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buinsighteditor@yahoo.com
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08055126343, 08033195982 positivepressng@gmail.com

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A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ANGLICAN MISSIONS IN ORA LAND

Mepaiyeda Solomon Makanjuola, PhD
mepaiyedas@yahoo.com

Department of Religious Studies
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

I. Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, Mission or Missionary activities has been described as “the propagation of the Christian faith among non-Christian people....”¹ Therefore, mission is a task given to people at different times and in different situations right from time immemorial. Examples abound that from the Old Testament period people had been saddled with the responsibility to carry out God's mission. Angels and prophets were used at that time as intermediaries or emissaries to relate God's intention either favourable or not, to individuals. This recalls the visit of Angels to Abraham during which the latter pleaded that Sodom and Gomorrah might not be destroyed..²

However, any mission both in the Old and New Testaments culminated in the advent of Jesus Christ. A sense of immediacy sprang from him as he stood up in the synagogue to announce; ‘today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’.³

The Scripture he claimed as his own referred to deliverance for the poor, for those without sight, for prisoners and for the oppressed.⁴ He had been sent by the Father to convert yesterday's vision into today's mission. Just as the Father had sent him so also he sent his disciples (apostles) and the church today. That is why the Anglican Consultative Council defined the mission of the Church thus:

To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; to teach, baptise and nurture new believers; to respond to human needs by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society.⁵

J. G. Davies, talking from ecumenical viewpoint equated humanization, reconciliation, shalom (peace) and the setting up of God's Kingdom as being together the goal of mission.⁶ This view was later stressed by the Upsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1967 where mission was seen as the historical process of the renewal of society. John Stott summarised the Assembly's resolution in this way:

Hence mission is concerned with the overcoming of industrial disputes, with the surmounting of class divisions, with the eradication of racial discrimination.⁷

Therefore, from our understanding of the word, mission embraces both biblical and ecumenical views. Missionary activities should not stop at the propagation of the gospel but must also include services that meet sociological needs of the people. To this effect, this study aims at assessing the Church Missionary Society which represents the evangelical arm of the Church of England; equally referred to as the largest of the protestant missionary societies.⁸ To what extent did their activities influence the lives of the people of Ora?

II. The Location of Ora Land

J.W. Omo Amu wrote, "the Ora speaking people inhabit the area of the mid Western Nigeria now known as Afenmia North-West 1-11 in the National politics of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Originally they migrated from Benin..."⁹ Today, Ora people are in Owan West and South Local Government areas of Edo State, with Sabongida Ora as headquarters. According to Pa Vincent Imoukhuede:

Ora clan comprises six towns listed according to order of seniority: Evbiobe (Sabongida), Ohia, Ovbiokhuai, Oke (Old and New), Uhonmora and Eme Ora (the cradle of Christianity in Ora).¹⁰

III. Pre-Missionary Era

One of the few sources of information concerning pre-missionary era in Ora land is Amu's book, titled *'The Rise of Christianity in Mid-Western Nigeria'*. According to the author,

The people of Ora are by nature religious. They have always believed

in the existence of Supreme Unseen Being which they call Oisenobua, God the Creator.¹¹

Like the Yoruba, Ora people appreciated the fact that this Supreme Being manifested his attributes in numerous ways through the divinities such as Ogun the god of iron, Olokun or Okun – the god of river and Utu – the god of agricultural abundance. Apart from this, there was the belief in ancestors, hence the existence of the family altar called “Ikute” in each family.¹² Such worship of divinities and ancestors shows that polytheism prevailed in their traditional religion. Amu asserts further that everywhere throughout Ora land, a special day is set aside as a mark of respect to Oise (God). On this day of celebration, all manners of work are prohibited. It is called “Ekioise”¹³ meaning God's market day. And it always coincided with the market of Evbiobe. The people share the general concept that the abode of Oisenobua is Heaven and associated God with anything white. This depicts evidence of the purity of his holiness.

On the other hand, Ora people hold the view that Esu is the God of evil and destruction whose symbol is a black image with horns and thistles.¹⁴ His preoccupation is always to plant quarrels and misunderstanding where peace and harmony flourished. This is a brief summary of the religious world view in Ora before the advent of Christianity.

IV. Historical, Socio-Cultural and Political Aspects of Ora People

Historically, Ora people according to Oje Aisiku¹⁵ are offspring of a Benin Prince named Okpame who later reign as king between 1481 and 1504.¹⁶ Thus, the Oras share the same ancestry with other peoples of Edo state namely, the Benin, Esan, Afemais and Akoko-Edos. This does not undermine notable differences in the history of migration, location, language and circumstances of each sub-group.

Ademola Iyi-Eweka¹⁷ posited that prince Okpame adopted the name Ozolua when he ascended kingship in Benin. He was said to have sought refuge in Uwokha in Ivbiosakon area (present day Afemai) in about 1473 from where he founded Ora and other villages. As a warlord, Oba Ozolua's carnage led to the capture of Uromi, Akoko-Edo land, as well as Igalla and Igbira lands in the present Kogi and Kwara States. His flair for Ora made him to spend the greater part of his life there before returning to Benin City. A remarkable aspect of this history is that before his departure to Benin Ozolua conferred on the Oras and its environ the rights to enjoy all

privileges of Edo princes and princesses in appreciation of their support for his military campaigns. No wonder the Oras called themselves “the children of Ozolua”.¹⁸ It is not surprising therefore that the relational and political ties with Benin led to the creation of Ogie-Duke-traditional rulership for the Oras by the Oba of Benin just a few years ago.

In the past, Ora people were geologists and weathermen of their day, forecasting and preventing physical calamities.¹⁹ To a large extent, this brought economic advantage to them because through this occupation, the Oba of Benin engaged their services to prevent natural disasters such as earthquake, hurricane, tornadoes and volcanoes in his kingdom. However, in the contemporary times, the Oras are mostly farmers and traders while a handful of them still keep to the traditional divination practices for economic reasons.

V. Advent of Christianity in Ora

Christianity penetrated into Ora land at two different times. The earlier period dated back to the reign of Asije, the second son of Emperor Ozolua who ascended Benin throne in 1520.²⁰ Since Ora people migrated from Benin, it has been argued that Christian religion brought by the Portuguese traders and spread in Benin City, Sapele and Warri area around 1480s,²¹ registered its presence there. The later period of Christianity in Ora dated back to the arrival of the first batch of freed Ora indigenes from Ijesaland on the 10th of February, 1895.²² Among the returnees were John Usiokhai Alegbeleye and Isaiah Okaingbuan Akinluyi. While the former acted as a fore-runner always talking about the new religion in the congregation of people, the latter's efforts contributed to the growth of Christianity in Ora. History agrees that he took Christianity from Ora to areas like Akoko-Edo, Etsako, Ishan and Benin division as a whole.

Like in other places, Christianity met with stiff oppositions and atrocious acts done to its converts by adherents of the traditional religion. One of such oppositions was recorded by Amu. There was the story of one Orhua man called Kekehebu, who was employed by the British Colonial Public Works Department of Nigeria. His duties entailed the organising of communal labour for the maintenance of the Orhua Ehor Benin Road. He was a strong adherent of traditional religion of his people and thus saw Christianity as a dangerous enemy. In order to prevent the conversion of more people, Kekehebu would undertake conscripting labour on Sundays when Anglican Christians should be assembled in the Church. Then he

would rush into the Church, drag down the preacher from the pulpit and force the congregation to road works. On a Sunday service in a village called Erha, a Catechist from Oraland, Adidi Obokhai was pulled down from the pulpit and given the beating of his life by Kekehebu. For this, Adidi Obokhai invoked a curse on him unless he submitted himself to pious repentance. However, Kekehebu did not repent. Amu asserts that on one rainy Sunday (Kekehebu) got out of his house to undertake further acts of vandalism at a nearby Church, lightning struck and killed him.²³

Such was the opposition faced by early Christians as they stepped on Ora soil. But, not minding the suffering, they were determined to Christianize Ora people and this is evident in the fact that the root of Christianity is well established in Ora land today although there is still much to be done.

VI. The Roles of the Missionary in Ora

As from 1940, when the church in Sabongida-Ora, was accorded Parish status,²⁴ consequent upon the transfer of the first pastor and the first Ora son in person of Rev. (later Venerable) S.O. Akinluyi to the area, Ora started to feel and see changes in all ramifications. Certain projects were established for the progress of the people.

Spiritually, the people's life changed for better. Many detached from traditional orientation and embraced the religion introduced by the missionaries. The fear of principalities and powers was allayed; churches sprang up in most villages and hamlets that contributed to the rapid expansion of Christianity in Ora and beyond. Field investigation revealed that up till year 2000, more than ten Anglican Churches had been established throughout Oraland. These include Cathedral of St. John's, Sabongida-Ora, St. Peter's Church, Uhonmora, Eme-Ora, St. Paul's Church Oke New, Oke Old; and St. Paul's Church, Oybiokhuai among others. To buttress this point, Ora in general and Sabongida in particular is the seat of the diocese of Sabongida Ora comprising Akoko-Edo, Ishan, Etsako and Ora areas.

In the field of education, many secondary schools with various primary schools throughout the district were established. Notable among them is Holy Trinity Grammar School, Ora, which foundation stone was laid on 28th April, 1942 and formally opened on 10th February 1948.²⁵ Through these schools, Ora children have become leaders in various professions such as Medicine, Law, Engineering, Religious Ministeries and many are graduates in the administration of various institutions. According to Amu,

Ora with Asaba have been in the fore-front in the old Mid-West in producing many University graduates and professionals...²⁶

He claimed further that:

There were awards of Scholarships to deserving students to study both within and outside Nigeria in various Universities and institution²⁷

In this regard, schools have been multiplied through the instrumentality of the first diocesan Bishop, the Most Rev. Dr. A.A. Agbaje whose educational drive resulted in the creation of four new mission schools within four years of the inception of the diocese. One of such schools is Akinluyi High School, Sabongida Ora.²⁸

Furthermore, based on holistic concept of the society, the missionary established a Maternity Home for women. While record shows that the first Maternity in the whole district was built by Government or mission²⁹, oral information from Ven. Omoera reveals that mission established the maternity. He even stressed further that apart from the one in Ora, mission also established a maternity centre in Ekpoma, opposite St. Andrew's Church, Eguare Ekpoma. Unfortunately, the latter is no longer functioning today due to mismanagement.³⁰

Socially, the people of Ora received general influence characteristic of the missionary in the adoption of names, dressing and marriage. According to Omoera, although the people adopted European names and dressings, it was a different thing when it comes to polygamy. He related the incident that happened between his grand father and Rev. H. Parsons (the first white missionary in Ora) around early 1940s. The old man, a polygamist was asked by Parsons to divorce five of his six wives and stick to one so that he could qualify for baptism. At a scheduled date, the missionary revisited the old man to know what the latter's decision was. To Parson's surprise, the old man had lined up children from the five wives to be estranged in front of Parsons and asked what the missionary thought would be the feelings of those children about the Church in future. The Reverend became speechless and that ended the conversation. This incident represents the Ora people's view on polygamy. Preaching against it was of no significant effect because even among the teachers employed by the missionary, polygamy gained prominence. While a teacher with two wives always took one wife to his station, the other wife was left in the village.

Politically, much cannot be said because according to Mr. Aisibvioje, the last missionary left in 1947, prior to this period, there was not any politics going on in the area.³¹ It was in the 50s that they started hearing of political parties like Action Group and others. On local level however, what the missionary always emphasized was obedience to the authority.

VII. Assessment of Missionary Activities in Ora

The activities of the missionaries left an indelible mark of great influence on both the political and social life of the people. Our focus here is to discuss the aspect that can be described as “bad politics” because it nearly brought missionary activities to a halt in Ora. The architects of this were Mr. C.W. Wakeman (later Canon) and Rev. Aina.³² Based on the importance attached to his office as British Secretary of the Church missionary society of Lagos diocese, Wakeman constituted himself into such a small god. He was seen as having a deliberate hatred for Oraland and always diverted Ora vote (financial aid from the diocese) to projects outside Oraland. An example of such was the vicarage proposed for Ora in 1934 which Wakeman caused to be built at Auchi, explaining that a Moslem area like that needed a certain post with a pastor. While others may see Wakeman's intention as evangelism motivated. It can be reasonably argued that he short-changed the Church at Ora thereby causing disaffection and unhealthy rivalry which hampered the growth of evangelism in Oraland for a period of time. Amu asserted that Auchi area was carved out from its provincial headquarters in Ora.³³ By that action the district church council reduced in strength and coverage.

Furthermore, Wakeman did not stop exhibiting his hatred for Ora. History reveals that when Rev. Parsons went on leave to Britain, Wakeman did everything possible to change the seat of the superintendent from Ora to Ekpoma. Therefore, at the arrival of Parsons, he was relocated to Ekpoma in Ishan. Amu calls this, “the origin of the famous Ecclesiastical Tension in Ora from 1937–1939”.³⁴

This habit of robbing Peter to pay Paul, displayed a great injustice unexpected of any missionary called to preach justice, fair-play and harmony in the society. The seed of discord planted by Wakeman has continued to influence wrong agitations from the people around Oraland. For example, at the creation of the diocese of Sabongida-Ora in 1993, pressures were mounted on national authority of the Anglican Church by Ishan people agitating that the headquarters be located in their land. However, the authority turned them down and Ora became the seat of the

diocese. Notwithstanding the aforementioned, the missionary activities brought enlightenment to Ora through the establishment of schools and healthcare centres which had its positive impact of raising the social status of the people. Even though the agitation of Ishan people may have been viewed as unnecessary, when it was finally granted, it contributed to the expansion of the Anglican Church in the area.

Another area of critical assessment is the compulsory adoption of European names by Ora people in particular and Nigerians in general. It has been discovered that such adoption happened under duress. Reports confirmed that baptism was always denied any candidate who refused to adopt foreign names. Unfortunately, to the natives, such European names are meaningless. It is a sheer cultural colonization that depicts pride in the lives of the white missionaries. This is an aberration since it is devoid of any relevance to gospel message.

Apart from this, the conflicts that mission had with traditional religion cannot be ignored. This affected both the economic and social life of the adherents of traditional religion. At the same time, it brought some pains in spite of the civilization discussed earlier. In economic sphere, some avenues by which adherents of traditional religion generated money were blocked. For example, trees presumed to be harbouring some powers like Ose (*Adansonia digitata*), Iroko (African teak) and Akoko (*Newboldia leavis*), given recognition around fetish groves were felled by the Christians. Before the missionary activities, traditional priests always took people with diverse problems to such groves where sacrifices were offered to Oisenobua and compensations made in terms of giving money, ram or other items as indicated by the oracle. With Christianity gaining more converts, patronage to traditional religion reduced drastically and automatically this led to the loss of supremacy and authority as well as recognition on the part of the traditional priests.

Lastly, the missionaries condemned African religion and customs. They saw traditional religion as evil, fetish and satanic and failed to appreciate the positive elements in its philosophy. They condemned most traditional rites of passage and social ceremonies as paganistic. The failure of European missionaries to appreciate those good elements in African religion, culture and worldview strangled the growth of Christian religion among Africans. Not every element of Traditional religion was bad.

Traditional music and dancing were rejected as heathen. African Christians had to sing hymns imported from Europe and America, that is why most of the early converts rejected their customs (Ora customs) and

embraced both European religion and customs. But unfortunately, they remain Nigerians in European clothing. On the other hand, some of the said early converts practised syncretism. They only embraced Christianity for the sake of civilization inherent in it. This makes it pertinent for missionaries to be faced with the herculean task of evangelisation. Although they tried, yet they could not stamp out syncretism in its entirety. However, the Anglican diocese of Sabongida-Ora in a bid to rid the church of syncretized Christians has introduced the "taking of oath" by all members on occasional Sunday service and annual synod. The Diocese should embark on rugged evangelism coupled with disciplining of members through mentoring of weak Anglican members by those who are strong in their faith.

VIII. Conclusions

Judging from the civilization prevalent in Oraland and the fame achieved by their children both nationally and internationally, the people of Ora should be indebted to the missionaries. Their encounter with Christianity brought such exposure.

Nevertheless, the missionaries failed to acculturate Christianity. They forgot that religion was not founded in a vacuum. Another shortcoming of the missionaries is their unwillingness to accommodate other religions of spiritual set up. They always want to uproot the existing establishment in all its ramifications. This has led many Africans to lose their sources and originality. They are neither Africans nor Europeans. Mission therefore as a matter of urgency should be concerned with the propagation of practical gospel, the establishment of educational and medicare facilities and other various ways through which the lives of the masses can be improved.

In addition, lay participation should be adopted by the Anglican Diocese in Ora. This will build in Ora indigenes the sense of participation in evangelistic work. This conclusion is corroborated by Ferguson who asserted that apart from Crowther, very little is known of the part played by those of African descent in the evangelisation of Nigeria.

Endnotes

¹F. Cross, (ed) *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford: University Press, 1974), 992.

²Gen 18:16ff

³Luke 4:21

⁴Cf. Isaiah 61:1-2.

⁵“The Truth shall make you free” *The Lambeth Conference 1988*, (London: Church House Publishing, 1988), 75.

⁶J. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, (London: Falcon Books, 1975), 18.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹J. Amu, *The Rise of Christianity in Mid-Western Nigeria*, (Lagos: Pacific Printers, 1965), 19.

¹⁰Interview with Mr. Vincent Imonkhuede, a Catechist at Eme Ora, 61 years, Eme Ora, January 2nd, 1997.

¹¹J. Amu, 23.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Interview with Mr Isaac Ogah, a society Leader at Uhomhora, 70 years, December 10th, 1999.

¹⁵Oje Aisiku, http://www.edo_nation.net

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ademola Iyi-Eweka, http://www.edo_nation.net

¹⁸Interview with Mr. Vincent Imonkhuede, a Catechist at Eme Ora, 61 years, Eme Ora, January 2nd, 1997.

¹⁹ Ademola Iyi-Eweka, http://www.edo_nation.net

²⁰ J. Amu, 24.

²¹ V. Sotunde, *How Christianity came to Nigeria*, (Abeokuta: Gbeni Sodipo Press Ltd, No Date), 9

²² J. Amu, 24.

²³ Ibid., 26.

²⁴ T. Olufosoye, *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Terms*, (Ibadan, University Press Ltd., 1987), 58.

²⁵ J. Amu, 31

²⁶ Ibid., 58

²⁷ Ibid., 32

²⁸ A.A. Agbaje Presidential Address at the First Section of the Second Synod of Sabongidda-Ora Diocese, 1997, pp.14-17

²⁹ J. Amu, 31

³⁰ Interview with Ven. S.I. Omoera, Department of Religious Studies, Edo State University, Ekpoma, Age 60, August 17th, 1997.

³¹ Interview with Pa S. Aisibvioje, Age 72, October 2nd, Eme Ora, 1997.

³² J. Amu, 29 30.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Ibid., 29 30.

³⁵ John Ferguson, *Some Nigerian Church Founders* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1975), v.