

CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN IGBO SOCIETY: THE CASE OF IHIALA

By

IKENNA ODIFE

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka Anambra State

ABSTRACT:

The Igbo traditional religion, was satisfactorily functional and provided the basis of behaviour and conduct among the people. It determined and controlled all facets of human behaviour, be they socio-economic, political, group or inter-group relations. It provided the spiritual cement that bound the individuals in the society. But Christianity reinforced by colonialism introduced new beliefs and value systems which tended to weaken and undermine the basic structure and roots of the society. The extent to which the Ihiala Society was altered and changed by the forces of Christianity is the focus of this paper. It contends that despite the apparent massive acceptance of Christianity and its ideals, most of its adherents and non-adherents alike still revere and uphold aspects of the traditional society. It argues that Christianity did not bring about a total departure or break from the past of the society.

1. INTRODUCTION

a) The Problem

Christianity affected and influenced the life almost Igbo societies. Then again, colonialism, which collaborated with and reinforced the Christian religion, weakened the Igbo traditional political authority. It also undermined and transformed the basis of the traditional society. Nonetheless, Igboland was relatively a quiet and peaceful society before the advent of the Christian Missionary enterprise¹. The traditional religion was satisfactorily functional and provided the basis of behavior and conduct among the people. It determined and controlled all facets of human behaviour be they socio-economic, political, group or inter-group relations. It also provided the spiritual cement that bound the individuals in the society. But the new religion, "whose aim," according to Richmond Palmer, "was to pull down the fabric of the society in order to build on its ruins"², indeed, endeavoured to break down the traditional solidarity of most Igbo communities. It is on account of the profound influence the introduction of Christianity had on the Igbo-that the need has arisen to appraise and evaluate its impact on Igbo society.

Ihiala is one of the Igbo towns where the presence of the Christian missions is heavily felt. It has a seminary and a hospital, which are gigantic monuments of missionary achievements. It is one of the towns in the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha that has produced a very large number of priests and Nuns. It also served as the center for the dispersion of both the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches to the neighboring towns). There is therefore, the need to study the impact of Christianity in

Ihiala in order to address these problems; Was Ihiala resilient to the changes introduced into the fabric of the society by Christianity? Or, did the change mean a complete break with and departure from her past? In other words, does Ihiala fit into B.A Ayandele's general assumption that the culture and traditional institutions of Igbo society crumbled like the walls of Jericho at the blare of Christianity. Can the social historian still talk of continuities and changes in the culture, belief practices and value systems of Ihiala in the face of the contact with Christianity?

b) THE PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of Christianity in the acceleration of social change in Ihiala; the weakening of the values and structures of the traditional society; and the provision of a new basis for social integration on a larger scale.

Furthermore, it will ascertain the role of Christianity in welding the political and social forces in Ihiala and to assess its performance as an agent of social change.

In, order to address the afore mentioned problems and achieve its set purpose; this paper will first highlight the advent of Christianity in Ihiala, assess the people's initial responses and reactions to it. Again, it throws a searchlight on the evangelistic strategies employed by the various missions that proselytized in Ihiala.

Furthermore, it x-rays the interaction between Christianity and the Ihiala society. Next, it discusses the impact of Christianity on the emergent society and the continuities and changes thereupon. Finally, it provides the concluding reflections.

2. THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE AND THE ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

The Christian missionary group that proselytized in Ihiala can be categorized into two, namely, mainline or primary missions and the secondary missions. The former were the Church Missionary Society (Anglican) and the Roman Catholic mission. They were so called because they were the first to proselytize in Ihiala and they attracted the first set of Converts to Christianity. The latter included, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah Witness) and Faith Tabernacle Congregation. Their adherents were secondary Converts, having earlier been converted to Christianity by either of the primary missions, especially the Church Missionary Society. Again they do not have history of organized evangelization process that gradually permeated Ihiala from other parts of Igboland.⁵

i. The Church Missionary Society (Anglican Church)

The Church Missionary Society championed the advent of the Anglican church in Igboland. It began in July 1857 with the establishment of a mission station at Onitsha, a town on the eastern bank of the river Niger, by Reverends S.A Crowder and J.C Taylor, together with some teachers and evangelists from Sierra Leone. For the first twenty years of the mission at Onitsha, the European traders on the Niger co-operated with the later, the relationship turned sour due to racial prejudices, and by 1877, the mission's situation began to deteriorate. Two years after, Rev. Crowder ceased to be the, administrator of the mission. In 1890, Crowder's authority over it collapsed. The situation was salvaged and re-organized by H.H. Dobinson. With the arrival of Archdeacon T.J. Dennis in

1895, the mission embarked on a vigorous policy of expansion. The towns around Onitsha became proselytized before the end of the decade. With the British penetration of Igboland early in the twentieth century, the C.M.S moved at the heels of British troops into Igbo hinterland⁶. Expanding southwards, it reached Ihiala in 1908. There are several gaps and conflict in the accounts of the advent of the C.M.S mission at Ihiala. However, all tend to agree that it was through the efforts of its agents, Rev F.G Payne, a West Indian, that the mission established the first station. And a local notable, Asoegwu Nwankezi invited him. A reconciled version is attempted here

Asoegwu Nwankezi invited Rev. F.G. Payne from Onitsha where the C.M.S. mission had already established a station. He requested Rev F.G. Payne to start a station at Ihiala and offered his reception chambers to be used by the mission till it was able to build a church. Several reasons accounted for the Asoegwu Nwankezi's invitation of Rev F.G. Payne. It would seem that his contact with the European at Aboh, where he traded and the fear of the upheavals from the punitive expedition (Uli-Ihiala patrol of 1908-1909)⁸ made him associate closely with the missionary as a sign of friendliness and solidarity with the colonial force, as that may avert any military onslaught by the colonial forces on Ihiala. Moreover, he had come in contact with or had knowledge of the use of troops of the West African frontier force (WAFF) against communities hostile to the British. He enlisted their assistance to end the protracted Uli-Ihiala war in the favour of the latter in 1903. That drew attention of the British colonial forces to Ihiala. Asoegwu Nwankezi and two others were appointed warrants chiefs and thereby became members of the native court at Aboh⁹

Later, in 1908 Rev. F.G. Payne formally established a station in Asoegwu's compound. Thereupon, it attracted the first set of Converts in Ihiala. In 1909, Rev: Payne with the assistance of these Converts acquired the sacred grove, Udengwu, adjacent to chief Nwankezi's compound for a permanent station .

ii) **The Roman Catholic Mission:** Ihiala had the first contact with the R.C.M. in March 1906 during Rev. Fr. Victor Dahuze's exploration of Igbo hinterland. Since his task was to explore the interior, no station was established in the town. The accounts of the people on the advent of the R.C.M. are silent in this event. However, records left by Rev Fr. Dahuze contain valuable Information on the state of the town and her attitude towards the white man and Christianity. It is probable that he arrived when the wounds inflicted on Ihiaia by the Uli-Ihiala war were still fresh as he recorded "... just like their neighbours at Okidja (sic) they (Ihiala) distrusted the Uli"¹⁰. To show the attitude of the people towards Christianity, he recorded that after he met with the leaders of the community "they; became quite pleasant ... and promised to put up two schools in the town"¹¹

The R.C.M was formally established in Ihiala in April 1911. There are several gaps and conflicts in the accounts on the genesis of the mission's activities in Ihiala, but all tend to agree on two points: Rev. Father Aphasis Bindel brought the mission to Ihiala; the station was located at Ezeani quarters of the town before it was transferred to the present site along the Onitsha Owerri road. A reconciled version is attempted here,

A delegation of the Eziani quarter of Ihiala invited Rev. Fr. Alphonous Bindel from his base at Ozubulu, about 20 kilometers North of Ihiala to establish a station in their village. On arrival in April 11, he was hosted in Ohajiobi Nwachukwu's house who also offered his reception chamber to missionary¹². "This new mission received wide acceptance from the people. According to Rev. Fr. Bindel's records, the Eziani people denounced members of their quarter that patronized the Anglican Church. This view seems to be a distortion of the reaction of Eziani people towards their neighbors who attended the Anglican Church." It would appear to be a reflection of the rivalry and rancor that characterized the relations between both missions at that time.

iii) **The Faith Tabernacle Congregation Church: 1933**

The advent of the Faith Tabernacle Congregation Church in Ihiala was through the instrumentality of one Benjamin Onwuchekwa. He was one of the earliest converts to the Anglican Church in the town. He came in contact with the church through series of correspondences with the Faith Tabernacle Congregation based in Philadelphia, United States of America, as a result of which he re-converted and embraced the new faith. He established the Faith Tabernacle Church in Ihiala in 1933.¹⁴

During its early years: the mission attracted a large number of converts. They were largely drawn from the discontented members of the Anglican Church. Grants and financial assistance from the parent mission overseas were effectively and judiciously utilized as a result of which it recorded an increase in the number of its adherents. However, this tempo was short lived; its adherents gradually decamped to either of the main line missions. The chief reason for this state of affairs was its teaching on faith healing, which caused high mortality among its adherents.

iv. **The Watchtower Bible And Tract Society Jehovah's Witnesses**

This mission was brought to Ihiala in about 1948 through one Elijah Onyekweluje. Like the Faith Tabernacle Congregation, its adherents were drawn principally from the mainline missions. It attracted very few converts, who no sooner than they embraced the Faith, decamped to either of the mainline missions. The very few who tenaciously clung to the Faith, blamed this state of affairs on the inability of most adherents to live up to the standard of Christian life set by the scripture and a consuming passion for the mundane. But some decampers and members of the other missions blamed it on the radical doctrine and extreme sectarianism of the church, which put some adherents under severe pressure from family members and relatives. Be these as they may, each of the reasons was a factor in the poor numerical strength of the mission.¹⁵

B. THE PEOPLE'S INITIAL REACTIONS TOWARDS CHRISTIANITY

The initial reactions of the people towards Christianity tended to be ambivalent, albeit, they did not generate any anxious moments in the town.

The message seemed to have no impression on the vast majority who spurned

and disparaged the churches. They could fathom nothing on the teaching on eternal life, the trinity, virgin birth and "worship of God in spirit". Similarly, they could not comprehend why one should turn the other cheek to an assailant. In short, they harbored strong doubts on the Christian message. However, a few seemed to have embraced the faith and showed marked fanaticism towards it. They renounced all their wives but one, and destroyed the insignia of their traditional authority. Some .desecrated sacred places and defiled the sanctity of the masquerade cult. These did not evoke violent reaction from the Non-Converts. Instead, they chose to 'let the gods speak' or take vengeance on those who defiled them. Nevertheless, some indigenes opposed the Christian mission. But the fear of the colonial situation, in which they stood the risk of apprehension in the Native court, restrained them from openly challenging the missionaries and Converts." They could not attack or seek to forcibly expel the missionaries from the town. They were thus constrained to swallow the spleen they wanted to vent on the missionaries and Converts¹⁶.

3. THE EVANGELISTIC STRATEGIES OF THE MISSIONS

The evangelistic strategies differed in the various missions. The secondary missions did not adopt some of the strategies of the mainline missions. This could be explained by the differences in their doctrine. For instance the Faith Tabernacle Congregation Church's belief in Faith healing and abstinence from drugs and medicine are inconsistent with the use of medical facilitates as instruments of evangelization.

i. **Home Visitation**: All the missions in Ihiala adopted this strategy; it was the primary method they used in winning their earliest set of Converts. It involved visits to the various household units in the town. During such visits the church teachers impressed the scriptures on the people. In the very early stages of their activities in the town, the expatriate priests of the mainline missions spoke through interpreters till they developed mastery of the Igbo Language.¹⁷ The secondary missions equally adopted this strategy. But because they arrived long after the doctrines and certain religious observances of the mainline missions had taken firm roots among "the Converts, their home visitations were more involving, initial visits were followed up by yet more coordinated visits during which the depth of the Holy scriptures was explored.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, more than any other group, adopted this strategy. It remained her most effective instrument of evangelism.

ii. **School and Technical Education**

The various missions in Ihiala recognized early enough the use of educational institutions as key factor in evangelization. The three missions, viz: the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Faith Tabernacle Congregation Churches, which employed it, closely associated it with the church. They recognized that young Converts would acquire the rudiments of literacy through the school and thus, gain easier and ready access to the printed word order. ¹⁸More so, schools offered opportunities for the Converts to benefit from the new order introduced by colonialism: paid employment as clerks in the large commercial firms and government department; catechists and

primary school teachers; and most importantly unravel the mystery of the white man's knowledge (erudition). Above all, the school was the most effective avenue for the propagation of the doctrine and dogmatic teachings of the various missions. Through it, the missions closely supervised the conduct of her young Converts, and in the process checked defection to rival missions.

But unfortunately, the missions' policies on education were rather lopsided. None of them embarked on the establishment of secondary schools. The R.C.M., which made attempts to establish what appeared like colleges, set up an Elementary Teacher Training college and a seminary for the training of prospective clergymen.

iii. **Welfare Services Hospitals and Gifts:** As early as 1928 the R.C.M. had established an orphanage and dispensary in the town. The orphanage took care of abandoned babies- twins, babies who first cut the tooth of the upper jaw and those whose mothers died on their delivery etc. The dispensary administered drugs to the sick and first aid to the wounded. The health care services rendered by the R.C.M were further improved with the opening of our Lady of Lourdes hospital in 1933.

These institutions, no doubt, provided a most useful and necessary need at that time, and the people were generally unrestrained by cultural inhibitions in their patronage of them. This was obviously due to the efficacy of the drugs and treatment received at the hospital.

Rev. Fr. Bindel also used gifts of alluring materials to attract children and the young to the Roman Catholic Church. He presented them with gifts of exquisite nature such, as sweets, looking glasses and clothes. These minor presents won the admiration of the people; and the children developed obsession for the possession of such gifts. The desire for these gifts lured them to the Roman Catholic Church. Even parents in the Anglican denomination encouraged their children to get their share of such gifts from Rev. Fr. Bindel.¹⁹

iv. **Use of Objectives of Worship.**

The Roman Catholic Mission seemed to have understood the relevance of symbols in the religious worship of the people. They encouraged the use of the crucifix and rosary as aids in worship. The people on their part saw these objects as alternatives to the traditional religious symbols. The scapular worn on the neck seemingly served then} as amulets. The other missions, however, were unequivocal in their condemnation of these practices. They tended to associate such objects and the Roman Catholic Church with idolatry.

v. **Use of Tracts and Leaflets.**

The Watchtower Bible and tract Society more than any other mission adopted this strategy. It required some degree of literacy on the people to admire the import of tracts and leaflets made available by the missions. These materials, which primarily explained as well as propagated the doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses, were availed at a token fee. The Awake! Magazine is noted for its high literacy standard and in depth analysis and commentaries on social and scientific matters. However some of these analyses tend to be two sectarian to be appreciated by the adherents of other missions.

4. **CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIETY.**

This section of this paper examines the interaction of Christianity with the traditional value systems of Ihiala and the problems associated with the integrating forces generated by this contact.

A) **Conflicts Between Christianity And The Society.**

The introduction of Christianity into traditional Igbo society meant a contact of two-cultures and worldviews; Christianity cum-western value systems with the traditional religion, cultural practices and value systems. Unfortunately, the propagators of Christianity, showed remarkable contempt for the belief system and culture of the people, and consequently e..deavored to supplant them with Christian ideals. This generated some conflicts. It is these that form the focus of this section of the paper.

i. **POLYGAMY.**

Polygamy, a cherished tradition in Ihiala, was the practice in which a man married more than one wife. The ability to marry several wives raised the social scale of the individual male in relation to his monogamolls or celibate neighbour. The Number of wives a man could marry was also a measure of his affluence.

Moreover, the subsistence nature of the traditional economy demanded a large labour force to work on the farms. This made polygamy and subsequently, large families imperative. Again fruitless marriages as well as those not blessed with male issues led to polygamous marriages. But Christianity tended to deride this practice. Church leaders and the missionaries conceived it as " an offence against the law of God and therefore incapable of amelioration".²⁰ They adopted very uncompromising attitude towards the practice and made it compulsory for Converts to dismiss all their wives but one. Ironically, the early missionaries lost sight of the fact that by compelling the Converts to renounce all their wives but one, they destroyed the roots and bases of traditional families life.

ii) **OZO TITLE INSTITUTION**

In the tradition Ihiala society, solid personal achievement was a mark of greatness. It was measured by the number of titles an individual could take from the hierarchy of social titles in the town. The ozo was the chief title open to all male to attain the highest social status. It was a social association into which men were initiated, with one of their wives in various stages with very expensive ceremonies. It could take as much as a life's savings to take the highest ozo title. The most important eligibility criterion was the moral rectitude of the individual. The ozo titleholders led a pious life, upheld the morality of the land and observed all its rituals. It did not, however, bestow religious role on its holders. Egbo has aptly and ably described the socio political significance of the ozo titleholders thus; "ozo titleholder occupies a position in Igboland comparable to the peerage of the English society with same prestige as 'lord' in the society".²¹ But whatever was its social and economic significance, the early missionaries

educated the Converts to dissociate from it. They seemed to have consensus opinion that ozo "is idolatrous" because of certain rites associated with the initiation into it.

The proper place for the ozo title institution among the Converts remained a knotty problem for the mainline denominations. Their members argued in favour of its relevance and insisted on the continuity of practice.

iii. KILLING OF TWINS AND TABOO BABIES

The belief system of any society is a reflection of its conception of the seen and unseen world. In Ihiala, it was considered unnatural for human being to bear or deliver more than one at a time, only lower animals like dogs, cats, and goats etc could have multiple birth. A woman who gave birth to twins would, therefore, need a special cleansing sacrifice and the twin destroyed. Otherwise the land thus abominated would incur the wrath of the gods and ancestral spirits. In the same vein, babies who first cut the tooth of the upper jaw were killed or dumped in the evil forest to die for defiling the sanctity of land. The first missionaries that evangelized in Ihiala advised the newly Converted to discountenance this custom and keep their children. Rather than accept the advice of the missionaries, some converts continued with the traditional practice for fear that failure to do so might attract ominous consequences.

However, the R.C.M rescued and rehabilitated some of these children through the services rendered by the orphanages it established in the town".²²

iv. FUNERAL OBSEQUIES.

The obsequies of an elderly and titled person took two stages. The first was the interment; it did not require elaborate ceremonies. The second usually took place in about one year or less depending on the preparedness of the bereaved family. The essence of the latter was to grant the spirit of such departed elderly person a comfortable rest with the ancestors in the land of ancestral bliss, from where he saw to the well being of his children on earth. Secondly, it was done to sever relations between the living and the dead. All social groups to which the deceased hitherto belonged severed all forms of associations and relations with him at such ceremonies. Again, it afforded the relatives, friends and Well-wishers the opportunity to express their grief and present gifts to the bereaved family in reciprocation of similar gestures earlier extended to them. Moreover, the property of the deceased would not be shared among his children if these rites were not performed. Furthermore, the extended family and members of various social groups to which the deceased had belonged would be harassed and tormented by the spirit as it had not settled with other ancestral spirits or formally severed relations with his social peers alive.

The early missionaries discouraged the Converts from perform such rites for dead relatives or even to participate in the reciprocity of gifts presented to bereaved friends and relatives.

V. THE OSU CASTE SYSTEM.

The "osu" are the individual and offsprings of individuals dedicated to the

major deities in the town. They were denied all forms of social relations and associations with the freeborn. It was, for instance, an abomination for the freeborn to marry or even have sexual relationship with them, attend the same social functions or seek safety in their house even when trailed by an assailant. The missionaries preached against this social segregation, inequality and injustice. They made reference to the biblical story of St. Paul's encounter with Cornelius the Centurion,²³ to teach the Converts not to regard any person as unclean or a social outcast, and advised them to jettison the practice.

vii **THE MASQUERADE CULT (MMANWU)**

The Masquerade cult is arguably the cult of the ancestral spirits animated and personified. They appeared in corporal form as masquerades and were venerated by all. It served as an instrument of social control and a source of entertainment and recreation. The missionaries encouraged the Converts to defile the sanctity of the institution by openly stating that the masquerade had a human form. They further advised them not to participate in the cult activities or submit themselves to its social control.

Viii **RITUAL OBSERVANCES.**

It amounted to a ritual pollution of Ihiala if one willfully or accidentally hurt or killed the sacred python and certain species of fish. These creatures among others were regarded as sacred because the people believed they embodied the soul of their communal unity and solidarity. Custom and tradition prescribed the appropriate sacrifice, which the offenders offered to propitiate the gods. But the early missionaries encouraged the Converts not only to kill such animals and creatures but hunt them for food as well. They used God's injunction to Peter to "arise, kill and eat. ... " And St. Paul's instruction to Timothy to discountenance "such teaching; (that) order them to abstain from foods which God created ..." for everything God created is good ...",²⁴ to kill and hurt such animals.

B. THE PROBLEM OF INTEGRATION. .

Christian missionaries activities involved the conversion of the individual or group of people from previously held belief system to a new one, based on Christianity. Certain traditional practices which formed the basis of the people's belief constituted stumbling blocks to the full acceptance of the ideals of Christianity. This creates the problem of infusing the Convert with Christian ideals as most of them had their beliefs and value systems already deeply rooted in the traditional society, where in also, they had attained high social status. The problems arising from this situation form the focus of this section of the paper.

As have been already indicated, aspects of the traditional value systems of Ihiala were at variance with those of Christianity. This placed some of the early Converts in a cruel dilemma, either to embrace the new religion and be cut off from the traditional society where they had laboured hard to achieve high social status or continue in the old system and lose the benefits in the emergent society brought about by Christianity. This made some of the Converts skeptical of Christianity, and so,

reverted to the ways of life in the traditional society. Others embraced Christianity but could not shed all aspects of the traditional society nor all aspects of the traditional life opposed to the ideals of Christianity. In other words, they either compromised some aspects of the traditional belief or adapted them to Christianity.

One instance of the problem of integration into the ideals of Christianity was the case of Madubugwu Okwuosa. He was one of the great men that emerged shortly before the advent of Christianity in Ihiala. He had amassed enormous wealth by the standards of his time, acquired the highest Ozo title and was polygamous. In order to receive baptism, he denounced all his wives but one, and also, renounced all his Ozo titles. He was baptized as Abraham Okwuosa in 1915. From then, he directed all his energies towards the growth of the church, participated in all its ceremonies and held tenaciously to the doctrine.

However, the need to raise a large family befitting his wealth and status, and the urge to relate with his former social peers prompted him to have revulsion of attitude against Christianity. He reverted to traditional life and reclaimed all his former social titles. This case is not only an illustration of the problem of a Convert in the early stages of Christianity in Ihiala, but shows the problem of uprooting them from the culture and environment they were deeply rooted in. Abraham Okwuosa was unable to find meaning in the Christian society and monogamous life he had adopted. Again it shows the impression Christian values had on the cream of society who embraced them. It equally shows how slightly they sat on some of the early Converts.

Again, it is noteworthy that none of the Chief supporters or patrons of the mainline missions in the town embraced the Christian faith despite their close association with them. They rather clung strongly to the traditional religion. Chief Odimegwu Igwegbe, the patron of the Roman Catholic Church, was so resolute about this that he did not allow any of his children to embrace Christianity or attend schools in his lifetime. This shows that they supported the Christian mission for reasons entirely outside the admiration of the Christian values and ideals. Apparently, they found them unsuitable for the traditional society and the world they knew. Again it shows a total rejection of the ideals of Christianity.

Nonetheless, some of the people embraced Christianity and Western education and made careers in the opportunities they offered.

5. CHRISTIANITY AND THE EMERGENT SOCIETY

The place of Christianity in the emergent Igbo society has attracted the attention of scholars. They have articulated reasons for the Igbo responses to Christianity. Their conclusions tend to suggest that the Igbo massively embraced Christianity. It is the light of the above that J.S. Coleman in bewilderment, exclaimed that, "it is difficult to explain the amazing rapid adoption of Christianity among the Ibo people?"²⁶ Similarly, Sylvia Leith-Ross conjectures;

I think it is true to say that only among Ibo has there been what could be called a massive acceptance towards Christianity²⁷:

However, Simon Ottemberg explained this in terms of the Igbo receptivity to change. He contends that the cultural adaptability of the Igbo made them open their minds to changes.²⁵

Uchendu rightly argued that the Igbo accepted only those changes that brought social improvements.²⁹

Several reasons have been adduced for the apparent acceptance of Christianity. Ozigbo argues that the success of Roman Catholic Mission was partially through the effect of resemblance between Catholic and Igbo religions beliefs and practices. He persuasively states it thus;

*The strong beliefs in Supreme Being the supra sensible world and life after death, the need for prayer, sacrifice and obedience to deities etc, became the bridge which the ... doctrines on Christ, heaven, the blessed trinity, grace, the mass and sacraments were apprehended by the people.*³⁰

But F.K Ekechi and E.A. Ayandele advance the "conquest theory" in which they argue that the exactions of colonial rule played a principal-role in the Igbo response to Christianity.³¹

Corroborating this view, O.U Kalu also adds that when the society is endangered, conquered and subjected to sudden and violent changes, the beliefs which were inseparably linked with it began to have limited, relative and perhaps exhaustive validity.³²

A reflective examination of above reasons shows that LR.A Ozigbo's suggestions are tenable only to the extent that they enhanced the Igbo apprehension of the message of Christianity, but could not lead to a massive acceptance of it. The conquest theory and the concomitant situation engendered by colonialism appear to be the fundamental issues in the phenomenal response to Christianity in Ihiala.

The British conquest of the Ihiala area coincided with the establishment of the first mission was A Native Court was established at Ihiala 1909, while the first mission approved in 1908. However, before 1908 the colonial forces had carried out series of military expeditions in the Achalla group, which Ihiala was part of. Prominent among these was the 1902/03 expedition in which they had assisted Ihiala in overwhelming the belligerent Uli.³³ It would appear this made the people of Ihiala favourably disposed towards the missionaries, as they had had favour in a previous association with the white man. Again, the 1907 military expedition against Okija instilled fear of the British in the communities in the neighbourhood. The development from this event jolted the society and appears to accord with Prof. O.U Kalu's position that chances of missionary successes were greater in communities undergoing social crisis at the time the missionaries arrived³⁴.

The urge to benefit from the services provided by the Christian mission would appear to explain the apparent missive acceptance of Christianity in Ihiala. The most prominent of which was the school. The agents of the various missions identified it as the most veritable instrument that made Christianity attractive to the people. Education meant unraveling the mystery behind the white man's knowledge and gave the ability to read, write and to communicate in English Language. Furthermore, the acquisition of education provided opportunities for earning ready wages in the church, government departments and European trading companies in contrast to the

relatively unproductive drudgery of farming. Commenting on the role of education in the response to Christianity in Igboland, which Ihiala is part of, Bishop Shanahan wrote;

*If we go from town to town talking about God, we know from our experience that much of our effort brings no result. But no one is opposed to schools.*³⁵

This was because, "education," according to E.A Anyandele, "came to be seen as the open sesame to the new world the Igbo were being led to envision ... ,"³⁶ In corroboration with this assertions, S.N Nwabara rightly states that the Igbo were filled with passion for Christianity; "not because local religion was abandoned in preference for Christianity but because many parents had began to appreciate the economic value of education which the missionaries offered."³⁷

All this indicates that the acceptance of Christianity and western education was based more on instrumental terms than an intrinsic desire to embrace them. Thus, it was in the bid to satisfy the craving for education in the people that the mainline missions established schools simultaneously with churches in all the villages. In fact, so entwined were they that the school buildings equally served as church, and the school teacher the same as the church teacher.

Other services the missions offered which stimulated the massive acceptance of Christianity were medical services and drugs. They provided cure for several ailments the traditional medical doctors, *dibia*, could not. Acknowledging the influence of medical Services in attracting the people to Christianity, a missionary in Igboland stated that "the cure we gave the children and the diseased has easily attracted them to the missions "³⁸. Again, the presentation of gift of alluring items fascinated the people and attracted them to the missions. The Reverend Fathers were noted for the dispensation of such gifts. Another motivating factor was the awe and curiosity the presence of the *Oyibo* (European) elicited from the people. Some also embraced Christianity in order to have contact with the white man and acquire his intelligence.

This conclusion does not however, invalidate the logic that some people embraced Christianity on religious basis and personal conviction. The salient issue is that the massive acceptance of the religion after the initial hesitation was predicted more upon instrumental terms than the desire to practice the new faith. In sum, the spur of the response to Christianity was the weakening of the traditional society by the forces of colonialism and the desire or the people to benefit from the social services the missions offered.

6. CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES.

The weakening of the traditional society by the forces of colonialism and the desire to benefit from the services provided by the mission were the chief reasons for which the people embraced Christianity. And those who embraced the faith were expected to renounce the traditional beliefs and value systems for the ideals of Christianity. But the important question is, how much has the society changed by her interaction with the ideals of Christianity? Or did the acceptance of Christianity amount to a total rejection of the traditional ways of life? To understand the impact of Christianity on Ihiala, it is essential to state that the society has no changed fundamentally.

This section of the paper studies the impact of Christianity on the traditional belief system by examining continuities and changes in the following traditional practices and belief systems" The Ozo title system, nmanwu (masquerade) cult institution, polygamy, the Osu caste system, twin murder and killing of taboo babies.

The early missionaries that proselytized Ihiala condemned the Ozo title system because of the initiation rites they considered idolatrous and lack of knowledge of its socio-economic functions. They made it compulsory for intending Converts to renounce their titles before accepting them into the churches. Similarly a Convert who took the ozo title automatically lost his membership in the church. The early Converts embraced this practice. However, initiation into the Ozo society remained unabated among the Non-converts but with the growth of cultural nationalism among the Igbo from the late 1940's, some influential members of the Roman Catholic Church mounted such inexorable pressures that made the mission revisit its strong anti Ozo stance. Between 1961 and 1967³⁹ the Catholic Mission introduced reforms which allowed her members to take the Ozo title in a "Christian way" with the Reverend father consecrating the insignia of office.

However, the Ozo title system, despite these outward manifestations of changes, retains its socio-economic function. It has remained an institution essentially for the morally upright and well to do in the society.

Aside from its function as an agent of social control and recreation, the "nmanwu" {masquerade} cult was believed to be corporal manifestation of the ancestral spirits. It has however, continued to flourish in Ihiala. Converts initiated into the cult have kept its oath of secrecy. But the institution has undergone several changes and modification. Each lineage in Ihiala now has an Nmanwu cult house, which is built in a permanent structure with bricks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets instead of the traditional mud wall and raffia palm frond roof. The walls of the house have artistic impression of skulls of different animals, which signify the attainment of the particular cult house in the hierarchy of the Nmanwu cult. In fact it will astonish scholars who propagate the suffocation of the traditional beliefs and practices of Ihiala by Christianity to see that at present, the Nmanwu cult house of Umunwajiobi lineage is adjacent the St. Silas' Anglican church.

Accounts on the activities of the early missionaries reveal that the polygamist was compelled to renounce all wives but one before he could be accepted as a Christian. Similarly on no account would the Convert marry several wives. The violation of this order earned an instant excommunication from the church. But along the line this ceased to be the practice. Converts could marry several wives. However, they are denied full church membership. For instance the polygamist is not allowed to partake in the Holy Eucharist and is stripped off his knighthood, as the case may be. The discrimination against the osu and social stigma on them have persisted, though with slight modification. Modernity and urbanization have made it impossible to identify them in public places. The result is that greater social interactions have developed between them and the freeborn to the extent of sexual relationships, However, they could not marry. Freeborn who married the osu was ostracized, by implication acquired the status. Again, with the advent of Christianity, individuals are no longer dedicated to the deities, hence no freeborn except one who marries the osu becomes one. In fact the discrimination against the osu and the social injustice they suffer are so intense that both the law of the defunct Eastern Nigerian Government, abolishing the practice among the Igbo⁴⁰ and the 1982 proclamation⁴¹ by Igwe John Udoji,

Oluoha XII, the traditional ruler of Ihiala on the subject could not put an end to this unwholesome practice in Ihiala.

Mother of twins and the killing of infants that cut the tooth of the upper jaw first appear to be the aspect of the traditional belief systems and cultural practices of the people which Christianity succeeded in abolishing. This could be explained by the increased scientific knowledge of human physiology amongst the Christians and Non-Converts, as well as the introduction of the English penal system. The fear of punishment for offences bordering on these made the people to jettison the practice *in toto*.

A thorough examination of continuities and changes in Ihiala society show that it did not completely break away or depart from its past. It still retains aspects of the traditional beliefs and practices despite the influence of Christianity. C. N. Uba's position on the resilience of the culture and belief practices of the Igbo appears to be a true reflection of the response to Christianity in Ihiala. He argued that;

*Traditional religion still ruled the minds of most Igbo to a greater extent than has generally been realized, not withstanding outward manifestation to the contrary*⁴²

Similarly, Frank Salmons contention that "little has changed in the Igbo world view ... the essentials still remained ...",⁴³ applies to Ihiala,

In sum, the basis of the traditional Ihiala values remained essentially intact despite the attempts by Christianity to stifle them. The changes observable in them are the products of the dynamics of culture contact. The two cultures in contact borrow from each other. This accords with Malinowsky's theory on social change, which states that the phenomenon of change resulting from the interaction of two cultures are "far from being a mechanical joining of two original influences, rather the two impinge on each other".⁴⁴

7. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This study has ably proved that the people's cultural practices values systems and worldviews showed a lot of resilience in the face of the attempts to supplant them with Christian ideals. This shows their importance and relevance in the lives of the people of Ihiala. Although, there are traces of changes, the traditional belief practices and value system of the people still retain their basic character. Again some of the changes noticeable in the lives of the people can be explained more on the account of the emergent society brought about by the forces of colonialism and modernity than the acceptance of the ideals of Christianity.

REFERENCES,

1. V.C Uchendu, The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria (New, York Rinehart and Winston, 1965),p.23 ,
2. Quoted in A.E. Afigbo, "Herbert Richmond Palmer and Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria." Journall of the Historical Society of Nigeria '(JHSN) 111 (1965),p307
3. V.A. Nwosu (ed) The Catholic Church in Onitsha: people, Places and Events (Onitsha: Etukokwu press 1985), p 14
4. E.A. Ayandele , Nigeria Historical Studies (London: Frank Cass, 1979), p. 168
5. Ikenna Odife, "Christian Missionary enterprise in Ihiala, 1908-1970" (M.A. thesis. Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 1996) p.8
6. F.K Ekechi, Christian Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in I gbo: 1857-1914 (London, Frank Cass 1972) p_6.
7. Ikenna Odife, "Christian Missionary Enterprise... " p.14
8. W.R.T. Milne, "Intelligence Report on Achalla group" (National Archives, Enugu (NAE) OD 119 Vol.11 ONDIST 7/1/10)P.13
9. C.R Obi, "A history of Christianity in Ihiala L.G.A 1908-1976" (B.A. Religion. Special Project UNN 1978)p.25.
10. J.P. Jordan, Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria (Dublin; Elo Press repro 1971), p.39
11. J.P. Jordan, Bishop Shanahanp.39 ,
12. Ikenna Odife Christian Missionary Enterprise " P.44
13. " Missionary Diary" quoted in R.D. Okeke "The coming of the Roman Catholic Church.in1hiaia, 1911-1960. "(Project Report. Dept. of History, A.I.C.E .Owerri 1978), p. 18.
14. Ikenna Odife, "Christian Missionary ... "p.32
15. C.B. Obi, "A History of Christianity ... p. 19
16. Ikenna Odife, "ChristianityMissional'y....p.40
17. C.R Obi, "A History of Christianity..... p21
18. C.B. Obi, "A History of Christianity.....p40
19. Ikenna Odife, " Christian Missionary..... "p 41
20. Quoted in J.F.A. Ajay , Christian: Missions in Nigeria 184 1-189 1: the Making of a New Elite (London, Longman Publishers, 1965) p.120
21. E. O. Egboh, "Conflict between traditional Religion and Christianity in Igbo land" Journal of West African Religions (WAR) 10, (July 1971) p.31
22. C.E Obi, "A History of Christianity "p⁵⁰ '
23. The Christian New Testament. Acts of the Apostle 10:9-1
24. The Christian New Testament 1 Timothy 4:2-3
25. Ikenna Odife "Christian Missionary Enterprise ... "p.⁵⁰
26. J.S. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism. (Berkeley, University of Califotnia Press, 1958)p.96
27. Ross, African Woman: A study of the Igbo of Nigeria. (London: O.U.P. 1939)p.297)1

28. S. Ottenberry "Ibo Receptivity to Change" in Bascom, W.E. and Herskovits M.J (eds.) Continuity and Change in African Culture. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1959)p. 130.
29. V.C. Uchendu, Thelgbo of Southeastern ... "p.19
30. I.R.A. Ozigbo, Roman Catholicism in Southeastern Nigeria 1885-1931 : A study in Colonial Evangelism: (Onitsha;Etukowu Press, 1988.)p. 276
31. E.A. Ayandele, "the Collapse of Pagandon in Igboland" in JHSN Vii, 1 (1973) pp 125-140 and EK. Etechi "Colonialism and Christianity in west Africa. The Igbo case" in Journal of African History (JAH) XII, I (1971) ppl03-115
32. O.U. Kalu " Broken covenants: Religious change in Igbo Historiography" in 'Onwuka, O.U. Kalli. C.N. Ubah, (eds) A Tapestry of the African past(Lagos Vista Books 1994): p.15
33. W.R.T. Milne" Intelligence Report on Achalla Group ... "p. 14
34. O.U. Kalu, Christianity in West African: the Nigerian story (Ibadan, Daystar press, 1978), p.360
35. Bishop Shanahan, quoted in J. p. Jordan, "Bishop Shanahan of....." p.82
36. E.A. Ayandele" the Collapse of pagandom in Igboland J.H.S.N. Vii, 1 (1973), p., 127
37. S.N. Nwabara, Iboland, A Century of contact with Britian·1860-1960. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977) p.iv
38. Fatherlutz, quoted in F.K. Ekechi Christian Missionary Enterprise ... p. 73
39. I. R. A. Ozigbo, Igbo Catholicism: The Onitsha connection,1967-1984. (Onitsha African-Fep, 1985),p. 72
40. Eastern Region of NigeriaGazatte No 26 Vol. 15 (15'h April 1956 partA),p. 91. .
41. Personal Communication with Prof C. C. Agbodike Dean Faculty of Arts Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka 10/11/2002.
42. C.N. Ubah, "Religious change among the Igbo during the Colonial period" in Journal of Religions in African (JRA) xviii, 1 (Feb, 1988) p.84.
43. F.A. Salmone, "Continuity of Igbo values after conversion: A study of purity and Change" Missology 111,(January, 1975), p.45.
44. B. Malinowski, The Dynamics of culture change (New Heaven, Yale University press, 1945), p.26