

NEO-LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY TO DEVELOPMENT OF ENGENNI IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The history of Christian religion (Christianity) dates back to the first century. It started within the Jewish culture frontiers, and spread to the rest of the gentile world and other continents of the world including Africa. In the past twenty centuries Christianity criss-crossed several cultural frontiers; shifting the paradigm to Global Christianity which is currently a religion coated with several cultural identities, complementing Christianity to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ and the various cultures through the practice of Global Christianity. The paper tries to draw a thin line between Global Christianity and Christianity-which flowed to Engenni a homogenous ethnic Kingdom in the Niger Delta oil rich region of Nigeria with the message of salvation in powerful archetypal water Imagery of ship, tidal waves, sail and anchor. The ship carried the message of salvation (Christianity and western culture (Global Christianity) Both changed the world view and narrative of the Engenni people, and sparked off socio-economic, and religio-cultural development expressed in the development of Indigenous Church-the Spiritual faith of Christ church international (SFCCI) as a coloration of Global Christianity. The change would foster further development of Engenni and academic Scholarship in Africa. For effective study, the paper adopts the phenomenological and historic methods of research, and max weber's functional theory of change with the rational choice theory. Both theories are liberal in approach to change in society. The paper concluded that Global Christianity in Engenni Provided the Engenni people alternative and a broader platform of choice to meet their survival needs and development, from a neo-liberal perspective. It therefore recommended that Global Christianity should be promoted in Engenni and Africa.

Introduction

There is a paradigm shift in the study of the Christian religion (Christianity) from what it was 2000 years ago to what it is today (global Christianity), today it has broadened its scope and content for scholarship in secular and theological institutions all over the world. It has also enriched the practice, aesthetics, fulfilment and hope of Christians for the now and future development. Walls (2019) talks about the serial expansion of Christianity threat inevitably baptized in a world of multiple

religious, social, political and cultural identities. European missionaries contributed immensely to the spread of Christianity and development in Africa in collaboration with colonial government who were more interested in economic engagements.

This paper focused on aspect of development in Engenni that is linked with global Christianity. The work explains how European missionaries succeeded in converting the Engenni people to Christianity and the western culture. Both prompted development in Engenni. To facilitate the discourse, the rational choice theory and Webber's theory of social change served as the lens. The paper also adopted the historical and phenomenological methods of data collection which revealed that global Christianity galvanized development in Engenni. The paper concluded that the people Engenni should promote global (Christianity) to further facilitate development in Engenni

Theoretical framework

The theoretical lens appropriate for this study is the functionalist theory of max weber. Weber argues that religion could be catalyst to produce social change (Kendall 2016). Scholars have stated that social change brings development to society. For example, the religious teaching of John Calvin in the protestant ethics was directly related to the rise of the capitalist economy (capitalism). In the same way, the practice of global Christianity provides the enabling environment for development. Global Christianity also provides alternatives for making choice between and among broad spectrum in religion, and culture. This study also considers the rational choices theory which considers the neo-liberal perspectives of global Christianity to development in Engenni. In terms of religion rational choices theory is based on the assumption that religion is essentially a rational response to human needs. The rational choice perspective views religion as a competitive market place in which religious organizations (suppliers) offer a variety of religions and religious products to potential followers (consumers) who shop around for the religious theologies, practices and communities that best suit them. The theory focuses on the process by which actors-individuals, groups and communities-settle on one optimal outcome out of a range of possible choices (a cost benefit analysis). These compensators provide a range of possible choices for people in the face of a limited (or non-existent supply of the choice (certainty, for example) that they truly desire. (Kendall 2016)

This provides the researcher the leverage to make liberal considerations and scholarly the leverage to make liberal consideration and scholarly assertions open for further research.

The neo-liberal perspective is a broad worldview that cuts across specific academic disciplines and makes unbiased judgment on controversial issues such as politics, religion, philosophy etc. scholars have considered the decision taken by Eve at the garden of Eve after her conversation with the serpent as a neoliberal one (American encyclopedia), it belong to free school in thought.

Background of Engenni

The Engenni ethnic nationality or kingdom trace her ancestry to the ancient Benin kingdom in the present Edo state in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Scholars – Abiobio (2012), James (2004) stated that the group of people known as Engenni today migrated from the ancient Benin kingdom to no specific destination in search of a preferred settlement. In the process of immigration, they hanged on at several other settlements, among the Isoko, Ishekiri and Orhobo communities, and finally settled in their present location. Some of them later moved on and settled at Degema, Kula etc. The present settlement of the Engenni people is along the bank of the Orashi River in the Ahoadia West Local Government Area of Rivers State.

The area is endowed with natural resources – gas and crude oil, timber, creeks, ponds etc. The ecology is good for fishing and farming which was the source of their main occupation. They also engaged in other activities such as carving, hunting, weaving, and commerce etc. They related well with her neighbors – the Ekpeye, Epie, Biseni, Okordia, Zarama communities, including the Kalabari people who were engaged in kernel, timber, oil etc. trade with the British merchants. The Engenni trade with the Kalabari and British merchants coincided with the European mission incursion in the area. The missionaries introduced the Christian religion and Western culture. Their intervention in the economy and social life of the Engenni people is our interest in this discourse. It is important to mention that before the incursion of the European missionaries, Engenni had an established administrative system of governance. The society was structured into family, community, clan and kingdom units referred to as Omu, Akie, Opiri and Ibeh respectively. These unit were organized by a leader referred to as Okilom; meaning head as per the person in charge. So, the family head is known as 'Okilom-Omu', community head as 'Okilom-Akie,' clan head is 'Okilom-Opiri', the head of the kingdom as 'Okilom-Ibeh'. Etc. there is also the council of Chief (Eka-Akie) headed by the 'Oka-Akie'. There is also peer groups, age grades, community development council groups, and traditional priests. These groups coordinated social groups and development in the communities. The priest is the religious representative of the Supreme God. Engenni is organized and classified into five groups – Ogua, Inedua, Ediro Ekun, Ediro Ede and Egboama Ogbogolo. The Egboama – Ogbogolo group speak Ogbogolo language which is a dialect of the Ogbia language, while the rest four groups speak the Engenni language which is classified as the Edoid group of languages of the Niger Delta group of languages (Ngulube, 2011). The Ogbogolo group may have via off at some point of the migration to the Ogbia area where they acquired the Ogbia dialect which they speak today. The older generation however spoke the Enginne language in parts.

Engenni is a patrimonial society. The father (Okilom – Omu) is the head of the family. Inheritance is shared among male children. It has rich cultural heritage which identify them as a homogenous people who share communal life.

The Culture and Religion

The cultural heritage of the Engenni people is a component of her values, customs, traditions and belief in the super natural beyond the physical existence as handed over to them from generation to generations as underlined in the Engenni religion and culture. In Engenni like in most African societies, the phenomena 'religion' and 'culture' are inseparable. They are two bedfellows of male and female identity, who sleep together, work together, eat together, and does virtually all things together. They accommodate one another for the purpose of living healthy, productive and adding value to society. The male and female representation in the literary configuration depicts natural and congenial relationship between religion and culture in Engenni world view and cosmology. The Engenni people recognizes and believes that God (Oniso) is the supreme religious divinity like the Christian 'religion even before the incursion of Christianity in Niger Delta. Their point of departure with Christianity is that Oniso (the supreme God) recognizes African deities and ancestors who the people venerate, but still worship Oniso- the supreme God who directs the day-to-day affairs of the people that cumulates into their culture i.e. way of life and identity. Religion and culture in Engenni are like two sides of a coin which share equal purchasing power and value in socio-economic market space. In other words, religion is a reflective mirror of the Engenni culture. Both have a tie, an underly that bond the people and the new religious movement churches of global Christianity. Some cultural aspects such as drumming, dancing, clapping indigenous language, songs, etc have infiltrated into global Christianity. According to Kwame Bediako (2007),

culture comprises far more than just music, dance, artifacts and the like. It is a people's worldview, it is fundamental to the people understanding of who they are, where they home from and where they are going. It is everything in and around a people that defines and shapes them. When a people for instance, turn to Christ as Lord, they return over to him all that is in, about and around them that defines and shapes them. Similarly, salvation encompasses the soul and culture at its deepest level. Scripture on the other hand, is the interpreters of who human beings are in the specific concrete sense of who they are in their cultures and traditions.

The commentary describes scriptures as a prism. When light passes through a prism, a rainbow of colors is revealed. Scripture, the light and shade intrinsic in cultures are revealed. In this sense scripture interprets traditions as a record of Gods dealings with his people. Suffice to say that 'scripture (religion) and culture are like merging circles, gradually coming to have one center as we increasingly recognize ourselves in scripture and scripture becomes more and more recognizable as our story. 'Badiako collaborates the strong bond between religion (scripture) and culture.

Engenni Religion-Cultural Heritage

The Engenni indigenous religion consists of her cosmology which is the way the people think about the universe and their attitude towards life and their environment

(James 2004). James asserts that from time immemorial the Engenni man acknowledge the existence of 'Onuoso' or 'Oniso' (The Supreme Being) and other divinities or spirits". He goes on to the state that Engenni traditional religion believes that Onuoso is gender positive. Religion pervades all spheres of the people's social, economic moral, and political life.

The Engenni religion is non-scriptural, but written in the hearts of devotees, adherents and worshippers. It has no founder unlike most religions. As the people respond to challenges in their environment it became obvious to them that there exist certain powers beyond their control and understanding. And they call that power 'Oniso' or 'Onuoso' (Supreme God). Ironically when the people experience a sting on the body without seeing or knowing what it was or responsible they attribute it to (Omoni-Oniso) The Son of God not God himself for the engenni person cannot imagine God stringing anybody. God is too holy to hurt anyone, but the son because of exuberance associated with human youthfulness can hurt. This is an area of scholarship that needs to be developed outside this study. Literally in the Engenni lexicon "Onuoso" means mother of the soul. This adds credence to the female gender attachment to "Onuoso" (the supreme God). According to James, (2004). A school of thought argued that the introduction of Christianity and the indoctrination of every convert with the idea of the Christian God led to the adoption of the idea of a male supreme God called "Oniso". However, gender crises do not invalidate the supremacy of the supreme God who the people worship but venerate deities such as 'Otoakie earth' goddess and ancestors who they believe represent God on earth. The supreme God resides in heaven above.

The cultural aspect of Engenni traditional heritage includes birth rites, puberty rites, funeral rites, marriage rites, festival etc. the observance of these rites including the Engenni communication with the Engenni language at home, school and public give Engenni her identity. Incidentally the observances of most of these rites have lost the traditional steam, value, beauty, aesthetics etc. because of the attractions of global Christianity which came to Africa with western culture. 'Western European missionaries did not bring a naked gospel but one dressed in their own clothes and shoes (Kunhilop 2008).

Global Christianity in Engenni

Global Christianity as used in the context of this discourse is a web coloration of the Christian church in different parts of the world, irrespective of doctrinal and cultural differences. Corroborating the unity of global Christianity, Akinade (2010) asserts that Christianity has been fully immersed into the globalization process which has permanently obliterated the boundaries of time, space and culture. He further stated that non-western churches leverage on this development to remain a vital part of global Christianity. This implies that global Christianity covers the early church up to the contemporary church, including the serial expansion of Christianity that inevitable baptized it in a world of multiple religious, social, political and cultural

identities. Walls (2019) also states that Christianity has always been a religion without a permanent axis mundus and has always identified itself as a religious movement that is meant for the whole world, thus scholars talk about various shades of Christianity such as western Christianity, African Christianity etc. Joel (2022) describes it as 'coloration: it means that cultural settings determine the description of particular shade of Christianity.

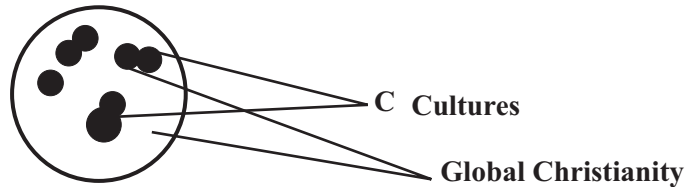
Global Christianity was introduced to Engenni in the early 20th century by indigenous and western missionaries of the Kalabari and European extraction. According to James (2004) Jack a kalabari merchant and Christian convert was the fore runner to European missionaries who came to Engenni. He seemed to have had a dual purpose of trade and mission; or rather he had a trade ministry like Paul who was engaged in tent ministry in addition to mission i.e. a kind of bi-vocational ministry. Later the European missionaries of the southern American Baptist convention (SABC) came to establish full pledge churches and schools in the area to educate the people on western culture and to convert the people from their indigenous religion and culture to Christianity.

The people were attracted to both the Christian religion and western culture as a preferred alternative to their indigenous religion because of the lust of the Eyes, lust of the flesh and pride of life which were associated with Global Christianity and western culture. Like Adam and Eve in the Christian Scriptures, lost their privileged position in the Garden of Eden, the Engenni people, out of choice, lost aspects of their cultural heritage such as integrity, communalism etc. Similarly for the same reason, some Engenni people were converted to western culture, not necessarily to Christianity. In this sense, such conversion was superficial because some of the people never had a genuine salvation experience like Paul in the scriptures. However, the new religion (Christianity) spread in the area and the Baptist church became a household name in Engenni.

The average Engenni person claimed to be a Christian of the Baptist church until in the late 70s and more recently when the wave of Pentecostalism Spread to Engenni. Currently there is a proliferation of churches in Engenni as it is the case in many Communities in African seeking for development. The proliferation of churches in Engenni seek to meet needs of the peoples and God particularly prosperity and salvation respectively. But the focus is on prosperity gospel not salvation as was the case with the early church Christianity. This is a paradigm shift as it applies to global Christianity.

The Various churches are more interested in protecting and projecting their identities than making their converts good followers of Jesus Christ. The Mission Christianity has not penetrated sufficiently deep into African religiosity. Many Conversions are for material reasons (Akinade 2010). The need to go back to the status quo for genuine salvation is germane for Christian maturity and development.

The cycle diagram below illustrates the paradigm shift.



Christianity at the center has grown to accommodate other culture that makes up Global Christianity. Global Christianity revolves round cultures of the world wearing a gown of several cultures

Development in Engenni

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Engenni, her economy was at the primordial stage as was the case with most African Communities and Countries, including Nigeria even at the time of Independence in 1960. At that time Nigeria was “under developed, but it's now a developing country (Eleazu 1988). Uzoeshi (2002) described development as a life process. It is the growth process of society from one stage to another in progression that positively impacts the individual, family, community and society at large. Human and material resources need to be developed for the benefit of society.

The Human and material resources that were available in Engenni about 1900 were unskilled and under-utilized because the people had not been exposed to the outside world, their worldview was limited within themselves, or at best their neighboring communities who were in the same primordial state of under development. But their exposure to the western world through European missionaries and merchants contact brought in different strokes of the good, the bad and the ugly which widened the worldview of the Engenni people, and this opened up avenues for development. The western missionaries introduced global Christianity and established churches, schools and hospital which are indices of development and development agencies.

The Churches as Agent of Development:

According to James (2004) about 1900, a member of the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) Daniel Jack started the first church cum school in Engenni at Okarki community. Some elders who enrolled in the school to learn how to read and write the English Language, and to be able to read the Bible were converted from the Engenni Indigenous religion to Global Christianity Pockets of resistance against the new religion (Global) Christianity ensued because the new “converts showed signs of opposition to the Indigenous religion. The Chiefs banned the new religion and ordered Jack to leave the community (Okarki) and its environs. Jack left the community but the converts who were tagged 'bad boy's' by the chiefs continued the school and church in another member's house.

The church became popular because the invocation of the deity against the converts could not destroy the member (s) nor the church which waxed stronger instead. One of the members received more training through discipleship at Buguma and returned to Okarki to continue the Christian mission work. Some years later European missionaries of the southern American Baptist Convention (SABC) came to Engenni and Established churches in all the communities. The doggedness of the early converts and the inability of the deity to destroy them contrary to the expectation and fear of the members of the community gave credence to the power of Global Christianity over the Indigenous deity and religion in Okarki Engenni.

This encounter and such as surviving evil forest where most churches were built prepared the grounds for the spread and growth of for Global Christianity in Engenni. Others include the establishment of schools that provided western education to the people and hospital to cure cronic diseases that had previously defiled traditional medications reduced mortality rate in the area. The Baptist Hospital at Joinkrama in Engenni was New Haven for many Communities in the Niger Delta area. Some members of the Engenni Communities were trained as medical and paramedical personnel at Ogbomoso and Iwo at (western Nigeria). Some were trained as teachers and pastors in Baptist mission Institutions in the south west Nigeria which had earlier contact with Global Christianity. It's pertinent to note that the European missionaries introduced the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, and the Baptist church in Engenni, but today there is a Proliferation of churches in Engenni including an Indigenous church "The Spiritual faith of Christ church International (SFCCI) and Pentecostal churches. All of these churches have incorporated some aspects of Engenni (African) culture such as drumming, dancing, clapping, singing, speaking in tongues, and prophetic declarations etc., which were not common in the mission churches. Particularly the orthodox churches including the 'Baptist church'.

These are all elements of development in Engenni associated with Global Christianity. The churches engaged Engenni Indigenes as pastors; some established churches and created employment opportunities as alternative occupations other than fishing and farming the traditional occupation of the Engenni people. Global Christianity has actually contributed to the human and material development of Engenni inspite of criticisms that could rightly be made against it. However, some cultural practices have clearly reduced Christianity to a low level, while some maintain a high standard of Christian life such as neighborly love, communal living etc.

The greatest impact of Global Christianity has been on a social cultural level where the Engenni (African) culture has a place in Global Christianity as does other cultures that came in contact with the Christian religion. For instance, the Jewish culture, Roman culture, western culture etc. This gives the Christian religion a global status in development studies, science and technology and other traits of the western

culture were preferred alternative choices to the Engenni people. All of these count as indices of development in Engenni.

Conclusion

The Christian religion (Christianity) has a global recognition as global Christianity because it has gone beyond the early church culture to include other cultures such as western and African. Cultures. The African component of global Christianity is on a reverse mission to other parts of the world. Global Christianity has impacted positively on Engenni particularly the influence of western culture which is a component of global Christianity. Global Christianity therefore is not the exclusive reserve of any particularly religion, culture or people.

Recommendations

The paper recommends a healthy collaboration between religion and culture in Engenni and Africa in general. This will foster its spread to promote the great commission mandate in the Holy Scripture and development of society, with a caution that the status quo of Christianity as practiced in the early church of the first century is maintained.

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