

AN ASSESSMENT OF TRADITIONALISM AMONG SOME CHRISTIANS IN OBIOKPOK NSIT TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Obiokpok Nsit belongs to the Ibibio tribe and the people speak Ibibio language. This study assesses traditionalism among some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit traditional society and observed that before the advent of Christianity, the people had their traditional religion, which they cherished and practiced. The study employed descriptive method and noted that though the Ibibio Christians believed in the Supreme God, they still felt they must be protected against physical misfortune, illness, calamities, accidents, and untimely deaths; hence, their reversion to traditionalism. The work revealed that traditionalism is a means to conform and hold tenaciously to the fundamental traditional religious beliefs and practices of a society. The finding revealed that the notion of traditionalism among African Christians in general and Obiokpok Nsit in particular is based on the fact that the people only know how to live comfortably within their traditional religious context. Seemingly, Christianity asked the people to abandon their beliefs and practices during conversion and baptism but have rarely provided them with appropriate substitutes especially in life threatening situations. This shows that Christianity only suppress but never kill the religious culture which the people were encultured as children; it is rising now to haunt their Christian faith. The work concluded that a sizable segment of Christians still holds their traditional religion in one hand, and Christian beliefs in the other. It recommended that Ibibio Christians should completely commit themselves to Jesus Christ, and reject every appearance of traditionalism that is practicable in their traditional rituals.

Keywords: Assessment, Traditionalism, Christianity, Obiokpok Nsit Traditional Society.

Introduction

The notion of traditionalism among African Christians in general and Obiokpok Nsit in particular is based on the fact that the people can only know how to live within their traditional religious context. The people believed that their religious way of life is God's gift to them; hence, it evolved slowly through centuries as their ancestors responded to the

situations in their lives and reflected upon their experiences. It is equally noted that Christianity promise salvation to African Christians on condition that they accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and the people should abandon their former religious way of living (Rheenen, 1991). And the people find it difficult to extinct themselves from their traditional religious culture.

Actually, before the advent of Christianity in the African continent as a whole, the traditional African people had their own kind of religion, cherished and practiced; this religious beliefs and practices differed between the different ethnic groups. Their religion influenced the way they lived, economically, socially, and politically. This religious tradition was and is still unique to each community, though slightly differed from other ethnic groups. Their religion was also incorporated into their cultures, and this determined the way each ethnic group ought to behave in the family and in the community. The paramount ruler of a clan, chief of a village, or family head was the custodian of a religious culture of the people. Hence, religious beliefs and practices are traditionally transferred from generation to generation.

Traditionally, at the centre of African traditional religion, is the veneration of the spirits of the ancestors who Africans believe and accept as mediators between themselves and the Supreme Being. With the introduction of Christianity in the African continent, the African traditional religion was viewed by the Christian missionaries as something against Christian teachings, and had to be abandoned as soon as a person accepts Christianity. Africans who accepted Christianity were asked to abandon their traditional religion. The result was half-baked Christian; because only some of the elements of African traditional religion were abandoned, and some were retained and are still being observed and practiced by African Christians in their everyday lives even though they have accepted Christianity.

Frankly speaking, though most African Christians believed in one Supreme God who had the whole world in His hand, they still felt they must protect themselves against physical misfortune, illness, calamities, accidents, and untimely deaths. All these, were believed could be caused by wicked men or spirits or even by ancestors if they were not satisfactorily appeased. Therefore, to ensure their safety, most of these African Christians go on with their traditional beliefs and practices, carry charms, amulets, black ring, magic, consult diviners and mediums, sorcerers, etc, even while they professed to be Christians. Many Christians even registered their membership in secret societies as part of their religious way of life, and they were assured of victory over their enemies.

On the whole, African religion gives its adherents, a sense of security in life, even after their conversion and acceptance of Christianity. These religious beliefs and practices seem to supply answers to many problems of this life, even if these may not have been the right answers in every case. But, because it provides for them answers and directions in life, the people are not willing to abandon it quickly; otherwise, they will feel insecure afterwards unless something else gives them additional or greater sense of security.

On this scenario therefore, the work provides information on the background of the people of Obiokpok Nsit, the concept of traditionalism and salient aspects that are evidently practiced by some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area.

Obiokpok Nsit: Background of the People, their Culture and Religion

Obiokpok Nsit village is one of the villages in Nsit Ibom Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom state, South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Nsit Ibom Local Government Area has its headquarters at Afaha Offiong and the Local Government Area shares borders with the Ibesikpo Asutan, Etinan, Uyo, and Nsit Ubium Local Government Areas. Mbiaso and Asang are two clans that make up Nsit Ibom Local Government Area. The estimated population of Nsit Ibom Local Government Area is put at 115,893 inhabitants with the area mostly populated by members of the Ibibio ethnic affiliation (Nsit Ibom, n.d.). The people belong to the Ibibio tribe, they commonly speak Ibibio language, and Christianity is extensively (but superficially) practiced in the area. Presently, it is observed, that English language is gaining wide acceptance as the people increase their level of education, and they are moving towards modernization.

Culture, remains total way of life of the people, and the people of Obiokpok Nsit are well versed with it. In mode of dressing, the dominant attire of an Ibibio man is a loin cloth, "*uwawan ofonisin*" with shirt, hat, and staff. The women folk have what is called "*ndot-iba ofonisin*" with blouse, and head-tie to match. Obiokpok Nsit is one of the villages in Asanga clan, and the village is made up of six (6) families (*ekpuk*); these include *Nung Akpaduak*, *Nung Ndem*, *Nung Ubo*, *Nung Abasi*, *Nung Udo Akpan*, and *Nung Ikwo*. The current village head is Obong Enefiok Sampson. The traditional political organization and structure of the Obiokpok Nsit people were based on social organization, consisting of lineage (*ekpuk*). This was made up of several related families (*idip-ete*), having a common male ancestor with the oldest man becoming "*Obong ekpuk*", the head of the lineage (Antia, 2005).

The traditional delicacies are "*afia efere ebot*" with "*usung udia*" (pounded yam), *efere afang*, *editan*, *atama*, *ibaba*, *mbukpa uyo*, *edikang ikong*" with fufu/garri, and others are *ekpang nkukwo*, *asa iwa*, *asa akapkpa*, etc. Their notable cultural plays include *ebre*, *akpasa*, *samba*, *uyai iban*, *eka ekoon*, and *ekpo*. These are featured during festivals and important occasions. Initially, *ekpo* masquerade was responsible for executing laws and orders, as well as an instrument of authority. *Ebre* was used by women for social and political control. Notable traditionally market in Obiokpok Nsit was known and called *Urua ndo-ndo ikon*. Presently, there are mini-super stores and petty trading managed particularly in various locations in Obiokpok Nsit village by the people.

Historically, agriculture and trading were the main occupations of the Ibibio people. Farming was practiced at subsistence level; some of its products were exchanged by batter for other goods. The men planted and harvested the palm trees, while the women processed the oil and nuts for various domestic uses. The palm fruit oil (palm oil) was extracted and sold to external markets as well as the palm kernels. Food crops such as cocoyam were very few in Ibibio land before the introduction of cassava and plantain into the economy. However, the people nowadays plant food crops such as maize, melon, pepper, yam, cocoyam, and so on.

For good harvest to be achieved, 'sacrifices were performed to "*ekpo inwang*", farm deity or ghost who was believed to be responsible for the fertility of the farm. Sacrifices were required to be performed before and after the harvest, and another before the final consumption of the crops, especially for new yam. These acts were believed by the people to be the cause of the bumper harvest, as compare to the present situation, where fertilizer is heavily used before a

good harvest is achieved. The land is richly endowed with a lot of mineral resources and exploitable forest resources. There are about 300 species of wood in the forests scattered over the place.

It is a basic fact that the life of the traditional Obiokpok Nsit people is underlined and regulated by religion. It is observed that wherever the African is, there is his religion. The restlessness of the hearts of the people about the flux of life drove them to search for the ultimate solutions to the problems of life and death, as well as the meaning of fulfillment in existence. This saying about Africans generally is applicable to Obiokpok Nsit people in particular. Actually, the religion of the people is polytheistic. The concept of monotheism did not seem to have had a place in the thinking of the ancient Ibibio people. This idea, therefore, reflects that the daily life of the people was regulated by the tenets of their religion, that is, the people live their daily lives consciously of their religious beliefs and practices (Essoh, 2004). The religious beliefs and practices of the Obiokpok Nsit people centres around the Supreme Being, who is directly or indirectly worshipped without an image or statue made to represent him because of his supremacy and uniqueness. Practically, the worship of the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*) was usually represented by a small pot with water placed in a clay mound besides "*okono*" and "*itomo*", the boundary marking plants. This act constitutes "*Iso Abasi*", the face of God at which the people offer sacrifices. Such sacrifices were direct appeals, prayers, or other supplications to the Supreme Being (*Abasi Ibom*). Specifically, "*Etaha*" or "*Ata – Etaha*", the eighth day was set aside for the worship of the Supreme Being called "*Usen Abasi*" (Abasiattai, 1991).

Additionally, the people of Obiokpok Nsit believed in the existence of a divinity (*ndem*) called *Anyang* that dwell in the stream as its sacred place. Traditionally, the people believed that this divinity cater for their general welfare and wellbeing. The *Anyang* was maintained by the Priest (*Okuku*) especially through pouring of libations, performing of necessary sacrifices and other offerings. The influence and power of *Anyang* could affect the people either positively or negatively. Moreover, there were also an in-depth belief in other lesser deities (*mme abasi*) and ancestors (*ikaan*). Notable among the lesser deities include "*abasi isong*", the goddess of the earth, responsible for the fertility of crops. "*eka abasi*", the mother of 'gods or head of deities, responsible for procreation and fertility of women; "*ebe abasi*", a deified husband; and "*abasi ekong*", god of war. Also, there was an inbuilt belief in spirits, witchcraft (*ifot*), magic, medicine and charm (*ibok*), and reincarnation. There was also a market deity (*ndem urua*) who took charge of the markets as well as farm deities (*ndem inwang*). Libations and sacrifices were often offered to appease and invoked them to act accordingly. The religion of the people is believed to have held the society together and guaranteed peace, unity, honesty, etc. giving every activity a religious connotation or aspect, as well as developing in the people's lives unshaken confidence in God.

The Concept of Traditionalism

Traditionalism encompasses activities or practices of the traditional society such as sorcery – the supposed art of controlling events or effects by the power of evil spirits; necromancy – the art of predicting events by allegedly communicating with the dead; witchcraft – the practice of magic, charm, witch-haunting; divination – fortune telling; and other African (Ibibio) traditional beliefs and practices. Traditionalism is the name properly given to the belief that the living can communicate with the spirits of the departed, and to the various practices by

which such communication is attempted. Hence, it means to conform and hold tenaciously to the fundamental traditional religious beliefs and practices of a traditional society (Lot, 2023).

Consequently, when one telescope the religious beliefs and practices of Africans in general, and the Ibibio in particular, aspects of traditionalism are very much abounding. It is noted that traditionalism is prevalent to some extent in all cultures, and the Ibibio people are not exception. Apparently, most African Christians have clung to their traditional rituals and beliefs, while some external forms of the traditional religious practices seems to be decaying; their internal traditional religious attitudes still remain in the lives though they claimed to be Christians. This is because of their worldview, that is, the perception of the world they live. These Christians thought to see other powers and forces useful in the world; hence, they renew and practice their traditional religious cultures.

Citing Tienou, Lot (2011) observed that both in public and private practices, it seems that most African Christians feel the tremendous burden of having to bear at least two cultural loads; the modern or so-called Western and the traditional. This Western understanding makes African Christians think of their religious way of life, customs as pagan (those who worship a god or gods other than the living God to whom the Bible witnesses) but have rarely provided them with appropriate substitutes for the cultural elements they were asked to discard. The consequence of this is the horrifying syncretism. This syncretism has many facets; the unwitting syncretism, which is produced by inadequate teaching of Christian truth; the practical syncretism, where a person (African Christian) will go to the specialist of the traditional religion, (often in secret) or will possess an amulet or talisman, or have some concoction prepared for him, while at the same time professing to be a good Christian; and there is theological syncretism, this is the act of mixing Christian and African theology together.

Ibibio traditional religion is the complex way which religious practices and beliefs are interwoven into the secular needs of the Ibibio communities and this geared towards finding solution of the practical problems in their day-to-day life. Moreover, there are some agents of ethical and social control among the Ibibio traditional society which are the aspects of traditionalism. These include divination (*idiong*), ordeal (*ukang*), swearing or taking of traditional concocted oath (*uta mbiam*), and some sacred institutions and belief systems like *ekpo*, *ekpri akata*, *inam*, *iban isong* that served as agents or mechanism in controlling crime, unethical behaviours and at the same time stabilizing the social order in Ibibio society. Obviously, average Ibibio man who wants to know what the future holds for him, and the causes of his misfortune would satisfy his curiosity by availing himself of the services of *mbia idiong* (diviners) who are believed to be able to foretell the future and uncover the causes and reasons for past and present occurrences of misfortunes such as sickness, death, accidents, and some other mishaps (Lot, 2023). The people believed that these diviners have a special privileged relationship with the Supreme Being, the lesser deities, and the ancestors.

Traditionalism among some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit Traditional Society

Citing Heibert, Lot (2011) revealed that the culture of the people of Africa towards their traditional religion is that, "Christianity can suppress but never kill the culture into which the Africans were encultured as children. It was buried alive, but it will rise someday to haunt the faith". What this statement really implies to some contemporary Obiokpok Nsit Christians is

that the culture of traditionalism into which they were by birth and origin encultured was only suppressed and buried in their lives to some extent, and was not completely exterminated; even on their confession and in water baptism, when they were converted to Christianity. It remained buried in their lives, and now rises to haunt their Christian faith. Certainly, it is a fact that before Christianization of this part of the Ibibio, the Obiokpok Nsit people have been participating in all the traditional rites, and they had to drink, eat a portion of meat and food scarified to the family or community deity at various occasions with utmost worship. Hence, they are unwilling to abandon this relationship and merriment.

Consequently, it is observed that among some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit, Christianity is understood as a social organization wherein God and money can be seriously and conscientiously worshiped simultaneously. This group of 'Christians' regard Christianity as a faith where money is demanded as a symbol of membership just as it is in any secular organization. Equally, Anyanwu (2004) posited that sacrifice is composed essentially of two elements; oblation which is an offering made to God or divinities, and immolation which is an instance of killing as an offering. Actually, though there is no open sacrifice of animals or fowls nowadays; some rituals performances by churches are in tandem with traditional sacrifices in guise of performing miracles. These are basically sorcery, divination, and soothsaying which involved aspects of sacrifices. It is noted that majority of cases of sacrifices are carried out when there is some serious problem threatening the individual, family, or community existence and survival. By implication, this indicates that many Obiokpok Nsit Christians ventured into traditionalism and revert to their traditional practices when they faced life threatening situation.

In traditional Ibibio society, pouring of libation is seen as an inescapable aspect of family and community rituals and obligations. It is a fact that pouring of libation is to invoke the spirits of the dead or the ancestral spirits, ghosts, and deities as well as appeasing them. Through this act, the people equally express their belief in the spiritual beings especially the Supreme Being, the divinities, and ancestors. Thus, libation gives the supplicants confidence and security to go about their daily activities. The people believed that libation can be performed together with other Christian practices. That is why it is not strange, at every traditional function especially marriages and funerals, one of the items in the agenda will be pouring of libation, and thereafter Christian prayers. These acts are common even at the functions chaired by Christian clergies. Obviously, these African Christians have pleasure in embarking on this kind of traditional practice without any sense of contradiction. Pouring of libation has been rooted in African consciousness, and it is seen as an aspect of African religious beliefs and practices. It is therefore, clear that many Christians today do not have faith in God's protection; they still think that God has distanced Himself from human affairs, so, the people want to maintain the unbroken relationship as well as showing hospitality with their ancestors, and divinity.

Other major aspects of traditionalism by some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit traditional society in particular and Ibibio as a whole are the issues of traditional oath taking (*uta mbiam*) and consulting a diviner (*abia idiong*). Traditionally, the core Ibibio, Obiokpok Nsit people tenaciously believed in the efficacy of *mbiam* (concocted oath). Offiong (2001) defined the concocted oath (*mbiam*) "as magically potent object used in swearing oaths and in fortifying one's property, supernatural ability to detect the innocent and the guilty as well as punishing

the offender". In fact, anything or object believed by the people to be sacred can be used as *mbiam*. Accordingly, traditional oath-taking (*uta-mbiam*) is made to be taken by individuals, families, or communities by swearing an oath in the name of the feared dangerous deity of the family or community. This concocted oath is prepared specially by a traditional medicine man or women which he or she invokes the name of one or more dangerous deity with some concoction and incantation. The village council and the entire villagers will gather, and the individual(s), family, or community concerned may simply swear by it or drink a portion of it to complete the swearing process.

Apparently, the average Ibibio man often wants to know what the future holds for him, and the causes of his misfortune; hence, he would satisfy his curiosity by availing himself of the services of *mbia idiong* (diviners) who are believed to be able to foretell the future and uncover the causes and reasons for past and present occurrences of misfortunes such as sickness, death, accidents, and some other mishaps. Moreover, diviners can also perform the duties of medium, medicine man; but their main function is to find out hidden secrets or knowledge and pass them on to other people who want to know. The people believed that these diviners have a special privileged relationship with the Supreme Being, the lesser deities, and the ancestors.

Moreso, Steyne (1996) noted that a sizable segment of third world Christians still holds their traditional religion in one hand, and Christian beliefs in the other. They hold the ideals, values, and beliefs of Christianity in high regard, but in times of crises, they know where to find the solution. To justify this notion, it is observed that many Ibibio Christians believed that the rituals, charms, and even gods of their own culture are not really evil, as believed by the westerners. The people believed that they are good as long as they help them in crises situation. Thus, they look for Christian faith for final salvation but look for their traditional gods and ritual practices for present help.

Conclusion

It has been observed that since the advent of Christianity in Ibibio land in general, and Obiokpok Nsit in particular, the people after conversion and acceptance of Christianity still deem it fit to revert to their traditional religious beliefs and practices which they believe are still very potent especially in their crises situation. What necessitated the problem is the superficial conversion, lack or little faith and their claimed that God has distanced Himself from them and their acceptance of Christianity due to motivational factors without in-depth commitment to Christian's teachings, beliefs and practices. Consequently, traditionalism among some Christians in Obiokpok Nsit has produced enormous effects in their lives which include fear, bondage, superficial solution to the felt problems and needs, and syncretism.

It is therefore, pertinent to note that when people experience conversion, the church should teach and assure them that their conversion frees them from those traditional prejudices, limitations, and obligations to the traditional rituals of their pre-Christians lives. The ministration of the word of God, and of the Holy Spirit should be capable of bringing the people to divine encounter which will definitely give new meaning and significance to the religious and spiritual yearning of Christians who usually revert to their traditional beliefs and practices.

Recommendations

- i. The converts from traditional religion to Christianity should completely commit themselves, body and soul to Jesus Christ, and reject every appearance of traditionalism that is practicable in their traditional rituals.
- ii. The power of God should be demonstrated by churches to touch the spiritual life of the people.
- iii. The ministers and the church should let the people understand the implications and the danger of some traditional practices such as oath-taking (*uta-mbiam*), divination (*ubre-idiong/us-nkpo*), sorcery, carrying of charms and magic for protection; and should make the people acknowledge God as a Saviour in crisis situation.
- iv. The Christians should endeavour to avoid the participation in some traditional festivities.
- v. African Christians should develop enough faith in the God of Christianity whom they claimed to have abandoned the former things (traditional religion) and pledge allegiance to.

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