

**A DISCOURSE ON CHRISTIAN CONVERSION TO THE DEVELOPMENT
OF ENGENNI IN AHOADA WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF
RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA.**

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Abstract

The phenomena of Christian conversion, has been open to academic discourse particularly by scholars of anthropology, philosophy, religion, culture, sociology and developmental studies of the African continent. Scholars have displayed knowledge and scholarship on Christian conversion based on their perspective, understanding and interest on the subject matter. This paper is an attempt to interrogate some thoughts raised by scholars about Christian conversion starting from the biblical perspective of the early apostolic church era to the 21st century of Pentecostalism and Christian milieu. The focus of this discourse is Christian conversion in Engenni – a traditional African society in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria which came in contact with Christian religion and western civilization about the late 20th century. The paper examines how Christian conversion has impacted on the people of Engenni who embraced the second and alien religion-Christianity. The paper adopts a historical and phenomenological methods of investigation considering the interface of academic discourse involved to arrive at some findings which includes, that Christian conversion in Engenni has religious, social and cultural dimensions that produce positive and negative impacts on the Engenni people and society as a result of global social change mantra. It defaces the Christian religion, and reduces the Engenni rich cultural heritage and identity. The paper finally recommends that the Christian church should emphasize the biblical perspective of Christian conversion and retain traditional values that prompt both religions.

Keywords: Conversion, Development, Engenni (Egene) Christian.

Introduction

Scholars have advanced different interpretations to the religious phenomenon of Christian conversion. To what extent these interpretations have affected the society; particularly the African society has been a matter of academic concern for scholars, and to various Christian missions including the society at large.

The scope of this paper however is restricted to the Engenni nation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The wheel of Christianization in Africa, has watered down the phenomenon of Christian conversion. The study made reference to an instance of Okarki-Engenni when converts openly opposed a traditional religious practice, and such actions eventually paved way for the Christian religion to survive and thrive in Engenni (Basene 2004).

The paper examined some scholarly perspectives to Christian conversion and how it has affected the Christian church and development of Engenni. And to adequately carry out this task, the study adopted the historical and phenomenological methods of investigation, including the insiders hindview of the Engenni culture, and leveraged on the rational choice theory and Horton's conversion model to explain the possible reasons for conversion from traditional religion to the Christian religion in Engenni. Consequent on the findings, the paper made some recommendations and conclusions to promote further studies and scholarship in this area.

Theoretical Framework

The rational choice theory of religion by Stark and Horton's religious model of conversion are considered relevant in this discourse.

Stark, a sociologist who studied conversion work with Lofland, focused on the early missionary effort of the unification church in the Sanfrancisco bay area; while Horton an anthropologist, stimulating essays on African conversion provides an alternative vantage point for evaluating the rationality of religion and the forces promoting conversion to world religions. This vantage point actually compliments the rational choice theory of religious conversion. According to Stark "converts are not attracted so much by a religious groups teachings, which at first usually seem bizarre, as by personal connections with people already in the group. Thus the theory considers religious conversion as a process of maximizing benefits from interpersonal relationships, given one's place within networks of such relationships. The theory was developed by Stark,

Pinke and Lannaccone. These scholars opine that people act to further their interests within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options guided by their preferences and tastes, human attempts to make rational choices" (Alles in King 2017). Scholars have linked the rational choice theory to the theories of modernism and thus provides the platform for Horton's religious model of conversion which states that conversion is "due as much to the development of the traditional cosmology (microcosm) in response to other features of the modern situation (macrocosm); as it is to the activities of missionaries. He stated that the pre-existing thought patterns and values and the pre-existing socio-economic matrix" sum up the basis of Christian conversion.

Horton's religious model of conversion is a function of osmotic pressure from a region of lesser quantity to a region of greater quantity, not necessarily quality related, as is the case with world religions and traditional religion. He further explains that this model "conflates two concepts that are better kept distinct: the contrast between traditional and world religions and that between localized and trans-regional religions". This is the basis for considering Christian conversion as the catalyst-stimulator and accelerator for development in Engenni.

The Concept Of Christian Conversion

The conceptualization of specific human situations like Christian conversion in relation to development of Engenni requires comparative and interdisciplinary considerations.

The Biblical consideration for instance is characterized with personal confessions and demonstration of faith as chronicled in the Holy Scriptures. A remarkable case in point is the dramatic conversion experience of Paul, an outstanding missionary, theologian and writer of the early church who was converted on his way to Damascus. The word conversion though rare in scripture is a crucial biblical and theological concept, meaning "to turn or return of a person to God". Paul's conversion experience is described as dramatic without a previous narrative script. It was spontaneous and believed to be Holy Spirit driven. "Christ appeared to him with blinding radiance" and within a split second, he was on the ground, heard an interrogating voice that convicted and directed him on what to do. He obeyed and thereafter his ways changed to be an apostle of Christ instead of a persecutor of Christians that he was. Paul received the Holy Spirit and was baptized. This was a model of Christian conversion. However, Christian conversion may not necessarily follow Paul's dramatic pattern, but there must be clear evidence of a right angle or 'u' turn from a former religious

way of life to a new one. In Africa, Christian conversion is a turn from the traditional religion to the Christian religion. Paul turned from a Jewish religion to the Christian religion in a spectacular, dramatic, spontaneous and spirit motivated action. However scholars have introduced other dimensions to Christian conversion as mentioned earlier.

In the religious market place, the rational choice theory and Horton's religious model of conversion are relevant to the Engenni experience.

The rational choice theory introduces economic perspective. Here the convert may not necessarily have a divine encounter, but is pressured by socio-economic or political needs. In this case, it is need rather than religious based, and therefore situational, circumstantial or directional to meet specific needs of the convert. For example, elements of the rational choice theory of conversion also played out in the apostolic era and the early church. The need for successful occupational career prompted Peter, Andrew and James the first disciples turn to Jesus. In the Roman Empire, Constantine's political ambition was a serious need which led to his conversion when he saw the vision of a cross and the assurance of victory in the battle that was ahead of him. The fulfillment in the expectation of these ones gave them the convert status. But the conversion of Constantine was controversial among scholars of church history even though his administration favoured the growth of the church. This implies that religious conversion can be pretentious, cosmetic and temporal contrary to the biblical model demonstrated by Paul who was actually steadfast to the end. The rational Choice Theory of Christian conversion like Christian marriage has capacity that distorts the divine principle of holding on to the end no matter challenges because rationality creates room for freedom of free entry and exit in any relationship.

This freedom is an essential ingredient in Christian conversion. How does this play out in the Engenni context?

Models Of Conversion

Three models of Christian conversion are discussed in this paper. The spiritual model, the evangelical model, and the imperialist model.

The Biblical Christian Conversion Model (BCCM): In this model of spiritual conversion, the Holy Spirit drives the process. Here the convert goes through a dramatic experience without his control. It is an instant event that ends up with

the convert responding to given instructions without resistance. Paul's conversion experience falls into this category.

The second one discussed is the Evangelical Christian Conversion Model (ECCM). Here the convert responds to the power of the word being preached. The word has the potential of the Holy Spirit that converts a person unto salvation. This is the common model used by the church through preaching and teaching and invitation to perform the religious ritual of alter call when a person willingly decides to accept Jesus as personal Lord and Saviour on the conviction by the declared word of God. After such experience, the convert goes through a systematic discipleship teaching to build him up to Christian maturity. This is akin to process Christian conversion. Here again the convert enjoys the freedom of choice either to resist or accept to go through the process.

The third one is the Imperialist Christian Conversion Model (ICCM), where the convert is influenced by the features of a wider worldview that are associated with globalization. This is associated with the world religions such as Christianity which is referred to as a macrocosm over traditional religion. The latter is usually overwhelmed by the imperialist tendencies of the world religions. This model complements the rational Choice Christian Conversion Theory which underpins this study.

The Engenni Experience Of Christian Conversion

Engenni is a cluster of twenty three traditional Africa communities situated along the Western bank of the Orashi/Engenni river in the Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers in Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

The Christian religion spread to Engenni in the early 20th Century from the neighbouring Kalabari people in the same geographical region who had earlier had trade and religious contact with European trade merchants of United African Company (UAC) and Christian Missionaries of the Southern American Baptist Mission (SABM). (Joel 2017).

The European trade merchants opened up trading posts at two Engenni communities - Okarki and Joinkrama, while the European Christian missionaries established churches and schools in many Engenni Communities, and hospital in one Engenni community Ususu-Engenni (Joinkrama) ie the Baptist Schools and the Baptist Hospital. These institutions particularly the schools and hospital

served as conversion grounds for the church and Christian missionaries – the Southern American Baptist mission (SABM).

The services provided by the schools – education; and hospital – health care delivery, including their ancillary employment opportunities as teachers, nurses, pastors, labourers, cooks, cleaners, messengers, cloth launderers, drivers etc. ie. White collar jobs were attraction to the Engenni people particularly young people (youths) who were hitherto limited to their traditional occupation – agriculture, fishing, farming, industry-crafts at the subsistence level. The schools, churches and hospital taught Engenni youths how to read, write and communicate in the English language and also writes the vernacular; they could read the bible, translate the scripture to vernacular, understand the science of healing the sick of various diseases particularly malaria and diarrhea that was prevalent in the area because of the enabling breeding environment for the vectors – mosquito lava and bacteria. These interventions reduced the mortality rate of the people, obnoxious practices such as killing of twins and human sacrifices were discouraged. The traditional Engenni people admired the life style of the European missionaries, and trade merchants and their values – eg dress code, moral code etc. All of these physical indices more than the spiritual constituted the basis for Christian conversion in Engenni. This situation was further enhanced because the early Baptist missionaries to Engenni paid less emphasis to spiritual formation and discipleship into the image of Christ through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as was the case with Apostle Paul’s dramatic conversion experience. A few cases of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Baptist Church was condemned by the European missionaries. For instance, Okwukwu a convert of the Christian church at the Baptist church Edagheri-Engenni manifested some spiritual fits and he was excommunicated from the Baptist church. This led him to establish the First Indigenous Church in Engenni (Joel 2019). At the later period, converted youths of the Baptist church who demonstrated the gift of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues, demand for musical instruments were penalized by the church elders. This led to the establishment of the Living Faith Baptist Church Ususu-Engenni (Odoya 2017), Odoya also stated the manifestation of the gift of the holy spirit at a youth program at the Baptist church attracted very serious condemnations by the elders of the church. These few examples corroborated the fact that the Holy Spirit was not emphasized by the early Baptist missionaries, and so dramatic and Holy Spirit Models of Conversion was not common in the early church in

Engenni. However, the following Engenni indigenes converts impacted positively to the growth of the church in Engenni.

Akinalapikia, Ogbapu, of the Peace movement, Pastor Opuwari, Apostle Oweh, Rev. Ade, Rev. Apapa, Rev. Alasia, Pastor Osuagi, Rev. Dimugu, Rev. Oku, Rev. Elijah, Rev. Osah, Rev. Odoya, Rev. Elijah, Rev. Eli, etc served as ministers of God at different times in Engenni. They impacted positively to the development of Engenni and the church.

Before the incursion of the Christian religion in Engenni at about 1900, the Engenni Indigenous religion was fully in place. According to Basene (2004) “the Egene (Engenni) traditional religion had been in full control of the people’s life”. But from 1900, Engenni was confronted with an entirely new religious message which posed a direct challenge to the old gods. Basene’s assertion implies that the indigenous religion of the Engenni people has been displaced by the Christian religion which rendered the Engenni religious gods as old. We see a new religious order taking over the “the people’s life, aspiration, culture and religion through a conscious, consistent, systematic Christianization and conversion process. The process involved the establishment of schools which introduced western education; churches which introduced Christian religion, hospitals which introduced western healthcare system and trading post for economic enterprise. All of these institutions provided essential services that complemented the needs of the people, and became strong avenues for Christian conversion – a turn from the indigenous Engenni religion to the Christian religion (Christianity).

Converts of the Niger Delta pastorate of the Anglican church from the Kalabari kingdom of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria had trade contacts with the Engenni people at two major trading posts along the Orashi/Engenni river – Okarki and Joinkrama. These traders came to Engenni in Christian and European clothing haven had earlier contact with European missionaries and merchants in their communities – Abonnema, Buguma, Bonny, Okrika, Opobo etc. The European missionaries actually took advantage of the trade merchants being Africans to gain entry into the Engenni domain. The trade merchants were more interested in economics of trade than of religious conversion. The latter was the attraction which also played out in the Engenni Christian conversion where the people became Christians without actually having the spiritual encounter as was in the apostolic dispensation of Paul as explained in the scripture. In this sense, we find more church goers who are yet to experience Christian

conversion. Some who share a conversion experience formulate it. In the course of the study, a couple of adult Engenni Christians were interviewed and they confessed that they never had a conversion experience. Some of them disclosed that they are Christian because they were born into a Christian home; their parents are Christians so that automatically make them Christians. Here we see conversion being reduced to belonging to a family were their parents had or may not have had any conversion experience. This is family conversion and it is common in Engenni. The respondent in an admission interview into a seminary was told to formulate a conversion experience which he never had to qualify him for admission for pastoral training. He had to formulate one (Odoya 2022). Similarly, in a funeral biography stating the Christian life of a deceased, she was described as a “Christian born into an Anglican family”. A mum as she was called by many was born a Christian into an Anglican family: One would ask, at what point was she converted? Was it before birth, at birth or later in life? It is also possible that she never had a Christian conversion experience all through life but was a Christian in the African sense of Christian conversion.

In Engenni, most of the cases of early Christian conversion were based on the rational choice theory and the Imperial Model of conversion as propounded by Stark and Horton respectively. This is reflected in the development pattern of Engenni. The early elites were attracted by the western education which gave them the opportunity and privilege to be identified with the European and trained as interpreters to the missionary pastors or the district officers in the customary court, or to be able to read and write letters for persons or corporate organizations like family or community. The Engenni people who were engaged in these activities went through missionary schools and churches, and were perceived to be Christian converts who had abandoned the traditional religion. Those who clinged to the traditional religion never had the opportunities and privileges that was open to those who accepted the Christian religion either as converts or church members. And in most cases, the church members outnumbered the converts. This is even the challenge in contemporary African church where baptized members are less in number compared to the church goers. A church of mixed multitude (the Nigerian Baptist Convention online).

From the perspective of Horton’s religious conversion, the European missionaries had a macrocosm status over the Engenni people. This was a strong factor that increased their worldview and stimulated the need for them to identify with the Christian religions which has become a household religion in Engenni.

Another side to Christian conversion in Engenni was the God factor that is also in the traditional religion. The Engenni culture and religion recognize the existence of a supreme God who they refer to as “Oniso na Odemufieya” meaning the God that is greatest ie the Supreme God. The Engenni people identified the commonality between the Christian religion and their traditional religion, and adjudged that the Christian religion share this same belief. Thus it was easy to identify with the Christian religion even though there was no clear cut divide – as (Mbiti (1976) argued that there is no departmentalization in the African religion. The African goes about with his religion but returns to it when he is faced with serious challenges. In order words, the Engenni Christian has the innate traditional capacity to convert, reconvert or reverse conversion.

Thus the dynamics of Christian conversion has a positive and negative influence on the development of Engenni. There are benefits accruing from the introduction of Christian religion in Engenni. They include the establishment of schools that opened up the Engenni worldview to globalization. The mission schools trained the pioneer elites that served in various areas of the civil service and brought recognition to Engenni. Secondly, the health facilities established by the Christian mission trained skilled medical personnels that also served as caregivers in Engenni and beyond. The institutions served as infrastructural development in Engenni. For example, the Baptist Hospital in Joinkrama, the Baptist State Schools etc which are now being poorly managed by the state government.

Thirdly, obnoxious traditional practices such as human sacrifices, killing of twins etc were discouraged and discontinued by converts who enforced the rejection in the churches, schools and hospital including the communities which was influenced by the converts.

Though it is difficult to identify a convert of the apostolic early church model in Engenni, converts attracted by their rational choice and influence of world religion (Christianity). This has contributed to the development of Engenni in various ways - economically, socially, politically and religiously. The religious development top the list because most Engenni people are Christians even though their conversion status may not be ascertained.

However, an exceptional and controversial case was the Christian conversion of Okwukwu an indigene of Edagberi – Engenni who abandoned the traditional religion for the Christian religion of the Baptist church and later established a new Christian religious movement of the Pentecostal extraction called the Faith

Tabernacle Congregation, which started a new community named Betterland-Engenni. It also established branches and followers in several communities along the Gbarain, Nembe, Okordia -Zarama, Oybia axis of Bayelsa State.

Conclusion And Recommendation

Christian conversion in Engenni was stimulated by the socio-economic needs rather than the spiritual needs of the people. Christianity was more of a social change agent of the society than a need for salvation to eternity. Thus, the development of Engenni was more materialistic than spiritual. For example, the pioneer elites of Engenni were Christian converts who served as agents of socio-economic development in Engenni, the state and nation. This paper therefore recommends that Christian conversion in Engenni should strike a balance between the Biblical Model and the Rational Choice Model. The God factor in the Engenni traditional religion should be sustained as the basis for Christian conversion and Engenni identity in the Christianization.

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