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The Christian Missions and Western Education in Ilorin, Nigeria: A Century of Resistance and Challenge: 1847–1957

ELIASU YAHYA

Introduction

This paper surveys the introduction of Western education by the Christian missions in Ilorin township, Nigeria and the nature of resistance they initially faced. This aspect of Nigerian history has often been neglected in previous research. This study examines why there was initial resistance to missionary education and how after a strenuous effort, it became possible to establish such schools in Nigeria.

The intensification of humanitarian concerns at the end of the slave trade opened up West Africa to active missionary work. Thus, by the 1840s various missionary denominations had penetrated the Yorubaland and challenged the old order with the introduction of new ideas and ways of life.[1] Indeed, the coming of the various Christian missions into Nigeria has been well documented. According to the records, the first missionaries to arrive on the scene were the Wesleyan Methodist who settled at Badagry in 1842.[2] They were followed immediately by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in December 1842, the American Baptist Mission in 1853 and Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) in the 1860s. They began to build churches where they preached and made converts. Schools were also built where they taught the rudiments of Christian life and Western civilization to the Christian community and the new converts. Majority of the early Christian missionaries that operated in Nigeria were British. It must be stated however that:

> The Church undertook the business of education not because it regarded education as good in itself, but because it found that it could not do its own proper work without giving its adherents, and especially its clergy, as much of the formal learning as was required for the performance of their religious duties.[3]

Missionary Activities in Ilorin

Throughout the period of the 19th century, Christian missionaries took several steps to build their mission stations within Ilorin township. For instance, Bowen sought permission to open up a mission station in Ilorin in 1855. The request for permission was denied by Emir Shitta. Reverend W. H. Clarke faced the same ordeal. In a similar manner, Emir Aliyu declined to allow a missionary station in Ilorin despite Bishop Ajayi Crowther's effort in 1871.[4]

Perhaps it may be correct to state that Christianity began its penetration in Ilorin starting in 1905. It was at this time that the Church Missionary Society acquired a site at Igbede near Lokoja. It was championed by a Nigerian Bishop Ajayi Crowther, who

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initiated the translation of the Bible into Yoruba. Since that time, the influence of the Christian faith spread westward toward Ilorin. Moreover, in the same year, the Mennonite Brethren in Christ opened their first station in Tsonga in northern Ilorin Provine.[5] After the introduction of the Christian faith to Ilorin in 1910, the first denomination to be established there was an Anglican Church led by an Ijesa man called I. A. Okin. The church was headed by Emmanuel Anjorin, who was reported to have been knowledgeable in the scripture.[6] Oral evidence, however, suggests that Saint Barnabas was the oldest church founded by some petty traders known as Ijesa or Osomaalo.[7]

Problems Encountered by the Missionaries

Naturally, it was not easy with the churches when they started to preach their gospels to the local people. There was vehement opposition from the indigenes who were Muslims. Some denominations were reported to have said that the indigenes were unfriendly to them. They were prevented from building churches in the town. Besides, the land given to them then was considered to be in very remote areas and distant from where the Muslim population was settled. It must be stated that what the Muslims did in the first instance was to preserve their community as they feared that their children might be converted to Christianity.[8] It was in line with this development that James John stressed:

> Our desire is to get as much as we can of our religion into the Mohammedan scholars before they leave school.[9]

In 1908, Mr. and Mrs. Dar of Church Missionary Society paid a visit to the Emir with the request to open a mission station in Ilorin and their sole aim was to spread Christianity. It was reported that Emir Sulaiman had to refer them to the then Resident, Dr. P. M. Dwyer. This led to a directive which reminded all the Christian religious leaders visiting Ilorin to forward an application before such a visit could be sanctioned. Following this development, Christian missionaries were encouraged to apply for sites in Ilorin. However, when the Church Missionary Society forwarded its application for a site in Ilorin in 1911, it was turned down by the colonial administration on the grounds that the proposed site was too near the walls of the town.[10]

The policy of allotting land outside the city wall was consistently followed by the colonial administration in granting sites to missionaries for church building. The consequence of this was that Christian missions were unable to carry out missionary work inside Ilorin town. Thus the indigenes of Ilorin were protected from Christian influence like their counterparts in places such as Kano, Sokoto, Zaria and Katsina.[11]

The first school established by the Christian missionaries in Ilorin was the Saint Barnabas Anglican Primary School in January 1917 by the Anglican Mission. The school was located along Lajorin Street Sabo-Oke Ilorin to cater to the educational requirements of both Christian and non-Christian children. By and large both the Christians and non-Christians embraced Western education.[12] The second school established by the Christian missionaries in Ilorin was the Saint James School founded and established by the Roman Catholic Mission in 1940. Since the founding of the school about five headmasters served in their various capacities in the school.[13]

Baptist Day School was the third school in Ilorin established in January 1942. The first headmaster of the then one-teacher school was Mr. N. M. Oladapo. The first pupil

TABLE 1. Western education mission schools in Ilorin, 1917–1959

Name of institution	Year founded	Proprietor
St. Barnabas Anglican Mission Primary School	1917	Anglican Mission
Saint James Primary School	1940	Roman Catholic
Baptist Day Primary School	1942	Baptist Mission
Saint Williams Primary School Ilorin	1954	Roman Catholic
Mt. Carmel Education Board Primary School	1957	Catholic Mission
Saint James Christ Apostolic Primary School	1959	Christ Apostolic Church
Saint John's African Church Primary School	1959	African Church
Wesley Local Education Primary School	1959	Methodist Mission

Source: Eliasu Yahaya, *The Establishment and Development of Western Education in Ilorin Township c. 1900–1960*, unpublished MA Thesis, University of Ilorin, 1998, pp. 90–92.

on the schools admission register was master Adepoju. The school started with an initial intake of about 20 pupils in 1942. The Baptist Day Primary School since 1942 was directly administered by the first Baptist Church. The entire congregation strove hard to subsidize the salaries of the primary school teachers teaching at the Baptist Primary School from January 1942 up to April 1967. When the school was begun, it was with a view of giving Christian education to the young ones who shall be the future leaders of this country. It was reported that pupils were charged modest school fees that were not even sufficient to buy chalk, chairs, tables, desks and blackboard for the use of students and teachers benefit. On its part, the church built three blocks of 10 classrooms in addition to the existing blocks.[14]

Saint Williams Primary School, established in 1954, was founded by the Roman Catholic Mission. About four headmasters have since served the school in their various capacities during the period under review.[15] Similarly Mount Carmel school was first established in the year 1957 with an enrollment of 12 pupils and one teacher. The proprietor of the school was the Catholic Mission. The school was then christened Saint Columbus Primary School. Later the school was closed down because of lack of pupils. The first headmaster of the school was Mr. Celestine Olagunju.[16]

Another school built by the Christian missionaries was the Saint James Christ Apostolic Church School which was established in January 1959. The proprietor of the school was the Christ Apostolic Church. Its first headmaster was Mr. D. A. Adeleke, who was assisted by three staff members. The school enrolment was 90 pupils comprising of 43 boys and 47 girls. Four headmasters served in the school since its inception.[17] Within the same month another school known as the Saint John's African Church Primary School was established by the Saint John's African Church. The school was founded on 30 January 1959. The school is adjacent to the Maraba Motor Park, Ilorin.[18]

Also established on 30 January 1959 was the Wesley Local Government Education Area School. The proprietor of the school was the Methodist Mission of Nigeria. The first headmistress of the school was Mrs. K. E. Oladele. At its inception the school took off with the total enrolment of 40 pupils, 22 boys and 18 girls. The name Wesley was derived from the name of the founder of the Methodist Church as Christianity first entered Nigeria. One of the founders of the school, J. O. Aduroja, is still an active member of the church.[19] It must be mentioned that all schools discussed here are

primary schools with a curriculum comprising of such subjects as reading, arithmetic, writing, singing, catechism, knowledge of the bible and English language.[20]

It must be pointed out that one of the major problems which emanated from the Christian mission education was an anti-intellectualism that was enshrined into the missionary educational system. Thus, the foreign missions refused to promote education above the primary school level. Not only that, but the missionaries' effort was a modest one. They were not interested in promoting secondary education, which from their proselytization perspectives was repetitious and was very likely to turn the followers into materialistic and intellectually arrogant set of people.[21]

The Effects of the Christian Missionary Activities in Ilorin on Acquisition of Western Education

The introduction of Western education amongst Muslims in Nigeria was always seen as suspicious, particularly during the colonial period. Dr. Gbadamosi has noted that the Yoruba Muslims in Lagos around the late 19th century were not antagonistic to Western education as such, but they suspected the type of education their wards would receive from the Christian missionary schools. In Ilorin, the educational policy offered by the colonial government was within the confines of the general educational policy for the entire North.[22] While it was true that the Christian missions brought Western secular education through their various activities in Ilorin, it was conditioned on Christian evangelism which the Muslims rejected. Therefore, the opposition was not against knowledge *per se* but against the perceived attempt to evangelize their children through education. However, it was after recognizing the skepticism of the Northerners about Western education that the colonial government in the North found it necessary to accommodate their concerns.

The Christian missions succeeded in establishing eight primary schools in Ilorin township during the period under review. In all the schools selected for the study, the percentage of Muslims was lower than that of their Christian counterparts. The main reason was that Muslim students were sent elsewhere by their parents who preferred Arabic and Islamic education. Furthermore, the schools were not fully established at that time and the initial intake of Muslim pupils in these schools was limited.

Saint Barnabas School was the first primary school which started to admit Muslim students in 1944. Its Muslim intake was the highest at 72%. Mount Carmel Primary School had 33%;Wesley Primary School, 26%; Baptist Day Primary School, 14% and Saint William Primary School, 2%. Except for Saint Barnabas, the percentage of Christian students was more than Muslim students in all the selected schools.[23]

It must be mentioned that the Christian challenges had a great effect on the history of Islam in the Yorubaland generally and Ilorin in particular. Through its monopoly of Western education, the Christian missionary seemed to have got a strong advantage in propagating Christanity in Yorubaland. Though Muslims resisted the challenge, they gained from it in a certain way. They were awakened to defend and propagate their faith. The gradual but persistent Christian challenges on one hand, and Muslims resistance on the other hand, provided the impetus to Muslims to become better acquainted with Christian scripture, especially the Bible. This was true of *mallams* who searched for the Christian literature for their dialectical gains. This later resulted in the emergence of a class of *mallams*, called *akewukewe* (scholars of comparative religion, Islam and Christianity) who could speak in Arabic and Yoruba. In many other ways, Muslim attendance of Christian schools had effects on the Muslim community. For

those who were educated in the mission schools and refused to be converted to Christianity became an important group among the Yoruba Muslims.[24]

Conclusion

This discussion has shown the earlier resistance to Christianity by the Muslims in Ilorin especially by the Emirs throughout the 19th century. Furthermore, we have shown that the main reason Ilorin Muslims were apathetic and somewhat antagonistic to the development of Western education was their concern for their children who would be exposed to Christianity when they wanted them to acquire Islamic education rather than Western education. Gradually, however, when the realities of the situation dawned on them that they had to provide secular education to their children in addition to the religious education, they changed that attitude and started sending their children to schools where they could acquire Western education in addition to Islamic education which they continued to impart to their children. Furthermore, considerations of ease and even apathy brought about a preference for government sponsored school rather than mission schools. Thus, the bulk of children who were going to missionary schools were the children of Christian residents in Ilorin. More importantly, until the close of colonial rule, missionaries' education effort remained restricted to the primary level of education.

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