The Pulpit and the Palace: Christian Missionary Enterprise and Political Transformation in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland.

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Abstract

This article examines the complex political nature of Christian missionary activity in nineteenth-century Yorubaland. The century had opened with the collapse of the Oyo Empire, leaving behind prolonged warfare, the rise of militarized states like Ibadan, and the devastating ripple effects of the slave trade. It was into this turbulent world that missionaries of the Church Missionary Society arrived, encountering a society already shaped by sophisticated political institutions. Rather than functioning purely as evangelists, missionaries and their African converts found themselves drawn into roles as intermediaries, diplomats, and political brokers. The article pays particular attention to the Kiriji War of 1877 to 1893, showing how mission agents like Samuel Johnson navigated negotiations between warring Yoruba factions and between local rulers and British colonial officials. Their literacy, wide-ranging networks, and access to colonial authorities made them indispensable in a world where communication and trust between opposing sides had completely broken down. The article argues that missionary diplomacy served as a bridge between indigenous political structures and incoming colonial administration. Missionaries may have been driven by spiritual conviction, but their peacemaking efforts and treaty facilitation materially advanced imperial consolidation. Crucially, however, Yoruba rulers and returnee elites were not passive in this process. They exercised real agency, actively shaping the terms of the encounter. The missionary enterprise, this study concludes, was one of the central forces in the political reordering of nineteenth-century Yorubaland.

Keywords: Yorubaland, Christian missionaries, missionary diplomacy, British protectorate, indigenous agency.

Introduction

The nineteenth century was a turning point for Yorubaland. It was a time of prolonged wars, economic strain, and major political shifts. But pre-colonial Yoruba society was far from disorganized. These were well-structured states with strong systems of governance, trade, and religious authority. Guild organizations, for instance, played real political roles, linking economic leadership to the broader machinery of statecraft (Raji & Abejide, 2013). It was into this already complex world that Christian missionaries arrived in the mid-nineteenth century.

At the heart of Yoruba political life was the institution of sacred kingship. The Oba, regarded as *Alase ekeji Orisa*, meaning second only to the gods, did not rule arbitrarily in the sense of an absolute monarch. His authority was checked and balanced by councils of chiefs (also called Oyomesi in Old Oyo Empire, for instance), lineage heads, ward leaders, and advisory bodies that handled everything from judicial matters to military affairs (Adetunji, 2011). Religion and governance were deeply intertwined. Missionaries could not simply walk in and preach; they had to navigate and negotiate with rulers and community elites whose power was rooted in centuries of custom and religious tradition.

To understand why missionaries came to Yorubaland in the first place, we also need to look at how European attitudes toward West Africa were shifting. After earlier failed attempts at evangelization, missionary work picked up serious momentum in the nineteenth century, largely through the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Ajayi (1969) affirmed that between 1841 and 1891, five principal missionary societies had launched their presence in Nigeria, with the CMS being the most consequential in Yorubaland (Balogun, 2016). But these missionaries were not just there to save souls. They came with a broader agenda that mixed spiritual goals with ideas about civilization, education, and social reform. Christianity, in practice, became deeply entangled with the colonial project (Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019).

Within Yorubaland itself, the missionary experience played out differently from place to place. Some traditional rulers saw opportunity in welcoming missionaries, who offered access to literacy, trade connections, and even a degree of protection from colonial powers. Others were deeply suspicious, viewing missionary

presence as a threat to religious authority and political independence. As Adetunji (2011) documents, the arrival of missionaries in Yorubaland divided traditional rulers into two distinct factions: pro-missionary and anti-missionary. These were not merely theological disputes but power struggles over who held legitimate authority and control. The ongoing Yoruba wars of the nineteenth century added another layer of complexity. Warfare gave missionaries the pretext to step into a new role as mediators and diplomats, and their literacy, regional connections, and relationships with British colonial officials made them invaluable go-betweens in treaty negotiations and conflict resolution (Balogun, 2016).

This article argues that Christian missionary activity in nineteenth-century Yorubaland was never purely a religious affair. It was deeply political. By engaging with traditional councils, working within factional divides, and aligning themselves with colonial administration, missionaries became key players in reshaping the political landscape of the region, a process that ultimately led to the establishment of British protectorate authority in 1893. The pulpit, it turns out, was never far from the seat of power.

Political Crisis and Governance in Yorubaland

The nineteenth century opened with Yorubaland in the grip of a political crisis rooted in the collapse of the Oyo Empire, which had dominated the region for centuries. This collapse did not happen overnight. It grew from internal dynastic intrigue, constitutional breakdown, and a slow erosion of central authority. As Stride and Ifeka (1978) observed, the fall of Oyo Empire was occasioned by dynastic intrigues and constitutional upheavals that progressively waned its imperial strength (Balogun, 2016). The rivalry between the Alaafin and the Bashorun, made notorious by the excesses of Bashorun Gaha who installed and deposed monarchs with alarming regularity, had fatally weakened the empire's political authority (Johnson, 1921; Olabimtan, 2009).

The emergence of new urban centers fundamentally altered how political authority was organized. Ibadan, which began as a military encampment, grew into the largest city in West Africa, but it was governed not by hereditary kings in the traditional sense. Power rested with a military aristocracy of war chiefs whose authority derived from martial ability rather than royal lineage. Cities like Ibadan

and Ijaye were led by warlords such as Oluyole and Kurunmi, men whose standing depended on their capacity to mobilize cavalry and defend their people from external threats (Olabimtan, 2009). Authority was constantly contested, and the boundary between statecraft and warfare all but disappeared. Even the constitutional innovations attempted at New Oyo under Alaafin Atiba, who sought to recreate monarchical tradition at Ago-Oja, could not hold back the centrifugal forces tearing the country apart (Akinjogbin, 1998, Balogun, 201).

Into this already volatile situation, the slave trade inserted itself as both cause and consequence of political disintegration. Professional slave raiders and marauding armies preyed upon vulnerable populations, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of insecurity and depopulation. The Ijebu people intensified their raiding activities through their Portuguese merchant connections, devastating Egba ancestral homelands between 1826 and 1830 (Olabimtan, 2009). This relentless pursuit of captives sustained the Yoruba wars through much of the century and generated the desperate conditions that eventually invited outside intervention. As Raji and Abejide (2013) note, the nineteenth-century wars in Yorubaland severely disrupted the effective conduct of guild economic activities, though the guild system remained relevant to the Yoruba economy up to the era of British rule.

The prolonged crisis reached its most visible expression in the sixteen-year Kiriji War from 1877 to 1893, which pitted Ibadan against a broad coalition of Ekiti, Ijesa, and other eastern Yoruba peoples. The conflict exemplified the political paralysis that had gripped the region for decades. Neither side could achieve decisive victory, nor could either afford to withdraw without catastrophic loss of face and territory. The resulting stalemate devastated the countryside and brought economic life to a standstill (Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019). It was the intervention of mission-educated intermediaries like Samuel Johnson and Charles Phillips that finally broke the deadlock. The peace treaty of 1886 and the subsequent declaration of a British protectorate in 1893 represented a fundamental reordering of Yoruba political life. Traditional governance structures, already weakened by decades of conflict, were absorbed into a colonial framework that permanently altered the relationship between rulers and subjects, and between the Yoruba states themselves (Olabimtan, 2009; Balogun, 2016).

The Expansion of the Missionaries in Yorubaland

As opined by Ajayi, there were five principal missionary societies who emerged in Nigeria between 1841-1891, they include: Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) (initiated by the Church of England, Anglican), 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, and the Catholic Society of African Missions of France (S.M.A.) Of these five societies, the C.M.S, Baptists and Catholics had more profound presence in Yorubaland and are the focus of this discourse. It is imperative to state, that the coming of the missionaries into Yorubaland was a strategic move by the various missionary societies who all saw Yorubaland, as a fertile ground for evangelism and missionary advancement. As a result, the C.M.S, Baptists, and the S.M.A, all penetrated into the hinterland of the Yoruba country, establishing their missions.

The expansion of the Church Missionary Society in Yorubaland was one of the most significant religious and cultural transformations in nineteenth-century West Africa. It grew from a convergence of evangelical zeal, anti-slavery sentiment, and strategic partnerships with liberated African returnees. The CMS, established in 1799 under the influence of the Clapham Sect's vision of Christianity, commerce, and civilization, found its most fertile ground in Yoruba-speaking regions following the failed Niger Expedition of 1841 (Balogun, 2016). This nineteenth-century CMS expansion benefited from a unique set of circumstances: the presence of Yoruba recaptives in Sierra Leone who had already converted to Christianity, the strategic coastal position of Badagry and Lagos, and a political fragmentation in Yorubaland that made several kingdoms receptive to external alliances. As Adedayo and Ogunbadejo (2019) note, it was within CMS mission circles that the nearest approximation to modern Nigeria as a political unit could be found, because their mission fields effectively gave the nation the territorial shape it would later take. By 1845, the CMS had established itself at Abeokuta, which, as Balogun (2017) observes, became a central mission post for several agencies and served as a vital link to other cities and villages.

The role of Sierra Leone returnees, known as the Saro, was absolutely central to the CMS expansion strategy. The return of Yoruba exiles from Freetown from the

1840s onward created an indigenous agency uniquely placed to bridge European missionary intentions and African cultural realities, making them local intermediaries between missionaries and the African population (Olabimtan, 2009). Figures like Henry Johnson, Samuel's father, who was recruited by David Hinderer from Hastings village in Sierra Leone in 1857, embodied this transnational religious network. These returnees brought Western literacy and an intimate understanding of both European and Yoruba worlds. The strategy of developing native agents who could operate within their own cultural context while maintaining evangelical commitment proved remarkably effective, creating a self-propagating Christian community capable of reaching communities where European missionaries simply could not go (Ajayi, 1969, Balogun, 2016).

The educational and linguistic work of the CMS missionaries may well constitute their most enduring legacy. Recognizing that effective evangelization required communication in indigenous languages, missionaries devoted themselves to learning Yoruba and reducing it to writing. Ajayi (1965) identified the driving force behind the work on the Yoruba language as the anxiety to teach converts and would-be converts to read the Bible in their mother tongue (Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019). Samuel Crowther's linguistic contributions created a standardized written form of the language that transcended dialectal variations and inadvertently fostered a pan-Yoruba sense of shared identity. The CMS Grammar School established in Lagos in 1859 became the first secondary institution in Nigeria (Balogun, 2016; Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019). By the 1890s, the CMS had established Christianity as a permanent presence in Yorubaland, with indigenous agents like Samuel Johnson, Daniel Olubi, and James Johnson leading congregations and engaging directly in the political processes that would bring the region under British protection (Olabimtan, 2009).

The origin of the Baptist mission in Nigeria in general and Yorubaland in particular can be traced to 1849 when the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States, commissioned Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen as the first missionary to the country. Rev. Jefferson, a young and energetic minister of God arrived Badagry with his wife on the 5th of August, 1850 and immediately set machinery in motion for evangelism with the establishment of Sabbath School which transformed into Sunday school at Ijaye – Orile. (Baptist

website). The growth and development of the Baptist was phenomenal to the extent that by 1914, the Baptist mission in Nigeria had spread across the country. With growth and expansion, came internal strife and indigenous agitations which started in the First Baptist Lagos church in 1888, leading to the formation of an indigenous new Baptist Church that can be considered as alternative and local in orientation and worship. Naturally, the people gravitated towards this new Baptist Church and it subsequently created disunity among the Baptist mission in Nigeria.

In 1914, an association was set up known as the Yoruba Baptist Association in order to coordinate the affairs of Baptist churches in Nigeria. The Yoruba Baptist Association (YBA) was established in 1914, by two Baptist bodies, the Southern Baptist Convention controlled churches and the Independent Baptist churches. It was at a conference held at the First Baptist Church Idikan, Ibadan from 11 to 14 March, 1914 that the association was founded with Dr. Mojola Agbebi as the first President of the association. (Ajayi,2014). Despite it ethnic nomenclature and regional inclination, the YBA pursued a reunification of the Baptist Church in Nigeria and after five years, the YBA brought the divided Baptist groups together in 1919 and changed its name from Yoruba Baptist Convention, to Nigeria Baptist Convention, ushering in a new era of unity, inclusivity and influence throughout the country. However, while the Nigeria Baptist Convention became a national body with a national orientation and representative selected from the various parts of the country, Yorubaland remained the central point of it evangelical activities characterised by the mission's socio-political involvement in Yorubaland.

The Catholic Missionary advancement in Yorubaland was piloted by the Society of African Missions (SMA), a Catholic religious society of consecrated life of pontifical right for men founded by Melchior de Marion Brésillac in 1856. The Society of African Missions (SMA), known as the SMA Fathers, played a foundational role in the establishment and growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Yorubaland, beginning with the arrival of Rev. Fr. Francesco Borghero in Lagos in 1863, where the catholic mission was established. From Lagos, the SMA penetrated into the hinterland of Yorubaland advancing Catholicism in Abeokuta, Ibadan and Ondo. Unlike the C.M.S and Baptist, the Catholic Missionary adopted

a unique strategy in its evangelism. One of the strategies employed by the catholic missionaries was the establishment of Christian village. Nwosu et al (1985). The Christian village was a community of converts of would be converts who stay together under the headship of a priest who provides spiritual guidance and leadership for the community. According to Nwosu et al (1985,):

> It was for a long time the point where Catholicism and the local cultures met for meaningful dialogue. Catholic doctrine was taught and put into practice by this small community. It was a kind of miniature parish or diocese so to say… In Christian village, only Christians and potential Christians live there in an environment that was regimental and quasimonastic. Every Christian villager was expected to be fervent; there was no room for laggards.

Apparently, this strategy facilitated the growth of Catholic communities across Yoruba land. These Christian communities provided education, health and social services to the people. For example, in Abeokuta, the Sacred Heart Hospital, Lantoro, regarded as the first and oldest hospital in Nigeria was established by Reverend Father Coquard, an SMA priest, to combat a severe leprosy outbreak that had ravaged Egbaland between 1857 and 1859 (Dioka, 2001). This went a long way to enhance the acceptability of the catholic faith among the people, which positioned the Catholic Church as a major stakeholder in the socio-political dynamics of Yorubaland.

Missionary Mediation and the Politics of War and Peace

The involvement of Christian missionaries in mediating the devastating Yoruba wars of the nineteenth century marked a significant departure from their stated spiritual purpose, driven by both humanitarian concern and the practical recognition that peace was essential for evangelization. David Hinderer, the pioneer CMS missionary at Ibadan, foresaw this predicament as early as 1860 when he observed that the Yoruba would need to experience great suffering before they would be receptive to the gospel being offered to them. His grim prophecy proved accurate. The wars created both the desperation that made people open to peace overtures and the practical obstacles that compelled missionaries to expand

their roles from preaching to active peacemaking. Their position as relative outsiders trusted by multiple parties placed them at the center of the complex negotiations required to end decades of internecine conflict (Olabimtan, 2009). As Arifalo (1998) pointed out, while Lagos colonial administrators were primarily interested in reopening trade routes closed by hostilities, it was CMS missionaries like Reverend J.B. Wood, Reverend D. Hinderer, and Reverend James Johnson who genuinely pursued peace and incorporated Yoruba educated elites resident in Lagos into the peace talks (Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019).

The most sustained and consequential missionary mediation occurred during the Kiriji War, when CMS agents undertook dangerous journeys between warring camps to facilitate communication and negotiation. In 1884, Reverend J.B. Wood, accompanied by Daniel Olubi, Samuel Johnson, and Abraham Foster, visited the war camps at Igbajo and Mesi Ipole, enduring harsh conditions in a determined attempt to broker peace. During the EkitiParapo/Kiriji War, Lagos administrators appointed Reverend Samuel Johnson and Reverend Charles Phillips to mediate in the crisis, and the efforts of these churchmen eventually resulted in the Peace Treaty of 1886 that ended the Yoruba civil wars (Balogun, 2016; Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019). The Ibadan chiefs genuinely wanted peace but feared annihilation if they withdrew first and their enemies then reneged. When Wood later learned that Ibadan had in fact planned to pursue and destroy the Ekiti had they decamped first, he was shaken by the revelation (Olabimtan, 2009). This experience persuaded the missionaries that only external intervention could break the deadlock.

The culmination of decades of missionary diplomacy was the establishment of the British protectorate over Yorubaland in 1893, a process in which churchmen played indispensable roles as negotiators, translators, and facilitators (Olabimtan, 2009). Following the failure of the 1884 peace mission, missionary agents intensified their advocacy for colonial intervention. At Iwo in the same year, a local ruler made an appeal to Reverend Wood that captured the political logic that would eventually bring the colonial state into Yoruba affairs: only an outside power with sufficient force to guarantee compliance could break the cycle of mistrust and violence, for the belligerents had exhausted their own resources for peacemaking (Olabimtan, 2009).

The threat of French colonial expansion further accelerated British determination to formalize relations with Yoruba authorities. When reports reached Lagos in 1888 that French emissaries from Porto Novo were heading to Oyo, Governor Moloney acted quickly, using Samuel Johnson, who happened to be in Lagos on mission business, to carry a proposed treaty to Alaafin Adeyemi. Moloney's letter skillfully appealed to Yoruba identity, distinguishing the Yoruba-speaking peoples from the Fon to the west and the Fulani to the north, and positioning Lagos as a natural ally and protector. The treaty's seventh clause stipulated that the Alaafin would conclude no agreement with any other power without the Lagos governor's consent, effectively neutralizing French ambitions in the region. Johnson facilitated the Alaafin's acceptance on July 23, 1888, using his scripture reader Moseri as witness (Olabimtan, 2009; Johnson, 1921).

The British military expedition against Ijebu Ode in 1892 dramatically altered the political calculus throughout Yorubaland. As Adetunji (2011) notes, the military attack on Ijebu, which the colonial administrator Carter had vowed would force the Ijebu to comply, relaxed the atmosphere and subsequently paved the way for Christian enterprises in the area. Samuel Johnson's account of the aftermath captures the magnitude of the shift: the fall of Ijebu Ode sent a shock of surprise and alarm across the entire country, with people sensing instinctively that a new era was beginning (Olabimtan, 2009). When Captain Bower shelled Oyo in 1895 to enforce protectorate provisions, the reality of the new dispensation became tragically clear. Samuel Johnson, whose diplomatic efforts had helped to create this new order, provided refuge for thousands of frightened townspeople in his mission compound. His reflection that the transition would bring disadvantages arising from the application of rules and ideas of a highly civilized people to those of another race revealed a sober awareness that the protectorate, however necessary for peace, would exact its own profound costs (Olabimtan, 2009). The old political order had given way to a new one, and missionary diplomacy had served as its midwife.

Conclusion

The missionary enterprise in nineteenth-century Yorubaland was far more than a religious movement; it was a catalyst for profound political and cultural transformation. From the CMS's arrival at Badagry in 1842 to the British

protectorate of 1893, missionaries and their indigenous converts became key political mediators whose peacemaking efforts inadvertently paved the way for colonial rule (Balogun, 2016; Olabimtan, 2009). As Raji and Abejide (2013) demonstrate, the pre-colonial Yoruba economic and political structures they encountered were far from primitive: the guild system, for instance, provided a sophisticated regulatory framework that linked commerce to governance in ways that shaped how missionaries had to engage with local authority. Crucially, Yoruba peoples were not passive recipients of missionary influence. Traditional rulers, women, and indigenous clergy actively shaped the encounter on their own terms, adapting the gospel for African purposes. As Adetunji (2011) shows through the case of Iperu and Shao, the responses of traditional councils determined whether missionary enterprise succeeded or failed in any given community, and the missionaries who endured eventually found their most durable advances came through patient negotiation with indigenous authority rather than confrontation with it. The result was not simple religious imposition but complex cultural negotiation (Adedayo & Ogunbadejo, 2019). The legacy lives on today in Yoruba educational institutions, language, and Christian communities, offering lasting lessons about external intervention, indigenous resilience, and cultural transformation.

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