

## **A Reflex Mission: African Ex-Slaves and Migrants in a new Wave of Global Christian Evangelization**

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### **Abstract**

*A reflex mission represents a unique form of Christian evangelization whereby African ex-slaves and other members of the African diaspora champions a new wave of global Christian evangelization that has spread from their diaspora communities to African continent, and back to secularized western world. First, the historical context of Atlantic slavery is discussed in order to contextualize the experiences of African ex-slaves. Then other forms of African migration into Europe and the Americas and the consequent emergence of African diaspora Christian communities were traced. The paper argues that African immigrant Christianity is not merely a response to migration challenges, but rather an active re-configuration of Christianity that is impacting the global church. The study concludes that this new mission has shifted the traditional power dynamics of the missionary enterprise, with African ex-slaves and migrants now playing an increasingly important role in the evangelization of both Africa and the global north.*

**Keywords:** Reflex Mission; African Ex-slaves; Migration; Diaspora Communities; Christian Evangelization

### **Introduction**

Migration has become a major feature of contemporary discourse on Africa. The description of African immigration could start with the enforced dispersion of people of African descent resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As early as the sixteenth century, slave dealers from the west captured young and able-bodied Africans and forced them out of their continent. African migration continues after the end of the slave trade when new forms of migration have started, caused by new forces and endowed with new patterns. These new forms of African migration are largely voluntary, yet they tend to deplete the working population of Africa to the advantage of countries in the west where young Africans believe there are greener pastures. This is likely the reason why the study of African migration has been dominated with brain drain with less attention on brain circulation. The brain drain discourse in African immigration tends to neglect the impact of migration in reconstructing contemporary global religious landscape.

This paper aims to explore a unique intersection of migration, religion, culture, and identity. The study challenges assumptions about the direction of Christian missionary flows and spark a new discuss about African ex-slaves and migrants in their long history of involvement in Christian evangelization, both in Africa and the global north. The study suggests that their forceful migration beginning from the sixteenth century could be a divine purpose. They might have been providentially taken out of their homelands to countries where they could be introduced to the Christian faith for the end purpose of a reverse flow of global evangelization. Hence, they played enormous roles in evangelization of not just their African homelands, but more importantly, they engaged in revitalization of faith in the secularized global north where Christianity had been greatly buffeted by the effects of globalization and materialistic cultures. Regrettably, this story has not been widely told because Europeans and their protégées who dominated the story-telling about global Christianity have deliberately played down the roles of non-western actors in the Christian missionary engagements. This unconscious prejudice in histories of white societies has often hidden the large contribution of blacks, coupled with the fact that the use by blacks of European names to replace those stolen from them adds difficulty. Moreover, the distinction between missionaries as constituting only the whites in a cross-cultural mission to Africa, and local workers, tended to neglect the large place of the African pastors, teachers and evangelists.

The central argument of this study; therefore, is that black Christians (descendants of the ex-African slaves and their migrant kin) were God's chosen instruments for a second missionary wave around the world. The study therefore crafts a new paradigm of understanding and nudging the reader to peep into the dark shadows of global missionary enterprise by immigrant Africans. More important for the study is the deep peep at the generally ignored but impressive history of blacks' involvement in the propagation of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa to show that to an extent far larger than is realized, or is represented in mission histories, the work of evangelism in parts of Africa was due to African immigrant Christians rather than to foreign missionaries. The study concludes that African immigrant Christianity is one way through which immigration has enabled Africa to contribute to the global Christian culture-a sign that the negative image of immigration could be reversed and constructed differently.

### **Conceptualizing Migration**

Migration has always been one of the most important means of spreading religions and migrants constitute the greatest means of spreading Christianity around the world. Safran (cited by Kalu, 2010) defines migrants as:

Any ethnic or religious minority that is dispersed physically from its original homeland, regardless of the conditions leading to the dispersion, and regardless of whether, and what extent, physical, cultural, or emotional links exists between the community and the home country. (p. 171).

Shapperson (1993) sees African migrants as the voluntary and forced dispersion of Africans at different periods in history and in several directions, the emergence of cultural identity abroad without losing the African base, whether spiritually or physically; the psychological or physical return to the homeland Africa. African migrants in the context of this study includes those residing in the new destination as exiles who sing native choruses in foreign lands and the circulatory migrants who return to the homeland after a period of forced or voluntary exile. This study, however, is not about migration generally, but more on the Christian dimension and especially the reflex mission description of Africans doing mission in their new destinations as well as taking their new found faith to their homelands. This reflex mission is about the emergence of African Christianity in the global Christian religious landscape aimed at re-energizing the weakened evangelical zeal in the mainline churches across the world. The study of religion in relation to the diaspora often tells a story of cultural exportation, religious decolonization, and trans-nationalism wherein the concept of religion is presented as a cultural system examining the links between micro-level interactions and macro-level structures, as reflected through the trans-nationality of religion among citizens of dispersed communities (Counted, 2019).

### **Trends in African Migration and the Emergence of Diaspora Christian Communities**

Exploration, slave trade, colonialism, poverty, cultural exchange and ecological disasters all contributed to an African diaspora that has scattered Africans to Europe, America and elsewhere. According to Adogame (2007), European presence and interest in Africa has been largely mixed and split along the countours of commerce, politics and religion. One of the inherent consequences of these interests was that it later created several institutions that brought Africans at varied times to other continental shores such as of Europe and the New World, thus also resulting in the formation of enclaves and communities. The imperial expansionist agenda generated new situations, circumstances and pose a catalyst towards diaspora formations. According to Cohen (cited by Counted, 2019) “The term diaspora has to do with “decolonization, increased immigration, global communication and

transport-a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations” (p. 59). Historically, the term African diaspora refers to people of African descent living outside their continental home. The concept was first used by George Shepperson in 1968 during an African history paper presentation at the University of Dar es Salaam in which he described the identity of African populations globally. A similar term used to describe Africa’s global populations before the presentation of Shapperson was “Pan-Africanism.” This notion of African diaspora has a broader meaning in colonial and postcolonial contexts. The former focuses on people of African descent scattered throughout the world as a result of the movement of African people in historic times around the globe through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, whereas the latter elaborates the changing condition under which people of African diaspora live (Butler, cited in Counted, 2019).

African diaspora is one theoretical construct used to describe the global dispersal of indigenous African population to different phases of world history, voluntarily and forcefully to Europe, Latin America and North America since the age of discovery. The earliest strata aggregated young, virile, able-bodied Africans, mopped up in the obnoxious web of human trafficking, and catapulted them involuntarily to various metropolises. In about the middle of the fifteenth century, with the dawn of the industrial revolution in the western hemisphere, the European expanding empires lacked manpower to work on new plantations that produced sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. This is because, on the one hand, the Native Americans who were enslaved by the Europeans proved unfit as a result of the ingenious tropical diseases that they suffered, diseases like smallpox, mumps, and measles, which the Europeans introduced into the region and to which the Native Americans lacked immunity. Africans, on the other hand, were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and they could work very hard on plantations or in mines, and so the Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system which was then guarded by international laws, and Africans became the best economic solution for plantation owners seeking inexpensive labour (Kanu, 2012).

The trans-Atlantic slave trade involved the largest intercontinental migration of people in world history prior to the twentieth century as millions were severed from their homelands. This period of carnage went on for about five hundred years during which an estimate of 12 million viable Africans were enslaved from their home lands to locations around the Atlantic. The fortunate survivors of this excruciating ordeal, their

descendants, and slave remnants in the post nineteenth century abolition scheme constituted the first African diaspora enclaves.

Physical contact between Africa and the west increased in frequency in the nineteenth century. Decades-long agitation for overseas colonies as settlement areas, sources of raw materials, and markets for manufactured goods preceded the colonial politics of the 1880s and the subsequent bisecting of Africa. Thus, a second coterie of African diaspora communities may be located in the wave of migrants that swelled as consequences of the Berlin-Congo 1884/85 conference's official partition of the African continent into spheres of artificial geographical zones of European influences, exploitation and expropriation (Adogame, 2007). The inter-war years (1914-1915) and its aftermath also experienced a reasonable degree of demographic shifts outside Africa. Some uprooted Africans commissioned as pawns in the European war game, either stayed back or charted for themselves new destinies, pathways and family relationship in the desolate battle fields.

The 1960s was the period when many African countries attained selfhood and political independences from European colonial hegemony. During this time, a new crop of African migrants charted new routes into the diaspora. These were no longer enslaved Africans, seamen, domestic workers or soldiers as experienced in the earlier periods. This new stream of migrants largely comprised African students sent or commissioned to pursue further studies abroad, civil servants, businessmen, and diplomats deployed to the newly established African embassies and consulates in foreign countries. Bangura (2002) highlights the situation in Belgian Congo thus:

After King Leopold was pressured to hand over the Congo to the Belgian state, Belgium began a process that was intended to redeem its chequered history and right the barbaric savagery which the repressive regime had inflicted upon native Africans. Among others, Belgium began to adopt policies that not only resulted in the Congo attaining independence in 1960 along with other colonies that had come under its jurisdiction after World War II, the former colonial power began to bring some Africans from its former colonies to pursue university education in Belgium. Others were recruited to serve as porters for Belgian sailors whose work was coordinated from the seaport of Antwerp. To survive the cultural and religious ruptures of migration, African students established Bible study fellowships which were pivotal in the successive establishment of African Christian churches. (p. 94).

This process which began in the 1960s and continued until the beginning of the 1980s saw a steady stream of migrant workers migrating to various countries in the west on a temporary worker programme. Thus, this official migratory policy of carefully controlled immigration-both of the one that had attracted African students at universities, African

porters, sailors and migrant workers, -saw diversified immigrant African populations choosing to settle permanently in Europe and America.

An unprecedented upsurge especially in the last two decades in the number of African migrants into Western Europe, North America and elsewhere heralds a new phase in history of African diaspora. Remarkable changes are evident in the composition and direction of international migrations, features that make contemporary migration different from the historical African diaspora in several respects. In more recent times, African migration assumed a more diffused dimension with noticeable numbers of immigrants from several African communities flocking to western countries. The upsurge in migration is due to rapid processes of economic, demographical, social, political, cultural and environmental changes, modernization and uneven development. Incessant crises and upheavals in several parts of Africa have exacerbated immigration and exodus, thus generating the economic pool of mostly able-bodied youths to Western Europe and North America. Bangura (2002) puts it this way: Another migration stream that brought English-speaking West Africans to the west relates to the socio-political upheavals which stem from poor governance, endemic poverty and economic hardships that were rampant in the region in the 1990s. From rebel wars that made Liberia and Sierra Leone failed states, to the economic hardships in Ghana as well as the civil unrest in oil-rich and poverty-stricken south-eastern and south-western Nigeria, or the secessionist insurrection in the English-speaking provinces of Cameroon, West Africa was infamous. Caught in intractable cycles of rebel insurrections and haunted by economic woes with no end in sight out of this quagmire, many university students migrated to Europe in search of either further university education or a generally better standard of life.

Although scholarly debates on transmigration and diaspora are no longer new; indeed, migration and diaspora discourses have engaged scholarly focus and analysis in various fields, and literature on the phenomenon is steadily burgeoning, the privileging of political and socio-economic considerations have largely hijacked such discourses in a way that often glosses over religious and other factors that stimulate and impact on such processes. While religion has remained a constant identity variable in African diaspora communities, the historiography of African diaspora and migration has often neglected this religious ferment. Across Europe, diversified immigrant Christian communities from Sub-Saharan Africa have been established. Studies that seek a missional understanding of these communities have increased, yet their contribution to the reappearance of religion in post-secular Europe was not yet fully understood. While churches of African origin were objects of various research projects, they were hardly represented at forums where crucial decisions

which impacted their operations were taken (Bangura, 2002). This is partly due to the shift in religious studies literature for the past two decades, with the majority of recent empirical studies in this area exploring migration-related and transnational attributes of African diaspora Christianity (Counted, 2019).

It is to be noted that the obvious dehumanization process and the racial discrimination witnessed by the historical African diaspora gave birth to a number of African diaspora denominations, from the Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterian backgrounds. Many African migrants had assumed that Europeans and Americans would perceive them in the first place as Christians. Upon arrival, they identify with mainstream churches or denominations similar or related to their home churches. But the disaffection with drab liturgies, the disappointment and pastoral neglect faced in the mainstream churches, resulted in churches with African initiatives and under African leadership. Adegoke (cited by Adogeme, 2007) reports that:

Any Nigerian will find the church here different from what he expected. The missionaries came to Nigeria; faking to live like Christians, but here in Europe many things are contrary to Christian principles. Sunday is not literally taken as the Christian Sabbath. Nobody has time for the Sunday services, whereas in Nigeria the services are long. You begin to wonder. After suffering for one year, I found myself in an African church. (p. 507).

The last four decades have witnessed a rapid proliferation of African Christian communities in diaspora, thus resulting in the revamping of old religious landscapes. This migratory trend and development bring to the fore the crucial role, functions and import of religious symbolic systems in new geographical contexts. According to Adogeme (2007), the African American community has been integral to the shaping of the American religious mosaic. As they settled in the new contexts, many became involved in religious activities that eventually led to the founding of African branches of the various Christian denominations in the west.

The religious mosaic of the African diaspora is further characterized by African groups, clergy and laity existing within foreign churches. Examples include the African Christian church, Hamburg under the Nordelbian Kirche in Germany, African groups within the American and European mainstream churches such as the Episcopal, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Catholic. There are growing members of Nigerian Roman Catholic and Anglican priests in the USA, Tanzanian Lutheran and Ghanaian Methodists priests in Germany. African priests and ministers in these churches are sometimes employed by the host churches, but have the African congregations as their primary constituency. Another variant of African Christianity which had its foothold in diaspora is the Coptic Orthodox

Church planted by migrants from Egypt. Millions of Copts had migrated to North America, Europe, Canada, Australia and the Arab world as an escape from religious discrimination and persecution in Egypt during the last half of the twentieth century. They established churches, cultural centres that became places of worship, retreat and social gatherings. The earliest Coptic churches established in the North America diaspora were in Toronto (1964), Los Angeles (1969) and in Jersey City (1970) (Adogame, 2007). The most popular of the churches established in Europe by African migrants in the 60s and 70s was what has been popularly referred to as African Instituted Churches (AICs). AICs, such as the Aladura, have increasingly made their footprints more viable on the European religious landscape since the establishment in London of the first branches of the Church of the Lord, Aladura (1964), Cherubim and Seraphim, and the Celestial Church of Christ (1967). The presence of African immigrant Christianity in the global religious landscape intensified from the 1980s characterized by emergence of a new generation of African Pentecostal leaders who enjoy increased contacts with worldwide Pentecostalism through outreaches, leadership training programmes and televangelism.

### **Slave Trade Abolition and the Blessed Reflex of African Ex-Slaves**

Although Christianity entered Africa in the first century after Christ, according to our present knowledge it did not have a strong influence south of the Sahara until the beginning of the Protestant missionary era. During the earlier age of exploration the Portuguese touched the west coast near the end of the fifteenth century and the Jesuits began working there. Later the Dutch and English centres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also had chaplains who ministered to Africans. These efforts were offset by the bad examples of Europeans and they were also forbidden when it became clear that the conversion of Africans hindered the slave trade. It was only with the British awakening to the evil of slave trade that widespread efforts were begun on behalf of Africa (Rieber, 1977). These efforts took three main directions: The establishment of colonies of freed slaves; the halting of the slave trade; and missionary endeavours in Africa. All three of these resulted in large participation of blacks in establishing Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa.

The story of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is as interesting as it is ambivalent. Britain, the chief slave-trading nation for more than two centuries produced the most able abolitionists. That is to say that the task of the abolitionists movements was as herculean as it was meant to be, given that the slave trade was by then considered inseparably associated with the commerce and welfare, and even British national security. Though many voices in the eighteenth century had already been raised against this nefarious traffic, noticeably among

Quakers; Njoku (2007), for instance intones that in their decades' long campaign to end slavery, the abolitionists, who included the ex-slaves, argued for mercy and compassion and reminded Europe and America of their Christian culture and moral demands of that culture with respect to other, particularly the enslaved other. A number of abolitionists suggested that rather than trade in human beings, Europe would profit more in trading in commodities with Africa. However, it was the Clapham brotherhood that embarked on the anti-slavery campaign with unprecedented militancy. According to Rieber (1977) "As a result of the evangelical revival in the eighteenth century, a group from England known as the Clapham sect became deeply involved in the issue of slavery" (p. 256). The first major victory in the abolitionist cause came with the case of James Summerset, a runaway slave boy who was brought up for trial before Lord chief Justice Mansfield in February, 1772. In a momentous legal verdict, Lord Mansfield declared, on June 22, 1772, that slavery was against the law of the land. This judgment automatically made all slaves within the British Isles free. Consequently, the abolitionist focused attention on getting the British parliament to pass an anti-slavery bill. Increasingly also, they propagated the view that Africa held great potential, both as source of raw material and new markets, which could only be realized with the abolition of slave trade. The British parliament faced increasing pressure from the public to take action. In March, 1807, with the passing of a bill entitled "The Slave Trade Abolition Act" in the House of the Lords, the abolitionist cause gained a landmark victory.

There is definitely an intimate relationship between the slave trade abolition and the spread of Christianity in Africa. In divine providence the abolition movement stimulated one of the most compelling missionary movements in history. Critical to that story is the black elements, so much overlooked or marginalized in popular narratives. The European dimension was hugely significant, but the blacks, predominantly ex-African slaves, were key factors in the establishment and spread of Christianity in African continent. With the formal end of slave trade, some Christian groups felt an obligation to pass on their Christian faith to Africa. Some of the ex-slaves, possibly as a way of reconciling with their African homelands, also volunteered to be agents of the propagation of the Christian message and values to Africa. Sierra Leone and Liberia, the homes of many diaspora resettled returnee slaves, provided a helpful reservoir of willing and capable black missionaries. The need for African freed slaves early in the missionary enterprise was the rule rather than the exception. These became the missionaries in their own right, and were actively involved as vanguard of pioneer missionaries to various parts of Africa. They knew the terrain very well and therefore were in the best position to serve as guides and "compass" for the foreign missionaries. They knew the local language, culture, customs and traditional religious heritage, and therefore were best suited to know how best to convey the message of the

gospel to their own people; they knew where the “dangers” lay, where the red lines in the two faiths, the two culture, lay. These indigenous missionaries, often derogatorily referred to as local agents, vastly outnumbered the foreign missionaries and were located and deployed in the remotest parts of a given mission territory, where they did sustained and difficult spade work introducing their own people to the Christian faith, teaching catechisms, conducting Sunday schools, preparing converts for the reception of the various sacraments, leading worships and staying on to continue on-going Christian formation of their people. Christianity was more credible and acceptable to the recipients as a result of the fact that it was indigenous people who transmitted it. These black evangelists certainly had an advantage over their white counterparts. In any case they were recruited into the mission by the European ministries and missions principally because they were seen as better suited to the vagaries of the tropical climate, and therefore considered immune to the land where the mosquito reigned supreme and played a crucial role in dissuading Europeans from settling.

The reconciling mission and the need to share what they saw as “liberating faith”, with their kith and kin in Africa were propelling the black missionaries more. They were there to reclaim and rebuild their homeland and restore its dignity tainted by the slave trade. A unique factor in the slave trade abolition and its consequent reflex mission in Africa was the modern settlement of two countries to be named Sierra Leone and Liberia, by black immigrants from Europe and America.

### **Sierra Leone Settlement and the Beginning of African Christian Missions**

When the British philanthropists chose Sierra Leone as a home for liberated slaves in 1787, liberated slaves perceived that they were out on a mission to Sierra Leone even before any British missionary society was founded, and with a clear vision to build a new society under the mandate of the gospel. They advocated a separation of church and state so as to delink the missionary enterprise of redeeming Africans through religion from the patronage of the governors of trading companies. They set the culture tone of industry and religion that nurtured thousands of ex-slaves in Africa in subsequent years. These freed slaves became agents of missionary enterprise throughout sub-Saharan Africa. They were also educators and counselors to indigenous communities, negotiators with the new change agents, preachers, traders and leaders of opinion in many African communities.

It should be noted here, therefore, that the story of modern African Christianity began not with white missionary agency, but as the initiative of ex-African slaves. It all began in 1787 when a party of 411 “black poor” from around London arrived in Sierra Leone but were

depleted to 130 survivors within a year. In 1792 they were joined by over 1,200 blacks who had served the British in the American Revolution and had settled in Nova Scotia. Unhappy with the climate, they were glad to return to Africa. The new settlers renamed it "Freetown". The entire community of Nova Scotia blacks was baptized Christians and they landed in Sierra Leone completely with their own churches and preachers. Their religious fervor and biblicentric lifestyle was obviously manifest. Their arrival marked the establishment of the first black church in Africa and arguably signifies the beginning of the modern missionary movement in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1800 a group known as "Maroons" also arrived. They had revolted against the British in Jamaica and, after an offer of equitable peace terms, were tricked into leaving their stronghold, then captured and removed to Freetown.

These settlers brought with them the faith they had acquired in their exile as naturally as the pilgrims brought their faith to America or as the American pioneers carried theirs across the plains. They organized their churches under their own pastors and witnessed to those who came to the colony after them. Even at this point they did not bring an un-adapted European Christianity; the Christian faith had become their own and they lived and proclaimed it as such. It is for this reason that the participation of the settlers in transmission of the Christian faith was crucial, since they were carriers of already indigenized Christianity. The likeness of their situation to that of the pilgrims is made vivid in a report of the Nova Scotian settlers arriving in Sierra Leone at a bad time of the year with many having died of fever on the way. As they disembarked and marched singing into the forest, the Bible was carried at the front with their preachers leading the way. Immediately they proceeded into a service of worship. Frederick Bultman, a German missionary of the Church Missionary Society, affirmed the effectiveness of one of these preachers, the Reverend Joseph Jewell, when he wrote of him that he has been ... the instrument of converting hundreds and inducing thousands ... to receive baptism at his hands (Rieber, 1977). These returnees, who arrived in Sierra Leone from 1787 to 1800, were later numerically overtaken by large numbers of Africans from the lower Guinea coasts, freed by British men-of-war from ships transporting them to plantations of slavery. In 1807 Britain made slave trade illegal for her own subjects. Nationals of other countries continued the practice, however, and some British subjects did so illegally. In 1808 as many as 80,000 slaves were shipped from West African ports. Britain tried to enforce the provision of the Act by the use of British preventive squadron-naval vessels which patrolled the coast to intercept and capture slave ships. These ships were escorted to Freetown where human cargoes were released and placed under mission supervision. These were the liberated Africans or the recaptives, as they were later called, and from about 1810 their arrival radically changed the population in Sierra Leone colony. The recaptives, who numbered 18,000 by 1825, and grew to 67,000 in 1840, became not just the dominant

element in the life and future of the Sierra Leone settlement, but also a target audience for the Nova Scotia evangelists. These recaptives of mid-passage set free in Sierra Leone found in Christianity a new religion that met their needs. It took no account of their diverse origins and addressed them as individuals of value. The accent on personal conversion and responsibility appealed to those cut off from their tribal customs, and the form of Christianity proclaimed by the Nova Scotians provided warmth and group experience while granting opportunities for leadership by laymen seeking a place in the new society. Although American colonization efforts centered in the area which became Liberia, its pioneer expedition went to Sierra Leone and was led and financed by an American Black. Paul Cuffe, a Massachusetts merchant and ship owner, whose father had come from Africa as a slave and earned his freedom, took thirty-eight persons to Sierra Leone as colonists in 1815 and paid \$4,000 of their expenses. In the first half of the nineteenth century, black Christians from the West Indies joined Christianized recaptives, Nova Scotians, and the small group of African American missionaries in the missionary effort. Freed from the clutches of slave traffickers their conversion to Christianity in vast numbers became one of the most potent force for missionary enterprise in modern Africa. To these liberated Africans Sierra Leone was not the end. There were looking beyond borders. Few years later hundreds of them returned to the very areas from whence they had ones been taken as slaves anxious to share their newly acquired Christian faith with their long-lost relatives and other members of their own ethnic communities. Sierra Leone Christians arguably formed the most formidable vanguard of a huge missionary movement, carrying back the message of the gospel and the attendant benefits of education to the various lands throughout West Africa and beyond, from which they or their ancestors had been uprooted as slaves.

Significantly, the motivation of African immigrant Christians to return to and develop their homelands through Christianity was coloured with the image of black Joseph. Blake (cited by Kalu, 2010) puts it this way:

Blacks were also sold into slavery, many times by our brothers in Africa. Like Joseph, our fore fathers endured many trials, much humiliations and suffering. But Joseph held to his dreams... through a series of supernatural and providential events Joseph was blessed by God to become the vice-president of Egypt. We through series of phenomenal and supernatural events have by God's grace come to success and power in this land of our captivity... Joseph realized that this blessed promotion had taken place so that he could fulfill his God-given destiny of reaching back to those same brothers who sold him into slavery and save them from starvation and death. (p. 243).

African ex-slaves represented themselves as black Josephs. Rev La Verve Hanes Stevens formed the Joseph project in Tyrone Georgia after an emotional visit to Ghana. The project promotes groups visits by churches to different parts of Africa, especially West Africa.

### **American Colonization Society in Liberia and the Return of the Exiles**

In relation to founding American Colonization Society (ACS) in Liberia, Hancile (2007) informs that with 700,000 slaves and 59,000 freed blacks by 1790, America had one of the largest communities of Africans anywhere in the world outside Africa. Christianization of such a large group was bound to have enduring consequences on the history of Christian missionary engagement, not just in Africa, but in the world. The American Colonization Society, which became the chief manifestation of American concern, revealed the very mixed motives that led to support of Negro migration to Africa. While there were those who genuinely believed that blacks desired and would be helped by a return to Africa, even these were influenced by the unwillingness to grant equality to freed blacks. Others were afraid of the incitement to freedom created by the presence of those already free. They wanted blacks out of the way to whatever place. Still others saw colonization as a profitable business enterprise. Nevertheless, enough blacks did go to make possible the establishment of a colony in Liberia. Sundkler and Steed (2004) intone that American Colonization Society was founded in close contact with groups which helped make emigrant plans parallel with missionary strategy. Its primary object was to help free blacks settle in Africa, particularly in Liberia. Kalu (2007) adds that the Colonization Society recruited enough African Americans to found Liberia in 1822 and from this period until 1920s, African Americans were a significant factor in the missionary enterprise in Africa. As these people returned with them their Christian faith, churches were formed, reflecting the variety of denominations from which they had come in the United States. Baptists and Methodists had the largest numbers, with Presbyterians and Episcopalians also present. While some white missionaries were sent from time to time, because of climate-produced illness there never was significant personnel or financial continuity of support. The churches of the colonists were begun and continued by blacks, and the strength of their efforts is indicated by the fact that they encouraged individual Africans to foray into mission fields without institutional supports, perhaps to the chagrin of western Europeans. Through the network of these freed slaves, an organization emerged that could recruit, train, fund and network with global centres and this in turn yielded a corps of committed Africans that could be mobilized and deployed into mission. These intrepid blacks garnered spiritual sustenance for their vision from evangelical spirituality and through appropriating the power of the gospel. West and Glaude (2003) explain that African Americans found in the Christian gospel as it was preached during the great revivals, liberating possibilities in their personal experiences of

conversion, in the family resemblance of evangelical worship services of African past, and in a vocabulary that enabled the slave to escape the psychic effects of slavery. They were no longer extensions of white master's will. Instead, many Christian ex-slaves came to see themselves as unique-even chosen-with a different moral sense about them, capable of distinguishing the wrongness of slavery and racial discrimination and rightness of their common complaint because of their distinctive relationship with God. African American presence was most conspicuous in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroun, Fernando PO, Congo, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Egypt and Ethiopia.

In the 1850s, Alexander Crunwell who had emigrated to Liberia after finishing his academic studies, developed an idea referring to the wondrous providence of God, by which the sons of Africa by hundreds and by thousands trained, civilized, and enlightened, are coming home again, bringing large gifts for Christ and his church to their heathen kin. Increasingly these thoughts were combined with Exodus chapters in the Bible and with Ethiopian myths (the declaration enshrined in Psalm 68:31, namely, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God"). Even the learned Edward W. Blyden, the West Indian who was to become a Liberian official and ambassador, propagated this idea. For him, the deportation of the Negro to the new world was as much decreed by an all-wise providence, as the expiration of the pilgrims from Europe...no indignation...can prevent us from recognizing the hands of an over-ruling providence in the deportation of Africans to the western world (Sundkler and Steed, 2004). Hanciles (2007) continues that:

By most accounts, these African ex-slaves understood the evangelical message very differently from whites; conditioned by the experience of slavery and oppressions their response to the gospel message fused religion and freedom in a manner that was patently subversive. They used Christianity not so much as it was delivered to them by racist white churches, but to reinforce an enculturated religious orientation and produce an indigenous faith that emphasized dignity, freedom, and human welfare. (p. 205).

Many of the African ex-slaves were inspired in their missionary works by Edward Wilmot Blyden. From Liberia, Blyden traveled widely to promote African course in Africa and America. His lecture in Lagos in 1891 entitle, "The Return of The Exile", encapsulated the heart of the movement. Acknowledging the sacrifices of white missionaries, he argued nonetheless that the destiny of Christianity in Africa lay in the hands of Africans. For him, "the sphinx must solve her own riddle. The genius of Africa must unravel its own enigma (Kalu, 2007). Thus, among African migrants, the exilic metaphor was very powerful. It moved their sense of identity and carried the hopes aptly articulated in Psalm 68: 31 that

“princess shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands to God”. This passage has been variously appropriated by African immigrants; one of such appropriations was the hope to return the glory of Africa through her immigrants who will return back from across the ocean; from the lands where their captors had sold them. This ideology spurred a massive enterprise by blacks. These blacks insisted that they were exiles who must return home to regain control of their homelands as a counter strategy to the whites who spawned ideas of progress to legitimize colonialism and imperialism.

This brief account cannot recreate the full history of the return migration of African ex-slaves to Liberia nor adequately weigh the amount of their influence. Yet it does make clear that their return migration was one major factor in the evangelization of Africa. Its strength was sufficient for the British and American anti-slavery groups who hope it would be a primary method of evangelizing and “civilizing” Africa. One can argue, therefore, that the slave trade had sapped the moral authority of the gospel and the commercial dimension absorbed the energy and commitment of early European missionaries to Africa; but abolitionism became the engine that moved the new missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century. The most intriguing part is that the black people who were brutally taken away from their ancestral homes have played enormous roles in the evangelization of their African homelands beginning from 1799. The slave trade that has vitiated the missionary impulse between 1500 and 1800 yielded the resources for countering its effects on Africa. This is the blessed reflex that this study talks about.

### **African Immigrant Christianity in the Global Religious Landscape**

Scholars who have studied dimensions of Christian practices and culture among African freed slaves and their migrant kin have wondered if their churches are mere models of coping strategy or that these Africans are engaged in global Christian missionary enterprise. Kalu (2010) answers that even if the Africans focus on the growing immigrant population; they are still engaged in mission in lands of their former captivity. A key component of global Christian missionary enterprise is the recovery of territory and lands for God. This is the character of African immigrant Christian mission in northern hemisphere; the character of the reflex mission. It declares that African migrant Christianity is beyond the religious performance of suffering communities, and that Africa has ceased to be just a mission field but has become a mission force. As African freed slaves struggle to create a viable space of survival in hostile foreign countries especially after the abolition victory, they are also changing the western understanding of faith and mission. At the sixty-third annual meeting of the American Colonization Society in 1880, Blyden (cited by Kalu, 2007) informs that:

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 the noblest and greatest of 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 susceptibilities blinded 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 faiths; for the promise of that land is that she shall stretch forth her hands unto God. (p. 272).

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. In the Congo, Simon Kimbangu, a nineteenth century prophet of African origin, prophesied that the global disorder occasioned by the two world wars signaled that God was changing the baton from whites to blacks, (Gampiot, 2008). Laar (2006) continues that:

In earlier times missionaries from Rotterdam harbor bounded for a colony or some distant country. They felt compelled to spread the gospel overseas. This journey was from the west to the east and to the south. Those times are past history. Now, evangelists come here from these same countries, to the Netherlands and other countries in Europe...Rotterdam has large areas where more than half the population is foreign. Non-western faith communities are flourishing in many parts of the city. In the very places where 30 years ago the Christian presence had almost disappeared, Christianity has staged a comeback. (p. 7).

Adogame (2013) adds that for generations, Christian missionaries from the U.S. journeyed to Africa to teach their religion. Now, however, amid a burgeoning of Christianity in Africa, churches there are sending thousands of missionaries overseas to preach the Christian message in their own unique style. African ministries are springing up in America because the church in Africa is on fire, while the church in America is, for the most part, losing its zeal. This is in reminiscence of the prediction of a nineteenth century forward-looking missionary who anticipated a reverse mission when the sending churches of the west would be challenged and renewed by the churches then springing up among African ex-slaves and their migrant kin (Kalu, 2010). The trend has created cultural shifts and has inserted African initiatives into the global Christian missionary engagements. This globalized form of African missionary initiatives consisted among African immigrants. This confirms the crucial question about the place of African immigrant Christianity in the global perspective. According to Oden (2007) “it is from Africa that global Christianity can relearn that the church guided by the spirit is never irretrievably fallen away from the truth” (p. 103).

Bangura (2002) echoes that non-western Christians especially those from Africa have continued to migrate overseas and set up churches among various diaspora African communities in the west. In Belgium for instance, African migration has not only increased, the African diaspora continue to make their presence felt in various ways, including the setting up of African-founded, African-led and African-majority churches in (Flanders) Belgium. Usually constituted at disused city centre shops and/or factory buildings, these African-majority churches provide an oasis of peace to attendees, a place to connect with the divine, relieve oneself of earthly burdens and re-imagine familiar forms of spirituality known at countries of origin. The African diaspora creatively utilizes various forms of Christian spirituality grounded in the African intuitions of the faith to make sense of the complexities which confront the life of immigrants at destination countries.

A number of significant motifs could be identified in this reverse mission: Africa's passion to register Africa's presence in the area of missionary evangelization of the world; the obvious relegation of religion in the alter of secularization in the west that require to be saved; the abysmal fall in church attendance and dwindling membership; desecralization of church buildings; liberalization; the issues of moral decadence and the motivation that privilege obedience to the Jesus' mandate. African immigrant Christians mirror Europe as a prodigal son that has wasted his privileged position in the global Christianity. According to Adogame (2013), it is not uncommon now that Christians from the third world often employ similar narratives of representation giving the impression of a 'Christian' Europe as 'the dark continent of Europe' or 'a dead and secularized Europe'. Controversial and puzzling as such assertions may be, they cast our minds and gaze to a new, emerging global religious phenomena. Haar (2006) paints a picture of Europe from the point of view of the vision of prophet Ezekiel as "a compelling resemblance to Christianity in the western world. Due to secularization, western Europe became a spiritual desert, a valley of dry bone stripped of flesh and spirit; Europe is spiritually dead" (p. 323). But Ezekiel's valley of dry bones had the prospect of rising again if the wind of God blows through it. African immigrant Christians felt the promptings as a destiny to agency the wind of God to revive the dry bones of western Christianity. William Wilberforce, a member of the Established church and renowned English politician, laments the declining rate of Christian practices in England as recorded by Hanciles (2007) in the following words "Religion also has declined. God is forgotten; his providence is exploded... improving in almost every branch of knowledge, we have become less and less acquainted with Christianity" (p. 193). Further, Smith (cited by Hanciles, 2007) corroborates that "except among ladies in the middle class of life, there is no religion at all, and the clergy have no more influence over the people at large than the cheese mongers in England" (p. 193). It is necessary to point out that the deplorable lack of earnestness in matters of religion in

England is almost the case in many parts of the northern hemisphere. The offices and officials of the church are objects of more specific condemnations-anti-clericalism were widespread-but charges about the erosion of Christian knowledge and values implicated the whole of society. For this reason, it could be argued that the pervasive sense of religious dissatisfaction probably meant that innumerable souls were ripe for a new religious experience. It was for this reason; therefore, that African immigrant Christians believed that a reflex mission was necessary to proclaim the word of God in the global atmosphere in obedience to the divine mandate of a global mission. The voice in the air of African immigrant Christians was that of a divine purpose for the continent of Africa to re-evangelize Europe where secularism has dampened the spiritual vision, and to re-echo the gospel where it has been weakened by globalization flowing from the secularized Europe. Africa's intervention in this global religious Christian mission arose from this conviction and the achievements have marked the distinctive role of Africa in the global religious landscape. According to Kalu (2010):

African immigrants try to link the areas in the northern globe where Christianity is declining with the areas of growth in the southern globe; it connects the vitality from the south to the surviving vitality in the north, re-energies both zones, and keep religion important in the modern public space. (p. 180).

African immigrant Christianity has thus, become the vanguard of African religious influence in the twenty-first century. The immigrant Christians have demonstrated determination to make global links and make non-Africans targets in their membership drives. The seriousness of this reflex mission could be seen in Africans sending pastors and missionaries commissioned to head already existing branches or establish new ones in the diaspora. This reflex mission initiative which entails sending African missionaries abroad came from the backdrop of the moratorium by the Lutheran World Foundation. The moratorium call was designed among other things to awaken the Third World peoples to their responsibility, creating new goals and formulating a viable evangelical strategy towards Europe. Kalu (2010) traces the reflex mission to the Conference of the International Missionary Council held at Tambaram, Medras, in 1938 where non-western actors drew attention to issues of racial exclusion in holistic mission, voiced their discontents, and started a theological trend that became more strident in the process of decolonization. Tambaram started a trend that gained force with an enlarged space for African culture and theology during the process of decolonization of African church. The process soon flowed into the call for moratorium and the request that western missionary organizations should observe a moratorium by not sending money and manpower to the churches in Africa for five years so that the short man may learn how to hang his knapsack by his reach.

At the beginning of 1980s, the Lutheran World Federation made the first effort to send African missionaries to Germany. They exported the theological nuances honed on the African soil, responding to problems through the African worldview. They invented and reconstructed theologies to meet the practical needs created by secularism and materialism. They successfully brought the developments in African continent to the world stage following the ancient route, the migration route. According to Bangura (2002) these churches are known for their use of loud music, complete with synthesizers and percussions for its worship services. Although these gatherings often attract consternation from distraught neighbours, it nevertheless enjoys significant following especially among the African Christian diaspora whose yearning for an encounter with the divine clearly resonates with such liturgical practices. Through their weekly congregation at those places of worship, African Christian immigrants have opportunities to reconnect with parishioners of likeminded faith and facilitate a change in the use of Europe's disused urban spaces. The experiment showed that if they could be a viable reverse mission, Africans must develop the theology, the missionary logistics, funding, and the passion or show the guts to endure hardship in mission. The exportation of clergy and missionaries on this reverse mission demonstrates the stature of Africa as an emerging global theatre of Christianity. The meaning of reflex mission therefore is that the old missionary era has ended and a new phase started. New faces have emerged and the prophecy about a blessed reflex has been fulfilled.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that African migration is important for reshaping the impact of Christianity on Africa, and for constructing the new shape of global Christianity. It points to the neglected fact that Africa is impacting the rest of the world through religion; that the vitality and growth of Christianity in Africa is flowing out to reshape the Christian landscape in many parts of the world. The study highlighted an aspect of African history that has been missed: the population movements and migration across the world and the role of African ex-slaves and their migrant kin in diffusing Christian message around the world. With the proliferation of African churches in virtually all parts of the world, Africa has become fully part of the global cosmos in religious terms. The salience of Christianity has been assisted by African migrant churches in western societies, particularly Europe where the insignificance of religion is prevalent. African immigrants are ensuring that Christianity survives the scorching heat of secularism, science and technology. The relevance of African churches is not only located in the unique expression of African Christianity they exhibit, they also constitute international ministries and groups that have implications on global scale. The liturgical revolution of the African churches and their

display of charismatic propensities equally draw some attraction from the local publics. The capacity to import African liturgical traditions including deliverance, prayer, fasting, night vigils and other traditions emerging from the interior of indigenous worldviews have all combined to contribute to the growth and high visibility of the contributions of African immigrants to global Christianity. New York Times of Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April 2004 as recorded by Kalu (2010) informs that:

Every Sunday, in more than 100 churches across New York, pastors preach the gospel in languages such as Ibo, Twi, and Ga. Conga drums drive songs of praise. Swaths of Kente clothes cover bodies of swaying in the paws. An explosion of African immigrant churches in the past 15 years has helped reshape religious worship in the city. The surge is creating oases of Christian faith for new comers from Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, Ethiopia, and other countries and fuelling an evangelical movement along the province of Latinos and African immigrants. (p. 216).

Phan (2007) confirms that “the American churches are now displaying a dazzling variety of cultures, ethnic and racial backgrounds. There has been a huge influx of immigrants from mostly non-European countries, especially from Africa, Asian and Latin America, and they bring with them languages, customs and cultures vastly different from those of their host country. This is vastly significant for the future of the church’s ministry, within a couple of decades these “minorities” will constitute the majority in the church. More importantly, these immigrants intend to preserve their native traditions. The emphasis here is that African immigrant Christianity should not be profiled as flowing in one direction. It moves around African continent, Asia America and Europe. African immigrants are imbued with the feeling that their relocation had a divine purpose: to re-evangelize the world, especially the west that has backslidden into ungodliness and lost its Christian birthright.

Another important aspect of this study is that it borrowed from Catto (cited by Bangura, 2002) to redefine the identity and traditional profile of a missionary. Accordingly, a missionary is no longer only to be considered a white Caucasian who is commissioned by churches in the west to travel to the non-western world to preach the gospel, plant Bible believing churches and disciple new converts toward Christian maturity. Missionaries are Christians who migrate from anywhere to anywhere for the purpose of advancing the gospel and annexing empires for Christ. African ex-slaves and their migrant kin who are largely involved in a second wave of global evangelization in a form of reflex mission are missionaries in their own right.

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