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THE PROLIFERATION OF RURAL RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND THE UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES (A STUDY OF ETIM EKPO, NIGERIA)

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ABSTRACT: *The study investigates the proliferation of religious organisations in Etim Ekpo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The effects of the multiplicity of these organisations on the social well-being of the area are examined. Interviews with a purposive sample of 56 resident clergy and 210 lay faithful of various denominations, along with the participant observation technique, confirmed the proliferation of these organisations, showing as many as 470 religious bodies among its population of 200,000. Socially, these religious bodies have contributed marginally and that only in the areas of education and health care. The poor performance is seen as related to the excessive abundance of these organisations in the area which in turn results in low memberships per congregation. The negative effect of scanty populations per congregation is felt heavily in the area of funding which in turn impacts adversely on development efforts. Proposed solutions include: (i) expanding the self-understanding of religious organisations to include their roles as development agents, and (ii) controlling further multiplication of rural churches by government through the requirements of permits and licences of registration before operation. That way, the number will be reduced and their impact more positive.*

Keyword: *Religious Organisation*

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate more research on the role of religious organizations in the rural community. Within this context lies the important question of institutional relevance, or otherwise, of rural based religious organizations to their host communities. The writer's attention was drawn to the subject, less by an abstract interest in the role of the religious institution in social life than by his curiosity concerning the proliferation of churches in the local government area of interest, (Etim Ekpo). The following discussion therefore is limited in application to the local government in question and, perhaps, any rural communities with comparable landscape. The study is further provoked by

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an interest in scholarly reports which suggest serious implications for the field of sociology of religion in general and the specific area of the social relevance of religion for rural dwellers. The research findings by scholars include, among others: (a) That in the U.S. small villages with 500 persons, or less, tend to have 2.5 to 3 times as many churches per 100 persons as larger villages and towns (Douglas and Burner, 1935; Ekong, 1983), (b) That the proliferation of religious organizations in a particular community distracts from, rather than enhance, community development and consciousness (Ekong, 1983) and (c) That membership in religious organizations, that is, religious experience, may be the result of economic distress (Holt, 1940).

Consistent with the above theoretical issues, the major objectives of the study are: (i) to identify the number of religious organizations in the above local government area in proportion to the overall population, (ii) to determine the underlying causes of the proliferation, if any, of the religious organizations in the area, (iii) to determine the contributions of these organizations in the social sector and (iv) to assess the extent to which rural poverty as experienced by the people of Etim Ekpo local government area has contributed to an enhanced membership in the rural churches of this local government.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Religious Organizations are considered to be those formally established religious bodies which maintain positive relationships with their social environment. In contrast to sects or cults, such organizations endorse existing political and social arrangements and are in turn given official recognition by the state because of their disposition to contribute to meaningful social progress. Unlike sects, they are considered "life-encompassing" formal institutions (Swatos, 1975) centred around a sacramentally-based system of offices and their occupants, and possessing a sociological nature that is clearly distinctive and visible (Valliar, 1970). Their historical interest in the social well-being of their lost communities has been testified in the literature by some analysts. (Berger and Neuhaus, 1981; Umoh, 1985; Luckman, 1975, etc).

Unfortunately, less systematic sociological research has been devoted to religion than to any other major social institution in the society. Particularly lacking, as observed long ago by Lenski (1963), are studies of the interrelations between modern religious institutions and other basic institutional systems. The present writer thinks that although a theory that maintains a continuous and systematic interest in the interaction of religion and society seems to be difficult to develop (Yinger, 1970), it is no sufficient excuse for a total neglect of the area. Consequently,

it is hoped that the present effort would contribute towards a theoretical advancement in the area.

In the area of rural/community development in particular, two conflicting positions are identified in the literature concerning the role of the religious organization. On the one hand, it is maintained that if efforts by these rural-based organizations were well directed, the results would help community residents to achieve a more meaningful existence and become more responsible to an expanding common good (Biddle and Biddle, 1965). Others, instead, claim that contemporary society is undergoing an institutional differentiation under which traditional religion is becoming increasingly autonomous and decreasingly relevant (Ekong, 1983).

From these theoretically contrasting positions, the following propositions are formulated for investigation: Do rural religious organizations contribute to the social development of their host communities? Does the increase in number of rural religious organizations lead invariably to a decrease in both quantity and quality of community facilities and amenities? How do these organizations attempt to provide social amenities to their host communities? Do these organizations perceive their involvement in the social sector as part of their functions? What types of programmes do they offer-for example, counseling, support groups, institutional building etc? Do these organizations engage in educational empowerment of the rural people? Do their various religious groups engage in community development efforts through the provision of social amenities? If yes, what types of programmes do they provide? How do they perceive their churches involvement in the social sector? What specific programmes do they benefit from? To what extent do these programmes improve their social well-being?

METHODS

Being primarily a social survey, the use of the interview instrument, rather than the questionnaire, for data collection was preferred. This was to ensure the involvement of the uneducated residents of the local government. Consistent with the type of questions, the instrument which was administered with the help of three research assistants comprised two sets of questions: (a) interviews with a purposive sample of fifty-six (56) clergy of the various denominations, and (b) interviews with a purposive sample of two hundred and ten (210) lay faithful.

Interviews with the clergy centred on issues concerning their perception of the need for religious organizations to be involved with social (non-religious) issues, the specific programmes offered by their churches, their relationships with co-pastors of other denominations (for joint action), the size of their congregations, their primary sources of funding, and the demographic profiles of

their congregations (age/sex-ratio, etc). Interviews with the lay faithful, on the other hand, sought answers to issues such as the extent of the churches concern over their social welfare, the level of community integration resulting from the church's social undertakings, and their perception of the church's involvement in non-spiritual matters. In addition to information gathered via interviews, and being a case study design, participant observation also proved quite useful as some of the questions relate to amorphous social experiences. This back-up technique accorded the researcher the opportunity not only to observe but also to match the reported responses with experience on ground as well as authenticate the actual beneficiaries of the social facilities so reported.

RESULT OF FINDINGS

Etim Ekpo, one of the thirty-one local government areas of Akwa Ibom State, as at 2004 when this study was conducted, had an estimated population of 200,000 based on the 1991 Population census (Local Government Census News, 1991). This population estimate has been in use pending the next population exercise projected for January 2005 and currently ongoing. It is made up of 5 clans-Ika Annang, Utu, Ikono, Obong and Uruk-with a total number of 72 villages. With the combined effort of the three research assistants and the information provided by the resident pastors, four hundred and seventy (470) religious bodies comprising different congregations were identified. These congregations are catered for by two hundred and twelve (212) resident pastors.

Table I: Number of Villages, Churches and Resident Pastors Per Clan in Etim Ekpo Local Government Akwa State.

S/N	Clan	No. of Villages	No. of Churches	No. of Resident Pastors
1.	Ika Annang	5	41	27
2.	Utu	14	99	52
3.	Ikono	14	92	39
4.	Obong	22	130	54
5.	Uruk	17	108	40
	Total	72	470	212

The study considered it unnecessary to discriminate between the different types of religious denominations since this is not a study on levels of religiosity nor on the inner logic of denominational persuasions. However, the differences in the degree of social impact of certain religious groups over others were noted. For

example, the Catholic church was overwhelmingly ahead of any other single denomination in the provision of schools and health care services, the only two areas of social involvement observed in this local government. Uniquely she was responsible for the establishment of nine (9) of the twelve (12) church-sponsored schools and the only one hospital in the area. Others, like the Jehovah's Witness and the Soul Lovers Assembly went no further than their spiritual mission of conversion and preaching of the Word. It is worth noting that other areas of social concern, e.g. institutional building, support groups and counseling services were observed to be completely overlooked, not only by the religious organizations but also by the government.

Table 2 below shows that in Etim Ekpo local government area, there are a total of forty-eight (48) schools made up of six (6) secondary schools and forty-two (42) primaries. All six of the secondary schools are established by the government while 12 (28.5%) of the forty-two primaries are church-owned. However, in line with the state policy on education, all the mission schools have been taken over by the government, though the credit still belongs to the religious organizations for their initial initiative.

Table 2: Number of Social Institutions (Schools and Health Services) and Types of Proprietorships in Etim Ekpo L. G. A.

S/N	Type of Social Institutions	Government sponsored	Church sponsored	Total
1.	Schools	36	12	48
2.	Health Services	6	1	7
3.	Others	-	-	-
	Total	42	13	55

In the area of health services provision, table 2 further shows that there is a total of seven (7) health care units in Etim Ekpo local government. Two of these are hospitals while five operate as health centres. One of the two hospitals is owned by the government and the other by a religious body. That there are no other kinds of social services provisions either by the government or by a religious organization has already been noted. This situation suggests that except for schools and health care services, there is a rather low presence of both government and church in this part of Akwa Ibom State in matters of social amenities.

Infrastructurally, it was observed that Etim Ekpo local government also suffers from a locational disadvantage compared to other local government areas of Akwa Ibom State. Within the local government, for instance, one finds no simple kilometer stretch of motorable road linking its villages with the local government

headquarters at Utu Etim Ekpo, nor with each other. Consequently, the local government, in every intent and purpose, is isolated from the neighbouring local governments of Ukanafun, Ika, Abak and Ukwá East of Abia and Andoni of rivers State. This situation hampers in no small measure the economic activities of the residents, making life unbearably difficult for this rural populace due to transportation problems.

The effect of infrastructural underdevelopment is seen to negatively spill over to other areas of social life. For example, the 2004 national immunization exercise recorded a less than 60% success rate due to poor transportation network across the local government. Low returns on the number of infants benefiting from the exercise were reported by the health personnel because a number of households could not be reached. Recently, however, the headquarters at Utu Etim Ekpo has been connected to the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) but the bulk of the villages in the rural areas are yet to be linked to the headquarters.

DISUSSION OF FINDINGS

The thrust of this research has been to determine the number of religious organizations, or congregations in Etim Ekpo local government area and to assess their social contributions towards the development of the area. With the use of the interview instrument on a purposive sample of 156 clergy and 210 of the lay faithful, 470 religious bodies were identified across the local government. This figure averages 425.5 different persons per congregation, indicating a rather high incidence of religious organizations or groupings for the local government of the size of Etim Ekpo given its population of 200,000.

As for their social contributions, both the oral interviews and observation disclosed that the only areas of involvement of these religious bodies are in the education and health sectors. Even here only 12 (28.5%) of the 48 schools and one (14%) of the seven health establishments were mission-owned. This portrays a negligible impact of religious organizations on issues of social services provision. Furthermore, with as many as 72 villages in the local government (table 1) sharing a total of 48 schools (six secondary and forty-two primaries) in the area, it means that as many as 24 villages have neither secondary nor primary educational institutions in their communities. The situation is worse in the health sector where there are only 7 health centres to service the 72 villages of 200,000 people—a regrettable average of 2857 people per health unit which, for the most part, is poor in both facilities and staff strength.

Although the present set of data does not permit statistical comparison with an urban environment in terms of the frequency of religious organizations.

the presence of 470 religious bodies among a rural population of 200,000 certainly portrays a high frequency. As for the findings by Douglas and Burner (Cited in Ekong, 1983) that in the U.S. small villages tend to have 2.5 to 3 times as many churches per 100 persons as larger villages and towns, this study found little support. This is not surprising because in Southern Nigeria religious proliferation is as much a problem in the town as in the hinterland (Udoette, 2002).

However, some interesting similarities with the Douglas and Burner study can still be noted. For example, in Abak urban, the closest town to Etim Ekpo local government area with semi-urban characteristics, there are seven (7) churches servicing the nearly 6000 inhabitants (Udoette, 2002). This figure compares negatively with the 470 churches catering for the 200,000 inhabitants of Etim Ekpo local government area. This means that while there is an average of 857 members per congregation in Abak town, the corresponding figure for Etim Ekpo local government area as a rural environment is 425 members per congregation since the more the number of churches in an area, the less the number of persons per congregation.

The problem of low membership per congregation as a consequence of religious proliferation as suggested by this study has an obvious implication for development. Obviously, small size congregations in poor communities cannot afford the financial ability to embark on any meaningful projects, nor engage in any economic ventures. In fact, interviews with the clergy revealed that the few primary schools and the only one health care unit in the local government owned by the churches were initiated and sustained by those religious bodies that have external linkages with more viable cognate bodies. In fact, some pastors disclosed that about 90% of rural churches derive funds through voluntary donations by the members who are themselves poor.

Some reasons have been suggested in support of the proliferation of churches in Etim Ekpo local government area. One of such reasons traces the unfortunate development to the spill-over effect of its historical appendage to former Abak local government area which had for years been associated with this phenomenon (Udoette, 2002; Mbon, 1984). Others see it as caused by poverty. This latter position was supported by the interviews during which it was claimed that some of the pastors are business drop-outs who seek refuge and means of livelihood in religious commercialism. The residents disclosed further that in their desire to attract adherents, some of the congregations with external linkages promise loans for business and other material benefits. Such promises understandably would drive the poor people to go in search of churches for perceived material returns.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has given some insights into Etim Ekpo local government area of Akwa Ibom State and other rural communities with similar characteristics on the role of religious organizations in matters of rural community development. Etim Ekpo local government area is seen to be bombarded with too many religious bodies relative to its population. This proliferation of religious organizations in the local government has, in turn, impacted negatively on its developmental profile. The religious organizations themselves have been seen to contribute little towards the development of the community especially in the area of the provision of social amenities toward the promotion of poverty alleviation.

From both the interviews and observation, the local government is seen to be neglected by the government of the day on such important social issues like availability of pipe borne water, electricity and road maintenance. This poor condition has driven the people to go in search of both consolation and means of livelihood in the churches, which in turn has led to unnecessary multiplication of these organizations. In order to improve the poor condition of the people, and reap some benefits from the presence of the religious organizations, the following recommendations are proffered:

Religious organizations should see their mission as a genuine call to liberate the whole person, body and soul, from misery so that their efforts at evangelizing may not be seen as hypocritical.

Efforts by religious bodies towards the provision of social services in rural communities should be encouraged and supported by both local and state governments since these organizations are closer to the people than the civil governments, being grassroots organizations.

The religious organizations should consider themselves to be not only instruments of spiritual salvation but also agents of community development so as to demonstrate their good intention towards the people's welfare.

The various religious bodies should operate as partners in progress, jointly drawing up workable plans of action, rather than function independently, thereby duplicating effort.

The government should direct more positive policies towards the provision of social amenities in Etim Ekpo local government area and endeavour to monitor their implementation every step of the way.

Finally, the government should control the indiscriminate founding of churches through the requirements of licences and permits of registration in order to control the promeration of churches which in turn undermine community development.

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