
Protestant Missions in the Igbo Heartland: Strategies and Impacts of Anglicanism and Adventism in Owerri Province, 1905-1950

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Abstract

The history of Christianity in Owerri area especially since 1902 after the historic Arochukwu expedition has been an impressive one. It is to be noted that this much celebrated spread of Christianity in the Igbo heartland was the hand work of mainly the Protestant missions. Yet the history of Protestant missions in the area has not received commensurable scholarly attention. This study is a systematic intent to re-examine and reconstruct the history of Protestant Christianity in Owerri area from 1902 to 1950. The study focuses on the strategies and approaches used by Anglicans and Adventists in the region to promote their particular brands of Christianity and leave their impacts amongst the indigenes. Qualitative research approach was adopted for data collection through primary and secondary sources. Data collected were analyzed using phenomenological approach. The study reveals that the Protestant missionaries had a significant impact on the daily life of the people, influencing the region's education system, economic development, health care system, human capital development through the engagement of indigenous agents, and even some of its traditional customs, and provided a platform for the expansion of Christianity in the Igbo interiors.

Keywords: Protestant Mission, Igbo Heartland, Strategies, Impacts, Anglicanism and Adventism.

Introduction

The history of Christianity in the Igbo heartland especially since 1906 has been an impressive one. Ekechi (cited in Anukam, 2000) posits that the Igbo heartland experienced great movement towards Christianity more than any subgroup in any other Igbo area. This great movement towards Christianity assumed the appearance of a revolution because of the zealous nature of the indigenes and the prospects offered by the socio-religious nature of the area. Thus, the expansion of Christianity in the Igbo heartland could be referred to as the golden age of Christian mission in Igboland. It is to be noted that this much celebrated spread of Christianity in the Igbo heartland was the hand work of mainly the Protestant missions.

Mission work in this area took a dramatic turn from 1905–1950 due to the competition among Protestant missions to carve out spheres of influence for themselves in the newly opened territories. Several meetings and conferences were held to partition Igboland into Protestant denominational districts, and this arrangement saw the opening of their missions and schools in communities who offered their hands of fellowship. A Christian

population census conducted in 1966 and was made available by Kalu (2003) states that the Igbo heartland, otherwise known as Owerri Province was greater in Christian population of the Protestant denominations. It is also worthy of note that Owerri province hosted the translation of the Bible into Igbo language. Anukam (2000) refers to the translation of the Bible into Igbo languages as the symbol of evangelism that necessitated the great movement of the Igbo towards Christianity. Yet the Protestant missions in the area have not received commensurable scholarly attention from historians of Igbo Christianity.

This study may not boast that the field is virgin; yet the early spread of Protestant Christianity and why the people accepted their message with such astonishing enthusiasm is quite understudied. The key role played by Owerri Province in the expansion of Christianity in the rest of Igbo communities and being the eventual host of translation of the Bible into Igbo language beg for attention. This study is, therefore, a modest attempt at contributing to the filling of the above observed gap in Igbo church historiography.

Conceptual Explications of Protestant Missions

The Peace of Westphalia of 24th October, 1648 guaranteed peace amongst the Christians and brought perpetual true and sincere friendship in the universe. But before this time the most momentous events in history of Christianity occurred. A large number of western Christians began to reject the authority of the pope along with many of the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church, and the rulers of several Christian states set about ‘reforming’ the church in their territories. This culminated in the sixteenth century reformation epoch and the net outcome was the emergence of several Protestant Churches. In the sixteenth century, Protestants referred primarily to the two great schools of thought that arose in the Reformation – the Lutheran and the Reformed. In England, in the early seventeenth century the word was used to denote “orthodox” or those who were opposed to Anglicans such as the Baptists or the Quakers. Roman Catholics used it for all who claimed to be Christian but opposed Catholicism. Protestant hence became a branch of Christianity

collectively used to describe or refer to the many religious groups that separated from Catholic Church due to differences in doctrine or display disapproval or objection to Roman Catholic doctrines. It is summarized that Protestant missions are churches that emerged from the reformation movement of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. They include: Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans, Methodist, Presbyterians, and Seventh - day Adventist, just to name but few.

Baumgartner (1999) explains the idea of mission in the concept of evangelistic activities and further opines that the birth of Protestant mission could be traced to the great missionary obedience and obligations published by Carey which eventually resulted to the foundation of the English Baptist missionary society (1793) and the London missionary society (1794) with the following Protestant denominations constituting the membership: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and free – Church Anglicans.

Notwithstanding that the Protestant mission may not have operated as a single entity, their characteristic principles and

doctrines stood as the bedrock of their missions embedded with denominational doctrinal approaches that set them apart. Hornby (2000) defines mission as the act of sending, or the state of being sent, as on some errand. Webster defines mission as the sending forth of men with authority to preach or spread the gospel; authority so given by God or the church or the efforts to spread, or the work of preaching religious teaching. Mckechinie (1977), define mission as “carrying the gospel across cultural boundaries to those who owe no allegiance to Jesus Christ, and encouraging them to accept Him as Lord and Saviour and to become responsible members of His church, working as the Holy Spirit leads, at both evangelism and justice, at making God’s will be done on earth as it is done in heaven’. While Mckechinie (1977), describes mission as primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mckechinie (1977) observes that the term mission is not found in the scripture, yet the concept of mission permeates the entire Bible. Mckechinie (1977) furthermore observes that some

scholars are of the view that the Old Testament has little, if anything, to say about mission notwithstanding, a more general understanding is that mission is an important Old Testament concept. For example, mission was obvious in the book of Jonah hence served as the major Old Testament's concern to letting the foreigners relate to God in worship.

The Igbo Heartland

The Igbo heartland, otherwise known as Owerri Province has an area of 198 square km and a population of 175,395 at the 2006 census. It encircles Owerri Municipal like a peninsular. Six major roads that led out of the Imo state capital city cuts across Igbo heartland - in the North, Orlu road leads to Amakaohia and Akwakuma communities. In the East, Okigwe road leads to Orji Community, in the West, MCC road off Wetheral to Obibi Uratta and Ihitaoha communities. In the South, Mbaise road leads to Egbu, Emekuku and Emii communities, while Aba road leads to Nazi, Agbala and Ulakwo communities.

The Arochukwu Expedition and Missionary Breakthrough in the Igbo Heartland

Arochukwu was founded at a meeting place between the Igbo and Ibibio (Isichei, 1976). Jones (cited in Afigbo, 1981) asserts that “except the Fulani no Nigerian people have produced more speculation about their origin than the Aro” (p. 187). There are two groups of speculations identified to discussing Arochukwu origin, the details of which is beyond the scope of this study, but suffice it to say that the first group of speculation is referred to as indigenous to Arochukwu as an account of their own history and social development; while the second group belongs to records traceable to British colonial officials in attempt to understand and “solve a many-sided riddle which they popularly described as the Aro problem” (Afigbo, 1981:187). This is because Aro constituted barrier to Europeans from penetrating the hinterland. The Ibini Ukapabi (long Juju) of the Arochukwu and their activities over the slave trade constituted security challenges in heartland of the Igbo that eventually restricted the Protestant missions and of course the Roman Catholic mission to coastal lines. Owerri Province which has being described as the heartland

of Igbo shared in this earlier restriction. It suffices to note that half a century, the hinterland had been a no go area for missionary activities because of the Aro, therefore its removal would usher in a new era of British controlled commerce, colonialism and Christianization of the Igbo race.

According to Igboke, Paul and Oguejiofor (2021), Ibini Ukapabi of the Arochukwu fostered interaction among various Igbo groups on one hand and between the Igbo and non-Igbo groups on the other hand. Also the Aro created trade links with Cross Rivers and between the Benue Rivers and the coast of the Bight of Biafra. What are better referred to as Cross River plains are the buffer zone between three major ethnic groups; the Igbo, Ibibio/Efik and the Ekoi. Their location gave them advantage in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In the pre-colonial days the Aro were an enterprising trading people. During the slave trade they were the middlemen between the Europeans and the Africans in the interior and when this was replaced by palm oil, the Aro were again

involved as middlemen. Moor (cited in Ekechi, 1971) discovers that:

The influence of the Aros extended over the whole of the Igbo country, and as they, time and again, frustrated attempts to enter their country and other areas which they dominated, peaceful attempts to penetrate the country were no longer possible. (p. 116).

Hence to stamp their control, the British in 1901, planned for an expedition of the Aro. The war began officially on December 18, 1901 until March 1902 with the use of four army columns from Akwete, Oguta, Elele and Owerri, and then proceeded to Arochukwu.

Afigbo (cited in Igboke, Paul & Oguejifor, 2021) aptly notes that the thought of the Europeans was that the defeat of the Arochukwu people would be the key to the conquering of the whole land, hence the Aro Expedition of 190-1902 was seen as the only gateway to the Igbo heartland.

The Coming of the Protestant Missions to Owerri Area

Indeed, the Aro expedition opened the Igbo hinterland for Christianization; the expansion into the hinterland provided a new base for recruitment into the Christian fold. Security drastically improved with constant patrol of British military. Isichei (1977) notes that, “in the wake of the expedition, the various Christian denominations made a move to the interior. . . . A far larger number of Igbo communities were exposed to mission influence” (p. 267). Anukam (2000) echoes that the number of Protestant missions in Owerri area was eight (8) between 1906 and 1935 thus, Owerri area became a beehive of missionary activities soon after the Aro expedition.

One of the first attempts in the Protestant penetration into the Igbo heartland was the colonial government’s invitation to the CMS mission to Owerri. Adiele (1995) opines that the invitation was rather a desire to ride on the back of the CMS into the hinterland to bring some areas under the control of colonial power. Anyabuike (1996) corroborates that:

The arrival of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Owerri marked a change in the general pattern of missionary enterprise in Igboland. Normally, it was the missionary that invited the government, but in the case of Owerri, it was the reverse. After the government represented by Leslie Probyn has failed to penetrate the interior by building a mono rail, it had to try penetrating through Christian religious means. (p. 27).

However, the invitation coincided with the desire of the CMS mission in Onitsha to find an area better suited for the translation of the Bible into universal Igbo language. Evidently, the awareness that language barrier was to pose a major challenge to the planting and expansion of Christianity in Igboland necessitated the Bible translation project; and since the Bible which is the major instrument of communicating the new religious faith and advancing the expected religious concepts and civilization was originally not in the language and form familiar to the Igbo people, the need for translating and transcribing the gospel message into understandable form through the indigenous language became palpable for the various Christian missions. It was for this that Ward (cited by Nwadike, 2012) submits that the

Union Igbo (the Igbo Bible) was devised in order to provide the Bible in a form, which it was hoped would be easily understood by speakers of differing Igbo dialects. It was constructed from materials belonging to five areas (Bonny, Owerri, Arochukwu, Ngwana and Onitsha). It might be thought, indeed it has been considered, that it would fill the role of a literary medium for the Igbo people.

It could be that the missionaries have severally met to search for a place in which the task of unifying the Igbo translations would be carried on but the Aro slave trafficking had stood as a stumbling block to the hinterland. But following the Aro expedition and the consequent opening of the Igbo heartland for missionary works, Tugwell recommended T.J. Dennis who was then at Onitsha for Owerri mission centre and to coordinate the translation work of the English Bible into Igbo language. Archdeacon Dennis' team comprised of Catechist Alfonso Onyeabor (later Bishop) and T. D. Anyaegbunam (a translator). April 1905 witnessed the presence of CMS in Owerri Province

with T. J. Denis establishing Anglicanism at Egbu a few kilometers off the present Owerri municipal. It could be that the plan could have gone on and on enthusiastically for Owerri to become the centre for the Bible translation even before the invitation of government who confirmed the accessibility of Owerri area, but Egbu was favoured because it was more populated than Owerri with an estimated population of about 21,000 against the estimated Owerri population of 3,000 (Chima, 1996). Chima goes on to say that when Archdeacon Dennis arrived at Owerri, three places provided themselves as possible centres for the translation project. They were Owerri, Egbu and Nekede. Owerri was immediately ruled out as it had already become the seat of colonial government under Douglas. Nekede was somehow at the outskirts and had a detachment of the colonial army. It became natural that Archdeacon T.J. Dennis should choose Egbu for the following reasons: the centrality of Egbu among the other towns, availability of water resources from Otamiri River, its population and the

enthusiasm and hospitality of the people. According to Orisakwe and Ahumibe (1996) the Bible project was completed in 1919, two years after the death of Archdeacon Dennis. It is not a gainsay, therefore, to state that Egbu occupy its pride of place as the centre of Christian religious activities from where it spread to many places of what is known as the Igbo heartland. With the events that later followed one would be tempted to say that Christianity would have spread faster and earlier in Igboland than it did if Owerri mission had preceded that of Onitsha. This was what Agbo (2020) meant when he said that the expansion of Christianity in Igboland would have been a farce if the cultural context of the Igbo people, particularly their language was ignored. Ekechi (1971) observers further that:

The rate of growth of the influence of the Church Missionary Society in Owerri between 1905 and 1914 was in fact phenomenal. . . actively pushed the frontiers of CMS influence very far indeed within a short period of time. . . include Emii, Awaka, Uratta, Naze, Ogwa, Atta, Obiangwu and Nguru. (pp. 217- 218).

Indeed, between 1905 and 1914 “practically all the towns and villages in Owerri district had been occupied. Ekechi (1971) continues that:

Because of the rapid growth of the Owerri mission, the CMS authorities, with much urging from Dennis, decided to create Owerri as a separate CMS district; in 1909, therefore, Owerri was no longer regarded as a missionary outstation of Onitsha and in 1913-14 there was a final partition between Onitsha and Owerri (p.278).

The Baptist opened her mission first at Imerienwe but two years after in 1915, a new mission station was founded at Ihiagwa. January 5, 1917 saw the coming of the Independent Native African Church to Owerri through Mr. Cheethan, a West Indian, formerly and a member of Niger Delta Baptist Church at Buguma. In 1927 the African Church mission opened her presence at Umuororonjo in Owerri through Rev. B. D. Johnson of the African mission Calabar. The Faith Tabernacle Congregation was among the Protestant missions that entered Owerri in 1927; Rev. L.F. Brown led the team. In 1928, a faction grew out of the Faith Tabernacle Congregation to organize the United Native Mission

at Obinze. Other notable Protestant missions that came within the period under review were: African Episcopal Church, Zion Mission Ecclesia. The Seventh-day Adventist opened her presence at Emohe Emii in 1934 under pioneering efforts of Johnson Ogbuokiri and Frank Ihuoma.

It can be argued therefore that since Owerri occupies the heartland of Igboland, it is explicit that the occupation of Owerri spread the awareness of missionary endeavour in cyclical format which could be referred to as dropping a pebble at the centre of a bowl of water which sent its wave easily to all parts of the Igboland. Suffice it to mention that the zealous nature of the indigenous converts and the socio-religious nature of the area may have been the reason for this mass movement to Christianity.

Strategies and Impacts of Protestant Missions in the Igbo Heartland

The Protestant missions in the Igbo heartland adopted almost uniform strategies that account for the rapid spread of Christianity in the area. This expansion represents the effective steps towards

missionary enterprise in the interior of Igboland. Through these strategies, the Protestant missions made a lot of impacts in the socio-cultural and economic lives of the people. Churches, schools, hospitals were established and the Bible was translated into native language.

The use of Local Agents

The Protestant missions penetrated the interior of the Igbo heartland largely by the use of local chiefs and trained native agents like catechists, teachers, interpreters and many other agents. According to Njoku (2005), one of the most important avenues through which the missionaries carried out their work of evangelization in the Igbo heartland is the recruitment of local agents. It is now being acknowledged that the success of the Christian mission to Igboland depends heavily on the enormous work carried out by this extensive network of local participants who were deployed to the remotest parts of a given mission territory, where they made sustained efforts at introducing their own people to the Christian faith. Njoku notes further that the Protestant missionaries were faster in incorporating local clergy into the band of missionaries than

were their Catholic counterparts. Onyeidu (2004) identifies a group of local agents called “*local helpers*” and describes them as mainly volunteers from local Christian congregations who taught in mission schools while at the same time itinerating as evangelists. They were men of little formal education but zealous for the Christian faith. Though not officially appointed by the society, the ‘local helpers’ depended on the charity of the local congregation to enable them keep body and soul together. Eighteen of such men were located in various stations at Egbu – Owerri in 1912. Very few of them were subsequently absorbed as full-time pupil-teachers or evangelists.

Smith (cited in Ekechi, 1971) writes:

I wish it were in my power to convey to you at home an adequate idea of the importance and value of the excellent work done by our native brethren in possessing the enormous (Igbo) country in the name of the king. I do not under-value the efforts of European missionaries in any way when I ask you to remember that the native agent is absolutely necessary to the spread of the gospel and the building up of the church. . . they visit assiduously and never seem to tire up in the work of personally recommending the Lord they serve. They feel the insults

and slights of their own people in a way no foreigner is called upon to endure . . . surely these things should call forth thanksgiving and lead to increasing faith in the future for the Ibo people. (p.158).

It is important also to recognize that the local agents were influential in molding the attitude of the converts; the local agents were also described as social institutions. Many gladly suffered excommunication in many community organizations and activities. According to Archdeacon Dobinson (cited in Ekechi, 1971) “Native agents are 3 times as valuable as any European agent for this work” (p.160).

Socio-cultural Impacts

Protestant missionaries in the Igbo heartland did not hesitate in confronting some traditional practices that were offensive to the Christian morality. According to Kalu (2003), the church had immediately addressed the issue of polygamy as well as confronted the practice of twin killing. Two Emii families or more benefited from the Anglican Church approach towards the practice of twin-killing – the family of Obi in Ezesara, Emohe

Emii and Odom family in Ubah Emii. These two families' twins were catered for by the women under the guidance of Frances, a trained nurse. The missionaries' efforts to the abolition of the sacrifice of 'osu' people to the goddess in Otamiri River yielded result as it was immediately stopped following the threat by Archdeacon Dennis to alert the colonial authorities in Owerri.

The uplift of the status of women was enunciated with a hospice to cater for twins and mothers under the guidance of Frances. The indigenes looked at the hospice respectfully as **OGIGE NWANYI BEKEE** -The white woman's Home. Girl's school and a sort of home vocational training were established for the women with Frances in charge. The White Woman's Home offered to the indigenes, especially women, a wide range of home management and home economics training; which laid the background to Egbu Women Training Home started in 1907. It soon spread to Emii, supervised by Mrs Beswick. Miss Kate Beswick of the CMS in 1912 opened a Women's Christian mothers' Home at Emii with a deliberate intention to convert for the church. Onyeidu (2004) asserts that Kate Beswick was the founder of the Women's Home

at Emii and in Egbu Owerri in 1910. Women attended the Women's Christian Mothers Home from neighbouring towns like Agbala, Emeke-Obibi, Uzoagba, Mbaise, Egbelu-obube, Imerienwe, and Upe. '**OGIGE NWANYI BEKEE**' became the platform for recruiting volunteers to assist in the conversion of souls. The time a mud-house was erected at Ebikoro Emeohe, a woman missionary, Miss K. Beswick was deemed to have come to enlighten the people of Emii, especially the women. She was accommodated in the mud-house. She established hostels for women and taught religion including Bible reading and home management. She also built clinic and all these attracted large number of followers. She worked in consultation with Rev. A. C. Onyeabo and Archdeacon Dennis, later in 1912, Miss K. Beswick was joined by Miss Brandeth. On her arrival, she was placed in charge of schools. This was the situation at Egbu as reported by Katae. Beswick (cited in Onyeidu, 2004) remarks thus:

Ten young women evangelists are living and working in a way no Ibo young woman has ever worked before. They have many dangers and difficulties; they have to bear being scoffed at because they uphold a standard of

Christian conduct for others to see. We need a hundred such women for our mass movement district. (p. 65).

Onyeidu (2004) further observes that “the Owerri District had two female institutions; one was the girls school, while the other was the ‘women’s home’ set up for married Christian women” (p. 66).

The Medical Mission of the Protestants in the Igbo Heartland

In the area of health care delivery, the Protestant missions since their inception, promoted a philosophy of health and healing. While developing a system of health care institutions a health-promoting way of life has been taught to the church membership. It must be admitted that the Protestant missions do not profess to be pioneers in the general principles of health reform, but they have the uniqueness of integrating health reform into their theology. Cooper (1968) notes that the far-reaching influence of medical missionary work as an evangelizing force is the chief reason for maintaining their health work. For him:

Some who go away restored, or greatly benefited, will be the means of introducing our faith in new places and raising the standard of truth where it would have been impossible to gain access had not prejudice been first

removed from minds by a tarry among our people for the object of gaining health. (p.101).

In addition, The C.M.S philosophy of medical mission indicates that they were committed to playing a role in improving the health status of the community and making a contribution to the community. They sought out new ideas and evaluated them with open minds in order to continue to improve the efficacy of health care and the health system. Chima (2021) asserts that the C.M.S mission in the Igbo heartland did not only open churches or schools but also hospitals in some places. The CMS three missionary objectives were Christianity, health and education. However, Ukaoha (2013) observes that “the CMS adopted and used school approach more than hospitals” (p. 150). In spite of that, Chima (2021) notes further that “Egbu diocese inherited three maternity homes; located at Okpala in Zion Anglican Church, Okpala, Ihiagwa in St. John Anglican Church, Ihiagwa and Obube in Holy Trinity Anglican Church (HTC), Obube” (p. 174). It is pertinent to note that the three medical missions were all maternities; however at the synod of the diocese held at Emmanuel Anglican Church, Emii in 2000, a launch was made to

upgrade the maternity home at Okpala to a fully fledged hospital. At its completion, the bishop of Egbu diocese, Rt. Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Uchechukwu Iheagwam, dedicated the hospital. The Anglican diocese of Egbu has one hospital and two maternity homes.

The challenging situations of diseases and dismayed poor sanitary condition among the indigenes must have necessitated the need for medical missionary alongside the gospel work. Damsteegt (1995) believes that “the integration of health reform into the vital part of the Seventh-Day Adventist theology of mission accounts for the emphasis in SDA’s thought on the intimate relationship of the human body and mind to the religious experience of the individual. Nyekwere (2004) further notes that “while the church was contemplating this idea, the Eastern Nigeria government who wanted to provide a hospital at Ahoada division invited the Seventh-Day Adventist church to operate the hospital. Their agreements among others include – the church would run the hospital while the government assisted with grants. The foundation stone of Ahoada hospital was laid by Hon. M.I.

Okpara, the then minister of health for the Eastern Nigeria Region with a 50 – bed space. Dr Harold M. Cherne served as the first medical director from 1958 – 59, the second, Dr Gordon Goude worked from 1959 – 1963. He was replaced by Dr Samuel Deshay 1963 -1972 when the military government took over the running of the hospital.

In 1959, Robinson Nwuzor an Anglican faithful accepted the Adventist faith because of his contact with Adventist medical mission. He grew to one of the highest ministerial level of the church work. A church building was raised to her spiritual demands where daily devotionals and weekly Sabbath worship on Saturdays held. Chief Agormuo Ochulor of Ukpakiri in Aba (a native worshipper priest) was baptized in 1958 as a result of his contact with Adventist medical mission. The Seventh - day Adventist medical mission reached out through the use of boat to Kugbo, Degema and many other riverrine areas.

In 1959, the Seventh - day Adventist medical mission commenced at northern Ngwa county council located on a 65 – acre piece of

land at Okpuala Ngwa and Dr Nagel served as the first medical director. According to Nyekwere (2004), he remained the medical director until 1969 when the International Red Cross Committee took over the hospital for the reason of Nigeria – Biafra war. Nwaejike (cited in Nyekwere, 2004) observed that when the federal troop took over the hospital on December 23, 1969, some hospital equipments were moved to Emii in Owerri where probably the church continued a skeletal medical mission. The northern Ngwa county hospital was taken over by the military of East Central government in 1972.

The takeover of these hospitals ran by the Seventh - day Adventist medical missionaries by the military regime necessitated the quest to own and run her hospital and in 1984 a health centre was started at Aba, the headquarters of the church with an indigenous medical doctor, Dr Nzota as its medical director. Motherless baby's home started by Pastor H.I. Oriaku, gave platform for the commencement of Adventist hospital Aba. In 1994, the Health centre was officially elevated to hospital status.

Educational Mission of the Protestants in the Igbo Heartland
Afigbo is of the view that the success of the Christian mission in Igboland was not necessarily by preaching but the advantage of literacy over illiteracy, that is through school. The schools started and remained the missions' chief instrument of conversion, hence the decision of the missions to use the school as their strategy for of proselytization. Nwadiolor and Umeanolue (2015) aptly surmise that:

Education became necessary for the missionaries for obvious reasons. First the missionaries considered it easier and rightly too, to achieve their aim of conversion using the school when the children had not become fully involved in traditional beliefs of their various cultures. Secondly, through the schools, they aimed at producing indigenes that would assist in propagating the gospel in the vernacular languages among their people. Besides, the development of colonial government and the expansion of mercantile houses required that the people be educated to occupy certain positions like clerks, messengers, church teachers, cooks, etc. Hence, for the first time, education was seen as the gateway to economic opportunity by the Igbo people themselves. They realized, as they never did before that knowledge is power, and that it commands economic security and social prominence. Western education offered an escape from the petty tyranny of

court clerks and warrant chiefs during the colonial era. As the products of the local mission schools began to compete with them, the commercial advantages of education became universally evident. (p. 188).

The history of missionary education in the Igbo heartland began with Mattie, T. J. Dennis' wife. According to Frances (cited in Kalu, 2003), she succeeded in getting some girls and women to learn how to sow and make simple covering for themselves and their babies. . . . The school was already developed and quickly took off in 1906. The little primary school soon grew to become Egbu central school which was quite famous in the whole culture theatre, as students came from surrounding towns in spite of the vernacular policy of the CMS.

Schools eventually became conditions for accepting the establishment of churches in some communities in the Igbo heartland such as Emohe Emii, which by 1933 demanded for opening of school; they gave it as the basic condition for accepting the new religion. According to Ekechi (1971):

Two factors helped to influence the vigorous education drive of the CMS in the Igbo heartland: the responsive

nature of the people and their demand for formal schooling...The avidity with which the Igbo in this area pursued education may be explained partly as an attempt to catch up with the people in Onitsha and Bonny (p.216).

Njoku (2005) corroborates that:

Education among the Onitsha and the Owerri is evidence . . . the quest for mission education was intense in Igboland. . . Schools were desired as a symbol of community status . . . there were competitions between families to gain advantages over each other. (p. 94).

To this, the presence of a school in one community would rouse fears in other communities that they were falling behind in the race for progress and they would hasten to have schools of their own built. According to Isichei (1995):

South eastern Nigeria is a particularly striking example of the way in which Christianity spread through the hunger for education . . . the Ibos are very emulative as in other things, so it will be in book learning. Other towns will not rest satisfied until they have learned the mystery of reading and writing, by which their neighbours may surpass or put them in the shade. (p. 270).

The missionaries effort to convert people of social prestige was difficulty hence they turned their effort through school towards the young. The result was enormous that according to Ekechi (1971), “all over Igboland there was school revolution” (p. 177). Through schools the reform of young hearts and mind were day by day achievement, education by the Protestant mission in the Igbo heartland contributed in an immeasurable way to nation building and ordered society. It also provided the foundation upon which the modern education is formed in the area. Onyeidu (2004) writes that:

Through the system, a class of literate young men and women emerged who later became the elite of the traditional Igbo society. These were the first letter writers, interpreters, clerks and sanitary inspectors of various communities. What is more, a great number of the leaders in the church and state today were the founding pupils of mission schools (p. 25).

It is expedient to assert that the “the conversion explosion was more pronounced among the young who were enticed by promises of a better life through mission education. . . the

majority of those who were baptized were those who had attended mission schools for any length of time” (Ekechi 1971: 145).

The statement above demonstrated that the missionary education was a serious means of conversion and hence made the movement towards the Igbo heartland momentous. In Egbu diocese, the primary schools that pioneered the education of many elites in Owerri area include: Central School Egbu, Central School Nekede, Central School Ihiagwa and Central School Emii. The secondary educations established by the CMS were: Bishop Onyeabor Teacher Training College in 1955, Girls Secondary School Egbu in 1966 and Archdeacon Dennis Junior Seminary in Egbu, which was later replaced with Archdeacon Dennis Foundation International Boys Secondary School Egbu on October 1996.

Conclusion

The Igbo heartland provided an excellent centre for missionary enterprise and also stood out as an Igbo language theatre; described by the missionaries as densely and thickly populated with towns/ communities closely together. The coming of the missionaries to the area marked the completion of the project to evangelize Igboland. Notwithstanding that the British occupation of Owerri area was brutal and traumatic; the Igbo heartland witnessed a phenomenal rapid and revolutionary mass movement towards Christianity; its characteristic high regard and value to religious matters and expressions consequentially attracted a great number of Protestant missions who massively scrambled for the newly accessible territory.

This study agrees with Afigbo's assertion that the Igbo heartland became Christians not so much because they felt they hate their old identity but because they found themselves in a world in which the old identity was no longer enough and they sought to supplement it by acquiring aspect of the identity of their conquerors; it also a truism that the Igbo heartland unexpectedly

were cut on web of missionary introduction of a new religion. The road links aided missionary connectivity and itinerary and creation of accessible faith communities.

The study further revealed that the Aro expedition of 1901-1902 set the stage for the phenomenal mass movement of Protestant missionaries into the Igbo heartland. British efforts at expansion into the Igbo heartland started in 1885 when the British government declared a protectorate over ‘Oil Rivers’ but its jurisdiction didn’t extend to the hinterland till Aro the expedition.

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