

Situating the African Ngwa Clan in Acts 17:15-34: An Efficient Missiological Method

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Abstract

Paul's method of mission and worship in Athens as recorded in Acts 17 brought success to missions in his time. Some missionaries have in one way or the other enforced one style fits all to worship and missions which brought about rejections, hatred and crisis in some cultures against the gospel. This study investigated Paul's methods of soul winning in Acts 17:15-34 Vis-a viz African Ngwa Culture with the objective to situate Ngwa culture in the context of the text to make the gospel mission relevant. The chosen text was analyzed using historical grammatical method and interviews analyzed thematically. Hence, the study discovered that Paul made careful observations of existing culture, acknowledged and used the indigenous cultural elements without discarding them, familiarized himself with the people, starting from the known to the unknown which brought success to mission in Athens. The study therefore concludes that situating African Ngwa culture in context of the chosen text by applying Paul's method will reduce to minimum crisis, hatred and rejection to the gospel in Ngwa Culture.

Introduction

The importance of culture in the missiological progression cannot be exaggerated, because culture is the societal framework in which individuals understand the information or events of their experiences (Pruitt, 2012). Individuals, group, society and even organizations are recognized by their cultural practices. Oxford Dictionary (2003) posits that culture is "the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people". Thus, an ethnic group dies if its culture is annihilated (Umezina, 2014). Worship on the other hand is a practice. Worship practices do not take place in a vacuum, rather it is practiced within a cultural context. Thus, it may be safe to say that culture is the vehicle through which worship is conveyed and organized. Missionary adventures must therefore take place within the confine of a specific culture. The owners of these cultures often times have their worship practices and styles concretely defined. Africa with its varied culture has religion as a feature that assists people to live in concord and work towards corporate progress of the environment and the people (Lateju, et al, 2012). Sampson (2014) asserts that before the British colonial intrusion into the different territories that are now amassed as Nigeria, the several ethnic nationalities within these territories had their individual systems of social organization and religious beliefs.

However, in most cases, every missionary who undertakes a missionary escapade had in mind to turn people back to God, especially if the said individual, group of people, organization, and society worship other gods aside the God of the missionary. This was true of the African experience during the colonization era. Okwu (1980) corroborates by asserting that,

In the context of missionary opinions, programs and pedagogy, the soul conversion of the African appeared to be the main objective of evangelization, or in other words the preparation of flock of Christian believers for the Parousia, the glorious coming back of Jesus to reward the good in heaven and to punish the evil.

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Paul also had the same aim as he evangelized the Athenians in Acts 17. Sometimes, for this aim to be achieved, deferent measures are employed by the missionary. Amongst these measures is education. Uchem, Ilechukwu, Asogwa (2014) suggest that this could otherwise be termed evangelization. They stretched that “People and their culture are the subject of evangelization”. This is to say that missiological adventures are always targeted at people of a specific culture.

Many missionaries have in one way or the other tried one style fits all to worship and missions thus to jettison the Ngwa culture in the name of bringing Christianity and this has caused rejection, hatred and crisis against the missionaries and the gospel. Nevertheless, the dilemma that has always faced missionaries has been on how best to reach an individual, group, organization, and society of a particular culture with the gospel? How should the gospel be brought down to the people without watering it down and at the same time not undermining the people's cultural values in its various shades? This study, therefore, investigated Paul's concept of worship and methodology of soul winning in Acts 17:15- 34 viz-a-viz Worship in Ngwa cultural context. The objective of this study are to discover how evangelism and worship can remain biblical and still be culturally relevant to Ngwa people. Examine some of the biblical principles used by Paul in the chosen text that should guide people in all African Ngwa culture in their expression of worship. Suggest the important of worshiping God in culturally relevant ways rather than having a one size fits all approach to worship. Mixed method of research was engaged and selected text analyzed using historical grammatical method.

Historical background

Ngwa people are a group of Igbo speaking clan who reside in Abia State, Nigeria, Africa. Abia State is located at approximately latitudes 4° 40' and 6°14' north, and longitudes 7°10' and 8° 00' east (Chigbu, et.al 2016). The state shares boundary with other states such as Cross River in the East, Akwa Ibom in the Southeast, Imo in the West, River State in the Southwest, Anambra in the Northwest, and Ebonyi in the North. Abia state comprises of 17 local governments namely; Aba North, Aba South, Arochukwu, Bende, Ikwuano, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Isiukwuato, Obi-Ngwa, Ohafia, Osisioma Ngwa, Ugunagbo, Ukwu East, Ukwu West, Umuhia North, Umuhia South, Umunneochi. Of the 17, 8 Local Governments are inhabited and known as Ngwaland. They are; Obi-Ngwa, Osisioma Ngwa, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Aba North, Aba South, Ukwu East, and Ukwu West. The Ngwa people are majorly Christians of their origin and history, Izugbara (2000) expounds; “the true origin of the Ngwa, like their parent Igbo stock, is not known and it may be very difficult to trace; there are various speculations about their origin”. He furthers that, “one such speculation suggests a possible affinity with the Jews, the name Igbo may well be an adulteration of the original and perhaps ancestral name ‘Hebrew’. “He adds that the Ngwa people are located between Latitude 50.30°N and Longitude 90° and 70.30°E. Its land mass is about 1312.768 square kilometers and has a population above 400,000. Research shows it to be the largest clan in Southeastern Nigeria. The temperature is of about 21°C, the climate is humid tropical type and is characterized by wet and dry seasons (Chigbu, 2011). The predominant food crops of the people are yam, maize, cassava, cocoyam, vegetables, oranges, palms and fruits. The agronomic practices hinge solely on the annual rainfall which has a mean value of 200cm and relative humidity of 80%.

The main God that is worshiped by Ngwa people traditionally is Chukwu- the great God; who is generally believed to be living in the far skies. Chukwu is accepted as being omnipotent, vindictive and self-sufficient. Other lesser gods serve as go-between. They are Njoku, Mmaji and Ogwugwu (included is Amadioha). In a nutshell, Ngwa people are highly religious (Chigbu, 2011).

The family constitutes the basis for their sociological organogram thus, the family is viewed as a sacred institution. Family sometimes could refer to the nuclear family of a whole lineage- onumara and whenever an Ngwa person talks of Ezi na Ulo, he is referring to both nuclear and Onumara which includes dead ancestors. The nuclear family unit (Ezi) is headed by the Nna (father), but in a compound where there are several nuclear family units is referred to as Eziukwu. Eziukwu consists of households whose members have a mutual and palpable decent through a patrilineal ancestor (Umunna) while Onumara is the largest extended family unit in Ngwa land (Eze Nmerengwa, Personal Communication, and November 17, 2016).

Marriage in Ngwa land is based on several reasons however, the central reason is procreation. Children are believed to be precious gifts from the most benevolent Chukwu who gives graciously to families, on the other hand, it has been a serious dilemma to women if they do not bear children.

Almost all the time when infertility occurs, the woman suffers it the most as though they are always the cause of every childless situation. Childlessness is seen as making futile the purpose and essence of marriage (procreation). This is almost always the mentality that guides every Ngwa man who wants to get married as he would look up to families whose history evidences of good reproductive aptitude. Ngwa people are known to be hospitable which is shown in the presentation of the oji (the traditional kola nut). Whenever the oji-Igbo is presented to a visitor in Ngwa land, it signifies that the visitor has been warmly welcomed. The hospitable nature of the Ngwa people could be accounted for on how Christianity gained ground in major parts of Ngwa land. The earliest missionaries met with success to a great degree due the fact that the people were welcoming. Nonetheless, some other Christian missionaries met with objection of the Christian faith by some groups. This is evident in the fact that there still exist traditional worshipers. The next section will be discussing on the successes and failures of the earliest missionaries (Eze Nmerengwa, Personal Communication, and November 17, 2016).

Missiological Adventure In Ngwa Land Viz a Viz Paul's Missiological Methodology In Acts 17:15-34

According to one of the current issues challenging Christian missionaries (foreign and local) is how to relay the Christian gospel to varied cultures. He props that the first missionaries to Africa faced this same challenge. It is known that out of the various tribes and clans in Nigeria, the Igbos happened to be almost if not the only tribe that were difficult to be ruled by the colonial masters. This is not to mean that the Igbos resisted the colonialism. However, due to its unique political structure, religious values, and social background etc. the colonial system could not just make headway in the Igbo society (Pruitt, 2012).

In a personal interview with Nmerengwa (2016), he stresses that one major problem that confronted colonialism in Igbo land and especially Ngwa land was its inability to allow the people to rule themselves. The arrival of the colonial system reshaped a lot of systems in Igbo land. The women were denied their rightful position. In addition to the economic havoc done to women, they were heavily tasked. The political system which was highly democratic was replaced with the British system of appointed chiefs. The Igbos had a well-structured and established religious system which was given up at the arrival of the colonial missionaries. An example of the how the Igbos especially the Ngwa show their detestation of colonialism in most of its faces (colonial missionaries inclusive) could be seen in the Aba women riot which took place on December 1929. Ottenberg (1965) emphasizing on the Aba Ngwa women riot adds:

In the history of the British administration of Nigeria, Ibo women have constituted a unique and unforgettable human force. When they changed almost overnight from apparently peaceable, home-loving villagers into a frenzied mob of thousands who in December, 1929, attacked administration authorities while their men stood passively by, they brought about a sudden interest in the preciously little-known Ibo-speaking peoples. This uprising, precipitated by an unfounded rumor that Ibo women were to be taxed by the government, arose from uneasiness on the part of the women concerning their economic position, which had already suffered from the world depression and.... other non-economic grievances.

Okwu (1980) who writes on the same matter asserts that "for the missionaries, successful evangelization implied not only conversion away from heathendom and its attendant cultural values, separating converts from the practices and belief system of their milieu to Christian faith and church discipline, but also the arousal in the Africans of a strong commitment and loyalty to the church, its doctrines and discipline". Amadiume (2007) collaborating with Ottenberg and Okwu opines that this event was "both peaceful and violent mass demonstrations, riots, and finally open war with the British colonial government in 1929". Umuezinwa (2014) adds that it was a very difficult task to do for the Ngwa people. This is why even till date there still exist traditional worshipers who uphold the old tradition in Ngwa land. He stressed that one weakness of the earliest missionaries, "indeed they forbade many of the traditional practices and described them as pagan."

In a personal communication with Apollos Nwaobia April 12, 2017, he orated that oral literature is the most valuable and reliable source on issues of culture and worship before and during the colonial rule in Ngwa land. Thus, he said that "Ngwa man worshipped the deities of the land-small gods and a supreme one among them which my father referred to as 'Ukwuleke', a god that was presumed to be more powerful than 'Amadiaoha'".

He agreed that the coming of the colonial masters affected the culture of the Ngwa people positively, he expounds, "the Ngwa culture was more homogeneous then than now." He furthers that, "though they worshipped idols, they were more committed to the gods they worshipped, more loving, more truthful and more peaceful."

However, he believes that the methodologies employed by the missionaries such as healthcare and education yielded a great success as evident in the high establishment of churches such as Adventist, Anglican as well as Catholic. In a personal communication with Uzoma Prince, April 15, 2017, who used to be a prince and later ruled his community for 4yrs after the death of his father corroborates that prior to the coming of the colonialists, gods such as Chukwu, Ihinjoku, and Ebere-Nba were worshipped. Chukwu was supreme. Ihinjoku was the god of fertility. Eber-nba was the local god of protection for the Mba community. At worship, Ofo was the symbol of authority and was handled by the eldest son of each family and community as the case may be. Nonetheless, these deities and their worship has been annihilated. The Chukwu who is believed to be the creator still exists but not in image form because He is believed to be living in the far sky. He agreed on the methodologies highlighted by Nwaobia added that the missionaries provided food stuffs and thus succeeded in supplanting the worship practices of the Ngwa people as the Christian faith was embraced.

However, before the arrival of the colonialists, the Ngwa people were tenaciously adherent to African traditional Religion. He agrees that the western culture brought by the colonial masters affected the culture of the Ngwa people without mentioning the how. He said that the success of the evangelistic methodologies of the white men were partially successful and pointed that one weakness of the methods was inconsideration of Ngwa culture which rendered it weak and helpless. (Chinyere Imo, personal communication, May 12, 2017)

In a personal communication with Onyekachi in April 20, 2017, he collaborates with Nwaobia, Imo and Uzoma that the coming of the white to Ngwa land had no negative impact. However, he notes that the whites failed in marrying culture and religion. He is of the opinion that culture should be upheld but where culture contradicts the Bible, the Bible overrules.

Paul's Missiological Approach in Acts 17:15-34.

At first, Paul made a careful observation before he started his ministry at Athens (17:16). He was not in haste to speak but spoke after he had observed the religious practices. Verse 17 suggests that even when he decided to speak, started with those who were familiar with the gospel. The Jews and in the synagogue (Pratte, 2016).

Paul used a seminar approach in disseminating the gospel. His discussion with the Jews and believers in the synagogue attracted the attention of the epicurean and stoic philosophers. It is important to note here that Paul's speech at the Areopagus council was upon invitation. As we read

Further to verse 21, we see Paul conducting a mega evangelism where all the city people gathered together without invitation cards. Timothy suggests that the council constitutes of "not only the Council but also a crowd of inquisitive bystanders (as 17:20-21 implies), some may be Jews who are drawn from the synagogue in the commotion; and probably many are ordinary Greeks who are believers in the traditional "folk" gods or pious keepers of the local "civil" cults" (Brokins, 2015).

Paul's speech started with acknowledgment of the religion of the people (17:22-23a). From known to the unknown: having acknowledged the people, Paul went on to speak with them concerning their gods as he has observed. He did not do away with the religion of the people. This can be contrasted with the attitude of the earliest missionaries who came to Ngwa land as has been highlighted previously- they regarded all our practices as paganism. However, Paul expounded their religion through a common ground, to some unknown areas. Thus, the culture of the people if well observed could help the missionary in breaking gospel barriers. Pratte (2016) has this to say, "by erecting that altar, the Athenians had admitted ignorance and had also admitted that they had reason to be interested in such a god; so, Paul used this as his opening. This is a great evangelism tool.

Furthermore, Paul went on to contrast their understanding of their god which is transcendent to the all-encompassing nature of a bigger God which is transcendent and at the same time immanent (27b). He was offering them to either choose a god who they did not know and was not close to them or to choose the God whom they could seek, find, and know. Additionally, the people's literature was a powerful tool Paul used in reaching them. These systematic approaches yielded much result. Without much persuasion, Paul won the heart of some as some prominent members of the Areopagus council instantly accepted the gospel while many others yearned to know more. Brokins (2015) thus expounds;

Paul's address in 17:22-31 is often considered a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism, for it depicts the Apostle 'translating' his gospel message into the vernacular of his audience. In other words, he restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise. There was no compromise in Paul's method of presentation yet he reached the people even the more through their own native culture. Brokin (2015) claims that "The Bible is not simply an historical book about the people of Israel," because the Bible is capable of speaking to Africa and Africans, even, as he puts it, "in the midst of our [i.e. Africa's] troublesome situation".

Conclusion

Situating the Ngwa clan in the book of Acts 17:15-34, a systematic and methodical missiological approach as used by Paul could yield a great success when carrying out a missiological task. Paul carefully observed the existing of the people of Athens, without discarding it on arrival rather familiarized himself with the people winning the people's confidence. He gradually met them in seminar form, reasoning with them to persuade them into understanding his argument and view from the known to the unknown. He acknowledged and used the indigenous cultural elements is introducing the gospel as he later got involved with public campaigns. Where these gradual steps and methods of Paul is used in Ngwa Culture, the gospel will receive more reception, growth and progress in Ngwa land.

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