

AN APPRAISAL OF THE EX-SLAVES FACTOR IN THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA, 1841-1900

Dr. Onyeka Egwuonwu

Department of Religion and Human Relations,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Email: mayoronyi@gmail.com

Abstract

The nineteenth century Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria was very successful compared to the first missionary enterprise carried out by the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries. It was between the 14th and the 17th centuries. At first, the indigenous Nigerians people resisted the missionaries but when the missionaries joined the ex-slaves who have been converted to Christianity in their missionary adventures, they recorded outstanding success. For example the encounter between Obi Ossai of Aboh land and Simon Jonas, a liberated slave from Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage who belonged to the team of Church Missionary Society, proved to the European Christian missionaries that partnership with the ex-slaves will yield tremendous results. Hence, they formed a team with the ex-slaves in missionary enterprise in Nigeria. The missionaries partnered with the ex-slaves in taking the gospel to interior areas, they served as interpreters between the indigenous people and foreign missionaries, they encouraged the missionaries to translate the Bible to indigenous languages and also played vital role in the process, to establish schools, hospitals as well to offer humanitarian services to the people. They trained the indigenous converts as Catechists, teachers, court clerks and so on. The ex-slaves were very resourceful to the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. Most of the existing literature on history of Christianity in Nigeria seem to be focused on the missionary enterprise without vividly capturing the roles of ex-slaves in spreading the gospel in Nigeria. Furthermore, Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria appears to be majorly seen by historians from the perspective of the general works carried out by various Christian missionary bodies, without looking inwards to identify the efforts of Nigerian ex-slaves in evangelizing the nation. This is the gap which this research work intends to fill. Therefore, the study is focused on pin pointing the role of ex-slaves in evangelizing Nigeria. The study relies on secondary sources of data collection which includes; mainline books, journals, book of readings and so forth. The study finds out that ex-slaves were of significant relevance in spreading Christianity in Nigeria.

Introduction

Christian missionary activities in Nigeria was a major turnaround in the economic, social, political and religious advancement of the nation. Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019) observe that the missionaries effected serious changes on the indigenous societies. The changes were made by the collective efforts of both the Western Christian missionaries and the ex-slaves. The ex-slaves also known as liberated African slaves were indigenous people who were rescued by British naval force on their way to Europe and America to be sold as slaves. After their rescue, they were kept in Free Town in Sierra Leone where most of them were converted to Christianity and joined the European missionaries to evangelize Africa of which Nigeria is inclusive.

The ex-slaves were very vital and played significant role in spreading the Gospel to the indigenous people especially into the interior areas. The combined efforts of the European Christian missionaries and the ex-slaves did not only lead to the conversion of Nigerians but was development oriented. There was the profit of missionary education, enabling a significant part of the population to earn their living through salaried work or to start their own trades, health care was also worthwhile. It liberated many Nigerians, especially from so many diseases and premature death, giving them more strength and joy to work for their livelihood (Diara and Nche, 2013). The introduction of modern commerce, cash crops among others assisted in developing Nigeria. The study will examine the joint efforts of early Christian missionaries and ex-slaves in missionary enterprise in Nigeria.

Brief History of Nigeria

It is paramount to note before the advent of Europeans to West Africa of which Nigeria is part of, it could be observed that some of the ethnic nationalities, were independent such as the Igbo nation including the Oduduwa kingdom, the Benin empire and the Aboh kingdom. Hence, there were myriads of empires and kingdoms in the pre-colonial West Africa. The Europeans' search for raw materials and the quest to expand their territorial control outside the shores of Europe, led to the advent of Europeans into African continent. Hence, the Berlin Conference was held to partition Africa and allocate the land among themselves. Thus, some part of West Africa was allocated to Britain. As the British colonial government through expedition conquered the indigenous lands, they further partitioned the conquered lands into various countries by amalgamating various ethnic groups into one whole to form a country. It was through this amalgamation process that led to the present day Nigeria to be formed.

The territory known today as Nigeria began its march to nationhood in 1861. In that year, Okeke (2010) posits that the king of Lagos, Dosumu was made to sign away the political independence of the territory to Britain. With treats of bombardment and other acts of intimidation, the imperial Britain succeeded in making the pliant king to succumb to its desire to control the politics and economy of Lagos. By this act, Lagos with its territory became a crown colony of Britain. Before this period, British consuls had established offices first along the cost and later in other parts of what is today known as Niger. Okpalike and Nwadiolor (2015) view that in 1879, sir George Goldie and Mr Hawith, a consul, requested the government of Britain to declare the lower and Delta areas of the Niger a British Colony. In response to this, as noted above, the British government granted Sir Goldie's trading company a charter of administration over territories along the Niger and Benue rivers for a period of ten years. To consolidate the territorial gains of Goldie, Britain sent Fredrick Lugard to assist in the establishment of British trade monopoly there. In January 1914, the Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated and became one British Colony. Fredrick Lugard was made its first Governor General. A name was now needed for the colony and a British reporter, Flora Shaw, who was later married to Fredrick Lugard suggested the name Nigeria, to be named after the Niger River meaning Niger Area.

This above account of colonial era in Nigeria is an affirmation to the earlier statement that the pre-colonial period was a conglomeration of different ethnic groups living either independently or under a kingdom or Emirate system of government. But was later held together by a superior authority of the British government. It was through superior military might that these ethnic nationalities were brought under subjection to the colonial rule. Initially, some of the ethnic groups had nothing in common while few others share some things in common because they have common boundary. It was simply an imposition of transcendental administration on a collection of peoples who had nothing or little in common with other collectivities.

It could be said that Christian missionary factor contributed to the development of national politics and the fight for independence of Nigeria. Onyebuagu (2002) opts that the missionaries worked hand-in-glove with the British colonial administrators in Nigeria as many of the British officials were Christians. Adediran cited by Diara and Nche (2013) is of the opinion that Church Missionary Society pressurized British government to establish an administrative frame work that would ensure a fruitful germination of Christian ideals which were development oriented. However, it was the missionaries teachings of the universal brotherhood and love of God towards humanity that was a decisive factor in the coming together of these desperate tribal bands to form a common nation (Wyse 1988). Diara and Nche (2013) point that most of the leading Nigerian nationals were educational products of the Christian missions like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Marcauley, Anthony Enahoro and a host of others. Without these Christian personalities the dream of having a sovereign Nigeria on October 1, 1960 would not have been realized. Nigeria adopted a republican government on October 1, 1963. Presently, it has 36 states with many ethnic groups too numerous to mention. The current Presidential is Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress.

History of Christianity in Nigeria

Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria is in two phases; pre-colonial phase and colonial phase.

Pre-Colonial Phase

The first Christian country in Europe to bring the Gospel to Nigeria was the Portuguese Catholic missionaries. Nwadiolor (2016) traces that from Sao-Tome, they arrived first in Benin Kingdom in 1486 and later in Warri between 1571- 1574. By 1515, some Portuguese missionaries had set up for the training of the sons of the Oba and his Chiefs who had been converted to Christianity (Okoro, 2018). The Portuguese contact later extended to the Delta areas of Brass and Warri, where they established trading posts, churches and schools. The missionary work carried out by Portuguese Catholic missionaries in Nigeria had limited success due to the following; attack on indigenous culture and beliefs, language barrier, unfavourable climate, lack of personnel, financial constraints, death of missionaries and the ravages of the slave trade among others. From this period to 19th century, there was no sort of missionary enterprise in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the British colonial government and European traders continued their exploits in Nigeria.

Colonial Phase

The British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 motivated European Christian missionaries to come to Nigeria. This was to commensurate for the wrong done to the indigenous people as a result of slave trade; to establish Christianity and to introduce legitimate trade in the area. In the second phase, there has been argument whether Christianity should be said to have started in Igbo land or Yoruba land. It is true that the British Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) visited Igboland as they accompanied the British Naval expedition in 1841, yet it was observed that C.M.S did not establish a permanent station as they left but started full missionary activity in 1857. While in the case of Yoruba, the missionaries arrived in 1842 and immediately opened a permanent mission station.

Hence, scholars trace the second phase of Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria, from Yoruba to other parts of Nigeria. According to Okoro (2018), second missionary endeavour in Nigeria saw the advent of the first English-speaking Christian mission in Badagry in 1842. Nwadiolor (2016) observes that in the 19th Century there was an intensive missionary activities by various missionary sects in Nigeria. The Protestants were in the forefront of this movement, this could be for them to gain more ground in African soil since the Roman Catholic dominated Europe. The aim of the 19 century missionary enterprise according to Deenville (1942), was for the Gospel be preached to the indigenous people, that schools may be established, that Bibles may be sent, that the British flag may be hoisted, and she may rank among the civilized nations of the earth. Okoro (2018) opines that the idea to evangelize Nigeria is noted to have originated from the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) both in London and in Freetown, but it was the Methodists that first sent missionaries to Badagry in 1842. One of the Methodist Missionary personnel, William de Graft began work in earnest. De Graft and his wife established the first known school called Nursery of the Infant Church in Badagry.

Later, Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) led by Townsend and his group arrived Abeokuta on 4 January 1843. Meanwhile, Church of Scotland Mission sent an exploratory mission to Calabar in 1846 while C.M.S first visited Aboh in 1841 through the Niger expedition and later established a permanent station by 1852 in Onitsha. The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) arrived at Onitsha in 1885 while RCM set their foot in Lagos in 1868. The Qua Ibo of Northern Ireland, which first established a mission in Eket and Uyo areas in 1887; the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society, which established its first mission post in Calabar and Owerri provinces in 1892 (Okoro, 2018).

With the amalgamation of northern and southern protectorates which gave rise to Nigeria, it paved way for Christian missionary to penetrate the north. Not until 1889 that the Gospel spread to northern Nigeria to places like Bida, Kano by the C.M.S. With the establishment of Cambridge University Mission in 1853 at London, this missionary body started evangelism in places like Nupe and Bida town in 1903, Bauchi and Plateau in 1907 and opened a mission station in 1910 (Odidi, 2014). Diseases like malaria and sleeping sickness dealt a big blow to the missionaries. However, with the discovering of quinine as antidote to malaria by Dr. Baikkie (Dike, 1966), coupled with the presence of the colonial

government's security as well as the inclusion of the ex-slaves into the missionary work; Nwadiolor (2016) states that there was a change in missionary activities and attitude to Africa like increase presence of foreign missionaries, greater penetration into the interiors, attempt to check Islam and so forth. It was in this colonial phase of missionary enterprise that the missionaries played vital roles in the development of Nigeria.

The Collaboration Between Early Christian Missionaries and the Ex-slaves

British missionary bodies and other British Christians like William Wilberforce were instrumental in abolishing slave trade. The missionary bodies preached for the abolition of slave trade on the ground of love of God which He demonstrated through Christ. Thompson (1836) wrote that the religion of Christ is a religion of love, and thus it never has, it never can sanction for a moment, so foul, so inhuman, so impious, and murderous a system as that of slavery. The missionaries further emphasized the biblical teaching that all humans were created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27) and the biblical injunction of Exodus 21:16 as a proof that slave trade is anti Christianity. Through these efforts, slave trade was abolished in 1807.

However, it was noticed that some European traders were secretly engaging in the trade hence, British government used their navy as coastal guards to checkmate the nefarious activities of slave traders in British colonies. The British designated Free Town in Sierra Leone as a place where recaptured slaves will live. During the British Naval operations, they rescued many people who were to be sold as slaves abroad. Those recaptured slaves like Ajayi Crowther were sent to settle in Free Town where most of ex-slaves were converted to Christianity and became agents to the missionary bodies in evangelisation in Nigeria.

Nwadiolor (2016) confirms that the CMS ideology of Self-governing, Self-sustaining and Self propagating which was preached by Venn and Buxton was for indigenous missionaries to enable them reach the interior towns. Clarke (1986) comments that it was from among the recaptives (ex-slaves) that the missionary societies chose as their agents to assist in spreading the gospel. Before the ex-slaves were selected for the missionary enterprise in Nigeria, they were first made to profess the Christian faith, taught in seminary schools established within West Africa, some among them were ordained as priests and then mobilized for evangelization.

According to Okoro (2018), under the influence of the Portuguese traders, the missionaries established a seminary on the Island of Sao-Tome, off the coast of Nigeria in 1571. This was intended to train Africans as priests and teachers. From Sao-Tome, they visited Warri to establish schools and preach the Gospel. While some of the ex-slaves like Ajayi Crowther and many other Yoruba ex-slaves were crucial to the C.M.S missionary enterprise in Yoruba, Simon Jonas, J.C Taylor among others from Igbo race were significant in spreading the Gospel in Igbo nation.

There were reasons that led to the joint efforts of the early missionaries and the ex-slaves in propagating the Gospel in Nigeria.

Environmental Condition

The weather condition in Nigeria is hot and this was not favourable to the missionaries whose own weather condition is cold. Nigeria located in a tropical forest, makes it a breeding ground for mosquitoes and tse-tse flies. The two insects inflicted the European missionaries with malaria and sleeping sickness which killed most of them. This was among the reason Africa was called the White man's grave. For instance when C.M.S sent their missionaries to explore the possibilities of missionary work in the Nigerian, Okoro (2018) points that out of one hundred and forty four Europeans, and one African that happened to be a Nigerian, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, forty eight died of malaria and other illnesses. But the Nigerian was among the survivors. Hence, the ex-slaves were considered the best option for the job.

Cultural Understanding and Co-operation of the Indigenous people

Initially, there was language barrier between the missionaries and the indigenous people. Moreover, the missionaries faced opposition from powerful local kings with their guards such as Jaja of Opobo. Some of the European missionaries were killed and those who ran for safety escaped with various degrees of injuries. Although the missionaries beckoned on the colonial government army for assistance which resulted in bombardments of resistant areas. This resulted in the indigenous people running away at the sight of the missionaries. The missionaries suggested that for the indigenous people to communicate effectively with them, there is need for an interpreter. Furthermore, for the indigenous people to be friendly with them and accept the Gospel which is their main objective, they need to work with the ex-slaves who were their kinsmen. To this end, Okpalike and Nwadiolor (2015) point that:

The first Igbo town that the C.M.S landed was Aboh, J.F. Schon, a German linguist and the leader of the C.M.S. team that accompanied the expedition, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave and Simon Jonas, a liberated slave from Sierra Leone of Igbo parentage, were able to forge a personal link with the King of Aboh, Obi Ossai with Simon Jonas acting as an interpreter. Here the missionaries succeeded in preaching the gospel message to the king and his people. During the encounter with the king, Jonas was asked to translate the Beatitudes into Igbo. As he translated the gospel, the king was said to have been so impressed with his eloquence and apparent erudition (p. 5).

Ekechi (1972) vividly captured Obi Ossai euphoria stating that Obi Ossai exclaimed, “you must not stop with me, you must teach me and my people. The white people can go up the river without you, they may leave you here until they return, or until” (p. 2). Igbo people say that *Bekee bu agbara* (Whiteman are spirits) but seeing a fellow Igbo man interacting with them was a thing of surprise to them. Hence, the indigenous people believed that they too could associate with the European missionaries. According to Okpalike and Nwadiolor (2015), a careful analysis of the king's answer to the Gospel message reveals an interesting dimension in the interaction; the king was impressed that his countryman could master the Whiteman. During Simon Jonas' short stay at Aboh, he made a remarkable progress in forming a Christian group among the people. From the above submission, it could be said that Igbo people received the Gospel joyfully and were not hostile to the missionaries because one of their relative was part of the team. This was the same reaction other indigenous people exhibited when they saw the missionaries with their fellow countryman coming to preach to them.

Taking the Gospel Into the Interior

The early missionaries concentrated their evangelism in notable towns neglecting the interior areas. This could be probably due to the following; incessant attacks, disease prone areas, not acquainted with the terrain as visitors, among others. For the gospel to get to the interior lands, the ex-slaves who were indigenes of the land should be used. Deanville (1942) reports that some Yoruba ex-slaves in Freetown, Sierra Leone had requested among other things, that missionaries be sent out to Badagry to preach the Gospel. In response to the ex-slaves request, the Methodists first sent missionaries to Badagry. The team included Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman an offspring of recaptive with an English mother, and an educated Ghanaian, William de Graft. In 1843 Henry Townsend of the C.M.S, and two Egba ex-slaves from Sierra Leone Andrew Wilholm and John McCormack later arrived Abeokuta later. Samuel Ajayi Crowther a recaptive from Yoruba race was joined to the C.M.S team to take the Gospel into interior areas. Furthermore, the Brazilian ex-slaves who had settled in Lagos requested RCM to establish the Catholic faith in Lagos and beyond, this led to the advent of RCM in Yoruba in 1886. Similarly, a Kanuri recaptive Wesleyan agent, W. Allakurah Sharpe, had also desperately pleaded with the Wesleyan mission to send missionaries to Kanuris in the Northeast of Nigeria in 1879 (Ayandele,1966).

The Need for More Labourers

This was stated in Matthew 9:37. In bringing this biblical analogy to this context, there are many places where the Gospel have not reached as at 19 century, yet, the missionary bodies do not have enough personnel to carry out this task. Hence, the ex-slaves who were many in numbers and have become Christians should fill in the gap. As the ex-slaves were included into the missionary plan, they converted many indigenous people who in turn continued the propagation of the Gospel after many European missionaries left Nigeria especially during the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Sense of Belonging

When the European missionaries were carrying out the evangelistic work alone, the indigenous s felt alienated hence, did not show much interest in the Gospel message. But with the inclusive of the ex-slaves, the people had a sense of belonging and developed much interest not only to the Gospel but to other things brought by the European missionaries such as Western education, health services and so on.

Appraisal of the Partnership Between European Christian Missionaries and The Ex-slaves

The joint efforts of the missionaries and the ex-slaves yielded positive results. This is enumerated below:

- i. Non-Hostility by the Indigenous People: The collective collaboration in evangelisation, led to the non hostility of the European Christian missionaries by the indigenous people.
- ii. Full Acceptance of the Gospel: Initially, the indigenous people showed less interest to the Gospel message but when the ex-slaves joined the missionary enterprise, greater number of them received the gospel with joy simply because it was their countrymen that preached or interpreted the Gospel to them. This was evident in the case of Obi Ossai and Simon Jonas of the C.M.S.
- iii. Acceptance of Humanitarian Services: The European Christian missionaries brought the gospel along with humanitarian services. As the indigenous people joyfully received the Gospel due to the presence of the ex-slaves, the people did not hesitate to access other humanitarian services given to them.
- iv. Many Warrant Chiefs partnered with the ex-slaves to call on the missionaries to come to their land to establish church, school, hospitals and so forth. Onwubiko (1985) comments that Chiefs of various Igbo towns as Aguleri, Nsugbe, Oguta, Emekuku, and several other peoples and towns of Igboland, Ibibioland and Efik began to invite the missionaries to their communities. Okoro (2018) recall the role played by Chief Idigo of Aguleri in the 1890s. Following the invitation he extended to the Roman Catholic Mission, Father Joseph Bubendorf opened a mission in Aguleri in 1890. The exertions of the mission not only saw the conversion of Chief Idigo himself, but by the time he died in 1900, the Roman Catholic faith and education flourished in Aguleri and the surrounding villages. Igwe (1977) states that in 1890, the Chief of Oguta, a town of about 30,000 inhabitants situated some sixty miles south-east of Onitsha, led a delegation to Father Lutz for a school and Church to be opened for his people on a piece of land already ear- marked for that purpose. In the same vein, Okoro (2018) opines that Chief Orjiako of Adazi was instrumental in the planting of Roman Catholicism in Adazi and its surrounding villages and towns that now make up the Awka Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Igwe (1977) states that the coming of Primitive Methodist Missionary Society (PMMS) in Calabar in 1894 was a result of the invitation by the Chief of the town and Sir Claude McDonald, Her Majesty's Commissioner for the Oil River Protectorate. Both men promised every material assistance to the Methodists in carrying out the job. The Chief provided land, labour and materials for the building of schools and mission stations in Calabar, Oron and Opobo respectively.
- v. Recruitment of Africans as Priests and Missionary Agents: With the presence of the ex-slaves in the missionary work, the Gospel extended into the interior areas and many more indigenous people were converted and trained by the ex-slaves. They served as agents to the European missionaries whom most of them had left Nigeria with few remaining as leaders of the various missionary bodies. Some of them included Cyprian I. Tansi a priest of Roman Catholic Church, Garrick Braide, a catechist in Church Missionary Society (CMS) Niger Delta pastorate, among others.

Conclusion

Christianity came into in Nigeria by the European Christian missionaries. At initial, there was limited success, but the second wave was successful due to the presence of the ex-slaves. The European Christian missionaries found out that the indigenous people were hostile to them, there was language barrier hence, could not fully communicate the Gospel to them. For their missionary aim to be actualised, they included some of the ex-slaves who accepted the Christian faith in their missionary

work. The ex-slaves played vital role in convincing and converting the indigenous people whom were their kinsmen. Some of the indigenous converts served as priests and agents of the European missionaries. These indigenous priests and religious leaders continued the quest to fulfill the Great Commission which motivated the European Christian missionaries to come to Nigeria.

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