Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.1 March, 2024; p.g. 211 – 209; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

ECCLESIASTICAL LIBERATION IN IGBO SOCIETY: NAVIGATING HISTORICAL STRUGGLES AND BUILDING A LIBERATING CHURCH

IFEANYI A. CHUKWUDEBELU
chukwudebeluifeanyia88@gmail.com
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria
&
AJAKOR, EMMANUEL (PhD)
ei.ajakor@unizik.edu.ng
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of ecclesiastical liberation in Igbo society, Nigeria, rooted in Liberation Theology principles. Emerging from the 1976 EATWOT conference, the research adopts a comprehensive methodology, combining primary and secondary sources. It employs qualitative analysis with cosmological, theological, and sociological approaches. The narrative examines the church's transformative potential in comprehensive liberation—beyond spiritual realms—addressing historical injustices like colonization, slavery, and poverty. Emphasizing the Igbo church's role in challenging oppressive systems, advocating for justice, and contributing to community liberation, the study highlights challenges, including the enduring impacts of colonialism and the slave trade. Specifically, it notes issues like socio-economic disparities, an enduring inferiority complex, and poverty. The research calls for the church's proactive role in addressing economic injustices, drawing from early Christian practices. It concludes by emphasizing the church's pivotal role as a catalyst for transformative change in Igbo society, urging a contextualized Igbo ecclesiology sensitive to local realities and an empowered clergy fostering African values. The abstract advocates for active church engagement in justice, equality, and liberation within Igbo cultural contexts.

Keywords: Ecclesiastical Liberation, Liberation Theology, Historical Struggles, Church, Igbo Society.

Introduction

Liberation theology entered Africa from Latin America, triggered by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) conference in Dar es Salaam in 1976, emphasizing the struggle against poor socio-economic conditions in Africa (**Han,** 2013). This theological paradigm gained popularity about a decade ago, with Latin American theologians playing a major role in its acceptance in Africa (**Han,** 2013).

EATWOT's final statement called for an active commitment to justice promotion, prevention of exploitation, and solidarity with the poor in their struggle for liberation (**Han,** 2013). Similar to the North American Liberation theological movement, African Liberation theology utilizes socio-political and economic analysis to understand religious experiences. Theologians argue

that the salvation of humanity in Jesus Christ requires resisting dehumanization (Gichure, 2008).

Liberation theology profoundly shapes ecclesiastical liberation, emphasizing the interpretation of Christian teachings within the context of liberation from diverse forms of oppression. It firmly posits that God exhibits a preferential option for the poor and oppressed, compelling the church to actively engage in their liberation (Dault, 2015). The life and teachings of Jesus Christ stand as central tenets within this theological framework. Thus, it remains undeniable that ecclesiastical liberation often arises in the aftermath of historical injustices like colonization, slavery, or poverty, as evident in the Nigerian context, particularly among the Igbo (Agbiji, 2012).

Quoting Schillebeeckx, Mueller (1991) states that salvation implies the humanization of the world through the eradication of suffering. Hence Liberation ecclesiology seeks genuine human promotion within Africa's context of poverty and political powerlessness (Bediako, 1980)). The Pan African Conference of Third World theologians in Accra, Ghana in 1977 emphasized the need for African theology to be liberation theology, demanding liberation from socio-economic exploitation and various forms of dehumanization, whether from white colonialism or internal oppression (**Han,** 2013).

This theology encourages the Christian Church to participate in the struggle not only with the colonial past but also with the new African ruling class who are exploiting the poor. Ela (Jimoh, 2004) argues that 'liberation of the oppressed must be the primary condition for any authentic Christian message'. African theology will always lack the 'socio-analytic mediation', until it (African theology) will begin to pay attention to the issues of poverty, injustice and human exploitation in Africa hence the goal of African Liberation theology (p.vi). hence, ecclesiastical Liberation is therefore a new way of perceiving the Christian church and giving newness to the Christian perception of church in Africa. It tries to express the Christian faith in terms that are relevant to the socio-economic and political situations of African people.

This research therefore, employed a comprehensive data collection strategy, incorporating both primary and secondary sources. This inclusive approach involved personal observations, oral interviews, and an extensive review of published and unpublished materials, including journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, dictionaries, and other library materials. By combining these various sources, the study aimed to ensure a thorough exploration and in-depth understanding of the research topic.

To analyze the collected data, the study opted for a qualitative research method, integrating cosmological, theological, and sociological approaches. This multifaceted methodology facilitated a nuanced interpretation of the data, allowing for a contextual understanding of the ecclesiastical liberation in Igbo society: navigating historical struggles and building a liberating church.

The Church: a Catalyst for Comprehensive Liberation in Igbo Society

The church, as both a religious and social institution, has a crucial role in promoting complete liberation for individuals and communities. This liberation should extend beyond spiritual aspects to include social, cultural, and even political freedom. In Igbo society, it's important

for the church to prioritize the liberation of oppressed individuals and communities (Uchegbue, 2016). The teachings of the church should actively address social injustices, inequality, and various forms of oppression.

This means the church, as a community of believers, has a responsibility to engage with societal issues, work towards justice, and contribute to the overall liberation of humanity. The church holds the potential to be a positive force for change, advocating for the well-being and freedom of its members and the wider society (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 1990). This liberation effort should not only address current challenges but also tackle historical injustices, challenge oppressive systems, and promote a comprehensive understanding of freedom that covers spiritual, social, and material dimensions (Uchegbue, 2016). This understanding is grounded in the belief that the church should be a transformative agent actively involved in addressing the struggles and challenges faced by its members and society as a whole.

The Church: original to Igbo/African Struggles and Realities

By African struggles and realities, we mean the various past and present experiences of operation and the struggles of the Igbo people which should be taken into consideration in the development of the church in Igbo society. According to Rwiza (2008);

The reality of Africa today cannot be seen to be true to the aspirations that were raised and nurtured by the liberation struggles and political independence when it was finally achieved… In many respects, the situation in Africa now resembles the situation in Latin America under which liberation theology irrupted, a situation under which both human and non human factors (external and internal) reduce the masses of the people to abject poverty and misery (p. 241).

The authentic Igbo church should actively engage with and address the practical challenges faced by its adherents, encompassing social, political, and cultural aspects. It is imperative because the Christian faith is not an external element for the oppressed; rather, it serves as a motivating force that necessitates their liberation for the fulfillment of the historical translation of Jesus' salvific deed and the divine will (Entwistle, 2015).

Therefore, the church in Igboland should evolve in tandem with the historical understanding of socio-economic and political situations in Nigeria and Igbo society. This adaptation involves a nuanced response to various struggles, including but not limited to:

Colonialism and Neocolonialism

Colonialism is characterized in the white minority's domination of the African majority through military force in late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Moreover despise the contemporary experience of post colonial era of most African countries; colonialism continues to be perpetuated indirectly on Africans through neo-colonialism. (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012).

Neo-colonialism therefore generally represents the actions and effects of certain remnant features and agents of the colonial era in a given society. It is extensively obvious that despite achieving independence, the influences of colonialism and its agents are still very present in

the lives of most former African colonies. Practically, every aspect of the ex-colonized society still harbours colonial influences. These influences include political, economical, cultural and religious perspectives (Halperin, 2024). It is therefore the persistence of the situation of this dominance, their agents and effects that constitute the subject matter of neocolonialism.

This situation of dominance is also strong in the churches of Africa especially in Igbo society. The organizational model imported from the west is still superimposed and accepted. This is particularly true by the theology and church structure in African and Igbo society. The life of our churches has been dominated by a theology and administrative structures, developed within a methodology and from a world view and conception of humanity, using western categories. Hence the authentic Igbo church must be sensitive to all forms of foreign interferences and hegemony in other to be authentic and genuine (Nwadialor & Nweke, 2013).

Slavery

This is the systematic plunder of the African race. During this period, the physical, psychological, intellectual and culture of Africans were taken away resulting in racial prejudices that continue to affect people of African descent everywhere (Scott-Jones, Kamara, 2020)). It has been estimated that over 12 million Africans were forcefully removed from Africa and transported across the Atlantic to the Caribbean Islands and the American continent (Sherman-Peter, 2022).

Generally, slave trade brought about a negative impact on African societies and led to the long-term impoverishment of West Africa by re-allocation of the resources of African economics towards raiding by the slave masters. This is believed to have significantly constrained the early economic development of African States. (Okure, 1990).

According to Ejiofor (1984);

Historians have not succeeded yet in giving us an exact number of black people who fell victims of slave trade. They may never succeed. Such victims include those who died in the inter village and town wars – instigated by the slave traders; those who died on the march from the point of capture in the homeland to the point of shipment on the coast, those who died of starvation, epidemic, suffocation, brutality and humiliation in the slave ships, those who died of the booting and the kicking, etc. it is important to note that during that period, premium was placed on culture substitution – displaying African languages with European languages, palm wine with beer, African clothing and food with European suits and food, African religion with foreign religions and ultimately displaying African way of life and value system with that of Europeans. (p.9).

Moreover, the effects of the slave trade varied widely from one region of Africa to another. In Igbo society for instance, slave trade provoked a culture of political violence and disregard for human life. Individuals and societies that did engage in the trade did so through raiding for people and capturing of land. Orji (1987) on highlighting Jones' (1941) view says: The miseries which the slave trade produced in the Igbo country; mentioned the continual wars carried on for the purpose of capturing slaves… how the whole population was continually in a state of excitement or fear and what injurious effect this condition had on their own temporal concerns. (p. 9).

During the era of slave trade in Igbo societies, the major European imported produce traded in exchange for human being is gun, but cloth, hard cash (cowries), iron bars, textiles, pottery, glassware, beads, ironmongery and gun power where also traded in exchange with slaves by the Europeans. However, gun remains the major import in the region. The possession of these fire arms however aided social upheaval among communities in Igbo society. In the well articulated words of Pilossof (2010): The mass introduction of firearms was the single most significant technological innovation brought by Europeans to West Africa. Kings and warlords were anxious to trade with Europeans acquire guns. Twenty million guns were imported to Africa in the second half of the 8th century. Many guns imported by the British were manufactured in Birmingham. African rulers exchanged captives for guns (p.64).

Rulers were in competition with each other, so the acquisition of guns provided an edge over their dive to capture and sell slaves. Each new available of guns was a direct consequence of the slave trade. Just as Whatley (2012) averred;

The mass importation of guns for slaves altered the conduct of warfare in Africa and changed the balance of power between kingdoms. At the height of the Atlantic trade, only states equipped with guns were able to resist attacks from their neighbours. The demand for slaves, combined with the supply of guns, encouraged rulers to attack neighbours (p.19).

By this, welfare became more attractive to those that might more easily profit from it. War created captives, and thus potential slaves to profit from. Wars were not usually fought just for captives but the temptation to go to war increased because of certain gains. As the demand for slaves grew, in some areas the impact destabilized existing kingdoms. Existing systems of government based on kinship and consent were destroyed (Perry et al, 2021). Raiding for slaves became a way of life for the armed elite. Frequent slave raiding meant it became harder to distinguish insider from outsider, as ethnic boundaries were churned up. Some societies preyed on others to obtain captives to exchange firearms. They believed that they had to acquire firearms in this way to protect themselves from attack and capture by rivals (Whatley, 2012). Slave trade therefore encourages ethic and social division, provoked political violence and disregard for human life in Igbo society.

Also, inferiority complex among the Igbo is part of the negative impact of slavery in the Igbo society. Inferiority complex syndrome is the feeling of inability to cope with some aspects of life because of a real or imagined physical or psychological deficiency, feelings of depression, and a cessation of coping efforts in that area which brings about low self esteem. Thus the unfortunate feature in the lives and character of the average Africans, Igbo inclusively.

Hoffman (2020) also posited that: An inferiority-complex occurs when the feelings of inferiority are intensified in the individual through discouragement or failure. Those who are at risk for developing a complex include people who: show signs of low self-esteem or self-worth have low socioeconomic status, or have a history of depression symptoms (p.96).

The performance of average individual is affected by the individual's self-esteem. Hence, hopelessness and helplessness (depression), the feeling that whatever you do you just can't be as good as you're supposed to be, or as other people seem to be. No matter how well you

do, it still won't be good enough. All these and lots more have been the experiences of Igbo/Africans emanating from the reality of slavery (Makowski, 2004).

The African people developed an inferiority complex to those with lighter pigmentations during the slave trade. The whites lived more comfortable lives as the oppressors while our people suffered. It brought the mentality that 'white is right'. Africans begin copying the western culture in hopes to escape the hardships placed on them. While that in itself is not wrong, the thinking behind it and the drastic measures the mentality causes our people to take in the issue (Nweke, & Nwoye, 2016).

Poverty

According to estimates from the World Data Lab's Poverty Clock (2017), about 90 million people – roughly half Nigeria's population – live in extreme poverty. Around June 2018; Nigeria overtook India, a country with seven times its population, at the bottom of the table. Put in another context, if poor Nigerians were a country, it would be more populous than Germany. Almost six people in Nigeria fall into this trap every minute. However, Igbo society being part of Nigeria is not an exemption in this matter. (Amuwo et al, 2001)

But no matter what the arguments might be, at the root of poverty lies the deprivation of people's access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare, education and assets. And the evidence shows that solving these issues generally lifts populations out of extreme poverty.

Moreover, Christians are called to exhibit special care for the poor, the sick, the elderly, the widow, the orphan, the resident alien, and the oppressed. Those who address poverty and the struggles of the poor cannot afford to ignore the centrality of the home, the family, and the church, in addition to other economic factors. (Ojene, 2007)

During the early church, there was generous care for those who were unable to support themselves. Record abounds of people who knew their role, supporting those who were unable to care for themselves (Ajah, 2018). There was no personal thing. Instead all that they had belonged to everyone (Act 4:32). They practiced the teaching of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:43:47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11; 6:1-7). As a result of sharing, "there was not a needy person among them" (Luke 4:34). Throughout the scripture, the same standard of sharing was recorded in that those who were not able to support themselves received help. The community of believers was obliged to help, so that their needs were met. Even when many people were converted on the day of the Pentecost, they were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:44). Giving to the needy was an order of the day. Their generosity was from within their hearts, some people like Barnabas sold a field he owned (Acts 4: 36-37) to support needy people. Sharing and selling their property to help the needy in the early church seems to have worked wonders among the believers. Thiongo (2019) has this to say:

The early Church activities and involvement with each other were evidence of a unified community who had Joy when sharing meals together (Acts 2: 46), oneness (Act 4:32), their one accord enabled praising the Lord as a team, and the Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:46-47). The sharing with those who did not have perhaps encouraged many to attend home fellowships. When people come to church just for physical food, it means that they have not fully committed themselves to follow Christ. (p.47)

The life and the words of Jesus and the teachings of his Church call Christians to serve those in need and work actively for social and economic justice, as community of believers, faith is tested by the quality of justice amongst Christians, which can best be measured by how the poor and vulnerable are treated.

Jesus words and practice must therefore be emulated in the churches today, Christians should practice what they believe is service the poor, act justly and empower people to get out of their economic injustice. While the faith of believers will be tested with how they loved the Lord, it will also be tested by how well they exercised justice to all.

The kingdom of God is not only spiritual it is intensely practical. Therefore, the authentic Igbo church must move beyond its traditional role if it is to fulfill its mission truly. It can no longer respond only to spiritual needs and speak only to people's heart per say, since the church is called to be a force for change in the world. Particularly when the needs are greatest when struggles: crime, poverty violence, and unemployment are the order of the day (Ma, 2013).

Poverty is a reality that must be dealt with in all stages of human development. As the scripture urges, that those who are able should open hands and welcome and feed the poor (Deut 15:11). Poverty is visible in our society and therefore needs an urgent action from the church. The Church in Igbo society should therefore try to build healthy communities in impoverished areas and help families out of poverty by providing economic opportunities; by this the Church can build communities and help eradicate poverty.

The authentic Igbo ecclesiology should not therefore pretend to be ignorant of these struggles experiences of the Igboman but should be able to formulate and encourage local theologies independent of western (former slave masters) influence. The true Igbo church should learn from their history and work to improve themselves. For this to take place, the clergy need to be competent and creative to be able to nurture the minds of the people in the society. The Christians will grow up to reach their full potential and to excel in diverse areas of life. Hence, all Igbo Christian should be taught to believe themselves, and to have confidence in African values, in order to dispel the notion that anything African was inferior.

The church must also present Christ as the liberator because, He is at once the foundation, the inspiration, the basic reason and the guarantor of the ultimate success of the struggle for the liberation of the human person, for development and for healing – idealistically, through the church (Rwiza, 2008). In the word of Nwadialor, & Nweke (2014):

This situation has therefore called for an adequate and clear theology and the development of liberation praxis born out of the living experience of the African people. We therefore believe that the stage is now set when African theologians will help the people to uncover the liberative dimension of their faith and call for a discipleship in praxis as the beginning of theological reflection (p.1).

Therefore, it is eminent that the church in Igbo society should be developed as an instrument of struggle for the liberation of the oppressed and exploited in the society taking into consideration both their past and present struggles through the word of God, perceiving the God of the Bible as the God of liberation.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, the church assumes a pivotal role, viewed as instrumental in championing justice, healing, and liberation from the lingering impacts of historical events, especially among the Igbo community. This active involvement necessitates the church's participation in social justice and advocacy efforts, addressing systemic injustices and supporting marginalized communities both within Igbo society and across Nigeria. The focus extends beyond mere theoretical discussions to demand tangible actions, including the empowerment of individuals and communities through initiatives such as educational programs, economic empowerment projects, and community-building endeavors. (Asuquo, 2018).

Crucially, acknowledging and respecting local cultures becomes paramount in this pursuit. The church must articulate its teachings and practices in ways that resonate with the unique cultural context of the Igbo people, fostering a profound sense of identity and belonging among its members. This transformative approach calls for a vibrant and engaged church that not only tends to spiritual needs but actively partakes in the broader struggle for justice, equality, and liberation. The emphasis lies in cultivating a holistic understanding of freedom that encompasses the entirety of human existence.

References

Agbiji, O. M. (2012). *Development-Oriented Church Leadership in Post-Military Nigeria: A Sustainable Transformational Approach* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Stellenbosch.

Bediako, K. (1980). *Review of the books "African Theology en route" and "Libération ou adaptation"?* In K. Appiah Kubi & S. Torres (Eds.), *Journal of Religion in Africa/Religion en Afrique*, 11(2), 154. Leiden.

Dault, K. (2015). What Is the Preferential Option for the Poor? *U.S. Catholic, 80*(1), 46. https://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2015/01/what-preferential-option-poor

Entwistle, David N. (30 June 2015). Integrative Approaches to Psychology and Christianity. Cascade Books. p. 148. ISBN 9781498223485.

Giclure, O. (2008). *Progress in Unity? Fifty years of theology within the World Council of Churches:* 1945-1995: A study guide. Peters Press. Louvain

Halperin, S. (2024). *neocolonialism*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/neocolonialism

Han, Y. S. (2013). *The Understanding of God in African theology: Contributions of John Samuel Mbiti and Mercy Amba Oduyoye*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology, Department of Science of Religion and Missiology.

Hoffman, R. (2020). Alfred Adler - Individual Psychology. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved July 21, 2020, from https://www.simplypsychology.org/alfred-adler.html

Jimoh, A. (2004). *Liberation Theology and the Nigerian Reality.* In A. A. Akinwale & F. Ogunmodede (Eds.), *All That They Had To Live On: Essays in Honour of Archbishop John Onaiyekan and Msgr. John Aniagwu* (pp. 147-162). Stirling-Horden Pub. Nig. ISBN 9780321446.

Makowski, J. B. (2004). *Low Self-Esteem as it Relates to Anxiety and Depression* (Master's thesis). Grand Valley State University. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/705

Mueller, J. (1991). *What are they saying*, Philandelphia, Fortress Press

Nwadialor, K. L., & Nweke, C. C. (2013). The Relevance of the Church in Oppressive Situations: The Praxis of Liberation Theology in Africa. *Ogirisi: A New Journal of African Studies, 10*(1), 5. http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v10i1.5

Nwaubani, A. T. (2020, September 14). Nigeria's slave descendants prevented from marrying who they want. *The News*. Retrieved.

Ocheni, S., & Nwankwo, B. C. (2012). Analysis of Colonialism and Its Impact in Africa. *Cross-Cultural Communication, 8*(3), 46-54. https://doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120803.1189

Okure, T. (1990). *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*: AMECEA Gaba Publications. Kenya

Oriji, J. N. (1987). THE SLAVE TRADE, WARFARE AND ARO EXPANSION IN THE IGBO HINTERLAND. *Transafrican Journal of History*, *16*, 151–166. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24328626

Perry, C., Eltis, D., Engerman, S. L., & Richardson, D. (Eds.). (2021). Captivity and the Slave Trade. In *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (pp. 25–152). part, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pilossof, R. (2010). 'Guns don't colonise people...': the role and use of firearms in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. *Kronos, 36*(1), [Page numbers]. https://doi.org

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (1990). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.* Vatican City.

Scott-Jones, G., Kamara, M. R., & PE. (2020). The Traumatic Impact of Structural Racism on African Americans. *Delaware Journal of Public Health, 6*(5), 80–82. https://doi.org/10.32481/djph.2020.11.019

Sherman-Peter, A. M. (2022). *The Legacy of Slavery in the Caribbean and the Journey towards Justice*. *UN Chronicle*.

Uchegbue, C. (2016). *The Place of the Church in the Socio-Political and Economic Liberation of Nigeria.* Online Academia.

Whatley, W. (2012). The Gun-Slave Cycle in the 18th Century British Slave Trade in Africa. *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*. Retrieved from https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/44492/