

THE LIBERATION OF IKA WOMEN THROUGH CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Abstract

The liberation of Ika Women through Christian religious Studies has brought some remarkable changes which led to the release of women from some of their traditional restrictions such as taboos, discriminations and obnoxious laws which hindered them from all the activities, functions and posts which men have occupied in the past. The discrimination includes the cultural restraint of women in Ika Land such as widows subjected to too much torture, injustice, deprivation of their deceased husband's property, women sleeping in isolated hut during menstrual circle and girls stripped naked when caught in the act of fornication and using their names to compose songs during moonlight. The methods used were descriptive, analytical, primary and secondary sources. This study emphasis the role played by Christian Religious Studies in the emancipation of Women in Ika land. The liberation of Ika Women has helped to improve the standard of living in the lives of Ika women because the indigenous knowledge which made women to be seen but not heard had been abandoned. Therefore, all restrictions hindering the full humanization and the development of women potentials should be abolished.

Introduction

The arrival of Christianity in Ika Land is a glaring reality because many people witnessed their activities everywhere. Christianity has existed in Ika Land for over a century which tried to sustain the Christian message and practices among Ika people which brought remarkable changes in their way of life and in the way they treated women (Okobia 2014). Christian religion which appeals to human conscience and leads to repentance and transformation of lives made Ika men to change their attitude towards women who were subjected to untold hardship, inhuman treatment, injustice and deprivation of their rights. Before then, women were seen and not heard and were regarded as inferior human beings and a little more than property.

Christianity helped to reconstruct the aspect of Ika culture and indigenous knowledge which often force widows to remain in total seclusion without washing or changing their clothes for a whole year, forcing them to marry their late husbands brothers and depriving them from inheriting their late husbands' property. Women sleeping in an isolation hut during menstrual period which led to barrenness, miscarriages and stillbirth, because as they stayed in the isolation hut, the evil ones studied their circles and bewitched some of them. The injustice faced by girls who were caught fornicating, the girls were stripped naked paraded round the village, composed songs with their names and threw pebbles on the roof of their fathers houses leaving the men or the boys that committed the fornication with them scot free. Christian religion

teaches that God punishes every body that commits sin equally because he is no respecter of persons.

The basic component of any country's knowledge system is its indigenous knowledge. Which encompasses the skills experiences and insights of people applied to maintain or improve their livelihood. Therefore the indigenous knowledge that made women to be seen and not heard should be reconstructed for the effective development of women and national development.

Atran (1990) posits that indigenous knowledge is developed and adopted continuously to gradually changing environments and passed down from one generation to another and closely interwoven with people cultural values. Indigenous knowledge is also the social capital of the poor, their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival, to produce food, to provide for shelter or have control over their own lives and women are contributing their own quarters in these areas. Therefore, the indigenous knowledge that will not encourage women's full progress and development of their potentials should be abhorred.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Liberation

Hornby (2005) defines liberation as the process of striving to achieve equal rights and status. It is also the act of liberating or the state of being liberated.

Christian Religion: is a monotheistic system of beliefs and practices based on the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus as embodied in New Testament and emphasizing the role of Jesus as Savior (McBrien, 1994).

Religion studies, according to McBrien (1994) is the multidisciplinary academic field devoted to research in religious beliefs, describes, compares, interprets, and explains religion, emphasizing, historically based, and cross-cultural perspectives.

Woman: a woman is a female human. The term woman is usually reserved for an adult, with the term girl being the usual term of female child or adolescent. The term woman is also sometimes used to identify a female human, regardless of age, as in phrases such as "woman's rights". "woman" may also refer to a person's gender identify. Woman with typical genetic development are usually capable of giving birth from puberty until menopause. According to Ojochide (2010) a woman is the female human and the most wonderful gift that God gave to our world, carved beautifully from the man's rib. She is the master piece of creation an epitome of beauty, passion and love, the glory of man and the last born of God.

Ika Land

Onyekpeze (2003) posits that Ika is one of the ethnic groups in Delta State of Nigeria, made up of eleven clans. Such as Agbor, Owa, Uteh, Abavo, Umunede, Mbiri, Otokpo, Owere Olubor, Akumazi, Ekuoma, and Igbodo. The Ika's were grouped in one local Government Area known as Ika Local Government Area before the creation of Delta State in 1991 after which it was split into two Local Government Areas Ika South and Ika North East. Ika has common boundaries with her neighbours, Edo State to the South West, Aniocha North and South Local Government Areas to the East, Edo to the North, Ndokwa and Ukwani Local Government Areas to the South. Ika lies

some 47 kilometers to the West of Asaba, the Headquarters of Delta State. Ika people are predominantly Farmers, Traders, Civil and Public servants.

The Place of Women in the Traditional Religion of Ika Society before the Advent of Christianity

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Ika Land there were cultural, social and religious discriminations placed against the women folk. Women were seen but not heard. Most of the taboos were built around women while their male counterparts were free. Women were regarded as inferior beings who were not likely to have the capacity of experiencing ultimate reality. Women have been subjected to suffering, subordination and outright refusal of men to acknowledge their roles in the society as the nation builders (Osajie, 2013).

The role of Christian missionaries in the improvement of the condition of women in Ika land cannot be over emphasized. Over the years, there have been remarkable developments in the activities of the missionaries. They addressed crucial areas of women downtrodden obnoxious customs of the land. The improvement of the condition of women in Ika land came into being as a result of formal education introduced by the missionaries which set them free from social cultural and gender restrictions. Christian religion and formal education also set the women free from traditional concept of womanhood and the place of women and the girl child in the society.

Mal-treatment of Ika women before the Advent of Christianity

According to Osajie (2013) one of the oldest social distinctions of mankind is that, based on the biological differences between male and female. Certain regards and punishment have been defined as appropriate for one sex but not for the other. The females are always marginalized in all aspects. Thus, even in our present day society, females are denied many opportunities enjoyed by their male counterparts. For example, Ika men build their houses in rectangular form leaving the women thereby making him to have concubines while the females are being restricted to their husbands only. Oral Interview with V Nwanze on August 10th 2016 said that, the rectangular form of the building helps to check the wife from going after other men. If caught in the act of adultery, the woman is being stripped naked, paraded round the village and given an oath in order to refrain her from such act.

Abudah (2007) posits that adultery is a serious crime and a taboo and any woman who indulges in it is always hunted by the gods of the land. It is regarded as an abomination which needs cleansing of the land. The belief is any woman who is found guilty of this offence must confess her sins and perform all the necessary sacrifice to appease the gods. This includes the slaughtering of the goat to the goddess of the earth (ali) in front of the house where the offence was committed. Failure to confess often leads to early death by swollen legs, and the body of such victim is buried in the evil forest while the male counterparts are left guiltless. Even the gods were partial in their judgment because they only hurt the women who committed adultery.

Abudah (2007) also avails that women as at that time during their menstrual period were forbidden to be in the house. It was a taboo for a married woman during her menstrual period to prepare food for her husband. This could not be possible because as soon as a woman

notices her period, she moves out of the house even if it is midway into her cooking. The woman has to move in to an isolated little hut built a distance away from the main hut. Where such an isolated house is not available near the house, the woman will be forced to look for any where she can find one and passes the night there. The nights were cold and dark with fire to illuminate the hut. The caring husband had to go out at night to keep vigil over the hut where the wife is sleeping. Women who were not guided at night had often experienced frightening scenes which caused their premature death. Also their isolation during menstrual period made the evil ones to study the women's circle and predict period of pregnancy which they destroyed. As a result of the harsh weather condition that exists around this hut, some women contracted some diseases which the people could not handle due to lack of basic health knowledge which led to their early death.

Women in Ika land suffered injustice and inhuman treatment before the arrival of the Christian missionaries. For example, a young girl that was not declared ripe for marriage and tattooed was not free to have any sexual intercourse with any man. If she had any sexual relationship and she was put in a family way, she has committed fornication and is called "Imegba-nzuzue" and the pregnancy is called "ituchu-ime"

In line with this, Onyekpeze (2003) posits that the women from her lineage and the entire village usually expressed their disapproval of pregnancy out of wedlock by a moonlight procession on the streets with songs, summoning all young women to come out for the protest procession. At the height of the procession, the women will march to the house of the girl by singing songs composed with her name to ridicule and humiliate her, and this serves as a deterrent to the young girls in the society. This act often ends with throwing stones and sticks at the roof of the victim's father's house and heaping worthless materials on her door step leaving the man that had the affairs with her scot free.

Osajie (2013) states that widows suffered emotional and physical torture in Ika land before the emergence of Christianity. The practice range from violent shaving of her hair, making her to drink the water used to bath the corpse of her deceased husband. At times she would be allowed to appear in tattered dress, remain indoors and deprived from bathing for days with no body to attend to her needs. Moreso, the woman will not be seen in the public for a year. She sat and slept on bare floor using left hand to feed for days without washing her hands. When she dies during the mourning period as a result of the harsh treatment, she would be automatically declared as the witch that killed her husband and would be buried in the evil forest without proper burial rite accorded.

According to Landa (2009), widowhood rites are in two stages- first she is confined to a room outside the family house or in her kitchen for seven days after the interment of the deceased husband. She is dressed in black with her hair shaven. The second stage of the mourning begins at the end of the seventh day. A wake keeping ceremony is held and the widow is forbidden by custom to sleep. On the same day, she performs the semi-purification rites by taking her bath around 4.00am. in most cases, after the mourning period, the widow will be compelled to remarry her husband's next of kin in the family. If she refuses, she will be sent packing without taking any of her husband's property. In some hostile families, the widow and her children will be thrown out of her husband's house without any provision made for their

welfare and before their children are grown to demand for their father's property, their uncle's must have sold them or mismanaged them.

Man's Equality before God:

Men and women were made in the image and likeness of God and as such women are not secondary or inferior before God. According to Holm (2001), man and woman were created and were given dominion over all other creatures. So, God created man and woman in his own image. He created them male and female (Gen 1: 27). There is no distinction in status; there is no subjugation of one sex to the other. The image of God is not tied to the male; the whole human race is in the image of God. This is the basis of a passage in Galatians where Paul seems to be describing Christianity as a religion in which distinctions of race, social status, and gender do not apply "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 28).

The role of Christianity in the liberation of Ika women

The most important thing done by the missionaries in Nigeria and Ika Land in particular is the Western Education which eradicated illiteracy from those that were opportune to go to school (Ubrurhe and Idamarhare (2000). Hence, Onyeldu (2004) states that Christianity is an important agent of change because whenever the gospel was preached and accepted in any given society, transformation follows in the lives of the people. He also states that immediately an individual is converted, the gospel is expected to bring changes in him. From the moment of conversion, the customs of the people becomes new which leads to the transformation of the society and the reconstruction of Ika Indigenous knowledge which encouraged the ill treatment of women in the society.

The liberation of women is one of the most important contributions of Christianity to Ika society. As a result of the impact of the gospel women are now taken their rightful places in all spheres of life as against the condition in the past when women were seen but not heard. The modern women are now taking their places in education, industry, the church, social organizations and politics. Furthermore, the right of widows to inherit the property of their late husbands has been impacted into them. All these changes came as a result of Christian education.

The knowledge acquired in Christian religion made Ika men to see their wives as suitable companions who need to be loved, cherished and cared for. Instead of the men beating their wives and seeing them as little more than possessions, they now see them as their suitable companion and helpers who are always there for them. The Ika men can now plan, discuss and executive domestic projects together with their wives and widows are no longer treated like beast of burden. Christian religion has helped to expunged the aspect of Ika culture that often force widows to remain in total seclusion without washing or changing their clothes for a year and they no longer deprived them from having access to their deceased husband's property.

Again, Ika women now sleep with their husbands on the same bed comfortably even when they are on their monthly circle instead of staying in isolation hut. Christian religion teaches that God is no respecter of persons. As he judges the adulterer that is how he judges

the adulteress. There is nothing like man is polygamous in nature in the sight of God and the punishment given to the man that commits sexual immorality is the same punishment for the woman that does the same act. So God treats every one equally (1st Cor 6: 18, Hebrews 13:4 and Lev 20:10). As a result of Christian religion, Ika women can now rise and shine. For everyone who is created in God's image should rise up from obscurity and shine.

Conclusion:

A remarkable change has taken place in the lives of women in Ika land. The old dehumanized customs which were stumbling blocks to the education of women in Ika land have become things of the past due to Western education brought by the Christian missionaries. The reconstruction of Ika indigenous knowledge through Christian religion has improved the status of Ika women in the society which has enabled them to contribute greatly to the national development.

Christianity had improved the family lives of women by making their husbands to plan and execute with them as they see them as suitable helpers and companions. Also, mourning period for widows had been reduced and are no longer subjected to harsh treatment. They can now inherit the property of their late husbands. Conclusively, women can now rise up and fulfill their destinies because God is in the business of using them today and they cannot afford to sit down as spectators any longer. It is time for all women to rise up and fulfill their destinies the way God created them to be.

Recommendations:

This paper recommends the following:

- I. All restrictions hindering the full humanization and the development of women potentials should be abolished through campaign against women inhuman treatment.
- II. Government should create enabling environment for women to actively participate in politics, education and otherwise.
- III. Ika women should enjoy the right to proper and sound education so as to develop their potentials and sharpen their lives in accordance with their aspirations
- IV. Ika women should fight against all forms of social discriminations and eradicate all obstacles to gender inequality to ensure that men and women are equal before the law, by educating them on their fundamental human right.
- V. Women should fight for their rights, self-respect and equal justices through women liberation programmes.
- VI. The concepts like liberty, freedom, equality and justices are better acknowledged when the mind is reconstructed by Christian religious studies. Therefore the government should encourage the study of Christian religious studies at all levels of education.

All hands must be on deck to encourage girl child education because the girl child has equal right with her male counterparts, because what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Therefore, education for genders equality is necessary to facilitate the elimination of stereotyped concepts of roles of men and women in the society.

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