Traditional Politics and Missionary Activities During the Colonial Era in Yorubaland, Nigeria: The Implications for Modern Missionaries

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ABSTRACT—One of the challenges confronted by the missionaries of the colonial era in Nigeria, was how to reach the people at the grass root through their community leaders. Those that found themselves in Yorubaland were not exempted from this challenge. In this work, two Yoruba communities namely: Iperu in the then Ijebu province and Shao in the then Ilorin province are considered. The paper examines the interactions between the Traditional Council, the Missionaries and the Colonial Administrators in the period under review. It presents the authority and roles of the traditional rulers along with the council that worked with them for the welfare of the communities. Historical and comparative approaches were employed using available records with personal experiences and observations of the writer. The author discovered that the missionaries, in their efforts to spread the gospel did not all receive similar receptions from the people. The work concludes that missionary endeavors could be challenging but God always work in mysterious ways to fulfill his purposes even, in mission.

Keywords: colonial era, Yorubaland, Nigeria, missionary

I. Introduction

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The Christian Missionary Society, among others, came to the South-Western Nigeria toward the middle of the 19th century through the Atlantic coastal land. At that time, the foreign missionaries teamed up with the freed and converted African slaves to work alongside with the colonial administrators. After establishing their missions in areas that were relatively close to the coast among the Yoruba, there was the need for some of them to spread the works into the hinterland (Mbiti, 2002, p. 231). This paper focuses on the experiences of some of these missionaries in two typical Yoruba communities of Nigeria. The paper compares the historical accounts of the interplay between traditional political organs and the missionaries in two communities: Iperu in Ijebu province (now in Ogun State) and Shao in Ilorin province (now in Kwara State). It considers how the interventions from the colonial administrators (remote or immediate), created inroads for missionary activities in the areas.

II. Political Organization in Yorubaland

Yoruba is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They occupy the south-western part of the country covering Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, and parts of Kwara and Kogi States. (Akintoye, 2004, in Nike S. Lawal et.al. p.18). The commonest form of political organization in Yorubaland is Kingship (Cf. Manus, 1991, pp. 312-316). Another form practiced is the one in which the head is called Baale – this literally means the father who owns the land. Generally speaking, the Baale is accountable to the King (Fadipe, 1991, p. 198). In relation to the organization of the court personnel, four major models have been identified among the Yoruba. The models are: the Oyo-Yoruba which is patterned after the political organization of the Alaafin of Oyo; the people of Ondo, Ijesa, Ekiti and Ife followed that of the Ife; those in Ijebuland in their various political units have an organization similar to that in Ijebu-Ode; the model of the court personnel found among the Egba is very simple but resembles the simpler form of political organization found in Ijebuland as per the roles of Ogboni secret society, especially among the Remo people. The model found in Lagos is also simple but regarded as aberrant (Fadipe, 1991, p. 199).

A traditional Yoruba community is usually divided into wards and each is supervised by a chief (Olaniyan, 2002, in Lawal Nike S. P. 279). Each ward is made up of many ancestral compounds – people