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RETHINKING MARXIST OPIUM IDEOLOGY: THE URHOBO EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT
Karl Marx won a very popular view in his time by postulating that religion is the opium of the people. This view however formidable it may have been, has not truly expressed the religious experience of the Urhobo. Thus, the paper among other things, seeks to extricate the views of Marx in the Urhobo religious context. It adopts a sociological interpretation of the phenomenon of religion among the people against the backdrop of blind followership (opium). The paper argues, rather than seeing religion from Karl Marx specs, it should be perceived as the soul of the soulless from experiential viewpoint which validates social actions and a basis for moral judgment, binding on the society. It has been a veritable tool in liberating the masses as well as a channel for expressing desires. The paper concludes that a religionless society is a soulless society that is capable of breeding anarchy and chaotic environment. Hence among the Urhobo, it is the panacea for peaceful co-existence, harmony and social development.

KEYWORDS: Karl Marx, Urhobo, Chaotic Environment, Sociological Interpretation, Opium

INTRODUCTION

Karl Max was born on 5th May, 1818 in Tier, the Kingdom of Prussa's prominence of the Lower Rhine, Germany. His early life was greatly influenced by his parents who ranked among the bourgeois of his time; a devout follower of Karl and Voltaire. Just like his father, he too was greatly influenced by Emmanuel Karl and Voltaire.

Essentially, people use the word "Marxist" as a theory developed after his name in two basic ways;

(a) To describe those who rely on Marx's conceptual language (for example; mode of production," "class," "commodity" fetishism") to understand capitalist and other societies; or

(b) To describe those who regard workers' revolution as the only means of a communist society [Mehring, 2003,75].

On religion, Marx delved into many areas of discourse of which Pearson [1964:213] notes that his prophetic call to man was for them to acknowledge that religion is the "bourgeois betrayal of man in the name of God". This opinion is also shared by Berger [1967,90]. Echekwube [1991,12] posits that Marx was strongly influenced by the dialectical philosophy of Hegel in which, a given situation generates opposing forces that ultimately break up the original situation and produce a new one. In resolving the difference between the bourgeois and the proletariat, he condemned the religious approach by encouraging constitutional ways of setting trade or labour disputes. Hence, he perceived religious means as "blind revolutionary process of the universe."

It was on this backdrop therefore, that Karl Marx made his most famous statement:

> Like opium, religion makes the present misery of the workers a little more endurable, but while providing some comfort, it also distracts them from the real cause of their misery and keeps them from doing nothing about it [Steward and Blocker, 1982,12]

This statement has been criticized and interpreted variously by scholars. Ollman, B [1996,45-46], Abram, M.H. [1971,54], Berridge, V. and Edward, G. [1980,143] argued for either a plain or simple interpretation, which, could mean the condemnation or the support of religion. The reasons for the subtle approach hinges on the fact

that religion is the general theory of this world. It includes its encyclopaedic compendium, logic in popular form, enthusiasm, moral sanction, solemn complement and universal basis of consolation and justification which creates fantastic realization of human essence. Howard [1972, 24, 27] from the religious experience of the individual, affirms that:

> The mutual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning *ne plus* ultra being, in which all that the individual is, becomes clear as immediate and often distinct revelation. He is face to face with something which is so much more, and so much more inclusive, than all of his awareness of himself that for him, in the moment, there are no questions. Without asking, somehow he knows.

Hence, the non consideration of religion is indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual arena is religion. Suffering *per ce* is not the object of religion but, it tries to bind hope in the hopeless, brings sigh to the oppressed as well as heart to the heartless world and soul to the soulless conditions. The hasty conclusion that religion brings illusory happiness to the people is also the personal conclusion of Marx, borne out of the belief in man's alienation. It is his wishful thinking that has resulted in undue loyalty and obedience to the bourgeois in strictly business order, wherein, they swindle between socialism and capitalism.

Ideologies and Religion on Trial

There are certain ideologies which are apposed to religion while others seek to either eliminate or to use it as a vehicle for achieving their goals. Hence, ideology usually seeks to control or use religion because of the many adherents.

Shenk [1998,23-24] in his comment on Marxism, listed Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Tse-tung as atheists, who denied the existence of both God and his dominion. Thus, religion has no place in the society wherein they conceived as the ideal. Adogbo [2000,13] debunked the atheist claim, affirming that religion as we know it in contemporary society, is a doubly rich and complex phenomenon that has existed throughout history and beyond the dark recesses of man's earliest cultures. It provides the basis for understanding human history, social, political, spiritual, economic and other spheres of human life all over the world.

Similarly, religion is concerned with supernatural beings and forces which encapsulate the perceptible and invisible realms of human existence that has made it possible for man to sustain social interaction and integration.

In Marxist Ideology, he is mainly concerned with the economic order and the right of proletariat in gaining freedom from the bourgeois; a total investiture of humanity without his Creator and obligation. Hence, he sees religion as submission to authority. He believed that to be fully human, one must be self-determined, free and guided by reason; the replacement of faith in God by faith in man. That is why he conceived the idea of alienation that is deeply embedded in all great religion … and there was some kind of rupture, which left people feeling like foreigners in the world caption as *opium* [Chiodi, 1976, 80]. It was once said of Mao Tse-tung about China, "Had no other god but he Chinese people." Karl Marx complimented Mao Tse-tung adding that, God is a projection of human self-consciousness as a result of imagination.

Marxists consider religion as evil illusion, a false ideology, unrealistic in its idealism. The call for the abolition of religion is a call for the death of the society. His call has no substance in the African context and indeed, among the Urhobo in their world view of religion.

Adewale [1983,45] notes that even before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the presence of religion permeates every aspect of the human life of the Africans, which consist of the world of the living and the living dead. Hence, Durkheim [1966,53-54] lends his support for the true nature of religion which brings about a state of effervescence that changes the condition of psychic activity in which vital energies are our excited, passions more active, sensation stronger, …. He feels himself transformed and consequently, impacts the immediate environment which surrounds him.

William [1961, 47] describes this as basic conviction and affirmative attitude that swivels valid approach to religious faith. Consequently, he vehemently rejects Hegelian philosophical thoughts that were shared by Karl Marx. Another scholar who became anti-Hegelian was Søren Kierkegaard, a Christian existentialist. Both scholars Søren Kierkegaard and William James attest to the reality of religious encounter with the 'Ultimate' so real that Marx's opiate, appeals only to philosophical thought, void of religious experience as posited by the duo. Accordingly, religious ceremonies therefore provide concrete opportunities for the reappraisal and consolidation of collective life in the society.

Karl Marx desire to eliminate religion in favour of atheism, did not wield a global sway today as most people have come to term with the experiential nature of religious experience, so real beyond doubt. The wishful postulation that religion will die a natural death or vanish has proved abortive as more people now turn to profess faith in one religion or the other. Boer [2003, 44] notes that efforts made to discredit religion was not nascent either the expression of belief in man as did Mao Tse-tung. The belief in fellow man as well as the veneration of certain individuals portrays the earliest form of atheism and animism as against monotheism.

Boer [2003, 43] notes that Christianity and Judaism, rather than the worship of the emperor (atheism), sought to meet the daily spiritual needs of the people against the backdrop of the fact that any religion which did not embrace the worship of the emperor was considered *illicita.* The situation became inexplicable, if not experiential, what else would have kept the people together in the face of persecution? The people implore the emperor to make anti-religious decrees, restrictions, and persecutions to exterminate religions that have had their course in contemporary history like: Lenin, who was militant against religion; the Red Guards of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as well as the oppressive religious agenda in Albania and North Korea [Shenk,1988, 24].

These were direct efforts made to kill religion based on Karl Marx theory, however, Adogbo from the Urhobo and indeed African context, perceived religion differently. He notes that religion and culture are parts of ethnic identity and social life and the people imbibe religious values from the time of birth and as they grow up, the ethos forms the very depths of their consciousness. This may result from the recognition which the government gave to religion and consequently, the freedom to practice one's faith.

Adogbo [2000, 13-14] notes that the Urhobo context is different. Religion and culture are part of ethnic identity and social life. The people imbibe religious values from the time of birth and as they mature, the ethos forms the very depths of their consciousness. Olakanmi [2007, 45-46] notes that it is the fundamental human rights of the individual; he is entitled to freedom of thoughts, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief … to manifest and propagate same in worship, teaching, practices and observance.

Therefore, the Marxist class theory does not reflect a free society wherein the fundamental human rights are vigorously pursued. Rather, the bourgeois [capitalist] controls the means of production and ownership of goods, aimed at self aggrandizement. The underpinning ideology behind Marxist philosophical thought according to Shenk [1998, 24] should be understood as atheism demonstrated by Mao literally "had no other god but the Chinese people". There is no need for religion rather; hope is built on man's consciousness and personal faith in the other man".

The Marxists desire to substitute science for religion because; they have unscientific and superstitious view of the world as harmful to human welfare. They argue that religion arises as a result of the fear of uncontrollable forces. However, Mbiti [1991, 81] from the African traditional point of view opines that the belief in the existence of spirits, provide people with the explanation of many mysteries which they find in the universe of which, scientific explanation is inadequate and defective.

Ejenobo [2007, 1] defines theology from a more technical perspective that gives succinct essence to it as "the scientific art of presenting data concerning the subject of God in a systematic order". Defined in this manner, theology can be seen as a discipline that seeks to elucidate the conceptions of man about God and the spiritual order of things in a manner consistent with scientific principles of social discourse. Karl Marx denial of theological conceptions about the reality of spiritual phenomenon, is his own short-sightedness as man generally, is perceived in terms of his religious affiliation. The inability to subject spiritual occurrences to empirical testing does not imply the non-existence or intimidation in the context of Marx.

Durkheim [1966, 56] therefore concludes that, if religion has given birth to all that is essential in society [science, technology, commerce, etc], it is because the idea of society is the soul of religions which should be perceived as human and moral forces. Whatever is done in the name of religion is done for humanity, the prime beneficiary. The atheist claim of the non-existence of God is bereft and ill-considered in mode and presentation. The affirmation of the spiritual world existence and the concept of God are well acknowledged among the Urhobo. Such ideas are shared also in the Hebrew scripture, "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it*". *The Heavens declare the Glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands"*. [Ps.24:1; 19:1].

Religion in Urhobo Context

To truly appreciate the Urhobo nation, Erivwo [1991, 2] states that the Urhobo people with their Isoko brothers inhabit the hinterland of the lower reaches of the Niger Delta between Longitude 5^0 and $6^0 25^1$ East and Latitude 6^0 and 5^0 North. Their neighbours include: Benin to the North, the Ijaw to the South, the Ukwani [in Aboh Division] to the East and Itsekiri to the West.

The Urhobo like other Africans, have always thought of God and the supersensible world in concrete terms. The oral traditions in which his thoughts categorizes concept are enshrined and present in their own systematic pattern. William [1959, 23] in favour of religious experience, argues that, "… whether it come in the form of visions or intuitions, or in the form of a crystallised conviction or habit of mind toward life, it is recognised as something overmastering." This phenomenon among the Urhobo is evidenced. The most common form of acknowledgement and submission to God and constituted authorities are expressed as proper nouns, names common among the people. Oyiborhoro [2005, 52-54] had names like:

Edewor	-	Sacred day of worship in God religion
Ejiroghene	-	Praise God
Ejokpaoghene	-	Let's trust God
Oghenero	-	God exists
Erhimeyoma	-	My guardian spirit (God) is good
Eseoghene	-	God's gift
Eserovwe	-	God's grace
Oghenebrume	-	God decided in my favour
Oghenechovwe	-	God aided me
Oghenegaren	-	God is great
Oghenetega	-	God is worship worthy
Oghenefegiro	-	God is worthy of praise
Oghene ochuko	-	God is my helper/provider

These names, affirm the reality, praise, trust and appreciation in the celebration of their religious submission and acknowledgment. Marx opposition to religion as a vehicle for submission to authority does not in any way constitute problem as the effervescence of the atmosphere is borne out of experience with the *Ultimate* as expressed by Martin Bubar [1923] in his work "*I* and *THOU*". Hence, they willingly submit through their religious experience to the *Ultimate* as expressed in *I and THOU*, that was corroborated by Mbiti [2005, 1] who notes that people take their religion with them wherever they go.

An oral interview conducted among the Urhobo over a period of two years [2009 – 2010] confirms their submission based on conviction and not impetuously to any authority. The study was intended to show that Urhobo expressed faith in God and not fellow man; they have personal knowledge of God which concretizes their faith and experience as well as their belief in the supernatural act of God (miracles) and spirit world. In an interview with Madam Okpako, she notes that names like: Oghenemine "I look up to God" clearly reveals the express confidence in the Creator of the Universe. She further adds in Urhobo language saying, "Obenu na ono yi hwere?" meaning "Who sweeps the heavens?"

The knowledge of God permeates every strata of the society. Akpomuaire affirms that the knowledge of religion is felt in every area within the society. Pointing to a totem among the Orogun people, he notes that God has set forth that creature as an intermediary between Him and the people. The analysis reveals the belief in religious experience and encounter with the *Ultimate* among Urhobo which constitutes an important aspect of their experience.

The interview has 155 respondents. Absolute faith in God has 34 respondents representing 21.9%, belief in religious encounter has 21 respondents representing 13.5%, breakthrough in life has 30 respondents representing 19.4%, and reality of the spiritual world has 28 representing 18.1% while faith in the continued existence of religious tradition has 20 respondents with 12.9%. These are various expressions of faith in religious encounter among Urhobo people.

Johnny Akpughe testified to the reality of spiritual world wherein people live and practice certain craft parallel to the physical which transcends the world of scientific empiricism that is strongly supported by Karl Marx to replace religion. From Westernized Philosophical thought, he has expressed his ideology, believing that the society is like a mechanical process which obeys certain rules otherwise it requires physical overhauling.

The Urhobo believe in the presence of both the physical and spiritual world. They strongly express confidence in the powers of the deity being venerated. Hence, a priest of any deity could be killed and or protected in times of trouble and rewarded for his faithfulness. Similarly, he gets protection when oppressed by other forces, hence he reverence his call as a priest and must live in a manner that will be of maximum good to the society because they serve as model to the people and the gods. Okudioghwa Patrick in this regard, warns that no one should hide the umbrella of traditional or Christian religious either to undo or control the mind set of others. "The gods will be very angry to deal with such an individual irrespective of his or her social status." The bourgeois in Marx's argument, hide under the guise of religion to deprive the proletariat by constantly subduing their conscience. Such acts are possible because there is no encounter as stated by Martins Buber, William James and Adogbo P. Michael.

Two religious ministers – Ivworin Godwin and Isiorhovoja Jones gave a very interesting remark on Marx opiate of the people. They shared similar ideology "*Yes, the people may blindly submit through religion but it will not be long because, some visit mediums and diviners, prophets, seers, to make certain enquiries unknown to their leaders who may have cajoled them together for long*". The people have ample places to go and seek out the outcome of certain phenomenon in their lives. Hence, it is absolutely difficult to use religion as a bait to control the lives of the Urhobo.

Today, the trend has changed. The era of Karl Marx may not have witnessed the widespread of knowledge advancement. Personal enquiries into the unforeseen which he regarded as *the unknown* resulting in submission are being delved into among the Urhobo through intermediaries like: mediums, diviners, seers with worthy offerings and sacrifices to appease the gods.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined Karl Marx ideology of the people's opiate. It discovers that men in his era may have submitted to authorities as a result of the uniqueness of the economic order of which, they have no choice to really make since the bourgeois determine the pace.

However, his ideology has attracted so much reaction as many scholars have challenged his use of religion as a vehicle for public impoverishment. This may have been true, but there is a paradigm shift as men now have religious encounter, which has brought total transformation to the lives of the people.

Similarly, advancement in knowledge has actually made it possible for men to know and appreciate the reality of both the physical and the spiritual world, which was greatly dreaded by Karl Marx of which, he resorted to science. His appeal to scientific empiricism as a substitute for religion was also bereft. He may have been greatly influence by his atheist background.

The Urhobo experience has made so much advancement in the phenomenon of religion as the soul of the society and as such, they live their total life around one form of religious affiliation or the other without being blind folded as they believe that the gods will deal with corrupt priests and followers equally. Religious encounter has made so much difference in the people's orientation, approach, submission and use of religion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper seeks to recommend among other things that:

i. Certain philosophical ideologies should be closely examined in local context though they may have gained wide acceptance.
ii. The use of religion in the society today is not limited only to Christianity and Islam rather; other forms of traditional practices like African tradition, Asian tradition are part of this bloc. The fact that anyone of these may have failed does not imply that all have failed.
iii. Religious freedom has really brought about great liberation to the people. The absence of restriction and freedom of association should be utilized by all and sundry until one finds solace and encounter with the *Ultimate* reality.
iv Traditional values should not be discarded as it may be tantamount to blind submission (opium) in the true senses of it. Critical enquiries should be carried out especially as science has got its limitation in the discovery of the Supreme Being in personal encounter, which transcends the realm of scientific discoveries.

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Mr. J. Akpughe, 70 years old, Seer/ Diviner, was interviewed at Effurun-Otor on 09/10/2009.
Mr. P. Okudioghwa 92 years old, chief priest, was interviewed at Kokori on 06/09/2010.
Rev. G. Ivworin 42 years old, clergy, was interviewed at Agbarho-Ughelli on 23/6/2010.
Pastor J.O. Isiorhovoja 40 years old, clergy, was interviewed at Effurun on 25/07/2010.