

## Slave-Trade, Christianity and European Imperialism In Nigeria: A Study of the Ante and Post Abolition Periods

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### Abstract

The approval of Christian founding fathers for African enslavement may be the slave -trade and their active involvement in the trade has vast literatures. They were as beneficiaries of the trade and slave institutions as nations of Europe. What is of paramount concern to this work is the usefulness of African slaves to the missionaries in economic terms, and in the evangelization of Nigeria, in the ante and post abolition periods. This paper argues that African slaves before and after the abolition of slavery/ slave-trade were baked into utility resource for European imperialism and proselytizers of Nigeria into Christianity.

This development had far reaching consequences on westernization of black personality and image spiritually, socially and culturally. These combined in undermining African resistance to European exploitation, and paved unhindered road for European colonialism and imperialism. The methodology adopted for this work is unit analysis, using the historical method for its presentation.

**Key words:** Slave-trade; Christianity; European imperialism

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### INTRODUCTION

As an eye-catching field of enquiry in African history, slavery and the slave trade have continued to attract

academic appeal in research. What largely accounts for this undying interest is its lingering legacy on the social and economic lives of Africans. Here, two antagonistic schools of thought readily come to mind, namely; the nationalists and the apologetics. The nationalists best represented by Uya (2000) and Ajayi (1966) insist that in spite of the marginal gains of few African slave entrepreneurs, the slave trade offered nothing good to Nigeria, nay the black race. They see it as Western organized and systematized theft of the very soul and life of Africa, justified with the racist fictive theory of white superiority. The latter emphasize on the impact on salvation to benighted blacks, especially after the abolition, and the economic, social and political transformations it ushered in Africa. This debate is outside the purview of this paper, because in my earlier work (2002), I stressed that African enslavement either by Europeans or Arabs alike, was a social and economic tragedy. It was also instrumental in influencing unequal social economic relations between Africa and Europe, which still persists. Rodney (1972) and several other Africanist scholars have also popularized the disarticulation of Africa's development by the slave-trade. Using Nigeria as a case study. This paper seeks to examine how Christian white missionaries made optimal use of African slaves for economic gains and evangelization of Nigeria. It addresses it through distinct but inter-related periods, namely; ante and post abolition eras. For a better grasp of the two historical phases of slave-trade, I shall situate my polemics first on the reasons popularized among Europeans for the rationalization of black enslavement, as a proviso for the theoretical framework.

### 1. RACISM AND RATIONALIZATION FOR ENSLAVEMENT OF AFRICANS

Uya (2002) espoused that slavery had existed in Africa as elsewhere. Uya (2000) further contended that during

the earliest period of slavery, it was a socially accepted institution in all human societies (Europe and Asia inclusive), and as such, slavery then had no racial connotation. In his contention, whites and blacks had been enslaved at one time or the other in Egypt, Sparta, Greece, Turkey and Rome. "Serfdom was justified as a natural social institution for the development and progress of societies" Njoku (2009, p.6). Little (1999) argued that the renowned Greek philosopher, Aristotle validated slavery by the classification of humans into masters and slaves. The former had natural rights of hegemony over the latter, considered as born to be under-dogs.

However, in a historical twist, slaves in the assertion of Anaele (2000) by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became predominantly blacks and assumed black denotation. Anaele (2000) further argued that in the Americas during this period, black slaves became necessary substitute for the failed labor of indentured whites and Indians, because black labor was by far cheaper than that of the whites and Indians. "Blacks could be abused and easily compelled by violence to bear and suffer wrong, since they were stripped of legal protection" (Anaele, 2000, p.8).

What was responsible for the depersonalization of blacks was color bar, sustained by the defective reasoning from racist theory of white superiority. Consequently, African inferiority gained popular appeal and acceptance among Europeans of various persuasions. The hypothesis of an eminent French scientist, J. F. Blumenbach cited by Mbabie (1990) gave scientific validation to blackness as synonymous with intellectual inferiority and non-creativity. Even, the celebrated philosopher, Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1772-1778), an apostle of liberalism and democracy, reasoned that "Negroes do not have the intellect of Europeans".

Thomas Jefferson, a wealthy slave-owner and strong advocate of the principle of egalitarianism in the American revolution, saw nothing wrong in black enslavement, because in his words cited by Anaele (2000) 'it is the best kind of school for the benighted, culturally backward and spiritually bankrupt Africans'. Captain Richard in his address to the Conference of the English Ethnographical Society after his voyage to West Africa in 1863 cited by Anaele (2000), told his audience that "due to some fatal deficiency in their nature, Africans are incapable of development beyond a certain stage of primitiveness". This, he attributed to some "mental arrest, they henceforth grew backward instead of forward". The above images of blacks, blended with a pot pour of literature on black inferiority blinded the eyes and consciences of the whites from seeing the horrors and evils in black enslavement, because their minds had been wrongly shaped to see blacks as sub-humans.

Having put in place a theoretical framework for this work, I shall in the subsequent discourse examine analytically the role of black slaves in Christian evangelism,

imperialism and Westernization of Africans, during the ante and post abolition periods, using Nigeria as a case study.

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## 2. ANTE-ABOLITION PERIOD

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It is not a coincidence of history if argued that the Christian imperialist nations of Europe made expansive use of missionaries as their spiritual and cultural wing of imperialism. I shall use Nigeria as my unit of analysis.

In the case of Nigeria, the Portuguese were the first among the several European Christian peoples to register their presence for economic and religious reasons.

Thus, outside economic motives, the need to spread Christianity to Nigeria as elsewhere in Africa was considered a worthwhile venture. This movement began from the fifteenth century onwards. At that time in Europe, most merchants integrated religion into trade and politics. For instance, from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, members of Christian organizations in Portugal served as imperial agents in Africa. For proselytizing work in Nigeria, the Portuguese missionaries made use of black slaves. Omenka (2000) quotes the English explorer, Adams of saying that when he (Adams) visited Warri 1847 in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, where the natives told him that in centuries gone by "several black Portuguese missionaries had been in Warri, endeavoring to convert the natives into Christianity." The conclusion from this attests to the resourceful use of black slaves in Christian evangelism long before the Abolition movement of the nineteenth century.

By the Papal Bull of 1493, Africa and East Indies were ceded to Portugal. Consequently, the Portuguese monarch gave support and investiture to Christian missionaries for unrestricted expansion and evangelization of the western coast of Africa in the fifteenth century. To accomplish this task, the Portuguese missionaries relied on optimal use of black slaves, to supplant whites, in order to reduce cost of evangelism. Okere (1990) opined that the Portuguese and other white missionaries who came after them in Nigeria established plantations sustained by slave labor. In the Niger-Delta and the Nigerian hinterland areas in the assertion of Dimkpa (1979), slaves were used for menial jobs in homes and plantations and for various church activities. White merchants and missionaries made effective use of black slaves as harbingers of European imperialism, missionary activities and colonialisation of Nigeria. They also were assets for the externalization and internalization of European culture and economic exploitation of Nigeria's hinterland. The works of Ryder (1960), Clark (1986) validate this assertion. In the kingdoms of Benin, Warri, Iteskiri of Nigeria, slaves featured prominently in Portuguese Christian evangelism.

As a result of indispensability of Black slaves in European evangelization enterprise and imperialism, the Portuguese and ecclesiastical authorities created black clergy. The Portuguese began at a very early time to

transport a great number of African slaves from Slave Coast to Lisbon. My earlier work (2002) confirms that by the 1550s, a copious black population was in Lisbon. Part of this black population was trained as priests and sent to different Portuguese bishoprics in West Africa. The Portuguese missionaries depended on the merchants and slave ships on the coast for food, provisions and safety. In effect, when a port lost its economic viability or under threat of local violence, and ships stopped coming, the missionaries re-located their posts to viable and peaceful ports, where ships berthed regularly. In part, this explains the reason for the view of Dike (1966) for the concentration of missionary activities along the coastal cities of Nigeria, and Europeans unwillingness to penetrate into the interior.

From these shades of arguments, we can make the following generalizations. (a) The first phase of evangelization and attempt to Christianize Nigeria was dominated by Portuguese. (b) This attempt began in the fifteenth century and incorporated black slaves. (c) It was restricted to the coastal regions. (d) Slaves doubled as missionaries and economic asset in the plantations. (e) Evangelism for the total salvation of blacks and transition from “darkness” to light, “ignorance” of enlightenment were their supreme tasks, albeit economic gains. (f) to the Portuguese and later European nations who joined in the slave trade race for competition over African soul, body and labor, black slaves served triad functions as article of trade for profit, cheap labor for productive gains and asset for Christian evangelism. Though, the Portuguese early intension for evangelization of Nigeria during the ante-abolition period failed abysmally, it is outside the scope of this study to offer explanations for the failure. However, this loss was compensated in the second phase of European missionary activities in Nigeria in the (1840s), after abolition of the slave trade. During this second phase, it was no longer the exclusive preserve for Portugal. Other Christian nations joined in Christianization of Nigeria. Black slaves to become a utility resource. In the next and concluding segment of this paper, I shall address the role of freed black slaves in Christian evangelism, European imperialism and colonisation of Nigeria.

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### 3. POST-ABOLITION PERIOD

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One constance in history is the dynamism at which people’s perception and human societies changes to catch up with developments. The slave trade and African enslavement earlier given official behest by the church and secular authorities came under fire and opprobrium from the general public, respected minds and the church, culminating to the Abolition Movement in America and Europe from the last quarter of the eighteenth century and early twentieth century.

The appeal of humanitarian spirit in America and Europe in the late eighteenth century turned into a water-

shad for a renewed spirit among European Christian missionaries for aggressive evangelization of Africa may be Nigeria. This period witnessed renewed efforts among the various Christian denominations in Europe and America for total evangelization of Africa, using the ex-slaves. The ex-slaves liberated from England, Nova Scotia, Jamaica and North America were resettled and rehabilitated in Sierra-Leone and Liberia. Later, freed slaves from Brazil were added to the ex-slave population of the West African coast. Many of their number settled in Nigerian coastal towns of Lagos and old Calabar. The Church Missionary Society CMS of England was the first to heed to this call. In 1807, they set out for work in Sierra Leone, and were later followed by other Christian Organizations. The CMS arrived first at Badagry near Lagos. With passage of time, they spread to other parts of Western Nigeria, predominantly Yoruba.

They were sharp differences between the missionaries of the fifteenth to eighteenth century and those of the nineteenth to twentieth century. “Whereas the former preached against evil, but did not see evil in slavery and the enslavement of Africans, the latter-day missionaries of the nineteenth century onwards saw this evil and condemned it” (Anaele, 2000, p.10). Anaele (2000) further argued that the fifteenth to eighteenth century missionaries in all their activities in Africa reflected the western mind of black inferiority, exploitation of black labor, and as such, toed along the path of European slave merchants and traders by actively participating in slave-trade, owned plantations worked by slave labor and reduced Christian preaching to the status of a hobby. Unlike those of the nineteenth to twentieth century, they made no attempts to educate Africans through the establishment of schools, which they saw as counter to their economic interest and those of the imperialist West, neither did they provide social services for the welfare of blacks. By this, they became collaborators with their home countries in European imperialism. In contrast, the later century missionaries tended to the spiritual and responded to the social needs of Africans, but were also careful not to make blacks see themselves as equal to the whites. In both phases, the driving forces were slaves and African primaries.

The turning point was the embankment on evangelization in the vast coastal hinterland, stretching from the Atlantic in the south, to the Benue River in the north, and from Niger in the west, to the Cameroon boarder in the east, using as would be expected, the services of ex-slaves. To accomplish this mission, Liberia and Sierra Leone was used for the pilot test. The choice for the two was informed by two reasons. First, both countries had abundant populations of freed Christian slaves to serve as volunteers. Second, the missionaries sought to establish schools for acceleration of church planting, and for the purpose of producing literate blacks to facilitate missionary works. The liberated slaves held

promise for the attainment of these noble objectives, being as they were, fairly educated Christians, somewhat westernized, and skilled. The freed slaves were also to serve as a model for other blacks in culture, and social life. Freed slaves were turned into two wings of European cultural imperialism and proselytizers of Africans. Ex-slaves proved equal to both tasks. Though, the missionaries demonstrated a strong sense of commitment to the salvation of the blacks, they were conscious of checking it from conflicting with European economic interest. Little wonder, Ayandele (1966) described them as the spiritual wing of European imperialism.

It is relevant here to add with emphasis that from 1807 and the later years, the political wing of the abolition movement popularized the idea in Europe that what the white-man needed most was African products, not African bodies. This came to be known as Fafunwa (1974) put it "The Bible and the plough". The "plough" emphasized production of raw materials in high demand for European industries (Dike, 1965). In a sense, agriculture became a source of "salvation" of a sort for Africans whose labor would be retained at home, instead of being exported overseas. This gave birth to what Dike (1965), Crowder (1973) called "legitimate" trade. It meant development of a new trade relationship with Europe, even if on unequal terms of exchange. In Nigeria, the Christian missionaries queued into this idea. They saw Christianization of Nigeria as the Lee-way to guarantee peace for a favorable economic climate. This was followed in the contention of Ekechi (1965) with missionary policy of "clean slate" aimed at destroying African culture and supplanting it with those of Christian Europe.

It has to be recalled that T. F. Buxton, a member of the Anti-Abolition Movement earlier suggested the exploration and cultivation of the interior of Nigeria, around the Niger water-way, to turn the minds of the people from slavery to agriculture. He saw the sending of missionaries and ex-slaves with the Bible and their penetration into eastern Nigeria as a means for the creation of a congenial climate for European imperialism. Thus, the official mind of Europeans and missionaries was the fusion of Commerce (an engine for economic development) with Christian evangelism, and in this regard, the Niger area of Nigeria. His idea was bought by the British Parliament, resulting as it did, to the Niger Expedition of 1841. Though, a freed slave, Ajayi Crowder, accompanied in the expedition, it turned out disastrous in terms of death toll. It however, enhanced the return of ex-slaves to Nigeria for missionary activities in the hinterland.

Earlier in 1839 before the first failed Niger expedition of 1842, some Yoruba ex-slaves in Sierra-Leone petitioned to the Queen of England for permission to establish a colony in Badagry (now part of Lagos) for missionary activities. It was also the liberated slaves who took the initiative in the founding of Christian churches

in their various communities through a series of petitions to Europe and America. Then, the Foci were Badagry and Abeokuta, both Yorubaland-Nigeria. The Methodists were the first to send missionaries to Badagry in September 24, 1842. This was the effort of Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman, son of Negro father, and William de graft, a Ghanaian. Both founded the Methodist church in Badagry in 1842 for emigrants. The Methodists established the first known school in Nigeria in Badagry in 1844. The ex-slaves were instrumental in the establishment of churches in Badagry and evangelization of Yoruba land in Western Nigeria. This was in response to their concern for the spiritual needs of ex-slaves from Sierra-Leone, then living in Badagry.

For the CMS, it was the doggedness of Andrew Wilhelm and John Mc Cormack (both Egba ex-slaves of Yoruba extraction) from Sierra-Leone, complemented by efforts of a white missionary, Henry Townsend, that led to the establishment of CMS church in Badagry for ex-slaves in December 1842, and later in Abeokuta in 1843. As the Methodists and CMS were evangelizing Badagry and Abeokuta, all in Yoruba land of western Nigeria, the Church of Scotland Mission in Jamaica sent a team of missionaries led by Reverend Andrew Hope Waddell to become the first missionaries in eastern Nigeria in the post slave trade abolition period. Among the team was Edward Miller, a Negro teacher. In 1846, the Church of Scotland Mission established a church in Calabar (first Christian church in Eastern Nigeria). Among the founders of the church was an ex-slave, Edward Miller. Many ex-slaves were used for its evangelism in eastern Nigeria as missionaries. The Roman Catholic Church, RCM, was not left out in what Fafunwa (1974) referred to as spiritual scramble for Nigeria. In response to the request of ex-Brazilian slaves in Lagos (Nigeria) for a school and church, the RCM came into Lagos in 1868, and later expanded to other parts of southern Nigeria. The successful Niger expedition of 1857 by Ajayi Crowder (ex-Yoruba slave CMS missionary who later became in 1864 a bishop) and twenty five ex-slaves from Sierra-Leone paved way for the founding of CMS churches in Onitsha and the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. Christian missionary incorporation of Igboland in eastern Nigeria into European enclave for economic plunder, was in part, a result of efforts of ex-slaves. Here also, mention must be made of reverend J. C. Taylor (ex-slave of Igbo extraction who was among the team of the Niger 1857 expedition) and his missionary exploits in southern Nigeria. The prominent role ex-slaves played in Christian activities in southern Nigeria has remained largely unsung in Nigeria's historiography.

It will be misrepresentation of history to write on Christian activities in southern Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general, without the recognition of the role of ex-slaves. They made quantum contributions in Europeanization of the people, catalyzed their early

acceptance of Western education and Christianity and early quit from the trappings of superstition. Most importantly too, they were key players with the whites in the conversion of Igbo and Yoruba languages (the two dominant ethnic groups in southern Nigeria) into written forms. Evidence emerging from Egbu near Owerri Imo State-Nigeria, during my field work for this study shows that the CMS Church Egbu was the place where the English Bible was translated into Igbo between 1912 to 1914. The translators were Arch Deacon Dennis (British), Onyeabo and Anyaegbu (Nigerians), both missionaries of Igbo extraction. This goes to confirm my earlier position that much of what we ascribe as Christian activities in Nigeria was combined efforts of whites and ex-slaves of African descent. In other words, any study in European activities and exploits in Nigeria that undermines the role of ex-slaves in Christian evangelism in Nigeria and European imperialism is grossly flawed. Without them, European expansionism in Nigeria, and the success story of Christian evangelism, perhaps would have been difficult to accomplish.

## CONCLUSION

African slaves prior to and after abolition of slave trade largely complemented European endeavors in the evangelization of Nigeria. Outside logistic supports from Europe and America, ex-slaves were unquantifiable values/ resources for the success of Christian activities. Perhaps unwary of European intensions, they directly and indirectly contributed to the advancement of European imperialism and subsequent colonialization of Nigeria. It is also a distortion of history to deny that the missionaries and their ex-slave converts and mission facilitators did not make outstanding contribution in Nigeria in the spheres of education, economic and social transformations. Indeed, the best of good from European relations with Nigeria came from the missionaries/Christianity. For their numerous contributions to serving both the interest of the whites on one hand, and those of their fellow blacks on the other hand, it is reasonable to describe them as the unsung heroes of European imperialism, colonialism and missionary activities in Africa. It will be recalled also that African slaves as in Africa, also contributed enormously to the development of the U.S and European economies with their sweat and blood. Thus, in spite of evils associated

with the slave-trade, one can as well ascribe to African ex-slaves as the real human resource for the supposedly European 'rescue' mission.

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