Conversion and Influence of Christianity on African Traditional Marriage Rituals

John Chidubem Nwaogaidu
Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

The coming of Christianity in the Southeastern part of Nigeria in the late nineteenth century through the Irish missionaries saw the conversion of many of the inhabitants into Christianity. Their conversion at first, placed them in complexity with their autochthonous religious practices out of the thrust for better religious/social status. This complexity is more evident on the issue of the marriage rituals. This study therefore interrogates how many of the converts were faced with the challenge of obedience either to the traditional rituals of marriage or the new Christian practices. It discovered that some of the initial efforts made by the missionaries to abolish or substitute some of the indigenous ritual practices with the Christian faith practices proved abortive. That notwithstanding, it became the case that the renunciation of the traditional religious beliefs for the 'alien' Christian beliefs was regarded as superlative. The objective of this work is to investigate the extent Christianity has wielded influence on the marriage rituals in today's Africa. This study is drawn from an ethnographical research and supplemented with archival sources.

Keywords*: indigenous beliefs; integration; kinship; missionary; religious obligations

Introduction

The changes implemented by the Christian mission in the marriage system in Africa especially in the Igbo society had effects on the lives of the people and their culture. The main intention of the mission was to impose the Christian values for the rearrangement of the existing social order. This work explores the character of Igbo society through the understanding of the social changes. The ritual changes as consequent of Christianity have implications in understanding the nature of social relations in the society. Marriage ritual implies a collective intervention towards the existence of a group and its integration into the society. Ritual is seen in this work based on its practice within the kinship system and how it consummates the marriage between a man and a woman on the one hand and between one family and another on the other hand (Gyekye, 1996, p. 76; 'alliance theory' by Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Keesing, 1981,

p. 251). Thus the importance of ritual is envisaged by its performance. The performance of marriage rituals especially in Africa establishes the social relationships and compels the performers to keep to the rules imposed by the system of exchanges.

The collected data under scrutiny in this work were supplemented by those examined in missionary archives in Dublin, Ireland. The validity of the analysis was greatly enhanced by the author's native knowledge of Igbo society and culture and his professional expertise in the Roman Catholic doctrine. Drawing on major social anthropological theories, the study emphasizes how by participating in ritual performances the individual tends to transform him/herself into a relational entity beyond his/her spatial reality. The rituals also ensure the reproduction of social and cosmological relationships by setting into motion the processes of transfer, in which the individual is bound up and to which he is subordinated.

The work as such examines the transformative impact of Christianity on the Igbo understanding and valuation of such ritual actions. Whereas the African traditional ritual of marriage remains to be valued, there is also is an acute conflict between the Christian and non-Christian Igbo understanding of the meaning of the ritual (Eller, 2007, p. 250). Indeed, profound discussions took place in Igbo society and beyond about the differences between Christian morality, theology and ontology, on the one side, and the Igbo socio-cosmological understanding of affinity embedded in holistic ancestral and spiritual relationships, on the other. The highly perceptive examination of these conflicts informs the carefully considered plea to integrate the precepts of global Catholicism and those of Igbo holism into a common system of thought and values. This idea therefore gives convincing and important study of this sort a relevance extending beyond that of a single particular case.

Conversion and Traditional Religious Obligation

Following the coming of Christianity in the Southeastern part of Nigeria in the late nineteenth century through the Irish missionaries, many of the inhabitants of the land were converted to Christianity. Their conversion at first placed them in complexity with their autochthonous religious practices out of the thrust for better religious/social status (Turner, 2008 p. 167). This complexity could be related to the issue of the marriage ceremonies. Many of the converts were faced with the challenge of obedience either to the traditional rituals of marriage or the new Christian practices. Some of the initial efforts made by the missionaries to abolish or substitute some of the indigenous ritual practices with the Christian faith practices proved abortive. That notwithstanding, it became the case that the renunciation of the traditional religious beliefs for the 'alien' Christian beliefs was regarded as conversion.

Aware of the fact that conversion is a complex process; different fields of study have understood it in their various ways. For the purpose of this study, conversion is view as a periodical break with the past experience in order to embrace another dimension of the present, and with the hope of constructing a new identity. When a new identity is constructed, one sees

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it as a religious transformation that engages the individual within the group into seeking a new experience as well as further expectations (Rambo, 1993, pp. 2 & 170). However, the transformation could be associated with many factors, which could be induced by socio-cultural, economic benefits or religious experiences. In either case, the transformation may not be said to be final because of the met and unmet expectations. It is not surprising to identify that most of the early Igbo converts to Christianity were motivated out of the gains established through education and its opportunities like employment and enhanced social status (Okorocha, 1987, pp. 234-235). Some of the gains were unfortunately short-lived because of certain impositions that might not have augured well with the traditional religious practices.

The conversion approach made the missionaries to condemn some religious practices such as *Ozo* title cult; engaging in a customary 'second burial' (that was the name given by the missionary to the funeral rituals after the burial has taken place) or participating in it; living with a woman before Christian wedding or marrying more than one wife (polygamy). Although the missionaries failed to realize the socio-political roles and cultural rights these practices have in the indigenous society, they were mistakenly or unknowingly condemned as 'paganism'. Clarke (1980) notes that "the customs and practices of the local people were regarded as being positively anti-Christian and the measures taken by the missionaries themselves to stamp out these habits are evidence of this" (p. 55). This attitude was because of they did not understand well the Igbo cosmology, which would have helped in integrating some of those indigenous practices to Christian religion.

Igbo holistic understanding of the universe of man (i.e. the constant interaction between the visible and invisible world (Eboh, 1993, p. 226; Nwaogaidu, 2013, p. 12) was a serious hindrance to a wholehearted conversion of most Igbo people to Christianity. Because this understanding is deeply rooted in the life of the people, it has remained difficult to be influenced by Christian thoughts. Paris (1995) made the point quite clear when he remarked that:

> The impact of modernity has not dissipated the power of these understanding. Even among the most sophisticated contemporary urban dwellers in Africa, these traditional worldviews are revealed in such familial and communal rituals as naming ceremonies, rites of passage, marriage betrothals, funeral traditions, and reverence for elders, to mention only a few (p. 34).

Though conversion tried to weaken the individual cohesion to the traditional cultural beliefs, but there is always a tension in this process because of the conflicting beliefs. The inability to surmount the conflicts often results to double standards of beliefs, which are sometimes seen among many African Christians. Following the attitudes of many African Christians, Parratt (1995) remarks that; "for the African the real world is one of the continuity of existence as exemplified in his or her relationship to ancestors. Christianity has demanded the renunciation

of this relationship, but it has failed to replace it with anything equally real" (p. 108). This situation has been the consequence of double standard in Christian belief as one observes among some Igbo people. Many Christians in Igboland constantly rely on the traditional cosmology in their social relations. It is not uncommon to witness some people who supposed to be Christians but at the same time revert to traditional religious practices in some other occasions. This is because they believe that Christianity may not offer them all their existential appeals. They rather pay double allegiance both to Christianity and the traditional religious beliefs (Okorocha, 1987, pp. 261-262). Some situations that can warrant this attitude may include sickness, perceived dangers of calamity, fruitless marriage, misfortunes, protection from enemies, fear of evil forces etc. Africans believed that these situations could be avoided through traditional ritual forms of primal religious beliefs. This double-standard attitude also plays out in the marriage ritual bonds, which some believed that the traditional religious bond might be more efficacious than the Christian marriage vows. This conviction emanates from the fact that the traditional ritual bond instills fear and thereby induces its observance to the latter. Therefore, even though the conversion may not have been in-depth, yet it left much to be desired for an authentic free choice to faith conviction.

Irish Missionary Approach

The major influence of the missionaries in Africa lies not actually on the 'moral probity' or 'spiritual plenitude', but rather on the social and economic impacts their mission had on the continent (Ayandele, 1966, p. 4; Ajayi, 1965, p. 15; Ekechi, 1972, p. 23). The Irish missionaries (represented in this work by Father Leon Lejeune and Bishop Shanahan) took the control of the villages through their philanthropic spirit of charity. As such, the local chiefs or the village heads were unable to override the social impacts of missionaries on the villagers, but rather joined in the crusade because of the material benefits (Ayandele, 1966, p. 171). Consequently, the dictates of the mission became sovereign to the cultural norms. For instance, the missionaries exalted the position of individual rather than the community or the family where the social structure revolves, thereby renouncing the fundamental aspect of the kinship relations (Ayandele, 1966, p. 330). It then follows that the exaltation of the individual positions endangered the solidarity of the community and the relationship to the ancestors. In fact, it placed the people of the same kinship in conflict, because those who accepted the Christian faith tried to cut themselves from the communal ritual practices. Here Onuh (1992) remarks that through the missionary approach:

> The Christians were separated and segregated from their kit and kin who were traditionalist, in order not to be ensnared into traditional religious practices. This strategy, however succeeded in estranging the Christians from their traditional culture, and thereby paved a way for the consequences which one observes among Christians in Igboland today (p. 110).

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One would say that even though most of the missionaries did not directly involve themselves in the kinship conflicts and the condemnation of the traditional rituals, yet they helped in the making of the zealous Igbo Christians who saw everything as bad in their old traditional religion. These zealous Christians openly condemned the traditional customs and laws, which were not in conformity with the Christian teachings (Ekechi, 1972, p. 36). It is on this note that Onwuejeogwu (1981) comments that:

> The encouragement of the destruction of traditional objects of worship spread out over all Igboland. In this operation, the educated Christians, who were mostly teachers and pastors, were used. They condemned the traditional title system, marriage, rituals, songs, arts and labeled them things of Satan (p. 175).

The encouragement obviously paved the way for the new converts in renouncing and destroying their old religious beliefs just to prove their faith in the new-found religion.

Subsequently, the construction of church as an extended family of God's people also had effect on the traditional kinship system in Africa. The Christian family became a structure in which the members saw themselves as belonging and united in one faith. They believed in one common descent because all came from one father and mother (i.e. Adam and Eve). Therefore, the ultimate value of this relationship was solidarity, which formed a structure of supportive network. This structure was a tool for conversion.

Lejeune's and Shanahan's Approaches Compared

In the early twentieth century, the situation was that most Igbo converts to Christianity were very reluctant to enter into marriage based on the Christian rituals alone. This was because on the one hand it might limit them from the rights they have over their women and on the other hand it might prevent them from the privileges of sustaining their patrilineal system through many wives in case of childless or no-male child marriage. From the findings, most Christians with childless marriage later lost their faith in Christianity by marrying new wives in order to beget children. It was on that basis that Bishop Shanahan in his 'Relatio Extra Ordinaria' lamented that "almost all the married couples without children are breaking up" (Shanahan, 1927). As a result, Shanahan concluded that the better way of making the people appreciate the value of marital life would be through education.

Education was however applied as the major strategy for proper conversion and integration. This method has already been employed by Fr. Leon Lejeune. In view of the traditional obstacles in Igbo culture especially the difficulty of renouncing the traditional cults, Lejeune rightly understood that education would be the quickest means of conversion and integration. He therefore ensured the alliance of the church with the government as a means of evangelization. This method was categorized as 'chapel-school method of evangelization' (CSSp Archives, 1900). In other words, the rapid progress of Christian faith would be the wide-

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spread system of schools. While Lejeune's approach was basically school education, Shanahan also incorporated a socio-cultural integration.

Bishop Shanahan, who first arrived the Eastern Nigeria in 1902, truly understood the need for integral conversion through respect for other people's culture and customs. For him, the indigenous beliefs must be handled with care in order not to inflict the very heart of the people and making them irreligious (Jordan, 1971, p. 116; Roe, 1989, p. 82). Emphasizing on Shanahan's missionary approach, Roe (1989) also notes that "if missionaries undermined a people's sense of the sacred in their own tradition then they were also undermining the foundation on which they hoped to build a Christian edifice later" (p. 82). The understanding of this issue raised by Roe would make the people to realize the Christian motive of marriage and the significant of the values it bestows on the couples. Awareness of this fact through education and cultural assimilation became one of the missionary instruments of integration into Christian beliefs by Bishop Shanahan.

The question for further research remains how far did education and cultural assimilation help in the conversion process? In the early period of mission, one would realize that the mainstream of the society such as the elders, the nobles were not sufficiently ready to embrace school education because they did not find it honorable being under the missionaries; instead the downstream such as the young ones, the outcasts, the weak were the beneficiaries. At the time the higher classes of community realized their failures, the lower class people have secured for themselves positions within the missionary circle but still they lacked authority within the cultural community. In fact, this divide was the initial obstacle to cultural integration. This was because the society was still controlled by the elders who see the missionaries as interfering to their cultural heritage and would not like to witness what they might regard as collapse of indigenous beliefs in their own life-time. They rather sort for their preservation.

Christianity and African Marriage Ritual

According to the Christian belief, marriage is a sacrament of a new covenant with Christ. Sacrament is ritual sign which gives grace to the person who receives it. This implies that marriage is not an empty action, rather it is an action embodied with meanings. It is an action of Jesus Christ in his church (CCC. no.1603). As a sacred union, marriage becomes a medium through which a wedded couple fully commits to each other in order to receive the grace of God. The church's understanding of the sacredness of marriage is founded on the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis: "The Lord said: it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper […]. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:18, 24). It then follows that the Christian marriage is between one man and one wife. This idea of marriage is in sharp contrast with the traditional conception of marriage in Africa, where the marriage is between two families and descent groups.

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Consequently, the marriage ritual procedures in Africa have witnessed major Christian influence. Radcliffe-Brown (1950) aptly states that:

> As the Church steadily increased in power and in control of social life, marriage became the concern of the Church and was regulated by Canon law. There was a new conception that in marriage the man and woman entered into a pact with God (or with His Church) that they would remain united till parted by death. The marriage was under the control of the Church; matrimonial cases were dealt with in the ecclesiastical courts (p. 45).

Furthermore, through the marriage ordinance with the government by the Church, the missionaries were able to integrate the Christian marriage into the traditional culture. The compliance to the government ordinance before the Christian marriage helped to strengthen the bond of marriage and a means of delimiting the strength of traditional marriage.

Christianity gave the young girls who have reached the age of marriage freedom. The freedom made them to realize that they could defy their parents' wish if they chose for them husbands that were not their desire. Through Christian indoctrination, most Christian girls would not also want to marry non-Christians or traditional African religionists unless they would convert to Christianity. But on remarkable thing was that their Christian beliefs most often would not deter them from joining in participating in the essential traditional marriage rituals. The insistence of some of the Christians in participating in the traditional rituals of marriage also indicates that a lot of customary powers are still being controlled by the traditional religious authority in matters patterning to marriage (Gyekye, 1996; Mulago, 1991; Pobee, 1998). However, that insistence does not delimit the influence of Christianity either.

In the rites of Christian marriage, there was a change of trend in the manner in which the brides were trained as against the normal traditional ritual practices. Initially, it was the responsibility of a kin member to train a bride in the way of marriage by teaching her the customs and tradition. But the coming of Christianity brought a new ideology of the bride being in the custody of religious sisters or one of the appointed members of the Christian community in order to learn the Christian norms. It was a system of education of the bride before marriage. Though this system is not currently emphasized, but there is also the obligatory marriage courses that usually last for three months before the wedding.

Moreover, the Igbo marriage value system emphasizes the importance of children, lineage descent and ancestral land, which from the Christian perspective would not be the major stake. Rather the Christian marriage values concentrated more on the 'complementarity' and 'indissolubility' of marriage. It is on this basis that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1601) defines marriage as an establishment geared towards a whole life partnership ordered towards the good of the couple and the procreation and education of offspring. In this definition, one discovers the two significant elements of Christian marriage values. Firstly, the

good of the partners involved in the marriage and secondly, one sees the procreation of children as the fruit of this love (Nolte, 2020, p. 440). In view of these, Christian marriage can be explained as an establishment of partnership between a man and a woman in conformity with love of Christ, promulgated by the church for the purpose of procreation of children if God wills and for the education of the offspring.

The advent of Christianity introduced a new attitude of a husband towards his wife. It changed from the woman's subservient to the man into mutual respect for each other. The respect is not in terms of independent of each other but in terms of responsibility to each other. Marioghae and Ferguson (1965) rightly state that:

> Christian partnership means not equal rights but common responsibilities, not the wife serving the husband, nor the wife refusing to serve the husband, but both serving one another, and joining together to serve God and their neighbor; not dependence, nor independence but interdependence (p. 63).

The Second Vatican Council also made some modifications with regard to the marriage alliance. Marriage is no longer seen as a contract as was traditionally upheld; instead the Council speaks of marriage covenant which is sealed by an irrevocable personal consent (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48). Furthermore, the Council did not continue with the idea of projecting procreation as the most important aim of marriage as had earlier believed. Even though procreation cannot be overruled, the Council rather advocates for mutual love of the couple as the *sine qua non* of Christian marriage. The Council in fact advises the couple to co-operate courageously with the love of the creator and savior who through them expands and enriches his own family (G.S. no.50). The council stresses that marriage is not just a ceremony by which two people are legally bound together. It is a mode of worship, an expression of faith, a sign of the church's unity, and a mode of Christ's presence. The position of the church becomes clear in advocating for equal rights of the spouses through mutual love, which should define the rituals of marriage.

With the Christian notion of marriage, some scholars have argued that Christianity has brought stability to the marriage system in Africa. This position is supported by some social anthropologists like Shorter (1998) who maintains that; "while church marriages tend to be more stable, the customary marriages of Christians are notoriously unstable and are liable to end in customary divorce" (p. 93). This position however questions the efficacy of the customary rituals of marriage, which, as a result of changes in the social system seems to have weakened in strengthening the social relations. Different factors could be responsible for that such as education, cultural contacts, migration, capitalism etc. But to what extent could the argument be justified in view of the current trends associated with Christian attitudes to marriage. The basic stance was also offered by Shorter (1998) when he observes that "spouses, marrying in defiance of parental consent are unwilling to enter an indissoluble union. They

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keep their options open by remaining indefinitely in a trial situation" (p. 94). The trial situation could be placed side by side with the fact that neither the Igbo customary marriage nor the Christian marriage seems to be more binding among the people of today.

In deviance to parental consent, one could also reason that, either the Christian beliefs have made the traditional rituals non-efficacious or vice versa. Would it be said that the individuals have now failed to understand the cultural systems and their Christian beliefs. As already discussed by Shorter, many people nowadays enter what may be termed a 'test' or 'trail' marriage. As a test marriage, once their intentions are not met, they seek other alternatives which may be divorce or polygamy. And in some instances, because the marriage is not built on the consent of their parents and kin members, also delimits the chances of stability and survival as against the stance of the Christian marriage.

Discussion

The discussion in this study offers the opportunity to recap the findings and relate some of the contentious issue between Christianity and African traditional rituals. In African culture, it was the usual custom that the young women who have reached the age of marriage had to decorate themselves with ornaments, plaiting of the hair and painting of the skin. The African maidens give particular attention to their beauty in order to attract men for marriage. However, this practice has been given another connotation with the influence of Christianity. For the Christians, the emphasis is rather given on the modesty of the heart instead on the modesty of the body, which for some is quite understandable. From the Christian teaching, "Christian women and girls are modestly and becomingly clothed, and are taught to adorn their souls more than their bodies, to please the eyes of the angels rather than the eyes of men" (Missionary Annals, 1937, p. 257). The African custom being so pragmatic in nature would not be able to make judgement from the inner attitude of young men and women. Rather there are set-down principles for marriage choices in Africa, which guide their judgement. It is the belief that the kinship system through the traditional values gives the moral backing in determining the rightful partners. But with the influence of Christianity and civilization (Schapera, 1950, p. 150), people are subsumed into anonymity. And where people may know some misgivings about the other, it is not always easy to reveal because of the Christian concept that nobody is to judge the other. Again, because it is not the same prescriptions in the choices of marriage partners which traditional custom makes that Christianity upholds, it becomes even more difficult in establishing a balance (Willoughby and James, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, the belief that God has a rightful partner for everyone seems to be in conflict with the traditional beliefs where the family and clan descent play a major role.

In the early periods of missionary activities, the elders of the community usually found it difficult to renounce and abandon their traditional practices as a result of the social status they confer. As a strategy, the missionaries tried to focus on the younger people with the hope of them becoming the elders of tomorrow. A typical example of this strategy could be captured from my encounter with some missionaries that worked in the Southeastern Nigeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s during my research trip in Dublin. They are people between the ages of 85 and 92 years, who shared their experiences years back in Nigeria. One of them narrated his experiences in a town called Obollo Eke during their St. Patrick's Day celebration. He told me how they organized the youths of the town for the celebration, and by oversight the elders were ignored. It was alleged that the elders out of annoyance consulted the native rainmaker to disrupt the occasion. Unfortunately, it rained cats and dogs that they could not celebrate St. Patrick's Day that year. Though I did not ask him what he could make out from his narrative. The narrative attests to the fact that the missionary approach geared mostly towards winning over the young members of the society. The attention to the young at the expense of the old is also well articulated by Onwubiko (1991) when he remarks that:

> [The missionaries] were convinced that the future of Africans lay in the hands of the children. So to effect the desired change in culture, they thought it was better to start with the children, the fathers and adults of tomorrow. The attention paid to children was motivated by the fact that the missionaries clearly saw that the adult Africans were men and made according to traditional standards and principles. They were traditionally religious to the core and to christianise them in the light of the new and foreign social environment required to accept the Christian religion then was difficult. They were forced to turn to the children who were still tender, impressionable, menable, uninitiated and therefore pliable (p. 127).

What has become the condition of these fathers and adults of tomorrow in the present situation of cultural changes? Suppose the intentions of those fathers and adults of tomorrow might have been met, but have the children and the young of today been well integrated into the Christian faith? Could it be possible that the reverse has become the case? It may be conceivable that Africans are now witnessing a situation whereby the elders are trying to preserve the Christian norms and the younger generations are trying to embrace back the old traditional norms. Could it be said that Christianity has not offered the people the yawning they are clamoring for? This gap leaves open for further research.

On the other hand, just like it could be said that the missionaries did not directly abolish the traditional customs but rather imparted on their converts with the means of breaking the local customs. It could also explain what is happening in most part of Africa where most Christians play down on the native customs and at the same time unable to defend their Christian faith. Instead, they fight the traditional religionists with the perception of the 'superior' culture introduced by Christianity and at the same time they easily make submission to the traditional culture out of the fear of unknown. Could it be their eagerness to keep to their traditional beliefs and at the same time remaining Christians? This attitude was pointed out by one of the missionaries who states that "their converts, excellent though they may be in other regards, are very loth to depart from immemorial tradition […]" (Missionary Annals, 1938, p. 252). This attitude could be attributed to the failure of understanding the essential message of the Christian Gospel. It is evident that in the fight for superiority, the said-Christians usually forget the essential teachings of the Gospel and how they could be related to the cultural environment. This understanding suggests why cultural integration is important in any cultural transformation. It entails a mutual relationship between the Christian faith and the traditional culture, which enriches both the faith and the indigenous culture of the people (Nwaogaidu, 2016, p. 205). That will finally make possible the interaction between the indigenous rituals and Christian ritual practices of marriage.

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