



ST PAUL'S MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE IN EPHESUS (ACTS 19:23-41): RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OZUBULU EVANGELISATION

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Abstract

St Paul's Missionary Enterprise in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41), in which a riot erupted against Paul and his companions owing to the effects of his successful mission on the culture and traditions of the Ephesians, is juxtaposed with the cultural tension that preceded and followed the advent of missionaries in Ozubulu. There is an upsurge of paganism, idolatry, and its attendant criminality in the hinterland, Ozubulu inclusive, because the Igbo person who received the Gospel did so while keeping intact his or her deities and forms of worship. Receiving the gospel with one hand, they kept their gods with the other. This study argues that Christianity is facing a serious threat of erosion in this regard. The researcher assembles materials through primary and secondary sources, as well as the area culture approach, applying textual criticism alongside the Historical Critical Method (HCM) of Exegesis, seeking to fathom, as nearly as possible, the original text even through conjecture. Reviewing the available literature, one observes a conspicuous missing link that presents a challenge. Christianity is declining while traditional worship, with its attendant abuses, gains ground as never before witnessed in the history of evangelisation in Ozubulu. All the problems and their solutions converge on the vanguard of the gospel, the minister's methodology, life, and conviction, as well as his or her inability to meet the immediate needs and expectations of the people. The minister must re-access his or her mission principles and methods, and must also examine his or her life to match that of Christ the Master, as evidenced in St Paul. Though traditional religion and its adherents are on the increase, there is a concurrent and speedy erosion of Igbo traditional values. The research opens room for further investigation, constituting a serious challenge not only to the church but also to African Traditional Religion.

Keywords: Missionary enterprise, Ephesus, Ozubulu, evangelisation, African Traditional Religion, inculturation, Paul, Acts of the Apostles.

Introduction

Paul's missionary work at Ephesus brought great cultural and religious change to that city. His missionary enterprise occasioned a serious cultural shift that produced two remarkable threats to the Ephesian world. The craftsmen led by Demetrius saw their business losing its hold, and the very existence of the goddess Artemis came under serious threat. The Gospel Paul preached demystified both the sellers of shrines of Artemis and the cult of Artemis itself. What held the city together, its awe, prodigy, and vigour, was dissolving before their very eyes. Even the city itself was under serious threat because the goddess gave Ephesus its meaning and worth. Those most directly affected, led by Demetrius, incited protests targeting Paul and his companions, casting them as enemies of the state and her god.



What happened at Ephesus- the cultural tension, shift, and realignment- was replicated at the advent of the church at Ozubulu and continues to the present day. The coming of the gospel to Nigeria, and especially to the lower Niger where Ozubulu is located, was replete with an avalanche of hiccups arising from this very cultural change. As the white missionaries were welcomed on the one hand, there was resistance and fear on the other. For Ndi Ozubulu, the firstborn was not allowed to go to school; school was left for those thought to be lazy. The fear that the ofo (a piece of stick symbolising authority) and other family values and cultural heritage might be lost was present from the very onset. Therefore, the Diokpala (first son) and the Elders were not permitted to follow the white man (Okolo, 1998, p. 107).

Here, Bishop Obiefuna's concept of endurance of conviction comes to the fore (Okeke, 2012, p. 36). To this day, Ndi Ozubulu continue to struggle with the tension, though now in the opposite direction. There are fears that the church is under threat, occasioned by modern-day paganism and neopaganism. The eruption of new deities, young people taking up shrine priesthood, and Eze Nwanyi (women traditional priestess) as a profession are all evident. According to O. Nnanyelugo (Personal Communication, 2023), within a space of five years, two new deities named Ajani and Ugwugwu were erected, and more than five personal shrines were built in the Umuchuno kindred, one of the villages in the town under study. The researcher personally observed that within a space of two years, between 2021 and 2023, within a distance of 2km between Afor Ilo and the Okija junction, more than five shops appeared where ngwo-ngwo (traditional medicine materials) are sold, implying that the sale of articles for the deities, charms, and objects for traditional divination has become a new means of livelihood.

The event of 2016 in which the church of God, St Philip's Amakwa Ozubulu, was attacked and about ten people killed provided clear proof that traditional religionists are in active conflict with the church. The shrines and the deities are feared more than the house of God. In 2021, one Dibia named Okafor Dulu instigated villagers to halt a prayer session organised by station Christians to make supplication for incest committed in the community, asserting that Christians had no power to appease the gods. In 2018, the parishioners of St Joseph's Catholic Church Egbema Ozubulu staged a walkout from the funeral of a member because the bereaved participated in the idolatrous mkpu ututu (the laying-in-state traditional ritual). Again in 2022, the Episcopal Vicar of Ozubulu Episcopal Region of the Catholic Diocese of Nnewi, Very Rev. Fr. Donald Chukwudoluo, called for a street rosary procession to dissociate Catholics from the idolatrous action of consecrating the whole town to the deities by the Igwe and his cabinet. All these situations, together with concerns about the future of the church and societal peace, prompted this research.

Statement of the Problem

Christian values and even places of worship are no longer esteemed or respected. Children and young adults are turning away from Christianity and joining African Traditional Religion (ATR). Traditional religion and its practices are becoming the order of the day, and the future of Christianity is therefore bleak. There is a serious threat to the existence of Christianity in Ozubulu. Christian values and places of worship are being desecrated, while young adults are increasingly shifting to idolatry. This has created social tension, with clashes between ndi odinani (traditional worshippers) and ndi uka (Christians). The following research questions are raised: Why are Christians in Ozubulu abandoning their faith for ATR? Why is the exodus more pronounced among the youth? What are the main reasons for the tension and clashes in Ozubulu? Are Christians involved in the devaluation and desecration of sacred things? What has led to the shallowness of faith among Christians in Ozubulu?



Purpose of the Study

This work aims to showcase the implications of St Paul's missionary enterprise in Ephesus for the Ozubulu mission. It places Paul's missionary exploits in Ephesus side by side with the Ozubulu missionary experience, both past and present. Specifically, it seeks to expose Paul's missionary principles, methodology, and strategies that resulted in his success; to use these principles to mirror the missionary work of early white missionaries in Ozubulu and the evangelisation experience of today; to examine the reasons for the exodus of Christians, especially the youth, from Christianity to ATR; to expose the tensions and clashes between traditionalists and Christians; to articulate the effects of these tensions on both the Christian and traditional values of the Ozubulu community; and to provide practical and tenable solutions guided by Paul's missionary strategy to the current state of affairs.

Significance of the Study

This study is of immense benefit to the Christians of Ozubulu in particular and to Christians globally and their leaders concerning missionary work and evangelisation. It assists students and teachers seeking further knowledge on socio-religious change. It helps traditionalists and adherents of ATR in the reappraisal and consolidation of ATR in Ozubulu. It also assists government and society in understanding the causes of religious strife, and benefits families, especially parents, in the area of inculcating Christian and traditional values in children, thereby avoiding hypocrisy and superficiality.

Scope of the Study

The research focuses on the Ozubulu community, its culture and tradition, the evangelisation of the community, and the level of impact of the gospel within it.

Methodology

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of unstructured oral interviews and participant observations. Since the researcher is a Catholic Priest working in the area under study, personal observations and communications provided great insight. Secondary sources include library and written materials related to the topic. Data were analysed using the Historical-Critical Method of Exegesis (HCM) and the Area Culture Approach. HCM, according to Ezeogamba (2019), permits examination of a text in its historical and theological dimensions, providing background information such as authorship, provenance, sources, and literary genre (p. 4). Through Textual Criticism (TC), the authenticity of Acts 19:23-41 was established, dealing with how closely the preserved text approximates the original, since achieving the exact original remains a matter of conjecture.

Definition of Key Terms

Mission

Mission derives etymologically from the Latin *mittere*, meaning "to send." In the Vatican II Council Document (1982), mission refers to the sending of a person or group for the evangelisation of a place where faith has not previously taken root, *Missio Ad Gentes*. The activity continues until there is a fully grown church that can itself engage in further mission (AG. 9, 19). The Trinity is the source, substance, and sustenance of mission activities. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2002) encapsulates this as missionary mandate, origin and purpose, motivation, paths, and carriers (nos. 849-852).



Missionary

A missionary, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000), is a person sent on a mission or one who travels to spread a religion. According to Kocman (2021), a missionary is one who preaches the gospel with the aim of starting churches that can reach people and groups among whom Jesus is not yet known and worshipped. Itsuelli (2012) defines it as the vocation of planting the faith where it has not yet been planted (p. 77). Vatican II (1982) affirms that missionary activity embraces all the works of the missionary, spiritual, physical, material, educational, and healthcare (AG, 10).

Enterprise

In this research, enterprise refers to a courageous, risky, and new project of evangelism. Savoiiu (2023) broadly defines enterprise as a business organisation formed to provide goods and services, contribute to the national income, and provide sustainable economic development (p. 65). The English Dictionary (2023) further includes the meanings of an undertaking, especially a daring or courageous one, and a willingness to undertake new or risky initiatives. In the present work, Paul's enterprise signifies his daring and courageous evangelistic project in Ephesus.

Evangelisation

Evangelisation derives from the Latin evangelizare ("to spread or preach the gospel") and from the Greek root Ευαγγελίσεσθαι ("to bring goodness"), rooted in Ευαγγέλιον and the Latinised Evangelium, meaning the bearer of good news (McKenzie, 1998, p. 254). Evangelisation is all-embracing and adapts to new challenges and ages. Swindal (2014) notes that Pope Francis teaches that evangelisation is motivated by love for God; one who loves something or someone desires to share that love with others (p. 35).

Community

Community derives from the Latin *communitas* ("the same") and *communis* ("common, public, shared by all, many"). The prefix *Co* ("together") combined with *munis* ("rendering services") gives community its fuller meaning. Jaspa (2021) identifies three types of community: location-based (villages, suburbs, towns), identity-based (subcultures, ethnic groups, religious groups), and organisationally-based (family networks, political groups, economic enterprises).

Literature Review

This chapter reviews documented works under the following sections: Conceptual Framework, Theoretical Framework, Empirical Studies, and Summary of the Literature Review.

Conceptual Framework

Mission

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2023) explains mission as a specific task with which a person or group is charged, a purpose, duty, or assignment. In a religious sense, it refers to the evangelistic spreading of faith. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) defines it as the work of teaching people about Christianity in a foreign country. Mirus (2010), dwelling on Vatican II missionary principles, affirms that the church by nature is missionary, that this mission flows from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit, acting in accordance with the decree of the Father. Vatican II (1982) asserts that mission is an "initiative" of God the Father, the source of love, and that God calls humanity to share his life and to be gathered into one people (AG. 2). The Catechism



of the Catholic Church (2002) further presents mission as a unified action from God the Father to the Incarnate Word, the Holy Spirit, the Apostles, and the Church (nos. 849-852).

Missionary

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) and the Vatican II Council Document (1982) both describe missionary as an adjectival concept from mission, referring to one who carries the gospel, the Christian faith, to where it has not previously been preached. Rimi (2023) affirms that a Christian missionary is someone called by Jesus to share the gospel with all peoples in every tribe, tongue, and nation. Paul's call in Acts 9:15 and his response exemplify the missionary vocation. According to Vatican II (1982), missionary activities may be synonymous with mission, encompassing all activities of planting, keeping, and sustaining the gospel message, including educational, caritas, hospital, and other social and spiritual works (AG, 10).

Relevance

Within the context of this study, relevance refers to the direct applicability of Paul's missionary enterprise in Ephesus to the contemporary evangelisation challenges facing the church in Ozubulu. Just as Paul's preaching brought about a crisis of faith and identity in Ephesus, threatening the economic and cultural foundations of the city, so too has the advent of Christianity generated corresponding crises, past and present, in Ozubulu. The relevance lies in how the dynamics of cultural disruption, resistance, and reform in Ephesus mirror the tensions in Ozubulu, enabling Paul's strategies to serve as a template for contemporary responses.

Implication

Implication, according to Merriam-Webster (2023), means something of possible significance and effect, a close connection especially involving incriminating involvement, or the state of being implicated or implied. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) defines it as a possible effect or result of an action or decision, or something suggested or indirectly stated (p. 600). In this work, implication refers to what the experience of the Ephesus mission suggests for the direction and reform of missionary enterprise in Ozubulu today.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is defined as the principle on which the explanation and interpretation of an event can be anchored. Grant and Osanloo (2023) describe it as the principle that can hold or support a research study. The following theories are adopted as relevant to this study.

Social Functionalism, Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim, the father of social functionalism, defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them" (Brainly, 2023). For Durkheim, religion separates the profane from the sacred and serves as the fundamental institution that unites other social forms. He viewed religion as fundamental to society's health and continuation, though he predicted that religion would decline with modernisation. This theory helps expose the serious and central implication of the advent of Christianity in creating social classes in Ozubulu and producing attendant cultural realignment tensions.

Social Religious Theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber

Karl Marx (1843) argues that religion is an opiate, a tool used by the bourgeoisie to weaken the proletariat and make them accept their conditions (Cole and Johnson, 2023). He asserted that religion diverts people's attention from real injustices in the world. Max Weber (1864-1920), by



contrast, propounded the Protestant ethics theory, arguing that individualistic values of Protestantism encouraged personal freedom and laid the foundation for social change in Europe. Weber evaluated Christianity's impact on Western culture, emphasising that religion responds to the human need for theodicy and soteriology, and that religion interacts with other dimensions of society including culture, politics, and economy (Vaghefi, 2023). The three theorists, while united in predicting religion's decline with modernity, together illuminate the complex social dynamics of religious change and community stratification evident in Ozubulu.

Conquest Theory and Peaceful Infiltration Theory

The Conquest Theory, propounded during the 15th and 16th centuries and developed further by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Franz Oppenheimer (1864-1943), provided legal justification for colonialism. Its chief biblical proponents, including W.F. Albright (1939), explained the emergence of Israel in Canaan through violent conquest. In this research, the conquest theory is used to analyse the role of colonialism in facilitating missionary penetration into Ozubulu. The Peaceful Infiltration Theory, propounded by Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth (1925), by contrast, argues that people enter a new land through gradual, peaceful, nomadic migration and friendly assimilation without violence. These two contrasting theories illuminate why some scholars interpret the coming of the missionaries as forceful and others as peaceful, while the observable reality in Ozubulu suggests a complex interplay of both dynamics.

Empirical Studies

Arnold (1999) in *The Missionary Journeys and Works of St Paul* outlines Paul's missionary movements in three phases: the First Mission (AD 47-49) with Barnabas and John Mark; the Second Mission (AD 50-51) with Silas and Timothy, moving toward Europe; and the Third Mission (AD 52-57) covering Galatia, Macedonia, and ultimately Rome. Arnold highlights Paul's principal strategies: meeting the Jews in the synagogue first, turning to the Gentiles when Jews proved resistant, avoiding being a burden to his hosts by means of tent-making, and grooming well-trained successors in each city.

Bradshaw (1998), in *The Missionary Principles of St Paul and How They Should Apply Today*, argues that Paul's purpose was to preach salvation through Christ alone and that his mission was always church-based, not freelance. Paul's method of beginning with Jews and then turning to Gentiles reflected a wise didactic strategy of moving from the known to the unknown, what Bradshaw calls "redemptive analogy." He emphasises indigenous leadership and the importance of self-reliance, observing that Paul did not even demand his due as a labourer. Bradshaw concludes that the most important dimension of Paul's ministry was not strategy alone but the quality of his life and lifestyle, controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Ezeogamba (2019), in *Paul an Astute and Security-Conscious Evangelist*, expounds Paul's wisdom in avoiding untimely death during his ministry, using his Roman citizenship and his knowledge of Jewish sects strategically. Ezeogamba provides a detailed background of Acts of the Apostles and Paul's position among the Pharisees and Sadducees, highlighting how Paul's astuteness enabled him to navigate these factions and proceed toward his Roman mission.

Agbodike (2008), in *The Centenary of Catholic Missionary Activities in Ihiala 1908-2008*, traces the chronological overview of evangelical events from Fr. Lutz in 1885 to 2008. He documents the founding of the Ozubulu mission by Bishop Shanahan in 1907, the growth of the Ozubulu mission to 102 parishes and more than 40 catechists by 1908, and the painful transfer of the mission to Ihiala



in 1927. He identifies the principal strategies of mission success as education, Catholic welfare services, teachers and catechists, and the receptivity of the people.

Oraegbunam (2018) in *Religion and Science in Symbiosis* examines the relationship between religion and science from antiquity to the present. He identifies four typological positions: conflict, separationism, dialogue and interaction, and integration, and advocates for dialogue, respect, and mutual dependence between religion and science. He concludes that the church must recognise and use technical advances for evangelisation.

Oguejiofor (2018), in *130 Years of Catholicism in Onitsha Archdiocese*, appraises the successes of the missionaries amidst difficulties and outlines challenges confronting the church today, including the plague of Pentecostalism, the challenge of teaching true Catholic faith, and the place of the poor in evangelisation. He critiques the missionaries' failure to acknowledge the gap created by their methodology, which did not come with dialogue but with the wrong idea that natives had nothing superior to offer.

Okolo (1998) in "Go Ye Afar!" *Ozubulu 1906-1927* documents the origin of the people of Ozubulu, the advent of the church, the symbiotic relationship between Bishop Shanahan and the people of Ozubulu, and the painful evacuation of the mission to Ihiala in 1927. Okolo emphasises the trait of openness and accommodation in Ndi Ozubulu that endeared them to the missionaries, and shows how Fr. Shanahan respected the shrines of the people while continuing his evangelistic exploits.

Nwanekezi and Madu (2020) in *Christian Ozo Title Taking and Leadership* examine the traditional Ozo title from the perspective of Christian faith, viewing it not as a cult but as a social and leadership institution. They expose the processes, stages, and items of the title, the effort to Christianise the institution, and the challenges that still arise from this process, including the suspicion of purist Christians and the opposition of thoroughgoing traditionalists.

Summary of Literature Review

Mission is the planting, sustaining, and nurturing of Christian faith in virgin territory. The agent of the faith is the missionary. Social theories by Durkheim, Marx, and Weber expose religion as a unifying, stratifying, and potentially exploitative social force. The conquest theory and peaceful infiltration theory are both relevant to understanding the spread of the gospel in Ozubulu. The reviewed works reveal various gaps, particularly in the areas of cultural encounter, inculturation, and the failure to register the ongoing cultural tension and neopagan resurgence. The present work seeks to fill these lacunae by examining Acts 19:23-41 as a textual mirror for the Ozubulu evangelical experience.

Ozubulu In History, Culture, And Evangelisation

Historical Background of Ozubulu Community

According to Okolo (1998), the Ozubulu community is a migrant people whose progenitor descends from Eri. The community traces its origins to a mythological period, "no oge afu, n'oge enu di na ana osa" (a time when heaven and earth were close). Chief H. Nworah (Personal Communication, 2023) states that Ozubulu Anakpu sojourned from the Benin area. They are children of Ubulu related to Ubulu Ukwu from the Delta area, who migrated using the Osisi Akpu tree as an improvised bridge across the River Niger. With the pledge made to the Akpu, they instituted it as a deity to be worshipped. Internal oral interviews with N. Ezeonu and O. Ezeriaku (Personal Communication, 2023) reveal that Ubulu was the ancestor of the community, and his grandfather was Eri, whose second wife, Imenyi, begot Oba Ozubulu and Onoju.



The departure of Ozo Ubulu and related groups from the Benin area eventually led them to cross back over the Niger, settling amidst wars and displacements from the Atanis and Akris, until they reached their present location (Okolo, 1998, p. 16). Ozubulu community is made up of four quarters: Amakwa, Egbema, Eziorah, and Nza, with Amakwa being the oldest. Their cultural institutions include the Obi monarchy institution, Nze na Ozo title, marriage institution, first-male right of inheritance, and various cultural festivals such as Ofala, mgbili, iri ji Ofuu, and Oha Mmonwu (Ejiofor, 2006, pp. xvii-xxi).

Geographical Location of Ozubulu Community

Ozubulu is the headquarters of Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State, South East of Nigeria, with a population of approximately 73,820 inhabitants as of 2015. It is located 24km south of Onitsha on the Onitsha-Owerri road, bounded by Ukpokoro to the south-east, Okija and Ihembosi to the south, Oraifite to the north, and Nnewi to the east and north-east (Okolo, 1998). Fr. Duhaze noted: "the customs, the air is healthy and the view beautiful, an encampment that overlooked a wooden valley with a spring of fresh water" (Nwosu, 1985, pp. 23-24). Doolin (1953) observed: "it was an excellent choice from many points of view because its customs and traditions were those of Igbo hinterland" (p. 24). Agbodike (2008) adds that Ozubulu was chosen because it was "the centre of the towns, a halfway point between Onitsha and Oguta and a walking distance for attending school" (p. 24).

Christianity's Encounter with the Traditional Culture of Ozubulu

The Advent of Christianity in Ozubulu

The first definite contact with religious significance was initiated by João Alfonso de Aveiro in 1486, when Oba Uzolua of Benin sought an alliance with the Portuguese, requesting both priests and firearms; the request for firearms was declined while the request for priests was granted (Okolo, 1998, p. 33). The missionaries encountered successive obstacles: the death of the king, changes in political authority, the hostility of the slave trade, tensions among European powers, and the claim of the right of patronage granted by Pope Nicholas V in 1455, which gave European kingdoms rights over the church in all discovered lands (Okolo, 1998, pp. 119-120). Despite these obstacles, vestiges of Christianity remained in the Benin Kingdom, as evidenced by the Aruosa shrines still present in Benin City (Odunlami and Onyenuga, 2020, p. 150).

The 19th-Century Mission of the Holy Ghost Fathers

The Holy Ghost Fathers, led by Fr. Leon Alexander and others, departed from the Apostolic Vicariate of Gabon in 1884 and moved into Onitsha, landing on 5 December 1885. Despite the suspicion of the Royal Niger Company (RNC), the Anglican Communion, and other missions, they secured land with the aid of Bishop Ajai Crowder of the Anglican mission. Fr. Lutz and his companions adopted a distinctive evangelisation strategy: buying and freeing slaves, establishing Christian villages, building schools, hospitals, and orphanages, and identifying with the indigenous people against the injustice of the government. This approach caused a spontaneous movement toward the Catholic faith; even some Anglicans abandoned their church and moved over to the Catholic mission (Nwosu, 1985, pp. 5-6).

Oguejiofor (2018) observes that the missionaries entered the "white man's grave" fully aware of the supreme sacrifice demanded. Fr. Leguene would say amid threats of despair: "Never! Keep the flag flying, mon enfant, God knows our sacrifices, one day he will give us victory" (Okeke, 2012, p. 127). The missionaries' single-minded purpose of evangelisation, without political gain or



exploitation, was recognised by the indigenous people, who responded accordingly (Oguejiofor, 2018, p. 99).

The Ozubulu Mission

Fr. Victor Duhaze arrived in Ozubulu in 1906 and was enthusiastically received by Chief Ezeani Odenigbo of Eziorah. The parish of St Michael was officially blessed and inaugurated on 29 September 1908 and attracted over 3,000 pilgrims by 1909. Between 1912 and 1918, outstations increased from 40 in 1914 to 80 in 1918, reaching 102 by 1926, with more than 40 catechist-teachers in the Ozubulu-Ihiala zone (Agbodike, 2008, p. 26). The white missionaries respected the shrines of the people, unlike some Anglican missionaries who initially killed pythons and burned sacred bushes, which greatly contributed to the peaceful and speedy growth of the Catholic mission (Okolo, 1998, p. 88).

The greatest blow to the Ozubulu mission came in 1927 when the parish headquarters was evacuated to Ihiala. Agbodike (2008) notes: "Psychologically Ozubulu citizens became depressed, disillusioned, and disequibrated; the original enthusiasm with which ndi Ozubulu embraced the faith was somehow dampened" (p. 38). The mission returned in 1953, and from then forward the community has continued to grow in faith and service to the universal church, now boasting 12 Catholic parishes, about 77 indigenous priests, and more than 100 female religious (Nnewi Catholic Diocese Directory, 2022; Ozubulu Ordination Brochure, 2022).

Christianity Today in Ozubulu

Ozubulu is a predominantly Christian community. Christians constitute approximately 98 per cent of the population. The town is the headquarters of the Ozubulu Episcopal Region in the Diocese of Nnewi, comprising Ozubulu Town, Ihembosi, Ukpör, Oraifite, and Ichi (Nnewi Diocesan Directory, 2022, p. 30). Alongside 12 Catholic parishes, the town has 15 Anglican churches and approximately 52 Pentecostal churches (Okwuelu and Obi, Personal Communication, 2023). Ozubulu has produced illustrious sons including Most Rev. Jude Thaddeus Okolo (now Apostolic Nuncio to the Czech Republic, the first Nigerian to hold this position) and Most Rev. Martin Igwemezie Uzoukwu (Catholic Bishop of Minna Diocese).

However, the sorry situation that confronts everyone is the rate of the upsurge of paganism, idolatrous practices, and the depopulation of the Christian community. Amakwa quarter now has 13 deities as against 8 in 2012; Nza has 11 against 7 in 2012; and Egbema records 6 against 4 in 2012, excluding private and family shrines (Okwuelu and Obi, Personal Communication, 2023). Nworah, H. (Personal Communication, 2023) notes that in 1907 there were only six deities in Ozubulu, meaning they have multiplied to 30 in 2023. People are rushing to idol worship not from religious conviction but because shrine-keeping has become a lucrative source of income. The office of chief priest of the Ogwugwu deity has attracted lobbying, with a young man reportedly offering one million naira to secure the position (Omenyiri, Personal Communication, 2023).

The Christian Gospel in Conflict with Traditional Practices

The encounter between the Christian gospel and Ozubulu traditional culture has produced an enduring paradox of acceptance, rejection, and compromise. Okeke (2012), reflecting on Bishop Obiefuna's teachings, notes: "Paganism was so deeply instilled in most people that they could not conceive a world not dominated by idols! They have been made to renounce Satan, his works, and pomp! But nobody will make them denounce the power of Idemili, Edo, Ogwugwu, Udo, Ulasi, and other local Deities. Indeed, they fear these deities more than they fear God!" (p. 36).



Specific areas of conflict and ongoing reconciliation include the Ozo title, Mmonwu, Ikpu aru, Idu iyi, Igba mkpu ututu, and Ibu ofo. In the area of Igba mkpu ututu (the early-morning communal lying-in-state ritual), a balance was eventually struck that allows for its continuation in a prayerful manner while deferring the presentation of traditional items until after internment. However, the people remain divided: Christian conservatives consider any cultural accommodation as paganism, moderates advocate inculturation, and thoroughgoing traditionalists reject Christianised versions of traditional institutions. This enduring tension confirms Unigwe's (2018) observation that religious conflicts emanate from the desire of one religious group to dominate the other (p. 22).

Exegesis Of Acts 19:23-41: Context and Interpretation

Background of Acts of the Apostles

Ezeogamba (2023) clarifies that when scholars refer to "Acts of the Apostles" (πράξεις Ἀποστόλων), they do not mean "The Acts of the Twelve Apostles," since the former allows for Paul to be numbered among the apostles even though he was not among the Twelve. Acts derives from the Greek πράξεις (praxeis), meaning the praxis or activities of the apostles (Liddell and Scott, 2022). Paul was uniquely called by Christ and commissioned to bring the message of salvation to the Gentiles, being born in Tarsus in Cilicia in approximately 4 BCE to Jewish parents (Sanders, 2023). Acts of the Apostles was authored by a companion of Paul and presents Paul as an honest and true preacher of the gospel. It constitutes the fifth book of the New Testament, serving as a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke.

Authorship

Burkett (2002) affirms that Luke the evangelist is generally accepted as the author of Acts of the Apostles, his work consisting of two volumes: Luke and Acts (p. 195). Bayer (2023) concurs, noting that neither Luke nor Acts specifically mentions the author's name, but both internal and external evidence confirm the traditional ascription to Luke.

Internal evidence includes the clear similarity in style, chronology, and recipient between the Gospel of Luke and Acts. The prologue of Acts 1:1 is addressed to Theophilus, the same recipient as Luke 1:1-4, constituting a continuation of the former work. Ezeogamba (2019) demonstrates that the style and grammar of both works show "literary affinity," proving they share the same source and root (p. 27). Furthermore, the travel narratives of the second and third missionary journeys employ the first-person plural, indicating the author is a companion of Paul (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15).

External evidence reveals acceptance of Lukan authorship as early as the 2nd century. By 150 AD, the two books were presented as having been written by one author. Ancient scholars including Irenaeus (130-202), Clement of Alexandria (150-215), Origen, and Tertullian (155-230) all affirm Luke as the author of Acts. The Jerusalem Bible (1985) concludes: "The author must have been a Christian of the Apostolic age, either a thoroughly Hellenised Jew or, more probably, a well-educated Greek, very well acquainted with the Septuagint and with Judaism" (p. 1794). Luke, a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin converted by Paul, is thus affirmed as the sole and real author of Acts of the Apostles.

Date and Provenance

No historical traditional record provides the exact place and date of writing. McKenzie (1998) notes that Irenaeus (130-202) situates the composition after the death of Paul, while Eusebius and Jerome suggest it was written during Paul's Roman imprisonment. Bayer (2023) argues that Acts stopped with Paul's accusation and arrest (Acts 28:30-31) and that Paul was probably martyred around 65



AD, suggesting the account was composed shortly before Nero persecuted Christians, approximately 60-62 AD. The provenience for the writing is most likely Rome, where Luke, as Paul's companion, was present, and from which the mission was seen as reaching its culmination in accordance with Acts 1:8.

Purpose of Acts

Acts was written to defend Christianity and present it credibly in a Greco-Roman world where Christians faced persecution and misunderstanding. It is addressed primarily to Theophilus, a Hellenistic elite and Christian, while also appealing to a wider Greek-speaking educated audience (Green, 1997, pp. 16-17, 36). Acts is both historical and apologetic, presenting Paul as a political innocent and not a criminal in a Roman legal context. Barclay (1976) emphasises that the primary aim of Luke was to demonstrate the fulfilment of Christ's words: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), showing how a small movement in Palestine reached Rome within thirty years. Ezeogamba (2019) summarises: Luke's purpose was to "present a portrait of Paul that would convince the Roman authorities that Paul was not a political criminal" (p. 30).

Literary Genre, Theology, and Structure of Acts

Acts of the Apostles is best characterised as a historical narrative with theological and apologetic dimensions. Stevens (2023) notes that while Luke's Gospel is a Greco-Roman biography, Acts is clearly a historical narrative that also contains multiple genres. McKenzie (1998) observes that the earlier chapters contain Semitic vulgar idioms reflecting oral tradition, while the travel narratives are more polished and coordinated, indicating multiple sources including oral tradition, personal diaries, and the testimonies of key figures such as Peter, Philip, Stephen, and James (p. 10). Dibelius (2008) adds that Luke is distinguished from other historians of his day in his use of speeches, employing them not only to illuminate the situation but also to proclaim the gospel.

Theologically, Luke presents the Holy Spirit as the active force behind the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the church. Acts has traditionally been called the "gospel of the Holy Spirit" in contrast to Luke's gospel, which is the "gospel of the Son." Luke's Christology is multidimensional, presenting Jesus as Davidic Messiah, suffering servant, Christ of God, righteous one, Lord (Kyrios), and Pais (servant/son), as Iorjaah (2016) analyses (pp. 55-74). The structure of Acts of the Apostles can be summarised as five major sections: (a) Christians in Jerusalem from the introduction through the death of Stephen; (b) the Christian movement from Judea to Samaria and Antioch of Syria; (c) Paul's mission in Asia Minor and Greece; (d) Paul's return to Jerusalem and trial; (e) Paul as a prisoner in Rome.

Delimitation and Context of Acts 19:23-41

Delimitation

Acts 19:23-41 falls within Paul's Third Missionary Journey and specifically within his mission to Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia (Acts 15:36-21:16). Within McKenzie's (1998) structural arrangement, Acts 19:23-41 belongs to Acts 18:23-20:4, with Acts 19:23-41 specifically dealing with the Riot in Ephesus. The event occurred as Paul was planning his journey to Jerusalem and Rome, towards the final phase of his stay in Ephesus.

Remote Context (Acts 19:1-10)

In the remote context, Paul's presence in Ephesus brought a turning point in the conversion of the Gentile world. He met disciples of John who had been baptised but had not yet encountered the



Holy Spirit. After fuller catechesis and the laying on of hands, they received the Spirit and spoke in tongues and prophesied (Baird et al., 1984, p. 72). This deeper initiation sparked a massive conversion movement that led to the depopulation of the temple of Diana.

Immediate Context (Acts 19:11-22)

God worked extraordinary miracles through Paul; even handkerchiefs and aprons he had touched were used to heal the sick and expel evil spirits. The dramatic failure of the seven sons of Sceva, who attempted to invoke Jesus's name without belief and were overpowered by the possessed man, spread fear throughout Ephesus and led many to burn their magic books, whose total value was reckoned at fifty thousand pieces of silver (Baird et al., 1984, p. 73). The name of the Lord Jesus was thus held in the highest honour. This massive conversion and renunciation of magic directly preceded and precipitated the riot of Acts 19:23-41.

Textual Criticism of Acts 19:23-41

The text of Acts 19:23-41 comprises 18 verses, of which only verses 23 and 36 are free of textual problems. Going through the Greek Bible editions such as Nestle-Aland (2007), 36 textual problems are scattered across the 18 verses, comprising alternative readings, omissions, insertions, and transpositions. Representative critical observations include:

Verse 24: Manuscript Bezae (D) substitutes the pronoun *ην* ("he") for the name *Δημήτριος*, and manuscripts Vaticanus (B) and *gig* omit the word *ἀργυροῦς* ("silver"). Verses 25-26 contain alternative readings of phrases relating to the gathering of craftsmen and Paul's persuasion of the crowds. Verse 27 contains a transposition of "*Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερὸν*" (temple of Artemis) in certain manuscripts, and omissions of the article *ἡ* by Vaticanus. Verses 33-34 show alternative readings and insertions, with Bazaе's substitution of the phrase "instructed" for "informed." Verse 40 presents three critical problems: an alternative reading, an omission of *οὐ* by multiple manuscripts, and an omission of *περὶ* by others. After thorough analysis, the researcher affirms that the content of Nestle-Aland (27th Edition) is very close to the original and therefore to be accepted as presented.

Literal Translation of Acts 19:23-41

The following is a literal translation of the text based on the above textual analysis: "About that time there arose no little stir concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen of like occupation, and said, 'Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only at Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable company of people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may count for nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.' When they heard this they were enraged, and cried out, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' So, the city was filled with confusion; and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel..."

Thematic Analysis of Acts 19:23-41

Paul's Kerygma in Ephesus

Paul's central theology constitutes the generic whole of his missionary preaching: Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross to bring salvation to the whole world; it is only in Jesus and his cross, that humanity shall be saved (Acts 13:26-39). Therefore, God is the only true God; nothing made



with human hands is to be worshipped, for "gods made of human hands are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26b). Henry (1961) captures this: "The first and most genuine notion we have of God is that he is of himself and depends upon none, but that all things have their being from him and their dependence on him; it follows that those are no gods which are the creatures of men's fancy and the work of men's hands" (p. 1721). The New Community Bible (2011) notes that while many cults and doctrines in the Roman world claimed to free people from death, the apostle Paul was stating a verifiable fact: a Jew named Jesus has risen, and we have seen him risen, and he liberates from the bondage of sin (p. 1986). This single kerygma centred on Christ is the explanation for Paul's transformative power in Ephesus.

The Goddess Artemis of Ephesus and the Religious Cults of Asian People

Ephesus was the largest city in the Asian province of the Roman Empire when Paul evangelised it (56-57 AD), with a population of approximately 250,000. Located near the River Cayster, it dated back to 1100 BC and boasted the biggest theatre, gymnasium, stadium, library, and largest market in the region. McKenzie (1998) notes that the Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, standing approximately 240 feet wide and 420 feet long, with 100 columns about 55 feet high (p. 24). Artemis (the Roman Diana) was the goddess of fertility, depicted with multiple breasts to represent her fruitfulness. She attracted pilgrims from across the ancient world, who bought her effigies as souvenirs and installed her altar in their homes. Taylor (2004) notes that Paul's preaching against idol worship threatened not only the income of artisans like Demetrius but also the prestige and financial function of the temple, which served as a city bank, and the prosperity of Ephesus itself as a pilgrimage centre (p. 1611).

Demetrius, the Smiths, and the Craftsmen of Ephesus

Demetrius was a famous, rich silversmith who made a fortune from moulding the effigies, shrines, and statues of Artemis (Acts 19:24). As apparent chairman of the craftsmen's union, he convoked a meeting, warning his colleagues that Paul's message was a serious threat to their trade and to the goddess. His inciting address had three dimensions: the economy was under threat; the people were converting to the new faith since Paul had convinced them that hand-made idols are not gods; and the great goddess faced extinction (Acts 19:25-27). The result was a riot in the theatre of Ephesus in which Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's companions, were seized and dragged in. Barclay (1997) aptly observes: "Their trouble was that their pocket was being touched" (p. 146). The town clerk intervened diplomatically, invoking the legendary belief of the Ephesians in Artemis while simultaneously invoking Roman law and warning the crowd of the danger of rioting (Acts 19:35-40). Green (2010) observes that even Paul's opponents in their protest acknowledged the far-reaching influence of Paul and his message (p. 759).

The Jewish People and the Assembly

The Jews in Ephesus, though not Christians, were always in opposition to Paul's mission. When Alexander, a Jew, was pushed forward by the Jewish community in the theatre to make a defence, the crowd, recognising him as a Jew, simply shouted all the louder for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:34). Henry (2008) notes that the Jews "had ill will enough to set in with the mob" in Ephesus (p. 1721). The Jewish attempt to disassociate themselves from Paul ultimately failed, and the town clerk's diplomacy prevailed: he warned the crowd that the accused men were neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of the goddess, and urged Demetrius and his colleagues to seek redress through the courts, not mob action. Thus the riot was defused without Paul or his companions suffering physical harm.



Conclusion

Comparing the ministers of today with the early ministers, and especially with St Paul, one observes a sharp difference in the power and authenticity of their witness. Paul's missionary journeys amidst persecutions were accompanied by visible effects of the word and authentic signs (Acts 18:11-12; 19). The evidence of the sons of Scheva reveals the clear distinction between true and fraudulent ministry (Acts 19:16). At ordination, the minister receives the Gospel with the charge: "Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practise what you teach" (Pazhayampallil, 2004, p. 506). The minister of the gospel must allow the word to take flesh in himself, living as alter Christus ("another Christ") and acting in persona Christi capitis (CCC, 1548). Paul's resolve, "It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20), must characterise the modern minister if evangelisation is to bear fruit.

The quest to make money by some ministers has derailed the course of evangelisation. The early missionaries used schools and other establishments to win men for Christ; today the same institutions are used primarily to make money (Oguejiofor, 2018, p. 104). Okeke (2008) warns of the commercialisation of prayer, observing that "prayer ministry is being turned into big business concerns" (pp. 86-87). False prophets and fraudulent ministers exploit the freedom of the church, using the name of Jesus for personal enrichment, prey upon economically vulnerable people, and erode the church's credibility.

The ministers of the gospel today reflect the diminished quality of today's society, shortcut mentality, compromised integrity, and half-hearted commitment. The early missionaries came to uplift the social life of the people, identifying with them against governmental injustice, educating them, and attending to their needs (Akukwe, 1985, pp. 217-219). The compromised lifestyle of ministers today, which punctures the evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity, and poverty, devastates the credibility and effectiveness of the church's mission.

The white missionaries came with the presumption that the natives were inferior in belief, worldview, and culture. While some were sensitive and treaded cautiously, most obliterated local customs and beliefs by imposing their own (Okolo, 1998, pp. 32, 52). The present-day ministers, instead of correcting these mistakes, retain the same misguided assumptions and continue to dismiss indigenous beliefs as fetish and foolishness. The Igbo Catechism's dismissal of idol worship, for example, wrongly conflates the Igbo concept of God and mediation through divinities with mere idolatry, ignoring the distinction between Igo mmuo (communion with ancestral spirits) and Igo Arusi (worship of idols).

Christians have failed to keep the principle of unity prescribed by Christ (John 17:20-23). The division within the Christian fold occasions internal tension, unhealthy competition, and the reduction of evangelisation to a mere scramble for adherents. The rivalry was handed over from the missionaries themselves to native adherents and continues to undermine dialogue and ecumenism (Okolo, 1998, p. 32). Infighting and the lack of a unified Christian voice have endangered the very existence of Christianity and made the church a laughingstock among other religions.

Paul did not even ask for his scriptural due as a labourer (1 Timothy 5:18), resorting to his tent-making business to sustain himself (Acts 18:3). The lack of self-reliance makes ministers vulnerable, causing them to fall prey to the wealthy and to compromise their prophetic function.



The prophetic function of the church is undermined whenever church authority fails to speak truth to the government of the day. The Ozubulu 2016 massacre was a clear manifestation of the consequences of the church's compromised integrity in the face of politicians and wealthy sponsors. Okoye (2022) describes the Nigerian government and its cronies as a "theatre of evil," yet some ministers openly campaign for, endorse, and prophesy in favour of manifestly corrupt governments, wounding the consciences of their followers and bringing evangelisation into disrepute.

Recommendations

Re-appraising the Missionary Mandate and Objective of Evangelisation

The sole objective of evangelisation is to plant, sustain, and nurture the Christian faith, taken from Christ's mandate to the apostles (Matthew 28:19-20) and to all disciples, ensuring that the gospel reaches the end of the world (Acts 1:8). Vatican II (1982) affirms: "To shepherd the people of God and to increase its numbers without ease, Christ the Lord set up in his church a variety of offices which aim at the good of the whole body" (LG. 18). No one sends himself: one who speaks must be given a mandate, a faculty, and a message (CCC, 875). The secret of Paul's success in Ephesus was his singular focus on Christ as source, summit, and objective of all missionary activity.

Reshaping the Lifestyle of the Ministers of the Gospel

Paul's testimony, "To live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21), and "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20), must be the standard for the modern minister. Vatican II (1982) insists: "By the sacrament of Orders, priests are configured to Christ the Priest as servants of the Head, so they are enabled and obliged even in the midst of human weakness to seek perfection" (PO, no. 12). The minister's true presence as another Christ in the world is the foremost and irreplaceable tool of evangelisation. Cheriampanatt (2010) affirms: "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, in the life and action than in theories" (p. 373).

Inculturation

More sincere, practical, and realistic effort must be channelled toward inculturation. The incarnation of God in Christ, taking up human nature, culture, and language, is the theological foundation of inculturation (Luke 1). Vatican II (1982) states: "The gospel in the bid of incarnation takes the good aspects of the culture, prefixes and strengthens them" (LG. 13). Okeke (2006) insists: "In the Jews, the gospel must become a Jew; to the Greeks, it must be a Greek; it must become all things to all men and women to save them. Therefore, the gospel must become Igbo for the Igbo people to be saved through it" (p. 56). Igbo cultural institutions, the Ozo title, Ofo symbol, masquerade, cultural festivals, and oath-taking, must be purified rather than wholesale condemned, so that the gospel may take root with African eyes, ears, breath, blood, and flesh.

Self-Reliance of the Church and Her Ministers

Financial independence protects the minister's integrity. The early missionaries sustained the church through internal resources, providing relief, hospitals, and education without burdening the people they were evangelising. The church of today must establish money-making ventures and entrepreneurship, making schools and hospitals accessible to the poor without financial burden (Armellini, 1994, p. 35), and must not allow institutional financial pressure to compromise prophetic integrity.



Ecumenism, Dialogue, and Reconciliation

Reconciliation within the body of Christ is paramount. Dialogue must be many-faced: among Christians of the same denomination, among different Christian churches, with African traditional religionists, and with Muslims. Okeke (2006) notes: "Dialogue is a way of being for the Christian within the community in contact with other believers and all men and women of goodwill. Dialogue is an important instrument for peace and unity, especially where society tends to be polarised along religious lines" (p. 81). Paul's own approach was deeply dialogical, as shown in his encounters in Athens, Ephesus, and throughout his missionary journeys. Ecumenical formation, mutual respect, shared liturgical worship, and a shared biblical and ecclesiological foundation must undergird the dialogical process (Okeke, 2006, pp. 87-88).

Checking Abuses in Prayer Ministry, Heresy, and Extremism

Both prayer ministry and Pentecostalism in Nigeria share a dangerous tendency toward prosperity preaching and the attribution of every human suffering to spiritual causes, thereby discharging individual responsibility and distorting the message of the cross (Dim, 2012, pp. 85-86). The church must rise to tell the truth, confront and expose false ministers, and regulate prayer ministry. The hierarchy must sincerely combat false prophecy, fake miracles, and the prosperity gospel, not capitulating to the lure of the wealth of the powerful men and women of God.

The Church Must Assume Her Prophetic Role toward Government

The church in Ozubulu and everywhere must reassume her prophetic function in relation to government. The ministers of the church must re-examine their consciences: Are they still friends of the poor? Are the poor still accessible to them? Is the option for the poor their prime function? They must be wary of undue association with the rich and powerful and must discern the dangers of what has been described as the "Greek gift." Karl Marx's dictum that religion is a tool in the hands of the powerful must not be given occasion for confirmation. Christ's own manifesto (Luke 4:18-19) requires bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

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