

## *Original Paper*

# The Influence of Freed Slaves on Western Education in West African Country

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of education in Africa was not a colonial invention, Prior to European colonization and subsequent introduction of Western education, traditional educational systems existed in Africa. The enduring role of education in every society is to prepare individuals to participate fully and effectively in their world; it prepares youths to be active and productive members of their societies by inculcating the skills necessary to achieve these goals. The missionary activities in Nigeria, especially their educational programs helped to whip-up the consciousness of a shared identity and helped to train a new set of elite that championed the course of nationalism and constituted a virile leadership for the young nation at independence. Freed slaves were significant agents of social, cultural, and religious change in Africa.*

### **Keywords**

*ex-slave, western education, Africa, Anglican church missionary society, history, and government*

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 History of Western Education in West African Country*

When the First World War broke out, little did Nigerians realize that the beginning and the end of the war would usher in a glorious beginning for Nigeria.

Formal, Western-type of education was introduced by British missionaries in the 1840s. The Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) started several schools in the mid-1800s. The colonial government gave the church financial aid, but in the early twentieth century, the government began building primary and secondary schools. By this time the British combined the northern and southern regions into one colony in 1914, and a total of 11 secondary schools were in operation, all but 1 run by missionaries.

Education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university. Education also means an enlightening experience.

Ex-slave simply means a freedman or freedwoman who is formerly enslaved person who has been

released from slavery, usually by legal means. Historically, enslaved people were freed by manumission (granted freedom by their captor-owners), emancipation (granted freedom as part of a larger group), or self-purchase.

Lord Macaulay, the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction played the most important role in introducing the western system of education. However, the process started in 1813. They started incorporating the western system of education in India by 1813. Lord Macaulay is the one who is said to have introduced western education in India. Lord Macaulay in his book “Minute upon Indian Education” opposed the publication of books in Sanskrit and Arabic.

## **2. What is Western Education?**

Western Education is a replacement to primitive African style of learning which emphasizes formal method of classroom education for all and sundry and is based on communication in writing, reading and numeric. It can also be defined as an education system that characterize by the process of assimilation and learning of the customs and practices of western culture.

The history of western education in Nigeria was traceable to the Portuguese traders who came to Benin in the early part of the 15th century. Then, they taught the children of the Oba of Benin. However, no meaningful development of western education which was not accepted took root until late 18th and early 19th centuries. However, the history of meaningful Western Education in Nigeria is traceable to the activities of the Christian missionaries, which started in 1842. Accounts of this historical event were given by numerous educationists. Among them were, Taiwo (1980), Adesina (1988), Fajana (1978) and Fafunwa (1974) to mention but just a few.

The mission responsible for the introduction of western education in Nigeria was the Wesleyan Methodist Society, which opened the Christian mission station at Badagry, near Lagos. The activities of this society were facilitated by an ex-slave of Yoruba race by name Ferguson who had earlier returned to the area. It was him that succeeded in persuading the Yoruba chiefs to bring the missionaries from Sierra Leone into Badagry. This effort saw the coming of Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr. and Mrs. De Graft in September, 1842 under the auspices of the Wesley Methodist Society to establish the first ever Christian mission station in the area. You should note as mentioned above that prior to this time, as early as 1472, there were pockets of literary activities going around the palace of the Oba of Benin, who had engaged the Portuguese Catholic missionaries in the training of his sons and the sons of his chiefs.

## **3. Western Education in Nigeria**

The aim of the missionaries who brought western education to Nigeria was almost similar to the Muslim Arabs that brought Islamic education into Northern Nigeria centuries before. The history of western education in Nigeria was traceable to the Portuguese traders who came to Benin in the early part of the 15th century. The Western Education system, on the other hand started in the Western part of

the country in the first half of the sixteenth century. The factors responsible for the introduction of the system were not indigenous but trade. The desire of the foreign Christian Missionary to “liberate” Africans from what they called “the dark mind, barbarism and idolatry war mainly to further their trade mission” (Aloy, 2001). This they pursued vigorously competing with each other through the establishment of schools and colleges.

Fafunwa (1978) observed “the Catholics, through the influence of the Portuguese trader were the first missionaries to set foot on the Nigerian soil. They established a seminary on the Island of Sao Tome, off the coast of Nigeria as early as 1571 to train Africans as church priests and teachers.” From Sao Tome, he continued, ‘they visited Warri where they established schools and preached the gospel.’ The effort of the Wesleyans Methodist Society was further consolidated by three missionaries of the Church Missionary Society who arrived Badagry from where they later moved to Abeokuta. On the team were Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, (later Bishop), Mr. Henry Townsend and Mr. G.A. Collman. Samuel Ajayi Crowther settled at Igbehin and established two schools – one for boys and the other for girls, while Townsend settled in Ake, another part of the town, where he built a mission house, a church and a school. This was the beginning of real rivalry among the Christian Missions in Nigeria. The Methodists, who started the first evangelical work in Nigeria, did not take this news kindly and so decided to send a lay of missionary to Abeokuta to commence work there. As the Catholic Mission Society was consolidating its activities around Abeokuta and Badagry and “extending its evangelical programmes to other parts of the country, Samuel Ajayi Crowther opened the first school in Onitsha in December 1858 for girls between the ages of 6 and 10.” (Fafunwa) Down Calabar and Bonny, developments in the introduction of Western education by the Church Mission Society missionaries were taking place. The chiefs of the area were, however, not interested in the evangelical activities of the missionaries, but would rather want their children to be taught how to gauge palm oil and other mercantile businesses as trading was the main interest of the people of the area. The missionaries had no option but to accept the people’s wishes. The Presbyterian Mission also made their presence known in 1846 and established mission house. Another Baptist convention established itself at Ijaye Abeokuta in 1853. The society of the African mission similarly arrived in Lagos and established their mission in 1868. Unfortunately, however, said Fafunwa (1978), “each denomination emphasized its own importance and spared no pains at proving that one denomination was better than the other”. As these denominations moved further into the hinterland, they established schools for the training of the catechists and teachers.

#### **4. Government Intervention in Education**

Decades after the introduction of western education in Nigeria, education had remained under the control of the Christian Missionaries. Government was unwilling to participate in the system in part or in total. The sources of funds for the mission schools mainly came from donations from groups and individuals outside the country, including local Christian and parents who were later paying for their

children. The bulk of the contributions were from the grants from the main missions abroad. In 1877 however, government decided to give unconditional grants to the mission school, which was used only to proliferate mushroom schools in villages. Thus, the conditions of the schools remain bad. There was acute shortage of teaching and learning facilities. “The Blackboards, chalks and slates were in short supply and the primers were largely religious tracts or information unrelated to local background”, observed Taiwo (1980).

In 1877, an education ordinance for the colony of Lagos came into being. The provision of the ordinance laid down some principles, which became the foundation of the education laws for Nigeria.

The provisions, as listed by Taiwo (1980) are:

1. The constitution of a Board of Education, comprising the Governor, members of the legislative council, (which was then a small body), the Inspector of Schools, the Governor’s nominees not exceeding four in number.
2. The appointment of Her Majesty of an Inspector schools for each colony, a sub-inspector of schools for the colony and other education officers.
3. Grant in aids to schools and teacher training institutions.
4. Power of the Board to make, alter and revoke rules for regulating the procedures of grant-in-aid.
5. Rates and conditions of grant-in-aid to infant schools, primary schools, secondary schools and industrial schools, based partly on subjects taught and partly on the degree of excellence in the schools.
6. Safeguard as to religious and racial freedom.
7. Certificate of teachers.
8. Admission into an assisted school of pauper and alien children assigned to it by the Governor.
9. Establishment of Scholarships for secondary and technical education.
10. Power of Governor to open and maintain Government schools.

A careful examination of the ordinance will reveal the re-echoing of the provisions of the 1877 provisions and the intention of government to participate with the missionaries as partners in the provision of education to Nigerians.

### **5. The Influence of Freed Slaves on Western Education in West African Country**

Inspired by Christian providentialism and emotional connections with their African ancestral heritage, ex-slaves in Britain and America provided much of the impetus for missionary contact with Africa in the nineteenth century and some subsequently returned to Africa as missionaries (Hastings, 1994). Catholic Orders such as the Holy Ghost Fathers, the White Fathers, and the Protestant Universities Mission to Central Africa used purchased and freed slaves in their attempts to socially engineer Christian communities (Kollman, 2005). More significantly, Christianized ex-slaves played a key role in the movements of mass conversion that traversed Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The impact of former slaves was most profound in West Africa where more than 70,000 slaves were freed by the Royal Navy in Sierra Leone following the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

Dispersed into Christian villages around Freetown, many adopted Christianity and subsequently returned home along the West African coast as agents of a Christian modernity. Considering themselves ‘Black English’ these returnees played a leading role in mediating British policies and practice in the era of imperialism and colonial conquest and, according to Vivian Bickford-Smith, influenced change at ‘the level of religious belief, dress, agricultural practices, domestic architecture, privately owned objects, diet and the sense of self in relation to society’ (Bickford-Smith, 2004).

This article extends the story of freed slaves to the frontier between Angola and Belgian Congo, where, save for a few glimpses, their historical experience has been largely ignored (Vansina, 2010). It examines the movement of ex-slaves who had been taken from Luba, Songye, and Lunda territories in what became Belgian Congo and marched to Bi éin Angola by Ovimbundu slavers between 1870 and the early 1900s. They were Christianized through contact with Euro-American missions while labouring in Angola. The former slaves returned home in the 1910s following the abolition of slavery in the Portuguese Empire to found a Christian movement in south-east Belgian Congo which introduced radical social and cultural change. But such change came with contradictions and costs; this article considers the tensions in the returnees’ social positions and experiences.

As actors in a colonial setting, missionaries often manifested a somewhat schizophrenic attitude towards Africans, seeking at once to preserve the past, promote economic change, and protect them from the worst effects of modernity. At times, freed slaves’ notions of respectability, which fused Christian ideals with older African notions of rank and honour, conflicted with missionary conceptions of respectability, particularly with regard to gender norms. The former slaves’ sophistication in diet, deportment, and dress ran counter to the demands of Christian humility and their own evangelical initiatives conflicted with loyalty to new missionary patrons. Moreover, their rejection of the uncivilized ‘other’ ran counter to the demands of Christian fellowship. And while they were indebted to missionaries for patronage and support, the trauma of enslavement coupled with missionary racism and paternalism produced what missionaries described as a ‘nameless grudge’ against authority.

Ideas of salvation provided the former slaves with an understanding of their experience of captivity and return, and a means of reimagining their social position and spiritual destiny. Although missionaries celebrated in their writings the returnees’ Christian endeavours, conflicts soon arose over authority and what constituted respectable behaviour. Following an examination of former slaves’ experiences of enslavement and return, the middle sections of the article considers these conflicts. The final part will examine how tensions with missionaries were exacerbated by the memory of servitude and the disorientation of return. One of the returnee leaders, Kaluwashi, severed relations with missionaries. Other former slaves sought alternative means to status and authority through Independent Christian movements or by mobilizing their traditional connections in local society.

A word is needed about sources. The missionary materials used in this article must be viewed with what J. D. Y. Peel terms “a hermeneutic of deep suspicion” given that they were created by European Christians imbued with the rhetoric of civilization and who were mindful of the metaphorical power of

stories of slavery and redemption (Peel, 2000). The primary missionary source analyzed is the bi-monthly journal published by the Congo Evangelistic Mission (CEM), first known simply as Report of Work (RW) and then, after 1922, as The Congo Evangelistic Mission Report (CEMR). This journal aimed to convince readers back home of the need to donate funds to and pray for the work of the CEM. Much of the content was what Nancy Rose Hunt describes as ‘evolutionary stories of progress’ that worked in terms of simple oppositions: darkness to light, savagery to civilization, heathens to Christians (Hunt, 1999). But not all missionary texts were triumphal. As Peel has shown in his outstanding study of the encounter of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) amongst the Yoruba, the sources often “spoke against their authors”. In order to vindicate their work of evangelism, some missionaries recorded “the hostility, indifference and mockery with which their preaching was received” (Peel, 2000). Others shared their heartaches, doubts, and failures in order to instruct readers on the costs of Christian service. These disturbances to missionary narratives offer indirect evidence of how Africans responded to Christianity. They are supplemented by yet more explicit private correspondence to family, friends, and prayer partners in the idiom of the embattled psalmist, who shared frustrations and failings as well as successes. Protestant mission periodicals reveal much about how missionaries viewed Africans, traditional and Christian, and what they found mystifying about them. They also, however, include African voices in order to demonstrate their evangelical successes. As Terence Ranger observed in his work on American Methodist missionaries (who are also considered in this article), evangelical religion placed a premium on recording the authentic heartfelt public confessions, testimonies, and sermons of converts as evidence of the saving power of the proclaimed Word (Ranger, 1994). At times African voices were stereotyped or their dialogues with missionaries became missionary monologues, but African words were also cited verbatim and some evangelists contributed articles. Apart from the need to assert authenticity, missionaries were often short of copy and African words were both compelling and readily available. The CEMR was produced and edited in Katanga. Missionaries, facing many challenges, generated this material and the scale and scope of their struggles is attested by the fact that some articles and images shocked metropolitan audiences (Maxwell, 2011).

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