

Examining the Sudden Religious Change in the South-East Nigeria in the Light of Horton's Theory of Religious Change

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Abstract

The recent religious change taking place in the South-East Nigeria has been a big influence on the life of people despite the high level of educational background among the people. Over the last decade, the South-East Nigeria has seen a dramatic switch in religious adherence, with an unprecedented number of votaries going back to the Igbo/African traditional religion. This paper will analyze Horton's theory of religious change in order to explain the causes of this sudden shift or return to traditional religion from Christian religion. To understand Horton's theory, it is important to understand the social structures of traditional religion. Horton suggests that traditional religion forms an intricate part of society's order, which gives them stability and durability. He argues that changes in the factors that form the basis of social order can lead to dramatic changes in religious practices. This research discovered that the South-East Nigeria has seen a number of dramatic social changes over the last decades, and due to these changes, it led to the shift in religious beliefs. The growth of urbanization and other social changes that occurred over the years has some profound effects on the life of the people. This research adopted a phenomenological approach to examine the impact of social changes on the religious transformation in the South-East Nigeria.

Introduction

The wind of religious change taking place or blowing across the whole continent of Africa, down to South-East Nigeria has taken another dimension in recent times, instead of religious change from the traditional religion to the Christian religion, it is now religious change from Christian religion (world religions) to African/Igbo traditional religion, irrespective of political instability, military coupe d'état and economic hardship threatening the living conditions of the African/Igbo people. This leaves many scholars or most people to think that something is going wrong somewhere or that some discoveries have been made by African/Igbo people about their traditional religion. This religious change as noted above, initially before the coming of the Europeans with their missionaries, colonial masters found it difficult to convert the Africans to their religious view or thought, change of religion, or conversion from African traditional religion to Christian/ Islamic religion or other world religions, was a very slow and hard task for them. The increase in the number of conversions from African (Igbo) traditional religion to World religions was expressed by Metuh (1985) as thus:

The tide of religious change in Africa, in the last sixty to seventy years has assumed phenomenal dimensions. Islam and Christianity have grown more rapidly and successfully in extent and in Africa in the last fifty years than at any previous periods of their long history. The report presented by the African bishops at the Synod of Bishops Meeting in Rome, in 1974, on the theme of Evangelization, notes that every year, about a total of 7 million people join the different Christian communities in Africa. (p. ix).

After the conversion or change from traditional religion to Christian religion with its consequences on the traditional structures and values, to a certain extent or level, the Africans again in recent times started going back to their traditional religion which earlier formed their worldviews, values, and life in general. This is why Metuh (1987) equally referred to traditional religion as being natural, institutionalized patterns of beliefs and worship of the African/Igbo people. Hence the question arises, why the sudden change back to traditional religion from the Christian religion which the African/Igbo Christians embraced earlier? Okolo (1995) expressed the same view or surprise thus:

Many, if not most, countries in Africa, including Nigeria, even nearer home, Igboland, have triumphantly celebrated at least one hundred years of Christian evangelism on the

content. But what has often equally baffled scholars in African missiology is the constant backsliding of the so-called African converts and long-practicing Christians to ‘paganism’, more appropriately tagged ‘traditional religious ways and culture’. What this means in practice is that the conviction of the new faith (Christianity) among African Christians, perhaps other Christians the world over, is at a low ebb. Very many Christians today are simply nominal Christians. (p. 2).

As of today, the reverse has been found to be the case, where many African/Igbo people are willingly and freely without being lured, going back to their traditional religious practices for so many reasons, which is the main gap or lacuna which this write-up wants to close up or find out in this research. The changing of faith or affiliation (from Christian religion to Igbo traditional religion or vice versa) or combination of faiths (combining the ingredients of Christianity and African/Igbo traditional religion) in the form of syncretism is seen and practiced mostly today among the South-East Nigeria, in which the scope of this write-up is mainly based. Again, when African/Igbo traditional religion is interchanged or used together in this write-up, it still refers to the religious practice found in South-East Nigeria. The intellectualist theory of religious change advanced by Horton (1971), will be used to explain or interpret the religious change taking place in the South-East Nigeria as this theory was initially used to interpret the religious change that took place in the African continent. This intellectualist theory of Horton is based on the relationship between traditional religious beliefs and the impacts of global forces like colonialism, modernization, and globalization on the structures of African/Igbo traditional religious practices. The impacts of these global factors on the religious change in Africa/Igbo traditional religion will be examined to see how they contributed towards change from traditional religion to world religions and then back to Igbo traditional religion.

Horton’s Intellectualist Theory of Religious Change

Horton with experience in Africa for more than four decades, came up with an intellectualist theory of religious change as a model in studying and interpreting religious change that took place in Africa and Nigeria in particular. As a researcher on African traditional religion, he advanced the intellectualist theoretical approach which for him explains the religious change that took place in Africa using the Aladura church in the Western part of Nigeria as a case study. The intellectualist theory shows or reflects an evolutionary trend because the theory assumed that conversion entails a movement from microcosm to macrocosm, based on active cognitive reasoning.

The advent of the Europeans in the twentieth century represented a symbol of power, and Christian religion itself came to be seen as a part of a larger order, comprising Western education, colonial administration, commerce, and industry, with which everyone started to be reckoned as one with great force and power. The advent of Europeans with the Christian religion again created a better atmosphere or condition for conversion. Many people in the Western part of Nigeria rejected the idea and practice of European monopoly of church authority and other things. This led to their break away from a mission church to an African independent church that includes Aladura churches which is the main subject matter of Peel (1968) discussion.

For Horton (1971), studying Yoruba traditional religion (Aladura) is a landmark in the studying of African religions and by extension traditional religion in South-East Nigeria. For Aladura churches have the capacity to combine the attributes of change from primitive to world religions. Horton’s study of religious change in Africa has shown that “intellectualism is in fact the only real starter in this field” (p. 94). For it is the only approach capable of answering the many questions surrounding the religious change in Africa and in Nigeria like: why should traditional African religion make use of concepts referring to entities with the peculiar properties attributed to spiritual beings in the Western or World religions?

Although Horton was not the only scholar calling for a return to the intellectualist approach to the study of traditional religious beliefs, many theologians and philosophers have been on this exercise. Through the study of the Yoruba traditional religious system, Horton was able to use this intellectualistic theory

to contrast the traditional religion which concerned itself mostly with the theory of the space-time world and its working, in relation with modern Western religion which eschews any such concern. Most African traditional religions have a dual nature, which Horton (1971) admitted in his theory.

Horton again advanced two-tier arrangements of unobservable realities just like in African/Igbo traditional religion. In the first tier, Horton called them the lesser spirits which are mainly concerned with the affairs of the local community and its environment (the Microcosm), while in the second tier, he called it the Supreme Being concerned with the world as a whole (the Macrocosm). Nnoruga (2020) noted that this corresponds with the ideas of some African/Igbo scholars who divided the African universe into two worlds, the visible and invisible world, while some scholars like Kanu (2015), Edeh (1983), Mbaegbu (2012), divided it into three tiers of structure the sky, the earth, and the underworld. Though Oguejiofor (1996) and Ekwunife (2012) contested this idea vehemently because the introduction of a Supreme Being in the Africa/Igbo world is an obvious attempt to impose a foreign category on the African worldview and the idea came from contact with the European religion.

For Horton (1971), the microcosm is part of the macrocosm, the Supreme Being is the ultimate controller of the lesser spirits and other things in the universe. The religious belief of the Africans/Igbo is characterized by a rich proliferation of ideas about the lesser spirits and their modes of action. There is a wealth of techniques for approaching and manipulating them to maintain a cosmic balance in the lives of the African/Igbo people. Though, the attributes of the Supreme Being in the African/Igbo traditional religion developed by Horton tend to be thin and vague. Few events are directly attributed to the Supreme Being, He seldom has a direct concern with human morality, and techniques for approaching Him are poorly developed by Horton's theory.

According to Nnoruga (2020), this view of Horton is congruous with the view of most scholars like Uchendu (1965) who described the Supreme Being as a withdrawal high God, Kanu (2015) described it as a deity with no temples and no shrines who is always in the life of the African people. Kanu (2015) agreed with the above and asserted that:

He is part and parcel of the Africans' daily life, and his care and protection is daily felt. God in Africa is part of the African's daily speech, in proverbs and wise sayings. And this consciousness of the divine is what makes the African take with him his religion wherever he goes: into politics, business, and social life. (pp. 101-102).

Horton (1971) used his view of the two tiers of cosmology to explain the religious situations of pre-modern African/Igbo people. Most events affecting the life of individuals or people occur within the microcosm of the local community, and this microcosm is to a considerable extent insulated from the macrocosm of the wider world. It means that most social interaction, moral rules, religious and economic activities occur within the microcosmic sphere rather than within the macrocosmic sphere. For lesser spirits within the microcosm are responsible for most events carried out by human beings, while Supreme Being in the macrocosm sphere has no direct contact or communication with everyday life events with the human beings in the visible world, and will seldom be approached by human beings. From the above understanding of African/Igbo traditional cosmology, Horton (1971) tried to develop a thought experiment/pattern of predicting how African/Igbo traditional religious ideas will respond to certain changes introduced in their environment.

The result of this thought pattern experiment would be noticeable improvements and developments in the areas of community life patterns that override the boundaries of the various microcosms. The effects of these developments would lure a great number of people away from their microcosms and set them up in a wider world. This will definitely to a large extent weaken the boundaries of microcosm which were insulated formerly from the wider world.

From the analysis of Horton's thought experiment, he predicted some changes which will affect traditional cosmology. Firstly, as an explanatory system, traditional religious thought has an adaptive potential which it used to face the challenges emanating from social change, this adaptive potential helps to remold and develop its cosmological boundaries until it attains its pristine level of explanatory coverage. The second flows from the first, with its adaptive potential, it develops techniques to relate

or communicate with the Supreme Being. The relevance of the lesser spirits or gods in the daily life of the African/Igbo people will be drastically reduced, hence the view that the African/Igbo gods are on retreat as posed by Ayandela (1973).

Thirdly, with people now in the wider social life beyond the confines of various microcosms, there arises the need to develop a moral code for the governance of this wider life. Since Supreme Being is the arbiter of everything that transcends the boundaries of the microcosm. Fourthly, it is noticed that in the African/Igbo traditional cosmology, there are bound to be ritual changes with regard to Supreme Being. This is because relations or rituals between man and spirits and relations and rituals between man and Supreme Being are seen as being different from each other. Horton concluded with the fifth one by assuming that developments seen above are matters of degree rather than kind. Hence there is an infinite number of potential positions between traditional religious life with lesser gods or spirits and the full-blooded monolithic cult of Supreme Being.

Due to changes and developments in the cosmological boundaries and rituals, there is bound to be cosmological adjustment by the people in the community. Every traditional cosmology has its philosophers (people), who interpret the system as a whole and its activities. They are found among the diviners, the cult priests, and even among ordinary laymen. The community relies on them for the exposition of cosmology in its relation to everyday events, and they play a crucial part in transmitting it from one generation to another. Horton asserted that the cosmological and ritual changes that occurred, were not the efforts of the two world religions but a response by the African/Igbo traditional cosmology to other features of modern situations. And it would appear that the beliefs and practices of the world religions are only accepted where they happen to coincide with responses of the African/Igbo traditional cosmology to other non-missionary factors of the modern situation.

Horton (1971) finally reduced Islam and Christianity to the role of catalysts, that was stimulators and accelerators of changes that were bound to take place anyway. While Islam accepted the function of catalyst, not being rigid about the acceptance of its doctrine by believers, Christianity on the other hand has never allowed freedom in the role of catalyst. It has been rigid in its insistence on the total acceptance of its official doctrines by individuals. This accounts or results in the proliferation of dissenting breakaway sects (independent churches). Horton concluded that the traditional African/Igbo cosmology or worldview still has its potential limits to reach through expansion and development. And that religion in Africa/Igbo land, just like in the Western world will be a way of communion, not a system of explanation, prediction, and control. From what we have observed from the beginning of Horton's theory, he has drawn heavily from Peel's intellectualist insight in explaining religious change in Nigeria and Africa in general, and how it can be developed and advanced further. Horton from all ramifications was clearly complementing the already established intellectualistic approach rather than refuting it.

Horton's Intellectualistic Theory and The Religious Change in South-East Nigeria: Convergent and Divergent Points of Views

It is very important at this point to see how Horton's intellectualistic theory relates to or forms a foundational basis for the sudden religious change in the South-East of Nigeria, and the impacts of these religious changes in the life of people in the South-East of Nigeria. When there is a change in any given situation there are bound to be corresponding reactions and counter actions which will produce a new situation or condition as the case may be. It has to be noted that Horton's analysis has thrown up a number of important points which need to be clarified or re-evaluated. According to Nnoruga (2019):

Horton has to be applauded and appreciated for elevating African traditional religion with the other world religions and even comparing it with them, unlike some scholars or researchers who kept relegating African traditional religion to the background as irrational and spiritually dark religion. Finally, the incorporation of African traditional religion into a larger macrocosm as most researchers believe is the persuasive factor for conversion to world religions. (p. 24).

In the theory, Horton pointed out the loose articulation of many different cults, a situation that encourages syncretism and absorption of new cults found in many religious communities today. The above situation shows the relationship between religion and social organization, a situation that favors religious innovation since a change in religious ideas does not threaten the already established social order most times (Horton, 1971). Diara (2010) firmly agreed with Horton that there is a connection or relation between religion and social change, though sociologically it has to be determined whether or not religion is the cause of social change or whether it is a channel through which social change originated. So, in the study of Aladura churches, Horton discovered the attribute of change in traditional or primitive religion. This religious adaptation found also in African/Igbo traditional religion accounts for its change or conversion to world religions. The religious adaptation also accounts for African Christians inheriting a good measure of the dual nature which Mbefo (1996) regarded as two folds of African/Nigerian heritages.

Moving away from the merits of Horton's intellectual approach to religious change in Africa, one immediately encounters a disturbing claim by Horton that the study of the Aladura church is a landmark in the study of African religions. Most of the sociologists interested in religious change have illustrated the importance of socio-structural factors in the emergence of new religions, hence they argued against the intellectualist approach that since religion is above all, a system of ideas and beliefs about the cosmos, we must explain innovation of cultic practices which result from people's attempts to make intellectual sense of new and old thought systems (Ifeka-Moller, 1974). Again Ifeka-Moller (1974) argued further that:

Horton's monolithic theory also leads him to contradict himself. He says that mission Christianity is in some respects so like the modified traditional religion that people can easily switch from that one to the other. If this is so, Horton cannot at the same time argue that conversion to Aladuras comes about on account of the tension and conflict that exists between mission cosmology and traditional modes of thought. (p. 59).

Religious change as explained by Horton (1971) shows that there is a change of cult or conversion and there are factors that are responsible for the change of religion or cult. In the African/Igbo traditional religion there many factors which were being attributed to have played some major roles in the change of religion from indigenous Igbo religion to Christian religion and possibly back to traditional religion again. Scholars of different disciplines and origins have advanced many reasons which range from urbanization, modernization, colonization, western education, globalization, and so on. However, Metuh (1985) stated that:

The causes of religious change are many and varied. However, generally, one could group them into two broad categories – religious and non-religious factors. Religious factors here are taken to refer to impulses to change generated by religious convictions and activities. Thus, missionary work, the appeal of teachings and way of life of a religious system, reformation or revivalism, conversion, syncretism, or proselytism and so forth, all in different ways bring about religious change. Non-religious factors are also many. There are historical factors, socio-structural factors, political factors, rapid social change, conquest, urbanization, education, and so forth. Of course, religious and non-religious factors often overlap. (p. xi).

Equally, it is important to put into consideration the methodology employed in the evangelizing of the South-East or the religious change that took place in the past years. For example, Onunwa (1985) enumerated strategies or methodologies used by different foreign missionaries in the South-East which ranged from the gathered colony approach, the industrial mission approach, the schools' approach, the use of medical services, the use of native agents and so on. But most researchers believed that religious change in Africa/Igbo land is a multi-casual phenomenon and cannot be explained exclusively by any one factor, theory, or methodology.

There was religious change or conversion in the South-East seen from the movement of adherents of Igbo indigenous religion to Christian religion. But Horton did not explain the type of conversion that

took place, only the process and how the religious change took place was discussed by the intellectualistic theory including the factors that played a major role in religious change. Onunwa (1985) pointed out that:

There are those who completely accepted the missionaries and the gospel message and swallowed it line, hook, and sinker. Others completely rejected them and vehemently resisted the encroachment of Christianity upon their traditional religion, culture and independence. Yet a group stood between these two extreme positions. They are the people who accepted some elements or benefits they saw in Christianity but did not abandon completely their own religious traditions at least during severe crises in life. This does not mean therefore that biblical Christianity has not or cannot get root in African soil, especially in Igboland. (p. 77).

Okonkwo's violent reaction to Nwoye's conversion and killing of one of the Christian missionaries in *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe (1978) indicates his total and vehement rejection of the Christian religion coming to Umuofia because for him Christian religion will lead to the downfall of Igbo culture at least in Umuofia clan. There are some who were lured into the Christian religion while some were tricked or begged into conversion to the new religion as depicted by Asante (1977) thus:

When we, in our camp, refused to listen to the white man, it was a big clergyman that begged us to listen to him, it was he who persuaded us that the white man was our friend ...that was the beginning of our slavery in Adasaland.... We were sold to the white man by the clergyman. (p. 10).

Describing the different senses of conversion that took place in Africa, Metuh (1987) took a glance or point of departure from the varied multi-causal factors of conversion, which for him provides the most adequate explanation of the complex problem of conversion in the South-East. So Metuh (1987) showed that:

The different senses in which the term "conversion" is used in the explanations range from mere change of membership (affiliation), to change of conviction. Change of affiliation could be from Traditional Religion to a mission church, or from a mission church to an independent African church, or even a lapse back to Traditional Religion. A change of affiliation does not necessarily involve a change in conviction. There might be what Nock called "adhesion", in which, people stood with one foot on either side of the fence, adopting the new worships as useful supplements. This must be distinguished from "conversion", properly so-called and defined by Nock as the deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. Thus, the term has been used to connote three different types of change:

- i) Change of affiliation without change of conviction- Adhesion, e.g. a "mixed" Islam or Christianity.
- ii) Change of affiliation with the change of conviction- Conversion I, e.g. from Traditional Religion to fervent Islam or Christianity.
- iii) Change of conviction without change of affiliation- Conversion II, e.g. from "mixed Islam or Christianity to fervency. (pp. 19-20).

From the above analysis, one can infer that religious change in the South-East has gone from stage (i) which is adhesion that is a change from Igbo traditional religion to Christianity and now to fervency in Igbo traditional religion for some in the South-East of Nigeria while some into fervent Christianity (Conversion iii). However, Fisher (1973) accused Horton of concentrating on the first stage in describing the religious change in the South-East, which is adhesion because Horton (1971) concluded that the traditional African/Igbo religion changed to fit into the modern situation which was natural responses of traditional cosmologies to socio-structural changes and this is purely adhesion.

So, it means that conversion in this sense means a change of affiliation from a cult that is from Igbo traditional religion to Christian religion or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist church/African

independent churches. Here independent churches or spiritualist churches are groups of converts who decamped from the mission churches because of the intolerant attitudes of these churches towards traditional beliefs. However, in decamping to other churches, they took some elements from the new churches or religions to combine them with the elements of old or traditional religion hence this accounts for syncretism found in most churches or traditional religion. In this sense, one can say that the adherents or votaries of the Igbo traditional religion merely moved or changed their affiliation to the Christian religion without being converted to it. This also accounts for the disturbing cries of most Christians that true Christian religion is not being practiced among the South-East Christians, that it is skin-deep Christianity (Obiefuna 1985).

Going further, Horton (1971) in his theory of religious change alluded to mushrooming of churches either from decamped members of mission churches forming theirs or members from independent churches forming their own Christian religion or those from one traditional religion creating and naming their own gods different from where they came from. This accounts for many self-made pastors both men and women, self-acclaimed traditional priests and priestesses (*ndi dibia na ndi ezenwanyị*) everywhere, again different churches seen in every corner of Nigeria space, in shops, open fields, warehouses, motor-parks, family houses. On this Agazie (2015) pointed out that:

Modern Pentecostalism has, since it emerged in the 1970s grown to be the most popular face of Christianity in Nigeria, due to the rapid increase of churches on every street, as well as its own ubiquitous presence in the media. The number of prosperous churches is huge, with entrepreneurial pastors starting new churches seemingly every day. Pentecostalism has become the fastest-growing industry in Nigeria, and the second most popular export (after crude oil). Churches in Nigeria... now out-number schools, clinics, and banks all put together. (pp.1-2).

Yet morality is going down every day in society, despite numerous churches and pastors everywhere. Traditional religion and culture have formed the basis upon which the African/Igbo people have lived their lives for ages, hence the constant recourse to traditional means in solving most of their day-to-day problems whether they are politicians, medical doctors, engineers, or highly placed people in the society. Hence divination can never stop in Igbo traditional religious practices. This is always the case with the Igbo man who believes that there are certain things which the new religions cannot take care of or offer them hence they consult their gods. For example, the widely known celebrated oath-taking between Chris Ngige former governor of Anambra State and Chris Uba at *Okija* shrine during the Anambra State governorship election. According to Alozieuwa (2009):

The idea of taking Ngige to the shrine actually emanated from Chuma, whose country home is just some stones' throw from *Okija* town where the *Ogwugwu Akpu* goddess resided, said Odunze. According to him, he (Odunze), had just come in from Umunya when Ngige informed him that Eselu had said that Chuma asked him that they took him (Ngige) to *Okija* shrine and that Eselu had already consented to it. (p. 112).

From the above incident, whether it really happened or not, one notices the importance and role of Igbo traditional religion among the people which cannot be offered by other world religions. For they believe strongly in the efficacy of the traditional God whom they are accustomed to, before the arrival of Christian religion. Hence the persistence of Igbo traditional religion is not in doubt and this confirms adherence which is not conversion per se in terms of religious change, for this is only a change of affiliation. The ongoing change in religious belief in the South-East from the above explanations is no more a surprising phenomenon for the basis for it, has been ascertained from Horton's theoretical explanations. It is obvious that adherence took place in the past years and continues to take place in the present times though some exceptions are there. But the wave of going back to traditional religion is visibly either directly or through syncretism that is going on among the new religious churches like Chief K. O. K Onyioha's Godianism, which claims to be the modern version of Igbo traditional religion. The *Odozi-obodo* prayer healing home of *nwanyị* Ufuma, which has a Christian outlook but draws inspiration from Igbo traditional religion (Ejizu, 1985).

Conclusion

Though no single theory can adequately explain any religious change in any society especially where there are many multiple factors responsible or operating on a daily basis in a society like the one of the South-East of Nigeria. But Horton (1971) has laid a foundation for understanding the reasons the religious change took place or started in the first place. Though the theory just like other theories has its own weaknesses, it cast the indigenous religion on the same par with the other world religions.

Religious change is a continuous process in any society, when the initial change was from Igbo traditional religion to Christian religion, it was believed that traditional gods were on retreat and never to come back or on retreat only to surrender to the superior gods of the Europeans who came with much power and dislodged the tenets and foundations of the indigenous religion. But unknowingly to Africans and other parts of the world, they only retreated to be equipped and re-strategized to take back their land firmly. For conversion or change in the religious system to take place different kinds of change agents were used by proselytizers to lure the Africans/Igbo to the Christian religion but from observation, these agents of change are not needed in converting or leading the Africans back to the indigenous cultural religion.

Though there seem to be bad perceptions or consequences on the issue of returning back to traditional religion by the African/Igbo people because most see the return to traditional religion as a way of getting rich fast at the expense of hard work rather than paying or offering sacrifices to their gods. This means that the African gods are aiding the people to commit all sorts of crimes in order to get rich quicker but that is not so. The huge wild cries over the young people going back to traditional religious practices in the South-East mostly stem from the above fact. This again increased ritual killings, organ harvesting, mutilation of human body parts, and kidnapping syndrome at its peak with traditional priests making charms for the kidnapers in the South-East. These ritual killings or acts make the South-East to be very unsafe for living or doing any business or for foreigners to come to the South-East, yet it is called or known as practicing the traditional religion of the forefathers. Of course, many people frowned at this type of religion that it is or was never the traditional religion practiced by the forefathers in the South - East.

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