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20



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Religious Behaviour and Political Participation of Rural People: A Study of Essien Udim Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the interaction between religious behaviour and political participation in Essien Udim Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. With the use of purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 100 church members and 100 non-church members were interviewed to determine the effect of church membership, defined as religious behaviour, on various aspects of political life culminating in voting behaviour. Religious behaviour served as the independent variable while political participation served as the dependent variable. Although there was little difference between the political behaviour of church members and those of non-church members, the difference was consistent in favour of the church members in the various aspects of political life. Given the general low level of political involvement across the Local Government, it is suggested that the churches, through their pastors, should be more actively involved in raising the political awareness of the members, while the Local Government should provide basic facilities in order to improve the quality of life. This way, the people, satisfied with community, will be encouraged to support government programmes like those during elections.

INTRODUCTION

The rural-urban divide is gradually dissipating with the rapid advancement in communication technology. Unlike the situation some fifty years ago, today one can no longer speak of a distinctly rural culture as different from the urban way of life. For instance, whereas in the past it was possible to recognize the rural person simply from his way of life, his manner of dress, his value orientation, his manner of speech, and other attitudinal indices, today the rural personality can no longer be identified on the basis of any of the above attributes.

The disappearance of the rural type can be traced to a number of factors. Prominent among such factors is the widespread availability and accessibility of modern technology gadgets. These include the radio, the television set and other means of communication that promote easy social contact including the current GSM revolution. This unprecedented communication revolution has impacted greatly on traditional social institutions including the religious and political institutions.

Some of the widely acknowledged functions of religion include conscience formation and the guidance of consciousness in human behaviour. Although hotly debated, social scientists have pointed out that religion forms the moral conscience as well as ensure group solidarity and common morality (Durkheim, 1912/1947). Similarly, the role of politics in a democracy has been widely acknowledge and political behaviour, particularly when it concerns political participation, has been credited with the ability to determine the success or failure of the entire democratic machinery. Unfortunately, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the two institutions, politics and religion, came to be considered strange bedfellows, as they seem to be openly at variance with each other. Today, considering the importance of social institutions in national life, these two institutions have been accorded their rightful places and encouraged to see themselves as partners in progress towards nation building. This new insight contradicts the situation some years ago when a high degree of political alienation was observed in many quarters as a result of religious factors among others (Schwartz, 1973).

This article examines the extent to which the religious behaviour of the people of Essien Udim Local Government Area of

Akwa Ibom State influences their level of political participation. Specifically, it compares resident's religiosity with their voting behaviour and other aspects of political life that support interest and personal involvement in political activity, like participation in rallies and electoral campaigns, interest in political personages and general attitude to local secular politics. In other words, the intention here is to determine if religiosity is, in fact, a factor in political involvement and participation. Accordingly, in order to properly focus the study, the following concepts need clarification:

(i) **Religious Behaviour:**

Religious behaviour is here equated with religiosity. The idea of religiosity designates the importance of religion in a person's life. Although simply identifying with a religion is a measure of religiosity, it is a very superficial one. This research therefore adopts one of the measures of religiosity identified by Glock (1962). It is termed experiential religiosity and refers to the strength of an individual's emotional ties to his religion. Such ties manifest themselves in church membership, in the frequency of ritual activity and how religious beliefs feature in a person's life as well as a person's knowledge of the history of the religion. Those in the sample who manifested these tendencies, or who were, on the average, close to manifesting them, were identified by the pastors or ministers of those religious congregations selected for the study.

(ii) **Voter Apathy:**

Voter apathy has to do with the outward display of indifference during political elections in matters relating to choice of candidates and the exercise of one's right to vote. Schwartz (1973:3) sees it as an aspect of political alienation, which manifests itself in various forms including non-voting, and/or protest voting and withdrawn political interest.

(iii) **Political Participation:**

Political participation is more than the simple involvement in political discussions and the political subsets of rallies and meetings. As the contrast of voter apathy, it is the involvement in the political process as manifested in actual voting for the candidate of one's choice. This process demands being current with the issues at hand,

the electoral candidates and their manifestos as well as the rules and regulations governing the election in question.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In spite of the increasing desire of people around the globe to gain a greater voice in government, it is disturbing that many people still appear indifferent to their political rights. There is no doubt that the problem of political indifference is everywhere but as Piven and Cloward (1988) noted some two and a half decades ago in their study of the United States electoral process, it is greater in some countries than in others. According to Macionis (1997), political indifference was observed to be high in the 1992 U.S. election in which only 55% of adults aged eighteen or older claimed to have voted. Macionis had suggested the four possible reasons for non-voting behaviour to include indisposition, non-registration, illiteracy and indifference. But in the rural environment, the lack of awareness could also count as a major factor.

Since the end of the colonial rule in Nigeria in 1960, politics has assumed an unprecedented dramatic centre stage. The constant interplay between civilian and military rules over the last forty-five years raises the people's political consciousness and speaks volumes on the role and quality of the political spectrum in the country's national landscape. Because politics so far has enjoyed the monopoly of the elite class, it tends to be construed as an urban experience. This partial portrayal of politics undermines the need for the involvement of all if a successful and sustainable democratic culture is to be achieved. The political *laissez-faire* attitude demonstrated by the rural populace who see politics as "their business" is a pointer to a basic fact – that Nigeria, after all, may not be running a true democracy. After all, the bulk of the population (70%) resides in the rural community.

This study seeks to uncover if, in fact, the people of Essien Udim Local Government Area, a typical rural community in Akwa Ibom State, do participate actively in past electoral activities in order to guarantee their rightful place in the national scheme. In order to ensure such involvement, the role of religion in raising the rural people's political consciousness is critically examined.

JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Essien Udim is a rural community, being itself part of Akwa Ibom State, a state defined as rural (Udoma, 2004). It is typified by the subsistence farming, which characterizes the economic activity of the great majority of rural people. Furthermore, Essien Udim shares most of the other defining features of a typical rural community: high level of poverty, low income, underutilized natural resources, high population growth, high unemployment rate and the use of traditional technology, among others (Ijere, 1992: 2-3). In addition to its rural typification, Essien Udim, along with its rural neighbours in Annang land, Abak, Etim Ekpo and Ikot Ekpene, is noted for the proliferation of various types of religious denominations (Umoh, 2004). The above characteristics make Essien Udim Local Government Area suitable for this investigation.

THEORETICAL UNDERPININGS

In analyzing some general principles underlying human behaviour and social action, a good deal of attention has been focused on political behaviour and participation including such issues as voting, following political debates and issues, and contributing in various ways to political campaigns. One of the most comprehensive studies in this area was a five-nation study by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963). Attitudes of alienation and subjective competence were found to be significantly related to political participation. Subjective competence was defined as the individual's belief that he/she can exert influence over decisions made by government officials.

While variations in alienation and subjective competence were observed across the five countries, some consistent patterns were noted, including the following:

Compared with the citizen, whose subjective competence is low, the self-confident citizen is likely to be the active citizen; to follow politics, to discuss politics, to be a more active partisan... He is more likely to believe that election campaigns are needed and to believe that the ordinary man has obligation to participate in the affairs of his country.

(Almond and Verba, 1963:257)

These findings by Almond and Verba suggest that citizens whose subjective competence is low, like those in the rural communities, are likely to be estranged from the political process and might be inclined towards withdrawn behaviour. While the present sample reveals a slight difference in political behaviour, especially voting behaviour, in favour of church members, it is obvious from the sample that the general political response in this local government is low. This situation might result from some measure of political indifference and alienation by the residents of Essien Udim Local Government Area.

Although with reference to this sample, the church's influence is seen to be minimal as a result of the pastor's attitude of indifference to politics, it should be noted that there are other factors that can contribute to political indifference within a community. One of such factors is resident's dissatisfaction with community life. In other words, poverty which is characteristic of most rural communities in Nigeria is capable of bearing a strong adverse relationship to political behaviour. Politics is a game of power and the poor is not only voiceless but also powerless.

Considering alienation as a manifestation of political powerlessness, David Schwartz (1973) examined the relationship between political alienation and political behaviour. Narrowing further the concepts of political alienation to estrangement, or the perception that one does not identify with the political system, Schwartz tested and found support for the hypothesis that alienation bears a strong negative relationship to conformist orientations to politics. In other words those who consider themselves to be powerless as a result of poverty or dissatisfaction with community life do not find any rational justification for political motivation. Among his more specific observations were the following:

Alienated people who are upper-class, energetic and secure of their psychological, economic and political well-being tend to prefer active modes of expressing their alienation and to be reformist or revolutionary in their orientations... Those who are of lower socio-economic status, less energetic and less invulnerable to repercussions in the economy, polity or

psyche tend to adopt more passive orientations to the polity, to withdraw or to become ritualists.

(Scwartz, 1973:159).

Thus, these observations demonstrate that political participation is a multiple-factor index. Schwartz's findings further suggest that a sense of political efficacy – that is, identification with, and being able to influence political decision-making – is related to political participation. These findings have strong theoretical implications as they affect residents' involvement and attachment with entire social fabric. Therefore, religious as well as economic empowerment is essential for political participation. This observation is of immense importance for the political machinery.

METHODOLOGY

This is a case study on Essien Udim Local Government Area. The survey design has been widely used for a study of this nature because it seeks information on personal experiences on particular aspects of social life like religious commitment and political behaviour. Since the major question deals with the effect of church membership (independent variable) on political behaviour (dependent variable), non-church members served as the control group. With the help of three research assistants, 200 members were interviewed. One necessary requirement for inclusion in the interview was a minimum educational qualification of elementary six to be able to withstand the rigorous stress of an interview; however respondents must not have read up to the graduate level in order not to offset the qualities of ruralness, but, must however be of the voting age of at least nineteen as required by law.

Since experience has shown that subjects are more likely to complete a survey if contacted personally than being required to fill out a questionnaire, the interview method was preferred. Due to population size and the fact that not every member of Essien Udim is a church member, the use of a purposive sample became necessary. Accordingly, one hundred (100) respondents who were judged to satisfy the requirement of being considered religious, measured on the strength of membership in church, commitment to church ritual

activities and knowledge of church doctrine were chosen from the five dominant denominations in Essien Udim, twenty (20) respondents from each denomination. This was done with the help of the five area pastors. The denominations include: Catholic, Methodist, Qua Iboe, Lutheran and Presbyterian. With the use of the snowball sampling technique, i.e., starting out with the familiar non-members who in turn suggested others to include in the sample, one hundred (100) non-church members were identified for inclusion in the study.

The interview sessions sought answers to such issues as:

- a) Is it considered proper for the church to address itself to social and political matters or to restrict itself only to matters of religion?
- b) Is it proper for the church to state its position on practical political issues to the local, state, or federal government?
- c) Is there any social relations group within the church?
- d) What is the frequency of the respondent at church services?
- e) Is the respondent active in the church's programmes?
- f) Has the respondent attended any lectures or political rallies in the community within the previous two years or there about?
- g) Did the respondent vote in the last local government, state or presidential elections? and
- h) Does the respondent owe allegiance to any of the political parties?

Some of these issues required follow-up questions in order to reap the full benefit of the interview. The pastors on their own part were demanded to indicate the frequency with which they addressed political issues from the pulpit especially issues on voting rights and general political awareness. The above formed the major frame of reference for the interview with both the lay faithful and the pastors.

FINDINGS

Table 1, which displays the demographic as well as the social indicator profile of the respondents, shows that for both church and non-church members, the majority were below 60 years of age, had Grade II certificates and were working as civil servants. The majority of those interviewed ranged between 20-59 years of age, 97% of whom were the church members and all of the non-church members. In terms of educational qualification, both groups were seen to be quite similar, 21% of the church members having attained the minimum of SSCE, 70% with the Grade II certificates and 12% having read up to the NCE level. The table further shows that 58% of the church members were civil servants as against 41% of the non-church members; 19% were self-employed and 23% were unemployed as against 26% and 33% of the non-church members respectively.

Table 1 Profile of Respondents used for the study

	AGE			Ed. Qualification			Employment status		
	20-39	40-59	60-70	SSCE	GRAD E II	NCE	Civil Ser- vant	Self employed	Unemp loyed
Non Church Members	73	27	-	20	68	12	41	26	33
Church Members	61	36	6	21	70	9	58	19	23

Table 2 Church/non-church membership and political participation in Essien Udim Local Government Area

	Political Party Membership	Voting at last elections	Politics not useful to rural society	Politics as dirty game	Politics not for common people
Non-church membership	42	51	86	81	88
Church membership	47	55	88	70	78

Five variables on political matters were given great importance in terms of their interaction or not with church membership. These include:

1. Membership in political parties;
2. Voting behaviour at the last political elections;
3. The belief that politics is not useful to rural society;
4. Belief that politics is a dirty game; and
5. Belief that politics is not for the rural (common) person.

Considering each of the variables in turn, it is observed from Table II that while 47% of the church members belong to one type of political party or another, 42% of the non-church members retain such memberships. In terms of voting behaviour at the last elections, which was considered the most crucial of the variables, the table shows that while 55% of the church members actually voted, 51% of the non-church members actually voted. The two groups of the respondents, 88% of the church members and 86% of the non-church members, actually believe that politics is not useful to the rural society. Whereas 70% of the church members considered politics as a dirty game, such a belief is held by as many as 81% of non-church members. In terms of the belief that politics is an urban experience that is not suitable for the common man in the rural society, 78% of the church members as against 88% of the non-church members agreed.

In order to gain awareness in political issues, the church as a grassroots organization needs to expose the faithful to the issues at hand. Accordingly, it became necessary to interview the local pastor on their interest and involvement in this regard. It was discovered that out of the five local pastors involved in the study, only two admitted ever having taken time off to address political issues from the pulpit. The other three admitted never going beyond some passing comments during political elections. This means that politics has never really enjoyed any measure of church support in this local government. This posture of indifference can be expected to manifest in the political behaviour of its members, as the following discussion demonstrates.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine the level of political involvement of church members of rural communities, using Essien Udim Local Government Area as a case study. Residents' attitudes towards politics generally and their involvement in the political process of the Local Government were measured against residents' religious propensity. Controlling for the influence of age, educational background and the employment status of residents, church membership, as the independent variable, was not observed to be of any significant influence on political behaviour as the dependent variable in this sample of Essien Udim church faithful.

Although the general political habit of Essien Udim people as observed in this sample is only slightly above average, especially in terms of their voting behaviour, the difference between church and non-church members in political behaviour was observed to be rather slight. This slight difference, however, was seen to be consistent on all counts in favour of church members: while 47% of church members belong to political parties, only 42% of non-church members hold political memberships. In terms of resident's voting behaviour at the last elections, 55% of the church members as against 51% of the non-church members actually voted. Reasons offered by those 45% of church members and the 49% of non-church members who did not vote include: selfishness and corrupt practices of politicians, experience of unfair electoral practices of past years, the violence associated with past elections, the determination of election results ahead of the actual voting exercise, the absence of any positive impact of politicians on the rural society and the fact that those who "win" at the end of the day are the rich and the powerful. This perception explains why as many as 70% of the church members and 81% of the non-church members see politics as a dirty game and 78% of the church members and 88% of the non-church members see it as an ill-suited experience for the common people of the rural society. As regards resident's perception as to the usefulness of politics to the rural people, almost all the respondents, 88% of the church members and 86% of the non-church members, are of the opinion that politics is not useful. The reasons offered for the non usefulness of politics to the rural society ranged from the perception that all the past political elections since independence have not changed the life styles of the ruralites due to the non provision of basic amenities like, electricity,

pipe borne water and, especially motorable roads. Many respondents simply confessed that they are tired of the empty promises of the politicians.

Although there appears to be no significant difference between the church and non-church member's political behaviour in this sample of rural people, the fact of consistency in favour of church membership on each of the counts is however worthy of note. The fact that 40% of the pastors do address political issues from the pulpit and the other 60% do make occasional passing comments on politics is capable of generating some level of political awareness, which the non-church members do not have the benefit of. It can, on the basis of these findings, be concluded that the church as a religious organization, because of its closeness to the grassroots, is capable of creating awareness on such contemporary issues like politics. If the little involvement of the local Government pastors as observed in this sample is capable of making the difference in the church members' and non-church members' political participation, it follows that if the church as a social institution is more actively involved, the resident's level of political participation will increase further.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article examines the relationship between church membership and political behaviour in a typical rural community. Church membership was measured in terms of the outward display of religious inclination, while various aspects of political behaviour, especially voting behaviour, were used to measure political participation. Two hundred (200) residents – one hundred (100) church members and one hundred (100) non-church members - were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques from the Essien Udim Local Government Area to test the various relationships.

Based on the above findings and the need for the involvement of the rural populace generally in the political process for sustainable democratic governance, there is the need therefore to reinforce and empower rural social institutions, especially the religious as well as the economic institutions. With particular reference to Essien Udim Local Government Area, it is essential that in order to increase the level of political participation, the religious institutions must be

involved through awareness campaigns and pastors' commitment to conscientization of their faithful from the pulpit. As a grassroots organization the church, more than any other rural institution, is uniquely qualified to perform the above role. The Local Government, on its own part, must be alive to its social responsibility to the people and ensure the provision of the basic needs of life that guarantee resident's satisfaction with the community in order to gain their confidence and support for government programmes and policies. Such basic needs include, among others, the provision of good roads, pipe borne water and electricity, all of which enhance the quality of life and satisfaction with community. If the above suggestions are implemented, the attitude of the rural people towards politics will change for the better and political participation will also be encouraged.

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