe that they are surrounded by evil forces one can appreciate why the new movement would be a welcome one in the community.

Elizabeth while justifying her revelation emphasized that all believers in God should wear only white clothes both at the inner and outer areas, without shoes but go about bare footed. That Elizabeth herself was God-sent, a great Prophetess who proclaims the will of God was believed by many. One sees that Elizabeth's religious experience transformed her and through her the entire Wula Catholic Parish was transformed. In this community, indeed, the emergence of a local illiterate woman to speak boldly against what have constituted threats to the people's lives would be a sensible project.

This may explain why Elizabeth's crusade received a good support. Directing her religious campaign against powers of darkness, against enemies of societal developments – nay witches and wizards would be a welcome exercise in the area. This is collaborated by Harnischfeger (2006) while commenting on the religious crusades of Ngozi in Alor Uno in these words.

Directing her religious campaign to the eradication of witch craft and other demonic threats was a sensible project. Fear of occult forces, with all the mistrust and mutual aggression it generates, is indeed a major obstacle to development. Democracy and a modern market economy flourish on the basis of trust yet trust is undermined when people suspect each other of secretly employing the most hideous of aggression (p.1)

Among the Europeans, there seems to be no more threats of witches and wizards, but this is not so in Nigeria. One observes the rapid proliferation of indigenous Churches steeped so much in the people's cultural values, beliefs and practices, that one's life must be enhanced and preserved through a harmonious interaction of the forces of the cosmic order. Thus any Church or religious institution that does not endorse this trado-cultural backdrop may not command many inner or spiritual convictions of the people.

The quest for security and harmony undoubtedly are very important factors that compel Africans to rally around any person who claims to have powers over mysterious powers of darkness like witches, wizards and sorcerers. And the fear of these forces in Africa generally and in Cross River state in particular has far reaching implications socially, politically, health-wise and even economically, psychologically and in developmental processes.

A learned gentleman from Okwabang Boki L.G.A., Barrister Sebastian Anyia who lives in Ekwulobia in Anambra State in a personal communication (Saturday, 6th, October 2007) was blunt in saying that he rarely visits his home, because of his fear of insecurity in his community where the threats of witches and sorcerers are highly pronounced. One can understand the fears of Barrister Sebastian, fears of death from enemies of progress, dangerous men and women, witches and wizards.

In Elizabeth's religious experience, she is believed to have the supernatural powers from God/Christ to fight the powers of darkness. Thus her brand of trado-Christian religious campaign definitely appealed to many people who probably were disenchanted with the Euro-Christian mission that was not sensitive to the trado-cultural beliefs of the people. In a religious cosmology where malevolent spiritual forces are everywhere inflicting pains and havocs to people at the least provocation, any religious

system, institution or persons endowed with supernatural powers to fight these forces would surely be welcome to the people.

This was the case with Elizabeth who went ahead to fight the mission Church (Roman Catholicism) where she was once a fully baptized member, a wedded woman with her husband in the same Church, a member of the Parish Choir and a Communicant.

As she left the Catholic Church, some members who were convinced of Elizabeth's religious experience also went out with her. Such includes Dr. Solomon Kekong, an orthodox medical practitioner and Patrick Ndep who later left Elizabeth's mother Church and founded his own Church called "Victory Chapel" located at Ikom. According to Patrick, now called Pastor Paddy, he served the "Mother Church" for three years (Personal Communication, Sept. 14 2007) with Phillip Oyame.

The Mode of Operation of the Mother Church

The insights into the mode of operation of the Mother Church were gathered from a former member of the Church, Patrick Ndep, now Pastor Paddy of Victory Chapel Ikom in Cross River State (Personal Communications 14/09/07). Pastor Paddy was a staunch member of the Church before leaving the Church for his present Church, where he serves as a minister of God.

According to Pastor Paddy, the Church follows the same pattern of worship akin to the Pentecostal brand of Churches. The Church has the following features.

- (a) Elizabeth is the only minister in the Church, the General Overseer. The Church building, a modest simple building in Olum serves as the house of worship of the Church.
- (b) The Church preaches sanctity of lives and righteousness
- (c) Not much of bible reading is done in the Church, and thus there is little preaching here. Instead prophecy takes much prominence in

the Church. Elizabeth herself is semi illiterate, without any seminary or theological training and as such concentrates on prophecies.

- (d) In the Church, the liturgy centers more on singing choruses and praises to God and to the Mother Minister.
- (e) All the members wear white flowing gowns, white cap and white inner wears and go about bare footed.
- (f) The Church's vanguard is on the attack of witches, wizard's sorcerers, mediums and people adjudged to be agents of the evil one.
- (g) It is believed by the members of the Church that Elizabeth, the founder of mother church has spiritual insights concerning people's lives, destinies and futures and has the divine power to ward off all negative forces that harass people. Such beliefs, the writer gathered nurtures the ground for a people who believe that they are surrounded by evil forces to rally around her for protection.

Implications of Elizabeth's Religious Experience and Campaign

Elizabeth's religious experiences and what followed thereafter are very insightful and revealing. Generally, it revealed the deep religious cosmology which underpins Africans' value scales and attitudinal orientations

Firstly, by rallying some members of the Parish to her side is an indication that some members were no longer convinced that the mission churches were sensitive to the core values and aspirations of the people especially as it concerned their security from malevolent spiritual forces.

Secondly, by rallying her followers against witches and sorcerers in their midst, she only succeeded in extolling the powers of these spiritual forces and the consequent fear of such powers by the people. If Mission

Christianity has failed to solve the cultural fears of the people, there was therefore the need to replace it with a more pragmatic one that would be sensitive to the fears, values and aspirations of the people. Although, modernism and enlightenment have made appreciable impact on the Africans, there seems to be resilience of traditional cultures by African Christians. Ejizu (1987) has painstakingly made a considerable demonstration of this in his article “continuity and discontinuity in Igbo Traditional Religion”.

Thirdly, that Elizabeth attracted many followers cannot be divorced from the fact that she waged a war against demonic powers and imagined agents of demons including the Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Odey. This is likened to what happened in the early Church, in which the Church of the apostles and their immediate successors were endowed with spiritual gifts to fight demonic powers and this was one reason why the Christian Community attracted many converts. It seemed that her followers felt that enlistment in the Community of the Mother Church was an insurance against anti-sorcery cult.

Fourthly, Elizabeth’s Community has gone a long way to restore the confidence of the people of their security in the area where the Church operates. At least, such confidence that they are insured in the Church has made people not to be afraid of coming home again, even to build fine buildings which hitherto were not contemplated. This was based on the backdrop that any promising young man or woman can easily be killed by the myriads of witches and sorcerers if the one was not protected by more powerful Spirit of the Creator, God and Christ. It was “No shaking” for members.

Fifthly, Elizabeth identified “black” with evil. Can this be linked with the Euro-Christian ideology and world-view in which the devil was symbolized in black and thus everything black including Africans were

identified with evil? This idea is quite erroneous indeed. This colour bar had been at the backdrop of the oppression of the blacks in both the United States and South Africa of the apartheid era. Could it be that Elizabeth is indirectly propagating oppression theology even in her own community?

Sixthly, the Boki community where Elizabeth hails from and in which her Church is situated is a simple rural community with little or no infrastructural development, even though that the community can boast of many intellectuals, academics and businessmen. One wonders why? In the words of Chief Benedict Oduah, a Catholic Knight of St. John's International, the progressive men and women of the community, rather than coming to the village, to build good houses prefer to do so in the cities which are cosmopolitan in nature. It is believed that once a man comes home to display his wealth, his life becomes endangered. So one sees that the fear of insecurity from evil men and women whose stock in trade is to kill all progressives lies behind people who have made it to visit the villages rarely.

In such communities, social harmonious interactions are highly restricted amongst the people because of mutual suspicion and fear. This, as we have said earlier underscores the absence of infrastructural facilities in the area.

Despite such crusaders against evil forces like Elizabeth's, the people are still plagued with fear that they patronize diviners at the event of sickness instead of going to the hospitals to seek for medial help. This is because people here believe so much that all unusual sicknesses are caused by malevolent forces, witches and wizards and sorcerers. In the light of this, one observes with keen interest the resilience of traditional beliefs and practices even in the wake of Western Education and Christianity.

Infact today in Boki Community and Nigeria in general, the indigenous Churches and their priests have replaced the traditional shrines and diviners. In the latter, we find what we may call neo-traditionalism. The traditional deities are now being extolled, an issue which can easily be observed in our indigenous Churches in which the major concern is attack on evil forces, witches and sorcerers, liberation from generational curses and the destruction of imagined habitats of the powers of evil, be them economic tress, farmlands and even houses.

These actions have affected the economic development of the area, injected a lot of bad blood in the community and have deeply dampened social relations in the area. All these go contrary to the millennium development goals.

The writer therefore advocates that a new orientation through education be seriously undertaken in these areas. Education will expel ignorance, irrational beliefs, instill confidence in the people and enhance the knowledge that man has his destiny in his hands. In Europe and America, the fear of spirits, witches and sorcerers is a thing of past years. So it is high time that we subscribe to the principles enunciated by Science and Technology.

Concluding Reflections

Elizabeth's religious experience like other religious experiences of man in history transformed her tremendously that she went on a religious crusade against spiritual forces and enemies believed to be anti progressive in Boki L.G.A of Cross River State. And in a community in which these forces in their myriads of forms are believed to walk along the streets inflicting havoc, misery and deaths to people, such a crusade received a welcome approbation by the people. This explains why prominent sons and daughters of the area, who, convinced that the main line Churches could not meet up to their spiritual and physical needs,

especially in the area of life security crossed over to Elizabeth's camp where it was believed that these forces of evil could be given a superior battle.

Insights gained from this belief are quite revealing.

- Evil forces both seen and unseen are believed to parade the African World
- They may be in the form of man and woman, can be in objects including clothes, trees, birds and animals.
- That these are enemies of progress and therefore must be fought to a stand still. In the course of this fight, certain men and women may be accused of being habitats of evil eg. as witches, wizards and sorcerers.

This creates divisions and antagonisms among people and this can culminate in social disorder, health disorder and a general atmosphere of insecurity and suspicion. In such a community, people's energies are not given to worth while ventures which lead to the society's development. This explains the backwardness that one can experience in such communities.

In these prevailing circumstances, the paper concludes that it is high time Africans rose above irrational beliefs and practices which have continued to drag them down in the path of global progress. The extolling of the powers of the paranormal and spiritual forces has been the bane of progress in the African World. And for Africans to compete with the Western World in the area of development, they must have to change to a new orientation of a scientific mind.

References

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