

IN the mid-1800s, while war and conflict ravaged Yorubaland, a disgraced *Alaafin* was said to have cursed his detractors by prophesying that slaves and sons of slaves would one day rule them. He then took his own life.

Around the same time in the distant city of Kano, Mallam Ibrahim, the founder of the Isawa Muslims, was said to have told his followers that they should wait for people with 'transparent ears' to tell them the rest of the message. He was executed, and his followers scattered to the winds.

The sources for the telling of both prophecies are not completely without suspicion, but their words did indeed come true.

Recaptives and their children - slaves and sons of slaves - in Sierra Leone returned to what is now Nigeria to spread the message of Christianity and antislavery, undermining traditional authority and becoming key figures in the new dispensation. People with 'transparent ears' - oyinbos, batures, onyochas - followed the Sierra Leonians into the region and also helped to spread the message of Christianity deep into the interior. The territory would never be the same and eventually, something of a country in the form of modern Nigeria emerged.

Now let us come back to the present, late twentieth century nation of Nigeria. Few could have imagined that such a short time later in the span of history, the area, then steeped in 'traditional belief' would be one of the world's largest Christian and Muslim nations.

In fact, statistics state that Nigeria, based on the level of regular participation in worship services by her citizens, is the most religious country in the world.

Both Islam and Christianity have rich histories which have added much to Nigeria's development. However, because we are presently now in the Christmas season, I will here focus on some aspects of Nigeria's Christian heritage.

Two hundred years ago, the number of Christians in what is now Nigeria was unlikely to be more than 100. Today, Nigeria has the largest number of Anglicans of any country, including Great Britain. Not to be outdone, the Nigerian Catholics boast the largest Catholic seminary in the world, and one of their own, Cardinal Francis Arinze, is being tipped to be the next Pope.

Numerous other Protestant denominations count their members in the millions, and the number of African, Independent, and Pentecostal churches is almost un-

1000 years of Christianity: A historian's Xmas message



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countable. Christianity is also one of the major faces of Nigeria internationally. Some years ago, the New York Times pictured a group of Papua New Guineans praying with a missionary after a devastating tidal wave had ravaged their country.

That missionary was not from Europe or North America, but was a Nigerian. When an American academic attended Catholic mass in Durban, South Africa at Christmas time two years ago, he was surprised to find that the priest in charge was Nigerian. When an almost entirely Nigerian church burned down in New York City a year or so ago, it was front page news.

Finally, my own pastor at St. Andrew's Episcopal (Anglican) Church in New Haven, Connecticut, USA is a Nigerian - Rev. Moses Aderibole!

Who, or what, brought about this revolution in Christianity in Nigeria so that by the end of the twentieth century the country would be at the centre of World Christianity? The first known contact with Christianity in what

is now Nigeria was not along the Atlantic coast as one might assume.

Rather it was along Nigeria's other coast - the Sahel (Arabic for coast) - on the southern fringes of the Sahara. According to Professor Jacob Ade Ajayi, Nigeria's senior historian, the Christian message was first brought to Nigeria around 900AD from Christian Nubia. The recipients of the message a millenium ago were the Kanuri of the Kanem-Borno Empire. Christianity did not survive there, and the next known contact with Christianity was the more well known evangelical attempts of Portuguese priests who accompanied Portuguese traders to Benin and later Warri starting in the early 1500s.

These missionary efforts were too tied up with Portuguese political and economic interests to be a viable long term option for the rulers of the two kingdoms. In 1710, another Catholic evangelical attempt was made, this time from across the Sahara. Two Franciscan monks actually made it to Katsina, dying

there of sickness before they could preach their message.

There were also Catholic attempts at evangelism of the 'Kororofa Kingdom' - the ancestors of today's Jukuns - and of Borno around the same time.

Again, none had a lasting impact. Christian missions worldwide were quite minimal until the evangelical revival of England in the mid-1700s. Out of that movement came antislavery and a desire to spread the Christian gospel worldwide.

These twin objectives were combined in Sierra Leone, the place where a large number of those now considered Nigerians first became Christians largely through the evangelical efforts of the Loyalist African-Americans who had been settled there first. The ones who led the recaptive emigration back to Nigeria were not from Sierra Leone, however, and they were also not from the Nigerian south.

They were two Hausa men who had been emancipated in Trinidad. These two men stopped in Freetown and many captives decided

Wiebe
Boer

Perspectives of a Nigerian-American



to join them in their return to Nigeria. They left for Badagry on 1 April, 1839 to launch the antislavery and Christian revolutions of the region.

These first emigrants from Freetown were followed by a large number of well educated and highly skilled captives who spread throughout the Niger Delta, Yorubaland, Igboland, and a handful even north of the Niger, serving as traders, artisans, educators and itinerant evangelists.

They paved the way for Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the other great heroes of Nigerian Christianity. They also solicited for missionary assistance from Europe, beginning the long involvement of Western missionaries with the church in Nigeria. Others came from Brazil to Lagos, bringing with them the architectural styles that are seen throughout Nigeria as well as Catholicism and Catholic missionaries from Europe.

What is unknown to many though, is that a large number of these Western missionaries were also of African descent. For example, most of the so-called Scottish Presbyterian missionaries of Calabar in the 1800s were actually Jamaicans! So many Jamaicans wanted to go into missionary service in Calabar that the Presbyterian training college in Jamaica was called Calabar College.

After the vital role of Africans and those of African descent in the first decades of Christianity in Nigeria, the rise of imperialism also brought a rise in white domination of church government. This stifled church growth to an extent, but the work of the thousands of indigenous Christian evangelists, most of their names now

lost to history, carried on a pace in spite of all efforts by Westerners to dominate and control the direction of Christianity in Nigeria.

Many critics argue that Christianity grew because of its close association with colonialism. It was not, however, until after 1960 that the explosive growth of Christianity in Nigeria and the rest of Africa really took place, negating the validity of all such criticisms.

Christianity is now thriving in Nigeria, and, like Islam, can be found throughout the nation, from the desert to the Delta. Both, then, should be elements of unity rather than division.

We are in the midst of a revolution in World Christianity where the centre of Christianity is moving away from the West and towards the non-Western world, to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. China, for instance, has more practicing Christians than all of Western Europe. Nigeria is now a central part of the Christian world, and it is important for Nigerians celebrating Christmas to remember that much of the spread and success of Christianity in Nigeria was due to the efforts of Nigerians and other Africans rather than the white missionary heroes who are usually given the credit.

In chapter sixteen of Chinua Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, we are told, "The arrival of the missionaries had caused quite a stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man." The other five were Africans and the time has come for historians and Christians alike to give them their historical due.