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THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS AGENTS IN THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

A critical survey of the history of Christianity in West Africa reveals a somber picture of gross omission and under-valuation of the contributions of indigenous missionaries. Thus, the history of Christianity and Church growth in West Africa will ever remain jejune and incomplete without a sedulous efforts aimed at proper inclusion of ardent and impactful evangelical enterprises of some indigenous agents in West African Church historiography. This paper, therefore, attempts to reconstruct the skewed perception of early Church historians, especially, those from European origin, who did not see the need for proper documentation of enormous contributions of indigenous missionary agents to the spread and growth of Christianity in West Africa, probably because of racial bias. The spread of the gospel in West African Coast was indeed due 'to the sacrifice, hard work and burning zeal of the indigenous converts, who were employed as pioneer lay agents of their various missions more especially, the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S). The paper after taking a look at a brief history of indigenization of Christianity in West Africa, goes on to examine the role of indigenous agents in Niger territory; and also the contributions of indigenous agents to successful evangelization of West Africa. It highlights the class of people from which they were recruited, and the level of education which qualified them to be employed as monitors, teachers, evangelist and catechists. The paper concludes by stressing that the mark made by the indigenous agents in the history of Christianity in Nigeria, West Africa and Africa at large is so enormous that it will remain indelible in the anal of history. It recommends that contemporary Christian missionaries and church planters should borrow a leaf from earliest African missionary agents in terms of selfless service, commitment, cooperative spirit and missionary focus with which they worked for the evangelization of their father land between 19th and 20th centuries.

Key words: Agents, Christianization, indigenous, missionary, West Africa

Introduction

Africa in general and West Africa in particular is regarded as a home to a wide range of Christian denominations. It houses about 30 percent of the world's evangelicals, 20 percent of the world's Pentecostals and Charismatics, and about 15 percent of the world's Roman Catholics. Africa in addition, has a significant number of orthodox churches (Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021). The above observation of Masoga and Nicolaides portrays Africans as a people not only highly religious but also as those ardently committed to Christianity and its advancement. Africans, particularly West Africans, can be described as game changers in the field of Christianity. They came, they saw and they conquered, exploiting the benefits Christianity to take proper care of different areas of felt needs among the people, such as spiritual, religious, socio-economic, political, cultural, among others.

The history of Christianity in West Africa, no doubt, was formally written by the missionaries, via disjointed pieces of information put down in their writing notes called "Diaries", which they sent home on weekly basis to their bodies for instance the C.M.S. (Nwosu; 1998:10). Their main goal was to tell how God assisted them bring light to the benighted souls in far away countries (Kalu; 1980). In missionary historiography, other historical factors were consciously or unconsciously ignored, thereby presenting distorted historical evidence. Most of their reports were exaggerated only to attract sympathy and funds from their headquarters. In later years, when Africans began to read and write, they began to discover that what the missionaries were saying were lies. Okon Uya (1984:6), described such reports as "lies systematized and institutionalized against the African past". The expansion of the gospel message in West Africa was indeed due to the sacrifice, hard work and burning zeal of the indigenous converts, some of whom were employed as the pioneer lay agents of the mission. It is unfortunate that Church historians of all generations focused their work mainly on the activities of white missionaries, while the missionary activities of indigenous agents who collaborated with the former were given little or no attention (Mepaiyeda & Popoola, 2019). The above created a wide chasm in systematic documentation of missionary enterprises in West Africa. This paper sees the above as a problem that requires urgent literary attention to be addressed, hence its engagement in the role of indigenous agents in the christianization of West Africa.

A Brief History of Indigenization of Christianity in West Africa

Bishop Crowther, the founding father of the Niger Mission had traced the origin of the indigenization of Christianity in West Africa to Rentier and Hartwig, two former European Missionaries, who were sent to commence their operation on the Rio Pougas in 1804. These two Europeans Missionaries originated the idea of employing African converts as missionaries in Sierra Leone and from the colony. The practice was later adopted in Niger mission (Onyeidu, 2005). The experience began in a humble way with the employment of some of the most intelligent and reliable liberated slaves as "Ushers", "Storekeepers", "Monitors" teachers, and Catechists in the village in Sierra Leone. Even Bishop Crowther himself began his life long ministry as an usher, in the settlement of Bathurst in 1826, and when he entered Furah Bay college as one of the foundation students in 1827, he was appointed its monitor and paid halfpenny (1/2 d) per month (Onyeidu, 2005).

As early as 1811, Wills Jenkins, a minister at Bath in Britain had suggested that African converts in the colony of Sierra-Leone should be engaged to evangelize their own father land. Having noticed the vastness and complexities that characterized West African evangelization and the need to cooperate with friends of the

Redeemer (Jesus Christ) in evangelization of the area, Jenkins did not mix words in advising that the scale of qualification for missionary service be extended to Christianized Africans. He, thus, raised the hypothetical questions, that if Christian negroes were commissioned to proclaim to their benighted countrymen the glad tidings of freedom from sin through Christ, might we not expect it would exhibit the light of the Gospel with a brilliance tenfold greater than that with which it has yet shined? (Onyeidu, 2005). Among other factors which cushioned the indigenous agent syndrome was the high mortality rate of European Missionaries in West Africa which was then known as the White men's Grave. The employment of Africans as missionary agents was thus in keeping with the policy of Native Agency which Henry Venn who was, for more than thirty years, the honorary secretary of the Church Missionary society in London formulated and implemented in both Sierra-Leone and Niger Missions. Thus the posting of Crowther and his African brethren answered the hypothetical question and achieved the desired goals.

The Role of Indigenous Agents in Niger Territory

The indigenous agents championed the Niger Mission course courtesy of the few missionary volunteers recruited from Sierra-Leone to the Niger Mission. The Mission had varied roots namely, economic, evangelistic and altruistic. Conceived on the troika of commerce, civilization and Christianity, an unsuccessful attempt to start it was made in 1841. The failure engendered interests from diverse ethnic groups in Freetown to return "home" with the good news. The first to show this interest was Yoruba group (Oduyoye, 1976:253) whose success in, 1842 garnered the Igbo Association in Freetown to embark on a similar mission. The Igbo party, under J.C Taylor, left Freetown for Onitsha early in 1857, and were later joined by Samuel Crowther who became the titular head of the Mission. The mission fields expanded with constant requests for teachers to open new stations. Citing J. Hamilton, Nwankiti (1998:16) wrote, "From the very outset of mission, there was a difficulty in-getting a supply of labourers from Sierra Leone: Crowther expressed his disappointment at this in a letter written to the Niger in 1857, and this was confirmed throughout the whole history of the mission".

It was this acute shortfall of the staff that led Crowther into adopting two missionary strategies which had already been successfully tried in Sierra Leone viz recruitment of the indigenous lay agents and the establishment of training institutions.

Training institutions: while the first strategy the recruitment of the indigenous lay agents served the immediate needs of the mission, the second approach had expected the first generation of the indigenous agents were men of little western education, with little or no formal training for the work ahead of them. Invariably, they were taught by the ex-slaves who may not have gotten the opportunity to acquire much education like Crowther. Hamilton, opined that they learnt missionary service by serving as missionaries in their humble ways". Also commenting on their level of education prior to their employment as preachers of the gospel Nwosu (1998) quoted Sidney R. Smith, a one-time secretary of the Niger Mission as saying that; some years ago the supply of mission workers was very limited and men were accepted as evangelists with little or no education. Some could only read and write in the vernacular with difficulty, while others had been to school and were far ahead of the rest.

Crowther established "preparandi" institutions for the training of church workers in Lokoja in 1883 and in Bonny in 1887. Earlier in 1851, mission colleges had been established in the Yoruba area of Abeokuta. One remarkable features of these institutions in the

Yoruba and Niger Mission areas is that they were industrial institutions. The first students who were sent abroad by the church missionary society from these missions according to Smith (1911), went to study bricks and tile making, navigation, horticulture and industrial management. Ade Ajayi (1965) describing the Abeokuta industrial institution and others like that, said: It collected and cleaned cotton for export, taught brick making, carpentry and printing and did little more than produced masons and carpenters to build missionary houses and coffins. These patriots were recruited to train others locally in their respective fields, but most importantly both the trainer and the trainee were absorbed officially into the service of the Church Missionary society where they rendered voluntary, unpaid services to the mission as local helpers.

The Contributions of Indigenous Agents to Successful Evangelization of West Africa

The indigenous agents contributed immensely to the positive change and success witnessed in West African evangelization in a number of ways which include:

i. Invitation of Missionaries to Evangelize their Communities-

(The Macedonian Call)

In most cases it was African indigenous agents who invited the missionaries to their communities for evangelization. This invitation was often followed by free will offering of vast acres of lands and evil forests. A case in point was King Sodeke of Abeokuta who offered his "Rock Haven" settlement said to have been started in about 1830 to the Church Missionary society (Nwankiti 1998). The enthusiastic natives also offered places of worship and residential accommodations for the workers and free labour for the clearing of the land offered and on other works.

ii. Breaking Of Language Barriers

The bi-lingualism of the returned slaves removed the linguistic difficulty of communicating the gospel. Speaking as many languages as the variety of the places from where they had been captured as slaves, the emigrants had to learn a new language to communicate among themselves and to create a new community. It was this that brought about the emergence of Creole in Freetown, (Oduyoye: 1978). The predominance of English element in that language (Creole) testifies to the British influence on the recaptives. Therefore when English speaking missionaries came among them to preach the gospel, the soil had been well prepared by the reality of their experience of salvation from slavery. They understood the Whiteman's language and could still communicate amongst themselves in their own native dialects. This enhanced communication and fostered the spreading of the gospel for the fact that almost all the translations, some editing work and revision done during the translation of the Bible in some African Languages like Yoruba and Igbo were done by Africans (Indigenous Agents) and not by expatriates. Furthermore, it is on records that Samuel Crowther began the translation of the Bible into Yoruba in England where he had gone to be ordained, and the first Christian service of worship according to Oduyoye (1979:251) to be conducted in Yoruba language was a service held not in Yoruba land, but in Freetown, Sierra Leone on January 3, 1844. Also, John Christopher Taylor, said to have been born of Igbo parents and known as Oyibo Ojii (Black Whiteman) by the converts, among other things by 1860 had translated in "Isuama" (Owerri) dialect of Igbo, the four gospels, Acts, Corinthians and Philemon. Commenting on the assiduousness of Taylor, Dike (1957) noted that Taylor found himself busy preaching, teaching, visiting, building, settling quarrels, studying the language and writing his journals. This ability of the ex slaves to

communicate in their native dialect paved a greater way to the evangelization of Nigeria and indeed West Africa as it leaves no doubt that those who had in no way previously had contacts with the white men were able to interact with them to the point of inviting them to come and evangelize their lands. In corroboration of the above, Odili (2014), observes that indigenous agents made use of vernacular as language of instruction in schools and churches and expressed the view that once the pupils were able to read and understand the scripture in their own language, the cardinal aim of evangelization would have been achieved..

iii. Establishment of Academic/Educational Institutions and the Rise of Nationalism

One other thing the indigenous agents would be remembered for was the establishment of schools where people were taught to read and write. This was possibly clone through the interpreters who were the ex-slaves. Some never became ordained like Crowther, they served the mission as Catechists, Scripture readers or just native agents. The indigenous Africans who passed through the tutelage of these missionaries were later regarded as nationalists. This group of people was those indigenous African who were not very comfortable with the ways in which the missionaries and the colonial masters condemned African cultural, religious beliefs and practices and the disgruntled carting away of her (African) rich economy. They (white missionaries) abolished slave trade and substituted it with other trades which were as deadly as the slave trade.

iv. Indigenization of Christianity

Indigenous Christianity is that type of Christianity that is expressed in African perception and worldview. It is Christianity that is compatible with the socio-cultural and political worldview of Africa (Olatunde,2016). Irrespective of the fact that the missionaries in their open and private conversations with the people, in their prayer and committee meetings and every other gathering of the 'faithful' condemned as evil every aspect of African religious and cultural life, including names, the indigenous agents were the actual people who brought the meaning of Christianity to the grass-root of the interiors of Nigeria and West Africa. As pointed out by Onunwa (2005), the indigenous agents succeeded in producing a form of Christianity relevant to the existential needs of Africans. They were the grass that suffered where two elephants fought. They faced and suffered the consequences of the clash of the two religions and cultures as they were treated with contempt and ignominy both from their white missionary counterparts, who deprived them their privileges and opportunities due to racism and their fellow natives who in some areas made them pay with their dear life in most cases for violating the norms and cultures of the land and for preaching against their gods. Crowther suffered greatly in the hands of the white missionaries under his episcopacy who never welcomed any instruction from him. Kalu, (1978) noted that John Christopher Taylor one of Crowther's Lieutenants preached so well in his valedictory sermon in Bathurst Gambia that one old man in the congregation burst out "Thank God, go my son, and tell the happy news to the heathens. Oh, is this true, that our children too can go out like White men and preach the gospel?"

v. Establishment of African-initiated Churches

The indigenous agents also championed the establishment of African-initiated Churches (AICs) in many parts of West Africa. These are Christian denominations that originated within African communities and founded by missionary agents of African origin. These African agents, between 19th and 20th centuries, zealously embarked on the spread of indigenous Christianity in their fatherland, a new form of Christianity expressed and practiced based on

prevailing African ecological and socio-cultural realities. They often combined traditional beliefs and practices with Christian teachings and practices in order to make Christianity authentic African as well as take care of certain spiritual and material challenges of the people (Etherington, 2019). Examples of such Churches include, the United Native African Church (UNAC), founded in 1891; the Christ Apostolic Church, founded by Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1941; the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, founded by Moses Orimolade Tunolase in 1925; the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), founded by Samuel Bilewa Joseph Oshoffa in 1947; the Church of the Lord (Aladura), founded by Joseph Olunowo Ositelu in 1930; the Harrist Church of Cote d' Ivoire, founded by William Wade Harris in 1913-1915 ; the Faith Tabanacle, founded by David Odubango from 1918 and the host of others (Olatunde, 2016).

The identity of these indigenous agents in our present day Nigeria speaks eloquently for them. The political freedom, religious affinity, the Western Education we acquired, infrastructural development we are enjoying, our social status and all the freedom we are enjoying are the outcome of the clogged efforts of the indigenous agents.

In conclusion, the mark made by the indigenous agents in the history of Christianity in Nigeria, West Africa and Africa at large is enormous and will remain indelible in the annals of history. They laid the foundations of every good thing we are doing today. We are just improving today what foundation they had laid. It is worth, of note that African Christians, in the recent times, are taking prosperity gospel and contemporary Christianity to other continents of the world (Nwokocha, 2022). Kaigama in Nnatuanya and Nwokocha (2025), observe that these Christians have continued to make great wave since the last 10 years, especially in the urban areas. There is, indeed, the need for contemporary Christian missionaries and church planters to borrow a leaf from earliest African missionary agents in terms of selfless service, commitment, cooperative spirit and missionary focus with which they worked for the evangelization of their father land between 19th and 20th centuries.

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