



CHALLENGES OF SUDAN INTERIOR MISSION (SIM) PIONEER MISSIONARIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges of Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) pioneer missionaries in Nigeria. The main objectives of this research were to investigate the missionaries' challenges and know how they were able to overcome those challenges in the Sudan. The methodology was a historical research method, using historical records and documents. The findings revealed that discouragement from the missionary colleague based in Lagos was the first challenge encountered by the pioneer missionaries. Followed by a communication barrier. At first, they were using an interpreter to preach, but later committed themselves to learning native languages to break the language barrier. The study also showed that the challenge that missionaries faced in Nigeria was the hot weather conditions and unconducive climate; they were not used to hot weather, and they found it difficult to acclimatise to the weather, and as a result, some returned home. The study concludes that the controversial area was disagreement between European missionaries and Africans people. They saw Africans as people without culture and wanted to impose their culture on them, which resulted in the founding of African indigenous churches. The study recommends that Culture is the way of life, and Africans' way of life is different from the West, so Europeans should not look down on the African way of life, because names such as paganism, primitive, uncivilised, and barbaric are misrepresentations of African culture.

Keywords: Missionaries, culture, Languages, challenges, and Mission



Introduction

The paper explores the challenges faced by the Sudan Interior Missionaries and how they were able to navigate and overcome their challenges. The missionaries who came to Nigeria in their quest to evangelize the far interior of Sudan faced various difficulties, hardships, and challenges. Even though they were confronted with a lot of challenges, they never succumbed to those challenges; they stood firm and achieved their goals and vision. Some of the challenges were examined in this paper for historical purposes.

Discouragement from Missionary Colleagues

When SIM missionaries left their comfort zone and landed in Lagos to proceed to the far interior of Sudan to preach the Gospel, instead of motivation and encouragement from their fellow missionary colleagues in Lagos, they were welcomed with words of discouragement. Turaki points out that “after landing in Lagos, the pioneers were met with one problem after another. The first was discouragement from their missionary colleagues of three missions operating in Lagos” (43).

Similarly, Bingham posits that on the fourth of December 1893, their ship anchored out at sea off Lagos, because the larger ships could not enter the harbour. They trans-shipped to what was then known as a “branch boat,” and they feared that they were going to a place where they didn’t know anybody, but they knew there were missionaries at the coast. As they sailed up the lagoon, they decided that one of them would go ashore and prospect while the other two should remain on board to pray. While their Scottish-Canadian leader located one of the Mission Homes and learned that there was just one vacant house in the city, the owner was an English trader. He sent his men to carry all their baggage ashore to his vacant house, and within an hour they had passed all the formalities of customs and owned their one vacant room. They were there for a time, and the man was so friendly to them (18-19).

Bingham goes further to say that they met the missionaries of the three societies labouring in Lagos. They prophesied dire calamity, and they all said they were undertaking the impossible. They dined one evening with the Superintendent of the Methodist Mission, and he predicted gloom to them and said, “*Young men, you will never see the Sudan; your children will never see the Sudan; your grandchildren may*” (19). He was regarded as a well-informed man in West African affairs. All sorts of discouragement is to dissuade them from their purpose.

In agreement with Bingham, Bengé posits that on December 7, 1893, three days after the missionaries arrived in Lagos, a messenger arrived at their door with an invitation to dine with the superintendent of the Methodist mission. Rowland was eager to meet with another missionary. He looked forward to hearing the superintendent’s insight on the Sudan and learning how they could go about getting inland, but he was in for a shock. Within a moment, they all sat down to dinner, then the superintendent shook his head and said, “Young men, I would be neglecting my duty if I did not tell you that you are on a fool’s errand. You will never see the Sudan.” He looked sternly at each of them, and then to emphasize his warning, he pointed his fork at them and added, “Your children will never see the Sudan; your grandchildren might.” He reached for another slice of beef and continued. “Such a waste I learned of another party of six missionaries who landed in Lagos today and have set their sights on the lower Niger. No doubt they will parish or retreat as well.



After all the shots of discouragement words to the young missionaries, he now asked them, where exactly are you headed, anyway? Welter replied, “We plan to make it to Bida and set up work there.” The superintendent now said, “Pure fantasy, don’t waste your lives.” In reaction, Rowland wanted to bring some facts to contradict the superintendent’s words, but later kept silent because everyone who knew of the conditions in the Sudan interior had predicted more or less the same fate for them about Sudan (55-56).

He goes further to say that in response to this discouragement by the superintendent, Rowland now remembered the biography of Livingstone, who was a great missionary explorer who had spent thirty-two years in Africa and died twenty years before. He also met with a lot of discouragement, and his response was, “I will open up central Africa to the gospel, or I will die in the attempt” After finishing his dinner, Rowland made a promise in his mind that “he too would either succeed in his mission or he die trying” (Benge 57).

Language and Communication Barrier

Communication is very important in the work of evangelism. SIM missionaries who came to Nigeria with the Burden of Sudan discovered that Nigeria has many languages, and they cannot achieve their mission without understanding the languages of the natives. So they committed themselves to learning and printing native languages to facilitate evangelism. Learning the languages is significant because that is the best way they can preach the gospels to the natives, for many of them may not understand English. According to Oshatoba, “As soon as the missionaries arrived, they immediately started trying to learn the language. Unless they heard that, they could not communicate with the people. After they had made some progress with the language, they started to preach in Patigi town and nearby villages” (4).

He further pointed out that Mr. Banfield was so intent on getting the language that for two years, he never read any book in English, except his Bible. After eighteen months, he was able to translate one of the gospels into Nupe (4). Kato, on the other hand, is of the view that language and communication were another challenge that confronted the missionaries in their quest to Christianise Nigeria. According to him, the missionaries grappled with the problem of language or mode of communication. To address this challenge, the missionaries introduced the use of interpreters before they could learn the native language. Kato further affirms that “interpreters were inadequate to meet the needs of ever-expanding Christian missions. Moreover, speaking through an interpreter is a defective means of communicating one’s thoughts to one’s audience” (112).

He further posits that some of these interpreters were not even from those localities, and they were not even educated. These affected the work of the missionaries (112). In addition, Lere asserts that “the difficulties in understanding the language of the natives by the European missionaries made them use interpreters to evangelize the natives” (80). She goes further to say that these interpreters, in most cases, created barriers in transmitting the gospel message to the natives because, likely, they didn’t understand the real meaning of the message (80).

Similarly, Baba opines that, as a matter of need, to facilitate quick evangelism, church planting, and discipleship, every SIM missionary was required to learn the local language of the natives where each was to serve as a missionary. For the missionary to achieve that, the person was



expected to devote at least two hours every day to learning the local language of the people. This was meant to open the closed doors to evangelism (29). He further alludes that at its annual meeting on January 23, 1911, at Wushishi, Nigeria, the SIM Field Council resolved again:

All the missionaries are supposed to learn the language daily and report to the secretary the hours spent herewith and also the hours spent on the language study privately except in cases (i) where itinerating duties demand his whole attention temporarily; (ii) where building duties are imperative; (iii) in case of protected duties in translation work; (iv) when duties toward his or her brethren on other stations demand his or her full time (29).

He goes further to say that SIM pioneer missionaries considered language learning to be a serious concern because, without understanding the local languages of the people, it would be difficult to communicate the Scriptures with the natives. Since SIM felt that they could not accomplish learning the language and translating it into the written script alone, they partnered with other mission agencies to help facilitate the printing of the Scriptures. These mission agencies were the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in Nigeria. They helped in translating the Scriptures into local languages. In July 1910, the leadership of SIM appointed a committee that would serve as advisers for the printing press. Through their effort, literature such as *Annals in Vernacular* was printed. The name of the committee was the “Standing Literature Committee.” (30).

He further pointed out that the following persons served as members of the committee: Rev. A. W. Banfield (SIM/BFBS), Dr. A. Stirrett (SIM), Rev. J. L. Macintyre (CMS), and Dr. W. R. Miller (CMS). The Christian Missionary Society (CMS) and the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) were “the two mission bodies that established the Niger Press for the publication of the Scriptures and other Christian literature in local languages. In 1932, the first complete Hausa Bible, Old and New Testaments, was published through the effort of several Protestant mission agencies in Northern Nigeria. The Lord used Christian Missions to contribute a lot towards the printing of Christian literature that had a positive impact on the improvement of literacy in Northern Nigeria. The SIM missionaries were able to identify places that lacked modern facilities for learning. Therefore, their abilities in linguistics helped to solve that challenge. They introduced the use of Roman script into Hausa and in the study of Hausa grammar and many other languages. Their linguistic ability helped to translate Scriptures into Hausa and Gbagyi languages in the North. The translation of Scriptures into various languages added value to the missionary services of SIM. There was other Christian literature that was printed for the new converts and educational purposes. This was one of the legacies left for ECWA by SIM (30)

It was part of the orientation for every newly recruited SIM missionary to make sure to learn the local language of the people in every district or region they entered and also to convert such languages into written scripts. This was meant to make it easier to translate the Scriptures into those languages. The printing of the written scripts of the Scriptures was done by the Niger Printing Press, owned by SIM Mission. There were about three hundred languages altogether in the Central Sudan region. The printing press was an asset to SIM and other mission agencies. SIM had a breakthrough among the elites when, through the printing press, Christian literature such as the “African Challenge” was printed. The stories, articles, and illustrations were captivating, so people bought them to read. The stories were short, and the language was simple. The editor was Rev. Harold Fuller, who brought success to the printing press (Baba qtd. in Fleck 29). This also agreed



with Cheesman that the task every field missionary was expected to accomplish was to make sure the Scriptures were translated into the local languages of the people (29).

Maigadi stresses that the Sudan Interior Mission was one of the mission agencies in Nigeria that considered the translation of the Scriptures into local languages indispensable to the success of its mission. Albert D. Helser, SIM General Director (1957-1962), has been quoted as saying:

The missionary aims at influencing, not the shallows of a people's life, but the deepest depths, to touch the springs of conduct, to reach down to the innermost recesses of their being. There is no part to the heart save through the mother tongue. And again, we insist that the mother tongue is the key that unlocks the door of the people's hearts. It is the road that leads to an understanding of their mind. It is the bridge across the gulf that yawns between their soul and our own. Unless and until you can speak to them, man and woman, heart to heart, soul to soul, you can never attain that intimate sympathy which is based upon knowledge (87).

For Corwin, when a person uses their mother-tongue language, he or she would be able to communicate the gospel better than someone who does not know the language. He went further to observe that knowledge is far better than translating the Scriptures into the language or interpreting the Scriptures to the person with whom one is communicating the gospel. In addition, he continued that most SIM field missionaries experienced some challenges because they were only good at translating the Scriptures into the languages of the people but had no genuine interpersonal relationships with the recipients of the gospel (217).

Hot Weather and Terrible Climate

The SIM missionaries who came to Nigeria encountered changes in weather conditions and climate. As a result of the hot weather, the missionaries found it easy to cope with the climate, which made other missionaries return home, while others died on the way. Bingham points out that they do not understand the terrible climate in those days, expedition after expedition of white men in trade, government, and missionary service was wiped out and six parties of missionaries who had landed in Lagos ten days after their arrival, four died before they reached their destination on the lower Niger, the fifth one was invalided home and one solitary survivor walked into the mission station. The station, which was furnished to receive six new workers, later witnessed the death of the remaining member of the party within twelve months, and within twelve months, eighty-seven percent had been either invalided home or had died. Such was the climate of the Sudan (22-23). Bengé alludes that "not only was the weather oppressively hot, but the tracks were overgrown and winding. And everyone was constantly on the lookout for deadly snakes in the grass and crocodiles in the rivers" (64).

Similarly, Agbeti is of the view that the kinds of challenges that confronted the missionaries in their quest to develop and Christianise West Africa had made some missionaries say, "Anyone who attempted travelling beyond Cape Bojador would be turned into negroes" (57). He further says that the missionaries believed that "the tropical sun is so hot that it pours out liquid flames which could cook sailors" (58). This scared and discouraged some missionaries, as some went back to their home countries and never came back.



While Onibonoje asserts that even though missionaries have done great work in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, the missionaries were confronted with challenges such as “thick forest, hot weather, lack of good natural waterways and good harbours and an abundance of harmful insects, among others” (62). He further says that these challenges have made some European missionaries call these mission areas a “Die area” (67). He continues that these challenges not only make mission work difficult for the missionaries, but it had also been the cause of the deaths of some missionaries. The hot weather and the thick forest, for example, limited the movement of the missionaries. He further opines that the “West Africa region was for long not penetrated by European traders and explorers owing to poor climatic conditions, thick and swampy forest” (68). With this, we can deduce that the climate and weather conditions of Africa affected the missionaries because some of them could not cope with the tropical hot weather.

Cultural Barrier

Culture is the way of life. The SIM missionaries that came to Nigeria encountered another way of life that was different from theirs, and to suit the new culture was a serious challenge to the missionaries. That was why Maigadi asserts that “the encountering of Nigerian cultures was the greatest challenge the SIM pioneers faced” (32). In the Conference, it was observed that many of the early missionaries of SIM and other mission agencies did not see any good in Nigerian cultures; in fact, there was an outright condemnation of them. The missionaries in their views of Nigerians and Africans, thought that there were no ethical manners or religious principles to guide their ways of life. The continent of Africa was seen and described by the missionaries as the dwelling place of Satan and his demons (Baba qtd. in Bingham 32). Bingham, in his writing about an ethnic group in Northern Nigeria, says:

There we found a people lower than any we had ever seen. From the time they came into the world naked, until they went out of the world naked, they never possessed a piece of cloth as large as one’s hand. The other pagan tribes we had passed through had at least a sense of decency, to the extent of following the fashion of Mother Eve and putting on a leafy apron each day (Baba qtd. in Bingham 32).

This view by Bingham and his colleagues of the people of Central Sudan and their culture provided the pioneers with a task: to “civilize,” and then to “Christianize” them. Therefore, three things occupied and dominated the thinking of SIM pioneers and other missionaries in Central Sudan and Africa. Firstly, the people of Central Sudan were living in moral depravity and prevailing darkness and ignorance. Secondly, Islam was responsible for causing untold suffering in the Sudan, such as slave-raiding, slavery, degradation, and immoral influence, and it is mandatory to stop its advance and influence. Thirdly, the white man, in general, brings both light and liberation to the land of darkness, and doing so is his or her moral and spiritual responsibility to the people of Central Sudan and ultimately to the Universal Church (Baba qtd. in Turaki 32-33).

Similarly, Greenway also points out clearly that cultural barriers have become a major concern to missionary work, and the challenges could be seen in areas such as customs, religion, values, attitudes, and race, and the leadership of mission agencies takes the challenge seriously. He argues that the cultural barrier has a tie with people; it can separate them from each other, and the cultural barrier can also prevent some people from accepting Christ as their Lord and Saviour. He further advocates that intended missionaries be trained in the area of the different cultures of the people. This orientation should include how missionaries should relate to and approach the nationals with



the gospel of Christ. He further affirms that nobody should assume that the cultural barrier will disappear soon, because it is the way of life of the people (qtd. in Baba 31).

According to Baba, “the SIM pioneer missionaries faced the challenge of culture. When they came to Africa, they also came with their Western culture. Unconsciously, many of them could not differentiate their cultures from the gospel. Therefore, the early missionaries who came to propagate the gospel came with the Western culture to the people of another culture” (31). To correct this situation, Corwin writes:

The SIM missionaries should re-examine their principles and practices, discard their white master attitudes, and encourage the growth of biblically-based local churches that would work out their roles in the new Africa that was evolving. Furthermore, there was no place in the missionaries’ vocabulary for words like “native,” “nigger,” “black man,” and possibly “national” that reflected white people’s deeply entrenched sense of “superiority” (qtd. in Baba 31).

Fuller puts it that the reality of life is decided by every culture, and the behaviours and their meanings are determined by the cultures of these people. Nobody can read meaning into the way people behave. He goes further to say that we need to know that culture is dynamic. It can change anytime and at any moment. The same behaviour can likely have a different meaning in another culture. He further pointed out that in a situation such as this, the missionary is left to decide on the kind of strategy or approach he would choose to present the gospel to the ethnic people. Therefore, the way the missionary would speak and act before the natives matters a lot (qtd. in Baba 32). He further added that the gospel message to the unreached people must be understood and relevant. Since culture is a way of life for the people, it would be very difficult for them to accept any changes because they are used to it and are satisfied with the way they live and behave, except that the Holy Spirit convinces and convicts them to see their culture in light of the Scriptures. Also, the missionary likes his or her own culture, but because the missionary has a mission among the unreached people, he or she has to adjust rather than expecting the native to adjust (qtd. in Baba32).

On the other hand, Maigadi emphasized that from the beginning, SIM pioneers lived among the people, learned and spoke the languages of the people, as well as identified with their suffering. The pioneers also worked alongside the Nigerian evangelists. The story of Thomas Titcombe, a Canadian who worked among the Yagba, is a good example of the incarnation principle the pioneers first employed in their ministry. By living among the Yagba people, Titcombe and his wife were adopted and accepted by the community. They were no longer regarded as strangers because they identified themselves with the people both physically and psychologically by living among them. They learned the host’s culture and regarded themselves as equals to the people (qtd. in Baba 33).

Falola and Adeniran also point out that cultural imperialism was one of the major challenges that confronted the European missionaries in their quest to Christianise the Dark Continent. They go further to say that the missionaries saw Africans as uncivilised, barbaric, and pagan, which was why European culture was loaded on the converts as Christian culture. As a result of this, African converts were made to accept European principles, which, according to him, led to some rebellion among the converts. They opine that “it was as a result of the Europeanised Christianity in Africa



that gave birth to the African indigenous church Movement motivated by a desire to reform existing mission protestant Christianity and make it more relevant to the needs of the daily African life” (21).

Lere posits that the missionaries did not understand the culture of the natives, and they assumed that Africans were without culture and traditional practices, and so sought to transform the natives into a carbon copy of the white people. But Africans greatly rejected it, and their resistance slowed down the missionary work. (80) From this understanding, one could deduce that the imposition of the Europeans’ culture by the missionaries greatly affected the missionaries’ quest to Christianise Africans. If they had considered the African culture, there would not have been conflicts that led to the establishment of the African Indigenous Church.

Conclusion

Missionaries have done a great job in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. Life is full of challenges, and without challenges life would not be interesting, because challenges are part of life. The European missionaries faced a lot of challenges when they came to African soil, but they did not give up, and those challenges made them know our culture, learn local languages, and help to translate our languages in the Bible for the benefit of African people. In respect to that, the growth and development of Christianity and Western education in Nigeria can be attributed to the efforts of the Europeans missionaries.

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