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## **The Rise of Independent African Churches, 1890-1930: An Ethical-genesis of Nigerian Nationalism** (Pp. 482-493)

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### **Abstract**

*The ethical-genesis of Christianity in the emergence of Nigerian nationalism is a statement that seems to say something opposite to common sense, but which contained a truth. The role of Christianity in arousing national consciousness was dealt with from positive and negative perspectives as could be seen in this paper. Evangelizations situate liberation in Christ to include a transformation of concrete historical and political conditions. The human beings to whom the gospel is proclaimed are not abstract, apolitical beings, but members of a society marked by injustice and human exploitation. This research work is relevant to contemporary Nigerian citizens especially now that there is a call to uphold democracy, human rights, rule of law, enshrine security, strong political, cultural, and economic institutions through religious and cultural practices. It will be of profound significance to realize how these inalienable human rights distorted by the advent of the West were resuscitated by the Africans through their protest against the colonial power and domination.*

### **Introduction**

Independent church movement had by the year 1967 been begun in thirty-two of the forty-one nations and colonies South of the Sahara, in Madagascar and in one nation in North Africa (Barrett, 1970). This situation can be reviewed briefly among the five main regions of Africa, describing some of

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the nations of each in 1819; the settlers' Meeting seceded from the Wesleyan Mission in Freetown Sierra Leone as the first ecclesiastical schism south of the Sahara, and the first of several secession which today constitute the West African Methodist Church, a Creole body with a total community of about 6,000 person. In Ghana, the first secession occurred over a century ago in 1862 near Cape Coast, when a small tectotal group among the Fanti tribe seceded from the Wesleyan Methodist Mission to form the short-lived Methodist society. Other separatist churches include the Church of the Twelve Apostles founded by Prophet Harris disciple John Nackaba; the large Army of the Cross of Christ Church (1922) and in 1939 Prophet Wovenu's Apostolic Revelation Society, a body with 60,000 active members mostly from the Ewe tribe. Before national independence in 1957, healing churches had already begun to spring up in large numbers among all the southern tribes with 200,000 adherents each.

In 1888 Nigeria, the Native Baptist Church seceded in Lagos from the America Southern Baptist Mission (Barrett, 1970) was later followed by many more and much larger schisms such as the United Native African Church in 1891 from the Anglican Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim in 1925, the Church of the Lord (Aladura in 1930 and Christ Apostolic Church in 1931 and are the more famous names in a long catalogue of movements that today stand at about two thousand. By 1922, there were seventeen major bodies in Southern Nigeria, with 90,233 adherents of various tribes though mainly Yoruba. Independent bodies are now found in great profusion in all tribes across Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio, Tiv, Edo, Igede, Igala among others.

Other separatist movement in West Africa include the Prophet Harris movement in Liberia, Ivory Coast etc. In northern Africa, ecclesiastical schisms were frequent during the first six centuries of Christianity, particularly in Egypt. By the fifth century, the church was divided into Dyophysites, Monophysites, Arians and Nestorians, and by the year 500 several inner- monophysitic divisions had emerged. In ancient Coptic Orthodox Church itself, several powerful movements of renewal have arisen in the twentieth century. One of the best- known is the society for the salvation of souls, founded in 1925 by five young Copts in Asyut with the aim of inducing an evangelical reformation written the church. In southern Africa, the biggest proliferation of African independent churches has occurred of the five regions of Africa (West Africa, Northern Africa,

Southern Africa, Central Africa, and Eastern Africa). Since 1872 over three thousand distinct movements have emerged.

Definition of independency according to Mayer (1962) is characterized by a reference to a tribe as a quasi - national political unit, having a high degree of political distinctiveness, with common symbols, history and traditions, though not necessary having an exclusive language or culture of its own. For Murdock (1959), the definition is any group of people numerically larger than the community to which members of an extended kinship group belong, often with a common name, language, culture and territory. Types of religious movement, depending on the viewpoint involved, they have been termed: separatist, schismatic, sectarian, secessionist, heretical, dissident, splinter, break-off, breakaway, protest, proselytic, spiritual, evangelical, revivalist, pentecostal, ecstatic, enthusiastic, perfectionist, charismatic, prophetic, prophet healing, the rapeutic, ethiopian, zionist, messianic, millennial, apocalyptic, eschatological, chiliastic, judaistic, israelitist, magico-religious, nativistic, neopagan, traditionalist, syncretistic, quasi-Christian, post-Christian, non-Christian, or anti-Christian movements or cults, in addition to the terms independent or African independent churches or church movements (Barrett, 1970). Barrett (1970) used four related meanings to define independent namely: (1) independence; (2) a territory not under the control of any other power; (3) in ecclesiastical usage the principle that the individual congregation of church is an autonomous and equalitarian society free from any external ecclesiastical control; and (4) the polity based on this principle. Number three definition under the concept of independency will form our operational working definitions in this research paper. One remarkable feature of these churches is their ability to survive. Their expansion is often by the involved tribes, by formation of new bodies, by new adherents, by persecution, by natural disasters, and by mission.

### **A General Causation of this Phenomenon in Africa**

The attitudes of the missionary enterprise towards the basics to certain time-honoured institutions such as family unit, family land, polygamous economy, the lineages, traditional religion, the ancestor cult, the magical world-view, divination and the like was deplorable. The widespread missionary disparagement of tribal religion is a further case in point. Other causative factors for independency include multiplicity of missionary agencies, land hunger, personal quarrels, political unrest, hankering after ancestor-worship, native love of pomp and colour, unnecessary delay in establishing

autonomous mission churches, missionary ignorance of African psychology, language, and avarice, ambition, imperiousness, and faulty biblical interpretation.

The background causes advanced in the literature can be classified for convenience under eight heads namely: (i) Historical factors - Most case studies on independency have been written from the historical and descriptive points of view and causes are put forward in terms of the history of a people and the missions who worked among them, usually as local factors unique to the case being studied. (ii) Political factors— Ethiopianism and other separatist movements were explained chiefly in terms of African opposition to colonial paternalism, being interpreted as the religious strand of African nationalism preparing the way for political independence. The term Ethiopianism (1875 -1900) is used to describing African nationalism expressed through the medium of the church. Nationalism in itself means opposition to foreign rule and domination. Ethiopianism is identified with Africa and the negro race. Before 1914, the church was to Africans also a training ground for the management of their own affairs. The education they had received had developed in the critical faculties. As the financial burden of the church fell on the Africans themselves, this familiarized them with the British system of parliamentary democracy. The educated Africans accepted Christianity wholeheartedly. They believed that by accepting Christianity, they were building up their nations. They believed also that political independence could not be achieved until Christianity had been fully established with the Africans fully in charge of it. Once they have achieved independence in the management of the church affairs, political independence would be achieved easily.

Other factors that caused nationalistic movement include African response to mission on issues bordering on polygyny, the ancestral cult, the earth-goddess, the traditional African family, the colonial factors (which include white settlers, duration of the colonial presence etc) and community structure. Other issues comprise missionary factors on areas of vernacular scriptures, duration of the missionary presence etc (Barrett, 1970).

Up to this point the missions had had the same absolute control over the scriptures as they had exercised over the church. They alone had access to the Hebrew and Greek sources; their interpretation was final. But with the publication of African translations, a momentous change took place: it now became possible to differentiate between missions and scriptures. Through

these scriptures, God Africans perceived, was addressing them in the vernacular which was enshrined the soul of their people; but a large proportion of the missionary force still had not learned the vernacular, and addressed them in African languages.

Onunwa (1991) citing Turner averred that in addition to culture, mission education, and political goal that created independent churches, some black pastors were denied by the missionaries from heading the churches. This forced the black pastors and other categories of black workers to start agitating for the control of the pulpit. Sociological factors may also serve as basic explanation for religious movements.

Nwosu (1993) stated that the relation of nationalism to the mission in Africa was often been described in favour of education, the gospel values, and the Christian principles as taught in the churches. Despite that, Nwosu raised issues that challenged the European power thereby enhancing the spirit of nationalism in Nigeria and Africa. These include cultural genocide committed by the missionaries against Africa, missionary support for colonialism in Africa, missionary opposition to Africa leadership in mission churches, missionary monopoly of the educational delivery system, missionary historiography among others. It was expedient as a result of these factors for nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo etc to start agitating for political independence.

The genesis of these movements was seen not as the clash of various personalities but as the need for political self-expression; they were simply safety-valves for frustrated nationalism. (iii) Economic factors - In all these instances, the claim is advanced that the basic background out of which movements emerge is economic deprivation, they are economic protest movements directed against exploitation of tribal of tribal lands or other riches by colonial powers. (iv) Sociological factors - The colonial colour bar policy such as in South Africa, elsewhere was responsible for movements. Where there is neither racial discrimination nor white settlement, explanations are proposed in terms of racial or tribal tensions, pressure groups, the struggle for power between elites and masses, and so on.

Other causative factors include ethnic factors, non-religious factors, religious factors and theological factors (Barrett, 1970 and Ndiokwere, 1995). The coming of the Europeans, missionaries alike, with their families into Africa led to less- social mixing with Africans especially in East and South Africa, a

reminiscent of severe relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. A gap in communication was thereby created leading often to sunbbery both in racial and religious grounds.

Another theory of causative phenomenon in independent church movements is lack of adapting the gospel according to African religion and cultural setting. The advent of Christian missions aroused widespread hopes among Africans. Their message enjoyed extraordinary response especially in West Africa. As a result of their swollen membership in the early days, the missionaries were often overwhelmed by their task of church building and had little time to see the rationale in adapting their message within the context of African indigenous beliefs and systems of thought.

There is also the theory of disillusionment. With the large number of European missionaries wishing to make West Africa their new home, all the high posts in the church government were reserved only for white clergy. The black clergy after receiving the equivalent education of their white counterparts became disillusioned that they could not receive equal treatment with respect to job opportunities (Kalu, 1997).

Nwankwo (1992) defined nationalism as a policy designed to achieve national self-determination. To the Nigerian context, 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 and sovereignty. Nationalism and nationalist movements for this paper will be defined as national self-assertion against the humiliating tendencies of colonialism. Evangelizations situate liberation in Christ to include a transformation of concrete historical and political conditions. The human beings to whom the gospel is proclaimed are not abstract, apolitical beings but members of a society marked by injustice and human exploitation.

### **Missionary Factor: An Ethical-Genesis of Nigeria Nationalism**

In the last subheading, we have been discussing Barrett (1970), Kalu (1997), Onunwa (1991) Nwosu (1993), Ajayi (1969), Ayandele (1966), Turner (1967) and Ndiokwere (1995) etc contributions to the role of Christianity in arousing national consciousness. With a wealth of vivid detail, these books described movements, personalities, prophets and prophetesses, liturgies, healing, sermons, dreams and visions, holy cities and countless other phenomena that enhanced nationalism in Nigeria during colonial era. Most of these new writers have been anthropologist, sociologists, social

psychologists, historians, political scientists and the like, interested in the social problem that independency represents.

In this subheading, we shall be x-raying on how the missionary factor galvanized the ethical- genesis of Nigeria nationalism.

The church established by the white missionaries was the cradle of Nigerian nationalism. It was not just the only forum of nationalist expression before the first ever Nigerian –owned press after 1879, but was also the main focus of nationalist attention till after 1914. This is a great ethical point missed by well-known authorities in constitutional development and of the rise of nationalism in Nigeria. At this point a central biblical concept with an immediate appeal to African societies came to the fore-the concept of love, under its various Greek forms agape, philia, and philadelphia, and the approximately one thousand equivalent terms used in African vernacular scripture translations. According to Barrett (1970), in the New Testament, agape is primarily the distinctive activity of the divine nature, the redemptive goodness of God exhibited towards the undeserving; philia denotes social love, or the affection of friends; and within the Christian community, agape takes the special form of philadelphia or love for the brotherhood. There are many facets to this most complex of biblical themes. In regard to most of them- love as service love, love as sacrifice, love as forgiveness, love as caring, love as compassion, love as charity, love in its social manifestation as peace-missions had exemplary records in most of the societies they served and died for. But there was one vital element missing. Brotherly love according to the New Testament is, ‘Willingness to serve and sacrifice, to forgive and make allowances, to share and sympathize, to lift up the fallen or down- trodden and restore the erring in a community which owes its whole existence to the mercy of God and the sacrificial death of his Christ’ (Barrett, 1970 p.155).

It dawned on the nationalists to emphatically and unequivocally to demonstrate perfect brotherly love by the willingness to serve and sacrifice their energy for the sake of our beloved nation and continent Nigeria and Africa respectively. They struggled to restore the dignity and respect for our nation by using very often biblical principles to agitate for religious, economic, social, cultural and political independence.

The Nigerian Christian nationalists were faced with the challenge of being able to talk about God, not to a world come of age, but to a world of

diminished and belittled human beings, not a non-believers but are people rendered less than human. That is indeed the value of gospel liberation praxis. Having faith is a means of breaking with all the egotism of the “old person” and entering the world of the other as a “new person” seeking to transform that world. The aim is to recover and integrate dimensions, of Christian spirituality that have somewhat overlooked the biblical dimension, the historical dimension and the dimension of personal commitment to inhuman, exploitative, dehumanizing, unjust structures that are at variance with God’s law. The seeds of revolution are inherent in the Christian gospel preached by missionaries. Exodus experience is a motif of liberation proper. Yahweh said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their out cry against their slave masters. I have taken heed of their suffering and have come down to rescue them from the power of Egypt and to bring them out of that country into a fine broad land; it is a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Ex.3:7-8). When the Nigerian nationalists applied the exodus motif to the liberation motif which is deeply embedded in the biblical tradition, the white Christians were often flabbergasted.

According to Iwe (1985), a missionary church in politics will see and interpret power in terms of service, of justice, and of love and peace. If one travels round this country, one will discover as one travels along the roads little cemeteries lost in the bush where they buried the brave men and women who brought the Christian faith in this country gave last full measure of their devotion. Their fortitude constituted the sure foundation upon which nationalistic movements in Nigeria based and are still based their inspiration for nationalism. Nigeria will ever salute these men and women enough who gave their lives for the enlightenment and welfare of this land.

### **Conclusion**

For an ordinary mind, Christianity might not have had any significant impact on the African nationalism from the factors above. Onunwa (1991) and Nwosu (1993) however, in their various views have identified the positive and negative contributions of Christianity in the development of nationalism in colonial Africa respectively. To Onunwa, Christianity promoted the Nigerian nationalism through its teachings. The teachings were imparted to the Africans through the gospel values, mission education, the translation of the Bible into different indigenous languages, the emergence of independence churches, spiritual consciousness and the growth in economic potentialities. We have to recognize that the European missionaries deserved



credit for introducing Christianity into Africa about four centuries ago. Their task was neither an easy nor an enviable one. They experienced problems of health, persecution, language or communication, culture, transport coupled with their unrealistic approach in that they demanded nothing less than effective colonization of all religions to be converted into Christianity. Their mission work was characterized by poor equality personnel, lack of interpreters, financial problem, political intrinsic and rivalry among different missionary bodies and even death. Africa, however, owes the foundation of its modern western education, its industrial economy, and its medical, scientific and vernacular literature developments to these missionaries.

The missionaries were, however, part of a larger programme of European colonization of Africa. Their activities cannot be properly appraised unless seen in the light of their connection with the European trader, diplomat and settler. To Nwosu, Christianity promoted nationalist movements through African Christian criticisms on the European Christian missionaries. Elements of this anti-European disaffection have been building since the 1900s with the conquest, colonization and Christianization of tropical Africa. The call manifested the desire on the part of Nigerians to give a place to indigenous leadership, to be self-reliant and to abolish the colonial relationship which persisted in the missionary enterprise. The call reflects a desire for liberation from the oppressive paternalism of some Western missionaries. It posses for Africans the vision of a new order of relationships free from the injustices and congruities of foreign institutions and domination. Nwosu examined these elements of anti-European disaffection from the negative point of view. He mentioned such elements as religio-cultural genocide, missionary support for colonialism in Africa; missionary support of colonial aggression; missionary opposition to African leadership in mission churches; missionary monopoly of the educational delivery system; and missionary historiography among others.

From 1888 – 1920, we have the Native Baptists 1888, the United Native Africa (U.N.A) 1891, the African Church 1901, the West African Episcopal 1903, and the United African Methodist 1916 among others which were new religious movements that emerged as a result of the nationalistic reaction to missionary activities in Nigeria (Webster, 1968).

Hence modern Nigerian nationalism should focus on producing adequate security, employment, good governance devoid of corruption, god-fatherism, nepotism, statism, tribalism and religious affiliation to the people. Nigerians

of today should be geared towards technology transfer coupled with indigenous technology development efforts that will lead to Nigerian industrial and nuclear energy development, and to an extent atomic energy development. By technology, we may deduce in its broadest and most accurate sense, is the aggregate of all knowledge and expertise necessary for transforming inputs, resources, and other factors of production (Labour, capital, materials etc) into goods and services. Nigerian industrial effort must be realistic and meaningful. It is then that Nigeria can deal with the problems of food cultivation, maize milling, groundnut processing, cocoa and palm produce, brewing, bricks, iron foundries, fertilizer, corrugated iron sheets, leather tanning, bolts and nuts, car, ship and plane manufacturing, cotton cloths, machine tools and food processing.

Nationalism, at least, has produced one visible result to Nigerians, independence. This was won through long struggle shepherded by patriotism. Patriotism in this manner has come to be accepted as a vital ingredient that sustains national ethos and which must be visibly expressed. This should form the basis of ethical thought of modern Nigerian development. Development as a concept has survived several mutilations and tinkering. It has also witnessed incessant invasions by experts and laymen alike. But this is not to suggest that the assaults are over yet. Development issue as a moral question is seemingly the concern of all (Ukpong, 1990). Since development deals with raising of the standard of living of people by generating and distributing equitably wealth and resources through improved techniques, strong institutions and technology; to achieve political and economic independence by taking direct control of productive forces of the economy and to raise effectiveness, to attain self-reliance; to gain international recognition and respect; and to attain human dignity and freedom, therefore modern nationalism has to address these issues.

Decline in cultural values disciplinary powers of the family coupled with tribalism, god-fatherism, the short-comings of public officers and government agencies, lack of a stable and well articulated ideology, statism or official discrimination, lack of strong political, economic, educational, and religious institutions are some of the factors hindering true nationalism in Nigeria. True modern nationalism should be anchored on the rule of law, strong family, educational, political, religious, and economic institutions along side available responsible mass communication media cultural values,

national ideology, an ideal leadership by example and the recognition of the dignity of labour.

The basic duty of every citizen of Nigeria should be to love Nigeria, our country. This duty, I suppose, rests in the law of nature, because the fatherland is the community of people to which the citizens are bound by common mores and cultures, and because they are indebted to their country for protection and promotion of the weal. The love of one's country must manifest itself in interest and concern for the country's welfare. To leave one's country for another one for purely egoistic reasons contradicts the spirit of Christianity, which values faithfulness and readiness to sacrifice as higher than material goods (Peschke, 1999).

Hitherto, conclude the whole research work by stating with special emphasis on the dialectics of church historians especial that of Onunwa and Nwosu as having significant impact in Nigerian nationalism.

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