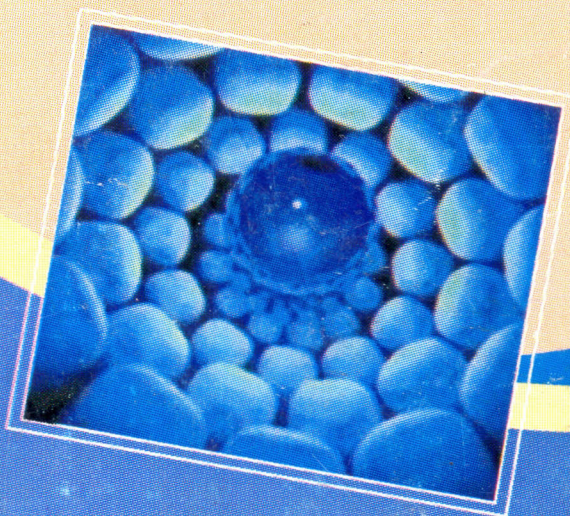


THOUGHTS IN THE HUMANITIES



Editor
R. A. Akanmidu

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CHAPTER 30

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN NIGERIA WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO ASA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA

Lydia Bosede Akande

Preamble:

Mention cannot be made of the activities of Christian missions in Asa Local Government Area (LGA), without having to make reference to the introduction of Christianity to Nigeria as a whole and to Ilorin specifically. In his own understanding of the birth of Christianity in Nigeria, Farounbi in his book *A Brief History of Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria*, explained that the Portuguese were the first missionaries in the fifteenth century to introduce Christianity to Nigeria. They were Catholic missionaries who started their missionary endeavours from Benin. As soon as they arrived for trade, they seized the opportunity to spread Christian faith to those they came in contact with. It is reasonable to say that this first attempt was not a total effort for evangelism. Trade, as an activity, cannot be identified as a companion of evangelism. This is because entrepreneurship is a clear agenda of trade, while winning of souls is the goal of evangelism. Apparently, the two seem incompatible. This incompatibility has been responsible for the failure of this first attempt. Thus Christianity failed to take root in Nigeria until about four centuries later¹. The reason for the failure of this first attempt according to Daudu and Gbule was that;

True Christianity was almost confined to the King and Prince, the rest only called themselves Christians to please the King. They took their children for baptism only with greatest reluctance believing that a baptised child will die immediately.

The majority of them took wives without sacrament of matrimony; they circumcised their children and practised superstitious rites and sorcery²

The determination of the Europeans to re-introduce Christianity according to Ajayi was realized in 1842 through the effort of a Methodist missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman who came in 1842 and Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (Anglican Church) arrived on December 17, 1842. Incidentally, their first station was Badagry, which eventually served as a base for sustained missionary efforts in Nigeria.³

As the missionaries were making frantic efforts to plant Christianity in different towns and villages in and around Nigeria, their activities gradually extended to Ilorin, an important Muslim centre as a result of Bowen's efforts in 1855.⁴ This subsequently extended to Asa Local Government Area, which constituted part of Ilorin Emirate and today a Local Government in Kwara State. The Headquarters of the Local Government is Afon which is 27km away from Ilorin⁴. It shares boundary with Osun State in several points.

The Contributions of Christianity in Asa Area

Prior to the advent of Christianity in Asa Local Government, traditional and Islamic education pre-dated the western system of education. Therefore, the people were literate to certain extent. The traditional system of education, although not formal, it was pragmatic and mainly taught by the elders in the Local Government. Stressing further the importance of traditional education system, Fafunwa says:

Every society whether simple or complex, has its own system of training and educating its youth and education for the good life has been one of the most persistent concerns of man through out history. ...however, the goals, method, or approach may differ from place to place, nation to nation and people to people.⁵

Also, in the traditional system of education, interactions at social level are encouraged. These include proper greetings at various times of the day, and at different occasions. It pays attention to seniority and

respect for elders. Hence, training of the child began from the cradle. On the other hand, apart from traditional education, Quranic education was quite prominent among the people of the Local Government before the introduction of Christianity and the western system of education. Quranic education provides basic teachings in Arabic, which has always been used as a language to promote the spread of Islam. This type of education is more formal than the traditional system because it provides opportunities for learners to sit under a Mallam who serves as the teacher. According to Abioye, has often been done through memorization when he says that; "memorization is the method of learning. The Mallam leads the learners in committing long verses of the Quran into memory"⁶. Thus, in the Local Government, several elementary schools (Ile-Kewu) were established.

Apart from their inadequacy especially in the aspect of Western medicine, there was a high rate of diseases and infant mortality as a result of lack of good medical facilities. Such sicknesses include; dysentery, cholera and guinea worm which were caused by poor diet, and unhygienic environment. Other types of diseases were malaria caused by mosquito bites. However, the coming of Christianity brought with it modern medical facilities that enhanced treatment where ailments were as a result of such diseases.

It also ushered in western education which brought socio-economic change that made life better and meaningful for individuals. With the new medical services provided by Christian missions, infant mortality reduced drastically, people with deadly diseases which hitherto used to be dreadful received adequate treatment and immunization to prevent the diseases. This was made possible because at the advent of Christianity, the missionaries according to Abioye brought along with them doctors, while some of them were even doctors themselves.⁷

It is to this effect that the history of Christianity in Asa Local Government Area can be traced to Rev.R.N. Ludlow from Canada. His impact and that of his wife, a medical practitioner Dr (Mrs) R.N.Ludlow in the religious, educational, social economic and medical life of the people can never be forgotten in the whole of the area. History has it that

the first known church in Asa LGA was the First Baptist Church, Alate/Otte in Kwara State which shared boundary with Oyo State.

The church through the missionary effort of Rev and Dr Mrs R.N. Ludlow was formally founded in 1935 with Moses Aremu as the first Lay reader of the church for many years, before the coming of an ordained minister in the person of Pastor Akano. However, prior to this period, fellowshiping was in the house of Pa James Aremu. Members who were mainly traders, farmers and hunters came from the surrounding towns and villages in Asa LGA to worship at Otte⁸. The fellowship that Aremu was managing became a church with a mission house dedicated on April, 2nd 1940. The scripture that was taken for the opening service of the church was Mark 6: 7-13. In attendance was the then District head of Afon Mallam M. Yahaya who was presented with a copy of the Yoruba Bible by Mr Olanijulo, on behalf of the Methodist mission; while Brother J. Jaiyesimi became the pioneer worker in the mission⁹.

In 1942, a mission school was established and a Bible school also in 1949 as a measure to arrest the quest for mission workers in most of the newly established stations. Consequently, as missionary activities were expanding, it became necessary to open up a dispensary at Afon because of the spread of epidemic in the area. The dispensary was headed by Dr Mrs Ludlow a medical doctor with the Methodist mission. In the words of Osaji, the present chairman of Christian Association of Nigeria in Asa LGA, confirmed in his address that; "the dispensary at Afon was so prominent that patients from Ilorin town did visit the dispensary for treatment"¹⁰.

By way of confirming the prominence of Afon dispensary, as further stated by Osaji; "the then Emir of Ilorin, Emir Oba was physically present at the opening of the dispensary. He was entertained in the house of Rev and Dr Mrs R.N. Ludlow"¹¹. It was also gathered that missionaries who were medical doctors from Wesley Hospital, Ilesha then used to visit the dispensary twice in a month to render free medical services to patients.

Apart from the dispensary and free medical services provided by the Ludlows, they also provided training for those who had no formal

education. In supporting this endeavour, it was reported that the Emir of Ilorin then, Emir Oba was advised by the Ludlows to come for treatment at the centre if the need arose. Though, the home craft training did not last long because it became difficult to obtain trained staff¹². Mission work moved to other areas in Asa LGA especially to Okeso. It is important to note here that the Ludlows were providing these institutions for the people of the LGA mainly because of the gospel.

The Okeso Mission:

The missionary activities of Rev. Ludlow in Afon were also extended to Okeso, another town in Asa LGA. Okeso is about 10km to Afon. As Rev Ludlow introduced education and Christianity simultaneously, he made use of one Mr Stephen as his interpreter. Their activities in the establishment of schools and furtherance of evangelism were tremendous until the first teacher in person of Mr S. Ade Jimoh was posted to Okeso on 14th April, 1948. He worked rigorously in the town and was admired by the people and pupils at Okeso. He made them to realise the importance of education and the benefits they could derive from it. He worked there for about six years before being posted to Oko-Ode in 1953. After him, several other teachers were posted to Okeso, among whom were Mr Majekodunmi, Mr. O. Oyeyemi, Mrs R. Esan(now late) and Mr T.O Omowumi.

The most difficult problem encountered was the uneasiness of most parents to allow their children and wards to attend the schools established, probably for fear of converting their children or wards to Christianity. Also, the Emir's will and the hegemonic situation at that time did not allow freedom of choice. As a result of this, the enrolment in schools was very low, and with the transfer of Omowumi, the school was closed down because of the problem earlier mentioned. All efforts made by the Christians in Okeso to make the Methodist mission reopen the school proved abortive¹³.

It was not until 1968 that J.K.Abimbola, with A.A.Folarori took it upon themselves to invite a Roman Catholic missionary from Offa in person of Rev Father Sean Lynch to build another school at Okeso. Their efforts yielded positive results as a school was later built for the people

of Okeso. The school was named St Anthony's Catholic School. The school which is still there till date has produced very important personalities in various fields of human endeavour. Among them are David Onaolapo Amoo, a Banker, Rafiu Akinola, a Pharmacist, Fatai Kadri(now late), was a Lecturer, Amusa Abimbola, a one time education Secretary and Olusola Abimbola, a minister with the Christ Apostolic Church.¹⁴ The following were the comments made by an indigenes of Okeso on the impact of Christianity on Asa LGA and especially at Okeso;

Christianity has brought us great fortune in Okeso town. The achievements recorded in Okeso today are as a result of Christian efforts. The civilization brought to the town is enormous; this prompted one of the illustrious sons of the town to be appointed as the council chairman of the Local Government between 1976 and 1978¹⁵.

At this point, it can be said that the introduction of Christianity to Asa people was guided by the principles of evangelism, human development and health care. Apparently, the last two principles gave strength to that of evangelism. Apart from the Methodist and Roman Catholic missions, other prominent missions in Asa Local Government include, Christ Apostolic Church, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Deeper Life Bible Church and the First Baptist Church to mention a few.

Christian evangelistic experience was not as difficult in Asa as was experienced in Ilorin because the attitudes of the *Daudus* (traditional chiefs) in this Local Government was positive to the missionaries that brought Christian message. Unlike Ilorin, they easily embraced Christianity, warmly welcomed the missionaries into their domain, and freely gave them land to erect their own residential buildings and missions. Since the *Daudus* embraced the religion, they also encouraged their subjects to do the same, hence making Christianity to expand to all nooks and crannies of the areas.

Conclusion

Generally, it has been acknowledged in this work that the introduction of Christianity in Asa has positively affected the growth and living conditions of the people. Christian missionary efforts in the areas of western education, health facilities and other socio-economic developments have enhanced and improved the welfare of the people of the Local Government.

In spite of the initial low attendance of pupils at Christian schools for fear of converting their children to Christianity, today, there is an impressive interest in western education. It is observed that many indigenes of the Local Government are occupying important positions in various fields of human endeavours. Religious harmony and cordiality also exist among the adherents of the various religions most especially between the Christians and the Muslims. It is to this effect that Christianity to a large extent has contributed tremendously to the development of Asa Local Government. The above contributions were without any religious affiliations or bias. It is therefore important to note that Asa area today have gained tremendously from this experience..

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