

Voices from the Niger Delta: A Tale of Lay Agents in St. Luke's Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu in Ikwerreland, Nigeria (1904-2014)

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Abstract

Over the decades there has been a paradigm shift in interests, approaches and methods in African Christian Historiography. There is the need for a circumscribed study and documentation of people's engagement and involvements in the Church in Africa. This study, "Stories from the Niger Delta: A Tale of Lay Agents in St. Luke's Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu in Ikwerreland, Nigeria (1904-2014)" illuminate the roles lay agents play in the advent, growth and development of St Luke's Anglican Church Rumuadaolu. Using the historical and sociological methods of inquiry into a religious phenomenon, this study reveals that about two-third of the indigenes of Rumuadaolu are Anglicans. This is due to the amiable activities of lay agents in that community. This study in addition to providing an in depth documentation of the history of St Luke's Anglican Church points out gray areas which the Church authority and members of the St Luke's Anglican Church Rumuadaolu community are to note and effect necessary changes if the St Luke's Anglican Church is to fulfill her divine mission in Rumuadaolu. Members of the Church, St Luke's Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu community and scholars who wish to have a complete view of the turn of events in African Christian historiography would find this study very important.

Keywords: Lay Agents; Anglican Church; Church History

Introduction

The study of religions covers a wide range of interests, approaches and methods that complement each other. Over the decades there has been a shift in such interests, approaches and methods in the study of a religious phenomenon. There were many ways, for instance, of doing Church history. These include the institutional, missionary and nationalist historiographies. The paradigm shift on African Christian historiography no longer focuses on what Western missionaries did and did not do. The contemporary history of the Church in Africa focuses on the roles African and African communities play in carrying out the Great Commission in their various communities. Consequently, this study is poised to address a number of issues that bother on the problems of the place of lay agents in the advent, growth and development of St Luke Anglican Church in Rumuadaolu. What were the initial bottlenecks the lay agents faced in the planting of the Anglican Churches in their community? What efforts have they put so far to promote Anglicanism in their community? What developmental impacts has the Church made in the community? What efforts have the female folks contributed to the development of the Anglican Church in Rumuadaolu community. It is the intention of this study, therefore, to illuminate the roles lay agents have played in the development of St Luke's Anglican Church Rumuadaolu.

Rumuadaolu: A Socio-Religious Overview

Rumuadaolu community is part of the Ikwerre ethnic group. They inhabit the northeastern part of the Niger Delta in the present Rivers State of Nigeria According to K. O

Amadi (1993:34-38), the Ikwerre occupy a unique position on “a frontier society, a geographical, economic and cultural crossroads between the peoples of Igbo hinterland to the North and the Niger Delta communities in the South. Put in terms of longitude and latitude, Rumuadaolu community lies between longitude 6:4 and 7⁰ East and latitude 4⁰45’ and 5,⁰ 15’ north. The language spoken is Ikwerre, a cluster of Igbo, and Ogbah or “Igboid” of the Benue-Congo linguistic group. Historically, Rumuadaolu like other Ikwerre people are predominantly farmers, and even today the economy continues to depend on its production of yam, cassava, maize, palm oil, cocoyam, garri, plantain, banana, vegetables, and other agricultural products. There are also those that are engaged in fishing activities, especially those communities located along the coastlines of the Sombrero and the New Calabar Rivers. The principal town is “Igwuocha” (or Port Harcourt), accessible from air, land, and sea. Migrant workers from other parts of the country have made Port Harcourt a cosmopolitan city. This interaction of both the rural and urban life is part of what makes Ikwerre unique.

The dynamics of Rumuadaolu indigenous society show that it is decentralized and segmental. The absence of any centralized authority does not suppose the absence of leadership. The Rumuadaolu are held together by a pervading influence of kinship and religious ties (Wobasi 1993:51). A more apt description is that Rumuadaolu is an indigenous democratic society. Specifically, in Rumuadaolu, the principal structures of social living are built around the family (*ezi-nuoro*), compound (*rununda*), village (*ngbu*), and the clan (*mbam*). The heads of various households, (*ezi-nu-oro*) discuss the affairs of the units at the sub-lineage, lineage, and the village levels. At this level, every male adult (*rumunda*) is directly involved in the affairs of the group. The head of sub-lineage or lineages (*nye-vu-oro*) presides over the affairs of the group. He is also the custodian of the sacred *owho*, *nu-ogwu* (the symbol of justice and fair play) and mediates between the group and the ancestors (*rukani*). Such issues as marital cases, farmlands, customs and rituals are discussed in this group.

The indigenous Rumuadaolu community is dominated by religion. There is no distinction between the sacred and profane in Rumuadaolu worldview, rather both complement each other. The ontological structure of the Rumuadaolu world has five categories and this is hierarchically controlled. At the apex is the Supreme Being, who is called *Chiokike*, He is neither a “loan” God, nor a being introduced by the missionaries as held by some Western notions (Aderibigbe 2001:148). Beside *Chiokike* are local deities called, “*renwu*.” There is also the belief in spirits (*rumu-renwu*), which inhabit natural objects, and which are personified and religiously manipulated by sacrifices, prayer, *et cetera*. Then there is the cult of the ancestors, known as “*rukani*” and the belief in medicine and magic. In fact, every of their activity is rooted in religion. It is this deep-rootedness in religion that Wotogbe-Weneka (1990:59-60) has in mind when he asserts: “....every Ikwerre man...at the core of his being thinks traditional, behaves traditional, and lives traditional.” Rumuadaolu ontology can be represented graphically in five concentric circles. At the outer shelf is *Chiokike* the creator God. Next to him are the divinities. Then there are the cult of ancestors, which attract food and drinks from man. And then we have the religious specialists, and man at the centre.

Scholarly Writings on Anglicanism in Ikwerreland

Several scholars have written on the subject of Anglicanism. They have discussed the origin of Anglicanism (Neill 1977), its administrative structure (Paul 1980), its source of doctrine (Holloway 1986), the social status and challenges of the Anglican Minister (Towler 1969), its beliefs (Obilon.d) and the changes going on in the Church (Ashton 1988). Several

others have written on the Church in Nigeria (Dauda and Gbule, 2000; Gbule, 2011) drawing attention to the diffusion of Anglicanism in Ikwerreland (Epelle, 1955; Onu 2005).

Epelle (1955) attempted to adduce reasons for the uncertainty of the exact date that Christianity was introduced into Ikwerreland. He has adduced several reasons for this, which range from Ikwerre non-engagement in the slave trade as other coastal communities, and the absence of a central authority in Ikwerre, which would have provided a rallying point to the disinterest shown by the missionary bodies to evangelize the area. But what we might say is that important as these factors are missionary expansion in Nigeria, and indeed, Ikwerreland, was influenced by ecology. In fact, there is a strong relationship between the Church historiography of an area and its geography. Much of Ikwerreland lies outside the coastline and the early missionaries that came to Nigeria used the sea routes when they discovered that the Muslims had captured the trans-Saharan land routes. OgbuKalu (2000) had asserted that “the geographical location of a place was crucial for its Church history.” Ikwerreland is not bounded by the Atlantic Ocean; it will require a number of expeditions before any access could be gained. Accessibility is an important factor in the Church histories of communities; those communities located on the water front came into earlier and consistent contact with external change agents, while those in the hinterland made late contacts. The result of such contacts paid huge dividends: schools, medical facilities, charitable institutions, materials goods, diplomatic and military presence. The Coastal towns became commercial hubs and indigenous peoples became middlemen in trade with the hinterlands. On the Niger Delta, the wealth of Brass produced beautiful Church buildings; hence many invitations for missionaries (Kalu 1978: 316 as cited in Gbule 2011:115).

Gbule (2011) maintains that a survey of the pattern of accession of Anglicanism into Ikwerreland would reveal that while those communities close to the coastal towns of Bonny, Kalabari and Okirika received the Anglican faith from the conversion experiences of itinerant fishermen and traders. Other parts of Ikwerre, especially those located in the hinterlands received Anglicanism as a result of the internal metamorphosis from either the Baptist Church or the United Native African Church, which were formed as an aftermath of the disagreements between James Johnson and the CMS Anglican Mission in the late 1890's. All said, the spread of Anglican Churches in Ikwerreland is best treated by culture area or clan by clan (Onu 2005). This does not suggest that the Church started from a particular Ikwerre town and spread to other towns and villages. Such an evangelistic drive was rare in the formative years of Anglicanism in Ikwerreland. In most cases, the establishment of each Church in each town or village was independent of each other. Much of the studies on the diffusion of Anglicanism in Ikwerreland reveal that the establishment of Anglican Churches in that land was due to a number of factors: the invitation of noble patrons and chiefs, contact with itinerant fishermen and traders, quest for the establishment of schools, healing experiences, rivalry between Christian denominations, etc. Gbule (2011) asserts that evangelistic drive was rare in the formative years of Anglicanism in Ikwerreland. In most cases, the establishment of each Church in each town or village was independent of each other.

Origin and Growth of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu

Much of the information on the origin of St. Luke's Anglican Church Rumuadaolu, is gotten from the Service Programme for the Episcopal Visit of His Grace, the Most Rev. I. C. O. Kattey, JP, for the Foundation laying of the New Church Building and dedication of the New Fence and Gate. Records from the Service Programme shows that through the concerted efforts

of Late Abraham Wichelaru Ekani Nwagwu and some others from Rumuadaolu and Rurnuola who were worshipping at Elikahia in Rebisi, Christian mode of worship was introduced to Rumuadaolu community in 1904. These early believers from Rumuola and Rumuadaolu with the spirit of oneness sited their first place of worship where the Rumunike family is presently occupying.

Due to increase in the number of worshippers they sort for a more spacious area, they relocated to where the Island Stores and Blazier Plaza are presently located. This new site accommodated the Church burial ground, the Church building, the teacher's/Catechist's house, and other workers' houses. These structures constructed with mud/clay were provided through direct labour from the two communities as they were working in one spirit. A person like, Late Elder Paul Worlu Nwagwu was one of those who embraced Christianity. The first Church building as mentioned earlier was built by Rumuola and Rumuadaolu communities with the name-St. Andrew's Church, Rumuola.

The place of worship was still at a temporary place which was not accommodating the worshipers adequately and the catechist residing at another site gave the Church members the concern for construction of a new Church building. As the Rumuadaolu town council noticed this need, the community council formed and inaugurated the Church building committee with Chief F. O. Amadi, the then chairman of the community council as the pioneer chairman of that committee.. He had Mr. Emerson A. Emenike and Uche E. Amadi as Vice Chairman and Secretary respectively. The Chairman engaged the services of Okwosa Engineering Company Limited to supervise the construction work of the Church building up to leveling stage. The chairman, Chief I O. Amadi, donated the materials needed for the foundation work. The Chairman also with Elder Isaiah O. Atuzie and Azirinuotu Women meeting donated one thousand (1000) blocks each for commencement.

It was within this period that some of the leaders and founding fathers, Joshua P Nwagwu, Chief Marcus N. Amadi died. In order to quicken work on the Church building, the community organized many internal launchings and one open launching on 4th September 1993, organised by committee Chairman, Mr. Ferguson A. Amadi with Steve E. Amadi as the Committee Secretary. Nda Aguma was the chairman of the occasion while Hon. A. V. Atuzie was the Chief launcher. Its proceeds enhanced the building project greatly. The 1993/94 building committee Chairman and Secretary F. I. Wagwu and Steven F. Amadi, respectively did a great job by completing the leveling of the Church building and the tower. With the (1994) harvest proceeds of which Hon. A. V. Atuzie was the chairman, and the roofing zinc donated by Rumuomarunma family, the 1995 building committee chairman W.B. Emeto roofed the Church. The Rumuomarunma family also donated additional land space for Church expansion. This gesture was made possible through the endorsement and support of Late Elder D. W. Atuzie, (Nyeweeli Rumuadaolu) as at that time, the eldest in Rumuadaolu.

The harvest committee chairman for 1995, Stanley I. Amadi, Mr. Emerson A. Emenike, Azirinuotu Women Meeting and others resolved that that year's harvest must take place at the new site of the Church; the Azirinuotu meeting embarked on the flooring of the Church building. That year's harvest actually took place at the permanent site on 26th November 1995 after a temporary commission performed by Ven. (Dr) E. C. Ogwo, the then Archdeacon of Port Harcourt Archdeaconry by the order of His Lordship Rt. Rev. S. O. Elenwo. On 23rd November, 1995 the Diocesan Board meeting while sitting considered an application dated 4th November, 1989 for the granting of the Church a parish status. The Parish so granted was inaugurated on 26th November 1999 by His Lordship RT. Rev. S. O. Elenwo (JP).

Since April, 1952 when the Niger Delta Diocese was inaugurated, planting and expansion of Churches has always retained a prominent position as a cardinal objective of the Anglican Communion. This, no doubt, is in direct response to the blessing of increase in the population of Christians of Anglican faith. St. Luke's Anglican Church happens to be a beneficiary of this programme. It all began when Rev. Charles Okoro was posted to St. Luke's Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu Parish in 2012. He brought the idea of Church expansion considering the increase in number of parishioners, the children section and the fact that all the Churches within the vicinity are wearing a new look.

The need to sustain this effort led to his initiating of "Project Offering" every third Sunday of the month to raise funds for building of the Church. With this "Project Offerings," they were able to mould over ten thousand blocks and some rods purchased. During the era of Rev. C. Okoro, the commencement of the fencing of the Church building was approved by His Grace, Most Rev. I. C. O. Kattey (JP). In January 2014, Rev. Charles Okoro was posted to St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Atode Parish, Eleme. In the same month, Rev. Abuoma Samuel E. was posted to take over precisely on 8th January, 2014. The Architect after due consultation with the Vicar and P.C. C. of the Church, reviewed and saw the need for a modification of the formal Church building plan into a 21st century edifice befitting the congregation of God Almighty. The modification plan was also approved by His Grace Most Rev. Ignatius Kattey. Immediately, under the watch of Rev. Abuoma Samuel E., and the works committee, headed by Arch. Habinuchi Emeto swung into action and the foundation for the expansion of this magnificent ultra-modern Church edifice was dug on the 7th day of September 2014 and till date, work has not stopped.

Impact of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu

Every institution has a mark in the society. It may be positive or negative. St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu is no exception to the rule. A preview of the origin of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu shows or proves to the community that the Church started like a mustard seed in the beginning and as time went on during the period of this research work, there is an observation in the community that the Church has grown like a mighty tree and touched the lives of people in Rumuadaolu today. In the light of the above, in this section of the paper, we shall be examining the impact of St Luke Anglican Church on the Rumuadaolu community.

From the beginning of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu the religio-cultural impact permeates the whole endeavour of the Church in the community. The Church's effort is for the people of Rumuadaolu to know God. The Church is remembered for the moral and spiritual influence it exerts in the society. The work of the St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu resulted in the decline of the local deities, which were believed to have given sanction to the traditional morality. In order to encourage members to cultivate higher ideals and higher standards of morality, it then became necessary for St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu to envelop or introduce a number of associations to enhance the spirituality of the men, women, youth and children in the community (Nweke, interview 12/0/15).

St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu is not against culture but frowns at those aspects of culture that work against human development in Rumuadaolu. There are two aspects of socio-cultural impact namely, positive and negative impacts. First and foremost St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu brought a new pattern of life and worship to the converts and people of Rumuadaolu. In the aspect of new cultures and civilization in the community, they added a new dimension to the cultural heritage of the people in Rumuadaolu. Community activities such as

the new yam festival have turned to annual Church harvests. The use of charms, amulets, concoctions and rituals by “Dibias” to fortify the masquerade-dancers and their families are now minimized in the community (Amadi, interview 15/02/15). Again the practice of libation, sacrifices to the divinities and ancestors in the open places has been influenced in Rumuadaolu Community. Most social gatherings are usually commenced with prayers offered to the Christian God. There are, however, some, though very few, who still pour libations. Those in this category are mostly the elderly ones

Some of the positive changes observed in Rumuadaolu today are as a result of the advent of the Anglican Church that saw the anti-Christian practices as activities that do not give glory to God. It is worthy of note to state that the Anglican Church in Rumuadaolu introduced Western education in that community. The formal education given to children was coupled with Christian teachings and the doctrines of the Anglican Church. Therefore, at the end of their school career, children are turned out as trained Anglican faithful. Enyindah (interview 20/02/15) laments that certain activities such as burials, marriages, chieftaincy installations, “Iriji” festivals, have been Anglicized. Such activities which were initially conducted by traditional priests are now handled by the clergy. A good example is burial rites. Most Anglican converts in Rumuadaolu bury their deceased in Christian ways. These Christian injunctions reshaped their socio-cultural practices in line with the Christian belief, doctrine up till today. In addition, there are instances of inter-religious crises in the areas of marriage, burial and dedication. Conflict arose between the Church and traditional institutions in the land. A good example is in the area of marriage. The negligence of the Church to follow the traditional method of marriage contract has in a number of cases resulted in conflict of interest between the parents of the bride and the Church. It is reported also that there was a case of incest because the couple did not care to find out the ancestry of their would-be partners (Opkara interview 14/03/15).

Eleanya (interview 15/03/15) observed that most of the adherents of the Church are in positions of authority in the government of the day. These are either those who attended Anglican schools in the mid nineteenth century or who thought the knighthood obtained links to enviable positions in the government both at the local, state and federal levels. The Church, in respect to contemporary electoral campaigns condemns political thuggery, election rigging and other electoral malpractices. Also the Church has always prayed for the people in position of authority in Rumuadaolu. In Nigeria generally, since bad governance affects its members negatively, the Church always prayed against bad and dictatorial leadership in Rivers State and Nigeria as a whole. Many other converts to the Church served in various capacities, contributing to the political development of Rumuadaolu. The presence of the Church has made the people to be law abiding citizens.

Summary and Conclusion

Several volumes have been written on the history of Anglican Churches in Ikwerreland, the fact remains, that St Luke’s Anglican Church Rumuadaolu is mentioned often briefly in passing. No indepth study has been carried out on the roles of lay agents on the growth and development of St Luke’s Anglican Church Rumuadaolu. This work, “Stories from the Niger Delta: A Tale of Lay Agents in St. Luke’s Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu in Ikwerreland, Nigeria (1904-2014)”, has discussed origin of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu. The factors and antecedents that led to its establishment have been highlighted. The historical origin and growth of St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu firstly brought about positive impact in Rumuadaolu with respect to the religio-cultural, social, political and the economic lives of the

people. This study reveals that most of the construction achievements recorded by the St. Luke' Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu, were due to efforts made by the members of the Church. From the establishment of the Church to date, the Church has continued to influence the members of the Rumuadaolu community. The Church has contributed greatly to the social, spiritual and moral development of Rumuadaolu community. We have seen that Church in any community affects the development of that community in all ramifications. Our evidence has also shown that the Anglican Church is one of the first Christian denominations to come to Rumuadaolu. It has come to stay and there are prospects pointing to its growth. A number of Rumuadaolu people are Anglicans. The planting of St Luke's Anglican Church in Rumuadaolu also encountered problems such as financial difficulty. St Luke's Rumuadaolubuiltprimary and nursery schoolsto stamp out ignorance and illiteracy. This changed the wellbeing of the people, economically, socially and religiously

This study in addition to providing an indepth documentation of the history of St Luke's Anglican Church points out gray areas which the Church authority and members of the St Luke's Anglican Church Rumuadaolu community are to note and effect necessary changes if the St Luke's Anglican Church is to fulfill her divine mission in Rumuadaolu. We, therefore, recommend that:

1. St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu should set up mathematical classes, more vocational and industrial schools which should be used to increase the number of young converts into the Anglican faith.
2. The Church should also use the Knights and Christian leaders to spread the gospel in Rumuadaolu Community.
3. The researcher recommends the Church to build a microfinance bank which will help their fellow Christians and the Rumuadaolu people to save money that will enable them solve their personal and family problems, as well as their community development projects when the need arises.
4. St Luke Anglican Church, Rumuadaolu should establish evening services every Sunday. This strategy will enable all the people whose nature of job does not allow to attend Sunday morning services to do so. The evening services on Sundays also will accommodate the elderly who find it difficult to wake up very early for the morning services.
5. The Church should avoid discriminations with other denominations in their doctrines and socio-cultural activities that deal with the welfare and wellbeing of the people in Rumuadaolu Community.

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