IGBO IDENTITY QUESTION IN THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD MISSION (RCCG) NIGERIA: AN ETHICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract
Every society especially in Africa requires that its members adhere to an articulated set of values in order to provide a sense of group identity for them. For the Igbo Christianity stands out as a major determinant of most of the values that marks them out with a distinctive identity. The expansionist strategies of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria, have great impact among Igbo Christians as many have accepted the faith especially for its social and spiritual benefits. It is to be noted that the Church was established and owned by the Yoruba and expectedly, the theological development of the Church has been tilted towards Yoruba worldview. Howbeit, if a new religion has assumed major significance in the lives of a people, as the Redeemed Christian Church of God has done among the Igbo, then it is very necessary to assess the nature of its activities and progress in order to see how far it has affected the identity of the people. This work has examined the identity of Igbo members of the Redeemed Christian Church of God and discovered that Igbo personhood and identity are not properly represented especially in the leadership of the Church. The work, therefore, recommended a proper integration of various ethnic groups in Nigeria so as to give a national outlook to the Church.

Keywords: Igbo, Identity, RCCG, Ethics

Introduction
The exponential growth of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) has become so phenomenal not only in Nigeria but much more in the global Christian evangelization that it is presently attracting the attention of many Church historiographers and even mission strategists. There is hardly any street and corners within the urban centers and even villages of the Nigerian society where one would not see the signpost and the presence of the Redeemed Church. Not much can be said without making reference to unique and expansive charismatic influence of the incumbent leader, Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye. Although, the Church started as an African Initiated Church (AIC), during the classical Pentecostal period, and within the Yoruba ethnic enclaves of the Western Nigeria, it would conveniently be said that the Church has broken the barriers of ethnicity, language, cultural boundaries and nationality. The Igbo people of the South-eastern Nigeria are not left out from the evangelistic exploits and impacts of this Church. Many people from this ethnic group have become either ‘first generation’ or ‘second generation’ converts to this Church. The ‘first generation’ converts are those who literally became members of the Church from African traditional worship, while the ‘second generation’ converts are those who, for one reason or the other left their primary Church to become members of the Redeemed Church. The question of identity of the Igbo in this Church, which is the heart and pursuit of this paper, is that of the personhood and representation in given
society. This paper would therefore examine the extent of involvement, acceptability, and level of influence of the Igbo people in this Church, which is adjudged “the fastest growing Pentecostal Church in the world, with her presence in 100 countries”.

Ojoibukun (2010) noted that “it is of vital importance that we document the mind of God in His plan for the world through The Redeemed Christian Church of God, as revealed through the prophecies of His anointed servants. These include Papa Josiah Akindayomi, the founder and first Superintendent . . . Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Church and many other men of God. In order to achieve effective and result-oriented research, this paper engaged on a one-on-one interactive interview with the leadership of the Church in ‘Region 6 – Enugu’ which covers the Provinces in Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu. The Assistant Provincial Pastor, Pst. Robert Joshua-Igbo with the Administrative Secretary to the Regional Pastor granted an interview audience to the Researcher. Some relevant books of history concerning the Church were also consulted to ascertain concrete information. Thus, the general background history of the Church, their vision and mission statements, their theology and expansionist strategies, their social impact and Igbo identity would examined.

The Beginnings
In an interview with the Assistant Provincial Pastor of Enugu Province 1, Pastor Robert Joshua-Igbo stated that “the Redeemed Christian Church of God was founded by God”. Although this is expressive of the assertiveness usually associated with classical Pentecostalism, it is clear that the Church had a beginning with the “encounter” which Pastor Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi, the founder had with God. He was born of July 5, 1909 at No 12 Odo-Alafia Street Ondo State Nigeria. He had his initial Christian encounter with the then “Church Missionary Society”. His wife and partner was Pastor (Mrs) Esther Egbedire Akindayomi. They both came to Lagos in 1941 and they got married that same year at the Cherubim & Seraphim, “white-garment church”. Because of the hunger and thirst for a true living God, Pastor Akindayomi and wife left the Cherubim & Seraphim Church in 1952. He was so thirst for the Holy Spirit that the pastorate of the Church became disturbed and ‘evicted him’ because of what was seen as his fundamentalism. “They were disturbed by the fact that he condemned the then prevailing practice of the Church members visiting cemeteries at night to consult with the dead”.

According to the brief history of the RCCG in the Workers in-training Manual, “in studying the Bible they found out about restitution and Josiah Akindayomi, who was once had three wives, was by the help of the Holy Spirit, able to handle marriage restitution by retaining only the first wife”. He was said to have gathered together twelve people in the living room of one of the members and began to expound to them the truth of the gospel as laid out in the scripture. The group soon became noted for their fiery kind of praying as they poured out their soul unto God after a time of studying the scripture. The group was then known as Egbe ogo Oluwa which means The Glory of God group. The Ogo Oluwa Society, therefore, took on the banner divinely revealed to Pastor Akindayomi who also received the name of the Church in a revelation. In his words the Assistant Provincial Pastor, who responded to our
questions said that Pa Akindayomi was a stark illiterate who could neither read nor write at the time, but in a vision he saw some strange symbols or what he was on a piece of wooden board. Using a piece of charcoal, he did so very painstakingly and diligently. He then took the board to Lagos and showed it to relations of his who read out the name “The Redeemed Christian Church of God”.

Following this, “he was supernaturally taught to read the Bible in the Yoruba language, his native tongue and it soon became clear to all that this was a truly anointed man of God, a prodigy, and a great bible scholar”. Pastor Josiah Akindayomi was said to have demonstrated amazing gift of preaching, healing, working of miracles and prophecy. Akindayomi also disclosed that during one of the religious experiences of divine revelations which he regarded as “supernatural visitation”, God told him that this Church will spread to the end of the earth, and that when the Lord Jesus would return in glory He will meet the Church still going on. By the time this great founder “passed on to glory” on November 2nd 1980 the church would be said to be having about two thousand (2000) members in 39 parishes in the South Western part of Nigeria.

The phenomenal growth of the church actually began in 1981, under the leadership of Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, a PhD holder in Applied Mathematics and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Ilorin then, who was “divinely chosen” to take over as the General Overseer. Dr. Adeboye who, according to Ojoibukun (2010:8), at that time was a nominal member of the Anglican Church, became a member of the church in 1973 in search of “protection from the evil men and women of his village” (p.9). Not long after he joined the church, he became the interpreter who translated the messages of Pa Akindayomi from Yoruba into the English Language. This was the man that the General Superintendent later named to succeed him and who is now the General Overseer of the Church. According to Ojoibukun (2010), it is estimated that the church can count an estimated over six million members in one hundred and twenty nations of the world. Pastor Adeboye has insisted that no modifier or adjective such as worldwide or international, be added to the name of the church because it was not given by man. According to him, some had thought it more dignifying or more exact in status to add these words. Many translators in other languages had also thought they could give an adaptation of the name to “fit the current taught of acceptability in the society in which they operate”. But wisdom soon teaches such new converts and leaders that what is divinely given should not be subject to the fabrications of man.

Prophecies Concerning the Church
Apart from the unique claim that the name of the Church “The Redeemed Christian Church of God” was received through a revelation given to Pa J.O. Akindayomi, several other supernatural encounters, prophecies and promises were claimed to have been made concerning the church among which are:

1) That Jesus Christ will meet this church on His return
2) That this church will become a model to the whole world
3) That other church from all over the world will come to learn and worship in this church.

**Theology of the Church**

Pastor Robert Joshua-Igbo said “the Redeemed Christian Church of God is not a secret cult, it is a Bible believing church. Holiness is the foundation upon which the RCCG is founded”. He insisted that the founder Pa Akindayomi treasured a life of holy living, sacrifice, fasting and prayers. Thus right from the beginning the church had been distinguished by uncompromising **holiness**. Wisdom teaches that the factor that guaranteed the establishment of a thing is always crucial to its sustenance and ultimate fulfillment. Holiness therefore became the watchword in all the doctrine and practices of the church. Ojoibukun maintains that while the founder as well as the members had no recourse to documentaries, commentaries and concordances of the bible, the simple translation of holiness as unwavering obedience to the word of God was considered sufficient.

**Practice and Spiritual Gifts**

Like several other charismatic and classical Pentecostals, the Redeemed Christian Church of God insists on the indispensability of an encounter for divine transformation usually referred to as being ‘born again’. They also believe and practice adult baptism by immersion as the only biblically and acceptable pattern of baptism prescribed by Jesus Christ. According to Pastor Joshua-Igbo, any baptized member of the RCCG is expected to begin the journey of sanctification wherein, he is baptized in the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues as its evidence. He acknowledged they allow the move of the Holy Spirit in prophecy, miracles, healing and other gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paying glowing tribute to usual grace and manifestation of the power of God in the life their General Overseer, Pst. Joshua-Igbo said, “apart from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the humility and sacrifice of Pasto E. A. Adeboye is the secret of the successes being recorded in the Church.

**Vision and Mission Statement of the Church**

The following are the visions and goals of The Redeemed Christian Church of God:

1. To make Heaven
2. To take as many people as possible with us
3. To have a member of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in every family of all nations.
4. To accomplish No 1 above, holiness is our lifestyle
5. To accomplish Nos. 2&3 above, we will plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of the developed countries.

The members are seen to be seemingly committed to these objectives, which according to the Assistant Provincial Pastor who granted us audience for interview, they will pursue these objectives until every nation in the world is reached for Jesus Christ our Lord.
Leadership in the Church
The Administrative Secretary to the Regional Pastor who addressed this question said, “only God determines leadership”. This is in collaboration with the growing notion that ‘there is no prospective successor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God’. For instance:

When Pa Akindayomi was getting older and it was apparent that his position would be vacant sooner than later, those who saw themselves as prospective successors had begun to scheme and jostle for the position. Some even “caused prophecies that favoured their aspiration to come from Their carnal minds . . . The first display of ignorance by such prospective successors” is that there is no prospective successor in The Redeemed Christian Church of God. God himself revealed to the founder who his successor would be. (p.13)

Presently, the leader of the Church is Pastor E. A. Adeboye, Yoruba. The structure of the leadership organigram flows from the General Overseer, the Assistant, to the Regional Pastors, Provincial, Zonal, Area and Parish Pastors. At the moment, only one Igbo Pastor, Pst Boniface Okenwa has reached the rank of a Regional Pastor. On the question of whether there is a foreseeable possibility of an Igbo emerging at the top leadership of the as the General Overseer or something close to it, given the number of adherents in the RCCG, Pastor Robert Joshua-Igbo who himself is of the Igbo ethnic background, and an Assistant Provincial Pastor, said, “it is not a matter within the human realm”. Though this statement sounds incredible, it is deducible that leadership in the RCCG is a reserved area, which is mostly thought of as God’s own business.

The Growth of the Church
One of the outstanding features of the Church is the geometric progression with which the Church is advancing its frontiers and multiplying its membership. Our respondent assertively claimed that this observable and tremendous growth in the Church is as a result of the move of the Holy Spirit in the effort in evangelism and visitation. He said, “just as we do not joke with prayer and fasting, so we do not with evangelism and visitation. The approximate statistical population data of Church which we requested for was not made available. The researcher observed a level of skepticism with regards to this as the respondent directed that an official application for this should directed to the Regional Pastor. The question of the possible population of Igbo adherents in the Church was addressed with a form of generalization, “hundreds of thousands of the Igbo are members of the RCCG, even Catholics who are our secret disciples”. There is the tendency that such detailed data for measuring growth are not available or they shrouded in skepticism as earlier observed.

The Impact of the Church in the Society
Apart from the spiritual fulfillment that their adherents confess to be receiving from the Church, they have gone beyond the scope of the limitedness of their Church enclaves to exert a wider influence and impact on the larger society in the areas of education, employment, national cohesion, health, international relations, tourism, and even gender integration etc. Presently, in Nigeria the Church claims have the largest

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Camp ground with world-class facilities which attracts ‘prayer pilgrims’ from various parts of the world. The monthly “Holy Ghost night” and “Festival of Life” held in Nigeria and in United Kingdom is gaining international attention among Christians of various backgrounds. They run educational institutions of various levels including their Redemption University at Ogun state which is already accredited by government National University Commission. This is in addition to their Bible colleges, primary and post-primary schools for human resource development. It is obvious that added to other social impacts that the Church is making, the employment which its various structures are providing to the people have in no small measure alleviated the economic burdens, not only of the individuals but have contributed greatly to the improvement of the gross national economic development.

The Question of Igbo Identity in the Church
This is the question of the personhood and representation of the individual and the collective Igbo person and worldview in the affairs of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. To briefly introduce the people of this ethnic group, the Wikipedia Free Dictionary says that, “The Igbo people, historically spelled "Ibo" are an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria. They speak Igbo, which includes various Igboïd languages and dialects. Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. In rural Nigeria, Igbo people work mostly as craftsmen, farmers and traders. The most important crop is the yam; celebrations take place annually to celebrate its harvesting” The Igbo population of Nigeria is estimated at 18% of a total population of 177 million, or approximately 32 million people. Southeastern Nigeria, which is inhabited primarily by the Igbo, is the most densely populated area in Nigeria, and possibly in all of Africa.

Chinua Achebe (2012) spoke extensively about the Igbo ethnic group in his celebrated work, There was a Country – A Personal History of Biafra, and said, “the Igbo culture, being receptive to change, individualistic, and highly competitive, gave the Igbo man an unquestioned advantage over his compatriots in securing credentials for advancement in Nigerian colonial history” (p.74). There is the notion that before knowledge of Europeans and full exposure to other neighbouring ethnic groups, the Igbo did not have a strong identity as one people. As in the case of most ethnic groups, the British and fellow Europeans identified the Igbo as a tribe. Chinua Achebe, among other scholars, challenged this because of its negative connotations and possible wrong definition. He suggested defining the Igbo people as a nation although the Igbo do not have an officially recognized physical state of their own.

In his work, The Trouble with Nigeria, Achebe earlier decried the common resentment of the Igbo in the Nigerian affairs, and said “Nigeria will probably achieve consensus in no other matter than their common resentment of the Igbo”. The rise of the Igbo in Nigerian affairs however, was due to the ‘self-confidence engendered by their open society and their belief that one man is as good as another, that no condition is permanent’. The question of Igbo identity in the Redeemed Christian Church of God therefore is not a protest or propaganda for Igbo ethnicity, but an examination or analysis of their involvement, their acceptability and representation in
the mainstream affairs of the Church. Hence, if the Igbos who approximately hold 18% of the total Nigerian population have become adherents of the Christian faith in the RCCG in their ‘hundreds of thousands’, the question of their proper integration this originally-Yoruba-background founded Church becomes an issue of socio-historical importance. If there are about 20 Regional Pastors with only one (1) of them coming from the entire Igbo adherents, does that represent sensible and equitable integration and representation of the various other ethnic groups that make up the Church? Although in the issue of leadership, “only God determines” but in situations majority of the positions are occupied by people one ethnic group, precisely the Yoruba, one may wonder whether this God who ‘determines leadership’ is an ‘ethnic personality’, especially in favor of the Yoruba. Of course, not much is said of people from other ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian society.

Another pertinent consideration is the question of language and culture. If it is assumed that the RCCG has broken the barriers of culture and differences among the various peoples that make up the Church, the question becomes necessary to understanding of the language of communication and the culture that is predominantly manifested in the activities of the Church. This is the concern for resolving the conflict between Christianity and culture, and the extant need for contextualization.

**Conclusion**

Generally speaking, Pentecostalism is making impactful and progressive developments in the global and Nigerian Christian historiography. This is in spite of the obvious exclusiveness, and sometimes excessive assertiveness usually manifested among many of them. The Redeemed Christian Church of God under the leadership of Pastor E. A. Adeboye, however seem to present a balanced and matured response to both the spiritual and social needs of the people, especially those of their adherents. Cutting across various cultural and ethnic barriers, and widely making members in tribes, nations, languages and cultures other than its original background is an achievement that can strongly be attributed to supernatural or divine involvement, yet maintaining a balance, equitable representation and integration of the various peoples that make up the Church is a challenge that needs to be given reasonable attention.

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Oral Interview:
Pastor Robert Joshua-Igbo. Assistant Pastor in-charge Enugu Province

...............The Administrative Secretary to the Region 6 Enugu Regional Pastor