

OUTLINE

AFRICAN MISSIONARY ACTIVITY AT HOME AND OVERSEAS

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A common view held by many people in the West is that Christianity was spread around the world by white missionary agents from the 'Northern' world. The standard picture often portrayed in the sectarian literature is of the work of devoted, noble, self-sacrificing white missionaries. This is, of course, partly true but there is another less well known story, that of the black evangelists who were mainly responsible for spreading the Gospel throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Historical background: Henry 'Linguist' Johnson, from Sierra Leone, while studying Hebrew and Arabic in Palestine in the mid 1870s, wrote to the secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London, that he was 'following the fortunes of the [CMS] East African mission with patriotic interest. I say "patriotic" because I feel that whatever concerns Africa, it matters not in whatever part of the vast Continent, concerns, or should, concern, me.' This was a statement of clerical pan-Africanism which showed a deep Christian concern for the spread of the Gospel in Africa.

Archdeacon Crowther, from West Africa, speaking at the Keswick Convention in 1897 said::

'he was at Keswick to testify to the power of Holy Ghost in convicting the souls of men, in whatever circumstances, tribes, nationalities, or race they might be. He said it was a rule that in the native churches that those who came to the Lord's table must be missionaries.' [*Keswick Week 1897*, 191]

These ideas were echoed 125 yrs later by Dr Musumbi Kanyoro in writing of the mission for African church in light of lessons from Acts:

'All Africans ... have a mandate to be missionaries beginning in our Jerusalem. Our localities in Africa are our Jerusalem; they are where our mission work must begin.'

1. A first and fairly obvious point: Africans were largely responsible for the spread of Christianity in Africa in 19-20Cs and the great expansion of Christian faith, the creation of the Protestant heartlands and the pentecostalist presence in sub-Saharan Africa, since the 1960s.

The idea of the African agency – of the appropriateness of Africans/Black Christians as missionaries to Africa, had its origins in the late 18C; it was the vision of Henry Venn of the CMS in the mid 19C, of other European and N. American missionary agencies at the same time, and of Hughes' Colwyn Bay Institute at the end of that century. However, the growth of racist thinking curtailed some of that work.

The Western missionary effort was limited:

(a) It involved a relatively small number of foreign missionaries; compare this with the large number of Africans who embraced Christianity: e.g. in South. Africa in 1800

only a handful of African Christians, by 1900 over 100,000 – remarkable growth in Eastern Cape and with enormous social, economic and religious influence. In West Africa in the 1850s there was only a small and limited Christian presence on the coast; by 1920 there had been several revivals and rapid growth of Christian work inland.

(b) Not only were white missionaries relatively few in number but they faced a number of serious constraints: sickness, being invalided home, death; and it took many years for most to acquire a working knowledge of language and culture.

By contrast African catechists, mission workers, and people who had become Christians were more effective in cross-cultural mission because they often learned other African languages more easily and had a ready empathy with the culture. Many were non-literate and they came with a *message* but not with the kind of cultural baggage (an Enlightenment/scientific world view) and notions of superiority that all so often accompanied white missionaries. Thus they were more effective in a missionary- evangelist role. Protestant mission activity was also book orientated – need for Scriptures in vernaculars, prayer books writing hymns, translation of books such as *Pilgrim's Progress* - vital role in this work by Africans.

Samuel Coker, W. Africa clergyman from Lagos, preaching in North Wales 1908, reported as saying:

‘He had never met a white missionary who knew fully how to deal with his fellow countrymen, and he believed that Africa would be evangelised through her own swarthy sons’

J.W. Dwane, who led the breakaway Order of Ethiopia from the AMEC in S. Africa also criticised the contribution of African-American missionaries; he argued that they were infatuated with ‘Western ideas and aspirations’ and were ill-suited to task of African redemption because of the culture and skills acquired in the ‘hard school’ of slavery. that they were shaped and conditioned by the experience of slavery and white culture.

Certainly European/North American missionaries helped plant a knowledge of the Christian Gospel in Africa but it was spread by African catechists, teachers, and believers. e.g. David Asante – evangelical work in the interior of the Gold Coast; Evangelistic Bands in Ondo, southern Nigeria in 1901; migrant labourers working in Kimberley compound; traders, market women, or another J.K. Coker, a Nigerian labourer on a cocoa plantation who learned to read and with a Yoruba Bible evangelised his fellow workers and neighbours; Dallington Maftao – initial work in Buganda: Buganda revival 1893-4 – African evangelists carried vernacular Scriptures to every district. In 1896: 200 evangelists in regular employ plus 500 in auxiliary positions; by 1902, 2000 men and 400 women involved; Shadrach Mogun – convert from Ibadan (via David Hinderer, the CMS missionary): ‘he lives alone with Jesus Christ – to use his own expression ... He preaches to the farmers, and now and again visits the town to preach. He looks like an old prophet, and is a veritable John the Baptist preparing the way for Christi’s second advent’. [Peel, *Aladura* (1968), 58]; women’s prayer groups in S. Africa among Methodists and Anglicans; the East African revival 1930s – *Tukutendereza* – into Kenya 1930s and its significance was still being felt in Tanzania in 1960s.

Then there are the African Initiated Churches (AIC): the AMEC, Garrick Braide, William Wade Harris, Aladura; the Christian revival among Tiv in 1929 when young men literate in Tiv, who could not gain, or were refused, employment as clerks and teachers, preachers by government and the Dutch Reformed Church Mission, set up their own system of 'Bible Schools' which led to a 'Christian Awakening'.

There is a growing literature on both the history and contemporary African national mission e.g. by Pirouet, Hastings, Isichei, Peel, Spear & Kimambo, Maxwell & Lawrie.

Contemporary mission work in Africa:

Great expansion since 1950s in African hands. There were, of course, some key external figures who helped stimulate evangelism: Matthews Ojo, writing of student work, points up the contribution of Tony Wilmot in West Africa, but students evangelising other students was vital

National mission – mission minded churches: cross cultural mission within national boundaries e.g. Twi speakers going to N. Ghana; Igbo Christians to Hausa speaking and Islamic regions of north.

African foreign mission within Africa: increasing role of churches where frontiers mean little. And also without Africa: to Brazil, Asia, Europe – ministering to the diaspora but also to non-Africans. The largest church in Britain is Black led in East London. [Gerrie Ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise* (Cardiff 1998), and ed., *Strangers & Sojourners* (Leuven, 1998); *IBMR* lxxxix, 354 (2000)]. The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria now has missionaries in over 80 countries.

RC Africa priests to France and UK where shortage of priests: in 2004 only 157 priests in training in France; in England & Wales in 2003, there were only 18 ordinations. ['The Church in the world', *The Tablet*, 220, Nov 2004] Also African Anglican clergy to England – impact of Africa church on Anglican Church in recent debates on Scripture and Christian morality. Africans also into para-church roles – London City Mission.

2. Second point: although there is literature on the African role in the diffusion of Christianity in Africa, there is still a great need for research on this history but perhaps more importantly on present African mission activity both within Africa and without. Stanley H. Skreselet, surveying recent 'Doctoral dissertations in mission: ten year update' (*IBMR* July 2003), stated that there was an 'almost exclusive preoccupation with Western missionary activity What ... non-white missionaries and agencies are doing now in increasing numbers deserve the same kind of scholarly attention that has been given so eagerly to Western cross-cultural missionary efforts'.

Why this lack of current writing?

African national churches, and particularly their mission agencies, have a much less institutional base than western churches and missions in 19-20C. They come out of

less bureaucratic and more informal societies; many churches possibly have a faith mission base; pre-eminence of local sending churches; missionaries as 'tent-makers' and thus without institutional and financial support cf. western churches; perhaps poor African churches are more generous in giving to mission via local churches than were their counterparts in Europe and N. America 100-150 years ago?

3. My third point: There is a need to capture and write this history – local studies, perhaps rather than institutional ones. Impact of Christian activity in troubled places, which Kanyoro suggests, often make for mission opportunities? Important role of women in African mission in past and the present
How to go about this, not only in Africa but also in Asia and Latin America? This was the subject of discussion.