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Missionary Historiography: A Factor for the Emergence of African Nationalism (Pp. 237-248)

Nmah, P. E. - Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University-Awka, Nigeria
E-mail: patricknmah @ yahoo.com
GSM: +2348056032439

Udezo, B. O. S. - Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University-Awka, Nigeria
E-mail: bensonudezo @ yahoo.com
GSM: +234806411914

Abstract

This paper assesses early missionary impacts that galvanized African nationalism. A later evaluation of African historiography confirmed this as one takes quick survey of recent African church historiographers' books and articles on the topic. This is an on-going debate and it is hoped that the clarifications of these factors may in some way facilitate the understanding of origin of nationalism in Africa, which is the ultimate aim of this paper. Undoubtedly, the research will be of great help to modern nationalists and patriots in areas of politics, religion, culture and social issues.

Introduction

The reconstruction and interpretation of African church history produced new themes that characterized religious-cultural, economic and political nationalism in Africa. The role of traditional rulers and native evangelists,

the role of the indigenous religion in the African church history, the peoples' traditional worldview and its influence on the missionary task, the place of indigenous institutions in the spread of Christianity which the historiographers have translated to suggest the Christianity has to be expressed in terms of African culture.

It is against this background that African church historiography began to emerge in the fifties whose aim was to reconstruct and interpret the history of the Christianity in Africa in order to highlight the various misconceptions of African historical image painted in missionary historiography. Kalu (1978) discovered that the current historiography of Christianity in West Africa by African writers has exposed the undignifying and non-biblical dimensions of the activities of the missionaries to black people.

The objective of the authors was to resuscitate the battered iconography of past African nation states and by so doing acknowledge the activities of the heroes-the black nationalists-without whom the positive missionary endeavours would have failed and the cultures that produced these heroes. This paper intends to prove that the missionary historiography aroused African nationalism. The main objective of the study is the identification of some factors involved in the missionary historiography that created national consciousness. The strength of this paper is that it generates information that can enlarge the modern nationalism in Africa.

Conceptual framework

The historiographer is someone who writes history especially in an official capacity. Historiography is the art of writing of history. That is the theory and methods of historical scholarship. It is a body of historical writings. This aspect of writing history includes oral tradition or oral history, scientific study of history, reconstruction of history and interpretation of church history through primary and secondary sources.

Nwankwo (1992) defined nationalism as a policy designed to achieve national self-determination. It is a protest against colonial power. It is also the identification of a people with the aspirations and interests of their nation, especially in matters related to their independence and sovereignty. Nationalism is also defined as doctrine which stipulates that each nation should be free of interference from other countries.

In Nigerian context, it goes beyond their initial perspectives. Nationalism should be seen as the identification of the people with the aspirations and interests of their nation, especially in matters related to its independence,

governance, democracy, justice and sovereignty. For our purpose, we shall employ the definition of nationalism which comprises a programme designed to achieve national self-determination in Africa. Nationalism and nationalist movements for this project will be defined as national self-assertion against the humiliating tendencies of ecclesiastical and political colonialism (Dare, 1988). By the nationalist movement, we shall refer to all efforts made by the indigenous peoples and their rulers to resist the imposition of colonial rule and also all the conscious organizations and movements formed during colonial rule with the sole objective of seeking freedom from colonialism. It was developed and by the newly educated people in Western education which had been an eye-opener. They were the first to conceive of the fact that colonial rule could be challenged both on logical and rational grounds and through armed confrontation if need be. In the course of this research work, we shall be using Nigeria and Africa interchangeably.

Missionary historiography: A factor for Nigerian nationalism

Sequel to some of the factors of the negative aspects of Missionary activities which might have evoked nationalism in Nigeria as well as Africa, missionary historiography contributed also to African nationalism. The Missionaries who introduced Christianity in Nigeria were interested in battling within their literatures on their itineraries, achievements and to an extent their failures. They did not historically, put the anthropology or ethnography of the people into consideration. This brought them into conflict with the people who could not understand the activities of these missionaries.

Nwosu (1994) citing Ogbu Kalu described the whole missionary historiography as uncritical, romantic and propagandist in nature. He stated that the contribution of Africans to the missionary enterprise was neglected. For the missionaries, the social change the people's pattern of response to the missionary propaganda, the rate and pattern of missionary expansion among others were all explained in terms of the activities of the man within the mission house, with particular reference to the European missionaries. At the opening of the last century, missionaries were beginning to write the histories of their respective denominations in order to justify the missionary incursion into Nigeria (Nwosu, 1993). This historiography is sermonic and hortatory, characterized by an unbridled euphuism on the missionary intervention of what he did or did not do.

Some of the historiographies such as Freed Dodd's *Tales of the African wilds* published in 1811 and F.D. Walker's two volumes *Black Continent* (1923) in

which both the authors were infatuated with the same popular imagination about Africa as dark continent, Black rivers, Black Man of the Nile, Ethios or people with burnt faces and black hostile heathen. In his book, "Invasion for God" (1944), by a Methodist missionary called H.G. Brewer who described his invasion into the interior from Okigwe to the northern most parts of the Igbo country amidst exaggerated suffering and occasional bloodshed. Fr. Joseph P. Jordan's Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria (1994) is a calculated propaganda and whitewash for this vibrant Roman Catholic Priest made to caricature Igbo traditional religion. Jacob Richards in his book, *Cannibals were my friends* (1957), in the same vain described the Africans as cannibals to state that the latter type of writing Christian history may earn the author honour in both secular and ecclesiastical circles in Europe. But here in Africa it evoked the wrath of the African nationalist historians who know the pictures were over painted and exaggerated.

It is against this background that African church historiography began to emerge in the sixties whose aim was to reconstruct and interpret the history of the church in Africa in order to rectify the wrong conceptions of African historical image painted in missionary historiography. The pioneering works of Ajayi (1965) and Ayandele (1966) are excellent books outlining respectively the racist attitudes of the whites to the first generation Christians in Nigerian; and the socio-political effects of missionary activities in Nigeria.

This reconstruction and interpretation of African church history produced new themes that characterized the religio-cultural nationalism of the period under review. This includes the role of the traditional rulers and native evangelists, the role of the indigenous religion in the African church history, the peoples' traditional worldview and its influence on the missionary task, the place of indigenous institutions in the spread of Christianity which the historiography translated to suggest Christianity has been expressed in terms of African culture.

Ajayi (1965), *Christian missions in Nigeria: the making of a New Elite 1841-1891*, examines the socio-economic and political consequences of the new elite produced by missionary education. Ayandele(1966), *missionary impact on modern Nigeria* (1966), extol the heroism and nationalism of those Nigerians who recognized the political dimension of the missionary enterprise and thus offered resistance. Ayandele demonstrated also nationalist spirit in his book, *Holy Johnson: The father of African nationalism* (1970).

Isichei (1983), *A History of Nigeria*, discusses many successful non-military responses of the Igbo to colonial aggression in Igboland and the role of the *dibia* (the medicine men). There are many other African historiographers who wrote to correct the wrong impression the western historiographers created. The historiographers included Idowu (1973), *Towards An indigenous Church*; Babalola (1988), *Christianity in West Africa*; Ekechi (1971), *Missionary enterprise and rivalry in Igboland*; Temu (1972), *British Protestant mission*; Kalu (1978), *Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian story*, and many others that are not referred to in our our research work.

According to Idowu (1973), the time is now overdue for the church in Nigeria in particular to look at her self; to examine her own soul. She is being called upon to justify her existence in the country; to answer in precise terms the question as to whether her purpose in Nigeria is not to serve as an effective tool of imperialism, a veritable means of softening up Nigerians for the purpose of convenient exploitation by the Europeans. Further still, there is the question as to whether what we have in Nigeria today is in fact Christianity, and not in fact only transplantations from a European cult the various ramifications of which are designated Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, and so forth. These various questions are all of a piece: they arise from the basic question as to whether Christianity is not, after all, a European institution which has no beneficial relevance for Nigerians, but which has nevertheless been imposed upon them as an engine of colonial policy by their European overlords.

Some of the invaluable heritage bequeathed to the nations in Africa by these African scholars included the translation of the Bible into various African languages, so that the language of evangelism would be spoken in clear accents instead of commending the Saviour to Africans in strange tongues, the evolving of African theology; liturgy; dress and vestments. Evangelism has certainly failed where some Africans call themselves Christians, set up edifices where they congregate for worship, and yet cannot say from their hearts and in their own words whom Jesus is, what he has done and is doing for them corporately and individually. And what he means to them as the absolute Lord of life-the whole of life –within the context of the world in which they live.

While such a formula like the Apostles' Creed or a book of formulas like the Church Catechism, may have its intrinsic value, it is certain that such a value

can be realized only when the articles of faith are learnt and repeated with understanding and the truth which they convey is appropriated intelligently. Otherwise, our congregations are just another sample of the parrot- like or robot- like worshippers of the prophet Isaiah's description (Isaiah 29: 13), or those whom St Paul describes as "holding the form of religion, but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5). As regards liturgy, it should be seen within the African context as people's way of approaching God in worship; a means of expressing themselves, especially in a congregational setting, before God and of assuring themselves of communion with him. Spiritual suitability for Africans are not to be found in the Anglican liturgy, or in the Methodist recession of it according to the Book of offices, as it is imparted intact into Africa by the missionaries. When hymns, psalms, or canticle are translated from English into Nigerian languages and then sung to European tunes, then we often find ourselves attaining the limit of cultic atrocity (Idowu, 1973). Music is a part of everyday life in Africa Christian songs, especially those composed by African song-writers in keeping with the rhythmic style and the pentatonic scale of most African music, have enriched the services and greatly enhanced the diffusion of the gospel.

Falk (1997), a missionary, narrated how the missionaries were sent by Portuguese and British governments to explore Africa as pathfinders for early colonialization. While the Portuguese and the British were vying for a monopoly of the Zambezi River area, the French and the British suspiciously watched each other on the Zanzibar, Madagascar, and Mauritius islands. The Germans, the French, King Leopold of Belgium, and the British carefully observed the political situation at Zanzibar and on the coast opposite Zanzibar. These colonial masters formed an association which served as an intelligence agency, establishing posts at strategic intervals across Central Africa to promote exploration and civilization on the continent. Leopold was the president of the association.

Another interesting foreign historiographer who portrayed Africa as depot of kingdom of Satan is Baur (2005) in his book, 2000 years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History. Citing basic tenet of Augustinian view of history in Africa as a fight between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, hence missionaries saw the fight against paganism as a fight against Satan, and traditional religion simply as idolatry. Its sacrifices were adoration of Satan, to be fought as Satan himself.

This was due to two misconceptions: on the one hand there was the unfortunate but quite general European prejudice that Africans were a primitive people without religion; on the other hand it had become generally accepted in Europe that magic and all spirits were devilish. Consequently the missionaries, not knowing anything about ancestor and fertility cults, or the African distinction between protective and harmful magic and between medicine man and witch, rejected all and everything as Satan's service. Hence all fetishes had to be burnt or buried. As a result the medicine men became their great adversaries, to be pursued mercilessly until they submitted. This ruthless attempt at rooting out all superstitions can only be explained by another European axiom: "There is no part with the devil", (Baur, 2005, p.66). The missionaries regarded also customary marriages as concubine.

Idowu (1991) described this missionary conception of African traditional religion as "errors of terminology" (p. 108). To him, the anthropological or sociological use of the words "primitive", "savage" and "native" have been defined on the grounds that it only refer to that which is adjudged to be nearer in behaviour or pattern to the original with reference to the human race or culture. It stands at the opposite end of the pole from "civilized". It is native since it is an indigenous religion.

Casely Hayford and Wilmot Blyden, according to Nwosu (1993), were the expression of Christianity in African culture, and the founding of African churches. The themes of suffering, courage, and bravery of the early missionaries serve as the backdrop of African hostility which appeared to be the staple food of missionaries' historiography. Kalu (1978) observed that the recent historiography of Christianity in West Africa by African writers has exposed the underrating and non-biblical dimensions of the activities of the missionaries to black people.

The objective of the authors was to resuscitate the battered iconography of past African nation states and by so doing acknowledge the activities of the heroes- the black nationalists without who the positive missionary endeavors would have failed and the cultures that produced those heroes. African scholars tried to analyze profoundly on the negative missionary attitudes on the people's culture, religion, economic, education, and coupled with the colonial aggression, their opposition to Africa leadership in mission Church and their wrong historiography about Nigeria and Africa per se. Baeta (1968)

in his article, Introductory Review: Facts and problems, agrees with Onunwa (1991) that the missionary historiography galvanized African nationalism.

African Christian historiography: its antecedents

African Christian historiography was galvanized to challenge the ecclesiastical and colonial power in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone and other parts of Africa thereby enhancing the spirit of nationalism. It aroused the early independency in missionary Christianity in Africa. African Christian historiography created an impact in Christian missionary strategy on African nationalism which helped them to achieve black leadership both in the church and in the political spheres (Nwosu, 1991).

African church historiographers' activities resulted in the agitation surrounding black slavery in England and their plan to create a "land of freedom" in Africa and to establish a Christian settlement at Sierra Leone (Kendall, 1978). A good number of works were published in this area as could be seen in the preceding pages. According to Kendall, the historiographers recognized the work of Christ in their midst and expressed concern for the total liberation of men and women from every form of oppression and exploitation in order to achieve peace in Africa. Gray (1968) states how African ministers and evangelists from the knowledge they gained from African historiographers took the initiative in evangelizing Africa by supplying leadership especially through the separatists and independent churches. But African Christian traders and craftsmen were also often the effective pioneers in creating Christian stations and arousing African consciousness for economic, cultural, religious and political independence. The term "Ethiopian" as a symbol of African pride in indigenous culture and achievement was used by West African writers and speaks well of before the classical period of Ethiopianism opened in 1872 (Shepperson, 1968).

This was the spirit, in the words of Shepperson, which caused the writings and sermons of the Yoruba Baptist minister, Mojola Agbebi, whose role in the development of the African Christian movement in Nigeria is highly important. This church at this period has every right to claim that she is the pioneer or even the author of African nationalism. This gave rise to the formation of the "society for the promotion of religion and education" in Lagos and it served as a protest against the colonial power (Ayandele, 1970).

For Nwosu (1993), the missionary historiographies actually incensed the Nigerians who saw the whole scenarios as negative aspects of the missionary attitudes to the local cultures, their reluctance to promote local leadership

among others. This action of missionary historiographers indeed encouraged the nationalist groups to reject the imposition of alien political, economic, religious and cultural forms or structures on Africans and on African institutions, and consequently, to seek for self-determination. The twin attractions of African leadership and toleration of polygamy contributed to the development of African nationalism.

Okeke (2003) opined how the missionaries of CMS found it difficult to make use of the natives to evangelize Nigeria. After a heated debate at Salisbury Square, the missionaries reluctantly succumbed to the idea of using the natives as initially proposed by Henry Venn. This paved way for self-reliance, self-propagation and self-governance of the founded stations. This in turn created also nationalistic consciousness among the Nigerian elite.

Conclusion

We examined the works of some historians on the encounter between Africa and the West that led to political, economic, religious and social domination by the West and how Nigerians protested against much domination. From the historiography, we realized that the initial motive of the missionaries was to introduce what they called 3cs namely commerce, civilization and Christianity (Northoott, 1963). These three factors represented three levels of activity such as the missionary, the trader, the diplomat and the settlers. These three factors also constitute the mission of the people Europe and England in particular to the rest of mankind. Hence the missionaries activated in their writings by a sense of patriotism exported everything including their Church's name, their form of organization, their liturgy, their hymns, their vestments, their Church architecture and the like to Churches in the mission field (Schorer, 1964).

The gospel was consequently ascribed the miraculous power that produced conversion, and the missionaries unwittingly interpreted Christianity to mean the same thing as Western civilization. The two were inextricably combined and they produce a distorted view of the original religious missionary motive. European missionaries came to Africa with the preconceived notion that there was either no religion at all or that it was entirely of devil. The missionaries therefore considered it their duty not only to convert Africans to Christianity, but also to make them give up and forget their past entirely and live up to their new dignity (Baeta, 1968). Their common interests, particularly their fears of African revolts, kept the missionaries, traders and colonial masters together. Although the diverse tribes in Africa were

conquered along side with their religion, culture, politics, economic and social, but it was not a total extermination. The people's religion culture, politics, economic and social continued to exist in the face of the Western trader, diplomat and missionary aggression and imperialism. This resulted to African historiography and protest against the missionary, trader and colonial power.

For one purpose, we employed the definition of nationalism which complies a programme designed to achieve national self-determination in Africa. The historiography and other factors such as gospel values, mission education, the emergence of independent Churches, missionary opposition to African leadership in mission Churches, mission support for colonialism among others promoted the nationalist movements in Africa. Elements of this anti-European disaffection have been building since the 1900s with the conquest, colonization and Christianization of tropical Africa. The calls manifest the desire on the part of Africans to give a place to indigenous leadership, to be self-reliant and to abolish the colonial relationship which persists in the missionary enterprise even till date.

The African historiography reflects a desire for liberation from the oppressive paternalism and fraternity of some western missionaries. It poses for Africa the vision of a new order of relationships free from the injustices and incongruities of foreign institution and domination. In analyzing the views of these historiographers, one will discover some similarities and dissimilarities in these school of thoughts.

In conclusion, we deduce the whole research work by stating with special emphasis on the dialectics of missionary and African Christian historiographers as having had significant impact in Nigerian nationalism and hence serve as the factors of Christianity in the emergence of Nigerian nationalism. From the aforesaid so far posited, it will be incredible to deny the fact that the factors of missionary and African Christian historiographies had impact in the Nigerian programme of achieving national self-determination.

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