

Preparing Converts for the Second Coming of Christ

The Encounter of Seventh-day Adventist Missionaries with Indigenous Issues in Nigeria from 1900 to the 1940s¹

Chigemezi Nnadozie Wogu

Abstract

This article explores the intricate and complex relationships of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries with indigenous issues during their mission work in Nigeria. It argues that despite their relative success, the approach of the missionaries to indigenous culture was coloured by points of conflict and the stark difference to their vision of Christ's *Parousia*. As a result, indigenous issues like the position of women in the society and public matters, polygamy and charismaticism in worship were divested of cultural significance and in some cases demonized and replaced with the Adventist alternative. Preparing converts for the second coming of Christ meant the disengagement of any cultural practice that seemingly turned the focus of converts away from the imminence of the kingdom of the otherworldly.

1. Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist conviction of an imminent return of Christ pushed them to the far ends of the world. This is a ubiquity that cannot be overemphasized. That conviction brought Adventist missionaries to Africa with an “invitation to join an eschatological community” (Bosch 1991, 123)

¹ I am most grateful to the editors and especially the peer-reviewers whose critical comments provided the necessary improvements made in this article.

that proclaimed the Three Angels' Messages. However, an end-time proclamation also meant an encounter with challenges of various indigenous cultures and practices. How Adventist missionaries dealt with complex cultural issues while preaching the future Christ event still remains an engaging academic endeavor in mission history.

There are a number of scholarly works which analyze the encounter of western missionaries with indigenous cultural issues in Africa. Issues like power relations, colonialism, ancestor worship, rites of passage have played significant roles in the discourse. While many have viewed western missionaries as soul mates of colonialism, others have focused on the positive contributions of missionaries to the development and civilization of African cultures and societies (Kaplan 1995, Samson 2004, Fiedler 2018). Among Adventists in general, there is a dearth of academic treatment of such discourse. An exception is Stefan Höschele's *magnum opus*, *Christian Remnant – African Folk Church*, which analyses Adventist missionary engagements with the traditional Tanzanian culture among other themes (Höschele 2007).² Particularly in Nigeria, there are only two main works that highlight the encounter of Christianity and African cultures (Kuranga 1991 and Alalade 2008).

Consequently, the key question to be explored in this article is how Seventh-day Adventist missionaries dealt with indigenous issues during their mission work in Nigeria. As will be shown in this paper, in the face of the imminent *Parousia*, the missionary approach to indigenous culture was marked by points of conflict and stark difference. It has to be maintained that not all elements of culture were demonized or discouraged. Those practices that were seemingly considered harmless were even used for the purposes of mission propagation. For instance, the ancient talking-drum, an element of communication across Nigeria's various ethnic groups, was used to call people to worship on Sabbath morning (Maxwell 1936). In some mission reports, aspects of culture like hospitality and the manner of singing have been praised. In fact, one female Adventist missionary, Mary J. Vine, once compared the manner in which native Abuans (a tribe in Southern Nigerian) learnt and sang Adventist hymns to the type of singing that may emanate from the 144,000 in Revelation (Vine 1931). Thus, what follows is not a complete historical account of Adventism in Nigeria, which has been attempted

² See chapter 7: "Adventism and Culture in Traditional and Modern Tanzanian Society," 259 ff.

by some, albeit incomplete in several ways.³ Rather, this is a historical reflection on and analysis of the subject of Adventist missionizing in Nigeria, from 1900 to the 1940s with reference to three crucial cultural issues: the position of women in society, polygamy, and charismatic tendencies in worship. After highlighting the peculiar context of Nigeria, the nature and approaches of the missionaries will be outlined. This will pave way for the three case studies that form the major enquiry in this article.

2. Establishing an Adventist Mission in Nigeria: Context and Beginnings

While the earliest Christian mission to Nigeria can be traced back to the 16th century⁴ and Protestants arrived in the late 1840s, Seventh-day Adventists arrived at the beginning of the 1900s and officially established their mission in 1914. 1914 was the year Lord Frederick D. Lugard of the British Empire amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates to form today's Nigeria, a product of British colonization. The colonization of Nigeria was a prolonged development (Falola and Heaton 2008, 109).

In the case of Nigeria, Falola and Heaton have argued that colonization "brought under the sole rule of the United Kingdom previously independent states that had been interconnected commercially and to some extent culturally over the previous centuries, but had not experienced political unification of any kind" (ibid.). Before the colonial period there had existed nation states of the Hausa-Fulani, Oyo, Ijebu, Ife, Kanem Bornu, the many Igbo kingdoms, the Benin kingdom, etc. Hence, the 1914 amalgamation succeeded in lumping together several nation states and kingdoms (Falola and Oyeniyi 2015, 23 ff.). No wonder Sir Hugh Clifford, Governor General of Nigeria (1919–1925) once dismissed the idea of Nigeria as a nation: he argued Nigeria is "a collection of independent Native states, separated from one another by great distances, by

³ Nigerian Adventists have attempted to document the history of Adventism in Nigeria. Most have taken time frames, thematic or regional approaches to trace Adventist history in Nigeria. Yet until now, there is no one definite attempt to document the history of Adventism in Nigeria. Nevertheless, what exists remains commendable: Agboola 1987; Alalade 2008; Kuranga 1991; Maigadi 2005.

⁴ "The first Portuguese ships anchored off the cost of the west-central Africa kingdom of Kongo in 1483. Catholicism survived, in an indigenized form, until the late nineteenth century, when a new wave of missionary activity began. It was introduced into the Niger Delta kingdom of Warri in the 1570s; despite long periods without missionaries, it endured until the mid-eighteenth century" (Isichei 1995, 45).

differences of history and traditions and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers” (Coleman 1971, 194). These barriers seen by Sir Hugh Clifford in the 1920s also bring to mind the description of Nigeria by Ken Post and Michael Vickers as a “conglomerate society” where citizens struggle to balance various social identifications (Post and Vickers 1973). It was this environment that Adventism entered. Undeniably, the coming of Seventh-day Adventism to Nigeria happened in two phases (Wogu 2019, 1–13). The first phase comprised the mission attempts of commissioned laymen and self-supporting missionaries. The first attempt to establish the denomination in Nigeria was carried out by James M. Hyatt, a black layman missionary from the United States. Hyatt had been working in Ghana and Sierra Leone and went to Nigeria between 1906 and 1907. Around the same time, in the very South of Nigeria, a young Ghanaian Adventist, Sydney Hayford, was employed as colonial government schoolmaster in Bonny. Simultaneously, he began doing some Adventist mission work and introduced Benjamin I. Tikili to Adventist beliefs. Tikili and his group of growing believers remained “Adventists” until an official Adventist missionary, Jesse C. Clifford, arrived Aba in 1923. Thence, they officially became Adventists after baptism. Tikili later became an ordained Adventist minister in 1924 (Wogu 2019).

Contrastingly, the second phase of the Adventist mission started around 1913 with ordained and commissioned missionaries who built upon the work started in the first phase. This phase brought David C. Babcock together with three other West African workers: R. P. Dauphin (an ordained minister), Samuel D. Morgue and James J. Hamilton (commissioned licentiates). After the Nigerian mission was officially organized in 1913, the Babcock team arrived in 1914 focusing their attention to the West of Nigeria while based in Ibadan. In 1923, the Southern part of Nigeria got its official missionary, Jesse C. Clifford, who got in touch with Benjamin Tikili in Aba, from where Adventism spread in the South of Nigeria (*ibid.*, 1–8). By the mid 1930s, Adventists had touched the major regions of Nigeria. The mission work was now established. The question was how to maintain and grow the burgeoning church in the most populous black nation of the world with its diverse cultural and contextual issues.

3. Mission through Institutional Organizations

As the 1940s set in, Adventism experienced further growth as it used institutions for missionary purposes. George Knight, a key Adventist historian, has

argued that the Adventist denominational mission has always been managed structurally through such organizations: the formation of publishing, administrative, educational, and medical institutions is a distinguishing feature of Adventist mission. It was a feature which began, though unintentionally, early in church's history and was replicated in various mission fields. The use those four types of institutions as mission strategy is what George Knight calls "Adventism's missiological quadrilateral" (Knight 1995, 81).

Specifically, in Nigeria, Adventism's missiological quadrilateral was replicated to a large extent. By the 1940s, Adventism in Nigeria operated educational (notably: Teacher's Training School, Ibadan), health (Ile-Ife Hospital and Jengre Hospital, 1947) and printing institutions (Advent Printing Press, Oke Bola, 1935). These early institutions contributed to the growth of the church as it supported evangelistic efforts and Bible study classes. They not only provided services of education, health and printing resources; they were avenues for training new Adventist converts. In addition, they meant job opportunities for a significant number of these converts. In essence, missionary Adventism in Nigeria began functioning as a holistic movement where the spiritual, mental, social and physical/psychological welfare of the members was catered for. This was not unusual for Protestant missions in those days; other mission organizations also built schools and hospitals alongside their evangelistic mission activities. Nevertheless, the Adventist movement in Nigeria clearly mirrored principles of American Adventism.

4. Encountering and Dealing with Indigenous Issues

Having explored the major approaches of Adventist missionaries especially early in the history of Adventism in Nigeria it is important to note that they were successful in gaining converts (Izima 1973, 43). However, the missionaries at the time faced tremendous challenges in maintaining the established mission. In their encounter with culture, Adventist missionaries faced peculiar complexities in relation to indigenous practices of their converts. This section will focus on the challenges that arose. Hence, in what follows, issues like the position of women in the society, polygamy, spiritism and charismatic influences will be highlighted.

4.1 *The Place of Women in Society and in Adventist Mission Praxis*

The following case study of the Igbo, among whom Adventism progressed steadily in the 1930s and up to the 1960s, shows that the important position of women in the society was not taken seriously by Adventist missionaries. Igbo women had a history of battling male oppression through communal efforts. Moreover, Igbo women played a powerful social, political and economic role in the society. They formed political, social and economic systems or institutions for governing their own issues in the Igbo Traditional society (Ezeigbo 1990 and Nnoroviele 1998). However, colonialism and Christian missions seemed not to recognize this fact. While British colonial authorities excluded women from political power through the indirect rule system, Christian missionaries often had their own agenda for women.

As much as Christian missionaries made education a priority for their converts, according to Van Allen, the purpose of educating girls was to train them largely “to be Christian wives and mothers, not for jobs or for citizenship” (Van Allen 1975, 25). She continues, missionaries

were not necessarily against women’s participation in politics – clergy in England, as in America, could be found supporting women’s suffrage. But in Africa their concern was the church, and for the church they needed Christian families. Therefore, Christian wives and mothers, not female political leaders, was the missions’ aim. (Ibid.)

This will be demonstrated in two ways: (1) the involvement of in traditional rites and (2) women’s participation in political and public order.

4.1.1 *Women and Traditional Rites: The “Fattening” Rite of Passage*

The Adventist missionaries had similar views of training women and girls. William McClements, in his plea for funding to start a girl’s school in Nigeria, decried the lack of educated Christian girls and especially the difficulty in finding Christian wives for the educated men of the mission. For McClements, when the Adventist young men left the training school to the mission field, there was need for “good intelligent Christian wives to help them in their homes and in their work” (McClements 1930, 5). Why was this so important for McClements and the Adventist mission in Nigeria? McClements claimed that the new crop of educated young men already had enough “degrading customs” to contend with outside their homes. These customs should not be seen in Adventist

homes. Yet, as McClements complained, “homes of several of our brightest teachers are blighted by the influence of unsuitable wives” (ibid.).

Citing the popular Igbo tradition of *Iru-mgbede* or *Nkpu* “fattening,” young women of marriage age were separated for a period of six months before marriage. The women are to do no work but eat and sleep as well as go through traditional education and initiation. McClements demonized the practice by asking, “how can young Adventist teachers take such wives; I am glad to say our members have taken their stand against this heathenish practice, but still things are not what they should be” (ibid.). Hence the need for an Adventist Girls’ school. Yet McClements and other Adventist missionaries⁵ failed to understand that *Iru-mgbede* or *Nkpu* was a rite of passage. It was one of the most famous pre-marriage preparations where participants were specifically given marriage instructions.⁶ However, Mary Vine saw the rite as an ill-treatment of young women. She argued that some were made to endure the practice for six months if they could afford it. In this vein, any girl who could only partake in the rite for a month was “more fortunate, though she doesn’t realize it, only being subjected to it for one month” (Vine 1933, 11–12).

Obviously, the lack of cultural understanding is apparent in the portrayal of this cultural practice. These missionaries were confronted with the otherness of an alien culture which they must have unconsciously regarded as heathen or degrading when compared to the ideals of their Victorian civilization. In reality, degrading words like “heathen” or “pagan” were popular in the missionaries’ *zeitgeist*. Yet, if Adventist missionaries had forgone their ethnocentrism and undertaken a careful investigation of the practice in discussion, they may have concluded otherwise. The rite was based on a holistic philosophy that gave a single woman ample time to be prepared by older women through intellectual, emotional and physical education for the status of becoming a married woman. As Dioka concluded, during the period of fattening, the women were “formally taught the virtues of womanhood, fidelity to husband, pregnancy rules and childcare, house craft and other necessary requirements for a happy married life” (Dioka 1980, 43).

⁵ See Vine 1933. The rite of passage in itself was not just heathen or degrading, Vine saw the whole elements and practices attached to marriage as “ugly,” “uncivilized” or without “enchantment” as in England.

⁶ The best treatment of this cultural practice is executed by Gregory Okorobia Onwuzurigbo: Onwuzurigbo 1990, 469–472.

The attempt of creating a substitute for a rite that was viewed as ineffective and incompatible to Adventism is similar to Steven Kaplan's conception of "Christianization".⁷ Kaplan used the term to "characterize those cases in which missionaries sought to create Christian versions of traditional African rites and practices" (Kaplan, 1995, 17). Kaplan's treatment shows that advocates of this process were not full supporters of traditional practices. They acknowledged the valuable social and educational functions of the rites. Western missionaries subscribed to this process to cleanse and purify some practices resulting in eliminating the bad and substituting the good. Consequently the process ensured that, "the form generally remained African, the content became Christian" (Kaplan, 1995, 17).

By way of contrast, the Adventist version of Christianization saw no positive value in the fattening rite. Hence, a complete alternative with recourse to Adventist education was proffered as the best solution. Therefore, not only were the missionaries wrong in hastily demeaning and vilifying this cultural practice; they glossed over an enviable opportunity to assimilate a good practice into their mission education program. Instead of appreciating the tradition, the missionaries had an agenda that saw a replacement for this "degrading custom" among Igbo women with Adventist education. By so doing they were creating a system that served as substitute sub-culture which had its own religio-cultural ethos.

4.1.2 Women and Public Order: The Aba Women Riots

Secondly, to the extent that women were the majority of the converts to Christianity, missionaries may have conceived their role in the society to be submissive even though indigenous women protested against unfair authorities. For instance, around December 1929, when Jesse Clifford returned from furlough in England, the Adventist mission buildings in Aba were temporarily used to keep injured refugees as a result of the Women's Riot that had just erupted in November of that year. The riots led by women were the first major challenge to British colonial authority in Nigeria and British West Africa. They began as anti-tax protests by women who were upset with the colonial authorities' plans

⁷ Christianization was one element in the typology of Kaplan developed to show how western missionaries responded to African indigenous cultures. Others were toleration, assimilation, translation, acculturation and incorporation.

to impose direct taxes on Igbo market women. This resulted in the massive opposition of women and came to be known as the “Women’s War” among Nigerians and “Aba Riots” among the British.⁸ By November and December of 1929, women from Owerri, Aba and Calabar had looted factories, destroyed native court buildings and properties including the homes of those associated with Native Courts (Falola and Heaton, 2008, 133).

According to Falola and Heaton, the fact that the Women’s War was organized and carried out by women who did not even have access to education at that time, was an “indication of how frustrated average Nigerians were with the colonial regime and its puppet indirect rulers” (Falola and Heaton, 2008, 133), who were men. The event showed and illustrated the “capacity of average Nigerians to organize and voice their opposition to colonial policy despite the obstacles” (Falola and Heaton, 2008, 133). It is also an identifier of the political and social power controlled by women during these colonial periods. The women protests were one of the most formidable avenues for fostering anti-colonial resistance. It is now widely seen as a turning point in the trajectory of anti-colonial resistance (Falola and Heaton, 2008, 135), which in many ways slipped into the Christian missions. The many schisms of the 1930s which were locally led and resulted in several new indigenous churches, especially in Igboland, testifies to this fact.

What remains relevant from the 1929 event is that as a result of the war, colonial authorities began recognizing women even as Warrant Chiefs as well as members in the Native Courts. It is not sure if Adventist missionaries joined the bandwagon to appreciate this type of local initiatives from women. What is sure is the denouncing of the 1929 event.

Clifford, leader of the Adventist mission in the Southeast reported negatively on the event. According to Clifford, the 1929 event was a “mob, consisting of thousands of native women,” who went around the district,

⁸ Before the 1929 event, a census had been conducted in 1926 to determine those who were eligible to pay tax in the Southeast region. In 1928, an assistant district officer in the Owerri Province ordered local warrant chiefs to conduct a follow up census. In the process, “Women in the region feared that a new census meant they were soon to be taxed as well. Already burdened with supporting families and helping men to pay their taxes, the women of Southeastern Nigeria held mass demonstrations and spread the protests throughout the regions” (Falola and Heaton, 133).

“destroying the post office, looting the stores, releasing the prisoners, and destroying the houses of their chiefs. The markets are closed, for they rob all they meet, and Aba is like a dead town” (Clifford 1930a, 8).

Again, what we see is a hasty conclusion of the priorities of indigenous women. However, there is a more important cause for the way Clifford sounded in his report. Clifford’s emphasis on public order and the disruption of social and political activities was centered on because he could not continue his work as an Adventist missionary (1930a, 8):

It seems rather trying to be thus held up after furlough when there is so much to be done, but we hope it will soon be over, and that it will work out to the advancement of the cause. Truly we must work now, or our ‘little time of peace’ will soon be in the past.

The missionary’s portrayal of the women uprising betrayed his pacifist views and perhaps his implicit support of colonial structures. Nevertheless, what really bothered Clifford was the fact that the uprising brought the advancement of the Adventist cause to a standstill. As a result of the activities of some unscrupulous elements in the society, this missionary was hit with the inability to go about his urgent missionary duties of proclaiming Christ’s *parousia*. This was a setback to a missionary who took the urgency of Christ’s soon return to heart. This claim can be readily gleaned from the mission reports of Clifford. After establishing the mission in Aba, Clifford began a Bible class where he primarily taught his students about the Sabbath and the second coming of Jesus (Babalola 2001, 81). Moreover, when he moved to Ghana, Clifford left a mission legacy colored with “a high focus on eschatology and the second coming of Christ” (Owusu-Mensa 2001).

Therefore, what Clifford conceived was a typical pessimism of premillennialism, as Rick Langer would term it, that “looks ahead to a rising world crisis that will only be averted by the return of Christ Himself. Things do not get better and better before the return of Christ, but quite the opposite” (Langer 2012, 29–30). As Langer further argues, this kind of thinking impeded cultural engagement. Thus, Clifford’s denouncement may have been as a result of his preoccupation with a mind-set that encouraged an optimism of the otherworldly rather than this-worldly. It shows that to a large extent some Adventist missionaries were culturally disengaged, as it seems to appear. Understanding the nature and significance of the women’s uprising would have

been an avenue to adequately incorporate the culture and ethos of indigenous women into the Adventist system in Nigeria.

4.2 *Polygamy*

In many other cases, the Adventists neither engaged with the culture of the mission field nor built on those converts who held the Sabbath truth and seemed closer to their own faith and beliefs. For instance, around 1930, after Tikili was ordained (Clifford 1930b, 13–14), Clifford and especially Tikili sought converts in the hinterlands of the Brass Tribe and Abua, a riverine area of the South known as Niger Delta (Clifford 1930c, 3). In those hinterlands, the Adventist workers met with other Sabbath keeping groups. One was the Church of Christ Seventh Day. Clifford was faced with the dilemma of taking this group of sabbatarians as foundational members of the Seventh-day Adventist church there. In other places, a number of indigenous Sabbath-keeping groups were incorporated into Adventist congregations (Maxwell 1936, 1). However, Clifford decided otherwise. Why did he make such decision? Since most of the sabbatarians “were polygamists and engaged in other strange practices and customs” (Alao 2004, 34), they did not stand a chance of being incorporated into the body of Adventists.

In respect to the issue of polygamy, Clifford’s decision was understandable since Adventist missionaries, like many other Christians of the period, were not supporters of the practice. In 1921, after Malcolm N. Campbell, then British Union Conference president, took a tour of West Africa, he condemned and discouraged polygamy as the “most difficult institution” faced by missionaries. He encouraged workers to continue to act under deep conviction of the truth so that converts would make the adequate sacrifice and abandon the practice (Campbell 1921, 1). McClements (1925, 4) not only saw the practice as the greatest hindrance to mission; plurality of wives was “the curse of Africa”. In fact, the General Conference Session of 1926 had taken an action not to admit any man living in polygamy into the fellowship of the church (Cormack 1926, 1).⁹ Hence, the treatment of the practice, its practitioners and especially, polygamous converts by Adventists was somewhat inconsiderate. Two cases are explored in this respect.

⁹ See original decision in “Polygamy,” General Conference Session Action, 1926, Box 3811, subject: Polygamy, General Conference Archives, Silver Spring Maryland, USA.

In the first case, Clifford praised a convert named Sampson who resisted the temptation of going into polygamous marriage by inheritance. In a mission report, Clifford claimed that after the death of Sampson's father, the Igbo native law compelled him to take his father's inheritance which included the young wives. However,

Sampson refused to do this, and chose to lose his father's inheritance rather than be forced to go contrary to God's will. When he had taken this stand, the women themselves used every persuasion to induce him to take them, but he stood firm. Finally, after a long period of persecution, they left him alone. (Clifford 1930d, 19)

In another polygamous case, William, a rich man, had been married with five wives before becoming an Adventist. When he accepted the Adventist faith, he and all his family joined the church. However, while William desired baptism and the opportunity to preach the Adventist message, this was not possible since the leaders refused. Eventually, Williams decided to find husbands for his four wives. He did find three young men from the Adventist church to marry his former wives. Unfortunately, this led the women to leave the Adventist faith because they saw the transfer of husbands as a disgrace to them in their traditional society. They did not deserve divorce. Vine (1933, 15) explained that

William's heart failed him. The salvation of those women meant much to him, and of the two wives that remained, if any one of the five had been dearer to him than the rest, she whom he must now send away was the one. A good, faithful woman, she, a sort of self-constituted deaconess in the church. William wavered and prayed and prayed and wavered, and surely as a result of the praying, Sabinah herself made the decision. 'It is not right that I should stay,' said she, 'only let me live in your compound until such time, William, as you have found another husband for me' – truly a noble course of action which rejoiced William's heart. But what was William's horror and surprise when Cordelia, his first and now only remaining wife, and hitherto quite faithful, grew tired of her drab existence as the lone mistress in her establishment, and went astray with other men.

The two stories are fascinating illustrations of the complexity that arose in the missionary encounter with indigenous Nigerian practices. In principle, polygamous converts were not accepted into Adventist congregation. However, we see a kind of toleration where polygamous converts who seem to have been participating in Adventist rituals. What changed? By 1930, the 1926

General Conference action was changed. A new policy resolved that in places where “where tribal customs subject a cast-off wife to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property,” polygamists maybe “admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church and be recognized as probationary members.”¹⁰

While the interesting dynamics of how this change came about at the Adventist top tier body has been analysed by Höschele,¹¹ insight from Kaplan’s analysis of “missionary toleration” proves most helpful. Toleration was used by Kaplan to “characterize those cases in which missionaries agreed to accept the continued existence of certain African social customs” while maintaining their incompatibility with Christianity (Kaplan 1995, 10). As a fitting example, Kaplan alludes to polygamy which, in theory, most missionaries were opposed to. However, the practice was tolerated because of its extensive manifestation. This helps to understand the 1930 decision and the reasons why the polygamists were participating in Adventist practices. However, as Kaplan rightly observes, in respect to a tolerant attitude towards polygamy, “we should not be misled into reading decisions passed by a majority as if they had unanimous support” (Kaplan 1995, 11). Among Adventists, there was no unanimous support for the decision. As Höschele perceived, although the 1930 resolution had a missiological strength, “its weakness was the lack of support by those engaged in missionary service” (Höschele 2015, 39). Therefore, although a decision was made in the “ivory tower”, those in the field had different opinions. Hence, while tolerating the polygamous converts as “probationary members” the missionaries ensured that such members were not fully “admitted to full membership unless or until circumstances change so as to leave them with only one companion.”¹²

Nonetheless, deeper than issues of policy, polygamy was considered by missionaries as a hindrance to the Adventist vision. This turned the outlook of the missionaries from the social wellbeing of the converts, the social and cultural significance of the practice to the perceived conflictual barrier erected

¹⁰ Fall Council Action, 1930, 74–75, Box 3811, subject: Polygamy, General Conference Archives, Maryland, USA.

¹¹ Höschele traces the reasons why the change came about especially through the intervention of “William H. Branson, the leader of the denomination’s African region and later General Conference president.” See Höschele 2015, 38 ff.

¹² Fall Council Action, 1930, 74–75, Box 3811.

by polygamy. Therefore, while Clifford did not raise the question of who would take care of the former wives of Sampson's father or how they would fare, he was more interested in showing the general Adventist public, especially those in the West, back home, that the Adventist message was progressing such that young men in the church like Sampson had begun rejecting local customs and traditions while accepting Adventist ways of life.

In the case of William, while his place and position in the society was lost, his place and position in the Adventist church was gained. As Vine reported, William

had been a respected man because of his affluence; now he is nothing but extremely poor. Which illustrates very forcibly the unconverted Ibo woman's attitude of mind, and, incidentally, one of the greatest problems we missionaries have to face. (Vine 1933, 15)

Although this inquiry does not necessarily support polygamous practice, it is very easy to take sides and be sympathetic with William and his wives. Therefore, aside from sympathy, a number of questions that may not be fully explored comes to mind.

Since Vine was aware that having other women to talk to and cook with was a sign of good luck and prestige (Mitchison 1960, 82), could she have intervened in trying to convince Cordelia, William's first wife to stay? Was Vine more interested in having a truly converted member, William, as a church member than losing all four women? Why was Vine not interested in repercussions of William's action and his position in the society as well as the prestige of Cordelia? Unlike Clifford, Vine seemed to be interested in telling the Adventist public how difficult it was to work among "heathen" Igbo women who took pride in standing firmly to their traditional customs. Did this mean that the greatest opponent of the mission work was not polygamy¹³ but unconverted women? Could there have been special missiological programs for those women? Or could the voices of those women in polygamous marriages be taken seriously?

Possibly the issue of power relations was present. As was the case in several of those societies, social upward mobility was taken seriously. Therefore,

¹³ This would seem to contrast the 1925 claim of William McClements that polygamy was the greatest hindrance to the Adventist message (McClements, 1925, 4). Other Christians had the same mindset. For instance, Anglican missionaries considered polygamy also as their greatest enemy; see Jones 2011.

questions in relations to William's actions come to mind. Was William acting on his own accord? Or was he merely interested in gaining position and power in the Adventist church while substituting his status in the society? These questions create more confusion than resolution. Answering these questions may recourse to speculations since the reported story only appears once in the history of Adventism in Nigeria. In view of further explorations, it can be established that aside from hastily judging their host cultures, Adventist missionaries in Nigeria at that time failed to exhibit any form of flexibility towards local meanings in the face of misconceptions.

4.3 *Spiritism or Indigenous Charismatics in the Church?*

In the late 1930s, the Adventist Church was rocked by a schism in the Southeast of Nigeria. Unsurprisingly, before the schism, the Southeast region continued to have the influence and direct contribution of Tikili until the end of 1930s when he left Adventism pulling several others with him. What led to the unfortunate disassociation of Tikili from the Adventist Church? In 1938, the world Adventist Sabbath School lesson featured topics related to "Spiritual Gifts" and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for the first quarter in its study guide (Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly 1938, 11–17; Izima 1973, 23–24).¹⁴ During this time, the membership of the growing denomination in Aba believed in the imminent manifestation of the latter rain. By July and August, a kind of "spirit movement" began. This charismatic movement saw several members claiming the power of the Spirit to see visions and dreams, power to heal the sick, raise the dead and make the lame to walk, etc. While others prophesied and spoke in tongues, others openly confessed their sins and were flogged publicly to gain forgiveness (Izima 1973, 23–24).

Surprisingly, the movement brought about two conflicting opinions. While some saw those manifestations as satanic counterfeits, another group most probably led by Tikili, the indigenous and influential pastor, believed the authenticity of the movement. When C. A. Bartlett, an Adventist regional leader, attended the workers' meeting in August, his lecture on "Try the Spirits

¹⁴ The related topics included "The Church of God" (January 29, 1938), "Spiritual Gifts" (February 5, 1938) and most especially "Spiritual Gifts (Concluded)" which centred on the topic of Pentecost (February 12, 1938).

whether *They Are of God*” seemed to diminish or quell the movement’s momentum and restored the much-cherished order known in Adventist circles. This may come as an astounding move since McClements had earlier given an account of “Pentecostal Experiences in Nigeria” in 1937. McClements (1937, 7) began his report with an ostentatious claim of “a new record of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” In narrating the deliverance of a convert from evil spirits, the healing of a woman who had been ill for nineteen years through prayer, and the conversion of a juju priest; McClements recounted how the Adventist message had exerted “a strong influence” in Nigeria (*ibid.*). Here again, a missionary seems to have been interested in the resulting effect of the Adventist message.

Implicitly, the direction of McClements’ report painted an interesting picture. It seemed to have claimed that the “Pentecostal experience” was possible only in the process of evangelization. Consequently, the Holy Spirit was limited to releasing those in bondage of evil spirits or giving power to the prayers of Adventist preachers. Thus, the work of the Holy Spirit is done immediately converts accept Adventism. It is no wonder, then, that McClements solicited his readers “to pray for our workers and believers, that they may be filled with the Holy Spirit and prepared to do their part in finishing the working in Nigeria” (McClements 1937, 1). Therefore, McClements’ vision helps to explain Bartlett’s lecture that branded the movement as counterfeit.

Nonetheless, if McClements saw the filling of the Holy Spirit as limited to finishing the mission work, Tikili’s vision differed. The Holy Spirit’s power can be bestowed upon those who have already professed Adventism. This can be evidenced in church life, during worship, and in the public engagements of God’s people. Furthermore, the supernatural and charismatic elements that characterized the movement were not new to Tikili. Interestingly, in June of that year, Tikili recounted his conversion to Adventism. In the process, he told the Adventist public of his special gifts: visions and healing. Of his vision, “In 1924”, Tikili (1930, 1) claimed,

the Lord showed me a night vision in which I was in a boat of pure gold, clear as glass. This boat took me to a certain village where there was a tree standing on the water’s edge. Suddenly three eagles came and stood on its extensive boughs; and as I looked these birds said in a very loud voice, as of a cathedral bell, ‘Repent, for the world is coming to an end.’ This seemed to reach every part of the world. At these words the whole village turned out weeping. The boat stood there for about five minutes and turned me round without anybody rowing it.

In respect to his healing power, Tikili maintained that God “has cured my diseases and has through me cured other men and women by prayer and a little first aid. I am known to many ... as the ‘doctor without medicine.’ For by prayer I have given them release” (Tikili 1930, 1–2). The account was re-published in a number of other Adventist magazines like *Canadian Union Messenger*, *Lake Union Herald*, *Pacific Union Recorder* and *Atlantic Union Gleaner*.

Unfortunately, the aim of the report cannot be fully harnessed due to lack of historical data. Yet on a closer look, the report was an abridged version of Tikili’s own account. In this vein, a further insight could be made though at the danger of speculation. Perhaps, Tikili had sought to give credence to the 1938 movement by resorting to his empirical and lived experiences from the time he was converted, called to pastoral ministry until the crisis. If he had experienced visions and miraculous healing, then the ordinary Adventists could also experience the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, in the African worldview, the cosmos as we have it is populated by benevolent and malevolent spirits. The malevolent spirits are capable of causing misfortune, wreaking havoc and bringing lack of progress in individual and communal lives. Being able to control the cosmos and knowing the causation of the misfortune is a prime preoccupation of their metaphysics (Ilogu 1965). Hence, they recourse to magic and divination in order to gain power from the benevolent spirits to protect them from the unseen evil forces. It should not be surprising then, that what was branded a “spirit movement” in 1938 was only a yearning for the power of God through the Holy Spirit to permeate the practicality of the new Adventist faith. The converts who experienced the charismatic renewal understood the Adventist theory of spiritual gifts in their own context by tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, they were able to see visions (the unseen), had power to heal and power to overcome evil forces.

However, this vision was not shared by the mission leaders who possibly did not fully understand the Nigerian metaphysics and the lived realities of indigenous life. Aside from branding the renewal as “ungodly”, they discouraged extemporal and vibrant worship interspersed with what was perceived as noisy clapping singing and dancing. With less support from the church leadership on this matter, Tikili eventually resigned and established his own Church (Seventh-day Church of God) taking with him a number of followers

(Izima 1973, 23–24).¹⁵ The resignation of Tikili should not be a surprise considering his African traditional background. He must have seen the manifestation of the Spirit as part of indigenizing or localizing Adventism and making it culturally relevant (Ilogu 1973).

Understandably, the Adventist leaders were wary and highly suspicious of such manifestations since it was becoming rampant among other Christian bodies. For instance, in 1930, just after the rise of Joseph Ayo Babalola, the foremost leader of Aladura Churches in Nigeria, other indigenous movements of this kind began springing up. Especially among members of the Faith Tabernacle Church in Ibadan, West of Nigeria, a prophet emerged. The name of this prophet is not mentioned in the report of W. G. Till. Till, an Adventist missionary leader, described the activities of the new leader-prophet and his followers as signs of the end time. It is likely that this was Daniel Orekoya, the healing prophet of the Oke-Bola revival in 1930, who laid the foundation for the indigenous Christ Apostolic Church, an Aladura (charismatic) movement.

Till's report through the Denomination's flagship magazine, *The Review*, branded the leader as a false prophet. Accordingly, when some inquirers came, they, the Adventist leaders, were able to point out that (Till 1930, 21):

there are false prophets as well as true, and the Bible teaches that in the last days Satan will work miracles. This surprised many, and they have asked how they can differentiate, and so we have been given opportunity to witness for the truth.

The opportunity to witness for the truth was a needed ingredient for the end-times. Notwithstanding issues of doctrine and the end-time mantra, Till was unhappy with the charismatic style of worship practised by the prophets and their followers. He complained that there was little preaching among the new indigenous Christians. Instead, there were much "so-called singing and chanting, interspersed freely with the clanging of a bell" (Till 1930, 21).

Interestingly, the "spirit movement" among Adventists at end of the 1930s also coincided with other indigenous revivals and schisms that occurred in

¹⁵ This resignation may have been around the end of 1939 or early in the 1940s for Tikili is pictured with other Adventist workers in the June 1939 edition of *Advent Survey* (Bartlett 1939, 1). Interview with Solomon O. Agharaumuna, August 2019. Agharaumuna is generally considered the oldest living Adventist in Aba. See also "Bible Sabbath Association Organizational Profile Interview with The Joint Church of God 7th-Day Fellowship." *The Sabbath Sentinel*, September–October 1999, 13–14.

the Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God Church as well as other mission churches in Igboland and in Nigeria. It seemed to be the time of disagreements and disavowal of orthodoxy and orthopraxis between foreign Christian leaders and local Christian leaders (Burgess 2008, 68–72) that led to innovation and invention of new ecclesial traditions with roots in the culture of the people of Nigeria. It was a contextual sign that Christianity in Nigeria moved towards cultural rootedness and this could have been taken seriously by the Adventist missionaries instead of the response of denial and replacement. Such disagreements in opinions, theology and praxis led to a schism which might have been avoided by Adventists through dialogue and patient cultivation of a positive view of their host cultures.

5. Summary and Conclusions

Nigeria, a multifaceted milieu with its immense cultural diversity, welcomed Adventist missionaries as latecomers to its religious scene. Generally, institutional organizations became the avenue for maintaining the Adventist mission in Nigeria. However, after establishing their mission in Nigeria, Adventist missionaries were faced with the challenges and task of maintaining what they had started. By exploring how Adventist missionaries encountered the three cultural issues and practices in Nigeria, this paper established that Adventist missionaries consciously or unconsciously sought avenues to replace elements of traditional culture, misunderstood the value of cultural practices, exhibited impatience towards the status of their converts and often held negative views of their host cultures. Aside from providing a substitute religio-cultural system that eventually became a sub-culture for converts to Adventism, any cultural practice that seemingly conflicted with the vision of a coming kingdom was discouraged. By implication, leaning on Langer's insights (2012, 30), Adventist missionaries in Nigeria seemed to envision a "triumphalistic" attitude to culture. This attitude sought a cultural disengagement or the conquest of the cultural elements through Adventist ethos and ecclesial praxis.

Nonetheless, it must be maintained that Adventist missionaries contributed in positive ways to Nigeria. This is evident especially in the educational and health facilities which contributed to a holistic view of humanity. However, the triumphalist engagement of missionaries with the indigenous culture as was demonstrated in this article bear significance for the historiography of Adventist mission in Nigeria.

The treatment and role of women seems to be an underexplored theme. While Adventist mission history does not undervalue the contribution of women to its history, the perception and engagement of Adventist missionaries with women in the host cultures has not been given adequate significance. What needs further academic engagement lies in the following questions: what views of women did Adventist missionaries bring to the mission field? Did Adventist missionaries fuel the colonial undermining of women or did they contribute to women empowerment over and against colonial structures?

Secondly, when it comes to polygamy, Adventist missionaries in Nigeria not only demonized the practice, they destabilized families which in some ways brought disrespect to individual converts. The issue of polygamy has been explored by Höschele (2015) in the East African encounter with Adventism. Yet a fuller engagement of the theme can reveal if the Adventist standpoint on the matter constituted a problem to the success of the mission in Nigeria. It can also reveal if there were Adventist missionaries who did not openly support the practice but condoned it for the sake of the mission or the converts.

Thirdly, the case of indigenous charismatic renewal which missionaries characterized as counterfeit may not be too surprising in the overall treatment of Adventist mission historiography. What may be interesting is if charismatic influences were ever seen in a positive light by Adventist missionaries. Moreover, since the case presented in this paper led to a split, exploring the perspective of those who left may bring a richer perspective in exploring the dynamics of end-time rhetoric claimed by those who learnt from Adventist missionaries but added more layers of discussion to the eschatological vision of the world. Unfortunately, this remains unexplored.

Finally, the historical analysis attempted here is not just a departure from institutional mission approaches which are incapable of taking into account the complex interaction between missionaries and various local elements. It is a departure from a Eurocentric or American centric avowal that sees everything done by missionaries as noble. It is an example of a critical engagement of mission history that attempts to grasp the unique instances and dynamics of Adventism's crossing of social, cultural, philosophical and linguistic barriers. It is an attempt that should be encouraged in doing Adventist mission history. Therefore, the need to continue investigating the engagement of missionaries and indigenous cultures is sustained. Yet, further explorations may

need to critique the theological underpinnings of missionaries in Nigeria so as to harness missiological principles for today's mission work.

Reference List

- Agboola, David T. *Seventh-day Adventists in Yorubaland, 1914-1964: A History of Christianity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1987.
- Alalade, Adekunle A. *Limiting Factors to the Success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa*. Ibadan: Agbo Areg Publishers, 2008.
- Alao, Dayo ed. *90 Years of Adventism in Nigeria: A Compendium*. Lagos: Communication and PARL Dpt. of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria, 2004.
- Allen, Judith Van. "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War? – Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6.1, 1975, 11–39.
- Babalola, David, O. *Sweet Memories of Our Pioneers*. Lagos: Emahine Reprographics, 2001.
- Bartlett, W.T. "A United Missions Council." *Advent Survey* 10.6, June 1939, 1–2.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.
- Burgess, Richard. *Nigeria's Christian Revolution: The Civil War Revival and its Pentecostal Progeny (1967–2006)*. Oxford: Regnum Book, 2008.
- Campbell, Malcolm. N. "West African Problems." *The Missionary Worker* 25.13, July 6, 1921, 1.
- Clifford, Jesse. "Troublous Times in West Africa." *The Missionary Worker* 35.2, January 24, 1930a, 8.
- Clifford, Jesse. "'Like a Grain of Mustard Seed.'" *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 29, 1930b, 13–14.
- Clifford, Jesse. "Camp-Meetings, in Southern Nigeria." *The Advent Survey*, May 1930c, 3.
- Clifford, Jesse. "The Message in the Niger Delta." *Missions Quarterly* 19.2, Second Quarter, 1930d, 17–20.
- Coleman, James. *Nigeria. Background to Nationalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Cormack, A. W. "Polygamy and Marriage Relationship." *Eastern Tidings* 21.17, September 1, 1926, 1.

- Dioka, J. "Marriage in Igboland." Unpublished Bachelor of Divinity dissertation, Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, 1980.
- Ezeigbo, Theodora Akachi. "Traditional Women's Institutions in Igbo Society: Implications for the Igbo Female Writer." *African Languages and Cultures* 3.2, 1990, 149–165.
- Falola, Toyin and Heaton, Matthew M. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Falola, Toyin and Oyeniyi, Bukola A. *Nigeria*. California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2015.
- Fiedler, Klaus. "Christian Missions and Western Colonialism: Soulmates or Antagonists?" Kenneth R. Ross, ed. *Faith at the Frontiers of Knowledge*. Luviri Reprints 2. Malawi: Luviri Press, 2018, 239–258.
- General Conference Session Action, 1926. Fall Council Action, 1930. Box 3811, General Conference Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, USA.
- Höschele, Stefan. *Christian Remnant – African Folk Church: Seventh-day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903–1980*. Studies in Christian Mission 34. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Höschele, Stefan. "To Baptize or Not to Baptize? Adventists and Polygamous Converts." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 34.1, 2015, 35–50.
- Interview with Solomon O. Agharaumuna, August 2019.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the Present*. London: SPCK 1995.
- Izima, David A. *A Brief History of the SDA Church in Eastern States of Nigeria*. Aba: Span Ltd., 1973.
- Jones, Timothy William. "The Missionaries' Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888–1988." *Journal of Religious History* 35.3, September 2011, 393–408.
- Kaplan, Steven. "The Africanization of Missionary Christianity: History and Typology." Steven Kaplan, ed. *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1995, 9–27.
- Knight, George R. *The Fat Lady and the Kingdom*. Nampa: Pacific Press, 1995.
- Kuranga, Abraham A. "Seventh-day Adventism in Western Nigeria, 1914–1981: A Study in the Relationship between Christianity and African Culture from the Missionary Era to the Introduction of African Leadership." Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1991.
- Langer, Richard C. "Kingdom Integration: Reflections on Premillennialism and Cultural Engagement." *Criswell Theological Review* 10.1, Fall 2012, 21–39.

- Maigadi, Ibrahim. B. *The Adventist Church in Northern Nigeria: A Historical Source Material of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria*. Zaria: Culture Impressive, 2005.
- Maxwell, A.S. "Widening Horizons." *British Advent Messenger* 41.2, January 1936, 1–2.
- McClements, William. "Missionary Problems in Nigeria." *Present Truth and Signs of the Times* 41.21, October 8, 1925, 4.
- McClements, William. "Nigeria Needs A Girls' School." *The Missionary Worker* 35. 8, April 18, 1930, 5–6.
- McClements, William. "Pentecostal Experiences in Nigeria." *British Advent Messenger* 42.4, January 8, 1937, 1.
- Mitchison, Lois. *Nigeria: Newest Nation*. London: Pall Mall Press, 1960.
- Nnoroviele, Salome C. *The Way People Live – Life among the Ibo Women of Nigeria*. San Diego: Lucent Books, 1998.
- Onwuzurigbo, Gregory Okorobia. "Igbo Marriage and Family Life." *Sacra Theologia* 18.6, 1990, 413–482.
- Owusu-Mensa, Kofi. "Clifford, Jesse." *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, 2001 (<https://dacb.org/stories/ghana/clifford-jesse/>; accessed November 5, 2020).
- Post, Kenneth and Vickers, Michael. *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria 1960–1966*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973.
- Samson, Jane. "The Problem of Colonialism in the Western Historiography of Christian Missions." *Religious Studies and Theology* 23.2, 2004, 3–25.
- Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly, First Quarter, 1938 (<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/SSQ/SS19380101-01.pdf>; accessed November 5, 2020).
- Till, W.G. "Advance on the Nigerian Front." *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 4, 1930, 21.
- Tikili, Benjamin I. "Experiences and Convictions." *Columbian Union Visitor* 43.22, June 2, 1938, 1–2.
- Vine, Mary J. "A New Song." *Present Truth*, September 10, 1931, 12–13.
- Vine, Mary J. "Marriage in the Ibo Country: A Great Mission Problem." *Present Truth*, January 5, 1933, 11–12.15.
- Wogu, Chigemezi N. "Trailblazers of Adventism in Nigeria, 1900s–1930s." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 15.2, 2019, 1–13.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die komplizierten und komplexen Beziehungen von adventistischen Missionaren mit einheimischen Themen während ihrer Missionsarbeit in Nigeria. Es wird argumentiert, dass die Annäherung der Missionare an die indigene Kultur trotz deren relativen Erfolgs geprägt war von Konfliktpunkten und von einer stark unterschiedlichen Vision der Parusie Christi. Infolgedessen wurden indigene Themenbereiche wie die Stellung der Frau in der Gesellschaft und in öffentlichen Angelegenheiten, Polygamie und Charismen im Gottesdienst ihrer kulturellen Bedeutung entzogen; sie wurden in einigen Fällen dämonisiert und durch eine adventistische Alternative ersetzt. Die Vorbereitung der Bekehrten auf das zweite Kommen Christi bedeutete demnach die Abkehr von jeder kulturellen Praxis, die scheinbar den Schwerpunkt der Bekehrten von der Unmittelbarkeit des außerweltlichen kommenden Reiches ablenkte.

Résumé

Cet article explore les relations complexes et délicates entre les missionnaires adventistes du septième jour et les questions indigènes pendant leur travail missionnaire au Nigeria. Il fait valoir que malgré leur succès relatif, l'approche des missionnaires à l'égard de la culture indigène a été marquée par des points de conflit et par la différence flagrante avec leur vision de la Parousie du Christ. En conséquence, les questions indigènes telles que le rôle des femmes dans la société et les affaires publiques, la polygamie et le charisme dans le culte ont été dépouillées de leur signification culturelle et, dans certains cas, diabolisées, pour être remplacées par l'alternative adventiste. La préparation des convertis à la seconde venue du Christ impliquait le désengagement de toute pratique culturelle qui semblait détourner l'attention des convertis concernant l'imminence du royaume à venir.

Chigemezi Nnadozie Wogu, Ph.D. cand. (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), has been working as a Researcher at Theologische Hochschule Friedensau where he has managed and coordinated the *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (EUD and ESD regions) since 2015. E-mail: chigemezi.nnadozie@gmail.com