

**CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES INFLUENCE IN OWERRI
1910-1990**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **UCHE WILLIAM MANUMEHE** of the Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under my direct supervision.

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Date

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to late Engr. (Oha) Maxwell O. Manumehe, for all you stood for and taught me. Rest on O'max

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

The influence of the Christian missionaries in Nigeria and particularly Igboland is immense. The advent of missionary activity in West Africa started with the Portuguese when they arrived at the kingdom of Kongo in the nineteenth century.¹ Christian missionary influence began in Nigeria through the visit of John Affonsod' Aveiro to Benin.² However, Christianity did not expand during this period even after the establishment of a church in Benin because of the non-committed effort of the evangelizers.³ The abolition of slave trade in the nineteenth century brought about a new era and the re-introduction of Christianity into West Africa by the humanitarian bodies who believed they were paying their debts for exploitation of Africa. They devoted a large portion of their resources in the spread of Christianity in Africa.

Before the introduction of Christianity in Igboland, the indigenous people were traditional or ancestor worshippers who believed in many gods and this made them polytheistic in nature and as every religion, African traditional religion served as a binding force to the people. There were different deities for different purposes but the most revered of them all is the Supreme Being and creator known as *Chineke*. The political, economic and social lives of the people were all

intertwined with their religion. This is to show that there was a flourishing religion that was greatly influenced by the activities of the Christian missionaries.

The exploration of the hinterland by the Europeans for goods during the era of legitimate trade was what led to the penetration of missionaries into Igboland. The first establishment of a base by the missionary activities started with the activities of the Christian Missionary Society in Onitsha in 1857.⁴ Much was not achieved by the CMS in Igboland in the nineteenth century as there were limitations which they encountered. The geography of the area which includes the forest region and the areas to be covered coupled with the hesitation of some people to accept the new religion posed as a great hindrance to them. Effective evangelism was only achieved after the conquest of many areas in Igboland which came with colonial rule. E. A. Ayandele recorded that the adoption of Christianity by some communities was because they did not want to be conquered by the British colonial officers.⁵

Before Christianity, the people of Owerri practiced the African traditional religion which is polytheistic in nature and made them believe in many gods. Christianity introduced its own doctrines and these doctrines have been set by society as a guideline for a moral life thereby rendering the traditional yardstick for morality which has served the people for many generations useless. The first missionary enterprise in Owerri was in 1903 through the efforts of Reverend T. J. Dennis under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society.⁶ Under the Roman Catholic Mission, Father Keraph sought to establish a central station between Calabar and Onitsha for the Catholic Church and in the Old Owerri province which was made up of Owerri, Umuahia, Okigwe, Aba, Orlu, Ahoada and Port Harcourt.⁷ It was from Owerri that Christianity began its expansion in the present Imo State of southeastern Nigerian.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the influence of Christian missionaries in Owerri. The objectives of the study are to

- i. Examine the history of Owerri before the introduction of Christianity.
- ii. Examine the advent of the Christian missionaries in Owerri town since its incursion.
- iii. Assess the impact of Christian missionaries in Owerri.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to examine and understand in what ways and to what extent the Christian missionaries have influenced the Owerri town. The study will also aid in understanding the pre-colonial Owerri town and its settings which includes their political institution, economic activities and social organization such as their religion, customs and tradition, festivals, sacrileges and taboos.

Research Methodology and the Sources

The historical method is employed in this study and the data were collected using primary and secondary sources. The data used are thoroughly analyzed. The primary sources based mainly on oral tradition and interviews are the major aspect of this study. Oral interview will be conducted with people of Owerri town focusing on the elders that witnessed the transition from one religion to another while the secondary sources includes books, journals and all documented materials relevant for this study.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study focuses on the Christian missionary influence in Owerri town from 1910 to 1990. However a study will be done on pre-colonial Owerri setting from early nineteenth century to 1900. The final aspect of this study focuses on the extent the missionaries have influenced the inhabitants of Owerri and their way of life. Owerri experienced the Christian works from the early years of the twentieth century and tremendous progress has been recorded by the town till date. The limitations of the study will be encountered in both primary and secondary sources. In the primary sources, there is the danger of distortion and subjectivity in acquiring the data needed through oral interview as the scope of the study will cover up to pre-colonial and colonial times.

Literature Review

The missionaries influence on Owerri have been documented but not detailed enough. In light of the above, some of the literature on the subject matter will be reviewed for the attainment of an intellectual comprehensive work for future academic benefit.

The first set of literature would focus on the traditional African society before the introduction of Christianity and the first work in this set is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The work portrayed a typical setting of Igbo society and culture before and during the colonial rule. It goes on to expatiate on the changes that have taken place after the introduction of Christianity.

According to Achebe;

The whites came very clever, he came quietly and peaceably with his religion, we allowed him to stay now he has won over our brothers and our clans no longer act like one. He put knife on things that held us together and we have fallen apart....⁸

Another literature focusing on the Igbo tradition, culture and religion before Christianity, is the work of K. Asare-Opoku titled “Religion in Africa During Colonial Rule” in *Africa Under Colonial Domination* edited by AduBoahen. He explained that the life of the Africans and culture were intertwined with their religion to the point that religion and culture were inseparable.⁹ Nevertheless, the missionaries were bent on influencing the lives of Africans by converting them and also imposing their culture. To achieve this aim he went on, they tried to divide their spiritual and social life. This move attacked the bond which held the Africans together.

The work by Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture* encompasses the Igbo traditional society; their traditional belief, changes in the society through Christianity and the comparison between the two religions. Writing on cultural patterns and customs of Igboland, Ilogu claims that the traditional social structures in Igboland as well as the institutions of family, religion and economic pursuit are communalistic meaning that the communal life transcends individual life in Igboland mainly in religion.¹⁰

Some cultures like “Osu” (caste system) by M. Idika in E. A. Ade Adegbola (ed), *Traditional Religion in West Africa* was well known in Igbo land. Idika described *osuas* as an individual who removes himself from communal covenant to that of the gods, they were considered the possession of the gods.¹¹ Other cultures of Igbo land contained in this literature are burial rites and new yam festival in Igbo land.

Another significant literature to this research is “External Influence in the African Society” a work by E. A. Ayandele contained in *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* edited by J. C. Anene and Brown. He posits that to the Africans, the missionaries were aliens and to the missionaries, Africans were inferior.¹² To this, the missionaries exuded superiority which made

the people suspicious of them and they did not record many converts in the early years of their evangelization because they considered Africa barbaric and beneath their standard.

The History of Igbo People by Elizabeth Isichei recorded that in the nineteenth century, missionaries remained closely confined to the Niger. Adoption of Christianity by Igbos she wrote, was brought about by opening of Igboland through the Aro expedition and British conquest.¹³ Another reason was that some Igbo groups looked to the missionaries as allies against violent conquest and oppression of early colonial period.

F. Ekechi in his work *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857-1914* recorded the activities of the early missionaries in Africa. He accounted about the disunity in Christian churches and how they have plagued Igboland.¹⁴ The quest for supremacy among the Protestants and the Roman Catholics has led to tussle of power among the Christian groups in Igboland.

Also related to this study is the work of E. A. Ayandele, "External Relations with European in the Nineteenth Century" contained in the *Groundwork of Nigerian History* edited by ObaroIkime. Ayandele wrote that the hope of missionaries for easy transformation from African tradition religion to Christianity was not realized as expected; the larger part of the southern Nigeria refused to patronize the alien religion and the northern part was out of the equation due to Islam.¹⁵ The part of southern Nigerian that yielded to them was the Yoruba because of the acquisition of fire arms while was part of were suspicious of them.

The Advent of Catholic Church in Nigeria: its Growth in Owerri Diocese, a work by R.A. Njoku tried to give a history of Catholic Church in Nigeria with Owerri as the focal point. The work gave an understanding of the Igbo society before Christianity in Owerri. It further examined the method of introduction of the new religion and finally, its aftermaths. However, the work though

on Owerri community, concentrated on a particular denomination of Christianity without examining the other ones; thus giving it a limited view.¹⁶

S. N Nwabara gave an account of the advent of Christianity in Nigeria and its penetration into Igboland in his work *Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860-1960*. During the incursion of Christianity into the hinterland, three pronged attack was adopted; first was from Onitsha by the Christian Missionary Society and Roman Catholic Mission; second from the Cross River by the United Free Church of Scotland and the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society and third from the Niger Delta by the Niger Delta Pastorate.¹⁷

Chapter Outline

In this project, the Christian missionaries influence in Owerri, there are five chapters and their summaries are as follows

Chapter one contains the introduction into the work, Background to study, aim and objectives, significance of study, research methodology, scope of study and limitation of study, literature review and chapterization. Chapter one introduces and analyzes the coming of European missionaries to West Africa, Nigeria and Igboland.

Chapter two is based on a brief history of Owerri before the missionaries; focusing on their traditions of origin, political institution, economic activities and social organization. The focus however will be directed to their social life which seemed more affected by the influence of the missionary activities.

Chapter three comprises of the introduction of Christianity to Nigeria, the coming of Christianity to Owerri and the Christiania missionaries activities in in Owerri town. The challenges faced by missionaries and reactions of the people towards the alien religion.

Chapter four focuses on the impact of the Christian missionaries in Nigeria focusing on the social and economic impacts.

Chapter five is the conclusion of the work with references and bibliography.

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CHAPTER TWO

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OWERRI PEOPLE

Introduction

This chapter examines the traditions of origin of the Owerri people, their political organization, economic activities and social organization. Owerri town is currently the state capital of Imo state and is located in the Owerri Municipal Local Government Area of ImoState in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Owerri town is bordered in the north by Ubomiri, in the south by the Otamiri River, in the east by Uratta and in the west by Irete, hence these towns constitutes her neighbors. The villages that make up the Owerri town are five in number and they are *Umuororonjo, Amawom, Umuonyeche, Umuodu, and Umuoyima.*

Traditions of Origin

Due to controversies and contradictions concerning the origin of the people of Owerri, their early history is still a case under study. There are different approaches to determining when Owerri town came into existence and this is caused by the lack of documented evidence. Some of the explanations toward the origin of Owerri are based on the theory of migration and adaption, oral tradition and hypothesis.

According to oral tradition,² it is believed that the founder of Owerri town by name EkwemOha emigrated from *Umuorivillage Uruattato* the present Owerri town in the 14th century following a dispute between him and his brother Ndum after the death of their father. When the matter

could not be settled even by the elders of the land, Ekwem fled his home town with his family because his life was threaten by his younger brother. He continued on his journey to an unhabituated land and later settled in a place he called *UgwuEkwem* (Ekwem's hill). From this location, Ekwem's family expanded and began to disperse.

From the perspective of the migration and adaptation theory, it is known in history that naturally, people migrate to a favorable environment, considerably near a river or source of water which could aid their survival and enhance their civilization; this could be seen in the civilization of Egypt and Mesopotamia. In line with the above assertion, Oral tradition claims³ that the Owerri people have been said to have migrated from *UgwuEkwem* which the oral tradition claimed to be their ancestral home to the present day Owerri town. They moved to the confines of the River and from there expanded and developed. The villages which are *Umuororonjo*, *Amawom*, *Umuonyeche*, *Umuodu*, and *Umuoyimawere* then named after the offspring of the founding father of the Owerri community.

Following the Nri-Awka-Isuama (Orlu) hypothesis, G.I. Jones described Nri-Awka-Isuama (Orlu) area as the core and center of Igbo from where waves of migration took off.⁴ His point was backed up by P. A. Talbot who holds the view that the Nri-Awka-Isuama (Orlu) was thickly populated for a long time before the wave of expansion began from there.⁵ Owerri town being situated in the area and have an approximate distance of about 30 kilometers from Isuama (Orlu) was in existence during this period. The evidence behind this hypothesis is that the Nri-Awka-Isuama (Orlu) is the demographic fact that the area was densely populated at the period of study and they share cultural features.⁶ After the Aro expedition and the conquest of most Igbo societies by the British, colonial rule brought Owerri town came under the British government which made Owerri town a district, moved up to a division and finally a province.

Political Organization

Pre-colonial Igbo society operated a segmentary and acephalous political organization. Owerri town being a community in Igbo land was bound to operate this system of government but later diverted to a monarchical system of government with a king at the helm of affairs.

As a decentralized society, there was no central system of government. There was however a mode through which law and order were adhered to. The *Umunna*, village assembly and town assembly were the governing bodies. The *Umunna*s made up of different families from the same lineage and is headed by the *Okpala*. The next is the village assembly, this is made up of different *Umunna*s and the last is the town assembly made up of different villages. The executive, judicial and legislative acts were handled by these bodies. Other political bodies were the Age Grade which varied in age, size and structure; the *Nze* and *Ozo* titled men were also a political instrument and the contributions of the *Umuada* to the political structure of Igbo society can never be over emphasized.⁷

The monarchical system of government is said to have been adopted through Benin influence on the western Igboland and later the other parts of Igboland as at the 17th century.⁸ Owerri town adopted the centralized system of government as early as the aforementioned period. The king was known as the Eze of Owerri and the reign of kingship started in 1690 with *Eze Eke Onunwa* and has continued until the present king *Eze Emmanuel Emenyonu Njemanzewo* ascended the throne of Owerri in 1989 till date.⁹ Despite the adoption of kingship, the formation of the decentralized political organization is still maintained.

Economic Activities

The economic engagements of the Igbo people were agriculture which involves the cultivation of crop and the rearing of animal. Also was the industry where local handcrafts were produced. The products of agriculture and the locally manufactured handcraft form the article of trade which is the last aspect of the economic engagements.

Owerri is within the tropical rainforest region of southern Nigeria. The geographical location of a place often determines the economic engagement of the inhabitants and as to the case of Owerri town, her economic life was based on agriculture as the area gets abundant rainfall. They engage in mainly subsistence farming with staple crops like yam, cocoyam, and cassava. Also, animal domestication and animal husbandry were also practiced but on a rate for consumption. With the presence of two rivers and a lake in Owerri town known as Otamiri River, Nworie River and NwebereLake, the people of Owerri town engaged in fishing. However, their fishing just like agriculture was also on a subsistence rate as they did not practice it on a commercial base. Another reason for not commercializing fishing was because there was the trace of a mineral deposit in the Nworie River thus making living things unavailable in it.¹⁰

The market days in Owerri are in line with the Igbo market days which are *Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo* and. Their articles of trade involve the product from their plant and animal agriculture such as pepper, yam, cassava, corn, fish, etc. These markets have aided in promoting lasting commercial activities and interactions amongst the villages and socio-economic co-operation between the town and her neighbors. Transportation in Owerri was like every other forest region, there were some difficulties in navigating through the area which made the major means of

transportation by human portage and by water. The human portage created bush paths which could lead from one village to the other or from one community to the other and this in its own way facilitated effective communication among the people.

Social Organization

Before the influence of Christianity in Igboland, the Owerri people practiced the African traditional religion which is a belief system that was handed down from one generation to another. The social life of the Igbo people was intertwined with their religious life such that one cannot exist in the absence of the other. To the above assertion, the people were born, nurtured and they grew in this religion¹¹ which also comprise of their belief, ethics and way of life. Social life, religion and morality are intertwined in Igboland. The social life of the Owerri town constitutes of their laws, customs, traditions, festivals and all these operate under one auspices known as *omenani*(ways of the people).

The people of Igboland believed in the existence of a Supreme Being known as *Chi-Ukwu (High God)or Chineke (God the creator)* who oversees the creations and is above all spirits; good or evil. This supreme God is believed to be in control of all things above and under the clouds. Any event that has no human explanation that is on the metaphysical realm is attributed to him or his mortal enemy *Ekwensu*.¹²However, beneath this supreme God are other deities and spirits that are subjected to him. These lesser gods acts as an intermediary between man and the Supreme Being. In line with this belief system, the people of Owerri town had spirits and deities that mediate between them and the Supreme Being.

The social organization of Igboland recognized the caste system which is also part of their belief. The caste system is called as *osu*and they are known as outcast. The caste system appears to be

strongest in Owerri Province stretching down below Aba and up into Onitsha Province and the origin of the of the system is uncertain.¹³These are individuals who remove themselves from the covenant of the people and join that of the gods,¹⁴they pledge their lives and that of their generations to come to the gods and thus becomes the property of the deity they consecrate themselves to. They enjoy the protection and privileges of the gods but were ostracized from the people as nobody wants to associate with what belonged to the gods. They marry and socialize among themselves because a freeborn that mingles with them automatically becomes what they are meaning that they don't marry outside their circle. The Owerri town recognized the institution of the caste system which has lasted since time immemorial but still affects marriages and social groups till date.

Igboland which the Owerri people are part of have some general belief. Some of these beliefs are ancestors, re-incarnation and personal god, proper burial. The dead which constitutes the ancestors are believed to watch of their family and intercede on behalf of the family before the gods. The ancestors are also classified as good and bad depending on the way a person lived their life before death. The good ones are usually worshiped and referred to as the *Ndiichie* (those of the old).¹⁵Belief in ancestors birthed the belief in re-incarnation. As the ancestors are assumed to still be part of the family though not visible, they are believed to re-incarnate and are born back into the family and this may occur between the immediate family and extended family. This hypothesis is deducted from the close resemblance of the new born baby and the dead or through their personality, character or body marks. Re-incarnation stretches to what is known as Ogbanje¹⁶ which area children that dies at infancy and is believed to come back again as a new born baby several times through the same woman.

In Owerri, every individual is believed to have a personal god known as *chi* which is given to him by the Supreme Being and has a duty of accompanying him from cradle to the grave.¹⁷ Burial are considered a mean of ensuring transition so that place would be secured for the dead in the spirit world¹⁸ and everyone must be buried according no matter the age or the status of the deceased to avoid the wandering of the spirits and disgruntled spirits. However, the advent of Christianity in Owerri town distorted the people's way of life and beliefs.

Festivals in Owerri differ from village to village and from community to community though some of them may have some similar features. In Owerri town, the known festivals are *OruOwere* also called *OruEze*. According to oral interview of Thompson Oparaugo,¹⁹ the period of the festival is marked as sacred and a lot of things were forbidden and these things include; no weeping when death occurs, no quarrel or open confrontation, no firing of guns and so on. It starts in the month of June and last till August. For the festival the traditional institution set up for proper conduct and observance of this festival is known as the *OhaOwere*. Their duty borders on determining the period and duration the festival will last while preparing for the festival proper. The highlights of the event are the roasting of old yam with signals the commencement and the preparation of corn meal porridge which closes the festival. The festival attracts a lot of fanfare from Owerri and beyond. One of the common festivals in Igboland that is not observed by the Owerri town is the New Yam Festival. The *Oru Owerri* was usually celebrated with the old yam and all the indigenes of Owerri were forbidden from taking the new yam until the end of the festival. The consumption of new yam commences after the festival, thus there is no celebration for the harvesting of the new yam.

The traditions of Owerri forbid the consumption of the '*ona*' yam known as bitter yam; it is a taboo. It is believed that calamity befalls anyone that eats the *ona* yam. The people believes that

whoever eats the yam will be afflicted with great ailment.²⁰ The myth behind this was that the *ona* was believed to have caused the death of a man and his household which made the ruler forbade the entire community from consuming the bitter yam.²¹

In the social life of the people, there things considered abomination which is regarded as the highest sin in Igboland. Some of the acts that still consist as abomination in the pre-colonial times are still upheld while some have been abolished. Abominable act in Igboland are seen from two different perspectives which are personal and moral crimes.²² However, the moral crime is mostly adhere to as it affects the whole community when it occurs. Some of the abolished crimes include killing of twins while the observed ones remain uprooting of a sown yam, suicide by hanging etc. Social life of the Owerri town thrived as they adhered to the social norms which are intertwined with the concept of morality and the African traditional religion. The African traditional religion acted as an instrument of social control and it was a fabric that tied the people together.

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CHAPTER 3

THE COMING OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES IN NIGERIA

Introduction

This chapter examines the coming of Christian missionaries in Nigeria, the advent of missionaries in Igbo land and finally in Owerri. The reception given to the Christian missionaries and the challenges they faced are also discussed. The first missionary enterprise in Nigeria started in Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great in 15th century when the king of Portugal launched a pioneering missionary enterprise.¹ This attempt yielded no fruit as the natives were not ready for the introduction of any alien culture and the high mortality rate caused by some diseases such as malaria.² After the failed attempts, the second opening of Nigeria to Christian mission was in the 18th century, Christianity was finally introduced into the present day Nigeria in 1842 as the first set of Christians landed in Badagry.³ Prior to the previous era, some factors contributed to the growth and the success of this era. These factors were the abolishment of slave trade and the introduction of the legitimate trade; the evangelical great awakening and the feeling of the white to Christianize the Africans as a way of atoning to the sins they committed against Africa during the era of slave trade.⁴

The first missionaries settled in Badagry where they made efforts to establish a base. Their plans were however fruitless as the town was still suffering from the effects of the slave trade which was just abolished. The natives were skeptical as to what the business of the white were again and this mindset frustrated the activities of the missionaries who decided to look inwards and entered negotiations with the authority of Abeokuta.⁵ The missionaries came in the

wake of the liberated slaves returning home to Nigeria, and the missionaries involved in this first period were Townsend, Crowther and Gollmer.⁶ The southern region of Nigeria was opened up to Christianity as the northern region was dominated by Islam. The southwest was the first in the southern region to be penetrated by the Christian missionaries followed by the south-south and then the southeast.

Between 1842 and 1892, eight Christian missions were able to set up themselves in different parts of the southern Nigeria. The Wesleyan Methodists established themselves to the southwestern area of Yoruba land concentrating in Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan; the Church Missionary Society was the largest in Yoruba land with greater influence in Lagos, Abeokuta, Ibadan and Ilesha and the in the eastern part of the country. Apart from Calabar, they also controlled the Niger Delta until the late nineteenth century; the United Presbyterians concentrated in the old Calabar with their sphere of influence in the Cross River Valley; Southern American Baptists also established in Lagos, Abeokuta and Ogbomoso; Qua Iboe set up them along the Qua Iboe River in 1887; In 1892, the Primitive Methodists started at Ibibio, specifically the Oron; the Roman Catholic Missions that came to Nigeria were two: the Society of African Missions and the Society of Holy Ghost Fathers. The former had strong influence in Lagos, Abeokuta, Oyo, Ibadan, Asaba whereas the later was more successful and established in areas located across the Niger towards the eastern area.⁷

Advent of Christianity in Igboland

Igboland is located roughly between latitude 5 and 7 degrees north of the equator and longitude 6 and 8 east of the Greenwich⁶. They occupy the south-eastern part of modern Nigeria. It is bounded on the North by Igala, Idoma, Igede and Tiv, on the west by Benin, on the South by

Ogoni and Ijaw, on South-east by Ibibio and on the south-west by Urhobo and Isoko.⁸As the dominant culture in the east, they make up the five states of the south-eastern Nigeria which are Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Imo and Ebonyi state. The land falls between the five main vegetation belts namely: mangrove forest, fresh water, swamp forest, rain forest and derived savanna⁹.

The seed of Christianity was planted in Igboland on the occasion of the Niger expedition of 1841 through a treaty signed between the Queen of England and an Igbo Chief, Obi Ossai of Aboh who granted them freedom of worship.¹⁰ The Church Missionary Society chose Onitsha as a base because of its strategic position into the interior of Igbo land¹¹ as the River Niger formed an obvious means of communication with the hinterland. Based on this development, two major expeditions were mounted on Niger; the 1841 expedition and the 1857 expedition. The Niger expedition of 1841 marked the beginning of new missionary enterprise in Nigeria. It was sent by the British government to explore the Rivers of Niger and Benue. Also it was to end slave trade in Africa and explore the legitimate trade. The leaders of the expedition were enjoined to relate to African rulers that “the Queen professes Christian religion and by the religion they are commanded to assist in promoting goodwill among all nations”¹² On the part of CMS, some missionaries accompanied the expedition with the view of surveying for the CMS what facilities needed for the evangelization of the hinterland¹³ and also pave way for the return of freed slaves from Sierra Leone who would create evangelizing and civilizing centers. This expedition was however a failure.

1857 expedition proved more successful than that of 1841 because it marked the establishment of the first church in Igboland which was in Onitsha. There were factors that made this new development possible and the 1857 expedition successful. According to Isichei in her work entitled *A History of the Igbo People*, these factors includes the opening of Igboland after

the Aro expedition of 1901 which allowed the British to invade the land; some Igbo groups looked to the missionaries as allies against violent and bloody conquest, extortion and oppression of early colonial rule¹⁴; also it have been identified that western education is the most important motive for Igbo acceptance of Christianity.¹⁵Also, the discovery of the power of quinine over malaria gave rise to more optimistic view that the Europeans had a better chance of surviving in Africa.¹⁶It was from the establishment at Onitsha that the Christian mission spread to other parts of Igboland. The rapid spread of Christianity may also be attributed partially to the efforts of indigenous church teachers and catechists for a good amount of the mission work were done by them.¹⁷ Inland penetration later developed through three different routes: the first was from Onitsha by the Christian Missionary Society, joined by the Roman Catholic Mission; second was the United Free Church of Scotland and the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society that worked from Cross River and the third from the Niger Delta was the Niger Delta Pastorate.¹⁸ The Church Missionary Society used the indigenous people as agents of evangelization.¹⁹

Conversion of the native people and the evangelization of the gospel was not an easy task to the missionaries. In Onitsha, no convert was made for a generation by the Christian Missionary Society Niger Mission established by Samuel Ajayi Crowther in 1857.²⁰

Christian Missionaries in Owerri

The opening up of the southern Igbo land which include Owerri started with the defeat of the Aro and the expulsion of the Long juju known as Ibinukpabi.²¹ The establishment of British rule in Owerri and making the town a new British administrative headquarter opened up the town to the activities of the missionaries as the Christian Missionary Society launched its expansionist policy into the newly colonized regions. The Owerri mission was an outpost of Onitsha until

1909 when the Owerri mission was christened the Southern District with the erection of the All Saints Church Egbu; it became independent of Onitsha in terms of financial and administrative dealings.²²

The first mission station in Owerri was opened at Egbu which was three miles to Owerri town and the first converts were recorded ten years later as the people were more interested in the western education than the religion. The converts were in the persons of John Ohale and James Uwakwe who were baptized in 1907 and the first marriage took place in 1908 as James Uwakwe wedded his wife. Established new stations stretched from Owerri and its environs to the other parts of Igbo land such as Arochuku and Afikpo.²³

Challenges Faced By Missionaries

The early missionaries faced some challenges which hindered the spread of Christianity in Igbo land. Some of these hindrances include language, transportation, tropical disease, hostility, finance, African traditional religion, security, rejection, and European sense of superiority.²⁴

Language and communication was one of the foremost challenges faced by early missionaries. It was impossible for them to express themselves and evangelize a group of people who neither hear their language nor understand them. This made communication difficult between the Africans and missionaries. Consequently, this problem led to the need for African translators with the duty of explaining to the natives. These translators were either small or nonexistent in some communities depending on the level of westernization in the area. In some towns like Owerri, there was need for translators but most times they translate the wrong thing just as Achebe wrote, “the inaccurate translation of Igbo words into English such as the word *ike*

which in Igbo can mean ‘strength’ or ‘buttocks’ depending on the translator”²⁵ this made their efforts strenuous.

During the time of the early missionaries, there was poor road network and facilities which made transportation and communication extremely difficult. As late as 1880, the CMS that arrived at Onitsha in 1857 could not move to Obosi which was only five miles away.²⁶ Owerri located in the area between Calabar and Onitsha was a thickly populated and partly thickly forested area of Igbo land.²⁷ It was characterized by dense impenetrable forest and bridgeless streams, thus their mobility was highly restricted.

Europeans referred to Africa as the “white mans grave” in the early 19th century. The tropical area of Igbo land made it possible for disease causing insects to breed and the Europeans not being immune to most of these diseases caught up with them easily which eventually leads to their death. Although a cure for malaria that was mostly known was discovered, there was no cure for other diseases like sleeping sickness caused by tsetse fly. This situation lessened the number of missionaries willing to evangelize Africa. The early missionaries lacked adequate fiscal support they needed because they were sent by organization like the Church Missionary Society and Roman Catholic Mission and not the government. They lacked many essential needs like food, clothing, medicine and shelter. Without the fulfillment of these basic needs, they most times had to rely on the community for survival. Even when their needs are catered for, their arrivals are usually slow in process and late in arrival. This made them depend on the traders and companies for support.²⁸

Before the advent of Christianity in Igbo land, there was already an established religion that is the African traditional religion. It is a religion that was handed down from generation to

generation and guides the life of every African. This indigenous religion encompassed the customs and traditions of the people which is the apex of their religious and social life. The bodies of African traditional religion came in conflict with the missionaries who tried to undermine their ways. Most Africans in the beginning of the 20th century remained loyal to their religion and custom and rejected the alien religion thereby ensuing great difficulty in the conversion of Africans.

The safety of the missionaries was always on a probability. The dense forest of the Igboland and area of the case study bred wild animals which acted as a source of insecurity and sometimes led to loss of life. Also inter community wars like that of Onitsha and Ogidi²⁹ which started around 1854 and lasted to the coming of the missionaries to Onitsha in 1857 was security risk that hindered expansion of missionaries. Their insecurities also arose from the community who could dispose of them according to their custom.

Owerri town accepted and welcomed Christianity with open arms. Most communities in Igboland however viewed them as outsiders who knew nothing about their culture, tradition and customs and therefore had no place amongst them³⁰ thereby rejecting them and their alien religion. The missionaries tried to force their religion on the people. They were obsessed with propagating their ideology; they considered themselves socially superior to the native³¹. From their own perspective, the natives should be grateful and appreciative for their work. They failed to compromise their religion with that of the indigenous people which made conversion difficult because the natives were suspicious of them and their religion and this further gave them the reason to reject Christianity.

Peoples' Reactions

Africans used their religion as a weapon to resist Christianity as it worked hand in hand with colonialism which was a threat to their independence and values; they often resorted on magic and intervention of their gods and ancestors. The reaction of the Africans toward the missionaries and their alien religion varied from place to place and depended on the kind of reception they received. This reaction can be in form of resistance or integration.

As expected, the missionary attempts to uproot the foundation of African belief was met with resistance.³²In resisting the alien religion and its propagator, some communities were more active than the others. The resisters were the people who vehemently and verbally resisted the Europeans and anything they could offer including Christianity. These resisters got to the extent of killing the Europeans and their reason always borders on the fact that the missionaries were encroaching on their territory or that they were a threat to their economy. Examples of these communities were Ezza people of Abakiliki division, the Uzuakoli and the Aro;³³ whom resistance consequently led to the Aro expedition of 1901. Some communities on the other hand resisted Christianity with the reason that it had no knowledge of their culture and tradition. This was brought up by the efforts of the missionaries to eradicate some of the Igbo cultures which they considered barbaric and a threat to human life like killing of twins and albino, human sacrifice, caste system. Some people engaged in active resistance which led to the use of arms against the missionaries while some were passive in their terms of resistance in terms of rely on their gods for fight for itself.

Unlike some towns in Igbo land, it was reported the people of Owerri were receptive to the missionaries and begged to live among them. However, there were factors that led to this

attitude towards the missionaries.³⁴ First the these reasons was the manner which colonial rule was introduced which was force, seeing the missionaries came with the administrators; the people feared that the method of intrusion will be repeated by the missionaries. Second was the notion that the missionaries will introduce western education which will educate the sons of the soil thus leading to the end of colonial rule and the oppression and exploitation from the Europeans. Another reason was for their sons to receive western education so that they can take up positions in the colonial government such as clerks and interpreters.³⁵These were the reasons that led to mass acceptance of Christianity in Owerri.

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CHAPTER FOUR

IMPACTS OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES IN OWERRI

The activities of the missionaries have made an important landmark in the history of Igboland. Their work started in the coast which was where they spent most time before penetrating into the interior. Nineteenth century was spent by missionaries striving to get a foothold on Africa therefore their impact did not manifest itself in a pronounced way until the twentieth century. These impacts have been a topic feasted on; many scholars have tried to examine the nature and implications of Christian missionaries on Africa. Some have viewed this from the angle that it did more good than harm to Africans while from other perspectives it have been seen as a force that has disintegrated the Africans by attacking their uniting force which is the African traditional religion. Consequently, not all the cultures which had contact with the alien tradition covered to it, some African cultures are still maintained despite the impacts of Christianity in Igboland.

Christianity however had a lot of impact on Owerri and Igboland as whole which have affected the people a positive and negative ways. Politically, economically, socially and religiously, the missionary propaganda inaugurated many changes. This chapter will however be focusing on the social and economic impacts of the Christian missionaries in Owerri. Some of the ways these impacts has manifested are; as an instrument of colonial rule, introduction of western education, evolution of native languages, introduction of new religion and secularism, abolition of inhumane activities, effects on culture, change in status of women, agriculture and architecture, commerce.

Social Impacts

These are ways the missionary activities have affected the social life of the people such as their way of life, culture and tradition..

Instrument of Colonial Rule

The 1841 expedition marked the advent of missionary enterprise and colonial government in Nigeria. Out of the three civilizing agents –explorers, missionaries and traders- the missionaries seem to have achieved more with its permanent foothold in Nigeria by making the local people establish a lasting relationship between them and the Europeans.¹ Over the years, Christianity has been viewed by Africans as an instrument that projected colonial rule. In some parts of Igboland where missionaries encountered opposition by the people and traditional rulers, they appealed to their home government for protection and establishment of law and order.²This complaint usually led to the establishment of colonial government and if opposition continues, expedition was used to subdue the people. Achebe concede to this as he wrote that the white man had not just brought religion but also a government.³

The political system was also affected as the colonial administrators installed individuals as warrant chiefs in Igboland. These individuals have received authority from the whites and were meant to also protect the missionaries and look out for the converts in Owerri community. In the process of doing this they neglected the rules and ritual practices and exploited the people. The Igbos not being used to individual leadership revolted thereby causing societal upheaval. The appointment of warrant chiefs also destroyed the Igbo traditional political system that involved all adult male of the community.

Impact on Education

Education remains the vital part of missionary impact in Africa. Prior to Christianity, pre-colonial education in Igboland was basically informal. It was a system whereby the child learns from the parents, relatives, peer group and the society at large. The highest course was the norms of the society while the highest form was apprenticeship⁴ in a chosen field such as blacksmithing for male and pottery for female. The advent of Christianity however introduced a formal system of education which was for effective interaction, translation and preparatory for the takeover from the foreigners by the natives.⁵

Many factors⁶ have been attributed to the introduction of western education into Igboland. First, missionaries regarded education as the fundamental importance to the spread of Christianity. Secondly, legitimate trade was portrayed as the reason for re-introduction of Christianity and western education which was meant to maintain peace in Africa. Thirdly, another purpose of the missionaries at this time was said to be the use of education for conversion. Furthermore, the missionary education was geared towards the provision of lower level man power such as interpreters, evangelists, catechists, priests and clerks. Also they felt that to achieve their ambition, they needed to train indigenous class of people who would be able to carry on evangelism should the Europeans withdraw.⁷

The first schoolmasters that came with the C.M.S. arrived with the 1857 expedition from Sierra Leone⁸ and the missions that actively participated in the provision of western education were Christian Missionary Society (CMS), Methodist Missionary Society (MMS), Roman Catholic Church Mission (RCM), Primitive Methodist Missionary Society, United Presbyterian Church of Scotland, The Qua Ibo and Basel Mission.⁹ They set up elementary, secondary schools

and training colleges but it was difficult to convince the Africans to send their ward to school. Some of the reasons for this was mostly out of ignorance; the children had roles to play in the farm; they felt that sending their wards to school will make them revolt against their culture which the missionaries sermonized against; it was not what they expected as Ajayi puts it:

What they expected was a supplement not a substitute they wanted a system of apprenticeship by which the children acquire additional arts or skills, the art of reading and writing, gauging palm oil and manufacturing gun powder or sugar or building boat¹⁰

In Owerri, the missionaries received favorable response towards education unlike some other parts of Igboland. Some factors however led to this development in Owerri and they are first, the manner and approach through which colonial rule was established in the region was through force and the natives viewed the missionaries to be mediating factor between them the colonial government. Also, the notion that the missionaries will establish schools that will educate the natives and help them attain the positions of Native court clerks and interpreters thus bringing an end to the era of oppression. It was to the extent that the Owerri chiefs wrote to the Governor of Nigeria in 1925 asking among other things that schools and jobs be provided for their children so that they will not be left behind.¹¹

Evolution of Native Language

Missionaries introduced the systematic and scientific study of West African languages and they were given written form. Scholars have attributed this development to the need of thorough knowledge of languages in order to approach the people directly rather than through the interpreters¹² so as to lessen the problem of misinterpretation; a way of writing and teaching their converts in vernacular; a way of facilitating evangelization. Dialect variation and study of Igbo

language was a more serious problem¹³, probably because Crowther who was the first missionary to settle in Igbo land was a Yoruba born. Presently all religious books introduced by the Europeans to be used in churches like bible, hymns, and prayer books have been translated to Igbo language. This has made it easier for both educated and uneducated people to participate in church services. The first attempt made by the missionaries to translate the Bible from English language to Igbo language was made by Venerable T. J. Dennis when he embarked on expansionist policy into Owerri town in 1905.¹⁴

Churches that were established

The coming of Christianity has totally changed the mode of worship in Owerri. With its introduction, the relevance of various traditional religious as mention in chapter two was mitigated. Ancestral beliefs, worship and libations have been clobbered. Christianity changed the system of worship from polytheism which was practiced in African traditional religion through worship of many deities to monotheism which means acknowledgement of one supreme God who frowns on the gods of the people. African traditional religion was accepted and acknowledged by all with no separation or rivalry, the belief they observed was one. Christianity broke this tribal solidarity with the denominations that came with it. Although they believe in one God, there are different faith and approach to Him.

The struggle for converts has divided Igboland along denominational lines as various denominations have tried to oust the other. This situation has created an atmosphere of hatred in the land where everyone was suspicious of each other which never happened with African traditional religion. Some factions even create a law that her members should not associate with

the others especially in terms of marriage. African traditional religion which was the cord that held the people together was severed giving disunity a chance to prevail.

Secularism is the act of separating religion from the people. This is a belief that religion should not be involved in the organization of the society. The idea of secularism began in the 15th and 16th century in Europe during the age of enlightenment. In this era, it was deemed necessary to extricate religion from the affairs of the state so the religion will not influence other activities of the society. It was this mindset that the Europeans used on Africa and their religion. In pre-colonial African society, the affairs of the society and their religion were intricately interwoven. Adoption of Christianity into Africa changed the way things were. Religion was separated from the society. The political, economic and social life of the Igbos was made independent of each other. Hence, people started behaving as they wished without fear of going against the religious doctrines.

Abolition of Inhumane Activities

The Igbo traditional religion rested on some inhumane activities like the killing of twins, human sacrifice, slavery and slave trade. It was this aspect of religion that the Europeans battled with until was totally eradicated. Among the Igbos, the custom of human sacrifice was widespread, the victims were offered either as sacrifice proper or at funeral.¹⁵As sacrifice proper, this was done communally by the community for fending off enemies, appeasing the gods and cleansing the land when struck with unknown epidemic. At funerals, wealthy and titled men and their wives were buried with slaves who are considered to serve them in the afterlife.¹⁶ Killing of twins in Igboland could be said to have been done out of ignorance. They believed that it was an

abomination against the earth goddess. The abolishment of this culture began with the activities of Mary Slessor who began from Calabar before arriving at Igboland.

The place of slaves in the society was just a step higher than the outcasts. Their maltreatment was up to the stage that they were buried alive with their mothers to continue servitude in death. Slave trade was tougher to abolish than the other because it involved the economy of the people. The missionaries had to contend with both African and European slave traders. Missionaries who were also humanitarians and abolitionists viewed the slave trade as a sin against God and humanity which should not only be abolished but amends should also be made through the civilization of Africans by educating and Christianizing them. To achieve this aim, the officers of British naval negotiated the slave trade treaties of missionaries who would come and create new era of things in Africa in the place of slave trade for the Africans while these new comers will teach their children European languages.¹⁷ Although the treaties was successful only in Calabar, expedition was used in Igboland.

The missionaries accepted everyone into their fold, free born or outcast. The diabolical and unjust social discrimination known as the *Osu* caste system was unacceptable to the missionaries. The people reluctantly let go of this tradition and a nexus was created to bridge the gap that the act has created in the society. Everyone was given the fundamental equality, dignity and rights. However some people still observe this practice especially in the area of marriage. Other beliefs abolished were oath taking, reincarnation.

Effects of Christianity on the customs and culture

The activities of the missionaries in Igboland have affected many cultures and traditions, good and bad alike. It has caused the weaning away of African social values which was rooted in

their religion. At a time children who their parents do not give up on some culture were debarred from missionary schools, cultures and traditions that were not understandable to the missionaries were condemned.¹⁸ They considered themselves and the culture they represent superior to the native and indigenous culture, they regarded Igbo cultural heritage as the product of the devil and the leaders as spiritual and social inferior, they poured disapproval towards African dancing, singing, and drumming as the work of Satan himself.¹⁹ To this Boahen affirmed that they looked down on everything African like art, music, dancing, system of marriage, naming and their converts have to renounce all this.²⁰ Some aspects of Igbo traditions that bears the burden of European influence includes language, festival, marriage, dressing.

Indigenous language has been neglected by the people in favor of English language. It suffers the fear of going into extinction such that some average students in Igboland cannot express themselves in their mother tongue. Furthermore teachers in school teach with English and parents who are supposed to champion the native language prefer the alien one.

Christianity also frowned on some institutions like polygamy; they associated polygamous marriage to sexual excesses. But to Africans, polygamy was not just a plurality of wives; it was a symbol of communal way of life in the family compound²¹ it was recognized as the integral part and is inseparably bound up with family and social life of the Igbos.²²The main of the reason for this kind of marriage was that the economy of pre-colonial Igbo was mainly agrarian, therefore more children was required to help in farm works. Other reasons may be the choice of the husband or the persuasion of the first wife who would see herself as lonely and in a humiliating situation thereby giving her husband the instigation and co-operation to marry another wife.As Christianity and the missionaries rejected this way of life and attacked it, they imposed monogamy on the people and made it criteria for participation in church. This caused a

lot of economic and social problem. When a man marries one wife, it makes his children fewer thereby reducing the quantity of his farm. Those who adopted monogamy and rejects his other wives created loss of societal respect for them. Christianity also rebuffed title taking and all title holders were meant to renounce their positions in the society.

Economic Impacts

The economic impacts can be said to be how the activities of the Christian missionaries have affected the economic life of the people.

Trade and Commerce

After the abolition of the slave trade which lasted for decades in the shores of Africa in the nineteenth century, another form of trade was introduced by the Europeans known as the legitimate trade. The legitimate trade was a trade in agricultural and natural resources needed in Europe at that era to aid in the wave of industrialization that hit the European countries. The Christian missionaries had great impact on this trade as they rendered help in form of opening up the interiors for colonial administration and the advance of the trade and in return they give protection against some group of people that responded with violence to the alien religion and colonial administration.

Agriculture

The missionaries did not confine themselves to building churches, converting Africans and preaching the gospel, they also paid attention to the development of agriculture and legitimate trade in order to substitute for the slave trade they fought against and also a way to sustain them²⁰. They introduced new crops, set up plantations and experimental farms, taught

new methods of producing and preparing commodities for external trade. The Church Missionary Society in 1863 formed the West Africa Company in Nigeria with the aim of buying products from the natives. To an extent they provided the farmers with seedlings and pods for cultivation.

New Architectural Designs

They also introduced new architecture suitable for tropics such as brick house, stone house and corrugated iron roofing. Within months of arrival they erected massive structures and superior wonder evoking architecture and furniture.²¹the known traditional building was substituted with ecclesiastical edifices and the CMS, Presbyterian and Baptist missionaries imported carpenters and sawyers from Sierra Leone and Liberia. One of the earliest commercial propositions in West Africa was made from 1946-1972 by Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS²². He was dispatched to Nigeria on a mission research to collect information about the terrain in 1842. Venn outlined three proposals for the development of the region: through the Christian gospel, through agriculture and through commerce. In 1845 he set up the African Native Agency Committee (ANAC) with the mandate to encourage the social and religious improvement of Africa by means of Africans. Many Nigerians were trained in building, agriculture, brick and tile making, producing and marketing cotton. In order to improve the socio-economic condition of the people, he also introduced African Improvement Committee (AIC) as a counterpart of ANAC. Venn appealed for voluntary action in establishing a savings bank, benefit clubs, lecture series and dispensaries. By the end of 1850 progress was being recorded in Venn's endeavors.

In conclusion, the impacts of the Christian missionaries' activities can never be over emphasized as they strong and resounding till date. These impacts have both the positive and negative aspect of it. The positive aspect of it has aided in what could be called growth and development in Owerri community, Igboland and Nigeria at large. Consequently, the negative aspect of missionaries' activities has also attacked the core culture and tradition of the people while forcibly pushing them to align to the new religion. Despite its popularity, Christianity have not been able to eradicate the whole of the Igbo culture as some of these cultures and tradition still survived.

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11. F. K. Ekechi, “The Missionary Career of the Venerable T. J. Dennis in West Africa, 1893-1917” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 9, Fasc. 1, 1978, pp. 1-26
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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The missionary activities in Owerri town led to the introduction of a new religion into a place where there was an existence of African traditional religion. In the case of missionary activities in Owerri town, where there is already an existence of African traditional religion, the outcome of this was the amalgamation of some aspects of the two religions known as syncretism. Syncretism is described as the mixing of different religions, philosophies and ideas. It is clear that the missionary's activities had a great influence in areas where African traditional religion was dominant and adapting to the new religion, the former converts even their descendants several generations after still carried aspects of the African traditional religion with them. There has therefore been a great deal of syncretic interaction between the two religions.

The missionaries in trying to assert Christianity in Owerri town destroyed most of the traditions like the *oruowerethat* established peace, harmony and have kept the people unified for centuries. Other traditions which survived have been Christianized thereby removing the value given to it by African traditional religion. On the other hand, missionaries' activities in Owerri town could be seen as blessing because it has acted as a civilizing agent which extended civilization to the interiors where other white settlers and traders considered irrelevant. The credit of putting a stop to most of the activities that has tagged Africa as an uncivilized continent such as human sacrifice and killing of twins was attributed to the effort of the missionaries; they also merged the freeborn and outcast in Owerri town by not discriminating against them as African traditional religion had done. The westernization of Africa was also partly done by the missionaries. Also the schools that have been established by the missionaries had produced great

men and women of intellectual capabilities in Owerri town. These personalities were trained and educated in the schools that were built by the missionaries. It is clear that the contributions of missionaries in Owerri town have positively affected the people more. The impact of the missionaries also showcased in the construction of healthcare and other infrastructures and social amenities such as tarred roads, electricity and improvement of the agricultural scheme.

The missionaries ensured the rapid spread of Christianity in areas of Owerri town where African traditional religion has been most predominant. Although the early missionaries and converts have condemned the traditional religion, it is however becoming clear that the two religions have many features in common and has a nexus where they meet. They believe in the existence of a Supreme Being although their approach to the being is different; they believe in prayers; they believe in the salvation of man; they believe in moral conducts and they believe in sacrifices.

The Christian missionaries' activities in Owerri town have continued to thrive over the years. They have made positive impacts on the people's lives and many churches have been established. Presently, Owerri has five Anglican churches and currently has the Diocese of Owerri in the town, for the Roman Catholic church, the Archdiocese of Owerri house many catholic churches and religious vocations with other Pentecostal churches. Though majority Owerri people are Christians, they nevertheless do not act contrary to the laws of the land which implies that African traditional religion has not been totally eliminated; parts of it are integrated into Christianity. The two religions exist alongside each other in peace. The festivals of the Christians like Christmas and Easter are observed by the traditionalists while the festivals of the land like New Yam festival is observed by Christians. The two religions have contributed greatly to the peace and prosperity of the people.

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