Cultural and Spiritual Implications of Head Covering Among the Igbo Christians of Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT - The issue of head covering as penned by Paul has never ceased to confront and challenge scholars and lay-people alike, especially concerning its application in the 21st Century. This paper endeavored to trace the history of the Igbo people, noting especially their cultural and religious inclinations. It explored the cultural and theological bases of head covering as understood in Igboland and the challenges the Christians have had to encounter as a result of the expectations from conservative Christians and even non-Christians. The cultural basis for head covering suggested that Igbo women who cover their heads do so because of the cultural expectations. At the same time, others within the same culture contend that women cover their heads on theological basis, namely, the injunction of Paul in 1Cor 11.2-16. This paper therefore argues that the theological reasoning is more compelling as a basis for head covering in Igboland. This, however, does not imply that one should make the lives of women miserable due to their non-conformity since the principle motif towers above the practice.

Keywords: culture, head covering, Igboland, Africa, Seventh-day Adventists, implications, principle, practice.

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I. Introduction

The injunction of Paul in 1 Cor. 11.2-16 about head covering has generated much discussion among educated and uneducated members of the various Christian faiths – especially in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in most of Africa. Actually, if some of the principles articulated by scholars (Akpa, 2011, pp. 117-124) were faithfully followed by the modern reader, the level of acrimony and theological wars in the churches would be radically reduced. Especially fascinating is the principle which advises readers not to be dogmatic over Paul’s writings (p.125). Although this work is situated in Nigeria especially among the Igbo of South-East, some of the arguments and conclusions are germane to the life of other Christians, especially Seventh-day Adventists in Africa and beyond. Interestingly, the majority of Seventh-day Adventists in Nigeria are Igbo people and their religious fervor is well attested to by other Christians in the country. With this background, it is understandable why the injunction of Paul has raised much controversy in most of the churches in Igboland – Adventists and others. This paper, however, focuses on the cultural and spiritual implications of the injunction to the Christians and non-Christians in Igboland. The historical and participant observation methods of inquiry are utilized in this study.

In this pericope, 1 Cor 11:2-16, Paul proposes, among other things, that a man should not cover his head while praying or prophesying and that a woman should not uncover her head while doing the same. This injunction seems to evoke a worship situation in the church at Corinth. Generally, the passage can be outlined as follows: Pauline commendation (vs. 2), consideration of the headship structure and the meaning of κεφαλή (vs.3), reasons for the injunction and what the covering is (vv. 4-9), the hermeneutical challenge of ἐξουσίαν and τοὺς ἀγγέλους, (vs. 10), a re-evaluation of the headship structure (vv. 11,12), a re-consideration of the covering argument (vv. 13-15) and Pauline commendation (v.16). Because of the focus and volume of this paper, all the aspects outlined above will not be dealt with. We shall however deal with what the covering is from the biblical point of view and juxtapose that with the cultural understanding of the Igbo people.

Concerning what the covering is, there is division among scholars. For some, the covering is something apart from the κοφή (the long hair). Akpa (2011, p. 126) in his textual study of verse 15 correctly posits that the variant κάλυμμα (veil) was a later addition by the