

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY EDUCATION IN IGBOLAND AND IMPLICATIONS OF GOVERNMENT TAKEOVER OF MISSION SCHOOLS, 1857-1975

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Abstract

Christian missionary education in Igboland, spanning from 1857 to 1975, profoundly influenced the Eastern region's social and cultural society. At the arrival of Christian missionaries, they found out that for the gospel to have its free course in the lives of the Igbo people, there is need to introduce Western education that is Christian oriented. They made efforts to establish mission schools. Christian missionary education instilled discipline and made moral behaviour the utmost priority. It further equipped students with technical/entrepreneurship skills and sound knowledge which made them contribute meaningfully to societal development. Furthermore, Western education made emphasis on literacy and religious instruction which facilitated the spread of Christianity and fostered new elite. However, immediately after the Nigerian-Biafra civil war (1967-1970), the federal military government took over mission schools in Old Eastern Region. This led to fallen standard of education and other negative impacts on the region. The governments take over led to secularization and also brought about diminished moral instruction and administrative inefficiencies. The transition highlighted tensions between religious and state control of education thereby impacting educational quality and cultural identity in Igboland. Many works have focused on the efforts of various Christian missionary bodies in development of Western education in Igboland, without an in-depth study on government takeover of mission schools and its effects on the standard of education as well as its impact on the Old Eastern region. This is the gap which this research intends to fill. The research methodology employed is mainly secondary source of data collection such as journals, mainline books, book of readings, newspaper, and unpublished project works related to the study under review. The study finds out that the standard of education was much better when it was under the control of the Christian missionaries than when the federal military government took over education from them. Therefore this research concludes by recommending that traditional Igbo cultural teachings and Christian moral values should be incorporated into school curriculum; also government schools should partner between religious organizations and government schools in order to maintain ethical and moral education.

Keywords: Christian, Missionary, Education, Igboland, Implications, Government, Mission, Schools

Introduction

Christian missionary enterprise in Igbo territory was not only evangelism oriented but also was accompanied with other meaningful developments such as: Western education, health facilities, mechanized agriculture, modern commerce amongst others. Prior to the advent of Christianity in Igboland, there was an indigenous or informal education which was constituted by the customs, norms, values, mores, culture and the belief system of the indigenous people. This education begins after the birth of a child which spans right from the home starting with the mother as she breastfeeds and cares for the new born baby. The indigenous system of education through socialization was passed on from one generation to another. It was a veritable means of inculcating into the younger generation discipline, values, and norms, in order to make them responsible members of the society. The Christian missionaries found out that Western education is necessary for the following reasons:

to overcome the challenge of language barrier, train indigenes who will serve in both the mission and colonial government offices, to develop indigenous languages into writing so that the Scripture could be translated into the various indigenous languages in order for the people to read the bible in their own languages among others. The Igbo people were receptive to Western education. According to Ekechi (1972) who quoted Crowther saying:

From all I could gather by observation, the Ibos (sic) are very emulative; as in other things, so it will be in book learning. Other towns will not rest satisfied until they have also learned the mystery of reading and writing, by which their neighbours may surpass or put them in the shade (p. 7).

From the foregoing, Western education attracted many Igbo people into Christianity because, its aim according to Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019), was to put into their hands (indigenous people) a handicraft, which enables them to take their position in the world as good and profitable citizens. Also, Western education was considered an escape route out of poverty as both the colonial government and the missionaries offered employment to the few educated indigenous people who granted them opportunity of living a better life. Christian missionary education was an epitome of discipline and morality. It further equipped students with technical/ entrepreneurship skills and sound knowledge, all to ensure that when students graduate, they become useful to themselves and contribute to societal development. After the civil war, the federal military government took over mission schools in Old Eastern region. Christian missionary education dominated in the region, this had adverse effects on the standard of education system in the region. Thus, this research examines the development of western education in Igboland of Old Eastern Nigeria, reasons for government takeover of schools and its implications.

History and Establishment of Western Education in Igboland

The first European Christian missionary body that came to Igboland was Church Missionary Society (CMS) who came with the Bible and the Plough strategy. The CMS came to commensurate for the ills the European slave traders who perpetrated into the Igbo people. As part of her apostolic work in Igbo land, the CMS came to evangelize the resurrected Christ, his love towards mankind and also to civilize and the lives of the Igbo people. In 1841 CMS joined the British expeditionary forces to enter Igbo land and they made few converts and left. In 1857, CMS came back again this time and was determined to spread the gospel to various parts of Igbo land. CMS opened a mission station in Onitsha. After many years, Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015) states that Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) landed at Onitsha in 1886 and they were led by French Reverend Father Lutz and Horne and Brothers John and Hermas, few years later the Qua Iboe mission came in 1887. According to Njoku (2007), Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) came to Igboland in 1888 at Unwana which is the home of late Ezeogo Akanu Ibiam then the Primitive Methodists in 1920. The 19th century featured many Christian missionary bodies and other evangelistic activities in Igboland.

When the missionaries came to Igboland, they found out that they cannot do without Western education and thus they made efforts to establish schools. Esibenne (2021) narrates that CMS was the first to establish school at Onitsha in 1857 while RCM started her first school in Igboland at 1886. According to Isichei (1977), the first notable educational institution was the station built by CMS in 1903 at Awka. It was for post-primary education. In 1913, Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019) records that RCM established a combined training college and seminary at Igbariam while the Methodists founded the first secondary school at Uzuakoli in 1923. With time other mission schools were later established by various missionary bodies in Igbo territory.

Reasons for Introduction of Western Education in Igboland

The involvement of the missionaries in development of Western education was tied to the aims of missionary enterprise in Igboland. Education which involved the establishment of schools and other related institutions became necessary for obvious reasons. Nwadiolor (2016) remarks that the missionaries considered it easier to achieve their aim of conversion using the schools when children had not become fully involved in the traditional beliefs of their various cultures. According to Uruakpa (1996) the missionaries believed that if children who at their stage of development were exposed to catechisms and Christian teachings would be of greater asset than adults who were already juju priests. There was language barrier between the missionaries and the indigenous population. Thus, through the schools, they aimed at producing indigenes that would assist in propagating the gospel in Igbo language and various dialects among them. The colonial government developed and expanded, plus the growth of mercantile houses, the missionary schools came to be the sources of manpower. So these schools intended to produce clerks, messengers, interpreters and so forth for colonial administration. Nwadiolor (2016) enunciate that for the missionaries, manpower development was integral part of education development. As expatriate Church workers were becoming extremely difficult to procure, the missionaries embarked on educational training of their native converts to serve as Church workers when expatriate workers could not be found. To achieve this policy, teachers training college were established within ecclesiastical areas. They were to produce teachers of different categories for both the school system and the Church work.

Features of Early Christian Missionary Education in Igboland

The main text book used by the missionaries was the holy bible because every subject was often connected with the Holy Book. Nwadiolor (2016) observes that the missionaries all have the intention of converting everybody that came within the four walls of the mission houses. Most of these schools were actually sited in the same compound as the mission houses and Church premises. The basic curriculum in all the schools consisted mainly of the four RS: Reading, Writing, Religion and Arithmetic. The medium of communication was English as time went on, the missionaries learnt local languages and used them for instructions. The medium of communication was English as time went on, the missionaries learnt local languages and used them for instructions. Enrolment at the initial stage was quite difficult for the missionaries. The Igbo people did not trust them, the parents were not willing to attend and were equally not willing to send their children to school. Some parents preferred sending their slaves or wards instead of their own children. This is why most of the earliest Christian converts and educated men and women were ex-home slaves. Felola and Adediran (1983) observe that the missionaries went out to persuade children to come to school, they offered all sorts of enticements and occasionally, they offered gifts to elders to persuade them to send their children to school. Some of the priests/missionaries often doubled as school teachers, sometimes the more advanced children were recruited to help teach others. Tuition was free at the initial stage, and the different missions also preferred having the children live with them in mission houses. They did this to discourage some of the children from dropping out of school. Some of the children were sponsored by the mission to go abroad for further studies. Those that remained either stayed on the mission after completing their course to act as catechists or become teachers, clerks, priests etcetera. According to Babalola (1988), one unique feature of the early mission schools was the huge rivalry that existed between different missionary bodies. Each mission tried to portray itself as being better than others. There was indeed a lot of competition amongst them, and they were encouraged by their home mission.

Impacts of Christian Missionary Education in Igboland Development of Igbo Language Studies

In order to facilitate evangelism, the missionaries made efforts to study Igbo language, and develop

it into a readable and writeable form. There was the need to translate the bible into Igbo language in order to teach the converts to read the Bible in Igbo language. Also the prayer book was translated too. According to Okpalaike and Nwadiakor (2015) by the first decade of the 20th century when Nigeria was thrown open to the missionaries and scholars, various primers and grammars and word lists had been published in the peripheral dialects of the various languages and thus, the languages began to acquire new prestige. Ozigi and Ocho (1981) note that even though the Christian missionaries' major objectives of establishing schools were for the propagation of Christianity, their greatest legacy was their educational work and development of indigenous languages into writing. By translating the Bible into Igbo language and developing Igbo literary studies, the missionaries offered a sense of belonging to Igbo converts which motivated many Igbo people to persist in their Christian faith.

Provision of Manpower to the European Colonial Administration

Igbo land just like other places in West Africa was described as a Whiteman's grave. This was a result of mosquito bites and other diseases that killed many staffs of the British colonial administration in Igboland. As a result of lack of British personnel in various offices of the colonial government, there was the need to train indigenous staffs to fill in the vacant positions. This task was placed on the missionaries who operated the school system, as it was hoped that the educated Igbo people would work in various available offices. Through missionary education, much skilled manpower was provided to the colonial government. Thus mission schools provided enough manpower for the colonial government in Igbo land. To sum it up, Nwadiakor (2016) records that the missionaries monopolized the field of education for the purpose of evangelism as well as to service the British colonial government and the mission houses with clerks, messengers and so forth.

Development of Igbo Nationalism

Many Igbo converts were sponsored by the missionaries to acquire Western education. According to Nwadiakor (2016), as a result of the Igbo quest for Western education, they had access to a world of literature and of ideas, and their contact awakened new aspiration, quickened the urge towards self-actualization and provided the notions and the medium for the expression of grievances. Missionary education according to Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019), taught equality and brotherhood of all men before God. Egwuonwu and Mgbemena further note that this teaching of equality and brotherhood of all men before God had the effect of generating self-consciousness and this in turn made them nurse the ambition for self-expression and self-government as a corollary to the philosophy of equality. Western education taught subjects like history, government, which pointed out how America got their freedom from alien rule. Thus, this motivated them that to fight for their own freedom. As Onuwa (1991) states "such themes as the English Revolution, the American revolutionary war of 1776, the French revolution of 1817 made them as "why not African revolution" (p. 36). All these prompted them to become nationalists. Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019) states that "personalities as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Jaja Nwachukwu, J.O.J Okezie, Mbonu Ojike, R.I. Uzoma, Sam Mbakwe among others, were all products of missionary education, and they all acquired virtues of leadership that enabled them to be reckoned with as builders of a modern Igbo nation in variety of ways" (p. 5).

Development of Modern Igbo Politics

After dismantling the Igbo pre-colonial political structure, the British colonial government, introduced Western politics. This type of modern politics needed educated elites to administer it. Hence many Igbo people who have acquired Western education through the mission schools became the major actors in the modern Igbo political system. Uruakpa (1996) affirms that through missionary education, the Igbo educated elites became politicians and nationalists. For Egwuonwu

and Mgbemena (2019), Igbo educated elites were leaders and models for the communities in which they lived.

Era of Government Takeover of Mission Schools in Igboland

As the missionaries pioneered the activities of education in Igboland, the British colonial government keyed into education and supported the various missionary bodies. With the support of the colonial government, mission schools scattered all over Igboland and many Igbo children and youths actively attended them. The independence of Nigeria in 1960, brought to an end to British colonial administration in Nigeria. Thus, mission schools received little or no assistance from the federal government. The newly independent government of Nigeria did not last long and was removed through military coup in 15th January 1966. The coup was led by Chukwuma Nzogwu which saw Aguiyi Ironsi to power. Few months later, there was a counter coup which led to the removal of Ironsi in July 1966. Igwe (1977) observes that this followed by series of uprisings in which many people from parts of Igboland lost their lives. The events of July 1966 were succeeded by a series of other crises and abortive peace meetings by the leaders up to early in 1967. Following the unresolved crisis between the Eastern region led by colonel Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu and federal military government led by Yakubu Gowon, especially Gowon's failure to keep to Aburi's Accord, the Eastern region declared the Sovereign State of Biafra. The federal military government made efforts to bring back the self-acclaimed Eastern region (Sovereign State of Biafra) into one Nigeria, the attempt failed. Thus, the federal military government declared war on the Eastern region in 1967. The Nigeria-Biafran civil war lasted over three years and some months. During this period, educational activities in Igboland, was suspended. Many missionaries who held one post or the other in various mission schools ran back to their various countries for safety.

Government Takeover of Mission Schools in Igboland

In the South-Eastern States and while the civil war was still on, the federal military government reopened some schools in areas occupied by its forces. Igwe (1977) observe that the first batch was reopened in April, 1968, but the majority of the schools remained closed till the end of the civil war. A year after the first number of schools were reopened and the South-Eastern State Government integrated the Local Government primary schools with those directly owned and managed by the former Regional Government and handed over their management to the new State Ministry of Education. In 1969 too, six Local School Boards were created to take over the management of Voluntary Agency primary schools. In the same year the State School Board was set up to take over the control and management of voluntary agency secondary schools. It was however pointed out that this measure did not remove the proprietorship of the schools from the Voluntary Agencies. Educational Progress Report (1974) documents that in June, 1969, a total of 361 of its 507 primary, and 18 of 28 secondary schools had reopened. The ones that reopened had no seats, text-books, doors, equipment and so forth. It was not until a year after the end of the civil war (1971) that all the schools in Eastern region were able to reopen. There was a slow start of educational activities in Igboland, buildings of most of educational institutions were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged; books, equipment, and utensils looted or burned. The vast majority of Igbo children who went back to school were studying under very cruel conditions.

After the civil war, schools were directly managed and supervised by the State Ministries of Education. The first indication that the schools were about to be nationalized came on the 9th of July, 1970. Igwe (1977) reports that:

This was when the East Central State Commissioner for Education, Dr. Magnus Adiele convened a meeting with the Voluntary Agencies and the private proprietors of schools at Enugu. According to the commissioner, the purpose of the meeting was to: (i) acquaint

them with details of government policy on the take-over of the control and management of all schools in the State; and (ii) pay tribute to their historic contributions to the progress of education in this part of the country". The commissioner was not consulting the agencies and bodies for their views on the policy. Instead, it was only to inform them that the military government had decided to take over the control and management of all the schools. Six months after the meeting, January, 1971, the East Central State Government promulgated its Public Education Edict 1970 (Edict No. 2 of 1971). By it, all primary and secondary schools and other educational institutions in the State were nationalized with effect from the 26th day of May, 1970. After some years, there came the last Edict. The South-Eastern State Education Edict (No. 5 of 1975) was promulgated with retrospective effect from 1st April, 1973 and by it, the state take-over of all Voluntary Agency schools in the three States was completed (pp. 598-599).

Reasons for Government Takeover of Mission Schools

One of the reasons for government takeover of mission schools or education was that, the federal military government alleged that the missionary societies supported the secessionist regime during the civil war. According to Igwe (1977), the reasons for the federal military government take-over of mission schools was the alleged support for the Biafran regime. This view was expressed by one of the Catholic Bishops among others. During the war, the Catholic Mission was sympathetic to the suffering of the masses and provided relief materials. The federal military government believed that the humanitarian activities of the Church prolonged the civil war, and as a reprisal against the Church, all mission schools were taken over by the federal military government. Igwe (1977) notes that the federal military government believed that the Church had a great deal of influence over the people through her mission schools. In order to make the Church less powerful, mission schools had to be taken over by the federal military government.

Another reason was that the federal military government believed that Igbo people were able to challenge the rest of the country because they were more advanced educationally (which they acquired through Christian missionary education) than most other parts of the federation. Okoro (2018) affirms that the East appeared set did not only compete but indeed rival against the West on the educational front in the period before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967. The things responsible for this quest and desire for Western education among the Igbo were the advantages accompanying it like high moral principles, employment opportunities among others. The Igbo embrace of Western education also resulted to their dominance of the labour force of the nation. Ihediwa (2010) records that the manpower situation in Nigeria was 45 percent Igbo, and threatened to reach 60%, while the North was created with only 10 percent of the existing posts. For instance, in the railway cooperation alone by 1964, out of the 431 senior posts available, the Igbo held 270 posts and in the Nigeria ports Authority, the Igbo (held) 73 posts out of 104 posts available. According to Okoro (2016), it is a common knowledge that the Federal Civil Service examination places for the recruitment of personnel into the service in 1965 was subsequently cancelled because it was alleged that graduates of the newly established University of Nigeria at Nsukka (UNN) (most of whom were of course Igbo), occupied the first twenty positions before graduates of other Nigerian universities at the time. The federal military government take-over of the schools was therefore designed to slow down the rate of educational development in the East to enable the other sections of the country to catch up. This could be true, if the federal military government wanted to takeover schools, the government should have started with other regions where their schools were functional not the Eastern region that was just recovering from the devastation which the war has wrought upon their academic institutions.

Implications of Government Takeover of Mission Schools on Education System in Eastern Region

Poor School Administration and Management

The exclusion of the missions from education had also meant an end to the existence of many school administration units and senior management personnel. Ministry of Education (1974) reports that the federal military government through Ministry of Education, surveyed and found out that in Eastern Nigeria, there were more schools than necessary. To eliminate the "unnecessary" ones, "about 190 schools (primary and secondary) were merged and 80 closed down" soon after the civil war. This was not encouraging for the Igbo people who showed high desire and great zeal for Western education since its inception. According to Okereke (1965), in 1975, the secondary schools in each state were managed by its state school board, supervised by the Divisional Education Officers (DEO's) and the DSB Secretaries. Every Administrative Division had a DEO attached to it. The arrangement in 1975 was unlike before the take-over when every secondary school was constituted into an administrative unit of its own even within the same missionary agency. When the new system of school management was designed, Igwe (1977) enunciates that the administrative difficulties caused by the concentration of much powers at the state levels under the new system, and the conflict of functions and responsibilities between the Ministries of Education and the State school Boards, would suggest that the new system of management was not yet as efficient and streamlined as was desirable. Furthermore, there were still administrative and lack of harmony in the new state system of management and control. Poor management of the educational system resulted to low standard of education.

Poor Financing and Efficient Running of School System

The heads of primary and secondary schools in general repeatedly complained against the failure of the Education Edicts to make provision for initiative at the local levels. The criticism was that the new education laws and regulations concentrated too much decision-making powers at the headquarters to the extent that those actually operating the schools had no powers to back-up the functions and responsibilities assigned to them. It affected the running of the schools. One of the major weaknesses was the failure of the new system to make adequate provision for local purchase of basic school equipment. Igwe (1977) recalls that in 1975, all school supplies were being centrally controlled and distributed by the State Boards. The heads of institutions complained that on many occasions they had found it difficult to obtain such items as registers, diaries, note-books, chalk, dusters and other similar items for their schools. Some of them had on several occasions, travelled more than one hundred miles to the headquarters to ask for these basic items. In some cases, they had had to return to their schools after a day or two without getting what they had gone for because of "bureaucratic red-tape" as one of the principals put it. To keep the schools going, some of them had in the past used their own money to buy the needed basic equipment. But in all such cases, the School Boards had refused to refund the out-of-pocket expenses arguing that the headmasters and principals had no authority under the Education Edicts to spend money on their schools without prior permission from the Boards. The overall effect of all this had been the disruption of the smooth flow of the school system.

Lack of Discipline and Morality among Students and Staffs

Mission schools were known for inculcating strict discipline and good virtues in the students. Teachers endeavoured to live an exemplary life which the students/pupils emulated in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for their moral and social developments. Christian missionary education was noted with its high moral principles. Thus, both students and the staffs of

mission schools lived a moral and virtuous life. As a result of that, a good number of families preferred to send their children to mission schools. There was zero tolerance for indiscipline and immoral behaviours. However when the government took over mission schools, less attention was paid to discipline. Another weakness was that the new system did not make adequate provision for disciplinary decisions to be taken on the spot. For instance, Igwe (1977) decried that a headmaster or principal had no power to discipline his pupils or teachers in any serious way without first of all referring the matter to the School Boards. As it took weeks or months for the Boards to take action, the result was greater indiscipline among pupils and teachers unlike when the schools were under the missions. Furthermore, many students began to perpetrate riots and fights against other students from other schools and so on. All this pointed to lack of discipline and morality in the lives of the students. It further led to moral decadence among youths in the society.

Change in Curriculum

The curriculum in mission schools was heavily influenced by Christian values and Western education models. It included a strong emphasis on religious instruction, alongside subjects such as English, mathematics, science, Christian religious studies and other subjects in humanities. This approach helped instill a sense of discipline and moral responsibility among students. The government aimed to develop a more secular and nationally relevant curriculum. While this was a positive move towards creating a more inclusive and nationally cohesive education system, the process of curriculum reform was fraught with challenges. The transition period saw inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in curriculum delivery. The new curriculum often lacked the depth and rigor of the previous missionary-led programs.

Poor Teacher's Training

Missionary schools benefited from well-trained and highly motivated teachers who were often expatriates or locals trained under rigorous programs. These teachers were committed not just to academic instruction but also to the moral and spiritual development of their students. The government faced significant challenges in maintaining the quality of teacher training and motivation. The rapid expansion of the school system necessitated the recruitment of a large number of teachers, many of whom were inadequately trained. This resulted in a decline in teaching quality and effectiveness. Also the removal of the religious and moral studies that guided missionary educators led to a loss of the holistic approach to education.

Conclusion

The government takeover of mission schools in the Eastern Region of Nigeria had profound implications for the education system. After the war, the federal military government took over mission schools which controlled the education system in the region. This led to poor administration of schools, inadequate funding, indiscipline and immorality among students. It further led to moral decadence among youths in the region. The research concludes that education in eastern Nigeria under the control of the missionaries was much better than when it was taken over by the federal military government. While the takeover aimed to increase accessibility and promoting national integration, it also led to a decline in educational quality, challenges in curriculum development, and the erosion of moral and ethical instruction. The transition from missionary to government control was marked by significant challenges, including inadequate funding, poor management, and a lack of continuity in teacher training and motivation. To address these issues, it is essential to learn from the past and implement policies that prioritize quality education, effective resource management, and the holistic development of students. By doing so, the education system can better serve the needs of all students and contribute to the broader social and economic development of the region.

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