PENTECOSTALISM AND THE DWINDLING STATE OF IGBO LANGUAGE: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract— The fear that the Igbo language is facing a threat of extinction is not unfounded. The indicators are indubitable that if the status quo remains as it is, the Igbo language may not survive the next fifty years. Whilst majority of the Igbo people are unruffled and remain placid about this trend, a sizeable number of people have begun to champion the crusade geared towards a reversal of this ugly trend. The comatose state of the Igbo language has a plethora of implications, especially, for the Igbo historian as indeed; the bulk of a people's history is decoded through their language. In this way, the task of restoring the Igbo language to a state of 'Eldorado' is not only a task for the linguist but indeed all stake-holders. However, to understand a problem, the causes of the problem must be rigorously identified. On this premise, therefore, this study attempts an appraisal of contemporary Pentecostal churches as facilitators of the degeneration of the Igbo language. Adopting historical methodology approach of data analysis, information deemed imperative for the subject under discussion were drawn from relevant primary and secondary sources. Findings in the study, however, revealed that there are several systems and methods through which the Igbo language is shunned and imperiled by these organizations. The study is concluded by suggestions on how to reinforce the crusade against the threat of extinction which stares the Igbo language in the face.

Index Terms— Dwindling, Igbo, language, Pentecostalism

I. INTRODUCTION

KARL Marx has maintained that "religion is the Opium of the masses"[1]. This thus means that religion works as a solace for the struggling masses; it promises things often beyond practical obtainability. Whether religion is ideal or not, has been the subject of seemingly endless debate amongst philosophers, theologians, and religious pundits; hardly does this engage the draw the attention of social historians. What is perhaps more important to the historian is "the role religion plays in the … forces that determine the history of societies and peoples" [2].

Man, as a religious entity, is preoccupied by the vastness of eternity and there appears to be an agreement among scholars that the systematic ordering of the universe induces man to believe that there must be a supernatural being responsible for the creation of the universe and all that are found in it. This belief in the existence of a supreme being has remained one of the cardinal spiritual features of man and thus, Christianity and other world religions subscribe to this. In Christendom, there are denominations with one identifying themselves as Pentecostals. The origin of this group in Nigeria in general and Igbo land in particular, cannot be discussed in total absentia of the coming of the Western missionaries to Nigeria, which unarguably, marked the advent of Christian faith in the geo-polity. The Portuguese were the early Western missionaries to visit Nigeria in the fifteenth century, and they attempted building the Christian faith on Church-State relationship strategy. This was experienced in Warri area of present day Delta State where the missionaries penetrated the court of the Olu (king), Christianize the traditional council, and educated the Prince of the kingdom, Domingos [3]. The primary rationale behind this strategy was that, in the perception of the missionaries, the monarch was viewed as linchpin; thus, a successful conversion of the king to Christianity means automatic acceptance of the faith by the subjects.

Subsequently, a new batch of missionaries (of protestant extraction) arrived in the 19th and 20th centuries. These missionaries focused on the abolition of trans-atlantic slave trade which, during this period, was beneficial to some Nigerians. Michael Omolewa seems to have captured how the trade benefited Nigerians; in his words, thus:

A merchant class grew up in Nigeria (courtesy of the slave trade). Their business was to serve as middlemen. They became very rich and powerful. They also owned exotic goods. Some communities benefited from the trade. For instance, the Ijaw … increased their salt production in order to produce currency for exchange with the interior contacts. The attraction of guns and gunpowder also led to greater economic incentives for the people [4].

In addition to the abolition of the trans-atlantic slave trade, these missionaries also had the aim of separating the Christian faith from colonialism, as submitted by F. Nwachukwu [5].

Pentecostalism had sprang up from the presence of the protestant missions in Nigeria, and this brought about the dissemination of dissimilar Christian messages to Nigerians. This was associated with more or less the waging battle for supremacy between Catholicism and Protestantism in the new world. This trend in

conjunction with the belief that Christian message can easily be made to conform with cultural milieu and intellectual conviction of the people, led to the multiplication of churches in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the rejection of the colonial encrustations in Christianity equally contributed to the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. For instance, The Christ Army Church, one of the foremost Pentecostal churches founded in 1918 had existed courtesy of the indigenous prophetic movement launched by its founder, Garick Sokari Marion Braide (a former Anglican catechist who would later assume the position of a Prophet). Thus, the people were happy with the movement that afforded them the opportunity to worship their God in their own tongues. In Yoruba land and Igbo land, most of the early Pentecostal churches assisted immensely in propagating the use and spread of indigenous languages. They employed many means to achieve this objective; prominent among them was the establishment of Sunday schools where proficiency in the use of the mother tongue was encouraged.

However, since change is said to be inevitable, Pentecostalism, in the contemporary era, has decided to trail a dimension different from the early Pentecostals as regards to the sustenance of the mother tongue. This trend which is mostly felt among the Pentecostal churches – adherents of Pentecostalism - in Igbo land pose serious threat not just to Igbo language alone but to Igbo culture in general, as language represents a core aspect of every culture. It is on this premise that this study attempts to appraise the various means through which Pentecostalism has been contributing to the dwindling state of Igbo language with the aim of proffering possible panacea to this prevalent malady.

For easy and ample comprehension, the study is divided into six sections. Followed by this introduction is the Section II where a conceptualization of Pentecostalism was done. In the Section III, the study looks at Igbo language and the Igbo people, while the Section IV examines the factors responsible for the spread of Pentecostalism in Igboland. In the Section V, the various means through which Pentecostalism has been contributing to the dwindling state of Igbo language were appraised, and the study was concluded in the Section VI. This section equally provides some recommendations on how to salvage Igbo language from the deleterious effects of Pentecostalism.

II. CONCEPTUAL EXPLANATIONS: PENTECOSTALISM

Pentecostalsim is a term derived from 'Pentecost', which was the Greek name for the Jewish feast of weeks. Within the Christendom, the word 'Pentecost' commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ. In the words of Uchechukwu Godson Okpute, "Pentecostalism involves a refined section of Christians who believe so much in the truthfulness of biblical accounts with the help of the Holy Spirit"[6]. This definition may have been informed by the traditions of Pentecostal Churches which include giving testimonies about the wonderful deeds of God; believe in the receipt of the supernatural gifts (such as the ability to heal, prophesy, and interpret speaking in tongues) by those baptized with the Holy Spirit; and emphasis on conversion, moral vigor, and a literal interpretation of the bible. On the other hand, E.A. Livingstone saw Pentecostalism to denote a moderate Christian religious movement with adherents that unanimously believe in the possibility of receiving similar experiences and gifts as the Christians during the day of Pentecost [7].

From another perspective, Pentecostalism is a movement within Christianity which is renewal in principle, and emphasizes on a direct experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This movement, according to Isaac Pandinjarekutt, "…has become the fastest growing Christian movement in the world today" [8]. Its uniqueness is partly represented in the belief that all Christians should seek baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is a post-conversion religious experience. This baptism is believed to be accompanied by the gift of tongues (also considered as the gift of the Holy Spirit) which assumes the form of *Glossalahia* or *Xenoglossy*. The former is known as speech in an unknown language, while the latter represents speech in a language unknown to the speaker but not to others. As noted by Kenneth E. Hagin, this gift does not only serve as a means of spiritual edification; it also constitutes an integral part of the devotional life of a believer [9].

III. IGBO LANGUAGE AND THE IGBO PEOPLE

Igbo language is the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. The language is also spoken by people who live mostly in Nigeria and are primarily of Igbo descent. Igbo language has different dialects, and there is apparently a degree of dialect leveling occurring. There are related *Igboid* languages which are sometimes considered dialects of Igbo, the most divergent being Ekpiye. In Equatorial Guinea, the language is also spoken as a minority language [10].

As earlier mentioned, the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria are the owners of Igbo language. These people are known with various features (apart from their language) which do not only reveal their heritage and ancestry but also establish their uniqueness before other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. For instance, the Igbo society is patrilineal, patrimonial, and patrilocal; the people are equally considered to be highly

religious. Credence to this could be laid on the observations on the Aboh people by an early German missionary to the area, as provided by Elizabeth Isichei. Thus she avers:

Tshuku-God-is continually heard. Tshuku is supposed to do everything… The notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respects, correct, and their manner of expressing them striking. God made everything: He made both white and black; is continually on their lips. Some of their parables are descriptive of the perfection of God [11].

Also, the Igbo are known with conflicting traditions which accounts for their origin. One of them, the autochthonous tradition, establishes the fact that the people have remained where they are presently located since time immemorial, and this is supported by scholars like Elizabeth Isichei [12], D.D. Hartle [13], and A. Sowunmi [14]. Other traditions, however, are found in the Oriental Origin School advocated by Innocent Okorie, which establishes that the people migrated from the Middle East and settled in their present location [15]; and the Niger/Benue Area school which holds the view of the Igbo as a member of the Kwa language sub-family alongside Ijo, Edo, and Idoma [16]. This school, as submitted by N.T. Nwaezeigwe, further reveals the closely relatedness of these languages to the Igbo language [17].

Identification of titled men with different insignia constitutes another common feature of the Igbo people. This is prevalent in various Igbo communities. For instance, in Awo-Omamma community, an Ozo title is recognized with a special anklet, natively called Agha, which is also relevant in indicating the type of the Ozo title one is conferred with [18].

Again, in the traditional Igbo society, the people were known with Ichi, which was a traditional mark usually engraved on the face. As discovered by G.T. Basden, the mark was "…a more elaborate and serious affair (amidst the people) and … no freeborn male would dream of foregoing his inherited right to display the marks of his town and family" [19].

Some communities in Igbo land are presently known with the practice of genital mutilation which is believed to serve as a preventive measure for possible promiscuity. The people also place strong emphasis on young girls getting married as virgins. Despite the fact that this system is suffering from the negative effects of westernization, most families still uphold such system as their first principle.

What is more, the practices of levirate and sororate still subsist among some Igbo people. There is also the belief in re-incarnation which usually comforts a dying person who thinks he could not accomplish his purpose in his first life. The people are also known with effective traditional political institutions and festivals whose impacts are felt, especially on the area of community development. These various features had been in existence prior to the advent of Pentecostalism in Igboland with its deleterious effects which are amply felt on the language in particular, and culture in general. In the next section, the study looks at the factors that contributed to the spread of this Pentecostalism in Igboland, which has continued to torment the existence of the language of the people.

IV. THE SPREAD OF PENTECOSTALISM IN IGBOLAND

The coming of Pentecostalism to Igboland cannot be discussed in the absence of the revival movement in Azusa street. This is because, the movement attracted immigrants from all over the western world with the aims of acquiring experiences of the gift of Holy Spirit (which was discovered by Agnes Ozman, the first mortal to speak in tongues, following the assignment that was given to the students of Bethel Bible College in Topeka by Charles Fox Perham – the founder of the college), and also to be baptized in the spirit. Reports from the press assisted in spreading the information beyond Azusa, and this led to the birth of Pentecostal Missions. The report of Allan Anderson, however, evidences that the present day Pentecostalism traced their origins to the revival movement in Azusa street. In his words:

Twenty-six different Pentecostal denominations trace their origins to Azusa Street including the largest, the Assemblies of God. People went there from Europe and other parts of North America and went back with the baptism, and Pentecostal missionaries were sent out all over the world reaching over 25 nations in two years [20].

These Pentecostal missionaries sent all over the world, as divulged by Anderson above, were responsible for the presence of Pentecostal movement in Nigeria, and Igboland by extension.

Since its presence in Igboland, Pentecostalism has been spreading like wildfire as churches continue to occupy available spaces like shops, and uncompleted buildings. Churches are equally found in hotels, for instance, a wing of the Dominion City in Imo State, whose member admitted in an interview to be situated at Radisson, and De Legend Hotels in Owerri, respectively [21]. Additionally, churches proliferate in streets and roads; such is the case with the popular street of Araba-Umuzocha in Awka Anambra State, and Umudagu road in Owerri, which house not less than four Pentecostal churches. This prevalent situation must have informed the perception of R. Ogidi on Nigeria as "…a country with … the largest number of churches per capita"[22].

Various factors are responsible for the spread of Pentecostal movement in Igboland with the prominent ones being the quest for economic prosperity, and church conflicts.

The quest for economic prosperity represents one principal factor that contributes to the spread of

Pentecostalism in Igboland. Consequently, the movement could be perceived as a modern-day commercial enterprise garbed in the cloak of religion with deception and exploitation as its foundation. This could also account for the reason why Pentecostal Churches lay more emphasis on prosperity gospel which retards spirituality or spiritual prosperity – the essence of Christianity. As observed by H.O. Alukwe, "there is undue emphasis on prosperity (in Pentecostalism) and in most cases to the exclusion of spiritual prosperity which is what God is more concerned about…" [23].

Presently, individuals claim divine authorization leading to the establishment of these churches. They are mainly moved with the aim of amassing wealth either as a result of experienced hardship or insatiability. To achieve this, the fears and ignorance of the people are exploited, mostly through crusade organizations, where false messages are disseminated during deliverance sections. The themes of these crusades are captioned in such a way that it must permeate the psychology of the common man who would run to these individuals for spiritual protection and fortification from known and unknown enemies, and taking care of illusive problems. Apart from crusade organizations, these individuals, under the umbrella of these religious organizations, produce various religious memorabilia such as aprons or bibs, handkerchiefs, books, and magazines, which members are occasionally meant to believe of their possibility to take care of situations because they contain some sort of supernatural powers. Such is the case with Pastor Lazarus Muoka and his 'The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Church', as divulged by a source:

The ministry (The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Church) … owns the Chosen Pure Water Ventures which produces all the bottle and sachet water taken by worshippers. During Sunday service, an average of 70,000 flock the auditorium. And an average of 50,000 buy the sachet or bottled water for personal use for miracle. On a special programme which runs from 8 a.m till around 5 p.m, they make excess revenue of over N3.5 million [24].

The source further reveals:

The publishing arm of the ministry which produces its journals and some of the books written by Pastor Muoka is another viable venture of the ministry. One of the popular journals published by the church every week is, The Time of Visitation which showcases the remarkable testimonies of worshippers every week and the prophetic message of their clergy. The journal is always a sell-out as worshippers struggle to pick a copy each time they attend church service. Weekly, the magazine which goes for N100, nets an average of N5 million as over 50 per cent of his followers buy it. That's over N30 million per month. Thus, over N360 million per annum is made from the journal [24].

The practice of contracting pastors which is trendy in the Pentecostal missions could equally be aligned to the quest for economic prosperity. Here, the founder of a church opens branches in various locations and recruits or ordains junior pastors who would be charged with the responsibility of manning these branches. These recruits are answerable to the founder and their major responsibility is to monthly remit certain amount of money to the parent church. At the expiration of their contracts, these pastors start their own churches which initially are built around friends and families.

Again, to achieve economic prosperity, the founders of these religious organization resort to miracle performance. This is an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause. To perform miracles, thus, powers on healing, economic breakthroughs, and meeting the right marriage partner, are received from different sources, many which are unchristian. This development has tremendously encouraged the influx of converts to Pentecostal churches from the mainline Christian denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist missions.

Apart from the quest for economic prosperity, conflicts in churches equally contribute to the spread Pentecostalism in Igboland. Such conflict can be found in disagreements between resident pastors and church owners in the area of salaries, divergent views of pastors on liturgical practices, and incongruent philosophies which might stand between the pastor and the congregation. Additionally, envy, injustice, and the presence of non-Christian practices in the church also contribute to church conflicts. The result of this development is found in the establishment of independent churches by the seceding pastors with loyal congregation.

V. IGBO LANGUAGE AT THE VERGE OF DEATH:

A. Examining the Role of Pentecostalism

As indicated elsewhere in the study, language is an important aspect of a culture. It stands as a major identity of a people. A language is considered prestigious if assigned prestigious functions and it's deemed not to be prestigious if it does not have any function at all. Thus, the status of any language can either be relegated or enhanced depending on the waging situation.

Ifeanyi S. Odinye and Ifeoma S. Odinye have warned that:

Language is an ethnic identity. It should be handled seriously. The people who loose their language have lost their identity. Language is an indispensable tool

for communication and national development. Most human activities make use of language. Man is not complete without language [25].

In a similar vein, I.U. Nwadike equally submits:

Language is the key to the heart of the people. If we loose the key, we loose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, riches that cannot be guessed … from the other side of the door [26].

From the above submissions, one could therefore conclude that the dwindling state of Igbo language must have informed the ideas of the aforementioned authors.

One cultural legacy bequeathed to the Igbo since their existence as a people is Igbo language, hence, the need for the preservation and promotion of this identity. However, the language appears to be at the verge of death consequent of neglect or continued disuse by the Igbo people. Christian E.C. Ogwudile further decries of the neglect of Igbo language having expressed its desired place in the Igbo nation. Thus he avers:

The Igbo language is supposed to be the most powerful tool to which Igbo indigenes think, create, aspire, desire, feel and express their enlarged mental horizon and fulfill that which man is capable of in his language. Igbo people, as a race, are supposed to be very proud of their language, but the reverse is the case [27].

Be that as it may, it is important to note that this act of neglect which Igbo language suffers in the hands of the Igbo people are encouraged by different factors, one of which is found in the activities of Pentecostal churches in Igboland.

Pentecostalism in Igboland has *sub-standardized* Igbo language. Presently, the language either plays less or no important roles in these churches during services. The language is deemed antithetical to progress, and this has serious implication on the minds of the members of these churches who thus believe that Igbo language is unproductive. Nnamdi Onyeukwu, in an interview, recounts his experience as a member of the Pentecostal fold. Thus he avers:

One serious experience I had as a member of the Living Water Ministries was that the use of Igbo language in conducting services is fully discouraged. There is this waging philosophy of the pastor that encouraging the use of indigenous languages may encourage divisions of the congregation along ethnic lines. This, in his calculation, is not healthy for the image of the church and the unity of its members [28].

More worrisome is the fact that some of these Christian assemblies, through various methods, encourage their members to detach from all forms of cultural affinities. An example could be drawn from the Believers Love World, otherwise known as Christ Embassy, where members are encouraged to loose any form of attachment to their ethnicities as they have become the citizens of Zion [29]. The implication of this is disconnection and estrangement of these members from their immediate communities, hence, the persistent dwindling of the culture and language of the Igbo people. Whereas in Yoruba land is quite converse situation as the members of these Christian folds do not neglect the use of Yoruba language in services. Pentecostal Churches like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners Chapel, Better Life Ministries, and The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Church in Lagos and other parts of Yorubaland conduct services with Yoruba interpreters while the case appears to be different in Igbo land. Only the mainline Christian Churches – the Roman Catholic Mission, Methodist Mission, and Church Missionary Society (Anglican Mission) – have continued to toll in different dimension from this prevalent malady, yet Pentecostal Churches continue to proliferate. One could therefore imagine the degree of adverse effects this development would have on Igbo language.

Again, in most of these churches, there seems to be an obvious de-accentuation on the use of indigenous names for converts. For instance, Obumneme Omemgboji, in an interview, admitted to have changed his name to Victor Daniels upon becoming a member of Covenant Peoples Assembly [30]. This practice could stem from the believe that God attaches great deal of importance to the names His people bear, hence, the change of Abram's name to Abraham, Jacob's name to Israel, and Saul's name to Paul. However, it is apt to deposit at this juncture, that this method runs counter with what is experienced in Yorubaland as the identities of the members of these Christian folds are not just represented, but also well promoted. The right question now is, why is the case different in Igboland?

The adverse effects of the activities of these Pentecostal churches are not just myriad but also deleterious on Igbo culture in general and Igbo language in particular. In a situation where a growing number of people are alienated from their first language, one wonders the fate of such language. To this end, Chinua Achebe, seems to have summarized the place of Igbo language in his 'Things Fall Apart' having been abreast with the situation. Indeed, things have fallen apart in Igboland. Therefore, action needs to be expedited to address this malady threatening the Igbo nation at large.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The submission of Pita Ejiofor is deemed apposite for this study. He had submitted that based on the threat of imminent extinction facing Igbo language, a tragedy worse than the defeat of Biafra is about befalling Ndigbo [31]. As a result, the quest to discover the factors responsible for this situation becomes

imperative not just to the historians alone but all stake-holders.

In this study, Pentecostalism has been deduced as a factor responsible for the dwindling state of Igbo language; this therefore informs the researchers' decisions to appraise the various means through which this is done. Christian E.C. Ogwudile once averred: "Language is the vehicle and effective way of communicating and a means of transmitting or passing the culture of the people to the younger ones. The indigenous language plays this role better" [32]. Going by this avowal, one might conclude that the loss of Igbo language, should it be allowed to occur, could mean a description of the Igbo as a nation that once existed. This is not healthy for a people whose identity had been well established since time immemorial.

On this note, therefore, this study recommends for the creation of awareness for the Igbo people, especially the adherents of Pentecostalism, on the need to stand up for their culture and language which are being encrusted by the movement. The study equally recommends that these people should champion a movement within their Pentecostal folds aimed at holding events that would elevate the status of Igbo language in their midst. The Odenigbo Lecture series which was instituted by the Catholic Archbishop of Owerri Ecclesiastical Province, His Grace, Most Rev. Dr. Anthony J. V. Obinna, could serve as an example. This intellectual harvest usually written and delivered in Igbo language by Igbo sons and daughters of great intellect, represents the sincere efforts of the Archbishop in particular and the Catholic community in general, at ensuring the continuous existence of Igbo language. These recommendations, if considered and employed, could assist in salvaging Igbo language from this deleterious effect of Pentecostalism under study.

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