

The Baptist Mission in Ekitiland (1901 – 2005): An Historical Analysis

Dr. Jegede, Gabriel Gbenga
Faculty of Arts , Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Abstract

Until recently, works on the history of Christian Missions in Nigeria has not taken cognizance of Ekiti geo-political landscape in their examination of the history of Christianity in the country. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill part of the lacuna left by earlier researchers. The paper traces the origin of Christianity in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. It corrects the earlier assumption that history of Christian Missions in Nigeria was only that of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) by insisting that the Baptist Mission began almost at the same time in this part of Nigeria with that of other Christian denominations. This work also reveals the unique history of the Baptist Church in Ekiti. It discusses the early Christian experience in term of persecutions and deprivations. The paper concludes that the Baptist Mission in Ekitiland has served as catalyst for social change in the communities that played host to the church.

Introduction

The history of Christianity in the South-Western part of Nigerian has enjoyed a bumper harvest of scholarly works¹. They all attest to the fact that Christianity was introduced into his part (South-West) of Nigerian in 1842 through Badagry, the costal town of Nigeria. The pioneering Christian Missionary work was led by Rev. Thomas Freeman who arrived Badagry with the fist batch of emigrants of the Methodist Mission in 1842². After this feat, he later went to open a mission station at Ogbe in Abeokuta in 1848³. Earlier, Rev. Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) also came to Abeokuta on the invitation of the Egba Christian recarpitives and consequently Anglican Church was established there in 1846⁴. The activities of the Church Missionary Society in Abeokuta⁵ made the town so prosperous that it became a watershed of Christian Missions in the Southern part of Nigeria. Besides, the prosperity enjoyed by the Egba acted as catalyst for the spread of the Gospel to the surrounding towns and villages which were prompted by such privileges to invite the missionaries to open missions in their areas.

It is worthy of note that the quest and agitations for the establishment of mission stations in many towns and villages in Southwestern Nigeria resulted in the Phenomenal rise in the number of missionaries of various denominations coming from Europe and America into the notable towns. Consequently, by the beginning of the century, strategic towns such as: Badagry, lagos, Ibadan, Oyo, Ogbmoso, Ijebu-Odo Saki, Iwo, Ilesa, Ife and Ondo, the then gateway to Ekitiland, had become Christian centres. Contrary to Michael Crowther's submission that the history of Christianity in South Western Nigeria is mainly that of the C.M.S⁶, the Baptist Mission actually made some towns in this part of Nigeria its strongholds. Such towns included: Saki, Igboho, Igbeti, Okeho Ogbomoso, Oko, Osogbo, Ejigbo, Iwo, Igede-Ekiti⁷, among others.

Beginning of Christianity in Ekitiland

The major prelude to the establishment of Christianity in Ekitiland was the Kiriji-Ekitiparapo war of 1793 - 1893⁸. Prior to this war, very few people of Ekiti origin traveled far from their native communities. The people of Ekiti were originally influenced by the incursions of the Benin army in the 16th to the 19th centuries. However, they were not troubled until the more serious upheavals of the civil wars in Yorubaland.

In the 1940s, Ibadan established its authority and supremacy over the people of Ekiti. This domination was resisted by the people due to the high-handedness of the ajeles.⁹ from Ibadan. The resistance snowballed into the kiriji-Ekitiparapo war which began in 1878 and ended in 1893. The Ekiti warriors formed an alliance with their counterparts from Ijesa, Ife and Igbomina. It was called Ekiti-Parapo Grand Alliance. The allies succeeded in fighting the Ibadan any to a stand-still. Consequently, in 1886, a piece treaty was signed which officially ended the overlordship of the Ibadan over the Ekiti¹⁰.

It is important to note that during the period of Ibadan overlordship and war, many Ekiti indigenes came in contact with the outside world either as war captives, slaves, soldiers and adventurers. In the course of these varying experiences, many of them were converted to Christianity. In 1893, the whole of Yorubaland was declared as British protectorate, as part of the Lagos protectorate. This political decision made the region to be secured for Christian evangelization.

In 1894, the Anglican Church acting through the Church Missionary Society (CMS) carried the gospel to Ekitiland. Prominent among the pioneer evangelists were Ekiti liberated slaves who has been converted to Christianity such as: Ifamuboni (who later changed his name to Babamuboni) of Iyin-Ekiti), S. Omojola (from Ikole-Ekiti), Charles Ajiro Jemiriye (from Igede-Ekiti), Mary Ojo (from Ode-Ekiti) and Helena Doherty (of

Ijero-Ekiti), among others.

From 1894-1910, no European Missionary worked in Ekitiland. Nevertheless, the gospel spread faster in Ekiti than at Badagry, Ibadan or Abeokuta. Through the hard-work, zeal and strict adherence to the new faith, the people of Ekiti evangelized themselves. During this period, there was no central organization for any of the mainline churches. Each of the pioneering evangelists was responsible for paying the stipends of agents put in charge of the churches he founded.

Origin of the Baptist Church in Nigeria

In 1846, the Southern wing of the General Convention of the United States of America (USA) set up a Board of Foreign Mission in Richmond, Virginia (USA). Shortly after the Board was constituted, it decided to begin mission work in West Africa¹¹. In 1849, the Board appointed Reverend T.J. Bowen to head the Baptist Mission in Nigeria¹². In 1850, he arrived Badagry as the pioneer Baptist Missionary¹³.

Towards the end of 1850, Mr. and Mrs. Philips together with Mr and Mrs Priest from Alabama in USA were sent to Abeokuta to assist the missionary team led by Bowen. Also, in September 1854, another missionary called W.H. Clarke arrived to reinforce the teams led by the earlier missionaries¹⁴. With these concerted efforts, Rev. Bowen was able to establish the Baptist Church firmly at Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ijaye, Ogbomoso, among others. To make his evangelistic work easy, he undertook the task of studying Yoruba language to enable him communicate effectively with the local people without the need for interpreters. So serious was his interest in the indigenous language that he wrote books on Yoruba Grammar and Yoruba Dictionary¹⁵.

Unfortunately, in 1878, the Kiriji – Ekiti Parapo war broke out. This hindered the movement of the Christian Missionaries from the coastal towns to the hinterland of Yorubaland¹⁶. However, Governor Carter of Lagos initiated a truce among the belligerent groups which brought the war to an end in 1886¹⁷.

After the Kiriji-Ekiti Parapo war, many of the indigenes of Ekiti who were captured as prisoners of war or sold into slavery were freed. A good number of them had in the course of their tribulations embraced Christianity among such people was Charles Ajiromola Jemiriye of Igede-Ekiti, who pioneered the growth and institutionalization of the Baptist Mission in Ekitiland.

The Baptist Mission in Ekitiland

The Baptist Church was founded in Igede-Ekiti on 7th February, 1910 under the spiritual leadership of Rev. Charles Ajiromola Jemiriye¹⁸. Igede was the first town in Ekitiland where the Baptist Church was established. The first converts assembled by Rev. Charles Jemiriye met regularly for worship and other activities in the sitting room of his mother at Odo-Uri Street of the town for about twelve months.

In 1902, some of the first converts were sent to Lagos to be baptized by Rev. Dr. Mojola Agbebi who was at that time the Director of Ekiti Baptist Mission. Those who participated in the baptismal exercise in Lagos were the following: Daniel Amoloye, Daniel Ayo, Famoroti John and D. Okebiorun¹⁹. Other prominent early converts into fold of the Baptist prominent personalities were later baptized in the town.

1903 marked a turning point in the hitherto blissful relationship between members of the Igede community and the laity of the Baptist Church. In the early part of the year, some members of the church were summoned to Ado-Ekiti by the Ewi of Ado-Ekiti²⁰. Who misinterpreted a trivial religious conflict between members of the Baptist Church and practitioners of traditional religion at Igede-Ekiti. The Ewi of Ado-Ekiti, working in tandem with the District Officer (D.O) who was resident in Ado-Ekiti, raised the issue to such a high magnitude that serious punishments were meted out to Rev. Charles Jemiriye and other notable leaders of the Baptist Church in Igede. The truce brokered by Dr. Mojola Agbebi notwithstanding, the colonial authority in Ekiti and the Ewi of Ado-Ekiti forced Rev. Jemiriye into compulsory exile in 1903²¹.

After Rev. Charles Jemiriye had sojourned in Benin and Owo provinces of Nigeria for about seven years, during which he worked as Court Secretary and School Headmaster, the people of Ekiti came to the realization that they unjustly persecuted a man who was trying to bring civilization, education and progress to them²². The efforts to bring him, back to his native land began even with those who were hitherto opposed to him in the forefront.

Therefore, towards the first decade of the 20th century, there was serious agitation and clamour for the return of Rev. Charles Jemiriye to Ekitiland. In 1910, he return to Igede-Ekiti and continued his consolidation of the Baptist Church in Ekitiland. He also began to spread the Baptist Ministry to other towns and villages in Ekiti. When he died in 1941, branches of the Baptist Church had been firmly established in the following places: Ikogosi (1911), Epe (1961), Aramoko (1917), Ipao (1917), Oke-Ako (1917), Ipoti (1920), Irele (1921), Ado-Ekiti (1923), Esure (1924), Oke-Mesi (1925), Ikere (1930), Efon-Alaaye (1931) and Iyin (1941)²³. After the death of Rev. Charles Jemiriye, the Baptist Church was embraced in many other communities in Ekiti, such as: Odo-Ayedun (1953), Ikole (1953), Ijesa-Isu (1953), Emure (1961), Omuo (1963), Oye (1965), Ise (1966), Imesi (1983), Ijan (1988) and Adehun (1995)²⁴. The method adopted by Rev. Jemiriye in spreading the Baptist Church in Ekiti was to organize classes for the converts. Those found to be very competent among them were sent out to

neighbouring towns and villages for evangelism.

In 1926, Rev. D.O Togun was appointed as the head of Ekiti District of the Baptist Church. He left Ekiti in 1931 and was replaced by Rev. N.F. Fatunla in 1931²⁵. Apart from being the superintending Pastor of Ekiti, Fatunla equally worked as the Manager of Baptist Schools in Ekiti and Akoko District. He consolidated on the gains recorded by Rev. Charles Jemiriye in the area of education.

The first foreign Baptist superintendent to work in Ekiti was Rev. A.C Donath. He arrived Ekiti in 1941 and was equally in charge of Kabba and Akoko provinces of the church. The comprehensive list of the leaders or shepherds of the Baptist church in Ekiti from 1901 were as follows:

- (i) Rev. Charles Ajiromola Jemiriye - 1901-1925
- (ii) Rev. D.O. Togun - 1926-1931
- (iii) Rev. N.F. Fatunla - 1931-1941
- (iv) Rev. J.L. Ogundiran - 1941-1944
- (v) Pastor J.O. Ayobahan - 1944
- (vi) Rev. S.O. Falana - 1945-1947
- (vii) Rev. N.F. Fatunla - 1948-1955
- (viii) Rev. N.R. Ola-Ojo - 1956-1960
- (ix) Rev. J.O. Oyetade - 1961-1966
- (x) Rev. Dr. S. Ola Fadeji - 1968-1969
- (xi) Rev. M.A. Adetoro - 1969-1980
- (xii) Rev. J.O. Ladiran - 1981-1983
- (xiii) Rev. A. Ojelade - 1983-1998
- (xiv) Rev. S.O. Ogundipe - 1999-2005²⁶

Administrative Structure of the Baptist Church in Ekiti

Shortly after the creation of Ondo State from the old Western state in 1976, the single Baptist District (Ekiti Baptist Association was divided into three, viz)

- i. Ekiti Central Baptist Association
- ii. Ekiti North Association
- iii. Ekiti West Baptist Association

All these association operated under the auspices of the Ondo State Baptist Conference which inaugurated at the first Baptist church, Igede-Ekiti, on the 17th February, 1978. Later the Ekiti Central Baptists association was divided into two, viz:

- i. Charles Jemiriye Baptists Association: the area covered by this association were: Irepodun – Ifelodun Local Government Area, Ido-Osi and Oye Local Government Areas.
- ii. Ife-Kristi Baptist Association, which was made up of the following; Ado-Ekiti, Ise, Ijan, Iluomoba, Imsesi and Agbado²⁷.

In line with the general pattern of the Baptists Church, the Ekiti Baptist churches practice a kind of congregational democracy. With this system, each local church maintained some level of autonomy. Nevertheless, a good number of Baptist churches in a given district could come together to form an “Association”. Also, a group of “Association” in a geo-political state could form a local conference. On the whole, a group of state conferences would form the National Convention.²⁸ The convention at the national level was normally headed by the President, while the General Secretary served as the executive head.

Educational Endeavour

Right from its inception in Ekiti, the Baptist church has given priority attention to the education of its members and that of the host communities. The initiative was started by the founder of the church in this part of Nigeria (Rev. Charles A Jemiriye). At the earlier stage of the church’s development, he organized literacy classes for the new converts. Those who distinguished themselves were engaged as church workers. In the course of time, primary schools were established in many of the communities that played hosts to Baptist Churches. Prominent among the Secondary Schools established by the Baptist comprehensive high school was established in Ado-Ekiti²⁹. Other educational institutions established by the Baptist Church were:

- (i) Baptist Central School - 1972
- (ii) Preliminary Teacher’s Training College - 1953
- (iii) Baptist Modern School - 1955

As a result of the efforts of members of the Baptist Church in Igede-Ekiti³⁰, the national Baptist Convention gave approval for the establishment of the Baptist Bible College in the town. The college officially began academic activities on 10th January, 1995. From its inception to July, 1999, the Baptists Bible College was solely funded by the Igede-Ekiti community. However, as from 2001, the theological college was jointly funded by the adjoining conferences namely, Ekiti, Ondo, Kogi and Kwara.

Conclusion

In the line with the usual experience of Christians in the early church and throughout the course of church history, early converts to the Baptist church in Ekiti and their leaders suffered severely from the hands of the traditional religious adherents. Many of the Baptist members were publicly flogged, some were rendered homeless and even declared personal non-grate in their homes towns. However, the church flowered and came to fruition due to the assiduity of the pioneering evangelists.

Finally, the Baptist Church in Ekiti from 1901 – 2005 had combined some characteristics of the

mainline churches with those of the new Pentecostal churches. For instance, the appointment of ‘Baba – Ebge’ (chairman) and ‘Iya-Ebge’ (Women leader) as leaders of the laity was very unique to the church in Ekitiland, Nigeria. Nevertheless, the doctrinal and Pentecostal proclivities of the Baptist Church in Ekiti agree with the orthodox positions of the National Baptist Conference. The social roles of the Baptist church in Ekiti were in line with that of the other Mission Churches. Apart from education, it had also made serious attempts to be actively involved in the promotion of modern health delivery in Ekitiland, especially in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Baptist Church has also responded positively to the challenges posed by the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in Ekiti: It has of recent been involved in series of evangelical revivals, vigils preaching through electronic media and evangelism through the use of pamphlets.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity I African from antiquity to the present*, Michigan, Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995; E.A. Ayandele, *The missionary impact on Modern Nigeria, 1984-1914*, London, Longmans, 1971; J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891*; D.O. Olayinola, “European Missions and Politics in West African”. In *Religions: A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions, Volume 9, December 1984*, pp 32-465; J. Baur, 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, Nairobi Pauline Publications African 1998.
2. M. Oduyoye, *Planting of Christinaity in Yorubaland, 1842-1888*, Ibadan, Day Star Press 1969, p. 4ff.
3. J.O. Ldoja “African Response to Christianity; The Yoruba Episode”. In NASR Conference of the Nigerian Association for the study of Religions, Vol. 9, December 1984, PP. 32.
4. E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact ...*, p. 10; There is still a raging controversy on the actual birthplace of Christianity in Yorubaland, among scholars and traditional rules of Abeokuta and badagry. An example of this is: “On the Birthplace of Christianity and the Church in Nigeria”. A rejoinder from the palace of Akran of Badagry, De Wheno Aholu Mnenu-Toyi 1 to claims by the Alake of Egbaland, Oba Oyebade Lipede that Abeokuta was the cradle of Christianity in Nigeria, in the Guardian (newspaper), Tuesday, 17th December, 1991, pp. 23-24.
5. The C.M.S. gave logistic supports to the Egbas during its war with Dahomey 1851. The missionaries also boosted the commercial activities of Abeokuta through commerce of the institutionalization of legitimate trade.
6. M. Crowther, the Story of Nigeria, London, Faber and Faber, 1971, p 12
7. J.O. Ldoja, *African Response ...*, p. 33
8. I.A. Akinjogbin, “Wars in Yorubaland, 1793-1893: An analytical Categorization”, in A. Akinjogbin (ed), *War and Peace in Yorubaland, 1793-1893*, (Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) PLC, 1998), PP. 33-51.
9. The *ajeles* were the official representatives (ambassadors) of the Ibadan authority in the various parts of Ekitiland, Ijesa and Igbomina. They had penchant for taking arbitrary actions. (causes belli for the war with the Ekiti was the incident at Imesi-Igbodo in which Fabunmi beheaded a recalcitrant ajele thereby incurring the wrath of Ibadan authority and its war-lords.
10. W. Ajayi, “The Legal Implications of the 1886 treaty”, in A. Akinjogbin (ed), *War and Peace ---* Pp. 363-369; S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, (Lagos, C.S.S. Limited, 2001). PP. 638-642.
11. P. Falk, *The Growth of the church I Africa*, Michigan, Zondervan corporation, 1982, pp 128-130; G.A. Oshitehu, *Expansion of Christianity in West Africa*, Ibadan, Oputoru Books Limited 2002, p. 70.
12. G.A. Oshitelu, the Growth of ... p 70
13. Ibid
14. P. Falk, *The Growth of the Church ...*p 128
15. G.A. Oshitelu, *The Growth of ...* p 70
16. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas, Lagos*, CSS Limited, 2001 pp 238-642.
17. Pastor Fredrick Oyeyemi Jemiriye Interviewed on 6th October, 2007, 91 years and a retired Pastor of the Baptist Church. He is a direct son or descendant of Rev. Charles A. Jemiriye. The claims of Pastor F.O. Jemiriye was given credence by the Centenary Anniversary Booklets of the Baptist Church in Igede-Ekiti: “Baptist Work in Igede-Ekiti: 100 years of Fruitful Ministry, 1901-2001”. Published by the Igede Community, Ibadan, Scepter Prints Limited, 2001, p. 20.
18. F.O. Jemiriye (oral) Ibid:
19. Ibid
20. Ado-Ekiti, the most cosmopolitan town in Ekitiland at that time was the District headquarters of Ekiti Division of the Colonial Government. With the support of the Colonial District Officer the Ewi (king) of Ado-Ekiti wielded tremendous power and authority over other towns and villages in the District, “Ewi” is the title of the oba (king) of Ado-Ekiti.
21. F.O. Jemiriye, (oral). There are evidences from books he initiated that he was actually at Agbede (now

- Edo State, Nigeria) in 1904.
22. N.F. Fatula, "*A short History of the Baptist Mission in Ekiti District Nigeria*", in J.A. Atanda (ed), *Baptist Church in Nigeria, 1850-1960*.
23. N.F. Fatula, *A short History of the Baptist* P. 230.
24. I.O. Owoola, Member, Baptist Church Adehun, 43 years, 25th May, 2005.
25. N.F. Fatula, "S short History of the Baptist ..." p, 230
26. Baptist Work in Igede-Ekiti ...p 103-104.
27. F.O. Jemiriye, (oral)
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. Igede-Ekiti is the home-town of Rev. Charles A. Jemiriye who founded the Baptist Church in Ekitiland (Nigeria).

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

