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THE PLACE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN THE HISTORY OF NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA, 1842-1914

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Abstract

The emergence and development of nationalism in Nigeria had its origin in the Christian missions that became firmly established in West Africa as from the mid-19th century. This paper focuses on the role played by the Christian missions in the promotion of nationalist aspirations in Nigeria. By using relevant source materials, the paper argues that as from 1842, the Church gradually became the pivot upon which the foundation of Nigerian nationalism was laid. It further state that the Church the only avenue for nationalists' feelings and expressions and this lasted till the takeoff of Nigerian indigenized press in 1879. The Christian missions equally served as the only megaphone of nationalists' development up to 1915. The study maintains that most of the scholars who have researched into the constitutional history of Nigeria had neglected the contributions of the Christian Missions to Nigerian nationalism and played down the pre-1914 with little constitutional achievement. The paper concludes that the place of Christian Missions in the history of nationalism in Nigeria is quite unique and central by all standards

Keywords: Christianity, Church, Nationalism, Missionaries and Megaphone

Introduction

The growth of nationalism championed by the Christian missions in Nigeria is an aspect of Nigerian history that has been neglected in previous research. This study examines how this idea of nationalism was brought about by the Christian missions who came to Nigeria primarily to promote Christianity. The idea of nationalism took its genealogy from the concept of nation. Thus, nationalism implies the consciousness on the part of individuals or groups of Africans as members of the same nation for the desire to achieve political and economic freedom. The church arrived into the Nigerian scene through the instrumentality of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Badagry in 1842. They were followed almost instantaneously by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in December 1842, the American Baptist Mission came in 1853 and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) in the 1860s. They embarked on the

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building of churches for preaching and winning converts. Attempts were also made to build schools to train catechists and preachers (Eliasu, 2001:149). Thus, the Christian Missions promoted the course which brought about political change and participation in Nigeria and this must be stated thus:

> For the church became the cradle of Nigerian nationalism, the only forum of nationalist expression until the beginnings of the Nigerian – owned press after 1870, and the main focus of nationalist energies until after 1914. This is the point missed by scholars who have investigated the constitutional development of and nationalist movement in Nigeria. (Ayandele, 1966:175).

Christian Missions and the Development of Nationalism in Nigeria

It must be stated that the Christian Missions produced the first set of nationalists through the church called the "Ethiopians". The concept of Ethiopianism has different connotations which have been used significantly to describe African nationalism embarked upon through the activities of the church. In Nigeria, as in other parts of West Africa, Ethiopianism took different dimensions and meanings compared to what has been learnt in South and Central African backgrounds as corroborated by scholars like, Sundkler, Shepperson and Price. In those regions, the issues of Ethiopianism has been perceived as discriminatory coming from religious leaders which brought about separatist churches that became the megaphone against government policy.

For most parts of West Africa, Ethiopianism resulted into racism in a peculiar manner but did not degenerate to attacking government as it was found in South Africa. Thus, Ethiopianism had identity with Africa and Ethiopians identified with Negro. It was used as a source of conversion of Africans to Christianity across Africa. For example the Church Missionary Society Grammar School in Sierra Leone adopted for its magazine *The Ethiopian*. This also applied to Nigeria where there was this slogan as *Africa for the Africans,* which became famous in the sixties.

Ethiopianism sparked off racialist feeling which translated into hope which the educated Africans perceived would be accomplished in the future. They were optimistic that Africa would become popular among the world and Negro race, a model for others to follow. But in practical terms, it represented the struggle for power and church administration.

Ethiopianism was also a fight put across by Africans to secure higher places in the civil service and to stimulate the spirit of nationhood completely manned by Africans. There were reported cases of different tribal schism within the church which culminated into the development of African churches. But

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there was secessionist motive against Nigerian Ethiopianism. It must be stated that prior to 1914, the church was the pivot of the social, spiritual and political inspiration of the educated African elites including the uneducated ones. For instance, Ajayi has educated us about the exposition of political ideology championed by the missionaries and their respective African followers during the nineteenth century. In a similar manner, Ayandele attributed the origin of nationalism to social elite and he equally identified two movements. The first movement was Ethiopanism, a body of African churches seeking for autonomy and of course independence that must be granted by the metropolitan churches. The second movement was known as cultural nationalism. This was a departure from European culture for the love of African manifestations, values and the documentation of African history (Lidwien, 1977:71).

Christian Missions Role in the Development of Nationalism: The Introduction of Western Education

Following immense role of the Christian Missions in their various evangelical activities as apostles of Western education, they played tremendous role in the rise of Nationalism in Nigeria. They did not function like traders, and at the same time did not limit their roles in the towns nor commercial centres but went deeper into the interior with the sole aim and determination to remain there until Christianity was strongly established. The Christian Missions did not act like the administrators. They did not embark on the preservation of traditional society, but sought to transform it. Without the concerted role of the Christian Missions, the task of promoting racial and national awareness would have been herculean.

Africa and Nigeria became a special and interesting place for Christian Missionary activities. Since, the heathen was the main focus of Christian evangelization, it must be stressed that Africans were believed and perceived by the Christian missions to be the most heathen. Perhaps this may explain better, the success of missionary endeavour in the success of nationalism in Nigeria. However, Coleman has commented that:

> Proposition regarding causal relationships between Christian missionary activities and the rise of nationalism can be advanced only with the greatest tentativeness and caution, and then only at the highest level of generalization. Certainly, they cannot be qualitatively stated (Coleman, 1958:96).

Western education has been the best legacy bequeathed to Nigerians by the Christian missions. The main objective of the Christian missions in Nigeria was to Christianize the heathens and the benighted savage. Thus, the circumstantial

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nature of the Christian mission to introduce Western education has been clearly stated by William Boyd in the following way:

> It must be kept in mind 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 especially its clergy, as much as of the formal learning as was required for the study of the sacred writings and for the performance of their religious duties (Boyd, 1961:99 – 101).

Be that as it may, the church total control of education lasted for over a thousand years. This contributed significantly to the intellectual growth in both Europe and America in the later years, which had greater influence on the British colonized territory in Asia and Africa respectively (Fafunwa, 1974:73).

Education has been a major factor that revolutionized Nigeria since the time of European incursion. This not-withstanding, and to a very large extent, the influence of Western education got to a very small proportion of the population at least before 1951. But its larger scope in terms of content and nature made it important and more effective than other factors in the relation to the development of cultural interaction. From inception, Western education was largely monopolized by the Christian missions and to this extent we can state that:

> To all intents and purposes the schools the Church. Right away in the bush or in the forest the two are one and the village teacher is also the village evangelist. An appreciation of this fact is cordial in all considerations of African education (Murray, 1929:65).

Up to 1898 the conduct of education was under district supervision of the Christian Missions. For example, in 1942, the missions had the monopoly of 99 percent of the schools in Nigeria. In addition to the fact that over 97 percent of the students in Nigeria were enlisted and registered in mission controlled schools. Thus, by 1945 there were hardly educated Nigerians who had not gone through mission the schools either partially or wholly (Coleman, 1958:113).

As the content of Western education was decided by the missions, the use of the English language school curricular provided by Nigeria's diversified language gave impetus to acculturation. Thus, Nigerians, who had knowledge of English language were opened to wider range of literature and developed ideas. This provided swifter opportunity towards the need for various expressions that led to vehement grievances. This communicative advantage through proficiency

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in English language was decisive in sharpening the development and spirit of Pan – Nigerian and nationalist re-awakening (Coleman, 1958:114).

Basically, literary education was promoted here for the purpose of evangelization of the people and for intellectual development. The establishments of schools were contingent on the establishment of churches. Thus, the schools and churches became adjunct to one another and consequentially became inseparable. There was also the neglect of secondary education by the Christian Missions. But through the efforts of traders, merchants, a scheme was put forward that led to the final establishment of the Church Missionary Grammar School in Lagos in 1859. The Christian Mission gave premium to character training. They were very busy to keep the moral standard of their followers very high. This was of course enshrined in their curriculum. Technical education was also promoted because it was through their desire to produce carpenters, masons and tailors that could be independent. (Lawrence. 1977: 488 – 489)

Nationalists Agitations in Nigeria: The Role of the Church

There were various facts to corroborate the tremendous contributions of the Christian missions to the growth of nationalist agitations in Nigeria. For example, the missionary newspapers gave the needed aspiration and candour to the desired nationalist' inspiration in Nigeria. This was significant particularly towards the end of the 19th century. For example, Richard Deale Blaize got to Lagos in 1862 and upon his arrival he established both the *Lagos Time* and *Gold Coast Colony Advertiser* simultaneously. Each of the newspapers became turbulent in expressing nationalist' feelings in Nigeria. This can be stated thus:

> We are not clamouring for immediate independence, but it should always be borne in mind that the present order of things will not last forever. A time will come when the colonies on the West Coast will be left to regulate their own internal and external affairs (Coker, 1963;9).

Missionary endeavour provided different grievances for proper reintegration and one of its major contributions was the impetus it gave to African cultural nationalism. This culminated into political nationalism, having adopted vernacular in both religious and educational efforts. The Christian missionaries were the first to embark on the study of African languages. They provided the necessary manpower not only for the sake of studying orthography but made effort in the study of the Bible and its translation. They were like the Catholic clerics, found in the medieval period who acted as the promoters of national literature and chroniclers of national history (Coleman, 1958:102).

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By 1851, the Church Missionary Society sponsored Bishop Ajayi Crowther to England to study and document a Yoruba grammar and Yoruba – English lexicon. He equally made efforts to translate numerous books into Yoruba. By 1869, the Reverend J. C. Taylor went to England where he translated some aspects of the Bible into Ibo and this led to the documentation of Union Ibo Bible in 1913.

Thus, by 1896, at the Le Zoute conference all representatives of the protestant missions unequivocally agreed that Africa be evangelized by her own sons. Even though, from the earliest time protestant mission believed in promoting Africans to the clergy status and in addition promoted the indigenous church. By 1850, only one Nigerian clergyman was chosen called Bishop Ajayi Crowther. According to J. F. Ade Ajayi, he was not Bishop consecrated in the Niger Mission or Territory as often stated. But he was:

> Bishop in an immense diocese described in the royal licence authorizing his consecration as the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of our dominion; that in West Africa from the Equator to the Senegal, with the exception of the British colonies of Lagos, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone. (Ajayi, 1965: 206).

Despite the various attempts towards the Nigerianization of the clergy, the church played a modest role in producing genuine loyalists and devotees who imbibed Christian ethics and consequently contributed in a significant measure to nationalism and political development in Nigeria. However, majority of the Africans or Nigerians influenced by the missionaries were conscious of European superiority with particular reference to technology. This view of white over-lordship was received wholeheartedly. But one of the major agitations that stemmed from this notion was the "damned nigger" school:

> It is from them in the main that has grown up the convictions..... that nothing in the structure of African social is worth preserving; that everything, indeed is bad and corrupt, and must be pulled down – tribal systems, communal tenure, and marriage laws (Coleman, 1958:105).

Thus, Africans and Nigerians alike were naturally bound to be vociferous against numerous attitude of the missionary policy. For instance, there was this Eurocentric view and misconception that Nigerians had no history of their own. This was then viewed as collaborative missionary – government policy and imperialist policy to discredit Nigerians. The concept of eurocentricism not only reflected in terms of Whites superiority over Nigerians

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but also blatant the denial of availability of history or documentation of Nigeria historical past.

Missionary Impact and the Role of Selected Individuals in the Development of Nationalism in Nigeria

It is noted that Reverend Henry Venn has been associated with the origin and development of nationalism in Nigeria. He belonged to the Presbyterian of St. Paul's London and within the period of thirty years, 1842 – 1972, he was the secretary to the Church Missionary Society. He advocated and he singlehandedly appealed to Africans to be ready to take over the mantle of leadership of their countries. His love for Africans started around 1800, when he was about four years old in Clapham Common, where he was also a playmate to some African wards reported to have been raised by Governor Zachary Macaulay of Sierra Leone. Looking into the missionary history, Venn's name has been very important particularly in the principles of church government found in his minutes of 1851 – 1861. These principles contained some evolutionary process and in three stages where churches in both Africa and Asia could be indigenous ones. Converts were to be given the impetus to take and assume responsibilities of their ministers because when churches in the district could do this, they should translate into Native Pastorate. In this respect, James John son mentioned thus:

> We continually cherish the remembrance of the days of former native independence and glory.... But we have seen nothing around us which we can call our own in the true sense of the term; nothing that shows an independent native capacity excepting this native pastorate institution. For this reason and the conviction that we have that, it is capable of being made a mighty instrument to develop the principles which create and strengthen a nation we toil... (Ayandele, 1966:181 – 182).

The political importance of Venn was also noted by the educated elites in West Africa, as majority of them owned their fame to him, but others considered Venn's move as too reactionary as it attempted to put aside the Church Missionary Society and to isolate the Europeans from the Lagos Church. This is because Lagos was seen by Venn as not being suitable for the beginning of the Native Pastorate when he vacated his office in 1872. In addition, Venn was quite significant for Africans in different ways. For example, in his minutes of instructions to the Christian missionaries, he was reported to have respect for African customs and institutions and ran away completely from what might be seen as not following Christian creed.

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The emergence of James Johnson was another land mark in the history of nationalism in Nigeria. He was reported to have had nationalist movement around him which made him to deserve special focus. James Johnson was born in Sierra Leone around 1838 and he belonged to both Ijebu and Ijesha in terms of parental background. He attended Freetown Grammar School and Fourah Bay College respectively where he taught in 1860 – 1863. He became a strong advocate for the native pastorate particularly that of Sierra Leone and attacked Europeans. He also demanded for the affiliation of Fourah Bay College to Durham University.

He had the firm believe that there must be complete evangelization of Africa and kicked against the notion that Africans were inferior as proclaimed by some – Negro personalities such as Burton, Winwood Reade and Hutchinson. James Johnson believed that both Christianity and African nationalism were alike and also believed that the former should give superstructure to the latter, the notion he had throughout his life. Among the Sierra Leoneans, James Johnson was popularly called 'Wonderful Johnson' and among the Nigerians, he was called 'Holy Johnson. He was also known as the 'Pope of Nigeria' in the Salisbury Square. In addition, his non isolation of African nationalism and Christianity enabled him to coin a motto for himself 'God and my country'. Indeed, nationalism as far as James Johnson was concerned meant everything. In the year 1887 at the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in London, he was reported to be very sad ostensibly because West African presentations were said to be very poor.

Christian Missions, Nationalism and Development of Northern Peoples' Congress in Nigeria

The press played fundamental role to disseminate nationalist feelings and aspirations of Nigerians. It must be stated that R. B. Blaize who had Oyo background and parentage, started the first indigenized newspaper called The Lagos Times. But there was the Anglo-African News Paper established in the year 1862. In addition, a more radical newspaper called The Lagos Observer started under the editorship of J. B. Benjamin. By 1887, the Eagle and Lagos Critic Newspaper was founded by O. E. Macaulay (Eliasu, 2014: 102). In the year 1887, The Mirror was established by Adolphes Marke. Such nationalist aspirations and feelings were intensified consequent upon media propaganda. This was followed by the persistent effort of some individual particularly the Christianized and westernized Nigerians. Amongst such notable individuals was Dr. Dikko, a missionary trained medical doctor in Birmingham through Dr. Walter Miller. The idea of this man led to a conception and formation of a very

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popular party in Northern Nigeria known and called the Northern Peoples' Congress (Ahmadu Bello, 1982: 85).

Thus, Reid commented and argued that if Dikko's place had earlier been projected and foreseen by the Christian Missions, his life would have been dramatic. Other personalities included Payne and Forsythe who collectively belonged to the society for development and promotion of religion and education in Lagos led and championed by the African Church Missionary Society. This society was regarded as supra-organizational in structure because it advocated for the right of African Churches to control finances and money instead of domination by the Salisbury Square.

By the year 1911, some Christian Missionary trained Nigerians were advocating for vibrant ideas. They particularly asked questions concerning the sovereignty of Europeans over Nigeria and how this concept was applied. Amongst such personalities and individuals was Esien Ukpabio of Efik origin and background in Nigeria who at the same time advocated for theory of cultural nationalism (George Ried, 1978: 228 – 229).

Some Newspapers that gave Impetus to Nationalism, 1862 – 1914

No	Name of Newspapers	Year Established
1.	Anglo-African Newspaper	1862
2.	The Eagle and Lagos Critics	1887
3.	The Mirror	1887
4.	Lagos Weekly Record	1897
5.	Lagos Standard	1903
6.	Nigerian Chronicle	1908
7.	Nigerian Times	1914

Source: Yahaya Eliasu, 2017

Conclusion

This paper has examined the coming of the Christian missions to Nigeria in 1842 with the primary aim to Christianize Nigerians. But, these Christian missions discovered that for them to do a proper work of evangelization, there was the need for them to educate Nigerians, hence they introduced Western education. However, the understanding of western ideas through western scholarship by Nigerians led to resentment in the church by the Nigerians who were the benefactors of Christian missions. In other words, the art of political governance was strongly laid by the Christian missions through the formation of nationalism in Nigeria. The various agitations and resentment that ensued were to further project the role of Christian missions in the

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development of nationalism in Nigeria. The first resentment was noted within the Church itself, called Ethiopianism. The other was the one exhibited by various individuals trained as clergymen, catechists and preachers within the church and who in later years called for the sovereignty of Nigeria as a nation through nationalism. Consequently, those who advocated for the parliamentary system of government in Nigeria in the nineteenth century were not only the African educated elites but significantly the church. Thus, between 1886 – 1914, minutes of the legislative council exemplified that members of the council were preponderantly Nigerian ministers and churchmen.

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