Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of African West Indians participating as agents of the western missionary enterprise in Western Africa in the mid nineteenth-century. It takes a comparative look at three of five missionary expeditions that took African West Indians to Western Africa between 1841-1897, and evaluates their participation against the background of various European attempts at that time to ‘remedy’ the problem of Africa. Various issues are examined, including the interplay between religion and identity, race and empire, margin and metropole. What impact did they have on the West Indians’ participation in what was considered to be a largely European civilizing project?

The three expeditions in this study are the Basel Mission to the Gold Coast (1842-1870), the Baptist Mission to the Cameroon (1841-1883), and the Anglican Mission to the Rio Pongas (now the Gambia) (1855-1897). As deliberate initiatives from the newly established West Indian churches, engagement in the enterprise as a marginal group of people from the margin of the British Empire has raised historical questions about their suitability, motivation, and contribution. The study therefore investigates their participation in the project and explores ways in which, in addition to their existential formation in the West Indies, physically encountering Africa may have shaped their conception of the missionary enterprise they had embraced and to which they sought to contribute.

Questioning the historical interpretation of their participation which portrays them as ‘nostalgic exiles’ in a mythic pursuit of an imagined homeland, or as misguided adventurers in pursuit of personal career advancements, the study proposes instead, that the African West Indians’ participation in the missionary enterprise in Africa in the mid nineteenth-century, was a pursuit to further the emancipation dream for themselves and their fellow Africans. Experiencing Mission Christianity in the West Indies, and physically encountering Africa, appeared to have reinforced and shaped a conception of the enterprise as a project of justice and freedom. Such a conception inherently includes personal, religious, and socio-political dimensions. Those dynamics enabled the missionary project in Western Africa to achieve its long desired goal of planting Christianity in Sub-Saharan African soil.