

CULTURAL COLOURATION OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGENNI IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Global Christianity (the Christian church) since the twentieth century is coloured with some African cultural practices which have changed certain aspects of religious and cultural values of Christianity and the Engenni culture in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. There are concerns of cultural alienation in Engenni, as was the case in Kenya (Bair 2013). The paper examines aspects of global Christianity and the Engenni culture that are affected and how they affect the development of Engenni in the 21st century. Adopting the historical and phenomenological methods of investigation, the paper observed that the Value Added Theory of Smelser (1963) logically explains the dynamics of the discourse on “Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity to the development of Engenni in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria”; and represents it in a Venn Diagram showing inculturation. Development studies recognise the diffusion of African culture in Global Christianity and the reverse order. This interplay opens up a broad spectrum study of academic scholarship by investigating the elements of culture in global Christianity and its effect with particular reference to Engenni as an ethnic nationality. The diffusion of culture and global Christianity in the development matrix of Engenni is expressed in gains, losses and a change mantra in the development landscape of Engenni. The paper recommends that the Engenni culture and Global Christianity should respect their identities and promote their core values to the advantage of the corporate development of human society.

Keywords: Culture, Christianity Colouration, Development, Engenni.

Introduction

Christianity (the Early Church) has a Jewish cultural background colouration. For example, the Jews observed and celebrated several festivals. One Jewish festival – “Shavuot”, was celebrated annually to mark the end of an event – the Grain Festival by farmers and their families; as a Jewish tradition. “Later, Christians celebrated a feast that is closely related to Shavuot, the Christian Pentecost or White Sunday, which comes 50 days after Easter,

marking the beginnings of the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Ward 1989). This could be regarded as a colouration of the early church.

There is a noticeable shift in the practice of Global Christianity in Africa, including Engenni. The shift is from the early church and Baptist Missionary pattern of worship to the contemporary Pentecostal or charismatic pattern of worship. Scholars identified reasons for the shift to include the emancipation of African culture and preserving African identity in the global marketplace to avoid alienation and possible extinction of the African cultural heritage.

Onwuejogwu asserts that cultural traits and complexes originate through innovation and spread through diffusion and geographic distribution. Cultural colouration, therefore, is a deliberate innovation domesticating global Christianity in Africa, including Engenni. Colouration in this context is used in terms of differentiation between the Engenni culture and Global Christianity; not in the common term of shade of colour – white, black, red, yellow etc.; but change from what it used to be, giving it a new face, the aftermath of a process such as diffusion, acculturation, etc.

The paper is discussed under the following outline to enhance delivery – abstract, introduction, theoretical anchor, the background of Engenni, Global Christianity in Engenni, Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity in Engenni – the case of Spiritual Faith Christ Church (SFCC), the impact of the cultural colouration of global Christianity in Engenni, recommendation, conclusion and references.

Theoretical Anchor

Considering the topic “Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity to the Development of Engenni, it is imperative to put into proper perspective a theoretical framework that can accommodate culture and religion.

Culture and religion are key functional and inseparable human phenomena that are fundamental to the development of society. Scholars have given different explanations and definitions of each from various perspectives and contexts.

Geertz (1973), in his sociological perspective on religion as a cultural system in Pals (2015), asserts that cultural analysis is not “an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretative one in search of meaning”. It becomes imperative to understand the meaning of culture and religion in this context to give meaning to the discourse. Simply put, culture is a people's lifestyle, while religion is a people's belief system. As people engage in both activities, value is added to society. Based on this consideration, the value-added theory of Smelser becomes relevant to this study. According to Smelser (1963), certain conditions are necessary for the development of a social movement. They are structural conduciveness, structural strain, spread of a generalised belief, precipitating factors, mobilisation for action

and social control factors. Following the economic principle, Smelser argued that each step in the production process adds value to the finished product. Similarly, the introduction of Engenni Culture into Global Christianity adds value to the individual and society, and this brings development. Kendall (2016) states that structural strain could be disruptive to society, particularly in times of tension and conflict, as is sometimes the case between culture in Africa and Global Christianity (the church). The value-added theory logically describes the dynamics of cultural colouration of Global Christianity because it adds aesthetic value to Global Christianity (the church) and identity to the Engenni Culture, as explained in this paper.

Background of Engenni

The origin of the Engenni people is shrouded in oral tradition until recently, when few scholars documented their research findings. The earliest documentation by Talbot (1965) in a personal interview with a chief whose name was not mentioned from the Isua community, one of the earliest settlements in Engenni, traced the origin of Engenni to the Isoko people in the present Delta State of Nigeria (James 2020). Some scholars traced the origin of Engenni to the Old Benin Kingdom, the root of the Isoko people and some other groups such as the Ekpeye, Ogba and Ikwerre ethnic nationalities (Agi Otto, 2019). Agi Otto stated that groups of disgruntled people migrated from the Ancient Benin Kingdom when Ewuare the Great (1440 – 1473) introduced some reforms that were not favourable to them. The various groups of immigrants settled in different places. A team travelled southwards through the River Niger to the Orashi River, where the Engenni people currently settle in Cluster communities dotted along the Orashi River, also known as the Engenni River (Joel 2019, Izeogu 2019). The only Engenni Community that is not located along the Orashi River is the Edagberi Betterland community which settled on a tributary of the Orashi River called Taylor Creek (Joel 2019).

A later documented source (Abadi, 2009) asserted that the earliest settlement of the Engenni people when they left the ancient Benin kingdom was at Ewurebe, a site near Eliabi (Akinima), which is the present headquarters of the Ahoada West Local Government where Engenni is situated politically. From Ewurebe, a group moved on to settle at Udekama, Degema, Usokun, Krakrama etc.

Recall that the name “Ewuare” (name of the Benin Chief) suggests to researchers that there could be a possible connection between the group that settled at Ewurebe in Engenni and Ewuare, the great Ancient Benin King, as stated by Agi Otto. Could it be a mere historical coincidence of name resemblance? There is, however, other evidence of a connection between both groups, as reflected in the Edoid group of language classification by Kay Williamson and other language experts. With regards to occupation, the present location of Engenni along the Orashi River flowing through the equatorial rain forest of Nigeria offers the Engenni people the privilege to engage in fishing, farming, hunting, carving and trading

occupations. Their trade items included agricultural products, food, timber, canoe, paddle, fishing gadgets etc. In terms of politics and administration, a traditional institution was in place, such as age grades, families and religious cults, Okilom Akie, Okilom Ibe, Okilom Opiri etc, as custodians of the culture. Nyang stated that “traditional African religion suffered a severe blow when it came into contact with alien religions. This was particularly true in the case of Euro-western Christianity that planted itself in Africa in the nineteenth century. The arrival of Christianity coincided with the unchallenged supremacy of Europe. Besides, material transformation ushered in by the Europeans helped to weaken African culture and religion.

James (2004) asserts that Engenni Cultural contents which include norms, values, folkways, and rites of passage such as naming ceremonies, teething ceremonies, puberty initiation for boys, marriage, coronation, burial and shaving rituals, festivals, dance performances, masquerade displays etc have gone into oblivion. However, some aspects however, such as the drums and voices, clapping and dance steps, have infiltrated into the church (Global Christianity), giving Christianity the African Colouration.

Global Christianity in Engenni

Global Christianity – (the Christian church) came into Engenni, a primordial African community in the Niger Delta region of Rivers State, Nigeria, in the late twentieth century. According to James (2004), “about 1900 onward, Engenni was confronted with an entirely new religious message and one which posed a direct challenge to the gods”. The message of Christianity, which was centred on salvation through confession of sin, denouncing the traditional religion and culture and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour, was a strange message. This message was crowned with baptism by immersion as a symbol of death to sin and identification with the burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The early Baptist missionaries who brought Christianity to Engenni failed to teach and preach about the Holy Spirit. It does appear that the missionaries came with the word, not the Holy Spirit. Even with the scriptures, certain aspects such as clapping, drumming and dancing, as recorded in several parts of the scriptures, were not taught to the people. A typical example is: Come, everyone! Clap your hands! Shout to God with joyful praise! For the Lord Most High is awesome. He is the Great King of all the earth (Psalm 47:1-2). Global Christianity spread through the length and breadth of Engenni through the missionary effort of the American Baptist Mission. Most families in Engenni had at least a Christian convert. The Baptist church became a household word in Engenni (Joel 2012).

It is pertinent to note that before the incursion of Global Christianity (the Christian church) to Engenni, the Engenni cosmology recognised the awesomeness of God and His supremacy over other gods – (Oniso no Odemufeya ne ekunu). The art and act of drumming, singing, clapping and dancing were cultural modes of praising God in Engenni for His numerous blessings (Joel 1987). However, they did this through deities and ancestors who were

venerated. Jesus Christ was completely out of the picture as the son of God. What the Engenni people erroneously regarded as the son of God was the insect known as a caterpillar that is usually found on the leaves of plants in an ecology. The caterpillar insect stings people who come in contact with the leaves in the habitat without anybody seeing it. This physical insect though invisible at the time of contact, was referred to as the child of God - "Omini Oniso". They believed that since God could not be seen with the naked eye, His child also could not be seen. This seeming mythology points to the fact that the Engenni cosmology recognised the supremacy of an invisible God who was acknowledged. What became worrisome and strange was that the European missionaries came with a religion that abhorred praising God through the use of musical instruments, dancing and clapping, contrary to the scriptures which they preached. This was a violation of cultural passion for praise and celebration by the Engenni people that needed to be filled because nature abhors no vacuum. The alternative readily came with the establishment of an indigenous church that filled that space and accommodated that aspect of the Engenni (African) culture with the establishment of an African Indigenous Church.

The first indigenous church in Engenni was the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church (SFCC) Betterland/Engenni. At inception, it was formally called "The Faith Tabernacle Congregation". It was founded by an indigene of Edagbari called Ekwenmodi George John, popularly called Okwukwu, who was converted to Christianity. He became a dedicated member who served as a Sunday School Teacher at the First Baptist Church, Edagberi-Engenni, now Faith Baptist Church, Edagberi. According to an oral source, Okwukwu, while serving the Baptist Church Edagberi, was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God with gifts of prophecy and healing. He exercised these gifts in the Baptist church, but the missionary leadership, including a section of the community who had been converted, condemned the gifts, which were described as demonic (Joel 2019). He had a running litigation with the church and was eventually acquitted and discharged for lack of sufficient evidence for conviction. He was later excommunicated by the church. So he eventually established the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church, which introduced the Engenni colouration of global Christianity. The prophetic healing powers, Engenni drums and voices etc. (Joel 2019) added colour to worship and attracted members to the church. Some members of the community and the Baptist Church identified with the new church to meet their spiritual needs and their passion for Africanness in the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church. The leader's spiritual prowess spread in the area, and people came from far and wide to worship God. Branches of the church were established in partnership with some of the members in their communities at Ogbia, Nembe, Epie, Okordia, Zarama, Engenni, and Biseni, including Oboburu (Agi Otto 2019 & Joel 2010). The Christian gospel also spread, and people were converted from the traditional religion and from the other churches that came to Engenni – the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP), the Roman Catholic Church, the Christ Army Church, the Three Cross Society in 1965, the World International Sacred Peace Movement in 1965, later there was a proliferation of Christian and Para-Christian Churches including Neo-orthodox, spiritual, Pentecostal churches. In the 70's, after the Nigeria Civil War 1967 – 71. All these

churches have shifted from the early church mode of worship to include the African cultural colouration of dancing, drumming, clapping, healing, prophesying etc.

Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity in Engenni

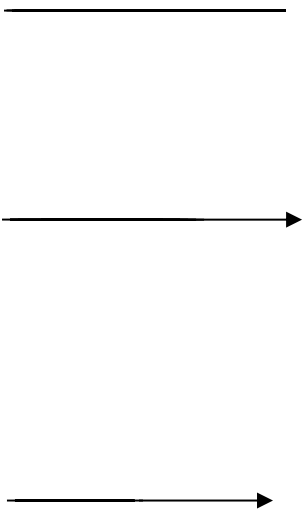
The word colouration is derived from the noun ‘colour’ as used in English, French and Latin in the 13th Century. Colouration is a phenomenon that refers to the appearance of something in regard to colour. It could depict vividness or a variety of effects of language and interest.

Note that appearance could be subjective or deceptive, like a mirage or colour blindness, depending on a person’s perspective or circumstance. However, in the text, colour is used empirically to connote a change that differentiates one thing from another and does not necessarily change the substance of the thing, which remains what it is; but adds another value to it. In this sense, the cultural colouration of Global Christianity is the added value to Christianity from the Engenni Cultural perspective, giving it cultural aesthetics and emotional satisfaction.

Culture identifies a people, or simply put; culture is the identity of a people. The human element in culture makes it flexible and susceptible to the dynamics of change and its complexity, as is characteristic of human nature. Scholars define culture from contextual humanistic perspectives. According to Maduka (2010), “Culture is the totality of a people’s mode of living” Culture envelopes a people’s arts, mores, technology, scientific inventions and attitudes to life (Wosu, 2012). The cultural content of a people subtly permeates into the culture of other peoples through an inculturation process and pressures which gradually transform both cultures. In our context, the Engenni culture and of Global Christianity.

Culture and religion, including Christianity, are intertwined. They are two sides of a coin, two inseparable bedfellows that influence each other in all facets of human development. Culture assumes a superstructure of world religion. Religion incubates in a cultural environment acquiring some cultural traits that colour it, particularly when one is alien to the other, as the case with Christianity in the African culture. In Engenni, culture has influenced the practice of the Christian religion – (the church) in reverse order. Such cultural impact is evident in all Christian movements that came after the Ethiopianist and nationalist wave of religious movements (Gyadu 2016) asserts that “the early twentieth century itinerant prophetic movement led by charismatic figures such as William Wade Harris of Liberia, Garrick Sokari Braide of the Niger Delta, Simon Kimbangu of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Isaiah Shembe of South Africa, tilled the soil on which modern Pentecostalism thrives”. There is the dirt of scholarly documentation or mention of Wachikwe George John, popularly known as ‘Okwukwu of the Niger Delta, who shared a similar worldview about Christianity with those chronicled above. Kalu asserts that such prophets were “closer to the grain of African culture in their responses to the gospel, and so

felt the resonance between charismatic indigenous worldviews and the equally charismatic biblical worldviews. “A cumulative resonance of the African worldview of these prophets has coloured Global Christianity (the church). The Engenni experience of Cultural Colouration of the church was initiated by Prophet Okwukwu, who introduced the Engenni dance steps, drum beats, voice pitch, clap rhythms, ethnic music, congregational responses etc., all in the Engenni way (culture). This is the pitch of Cultural Colouration in Engenni Global Christianity (the Christian Church). Some of these cultural aspects spread to modern and contemporary Christian churches, particularly the Pentecostal churches, including the evangelicals and Orthodox such as Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, Methodist etc. Okwukwu was a Charismatic leader of the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church that introduced valued aspects of Engenni culture into Global Christianity (church). A symbolism of cultural colouration of Global Christianity in Engenni is shown in the Venn diagram below:



The Venn Diagram explained

The new colours give the old (original) a pseudo status. The original is old in terms of comparison. Therefore, the early church (Christianity) is old, while Global Christianity which is new, symbolize cultural colouration like the rainbow, Joseph’s coat of many colours, and the chameleon that assumes different colours of its ecological habitation. These objects of simile retain their identity and uniqueness despite their colouration. In a similar vein, the Engenni culture should retain her cultural values, identity and uniqueness despite

the impact of Global Christianity – (the church) as is the case with Global Christianity (the church).

Impact of Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity on the Development of Engenni

The Engenni people are homo-religious, culture-oriented and development driven. Their trade contacts with neighbouring people, western merchants and missionaries sharpened her worldview about commerce, culture and Christianity. With their engagement in these activities, the Engenni people introduced elements of their culture, particularly Christianity.

The missionaries presented the gospel in terms of “cultural superiority” that gradually eroded the culture and identity and undermined cultural continuity from the pre-Christian period. This was the Engenni experience, where barely the entire community accepted Christianity through conversion. This development was a cultural loss to Engenni and a cultural gain to Christianity because there was a shift in Engenni traditional culture. Religion is closely integrated with all other facets of culture, especially socio-economic and family life. Contrarily, Helleman argued that “Christianity neither ignores nor destroys a culture but seeks to change it to reform and restore it to what it should be, a healthy, positive environment for human life and society”. For example, translating the scriptures into the Engenni language changed the people’s worldview that favoured continuity and discontinuity of some aspects of the Engenni culture in favour of the Engenni people still recognised the supremacy of God; while in favour of discontinuity, the taboo associated with the birth of twin babies was stopped. The consideration for values is applicable here. Another consideration is language. Engenni language is a cultural tool (Ogua, Eديو, Enedua) dialects that colour global Christianity. For example, the translation of the scriptures and interpretation of the gospel message into Engenni language serve as a veritable tool for effective communication as expressed in the Engenni New Testament Bible translation, which has given colour to the practice of Christianity in Engenni as was never the case in the first instance.

Thirdly, according to Ella (2002), Ethnic music is the music of the people by the people for the people. It has the cognitive capacity to elicit emotions capable of forming attitudes and moulding character. It is a veritable tool for education, enlightenment, awareness and counsel about immoral lifestyles and moral virtues”. The drums and voices of the Engenni people (culture) in Christian worship suggest cultural identity and colouration of global Christianity. It imparts moral values to solicit peace, security, trust, better and more attractive place to live. Ella further states that music is an ethnic communion that portrays group spirit, thoughts, myths and aspirations that links the ultra-terrestrial forces; and gives psychological and therapeutic essence to the listeners. The Engenni music conveys all of these attributes in the worship experience. It is little wonder the Engenni ethnic music is preferable to the hymns, which have more of a Western attachment. To buttress this point (Rottenbary, 1941 and Hildebrandt 1951, Wemann 1960) state that the gospel be conveyed

through music and hymns produced on the local soil, speaking a language that is familiar and meaningful”. All of these impacts are expressed in the establishment of the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church (SFCC) in Engenni, which pioneered a process of inculturation and emotional emancipation that has coloured Global Christianity in Engenni. The Spiritual Faith of Christ Church established a Christian community (Betterland), now a community recognised by the government. The church respects core Christo-cultural values such as Christology of scriptures, healing, prophesy, love, communalism etc., which are also cultural in Engenni culture except for the Christology theology.

Recommendations

Global Christianity should incorporate Engenni cultural values that will promote the spread of the gospel and enhance the cultural renaissance in Engenni. For example, the catholic synod accepted the need to integrate customary marriage into the sacramental celebration and urged the Episcopal conferences to work out this inculturation (Baeta 2018). The idea is to make Christianity ‘native’ as it is ‘native’ in Europe and America (Mbiti J. 1965).

The cultural colouration of global Christianity in Engenni should make a conscious and systematic effort to enculturate and domesticate Christianity as African in line with Mbiti’s perception that such will eradicate the wrong impression that Christianity is simply a Western religion and that the Bible is a European book. This will also show that Christianity is not so foreign and remote and will open up a creative way of interpreting biblical teaching in a context with which the people are familiar.

Conclusion

The topic “Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity to the Development of Engenni in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is expressed in the summary of two circles, A and B. A represents the early Christian Church (Christianity), a crystal clear tabular rasa, void of external encumbrances, except some aspects of the Jewish Culture etc., while Circle B represents Christianity from the perspective of the early church as a crystal clear void of other encumbrances except the Jewish culture which conflicted with the church as presented by Jesus Christ. However, in the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and other parts of the world, including Engenni in Africa, other cultures smeared on it, including the Roman, European, and the African culture as represented in a Venn circle diagram C, in a section of colouration Global Christianity meshed with the Engenni culture. The aspect of Engenni culture that colour Global Christianity is the language, music, drums and voices, clapping and dancing impressed in the pioneer indigenous Christian church called the Spiritual Faith of Christ Church International (SFCC) Edagberi – Betterland established by Prophet Warchikwe George John popularly known as Okwukwu, a Baptist Church convert who left the Baptist church and established the Faith Tabernacle Congregation in 1939.

The Spiritual Faith of Christ Church International (SFCCI), Betterland, is perceived in this context as a Cultural Colouration of Global Christianity in Engenni. However, the physical attractions of Global Christianity, such as the provision of Western education, health care services, white collar jobs, technology, industrialisation etc, overwhelmed the Christian converts. Some are overwhelmed by traditional culture. The matter of conviction is outside the scope of this study. However, suffice to state that whatever adds value to a people's need informs her culture and religion. Both are two bedfellows in human existence and the development of society.

The Engenni culture has added colour to Global Christianity in Engenni as gain to Global Christianity and loss to the Engenni culture, which is experiencing alienation. A synergy is necessary at this point to build a balanced society that would add value to each system.

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