

**CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE AND THE BACKGROUND TO
NATIONALISM IN NIGERIA, 1870-1960**

By

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Abstract

Hitherto it had been the fashion among scholars to assume that Nigerian nationalism and modern political development did not begin vigorously until after 1914, and that religion has no contribution to series of protest movement that eventually earned political independence for Nigeria. This paper was conceived on the conviction that the above assumption might be misleading and not based upon empirical data. The paper has shown certain evidence that proved a forceful nationalist awakening in Nigeria before 1914 which began within the Christian missionary circles; an awakening which was obviously constructive and purposeful and which prepared the ground for the better known post World War 1 nationalism in Nigeria. For instance, it was the Christian missionaries who started operating in the territories that later became modern Nigeria since the 1840s that encouraged their converts on the idea of the creation of a modern state which would take its rightful place in the comity of nations. Their activities helped to break down ethnic prejudices and to bring their converts in a loyalty transcending ethnic ties. From the second half of the 19th century, these Christian converts featured prominently in the political, economic and social scenes of the nation. It stands to their credit that they contributed to the struggle which put Nigeria on the road to self government. They did much to awaken the spirit of modern nationalism in the people of Nigeria. They broke with the European missions and criticized most aspects of colonial administration, and they provided a virile leadership for the movement that led to the independence of Nigeria through their western education.

Keywords: Christian, Missionary, Enterprise, Nationalism, Nigeria.

Introduction

The advent of Christianity to Nigeria was so closely linked with colonialism that a very dubious alliance developed between Christianity and colonialism. While many Nigerians swallowed the teaching of the new religion hook, line and sinker, later events, would prove that their unquestionable acceptance only postponed the day of reckoning, when Nigerian educated Christians would rise up to demand both cultural and historical redress and a redefinition of the Christian theology. In this way, freedom from the shackles of colonialism became

identical with freedom from religious imperialism and vice versa because both had combined to upset the socio-economic and political balance of Nigeria. It is not surprising then that under the auspices of Independent African Churches, Nigerian educated elites came together in relentless struggle to ensure the political and ecclesiastical independence of Nigeria. This is particularly so because the Church was the only institution in which the educated Nigerians could give free and unfettered expression to their own personality during the colonial era. The political possibilities of the Church were already clearly understood by the elites in the middle 19th century and it was mainly because of its political usefulness that the educated Nigerians zealously patronized Christianity.

The missionaries' teaching of equality and brotherhood of all men before God, which had been implanted in them, produced in the long run its logical consequence. As Falola and Adediran (1983) aptly summarized:

By teaching wards the art of reading and writing, by allowing them to have unrestricted access to the bible, Nigerians began to interpret the bible in a way that encouraged an independent, nationalistic spirit...when Europeans began to exercise control and exhibit an exclusive attitudes that could not be justified by the scriptures, they began to challenge the white missionaries. (p. 131).

Slowly many Nigerians began to nurse seedling ambitions of political self expression and self-government as a corollary to the Christian theory of equality. Patriotic Nigerians came to believe that by practicing Christianity they were paving the way for the creation of the Nigerian nation state. In their own understanding only when they were in full control of the Church affairs and when Christianity had leavened the society would complete independence follow. Control of the Church would be progressively followed by control of the state. Hence Ayandele (1970) noted that: "Christianity was cause and nationalism effect, Christianity was creator, the sustainer and premium mobile of a nation's existence, the history of Christendom illustrates this fact" (p. 94). It is for this same reason that James Johnson, a pioneer Nigerian missionary nationalist, remarked that Christianity must therefore create a Nigerian nation. For him the political salvation of Nigerian was dependent on their religious and moral growth. For him, the association of an independent national Church with an independent national life was an article of faith. It was his belief in the inseparableness of Christianity and the realization of Nigerian independent that informed his intense passion and apostolic dedication to the cause of

Christianization of Nigeria. The thrust of this paper therefore, is to trace the relationship between the Christian missionary activities and the development of sustainable nationalism in Nigeria. The paper shall highlight the contributions of the early Christian converts in Nigeria to the awakening of the spirit of nationalism in Nigeria, and thus show that when, in 1914 the British brought together the two halves of the country, they were only putting the finishing touches to the process already going on even before the 1914 amalgamation.

Missionary Education and Nationalism in Nigeria

From the very beginning education was a virtual monopoly of the Christian missionary societies; Coleman (1986) opined that to all intents and purposes the school is 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 cardinal in all consideration of African education. Through their extensive evangelical activity and long monopoly in the field of education, Christian missionaries played a critical role in the rise of nationalism in Nigeria. Without the missionary enterprise both the timing and nature of the awakening of racial and national consciousness would probably have been difficult. According to Nwuzo, Igboabuchi and Ilorah (2010) “Because the missions laid the foundation for modern education and literacy in Nigeria, their education was responsible for producing the people who championed nationalism and eventually won independence for Nigeria” (p.58).

As the missions had a monopoly over education the Christians in urban communities included most of the educated elements, who were later to become the leaders of protest movements and in the awakening of a political and trans-tribal national consciousness. To be effective, the leaders of such a movement ought to be able to speak the language of the conqueror and to understand their thought and actions. Herein lays the fundamental contribution of the Christian missions in the growth of Nigerian nationalism.

It was true that the intention of the missions was not to train people who would lead a revolt against foreign rule of which the majority of them were the great exponents, but once opportunity for education had been given, it was difficult to control the thought of the educated or to channel them along a predetermined course, more so, all instructions at higher levels of education in Nigeria were in English. The Nigerians who acquired a knowledge of English had access to vast new world of literature and ideas, and their contact with it awakened new

aspirations, quickened the urge toward emulation, and provided the notions and the medium for the expression of grievances. Again, the English language served as a lingua franca for communication among the educated elements of all tribes, a bond of decisive importance in the development of pan-Nigeria or nationalist movement. Ajayi (1965) argued that the most important contribution of the missionaries in Nigeria is the making of new elite. Conversion to Christianity, knowledge of and preference for English, imitation of European behaviour, and post-school employment in an urban milieu all helped to isolate the educated elites from their traditional environment. Western education did not merely facilitate the emergence of a separate class; it endowed the individuals in that class with the knowledge and skills, the ambitions and aspirations, that enable them to challenge the Nigerian colonial government and ultimately to wrest control over the central political power from it.

The Church and the State in colonial Nigeria

Nigerian people in the colonial era were over burdened with many problems emanating from the ugly consequences of political instability, poor economic situation, social and religious upheavals. The numerous Nigerians who were victims of injustice and other forms of oppression looked to the Church for succour. In situations where the forces of the opposition and critics had been silenced and the people intimidated by the dictatorial regimes, the Church used the gospel as the voice of the oppressed, the only effective pressure group that could rouse the conscience of the political leaders. Until the 20th century there were no organized political movements to canalize the various grievances against the British colonial government and to spearhead opposition. The Church therefore, became the only institution through which the educated Nigerians could come together in an organized form to articulate their views and form a common front for the struggle for political emancipation. The Christian message was then being addressed to change people and change situations. Nebechukwu (1992) opined that, the Church became involved directly in the fight against the causes of social and political oppression with the sole aim of effecting historical change of the situation. Ndiokwere (1994) further submitted that the Church developed a critical awareness of the causes of injustice and participated in actions to change the social, economic and political structures that caused human suffering in Africa. This involved conscientizing the people to begin to listen to the demands for justice for the poor and oppressed in every concrete situation. Baur (2005) further stressed, "Religion and patriotism were intimately interwoven in the hearts of the Nigerian Christian nationalist, such as James

Johnson, which was expressed by his motto “God and my country”. Though he joined the Anglican Communion in which he was educated, the National Church of Nigeria he had known in his childhood remained the ideal of his whole lifetime. Indeed James Johnson from the beginning identified himself with the nationalist movement. But while all credit for the first stirring of Nigeria nationalism may not be given to him, it is beyond doubt that his advent quickened the pulse of nationalist feelings. For the first time the educated Nigerians in Lagos had a fearless, confident, able and awe-inspiring spokesman who could stand up to the white men who he did not considered to be superior to the Blackman.

Indeed James Johnson was by no means alone in the belief and hope that Christianity and Nigerian nationalism were like cause and effect. His politico-religious ideas were passionately shared by many educated Nigerians that church was by far the most important institution in their lives and that is was through the church that they sought the achievement of their social and political aspirations. According to Olusanya (1999):

These men were mainly products of the mission schools and it was by educating them and later denying them equality with the whites that the Christian missions helped to contribute their own quota to the emergence of Nigerian nationalism. (p. 547).

In the thinking of the educated Nigerians, Christianity was not just the pure milk of the gospel but was as well the most potent political instrument that could and should be employed in the creation of virile, independent Nigerian nation state. In this regard, it is safe to conclude that Christianity was being zealously patronized in the conviction that it is the chief instrument that should be employed to promote the advancement of a nation.

The Beginnings of Christian Nationalist Movement in Nigeria

The assumption that Nigeria nationalism and political development did not begin vigorously until after 1914 is unfounded. Hence, Nmah and Nwadiolor (2010) confirmed that:

This observation, to say the least, is misleading and not based upon empirical data. Evidence showed that there was a forceful nationalist awakening in Nigeria before 1914; that it was constructive, purposeful, inspiring and fruitful and that it prepared the ground for the better known post World War 1 nationalism. (p. 128).

By 1870 missionary enterprise had begun to produce inherent nationalism in Nigeria. The educated elites, mainly ex-slaves from Sierra-Leone, had begun to identify themselves with the interest of their fatherland and to protest against specific acts of the British administration they deemed inimical to the interests of their fatherland. According to Sawyer (1997):

Nationalism in Africa began when it was discovered that the Church in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, had come into being with pre-fabricated theology, liturgies and traditions, and now bears little, if any, real relation to the indigenous beliefs and practices of the people to which it was brought. So, on the one hand, the church has every right to claim that she is the pioneer, or even the author of Nigerian nationalism. (p. 10).

The educated elite began to present a united front, combining to found the first supra-tribal organization in Nigeria with political aims. This was the “Society for the Promotion of Religion and Education in Lagos”. According to Ayandele (1970):

Without the prior knowledge of the European missionaries, all Nigerian clerical agents and prominent laymen, totaling 108, met on 1 October 1873 to found this organization, which was expected to assume all responsibility for missionary and educational work in Lagos. (p. 90).

Their aim, it was said, was to render the European missionaries redundant, so that the C.M.S might withdraw them. The European mentors they observed, had not been working in the interest of Nigerian independence that Nigerians were committed to achieve. The new society, for which a constitution was provided, it was said, was a thing ordained of God and the beginning of Nigerian Church missionary society. The Society for the Promotion of Religion and Education in Lagos became the first organized collective act of rebellion by the educated elites – the product of Christian mission – against the white man’s rule in Nigeria.

These individuals were also exponents and founders of the indigenous African churches which were the first concrete manifestations of cultural nationalism. This group of Nigerians were led by men such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Bishop James Johnson, Majola Agbebi, John Payne Jackson, William Bright Davies, Tejumade Osholoke Johnson, to mention only a few. These men were all products of mission schools but they were strongly opposed to the attempts of Christian missions to denationalize Africans and were never weary of advocating a conscious rejection of those aspects of Western culture which seemed to them to be of no value to Africans and calling on them to drink deep from the fountain of their heritage. Some of them demonstrated their rejection of

Western culture in practical terms by dropping their English names and dresses. For examples, David Vincent became Majola Agbebi and abandoned altogether the wearing of English dress even when in Europe, Rev. S.H. Samuel became Adeboye Osholoke Tejumade Johnson.

The new Religious Movements as an Aspect of Nationalism in Nigeria

The emergence of the new religious movements further widened the rift in social relationship of the white and black missionaries. Nigerians saw in the institution a power agency and a training ground for self-government in the Church affairs that would automatically qualify them for self government in the administration of Nigeria. In various committees and boards the educated elites began to question the practice of European missionaries in reserving superior positions for members of their own race. In the words of Falola and Adediran (1983):

The attitude of the European missionaries was succinctly expressed in 1927 by an English missionary who declared with impunity that God wants you all to be Christians – some few of you to be priests, but he only chooses Whiteman as Bishops. (p. 131).

This policy greatly embittered the Nigerian converts and was intolerable to the new elites who continued to demand increasing responsibility in the affairs of the church. According to Nwosu (1993) many of the people who led these resistance movements were evangelists and clergymen. As far back as 1891, Edward Wilmot Blyden began to speak vehemently against the attempts of the European missionaries to destroy African culture. Believing in the universality of Christianity and thus its adaptation to the African culture, he called on Lagosians to organize an independent African church. Following this clarion call, The United Native African Church was formed in Lagos in August 1891. By the close of the second decade of the 19th century instances of the rise of African Christian groups were becoming more common.

The emergence of the new religious movements signaled the beginnings of Nigeria towards independence under the leadership of educated elite. By marking the beginning of displacement of white dominance from church affairs, it removed Nigerian nationalism from the realm of ideology to that of a practical achievement. Through councils, committees and native pastorates, the idea of independence gradually spread throughout Nigeria. Consequently, by the end of the century the prestige of the white missionaries had fallen sharply and the days of the all-powerful, paternalistic and patronizing missionaries were clearly over.

The native pastorate was conceived as a mighty instrument to develop the principles which create and strengthen a nation. Thus when Nigerians began to show eagerness in the assumption of the financial responsibility of their churches, they wanted to control the affairs of the church with the hope that in future, control of the church would be followed by the control of the state.

Nationalist protest against Europeanization of the Nigerian Christians and Christianity in Nigeria also took another dimension when those Christians who could not muster courage enough to opt out of the mission Churches for indigenous Churches reacted in other ways. Many Christian nationalists dropped their European Christian names, while others retained their surnames, but adopted Nigeria first names. Rev. James Johnson, who later became a bishop did not change his own name but refused to baptize children with foreign names. And well into the post colonial periods the trend continued. Sir Francis Ibiam, the first indigenous governor of Eastern Nigeria, became Dr. Akanu Ibiam. Today, the use of indigenous names in baptism appears to have become popular among the educated circles in Nigeria.

Whatever explanations are offered for the rise of the New religious movements in Nigeria, if nationalism is taken to describe any organization or group that explicitly asserts the rights, claims and aspirations of a given African society in opposition to Europeans' authority, whatever its institutional forms and objectives, then the rise of these separatist churches should certainly be regarded as an aspect of nationalism in colonial Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nationalism anywhere in the world and under whatever manner or shape it operates, is the product of awareness that oppression and exploitation of the less privileged nations by the powerful ones are man-made, sinful, and therefore contradicts everything that justice and even the gospel message stands for. Christian nationalists' movement has made its impact felt in Nigeria especially as different forms of oppression existed side by side with adherence to the Christian faith.

The missionary teaching of equality of all men challenged Nigerian Christians to question the common faith which they shared with their white oppressors. In this way nationalism became a way of thinking and acting by Nigerian Christians as they attempt to discover the political implications of the faith in a

given situation. Nigerian missionaries who believed that in the state Nigerians were already ripe for a measure of self-government could hardly be expected to be silent about self-government in the church which, as has been emphasized, was generally believed should be the fore runner of political independence. Their nationalist commitment shows clearly that they were not just Nigerians wrapped up in spiritual contemplation and living far away from the madding crowd. They were not only in but of society, unlike St. Augustine they did not regard human society as evil or secular, but they regarded the church as an agency for the realization of Nigerian political emancipation. As Odey (1996) stated “Christianity is about a liberation movement among us earthlings. Being the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who incarnated himself in man and his history, is intensely worldly, and not particularly religious” (p. 24).

It is clear from this paper that there is substance in the saying that Nigeria should be grateful for the priceless gift of such educated Nigerian missionaries who fought doggedly to put Nigeria on the path of political independence. For ardent Nigerian Christians who found the ecclesiastical imperialism of alien Christian missions the obstacles to the evolution of independent African churches, the activities of the Christian nationalists proved a worthy inspiration. To the frustrated members of the Nigerian population, there was solace in James Johnson’s conviction that the latter days of the Negro race shall exceed the former. To the nationalist crusaders, and independent winners of present day Nigeria, the Nigerian indigenous missionaries gave a message. Hence Nmah and Nwadiolor (2010) concluded that such nationalists like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmedu Bello, Anthony Enahoro – to name a few – are architects rather than factors of independence, winners rather than beginners or originators.

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