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**THE RISE OF ETHIOPIAN CHURCHES IN NIGERIA: A REACTION  
AGAINST RELIGIOUS COLONISATION IN AFRICA**

**Mepaiyeda Solomon M.**

Department of Religious Studies  
University of Ibadan

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**Abstract**

Colonisation of Africa by the European nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could be adjudged as a means of development in some facets of life, yet its resultant effects among others was cultural enslavement of the indigenes. Such negative effect was rebuffed by a few educated Africans with nationalistic consciousness. In a similar vein, African Christians reacted against what can be termed religious colonisation orchestrated by European Missionaries who among other evils, ostracised African Christians from the mainline churches because of polygamy, condemned the institution of chieftaincy and grossly discriminated against the natives in the polity of the Church. The inhuman treatment of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Rev James Johnson exemplified this anti-African attitude of the European Missionaries. Hence the emergence of Ethiopian Churches in Nigeria towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century served as a religious expression of nationalism in Africa. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the dynamism of religious expressions of nationalism in Nigeria as typified by The African Church and others with nationalistic tendencies with a view to determining how the claims of religious nationalists interfaced with Henry Venn's principles of evangelisation in Africa. Historical method was adopted for the collection of data.

**Keywords:** Colonisation of Africa, Religious Colonialism, Ethiopian Churches, Nationalism.

## Introduction

It is worthwhile to attempt a clarification of two concepts, that is, Ethiopian Churches and religious colonization. Ethiopian Churches refer to Churches of African origin with nationalistic consciousness. They were churches that rebuffed foreign domination in African Christianity. Kalu asserted that Ethiopianism has three broad strands-African American diasporic experience, western African and southern African expressions (Kalu, 2005: 259). Similarly, he described those championing the cause of feminism as ‘daughters of Ethiopia’ (Ogungbile & Akinade, 2010: 37).

Though the word “Ethiopian” is mostly used in South Africa, Central Africa and the Congo for political emancipation (Osamolu et al, 2014: 3), in Nigerian Christianity, it applies to resentment by African converts at the unscriptural and racial behaviour of the white missionaries. Therefore Ethiopian churches are part of a wide variety of churches that emanated in Africa in the nineteenth century with the aim of making Christianity indigenous, vibrant and homely. The word Ethiopian was adopted in describing these churches probably because historically, Ethiopia is the only African country that was not colonized by any Western nation (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1999: 13). However, one is still amazed by the connection that Ethiopian churches have with Biblical King Solomon, the father of the founders of Ethiopia that made them to have recourse to his book in their expression of colour identity. For instance, the Songs of Solomon chapter six was quoted by the African Church, Bethel at its inauguration in 1901. Could this be a coincidence or deliberate action?

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to state that though these older churches among the indigenous churches in Africa seceded from the mission churches, however, it is interesting to note that they still replicate the liturgy and polity of their parent churches. Examples of Ethiopian Churches in Nigeria were Ebenezer/ Native Baptist Church (1888) (Ayegboyin & Ishola: 36) and The African Church Bethel (1901), both established in Lagos (Ayegboyin & Ishola: 36 & 38).

Political colonization is a process by which the migrants gain significant privileges over indigenous people (Wikipedia, 2020) after establishing control over the latter, but religious colonization is a process whereby the indigenous people are removed from their traditional beliefs and turned into a new religious orientation. This is exemplified by Abrahamic religions in Africa which used missionary strategies to attract the natives, made them to jettison their indigenous religions and adopt Christianity and Islam as their new religions.

The most disturbing aspect of the endeavours of European or White Missionaries was their negative disposition towards their African counterparts on mission fields seeing them as lacking the acumen for leadership. Secondly, these foreigners showed disdain for black Christians whose cultural values were considered idolatrous. Even some cultural practices that are not opposed to biblical teachings were grossly rejected by the white missionaries.

The effect of this disposition was the imposition of Christianity practised within the garb of western culture. This is a kind of spiritual enslavement through actions that set boundaries against the indigenous people which generated disaffection among some African Christians who began to crave for emancipation from what could be seen as religious colonization.

### **Precursors that Gave Impetus to Ethiopianism in Africa**

From the teachings and emphases of some of the charismatic and prophetic figures that arose in the late nineteenth century and at the wake of the twentieth century, there are indications that their concern was to carry out evangelistic mandate with African touch. This served as one of the pillars that the quest for religious emancipation rested on. These prophetic figures included William Wade Harris of Liberia (Haliburton, 1971: 176), Garrick Sokari Braide of Niger Delta in Nigeria (Ekebuisi, 2020) and Isaiah Shembe of South Africa (Oosthuizen, 1992: 28), who in this paper have been identified as precursors of Ethiopianism through their teachings.

The first display of Africanness by Wade Harris was manifested when he jettisoned European dress and substituted it with a long white robe with black bands across his chest (Ayegboyin & Ishola: 49). This happened after his release from prison on account of his disdain for American style of government in Liberia. In addition, the recognition of African worldview propelled his stance on exorcism as a means of addressing one of the existential realities in African spirituality. This is at variance with the missionaries' stereotyped liturgy that did not address the activities of demons and spirits in the mainline churches at that time. Furthermore, Harris' preference for polygamy for Africans stemmed from its cultural and socio-economic importance; though he himself recognized monogamy as the ideal form of marriage (Ayegboyin & Ishola: 53).

Moreover, another African value that he recommended was communalism as against the individualism of the Europeans. For him, in order to enhance social relationship, obedience to the Ten Commandments is key and in the spirit of good neighbourliness, victims of suicide should not be neglected but should be sympathized with and given decent burial.

For Sokari Braide, his habitual solitary prayer with focus on divine intervention in the plight of Africans not only from the colonial lords but also from spiritual slavery is an evidence of Ethiopian spirit. This is further buttressed by his recommendation of Christian liturgy with African colouration which includes the use of native language, songs and prayers (Mepaiyeda, 2018: 333). By this, he believed that Christianity would become relevant to Africans. Another factor which was adjudged as treasonable offence by the colonial government was Braide's prophesies in 1916 that the days of Europeans in Africa were over. For the latter, the prophet was inciting the blacks against the whites and so his political sentiment should be nipped in the bud, hence his incarceration and eventual death few months after his release from prison. Nevertheless, his legacies linger through his movement that later metamorphosed to Christ Army Church.

The spectacular contributions of a prophetic figure from South Africa, Isaiah Shembe is very germane to this discussion. According to Sundkler (1961: 130), many South Africans with nationalistic tendencies were attracted to Shembe's prophetic ministry and saw him as the political Messiah appointed by God to break the yoke of oppression imposed on the Blacks by the Europeans. Notably among his contributions was emphasis on African Christian Music and strong opposition to apartheid. Erlmann (1991: 51) states that while Shembe's music was a reaction to the resentment of the missionaries to the people's culture and world-view, it was so composed in order to enhance African expressions of Christianity leveraging on the symbols of Zulu political autonomy.

Secondly, Shembe developed an eschatological doctrine of apartheid whereby he argued that there would be reversed colour bar in heaven where the blacks would be admitted while the whites turned away. He added that those blacks who were martyred for their resistance to racist government would be raised to comfort.

### **Situations that Led to the Rise of Ethiopian Churches**

The need for cultural liberation has been identified as a factor in the emergence of Ethiopian churches. In order to make Christianity relevant to African people, the indigenous people believed that African culture that are in congruence with Biblical teachings or principles should not be discarded, hence they resolved to indigenize Christianity. Cultural practices such as polygamy and holding of chieftaincy titles were allowed. David Barrett corroborates this position when he states that independency reflects a rebellion against a Christianity that had become “over-Europeanised” (Ayeboyin & Ishola: 24).

There was a longing in the hearts of several Africans to find a mode of religious expression, which is psychologically and sociologically satisfying. Therefore, by incorporating African culture and consciousness into Christianity by indigenous churches, European customs and traditions were resiliently rejected. However, scholars like Meyer opine that though concepts such as inculturation, indigenization and contextualization have been used as authentic expression of African Christianity, the irresolvable question remains how to be Christian and African at the same time (Meyer, 2004: 454-456). This is because every efforts geared towards incorporating African culture in Christianity could lead to dualism. In addition he expresses the notion that Africanization of Christianity has been problematized, seeing it as the idea of some Ethiopians alone whereas it has been an integral part of missionary Christianity. However, the argument of Meyer cannot be said to be a holistic expression because the Ethiopians pushing for Africanization were convinced that it is possible to be an African while maintaining Christian ideals at the same time. This therefore negates the fear of syncretism and proves that failure to incorporate African cultures in African Christianity will make the people much less Africans.

Secondly, the quest for native emancipation through indigenized leadership is another factor that inspired the rise of Ethiopian Churches. The contribution of Henry Venn in 1846 was very significant to this quest by Ethiopian churches because in his 7<sup>th</sup> Mission Principle for the evangelization of Africa, Venn advocated for native agency which was basic to the development of the mission in Africa (Shank, 1983: 31). In order to realize this vision, he suggested the training of indigenous people to take up leadership roles. According to him, Christianity will thrive in Africa if the natives are given the opportunity to advance it. Therefore, he canvassed that the missionaries’ stay on mission fields should be brief so that as early as possible, they could be replaced by indigenes.

The situation in the mainline churches at that time was that positions of stewardship, leadership and authority were carefully regulated and the people who were not well educated could not expect to go far. Several of these charismatic figures therefore, saw the Mission Churches as institutions which impeded their opportunity to utilize their charisma and genuine gifts of leadership. Consequently, a number of illiterates and semi-literate prophetic figures, who found themselves criticised or frustrated in the Older Churches, found a refuge in the indigenous institutions (Ayeboyin & Ishola: 26).

This nationalistic feeling of Ethiopian churches is exemplified by the event that led to the formation of Native/Ebenezer Baptist Church in Lagos in 1888 (Osamolu et al: 3), a product of the dispute between Rev. Moses Ladejo Stone, Pastor of the first Baptist Church in Lagos and Rev. David (a missionary in charge). Several reasons were adduced for the rift but authentically, disparity in salary structure paid to the white missionaries and African clergy is spotted. The effrontery of Rev. Stone to request for the same scale as that of his white counterparts resulted in his dismissal by Rev. Stone but the congregation who supported the indigenous clergy formed the “Native Baptist Church” taking the name “Ebenezer” later. Rev. Stone however re-united with the missionaries in 1894 and the Ebenezer Baptist Church joined the Baptist Convention of Nigeria in 1915.

Similarly, Ayandele posits that following the ill-treatment of Rev. James Johnson by Bishop Tugwell, there was a mass exodus of African members from both the St. Jude’s Church, Ebute- Metta and St Paul’s Church, Breadfruit, Lagos who formed the African Church, Bethel (Ayandele, 1966: 202). At least about six hundred members under the leadership of Chief J.K. Coker left the Anglican Church for what is perceived as high-handedness of the European against the indigenous workers.

Reminiscing on the crisis which gave birth to the African Church, Peter Adebisi said the scenario was a product of the shabby treatment given to James Johnson, a graduate from Sierra Leone who had a great desire for the creation of an African Independent Church (Adebisi, 1995: 101). This desire led him to Lagos to assist in the creation of the Native Pastorate Church. This was arranged by the C.M.S. London, with a view towards self-support and self-propagation for natives. From Lagos, Johnson was sent to Abeokuta in the hope that in Abeokuta, which was a native independent country, not under foreign government, he might become a native Bishop there and thereby create a native national Church. But the indigenous ministers were used by European missionaries to rise against him opposing his pious arrangement of discipline. Thus he was again moved out of Abeokuta to become the Vicar of St. Paul’s Breadfruit. Lagos.

In order to realize the vision of indigenous leadership in Africa, the C.M.S. invited Johnson to Great Britain in 1899 to be consecrated as the Assistant Bishop of the Niger. In fact, he was given a promise of being made full bishop if he could raise ten thousand pounds on his return to West Africa. With his enthusiasm coupled with his charismatic nature, Johnson raised six thousand pounds by the time he reached the Gold Coast on his way from Britain (Adebisi, 1995: 102). However, Johnson faced stiff opposition from the Diocesan Bishop of Lagos who did not only prevent him from raising the needed funds but went ahead to place another Vicar at St. Paul’s Breadfruit without making arrangements for James Johnson in respect of accommodation and from where he would operate as the Assistant Bishop.

Despite the appeal from members of Breadfruit, and the letter from the headquarters of the Church Missionary Society in London to the Church Committee in Lagos in 1901, stating the best way to handle James Johnson, Bishop Tugwell decided to eject him with ignominy from his Lagos residence. Even the assurance by he CMS. to bear a large proportion of the cost of maintaining the Niger Delta pastorate as well as the stipend of the Assistant Bishop fell on deaf ears.

In a similar vein, Bishop Ajayi Crowther was discredited for all his efforts most especially on the Niger Mission. Earlier, his consecration caused disaffection between



Henry Venn and European missionaries in Africa, especially under the leadership of Henry Townsend. In one of the petitions, Townsend wrote;

Native teachers of whatever grade have been received and respected by the Chief and people only as being the agents or servants of white men... not because they are worthy... Our esteemed brother Mr. Crowther was often treated as the white man's inferior ... as the country remained heathen, no native who had no traditional title or rank could command respect outside the mission village, except as the agent or servant of the white man (Adebiyi, 1995: 100).

He elaborated this by saying further thus, "there is one other view we must not lose sight of viz that as the negro feels a great respect for a white man, that God kindly gives a great talent to the white man in trust to be used for the negro's good. Shall we shift the responsibility? Can we do it without sin?" (Isichei, 1995: 229).

It was circumstances like this which opened the eyes of African Christians to the contemptuous attitude of the European missionaries to them and therefore paved the way for agitations for autonomy. Hastings stated that the attitude of the Whites against Africans could be traced to two major factors- extreme ignorance of the African societies and impregnable confidence in the overwhelming superiority of the Europeans over other people (Hastings, 1976: 38).

Records equally show that there was the separation of the Niger Delta Pastorate from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Lagos. This was as a result of the bitter conflict between young missionaries of the CMS and Bishop Crowther and his agents before the latter's death in 1891. The young missionaries had planned to remove what they considered to be the abuses beside the racial prejudices displayed by the white leadership. This led to the separation of the Delta Pastorate under Bishop Crowther's son, Archdeacon Dandeson Crowther from the CMS in Lagos but not from the Anglican Communion Canterbury. A reunification was also witnessed in 1930 (Beyer, 1997: 4). In addition, a rift ensued especially after the lecture of Edward Blyden, a Negro scholar in 1890 which spurred a conglomerate of members from different Protestant Churches to form the "United Native African Church". He contended that firm Christianity would be a mirage as long as the evangelization of the continent was left in the hands of the Europeans (Blyden, 1967: 347).

Hence, at its inauguration, the objectives of UNA were the evangelization of African continent devoid of foreign forms of Christianity, the establishment of the pastorate solely constituted by African indigenes and improving the standard of living of clergy and laity (Sanneh, 1983: 214-217). They however retained the doctrines and forms of worship of their parent churches. This clearly shows that, racial or cultural reasons played significant roles in these mass movements than doctrinal beliefs (Beyer, 1997: 4). It must be noted that the effect of nationalism that orchestrated the whole situation and agitation within the commercial and political administrative circles provided the ground for Ethiopian movements in the churches.

### **The Roles of Mojola Agbebi and the Connection of the Diasporic Ethiopians**

Mojola Agbebi who was labeled in his lifetime as the Apostle of the African personality (Okonkwo, 2020) played a vital role in promoting African consciousness. Though born in Ilesha, Osun State, Nigeria, he was of Ekiti extraction. His father became a Catechist after he was set free from slavery by the British Navy and trained in Christianity. Such background must have made Agbebi to jettison any attachments to the Whites but he retained his African identity. Okonkwo noted that the most noteworthy characteristic of Agbebi was opposition to European culture and colonialism, though one would have expected that being a product of missionary school, he would have imbibed European culture and grasped the opportunities of Europe travels like his contemporaries did. This stance of African patriotism might have led to his dismissal from the CMS in 1880 (Okonkwo, 2020).

The strongest influence in the Africanisation of Agbebi was the atmosphere of Lagos where he spent his boyhood and youth. Lagos at that time was a centre of race pride with the presence of Negroes in a place deeply concerned with the condition of the black man. The racial nationalism became more pronounced after his visit to Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1894. It was at the latter that he saw for the first time the image of the black angels carved on a site and he interpreted that to mean that the spirit of the black is still alive. Agbebi applauded the effort and reasoned that to put white angels on a black man's grave would have been an insult to the dead and a mark of a rebellious spirit against the maker of the African continent.

The connection that Agbebi had with some Negroes went a long way to boost his Ethiopian stance. These included James Africanus Horton, a Sierra-Leonian physician; Robert Campbell – Jamaican and Martin Delany who came to settle in Lagos, Nigeria in 1859 and Nathaniel T. King, a Sierra Leonian physician and musician. In addition, through his contact with other Negroes in the United States when he travelled in 1903, Edward Bruce, a Pan Africanist hailed Agbebi as the new voice from Africa and proclaimed him second to Blyden in scholarly ability and general attitude, an embodiment of the African personality and a link between Blacks in Africa and America (Ayandele: 187).

The following developments resulted from the contacts Agbebi made with the blacks in the diaspora. One, the advocacy that vernacular should be given as much prominence as the English language. This was to corroborate the earlier agitation from the pro – Yoruba group. Two, the publishing of a book titled *Iwe Alo* – a collection of riddles and puzzles in 1885, a Yoruba literature seen as second to Crowther's vocabulary and recommended for every Yoruba (Aku). Three, the recommendation of the development of Yoruba alphabet based on the conviction that the English equivalent is unsuitable for writing Yoruba. Besides, he believed that language is a major determinant of national culture. He argued further that the missionaries would fare better if the vernacular is used in evangelical work and in church services. Four, the defense of polygamy in line with Wilmot Blyden's argument that it was the most suitable type of marriage for traditional African society. Although he was personally a monogamist, he berated the criticism of the Europeans against polygamy which he claimed stands in comparison with incest, rape and prostitution that pervaded European society. That is why he showed tolerance towards polygamists in his missionary activities as a clergy of the Baptist denomination.

Besides the aforementioned, Agbebi was remembered for wearing African dress at all times except whenever he was on the pulpit; and for changing his name in 1894 from David Brown Vincent to Mojola Agbebi. That is why a tribute was paid to him at

that time as the only African who was bold enough to discard European garb and names. Finally, Agbebi dedicated himself to the cause of African evangelization and became a moving force behind the establishment of the Native/Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1888, United Native African Church (UNAC) in 1891 and the African Church Bethel, 1901. No wonder George Shepperson, labelled him an Ethiopian to the core and he was elected President of the African communion in 1913 (Okonkwo, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite the laudable achievements of this Ethiopian, it is surprising to note that as an ordained clergy, Agbebi still defended institutions such as domestic slavery, human sacrifice and cannibalism which were contained in his speech to the Universal Races Congress in 1911 (Okonkwo, 2020). One should wonder if that was not a betrayal of the ideals of Christianity? Was Agbebi pretending to be a Christian whereas he was yet to be totally converted from heathenism? This questions call for further enquiries.

### Conclusion

From this research, the following facts can be deduced: the dehumanisation of the black race by the Europeans through colonialism, the suppression of African traditional institutions and the coercion of Africans to practice Christianity in the garb of Western culture. However, the rise of Ethiopianists in the political and social contexts exerted a significant influence on few educated African converts in mission churches who began to react against what can be seen as religious colonialism in Africa which resulted in the emergence of Ethiopian and Zionist churches. Despite this effort, from that period to the present, a pertinent question remains on what has become of Christianity since it has been handled by Africans.

It is observed that Christianity today is still wearing the garment of colonialism because some churches, Mainline and Pentecostal-Charismatic still retain European mode of dressing. Secondly, in Nigeria for instance, it is observed that the imperialist attitude of European missionaries is still rearing its ugly head among some religious leaders and so colonialism in the church today is not by the foreigners but by few lucky Africans who decide to enslave co-labourers in the mission fields. Godliness with contentment has been replaced with materialism and empire building, while racial discrimination by the Europeans has been replaced by ethnic bigotry by African religious leaders. All of these have raised the question in the minds of curious Africans whether the moratorium on European missionaries was justified or whether it was not too premature.

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