Crisis and Renewal: Civil War Revival and the New Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria’s Igboland

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Introduction

Paul Gifford has described the new wave of Pentecostalism that has swept across Africa since independence as “Africa’s new Christianity” and “undoubtedly the salient sector of African Christianity today.” Ogbu Kalu calls it the “third response” to white cultural dominance within the Christian community, the earlier two being Ethiopianism and the Aladura or Zionist churches. Recently a number of scholars have recognized the importance of this movement for the church in Nigeria. Its origins can be traced to a religious awakening that flowed from two sources in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first of these was the ending of the Biafran war; the second was the rise of the Nigerian university system. Most research has focused on the development of the movement in Western Nigeria, with its roots in the university campuses and the work of the Scripture Union. My focus will be the origins and early progress of the movement among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria.

During the Civil War what happened in the east was different from the west. In Western Nigeria the renewal arose in the cities and began initially among students at Ibadan University toward the end of the war. After the war it spread to other university campuses, colleges, and secondary education institutions in the west. In Eastern Nigeria the renewal focused on the countryside and village centers.

4 The three main ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Yoruba in the west, the Igbo in the east, and the Hausa-Fulani in the north.
schools in predominantly urban areas. By the mid-1970s it had penetrated into the wider society.\(^5\) In the east, most participants in the revival had no college education because schools and tertiary institutions were closed. Furthermore, although it began in the town of Umuahia, the movement soon spread to the villages and affected the church at grassroots level. Access to the cities was severely restricted because they were the main focus of the conflict, and so it was only after the war that the revival spread to the urban areas.

Gifford has asserted that externality continued as an important factor in African Christianity after independence, and that in the case of the newer Pentecostal churches links with America proved particularly influential.\(^6\) This paper will show that the new wave of Pentecostalism that swept through Eastern Nigeria in the early 1970s was not a North American import but a response to local concerns, and must be understood against the backdrop of the insecurities engendered by the Civil War crisis.\(^7\) It began as an evangelical revival associated with the Scripture Union but quickly acquired a Pentecostal spirituality as participants sought for practical answers to their current dilemmas. It was not long before new Pentecostal churches began to emerge, but it was only in the late 1970s that these churches established links with certain sectors of the Pentecostal community in America.

Lewis Rambo has argued that some form of crisis normally precedes religious conversion. This is not enough to explain conversion, but it may act as an initiator of the conversion process.\(^8\) Within Igbo religious history two major socio-political crises have affected Igbo responses to Christianity. The first occurred with the invasion of Igbo territory by British colonialists and Christian missionaries, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Igbo response to this has been well documented.\(^9\) It is generally agreed that a turning point in Igbo religious his-


\(^6\) Gifford, African Christianity, 314.

\(^7\) Some of the material for this article was collected during field research in Nigeria between April and June 2000.
