Ignored but not Forgotten: The Contributions of African Pioneer Missionaries to God's Mission on their Home Continent

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the work of 19th and early 20th-century Protestant missionaries on the African continent in recent years, especially by authors who take a rather critical stance.[1] Many publications by Western scholars, and an increasing number of their African peers, focus on the mistakes and failures of the Protestant mission movement.[2] Interestingly, most of the critics exclusively comment on the work of Western missionaries, as if Christian mission in Africa was solely a Western enterprise. African missionaries get no or hardly any mention at all.[3] Others refer to indigenous mission workers, but they portray them as willing and powerless instruments of their Western masters, who supported the political and economic agenda of the colonisers.[4] Akena Adyanga, for example, writes that churches and missionary schools were a means of imple-

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1 See, for example, *Missions, States, and European Expansion in Africa*, ed. by C.J. Korieh and R.C. Njoku (New York: Routledge, 2007); N.N. Mhango, *How Africa Developed Europe: Deconstructing the History of Africa, Excavating Untold Truth and What Ought to be Done and Known* (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa RPCID, 2018)

2 Cf. F.M. Givule, 'Missionary Paternalism Factor in Self Reliance of Congo Mennonite Brethren Church', *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 16 (2008), p. 12; T. Oduro, H. Pretorius, S. Nussbaum and B. Born, *Mission in an African Way: A Practical Introduction to African Instituted Churches and their Sense of Mission* (Wellington: Christian Literature Fund / Bible Media, 2008), p. 37; M.A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), pp. 42-43.

3 See, for example, J.H. Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission: A Panoramic View of Missions from Pentecost to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), pp. 137-144; A. Mukaria, 'Western Colonialism: The Genesis of the Degradation of Nature', Academia Letters July (2021), pp. 1-9.

4 See, for example, R.W. Strayer, *The Making of Mission in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 26.

menting cultural imperialism through training indigenous catechists to evangelise in their communities.[5] Both interpretations of the Protestant mission movement, however, are not very helpful, as they are in danger of presenting a distorted picture. They either ignore or undervalue both the motivation of African Christians and also the contributions they made to the growth of the African church. It seems that, in their attempt to critically evaluate the legacy of Protestant missionaries, some authors overlook the significant role African Christians played in spreading the Gospel on their home continent. Right from the beginning of Western Protestant mission work, African men and women who became followers of Christ not only actively shared their newly found faith with their fellow Africans but also avoided many of the mistakes of their Western counterparts.[6]

If we want to categorise African missionaries who were involved in the advancement of the Christian faith in the 19th and early 20th centuries, we can roughly distinguish between three groups. The first group consisted of African evangelists, catechists and Bible translators who worked closely together with European and North American missionaries and whose ministries were funded in one way or another by the latter. The second group was made up of independent indigenous missionaries, often former co-workers of Western missionaries, who operated outside the Western mission structures. A third group comprised black missionaries from Great Britain, North America and the Caribbean who came or returned to Africa as members of the *Back to Africa* movement.

AFRICAN EVANGELISTS, CATECHISTS AND BIBLE TRANSLATORS

In their book entitled *Indigenous Evangelists and Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750-1940* Peggy Brock, Norman Etherington, Gareth Griffiths and Jacqueline Van Gent remind us that indigenous evangelism was at the heart of the strategies of Protestant mission societies.[7] They write: 'With some ups and downs the local evangelist occupied a central place in missionary operations until the era of decolonization when

5 A. Adyanga, 'The Dialectics of Western Christianity and African Spirituality', in *Spirituality, Education and Society: An Integrated Approach*, ed. by N.N. Wane, E.L. Manyimo and E.J. Ritskes (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), p. 111.

6 P. Brock, N. Etherington, G. Griffiths and J. Van Gent, *Indigenous Evangelists and Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750-1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 1.

7 Ibid., p. 5.

most missions ceded ecclesiastical authority to nation-based churches.'[8] Western mission societies believed that local preachers, evangelists and catechists could be more effective messengers than European or North American missionaries as they spoke the local languages and were familiar with the socio-cultural contexts.[9] Lars Berge, for example, writes about the crucial role that Zulu co-workers played as cross-cultural bridgebuilders and messengers in South Africa: 'The importance of the evangelist as a forerunner and pioneer of Christianity can hardly be exaggerated. Without the evangelists, the missionaries would have been more or less alien to the life and thought patterns of those they sought to convert.'[10] Many of these African co-workers were much more than mere support workers of Western missionaries. They were, as Dorottya Nagy and Martha Frederiks state, 'cross-cultural missionaries in their own right'.[11]

At this point, it is important to note that many of these African missionaries did not imitate their Western employers and their style of evangelism but often developed their own ways of sharing the Christian message in a culturally relevant manner. As Brock puts it, they 'did not simply parrot a European message but communicated their own understanding of the Bible. They transmitted aspects of their own cultural heritage along with ideas received from foreign missions.'[12]

One of these indigenous missionaries was Bernard Mizeki (1861-1896) who was born in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) and worked as an Anglican catechist in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the 1890s.[13] Mizeki was a stern critic of dehumanising traditions and rituals practised by the Shona people. In particular, he challenged the work of the witchdoctors (*ngangas*). Mizeki had, as Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom write, 'a systematic plan to reform what he saw as the evil practices of

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 Cf. J.J. Bonk, 'Mission and the Problem of Affluence', in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. by J.M. Phillips and R.T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 296.

10 L. Berge, 'Divided Loyalties: An African Christian Community During the 1906 Uprising in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa', in *Themes in Modern African History and Culture: Festschrift for Tekeste Negash*, ed. by L. Berge and I. Taddia (Padova: Liberianumuniversitaria.it edizioni, 2013), p. 117.

11 D. Nagy and M. Frederiks, 'Introduction', in *Critical Readings in the History of Christian Mission*, volume 1, ed. by D. Nagy and M. Frederiks (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 18.

12 P. Brock, 'New Christians as Evangelists', in *Missions and Empire*, ed. by N. Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 143.

13 J. Hodgson, 'Bernard Mizeki, c. 1861 to 1896, Anglican, Zimbabwe', *Journal of African Christian Biography* 2/4 (2017), p. 12.

the Shona, including the killing of twin babies, habitual drunkenness, the offering of sacrifices to spirits and the harsh treatment (or murder) of individuals named by the ngangas as sorcerers.'[14] At the same time, Meziki demonstrated great respect for other aspects of the Shona religion.[15] Thus, he believed that their monotheistic faith in Mwari, their supreme deity, was compatible with the Christian faith. Consequently, he had no scruples, as Emma Wild-Wood points out, to incorporate stories about Mwari into his Christian preaching.[16] Wild-Wood continues to comment: 'Mizeki's approach represents an African appropriation of Christianity which demanded significant rupture from traditional practices but maintained connections with previous theistic belief.'[17] There can be no doubt that Mizeki went a long way to contextualise not only the Christian message but also himself as a message bearer. In addition to Dutch, English, French and Portuguese he spoke eight indigenous languages.[18] He mastered the Shona language within a year of his arrival in Southern Rhodesia. Furthermore, Mizeki deliberately decided not to look for a future wife in Cape Town but married a young woman called Mutawa who was related to the local Shona chief.[19] Bernard Mizeki died as a Christian martyr during the Ndebele and Shona rebellion against the colonialists in 1896.[20]

Another key point to remember is that indigenous Christian workers played a crucial part in the translation of the Bible into local African languages. Wild-Wood notes, 'Evangelists were at the forefront of the first processes of inculturation inherent in the work of translation, in which the Bible meets local thought forms.'[21] In Namibia, for instance, the

14 M.A. Noll and C. Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 27.

15 F. Quinn, 'Bernard Mizeki, Anglican, Zimbabwe', *Journal of African Christian Biography* 2/4 (2017), p. 13.

16 E. Wild-Wood, 'The Travels and Translations of Three African Anglican Missionaries, 1890-1930', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67/4 (2016), p. 787.

17 Ibid., p. 787.

18 Noll and Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses*, p. 25.

19 K. Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 156.

20 T. Presler, *Horizons of Mission* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2001), p. 60.

21 E. Wild-Wood, 'Evangelists: The Case of Kivebulaya', in *Communities of Faith in Africa and the African Diaspora: In Honor of Dr. Tite Tiénou with Additional Essays on World Christianity*, ed. by C.B. Essamuah and D.K. Ngaruiya (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), p. 190.

work of Urieta Kazahendike (1836-1936),[22] a young Herero woman, was instrumental for both the codification of Otjiherero and the translation of biblical texts and Christian literature into her mother tongue.[23] After Kazahendike had become the first convert of the Rhenish missionary Carl Hugo Hahn in 1858, she continued to work with Hahn and his wife Emma and even accompanied them to Germany in 1860.[24] On her return journey to Africa in 1861, which she undertook on her own, she wrote a letter to Hahn, which gives an insight into the profoundness of her faith. Feeling apprehensive about the long and lonely journey, Kazahendike found great comfort and strength in her Christian faith. She wrote:

> I want to tell you something. The day after I left you, my heart was heavy when I lay down to sleep. I prayed and fell asleep. During the might I screamed loudly in my sleep and woke up; but it was a dream and I was glad it was only a dream. Then I fell asleep again and heard a voice which said to me: Don't cry, for behold you have prayed that you want to be comforted. Well, Jesus has given me strength, and not only today; He will always give it, if I just surrender myself to him. He is always nearby, He is my leader in death and life. He satisfies my hunger and thirst. Jesus, make me hunger and thirst for You and for Your word. Jesus, feed me and quench my thirst with Your wounds and Your death. Jesus Christ, in Your great mercy, take me and hold me. You who are the same yesterday and today, in eternity and splendour. May He hold you and me. Amen.[25]

These words are hardly 'sedate Christian platitudes' as Margie Orford claims,[26] but rather expressions of a deep-rooted trust in God. Neither is it plausible to consider Kazahendike as a victim of missionary colonialism, as Orford does.[27] On the contrary, Kazahendike seemed to have a

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22 Also known as Johanna Maria Kazahendike, Johanna Scheudeke, and Johanna Maria Gertze.

23 H. Becker, 'Kazahendike, Urieta', in *Dictionary of African Biography*, Vol. 1, ed. by E.K. Akyeampong and H.L. Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 318.

24 Ibid., p. 138.

25 J. Scheudeke, 'Letter to Carl Hugo Hahn', translated by M. Miller, quoted by D. Hubbard, 'Urieta Kazahendike', in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. by. M.J. Daymond, D. Driver and S. Meintjes (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 97.

26 M. Orford, 'Gathering Scattered Archives', in *Writing Namibia: Literature in Transition*, ed. by. S. Krishnamurthy and H. Vale (Windhoek: University of Namibia Press, 2018), p. 47.

27 See Orford, 'Gathering Scattered Archives', pp. 45, 47.

great affection for the Hahn family and was very committed to her task.[28] Thus, she continued with her linguistic work on her long journey back to southern Africa.[29] Unfortunately, like many other African Christian workers, she never received wider recognition for it. Heike Becker comments on her ministry:

> Kazahendike was a woman of great linguistic ability who spoke Cape Dutch, German, English and Khokhoegowab (the Nama language) in addition to Otjiherero. Her work as a translator and editor was invaluable, though it remained unrecognized in Carl Hahn's efforts to publish nine books, including the Otjiherero grammar and dictionary for which he received an honorary doctorate in 1873 from the University of Leipzig in Germany.[30]

It is noteworthy that many indigenous Christian workers had an impact on their communities beyond the spiritual realm. African evangelists were often catalysts of cultural and socio-political change.[31] As agents of change, they worked not only towards the spiritual but also the social and political empowerment of their fellow Africans.[32]

Lastly, the importance of the role of native evangelists is also reflected by their numbers. David Killingray reports that in 1910 '[a]cross the sub-Saharan continent there were 7,650 'foreign missionaries', but 26,747 so-called 'native workers'.[33] In other words, the missionary movement on the African continent was already overwhelmingly African at the beginning of the 20th century.

INDEPENDENT INDIGENOUS MISSIONARIES

While these figures are impressive, one must not make the mistake of seeing indigenous evangelism and mission work as the sole activities of native workers who were recruited and paid by Western missionaries. Indigenous outreach also took place outside the Protestant mission stations and the control of Western mission societies through self-appointed independent African evangelists, preachers and prophets, as well as ordi-

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28 In her letter to Hahn Kazahendike wrote: 'I thank you very much, my dear teacher, for your letter which made me very happy […] Farewell, very beloved in God […] Farewell again and stay very, very well.' Scheudeke, 'Letter to Carl Hugo Hahn', p. 98.

29 Becker, 'Kazahendike, Urieta', p. 318.

30 Ibid.

31 Wild-Wood, 'Evangelists: The Case of Kivebulaya', p. 183.

32 Ibid.

33 D. Kilingray, 'Passing on the Gospel: Indigenous Mission in Africa', *Transformation* 28/2 (2011), p. 95.

nary Christians who shared the Christian message with members of their families and tribes. Brock and her co-authors speak of 'enthusiasts who spread the word on their own initiative.'[34] In Namibia, for example, the contribution of lay Christians was pivotal for the growth of the church. Namibian church historians Gerhard Buys and Shekutaamba Nambala explain:

> Lay workers started to preach the Gospel to their friends, family and local community. They started Sunday Schools and built up local churches, waiting for visiting missionaries or pastors to administer the sacraments. Visiting missionaries or pastors were usually surprised to find groups of local people, who were already Christians, involved in Bible study and catechist classes. These first church planters and lay preachers were used by Jesus Christ to become leaders of the first local churches and therefore the whole body of Christ in Namibia.[35]

In other parts of southern Africa, mission work outside the official structures met with severe oppression. Self-appointed evangelists and prophets were considered a threat to colonial rule. The situation in Natal was particularly difficult for independent black missionaries. Norman Etherington writes:

> The government of Natal made the most concerted effort to stamp out African evangelism. Spies and secret police were assigned to report on their meetings. Laws were passed prohibiting any non-white preacher from occupying a station or preaching place without direct supervision by a white missionary. Itinerant black preachers were turned back at border crossings and American black missionaries – thought to be especially dangerous – were denied entry.[36]

In West and Central Africa, self-appointed prophets like William Wadé Harris and Simon Kimbangu spent many years in prison.[37] Harris, in particular, was a controversial figure. While in prison for his open support of a coup d'état in Liberia, Harris, an Anglican teacher and catechist, had a vision in which he was called by the Angel Gabriel to preach the gospel, abolish the use of fetishes, and baptise those who responded to his mes-

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34 Brock, Etherington, Griffiths and Van Gent, *Indigenous Evangelists and the Questions of Authority in the British Empire 1750-1940*, p. 2.

35 G.L. Buys and S.V.V. Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia: An Introduction* (Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 2003), p. 48.

36 N. Etherington, 'Christian Missions in Africa', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. by E.K. Bongmba (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 204.

37 Ibid.

sage of repentance.[38] Some people questioned his sanity and the genuineness of his Christian faith. Western missionaries held that his approval of polygamy was not only a rebellion against God but also put their own work at risk.[39] Having said that, his impact on the church was tremendous. After his release from prison in 1910, he first preached in Liberia for three years before he moved on to the adjacent French territories of the Ivory Coast and Gold Coast.[40] In his outward appearance, he differed significantly from the Western missionaries. Wearing a long white gown and a white turban, he carried four objects, i.e. a Bible usually covered in sheepskin, a small bowl filled with water, a calabash and a long staff with a cross at its top.[41] This is how David Shank describes Harris' ministry:

> Accompanied by two women disciples – excellent singers playing calabash rattles – he visited village after village, calling the coastal people to abandon and destroy their "fetishes", to turn to the one true and living God, to be baptized and forgiven by the Savior; he then taught them to follow the commandments of God, to live in peace, and organized them for prayer and worship of God in their own languages, music and dance, to await the "white man with the Book" and the new times that were to come.[42]

Harris' unusual but contextual approach bore great fruit. It is reckoned that in Ivory Coast, where eighty years of Western missionary work had resulted in only a few hundred believers, between 200,000 and 300,000 Africans were baptised within eighteen months.[43]

THE 'BACK TO AFRICA' MISSIONARIES

Finally, we must not ignore the role that black missionaries from North America, Great Britain and the Caribbean played in spreading the Christian gospel on the African continent. As part of the *Back to Africa* movement, black Christians settled in the British colony of Sierra Leone and the territory that was later named Liberia and which became an independent country in 1847.[44] In the United States, it was the American

38 D.A. Shank, *Prophet of Harris: The "Black Elijah" of West Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 3-4.

39 Shank, *Prophet Harris*, p. 22.

40 Ibid., p. 4.

41 Noll and Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses*, p. 74.

42 D.A. Shank, 'The Legacy of William Wadé Harris', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 4 (1986), p. 170.

43 Noll and Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses*, p. 66.

44 A.S. Moreau, 'Liberia', in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. by A.S. Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 576.

Colonization Society that sponsored the migration of black ex-slaves to Africa, while the Sierra Leone Company took the lead in Britain.[45] These 'resettlement' projects were supported by various groups whose motivations and goals differed significantly. Among them were abolitionists who envisioned a better life for freed slaves in Africa. Although slavery was officially abolished in the Northern US states by the beginning of the 19th century, 'the end of slavery brought only limited freedom for blacks since they continued to be systematically denied the full rights and privileges of citizenship.'[46] Christian abolitionists also saw in the establishment of Christian settlements on the African continent a chance of undermining the slave trade and spreading the Gospel among adherents of African traditional religions and Islam. Jehu Hanciles notes:

> [T]he Sierra Leone Company and other evangelical promoters were fired by a vision of the settlement as a Christian centre, a strategic foothold for commercial undertakings (to counter the slave trade) as well as a spring board of Western civilization and Christianity in Africa.[47]

Other sponsors considered former slaves both as an economic burden and threat. They feared that poor ex-slaves would not only increase the public costs for poverty relief but would also become unwanted competitors in the labour market.[48] Some politicians, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that white and black people could not live together peacefully.[49] The migration of black Americans to Africa, he argued, would, therefore, benefit both groups.

LOTT CAREY AND COLIN TEAGUE

Among the first black American missionaries, Lott Carey and Colin Teague, arrived in Liberia in 1821, a year after the first group of black settlers.[50] Both were sponsored by the American Baptist Missionary Union.[51]

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45 Cf. B. Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-3.

46 A. Yarema, *The American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom?* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), p. 2.

47 J. Hanciles, 'Back to Africa: White Abolitionists and Black Missionaries', in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. by O.U. Kalu (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007), p. 204.

48 Yarema, *The American Colonization Society*, p. 2.

49 Ibid., p. 5.

50 Moreau, 'Liberia', p. 576.

51 W. Seraile, 'Black American Missionaries in Africa: 1821-1925', in *African-American Experience in World Mission: A Call Beyond Community*, ed. by V.J.

They established a Baptist church in Monrovia which grew to 100 members by the time of Carey's death in 1826.[52] Under Teague's leadership, the church later reached a membership of 200. Carey's motivation for his work in Africa was twofold: to live and work in a society free of racial discrimination and to share his Christian faith with his fellow Africans. Before he departed for West Africa he declared the following: 'I am an African […] I wish to go to a country where I shall be estimated by my merits – not by my complexion and I feel bound to labour for my suffering race.'[53] On another occasion, he said: 'I long to preach to the poor Africans the way of life and salvation.'[54]

DANIEL COKER AND JOHN KEZZEL

A year before Carey and Teague came to Liberia, Daniel Coker (1780 – 1846), an American missionary of mixed ethnicity left for West Africa.[55] Coker was a freed slave, a prominent critic of slavery and one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.[56] When he arrived in Africa, he sent several letters to friends and supporters back home. In a letter dated 29th March 1820 he calls upon his American fellow believers to join the mission work on the African continent:

> Dear brethren! To all you who love the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom, I would with pleasure inform you that I, with about 90 of our American coloured brethren, have arrived safe in Africa. We find the land to be good, and the natives kind, only those, who, from inter-course with the slave traders, become otherwise. There is a great work here to do. Thousands, and thousands of souls here, to be converted from Paganism and Mahometanism to the religion of Jesus. Oh! brethren, who will come over to the help of the Lord?[57]

Walston and R.J. Stevens (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), p. 25.

52 Ibid., p. 26.

53 Quoted by Seraile, 'Black American Missionaries in Africa', p. 25.

54 Quoted by Seraile, ibid.

55 H.T. Maclin, 'Coker, Daniel', in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, ed. by G.H. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 143.

56 M.F. Corey, 'Coker, Daniel', in *African American Lives*, ed. by H.L. Gates and E.B. Higginbotham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 117.

57 D. Coker, *Journal of Daniel Coker: A Descendant of Africa: From the Time of Leaving New York in the Ship Elizabeth, Capt. Sebor on a Voyage for Sherbro, in Africa in Company with Three Agents and About Ninety Persons of Colour* (Baltimore: Edward J. Coale, 1820), p. 42.

Coker continues to emphasise that any mission work in Africa needs to be both contextual and carried out in the spirit of Christian love and unity. Thus, churches planted among the indigenous population must not simply be copies of American churches but must be African in nature. Furthermore, any form of sectarianism or denominationalism needs to be avoided at all costs, as they put the missionary endeavour at risk. Coker writes:

> If you come as Baptists, come to establish an African baptist church, and not to encourage division. If you come as presbyterians, come to support an African presbyterian church, and not to make divisions. If you come as protestants, come to support an African protestant church, and not to make divisions. If you come as Methodists, come to support an African Methodist church. We wish to know nothing of *Bethel* and of *Sharp-street* in Africa – leave all these divisions in America. Before these heathens, all should be sweetly united; and if darkness is driven from this land, it must be by a united effort among christians […] Those who come will come in love, to do good, and spread the gospel – come in the name of God, come! Otherwise, they had better stay away; for nothing but love and union will do good among these heathens. God grant that many will come over to help with this great work.[58]

Coker worked in Sierra Leone for 25 years. He preached in local churches, served as a justice of the peace, and acted as a mediator between black settlers and white agents.[59] After seceding from the African Methodist Episcopal Church he became the founder and superintendent of the West African Methodist Church.[60]

Daniel Coker, however, was not the first black missionary who came to Sierra Leone. In his journal, he mentions a man by the name of John Kezzel who was very supportive when Coker and his party first arrived.[61] Kezzel was a freed slave from America who had returned to his African country of birth.[62] These are Cooker's first impressions of Kezzel:

> I find John Kezzel to be a short, dark man; African born; reads and speaks English well; a man of information; I believe that he has more than we brought with us. I think he is able to give us counsel. I conversed with him to-day on christian experience, and found that he professed that he had been converted. I was much edified by our conversation. Few coloured men that I have met with can excel him in quoting Scripture. He is considered by the natives a

58 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
59 Corey, 'Coker, Daniel', p. 178.
60 Maclin, 'Coker, Daniel', p. 143.
61 Coker, *Journal of Daniel Coker*, p. 33.
62 Ibid., p. 48.

> head-man, and his influence is great. He has built a small meeting house in his town, and preaches in it himself, to his little society. He is no friend to division among us.[63]

SAMUEL AJAYI CROWTHER

Sierra Leone, where Kezzel and Coker served, soon became the base for missionary outreach into other parts of West Africa.[64] A key figure was Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891), a Nigerian-born former slave who had been freed by a British Navy commando in 1822.[65] Three years later he became a Christian and was baptised by an Anglican minister serving with the Church Missionary Society (CMS).[66] He received part of his schooling and higher education in the British colony, but also spent some time training at an Anglican theological college in England, where he was ordained as a Church of England priest by the Bishop of London in 1844.[67] In 1864 he was called once more to Europe to be consecrated the first African bishop of the Anglican Church and be awarded an honorary doctorate in divinity from the University of Oxford.[68] While Stephen Neill seems to be quite sceptical of the effectiveness of Crowther's ministry,[69] Andrew Walls' evaluation is much more positive. Walls notes:

> Already a veteran of the Niger Expeditions of 1841 and 1854, and a seasoned pillar of the CMS Yoruba mission, he was in 1857 appointed to head the mission in the Niger territories, becoming bishop there in 1864. His mission staff was entirely African; most of them had, like himself, been either born or brought up in Sierra Leone.

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63 Ibid., p. 34.

64 A.F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 161.

65 Ibid., pp. 155-156.

66 Ibid., p. 157.

67 I.O. Olofinjana, 'Introduction: Towards African Theology in Britain', in *African Voices: Towards African British Theologies*, ed. by I.O. Olofinjana (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), p. 4.

68 C.I. Nnaocha, 'Crowther, Samuel Ajayi', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought, Volume 1: Abolitionism-Imperialism*, ed. by F.A. Irele and B. Jeyifo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 257.

69 Cf. S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 377.

The fact that Crowther and his co-workers were Africans was without doubt to their advantage. It helped them to connect with local people in ways that Western missionaries found difficult and thus opened doors that otherwise might have remained closed. In his report on a mission trip, which took place in Niger from November 1871 to February 1872, Crowther shares the following about an encounter with a local chief (bale):

> My European friends could not understand what all these could mean, as we were still on horseback, impatient to dismount and rest; the only explanation I could give them was that it was a sign of our kind reception by their Chief. After a considerable delay – the Chief having dressed himself ready to receive us – we were requested to dismount and come to the entrance of the palace, where we had an interview with some of the elders, and thence were invited into the spacious compound within, where we were received by the Chief himself […] At first we stood at a great distance, while the Ogbomosho messenger was going through the process of the ceremony of salutation by prostration […] After this the Chief invited us nearer, and me foremost, as the spokesman of the party. After a long repetition of salutation, he asked a variety of questions, which I answered in the name of the party. He was very inquisitive to know which was my town in the Yoruba country? That being told him, I named my grandfather on my mother's side, who was Alawo, of the royal family, and the eldest councillor of the Chief of my home town Oshógùn. "Well, well," said he, "that is enough, you are one of us; I knew not that there was such a person among the party, or else you should not have been kept so long waiting." It was not long before the Bale opened his mind to us […].[70]

According to Walls, Crowther was a gifted linguist.[71] He not only produced the *Yoruba Vocabulary* but was also the main contributor to the *Yoruba Bible*. He studied other West African languages, wrote the first book on the Igbo language, and encouraged J.F. Schön, a German missionary, to finish his Hausa dictionary.[72] Additionally, Crowther developed an evangelisation strategy for his work among Muslims which was respectful and culturally sensitive and relied on the testimony and power of the Bible. Walls writes:

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70 S.A. Crowther, *Niger Mission: Bishop Crowther's Report of the Overland Journey from Lokoja to Bida, on the River Niger, and thence to Lagos, on the Sea Coast, from November 10th, to February 8th, 1872* (London: Church Missionary House, 1872), p. 23.

71 Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, pp. 159-160.

72 Ibid., p. 161.

> Christians should of course defend Trinitarian doctrine, but let them do so mindful of the horror-stricken cry of the Qur'an, "Is it possible Thou dost teach that Thou and Thy Mother are two Gods?" In other words, Christians must show that the things Muslims fear as blasphemous are not part of Christian doctrine […] Crowther, though no great scholar or Arabist, developed an approach to Islam in its African setting that reflected the patience and the readiness to listen that marked his entire missionary method. Avoiding denunciation and allegations of false prophecy, it worked by acceptance of what the Qur'an says of Christ, and an effective knowledge of the Bible.[73]

Crowther's influence on the development of a genuinely African Christianity cannot be stressed enough. With his translation work, he was one of the first Africans who contributed to the process of decolonising the African mind.[74] When African Christians, for instance, were given the chance to read the New Testament baptismal accounts in their own languages they began to realise that there was no need for converts to exchange their birth names for European names. With his consecration as the first African bishop and his emphasis on the importance of education Crowther also galvanised a whole generation of African believers.[75] Even when the CMS leadership later opposed Henry Venn's Native Pastorate policy and some young and inexperienced CMS missionaries criticised Crowther's ministry, dismissed his African staff, declared the Niger Mission a failure, and insisted on the appointment of a European bishop as his successor, Crowther's legacy prevailed.[76] In response to the measures taken by CMS, Crowther's son, Dandeson Crowther, organised parts of the Niger Mission into an Anglican church body without CMS involvement in 1892.[77] Sunday Jide Komolafe speaks of 'a palpable triumph of African initiative to stifle European doubts about African administrative and organizational abilities.'[78] However, the real 'triumph', if one wants to use that phrase, is surely the fact that out of the so-called Niger Delta Pastorate the Niger Delta Diocese emerged in 1952. This diocese was instrumental in the formation of many other dioceses and provinces which ultimately joined in the Church of Nigeria, one of the largest and fastest-growing

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73 Ibid., p. 162.

74 Olofinjana, 'Introduction: Towards African Theology in Britain', p. 7.

75 Ibid.

76 Cf. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, pp. 163-164; L. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 175.

77 Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 164.

78 S.J. Komolafe, *The Transformation of African Christianity: Development and Change in the Nigerian Church* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2013), p. 69.

provinces in the Anglican Communion.[79] Other African staff members and supporters of Crowther's work decided to leave the Anglican church (and other denominations dominated by Western missionaries) to form their own churches.[80] Among those new bodies were the United Native African Church, founded in 1891, and the Bethel African Church established ten years later.[81]

EDWARD WALKER AND OTHER CARIBBEAN MISSIONARIES

Another group of black missionaries who played a significant role in taking the gospel to the peoples of West Africa were Christians who came from Caribbean islands, such as Antigua, Barbados and Jamaica.[82] In the early 1840s, missionaries of the Basel Mission were challenged by a local king in the Gold Coast; that if they could present to him some black people who were able to read the Bible his people would turn to the God of the Bible.[83] The king did not believe, as Gareth Griffiths writes, 'that Christianity as a religion was suitable for his people.'[84] Moved by this challenge and the high mortality rate among the Western missionaries – the Gold Coast was known as 'the Whiteman's grave' – the Basel Mission began to recruit former slaves from the Caribbean islands for missionary service.[85] The first 25 Jamaicans arrived in Africa in spring 1843.[86] Among them was Edward Walker who had given a speech shortly before his departure which gives some insight into his motivation and self-identity. Walker said:

> I would like to do something good for my Lord with my hands. If the Lord helps me to be an example for the poor people over there. If I leave you, I do not go to a foreign country. Africa is our country. Our fathers and grandfathers have been brought here by force and we are strangers in this land. But Africa is our proper home. I therefore ask my brothers and sisters to pray for Africa and for us, when we go there: to pray that the Lord may help us and

79 Cf. J.H. Enemugwem, 'A History of the Niger Delta Diocese, 1952-2012', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 25 (2016), p. 139.

80 Olofinjana, 'Introduction: Towards African Theology in Britain', p. 7.

81 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

82 A.N.O. Kwakye, 'Returning African Christians in Mission to the Gold Coast', *Studies in World Christianity* 24/1 (2018), p. 26.

83 Ibid., p. 27.

84 G. Griffiths, 'The Reverend Joseph Jackson Fuller: A 'Native' Evangelist and 'Black' Identity in the Cameroons', in *African Literatures and Beyond: A Florilegium*, ed. by B. Lindfors and G.V. Davis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 70.

85 Kwakye, 'Returning African Christians in Mission to the Gold Coast', p. 27.

86 Ibid., p. 28.

> bless us. We do not trust in ourselves, therefore we are not afraid to go to Africa since He will guard us and help us.[87]

Abraham Nana Opare Kwakye points out that Caribbean missionaries like Walker served as school teachers, evangelists and pastors in the Gold Coast.[88] Some of them returned to the Caribbean after a while, but others stayed on and greatly contributed with their exemplary Christian lifestyles to the growth of the church in that part of Africa. Kwakye summarises their impact as follows:

> Those who stayed served with distinction as God's servants at the forefront of the evangelisation of southern Ghana. They were Africans who returned to Africa as missionaries, looking for opportunity to set an example of a Christian lifestyle for the people of the Gold Coast. Whether as missionary-teachers, missionary-craftsmen, missionary-agriculturalists or missionary-preachers and eventually church leaders, they demonstrated a clear sense of mission right from the beginning. They played a significant role in the development of the Gold Coast.[89]

While Kwakye stresses the Christian lifestyles of the Caribbean missionaries as a key factor of their success, Griffiths points us to two other possible reasons, i.e. 'a shared identity based on colour', and the ability 'to sympathize with their fellow blacks in ways that white missionaries did far less frequently.'[90]

Surely, the work of black missionaries from both outside Africa and also indigenous missionaries, most of them liberated slaves, would not have been possible without the vision of evangelical abolitionists. Hanciles comments:

> In the divine providence the abolition movement stimulated one of the most compelling missionary movements in history. Critical to that story is the black element, so much overlooked or marginalized in popular accounts. The European dimension was hugely significant, but black missionaries, predominantly ex-African slaves, were key agents in the establishment and spread of Christianity in the African context. In truth, the "back to Africa" movements rested in mixed motives and never quite fulfilled expectations […] But numerical evaluation is an inadequate tool for measuring intangibles

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87 Quoted in Kwakye, 'Returning African Christians in Mission to the Gold Coast', p. 31.

88 Cf. Kwakye, 'Returning African Christians in Mission to the Gold Coast', pp. 38-40.

89 Ibid., p. 42.

90 Griffiths, 'The Reverend Joseph Jackson Fuller', pp. 70-71.

like ideological influence and transfer of consciousness […] Crucially, white abolitionists were among the first to recognize that African initiatives and African empowerment were indispensable for the fulfilment of the Scriptural promise that "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God."[91]

CONCLUSION

The fruitful ministries of African missionaries like Daniel Coker, Lott Carey, Johanna Kazahendike, Bernhard Mizeki, William Wadé Harris, Samuel Crowther and many others surely challenge the popular claim that Christianity was the white man's religion, which 'imposed a hegemonic structure on indigenous people, enforced by the use of literacy and ecclesiastical structures, with the latter replacing traditional charismatic activity and mysticism with modern bureaucratic rationalism.'[92] The growth of the African Church in the 19th and early 20th century was not only the result of the work of European and North American missionaries but also of many African mission workers who devoted their lives to spreading the Christian message. These pioneers served as co-workers of Western missionaries or independently. Most of them received the missionary call in Africa, others were called overseas and returned to the continent of their ancestors. Their approach to mission was usually characterised by cultural sensitivity and the ability to contextualise themselves and their message. Whatever their circumstances and backgrounds they are a lasting reminder of the huge contributions that many sons and daughters of Africa made to God's mission on their home continent.

[91] Hanciles, 'Back to Africa: White Abolitionists and Black Missionaries', pp. 215-216.

[92] Wild-Wood, 'Evangelists: The Case of Kivebulaya', p. 183.