THE PARADOX OF FAITH, SOCIAL AND LEGAL TRANSFORMATION: AFRICAN INTEREEST IN THE MESSAGE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

Kanayo Nwadialor, Ph.D
Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Kl.nwadialor@unizik.edu.ng
&
Helen O. Obi
Faculty of Law
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
helentonyobi@yahoo.com

Abstract

It is argued that the history of Christianity in Africa is not merely a narrative of what the missionaries did or did not do. Nor does the view that Africans enthusiastically embraced Christianity largely because they are naturally religious, provides any satisfactory answer to the question of the success of missionary enterprise in Africa. Rather several themes converge on the subject of the character of Christianity in Africa. Therefore, in view of many factors other than the ordinary preaching of the gospel message and established rule which led to the new impulse to embrace Christianity, and in view of the fact that material aspect of Christianity would have attracted a large segment of African population, this paper underscored a particular historiographical perspective and drew attention to certain wider issues such as how and why communities which had their own religious and viable instruments of social and legal principles came into conduct with a new religious form and the varieties of factors that necessitated their response to this external agent of change. Church history in this perspective is studied within the total context of the lives of communities. This is particularly so since this paper revealed that African response to the message of the early missionaries indicates the belief that Africa could be redeemed through the power of Christianity. The study is attentive to legal and socio-economic interpretations because Africans seek health, power, and health through religious powers. This has stamped African Christianity with recurring themes that would engage and engage African Christian spirituality for centuries that follow.

Introduction

The light of Christianity began to shine, dimly though, in sub-Sahara Africa in the 15th century. However, Christianity, as it were, came into and radiated African legal system, thought and culture in the second half of the 19th century. Africans' early encounters with Christianity were, of course, as complicated and various as African cultures and legal system themselves. They varied from one community or sub-cultural area to the other with the political structure of the state, and the position of the individuals within it. Missionary teaching encountered a world of cultural values and legal practices, of which religion was a part. The essential dilemma for the historian is to discern patterns of meaning in unique events.

It is remarkable that within about a hundred years an alien institution had made such tremendous progress in a completely different political and social and legal milieu. African response to Christianity within a hundred years was so dramatic that Isichei (1995) describes it as "the fourth great age of Christian expansion" (p.1). This massive conversion can be attributed to several factors-religious, social and other wise. However, the important fact is that Africans were then converted in large numbers.

Africans are probably the most receptive to cultural change, and most willing to accept Western ways. This is probably so because of the nature of direct European contact through missionary activities. Mention must be made of the friendly disposition, cordial reception and consequent adequate protection offered to the missionaries by the leaders or chiefs of various communities in Africa. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that from the earliest contact with the gospel, Africans have tended to appropriate its socio-economic and legal dimensions, attracted to the extra power offered by the new religion, and stamped it with African identity.

Since in a general study, it is impossible to examine all the variables that shaped the nature of encounter between African communities and the missionaries, Ceray (cited by Achunike, 2002) warns that "any thesis that claims to provide an overall causal explanation of a phenomenon as complex as conversion in Africa is suspect" (p. 62). As such African interest in gaining from the new religion certain benefits for their social and legal innovation forms the task of this paper. To these Africans, the coming of the gospel seemed a fulfillment of the promise of the psalmist, "princess shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall stretch

forth her hands to God". Thus, Africans responded to Christian message on the belief that the new religion would open vistas of opportunities that would make them be like the westerners.

Theoretical Framework

Probably the most relevant theoretical development in this study is the theory of Neo-orthodoxy which has risen to a position of great prominence in Protestantism. Neo-orthodoxy is a complex movement with many shades of meaning. It is not simply a reassertion of fundamentalism, although it shares some of its views. Neo-orthodoxy is an attempt to develop a theology for democratic and developing nations, alert to the impact of social gospel and concerned with political problems, yet seeking to reemphasize what it considers to be the insights of historic theology-the incapacity of man to grapple alone with evil and tragedy. The proponents of this theory hold, not only that the optimism of liberal theology and its secular counterparts is an inaccurate interpretation of human situation, but also that it leads to unhappy consequences.

Neo-orthodoxy calls for responsible political and social action in the context of full recognition of how easy it is for man to fail. According to Ilori (1993), the proponents of Neo-orthodoxy hold that the religious man will not rest content with personal salvation. He will strive to bring about a social order which will ensure to all men freedom for self-realization, he will weigh all social institutions in the balance of spiritual utility. If found wanting, he will set about to reconstruct them, or if need be, to destroy them. His spirituality will be militant, and, when necessary, revolutionary. Hence, it is that the profound religious Africans weighed the missionary message in the scale of social utility and opted for Christianity for its obvious social relevance.

Patterns of Missionary Propaganda as a Background to African Response

In the 19h century when European missionaries were setting out to take Christianity to the interiors of Africa, their agenda was such that was fashioned to make Christianity an attractive social and legal force. The basis of the expansion of Christianity in the interiors of Africa was the notion of Christian community in which converts would be concentrated under Christian nurture and from which Christianity would emerge as an attractive religion. Both Christians and Muslim missionaries to Africa gave this *a priori* indication of the validity of their religious claims, but the technological superiority of the

Christians seemed to suggest that their religion was greater. Isichei (1995) records the testimony of a Buganda Chief thus:

> The Arabs bring cloth, beards and wires, to buy ivory and slaves, they also bring power and guns; but who make all these things….? I have seen nothing yet of all they have brought that the white man did not make. Therefore, I say, give me the white man. (p. 146).

Implicit in the European missionaries' rationale for going to Africa was the 19th century European notion that the introduction of Christianity would be the panacea for Africa's wretchedness and woe. The new religion was brought by men with a relative abundance of moral material goods. In traditional religious systems that emphasized this-worldly blessings, this gave a *prima-facie* indications of its probable truth. In this way Christianity in Africa was presented to have come to encourage the habits of useful industry and self-reliance. Henry Venn of the C.M.S. had decreed in 1857 that the aim of Christian missions in Africa should be to create a strong middle class, members of which would become leaders in society, in Church, commerce and politics. These men, he said, would form an intelligent and influential class of society and become the founders of a kingdom which shall render incalculable benefits to Africa and hold a position among the states of Europe. A parallel innovation was to be initiated in the Church, which would be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. This programme was summarized in the theme "The Bible and the Plough", and the catchy slogan with which it was expanded: Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. This idea that commerce and civilization would form the saddle in which Christianity would ride became the basis upon which Africans displayed their interest in the message of the missionaries. By the turn of the 19th century, Africa was stirring with the leaving expectancy because Christianity, having arrived on the scene, was seized upon as the instrument by which forces of social innovation would be meaningfully harnessed. They were told that England and indeed Europe owned her prosperity, greatness and security mainly to Christianity and they were resolved to replicate such progress across Africa through the same power of Christianity.

In East Africa, Isichei (1985) recorded the testimony of the Queen mother of Sheba thus:

> God had promised in His word not only spiritual but temporal rewards to those who obeyed His commandments; that the English, Germans, and Europeans in general, had once been as rude and ignorant as the Gallas,

but after their acceptance of the gospel, God had given them with science and arts wondrous blessings of an earthly kind. (p. 84).

Again conversion to Christianity involved dislocation, a break from the traditions of the past, and it came more easily to those who had endured disruption already especially from slavery and other forms of social disadvantages. To such people, the message of the missionaries offered a new mode of identity, a place on which to stand.

African World-View as a Paradigm for African Response to the Message of the Missionaries
The world-view prevalent in Africa before their encounter with Christianity had a great contribution in African response to the message of the Christian missionaries. African society is a place where this worldly and the other-worldly, the social and the religious are fused together. As a result of this, political, social and economic activities in life are underpinned by religion. Religion was part of the continuum of life, not compartmentalized on its margins, and it was supernatural interventions that make rain fall, for instance and determined the outcome of battle. Conversion on this ground was not merely exchanging new ideologies for the old but also exchanging one form of social life for another.

African responses to the gospel in this sense were determined by the fact that the gospel answered questions raised in the interior of the world-views. Africans wanted the new religion to better perform the tasks of the old religion, yet, Christianity served as an instrument or a coping mechanism in the midst of rapidly changing socio-economic and political settings. Christian missionaries seemed to have re-emphasized the same goals of traditional religion, namely, fertility, abundant harvest, material wealth and prosperity, protection against evil, sorcery or witchcraft. Kalu (2008) stresses that Africans believed that Christianity should absorb the old goals of primal religion while recording the worldview and introducing new symbols and sources.

It is noteworthy, however, that in spite of the social determinants of conversion, some Africans were influenced by purely religious considerations. There were some who found Christianity the end of a journey on which they had already embarked. Traditional religion was typically rich in visual symbolism, and this formed a bridge between African and Christian cultures. However, it seems to have been above all, the teaching of eternal life that drew converts in this

category. Many were drawn to the mission field by an evangelical theology that let them to believe that the "heathens" were perishing.

The teaching that all mankind would rise again from dead caused uncommon joy among Africans who said would like to see their grandfathers and others whom they loved. Isichei (1985) records an interview with an Africa Christian in 1983 thus:

> When Christianity came, it said, when somebody dies he does not die, but goes somewhere to stay, that there is a day when God will call him. That is why I became a Christian. For me, before, when you die, you just rot. But when you die, you do not rot. Your spirit will be taken somewhere and rest. (p. 274).

The concept of original sin was alien to African peoples, though the occasional individual was drawn to conversion by a sense of guilt.

Traditional African religion was life-affirming- the benefits it sought were long life, good health, good crops, children, and protection from evil- but it offered little solace in times of famine or disease and sometimes found them in the malice of witches. The belief in witchcraft and magic was a characteristic of African thought. The great strength of the monk missionaries, therefore, is that they offer deliverance from evil, perceived as witchcraft, and specific spiritual remedies for the multiple afflictions to which Africans are all heir. In Ethiopia, Isichei (1985) says that "the monks were healers and missionaries; they did battle with the forces of Satan, whom Kaplain call the forgotten man of Ethiopian history" (p. 50).

Africans have seen Christianity as immensely relevant to a very different face of evil: the suffering associated with disease, poverty and death, and also the misfortunes inherent in human experience. They have seen in the Christ of the gospel and in the work of the missionaries a source of healing and salvation here and now.

The Expansion of European Colonial Powers and African Response to Christianity

Until the turn of the 19th century, the number of Christian converts in Africa was not very impressive. Nor did they consider the regenerating power of Christianity as preached by the missionaries relevant to their needs. Believing

that their traditional religion was better for them than this new religion, most of the African people listened to missionary propaganda but remained outside the Christian Church. As the records reveal, however, it was in the period following the extension of European political authorities into the countries of Africa that missionary evangelism prospered. Prior to that time, in fact, it may be safely said that most Africans treated missionary propaganda with respectful indifference. But towards the end of the 19th century, indifference to the Christian Church seemed to have changed dramatically to a mass movement. It became even fashionable to be called a Christian. Church attendance became a new status symbol. What then brought this rather sudden shift in the attitude of the people towards Christianity? This aspect of the case, unfortunately, has not yet been fully appreciated. It is for this that this section of the paper will attempt to show the social benefits of missionary propaganda with the expansion of European authorities in Africa that attracted the people to the Church.

Indeed, the wave of missionary penetration into the interiors of Africa coincided with the era of European colonial expansion. In Igboland, for instance, it was not until the Igbo hinterland was conquered by the British government that the stage was set for the phenomenally rapid mass movement towards Christianity. The conquest of the Igbo between 1901 and 1910 came as a direct result of the British drive to penetrate beyond the coastal margins and thus extend its political and commercial spheres. The expedition was without doubt the first far reaching military action Eastern Nigerians ever witnessed. Ayandele (cited by Achunike, 2002) remarks that the Christianization of Igboland was nothing short of an epic; in his words "with the systematic destruction of the long Juju by the British invaders between 1900 and 1902, the Bible rolled through Igboland like a juggernaut, crushing the gods to atoms" (p. 20). The fear of not surviving the military actions, it must be noted, made many open up their hearts to missionary propaganda.

European occupation of African countries, and the political and social disruption that followed, were indeed far-reaching and quite unsettling. While engaged in the frequent military patrols, the solders molested the villages, seized their animals, and often destroyed or ravaged their farm crops. The degree of social dislocation and human misery may indeed be imagined. Panic, arising from sustained artillery bombardment, brought general confusion. The new social environment made it relatively easy for the so-called consul men to impersonate either the soldiers or government officials and thereby commit greater havoc in

various communities. Although initially the entire populace was subjected to military expeditions and wanton exploitation, in due course, however, it appeared that Christians became immune to certain local exactions. In some cases, one's own religious beliefs or a town's religious sympathies determined the kind of treatment that was meted out. Following this social and political disruption that accompanied the establishment of European colonial rule, and the consequent breakdown of law and order resulting from the weakening of the mechanism for preserving internal order, and traditional government, the Christian Church seemed, therefore, to be the one institution that would afford some measure of security and refuge for the people under stress. The apparent enthusiasm on the part of many individuals to embrace Christianity appears to have sprung from the realization that being a Christian implied being treated preferentially by government officials. This is illustrated in an Igbo Roman Catholic eye-witness account as preserved by Ekechi (1972), "the whole population is in movements, there is a general exodus of the Achallas, Ntejes, Nris, Nandos, Owerris, etc. towards the river Niger. Everybody has panicked and everybody had taken refuge in our missions at Aguleri and Nsugbe" (p. 124).

Fear and insecurity coupled with the realization that Christianity had suddenly become a badge of honour, persuaded many people then to reconsider their position *vis-à-vis* the Christian missions. Hence it was that there was indeed a run to the Church in order to avail oneself of the rewards of being a Christian. A remarkable movement towards Christianity, therefore, was the result of a strong belief that acceptance of Christianity would mean immunity from government "punitive" expeditions. To avoid such expeditions, requests were sent from various towns and villages to the Christian missionaries to come and open up mission stations as a way of cementing closer ties with the administration.

In Asente and the Yoruba countries, all the chiefs appreciated the position of missionaries as honorary secretaries to correspond either with other chiefs or with the British government in Lagos and Cape Coast. The Dahomean King was able to transmit his grievances against the British through the missionary.

As European political and commercial expansion inevitably drew the Europeans into occasional conflicts with the Africans, the missionaries, too, could hardly escape being entangled, one way or the other. In Obosi, for example, when the dispute with the British burst into an open war in 1890, the missionaries of the

Roman Catholic threw their weight behind Obosi. Acting as medical chaplains the Catholic missionaries treated the wounded soldiers, adopted some of the children whose parents had been killed during the war, and rendered various other forms of assistance. Naturally, the people of Obosi were deeply impressed by the Catholics. Thanking father Lutz on behalf of his people, the chief of Obosi said: Whiteman, I salute you. God is with you, men from Oyibo country. Providence has brought you to this country to render us needed assistance…. I salute you, Whiteman, for diseases you gave us to a box of medicines which we knew nothing of (Ekechi, 1972).

The effect of this Roman Catholic intervention was almost immediate. On the one hand, it became easy for the Roman Catholics to open schools and Churches in the town. On the other hand, there occurred what the Roman Catholics described as a "spontaneous movement towards Catholicism".

At Aguleri, the timely intervention of the Roman Catholic missionaries after the bombardment of the town by the Royal Niger company in 1893, and the material and financial assistance given to the people by the Catholic missionaries elicited expressions of gratitude from the people and predisposed them to the message of the Catholic missionaries.

Apart from military expeditions which provided a new impulse to embrace Christianity, other forces were at work. Of special significance were the forced labour and the carrier services which the new regime had imposed upon Africans. The use of forced labour for road making, and for building government stations and quarters, the use of conscripted carriers as the main means of transportation for more than two decades and a half, the depredations of the licentious court messengers, and the use of Native court itself actually exasperated many people. But because the missionaries were quick to intervene on behalf of their protégés, especially those who went to school; a large number of Africans embraced Christianity in an attempt to circumvent the new colonial situation. Imbued with the belief that the Christian missionaries would act as a protective shield against the exploitative mechanism of the colonial administration, individuals then swarmed into the Churches. In 1912, for instance, the C.M.S. station teacher at Egbu Owerri reported that on one Sunday service alone, over 3, 000 people were in attendance. This unusual argumentation of the Church congregation, he explained, stemmed from the people's conviction

that association with the missions would enable them to escape from the exactions of the chiefs (Ekechi, 1971).

Economic Considerations and the Quest for Modernity among African Chiefs
Although it has been said that Africans are remarkably receptive to change, but their positive response to innovation is indeed determined by their uncanny sense of the comparative advantages involved. People do not change for change's sake; they do so especially because of the anticipated rewards that follows any innovation. Ekechi (1971) remarks that:

> Leslie Probyn, who had been high commissioner of Southern Nigeria, in one of his criticisms of the Christian missionaries, remarked that the failure of the Christian missions to convert the Africans lay in the missionaries' almost unrealistic assumption that Africans could easily be persuaded to change their traditional religion by simply introducing the Bible in their midst. (p. 104).

This assumption, he observed, never worked because Africans are a very cautious race, and will not accept new ideas merely because they were presented to them by a white man. Indeed, continued the High commissioner, new ideas (including Christianity) are acceptable only when the Africans see that they are obviously useful.

Ekechi (1971) further quoted an Igbo anthropologist thus:

> The crucial question is this, will the acceptance of this innovation make the individual or the town gets up? If the answer is in affirmative, there is a great possibility of immediate acceptance, but to be retained, the innovation must work, the material and symbolic evidence of getting up must be demonstrated. (p. 104).

Many African chiefs believed that missionary presence would lead to secular advantages, such as trade. David Livingstone, who began his missionary career among the Kwena in East Africa, said that wherever a missionary lives, traders were sure to come, they were mutually dependent, and each aids the other.

In the middle years of the 19th century, British Evangelicals tended to believe that Christianity and commerce went hand in hand. They envisaged an Africa producing raw materials, such as cotton for British industry, and purchasing the products that resulted. They equally believed that the development of alternative

forms of commerce was the sure way to eliminating slave trade. The advocates of Christianity and commerce had tended to believe in progress by which they understood the gradual spread of Christianity and Western civilization throughout the world.

It was believed, and rightly so, that trade followed the missionaries. A group of Giriama villages in central Kenya asked for a C.M.S teacher in the 1870s, (as almost confessed by themselves) for the desire that traders in cloth, knives, etc, may settle among them (Isichei, 1985). In Ijaye, a large Yoruba town destroyed by Ibadan in 1862, Kurunmi, the ruler, believed that the presence of missionaries would enhance his prestige in Yoruba country and draw traders to his capital. At Ijebu in South-Eastern Yoruba, Manuwa, the King, patronized the C.M.S. in the hope that his town would become a trading centre pot for the Ijesha, Ondo and Ekiti countries. At Aboh in 1841, the C.M.S. missionaries were able to forge a personal link with the ruler, Obi Ossai, mainly because the king was a merchant, shrewd and very skillful in matters of business. The economic implications of missionary enterprise, rather than the intrinsic value of Christianity, it appears, might have influenced the king to accept the message of the missionaries. This is borne out perhaps by the fact that the concept of Christianity espoused by the trade missioners associated material prosperity with the adoption of the religion. Captain Trotter impressed upon the king, without its blessing, we would not have been as prosperous as a nation, as we now are (Ekechi, 1982).

The Niger mission's greatest success was in the Delta, where a station was established at Bonny in 1865. In a sense, its little states were already attuned to a wider world: they traded with visiting European merchants for centuries. In 1842, a letter from a Calabar notable, as recorded by Isichei (1985) puts their interest in Christianity clearly "we want something for make work and trade …. If some man would come teach way for do it, we get plenty sugar too, and then some men must came teach book proper" (p. 174). They agreed to the establishment of a mission because centuries of business dealings with Europeans had taught them the value of literacy. This earnest desire for missionaries was in great measure owing to a belief current that missionaries would bring merchants with them, or if they were there already they would not easily remove should missionaries be there also.

Gifts from the missionaries also seemed to have made the local chiefs more receptive to missionary propaganda. It was through the missionaries that many

chiefs in the interior became familiar with many of the sophisticated articles of European society. The disposition of the paramount ruler of Asante, the Asantehene, towards the Wesleyan missionaries changed from one of suspicion to that of friendliness when he was offered a carriage. Gifts commonly made to African rulers by missionaries included chairs, glass ware, foot ware, cutlery umbrella. The umbrella in particular became an emblem of royalty.

In another way, chiefs benefited economically from the presence of the missionaries in their midst; they valued the religious teachers as money-lenders in times of need. Many of the chiefs were also attracted by the idea of their states becoming as powerful and developed as contemporary European states, a prospect dangled before their imagination by missionaries themselves. There was a widespread feeling that the power and prosperity of the Europeans and their military success meant that their religion was likely to be true.

The Ethiopian princess welcomed missionaries not because of a genuine interest in theological dialogue, but they hoped for access to western technology and, especially firearms. They needed the latter, not only in their internal struggles, but because of the danger posed by Muhammad Ali's modernized and nationalized Egypt.

The Ganda were drawn to Christianity in part by their admiration for the technical achievements of western culture. The London missionary society established a mission in Madagascar in 1820. The people welcomed it as they had an avid enthusiasm for modernity and receptivity to new ideas. Some Malagasy were sent abroad for education, and the missionaries were a welcome source of new technology, including the making of unfired bricks, soap, and sullpher.

According to Afigbo (1981), the avidity of Africans to become as expert as the Europeans in changing their physical world ensnared them to Christianity instead of converting them to Christianity. The Mfengu's enthusiasm for Christianity is a good example of the way in which social innovation readily produced a change in religious belief. The Mfengu were northern Nguri of South Africa who, in the 1820s and 1830s fled south from Zulu expansion, and lived among the Xhosa as clients. They were invited by British to settle as peasant farmers, west of the Kei River. Uprooted from their homes, they turned willingly to Christianity and western ways, and fought for the colony in frontier wars. Some were forced to live on mission stations as a result of their need for land.

They pioneered commercial agriculture and many other African farmers followed, adopting the plough, cultivating wheat, selling wool, and competing successfully with white farmers at agricultural shows. Missionaries encouraged this growth of peasant agriculture.

According to Isichei (1985), in 1833 Moshoeshoe of Lesotho learned of the existence of missionaries from a visiting Griqua hunter, and invited them to visit him. Three Protestant Frenchmen, members of the Paris Evangelical missionary society, were already in Graqua-land, seeking a mission field, so they responded promptly to this invitation. Like other African rulers, Mosheoshoe welcomed them, initially because of the Europeans' technological superiority, and because he needed allies against dangers from neighbouring kingdoms. Isichei (1985) echoed Mosheoshoe's testimony thus:

> It is enough for me to see your clothing, your arms, and the rolling houses in which you travel, to understand how much intelligence and strength you have. This country was full of inhabitants…wars have devastated it…I have been told that you can help us. (p. 119).

Indeed, in a dangerous world, missionaries had much to offer. As with warlike nations elsewhere, African Kings sought to profit from the presence of the missionaries, while limiting their impact. The missionaries could act as advisers, explaining the powerful other to African rulers faced with unprecedented pressures. The Egba, a Yomba group in western Nigeria, gave such an enthusiastic welcome to missionaries that the missionary journals presented them as peace-loving virtuous people who loathed slavery. But the Egba had political motives for adopting their pro-missionary policy. According to Ayandele (1969):

> Surrounded by enemies in all directions- the Ibadan in the north, the Ijebu in the south and east and the Dahomean in the West-Sodeke, the leader of the Egba settlement in Abeokuta, made the Egba motive clear, expectation of military help from the British government against all their enemies. (p. 28).

In south-eastern Nigeria, the missionaries seemed to have arrived at a very opportune moment. When they arrived, Onitsha was at war with her neighbours-especially with Ogidi, Aboh, Obosi, and Idda. These riverine city-states were intensely competitive in the pursuit of wealth and power. Given this political situation, Onitsha people welcomed the missionaries in order to

strengthen their position *vis-à-vis* their neighbours. The missionaries, on their part, were to exploit this open rivalry for their own purpose. In this state of inter-town rivalry, Crowther remarked, as echoed by Ekechi (1972) that "our establishments at Onitsha were welcome to them, since other towns were anxious to attain the same political prestige as Onitsha, their rulers were also eager to attract the missionaries so as to prevent Onitsha from becoming *primus interpares*. (p. 7).

Chief Idigo of Aguleri was said to have invited the Catholic missionaries to his territory in 1887, two years after they had established themselves at Onitsha. It is not immediately clear from the records why the chief did this. It is quite probable that the impulse sprang from a genuine desire for Christianity. On the other hand, it may have sprung from his belief that Onitsha had become the first among its equals largely owing to the presence of the Europeans. The schools, Churches, hospitals and trading factories there must have impressed him too, as evidence of a town that had "grown up". And as competition and rivalry are two important characteristic aspects of Igbo life, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that chief Idigo wanted Aguleri to become as famous and as prestigious as Onitsha. Ekechi (1972) further contends that:

> The chief of Nsugbe (nine miles from Onitsha) should himself make his conversion to Christianity contingent upon missionary establishment in his town, tends to indicate that town development might have been a determining factor in the invitation extended to the Christian missionaries. (p. 91).

Unaware of the many implications of missionary propaganda, the various African groups were eager at the outset to accept Christianity. The African spirit of competition, emulation and rivalry must have been seen, therefore, as a significant force in the eventual bringing about of missionary penetration. The missionaries, on the other hand, exploited the African inclination for status and achievement to promote their own work. If missionary presence in a town was the criterion for measuring progress and civilization, Africans vied with each other to acquire this new status symbol.

In Awka in 1904, the political dispute between the dibias and the blacksmiths made it possible for the presence of the missionaries to be inevitably important. The exact nature of the political crisis is obscure, but in their bid to topple the dibias and weaken their local influence, the blacksmiths thought it politic to seek

the support for the missionaries. Missionary support for the blacksmiths seemed natural since the dibias were utterly opposed to the missionaries. For the C.M.S., this was an opportunity for them to consolidate their precarious position; for the Roman Catholics, it was a good opportunity for co-existence with the Protestants. According to Ekechi (1972), "the Roman Catholic superior claimed that several deputations were sent to him to open a mission in the town- apparently by the blacksmiths" (p. 140).

Missionary Education and African Response to Christianity
By and large, what ultimately accounted for African interest in the message of the missionaries was the Christian missions' contribution in the field of education. Afigbo (1981) is of the opinion that "the success of the Christian missions in Africa was brought about not so much by preaching Christ crucified as through the parade of advantages of literacy over illiteracy, that is through the school" (pp. 339 – 240).

As in other aspects of missionary activity the adoption of a policy of evangelization through the schools was essentially a pragmatic decision. From practical experience the missionaries had learned that it was indeed rather difficult to persuade people of social prestige to embrace Christianity. The natural concomitant of this sad but realistic appraisal of the social and economic forces which hindered the conversion of people of prestige was the redirection of missionary efforts towards the young. In doing so, formal education became the bait with which the young generation was enticed to Christianity. Bishop Shanahan of the Roman Catholic mission warned that "if we go from town to town talking only about God, we know from experience that much of our effort brings no result. But no one is opposed to school" (Ekechi, 1972: 176). In the 1930s, an educated Igbo was asked why his people became Christians. He replied, the boy who goes to a mission school takes it for granted that becoming a Christian is a corollary to becoming a scholar (Isichei, 1985).

To all intents and purposes the school was the Church. Right away in the bush or in the forest the two were one, and the village teacher was also the village evangelist (Coleman, 1986). The material advantage of education lay in the position, prestige and wealth that were quickly coming the way of the educated ones in the changing political, economic and social situations. As colonial administration and commerce expanded, the colonial authorities and commercial firms sought indigenous auxiliaries to fill the lower posts. Education was,

therefore, seen as an avenue to white collar job with government, post in the native authority system and position in colonial administration itself. Many social groups strove to push some of their sons ahead in schooling and to obtain scholarships in competition with other groups. Individuals who acquired schooling, wealth or political influence were expected to use their new social standing to benefit the groups with which they were associated. These attracted the people enormously as Father Xavier Lichtenberger reported in 1910 as echoed by Kalu (1996) thus:

> From every corner we are being requested to establish not missions, but schools in many cases. If the local chiefs were to know that our arrival in their districts was only for the purpose of preaching the truths of our sacred religion, they would not accept us; but once the pretext is a school, access to a town or village is easy for us. (p. 98).

During the first expedition up the Niger in 1841, what impressed Obi Ossai of Aboh most was that an Igbo man could master the act of reading and writing and he requested that the Igbo ex-slave, Simon Jonas, be left behind to instruct his people. According to Amucheazi (1981):

> As early as 1846, the king and chiefs of old Calabar requested for missionaries from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland hoping to have their children taught in English learning. In 1848, the chiefs of Bonny negotiated for missionary teachers on serious terms: we agree to let them have good ground for a house and garden or gardens for a period of twenty years… And if payment for their services be requested, we also agree that every gentleman sending a son to their school shall pay for the education of such son five puncheons of palm oil. We are anxious to afford them every assistance in our power and we further expect that those gentlemen to be sent us shall be capable of instructing on young people in English language (pp. 18 – 19).

Education was synonymous with progress and a community was quite prepared to turn down an agency in favour of another if the latter could satisfy its educational needs. Thus according to Amucheazi (1996), in 1930s the Ibesikpo community in Uyo District invited the Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America to replace the Qua Iboe mission because of the latter's weak education programme. The Egbu people in Owerri Division complained that the C.M.S. neglected the development of their town in contrast to the rapid development of

the nearby Emekuku by the Roman Catholics, and requested for the latter in their community.

It is not surprising then that the Church turned to the school as its most useful instrument for recruitment and socialization. The mission schools prospered because they fulfilled African quest for social innovation.

The Medical Mission of European Missionaries and African Response to Christianity

In the field of health services the missionaries once again endeared themselves to Africans by fulfilling a basic function. The missions opened up hospitals, health centres, maternity homes and dispensaries in remote villages, but these institutions were equally instruments for recruitment. They won for the Church and the particular denomination the respect and loyalty of the community in which the institution was situated. According to Achunike (2002) "Initially, the Igbo had no interest in missionary message and thus responded negatively but with the advent of influenza and yaws and other common maladies, the Igbo sought the medical aid of the Christian missions" (p. 35).

Rev. Fr. Lutz, a pioneer Roman Catholic missionary to Igboland, adopted the practical expedient of approaching the inhabitants via the charitable provision of medicines and other material needs. And before long, Fr Lutz was to report, with obvious gratification, that the care they gave to the people has easily conquered for them the sympathies of the natives.

In addition, in most cases, the missionary authorities insisted on baptizing babies born in the maternity wards of their hospitals. There have been reports that efforts were made to convert patients who were outright non-converts or belonged to another denomination. Thus complained the Anglican section of Ozubulu as echoed by Amucheazi (1986):

> The Anglicans have been treated with numerous insults and discriminations in the (that is community maternity home run by the Catholics) medical attention. Both the Rev. Sisters and the nurses hiss and frown at the non-Catholic patients and expectant mothers, forced baptism are conducted right in the maternity home. And forced conversion has occasioned several Anglican mothers going home with babies having medals swing round their necks. (p. 21).

These complaints partly explain the acute struggle among the denominations for control for medical institutions. Indeed, the apparent benevolence of the missionaries tended to predispose Africans to almost blind acceptance of missionary propaganda. They were regarded by Africans as a kind of white men who came for the welfare of the people. This is very important to keep in mind in order to understand one aspect of the eventual mass movement towards Christianity at the turn of the 19th century.

Missionary Message and the Less Privileged in African Societies
The first sets of Christians in Africa were drawn from those to whom the traditional world offered little happiness. The first C.M.S. convert in East Africa, Mrenge, of Rabai, was disabled, and the first Christians in Usambara were lepers, or mothers of twins. The first ordained pastor in Nyasa province was a former slave, so was the first baptized convert of the L.M.S. station at Fwambo, at the Southern end of Lake Tanganyika. The most extreme example was Swema, a Yao child born in 1855, who was enslaved, buried alive at Zanzibar when apparently dying, rescued, and taken to missionary nuns. She became a sister of mercy, Sister Marie Antoinette.

The young, like the poor, ill, and marginalized, had fewer stakes in traditional societies that were dominated by older men who controlled access to resources. Christianity came and gave the young a place on which to stand, a hope of earning an income in the modern sector. They could acquire a wife in mission circles or with their earnings. In practice, it released individuals from many of the burdensome demands of traditional life. The missionaries were able to provide social security partly through the means of Christian villages. In the later 19th century, Catholic missionaries concentrated on redeeming slaves, and providing a refuge for those who society marginalized. The establishment of Christian villages sometimes reflected the belief that Africans could not practice Christianity in a traditional environment, that it was necessary to make a clear break. In this case, they were not all redeemed slaves as freemen were often willing to exchange their liberty for security. There was also the hope that redeemed slaves would become evangelists, carrying the gospel to their own people, like the missionary Creoles of Sierra Leone.

Conclusion
Africans encountered Christianity in Western   packaging. Each generation of African Christians has displayed various reasons for their acceptance of the new

religion. Although there were some Africans who embraced the new religion out of personal conviction, however, it is most likely that socio-economic interest of Africans in the 19th and 20th centuries was a major determinant for their acceptance of the missionary message.

Very often, Christianity and westernization came in the same package, so that Africans, who said they would like to see practical industrial schools, more than the religious, were not allowed to select the elements they desired. The Kwena ruler of East Africa, Sechele, was candid about the factors that attracted him to Christianity; his reasons were, a missionary could help him in sickness, mend his gun, teach him to read and gain wisdom. Missionaries presented Christianity in a particular packaging closely related to literacy; they were advocates of the Bible and the Plough" and of private enterprise. It was a vision that ever-growing numbers of African came to share.

In some cases, natural disasters encouraged people to experiment with the supernatural power of the missionaries. In Kikuyu, the dreadful famines of 1898 – 1900, and the failure of traditional spiritual remedies to relieve them may have predisposed the people to seek the aid of new and perhaps stronger spiritual powers. Missionaries were perceived as supernatural agents, like ancestors and spirits, who could bring the technical expertise necessary for development. The ecological crisis was compounded by colonialism, often imposed and maintained with great brutality. The turbulence of the 19th century may have made the eternal safety the new religion promised more attractive. Independent rulers often welcomed missionaries as allies in a situation of peril. They were valued go-between in their dealings with European powers.

The mission meant education and education meant a miraculous ladder to fame and fortune, a necessary step towards becoming like the white man. However, here in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the factors that led to a particular religious adherence often had little bearing on the subsequent quality of an individual's spiritual life. The traditional pro-missionary chiefs were not necessarily convinced that Christianity should replace their traditional religion. This was why the king of Ijaye, for instance, instructed the missionaries in his domain that they should not commit the error of converting his people to Christianity in the process of educating them. In Kumasi, the report of the Wesleyan missionaries continued to be glooming. Even in Abeokuta, the celebrated citadel of Christianity in the interior of West Africa, the chiefs did not

want genuine Egbas to be converted to Christianity. In new Calabar, in the Niger Delta, so horrified did the chiefs become only five years after the introduction of Christianity in their state that they prepared a lotion with which they wiped the face of their school children in the hope that all that they had been learning under the missionaries might disappear from their minds. Among the Igbo, J.C. Taylor, the pioneer Igbo missionary, remarked that they preached of the blessedness of Christian life but none was elated. All these go to prove that African interest in missionary propaganda resulted not from prosylitization, but rather from their desire for social innovation.

References

Achunike, H.C. (2002). *Dreams of heaven: A modern response to Christianity in north-western Igboland,* 1970 – 1990. Onitsha: Africana Feb.

Afigbo, A. (1981). *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo history and cultures.* Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.

Amucheazi, E.C. (1986). *Church and politics in Eastern Nigeria, 1945–1966: A study in pressure group politics.* Lagos: Macmillan.

Ayandele, E.A. (1969). Traditional rulers and missionaries in pre-colonial West Africa. *Tarikh,* 3, 1, 23-37.

Coleman, J.S. (1986). *Nigeria background to nationalism.* Benin: Bradbury & Wistrom.

Ekechi, F.K. (1971). Colonization and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo case, 1900-1915. *African history,* XII, I, 103 -116.

Ekechi, F.K. (1972). *Missionary enterprise and rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914.* London: Frank Cass.

Ilori, J.A. (1993). *Religion and social change: An African perspective.* Zaria: Adams.

Isichei, E.(1985). *A history of Christianity in Africa: From antiquity to present.* Michigan: William B. Eerdmans.

Kalu, O.U. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction.* Oxford: University Press.

Kalu, O.U. (1996). *The embattled gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991.* Lagos: Minaj.