

## Research Article

# Interactions between the Traditional Religion of the Efik and Christianity: A Socio-Cultural Investigation

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**Abstract:** The Efik people of Calabar, who inhabit the lower Cross River estuary, had established early social intercourse with the Europeans long before the communities of the hinterland. By reason of their proximity to the coast as gateway to the Atlantic Ocean, the Efik of Old Calabar were among the first Africans east of the Niger to interact with the white men, who established trading posts and churches, built mission schools and ran some form of civil administration in the territory. This early interaction will later influence the Efik traditional mores, including their religious beliefs. Using a socio-historical approach, this paper investigates the extent of European influences on the centrifugal norms of the Efik arising from these early interactions.

**Keywords:** Indigenisation, contextualisation, adaptation, incarnation, acculturation, enculturation, inculturation.

## Introduction

Interaction, according to Dennings, is “a response experience in which both actor and reactor are engaged in a mutually affecting experience” (9). This means that the system is comprised of two interactive partners. Ordinal interaction is unidirectional and consists of the ordering or selection of pre-structured elements. Reciprocal interaction (or tutorial interaction) involves the presenting system accepting student’s input and activity, shaping the interaction in response to it (DX, 29). Interaction is a kind of action which occurs as two or more objects have an effect upon one another.

The idea of a two-way effect is essential in the concept of interaction, instead of one-way causal effect. Interaction must, as a necessity, involve two parties, in the instant case; it is about Christianity and the traditional religion of the Efik People. We shall examine these interactions in two perspectives, namely; positive and negative interaction. Positively, interactions existed between the Ekpe society officials and the Christian missionaries. These interactions led to the regulation of certain religious practices and institutions. Also, the coronation services of the Obong of Calabar held at Duke Town Presbyterian Church on November 27, 1982 occasioned an ecumenical gathering in Calabar of hitherto unknown proportions.

Leaders from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, AME Zion, Mount Zion Light House Full Gospel Church, Salvation Army, Apostolic Church, Qua Iboe, Anglican, Christ African, Methodist and Brotherhood were all in attendance. A church minister was called upon to offer prayers and blessings, along with a traditional chief or religious functionary who poured the necessary libation to the ancestors to ensure the success of the occasion. Traditional masquerades were also invited to take part in the occasion. Negatively, some conflict and tension existed between several Christian groups and traditional religion. A typical example

is the pouring of libation. This customary mark of respect to the ancestors before a meal or ceremony has been condemned by the Catholic authorities as being “non-Christian”.

Majority of church leaders in Calabar are always imploring their members to abstain from visits to traditional diviners and herbalists. It is argued that such people deal with evil or at least unknown spirits and that recourse to their skills and powers constitute a compromise or departure from the Christian faith, as well as a risk to their individual souls. While it may be acknowledged that herbalists possess useful knowledge in the domain of traditional medicine, it is generally believed that they do not operate on an “objective”, non-ritual basis.

The spiritual churches and revivalist movements constantly frown upon herbalism and do not hesitate to discipline their members if found violating this code. Bitter battles have also been fought over membership of Christians in secret societies.

Under this rubric are classified traditional secret societies such as Ekpe, Obon, Ekon and so on. It is vital to note that while there is an important distinction between the activities of Ekpe or other traditional secret societies and the cultural groups which perform traditional dances on public occasions, some of the churches have placed an overall ban on their members participating in any such activities. Other churches, such as the Presbyterians, are not so rigid in this regard and even have their ecclesiastical occasions graced by traditional masqueraders.

Several of these churches, especially the Pentecostal ones are angry that Christmas and Easter have become a time for masquerade activities because of the violent nature of some of these masquerades. Masquerades such as Ekpe, Nnabo, Ekpo, Ekpe Obon, Abonko and so on, were banned from playing on Christmas days by the traditional rulers council of Calabar Municipality; public notices were issued to this effect.

Occasionally, there are reports, usually from the rural areas, of masqueraders destroying church property or of Christians ignoring Ekpe sanctions. Cooper defines interaction as “Exchange of information, ideas, opinions between and among learners and teachers, usually occurring through technology with the aim of facilitating learning” (4). He says that it “includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject” (4).

There are various names given to interaction between traditional and Christian cultures. They include indigenisation, contextualisation, adaptation, incarnation, acculturation, enculturation and inculturation. We shall briefly explain what each of these patterns of interaction means as they apply to the Efik people in their encounter with western civilisation and Christian culture.

### **Geographical Location of the Efik People**

The Efik People are one of the three ethnic groups in Calabar. The other two ethnic groups are the Qua and the Efut. Like any other tribe in Nigeria, all three have their traditional religious beliefs and cultural institutions. The Efik people occupy Calabar Municipality and part of Calabar South, Odukpani and Akpabuyo Local Government areas in modern Cross River State of Nigeria.

Cross River State shares a common boundary with Akwa – Ibom (south-west), Abia, Ebonyi (west) and Benue State (north). We shall now investigate the processes through which western civilisation gained currency and influenced the cultural patterns of the Efik of Calabar.

### 1. Indigenisation

The term indigenisation refers to a process in mission methodology which aims at evolving and maintaining a culturally integrated Christianity. The abstract noun “indigenisation”, connotes the idea of native, aboriginal, originating in, characteristic of, or endemic to. In the context of African culture, some African scholars have suggested the term “Africanisation”, as a way of making Christianity native or endemic to the African peoples. They argued that for Christianity to be authentic in Africa, African ways of life must replace Western ways of life. They assert that Africans must look at Christianity with the “African eye” and understand its tenets with the “African mind” (Don Nwachukwu 109).

We find traces of this pattern of interaction between the European missionaries and Efik people. For instance, the Holy Writ (Bible) itself was translated into Efik dialect in order to fit into the Efik Culture. This implies that the Gospel was presented in Efik language in order to enhance the quick assimilation and comprehension of the typical Efik man. Moreover, Efik symbols and metaphors were effectively utilised to postulate Biblical affirmation.

**2. Contextualisation:** Contextualisation is a relatively new term in the arena of Christian missions and church growth. Shjaki Coe and Ahon Sapsezian, directors of the Theological Education Fund (TEF) were the first people to use this term in 1972.

The TEF report for that year, “Ministry and Context”, suggested that “Contextualisation” implies all that is involved in the familiar term indigenisation, but seeks to press beyond it to take into account the process of secularity, technology and the struggle for human justice which characterised the historical movement of nations in Third World.

The report introduces the TEF’s Third mandate as a response to the wide-spread crisis of faith and search for meaning in life, the urgent issues of human development and social justice; the dialectics between a universal technological civilisation and local cultural and religious situations (Nicholls 21). Nicholls asserts that contextualisation is a:

Theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the world. Contextualisation is akin to contextuality, the capacity to respond fully to the gospel within the framework of one’s own situation. Conceptualisation is a process, just like indigenisation. While contextualisation suggests the process of bringing out something from within, indigenization connotes the idea of taking something which is external or foreign and making it indigenous. Contextualization takes place in every form of faith, Christian or non-Christian, liberal or conservative, revolutionary or non-revolutionary (Dom Nwachukwu 119).

Contextualisation as already, described relates to the capacity to respond fully to the gospel within the framework of one’s own situation. The Efik people even in the barbaric state of their pristine practices responded whole-heartedly to Christianity. That is why Christianity affects the institutions of family, law, education and the observable level of cultural behavior of the Efik, including the use of their artifacts.

### 3. Adaptation

Adaptation is more of a sociological term than a theological or missiological term. Adaptation, as a sociological term “refers to the process of interaction between changes made by an organism on its environment and change made by the environment on the organism” (Haviland 140). Human beings are organisms. They react to environmental, sociological and religious changes. In the arena of missions, adaptation encourages a borrowing of foreign

ideas and practice by the national church. The goal of adaptation is mainly to change existing ideas and practices in the national church, so as to bring conformity in these areas with those of the foreign mission boards.

The missionaries in their encounter with the Efik people tremendously frowned at the worship of local divinities and persuaded the locals to give allegiance to the true God. But the changing of an Efik name to either Biblical or English one at baptism does not necessarily make that individual a Christian. It may satisfy the missionary, but not the individual who is baptised. The Efik are good at adaptation.

#### **4. Incarnation**

The theory of incarnation derives from the coming of God into the world in human form. Jesus is the incarnation of God. He came into the world as a human being in order to understand the plight of human beings and to respond appropriately to such plight. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus has been an unfathomable mystery in the minds of many, and will remain so. As God came to take the form of man, so the Gospel must take the form of Efik culture wherein it is planted. This explains the reason why the Holy writ or the infallible word of God was translated into Efik dialect in order to enhance easy assimilation and conversion.

#### **5. Acculturation**

No culture is static. Since creation, human societies have been characterised by movement and interaction. When people move, they normally move with their culture. When they come into contact with people of other cultures, they relate to such people through the instrumentality of their culture. One of the major vehicles of cultural interchange is language. Acculturation involves major changes which may occur as a result of prolonged inter-cultural contact.

The case of the Efik is an example. So much has happened to the Efik people as a result of intensive first hand contact with Christianity, to the effect that there have been changes in the original culture pattern of the Efik. For instance, the killing of twins which was being practiced by the Efik people has today become a thing of the past. For a woman to give birth to twins today is no longer a taboo, but a thing to be celebrated.

#### **6. Enculturation**

Enculturation is another sociological term. Every society in the world has its own culture. People who are born into a given society learn the culture of that group of people through the process of socialisation. Culture is not genetic; rather culture is transmitted from one generation to another. This process of transmission is called enculturation. Enculturation therefore is a process by which a society's culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. In the context of this study, it is the process of transmitting the Christian culture into Efik culture from one generation to another. This is done mainly through education, trade and society approved ways of meeting biological needs such as food, shelter, companionship and sexual gratification.

#### **7. Inculturation**

Aylward Shorter views inculturation as the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures. Dom Nwachukwu defines it as: "Cultural interchange which freely and openly allows the non-Christian community or the apostate community the

opportunity to interpret the Bible message of salvation within their cultural, conceptual and symbolic frameworks” (128). According to Justin S. Ukpong, inculturation involves: “evangelising a culture from within, that is to say, proclaiming the good news to the people within the perspective of their culture” (127).

Ukpong elaborates his view point to imply that in evangelism and Christian witnessing, inculturation implies the utilisation of the resources of the culture which is being evangelised in expressing the Christian faith. Here, the good news of Jesus is preached to challenge and animate the culture. This is exactly what took place in the evangelization of the Efik people. Here, it was the people’s language and culture that were used to present the Christian faith to them. That is why the Christian faith took root among the Efik people during the early stage of their contact.

### **Synthesis**

From the foregoing therefore, it is explicit that there has been a significant interaction between the Efik people and Christianity. It is obvious that even though Christianity has existed in Africa for nearly two thousand years, it is still difficult for certain aspects of it to be completely absorbed and integrated into the main-stream of African Culture. It is a veritable historical fact that Africa provided some of the earliest centres that nurtured Christianity, like Egypt and Cyrene.

Christianity has existed for nearly seven hundred years in Africa before it was obliterated by militant Islamisation from Arabia in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Christianity is older in Africa than it is in England, Ireland, the Americas and some parts of Europe. Some of the early church fathers like Augustine and Tertullian theologians, apologist and martyrs were Africans (Uka 242).

Two thousand years could be considered a long period but not long enough when compared with the age of African Traditional Religion, which could be said to be as old as man in the African soil. Traditional religion had offered Africans valid explanations to events and answers to life problems before the arrival of Christianity. It is therefore not surprising to have Christianity as a “tenant” in African soil.

### **Conclusion**

From what has been examined, particularly with respect to the impact of Christianity on the Efik people, it could be said that the process of inculturation took place in the inter-cultural contact between Efik people and the Europeans. It is obvious therefore; that the model of interaction that best describes the inter-cultural contact between the Efik people and the white man is that of acculturation. By way of comparison, it is possible to know how much of the original culture of the Efik people is discarded, how much is modified and how much is retained. The Ekpo Iquo cultural practice for instance, which rendered women helpless by stripping them of their clothing has been completely abolished. Women now enjoy free movement without any embarrassment. Also, the nefarious habit of killing twin children as though their birth was a curse instead of a blessing is apparently a forgotten issue. The birth of twins is now a thing of joy, not only to the families involved, but also to the entire community. Mothers of twins now have the right to celebrate their birth without any form of molestation.

The Ekpe masquerade too which previously had judicial powers is now engaged mainly in ceremonial occasions. It has now been modified into being a colourful, graceful and harmless



masquerade. Judicial powers now reside with the law courts and no longer with the Ekpe cult. Ekpe too is no longer the exclusive preserve of the Efik people; it now includes initiates from all tribes. In spite of all these changes and modernisations, the Efik people still retain some of their traditional practices and beliefs.

A typical Efik man still pours libations and calls upon the spirit of his ancestors before the commencement of any major project. The belief in witchcraft is still common place among the Efik people. Witchcraft (Ifot) is seen as an evil spirit that exercises adverse effects on its victims. It could therefore be safely argued, that early interactions between the Europeans and the Efik have yielded some positive influences on the socio-cultural patterns of the latter.

### Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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