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A Trio-Model for Socio-Religious Intervention in the Religious Culture of Annang People: Hemadep¹ Initiative

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Introduction

The religious cultural practices of divinations, consultations of oracles and reliance on institutionalized Sacred Specialists to give answers to most problems of life is deep-rooted in the traditional religious spirituality of the Annang people. Parrinder's 1975 observation succinctly describes the religious cultural tendencies of the people: the Sacred Specialists are consulted:

*If anything is lost, if a barren woman desires children, if there is a mysterious disease, if a man is troubled by strange dreams and for many other causes....at all important crises of life, at birth to discover the appropriate name to give the child, at betrothal to find the right husband, at death to find who caused the death...*²

Surveying our research area, approximately fifty four years after Parrinder's research, reveals that a lot has happened to and for the people: industrialization, technology, improved social services, globalization, education, wars, politics: democracy, researches³ etc. Despite all these, the cultural reliance on institutionalized Sacred Specialists to solve all problems of life still grips the people, sometimes to an absurd level. Many Christians in this area of study have imbibed these tendencies from the traditional religious sensitivity. In the present era of multifarious religious ferment, any person that identifies himself or herself as a religious leader or Sacred Specialists has an uphill task: to put on a spiritual spectacle to solve all human problems ranging from prediction of the future, uncovering hidden events, healing all diseases, smelling out witches, in brief, he or she is expected to see 'tomorrow' and know all things. In other words, the common trend being that most adherents and leaders of the present day religious groups are deeply influenced by the traditional religious and cultural practices described above and prefer to bring issues to a spiritual level and find Satan and witches behind every problem they have. The most feared of all the spiritual agents of evil are the witches and wizards. Perhaps Ukpong had a point when he noted that "In Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, the fear of Witches and Wizards appears to be the beginning

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of wisdom as most murders are committed in its name"⁴ When issues are spiritualized, it is only logical to conclude spiritual solutions are sought.

The religious culture of spiritualization of issues can and does divert attention from the true causes of the people's problems. For instance, health problems may be due to inadequate access to safe water, deficiency of diet, lack of medical care, lack of education, poverty, unemployment and poor hygienic conditions and so on. Many of these are consequences of more basic causes: corruption, mismanagement and disorder of international relations. But some Religious Leaders and Sacred Specialists prefer to give religious interpretations to all these problems thereby perpetrating undue reliance on themselves primarily for economic advantages thereby compounding the people's problems.

This is the religious cultural context, this research originates. The purpose of this paper is to present HEMADEP's trio- model as alternative ways of dealing with localized human problems rather than spiritualizing them. The models developed will help people caught in the religious cultural quandary overcome the over dependent on Sacred Specialists with their subjective religious cultural practices. This article is arranged in three sections. The first section is the description of the religious culture of the study area. The second and the last section followed by the conclusion present HEMADEP and the trio-model for socio-religious intervention in a religious culture of the Annang people of Akwa Ibom State.

The Religious Culture of the Study Area

The areas of study for this research in Annangland of Akwa Ibom State⁵ are Ikot Abia and Amayan clans. Being a homogeneous people in culture, the religious aspiration, practices and worldview does not differ at all. The areas chosen for this study are rural communities where basic amenities: light, water, good roads, hospitals etc are still at a minimal level. As a developing economy, much of the social services are still lacking. Education which is the key to development is not free and so not affordable to all the growing children. Children whose parents are unable to send them to school suffer immensely, taking to street trading or recruited as menial workers in more developed cities. Medical and social services are not free and therefore not easily affordable for those who may want them. Everyone has to survive by individual means. Witch-talk, attribution of unfortunate events, deaths, barrenness, accidents, sickness etc to agents of evil are house hold discussions. Numerous independent religious groups and sacred specialists that supposedly help people to uncover sources of evils are common in the area. Some old people and even young children have been abandoned as witches. The Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) a Non-Government Organization in Akwa Ibom

¹ E. G. Parrinder *African Traditional Religion*. Sheldon Press London, Ibid P. 120 1975.

² Our team has conducted lots of research to find out the important part religion plays in society. Such research has been sponsored by the McArthur Foundation, Program for Appropriate Technology in Health. World Bank Sponsored HIV/AIDS Project.

⁴ Ukpong Cletus, *Witchcraft Incorporated*, in Insider -Nigerian Weekly Magazine, No. 35, P. 18 September 1, 2003.

⁵ The Annang people of Akwa Ibom State occupy eight out of the thirty one Local Government Areas of the State. They are homogenous in culture. They are the second largest ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State.

State presently has gathered over 300 children for education and protection abandoned by parents on the allegation by religious leaders and other Sacred Specialists that they are witches. This is flashing picture of the religious culture of the study area.

In sum, the area of study is dominated by many religious groups, mostly Independent Christian denominations that have been tinted with the cultural practices of spiritualization of issues. *Ufok Akam Akpan Udoma*⁶ is an example of typical religious groups that suits our interest of study. During our field work, statistics gathered revealed that people flock to him from established churches for a wide range of problems including: pre-natal and post natal issues, Chronic fever, internal heat, constant severe headache, land disputes, presumed spiritual attack on persons, business and on property, desire for favour from people, fertility, marriage, persistent sickness, paralyses, legal battles among others. The study of the approaches used by *Akpan Udoma* in his religious endeavour reveals a basic conception that guides his work for his clients. According to him:

*The universe is a spiritual universe and every thing that happens in the physical is a reflection of spiritual reality. God meant people to enjoy good health, wealth and happiness and freedom from problems. The absence of these is indication that the enemy - Satan and Witches are on the path way, and these must be tackled spiritually*⁷.

He went further to explain that this is why he prefers to prescribe spiritual religious assignments⁸ for his clients in the bid to alleviate their social, economic, political and health problems or conditions.

I held sessions with the pregnant women found in this prayer house to study Akpan Udoma's procedures with his clients. Common feature was fasting and prayers. The fasting period could span from 6.00 am till 6.00pm in duration of seven days, fourteen days or twenty-one days depending on his judgment. The reason the Leader of this Prayer House subjects these clients to rigorous fasting is to ensure that they gain enough spiritual energy to withstand their enemies in the journey through pregnancy to delivery. According to him, women under pregnancy are very susceptible to spiritual attacks by evil forcers. In some cases, the women are not allowed to receive visitors from their homes for fear that they could be agents of the evil one. Every item brought to the clients is spiritually diagnosed to ensure that it is free from evil. Depending on the state of discovery, the items may or may not be passed on to the clients. Furthermore, I also encountered clients with chronic fever.

Most of them were given several days of dry fasting and prayers. One of the clients informed me that the Spiritualist had diagnosed that his enemies had put him in a spiritual oven hence the internal heat always experienced.

Again, land ownership system in the area of study is a real problem. This is to say that disputes with regard to land ownership are common. Land disputes sometimes lead to fatal consequences if not properly resolved. I discovered during this research that clients flock to this Spiritualist to help them determine what needs be done to retain the land they believe is theirs when there is crisis of ownership. Although the spiritualist is not a member of the family with land dispute, he is expected to put on his *spiritual spectacle* to tell who rightly owns a disputed land. Akpan Udoma in an interview session claims he has the spiritual powers to know it all even without historical records of the land owners.

In our socio-cultural and religious climate, barrenness is most often than not attributed to the evil attack of enemies as well as of witches and so on. Consequently, some women prefer to seek the help of religious experts they believe can see beyond the ordinary and proffer spiritual solutions to their problems. We noted a wide range of religious therapy given to the barren women we met at this centre to help achieve pregnancy. Akpan Udoma sees the witches as the chief agents causing infertility in women. His prescription for women seeking pregnancy is mostly fasting and prayers.

For most rural women in the area of study, marriage is so important in their lives that every effort is made to get married. Socially, unmarried women are seen as misfit in the society and considered to be of easy virtue. This issue too has been moved to the realm of spirituality and is among the cases that Akpan Udoma handles. Again fasting and prayers are recommended among other religious prescriptions. This is not all; I also encountered many clients with various bad health conditions. They were admitted for treatment at Akpan Udoma's place in the hope that the benevolence influence of the Spirit of God in the Prayer House would make them well again.

Akpan Udoma religious group and many others of like tendencies are unable to see beyond the spirits as agents of problems and evil.

HEMADEP

The Leadership Development Skills which led to the foundation of HEMADEP by the author of this work was realized through the *Fund for Leadership Development* [FLD] provided by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation few years ago. HEMADEP is an acronym of Human Empowerment and Development Project. It is registered as an Incorporated Trustee with the Corporate Affairs Commission of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, IT/CERT. NO. 15,199. HEMADEP is non-governmental, non-religious, non-partisan, not-for-profit-making, educational, research and philanthropic organization. It has as its major objectives; promoting and empowering the youths, children and women on sexual and reproductive health issues in order to improve the quality of life for the enhancement of their economic, social and political welfare for building a better nation; promoting skills acquisition of young people as an alternative means of

⁶ It was begun by Akpan Udoma a native of Ikot Osurua, a village in our area of study.

⁷ This is a extract from an interview with Akpan Udoma on 8th August 2007.

⁸ These are ordinary activities with religious connotation usually prescribed by a church leaders or their Spiritual Aide-de-camp to be done in order to bring down spiritual blessings better the social, economic, political and health conditions of a person seeking help from the Spiritualists.

livelihood, enlightening particularly the rural dwellers on female reproductive health issues. It also focuses on education programme on faith-based organization particularly those who see Satan at work in every crises or problems of life. It empowers and encourages male involvement, participation and commitment in female reproductive health issues.

HEMADEP's vision is to build a dynamic, gender conscious and empowered human communities based on respect for the rights of girls and women for sustainable development. HEMADEP's interest is also focused on eliminating undue social and health problems perpetrated by Nativistic Religious Group. The mission of HEMADEP is to empower women and men in our societies through workshops, seminars, church-based programmes, school-based programmes, educational research, social actions, recreational opportunities and health information to make informed decisions about their lives. HEMADEP works closely with and for Faith Based Organizations to achieve its goals for a better society: important of which is to dissuade undue spiritualization of issues.

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MODEL 1: Faith-Building Education Programme *sans*⁹ Intermediaries.

HEMADEP considers this faith-building model a very important one in a sensitive religious culture. The dominant faith in our research area is the Christian faith, therefore, I used examples from the Christian Scripture for this model. The New Testament has records of numerous people who received healing or other redemptive needs through Divine Intervention by absolute display of faith. This kind of faith in most cases has not been noted to be through an Intermediary. HEMADEP therefore considers that the Christian Faith-building Education Programme *sans* is a paramount model that should be encouraged. These examples cited below prove that Faith-building without an Intermediary is possible and also important.

- a. Luke 8: 40-48 recounts the story of the woman who had suffered a haemorrhage for twelve years and could not receive any cure from all known medical services at the time. This is to say that no one was able to cure her. In this situation she sought divine intervention where medical science failed and received the much desired cure. She did not go through an Intermediary. She approached Jesus directly in a personal faith that worked for her.
- b. Luke 8: 49-56 also narrates the raising to life of Jairus' daughter. Again Jairus went to Jesus directly and got his dead daughter raised to life without Intermediary.

There are many examples of this kind in the Christian Scripture to discourage over dependant on human Sacred Specialists. In these two episodes, divine interventions are received *sans* Intermediary.

⁹ *Sans* is a French word for "without"

HEMADEP took off from here and embarks on education on faith-building to encourage people in a pluralistic religious milieu to build the faith that can help them achieve what they want. This model adapted by HEMADEP discourages undue dependency on Sacred Specialists as is common in the area of this research. The motive of the Sacred Specialists can be anything other than spiritual assistance of their clients for instance, economic interest cannot be ruled out in the activities of the Sacred Specialists. This model can also keep clients from falling victims to Sacred Specialists who may have what I described above as sick religiosity that can result in untold social problems of destruction of lives and property.

MODEL 2: Reproductive Health and Civic Education Programme.

This model was considered by HEMADEP as very crucial model that religious groups could adopt for their adherents. This is due to the fact that during the field experience, HEMADEP had discovered that most of the problems for which the people search after divine intervention circle around reproductive health issues and most are preventable evil that need not be pushed to the door step of Satan. These are practical issues that can be tackled with education and informed decisions. The issues of Reproductive health circle around the very centre of human life and the components include:

- a. Safe motherhood (prenatal care, safe delivery by skilled attendants, prenatal and neonatal care, postnatal care and breastfeeding)
- b. Family planning information and services
- c. Prevention and Management of Infertility and sexual dysfunction in both men and women
- d. Prevention and Management of the complications of Abortion
- e. Prevention and Treatment of Reproductive Tract Infections-sexually transmitted infections, including HIV infections and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)
- f. Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health-promotion of healthy sexual maturation, responsible and safe sex
- g. Elimination of Harmful Practices such as female genital mutilation, premature marriage, and domestic and sexual violence against women
- h. Screening for Reproductive Tract Cancers- prostate, Breast, cervix and Management of Reproductive conditions associated with Andropause and Menopause.
- i. Gender Equity: meeting reproductive right issues of men, male involvement-responsibilities and participation, girl-child education, status of women, Reproductive Rights¹⁰.

Whenever there are crises in this area of human life, most Nativistic Religious Leaders believe that the devil and witches are at work.

¹⁰ Components of Reproductive Health issued by Reproductive Health Division, CDPA, Federal Ministry of Health, Nigeria and WHO (World Health Organization).

With the support from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, HEMADEP designed a project as a model for religious groups to learn to improve their services to their clients: Church Peer Education Network for Reproductive Health. This project was designed to mobilize Churches to intervene in the Reproductive Health crises affecting members rather than raise everything to the spiritual level. The components of Comprehensive reproductive health issues as described above was organized for the Adolescents and young adults with the reproductive ages of 13-49 to ensure that they live in a state of mental, social, physical and sexual well being within their respective religious contexts. This is because: it had been observed that Churches are the main industries in Annangland. This anecdotal reference no doubt shows the central place of the churches in communications, education, and social organization and control in the area. The Church remains an important medium of putting significant issues across to the people. HEMADEP undertook this project because of the realization that issues of sexuality and reproductive health are masked in the churches, some out-rightly absolve themselves of engaging in it or discussing it. Artificial taboos and prejudice exist around this most important subject. Consequently, at the observable level, crises of reproductive health stare daily on the face because young people are denied information about sexuality and the older members may not know much either. Members of these Churches particularly the adolescents and women in the rural areas cannot make informed decisions about their sexuality and marriage. Many adolescents and young women have lost their lives because they did not have access to timely information and services that could improve their knowledge. Adolescents and young adults are ignorant of the significance of reproductive health; teenage pregnancies and unsafe abortion are on the increase. And the Churches appear unconcerned and dismiss these unfortunate victims as disloyal members. There are also cases of people living with HIV/AIDS. In all these cases, seeking divine intervention may be diverting attention from the real causes of reproductive health issues. Comprehensive Sexuality and reproductive health education as modeled by HEMADEP is indispensable for Religious Organizations. HEMADEP has organized workshops, seminars, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and also taught many churches how to address the reproductive health issues among their members. This could be emulated by Religious Organizations. It is important to encourage Churches to focus on reproductive health care issues so that members can make informed decisions about their lives and avoid undue spiritualization of issues. It is hoped that this model if adhered to will help solve the numerous problems of people that drive them to seek spiritual solution that sometimes divert attention from authentic causes of reproductive health crises.

MODEL 3: Poverty Reduction Programme

In another vein, poverty is at the root of most problems of the people. HEMADEP tackled this by collaborating with agencies to help in poverty reduction and possible eradication. Religious Organizations need to constantly work at poverty reduction because poverty can lead to many social crises and encourage people to spiritual issues. HEMADEP partnered with Federal Government of Nigeria and

other International Organizations to address the issue of poverty in a pluralistic religious milieu. Presently, HEMADEP has assisted in implementing the following projects in order to reduce poverty and work of community liberation: ♦ Primary Schools Renovations ♦ Water/Sanitation Projects ♦ Market projects for economic improvement ♦ Health Centre Renovation and many more. It is my belief that with the reduction of poverty, people's way of life and attitude will change significantly. It is also assumed that poverty reduction will have great influence on the religious sensitivity and practices of the people.

Conclusion

In the religious culture described above, our research findings were gathered. The significant fact noted being that the apparent ability of any founder or leader of any religious group in prediction of the future, uncovering the past, determining the sources of problems, sickness, failures in life and detecting and fishing out witches makes him or her a very popular figure in the religious and social life of the people in the study area. The categories of religious leaders that subject every event in life to spiritual interpretations are in the habit of encouraging their clients to seek only spiritual solutions to events in life. When nearly every issue is subjected to religious interpretations by religious leaders, one basic problem arises: diverting attention from the true causes of human problems in society; this further leads to more numerous social and health crises among the people. In the same vein, orthodox medication is often disregarded and *religious assignments*¹¹ encouraged instead. In this religious culture and practice of spiritualization of issues, so many lives have been lost, filial, marital and business relationships have also been broken.

What is bothersome in this religious culture is that in this 21st century, when many communities in the world are reaching the peak of scientific and technological development, these categories of religious leaders are drawing the society back into primitiveness, superstitious tendencies, fetish practices and witchcraft talks that can do no more than lead to broken social relationships, complicated health problems and deaths. In other words, the approaches used by many religious leaders in the study area are very subjective and often lead to more complicated social issues and compounded health problems. Consequently, I considered the trio-model analyzed above more objective in addressing human problems in a religious culture that is super spiritually sensitive.

¹¹ These are practices designated to the clients by a supposed spiritualists in order to obtain what the clients desires.

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