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ORIGINS OF THE  
NIGER MISSION

1841-1891

by

K. Onwuka Dike



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1841-1891

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by

K. Onwuka Dike

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A paper read at the Centenary of the Mission at  
Christ Church, Onitsha, on 13 November 1957

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## ORIGINS OF THE NIGER MISSION

I ACCEPTED the invitation to read this paper with more than ordinary pleasure because I am myself from start to finish a product of missionary education. I received my early training at two Mission Schools: the Hope Waddell Institute, Calabar and St. George's school, Opobo. My secondary school course began and ended at the Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha. It was at a C.M.S. institution, the Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, that I took my first degree. So that from school to university I was educated in institutions which arose as a result of missionary enterprise. I have no doubt that the history of my own education is very much the history of the education of most Nigerians of my generation; today the great majority of our leaders in public life, in politics, in education and the Church, in commerce and industry, owe their education in whole or in part to missionary enterprise.

### *Early Missionary Enterprise*

Missionary activity in Nigeria cannot, of course, be viewed apart from the general European invasion of the West African territories from the advent of the Portuguese. During the fifteenth century when crusading zeal was ever present in Europe, commercial and religious issues were one and indivisible. Even in the early years of European contact with the Guinea coasts, the Christian priest invariably travelled with the trader either to check the advance of Islam—at the time the hereditary foe of Christendom—or to extend the Christian message to unknown lands. With the beginning of European commerce in the fifteenth century, there came the first missionary outposts in West Africa: for example in Mina (modern Ghana), Benin, Warri and the Congo. These Christian outposts were short-lived and the reasons for their virtual disappearance towards the end of the seventeenth century are many and various. First, the character and organization of the slave trade militated against the work of the missions. Under the chaotic and unsettled conditions in which the slaves were captured and sold, the spread of the Christian message proved well-nigh impossible. Again, with the possible exception of the Kingdom of the Congo, the early European missionaries worked in territories in which Africans were sovereign; in a majority of cases the African governments supported the indigenous faith against that of the trading Europeans. There was, moreover, the high mortality among the missionaries brought about by their contact with unaccustomed diseases such as malaria. For such reasons the first attempt to plant Christianity in West Africa failed to take root.

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The second attempt covered the years 1788-1900 and was, in fact, intimately linked with the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and, following it, the European desire to trade with the African interior instead of with the coast as formerly. The foundation of the Niger Mission was part of this second movement.

### *Eighteenth Century Enlightenment*

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century a new enlightenment swept through Europe. This enlightenment originated, in part, with Christian and humanitarian groups; and in part with the American and French Revolutions. Both preached the brotherhood of man and all worked towards the same end, namely the abolition of the iniquitous traffic in men. One of the main results of the Abolitionist Movement was that it altered the European attitude not only towards the Slave Trade but also towards the peoples of Asia and Africa. Already, with regard to British rule in India, Edmund Burke had put forward the theory that political relations involve moral obligations. The American and French Revolutions which occurred around this time insisted on the "Rights of Man" everywhere and, incidentally, on those of the "Noble Savage." The Evangelical movement gave new life to the Church of the day and made the emancipation and regeneration of distant peoples the duty of Christendom. Its activities resulted in the formation of missionary societies. Thus the Baptist Mission was founded in 1792, the London Missionary Society in 1795 and the C.M.S. in 1799.

At the time of the missionary revival other forces were at work directed towards the opening up of Africa to British commerce. A body known as the "African Association," whose membership included politicians such as Pitt and Fox, business men such as Josiah Wedgwood, humanitarians such as Wilberforce and Clarkson, sent expedition after expedition to explore the African interior and to trace the source and termination of the River Niger. Through the geographical work of its explorers such as Ledyard, Houghton, Hornemann, Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, Richard and John Lander, interest in West Africa was greatly stimulated in Europe.

### *The "Bible and Plough"*

But in spite of the growing interest in and knowledge of West Africa, the Abolitionists soon discovered that although they had won a legal victory by the Abolition Act of 1807 (which put an end to the slave trade so far as Englishmen were concerned) the West Coast of Africa was still supplying the plantations of the New World with slave labour. These slaves were carried in the ships of those nations, such as Portugal, Spain, France, the United States and Brazil, who had not yet put an end to the traffic. The Evangelicals, the Humanitarians and the British Government soon realized that

mere legal prohibition of the traffic was not enough; a way had to be found to put an end not only to the British traffic but also to that of foreign nations.

To achieve this end Britain entered into treaty relations with the slave trading nations of Europe and America which enabled her Navy to capture foreign slavers on the high seas. This expedient cost her much in men and money. At the same time the Humanitarians maintained that prohibition of the slave trade was not enough. The illegitimate trade in men, they said, must be replaced by legitimate trade in the raw materials of the African forest. By this means the manpower of Africa, instead of being exhausted to cultivate the New World and the Indies, could be turned to agricultural production in Africa itself. Only through cultivating habits of industry and preaching the Gospel of Christ could the African be redeemed and regenerated.

From such an idea, first conceived by Granville Sharp, was born in 1787 the settlement of Freetown as a home for freed slaves. In Freetown, it was argued, the liberated slaves could lead lives that were self-supporting as well as self-respecting.

Perhaps the greatest leader of this group after the death of Wilberforce was Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. He set to work to mobilise public opinion and secure government support for the development of African resources. Such development, he claimed, could offer attractions of economic profit outrivalling those of the slave trade. Buxton turned his attention to this problem in 1837. Early one morning he walked into a room where one of his sons was sleeping and told him that he had been awake all night thinking of the Slave Trade, and "hit upon the true remedy for that portentous evil—the deliverance of Africa is to be effected by calling out her own resources." In his book *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* he gathered evidence to show the alarming proportions of the slave trade, even after its abolition by England, the high mortality and the inhuman brutality and suffering involved. The true ransom for Africa, he declared, will be found in her fertile soil. To further this aim a settlement could be made at the confluence of the Niger and Benue to act as an agricultural training centre for Africans. As a necessary concomitant, Christianity was also to be introduced to bring about the moral and spiritual regeneration of the African. Hence his constant use of the phrase "the Bible and plough" as the means of African redemption. Thanks to his perseverance a society was formed to promote his views.

It was in June 1840 that Prince Albert became the President of the newly formed "Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and Civilisation of Africa," an organisation supported by many of the leading personalities of the day. "Quite an epitome of the state: Whig, Tory and Radical; dissenter, Low Church, High Church, tip-top Oxfordism, all united" to serve Africa.

### *The Niger Expedition of 1841*

The River Niger formed an obvious means of communication with the hinterland. In response to the pressing demand of the Society, in 1841 the Government commissioned three ships, the *Albert*, *Wilberforce* and *Sudan*, to explore and chart the Rivers Niger and Benue. The C.M.S. was actively concerned from the start in the preparations for the expedition. Two men from Sierra Leone accompanied it on the Society's behalf. The Rev. J. F. Schon, a German missionary and an able linguist, "was engaged to accompany the expedition with view of ascertaining for the C.M.S. what facilities there might be for the introduction of the Gospel among the nations of the interior of Africa" and "to report on the disposition of the (African) chiefs to receive missionaries." He was accompanied by Samuel Adjai Crowther, a catechist, an ex-slave boy of Yoruba parentage. Thus from the outset there was a direct connection between the mission in Sierra Leone and the mission to the Niger. The C.M.S. had already built up a considerable body of West African experience by its work in Freetown, where the first missionaries were sent out by the Society in 1804.

### *Origins of the Niger Mission*

The foundations of the Niger Mission were laid in this expedition of 1841. Its leaders were commissioned by the British Government to negotiate with important local chiefs treaties for the abolition of the slave trade and "to substitute instead thereof, a friendly commercial intercourse between Her Majesty's subjects and the natives of Africa." But the British Government was not concerned with trade alone. In the instructions to the leaders of the expedition the Government enjoined them to tell the rulers of Africa "that the Queen and the people of England profess the Christian religion; and that by this religion they are commanded to assist in promoting goodwill, peace, and brotherly love, among all nations and men; and that in endeavouring to commence a further intercourse with the African nations, Her Majesty's Government are actuated and guided by these (Christian) principles." In this and in subsequent Niger expeditions missionary, commercial and governmental activities were closely linked. Four thousand pounds was subscribed in England for the establishment of a model farm at the confluence of the Niger and the Benue, a practical demonstration of Buxton's unity of "Bible and Plough".

The outcome of this, in some ways, unfortunate expedition is more or less well known. The three vessels, the *Wilberforce*, the *Albert*, and the *Sudan*, entered the Niger in August 1841. Within a few weeks the dreaded malaria fever began to take heavy toll: of the 162 white men who entered the river, 54 died of malaria before the surviving ship, the *Albert*, reached Fernando Po in October of the same year. As a contemporary writer put it, the *Albert* "like a plague-ship

filled with its dead and dying" returned to the coast under the direction of John Beecroft. The 1841 expedition became a byword for hopeless failure.

Without doubt its fate ended Buxton's public career and hastened his death. When the hopes of great commercial gains were not realised, many who had formerly given their support lost their enthusiasm for the development of trade with the Niger basin. The Humanitarians, called by their opponents the "devils of Exeter Hall," were subjected to heavy attacks by literary critics and commercial publicists.

But as always in history during times of failure and reaction there are men who see beyond the happenings of the present to the possibilities of the future. These men clung tenaciously to Buxton's idea and in missionary circles one such man was the Rev. Henry Venn, who became Honorary Secretary of the C.M.S. from 1841 till 1872. His period of office coincided with the foundation of the Niger Mission. His faith in the African, and particularly in Samuel Crowther, was unlimited. It is doubtful whether Crowther could have achieved the greatness he did in the Niger Mission without Venn's unflinching support.

But to return to the expedition. It was not, in the end, the hopeless failure that contemporaries judged it to be. True, the high mortality obscured its achievements, but those achievements were nonetheless real. To take a few examples. During the ascent of the Niger, treaties for the abolition of the slave trade were negotiated with the rulers of Aboh and Iddah, who also granted permission for the entry of missionaries. The interview with Obi Ossai of Aboh conducted by the Rev. Schon demonstrates the warm reception accorded the Christian message by some of the Ibo rulers.

On arrival at the King's house the missionaries explained the purpose of the visit and the message of the Gospel. At the end they presented Obi Essai with two Bibles, one in English and the other in Arabic. King Obi could neither read nor write but the missionaries were accompanied by one Simon Jonas, an Ibo ex-slave from Sierra Leone who acted as interpreter. This gentleman read the Sermon on the Mount to the King. According to the journal of Schon and Crowther, "Obi was uncommonly taken with this. That a white man could read and write was a matter of course; but that a black man—an Ibo man—should know these wonderful things... was more than he could ever have anticipated." It was indeed at Obi's insistence that Simon Jonas was left behind at Aboh where he remained to preach the Gospel and expound the mysteries of the written word, while the rest of the expedition proceeded to Iddah.

Unfortunately the missionary activities of the members of the 1841 expedition and the treaties concluded between them and the communities on the banks of the Niger lapsed, since the promises and obligations were not honoured by Britain. After its failure no British mission was sent to the Niger valley for another thirteen years.

Nevertheless, as far as the C.M.S. was concerned the interval was used to plan the work along more practical lines. The reports of Schon and Crowther greatly assisted them in formulating a sounder policy for a future assault on the Niger territories. Schon's recommendations may be briefly summarised. He stated emphatically that the West African climate and lack of regular communications in the Niger Districts would make a mission run by Europeans a physical impossibility. The high mortality of the 1841 expedition, he said, "not only demonstrates to us, that the designs for which the expedition has been chiefly undertaken will, in the course of events, be carried out by Natives (of Africa);" he went on to stress that the inhabitants of the African interior "acknowledge the superiority over themselves of their own country people who had received instruction" at the white man's hands. These educated Africans, Schon pleaded, mainly resident in Sierra Leone, should be sent back as missionaries to their own countrymen. "In Sierra Leone," he claimed, "there is a general desire among the liberated Africans to return to their own countries. This was unheard of a few years ago." Schon discerned the Hand of God in the reciprocity of feeling between the educated African abroad and the tribal inhabitants who desired their services at this critical hour in African history. He therefore called upon the Home Committee of the C.M.S. to adopt the measures he advocated. "Everything," he said, "tends to confirm my opinion of Sierra Leone and its destiny, that from thence the Gospel will proceed to numerous benighted tribes of Africa." He ended his appeal to the C.M.S. Committee with this question: "Are the Natives of Africa then, to become Missionaries to their own country people?" "Yes," he answered—"for this the Church of God has been longing and praying."

Schon was strongly supported by Crowther in this view. Writing to the C.M.S. Secretary from Fernando Po on November 2, 1841 the latter declared: "As regards missionary labours on the banks of the Niger and in the interior of Africa—very little can be done by European missionaries. . . . On the other hand, it would be practicable to employ native converts from Sierra Leone who are willing to return and teach their fellow countrymen." In order to implement this proposal, Schon strongly recommended that the C.M.S. should expand educational facilities in Sierra Leone in order to prepare its people adequately for missionary enterprise. He suggested the re-organization of Fourah Bay Institution "on such a footing that the students might receive superior education, with a special view to prepare them for the Missionary work." He urged that the languages spoken in the Niger should be reduced to writing and that portions of the scriptures should be translated into these languages. He stressed that "the work of translating should be made a distinct branch of the operations of the Mission." Perhaps Schon's greatest service to the Niger Mission was his clear grasp of the practical difficulties in the field and his convincing presentation of these to the

C.M.S. authorities in England. The Home Committee agreed with Schon that Africa should be saved not only by European efforts but largely through the agency of her own children who had come into touch with Western civilization in Sierra Leone and the West Indies. The Niger mission therefore began, particularly with regard to its personnel, as a predominantly African Mission, drawing no doubt much guidance and financial support from the C.M.S. Fourah Bay College was developed along the lines he suggested, as a training institution "for a Native Ministry. . . ."

It was clear from Schon's recommendations that the man intended to lead the team of Native missionaries into the Niger Valley was Samuel Adjai Crowther. The story of Samuel Crowther is well known, but as he achieved his life's fulfilment in the building up of the Niger Mission it is fitting that in this talk there should be an outline, however bare, of his extraordinary career. In 1822 Crowther, as a young boy, had been rescued from a Portuguese slaver by an English man-of-war. Together with the other slaves on board he was taken to Freetown where, to take up the story in his own words, "I was under the care of the C.M.S. and in about six months after my arrival at Sierra Leone I was able to read the New Testament with some degree of freedom; and was made a Monitor, for which I was rewarded by 7½d per month." He was an outstanding pupil and when he enrolled as one of the first students at the African Institution established in 1827 Mr. Haensal, the Principal, wrote, "He is a lad of uncommon ability, steady conduct, a thirst for knowledge and indefatigable industry." After the 1841 expedition, Schon who was greatly impressed by his conduct in that dangerous undertaking, recommended that Crowther should go to England for ordination. The Rev. F. Bultiman who knew him intimately at this time wrote: "I am convinced that he would do honour to our society, if presented by them as a candidate for Holy Orders to the Bishop of London. . . . though I am sure his modesty will not allow him to ask for it." As his later career proved, Samuel Crowther more than justified the confidence placed in him by contemporaries. He was ordained in 1843.

But the call to return to the Niger did not come for another decade. His services were directed to another part of Nigeria. Already many of the freed slaves of Nigerian origin who had settled down in Sierra Leone were turning their thoughts to their old homes. The Yoruba traders who did return to settle in towns such as Lagos, Badagry and Abeokuta began to miss the religious instruction they had enjoyed in Freetown and sent urgent appeals for teachers and pastors. It was in response to this call that Samuel Crowther was sent to Abeokuta in 1846 to work with the Rev. Townsend, a pioneer missionary among the Egbas.

#### *Successful Expeditions of 1854 and 1857*

Crowther's work for the Niger Mission was resumed in 1854

when he accompanied Dr Baikie's expedition up the river. This venture, in which the Government and MacGregor Laird closely collaborated, afforded the C.M.S. another opportunity of sending missionaries again to the Niger. Crowther was remembered and welcomed at the places he had visited in 1841, especially at Aboh and Iddah.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this expedition was that during a voyage of 118 days not a single European died of fever. This was largely due to the fact that quinine was used for the first time in these ventures as a prophylactic. The discovery of its power over malaria gave rise to a wave of optimism in England, and in government and missionary circles it was widely believed that the problem of Europeans surviving in the African interior had been solved. To some extent this was so, but the success of the 1854 expedition was also due to the lessons learnt from past ventures: the number of Europeans was reduced to a minimum; where possible black men were employed to do the work formerly done by white men; the planning was entrusted to able and experienced Niger hands, e.g. MacGregor Laird, the pioneer of the British trade with the Niger, was placed in charge of the arrangements in England; John Beccroft, the veteran European settler on the coast and a former leader of expeditions to the interior, was to command it. But Beccroft died before the expedition reached Fernando Po and Dr Baikie, who would have been his deputy, succeeded to the command. Baikie proved more than equal to the task and the 1854 expedition demonstrated that white men could, through the use of quinine, survive the Niger. The success of the expedition led to a revival of British interest in this region.

The Government was urged on all sides to advance the exploration of the River and so enable British merchants to tap the resources of an area which her enterprise had opened up. MacGregor Laird persuaded the Government to send a yearly expedition in order to convince the inhabitants of the Niger Valley that England really intended to trade with them. This appeal was not unheeded: in 1857 the Government entered into a contract with Laird for five years to explore the Niger and its tributaries. It was during this 1857 expedition, partly financed by the British Government and partly by Laird, that the C.M.S. at last realised its hope of founding mission stations on the Niger. When in 1857 the *Dayspring* set sail under the command of Dr Baikie, the Rev. S. A. Crowther, together with the Rev. J. C. Taylor and a number of Catechists, were on board. This time Crowther had a definite commission from the C.M.S. to found the Niger Mission. It was here, where we are meeting today, in this town of Onitsha, that the Niger Mission began, in 1857, as a predominantly African enterprise.

#### *Onitsha in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century*

The Onitsha which Crowther and his team visited in 1857 was, of

course, a very different town from the Onitsha of today. Almost all the area around the banks of the river was uninhabited and indeed, as Crowther recorded, the centre of the old town was at least two to three miles distant from the waterside. The population, according to Crowther's estimate in 1857, was 13,000. (Today it is over 76,000.) Crowther's description is worth quoting. The town "was about one mile in length, if not more, . . . one broad road runs length-wise, which divides it into two sections. Both sides of the roads are either covered by bushes or plantations. . . ." From Crowther's description, Onitsha seems to have been a prosperous town according to the standards of those days. "I took a short walk in the extensive corn and yam plantations, when I had a good opportunity of observing that cotton" was extensively cultivated. "The people of Onitsha," he said, "manufactured their own clothes, generally plain or fanciful white. European manufactured goods are not so commonly used here as in the lower parts of the river: shirts, jackets and straw hats are in great demand by the people. Cowries are current here, but their relative value I have not been able to ascertain."

When the missionaries arrived, the people of Onitsha were at war with their neighbours (Ogidi people) and as a consequence of this war "a great many good houses were deserted at the east end of the town, where a constant look-out was kept for the approach of the enemies. . ." According to Crowther's report, twenty Onitsha men were killed as against three of the enemy. In this state of affairs, Crowther stated, Onitsha people welcomed European traders and missionaries in order to strengthen their own position.

The reigning Obi in 1857 was Akazua. His son Odiri was prominent in all the negotiations with the missionaries and traders; so also were two of the prominent councillors, Orikabue and Ayan-koha, described as "the King's brother and councillor." In the negotiations which led to the establishment of British trading posts at Onitsha and the founding of the Mission station, Simon Jonas and Augustus Radillo, both liberated slaves of Ibo descent, from Sierra Leone, acted as interpreters. Dr W. B. Baikie, leader of the 1854 and 1857 expeditions, spoke for the British Government, while Captain Grant dealt with commercial matters and the Rev. S. A. Crowther led the missionary group. Crowther, a man of great tact and common sense, worked amicably with all concerned.

How far was the 1857 expedition successful in its aims? On the missionary side, Crowther achieved much success. After negotiations with the Onitsha King and his council he got them to allocate land for a Mission station. And he was very satisfied with the site of the land given to the Mission. "I am fully convinced," he said, "that there could not have been a better place selected as the headquarters of our Ibo Mission establishment, for salubrity, and elevation of the country above the swamps of the delta, as well as facility to communicate with the interior."

Having chosen the site, the next problem was to hire a house in which J. C. Taylor could live temporarily while the Mission houses were being constructed. "Houses," said Crowther, "are very inferior here: they are mere enclosed verandahs, in oblong squares of mud walls, without rooms. After diligent search, we fixed upon one small square which needed much alteration to make it inhabitable for any length of time." The price agreed upon as rent was "six pieces of romal handkerchiefs at five shillings per piece," and for this price the missionaries were to occupy the compound until their own house was built. After a week's stay at Onitsha, Crowther completed the arrangements for opening a Mission station there and placed the Rev. Taylor in charge. To Taylor therefore, an Ibo ex-slave and a convert from Sierra Leone, was given the responsibility of establishing the first Mission in the Ibo country and of fulfilling Crowther's fervently expressed prayer: "May this be the beginning of a rapid overspread of Christianity in the countries on the banks of the Niger, and in the heart of Africa, through native agents!"

On the 31st of July 1857 the *Dayspring*, accompanied by Crowther, left Onitsha and continued its journey up the Niger. At Iddah and Gbebe Crowther was granted land for the building of Mission stations. He was not able, however, to leave teachers there or to make extensive preparations as at Onitsha. Both Crowther and Lieutenant Glover met the Emir of Nupeland in camp at Bida. But the travellers had now entered the frontiers of Islamic influence and progress was less spectacular than in the Southern districts. Moreover, after a short visit to Rabba the *Dayspring* was completely wrecked near the so called Ju-Ju rock at Jebba. The members of the expedition were compelled to camp here for a year, i.e. until October 1858, when a relief ship, the *Sunbeam*, arrived from England. The time, however, was not wasted as Dr Baikie toured the Northern Emirates and Glover took the overland route via Ilorin and Ibadan to Lagos. Crowther was able to accumulate information about the Nupe Kingdom and its capital Rabba, and about the caravan route from Kano to Rabba and on to Ilorin.

And yet, Gbebe and Lokoja excepted, there was in the North no centre of missionary work or of British influence comparable to Onitsha during the fifties. Situated at the junction of Nigeria's two great waterways, every British expedition recognised Lokoja and Gbebe as convenient meeting places for traders from all parts. It was there that the 1841 expedition established its model farm, which had to be abandoned although a native missionary was left in charge. In less than a year, however, Usman Saki, Emir of Nupe, suppressed what was left of the settlement. After this, other expeditions visited Lokoja but did nothing to revive the settlement until the wreck of the *Dayspring* in 1858 when Dr Baikie tried to establish a post at Rabba. But King Massaba, who was then Emir of Nupe, ordered him to go down to Lokoja, where he said the British could stay. It was here, at Lokoja, that Baikie founded a settlement in 1859.

Later, a British consulate was established there but was closed down in 1869 owing to the hostility of the natives. Lokoja, unlike Onitsha, belonged to no particular tribe and was the meeting place of adventurers from all quarters. This helps to explain why it was that while at Onitsha mission work took root, at Lokoja and Gbebe the churches and the schools experienced many vicissitudes.

#### *Development of the Onitsha Mission*

But to return to the work at Onitsha. The Rev. Taylor found himself busy preaching, teaching, visiting, building, healing, settling quarrels, studying the language and writing his journals. As already indicated, Taylor was helped in his pastoral work by Simon Jonas, the Catechist; there were also three Sierra Leone settlers in Onitsha who had come as traders, and along with other merchants resided at Laird's Port. (At this time Onitsha Waterside was known as Laird's Port.) This trading community gave much support to the missionaries. Taylor's first Sunday at Onitsha fell on August 2, 1857. He indeed felt that he was in a strange land, albeit the land of his ancestors: during the morning service his congregation numbered between 200 and 400, half-dressed men and women and naked boys and girls. The Sierra Leone traders from Laird's Port joined in the service and in singing the hymn "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun." Another service was held in the afternoon: to quote from Taylor's diary, "at half-past four p.m. I went to the King's Yard for Service. . . His Majesty, King Akazua, with his captains and chiefs, were present. There were also present from 500 to 600 souls, all of whom behaved well. . . The children laughed when we knelt down to pray." But "the conduct of the adults, on this occasion, was as orderly as one could wish, and they seemed much pleased with the attention given to their immortal interests."

One of Taylor's most important tasks was to open a school. Indeed, a week after his arrival twelve children were brought to him to be educated by their respective parents and guardians. "I looked upon them," said Taylor, "as the commencement of our missionary work. We lost no time but began to teach them the A.B.C. Attendance at the young school was, however, very irregular as the children had to work on their parents' farms." On his visit to Onitsha in 1858 Crowther was very impressed by the progress made and sent a dozen iron slates and two dozen slate-pencils to aid Mr Romaine, the schoolmaster, in his work. People of all ages attended Mr Romaine's school. There was the case of one Okosi, a candidate for baptism, who attended every night along with five boys and sometimes in day-time "when there is not much work for them to do on their farm." Mr Romaine also numbered among his pupils some "little girls."

During Taylor's sojourn at Onitsha the news of his work spread far and wide. Deputations came to see him from many Ibo towns including Obosi, Ogidi, Nri and Bende, to name but a few. They

all wanted Mission stations opened in their respective towns, and, as in our own day, Mission expansion was impeded by the lack of men and materials. Very wisely Taylor, on the whole, concentrated his activities at Onitsha, where in spite of his many successes he encountered hostility from the upholders of the ancestral religion. The impression gained from reading the diaries of the early missionaries is that in spite of the novelty of the Christian message the old religion held its own, and beliefs associated with it, such as twin murder, the casting away of infants who cut the upper tooth first, the burial of slaves alive with their dead masters and many other superstitions, persisted. Missionaries naturally condemned these cruel practices as repugnant to the Christian standards of justice and the belief in the inviolability of human dignity and rights.

It is to be expected that in the first excess of evangelistic zeal little or no attempt was made to understand the African way of life. And, to a great extent, the reaction of the early missionaries to these unaccustomed cruelties is understandable. Crowther himself related that "the King (of Onitsha) does not step out of his house into the town, unless a human sacrifice is made to propitiate the gods: on this account he never goes out beyond the precincts of his own premises." Taylor recorded that every year a girl is put to death to propitiate for the sins of Onitsha people. In spite of the work of the Missions the practice persisted, for in 1880 Adolphe Burdo, a French traveller, visited Onitsha and described this annual human sacrifice which he witnessed. According to Burdo, Onitsha girls who were to be sacrificed accepted their fate with resignation and were dragged to the river singing and dancing on the way to death. These customs were undoubtedly cruel but yet illustrate the social sanctions in force in Onitsha of a hundred years ago, sanctions which gave cohesion and stability to Ibo society. Opposition to the Mission came mainly from Ju-Ju priests who viewed the new religion as a threat to the *status quo*. Thanks to their propaganda, Taylor and his team were regarded as a people apart with whom the townsmen should not associate.

On July 28th 1857 Taylor entered in his journal: "We went to the brook to wash our clothes. No one could do it for us, as the people are afraid of us, calling us spirits." A year later, in October 1858, when Taylor was about to go on leave and had to leave Onitsha in the charge of a catechist, the situation had completely altered. The impact of the Gospel of peace began to lighten the darkness.

To quote again from Taylor's diary: "The influential men (of Onitsha), my little congregation—men, women, and children—accompanied me down to the wharf. Some hung on my neck, others took me by the hand, others held my shoulder, and some were even bathed in tears, telling me to return to them again. It is a sight truly affecting. These were the people who termed me last year a spirit without toes (on account of my shoes), who even refused to give me a mat to lie down on. . . . Now they looked on my removal

from them as a matter of grief for our separation."

I have already indicated that after the wreck of the *Dayspring* Dr Baikie occupied Lokoja. Here he settled emigrants from Sierra Leone and Lagos, educated Africans, who manned the new trading posts opened by European firms at the confluence. The new settlement was swollen by slaves redeemed by Baikie and his staff from the neighbouring tribes. So that before Baikie's departure in 1862 a small but well-ordered British settlement had grown up. This place became the centre of British activity in the North. Schools and Churches developed at Gbebe and Lokoja and the surrounding districts. Great hopes were raised that Lokoja, like Onitsha, would prove another fruitful field for the planting of Christianity among the Moslems and pagan peoples of the North.

But unforeseen events emerged to impede the progress of the Niger Mission. As British trade with the hinterland developed, both the middlemen tribes of the Delta and the rulers of the tribal interior began to suspect the motives of British penetration, and to attack British trading ships going up the river. This was so because the two British consulates, one at Fernando Po and the other at Lokoja, began to interfere in the politics of the African states in order to protect the expanding commerce of England.

The effect of this on the work of the Niger Mission can be imagined. Missionary posts were closely linked with the trading factories. Since the Mission was too poor to provide its own river steamers they depended on the trading expeditions for transport up and down the river. During 1859 and 1860, when native attacks were resumed, the work of the Mission virtually came to a standstill, and in 1861, when MacGregor Laird died, nearly all the trading posts were closed. Crowther saw very clearly that unless the Mission could stand on its own feet its future would remain uncertain. Writing to the C.M.S. in 1861 he stated, "If the Niger Mission is to be taken up by the Society it must be done independently of the trading factories. . . . The natives will never believe that we are sincere until we go to work among them with earnestness and zeal." Crowther asked for more staff and materials, pleading that the existing resources were inadequate. In 1862, he was able to go up the Niger again and took with him thirty-three native teachers, together with their wives and children, placing them at various Mission stations but concentrating at Onitsha and Lokoja. He was particularly happy to bring the Rev. Taylor back to Onitsha after four years' absence. Taylor's return meant that this important station was again in the hands of an ordained man.

Having installed Taylor at Onitsha, Crowther moved on to Lokoja where, on a memorable day, he baptised nine converts, who were among the first fruits of his labours. This slow but steady growth of the Mission raised urgent problems of administration. It was to this pressing problem that the C.M.S. turned its attention.

### *Founding of Native Episcopacy*

At first the parent committee of the C.M.S. envisaged a development in which Europeans and Africans should work together. But, as already indicated, the West African climate thwarted its plans. In 1859, for instance, five European missionaries were sent out to the West Coast, but of the two destined for the Niger one died at Lagos and the other was invalidated home. It seemed hopeless to expect Europeans to work on the Niger for any length of time, and yet if the Mission was to expand there must be a Bishop to confirm and ordain. It was the Rev. Henry Venn, the C.M.S. Secretary at the time, who envisaged an African Mission under an African Bishop. Samuel Crowther was the obvious choice; he was already on the Niger, and was the first native clergyman ordained in the West African Mission field. When the news that he might be consecrated Bishop reached Crowther, he declared himself unfit for the post. But the C.M.S. knew better and he was dully consecrated Bishop on 29th June 1864, in Canterbury Cathedral.

In order to understand what happened subsequently it must be pointed out that Crowther was not consecrated Bishop of the Niger Mission. He was consecrated Bishop of "Western Equatorial Africa beyond the Queen's Dominions." That is to say, his jurisdiction extended over all West Africa with the exception of Bathurst, Freetown, Cape Coast and Lagos. By a special agreement he waived jurisdiction over the European missionaries at Abeokuta and Ibadan. When Europeans were expelled from Abeokuta in 1867, it was mooted that he should resume control over all the Mission. He therefore planted his headquarters not at Onitsha or Lokoja but at Lagos, the most central point of his immense diocese. It turned out, of course, that the diocese was far too large and, to a great extent, the Niger Mission was to suffer in consequence. After his consecration the Bishop was back again on the Niger by August of 1864. From now on it became his custom to work from Lagos and to pay annual visits of some months to the Niger stations as transport allowed.

### *Progress and Persecution*

The twenty-seven years of Bishop Crowther's episcopate witnessed rapid expansion in the work of the Niger Mission. But this expansion was accompanied by many trials and anxieties. As already indicated, most of the early troubles arose out of the unsettled state of the country. In the sixties and seventies of the last century the African communities in the Niger basin began to view the European invasion of their territories with alarm. In their attack against the invaders our ancestors saw little difference between British trading posts, consular establishments or missionary stations.

But the trials and persecutions were not solely due to native hostility towards the foreigner. Africans also warred against

Africans and inter-tribal strife was rampant. As an instance, Crowther and Dr Baikie described the lawlessness in the area around Iddah caused by the rivalry between the warring factions of the Mohammedan Emirate of Nupe. In 1866 a civil war resulted from this dynastic quarrel and, as a result, the Mission station at Gbebe itself had to be abandoned and the Mission house was destroyed by the insurgents. In 1867 Bishop Crowther was taken prisoner by Abboko, the Atta of Iddah's brother. In 1868, Mr Fell, the British Consul at Lokoja, was killed in his attempt to rescue the Bishop from captivity. Harassed by native attacks, Britain withdrew her Consulate from Lokoja in 1869. The Mission stations struggled alone against heavy odds.

The situation was not less gloomy down the River. At almost every station the Bishop had internal squabbles to settle and superstitions to combat. At Akassa, on the mouth of the Niger, where it was said "the inhabitants seem to be dead to spiritual things," the Bishop decided after a disheartening struggle to close it. At the newly opened stations of Ossamare (1871) and Alenso (1877) the Mission had to fight pagan degradations. In his report for 1877 Bishop Crowther stated that at Alenso a "living slave was dressed up, and ordered down the grave, at the bottom of which he was commanded to lie on his back with his face upwards, with both his arms stretched open; in this position the corpse of his master was let down and placed on his breast, which he embraced with both arms, when the grave was covered up with earth."

I cite these examples merely to illustrate the problems that faced the infant Mission. But prospects were by no means universally depressing. Asaba, a promising station, was opened in 1874. Onitsha, in spite of the fluctuations of its fortunes, remained the chief centre of activity. In 1865 Crowther was able to write; "Things are decidedly improving at Onitsha; the Christian sabbath is becoming generally known... the people are more becoming in their habits and manners... many of our school children can read the New Testament fluently in their mother tongue and join in the responses of the Church service with feelings of devotion... These are tangible improvements upon the state of the people when we first landed here... eight years ago... and met them... filthy and rude."

The Bishop's activities were not confined to the Niger valley. In 1864 King William Pepple of Bonny wrote to the Bishop of London asking that missionaries be sent to preach to his people. This letter was passed on to Bishop Crowther. One of his first acts after his consecration was to found the Mission station at Bonny—the first outpost of Christianity in the Niger Delta. So successful was this Mission that in 1867 the worship of monitor lizards in Bonny town was publicly renounced. In 1871, Crowther's son, Dandeson C. Crowther, took charge of Bonny and very soon had to face a revulsion of feeling against the rapid progress of Christianity. As in the Niger valley, progress in the Delta was

followed by persecution of converts. Even the Bishop and his son were kidnapped. In the course of these upheavals the proto-martyr of the Niger, an African named Joshua Hart, met his death by being thrown into the water and battered to death with paddles. Persecution, strange to say, did not impede the spread of Christianity to Brass, to New Calabar, to Okrika and Opobo.

Even at Onitsha things were far from encouraging. After Bishop Crowther's favourable report of 1865, in 1867 a disastrous fire destroyed the central Mission premises. This misfortune was aggravated by the mutual distrust between the missionaries and the European merchants trading on the river. As Bishop Crowther put it, "We are between two evils: the unjust suspicion of the merchants, as if the Mission agents were instigating the natives against them—and the evil influences of the mercantile agents which militate against our work." The fortunes of the Mission at Onitsha reached their lowest ebb in 1879, when rioting broke out and a mob destroyed the British trading factories and plundered the Mission station. The British Government at once decided to take reprisals and the gunboat, H.M.S. *Pioneer*, removed £50,000 worth of British trade goods at Onitsha and then subjected the town to naval bombardment for three days. The native town was nearly razed to the ground and the greater part of the Mission premises was destroyed. After this disaster a few Christian stalwarts carried on their worship at Onitsha, but the body of the Mission was for a time transferred to Asaba.

What is clear from a study of the history of the Niger Mission is that from the earliest beginnings its history is a chequered one; periods of seeming expansion and consolidation were followed by periods of persecution and a falling away of converts. The early Christian Church had its martyrs, and indeed gathered strength from persecution. So it was with the Niger Mission. Persecution strengthened rather than weakened it. In the sixties and seventies when native attacks compelled the Government and the commercial firms to abandon their posts and desert the Niger, only the missionaries remained. Obstacles that overwhelmed other groups inspired the Church to greater efforts, and, as if by a miracle, the Gospel message struck deeper roots with persecution.

In spite of these set-backs the report on the Mission for 1880 spoke of eleven stations in occupation with over 1,000 Christian adherents. The entire Mission was under the control of Bishop Crowther, assisted by nine native clergymen and a large number of native teachers. Whatever his critics may say, within a period of forty years (Crowther first came to the Niger with the expedition of 1841) he had laid firmly the foundations of the Niger Mission. That Mission had shown itself capable of withstanding persecution, whether it came from the pagan and Mohammedan communities of the Niger basin or from the less reputable of the European merchants on the river. This is no small achievement when we remember that Crowther and his team achieved all these at a time when no order

or Government (in the modern sense) existed in all Nigeria, and when his supervision of the work of the Mission was seriously handicapped by lack of regular transportation. It was not until 1877 that the Mission was able to possess a vessel of its own.

Because of this lack of superintendence Mission agents, isolated in river stations for long periods, were exposed to moral perils to which a number of them succumbed. The Bishop was himself seriously disturbed by the indiscipline and poor quality of most of the Mission workers. But he could do little to alter the state of affairs. To begin with, most of his subordinates on the Niger were appointed by a Board in Sierra Leone. Crowther himself complained a good deal about many of these appointments. And in a Mission where court messengers in Freetown became pastors on the Niger a good deal may be expected to go wrong. Crowther was far from being blind to this. He tried to rectify matters by improving the quality of his pastors through better training at Lagos, Freetown and Islington and later at the Mission's own training college at Eggan; and secondly by dividing the Mission into two, under resident archdeacons, and himself living more in the Mission field as transport facilities improved. But progress in these directions was handicapped by lack of funds. The Niger Mission, it should be noted, depended less than other Missions on the C.M.S. as it was developing just at the time that C.M.S. funds were not increasing and when India and later East Africa occupied the centre of the stage. A good proportion of the funds came from dues collected in the Oil Rivers; and the West African Native Bishopric Fund, collected all over the world from advertising the all-African nature of the Mission, was also subject to fluctuations. This meant that stipends were low and that not only was it difficult to persuade Sierra Leonians of the right calibre to go to the Niger but that those who went were strongly tempted to trade. In the eighties and nineties the situation in the Mission gave cause for serious concern. Special enquiries were instituted by the C.M.S. and drastic steps taken to discipline the agents.

The C.M.S., in order to remedy this state of affairs, decided to modify the basis of the Niger Mission and from being an all-African agency to make it, as elsewhere, a partnership between African and European. Following this decision the Mission was divided in 1890 into the Sudan and Upper Niger Mission and the Delta and Lower Niger Mission. Lokoja became the headquarters of the northern section and European recruits were appointed for work on the Niger. These innovations and the disciplinary actions against African leaders which followed did not make for peace in the Mission. Africans, not only on the Niger but in Lagos and Sierra Leone, looked upon the changes as a declaration of non-confidence in African leadership. A sequel to this was the decision to establish a Niger Delta Pastorate, centred at Bonny and under the leadership of Archdeacon D. C. Crowther, the Bishop's son. This new body

was to be independent of the Society. Bishop Crowther did not live to see this separation; he died at Lagos on December 31, 1891.

Throughout the last ten years of his episcopate, Crowther was painfully aware of the evils that assailed the Mission from within. It may be that as a leader he was too gentle, too soft for a pioneer, relying as he did on guiding his staff by persuasion and example rather than by strict disciplinary measures. But as already indicated he was working against heavy odds, and it is against the background of his immense difficulties that he must ultimately be judged. Looking back the historian is impressed not by the Bishop's failures but by his successes: had Crowther been given the tools required for the job, most of the short-comings of his Mission could have been avoided. I am convinced that the great things he achieved for God in the Niger basin are triumphs for his own saintly character. Perhaps the most convincing proof that Crowther built the Niger Mission on sound and solid foundations was the fact that after his death the Mission survived the weaknesses that afflicted it from within. Under his successors, Bishops Joseph Sidney Hill and Herbert Tugwell, the schism which rent the Mission was healed and fellowship was restored between the Niger Delta Pastorate and the C.M.S.

After Bishop Crowther's death a short account of his life was published by the C.M.S. and it is fitting to conclude this talk with their own assessment of his character and contribution: "In the annals of evangelisation of West Africa, no name stands higher than his. A boy picked out of heathenism and slavery, with no background and no inheritance save generations of crudest paganism, yet he became a man whose Christian character was an example to everyone, a scholar capable of translation work of high merit, the founder of a great pioneer mission, and the organiser of a large African Church. Where is the parallel to such a life?"

## NOTE ON THE SOURCES

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