

WOMEN AND THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN OBOLO (ANDONI), 1870-2020

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Obolo women and the historical development of Christianity in Obolo from 1870 to 2020. The origin of Christianity in Obolo in the 19th century was traced to Madam Ngban Ijo who was a worshipper of Adumu prior to her conversion. She was converted by her Bonny trading customer, Mr. Ibitomie Hart who she accommodated during his trading expeditions in Ataba. Through her, Christianity was established in Ataba and Ataba became the first place in Obolo to embrace the new religion. Her house became the first centre of worship and early church activities. Other women were similarly converted and the church grew from her house to what is known today as St. James Anglican Church, Ataba. Obolo women were also instrumental in the spread of Pentecostal churches in the area. The women have contributed enormously to the expansion of Christianity in Obolo in several ways. They built parsonages and supported the church financially. The finding of this paper is that through Christianity, Obolo experienced great transformation which influenced the socio-economic life of the people and Obolo society. The methodology adopted to reconstruct this past are the primary and secondary sources.

Key words: Women, Spread, Christianity, Obolo (Andoni).

Introduction

Prior to the 19th century rapid spread of Christianity, the Obolo had early contact with Missionaries who came to the Obolo territory during the slave trade. The Missionaries eventually built the Catholic Church in the Egwede/Agana/Unyangala cluster.¹ Christian missionary activities in Obolo then were ephemeral and the alien religion became extinct in Obolo. This was a common experience in the Eastern Niger Delta where the first phase of Christianity was not firmly established in spite of the Missionary efforts.

However, the establishment of the second phase of Christianity in the Eastern Niger Delta in particular and Niger Delta in general was traced to King William Dappa Pepple of Bonny. Historically, it is common knowledge that King William Dappa Pepple was the “political child of the British”, installed by the British, exiled by the British and released by the British with a new religious identity.² He became converted with his family and was baptised by Reverend George Henry McGill at Christ Church Watney Street, Middle Sex in 1856, with a new name William.³ Consequently, he became the vessel that conveyed the Whiteman’s religion to his ancient kingdom built on traditional religious faith. Eric Gentle John asserts that King William Dappa Pepple was regarded as the architect and patron of the whole social movement of enlightenment to Bonny through the advent of Christianity and school system.⁴

The seven years of his exile in London had tremendous effect on him. It gave him a new orientation about life and society which in turn impacted it on the Ibani. Therefore, the fascinating and strange development he saw in England compelled him to ask the Queen the source of these infrastructural developments. According to Bonny tradition, King William Dappa Pepple asked the Queen where lies the strength of Great Britain? The Queen answered, “The Christian faith based on the Holy Bible”. His conviction of the transforming power of Christian religion and the attainment of greatness propelled him to employ the services of the English professionals who will go with him to Bonny to transform the ancient kingdom.⁵

King Dappa Pepple perception of the church as a source of development motivated him to transplant the church in Bonny after he was released from exile in 1861. “Thus King William Dappa Pepple genuinely planted the seed of Christianity from 1861 to 1864 when Bishop Ajayi Crowther posted to Bonny, watered it and God grew it to maturity”. Therefore Christianity began to spread across the length and breadth of the

Eastern Niger Delta first before the entire Niger Delta and beyond. Thus, the second phase of Christianity started in Bonny in 1864, Brass 1868, Ataba (Andoni) 1870, Opobo 1873, Kalabari 1874 and Okrika 1878.⁶

In the era of Pentecostal church movement, women became the source of establishing The Apostolic Church, Greater Evangelism World Crusade, Deeper Life Bible Church in Western Obolo and St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Iko in Eastern Obolo. Through these denominations women have contributed greatly to the spread of Christianity in Obolo.

Obolo women in their religious enthusiasm and commitment, have contributed significantly to the development of churches in Obolo. The women pioneering role in Christianity in Obolo laid the foundation of social transformation of Obolo and its impact on the socio-economic and political development in the area. Her conversion was a historical coincidence with the ordination of Venerable D.C. Crowther who was ordained by Bishop Crowther in 1870.⁷ This year is not only significant in the religious circle but in global history. It should be recalled that 1870 was the remarkable year in the history of Germany when the unification of Germany was achieved by the Great German Diplomat Otto Von Bismack. Notably, Christianity in Ataba predates the establishment of Opobo on 25th December, 1870.

Spread of Christianity in Obolo

The origin of the alien religion in Obolo is traceable to the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Obolo. Documentary evidence indicates that the Portuguese were the first slave traders in Obolo and the Missionaries came along with the slave traders and the Obolo pioneered the trade in human cargo in the Niger Delta region. They were active in the villages of Egwede, Unyangala and Agana on the Andoni River. In the Egwede/Agana/Unyangala cluster, they taught some of the leading citizens to speak Portuguese, and built a Catholic Church.⁸ Missionary activities and Christianity in Obolo was short-lived and thereafter became extinct. The first phase of Christian Missionary activities in Obolo was not deeply rooted until the late 19th century. The 19th century Christianity in Obolo was established through Bonny.

This religion spread to Obolo through two centres of influence, Bonny and Opobo. It was from Bonny that the 19th century Christianity spread to Western Obolo. During this period Obolo women played a pioneering role in the establishment of Christianity in Obolo. Madam

Ngban Ijo of Ataba received Christianity in 1870 and through her Christianity was established in Ataba. She was converted by Mr. Ibitomie Hart a trader from Bonny whom she did accommodate during his trading expeditions in Ataba. It is noteworthy that Christianity was not spread to Obolo by European Missionaries but indigenous believers. Indigenous converts and believers pioneered the propagation of the alien religion in Obolo from the Orthodox era to the Pentecostal era.

The worship of God and church activities commenced from her house until it was relocated to her brother's house Late Mr. Owonte Ndedeng. By 1910 when Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther visited Ataba, he told the members of the church to provide a more spacious place for the worship of God. In response, Late Mr. Alaka of Iyoko family provided the needed land for the church building. Subsequently, a more spacious and befitting place of worship was acquired in the Old Mission in Ataba. With her conversion and growth of Christianity, Ataba became the first community in Obolo to embrace Christianity in 1870. Since 1870 Obolo women have been instrumental to the spread of Christianity in Obolo.

By the second half of the 19th century, Bonny became the centre of the spread of the Western religion to various parts of Eastern Niger Delta including Obolo. In Obolo, documented history indicates that Ataba was the first Andoni community to receive Christianity in 1870 through a trader from Bonny called Mr. Ibitomie Hart, and Madam Ngban Ijo of Ataba who was the first woman to be converted. Her conversion was facilitated by the already established trade relation that existed between her and Mr. Ibitomie Hart whom she accommodated on his trading expedition to Ataba.

Madam Ngban Ijo's relation, Mr. Owonte Ndedeng had also embraced Christianity through the sister as he intermittently observed them worship God. Mr. Owonte Ndedeng had often seen his relative Ngban Ijo and her guest kneeling down in prayers but knew not what it was all about. On one occasion he inquired from them what it was all about. He was told it was about the worship of the true God. With much preaching from his sister and her guest, Owonte was converted. Upon his conversion, he became the Christian leader in Ataba since women are not opportune to be leaders.⁹

She hails from Ataba in Egwe (compound) Ituk and formerly worshipped Adumu. Mr. Ibitomie Hart was accommodated by her during his trading expeditions at Ataba. As a worshipper of Adumu, there was a shrine at the corner of her house dedicated to the god of the sea; Adumu

where sacrifices were regularly offered. This shrine attracted the uncomfortable Christian; Mr. Ibitomie Hart. It was the shrine that brought a turning point in the life of Madam Ngban Ijo. Subsequently, Mr. Ibitomie Hart introduced God to her. With the knowledge of God, she became converted to Christianity thereafter in 1870. Through this contact, her conversion to the new religion became possible.

After her conversion, regular prayer meetings and worship of God started in her house under the supervision of her guest. Mr. Owonte Ndedeng who also embraced Christianity worshipped with them. Being the only converted man among them, he became the leader of the Christian group in Ataba. He also helped to spread the gospel and through his influence some members of his age grade (Ogbo Ngelenge) became converted to Christianity. Such persons included Messrs Awalo Nja, Igwurugwu Nte and Chief Bara Horsfall. Other women in Ataba were also converted to Christianity.

Opobo was another centre where Christianity spread to Eastern Obolo. In Eastern Obolo, early Christian activities derived inspiration from Opobo Town. Christianity spread to Obianga, Okoroete, Amadaka, Emeroke, Okoroinyong and other towns and villages of Eastern Obolo.¹⁰ The Christian converts in these communities included the women also. The establishment of Christianity in Obolo was received with mixed reactions. The early Christians were persecuted by the traditionalists, comprising individuals, age groups, secret societies mostly Ofiokpo and unconverted husbands. It took different form in various communities and the women were similarly affected. Converts were denied certain privileges in their communities.

Women were persecuted mostly by their unconverted husbands. Mr. Ibani of Ataba provides a good example of husband-wife persecution. He struck his wife, Agere with a rod on her waist, while she was kneeling in prayer with her fellow converts at Owonte's house. She had almost bled to death as a result of the incident. Yet she persisted fervently in the faith.¹¹ These confrontations did not affect their faith. Christianity thereafter spread to other parts of Obolo with women as the largest converts.

When Crowther was in Grand Bonny, he entered into agreement with King William Dappa Pepple-in-council for the extension of the Anglican Communion to the Niger Delta and joint sponsorship of both church and school.¹² Christianity had been consolidated in Ataba. With the growth of Christianity and its population in Ataba, the Ataba church was

recognised by the parent church in Bonny in 1880 when Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther was the Bishop. By this period Rev. James Boyle was the Pastor at St. Stephen Cathedral Anglican Church, Bonny. The church was named after James one of the followers of Jesus Christ based on the doctrine of the Anglican Communion.¹³

John H. Enemugwem asserts that churches are named after Patron Saints and not after existing men of God. On the other hand, churches can also be named after some pioneer and renowned Bishops in their memory. Such churches are known as memorial. For instance, in Bonny a church was named after late Bishop Dimeari and the church became known as Bishop Dimeari Memorial Church.

Clearly, it should be noted that the Ataba church christened St. James does not in any way suggest that it was named after Rev. James Boyle as may be upheld by some people and entrenched in oral traditions of Ataba and Andoni respectively. The fact remains that in the doctrine and traditions of the Anglican Communion, churches are named after Patron Saints.

However, the constraint of this study is identifying the actual St. James, the Ataba church was named after since there existed St. James the Apostle whose Saint Day was/is 25 July and St. James of Jerusalem, the brother of the Lord; whose Saint Day was/is 23 October respectively. This difficulty was attributed to the period when the Niger Delta Pastorate was created in 1952 and the Bishop's court was situated at St. Michael's Church, Aba.¹⁴ The new status necessitated the movement of church records to Aba in 1952. St. Stephen Cathedral Bonny oral account indicates that the records so transferred to Aba were destroyed by the Biafran soldiers who converted St. Michael's Church, Aba as their camp during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. Even after the Civil War, the remnants of the records returned to the Bishop's court in Port Harcourt have no trace of the records as regards the determinant date of Christening St. James Anglican Church, Ataba.

With the prevalent situation, one is inclined to adopting 25 July being the Saint Day of St. James the Apostle as the probable date the Ataba Church was christened and after St. James the Apostle respectively. This is premised on the earlier publication of The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) Churchman's Calendar, 1986, which situates St. James the Apostle Saint Day on 25 July and did not include any other Saint James. Similarly, Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) Church Year

Calendar 2021, documented St. James the Apostle Saints Day as 26 July (transferred) and St. James of Jerusalem, the brother of the Lord Saint Day on 23 October.

Significantly, after the official recognition and naming of the church, a church teacher then commonly regarded as station holder was posted to the church. The teacher was one Jacob Okorochoa Pepple of Bonny. The challenge of the then Anglican Church in Ataba was that there was no regular church teacher posted to them. Sometime the parent church in Bonny will send church teacher to them. At other time they remain like that under the local leaders.¹⁵ The foundation of Christianity in Obolo, was laid first in Ataba through the first woman convert, Madam Ngban Ijo. This religion grew tremendously from her house to what is today known as St. James Anglican Church, Ataba. Since the 19th century to the 21st century, Christianity had evolved into Pentecostalism and the Obolo women have also played pioneering role in the spread of the gospel and establishment of Pentecostal Churches in various Obolo communities.

Women and the Era of Pentecostalism in Obolo

The converted Obolo women became devoted and committed to the work of God. They were seriously involved in the spread of the gospel of God as they preached the word of God to their family members, trading partners and friends. At other times, women embarked on personal and group evangelism. During crusades, the women were able to access their fellow women and preached the gospel to them. Through their preaching, some women were also converted to Christianity. The women therefore became agent of conversion and social transformation.

During the era of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Obolo witnessed the establishment of Pentecostal churches in the area. The Obolo women distinguished themselves in Christianity, especially in the area of establishing branches of their various church denominations in their communities. The established Pentecostal churches serve as the mouth-piece in the spread of the gospel on daily basis. In this regard a typical example is the establishment of The Apostolic Church in Ngo through Late Madam and later Deaconess Dorcas Ogbodo of Ngo Town, Andoni.

Documentary and Obolo oral history traced the origin of The Apostolic Church in Obolo to Opobo. Late Deaconess Dorcas Ogbodo spearheaded the establishment of the branch of her parent church in her locality, Ngo. Thus, in 1960 she established The Apostolic Church in Ngo,

the first in Obolo. She brought the church from Opobo where she went for the healing of her daughter. As her daughter was healed, they returned home to commence prayer meetings in her house. Mr. Solomon Ali and others, who also went to Opobo for healing, returned home to join her. Thus, her house became the worship centre where other Obolo people who sought spiritual healing and deliverance from The Apostolic Church before they acquired a permanent place of worshipping God in Ngo. For reasons of doctrine, Mr. Solomon Ali who was later ordained an elder presided over the church until a Pastor was sent to them. In The Apostolic Church women are not privileged to be Pastors. The church spread from Ngo to other parts of Obolo.¹⁶

In another dimension, The Apostolic Church Ataba Assembly was also established in 1974 through Late Mrs. and later Deaconess Roseline Howells. Her conversion was an outcome of her healing and deliverance from the worship of water spirit (Yok-emenmun) and its torments. Her deliverance took place in The Apostolic Church Ngo. She worshipped there until they returned home (Ataba) after her husband's retirement as a member of the Customary Court at Ngo. At home she continued worshipping God independently in her house because there was no branch of the church in Ataba then.

This church was formally inaugurated through a three day Witnessing Crusade held from Friday 22nd to Sunday 24th November, 1974. The crusade was conducted at her instance to actualise her intension to open the branch of the church in her home town, Ataba. It was a well attended crusade conducted by Pastor Udoma and Worker Umor both from the present Akwa Ibom State and it was intended to win additional converts to her. She and her husband led the crusade team to Ataba to proselytise the gospel.

Indeed, converts were made and were baptised immediately on Sunday, 24th November, 1974. The converts were subsequently entrusted to her as a senior convert. One of the pioneer converts is Deaconess Sarah Opuwari. Prayer meetings continued in her house. Elder Z.S. Warigbani (now Apostle Z.S. Warigbani) was mandated to remain with them for one week to feed them spiritually. She and others continued steadfastly in the worship of God in her house. She attracted her literate and converted husband to read and interpret the Bible for them. With increased population, she secured accommodation from her son-in-law, Mr.

Akpankpa Lawson Amos. Through her the church got a land allocated to them by her husband, Late Chief Howells Osotogile in 1975.¹⁷

Her conversion was not without persecution from her husband Late Chief Howells Osotogile. According to the oral account of Virginia Romokere Benson, her aunt Late Deaconess Roseline Howells was severally persecuted by her husband, Late Chief Howells Osotogile each time she went to church. One of such persecutions was that, Late Chief H. Osotogile did hit her with his staff (walking stick) on her head. She sustained wound and injury on her head respectively. Irrespective of her persecution, she was not deterred but persistently served God until the husband died in 1992 while she died in 2001.¹⁸

From Greater Evangelism World Crusade to Deeper Life Bible Church

Greater Evangelism World Crusade founded by Late Apostle Geoffrey Dabibi Numbere on 9th September, 1972¹⁹ is another Pentecostal Church which attracted both men and women membership in the Old Rivers State which Obolo was inclusive. Ataba is the first community in Obolo where this denomination was established through a native, Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel. She brought the church to Ataba on 5th September, 1975. It started as a fellowship.

According to the oral account of Obia, who stated that before Greater Evangelism World Crusade came to Ataba Town, the pioneer members of the above denomination were former members of the Anglican Communion, St. James Church, Ataba. The converts and members of the Scripture Union constituted themselves into a prayer group. They usually observed fasting and prayers at the St. James Anglican Church, Ataba.

In August, 1975, Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel recounted her experience of divine deliverance and healing of Tuberculosis disease she suffered several years to her prayer group in Ataba Town, Andoni at a crusade in Port Harcourt. She stated that her daughter Mrs. Evelyn Opuwari took her to the crusade at St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Mile 1 Diobu.

On the basis of her deliverance, she invited the members of the prayer group to attend the subsequent crusade and conference slated to hold in August, 1975. The members honoured the invitation and on Sunday, 24th August, 1975 they went with Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel to attend the conference in Port Harcourt in a secondary school compound at Creek Road. Members who attended the crusade are Late Lilian Felix (Later Mrs.

Lillian Garrick), Mrs. Rosemond Papanye, Mrs. Elizabeth Amos (now Pastor Elizabeth Amos), Mrs. Belinda Joshua, Agnes Shedrack and Mr. William Henry. Other Obolo indigenes that were in attendance were late Pastor Garrick Inomo from Ataba and Mrs. Charity Okujiagu of Ilotombi (now Professor Charity Okujiagu).

The conference provided them the opportunity to meet with the founder and Director of the church; late Apostle G.D. Numbere. The director mandated Evangelist Fubara Ibama and Goddy Oraite to interview and interact with them. In course of the interaction, they disclose their intension of establishing the branch of the church in Ataba Town, Andoni. Their request was granted by the founder of the church. Mr. William Henry volunteered a piece of land for the commencement of Greater Evangelism World Crusade in Ataba. With this development, the church commenced its religious activities on 5th September, 1975 as a fellowship. Pastor Garrick Inomo was posted to Ataba to shepherd the church.

In essence, Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel was the forerunner who led them to the church authority in Port Harcourt. Through this encounter, the establishment of the branch of Greater Evangelism World Crusade in Ataba was attributed to Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel. There are three dimensions to the existence of this denomination in Ataba. Foremost is the role of Late Elder Hannah Emmanuel who led the prayer group to attend the conference. This resulted in the establishment of GEWC in Ataba, Andoni. Secondly, Mr. William Henry (now Chief William Henry Obia) provided the land for the church building where they are worshipping till date. Thirdly, Pastor Garrick Inomo became the pioneer indigene to shepherd the church which grew in membership both men and women before other Pastors were posted to the church.²⁰

Greater Evangelism World Crusade spread from Ataba to other parts of Obolo. Their enthusiasm to propagate the gospel made them to organise a crusade in Asarama in the 1980s. It was this crusade that laid the foundation of the church in Asarama. One significant thing to note is that while the Ataba brethren were planning the crusade programme, one Madam Agnes Ezekiel an indigene of Asarama had the vision or the intension to establish Greater Evangelism World Crusade in Asarama. So, when she visited the church in Ataba and declared her intension, the brethren from Ataba went with her to Asarama where they established another branch of the church. Infact, it became a common knowledge that

Greater Evangelism World Crusade was established in Asarama at the instance of Madam Agnes Ezekiel.

Since then, the church had witnessed tremendous growth in membership and spread of the gospel.²¹ She is currently an Evangelist in GEWC and embarks on soul winning as she preaches the gospel at different fora.²² Elder Elizabeth Amos has been ordained a Pastor. She served at Obia-Ama in Andoni and retired from pastoral work in 2021.²³ Some Obolo women in Greater Evangelism World Crusade were called into the offices of Pastor and Evangelist. Thus, they have become the vanguard for the spread of Christianity in Obolo and beyond.

Deeper Life Bible Church is not left out in the women effort to spread Christianity. It was brought to Ataba in 1990 by Madam Tity Ezioma Benneth Iwowari. She spread the word and won converts who became members of the denomination. She volunteered her house for the worship of God from the onset before the church relocated to another worship centre.²⁴ Presently, the members have a permanent and befitting place of worship in Ataba. The edifice was built by a member of the church, Mr. Atajit Francis.

Anglican Church, Iko Town, Eastern Obolo

Another woman who brought church to Iko Town is Mrs. Cecilia Enyinah. She hails from Iko Town in Eastern Obolo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. She was the one who established the Anglican Church at Iko Town. The church was started by her in December, 2003 and it was inaugurated by Archbishop Emmanuel Ebenezer Nglas. He christened the church St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Iko. Before the establishment of St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Iko Town, the people of Iko were worshipping with St. Silas Anglican Church, Okoroete. St. Nicholas Anglican Church Iko has since grown in membership and became an avenue of spreading the word of God.²⁵ The founding of the St. Nicholas Anglican Church Iko has increased the number of Orthodox Church in Obolo (Andoni).

These churches established by Obolo women subsequently became the vehicle that spread the gospel in an effort to expanding the frontiers of Christianity in Obolo (Andoni) and beyond. To achieve this, these Pentecostal churches organized religious crusades in various Obolo Communities especially where their church denomination does not exist. In such crusades, women are usually the dominant members who provide essential services towards the success of the crusade. Through the women,

the unconverted women were influenced and they became converted. Women also invested their resources in the propagation of the gospel and Western education as well as expansion of the work of God in Obolo. Some women in Greater Evangelism World Crusade were called into the office of Pastor and Evangelist. Thus, they become the vanguard for the spread of Christianity in Obolo, and have contributed enormously to the development of the churches largely in Obolo (Andoni).

Conclusion

This study is an advocacy of the numerous contributions of Obolo (Andoni) women towards the expansion of Christianity and infrastructure development of both orthodox and Pentecostal churches in Obolo (Andoni). Christianity in Obolo was first embraced by a woman, Madam Ngban Ijo of Ataba in 1870. The Obolo (Andoni) women were instrumental in the spread of Christianity in Obolo. More over in the area of establishing several Pentecostal churches in Obolo such as The Apostolic Church, Greater Evangelism World Crusade and Deeper Life Bible Church. In the same vein, St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Iko established by a woman had contributed significantly towards the overall development of Iko Town and its environs. Through the spread of Christianity, Obolo experiences great level of human capital development, economic empowerment and social transformation. Obolo women Christians became the fulcrum upon which Christianity was built in the area. Christianity is an agent of change and continuity.

Endnotes

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