

The Impact of Christianity on the Extinction of Ekau Feminine Cult in Ekori

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Abstract

There is no argument that Christianity played a great and positive role in Ekori by getting rid of heinous cultural practices, providing health care services and educating the people, but it has also robbed the people of certain cultural institutions and heritage. Ekau Cult was a highly placed and important social institution that played a variety of roles in the community; ranging from maintaining ethical order and stability, judicial, economic and security roles. The qualitative method of data collection and analysis includes both primary and secondary materials. Primary data were gathered from the field through extensive oral interviews under a conducive atmosphere void of external influences which attest to the originality of the information obtained. The secondary data includes works written by scholars found in journals, textbooks and Internet. It was discovered in the course of this research that the extinction of Ekau Feminine Cult has resulted to insecurity, moral decadence, infertility and infidelity, broken relationships, domestic violence, among others. The need for cultural revivalism, self identity and religious tolerance is among the recommendations made in this work.

Key Words: Impact, Christianity, Extinction, Ekau, Feminine, Cult, Ekori.

Introduction

It is a well known fact that Christianity had impacted positively on the traditional and cultural institutions in Ekori, but at the same time dealt a staggering blow on its socio-cultural and religious heritage. The Christian missionaries perceived no wisdom in compromising their faith with indigenous customs and institutions, creating a new social order to wipe away most customs and traditional institutions in Ekori. As Lado (2006) contends, the ethnocentric attitude of Christianity elevated the dominance of Western culture at the expense of African culture. This infiltration of Western ideas demonstrates how aggressive the Western culture is compared to African indigenous culture and knowledge system.

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The deliberate attempt to send into extinction and displacing traditional institutions and social systems by the missionaries is founded on the imposition of eurocentric institutions and values exalted as the way to morality and modernity in Ekori. This implies that after conversion to Christianity, there is a concern of breaking away from their indigenous identity and possibility of social denunciation by upholding the principles of Western values and culture. This work therefore x-rays the history and origin of Ekau Feminine Cult, its relevance and effect of its extinction in the society, and how Christianity under the disguise of civilization and modernization contributed to the extinction of the cult in Ekori.

Research Study Area

Ekoli Yedeen which was wrongly pronounced and documented as Ekori due to linguistic differences by the whites was founded between AD1617 and 1670 by Inah Nkpatu. It is the second largest community in Yakurr Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. It is made up of three council wards (Afrekpe-Epenti, Ajere and Ntan) and three autonomous communities: Afrekpe, Ajere Beach and Epenti Beach. They speak Lokáá language which is of the Bantu linguistic family (James E. Egbe, oral interview).

Geographically, Ekori is centrally located in Yakurr Local Government Area and surrounded by other communities. In the Northern part, she is bounded by Nko and Assiga; in the South by Ugep and Anong; in the East by Mkpani and in the West by the River Cross. However, between 1700BCE and 1800BCE Ekori shared boundaries in the North with the people of Adon (Onyadama) and in the East with the Agois, and in the South with Ugep and Ediba, before Ekori gave some of her lands to Mkpani, Nko, Assiga Inyima, Anong and Igbo Imabana and Ikwalegwa (Agada I. Agada, Oral interview).

Literature Review

The birth of feminism can be traced back to late 1848 when thousands of women at the Seneca Falls Convention rallied for equal opportunity of women in the society (Eteng et al, 2023). Outlining the new movement ideology, Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted its Declaration and Political Strategies. It is a radical movement with the intention of salvaging women from the patriarchal society which had subjugated them to oppression. Feminism is a form of liberation movement with the primary aim of liberating women from the shackles of oppression, subjugation and inhumane treatment orchestrated by their male counterpart. This subjugation traced its origin to the early church fathers like St. Augustine, Tertullian and St. Chrysostom who taught that women are the cause of sin in the world which could be the reason for the denial of women occupying certain positions in the Church. This movement has received a wider scholastic attention all over the world, with each scholar defining the concept from his or her perspective. Though coming from different scholastic angles, there is a point of convergence within the scholars.

Feminism is a conscientization movement with the sole aim of demanding equal right and opportunities in the society, as against exploitation, marginalization, powerless, cultural imperialism and systematic violence (Eteng, 2018). According to Gabriel-olugbemi (2015), “feminism is an ideology cum theory which has evolved over the years ... as a cultural practice put in place by a patriarchal world order bent on controlling or stifling the sexuality of women in practising societies”. The societal interpretations attached to what is considered feminine such as class, sexuality and individuality helped in placing women in an inferior position (Bukkar, 2022). In spite of their positive roles socially, economically and politically, their efforts and contributions are unnoticed which has led to the campaign against gender inequality (Kayode, 2020). Bonaventure (2005) avers that it was between 1820 and 1860 that the changing economic and social structures affected both family structures and gender roles in the society. The inferiority and subordination of women are as a result of the superiority attached to men (Bhasin, 2004). For Fiorenza 2004, the radical notion of women being humans evokes memories for equal decision making powers. It brings to light the awareness of women’s exploitation and oppression with the aim of social, economic and cultural liberation.

The missionaries established boarding schools with the intention of removing new converts from traditional influence. Reid (2011) pictured how the people lost part of their cultural identity since tribal history, beliefs, and cultures were substituted with the teaching of the Bible. They promoted western values and cultural patterns totally different from that of the people. Vilhanova (2007) noted that cultural contacts with the West were spearheaded by the missionaries with the intention to transform African societies, having no doubt about the superiority of Western culture. According to Iwe (1958) African culture had suffered great shock as a result of the waves of missionary activities which overshadow some cultural values in Africa. He is of the view that African culture is under shocking bondage to Christianity and Western values which has resulted to the extinction of certain parts of African culture. Okon (2013) agreed with Iwe when he aversed that European missionaries and scholars have distorted and mutilated facts on African culture, religion and society which is unsatisfactory and detrimental to Africa. This attitude of viewing Africans as worshipping a wrong God which they denote with a small letter “g” is responsible for the enmity existing between the church and African Indigenous Religion (Chavunduka, 2001). In concordance with Chavunduka, Ibenwa (2014) noted that this has impacted so much on African culture negatively. The missionaries disdained some African values which caused disagreement between them and the people as a result of their superior attitude (Akpan, 1973). They rudely shattered African societies with their cultural values which determined the type of education and moral values taught in their schools. This according to Mugambi (2002) forced Africans to live a double lifestyle by accepting the norms introduced to them on one hand, and on the other hand could not become Europeans by simply adopting the missionaries’ norms and values. Achebe (1958) demonstrated how the family unit was also destroyed as a result of conversion to Christianity and how Mbantan leaders wanted the Christians to be alienated from the rest of the villagers after the sacred python of the tribe was killed by a Christian.

The Christian missionaries wreaked their havoc on African soil with the assistance of the colonial masters. African shrine, places of worship, spirit mediums etc were destroyed. Even philosophers who were considered to be objective and rational in their dealings were also guilty of this mess. They denied that Africans have consciousness of God, any substantial objectivity or law. In order to solve this problem, there is urgent need for dialogue between Christianity and African cultural heritage which is the antidote needed (Nwafor, 2016). For Edet (2016), "Dialogue will promote tolerance.... Tolerance is to make allowance for other people's beliefs, opinions, customs, behaviour, tastes and choices". Maurice (2014) opines that Africanization of Christianity which is still ongoing will bring an agreeable and good dialogue with Christianity for a better life in Africa. Christianity is not native or indigenous in Africa which makes it an external force. It will therefore be necessary to make a creative effort to domesticate Christianity in order to transform the future, rather than create tension and strains.

Origin of Ekau Feminine Cult

There are numerous sources on the origin of Ekau feminine cult; ranging from the battle against barrenness in favour of multiplicity, the protection of the female gender from the shackles of oppression, as well as the maintenance of ethical order and stability in Ekori. This is consequent on the fact that every good mother is delighted to see her home in peace and harmony. Ekau as a sacred cult was a highly placed social and cultural group that is designed by the female folk to compliment the leadership of the society, enhance fertility and also maintain peaceful co-existence (Grace Ofem, oral interview).

In general terms, every woman is qualified to be a member of the cult and participate in all its activities and ceremonies. However, for certain offices in this cult, a woman is spiritually selected by the gods to serve as the Ojiekau (Ekau Priestess). In some instances the Ojiekau takes part in the governance of the society and serves as a mediator between the people and the gods (Usang Christopher, oral interview). She also serves as a messenger who makes the will of the gods known to the people. She offers sacrifices to Ekau deity and also officiate during certain traditional ceremonies and rituals due to her social, cultural and spiritual importance.

Although, all human endeavours are majorly and principally dependent upon politics, but that cannot be said of Ekau Cult due to its spiritual nature. Therefore, for there to be a handing and taking over, the power to appoint a new Ojiekau lies in the hands of the gods. Be that as it may, the physical representatives (humans) take over from one another depending on the life span of any given Ojiekau. In some cases, an Ojiekau inherits the office from her relative through the directives of Ekau deity. Those appointed for such offices pass through a spiritual cleansing that will qualify them to render such services.

Deities Associated with Ekau Feminine Cult

Primarily, Ekau feminine cult derived its powers from the traditional beliefs associated with various deities including Obokupo, Ntakalegu, Mgbeke, Ilumoh, etc. However, the cult specifically derives its powers from a major deity named after the cult (Ekau deity). The deity is located at the boundary between Ekori and Assiga to foster peace, oneness, order, peaceful co-existence, gender equality and equity among others. In our contemporary society, Ekau as a deity is believed by Ekori and Assiga specifically, and Yakurr in general to be a source of protection and defence to Ekori and Assiga people.

The deity is believed to be partnering with other deities in Yakurr to fight against societal ills. For instance, no Assiga or Ekori man or woman goes unpunished for secretly or publicly shedding blood, stealing from or being angry with each other. Such punishment ranges from taking ill of either paralysis or unable to make use of the hands, as well as developing a stiff neck that will turn and remain in any direction that pleases the deity, or being involved in a serious or fatal accident. In some cases, the offender will be struck by thunder (obal Ubi, oral interview).

Rituals, Rites and Ceremonies in Ekau Feminine Cult

The Ekau deity like every other deity requires from its believers appeasement that has to be carried out when seeking favour or protection from the deity. For instance, in the case of protection, the individual appears before the deity through its priestess with items ranging from goat, native fowl of prescribed colour or sex, palm fronds, native chalk, kolanut, yams etc. Those seeking favour or forgiveness are expected to go with items like those used for protection but in line with the recommendation of the deity through its priestess. For the Ojiekau or appeaser to know if the deity has accepted the request, a special brand of leaves is used for incantation, and when they are thrown in the air and both lie face downward or upward, it is believed that the request has been rejected. But when one faces up and the other down, it is a sign that the request has been granted by the deity (Isu Peter, oral interview).

An annual ceremony is organised where women dress with Kokpi (traditional napkins) which is tied only to cover the pubis of a woman and the line at the middle of the buttocks. They adorn themselves with Ekan-koh (red dye extract from cam-wood) and Eblomi (indigo) to bring out the beauty in them. The Ojiekau adorns her forehead with a block of Ekan-koh and holds a designed local axe known as Ewan-bah on her left hand with a clay pot containing a special ritual leaf called Lipah-wah. These items symbolise spiritual weapons designed to strike any impending force.

However, Ekau ceremony being for the female folk, the male play a significant role by wearing and participating in the ceremony through a masquerade known as Okowah which helps in moderating the dance and raising melodious songs which the women join in singing. To give credence to the music, a very big and special wooden gong (Lokau-kumoh) is beaten to give inspiration (Obol Uduma Ikor, oral interview).

Relevance of Ekau Feminine Cult

The traditional feminine cult of Ekori, known as Ekau is very important and also plays a significant role in the lives of the people.; Which includes:

I. **Ethical Role:** it serves as an institutional custodian of morality and good behaviour. Acting through the Ojiekau, Ekau deity upholds moral values and sanctions offenders with prescribed punishment. Required purification rites are performed whenever there is violation of the moral standard put in place by the society.

II. **Judicial Role:** in a case of infidelity and theft, the Ojiekau serves as a judge to settle such issues by meting out punishment to the offender. Also, when a woman is molested or harassed by a man, the cult summons him for hearing and subsequently fines him when he is found guilty of such accusation. When he fails to appear before the cult or pay the fine within a given period, the cult will have no other option than to match half naked to his house early in the morning as a protest for molesting their member. In such a situation, the man will double the fine with the intervention of the Obol Lopon (King) and the Council of Chiefs.

III. **Economic and Security Role:** the security of lives and properties is very paramount in every society. The development and growth of any given society are tied to adequate security and a standard economic growth which can only be achieved in a peaceful environment. Ekau feminine cult serves the purpose of security to the people of Ekori as well as neighbouring communities. The presence of Ekau deity at the boundary between Ekori and Assiga prevents any aggrieved person from attacking anybody or group under the protection of the deity; be it external or internal forces (Eteng Bassey, oral interview). Till date, an Ekori person or Assiga person does not fight or use hurt words on one another irrespective of the gravity of the provocation or offence. As funny as it may sound, what usually settles it is to abuse one another without any provocative intension. This has helped to promote peaceful co-existence and safety between Ekori and Assiga since there is no fear of victimization.

IV. **Productivity:** the productivity and fertility of women occupy a unique and crucial place in Ekau feminine cult. When a woman fails to reproduce, she is made to go through a customary confinement known as Ekpoh-teti during which she is made to perform all the necessary rituals and rites a maiden passes through during her first conception and before child birth (Martina Igri, (oral interview). During this period, the potency of her husband is also tried by allowing certain men to make love to her. In some cases the woman becomes pregnant, thereby vindicating her from the shame of barrenness. Looking at this situation critically, one would notice that it is either the couple are not compatible or the man is impotent as against the barrenness being ascribed to the woman.

V. **Religious Role:** till date, Ekau deity is being worshipped by a section of the people of Ekori, Assiga and by extension other communities in Yakurr who believe in the deity. Therefore, the worship of Ekau deity is an aspect or denomination of African Indigenous Religion which combines with other deities to give a formidable spiritual services to the people.

Effect of the Extinction of Ekau Feminine Cult in Ekori

The extinction of Ekau feminine cult and its numerous activities in Ekori has negative effect on the culture and traditions of the people. These include the following;

I. *Infertility and Crime*: there is an increase in crime rate owing to the disbelief on the deadly effect of Ekau deity against criminality, even when culprits still face the wrath of Ekau. Extra-marital sexual relationship is also prevalent since the society which is endowed with the responsibility of checkmating such activities is no longer in existence.

II. *Broken Relationship and Infant Mortality*: the cordial relationship that exists between Ekori and her neighbours especially Assiga is threatened by some individuals who stubbornly and ignorantly do not believe in what their fathers believed. The rate of infant mortality has also increased since no one wants to perform the rituals that keep babies healthy and fit.

III. *Infertility*: There is a high rate of barrenness resulting from too much belief and faith in Orthodox medication rather than the ritual, natural and traditional way of battling infertility.

IV. *Fading of History*: the extinction of Ekau feminine cult has actually robbed the people of her cultural heritage and history. Today a typical Ekori person below the age of sixty (60) years knows little or nothing about Ekau feminine cult and its functions. People use terms associated with Ekau without knowing the meaning. We still have people answering the name Ekau-kau or Ojiekau without knowing anything pertaining to Ekau. It is believed that such people were given to their parents by Ekau deity.

Conclusion

As relevant as Ekau feminine cult is to the people of Ekori and Assiga, unfortunately the institution has gradually faded away leaving only the worship of the deity to a smaller section of the people. This was engineered and orchestrated by the advent of Christianity under the disguise of Western civilization in Ekori. It became a herculean task to come back to the traditional and cultural way of life after acquiring western education and conversion to Christianity. This conflict in culture and religious belief had contributed to the heinous consideration of this cultural practice as barbaric and archaic, even when they abuse their womanhood through pornographic activities and the so-called fashion which makes them go nude on the streets in the name of Western civilization.

It is therefore very clear going by the aforementioned, the exploration and later exploitation by the missionaries among others seriously and regrettably contributed to the extinction of Ekau feminine cult just like other traditional institutions in Africa. This is because the missionaries were guilty of ideological fanaticism and racism which spilled into their missionary activities.

Recommendations

- I. There is need for cultural revivalism, not only in Ekorì but Africa as a whole. Reawakening the aesthetics of African culture is very crucial if things must go right again. Africans should note that their uniqueness lies in their cultural heritage, identity and personality which distinguish them from others. Instead of gambling it for westernization or abandoning it in totality, they should harness it with modern trends.
- II. Where dialogue and tolerance mechanisms exist, there are opportunities for a greater knowledge and awareness among people of different cultural backgrounds. This will not only promote the cultural and religious practices of the people, but civilisation as well. Therefore dialogue will play a crucial role in solving this puzzle.
- III. Africans should take their destinies into their own hands by liberating it from the bondage and oppression of foreign cultures. This can be achieved through courageous, sincere and laborious researches in the field of anthropology, religion and cultural heritage in Africa.
- IV. The academia should introduce topics and subjects in African Religious and Cultural Heritage into the school curriculum and have a well constructed and elaborate syllabus on Religious Tolerance and Cultural Studies from primary education to senior high school.
- V. The National University Commission (NUC) should introduce African Historical Studies as a compulsory course for all university Students.

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Oral Interview Timetable

S/N	NAME	AGE	SEX	PLACE OF INTERVIEW	DATE OF INTERVIEW	OCCUPATION
1	Chief. Agada I. Agada	61	Male	Ntan Ekori	26/3/2021	Protocol to Obol Lupon
2	Obol Uduma Ikor	60	Male	Ajere Beach	27/12/2019	Obol Lupon of Ajere Beach
3	Eld. James E. Egbe	72	Male	Ajere Beach	27/12/2019	Retired Civil Servant
4	Mrs. Grace Ofem	83	Female	Assiga	7/4/2021	Farmer
5	Mrs. Eteng Bassey	76	Female	Assiga	7/4/2021	Farmer
6	Mrs. Obal Ubi	87	Female	Assiga	7/4/2021	Farmer
7	Chief Usang Christopher	75	Male	Epenti Ekori	26/3/2021	Farmer
8	Mrs. Isu Peter	89	Female	Ajere Ekori	26/3/2021	Farmer
9	Mrs. Martina Igri	79	Female	Epenti Ekori	30/3/2021	Farmer