Eva Gillies

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO A NIGERIAN MIDDLE BELT COMMUNITY

> For thou bringest in certain new things to our ears. We would know therefore what these things mean.
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> Acts 17: 20

It is broadly speaking true that in the Middle Belt area of Nigeria (as indeed in most of English-speaking Africa) Christianity first arrived, as Godfrey Lienhardt tells us it did in the southern Sudan, 'through foreign secular ideas of progress and development'.[1] Indeed, it is still not always sufficiently appreciated by Western observers that the acceptance of Christianity was often *itself* experienced by pagans as a secularization of the previously perceived universe. Like St Paul's Athenians, most Africans were already aware of an 'Unknown God': the problem lay in dismantling all the other altars.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the whole Christianity-progress-Western-education package appealed primarily to young men: women and the elderly tend, in any tradition-oriented society, to be more conservative both in belief and practice. And indeed, when I was living in the Nigerian Middle Belt community of Ogori in the early 1960s, it was noticeable that Christianity, though overwhelmingly the majority religion and despite its half-century

1. R. G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London and New York: Academic Press 1982 (ASA Monographs, no. 21), p. 89.

history in the area, was still in some sense regarded as a young man's game. Thus, all the sons of the old titleman responsible for the New Yam cult were Christians of one denomination or another; but it was generally expected that, when one of them eventually came to succeed to his father's office, he would do his social duty and revert to a religion more suited to the traditional responsibilities of his lineage. This was expected, not only by the old yam-priest, but by the young men themselves, who in the meantime performed their proper duty of digging up the first new yams before dawn, while their father remained in the compound, title-staff grasped in his right hand, watching and praying. All this was known and tacitly accepted by both Christians and pagans (often, as in this case, different generations of the same family): it was the very few Muslims in Ogori who were felt as an anomaly.

Nearly all these Muslims were themselves elderly, left over from an earlier period of the area's history. They were tolerated, but people suspected them of currying political favour outside Ogori. Most of their fellow-townsmen still resented the colonial administrative decision which, in 1923, had made Ogori and its sister community Magongo part of the Igbirra Division of Kabba Province and therefore ultimately of the post-Independence Northern Region. At the time of my fieldwork, the Region was still controlled by that notorious Muslim proselytizer, the Sardauna of Sokoto. His government was widely seen by Christians and pagans in the south of the Region as a successor-state to the nineteenth-century emirates whose Fulani-led warriors had carried the *jihad* southwards to raid and harry small Middle Belt communities like Ogori and Magongo. Ogori's handful of elderly Muslims were a disagreeable reminder of forced (or perhaps simply expedient) conversions at that time.

For Ogori itself, we are fortunate in possessing a circumstantial account of the arrival of Christianity: the late G. B. Akerejola, who held the office of Ologori (modelled on that of a Yoruba *oba*) in the 1950s and 1960s, documents the whole process in his *History*.[2] Turning to his account, it at once becomes apparent that we are dealing with a situation that may have been slightly uncommon in mission history, for in the early stages, European missionaries were not involved at all. Instead, the people of Ogori acquired their Christianity (along with, at various times, cocoa-growing, new styles in facial scarification, the institution of kingship, producers' co-operatives and both the ancient and the more modern forms of the Ogboni cult) from the much-admired Yoruba to the south whose pre-*jihad* depredations had long since been forgiven and forgotten, and who were looked upon, certainly up until the mid-1960s, as in all respects 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form'.

The Yoruba themselves had first come into contact with Christianity through the visit of the Methodist T. B. Freeman to Abeokuta in 1842; a CMS (Anglican) mission was established there the following year, and the movement soon spread to other Yoruba towns. All these early missionaries were in some sort evangelicals, with clear ideas about the Victorian middle-class values

2. G. B. Akerejola, *The History of Ogori*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan 1973 (Institute of African Studies, Occasional Publication no. 22).

they wished to foster.[3] Both 'legitimate trade' and literacy were part of the programme; and markets as well as schools began to proliferate throughout Yorubaland.

But let Akerejola take up the story:

> Ejirin market in Ijebu Province was opened in 1873; the impact of this soon became felt as a coastal market where European (*Potogi*, i.e. Portuguese) goods were cheaper, and people of average means were rushing there to buy things which they brought up to the interior to sell to their own people.... In about 1911, Adeoye Akinbitan, who was a close friend of Anuwesi (Moses Eleko), told him of the boon in becoming an Ejirin market trader. This they started to pursue with their comrades.... On one of these trips, Moses Eleko and company had to sleep at Arigidi, where in the evening they discovered to their amazement that their host, one Adewumi, was reading some sentences from the Psalms in the Yoruba Prayer Book.... Instantly the inquiring mind of Eleko forced him to ask this gentleman what miracle he was performing by just glancing at something and soliloquizing. Adewumi told him that he was reading what was written down and not his own words. Adewumi was also an Ejirin trader. He went in company of Eleko down to the market and on reaching there the latter bought an ABD; and before they got back to Arigidi on their journey back home Eleko had mastered to recite the 25 letters of the alphabet in the Yoruba Primer.[4] When he got back home he reported this adventure to his companions, and urged them to join him in learning what he believed would help them in their future lives and trade, that is, the art of reading and writing.... Each Sunday, every seeker of this new knowledge would gather at the house of Eleko (at Eni, in Salihu Daomi's compound where his mother was). And after reciting the letters of the alphabet in imitation of church service as they had often seen on the coast, they would start chatting and drinking; but when they were tired of this monotonous recitation they decided to go further than this.[5]

Several things are worth noticing in this account of the spreading of a new fashion among a travelled, sophisticated minority: the Yoruba name borne by Eleko's friend Adeoye Akinbitan (was he actually a Yoruba or simply an already 'Yorubaized' fellow-townsman?); the Muslim one of Salihu Daomi, perhaps the second husband of Eleko's mother and almost certainly a member of the generation that had lived under northern-Muslim dominion; the probable youth of Anuwesi/Eleko himself, living with his mother in someone else's compound; but most of all the attitude (still very prevalent in the Ogori of the early 1960s) that 'if the Yoruba do it, there must be some point—no doubt in time we shall find out exactly what'. Elderly informants used to tell me very similar stories about the origins of cocoa-growing.

To get beyond their 'monotonous recitation' of the Yoruba alphabet, the young men now decided to seek a teacher; and, after a number of false starts, Eleko set out for the Yoruba town of Ikare. On his journey, he was fed by a

3. J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891*, London: Longmans 1965, pp. 14–19.

4. The Yoruba alphabet, as devised by the early missionaries, dispenses with the letter C.

5. Akerejola, *History*, pp. 88–9.

hospitable farmer who, on learning of his quest, told him there were teachers nearer home, and directed him to the Akoko-Edo town of Okpe.

> On reaching there he knew nobody, but sat in a public place. Some eager inquirers came and asked him what it was about. He replied that he wanted *igbagbo*, meaning 'faith', but knew nobody to teach him and his people. He [had been] told that there were people in Okpe who knew what *igbagbo*...was (in his intention *igbagbo* means the art of reading and writing); and he therefore came to beg the people of Okpe to come to Ogori to teach his own people this new method of communication.
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> The church at Okpe in one voice were glad to receive, house and feed him for three days, and delegated three of their church members to accompany him home. When they reached Ogori, these teachers started in earnest, not only to teach reading and writing, but also to preach the Gospel.... They were taught to read and to sing songs like *Ouigiyigi l'Olorun wa o*.

'Thus,' triumphantly concludes Akerejola, 'in quest of reading and writing in imitation of clerks seen in...Ejirin, God in His mysterious ways brought Christianity to Ogori.'[6]

The fragment of song text indicates that the medium of instruction was Yoruba—almost certainly the language in which the Edo-speaking people of Okpe had themselves been taught their Christianity.[7] And indeed, Yoruba has remained, both in Ogori and Magongo (which together form a separate linguistic community) and in the Akoko-Edo villages further south, the language of church and school—a kind of Latin, in fact; except that its use has never been confined to the literate. Like medieval Latin, it also serves as a lingua franca between villages, Akoko-Edo dialects being themselves sufficiently fragmented to make a lingua franca desirable.

Two years later, the Christian community in Ogori had grown sufficiently to send delegates to a Parochial Church Committee meeting held in the Akoko-Edo town of Afuze. But (as one might perhaps expect from Akerejola's picture of the young men 'chatting and drinking' together after their earlier alphabetic liturgy) trouble—this time of a kind all too familiar, at least in Nigerian mission history—very soon followed: the converts were seen as worshipping a 'strange God who set aside a day (Sunday) for youths as a day of laziness'.[8] They were accordingly—and by traditional standards quite properly—lampooned, along with other social deviants, by the satiric bards who formed the main attraction at one of the local festivals; and they in turn retaliated by destroying an important pagan shrine. The elders of Ogori brought the matter before the District Officer at nearby Okene. Moses Eleko, charged with insurrection, riotous assembly and behaving in a manner likely to cause a breach of the peace, was duly imprisoned, as indeed was an elderly

6. Ibid., p. 90.

7. J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba*, London: International African Institute 1968, p. 50.

8. Akerejola, *History*, p. 91.

titleman, himself a pagan, who had allowed his young sons and their Christian friends to use his compound for their unseemly prayer-meetings.

By the time Eleko had served his sentence, the situation had changed again. The fashion for Christianity had, indeed, persisted among the young; but one result was that they were beginning to be rather more fussy about the proper qualifications for a leader. The unfortunate Eleko (who by this time had two wives) was no longer deemed quite suitable for pastoral duties and found it best to retire back to Okene.

In 1917, a new and aggressively Muslim Atta of Igbirra was installed as the Native Authority in that city. Nothing, clearly, could have been better calculated to make Christianity more widely acceptable in Ogori; and it must be interpreted as a sign of the changing times that the District Officer (or possibly his successor) was now—three years later—inclined, in such conflicts as still occurred, to support the Christians. A church was built, and literacy classes were started for children as well as adults. Traditionalist titlemen, on the other hand (including the Ologori of the day, despite the Yoruba style by now given to his office), were still distinctly reticent, seeing Christianity as a young men's fad, at best frivolous, at worst a threat to properly constituted authority.

In the early 1920s a further novelty appeared, in the form of Roman Catholicism. Once again, it was not brought by the official missions but, as it were, by private enterprise, this time that of a retired Lagos clerk from the Akoko-Edo village of Ibiekuma, who came to settle in Ogori. But this late variant upon what had, in itself, proved a durable intellectual fashion seems to have had rather less appeal than the earlier version. Partly, perhaps, the time was over-ripe; and then, although this latest style in Christianity did come from Lagos, it had not been brought by a Yoruba. Still, Catholicism did attract a few converts, along with its due share of very mild 'persecution' from Ologori Fadipe—so mild, indeed, that the local Catholic missionary, one Father Seminatti, seems to have been quite unaware that anything of the sort was going on. At any rate, he cheerfully accepted the Ologori's hospitality, thus ensuring for his flock at once chiefly protection and widespread unpopularity among their fellow Christians. It is perhaps worth noting that the earlier established CMS retained its majority hold over the population, Catholicism remaining no more than a successful sect.

But the real turning-point, in the fortunes of Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike, came with Joseph Babalola's 'Aladura' revival in 1930–1. Babalola, starting out from the Yoruba town of Ilesha, reached Efon Alaiye, the westernmost of the Ekiti towns, in September 1930. He was granted land by the local *oba* and thenceforth made Efon the centre of his activities all over Ekiti.[9] As he had previously done at Ilesha, he sanctified a local stream as *omi iye*, water of life, and called upon people to drink from it and to renounce witchcraft, the use of charms and all forms of idolatry. It is said that Efon

9. Peel, *Aladura*, pp. 92–5.

Alaiye, which had been a major centre of woodcarving, was almost denuded of its images: the 'Unknown God' stood revealed as a jealous god indeed.

News of the revival soon spread; and Ogori people, true to form, came to find out more about the latest 'new thing' in matters religious. They were among the first of those who came to drink the 'water of life' and stayed to hear Babalola's preaching. And the Aladura's eloquence had its usual effect: most of his hearers simply returned home and either joined or re-joined the Christian churches already established in their area. Thus in 1931, the Abeokuta Methodist Mission reported:

> The work of organizing and directing the people touched by the Aladura was left to the churches.... The catechumen classes are kept very busy, teaching the Aladura converts to read and understand the Scriptures.[10]

In Ogori, 'the churches' to profit were, naturally, the existing CMS and Roman Catholic ones. Both became and have remained, in different degrees, successful and prosperous; both, by the early 1960s, had primary schools with an excellent local reputation. Christianity-and-education had, in practical terms, paid off very well; Ogori, populous and land-hungry, had achieved a reasonable prosperity by exporting its educated citizens, most of them to educational and civil-service jobs in the vast, understaffed Northern Region of those days, but some also to the more fiercely competitive, modern employment section of the big southern cities. And these educated citizens (like their Yoruba peers) went home for Christmas, or Easter, or the *Oviya* festival,[11] or all three; and in any case sent money home, either to help educate younger brothers and sisters, or to build houses against their own retirement.

Yet material success, welcome as it undoubtedly was, in one sense was not the most valued of Christianity's this-worldly rewards. For acceptance of the 'new' religion was also a discreet yet unmistakable political statement, a contemporary way of expressing what paganism had expressed earlier—distance from what was still felt to be an aggressively Islamizing North, and solidarity with the Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples further south.

This 'political' way of experiencing Christianity was not, of course, confined to Ogori: much the same sentiments prevailed among the Kabba Yoruba (who live slightly to the north of Ogori and Magongo) and among other peoples on the southern fringe of the nineteenth-century *jihad*-fuelled raids and invasions. Locally, an instructive exception was provided by the Okene Igbirra, who had a tradition that their ancestors, alone in all that area, had put up a successful resistance against the invaders. It may be worth noting also that the raiding warriors were in fact Nupe (though under a Fulani dynasty) and thus spoke a language somewhat similar to Igibirra.[12] Whatever the reason, the Igbirra

10. *54th Annual Report of the Wesleyan Missionary Society* (London 1931), p. 22.

11. A festival devised by local educated Christians to incorporate some valued features of the traditional girls' nubility ceremonies into the new liturgical year. It was very successful, and widely attended.

12. Paula Brown, 'The Igbira', in Daryll Forde (ed.), *Peoples of the Niger–Benue Confluence*, London: International African Institute 1935 (Ethnographic Survey of Africa, Part X), p. 58.

had a noticeably more relaxed attitude towards Islam than any of their neighbours.

Writing of a very different part of Africa, Lienhardt says:

> It was not primarily as Christians that southerners fought against the northern government...but as non-Arabs and non-Muslims against Arab and Muslim domination. In that world, what kind of translation, as it were, of experience was required for a Dinka to become a nominal or believing Christian?[13]

Anyone who has ever lived in the Nigerian Middle Belt will instantly recognize 'that world'. True, on the much smaller and less tragic stage of Ogori, both Arabs and European missionaries remain in the wings throughout the important part of the action. Yet the plot is unmistakably familiar; the same basic experience has received a very similar translation.

13. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', p. 82.