

## A FOREIGN FAITH IN A CHRISTIAN DOMAIN: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM AMONG THE IGBOS OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

(Wujudnya Kepercayaan Asing Di Kalangan Golongan Kristian:  
Pembangunan Sejarah Islam Di Kalangan Kaum Igbo  
Di Tenggara Nigeria)

<sup>1</sup>SAHEED AHMAD RUFAl

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Education, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria

---

### ABSTRACT

*Igboland, which is geographically located in the Southeastern part of Nigeria, was the last part of the country to witness the advent of Islam. This was owing to the fact that the people are predominantly Christian and adherents of African traditional religions. Notwithstanding, Islam spread to the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has since been earning itself new adherents among the local people. However, there has not been a systematic study of the spread, growth and development so far of the religion among the Igbo people whose adherents are a minority and to whom the religion is alien. The purpose of this article is to trace the historical development of the religion in the region by identifying the factors instrumental to its spread as well as the initiatives of the early Muslims. The significance of such a historical analysis lies in its potential to provide some new insight into how a minority survives with their religions persuasion in the face of majority adherents of dominant faiths. The article employs a combination of the historical and the analytical methods and concludes that with appropriate da'wah machineries in place, Islam stands a good chance of becoming the religion of the majority of the Igbo people.*

**Keywords:** Islam in Igboland; Muslim minority; christian majority; historical development; Southeastern Nigeria.

## ABSTRAK

*Tanah tempat kediaman kaum Igbo yang terletak di bahagian Tenggara Nigeria adalah bahagian yang terakhir menyaksikan ketibaan agama Islam. Ini disebabkan sebahagian besar penduduknya terdiri daripada penganut berketurunan Kristian, iaitu agama turun temurun nenek moyang mereka. Sungguhpun demikian, agama Islam telah berkembang ke daerah tersebut pada kurun ke-19 dan telah mendapat sambutan yang menggalakkan daripada penganut-penganut baru daripada penduduk tempatan. Bagaimanapun sehingga kini tiada kajian sistematik dilakukan berkaitan perkembangan, pertumbuhan dan pembangunan Islam di kalangan kaum Igbo yang terdiri daripada golongan minoriti di mana Islam merupakan sesuatu yang baru dan asing bagi mereka. Tujuan artikel ini adalah untuk menyusuri perkembangan sejarah agama Islam di rantau itu dengan mengenal pasti faktor-faktor yang secara langsung melibatkan perkembangan dan usaha peringkat awal masyarakat Islam di kawasan itu. Kepentingan analisa sejarah ini terkandung dalam keupayaannya untuk memberi suatu pandangan yang mendalam bagaimana kaum minoriti ini dapat melangsungkan hidup mereka tanpa ragu-ragu dan dipengaruhi masyarakat Kristian yang lebih besar jumlahnya. Artikel ini menggunakan gabungan metode analisis dan metode persejarahan. Artikel ini juga merumuskan usaha dakwah perlu menggunakan pendekatan yang sesuai dengan situasi semasa dan keadaan setempat supaya Islam berupaya menjadi agama yang dianuti oleh majoriti masyarakat Igbo.*

**Kata kunci:** Islam di Igboland; minoriti Muslim; majoriti Kristian; pembangunan persejarahan; Tenggara Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

There is a considerable body of scholarship on the geographical entity being described today as Southeastern Nigeria and otherwise known as Igboland. It should be pointed out from the onset that both the language spoken by the people of the area and the people themselves are referred to as 'Igbo' which is often anglicised as 'Ibo' (Chidiebere, 2007), which is why both Igbo and Ibo may be used interchangeably in the present paper. For instance, Uchendu (2010 a) observes that various Igbo settlements in the old Nsukka Division of Onitsha province have, for almost a century, received attention from scholars and researchers some of whom have conducted extensive studies on various groups in that part of the country. Notable among such scholars as identified by Uchendu are Meek (1930); Boston (1968); Shelton (1971), Afigbo (1981), and Achebe (2005). Yet there are other notable researchers who unfortunately are not captured by the lense of Uchendu's scholarly camera. They include Ugwu (1987), Opaka *et al* (1997) Ohidike (1994), Van den Barsselaar (1997), Onwubu (1975), Nkechi (1984), Smock (1971), Green (1947), Forde (1950), and

Waddington (1931). Others include the numerous works of Simon Ottenberg as well as those of Peter Ottenberg on various aspects of life in Igboland.

However, notwithstanding the substantial evidence of research literature on Igbo communities, there is little evidence of availability of adequate scholarship on the history of Islam among the Igbos. Excepting the celebrated works of Uchendu (2010 a), Anthony (2000), Doi (1984) Ottenberg (1971), and Maduagwu (2011) and few others, there have not been scholarly studies on Islam in Igboland. Besides, each of the few scholarly works that there are focuses essentially on a particular subject concerning Islam in the area without necessarily tracing the historical development of Islam among the people in a systematic and chronological order.

For instance, Ottenberg (1971) devotes his study to the religious change recorded in the life of the people of Anohia village in Afikpo during the interval between his first visit to the village in 1953, and his second visit to it, in 1960. The study provides a comprehensive historical and geographical background of Anohia village, discusses the genesis of the contact of the people of Anohia with the outside world, addresses their religious life and conversion of some of them to Islam as well as the conflict involved in the conversion process. If any element or ingredient will be described as conspicuously absent from the work in question, it is a meaningful analysis on the historical development of Islam in Igboland which would have constituted a good foundation for Ottenberg's discussion on Islam in Anohia.

In his own work, Doi (1984) offers a rigorous analysis on the beginning of Islamic influence among the Igbos. He also offers useful information on the arrival of Christian Mission, Islamic missionary activities, effects of the Nigerian civil war on Muslims as well as the influence of Islamic socio-cultural practices on the Igbos. There is no gainsaying that Doi's work constitutes a rich mine of information on the subject notwithstanding its several historical inaccuracies. However, the fact that it focuses on the religious rites and socio-cultural practices of the religion among the Igbos at the expense of its historical development through a chronological narration of historical events, leaves much to be desired. Notwithstanding, no more injurious and absurd myth can be concocted on Islamic historical scholarship on Igboland than that Doi's work has not earned itself a central place.

The criticism that greeted Doi (1984) may not apply to Anthony (2000) who does not equivocate in declaring that his study was aimed at investigating ethnic and religious identities among male Igbo converts in Hausaland. That explains why one may not expect much of historical analysis from such a work. It should even be pointed out that Anthony's work has provided many researchers in the area of history of Islam in Igboland with a good sense of

direction, especially with regards to the analysis of the ethnic and religious identities of the people, which is a question that can hardly be eluded in any scholarly discourse on the historical development of Islam among the people. Though a total departure from the present article in the core of its analysis, Anthony's work is a potential source of data for scholarly works on the subject of Islam and ethnic identities.

Uchendu (2010 a) fulfils the role of an eye-opener as it offers a critical analysis of some of the earlier works on Islam in Igboland especially Doi (1984). In a rather rigorous manner, Uchendu engages with the historical scholarship of Doi and highlighted some of its inaccuracies. It is obvious from Uchendu's line of argument that his purpose is simply to draw the blind and adjust our view of the spread of Islam to Igboland. However, he attends excessively to that at the expense of offering some information on the growth and development of the religion in the area. Consequently, all he achieves is simply that Doi (1984) is wrong in his view that Islam spread to Igboland in the nineteenth century for, "Islam was a twentieth century phenomenon in... Igboland and in Southeast Nigeria" (Uchendu 2010a). Although tiny, such a contribution made by him is of great importance to historical scholarship. Moreover, the submission made by him in this regard finds support in the opinion of Rufai (2011) who, in his study of the challenge of speaking in one voice among Yoruba Muslims of Southwestern Nigeria, alludes to the fact that Islam, which had been known to the Yorubas since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, only spread to other parts of the country especially the Southeast in the twentieth century.

However, Ajah (2010) provides a contrary perspective when he argues that although "the arrival of Islam in the region could be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century: say between 1880 and 1900 when it is believed to have begun at the Igbo Eze division of Nsukka in the present Enugu state and some parts of Owerri capital of Imo state', the insignificant number of Igbos who 'have embraced Islam compared to the fast spread of Christianity in the North' is not unconnected with lethargy and inaction of Muslims in the area of *da'wah* given that 'the Igbo Muslims are extraordinarily patient amidst alleged denials...and they do not mount loud speakers on daily basis along the roads and in every empty spaces to attract audience or *praise* God and also unfortunately because they do not speak in one voice owing to their divided house. Notwithstanding Ajah's analysis, Badmos maintains that the growing argument that Islam was 'a twentieth century phenomenon was a product of the fact that the impact of Islam could not be felt among the Igbo until towards the end of the nineteen century whereas by the beginning of the twenty first century, a large number of Igbo around Nsuka began to embrace Islam'. The implication of this is that Islam had spread to Igboland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but remained passive for almost a century as it only began to make considerable impact in the early part

of the twenty first century. Although this argument offers a somewhat useful perspective, the perceived lacuna in the author's argument that the religion remained passive throughout the twentieth century before beginning to make its marks in the twenty first century, leaves much to be desired, especially with regard to the linkage between Islam and the local community. This is because any critical mind will be tempted to ask what informed the passive or lethargic nature of Islam for the whole of the twentieth century before it began to spread fast in the following century.

In a recent study, Maduagwu (2011) addresses the interplay of Islam and Igbo culture in Eastern Nigeria. He discusses, albeit in passing, the advent of Islam in Igboland and offers, briefly, critical perspectives on the question. But for its failure to provide a meaningful analysis on why Islam could not have spread to Igboland at the time it was said to have spread there by some scholars, Maduagwu's work would have earned itself a permanent place in the race course of scholarly contributions on the history of Islam in Igboland. Notwithstanding, the work in question is a significant addition to research literature on Igboland. There also are other studies that, though may not be as central to the subject under discussion, as those reviewed in the foregoing, are of relevance to the present study. Their non-centrality has informed the idea of regarding them as subsumed under the major works that have been identified here for review.

The present study is intended to fill the gap identified in the various scholarly works reviewed above namely trace the historical development of Islam among the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria. The article employs both the historical and analytical methods in pursuing its purpose, which includes a discussion of the religious identifies for Nigeria ethnic groups with a focus on the Igbos who are located in the Southeastern part of Nigeria.

## **HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND OF THE IGBOS**

The Igbos have settled and remained in their present location for quite a long time. Alluding to Professor D. D. Hartle's test excavation at the University of Nigeria (Nsukka) Agricultural Farm, Afigbo (1980) suggests the availability of evidence of human occupation of what is now known as Igboland, dating back to 2, 555 B.C. + 130. Dispelling the doubt concerning whether such early sellers of the place were the ancestors or direct forebears of the Igbo-speaking people of Nsukka of the today, Afigbo relies on the result of the analysis of the material artifacts investigated by Professor Hartle, which included "unfired clay vessels that are much like the unfired vessels used in the area (Nsukka)

today' thereby suggesting 'a high degree of ethnographic and cultural continuity as could be explained by positing that the present inhabitants of Nsukka are probably in the line of direct descent from the occupants of the area since 3 millenia B.C.'" (p. 76).

According to Talbot (1962), the above stated view, which is held by most writers, suggests somewhat that the Igbo have lost all memories of their migration to this part of Southern Nigeria. In the opinion of Afigbo (1980), scholars and researchers in various fields such as archaeology and anthropology, in their rigorous study of the question of the migration of the Igbos to their present home,

invariably ended up with the theory that the Nri-Awka-Orlu complex was probably the earliest centre of Igbo settlement in Southern Nigeria, and that it was from there that waves of migration set out to occupy the other portions of present day Igboland...

The present-day Igboland has been described by Rufai (1993) as covering the geographical areas located in eastern Nigeria covering a vast land of about 11, 548 square miles and accommodating about 7,469,000 individuals, according to the 1973 head count. In 1991, however, which witnessed the last population census in Nigeria, the population of the Igbos was estimated at about 19 million (National Population Commission 2006). Igbos are known for farming and trading as they trade in various goods and commodities across countries. They embark on trade missions as far as Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast in West Africa and as far a field as Belgium, Germany, Spain and other countries in Europe. This probably explains why Doi (1984) sees them as deserving the attribute conferred by their foreign business partners who describe them as "the Jews of Africa." At present, Igboland comprises several major cities in Southeastern Nigeria such as Nsukka, Enugu, Onitsha, Abakaliki, Umuahia, Owerri, Aba, Eहेle, Arochukwu, Afam, Obigbo, Ndoni, Ossomari, Nri, Okigwe, Akri Ogidi, and few others.

## **ETHNIC, REGIONAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES OF THE IGBOS**

Ethnic identities in Nigeria are perceived in two broad categories of majority and minority groups (Suberu and Osaghae 2005). It should be pointed out however that such a perception is a product of the power distribution arrangement put in place by the colonial masters who located the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West. In such a scheme of power configuration and geographical distribution, the Igbos feature clearly as a majority

group in Nigeria. Even after the creation and proliferation of states and local councils whose number, according to Suberu and Osaghae (2005) increased from 12 in 1967 to 36 in 1996, and which led to the replacement of the three major regions and the emergence of new majorities and minorities, the Igbos remain a majority group. This is evident from another category of regional identities in Nigeria which, in 1996, reinforced the old regional cleavages and positioned Southeast as the Igbo core of the old East, Southwest as the Yoruba core of the old West, Northwest as the so-called 'core-North,' North central to encompass the old Middle Belt, and South south to cover the old cleavage of Southern minorities (Suberu and Osaghae 2005).

Uchendu (2011) notes that the impression has been created that Southeast Nigeria generally and Igboland in particular, have been repeatedly described as a predominantly Christian region. Yet he offers an interesting perspective on this notion when he further writes that:

Only a few years back a Catholic priest and scholar referred to Igboland as one of Africa's homogenous Christian regions. The Igbo Christian identity at present does not derive from total absence of other religious groups within it but the result of considerably few numbers of members of other faiths (indigenous Igbo religions, Eastern religions, and esoteric religions) vis-à-vis Christians in Igboland. While still retaining its profile as Nigeria's most populous Christian region, Igboland began after the Nigeria-Biafra war (the Nigeria civil war of 1967-1970) to manifest tendencies indicative of religious heterogeneity. Indeed the Nigeria-Biafra war was an important catalyst in the development of an indigenous Muslim community in Igboland, having opened Igboland to a varied range of external influences especially those linked to religion.

The above quotation is self-explanatory with regard to the nature of the religious identities of the Igbos. According to Lewis and Bratton (2006) religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three namely Christian, Muslim and Traditional. While the North is predominantly Muslim and the West divided by both Islam and Christianity, the East which is peopled by the Igbos, is predominantly Christian. Accordingly, any prosperous Christian evangelist movement in the North may be tagged alien in the same manner that any successful Islamic *da'wah* (i.e. missionary) project in the East may be regarded as foreign. Hence the concept, Foreign Faith in a Christian Domain: The Historical Development of Islam among the Igbos of Southeastern Nigerian.

## **THE ADVENT OF ISLAM IN IGBOLAND**

An evidence of the earliest date for the advent of Islam in Igboland is offered by Doi (1984) who suggests that Islam spread to that part of Nigeria in the nineteenth century. However, it is noteworthy that Doi maintains that although the Hausa-Fulani and Nupe Muslims had commercial dealings or trade contacts with the Igbos of Nsukka and its environs much earlier than the nineteenth century, it was the Fulani Jihad of the nineteenth century which gave stronger impetus to the spread of Islam in the area. That explains why only few individual Igbos embraced Islam during its early days as its spread did not cover a considerably vast area.

Islam had penetrated this part of Nigeria through the trade routes which have increased the volume of dealings and interactions between the people of Nsukka and other people to the North, East and West. Nsukka Division where Islamic influence in Igboland began is 'the fourth largest and northernmost administrative division of former Eastern Nigeria and Igboland, and the last area of Igboland to be effectively conquered and occupied by the British' (Doi 1984). Highlighting the factors which aided the spread of Islam in this area, Doi (1984) enumerates that the Nsukka District through which Islam penetrated Igboland was bounded on the west and the north by Igala country and on the east and north-east by Idoma country. Doi adds that the residents of the neighbouring areas who are non-Igbos are residents of Nsukka District through whom Islamic religious and cultural influences penetrated the entire Division especially after the 'Igala conquest of Nsukka and the establishment of Igala occupational personnels in key village positions' which put some of them in a vantage place to accelerate the spread of Islam among the people. A notable instance of this was the Okpoto-Igala, Chief of Ankpa who, according to Doi, was 'a Muslim and has influenced the people of the area'. Other factors identified by Doi as responsible for the spread of Islam in Igboland during this period include the presence and influence of Nupe Muslims most of whom were Islamic scholars, as well as intermarriages between Nupes, Igalas, Igbos and Hausa-Fulanis living in the area in the nineteenth century.

An account has been given of why Islam did not spread to most part of Igboland before the period under discussion despite the availability of evidence on the presence of Islam in the area in the eighteenth century. This account was contained in the declaration made in 2003 by Sheikh Idoko, a chief imam of Enugu Ezike origin who was quoted by Uchendu (2010), as saying:

Islam came to Nsukka area around the eighteenth century. That was before the arrival of the Europeans or Christian missionaries. The people they came into contact with belonged to the Igbo religion. Those who came with this noble message of Allah came



for trade or Sufism. Certainly that was not primarily aimed at propagation. It was by coincidence that people who had dealings with them embraced Islam and because they were not so eager to propagate Islam, the spirit of religious propagation was lost within them.

Even in the face of the above stated historical account Uchendu (2010 a) advances a much later date for the advent of Islam in Igboland. He argues that Hausa presence, to which the spread of Islam to the area was closely linked, 'was indeed rare or nonexistent in Igboland before 1900 in spite of the closeness of northern Igboland to North central and Northern Nigeria'. He supports himself with Ottenberg (2006) who himself argues that 'Igbo groups ...had no close contact with persons of Northern Nigeria origin before 1920'. This invariably supports the perception that Islam in Igboland is a twentieth century experience.

It is not out of place to point out that the advocates of the nineteenth century as a possible period for the spread of Islam to Igboland were influenced by the writings of some European visitors to Nigeria. For instance, Lander was reported (Armstrong 1955) to have seen a Hausa in Igboland in 1830. Yet such an account may not be taken seriously as suggesting the presence of Islam in Igboland during this period owing to the fact that the specific location where Lander reportedly saw the Hausa man was the kingdom of Aboh which was located 'west of the river Niger and therefore totally outside the Southeast' (Uchendu 2010) which was the country home of the Igbos. Closely related to this account is that of Crowther (1855) who wrote 'of hearing Igbo language spoken in markets at the confluence of the Rivers Benue and Niger in 1854 by actors whose identity was unknown' (Uchendu 2010). According to Uchendu (2010 a), 'that isolated event... would not warrant the interpretation that close trade contacts existed between the Igbos, including Nsukka Igbo, with traders of Northern Nigerian origin or that Islam came to Igboland from that trade contact'.

The above articulated position finds support in most of the works (especially Nadel, 1942; Bohannon, 1953; Forde, 1955; Armstrong, 1955; and Grove, 1965) which appeared almost a century after the purported date of the advent of Islam in Igboland. For instance, writing in 1956, Grove describes the inhabitants of the area in question as 'pagan people' who had not had any meaningful contact with Nupeland, Hausaland or other groups in the Muslim North owing to what Uchendu (2010) describes as 'the geographical hostility of the middle belt area, and the Benue Valley in particular, to horses and cattle which kept Fulani warriors and cattle herders away for so long.' The implication of this is that Islam did not spread to this part of the world before the twentieth century.

In another study by him, Uchendu (2010b) opines that conversions to Islam began in the 1930s in the Igbo territory of Southeastern Nigeria. In specific terms, he identified Garba Oheme, from Enugu Ezike in the old Nsukka Division as the first Igbo man to convert to Islam. Garba Oheme had converted to Islam at the age of 29 in 1937 at Calabar. Uchendu adds that Muslim leaders in Igboland were agreed that Garba Oheme was the first Igbo convert to Islam and that by his conversion, the old Nsukka Division became the first part of Igboland to produce an indigenous Muslim. This development was sequel to the presence in the area of Muslim migrants from the northern and the western parts of the country who had begun to settle there from the 1920s and spread the cultural and religious influences of Islam (Uchendu 2010b).

However, Uchendu (2010 a) maintains that Garba Oheme has a dual status; one he is the first indigenous convert and two, he is the second Muslim from Nsukka Division. The basis for Uchendu's view in this connection is that although Aduku, who is more appropriately regarded as the first Muslim from Amufie in Enugu Ezike, was originally a non-Igbo, there is an overwhelming 'testimony of his naturalization with the symbolic relics of the event which situates him as a full indigene and no longer a foreigner'. It is noteworthy that it was after his 'naturalization and settlement in 1918 that other local strangers from Nupe and elsewhere joined him in his new home, gradually building up a modest community of Muslim strangers of Nupe origin; but Aduku remained an exception as the only person of non-Igbo origin given full citizenship in the community'. Accordingly, Aduku is expected to be regarded as 'the first Muslim from Amufie in Enugu Ezike and not as a horse trader through whom, eventually, Islamic beliefs were disseminated in the community'. To the proponents of such a view, Igboland knew its first indigenous Muslim in 1918, the year of Aduku's naturalization and settlement and not in 1937 which was the year of Garba Oheme's conversion. To the present writer, however, it is all a matter of perception or conception, and there is no strain in stating that Aduku originally a non-Igbo which is why Garba Oheme may correctly be regarded as the first Igbo Muslim.

In the 1940s, Islam recorded some progress in its acceptance among the Igbos through their contact with some Northern Muslims especially at Afikpo around which 'they had a cattle trade route running from Abakaliki to Umuahia which passed by the village-group' (Ottenberg 1971). Although a few of these Northern Muslims lived at Afikpo, many others were itinerant cattle traders engaging in trading activities with the indigenous people of the area. Such commercial activities as operated between the Muslim traders and their Igbo partners contributed significantly in the spread of the influence of Islam among the indigenous people.

The year 1957 marked a turning point in the history of Islam in Igboland. That year, a son of Anohia, known as Okpani. Egwani, returned to Anohia, a Muslim 'with a small following of Muslim strangers from the north' (Ottenberg 1971). Ottenberg (1971) writes of this man who had changed his name to Alhaji Ibrahim before his return home,

This man, who was to become the leader of the Anohia Moslem community was born in 1920 in the compound of Ezi Ewa, and was thus a member of one of the original patrilineages that formed the village's first ward. His parents were also Anohia born. His father was not prominent but a mother's brother had been an influential elder. He studied at the Afikpo Government Primary School where he learned English, which he speaks well. Later, he worked in Calabar, and then on the Island of Fernando Po, where he acquired a knowledge of Spanish. In 1944, he joined the Nigerian Army and he was in the Home Guard for about a year and a half. After his discharge, he stayed at Lagos where he claimed to have had a dream about God which made him travel far, to Egypt, in West Africa, and to Garbon and the Congo. On his voyages, he joined the Moslem sect of Tijaniyya, following the spiritual leadership of Ibrahim Niyas of Kaolak, near Dakar. He joined up after having a dream about this man, whom he then visited, and who converted him... He learned to speak and write Arabic and studied the Koran; also he claims knowledge of Portuguese and French... On his return, he lived for many months with his followers in a house near the Government station, in a non-traditional residential section. He visited Anohia shortly after his return.... To welcome him there was much feasting, shooting of guns, and the performing of plays and dances in his home village. His fellow villagers asked him to settle at Anohia. It is not clear whether he intended to at first or not, although he wished to convert all of Afikpo to Islam.

It is infact on the basis of the above stated account that Maduagwu (2011) posits that 'there is evidence to show that Islam might have been planted in Igboland by an Igbo Muslim as far back as 1957, even before Nigeria's independence.' Maduagwu (2011) relies on both Ottenberg (1971) and Nnorom (2003) in tracing the origins of Islam in Igboland to the very source already articulated above.

It is derivable from the foregoing statements that Islam spread to Igboland through the contact of some Igbo merchants with their Nupe and Hausa-Fulani Muslim counterparts in early twentieth century. It is equally derivable that the

religion did not make much progress in terms of its acceptance by the indigenous people of the area most of whom saw the religion as an alien practice among them. However, the religion began to flourish steadily among the people after independence in 1960. Developmental stages through which the religion has since passed in Igboland will be discussed in the following section.

## **GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM IN IGBOLAND**

Shaikh Ibrahim Nwagui later started to preach and teach the principles of Islam among his people. He taught them the Qur'an and Hadith, in their native Igbo language. The people were pleased to have the foreign religion preached to them by one of their tribesmen. As their influx into Islam continued, Ibrahim Nwagui thought it wise to make Nnofia, a village near Afikpo, the centre of Islamic activities where conversions took place. According to Doi (1984), after establishing the centre, Shaikh Ibrahim Nwagui began to tour around Ibo country, and influenced people and familiarized them with the doctrine of the new religion. Doi also provides a list of some of the famous Igbo Muslim leaders who embraced Islam through this effort. They include Musa Udaemba Eme of Aberiba, Alhaji Tijani Akubuo of Orlu, Umar Usu of Ndibe (Afikpo), Alhaji Okpaloko of Owerri, Ibrahim Chukwu Idam and Alhaji Isa of Amuze. The *da'wah* efforts of Shaikh Ibrahim Nwagui earned him acceptance and recognition in various Muslim settlements. He later visited various Muslim countries especially in the Middle East where he was supported financially for the purpose of establishing an Islamic centre in Igboland. Doi (1984) informs that the enormous financial and material support he received from the King of Saudi Arabia was channeled towards the building of a large Islamic centre in his hometown, Nnofia, which 'included a large mosque, a primary and Qur'anic school, a library, a small hospital and, fairly close to the compound, his personal residence from where he could supervise the activities of the centre'.

The efforts of Shaikh Ibrahim Nwagui led to the embrace of Islam by a number of Igbo indigenes. The success recorded by him in this regard was felt more in the old Nsukka Division than in other parts of Igboland. This pattern in the spread of Islam has been attributed to the closeness of the old Nsukka Division to northern Nigeria which is peopled essentially by Muslims (Uchendu 2010). By the time the Nigeria – Biafra War started in 1967, Islam had spread to other parts of Igboland notably Owerri, Abakaliki, and Enoha. According to Uchendu (2010:b), "Enoha had the largest number of Igbo converts to Islam, following the group conversion of a quarter of the village ... by Shaikh Ibrahim Nwagui." The proselytization effort by Nwagui was later boosted by the support of a Yoruba Muslim professor, Aliu Babs Fafunwa who, in his capacity as Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, gave "intellectual leadership and patronage" to Muslims in

the area who were composed of “Igbos but also included the Hausas, Fulanis and Nupes living in the area” (Doi 1984). For a number of years, Professor Fafunwa coordinated activities of the Muslims and meetings of the members of the Islamic centre of Nsukka Division at the Nsukka Campus of the University of Nigeria.

When the civil war ended in 1970, and part of the former Eastern Region became East central state with the creation of a twelve state federation, the migrant Hausa, Fulani, Nupe and Yoruba communities who were ordered to flee their homes in Igboland, returned to their settlements and abodes and started to rebuild their houses, mosques, and Qur’anic schools which attracted Igbos and non-Igbos alike (Doi 1984). This development contributed greatly to conversion of many Igbos to Islam more so that many of them realized that the civil war was purely political and not in any way intended to wipe the Igbos who were predominantly non-Muslims, out of existence. Closely related to this as a factor instrumental to the spread of Islam among the Igbos in the 1970s and the 1980s was the fact that Muslim members of the Nigerian army were among the soldiers present in Igbo domains to restore law and order after the war. The fact that such Muslim soldiers normally built mosques for Islamic religious purposes wherever they were posted or deployed was a booster to Islam among the Igbos, during the period under discussion (Doi 1984).

By 1990, the population of Igbo Muslims was estimated at about ten thousand out of the total population of sixteen million Igbos in various Eastern states. This, according to Uchendu (2010), “still indicates a modest but insignificant progress in the face of almost total Christianity in Igboland and despite the antagonism to Islam from Christians and followers of Igbo indigenous religion.”

Uchendu (2010b) describes the process of conversion to Islam in Igboland as following the normal pattern of conversion to Islam generally, where he writes:

an intending male convert informs a Muslim, generally an imam ... if personally acquainted with one, of his decision to become Muslim. Some first try to obtain basic knowledge about Islam or discuss their intentions with people around them, friends as well as family members who appear predisposed to support their move. Once the decision to convert is taken, the intending convert contacts an imam directly or through an acquaintance. In response, the imam invites the individual to the next Friday worship at the mosque.

Uchendu identifies a number of Igbo Muslims who passed through the above described process in their conversion to Islam. They normally informed the congregation of their intention to be Muslim. They were thereafter told of the basic obligations and prohibitions involved in the practice of Islam. Once the converts pledged to abide by the basic rules of the religion, he was led in to observe the initial ritual bath of a Muslim. According to Uchendu (2010b), “the ritual is interspersed with recitations and the confession of the *Shahadah*, by which the convert affirms “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet’.

The intending convert is given a bath, and is dressed in a white robe especially prepared for him for this occasion; then he is brought to the mosque where fellow Muslims of different ethnic origin assemble to witness the conversion. The *shahada* is pronounced and repeated by the convert and the imam gives him guidance on Islamic matters. Then the *Jama'ah*, (i.e. the gathering), cheer the new convert, saying *Alhamdulillah* and *Allahu Akbar*, after which the congregation donate whatever they can to help their new Muslim brother, from one kobo to one naira.

The pattern of conversion to Islam described above flourishes till date and has culminated in a growth in Muslim population among the Igbos.

In a recent study, Maduagwu (2011) relies on Nnorom (2003) in stating that Islam is spreading fast among the Igbos. He adds that Nsukka Division which is generally regarded as the Islamic capital of Igboland, currently has no fewer than 14 mosques. There are now mosques in various parts of Igboland. Maduagwu identifies two institutions as playing leading roles in the propagation of Islam in Igboland in recent times. One of them is the Jam'at Nazral School which was founded in Enugu but later moved to Afikpo. The school currently has a population of almost one thousand students comprising indigenes of various Igbo states. The school awards scholarships to students and operates a curriculum that comprises secular subjects alongside Arabic and Islamic studies. The second institution is the Al-Hudah Muslim School in Enugu, which is a state-approved Islamic school founded by Igbo Muslim in Enugu, in 1990. With a student population of almost 500, the school engages the services of both Muslim and Christian teachers who are paid higher salaries than their counterparts in public schools. Yet the school authority does not disallow the Christians among such teachers from practicing their chosen religion (Maduagwu 2011).

At present, Islam has gained much ground in Igboland to the extent that Igbo Muslims are now challenging the dominant impression that Islam is an alien religion in their domain. Anthony (2000) has observed a realignment of ethnicity and religion in the lives of converts to Islam born as members of

Nigeria's Igbo ethnic group.... as these converts actively challenge the view, so widely embraced in Nigeria, that Igbo and Muslim identities are mutually exclusive. Anthony relies on the 25 October 1993 edition of the Nigerian news magazine, *Citizen*, which published a cover story on 'Igbo Muslims' (Akoshile and Ummuna 1993), in articulating 'the inroads Islam has made in the overwhelmingly Christian Igbo homeland'. This shows that Islam is gaining some stronghold among the Igbos who originally are not known to be Muslims.

The present writer can attest to the manifestations of the growth and development of Islam in Igboland with the experience recorded by him during his field work for a research on the activities of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He was initially hosted by the Vice President – General of the NSCIA in Enugu, Alhaji Sulaiman Onyeama who gave him access to several human and material sources of information on the state of Islam in Igboland. This writer's analysis of the situation and the data collected revealed that there are many committed Muslims among the Igbos and that the religion is spreading fast on account of the character of most Muslims whom their people see as exemplary and good ambassadors of the religion. The analysis also revealed that most Igbo Muslims have good knowledge of the fundamentals of the Islamic religious practices. This writer recalls clearly how Alhaji Onyeama and one of his children, Hamzah engaged him in a scholarly discussion on the circumstances necessitating *al-qasr* (i.e. the shortening of prayer) by a Muslim traveller. Their contributions in the discussion portrayed them as well-informed about Islamic principles. The fact that there are several individuals like them who also demonstrated a good mastery of various aspects of Islamic religious practices, in their interaction with this writer, shows that the Igbos may not really be regarded as "outsiders" in the scheme of Islamic affairs in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to trace the historical development of Islam the Igbos of Southeastern Nigeria. It provides the geographical and historical background as well as the ethnic, religious and regional identities of the people. With a critical and extensive review of literature, the article identified a problem area in the available body of scholarship on Islam in Igboland and proceeded to discuss with specific details, the advent of Islam in what is now known as Southeastern Nigeria which is the home of the Igbos. The paper discussed critically various emergent issues in Islam in Igboland especially the contemporary factors involved in the growth and development of the religion. The article concludes that it may no longer be appropriate to regard the Igbos as outsiders in Islam just in the same manner that Islam may no longer be described as an alien faith among them.

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, N. 2005. *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960*, Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Afigbo, A. 1981. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Afigbo, A. E. 1980. Igboland Before 1800 in Ikime, O. (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Afigbo, A.E. 1981. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. London: Longman.
- Ajah, M. (2010). The Need for Unity among Muslim Minorities in Nigeria. N.P.: N.c.
- Akoshike, M., and Ummuna, I. 1993. 'Igbo Muslim: Their trials and triumphs,' *Citizen 4* (40), 10-19.
- Anthony, D. 2000. Islam Does Not Belong to Them: Ethnic and Religious Identities among Male Igbo Converts in Hausaland. *Journal of the International African Institute*, 70(3), Pp.422-441.
- Armstrong, R.G. 1955. The Idoma-Speaking peoples. In Forde, D – (ed.) *Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence*. London: International African Institute.
- Badmos, N.O. 2012. Perspective on the Advent, Spread and Consolidation of Islam in Igboland: The Role of Jihad and the Jihadists. N. p.: N.c.
- Bohannon, L. & Bohannon, P. 1953. *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Boston, J.S. 1968. *The Igala Kingdom*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Chidiebere, E. 2007. The Igbos (Ibos): Our Journey so far. *Media, Culture, and Human Rights*. Pp. 1-3.
- Crowther, S. 1854. *Journal of an Expedition of the Niger and Tshaddah Rivers...in 1854*. London; Church Missionary House.
- Doi, A.R. 1984. *Islam in Nigeria*. Zaria: Gaskiya Corporation.



- Forde, D. 1955. The Nupe. In Forde, D. (ed.) *Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence*. London: International African Institute.
- Forde, D. and Jone, G.I. 1950. *The Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria*, London.
- Green, M.M. 1947 *Ibo Village Affairs*, London.
- Hartle, D.D. 1967. Archaeology in Eastern Nigeria. *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 93.
- Lewis, Paul Bratton, M. 2000 Attitudes Towards Democracy and Markets in Nigeria: *Report of a National Opinion Survey*, January – February 2000, Washington, DC: International Foundation for Election System and Management System International.
- Maduagwu, M.O. 2011. *Igbo Culture and the Prospects of Islam in Eastern Nigeria*. N.p.: n.c.
- Meek, C.K (1930). *An Ethnological Report on the Peoples of Nsukka Division, Onitsha Province*, Lagos.
- Nadel, S.F. 1942. *A Black Byzantium*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Nnorom, A. 2003. Islam in Igboland: Lesson in History. Paper delivered at the International Conference on Igbo Studies: A tribute to Simon Ottenberg, Cornell University, New York, April 3 – 6, 2003.
- Onwubu, C. 1975. Ethnic identity, political integration and national development: the Igbo diaspora in Nigeria. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 13 (4), 399-413.
- Opaka, D., Ozloko, J.& Eze, C (eds). *Nsukka: Development Challenges*. Nsukka; Adaba Investment.
- Osagbae, E.E. and Suberu, R.T. 2005. A History of Identities, Violence, and Stability in Nigeria. *Crise Working Paper 6*, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford.
- Ottenberg, S. 2006. *Farmers and townspeople in a changing Nigeria: Abakaliki during colonial times (1905 – 1960)*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Ottenberg, S. 1971. A Moslem Ibo Village, *Cahiers d'etudes africaines* 11(2), 231 Personal Interview with Alhaji Sulaiman Onyeama, Enugu, July 1997.

- Rufai, S.A. 1993. *Islam in History*. Lagos: Ibrash.
- Rufai, S.A.2011. The Muslim Minority of Southwestern Nigeria: WESTJOMO and the Challenge of Speaking with One Voice. *International Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (IJMMA), 31 (2), 274-285.
- Shelton, A. 1971. *The Igbo – Igala borderland: Religion and social control in indigenous African colonialism*. Albany: The state of New York Press.
- Smock, A. 1971. *Ibo Politic: the role of ethnic unions in eastern Nigeria*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Talbot, M. 1962. *The Physical Anthropology of Southern Nigeria*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Uchendu, E. 2010a. Being Igbo and Muslim: The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria and Conversions to Islam, 1930s to recent times. *The Journal of African History*, 51:63:87.
- Uchendu, E. 2010b. Evidence for Islam in Southeast Nigeria. *The Social Science Journal*, 47, pp.172-188.
- Uchendu, E. 2011. Negotiating Relationships in a Mixed Religious Society: Islam among the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 28 (2), pp. 207-219.
- Ugwu, D. 1987. *This is Obukpa: A History of Typical Ancient Igbo State*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- Van Den Bersselaar, D. 1997. ‘Creating “Union Ibo”: Missionaries and the Igbo language’, *Africa* 67(2), 273-95.
- Waddington, H. 1931. *Intelligence Report on Afikpo Clan of Ogoja Province*. Unpublished MS.