Urhobo Cultural Parental Leadership: A Tool for Church Transformation

By

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Abstract

It is not a gain saying that most churches today are not transformed. This is true because the characters of most followers of Christ vary from the standard of the scriptures which also reflect in their relationship with others, including unbelievers in the society. Some unbelievers often confess that instead of going to church, they would rather remain at home. This is because of the character of some of those who attend church. Many Christians often forget that their lives are the mirrors through which others view the Christian faith in the society, even in Nigeria. Thus, it appears that there are more revivals in indigenous religion than that of church. Many have observed that the more the churches, the more sin dominates; this could be traced to lack of leadership transformation in spite of various church activities such as revivals, spiritual enrichment programmes, and Sunday worship services. Thus, in Delta State, Nigeria, the church seems to have lost her own glory in the 21st century, unlike the 20th century churches where many messages were centered on repentance, and heavenly based mindset. For the church to regain her lost glory, the researcher advocates that Urhobo cultural parental leadership may serve as a tool for church transformation. The researcher adopts historical and descriptive research methods to discuss the past and present church's leadership in Urhobo land of Delta State, Nigeria, and Urhobo cultural parental leadership. The study notes that many church leaders undermine the import of traditional culture to church transformation and recommends that church leaders should organize retreats with parents where select Urhobo traditional culture could integrated into church programmes for good character formation, church leaders should show good example for followers to emulate; and theological institutions should include a course title 'Nigerian People and Culture' into their curriculum.

Keywords: Urhobo, Culture, Parental leadership; Transformational leadership.

Introduction

In twenty-first century Nigeria, the religious scene features the proliferation of churches, with the churches executing different programmes that emphasis prosperity and the destruction of real and imagined enemies. The faith aims to enjoy heaven on earth, instead of heaven above. This means that they aim to enjoy the earth, and leave the rest for God. Thus, good character formation seems to have been left out of church programmes! Hence, as churches increase, sin dominates; but that does not mean that some church leaders are not doing their best. It appears that their congregations are larger than what they can adequately cared for. While it is possible that some church leaders may have used different styles of leadership without realizing character transformation, this raises the need for leadership to engage indigenous culture in the continuous quest for church transformation onto Christ-likeness. In this article, I use historical and descriptive research methods to discuss Urhobo cultural parental leadership as a tool for church transformation under the following sub--headings: church leadership in the past, church leadership at present; and Urhobo cultural parental leadership.

Church Leadership in the Past

The Urhobo people occupy the following Local Government Areas in Delta State: Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Okpe, Ughelli South, Ughellli North, Udu, Uvwie, Sapele and Part of Warri South. According to Aweto and Igbe (2011), the Urhobo people occupy a contiguous territory bounded by Latitudes 5°15' and 6^0North and Longitudes 5°40' and 6°25' East. The Urhobo people are very religious like other people groups in Africa. Their religion reflects on their way of life, which is their culture. As Kwame (1996) observed, to be born into the African society is invariably to be born into culture that is intensely and pervasively religious. To him, that means and requires participating in the religious beliefs and rituals of the community; this is not an individual but a communal affair that is woven into the culture of the people. In other words, religion and culture are inseparable; this is true of the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria.

In Urhobo land, there are two major religions practiced by the people. These are Urhobo Traditional Religion and Christianity. Before the advent of Christianity,

their traditional religion was like a state religion, for every member of the Urhobo nation practiced the religion. But when Christianity came, the gospel spread across Urhobo land and many natives, including traditional priests were converted into Christianity. This was the case in man Nigerian communities, even in Ogoni land. As noted by Erivwo (2003), in Ogoni was a lake-let called Okuriroro. This lake-let was teaming with fish before the advent of Christianity, no one could fish in the lake-let; and the forest in which Okuriroro was situated was forbidden; thus, it was an abomination to pluck leaf/leaves from the trees in the bush. Failure to abide by the law, Okuriroro alias Irhibo would strike such a person blind. When Osenoto, the former priest of Okuriroro, and all Ogoni who had been sick of the oppressive and over bearing rule of Okuriroro embraced Christianity, they were freed from the excesses of the deity. The Ogoni people therefore flocked to the lake-let and bailed it, caught enough fish, roasted some; and ate. Therefore, the name of the deity was changed from Okuriroro to Eterheri Noah. This indisputable evidence of the power of Christianity would appear to have been responsible for the thousands of coverts made. The power of God was not only heard in the preached Word, it was evident in the signs and wonders which followed them who believed. From the above, it could be observed that the Christian religion rendered powerless the indigenous deity as its hitherto adherents were liberated. Thus, some individuals who were abandoned because of sicknesses and diseases became evangelists after divine healing.

As also reported by Erivwo (2003), in Idjerhe community among the Urhobo of Delta State of Nigeria, Christianity was introduced by a leper who had been earlier driven from the community. While isolated in the bush he claimed to have seen a vision in which he was asked to bath with rain water and when healed to do no evil. When he was healed, he embraced the faith believing that it was Oghene, the Almighty God which was given a new emphasis in the Christian faith, who healed him. He brought the Christian faith from Sapele to Idjerhe in today's Delta State, Nigeria. Such healing and deliverance were not limited to one locality; it happened across Urhobo land; and beyond. As Christian faith was spreading, churches were being established with leaders who were lay-leaders, and school teachers. Pupils from Christian missions founded schools were mostly the foundational members of the churches. More so, the converts from edjo knew what they suffer of before

their liberation. Haven witnessed the power of God through the church, they held on to Christ without moving.

Most messages at that time were centered on repentance, salvation, healing, deliverance, and heaven. Because of their fewer congregations, church leaders could observe any unwanted behaviours in their lives and respond accordingly. On that note, Erivwo (2003) reports the work of Evangelist Abraham Evwaire, noting that he moved with teams of converts from place to place, from town to town, and from village to village, visiting new converts and preaching to unbelievers to come to God through His Son, Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that those converts were also visited by their leaders. This act was to lead all the converts to maturity in Christ. In that case, the vision of those who are leaders to prepare people for heaven are built in the heart of all. Furthermore, from the writer's experiences and observations, leaders of churches precisely late 20th century cooperate in terms of leadership irrespective of churches or denominations. They view the church as a body with common goal and objectives. That was the reason why an erring and disciplined member in a particular church could not be allowed to attend another church. Such member would be made to complete his/her terms of discipline. By so doing, it became a signal to others to learn from that mistake and to correct themselves. Not only that, during festive periods like Easter, Christmas and New Year, churches organized competition such as such drama, quiz, and songs besides revival programmes. In attempt to prepare and be the best, Christians especially the youths had the desire of reading the scriptures to know more about God through Christ and to compose scriptural based songs for rendition. Thus, it enhanced their spiritual growth, no wonder James said "draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8).

At that time, the transformation power is witnessed by all including unbelievers in terms of character, dressing and relationship between leaders who are respected and members who are trained in Christlikeness. To this end, Mercy Aghawenu (2025) in an interview narrated her grandfather's experience in the hand of her community unbelievers, who tied her father under the sun for failure to participate in the activities accorded to the deity of the land and it took the intervention of the missionary from Eku Baptist Hospital before he was released. In the face of persecution, believers were resolute in Christ. Those were the days when

crusaders stood up while the message was on; and even danced under the rain with great joy. Believers were well packaged in Christ, it was in the said period that believers proudly sang some songs in Urhobo dialect with the following texts:

Chihwe, chihwe,
Emori Jesu (or Oghene)
Chihwe edjohwe re o chihwe.

In English Language, this means:

Trample, trample
Children of Jesus (or God)
Have trampled deities to death, o trample.

Edjoghene okpekeyo-o, Okpeke-e
Igho me orero,
Udi me orero,
Oneme orero,
Edjoghene Okpekeyo-o,
OkpekeOhwori do no-uhuu.

In English language, it simply means that deities are actually dubious, they ate my money, drank my wine, ate my yam, deities are actually dubious, waste of resources! Shame! Christian women who were crusaders refused to abandon such in spite of their jealous husband who tried by all means to stop them. Hence, jealous husbands in Urhobo composed a song to discourage other men from allowing their wives to join any crusader band saying:

Kirimomo mievwe aye me kpo - o
Wo de vwayerogbi kirimo, wodio kena
Djeroyajovwo - o

Meaning, Crusade has divorced my wife
If you have a wife who is a crusader,
Just stop her now to leave it.

Meanwhile, the women responded with the following song texts:

Udur'akpogbirhebruvweekidie me voghenemeero,
Oyorovweke r omorobe e - Oghene me Olori me lya-o.

In English language, the women's response means that:

I am no longer afraid of the world,
Because my God is with me,
He holds my hand like a baby,
O my God so it is.

On that note, they were consciously aware of what Christ said in Matthew 10:37 "whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not fit to be my disciple." More still, those church leaders in Urhobo land allowed some cultural values to be practiced alongside with Christianity that strengthened morality of church members. Morality, according to Awoniyi (2017) is concerned with principles of right and wrong behaviours. The right and wrong behaviors are known through the expression of one's character either good or bad. Behaviours are known in Urhobo land. As Erivwo (2003) observes, moral law is written in the conscience of all men and sin is a concept which may be broadly divided into three categories, namely: *Umenu*, *Okon*, and *Orukuruku*, which correspond in meaning to sin, wickedness, and iniquity. Anyone in Urhobo land who falls into those categories especially girls of marriageable age bring(s) disgrace and stigma to their families. The most notable one is the issue of virginity which is celebrated by parents of the bride. This is made known to people in the morning of first sexual intercourse between the groom and the bride in the home of her parents with a blood stain on white cloth served as a bedspread, inspite of togetherness of boys and girls, they remain virgins. Such were the early breed of Christian converts in Urhobo land and so church leaders would only focus on the destruction of Edjo and the repentance of people since virginity is one of the cultural values of the people and it is biblical as Paul stated in 1 Cor. 7:34b "An unmarried woman or a virgin concerns herself with the Lord's work, because she wants to be dedicated both in body and spirit." Thus, churches witnessed reduction of vices in Urhobo land as Christian converts held to moral values that were both traditionally and biblically compliant.

Church Leadership at Present

It is noteworthy that some leaders of churches in Urhobo land have deviated from the good foundations laid by past church leaders who sacrificed themselves and led by examples; with heaven consciousness; by influencing good conducts in their

members. In line with Stott (2002), to lead is to go ahead, show the way and inspire others to follow. That is the best church leadership style that could lead to transformation. Some church leaders in Urhobo today apply multiple styles of leadership at different times to suit their purpose and goal which are mostly geared towards self. From the writer's observation their blended styles fall into what Mambula (2009) listed as pseudo-democratic, autocratic, passive or laissez - faire, charismatic and facilitative leadership. Any leadership centered on self cannot produce an expectant result that can bring glory to God. As Heward (2016) opines, in the church, the lack of true leadership proliferate sin and evil doers, as well as false church leaders. It is not an easy task to identify false church leaders. The Deltan saying that "Kidie Makanekiri Warri buno egbije Vughierhuero - o". This means that because Warri mechanics are many, it is not easy to identify mad people. Since there are many church leaders, it is not easy to identify the false ones; however, by their fruit, one may know them. The fruit in this regard is the product of the church.

The church is likened to salt factory by Ishola (2013), who notes that leaders are the factory supervisors, maintenance officers, those who make sure the product is well produced, distributed and patronized. Most church products live at variance with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This variation is identified under immoral act by Awoniyi (2017) as adultery, covetousness, election malpractices, drunkenness, extravagance, assassination, fornication, corruption, falsehood, greed, deceit, worldliness, child abuse, dishonesty, wickedness, selfishness, wastefulness, unfaithfulness, abortion, laziness, inordinate ambition, pleasure seeking, promiscuity, arrogance, armed robbery, egoism, individualism, lack of a sense of duty, bribery, un-forgiveness, embezzlement of public funds, kickbacks, oppression, denial of justice, examination malpractices and cultism. The afore-listed vices are some of the traits found in the products of most church leaders in Urhobo land today. Gideon Onorienene, in an interview, narrated what he saw when he was invited to a church programme, stating that the pastor called for those into fraud to submit their phones for prayers that would make their victims to favour them by force. In the same vein, Victor Odogboro shared his experiences with the preacher in a church programme asked worshippers to raise their phones for Holy Ghost alert. In another development, King Efekodo narrated that he was able to sell all his coconut fruits to church members as ordered by their leaders to

be broken at every T-junction with the sum of two hundred naira each. These show that among church leaders in Urhobo, there are false church leaders who are leading people to act contrary to the scriptures. Not only that, there are some church leaders who do not discipline erred members for fear of losing them. Some of them pretend as if nothing was at stake. This could be attributed to church leaders who totally depend on the church for survivor. So, the fear of saying the truth and to act on it are the skills needed to bring food to one's table. Another factor which is responsible for lack of transformation could be the large congregation without correspondent leaders that would care for them, adequately. In most cases, only one leader oversees hundreds and thousands persons under a roof called the church building. This is to the extent that the homes of some members and their names are not known by the church leader(s). Those individuals, if they are not in the church, their leaders will be unaware so long as church activities and services are on. In that case, most people are on their own. One can imagine how long it will take for a baby convert to survive without the assistance of anyone. Such a baby is prone to all things especially negativities that could ruin a society instead of transformation.

Lastly, it appears that the English language is another factor. Most church leaders present their messages and their teachings in English language. They seem to forget the educational levels of their members. They mostly depend on interpreters who may not interpret exactly what the leader is saying. The language of the people is more powerful, understandable than any foreign one. Some may argue that since churches of today are composed of multi-ethnic people, so there is no need for the usage of indigenous language. In this case, one should not forget that the location of a church determines its worshippers. In Urhobo land, majority are the indigenes. What then deprives the leader from holding two services? This will go a long way for better understanding and application of the Word of God, which is the way to transformation.

Urhobo Cultural Parental Leadership

The Urhobo cultural parental leadership like other African parents is part of the guiding roles of a father and mother in a given family. The Urhobo family grows beyond father, mother, and children. This is also true with other African families as Mbiti (1980) posits that in African traditional society, the family includes

children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters. This may suggest that they have the same pattern of parental leadership. In Urhobo culture, parents want their children to behave well, which is also the same with other African parents as documented by Kwame (1996:85) that:

> African parents, like parents in all other societies, want their children to develop good character traits to grow and become worthy, respectful, and respectable adults, and responsible citizens. Character development, accordingly, is an important aspect of the upbringing of children. In this connection, efforts are constantly made to instruct children in the values of the society and to help them acquire the virtues that a person should possess in order to live a most satisfactory life. Folktales are in the traditional setting, an effective means of inculcating the virtues in children. Also, many of the maxims dealing with practical aspects of life appropriate to children such as respect for elders and obligations to blood relatives are used to show children the acceptable standards of social behavior. Children are taught to be kind and to share what they have (or get) with others and not to be selfish. They are exhorted to be obedient to their parents and to respect their elders and thereby, win wither good will and appreciation.

The above assertion pictures the Urhobo cultural parental leadership style in the upbringing of their children with the exception of discipline and leading by example, which children emulate. On discipline, any child who violates the moral standard especially stealing is disciplined in love but if he/she continues in that act, such a child in the village would be humiliated by his/her age group as ordered by the parents. Parents will gather some snail shells to form necklace and used charcoal as face powder with the hand tied behind, and made to dance all over the village while his/her age group would be flogging him/her. The age group will sing a song:

Ochoriojovwo - o
Ujihwere, e-e ero
Ki ri me, uhu-u

In English language, the above song texts mean:

A person who refuses to stop stealing
Will receive beating;
And see with his eyes, shame - e.

The song texts reflect the use of satirical music in regulating morality in African community. At the end of the humiliation, such child is expected to live a better life that would be a pride to the parents and the entire village. Secondly, the traditional Urhobo parents use their mother tongue (language) to bring up their children. It is easier for them to understand and apply the message of their language than any foreign one. As Otite (1982) posits, language is a means of communication, an instrument for a people's organization. Thus, a people instructed in their language are better informed in their language than others. Furthermore, parental leadership in Urhobo culture is a team work. The Urhobo culture permits a man to marry more than one wife, provided he can care for them. Each wife with her children is a gate; and every in gate, the mother does all she can to raise her children in good character which brings good name to the gate and family. No matter the number of children given birth to, the wives would nurse them well and report any abnormal behavior of a child to their husband for proper cautioning or face the wrath of the father. Thus, in Urhobo culture, a man can have many gates or households as Mbiti (1980) puts it, a man can have two or more wives; thus, have many households, since each wife would usually have her own house erected within the same compound where other wives and their households live.

From the above descriptions, church leaders should endeavour to teach their congregations well, discipline in love, minster to those whom they can properly guide or involve other leaders with their job descriptions, when the congregation is large. Church leaders should show good example to others, and use the local language to minister. Though it is possible for a church to have multi-ethnic members which should reflect on the choice of leaders, provided people's dialect is used and finally, people's culture that does not negate the standard of the scripture should be revitalized. David and Bernard (2008) affirm that all cultures are to be judged and affirmed by the Word of God as God's gift, even in their corrupted form. Thus, the writer recommends that there should be church leaders

and parents retreat whereby traditional culture should be taught, so that both could know the relevance of culture in church transformation. Again, church leaders should be role models to their members. More so, in all theological schools, Nigerian people and culture should be included in the curriculum with which many church leaders are taught.

Conclusion

This articled discussed Urhobo culture as tool for church transformation, in view worsening moral decadence in the church and society. It is obvious that many products of the church today live below scriptural standard as contained in Gal. 5:22 "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Conversely, many church members are cleaving to adultery, fornication, un-cleanliness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outburst of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissension, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries and the like (Gals 5:19-21). Romancing with the above flesh desires, transformation of the church will remain impossible; for the church to regain her lost glory, church leaders should engage traditional cultural values to inculcate virtues on the leaders and followers for church transformation.

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