Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.6 No.1 March, 2023; p.g. 371 – 378; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION IN OKUNLAND OF KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the Sociological Implications of Church Proliferation in Okunland of Kogi State, Nigeria. The historical development of Christianity and the rise in Church proliferation in Okunland was examined. The research employs descriptive and sociological methods as well as the use of oral interview. The research showed some of the factors responsible for church proliferation in the land. The study also revealed some of the sociological implications of Church proliferation in the studied areas. However, the findings of the paper, among others, were that, despite the problems posed on the society by Church proliferation, it can still be of a great blessing to the studied area if properly managed and guided. It was equally discovered that despite the fact that the issue of Church proliferation is still at alarming rate in the community, it has not helped to break the stronghold of traditional religion in the Land. Based on the findings it was recommended that, government should enforce the law banning the indiscriminate Church building and the use of public address system by churches mostly at night in the land Also, it was discovered in the cause of this work that Church proliferation is mostly caused by unemployment, as a result of this, the work recommends that the evils associated with church proliferation in the Land will be reduced if Government would evolve more policies and programmes that would enable the youth to get reasonably engaged. The work also showed that founders of some of the newly established independent churches lack adequate knowledge to lead congregations, and so, as a matter of urgency the CAN and the PFN should make Bible and Theology Schools compulsory for church founders in the Land before given approval for establishment..Conclusively, this work concludes that despite the blessings that church proliferation has brought to the land it has also posed on the land some negative implications which if not properly addressed can lead to so many other vices in the land.

Keywords: Sociological Implications, Church Proliferation, Okunland.

Introduction

Proliferation of Churches has been a worrisome subject over the years. The establishment, growth and expansion of Churches in Okunland have been greatly influenced by some great ministers and men of God through serious evangelism and revival among the Christians and non Christians. Meanwhile, it is obvious that some Churches are growing and spreading today but at the same time deviating from the aims and objectives of preaching and spreading the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to all nations. This can be attributed to the fact that many Pastors and founders of these newly established Churches, see Church as a means of generating income into their own pocket, thereby leaning the spiritual aspects for physical and material aspects.

It has also been observed that most of these newly established Church founders have misled a lot of people especially their Church members, mostly when it comes to the interpretation of the Gospel. This issue seems to be the main problem with too many churches out there. This is because most of all these newly established churches go to all sorts of lengths to be different from the existing ones to attract more worshippers. Due to this fact, at the end of the day, one would find out that what they are preaching do not correlate with the Bible. Though, some of these churches were established with good and sincere motives, it is observed that in most cases it is very difficult to differentiate the good ones from the fake ones. As the populace will always say that the proportion of the good ones is lesser when compared to the fake Churches. It is as a result of this, that this study is carried out to look into some of the sociological implications of Church proliferation in Okunland.

Historical Development and Rise in Church Proliferation in Okunland

The issue of proliferation of churches in Okunland can be traced back to the period when Christianity was introduced to the land. Meanwhile, Christianity and Christian Missionary activities did not commence in the land until the beginning of the 18th century (Centenary of Christianity in Kabba, 2006). Okunland was brought under colonial rule in 1897, but before that time, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, who was the first Nigerian Bishop had already commenced his missionary activities in Lokoja. The origin of Christianity in Okunland could not be purely attributed to the European missionary activities but largely to Africans themselves. Before 1900, Christianity had got some strong hold in Lokoja and Owo areas but not in Okunland, though, it was possible that it got some Okun people as converts in Lokoja or somewhere else outside Okun division These converts might have been workers, labourers, or strangers in Lokoja, Owo, Lagos, or Ondo where they had been preached to and they became Christians. The Niger Mission Operated formal educational institutions and promoted adult education The Niger Mission and Rev. J.L. Macintyre assisted few of the early converts by sending them for training to become future pastors at Lokoja By 1914, a Bible college was established in Igbaja, pa Daniel Iluromi from Kabba, Pa P.B Owa from Odo-ere and Pa Daniel Amokere from Mopa were some, of the earliest product of the school from Okunland (Centenary of Christian in Kabba, 2006).

One significant instrument used in spreading Christianity in this period was through organizing classes for teaching, reading and writing. It was designed to educate the people for them to be able to read the Bible and interpret it as well. Besides, they were trained in order for them to be able to participate in the day to day affairs of the church. In the case of Okunland, the missionaries started by teaching them the Yoruba alphabets. Later, it became a matter of pride to be able to read and write for this reason many attended the classes during which they were converted. Iluromi (1993) explains that there was deep sincerity and genuineness of service and worship to God. Members had their minds totally fixed on God they could not afford distraction of any kind despite the fact that there was high rate of persecution in the land due to the inception of Christianity. In fact he recorded that during this time, people were arrested and tutored for the sake of Christianity. Worship during this period was a big business to them, not handled with levity and no prevarication of any sort. Worship was conducted devoid of sophistication.

Benedict Elowomakan (2019) explained that in spite of this simplicity in their worship was great reverence. To him, for the members, the sanctity of the name of God was sacerdotal. It

could not be compromised. Holiness of life was vigorously pursued in the fear of the lord and total obedience to His commandments. During this period, the church was seen as a learning church where the little members devoted themselves to the disciples teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Elewomakan (2019) stated that Churches were not proliferated but among the ones that was present then, there was love among them this was revealed in the fellowship of the believers with God the father, the son and the holy spirit. To them during this period, they believed that if the father, son and Holy spirit were united hence they could not afford to allow themselves to be separated by whatever reason. Following the explanation of Pa. D.O Iluromi (1993) the churches in this period did not just keep within itself its attributes of love and fellowship. It realized the need to put on the mind of Christ a compassionate mind; the mind that is large and bleeds for souls under the bandage of devil. They reached out to those around them and this was done through a direct, sincere and genuine mission mindedness. In fact it was recorded that, they did not take slothfully the need to reach out to others around, they were dynamic in this and also very contagious. They took Christ to every nooks and crannies of the villages around them.

Factors Responsible For Church Proliferation in Okunland

Pa J.O Fashami (2022) explained that one of the major causes of church proliferation in Okun is over-population. To him, some churches when established started with a very small number of people, hence as the church is developing and due to vast growing of the community, government polices and infrastructural changes some churches must divide into parishes. He gave an example of the CMS church that was the first church and latter brought up the idea of English and Yoruba parishes and gradually planting some other parishes. Bishop Akobe (2022) of the cathedral church of Saint Andrew's Kabba supported the above by explaining that as a result of the influx of higher institutions in the community churches are bound to flourish in order to meet the immediate needs of the people.

Economic reason is another condition that was given by pastor Babalola of one of the CAC in Ponyon. He explained that one major causes of the church proliferation in Okunland is the people's excessive quest for material wealth. According to Pastor Babalola, materialism coupled with status consciousness and value orientations that have increased in the modern living have made jobless young men seek means of economic survival through the establishment of churches. He further explained that most of the youths in the community are not ready to go to farm for survival instead they use lands that are supposed to be used for farming as their churches and prayer mountains where they will be exhausting people who are gullible. Infact, according to him, he noted that in the community today the richest ones are the men of God since unemployment and youths restiveness often lead to the formation and establishment of churches which is the quickest way to get rich and be employed Babalola (2022).

Prophetess Abosede Ajayi (2022) opined that divine instructions and competency are some of the reasons for Church proliferation in Okunland. She further explained that God needs more hands to work for him in order to populate His kingdom. According to her, in the previous centuries in Okun women were not allowed as such to display their potentials as workers in the house of God. But looking at the world today Okun community especially, women who

are church founders, who are generally called by God and are competent to do the work are innumerable. She explained that people obey the divine instructions of God and so become church planters. To her, obedience to divine instructions and competency are some of the reasons why there are too many churches in Okun today

Zeal and spirituality are some other reasons given by Pastor Joshua (2022) the Apicp of The Redeemed Christian Church of God Kogi province 4. He explained that there are some people that are naturally created by God for His work. In his explanation he mentioned that some people are so spiritual that without even closing their eyes to pray for you God had shown them so many things about you. He also explained that some have the zeal for God's work that is why they are into it. On this note, he said in Okun there are people who are spiritual and have the zeal for God's work and as a result church planting becomes a compulsory thing for them. Prophetess Adeoti (2022) of the Igbala Apostolic Church also explained that excommunicated members from the mainline churches are also one the reasons for church proliferation in Okun. According to her, the majority of new generational church founders saw a small crisis as an opportunity to start their own business ministries. She went on to say that the fear of being penalized or suspended from mainline churches because of erring members was also recognized as a way to succeed.

According to prophetess Adeoti, currently in Okun, there are numerous churches started by excommunicated members of established churches. Such erring members frequently say that God has called them to leave the mother churches, according to her. Many lawsuits and accusations will be thrown into the air, which she believes is uncalled for by fellow Christians in the house of God. She described it as "shameful, unholy, and unchristian.

Prophetess Abosede Ajayi added on to say that as a result of the spiritual discernment apparently employed by some of the pastors and leaders founding these churches, more parishes and new religious movements are springing up every day. "We prayed about it, and God instructed us to start our own church." The statement is commonly used to silence silent complaints and avoid thorough education and accountability, according to her. And, according to her, its use is on the rise: "God told me so" is today possibly the most harmful four-word line said by church leaders and society creators. Pastor Ojo Joel (2022) is of the opinion that the RCCG in Okun in respect to the issues of church proliferation is as a results of the universal vision and mission of five minutes work given by the general overseer Pastor E.A. Adeboye through their Lets go a fishing program that is usually done almost every three month. To this effect, the RCCG has been planted indiscriminately in Okun.

Negative Implications of Church Proliferation in Okunland

Proliferation of Churches in Okunland has led to disunity within the Churches. Each denomination is tempted to adhere tenaciously to the doctrine of their own Church and this often times be contrary to the general interests of the Church in the land. In some cases the denominations expend precious time in criticizing or attacking one another, intolerance and bitterness against other sects runs through their monologue which they call sermon. Fundamentalism is an unfortunate characteristic that runs through these sects and denominations. They adhere strictly to the literary interpretations of the Bible and discard the fact that literary forms were used and also they refuse to accept the indispensability of biblical exegetes. Proliferation leaves little or no room for the coordination of the interests of the

Church as one in the land. The Christian Association of Nigeria cannot confidently claim to have the correct data as to the number of Churches in the land. Similarly, the body cannot claim to have control over all the Churches in the land, for they are legion. This unfortunate situation means outright freedom for religious quacks. This leaves room for indiscipline and unchecked erroneous practices by the Churches such as fraud, ritualism and immoralities. These vices run counter to the social interests of people (Omonayin 2022).

Church proliferation gives room for adulteration of the Christian message, virtue and ethos. A new Churches desire to offer something new, the tendency abounds for them to water down the gospel to make it more attractive by permitting liberalism such as encouraging loose dresses or non-covering of the head, by women inside the Church. Similarly, Elder Ibinaiye in Iffe Ijumu (2022) explained that the establishment of new independent churches in Okunalnd in our contemporary society has been an instrument of disintegration in our society. He explained that due to the existence of some new religious movements some parents now find it very difficult to curb the religious zeal of their children. To him, in some families as the case may be, some of their children had decamped from their parents churches. He explained that this scenario actually happened to himself that before the arrival of CAC in Iffe Ijumu their family were formally and Anglican family and as soon as CAC was established in Iffe Ijumu he decided to leave his parent in Anglican and joined the CAC as this brought serious problem and disintegration between him and his parent to the extent that he was sent away from home by his father

Issues of immorality among the pastors of some of these newly established churches is a major concern as immoral behaviors such as duping, raping, murder occur in these churches. There was a case of one pastor Abraham who was excommunicated from Okun land due to his questionable character and immoral life by taken the wife of one of his assistant pastor and wedded her. Alcoholism poses a great problem to some of the founders of these newly establish churches, unfortunately some denominations do not find anything wrong with such, most especially the African Indigenous Churches Following the interview conducted with pastor Owosuhi (2022) he explained that some of the founders of the newly established churches in Okun have turned their churches to profit making ventures instead of preaching the gospel. He explained that they are noted for series of collections which in turn make such leaders wealthy men in the society even without their being known to own any business house.

Pastor Ibitomi (2022) of CAC Oranre stated that the emergence of Proliferation in Okun has increased noise pollution in the land. As a result, one may argue that the emergence of African indigenous churches has resulted in an increase in noise pollution in our villages and towns. This statement is in line with Emeka Nwosu (2013) who mentioned that Nigerians and Africans are known for being exuberant and talkative; they have little in common with the deafening noise that has infiltrated our public and private areas.

The noise decibel (Db) has risen astronomically as each prayer house or prayer centre tries to outdo each other in their bid to attract gullible and hopeless believers to their business centers or corporate establishments, as the number of so-called churches and prayer houses sprouting up like mushrooms. According to Pa Iluromi (1993) in his book "The Establishment and Development of Christianity in Kabba and its Environs" where he explained that due to the

issues of church proliferation in Okun various denominations see themselves as rivals in the propagation of the Gospels. According to him, this rivalry brings some hatred, pride and unhealthy competition between them. For example, there is not much cooperation until recently among the protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Okun. This is evident in the sense that it is very rare to find protestant pastors officiating in Roman Catholic Church and vice-versa. This is because each group has different traditions and keeps to them strictly. The CAN chairman of Kabba/Bunu chapter Senior Apostle Abolarin (2022) explained that even among the independent churches which himself is one, there is not much cooperation because one independent church claims superiority over the other. According to senior Apostle Abolarin, he explained that the main weakness of church proliferation in Okun is the lack of unity one faith and one church within the denominations.

Environmental effect of church proliferation on Okunland has brought not only a social embarrassment but has constituted a source of serious worry through its religious activities. Mr. Ifepariola (2022) explained that this issue has been a worrisome issue in Okun, and this is due to the fact that most often, members of these churches tend to practice their religion without considering its effects on the immediate environment. To buttress the above, one Mr Adetula (2022) whose house is in between two churches, a Christ Apostolic Church and a Deeper Life Church narrated the ordeal his family faces in the hand of these churches. Mr Adetula explained that they often embark on noisy religions activities with the loudest public address systems even when they were still in one room apartment. Mr Adetula explained that, the more worrisome is their night vigils which they hold almost every night as if God hear prayers only at nights.

Positive Implications of Church Proliferation in Okunland

In the area of education and health, some of these churches have built many schools both primary and secondary as well as health centers across the land. With passage of time, they built more schools to complement the efforts of the Mission Churches and some of these churches have faith homes as this has led to the recruitment of more personnel and has brought about good development in the churches concerned. The process of building more schools, health centers, churches and creation of job opportunities is opened to the people of the land. Another area where church proliferation has been proved justified in Okun is in the area of evangelism. On evangelism, Rev Father Dukia (2022) explained that church proliferation has contributed and is still contributing immensely to the expansion of Christianity in Okun, more especially at this time that Islam seems to be gaining more ground in Okun. According Rev Fr Dukia, proliferation of churches is of greater advantage to the Okun Christians because the proclamation of the gospel in many churches helps to convert many non-Christians in Okun into Christendom among the Okuns.

In addition to the above are some social problems of the Okun people that are solved in some of these newly established churches. Following the interview conducted with one Mr Wale Onihunwa (2022) he explained that he was formerly an Anglican member but due to the problem of bareness that faced his family during that time he decided to switch to one of the Cherubim and seraphim churches in Okun and according to him when he got there for just less than a year the Lord blessed his family with a set of twins. According to him such problems like barrenness, physical deformities, blindness, dumbness, mental problems and encounters with evil spirits, witches and wizard etc are areas where some of these churches

have helped and are still assisting the Okun people to overcome. Therefore, church proliferation in Okun either within the mainland churches or independent churches has helped greatly in several ways to satisfy the Okun curiosity in Christianity. Okun people love music, dancing, and want to display their spiritual sentiments hence the Okun people drifted into many kinds of spiritual churches. The economic impact of some of these churches in Okun cannot be ruled out. This is due to the fact that with the establishment of many Christian denominations in Okun some job opportunities had been created for the people. For example, some Okun sons and daughters are employed as prophets and prophetesses. One of the positive impacts of church's proliferation in Okun is in the area of education. Some of these churches have been able to fund schools along with their churches and this had been a long way to helping to improve the standard of education in Okunland

Finally in the area of charity, some of these newly established churches are so curious in meeting the needs of their members. Some of these churches at times give out foods, clothes, money and some other relief materials to their members and at the same time giving them succor in times of distress. Another way by which they give succor to their members is by helping some of their members in the payment of their children's school fees and also help in training some of their young members in institutions of higher learning (Pastor Joshua, 2022). At this juncture, it is important to note that a random counting of the numbers of churches in Okun presently justified the claim that proliferation of churches has helped greatly in the expansion of Christianity in Okun. It is observed that there is no town or village in Okun that has not gotten at least a church. These are some of the socio-religious impacts of church proliferation on Okun. It is therefore pertinent to know that there is no doubt in the fact that Church proliferation has brought some benefits to individuals, families, society and the whole world at large.

Conclusion

The work conclude on the fact that Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic country and that the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees its citizens freedom of worship and freedom of association with any group or society. On this basis, any religious group is free to operate and enjoy fellowship and patronage on the condition that such activities are not injurious or detrimental to the peace and good of the society at large. Through the work it has also been discovered that church proliferation could still be a blessing or an asset for the Okun people if properly handled and scrutinized. On the whole, the sociological implications of Church proliferation can be seen from the positive and negative perspectives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that church proliferation should continue and be seriously pursued by all Christians in order to bring more converts into the Christian fold, and while doing this, the abuses of church proliferation should be guarded against. It is then the socio-religious development of the nation and Okunland in particular would be greatly improved upon.

Secondly, based on the findings it was recommended that, government should enforce the law banning the indiscriminate Church building and the use of public address system by churches mostly at night in the land

Thirdly, it was discovered in the cause of this work that Church proliferation is mostly caused by unemployment, as a result of this, the work recommends that the evils associated with church proliferation in the Land will be greatly reduced if Government would evolve more policies and programmes that would enable the youth to get reasonably engaged.

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