The Impact of Christian Missionaries on Oyo Empire 1893-1960

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Abstract
This paper appraises the impact of the interrelation between the Christian missions and Oyo Empire on the civilization of Yoruba nation. The paper briefly explores the history of Oyo and Alaafin, it discusses the contributions of Alaafin to Yoruba race and Nigeria development in general. The paper focuses attention specifically on the activities and roles of Christian missionaries in both the old and the modern Oyo Empire. The paper aims to examine the positive and negative impacts of the Christian missions on social, cultural, political and economic development of Oyo. It therefore examines the triangular relationship between the Christian religion and cultural practices. The paper derives its materials from selected books, newspapers and internet materials. In addition, the paper made copious use of recorded history of missionary
involvement and observable evidences of continued impact of
the Christian missionaries (churches) on the development of
present-day Oyo. The paper observes that Christian
missionaries play pivotal roles in both physical and socio-
economic development of the modern Oyo Empire. It finally
concludes that Christian missionaries have influenced major
activities of Oyo indigenous/traditional religion.

Keywords: Christian missionary, Christianity, Oyo Empire, Civilization, Development

Introduction

Oyo Empire was a Yoruba Empire located in the western part of the
present day Nigeria. Oyo Empire played prominent and pivotal roles in
Yoruba civilization. The root of Oyo and other kingdoms in Yoruba land is
traceable to Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba people. According to Yoruba
cosmology, Oranmiyan, the youngest son of Oduduwa founded Oyo. He is
also acclaimed by history to be the first Alaafin (the king) of Oyo. He earned
for himself the patriarchy of all Yoruba kingdoms due to his bravery and
resilience. He migrated from Ile-Ife to Oyo and transferred the political
headquarters of Yoruba nation from Ile-Ife to Oyo. Ile-Ife however,
remained the ancestral home and spiritual headquarters of Yoruba people.
The city is the cradle of Yoruba civilization (Balogun, 2017).

Atanda (1980) stated that the Yoruba constitute one of the major
ethnic groups in the modern day Nigeria. In their various settlements
before the modern political creations, they adopted a form of city states and
kingdoms settlement. Notable kingdoms that existed under the Oyo
Empire were Owu, Ijesa, Ijebu, Egba, Ekiti, Owo, Ondo, Sabe, Popo,
Igbomina and Egbado.
Prior to the advent of Christian missionaries, the religion of Oyo people was the traditional African (Indigenous Yoruba Religion) Religion. The indigenous Yoruba religion is a monotheistic religion, notwithstanding that the religion gives premium to the presence of pantheon of gods and deified ancestors, who happened to be the representatives of the supreme deity in charge of different portfolios. So, the Yoruba believe in the existence of a Supreme Being.

The geographical location of Oyo Empire favoured the evolution of the empire. The plain areas brought the idea of having military brigade as well as development of metal crafts for the production of weapons of war. The possession of weapons of war put Alaafin and his empire at superior vantage over many lands and tribes.

Religion is such a vast subject, and the Yoruba religious belief system is complex. According to Alimi & Adesoji (2011), the pantheon of the Yoruba religion consisted of at least four hundred and one gods and goddesses. Some of these deities were believed to be intercessors between man and Almighty God. The Yoruba people also worshipped awe inspiring objects of nature such as trees, rivers, hills and mountains. Highly revered personalities were also deified because of their talents or heroic deeds. However, the Supreme Being God is the object of worship, which they called Eledumare or Olorun. The most commonly worshiped gods include Ifa, Ogun, Esu or Elegbara, Osun and so on.

They use names such as Olorun, Olodumare, Adaniwayne among others to refer to the Supreme being. The Yoruba believe that Olodumare is holy, and too remote from the physical world, so, in reverence for the Supreme Being, the Oyos resolve to worship God through minor deities. Notable ancestors are deified to function as intermediaries between the living and the dead Balogun (2017).
The Establishment of Christianity in Nigeria

After the failed attempt to plant effective Christianity in Nigeria in the 14th and 15th centuries by the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries, the successful expansion of the Christian missions in Nigeria began in the 19th century. The first half of that century witnessed a revolution in European attitudes and policies towards West Africa. It is pertinent at this point to state the hard fact of history, that the principal relation between the industrialized nations of the west and tropical Africa for many centuries was the slave trade carried out mainly by Christian peoples of Western Europe and Arabs.

According to Anene (1999), while it is true that Nigeria did not yet exist as a political unit in the middle 19th century, the nearest approach to the Nigeria of today was to be found in C.M.S. circles because their mission fields were the likely basis of the new nation. In this regard, it can be argued that the Church Mission Society (C.M.S.) gave Nigeria the shape that it later took. The missionaries of the C.M.S. desired that the British flag may be hoisted, especially within their areas of operation. It was their areas of operation that later became modern Nigeria.

The Christian missionaries were products of the new enlightenment age characterized by a belief in progress. This explains the Christian missionaries’ commitment to the material, moral and political advancement of the so called unenlightened or uncivilized people. It should be bore in mind that social reform is implicit in the preaching of the Christian missionaries. Consciously, as a preacher of Christianity interpreted in the light of European social and political history and unconsciously, as a man produced by that particular environment, the missionary brought to Nigeria various aspects of European life. The missionaries who saw civilization as allied to Christianity attempted more than just a reform of the manners of the converted people. The products of the industrial revolution were by then beginning to reach down to the masses from
among which many of the missionaries arose. When the missionaries talked about civilization, it was not so much the reform of the manners that they referred to as the temporal blessings which resulted from the spread of the Christian religion.

The real interest of the missionaries is gradually to train the inhabitants of this part in the arts of civilization and government. In particular, the Christian missionaries introduced into Nigeria the idea of nation-building of contemporary Europe. The supreme importance of Christian missions in Nigerian nation building lies in the fact that it was upon them, almost entirely that the socio-political development of Nigeria sprang.

Emergence of Christian Missionaries in Oyo Empire: Historical Perspective

Christianity was the religion that was introduced into Yoruba-land by the Europeans (the colonial masters). It is the religion of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christianity as a religion emerged among the Jews after the death of Jesus Christ. Through missionary activities, Christianity spread to different parts of the world Alimi & Adesoji (2011).

Oyo Empire encountered Christian missionaries in the eighteenth century. Precisely, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries entered Nigeria in 1842 through Badagry to plant Christianity. Christianity was introduced by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) into Abeokuta via Badadry in 1843. From Abeokuta, it spread to Oyo Empire and from there, they journeyed into the interiors to evangelise. Ajayi (1979) affirmed that within the period of 1841 to 1891, missionary societies have launched their presence in Nigeria. The five mission societies identified by Ajayi include:

- Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) (now, Anglican Communion)
- The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (founded by English Methodist Conference)
The Foreign Mission Committee of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland
The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States
The Catholic Society of African Missions of France (S.M.A.)

The incursion of Christian missionaries into Yoruba hinterland coincided with the beginning of the decline of the political influence of Alaafin of Oyo during the fall of Oyo Empire in the 19th century.

Factors that Aided Christian Missionary Activities in Oyo Empire

The Christian missionaries came to Africa for three (3) major reasons, namely; Christianization, civilization and Commercialization. Many factors aided the penetration of Christian missionary activities in Oyo Empire; this study will examine some of these factors.

- The Christian religion was introduced at a period when Yoruba land was boiling with civil war. The advent of Christian mission in Oyo Empire was very significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Christian missionary through diplomacy helped end the raging Yoruba civil war.
- Secondly, the Christian missions contributed to the eradication of slave trade in Yoruba-land. The missionaries also brought the art of writing into Yoruba-land, hence the building of schools and the first printing press and newspaper were also introduced by the Christian missionaries.

Impact of Christian Missions on Socio-Political and Cultural Formation of Oyo Empire

Traditional educational system was prevalent among the Yoruba people prior to the advent of Christianity. It is a form of education that was
rooted in the needs and shared values of Yoruba people. The traditional education inculcates moral values and skills in young ones. Western form of education introduced by the missionaries helped to raise standard of living of Yoruba people. Unlike the traditional education that was informal, western education was formal. Schools were established alongside the churches already planted. The priests doubled as class teachers during week days, and ministered as priests on Sundays. They introduced the acts of reading and writing to the Yorubas.

Today, the Yorubas are still the most educated and most civilized people among the tribes in the present day Nigeria. The missionaries were the first to provide primary and post-primary education in Nigeria. The first sets of schools established were situated in Yoruba region of the present day Nigeria. For instance, the Church Missionary Society established the first secondary school in Nigeria, C.M.S. Grammar School, Bariga, Lagos in 1859. Teacher training colleges were equally established to prepare Africans to take up teaching career in the schools. The education developed the minds of the educated elite. It is not surprising that those educated by the missionaries turned out to be strong voices that demanded for the independence of Nigeria from the colonial rule.

According to Akinjogbin (1998), Oyo gave security and political stability to all in Yoruba land. It is therefore not surprising that Yoruba-land was bedeviled by internal turmoil and external attacks as soon as Oyo Empire collapsed. The 18th-19th centuries Yoruba civil wars should not be seen as a mere strategy for kings and warlords to raid slaves for the European slave market. Rather, it was a fall out of the leadership vacuum created in Yoruba-land from the collapse of Oyo Empire. During this period, each kingdom had to engage in war to exercise independent authority and for the protection of their territories.

The colonial administration suffered a huge economic loss arising from the Yoruba civil wars. Their interest was to restore peace for economic
gains. Whereas, the missionaries engagement facilitated peace talks in order to create an enabling atmosphere for the expansion of Christian faith in Yoruba interior towns. Arifalo (1998) equally pointed out that the Lagos colonial administrators were only interested in the opening of the trade routes in Yoruba-land that the hostilities have closed down. He noted that there were no serious indications that they actually wanted peace. Arifalo however, appraised the efforts of C.M.S. missionaries like Rev. J.B. Wood, Rev. D. Hinderer, and Rev. James Johnson among others who incorporated Yoruba educated elites resident in Lagos into the peace talks.

During the EkitiParapo/Kiriji war, the missionaries tried to engage the warring Ekiti and Ibadan warlords in discussions with the hope to end hostilities Olaniyan (1998). About 1884-1885, Lagos administrators appointed Rev. Samuel Johnson and Rev. Charles Phillips to mediate in the crisis.

The missionaries were of Africa descent, they visited Ekiti Parapo and Ibadan camps and major Yoruba towns to negotiate for peace and cessation of violence. Efforts of these churchmen resulted in Peace Treaty of 1886 that eventually ended Yoruba civil war. It is worthy of note here that though the British colonial administration sponsored the peace treaty, the C.M.S. agency was used to bring the warring sides together.

The Oyo Empire and its people before the coming of Christian missionaries practiced human sacrifice. People with disabilities, were not regarded but treated with contempt. They were discriminated against and accused of serving the punishment imposed by the gods. The coming of Christianity brought about gradual change in attitude towards persons with disabilities. Special schools for different categories of disabilities were established.

The missionary also struggle to stop the practice of human sacrifice in Oyo Empire. The ancient practice of burying human beings alive along
with a deceased king or noble men was equally eradicated through the intervention of the Christian missionaries. They equally taught Yoruba’s to give descent burial rites to persons with disabilities, albinos and persons with hunch-back.

According to Kane (1974), the Christian missionaries taught agricultural science in schools and in addition to that, they cleared forest and planted trees and fruits. They introduced the Yorubas to new methods of farming, utilization of fertilizers and modern agricultural implements to reduce labour and enhance effective production. Atanda (1980) corroborated this that the missionaries introduced and promoted cash crops like cocoa and rubber. The missionary’s efforts on land cultivation improved the living condition of Oyo populace. The farm settlements created employment opportunities for new converts. The popular slogan of the Christian missionaries was ‘the Bible and the Plough’. This was because the missionaries at that time saw a strong connection between evangelism and farming.

Though, the Yorubas as observed by Olujinmi (2012), were a self-sustaining cultural group, with sufficient economies. Also in agreement with Olujinmi’s observation, Adekola (2004) maintained that the Yorubas operated a system where the good of the individual was never in conflict with that of the whole community. In this circumstance, it is obvious that one person’s gain was not the other person’s loss. Mutuality rather than competition shaped the economy of the Yorubas. However, the western missionary added a new impetus to the socio-economic climate of Yoruba communities through the establishment of vocational training centers through which the people acquired skills in carpentry, brick moulding and building, tailoring, mechanic among others. This helped in no small measure in creating job opportunities for Yoruba people. Successful trainees became self-reliant and independent of others for sustenance.
The Christian missions established Medical mission, the medical mission was one of the most visible humanitarian services of the missionaries. They established hospitals in which the health needs of the people were taken care of. Thomas Jefferson Bowen (1850-1856), the pioneer Baptist missionary in Nigeria was never a doctor by training, this notwithstanding, during the Ijaye war, his home at Ijaye was used as first aid centre and clinic where many who were wounded were treated Okedara & Ajayi (2004).

Foremost medical institutions in the present day Yoruba nation were fruits of the 19th century missionary efforts. Few examples are Seventh Day Adventist Hospital at Ile-Ife, Baptist Medical Centre at Ogbomoso and several Catholic Hospitals at Ibadan, Ikorodu, Iseyin, and Abeokuta. Apart from these, the missionaries also established Lepers’ colony across Yoruba-land to care for the social outcast. The medical outreaches brought many converts and helped Yoruba communities to nip to the bud, the incidence of maternal and child mortality.

**The Implications of Christian Missionary Activities on Modern Oyo Empire**

The Christian missionary activities in Yoruba-land have various effects on social, cultural, political and economic development of both the old and modern Oyo Empire; missionary projects of Christianity have both positive and negative effects on the Yoruba society.

As mentioned earlier, the Christian missionaries embarked on socio-economic empowerment and development of Oyo, through western education and vocational training. The Christian missionaries introduced these programs in order to help to develop skills needed for self-actualization and economic independence. Those who graduated from the mission schools were offered appointments under colonial administration as clerks or office assistants. The products from the Grade II Teachers’
Colleges were employed as teachers into primary schools. These pioneering efforts transformed the economic fortunes of the people of old Oyo Empire.

In the 19th century, Christian missionaries adopted a policy that ensured that the natives who accepted Christianity were allowed to take up leadership roles in the local assemblies. The Christian missionaries employed a strategy that resulted in raising churches that were self-sustaining, self-financing, and self-propagating. This policy helped greatly to produce native teachers, pastors, evangelists and missionaries who carried on with mission works after the missionaries from Europe and America returned to their countries. Today, demographic shift in the centre of gravity of world Christianity is widely acclaimed to be in Africa. South western Nigeria is a key player in the sustainability of Christian faith across the country. Walls (2002) opined that it is not just the population of Christians that justifies the shift in gravity to the southern hemisphere. Rather, Walls pointed out that the characteristic doctrines, the liturgy, the ethical codes; the social applications of faith are increasingly determined by prominent African preachers.

Fatokun (2007) noted that in addition to evangelism, Christian missionaries from Europe and America to Nigeria did much for the development of Nigeria. He emphasized that the development was specifically in the Yoruba kingdoms. The welfare programs incorporated into evangelism turned most rural communities to cities. Cottage industries opened during the 19th century have witnessed great turn around in the contemporary time. Vocational Training Centre at Topo near Badagry, established in 1876, has been upgraded to Topo industrial School.

As has been indicated in the foregoing, one of the far reaching implications of the Christian mission’s presence in Oyo Empire was in the area of literacy. Indeed nothing shows the ardor of the pioneering
missionaries better than the effort devoted within the limited resources of the missions and the ability of the missionaries, to making the principal Yoruba language a literary language. According to Ajayi (1965), the driving force behind the work on the Yoruba language was the anxiety to teach the converts and would-be converts to read the Bible in it. The literate Yorubas began to read the Bible in Yoruba language. Samuel Crowther intensified his study of Yoruba language and the results of these studies were published in 1841. The other missions in Nigeria were also studying different languages in the country, comparing translations and discussing the orthography.

By the first decade of the 20th century when Nigeria was thrown open to the missionaries and scholars, various primers, grammars and words lists had been published in the peripheral dialects of the various languages and thus, the languages began to acquire new prestige. It must be conceded therefore, that the missionaries rendered remarkable services to the development of Yoruba language by making it a language of writing, through their numerous catechetical tracks in the vernacular and through the translation of the Bible into Yoruba language.

The missionaries emphasized that it would be impossible to convey the gospel message effectively to any people unless the evangelist himself was able, not only to master the local tongue of the people, but also to understand their thoughts and value system. It is possible that these considerations caused them to stress the importance of producing literatures and teaching materials in vernaculars, and in Yoruba language in particular. Meanwhile, even though vernacular literatures were first produced primarily for evangelistic considerations, this however has also had considerable positive effects upon the building of Oyo Empire.

Notwithstanding the numerous positive dividends of missionary activities in Yoruba-land, the contraposition of the contraflow of missionary incursion of Yoruba-land cannot be underestimated. The Modernity fostered by the introduction of western education cum civilization has
gradually eroded African value of communal relationship and interdependence. O’Donovan (2000) observed that the Africans living in the cities adopt western values, he adjudged reasons for the preference for western culture to include advantages in education, technology, health care and democratic government. It is a truism that modernization fostered by western ideology and values have greatly liberated kingdoms from the political hegemony and tyrannical rule of emperors and kings. However, complete abandonment of African values, cultures, norms, beliefs and heritages is destructive, it inhibits peaceful co-existence.

The Christian missionaries initially encouraged indigenous participation. They saw the need to carry on evangelism with the natives at a point when Christian missionaries died in hundreds. This policy was reemphasized in the wake of the introduction of medical facilities and assurance of security from the colonial administrators.

However, from the wake of the 20th century, Africans were kept away from ecclesiastical authority and administration. African priests were made to serve under the European and American priests, even, when the latter were junior in rank. A case in point was the humiliation and unjust removal of Episcopal authority of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The relegation formed part of the reasons for the Indigenous Church initiatives by the Africans. Crowther (1981) accused the missionaries of forced labour, and living in comfort at the expense of the labour of the faithful. He reported that school pupils were forced to cultivate crops for their western missionary teachers. Highly paid jobs were reserved for the Europeans, while indigenous people took up clerical jobs that made them subservient to the whites. Racial prejudice was introduced and reached its peak during this period.

Eventhough the pioneering efforts of Christian missionaries in the area of education are quite commendable, however, the form of education provided as pointed out by Falk (1997) was at variance with the needs and
aspirations of the indigenous settlers. The missionaries introduced western education to be able to have literate laity, while the people jumped at the offer with the eagerness to receive education that could equip them with the skills to transform their society. This shows that there was no connection between the goals of western education providers and the native recipients. The natives needed a form of education that would advance their society and human person. The missionaries gave western education to make evangelism and conversion of Africans to Christianity easy for them.

The missionaries jettisoned the traditional education that had long lived with the Yorubas and imported western biased form of education that alienated the indigenous culture. This faulty foundation laid for education at this time has been alleged to be responsible for the inability of the contemporary Nigerian education curriculum at all levels, to incorporate technology driven content of instruction. Universities therefore turn out unproductive graduates, without being able to bequeath to them, good creative, vocational and entrepreneurial skills with which they could become self-reliant. The implication of this is that, the yearly graduates from Nigerian Universities now depend on government for non-existing white collar jobs, just as it was in the days of the Christian missionaries.

**The Consequences of Christian Missionary Activities on the Cultural Heritages of Oyo Empire**

The Public engagement and interpretation of cultural heritage resources in Oyo Kingdom have become fast diminishing as they are now fast-going into extinction. Cultural heritages which include interactions with, and interpretations of the beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions of the existing social groups and their heritages from the past, through their tangible and intangible expressions, have almost faded away due to the activities and beliefs of the populace in Christian and western philosophy. Through their extensive missionary activities and long monopoly in the
field of education, Christian missionaries played a critical role in Oyo Empire, and have consequently greatly influenced the way of life of the people including the people’s worldview.

The cultural heritage elements such as music, norms, customs, greetings, dance, language, traditional religion, and festivals are no longer important to the contemporary generation of Yoruba. The tangible (material) aspects of the cultural heritages of Oyo kingdom which include monuments, historical public buildings, homes, farms, castles, cathedrals, and museums are Christian missions’ leftovers and associated relics Dallen and Gyan, (2009). These relics of tangible cultural heritages have been distorted and adulterated by Christian missionaries’ activities. With colonization and industrialization, cultural values and practices also shifted and this created distinct facets of the Oyo kingdom Olukole (2009).

In the Oyo tradition, the first son of a king popularly referred to as ‘Aremo Oba’ was held at a very high esteem, he was honored as the heir to the seat of his father, and was highly revered among the subject. However, today such important aspect of Yoruba cultural practice has become a thing of the past. The throne is arbitrarily thrown open to high bidders who are not even related to the royal family in bastardization of the traditional hereditary nature of royalty. The implication of this is the numerous kingship controversies that have polarized many important Yoruba ancient towns. The civilization brought by Christian missions changed various law, order and tradition in Oyo kingdom Ogunmola (2008).

**Conclusion**

Christian missionary activities in Oyo Empire have greatly influenced the Yoruba race in particular and Nigeria as a whole in both positive and negative senses. From the 19th and 21st century, Christian missionaries featured prominently in the series of events that led to the development of Oyo Empire, and were able to bring about certain cultural, political, economic, technological changes in the empire and the entire
country. The missionaries bequeathed to the ever increasing number of people in Oyo Empire a powerful weapon through the provision of western education. Within the mission stations, education was the main instrument used for establishing and maintaining the new values.

Through the approaches employed by the missionaries as discussed in this study, the Christian missions assisted in the civilization and expansion of Oyo Empire in particular, and Nigeria nation as a whole. Christian missionaries play pivotal roles in both physical and socio-economic development of the modern Oyo Empire. Based on this observation, it is the suggestion of this paper that the contemporary Yoruba society and Nigerian nation should strive to improve upon the desirable aspects of the civilization bequeathed to us through western missionary occupation of Yoruba-land and Nigeria. Our education system should be tailored towards moulding a complete personality who will be self-reliant and at the same time be willing not only to identify with our rich cultural heritages, but to also help to preserve them.

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