Chapter 15

Religious and Cultural Conflicts: A Critical Appraisal of the Scottish Mission Activities Among the Efik People of Old Calabar

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ABSTRACT

Culture and religion are two important parts of human life that are highly emotional. People do everything to protect, defend, and keep their cultural and religious heritage no matter how primitive others may think it is. Failure to recognize the religious and cultural worldview of a people in the evangelization of such society often leads to a conflict of allegiance. This study is a critical appraisal of the Scottish missionary activities among the Efik people of Old Calabar, Nigeria. The effect of neglecting these cultural elements that would have acted as a bridge to the full acceptance of Christianity among the people was neglected. This rigid attitude was challenged by the emergence of some Independent African Churches that came as a substitute for the mission churches. The need for a new perspective on the interaction of culture and religion is therefore required if the world is to survive the current global religious conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

The modern history and religion of the Efik people of Old Calabar cannot be completely written without due reference to the Scottish missionaries. This chapter examines the missionary activities of the Church of Scotland in Old Calabar, Nigeria and the cultural conflicts that slowed down the acceptance of Christianity among the Efiks of Old Calabar. The chapter examines the inherent effect of these cultural conflicts in the worship life of the people even in the contemporary time and suggested ways it would have been prevented The Edinburgh Society which was later changed to the Scottish Missionary Society started its work in Old Calabar, Nigeria in 1846 with an initiative by the Jamaican Negroes in Jamaica (Aye, 1987). The Scottish Missionary Society considering sending some missionaries to Africa and the Jamaican Negroes, finding their condition so much improved by their freedom and appreciat-
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ing their Christian privileges, became deeply concerned with the spiritual condition of the indigenous peoples of Africa and volunteered their services. Consequently, the idea to send some missionaries to Calabar, Cross River, in Nigeria, was conceived, and on January 6, 1846, Rev. Hope Waddell and 5 other Jamaicans set sail from Liverpool for Old Calabar (Kalu, 1996). After four months, their ship arrived the Calabar River and the Calabar Missionary activity was born, on the 10th of April, 1846, beginning with the establishment of the Church of Scotland Mission that later became the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (Aye, 1987).

On arrival, however, the missionaries, besides their preaching, concentrated their activities around education and healthcare. Mission stations were developed around the tripartite model of church, school and hospitals (Kalu, 1996). The western approach that places more emphasis on the scientific and empirical worldview was made to replace the cyclical spiritual worldview of the Efik people. For instance, some sicknesses which were seen as punishments from the gods or demonic attacks and spiritual possessions were believed in Efik cosmology to be caused by the gods, were now being explained scientifically rather than spiritually. These differences in worldview created a spiritual vacuum that kept the Efik people in the middle of two worldviews. The foundation that had socially and religiously defined the people for years prior to the coming of Christianity was adjudged to be fetish, animistic, demonic and baseless. Institutions like the Ekpe cult, ancestral veneration, the magical worldview, divination and spiritual powers which has had a long history of practice among the people and had practically provided solutions to their problems for centuries, was suddenly regarded as godless.

This brought a serious cultural face-off between the people and the missionaries. This radical religious and cultural change by the missionaries had a far-reaching implication on the religious life of the Efik people and their culture, leaving them in between two worldviews. The destabilization of the traditional religion and its institutions clearly left wide gaps in the social and religious structures of the people and the effect is the syncretism that characterizes the attitude of members even till today.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE REQUEST OF EFIK CHIEFS TO HER MAJESTY: THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Apart from the initiative of the Jamaican Negroes and their sponsorship by the Scottish Missionary Society to Africa and particularly Old Calabar, several other factors played out in making the missionary activity easy. One of it was the abolition of slave trade. The business of slave trade in Old Calabar had exposed the native Chiefs to the economic benefits and wealth of knowledge that could be gained from the white man and in an attempt to maintain the business relationship and consolidate on the economic benefits of the bilateral trade, after the abolition of slave trade, the Chiefs of Old Calabar invited the missionaries to fill the gap created by the abolitionist movement (Aye, 1987).

In two separate letters written by King Eyo Honesty 11 of Creek Town and King Eyamba V of Duke Town on the 1st and 4th of December, 1842 respectively to Her Majesty, the two Chiefs expressed their desire to continue business with the white men and appealed to her Majesty to send them some white men to teach them “how to saby book” (Aye, 1987:16). Their appeal and request were twofold, trade and religion. They were invited “to come and teach them how to plant cotton, coffee and sugar cane and make them saby God proper”. The letter of invitation from King Eyo Honesty 11 of Creek Town reads: