

## Chapter Ten

# Ethiopianism in African Christianity

Ogbu U. Kalu

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is designed to achieve a number of things: first to explore how Africans responded to Christian presence as early as the nineteenth century, soon after missionary activities intensified in the continent in the wakes of two major movements, the abolition of slave trade and slavery and the second and largest wave of the evangelical revivals in Europe. Second, to demonstrate that all history is interpretation and, therefore, the story about the people who called themselves “Ethiopians”, has been told by missionaries to portray them as people who were either cultural nationalists or people whose sinister goal was to secede from mission churches. Either profile is biased and less than the true image. What does this label mean during the period 1872-1922? Third, their story re-links Christianity in Africa homeland with Christianity among Africans in the diaspora. It buttresses the connection between African Americans and Africa. The crucial concern is about where the rain of the gospel met Africans and what they did with the showers of blessing.

A genre of church historiography during the early independence period decried the fact that many “native agents” or indigenous people bore the brunt of the enterprise but remained nameless, as unsung heroes, in a missionary historiography that placed the missionary at the center of the story. Nationalist historiography swung to the other extreme from two foci: one strand imaged missionary ideology as subversive of indigenous culture and leadership while another strand glorified the various types of local participation in the enterprise: chiefs who invited and patronized missionaries; communities who paid for the teachers and built the infrastructure, evangelists and interpreters; lay people who funded the

enormous vertical expansion that occurred, especially in the inter-war years; and *émigrés* who returned from America and West Indies to prosecute mission. The native agency discourse became the staple diet of the 1970s.

One of the problems of the native agency discourse is that it operated within the missionary framework that privileged the insertion of the institutional church and gospel within the communities. Its concern was akin to the diatribe of a certain brand of feminism that queries the fact that in the gospel account two people took their needs to Jesus. One was a man and the other a woman. The writer named the man, Jairus and forgot the name of the woman who had an issue of blood. In the heat of political independence, the ecclesiastical brand of nationalism and indigenization project demanded that the African protagonists be named!

Years later, a different concern has appeared in a new historiography. It ceased to complain that missionary cultural policy demonized African culture and that even the neglect of African roles was an aspect of the racism that suffused the environment of the resurgent missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century. It boldly claimed that Christianity was a non-Western religion in the first place and the African version was an extension of African primal religion precisely because its expression of the gospel was forged in the heat of the gospel's challenge to the indigenous worldview. African Christianity, therefore, answered questions raised in the interior of the worldview.

This assertion was based on many unarticulated assumptions that could be easily unpacked. An aspect concerned the nature of church history and the place of theology in telling the story of gospel-people encounter. The assertion celebrates the contemporary growth of Christianity in the non-Western world that has challenged the perception of Christian expressions in those regions. Since people reconstruct from fragments of evidence what happened in the distant and contemporary past, the bias of either the missionary or the nationalist could be understood. But both operated from a predominantly institutional image of the church and its insertion into non-Western communities. When the gospel establishes a presence in another culture, it creates a culture and people encounters and the host community must perforce respond because the gospel affirms and challenges the presuppositions that prop the culture and life of the communities. The concern of this chapter is to show that those called "Ethiopians" were ahead of their times and had started a process of reflection that perceived Christianity as a non-Western religion, asserted African contribution in the Jesus movement and sought to fashion an authentic African response to the gospel's good news. Where is the black person in God's divine economy?

There are two things that must be emphasized: first, that early evangelical missionary enterprise in the nineteenth century was driven by a spiritual revival, a strong urge to share the gospel and a social activism that opposed the slave trade. But the situation or the exigencies of the mission fields compelled them to temper this hot spirituality for an institutional emphasis and character. Thus, the early indigenous response focused on the texture of this institutional presence. Missionary attitudes sometimes contested or colluded with colonial policies and ideology. In this particular case, colonial attitude to indigenous people changed dramatically after the Berlin Conference of 1885 and partition of Africa. Respect for indigenous rulers and acceptance of African capacity changed to jaundiced views.

Partition introduced virulent forms of European nationalism into the continent. The mission churches embellished this spirit with denominational stripes. The Berlin Conference's demand for physical presence rather than mere declarations of areas of influence opened the bowels of the African interior to missionary gaze. It was a moot point whether colonies were acquired in a fit of official absent-mindedness or by the machinations of the men-on-the-spot; the character of the cross-cultural process changed. European self-confidence, which replaced the initial respect for African chiefs as colonial weaponry, was now at the behest of gospel bearers. The scale of missionary activities was enormously enlarged making analysis complex; competition among missionaries became rife: broadly, Catholics squared off against Protestants but there were intra-mural competitions among the Catholic Orders and Protestant denominations because they came from different nations. Sometimes rivalry determined the pace, direction and nature of the Christian presence.

Missionary policy was forged amidst the competing claims of colonial ambitions, evangelical spirituality and obligations to the indigenous peoples. The allegation that missionaries colluded with the colonial governments must consider that these intimate enemies contested over cultural policy, educational curricula, and the moral temper of governance, and also the curious fact that colonialism benefited Islam more than several jihads could ever accomplish. The texture of colonial Christianity contained four strands that would challenge the indigenous peoples and evoke responses. First, *the character of the missionary presence* exhibited in such varied contexts as the mission centers of southern and central Africa, the protection of the settler communities in eastern Africa, and the increasing rejection of the large space that progressives, such as Henry Venn, advocated for African agency in West Africa. The second strand was a *cultural policy* that despised indigenous realities and embedded racism in mission practice. Third, the *institutionalization* of mission agencies that

ignored the powerful resources of the Holy Spirit in the gospel, sapped the vigor of the original evangelical spirituality and encrusted the monopoly of decision-making processes and the practice of faith. Fourth, *translation* of the Scriptures exposed the underbelly of the missionary enterprise and produced unintended consequences.

The net effect of the first three strands loaded the cross of humiliation on African shoulders. Missionaries shared the Enlightenment worldview of the age and negative image of Africa. While they used education to create an elite that would mediate the new dispensation and carry the gospel to their people, education served as an instrument of rivalry and a means of evangelization; therefore, the range in the curricula was limited. Missionaries disdained the educated “black Englishman”; some stoutly resisted the belief in African capacity nurtured by Henry Venn. From the fate of the native pastorate in Sierra Leone, through the delimitation of the powers of Samuel Crowther’s Niger bishopric, to his disgrace and the ousting of Africans from such high posts, the character of Christian presence in Africa was beclouded by racism. Missionaries showed more respect for South and East Asian cultures. In Africa this cultural policy created physical and psychological burdens and gave the enterprise a negative image embedded in a certain way of reading the Bible and in paternalistic principles that emphasized hierarchy, discipline and control. Race was particularly a major aspect of the Christian story in eastern and southern Africa. When Winston Churchill visited Kenya in 1906 as the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, he compared its racial issue to “*rhinoceros questions—awkward, thick-skinned, and horned, with a short sight, an evil temper, and a tendency to rush blindly upwind upon any alarm.*” That was a swipe at the settlers who reserved a sports cup named the *Kifaru (Rhinoceros)* for themselves.<sup>418</sup> Settlers implicated all whites by creating social and geographical boundaries between themselves and the indigenes. Ironies pervaded as white civilization, envisioned as the redemption of Africans, held them back, chafing for self-expression.

Control and the quest for a monopolistic interpretation of Christianity occupied the centre of much missionary ideology. This controlling attitude affected the pattern of African responses. For instance, the Africa Inland Mission among the Kikuyu from 1895 recruited only personnel who demonstrated strong piety, personal conversion, passion for evangelism, and could fund themselves. But their piety demonized local cultures and

<sup>418</sup> P. LONSDALE, “Mission Christianity & settler colonialism in eastern Africa”, in H HANSEN & M TWADDLE (eds), *Christian Missionaries and the State in the Third World* (Oxford: Currey, 2002), 194-211, 196.

created tight-knit separate communities of believers (*athomi*). The tension between them and the rest of the community was so strong that the Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has described this type of Christianity as a *River Between*. After 1914 such tensions would intensify, splintering the Kikuyu nation into competing Christianities. Nevertheless, the Kikuyu would reject, not Christianity itself but the mode of evangelization practiced by the missionaries. Much to the contrary, their nationalism contested the liberation offered by missionaries as being less than the translated Bible promised.<sup>419</sup>

Why did missionaries fail to disengage from the frontier mounted by the settlers? There appeared to be a strong evangelical reticence towards practical issues of social justice: for some it was the result of premillennial eschatology; for others it was the emphasis on the individual in their theology; for most, the openness that invited all people to be converted failed to dissolve the frontier of racial exclusion. The Anglicans and Scottish Presbyterians who were a part of the establishment were most inclined to accept the hegemony and justice of colonial rule. Most whites lived under fear of the African; the dark skin, large numbers, and cultures steeped in alien religiosity frightened outsiders. Control measures were adopted as a survival technique.

From this perspective, the wave of "Ethiopianism" in Africa from 1860 to the turn of the century may be viewed as an example of African response to colonial Christianity. According to a key figure, the Sierra-Leonean medical doctor, Africanus Beale Horton (1835-1883), it was a response to the European nationalism of the period that resulted in the partition of Africa and the change in white temperament that sought to restrain African initiative with European domination.<sup>420</sup>

## I. THE LENS:

### MORAL ECONOMY AND AGENCY

It is useful to spell out how this re-interpretation of Ethiopianism will be done. The first is to borrow the notion of "moral economy", which may be helpful. The concept has been employed by the social historian E.P.

<sup>419</sup> P. LONSDALE, "Kikuyu Christianities: A history of intimate diversity", in D. MAXWELL & I. LAWRIE (eds), *Christianity and the African Imagination* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 157-97.

<sup>420</sup> C. FYFE, *Africanus Horton: 1835-1883: West African Scientist and Patriot*, Modern Revivals in African Studies (London: Ashgate, 1993).

Thompson to describe the failure by those in authority in early modern England to meet traditional and customary obligations towards the ruled. Thompson characterizes those expectations, embodied in values and roughly approximating to a consensus, as “moral economy”. This concept could apply to the context of colonial Christianity, in which the original motives, included saving Africans from the evil caused by the nefarious slave trade, obeying the Great Commission, and bringing the resources of the kingdom of God to the continent. Within the colonial structure built on the tripod of civil administration, legitimate trade and judiciary, missionaries served as the civilizing agents, the conscience of a civilizing moral economy. They proceeded to build a structure that embodied certain values and the new indigenous members were compelled to respond to the structure. By structure is meant the ways social forces constrained, shaped and/or determined human behavior within such contexts.

A second way of looking at it is through the concept of “legibility”; that is, missionaries maintained the structure by making the new converts “readable”. They read the “natives” by employing simple characterizations, stereotypes, simplifications, and prejudices. Nineteenth-century missionaries constructed physical and psychological tools for “reading” the new converts. The mission compound and its allocation of space, regimen in boarding schools and mission compounds, ethical boundaries, character formation strategies and dynamics of church polity were all designed to make the converts legible. The argument is Africans responded to missionary structures in three ways: some individuals and communities accepted them with *loyalty*, others *voiced* their dissent, and some took measures to *exit* from them.

Harris W. Mobley illustrates the pattern with an example from Ghana.<sup>421</sup> He draws a distinction between the literature of tutelage by courteous critics and the radical genre of critical literature by a second generation that avoided such deferential, tentative nuances. The new voices criticized the missionary’s secluded habitation, social distance and vocational dominance. They explored the negative dimensions of missionary institutionalism or structure, harping on the imposition of ecclesiastical forms, the replacement of village community with church membership, marriage issues and the retarding effects of rivalry. They suspected the use of schools as a means of evangelization and faulted the missionary interpretation of Christianity, especially its failure to relate to

<sup>421</sup> H. MOBLEY, *The Ghanaian's Image of the Missionary: An Analysis of the Published Critiques of Christian Missionaries by Ghanaians 1897-1965* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

indigenous beliefs. The ambiguity in the structure did not escape notice, recognizing what was dubbed as “coast conscience” that afflicted a minority of daring European “progressives” who cared for the welfare of Africans.

In contemporary social sciences, radicalism is profiled as “agency”. Agency is used to refer to how individuals and groups self-consciously shape their behavior within such structures. It is the ability to make decisions, initiate redemptive actions and counter vulnerability or the inability to take decisions for oneself or one’s community. Agency is a visioning gift that sees beyond simple tasks of survival and defines the importance of activism on behalf of self and community. As applied here, it refers to the dual processes by which black people confronted colonial social structures and institutions; they refused to accept the negative image of the black person. It must be stressed that colonialism was not just an administrative structure but also a psychological instrument that humiliated and wounded the soul and made the victim dependent on the master figure. In church historiography, agency is a tool for analyzing both the patterns of insertion of the gospel and the modes of appropriation; or, how Africans responded in the process of culture-encounter. Those described as “Ethiopians” were agents who “set to work” the missionary message, responded to the larger import of its moral values and gave voice to whispers from the ranges of infra-politics—that zone where the ruled talk freely about their rulers. Since missionary racial and cultural ideologies jarred most prominently against the biblical values that their translation of the gospel betrayed, and since the cultural hardware of the enterprise was intimidating, these two issues dominated the first African response to the missionary message.

## II. ETHIOPIANISM:

### MYTH AND MEMORY

Ethiopianism was a movement with many strands. It was rooted in the Bible; specifically in the passage in Psalm 68:31 which prophesied that “*Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.*” The prophetic reading of this passage is traced to African Americans who, in the golden age of black nationalism from 1870 to 1920, crafted an empowering exegesis around this passage. It has inspired generations who re-fashioned it freely. The Ethiopian tradition sprang from certain shared political and religious experiences and found expression in slave narratives, in the exhortations of conspiratorial slave preachers, folklore and songs of slaves. After 1872, it moved beyond the nostalgia of

prideful heritage to communal assertion. The intellectual origin may include the impact of European ideals that were filtered through American revolutionary rhetoric to inspire African Americans who returned to the motherland. The Christianity of the returnees, argues Sanneh, was stamped with the values of anti-slavery and promoted as the cause of the oppressed and the stigmatized.<sup>422</sup> It called for freeing Africans from the religious and political tutelage of Europeans. The core concerns included a quest for a place of their own, for identity, self-respect, and an opportunity to nurse Africa back to its old glory. That glory was imaged with the achievements of ancient Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia. There was a conflation of myth and history. Ethiopia was both a place and an ideological symbol and there is little doubt about the achievements of Egypt in science, architecture and government. The contributions of ancient Egypt were injected into western civilization through the Greeks and mistaken for Greek ingenuity. The contributions of this part of Africa to the consolidation of the theology and identity of early Christianity are equally immense. Ethiopianism, therefore, has three broad strands: in African American diasporic experience, western African manifestations, and southern African genre. In all incarnations, it fuelled black nationalism.

The first task is to explore the search for heroic roots, which often fails to underscore patches in the story. It is a puzzle why the Egyptians did not refer to themselves as *Kushites* but applied the term *Kush* to the region south of the first cataract of the Nile, and to the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah who witnessed his drunken father's nakedness. The notion of a curse was introduced into the story even though it was Canaan that was cursed. Did the ancient Egyptians perceive themselves as related to the Kush? Historically, the relationship between Egypt and the Kushite region was fraught with ambiguity. Egypt was attracted to the mineral wealth, commercial and cultural exchanges with the region that stood between it and central Africa, as well as the trade with Arabs from the Red Sea island of Dahlak and the sea port of Adulis. Nubians patronized the cultic temples at Philae (Aswan). Archaeological evidence of Egyptian cultural presence in the interior of the Nubian region abounds. Meanwhile, the Blemmyes, ancestors of the Beja of contemporary Sudan, constantly raided the southern Egyptian regions around Thebes and Philae. It is said that the rich Nubian kingdom of Meroe was once located around Napata; when the Nubians attacked Egyptian towns, the latter revenged, sacked its capital and forced its relocation down the Nile. The treasurer to the Queen Mother,

<sup>422</sup> L. SANNEH, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of the Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Candace of Meroe, made it into the pages of the Bible as Philip met him returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>423</sup> He was reading the Septuagint.

Matters darkened as the translators of the Septuagint Bible in 300BC mistakenly translated the Hebrew *Kush* into the Greek, *Aithiop*, a word that the Greeks used for any country south of their known world, and derived from their word for black face, *aithiops*. The entire region from Egypt to Ethiopia/Abyssinia thus became known as Ethiopia. This explains how “Ethiopianism” as a movement sought to re-create and moor itself onto the prideful, golden age of African civilization, the splendor of the kingdoms of Meroe and Aksum that survived the Islamic onslaught of the seventh century and retained the pristine traditions of early Christianity. In European imagination, this was the kingdom of Prester John, whose myth allured many crusaders into arduous sojourns and served as a key component of Iberian voyages of the fifteenth century. Ethiopia was an enchanted place, whose monarch claimed to be the Lion of Judah, a scion of Queen Sheba and King Solomon, whose land is said to hold the ark of the covenant, and who defeated the Italians at Adwa in March 1896 to prove that the whites were not invincible. Ethiopians maintained their independence into the modern times, though Nubia collapsed into Islamic embrace in the fifteenth century. “Ethiopia” passed into the nineteenth-century imagination as a generic term for blacks, the descendants of Ham and Cush. The Rastafarians of the West Indies equally celebrate this conflation of myth and historical memory because the movement was, like Ethiopianism, a form of cultural appreciation, a social and historical excavation, a recovery and re-contextualization of black traditions of emancipation hidden from consciousness of black peoples by colonial hegemony.

However, recent archaeological literature on the alluring Queen of Sheba, whose image rivals that of Delilah and Cleopatra, locates her in South Arabia rather than in Nubia or Ethiopia. Indeed, it was the dynasty of Tewodros of Ethiopia (1855-1868) that contrived the Solomonic succession into a messianic ideology of a king whose coming had long been prophesied. He would later add “*the son of David and of Solomon*” into his official titles. Ethiopia was imaged as the land from where Queen Sheba sojourned to consort with Solomon and produced the heritage of the monarchy. Tewodros superseded the story of the Falasha linkage with ancient Israel and conjured a myth. The Falasha or Beta-Israel trace a genuine religious heritage to Israel. Some Victorian observers claimed that

<sup>423</sup> Acts 8:27.

there was a Semitic physiognomic resemblance; this is debatable.<sup>424</sup> The Falasha maintained a Mosaic tradition with a strong asceticism that borrowed elements of the indigenous culture. They inhabited a number of communities mostly in northern Ethiopia and were despised. The term *falasi* meant stranger.

Various Christian kings of Ethiopia sought to counter the Falasha claim to a more authentic heritage and tried to *Amharize* them. They became generally poor, powerless artisans; some could not afford to retain the Mosaic rituals. The *zimana mesafent*, rule of princes (1769-1855), when the central authority virtually dissolved, was the worst period for the Falasha as the princes disenfranchised their lands. In the mid-nineteenth century, missionary efforts by Jewish organizations, such as the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, attempted to consolidate their Jewish heritage and later to promote repatriation to Israel.

Thus, Ethiopian kings constructed the Hebraic linkage by disestablishing the direct line. The myth about Ethiopia, therefore, conflated different genres: the achievements of ancient Egypt that were staggering in their range, the achievements of the early Christian apologists in Alexandria and Carthage, the gilded kingdoms of Nubian Meroe, the exploits of Aksum, and the endeavors of various Abyssinian kings who sustained the Christian kingdom in the face of Islamic onslaught until Yohannes and Menelik modernized it. The defeat of the Italians crowned all these into a prideful past for Africans. Ethiopia became a symbol of African redemption, political and religious ideology that continued to inspire through generations.

### III. "GOD IS A NEGRO":

#### ETHIOPIANISM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915) was perhaps the greatest protagonist of the Ethiopian cause for the period. Confronted with a keen sense of the sovereignty of God and the cross of humiliation of the black people at home and abroad, he designed a providential theology hewn from the rock of the belief that God has the interest of Negroes so much at heart that he is a Negro. God providentially brought them as slaves to America to acquire the resources of the gospel for redeeming the fatherland. Black

<sup>424</sup> Don SEEMAN, "The Question of Kinship: Bodies and Narratives in the Beta Israel-European Encounter (1860-1920)", in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30, 1 (2000), 86-120, 101-102.

Manifest Destiny conferred a responsibility. Many others, such as Alexander Crummell (1819-1898), Martin Delany (1812-1885) and Henry Garnet (1815-1882), contributed to developing the idea.

Some understood the prophecy in Psalm 68:31 to mean that Africa would be saved from heathenism; others imagined it on a grand scale to say that Africa would one day rise to rule the world. For all, it explained the forced dispersion, countered the prevalent Hamitic theory, and imposed a sacred duty. African Americans were the instruments for achieving God's design. Each commentator prescribed how the task could be accomplished. Some urged the exercise of black religious genius and commitment already evident in Simon Cyrene's assistance to Jesus. Crummell imagined the black intellectuals as agents and leaders for redeeming the fatherland through religion. Delany, who was a Harvard trained medical doctor, harped on the cultivation of self-help ("elevation"), education and skills. Such trained manpower would return to Africa to develop it. Henry Turner labored to inspire and mobilize Africans in black churches.

All agreed on emigration and the imperative to appropriate the best of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Garnet buttressed the dream with an organizational structure. He scripted a constitution in 1858 for the American Colonization Society based on a voluntary and co-operative mobilization and re-direction of the energy of black people. For Turner, America held no hopes for the black person. Incidentally, the period coincided with white realization that the challenges of the climate in certain parts of Africa required black personnel. They toured institutions to recruit and founded others for training such personnel. Other blacks suspected white motives, arguing that those who did not care for the welfare of blacks in the United States could not possibly sympathize with Africans at home.

The American Colonization Society suffered challenges because of funding, the robust opposition of integrationists, and the American Civil War that distracted focus, but its ideal flowed into various Pan-African movements in latter years. In many ways, their activism buttressed the daring of the Nova Scotians and Maroons who had emigrated in 1792 to Sierra Leone and whose example inspired the foundation of Liberia in 1822. African Americans articulated some of the key themes that would be picked up on the continent precisely because some protagonists, such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), participated from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

## IV. "WE ARE NO LONGER SLAVES":

## VOICE AND ANTI-STRUCTURE IN WEST AFRICA

Beyond myth and ideology, Ethiopianism was a daring voice of new confidence that was manifested in the Native Pastorate experiment by the CMS in Sierra Leone; it breathed with the hope that Africans would bear the responsibility to evangelize Africa, build an autonomous church devoid of denominations and shirk European cultural domination and control of decision-making in the church. It dreamt of developing a Negro state with a different type of education that included a tertiary facility; one that would mobilize Christian and Muslim resources in the larger African interest; preserve African culture, language, and racial distinctives. It would ironically do all these by absorbing the best in European culture. There was no rejection of European culture in the program. It wanted only a share in an envisioned new dispensation rooted in a prophecy of the destiny of the black race. The emphasis was on re-imagining the race in the face of denigration by the whites. This explains the strand in Ethiopianism that urged awareness and activist protest about the fate of oppressed Africans in the Congo, West Indies, South Africa, and Fernando Po.<sup>425</sup>

Jehu Hanciles has rooted the West African manifestation of Ethiopianism in Henry Venn's vision of the euthanasia of missionary control that promoted a counter-imagination built on confidence in African ability and created space for the indigenes to run their churches. Venn advised missionaries to build nuclei congregations, study and respect indigenous peculiarities, and avoid mistaking black nationalism for presumption or ingratitude. He predicted that the desire to supersede denominational distinctions was bound to grow.<sup>426</sup> James "Holy" Johnson of Freetown, and later of the CMS Yoruba mission, best expressed this view when he wrote in April 1873:

"The desire to have an independent church closely follows the knowledge that we are a distinct race, existing under peculiar circumstances and possessing peculiar characteristics, the desire to preserve this distinction uninjured, the conviction that it would materially contribute to give a purely native character and power

<sup>425</sup> E.A. AYANDELE, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914, A Political Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1966), 187.

<sup>426</sup> J.J. HANCILES, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial context* (Connecticut, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002).

to our religious profession, and that the arrangement of foreign churches made to suit their own local circumstances can hardly be expected to suit our own in all their details."<sup>427</sup>

Johnson anticipated the roots of the indigenization project of the future and could be seen as a forerunner of the moratorium debate of the 1970s. The Native Pastorate caused a vigorous debate over the availability of educated personnel, funding and the marginalized role of whites. While this was going on, an ideological fire from the African American emigration activists engulfed the West African educated elite who chafed under white control of decision-making processes in the churches and state.

Crucial to the nationalism of the period was the use of the Bible to legitimate racial ideology. It shared the diatribe by African-American protagonists such as Martin Delany who countered culture-based hermeneutics by declaring that "we are no longer slaves, believing any interpretation that our oppressors may give the word of God, for the purpose of deluding us to the more easy subjugation; but freemen."<sup>428</sup> Ethiopianism went beyond passive radicalism, that is, a coping mechanism against ideological and material disadvantage, to an active radicalism that sought to remove the source of the control system. African response would gradually move from voicing opposition to the moral economy of missionary structure to anti-structural agency. Some nationalists gave voice to dissent through their writings but remained within the structure; others sought to emasculate missionary structures.

By networking through Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gold Coast and Nigeria, Ethiopians in West Africa built a formidable following among the sector of the new elite who refused to be co-opted. It bonded the stars of West Africa. To name but a few: in the Gold Coast, J. E. Casely Hayford (Ekra-Agiman; 1868-1930), a brilliant lawyer and Methodist layman, wrote *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) and initiated a critical tradition which rejected the literature of tutelage characteristic of missionary protégés. As an admirer of Wilmot Blyden, his activism centered on mobilizing the entire West African colonies in educational and political matters. Unlike Casely-Hayford, the educationist Mensah Sarbah (b. 1864) avoided an open attack on missionaries but offered an insightful work on Fanti customary laws that would show the moral foundations of an African community. Attah Ahuma

<sup>427</sup> E.A. AYANDELE, 'Holy' Johnson, *Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836-1917* (Southgate: Frank Cass, 1970), 42.

<sup>428</sup> G. WILMORE, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998 [1973]), 137.

(1863-1921) broke away and affiliated his Gold Coast African Methodist Church to the bastion of African American self-assertion, the American Methodist Episcopal Zion, in 1896.

In Nigeria, a leader in the Southern Baptist mission, David Brown Vincent (1860-1917), took to wearing only Yoruba clothes, founded a school with no foreign support, and in 1888 seceded from the Southern Baptists to form the Native Baptist Church in Lagos, the first indigenous church in West Africa. In 1894 he reverted to his original name, Mojola Agbebi. Similarly, another Yoruba, E.M. Lijadu (1862-1926), refused to be insulted by an Anglican agent, funded his "Self-Supporting Evangelist Band" (1900) through trade, and wrote two books in which he tried to articulate Christian theology with indigenous knowledge, arguing that the Yoruba deity, Orunmila, was a pre-figuration of Jesus. The educationist, Henry Car, asserted that education was a crucial tool for building African self-image. Car and the more famous Ghanaian, J.E.K. Aggrey (1875-1927) of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, inspired a generation of educationists. The ambiguity in the movement was encapsulated in the career of James "Holy" Johnson (c. 1836-1917), who led the movement before he was transferred from Sierra Leone to Lagos. He had a reputation for an unbending evangelicalism and as an agitator for African rights to education and ecclesiastical independence. He insisted on fighting the battle from inside the Anglican Church and would not be persuaded to secede. He did not even accept the platform of polygamy as the basis for Ethiopianism. The same pragmatism characterized the ideals of Julius Ojo-Cole, who was not averse to borrowing the best of other civilizations to improve Africa as long as it was affirmed that each race of people possessed its genius and must unite, co-operate to foster a spirit of national consciousness and radical pride. He was a founding member of the West African Students' Union; published the journal *West African Review* and sought to introduce a new type of education in West Africa.<sup>429</sup> Many of the Ethiopianists were inspired by Blyden, but did not share his optimism about the spread of Islam. From Liberia, Blyden traveled widely to promote the cause in Africa and America. His lecture in Lagos in 1891 entitled, *The Return of the Exiles*, encapsulated the heart of the movement. Acknowledging the sacrifices of white missionaries, he argued nonetheless that the destiny of the Christianity lay in the hands of Africans or, as a weekly newspaper in Sierra Leone reported on a speech by Agbebi in 1892,

<sup>429</sup> Gabriel OLUSANYA, "Julius Cole: a Neglected Nigerian Nationalist and Educationist", in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7,1 (December, 1973), 91-110.

“the sphinx must solve her own riddle. The genius of Africa must unravel its own enigma.” Blyden braided cultural, religious and political strands of nationalism into a coherent prophetic logic of African response to the missionary structure and message. As he put it in a lecture to the Sixty-third Annual Meeting of the American Colonization Society in 1880:

“Africa may yet prove to be the spiritual conservatory of the world. Just as in past times, Egypt proved the stronghold of Christianity after Jerusalem fell, and just as the noblest and greatest of the Fathers of the Christian Church came out of Egypt, so it may be, when the civilized nations, in consequence of their wonderful material development, have had their spiritual perceptions darkened and their spiritual susceptibilities blunted through the agency of a capturing and absorbing materialism, it may be, that they may have to resort to Africa to recover some of the simple elements of faith; for the promise of that land is that she shall stretch forth her hands unto God.”<sup>430</sup>

Blyden thus foresaw the coming shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity from the north to the south Atlantic and its import for African Christianity.

Perhaps, the significance of the movement can best be gleaned from the fact that African Christians choreographed all three movements of loyalty, voice and exit; as some loyally memorized the script written by the missionaries, others voiced their dissent through publications and media; gradually, a few, such as Mojola Agbebi, led a movement of exit to form Native African Churches which split from the mission-founded ones to experiment with interdenominational Christianity. In Nigeria, there were six main branches of the movement: three split from mainline churches and three sprouted thereafter on their own. By the 1921 census, these churches in aggregate constituted the third largest Christian form in southern Nigeria. The Ethiopian cultural register included the rejection of European baptismal names; the use of African clothes; praying for chiefs instead of the British monarch; and accepting polygamists as members of the church. They contested missionary polity, liturgy and ethics from an honest

<sup>430</sup> E. HOLDEN, *Blyden of Liberia* (New York: Vantage Press, 1966); H.R. LYNCH, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 147; E.W. BLYDEN, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London: W.B. Whittingham, 1888), 143.

appropriation of biblical principles.<sup>431</sup> Indeed, by 1914 two of the Native Baptist churches had returned into fellowship with the Southern Baptist Convention. The image of a syncretistic endeavor is fictional.

This may explain the changing pattern of white responses to Ethiopianism. The conservative ones were often regarded as useful for controlling the natives, while those influenced by African Americans, such as the African Orthodox Church in Zimbabwe, were viewed as subversive, to be hounded out of the religious space. For the most part, Ethiopianism pursued the symbols of modernity such as education, but used anti-structural strategy to protest against the arrogance of power. Beyond cultural nationalism, Ethiopianism re-structured the ecclesiology and theology of the missionary churches and encapsulated the dilemmas of blending missionary endeavor, colonization and endogenous development in African societies. It confronted externality in African Christianity by asserting that all forms of Christianity were tribal and that a truly African Christianity was possible, even though its full character would emerge only with time: in the words of an Akamba proverb, "cattle are born with ears, they grow horns later." Ethiopians laid the foundations for modern forms of African nationalism whether in the political or ecclesiastical realm and initiated the current debates on inculturation and vernacularization in African theology. They voiced a new form of Christianity in Africa.

## V. AGENCY AND EXIT:

### ETHIOPIANISM IN SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA

In southern and central Africa, three interesting dimensions intrigue: first, the question of why Africans reacted with such confidence to the new face of missionary Christianity; second, the different faces of Ethiopianism in the region, where the movement occurred independently though rooted in the same principles as in West Africa; third, the role of African American black churches in catalyzing and sustaining African radicalism. Certain regional characteristics equally emerged: race was more prominent than culture in white settler communities; exit was sometimes forced and sometimes adopted out of frustration; the political dimension was buttressed by the religious as churches provided havens from the brutality and humiliations of the structure, and served as the forum for mobilizing

<sup>431</sup> J.B. WEBSTER, *The African Churches among the Yoruba, 1888-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), xvi.

dissent until the character of radicalism changed and the weight of frustration produced the violent genre of Ethiopianism.

Many forms of exit were led by people of chiefly pedigree, thus weaving religious movements into the communal quest for survival in the midst of the disruptions and internal stability caused by the expansions of whites. Missionary enterprise that started in earnest in the dawn of the nineteenth century, had by the third quarter of the century produced a bulge of educated people who had the confidence to seek the well-being of their people by confronting the exploiters and their moral subalterns/legitimizers. For instance, in 1892, Mangena M. Mokone (1851-c.1936), an ordained Wesleyan Methodist, rejected the racial segregation of the church and withdrew to found his Ethiopian Church in Pretoria. Four years later, he contacted the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) through the agency of his niece, Charlotte Manye. She was a member of a group of singers that had been stranded in the United States after a tour of America in 1893. The intervention of an African Methodist Episcopal minister helped her enter Wilberforce College in Ohio, where she graduated with honors. The two churches united. Mokone's agent, James M. Dwane (1848-1915), was made the General Superintendent of the AMEC, but in 1900 broke off and took his group into the Anglican Church, maintaining its quasi-independent identity as "the Order of Ethiopia".

A pattern of enclavement dominated the character of the missionary presence in the region; perhaps derived from the model of treating delinquents in Europe. African responses varied from loyalty to exit, in rejection of the enclavement pattern. Nehemiah Tile (d. 1891), a member of a chiefly family, left the Wesleyans in Tembuland in 1884 in an effort to achieve political and religious freedom from whites; Pambani J. Mzimba abandoned the Presbyterians of Lovedale in 1890, just as Charles Domingo would exit from the Livingstonia Mission in Nyasaland in 1908. It should also be noted that the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) aided the spread of Christianity into the African camps; as many Africans dispersed from the mining centers, they took the radical Christian forms to their rural communities.

Moreover, African American influence was important, as the visit of Bishop Henry M Turner of the AMEC to South Africa in 1898 did much to galvanize the Ethiopian movement of the period to the consternation of the settlers. His liaison with James Mata Dwane, son of a Ntinde ruler, catalyzed tremendous growth in the Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Transvaal. A cultural aside is that it was Mankayi Enoch Sontonga (c. 1873-1905), a product of the Lovedale Institution and member of Mzimba's African Presbyterian Church, who composed the famous song,

“Nkosi Sikelel’ i-Afrika” in 1897. This has become the theme song of African liberation, forms the national anthem of Zambia and Zimbabwe, and has been incorporated into the national anthem of South Africa.

Collectively, these men rejected the racism, insults, control, and European cultural and religious domination that frequently overshadowed the evangelical spirit in the missionary enterprise. They harped on the themes of a non-denominational African Christianity; self-expression; political and ecclesiastical freedom and inter-ethnic mobilization. Dwane’s anti-white rhetoric may have been strident but there was something inexplicable that galled Africans in this period. This can be well illustrated by the case of John Chilembwe’s exit from white tutelage in Nyasaland (modern Malawi). Like Mzimba and Domingo, Chilembwe (c.1871-1915) was nurtured by a loving missionary, who placed much hope on his loyalty. Joseph Booth of the Zambezi Industrial Mission reared him from the position of a cook to a status as a son and sent him to a black college in West Virginia. Chilembwe returned in 1900 to Nyasaland a changed person and founded the Providence Industrial Mission at Chiradzu, which was supervised by an African American Baptist missionary through its first six years. His preference for ebony kinship frightened the whites, even though they had no sympathy for Booth, who was later deported.

Chilembwe’s resort to violence in 1915 was only one of seven cases that stoked white scares about Ethiopianism between 1906 (the last Zulu Bambata rebellion) and 1927. African American churches were blamed as the external agitators of African unrest until the Watch Tower challenge to civil polity (led in Nyasaland by Booth’s former protégé, Elliot Kamwana) became the dread of white politics in southern Africa between 1909 and 1915. Indeed, white fears severely throttled the African American missionary impulse. The underlying reasons for the tense socio-political environment in the period were the political restructuring and creation of the Union in 1910, increased alienation of land from the indigenes, and the decline of the status of educated blacks, who responded by forming the South African Native National Congress in 1912 and sent a delegation to London to protest against the South Africa Native Land Act of 1913. Though some Ethiopians were involved, a political force took over control. Even in the United States, black nationalism took a political color as Garveyism and the United Negro Improvement Association captured the centre stage.

It could be argued that after 1915 Ethiopianism as a movement started to lose momentum, so that by 1930 it had become disengaged from the religious terrain and merged into a larger Pan Africanist political movement that had operated since 1896 as a component of a larger

ideology.<sup>432</sup> Various reasons can be canvassed for this trend, some of which were discernible even before 1915. First is the diverse character of missionary ideologies; this means that no single person or group represented the whole. Within the same missionary movement some perceived the dangers of the missionary's cultural hardware and voiced African discomfort. Others went even further to wonder whether managerial mission did not overshadow the role of the Holy Spirit. The strength of the missionary enterprise lay in the capacity for internal criticism. Some aspects of missionary practices countered and chipped away the rough edges of its other manifestations, and hence weakened the appeal of the Ethiopian churches.

Second, Africans appropriated those resources in a variety of ways and differently in time perspective. The vision, sacrifice and range of social services by missionaries benefited Africans in their quest to adjust to new power realities. The effect of Bible translation, the power of the gospel working in spite of the bearers, thus appreciating and yet limiting human agency, ensured that Christianity began to answer the questions raised by the interior of the prevailing worldviews and the tensions encountered with colonialism. Soon African agents carried the burden of evangelization and grew more confident with the times. African Bible women, who visited kraals in the Transvaal enthused with a hot gospel, increasingly became adept. Xhosa evangelists worked in Malawi in the 1870s. South Africa was like a nodal point from which many migrant laborers, as black missionaries, fanned into the contiguous countries.

Third, by the turn of the century, the character of Christian presence and the mode of appropriating the gospel had changed; further shifts in geopolitics reshaped the character of Christian presence in Africa. For instance, political parties emerged in West Africa as cultural nationalism shifted to political nationalism. The reshaped character of Christian presence can be illustrated by the immense efforts made to consolidate the enterprise through ecumenical endeavor and to promote indigenization. The World Missionary Conference of 1910 depicts the character of this strand. After Edinburgh, many missionary groups shifted from comity or mere friendship among whites in foreign lands to more formal cooperation. They negotiated boundaries and delimited areas of operation to avoid rivalry and later, following Indian precedent, founded National Councils of Churches. Examples include Nigeria, Zambia, Madagascar, Swaziland and Angola.

<sup>432</sup> P. Olanwuche ESEDEBE, *Pan-Africanism; The Idea and Movement 1776-1963* (Washington DC: Howard University Press 1994), ch. 2.

Fourth, the hopes of Edinburgh did not fully materialize because the whole missionary field soon became confused, insecure and vulnerable with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. As it dragged on longer than anticipated, missionary logistics would become endangered: posts, supplies, transportation, and manpower. Nevertheless, the War would enlarge the space for African roles and initiative and thus reduce racial tensions. Moreover, mass movements of conversion to Christianity would enable a new era of consolidation for the mission churches after 1914.

#### CONCLUSION:

#### THE ENDURING LEGACY OF ETHIOPIANISM

In 1964, the Nigerian Methodist theologian, E. B. Idowu, presented a series of radio talks, "Towards an Indigenous Church", which sounded like a close reading of earlier Ethiopian themes. The indigenization project that followed decolonization so mirrored the design of Ethiopianism that the movement could be said to have nurtured the roots of modern African Christianity. Ethiopianism deployed Christianity as an instrument to reconstruct the development of African cultural and political nationalism. Later African indigenous churches uncovered the Achilles' heels of missionary Christianity and also revealed the limits of the Ethiopian response. The legacies of the Ethiopian movement were, however, numerous: the quests to appropriate the gospel and modernity with dignity; to be both an African and a Christian; to express faith from an indigenous worldview and spirituality so that Africans could respond to their own realities and culture in the spheres of liturgy, polity and ethics; to tap the resources of indigenous knowledge in communicating the kerygma; and to practice local initiatives in evangelism, decision-making processes, ecclesial structures and funding. Some Ethiopians even advocated dialogue with other faiths by responding to Islam without confrontation. Dialogue was an African idea long before missionaries woke up to its import.