

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CULTURE,
POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT

VOL. 2 NO. 1 APRIL, 2007

22



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CULTURE, POLITICS AND DEVELOPMENT

DEFECTION TO NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS BY IMMIGRANTS TO URBAN ENVIRONMENT: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF URBAN DWELLERS IN IKOT EKPENE, AKWA IBOM STATE

John O. Umoh

*Department of Sociology /Anthropology
University of Uyo*

Volume 2, No. 1, April 2007

Abstract

The study is a social survey on the influence of urban life on religious behaviour. It examines the probability of rural migrants to change their religious orientation from conventional religion to the New Religious Movements (NRMs) on arrival to an urban environment. Interviews were conducted on a sample of 150 rural migrants to Ikot Ekpene urban who have had a minimum of five – year residency period. The interviews with the sample, which was chosen purposefully through the snowball sampling technique yielded the following results, among others: (1) that 134 (89.3%) of the migrants were motivated by the desire for better job opportunities, (2) that only 37 (24.7%) of the sample changed their former religious orientations, 35 (95%) of them in favour of the NRMs, (3) that of those 35, 27 (77%) changed to the NRM in response to the promise of employment and material prosperity emphasized by these religions, and (4) that none of the only five migrants who found jobs after enrolment into the NRM owed their fortune to such membership. Based on the findings, the paper concludes that although the NRMs may provide a certain level of psychological apogee to urban migrants, their social or religious relevance, for that matter, is questionable in respect of this sample.

Introduction

According to historians Macionis (1997), the concentration of humanity into cities started appearing some 10,000 years ago. Jericho, a disputed town, North of the Dead Sea, presently occupied by Israel, had a scanty population of about 600 people as of the time of formation in 8000 BC (Macionis, 1997:569). Since then and as a result of natural

increase –the excess of birth over death rate – and immigration – the urban pull of the population due to industrialization, cities have increased both in size and in number, resulting in serious problems in the composition and distribution of urban populations. Brockerhoff (2000), noted that managing urban population change will be one of the world's most important challenges in the next few decades. This challenge is a global concern as it affects both the developing as well as the developed nations of the world. In the less developed countries, for instance, where 80% of the world's population resides, the central issue will be how to cope with an unprecedented increase with the number of people living in urban areas and the growing concentration of these urban dwellers in large cities with millions of residents. In more developed nations, on the other hand, the urban problems will involve dealing with complex changes in the composition of urban populations in an attempt to contain urban sprawl.

The United Nations (UN) has projected that by 2025, the world population will expand from the present 6.1 billion to 7.8 billion and that 90% of this growth will occur in urban areas of less developed countries (UN World Population Prospects, 1999). Referring more specifically to the less developed nations, Asia, Africa and Latin America, Brockerhoff further records that the unprecedented population growth that characterized much of the 20th century evolved into unparalleled urban growth, and that by 2020 the majority of the population of the less developed areas will live in urban centers. In the light of the above trend, he estimates that cities of 10 million or more residents will become more numerous and will play an important role in the world's urban future (Brockerhoff, 2000).

Although tremendous population growth in urban areas of the developed as well as the developing nations of the world has been associated with current trends such as economic development, centres of industry and commerce, and significant cost advantages for governments in the delivery of essential goods and services as well as the private sector benefit in the production and consumption of goods (Bairoch, 1988), there are also some obvious undesired trends that accompany such development. There are, for instance, the important concerns of slum and ghetto culture resulting from overcrowding conditions, impersonal social relationships and the daily increase in criminal tendency, among others.

This study examines the effect of urban life on a specific aspect of social life. Specifically, it examines the probability of urban residents to retain or abandon their religion in favour of new religious movements as a result of urban influence, on

migration into the urban area. From a sample of 150 residents moving into Ikot Ekpene, a typical urban center in Akwa Ibom State, the study seeks to determine :

- (1) If the residents have changed their former religion on arrival into the city,
- (2) The percentage in the sample who have done so,
- (3) The reason(s) for the change in religious position, if yes,
- (4) The direction of the change, i.e., whether or not in favour of the new religious movements, and
- (5) The implication of such behavioral trend for the religious Institution in particular and the society in general.

Conceptual Clarification

In order to situate the following discussion in its proper perspective, it is important to clarify the following concepts:

i) **Urban Centre:**

The definition of an urban population/centre varies from country to country. While some sociologists adopt administrative considerations in their definition of urban centre, others consider the factors of size and density of locality, while others still place emphasis on functional characteristics. To further complicate matters, some countries sometimes change their definitions of urban places over time, thereby making precise measurement of urban populations problematic. In this study, the concept of urban centre is given the same characteristics that are associated with "city", such as nonagricultural activities, high level of industrialization and the availability of modern infrastructure. These factors usually have the potential of attracting residents of the rural community thereby resulting in high population density, a further characteristic of the urban type.

ii. **Religious Behaviour:**

Generally, religious behaviour refers to the highly visible religious traditions among a group and individual's relationship to them in terms of belief and participation (Yinger, 1969). Operationally such religious behaviour can be measured through such variables like church attendance and individual participation in various forms of church activities. Such rational approach to religious behaviour is sometimes unavoidable due in part to the inability of social scientists to reach a consensus about what really constitutes the religious experience since much of what passes for religion remains largely invisible (Umoh, 2004). For the purpose of the present study,

religious behaviour is measured in terms of an individual's tendency or inclination to change from one type of religion (or denomination) to another.

iii) **New Religious Movements:**

Without getting into the classification of the New Religious Movements by scholars like Roy Wallis (1984) has done, and because some are so idiosyncratic as to defy classification (Barker, 1985), this study conceives of the new religious movements as the wide variety of those minor religious, spiritual or mystical groups that have sprung up since the 1960s. Some of these have the characteristics of sects; others share the traits of cults, while others are fall-outs from conventional parent religious bodies (Wilson, 1982).

Study Methodology

The study was conducted among 150 residents of Ikot Ekpene municipality who have moved into the area from other localities of the State and beyond and have had a residency period of at least five years. The 150 residents who make up the sample frame were chosen from the length and breadth of the municipality through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. With the above techniques, the migrant residents were able to identify fellow migrants since many of them retain regular contacts through associations of like-mindedness, club affiliations and other forms of "osusu" (that is, contribution) memberships. Because of the importance of sex differentials and preferences in choice-making situations, both males and females had a 50% chance of representation each. In terms of age, only those within the range of 20-50 years of age were considered suitable for inclusion. This age range was seen as necessary as those below the age of 20 were considered to be not fully mature to be able to make independent decisions on important life issues while those above 50 years were not considered likely potential candidates in changing their religion at such late stage in life. The minimum five-year residency was seen as necessary in order to ensure that the migrant had lived long enough in the municipality to be influenced by urban culture. Being a social survey, the study entailed sessions of intensive oral interview of all 150 migrants by the researcher.

The Interviews

The interview sessions which lasted between 20 to 30 minutes per session sought answers to such relevant issues as: the migrants' age and place of origin, period of residency in the

present urban habitation, reasons for movement into the area, the migrant's profession, present religion, former religion (if different from the present), reasons for choice of the present religion, instrumental agent of present religion, etc.

Findings

Of the 150 migrants interviewed, only a few, 28 (18.7%) came from outside the Ikot Ekpene Local Government area. Of these 21(75%) came from places that are themselves more urbanized and sophisticated than Ikot Ekpene itself. The remaining 128 (85.3%) of the sample had moved into Ikot Ekpene urban from various rural locations of the local government. 134 (89.3%) of them had come in search of job opportunities while the remaining 16(10.7%) simply joined their kith and kin. Most, 112 (83.6%), of the job seekers had their dreams fulfilled while for the remaining 22 (16.4%) their aspirations were yet to materialize.

In matters of religious behaviour, all 150 migrants had one form or another of religious affiliation before coming to Ikot Ekpene urban. Interviews revealed that 113 (75%) of the migrants had retained their former religion while the remaining 37 (24.7%) had changed their original religious positions at varying frequencies. Among the 37 who had changed their former positions, 22 (59.5%) were females while 15 (40%) were males, all of who were between the age range of 20-35.

When asked the reason for the change in religious position, only a few, 6 (16.2%) did so on doctrinal grounds. The majority, 31 (83.8%) admitted having been indoctrinated either by friends or other family members, who oftentimes were themselves converts to the new faith. Reasons advanced by those who were instrumental to the sudden change in religious position included: opportunities for new friendship contacts (48.6%), need for spirited religious environment (24.3%), the promise of deliverance from satanic bandage and misfortune (27.0%), offer of employment or educational opportunity, or credit facility from the church and, even, the promise of prosperity. Among the 35 who changed their faith posture in favour of the new religious movements, 27 (77.7%) were motivated by the promise of economic prosperity. Surprisingly, none of these "converts" mentioned doctrinal rigidity or stringent legislative measures by previous religion as reason for defection to the new denomination.

Defection to religious movements as in other kinds of associations, can be seen as a safety measure that shields the individual from the anonymity and impersonal social relationships that characterize urban culture. This tends to

support the claim that people may at times feel too spiritually deprived in a world they perceive as too materialistic, lonely and impersonal that they seek salvation in the sense of community offered by the new religious movement (Wallis, 1984). Using the example of the Methodist movement in the 1960s which had the characteristics of a sect, Wilson (1970) considered its pull of membership as a response of the urban working class to the chaos and uncertainty of life in the newly settled industrial areas.

It is also worthy of note that as many as 95% of those cases of religious prostitution are in the direction of defection from traditional mainstream religious bodies (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Presbyterianism etc) to modern day Pentecostalist movements or what is called the New Religious Movements (NRMs).

Discussion on Findings

The principal variable of the study concerned the likelihood of rural migrants to change their religious position on arrival into an urban environment after a minimum period of five years of residence. Contrary to expectation, the belief that the urban way of life exerts a negative influence on urban migrants by making them to switch from their former religious tenets to new ones did not show up in this sample. This is seen in the fact that only (24.7%) of the sample had switched to new denominations after a period of urban residence. This finding tends to suggest that the urban factor per se has little or no influence on an individual's choice of religious behaviour. It is equally true of the present sample that the demographic factors of sex and age do not play any significant part in an individual's level of commitment to his faith as the difference in number between the males (15) and the females (22) who changed their faith posture is not seen to be significant.

For those few, 37 (24.7%), who changed their religious affiliation, it was also necessary to find out the reasons advanced in support of the change in position. In this regard, it was observed that as many as 18 (48.6%) of those in that category admitted being talked into it by their friends. That the change is in the direction of the new religious movements confirms the finding that in modern society, conversion to new religions often takes the form of movements away from conventional religions towards sects and various other forms of mystical religious bodies (Haralambos and Holborn, *ibid*:426). Since some of these sects act as "total institutions" (Goffman, 1959), their members develop a reputation for brainwashing their friends into conversion.

Another important revelation in the interview was the fact that among the 37 respondents who had changed their faith 28 (75.7%) of them were jobless as at the time of the interview. On the basis of the findings, it can be said that the condition of joblessness is capable of disposing the victim to membership into any association with the promise of immediate life succor. Haralambos and Holborn (2004) have established that those in the society who are marginalized and having a feeling of relative deprivation are easily drawn to membership into cultic organizations. Because cults are loosely structured, tolerant and non-exclusive, membership can be achieved with relative ease. Bruce (1995) observed that cult membership involves taking training courses which allow individuals to discover a "center" within themselves that contains the answer to all their problems. It enables individuals to free themselves from guilt and anxiety, to think positively about themselves and to live fulfilled lives. The success promised by these new religious movements make them attractive to members especially those experiencing different kinds of life problems or who have failed to achieve their life dreams. Sometimes, such religious movements lack the features normally associated with a formal religion. Wallis (1984) noted that such a group may have no "church", no collective ritual of worship and may lack any formally developed theology or ethics.

Sometimes, due to their complacency with the existing social arrangement, some of them are also referred to as "world-affirming" religions (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). What they offer the follower is the potential to be successful in terms of the dominant values of society. Those with specific life problems are made to see salvation as a personal achievement and as a solution to personal problems such as joblessness, unhappiness, suffering or disability. Individuals usually overcome their problems by being introduced to techniques that heighten their awareness or potentials. It can therefore be understood why it is easy to surrender to these religions when one feels a sense of failure or inability to keep pace with existing social order. Furthermore, since these new religious movements seek as wide a member as possible, rather than try to convert people as such, they try to sell their services commercially.

The growth of sects and other forms of new religious movements has become a constant feature of modern society as a result of the increasing trend in social problems. About half a century ago, Max Weber had provided an explanation of the growth of new religious movements in contemporary society. According to Weber (1963), religious movements are likely to

arise within groups that are marginal in the society. This is so because those who are outside the mainstream of social life often feel they are deprived of the prestige and economic rewards offered by the society. Therefore, he argued, these religious movements promise their members a "sense of honour" either in the after-life or in a future "new world" on earth.

Since economic deprivation and the need for companionship or the sense of community are two crucial factors in the defection of urban migrants to new religious movements, it is necessary to examine the extent to which these aspirations have been fulfilled in the above sample. Among the 18 (48.6%) of the sample who were driven by the need for companionship to membership into various types of new religious movements, the great majority, i.e., 15 (83.3%), admitted having had their ambitions met. Some openly accepted that "there is a greater opportunity of making new friendship contacts here than in my former church in the village". Those with the hope of better economic chances and employment opportunities were not so lucky. Twenty-five (67.6%) in the sample had combined economic and other aspirations as motivating factors in their memberships. Among those in the above group, only 5 (20%) had found jobs after enrolment into these religious bodies. None of those five, however, attributed the fortune to any religious factors. The remaining 20 (80%) who were yet to find employment actually blamed part of their prolonged predicament of joblessness to the problem of long hours of prayer and deliverance sessions engaged in by the religious groups. These are periods that could otherwise be utilized in searching for the job.

Conclusion

As a matter of routine, many youths migrate out of the rural areas annually into the city in search of better economic opportunities. At the end of their urban residency, it is often noted that one of the new things they usually brought back to the village is a new religious orientation, having abandoned their former religion "as a result of " urban residency. This study has sought to ascertain if in fact it is the effect of urban residency per se that influences this change in religious behaviour. The findings, drawn from the sample of 150 migrant residents, indicate first that the proportion of migrant residents that change their religious position is, in fact, negligible, second, that those migrants so affected are often within the age range of 20-50 years, third, that the change in religious position, where it does happen, is not directly associated with

the urban traits of sophistication and high standard of living, and fourth, where the change in religious position obtains, it is often a movement away from conventional religion towards the direction of the new religious movements.

The reasons advanced by those youths who change their religious orientations in favour of cultic religions or contemporary new religious movements are similar to those identified by Max Weber (1963), Wilson (1970), Haralambos and Holborn (2004) and other social science scholars. These include among others: the experience of marginality and relative deprivation, the promise of more potential, spiritual and caring relationships as well as material advantages to members, the promise of individual success in terms of status, income and social mobility and the provision of a technique which claims to bring people both success and a spiritual element to their life (Wallis, 1984). Additionally, defection to new religious movements should also be seen as part of the elements of youth culture with its emphasis on freedom but little in the way of family and work responsibility (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004; Bruce, 1995).

Based on the above reasoning, some sociologists believe that the new religious movements rather than fulfill spiritual needs, appeal to those who have become disillusioned or feel they need to earn a living in a conventional way. Therefore, they offer stepping-stone measures towards respectability. This means they should be seen as temporary measures to reintegrate people into society while allowing them to retain some elements of an alternative lifestyle because they neither advocate a radical break with a conventional lifestyle nor restrict the behaviour of its members (Bruce, 1995). In this sense, their psychological usefulness can be acknowledged, but socially, their justification as functional institutions is questionable since they offer little in the way of social services. Therefore, it is suggested that society would be the better for it if structures were put in place to control further spread of the new religious movements. The requirement of operational licenses, for example, by operators of religious organizations could serve as a useful control strategy.

REFERENCES

- Barker, E. (1985): *New Religious Movements: Yet another great Awakening?* In P.E. Hammond (ed.) *The sacred in a secular age*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Brocknerhoff, Martin P. (2000): *An Urbanizing World*. *Population Bulletin*. Vol. 55, no. 3.
- Bruce S. (1995): *Religion in Modern Britain*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Goffman, Erving (1959): *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday Anchor New York.
- Haralambos, M. and Martin Holborn (2004): *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. HarperCollins Publishers Limited, London.
- Macionis, John J. (1997): *Sociology* (6th ed.), New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Umoh, J. O. (2004): *Globalization and Religiosity: The Effects of Western Values on Religious Behaviour. (A Study of the University of Uyo, Nigeria)*. *International Journal of Economics and Development Issues*, vol. 4, Nos. 1-2.
- Wallis, R. (1984): *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Weber, Max (1963): *The Sociology of Religion*. Beacon Press, Boston, Mass.
- Wilson, B. R. (1970): *Religious Sects*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London.
- (1982): *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Yinger, M. J. (1969-70): *A Structural Examination of religion*. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vols. 8-9.