



THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN IKALAND

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ABSTRACT

Christian emancipation of women in Ikaland is the releasing of women from their traditional restrictions such as taboos, discriminations and obnoxious laws which debar them from all the activities, functions and post which men have hitherto assumed prerogative powers to occupy in the complete isolation of women folk in the olden days. The discriminations include the cultural restrain or difficulty of women in Ikaland such as killing of twins, sharing of landed properties, widows subjected to too much torture, lack of education, forced marriages, domestic slavery and pawning etc. This paper also examines the advent of Christianity into Ikaland and to assess the impact of Christian emancipation of women in Ikaland. The methods used are both descriptive and analytical. From what one deduced in the emancipation of women in Ikaland, via the Missionaries proved that the poor standard of living in Ika women has really been elevated and that all the obnoxious laws and customs which before made the women to be seen and not to be heard were equally destroyed.

KEYWORDS: Ikaland, Missionaries, discriminations, obnoxious laws, Christian emancipation

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been a remarkable development in the activities of the Missionaries. They addressed crucial areas of women's down grading status arising from the obnoxious customs of the land. Christian emancipation of women in Ika Land came into being as a result of formal education which set them free from social, cultural and gender restrictions that limited their aspirations. Christian emancipation of women also set them free from the traditional concept of womanhood and the place of women and the girl child in the society.

Before the advent of the Christian Missionaries in Ika land, there were cultural, social and religious discriminations placed against the women folks. Women were seen but not heard. Most of the taboos were built around women, while their male counterparts moved freely. They saw no evil in killing twin babies and isolating their mothers and sometimes disowning them. For them scanty dressing was a way of life; therefore, there was nothing wrong about it. In their religious beliefs, worship included the veneration of inanimate objects perceived to contain unseen forces that needed to be pacified for protection. The ancestors were constantly called upon in prayers and through incantations to take part in family discussions and ceremonies. But the roles of women in the traditional religion were restricted as a result of imposed taboos on them. This paper therefore, examines the role of Christianity in the emancipation of women in Ikaland.

One of the oldest social distinctions of mankind is that based on the biological differences between male and female. Certain regards and punishments 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 advantages enjoyed by their male counterparts. For examples, Nwanze (2008) stated that Ika men built their house in rectangular form leaving the women thereby making him to have concubines outside the matrimonial home, while the female is being restricted only to their husbands. To the man too, the rectangular form of the

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building helps to check the wife from going after other men. If found in such an act, the woman is being stripped naked, parade her all through the village and such women will be given an oath in order to refrain her from such act. Therefore, any misbehaviour on the part of the female attracts fine or sacrificial rites for purification.

In line with this, Owabor (2008) opines that if a man is sick, the woman is always being accused and suspected and will be subjected to some traditional rituals in order for the man to be cured. If eventually the man dies, his widows will be compelled to re-marry the husband's next of kin in the family. At the same time, the widow has no share in the inheritance of her deceased husband's property. Infact, in some hostile families, the widow and her children will be thrown out of the family house without any provision made for their welfare.

Furthermore, is the giving birth to twins. To Ika people, the coming in of new born baby in the family is a thing of joy that calls for mass jubilation because they see babies as special gifts from God, hence the Ika name; "Chukwuenyewa" (God is the giver of child). But on the other way round, it was a taboo for a human being to give birth to twins or more than one child at a time. To them, twins or triplets birth was the nature of animals and not humans and as such children were thrown away to the evil forest where they will be left to die, and their mother has to be isolated from the town for some days until some purification rituals were performed to appease the gods. According to Onyeidu (2001), the wife of Daniel Odiegwu one of the early converts gave birth to twins. The children thus born are not suffered to lie a moment after birth but thrown away because it is against their laws and customs to nurse up twin children born in their soil.

The level of female education in Ika land is low because until too long ago, education in Ika focused mainly on men while investment in a girl's education was seen as a waste of resources. It is assumed that a girl will eventually be married off into some other family. As a result, when family resources are scarce for fees, uniforms or books, the girl-child is more likely to be withdrawn from school than the boy. In homes and communities, genders roles are largely stereotyped with the girl saddle with bulk of domestic chores, living her with little time for school works. Girls in poor families are likely to be faced into early marriages, or sent to live with affluent families as domestic workers or to care for sick family members.

In the traditional religion according to Mgbakor (2007) as the female plays important roles, they have limitations that their male counterparts do not have. For example, where both sexes are in the same religious cult the shrine, the females do not come close to officiate. In terms of breaking kola-nuts in a gathering, no matter the age of female to male, the male has to break it even as at today. Also, the house-hold deities associated to women are few in number.

In marriage, women are subjected to the authority of their husbands and are expected to cook meals and rear children. Repressive practices in most cultures in Ika see to it that women loose their rights to individuality while in marriage. Generally speaking, wives are seen as properties of their husbands to be dealt with at will. Under customary laws, property acquired during marriage is seen as that of the husband and in the event of divorce, the women's right to property is not adequately protected, except a woman married under the marriage act.

In line with this, Talbot (1948) sees forced marriage as denial of fundamental human rights; forced marriage is an unpleasant method by which a girl marries the man chosen for her by her parents or guardians irrespective of what her feelings might be. The two in most cases, make an unhappy home and eventually the marriage collapse. In other rare cases, the girl, having no love for the man chosen for her, becomes more resolute as she grows up and refuses to marry him. Girls were also betrothed to future husbands when they are still tender. They had no right to choose their future partners. Sometimes, the girl-child was used to settle old debt. These girls were given out to creditors as pawns or domestic slaves.

The practice of subjecting a widow to physical and emotional torture was very common in Ika land in the olden days. The practice range from violent shaving of her hair to making her drink the water used to bath the corpse of her deceased husband. At times, they were allowed to appear in tattered dress, remain indoors and deprived



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from bathing for months with no body to attend to their needs. Moreso, the dead man's wives will not be seen in the public for a year. They sat and slept on bare floor, using left hand to feed for days without washing the hands or not even washing the mourning cloth for a year. The more agonizing, is that this barbaric and torture came from their women folk called "Umu-adan".

Aghedo (2008) pointed out that women in the olden days used to sleep outside the main house throughout the period of menstruation. To the Ika men, especially the titled men, elderly men and those that go out for medicine making (Imeme-Ogwu) feel it is a taboo and unholy for women in their period to co-habit with them, as such will make their medicine to loose potency and shortens their lives. At the period of the menses, she will be given a seat outside the house until she finishes, thereafter the clothes used during the period will be washed and hung outside until the next menstrual circle. The men too will not allow such women to cook food for them during the period.

Advent of Christianity of Ika land

Christianity is one of the major religions in Nigeria. Before the coming of Christianity, the Ika people had the knowledge of God. They had strong belief in God "Osolobue" or Chukwurielu Igwe meaning Almighty God in heaven but had not the means of reaching Him directly, hence they approached Him through lesser gods. Idowu (1973) opines that many factors were held for their religious development. These include the mountains, rivers, geographical environment, forest, the change of season, the powers of nature like earth quake, thunder, storm, calamities, epidemics, diseases, birth and deaths etc.

In an attempt of searching for answers to these problems and to make life more conducive and better for living, religious concepts arose and took place. Idowu (1973) also has it to say that the people reached God through sacrifices at different occasions. Ika people also participated in some obnoxious practices that endangered lives like human sacrifices and killing of twins.

Dauda (2000) opines that the social condition and practice like human sacrifices, infertility, widowhood, slave trade, trial by ordeal prevailed in African community. It was these set of people that saw the advent of the missionaries in their midst in the 19th century.

The first missionaries to arrive Ika according to Onyeidu (2003) were "the church missionary society (CMS) accompanied by the Roman Catholic Missionaries. When the mission became true and attractive, the Pentecostal churches started coming into the land. Christianity played and is still playing a very vital role in the transforming of the people lives and environment. The movement of the missionaries especially down to the earth of Ika land was as a result of Jesus great Commission to his disciples (Math 26:19)

Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, Baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always to the close of age.

It was in response to this commission that the disciples embarked on their missionary work as documented in acts of the Apostle and letters of St. Paul. The Church, like the parable of the Mustard seed began with a handful of believers, but today, Christianity has become a universal religion.

The coming of Christianity to Ika land by Onyeidu (2003) was in three phases. The first phase was the "Anglican Missionary Society (CMS), which dates back to 1875, followed by Roman Catholic Missionary activities in 1818 and that of the Pentecostal churches in 1970's. Onyeidu (2003) opines that it was Idumje-Ugboko that provided the main base from where the gospel took off to Ika land writing further, he asserts that Anglican Missionary activities reached Igbodo in 1903 where they had their early converts. According to him too, the response of the converts was tremendous.



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Azike (2004) observed that, the school introduced by the missionary workers which existed side by side with the new church gave the new converts a brilliant, small and uniform outlook. But in 1914, the mission at Igbodo met a temporary setback as a result of the persecution that arose against the new converts who were accused of upsetting native customs by the traditional practitioners. However, peace was later restored when mission work resumed.

With Igbodo as a base in Ika land, the mission extended to the present Ekwuoma, Umunede, Obior, Otolokpo. From Owa-Oyibu, the missionary work spread to Ute-Okpu in 1919 with tremendous converts as notice in Igbodo although there was a serious uprising at Owa-Aliosimie protesting against the presence of the white colonial masters in the town. Consequently the then district commissioner Crewe Read was ambushed and murdered in one of his outings Ijeoyi (1983).

In line with this, a punitive expenditure was sent to Owa and Agbor, which led to the occupation by the British soldiers in order to restore peace and avert future occurrence. This, however, brought a setback to the mission work until 1910 when peace was restored and safety of the missionaries was assured. This led to the establishment of St. John's Anglican Church Boji-Boji, Agbor, which served as a meeting point for the converts from Igbanke, others from hinterland like the Yoruba and Urhobo settlers. As the church or Christian population was on the increase, Ute-Owa district was created out of the original Agbor district.

The Role of Christianity in the Emancipation of women in Ikaland

In the words of Onyeidu (2004) Christianity, is an important agent of change. Whenever the gospel has been introduced and accepted in any given society, transformations follow in the lives of the people. Quoting Bardsley, a one-time secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Onyeidu remarks that:

Immediately an individual is converted, the gospel is expected to bring changes in him. Behold I make all things new is used to show that this is anticipated. Not only the individual but the society is expected to change also. From the moment of conversion, the converts' attitude to his home, his neighbours, the customs of his people becomes new.

The emancipation of women and girls is one of the most important contributions of Christianity to Ika society. As a result of the impact of the Gospel, women are now taking their rightful places in all spheres of life. As against the situation 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. Again, the right of girls to choose their life partners and widows to inherit the property left behind by their deceased husbands has been imparted to them. All these changes came in as a result of Christian education. The role of Christianity in the emancipation of Ika women are as follows;

Introduction of Western Education

In Ikaland as elsewhere in Southern Nigeria, it was the Christian denominations that pioneered the work of Western education in the society. From the beginning, the establishment of schools was an important part of their evangelism. This was to enable them have maximum yield of the evangelical work. Of these missions, the most prominent were the Anglican and the Roman Catholics. The obligating subjects in the curriculum are English language, Nature study, Arithmetic, Hygiene which involved cooking, banking, needle work and laundry. In line with this, Lugard as quoted by Onyeidu (2004) opined a larger proportionate impulse is given to the advancement of a people by the education of its women than that of men.

Lugard further observed the need for the education of the women:

The high rate of infant mortality, the lack of Sanitation, and of Cleanliness in the preparation of food and drink, the squalor filth of the home and its surroundings, all bear witness to the urgent need of education in domestic hygiene and the betterment of the conditions of the home.



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To buttress the afore reasons, education in Ika became more formal. People were organized into units for learning and to acquire knowledge in the areas they needed them. Hence, Morka in Nzemeke (1988) reports that:

In 1918, the Obi of Abavo, Obi Jegbefune granted a request made by Rev. Fr. Charles Burr and offered him a piece of land where the missionaries set up a catholic church which also serves as the first primary school. Thereafter, two teachers' Messer Ologhogho and Odiakose were appointed as the first teachers to man the school.

Infant, the missionaries built so many primary schools and secondary schools in Ika especially at Umunede, Abavo, Boji-Boji Agbor. The effect of Christian education on the womenfolk cannot be over emphasized. As early as 1910, Holbrook of the Nigerian Mission remarked that "The men are waking at the fact that women are not merely slaves and they can be a real help to the church and country, and the women, although afraid of themselves are really appreciating the honour done to them and feel the necessity of living up to it.

Indeed, Western education has put women on equal bases with their male counterpart. Quoting Holbook, Onyeidu said:

The Nigerian woman no longer is satisfied to have the men think, plan and act for her. She has come of age and is asking to be placed in a position where her voice can be heard. As a result of the useful roles of our educated women today, the traditional question, what is to be done with educated women? Is no longer tenable (Onyeidu 2004).

Abolition of Domestic Slavery and Pawning:

In those days, Ika women were used as domestic slaves and pawning in the sense that some poor families gave out their female children to live with affluent families as domestic workers to care for sick family members.

UNICEF (2005) made reference to poverty as one of the critical factors contributing to child marriage, domestic slavery and pawning. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older sometimes even elderly man is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes can be used as currency or to settle debts. But, with the inception of Christianity, there was a stoppage to that effect and the people no longer use their female children as a means of surviving or livelihood.

Encouragement of Christian Marriage of One Man, One Wife

Christianity has changed the traditional forms and methods of marriage and instituted the Christian ideal of family life. The missionary agents believed that as quoted by Onyeidu (2004) that:

The living examplication of the Divine ideal of marriage and the example of holy, happy married life are potent for good in a non-exhortation to uplift and purify the homes of the people.

With this conviction, the missionary agents tackled the issues of polygamy, bigamy, early betrothal and infant marriage. Prior to the coming of the Gospel, Monogamy was practiced side by side with the system of polygamy, but Christianity enforced the principle of one man, one wife.

The struggle Against Infant Marriage, Forced Marriages and Polygamy

Yet another sphere of the traditional marriage, which the church went against, was the practice of early betrothal and infant marriage. Quoting Hensley, Onyeidu said:



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Every Ibo woman from her birth belonged entirely to some body. At her birth she might be betrothed to whosoever her father pleased, the dairy being paid by the man in installments, either in labour or money, and the girl was known by his name always. (Onyeidu 2004).

With the education of the girls through Christianity, some of them were bold enough to reject their betrothed husbands.

Another aspect of traditional marriage customs affected by Christianity are, the practice of inheriting the wife of a deceased relation, prolonged and tortuous widowhood and the forceful abolition of women for marriage. On the case of remarriage in a deceased quoted by on a husband's family, meek as quoted by Onyeidu (2005) observes that:

It may be said generally that widows nowadays are to a very great extent than formerly, exercising their options of marrying into other families, and in this, they are encouraged by the Christian missions, which look with disfavour on the polygamous custom of a man inheriting a widow when he already has a wife.

Polygamy is universal and on the whole greatly approved by the women. But with the influence of Christianity, polygamy is becoming less fashionable. In the first place, the church is against it so that those who staunchly profess the Christian religion condemn it. In the second place, the rising standard of living, particularly among the literate class, makes it burdensome to marry more than one wife. The average workman earns a meager income just enough for the bare necessities of life and if he is to march along with time, the children have to be well fed, sufficiently clad and educated. The tendency therefore, is to marry one wife by whom he hopes to get few children and then enjoy a family decent life.

Women as Church Founders and Leaders

In the past, according to Bible (R.V.S) states that:

Women should keep silence in the church, for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also with the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

But at present, both in orthodox churches and in the modern Pentecostal churches, the number of women is more than that of their male counterparts. In the Pentecostal movements, many women are church founders and elders. A good illustration is Bishop (Mrs.) Margaret Idahosa the Church of God Mission International, who took over a leadership of the church after the death of her husband, Archbishop Benson Idahosa. While interviewing her on the leadership position, Margaret Idahosa averred:

The day I was consecrated a Bishop, everybody that was there knew that it was the power of the Holy Spirit that did it and the power of God does not know gender. What a man can do in God, a woman can as well do it in God, because the spirit of God is one.

The work of Churches in Ika Land

The Church in Ika Local Government Area helped to improve the condition of women by preaching against the ugly practices of husbands towards their wives. Majority of husbands presently do not beat their wives, or abuse them as if they are servants but can now plan, discuss and execute domestic projects together. Thanks to the work of churches that wives and widows are no longer treated like beast of burden. Widows now do not drink or sit and sleep continuously on the floor for a year. Even, the non-Christian widows sit on the mat for just only a month before going back to her bed. A Christian widow has no blame or taboo holding her on that, unless she feels like. A s widow that has female children or little boys can inherit their deceased father's



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wealth until the woman dies. Again, a wife who was married to king or noble man could not be said to be buried with him when he dies. Finally, a widow can now decide on any Christian church to attend of which will make cease cooking foods or killing of goats in order to worship or appease her deceased husband, ancestors or fore-fathers.

Modern Medicine Services

It was also the missionaries who came to this country that introduced different medical ways of treating diseases. This, Aja (2007) pointed out thus: the coming of the missionaries improved the health of the people. The crude medical system of the native doctors in Nigerian before the advent of the missionaries was not so valuable as to minimize death rate in the community. The Christian agents came not only to save souls but also to provide health delivery services. This was why they set up dispensaries, maternity homes and hospitals. For example, Catholic maternity in Agbor, health care in Owa-Oyibu, Owa-Alizomor, Aliagwa, Agbor Ewuru are concrete evidences. Some diseases which were incurable were being cured eg. Chicken pox, leprosy, small pox etc. Prior to the coming of the missionaries, anybody who was unfortunate to contract any of these diseases was isolated from the community and will be left to die. The same person was looked upon in the community as an evil person who had violated the law of the gods.

In Ika land, the story was the same. The missionary doctors and nurse cared for the sick and pregnant women who were given attention to by the native doctors. They built dispensaries and health centre in Boji-Boji, Agbor. They introduced drugs and embarked on war against diseases. The success of the medical filed helped to reduce the mortality and unpleasant death rate of the community. The Roman Catholic Church established a clinic and maternity home at Alika Street, Agbor and other areas in the community.

CONCLUSION

By and large, a remarkable change had taken place in the lives of women in Ika land. The old dehumanized customs and prejudices which was a stumbling block to the education of women in Ika Land had become something of the past. As a result of formal and literate Western education initiated and developed by the Christian missions, Women are now “liberated” and “emancipated”. Their improved status in the society has helped them to contribute greatly to the environment they found themselves and to the national development in all ramifications of life.

Moreso, from the primary schools through the secondary schools to tertiary institutions of learning in Ika Land, the population of girls and young women out numbers that of their male counterparts. The same is exactly true of the different Christian churches. Anybody or Layman knows that in most Christian congregations today, the women, who are in the majority form the pillars of the church.

Christianity improved the family lives of women by introducing monogamy, domestic hygiene, healthy upbringing of children, improved relationship between husband and wife etc. Also, mourning period for widows had been cut short. Women can now inherit the property of their deceased husbands. No more early betrothal and infant marriage. Pawning is now a crime.

RECOMMENDATION

The first recommendation to Ika women is that they should in the name of all that is good, give themselves self-respect. As wives and mothers, they should strive to maintain the highest standard of personal discipline, honesty, integrity and loyalty in their homes, to their husbands and children, from whom they should, of course, expect reciprocal treatment. They should aim at setting good examples of moral probity, not only in their homes but also in the communities and in their place of work.

Education is the favourable climate for the full emancipation of Ika women. Akumadu (2005) in *beast of Burden* “Education should be the indispensable catalyst, the most formidable weapon in the armory of Ika women in their fight for personal confidence, self-respect, equal rights and equal justices. Concept like liberty, freedom, equality and justices are better appreciated when the mind is liberated by education”.



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Therefore, every Ika girl and woman should enjoy the right to proper and sound education so as to develop their potentials and sharpen their lives in accordance with their aspirations.

Women should marry under the marriage Act. This will enhance their rights and protect the rights of their children to inheritance, be they boys or girls.

Ika women should fight against all forms of social discriminations and abolish all obstacles to gender inequality to ensure that men and women are equal before the law. In court both sexes should be regarded as equal. There should be resistance by the women against all forms of dehumanizing customary practices. Most laws are inadequate for stopping such violence unless present cultural and social values can change, and now is the time for change. In the Beijing conference of 1995, it was declared that “Immediate and concerted action by all can achieve a peaceful, just and humane world in which women will be respected”.

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