

Africa-Led Cross-Cultural Missions: Challenges and Triumphs

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ABSTRACT

Once a mission field for European missionaries, Africa is gradually becoming a global mission force. Africa is a unique continent in the world, and it has a long history of missionary endeavours, starting from the early second century to the 18th and 19th centuries. Christians in Africa have realized their roles in the propagation of the gospel and in reaching their ethnic groups and others. The history of the Nigerian Church started with the advent of Portuguese traders. Still, in the later years, the working of Western missionaries with the Africans yielded a tangible impact on the land. Through many years of labor by African Christian leaders in reaching the unreached people groups, they are now recognized and placed in leadership positions of many global mission agencies; wherein, some leading mission agencies originated from Africa. Through historical and descriptive research methods, some challenges of cross-cultural missions in Africa include training, funding, human resources, and insecurity. In the face of all the challenges, cross-cultural missions in Africa have experienced many triumphs, such as progressive contextualization, engagement in business, social actions, and power encounter strategies. Even though Africans need to do a lot to finish the unfinished task, they are still celebrated for the tangible progress recorded over the years.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian missions in Africa are of great interest to the world because the African countries termed “the dark nations” are rapidly growing in church planting and cross-cultural missions. According to the statistical data obtained from the World Meter website, Africa is the second largest continent, occupying 20% of the total land surface. It is divided into five sub-sections: East Africa, North Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa. There are no less than 3,000 distinct ethnic groups in Africa alone, and approximately 2,000 various languages are spoken, and each of the languages has different dialects. Presently, there are 54 countries in Africa. One notable uniqueness of Africa is that it contains the longest river in the world, i.e. River Nile.¹ The Sahara in Africa is the world’s largest hot desert and one of the most challenging places on earth, and likewise, the African elephant is the world’s largest land animal.²

There is also uniqueness in the arrival of the Christian faith in Africa, as explained by Fatokun,³ who states that Christianity primarily arrived in North Africa in the first or early second century AD. The Christian societies in North Africa were among the earliest in the globe. Legend has it that John Mark, one of the four evangelists, brought the Christian faith from Jerusalem to Alexandria on the Egyptian coast in 60 AD. Once in North Africa, the Christian faith spread slowly West from Alexandria and East to Ethiopia. With the Christian missions came education, literacy and hope for the disadvantaged. However, the spread of Christianity paved the way for commercial speculators and, in its original rigid European form, denied people pride in their culture and ceremonies. Still, Africans were able to rise to the call for cross-cultural missions. In light of such background, this paper used historical and descriptive methods to focus on the contemporary issues in African Mission, the various missionary activities in Africa using Nigeria as a case study and explains some challenges and triumphs of cross-cultural missions in Nigeria before strategically concluding.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS IN AFRICA

The Church is the primary center for sending missionaries cross-culturally. The first missionary commission in the Bible is in Acts 13. It describes the first Body of Christ to commission cross-cultural foreign missionaries in the New Testament.

13 ¹ Now in the Church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod, the tetrarch) and Saul. ² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Acts 13:1-3 (NIV)

Surprisingly, the Church in Jerusalem was not the epicenter of this new movement. It is, therefore, biblically appropriate and possible for African churches, with all its challenges, to have the opportunity to evangelize the nations of the world.⁴ The Lord instructed the leaders to set apart Barnabas

(*Loxodonta africana*).” Geo Consult Wildlife (pty) Ltd, 2010, 7.

1. Fielding, L., Najman, Y., Millar, I., Butterworth, P., Garzanti, E., Vezzoli, G., Barfod, D., and Kneller, B: The initiation and evolution of the River Nile, “Earth and Planetary Science Letters”. Volume 489, 2018, 3.

2. Deon Furstenburg, “Focus on the African Elephant

3. Samson Fatokun, “Christianity in Africa: a historical appraisal.” *Verbum Et Ecclesia* Vol. 26. No. 2. 2005, 358.

4. Yaw Perbi and Sam Ngugi, 2022, *Africa to the Rest: From Mission Field to Mission Force* (Again). Xulon Press, Maitland, 2022, 101.

and Paul for the work He had called them. Jesus issued the Great Commission, and a church planted among Gentiles far away profoundly influenced the world. Indeed, whereas Peter was still in Jerusalem⁵ defending his manifestation in the home of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit was already raising leaders in Antioch. Antioch has significantly impacted the world more than the Church in Jerusalem. The primary reason was that the Church in Antioch had leaders willing to obey God's voice. It shows that Christian leaders are crucial in what God can do through the Church. They have a strong influence on the members of the Church. To a large extent, African Christian leaders are awakening to the task of cross-cultural missions.

Africa has the resources of people making great exploits related to cross-cultural missions. Africa has churches filled with prayer and worship. The passionate worship and vibrant prayer experiences in Africa are unique as they involve lots of shouting, dancing, and singing.⁶ Africans have celebrated this form of prayer and worship worldwide. Likewise, African Christians influence the world by engaging and leading through mission agencies.

There are African homegrown mission agencies, such as CAPRO (Calvary Ministries) and the Evangelical Mission Association (EMS) of ECWA. Also, historically, there are Western mission agencies where Africans now provide leadership. Examples include Open Door Missions, Inc. (It assists church pastors in funding projects that will bring about the fulfilment of the Great Commission), SIL (It is a global, faith-based non-profit that works with local societies around the world to develop language solutions that expand possibilities for a better life. Its core contribution areas are Bible translation, literacy, education, development, linguistic research and language tools), Navigators (It was founded in 1933; its ministry is to share the gospel of Jesus and help the people grow in their relationship with him through "Life-to-life" discipleship, creating spiritual generations of believers) and SIM (It was established in 1893 by three founders; Walter, Rowland, and Kent). Presently, all the mentioned mission agencies have African International Directors.

The roles provided by mission agencies include the provision of the pathways, infrastructure, and expertise to send missionaries from local churches anywhere into mission fields everywhere. Therefore, they must have good governance, practice fiscal transparency, a wise theology of risk, and a track record of caring for God's most valuable African resource and people.⁷ It is a great privilege for Africans to spearhead such a task.

5. Kayode Owojori, (ed). "Contemporary Issues in African Mission, Compendium: Contemporary Issues in African Missions." Papers in Honour of Rev. Dr. Reuben Ezemadu. African Christian Centre for Leadership Advancement and International Missions. Ibadan, 2020. 166.

6. Perbi and Ngugi. 28.

7. Eddie Arthur, "Mission Agencies in the 21st Century: A Research Report for Agency Leadership and Boards." Wycliffe Bible. Toronto. 2018, 3.

Accordingly, there are some shifts in the African-led cross-cultural mission workers, churches, and agencies. The perspective on its role in global missions is also changing. Africans now see themselves as agents of change that can affect the world with the gospel. Also, it was also observed that Africans can go where others may not be able to go. For instance, Westerners cannot be missionaries in North Africa or China as in the past, but a Nigerian in either context will never be considered a missionary; therefore, they will have access to preach the gospel. Likewise, financially, Africa's poverty mentality is changing. Africans now see that they can do cross-cultural missions without Western assistance.⁸

Over the years, there has been continuous progress in reaching the unreached people groups in Africa. In Nigeria, there are still a noticeable number of unreached people groups even though Christianity has been in the country for over a century. According to Peter Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park,⁹ a people group can be described as the largest group within which the good news can spread as a church-planting movement without coming across barriers of acceptance or understanding. A people group becomes unreached when there is no indigenous society of believing Christians with suitable resources and numbers to evangelize the people group. They can also be described as a people group with less than 2% evangelical and less than 5% Christian adherents. Understanding the unreached people group helps to develop effective strategies for evangelism.

In Africa, the number of unreached people groups is 972 (25.9%) out of 3,749. These unreached people number about 426.1 million out of Africa's population of 1.5 trillion.¹⁰ Among the worst of such unreached people in | Africa are the Tuareg, the Fulbe, the Hausa, and the Cushitic. In Nigeria, the number of unreached people groups is 52 out of 542. The unreached people number about 69.8 million out of Nigeria's population of 228.4 million. The more popular unreached people groups in Nigeria are Kanuri, Hausa and the Fulani. The missionary activities in Africa demonstrated these various paradigm shifts and progress in African cross-cultural missions.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA: THE NIGERIAN CASE STUDY

This section does not attempt to trace the history of Christian missions in Nigeria or Africa. Instead, it highlights the attempts Nigerian Christians and churches have made so far, either on their initiative or in cooperation with Christians from other countries, to evangelize Nigeria and their attempts to extend the gospel into other lands. For brevity, the writer limits

8. Owojori (ed), 168.

9. Peter Lee and James Sung-Hwan, "Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical reevaluation of Unreached People Group". *Missiology An International Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1. 2018, 3.

10. Joshua Project, "Continent: Africa, <https://joshuaproject.net/continents/AFR>." 2025.

the discussion to the period before the emergence of the charismatic indigenous mission movements of the 70s and beyond.

Nigeria's earliest contact with Christianity was through Portuguese Christians, who exploited the contact established by Portuguese traders with the Oba of Benin for missionary purposes. The Oba was said to have been baptized as a Christian in 1491. However, this early attempt was unsuccessful because the material influence of the Portuguese relationship with the Oba seems to have overshadowed the spiritual witness of the missionaries.¹¹ It is clear because when the Portuguese traders left in 1520, the missions were terminated without any visible result from their efforts.

Ezemadu explained that between 1839 and 1842, several hundreds of formerly enslaved people began to return to their people in the southwestern parts of Nigeria. Some of these returning ex-slaves had become Christians while they were in the foreign land. Those who settled in Abeokuta wrote to Britain requesting help to come over and minister to their spiritual needs, drawing the attention of the Christians in Britain to the opportunity to preach the gospel in the areas, and the "Abeokuta" call was heeded. The Methodist Mission sent their missionary in Ghana (then Gold Coast). Thomas B. Freeman responds to the request from the returnee Christians at Abeokuta. He arrived at Badagry on September 2, 1842. Also, Thomas B. Freeman brought with him a missionary couple William de Graft and his wife. They continued the mission work he started, which resulted in the beginning of the first Church in Nigeria and influenced the first Baptist missionary thrust into Nigeria. Baptist missionaries started to arrive in Nigeria including Thomas Jefferson Bowen who landed at Badagry in August 1850.¹²

Ezemadu added that the contributions of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a liberated Yoruba slave boy who eventually became the first Bishop of modern Christian times, to spreading the gospel in Nigeria are already a celebrated fact. His ministry among his people at Abeokuta led to his mother's conversion and the expansion of the Church at Abeokuta, which was said to have had a worshipping congregation of 500 by 1849. He participated in three expeditions up the Niger and later opened up the Niger mission. He contributed significantly to preparing the Yoruba and English dictionaries, grammar, and Yoruba versions of the Bible. It shows that an indigene played a pioneering role in spreading the gospel right from the cradle of Christianity in Nigeria.

According to Ogunewu, John Christopher Taylor

was another Nigerian pioneer missionary from the Ibo tribe who worked both in Bathurst (now Banjul) in the Gambia and later pioneered the CMS work in Onitsha and its environs. His ministry started at Onitsha on August 2, 1857, when he preached to a church membership of more than 500 people in the open air.¹³ When a decision was taken to open up a Christian mission to Oyo in 1856, Daniel Olubi, a young Christian at Abeokuta who was already assisting the missionaries in the work of the ministry, was considered the best material to use. He was diligent and opened a church of 100 members at Ogunpa, Ibadan, on January 1, 1869.

The Nigerian Christians were also involved in Nigeria's early Baptist missionary work. Moses Ladejo Stone was one of the earliest Baptist converts involved in the Missions as evangelist and interpreter. The leadership of the young Church fell upon him during the American crisis, which hindered the coming of more white missionaries until 1875. Stone's early ministry included building the Baptist church in Lagos and pastoring the Baptist congregation in Ogbomoso for seven years.¹⁴

The assemblies of God missionaries from the U.S.A. came to Nigeria in 1930 at the request of a group of Nigerian Christians who were already experiencing a revival and needed assistance training for the ministry. A similar factor brought the Apostolic Church Missionaries from Britain to Nigeria in 1939 following a request from members of the Precious Stone Praying Band formed during the revival, which broke out among some Yoruba Christians of the Anglican Church, leading particularly from the powerful evangelistic and healing ministry of Babalola.¹⁵

The cross-cultural missions in Africa have led to various exploits ranging from millions of souls won to Christ and planting multiple churches in Africa and beyond the shores of Africa. However, some challenges and triumphs have been recorded over the years, a few of which will be explained.

CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS OF CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS IN AFRICA/NIGERIA

Challenges

Challenges of reaching the unreached people in Nigeria include religious violence and perceptions. As stated by Nwachukwu, in northern Nigeria, especially the North East, Boko Haram has held sway over the land and people, and religious violence is the order of the day. Similar situations persist in several other countries of North Africa like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, where Christian missions are not only

11. Babatunde Ogunlana, "The Nigerian Baptist Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Critical Reflection," The Centenary Lecture At First Baptist Church, Ahmadu Bello Way/Taiwo Road, Kaduna, 2018, 7

12. Ezemadu Reuben. (2020). Current issues in African Mission, Compendium: Contemporary Issues in African Missions, Papers in Honour of Rev. Dr. Reuben Ezemadu. Kayode Owojori (editor), African Christian Centre for Leadership Advancement and International Missions. Ibadan, 2020, 169-171.

13. Ogunewu Michael, 2015, "Travails and Triumphs of Aladura Christianity in Nigeria 1920 to 2010". The Amen Missions Inc. Ikeja. 2015, 17.

14. Ogunewu, 2015, 5.

15. Ogunewu, 63.

unwelcomed but violently resisted.¹⁶

As beautifully observed by Ogunewu, inadequate workforce and funds are challenging. There is a state of emergency in the work of missions to the unreached workforce because many missionaries work in areas relatively reached by the gospel. The same goes for the area of African mission funding because many still believe that only wealthy nations are to be involved in cross-cultural missions. It cannot be over-emphasized that reaching the unreached cannot progress without adequate funding.¹⁷

Another challenge on cross-cultural missions is that in the 21st-century missions, there is this idea among missionaries where the mission work is likened to commercial businesses that it must break even and yield profit within an expected time frame.¹⁸ A mission to the unreached is not so, as sometimes it could take decades for the impact to manifest. Africa's cross-cultural missions also face the challenge of inadequate training and training opportunities. It is agreed that unreached people may not be reached, except the condemnatory attitude and social arrogance of missionaries towards the cultures of remote people change substantially.

Triumphs

There are some noticeable triumphs of cross-cultural missions in Africa. The first is the increased contextualization of the gospel. According to Adenike Adeodun, storytelling has played a tangible role in reaching the unreached in Africa. Most unreached people groups in Africa, like the Hausa and Fulani, are oral learners. The people learn through oral methods such as stories, songs, proverbs, sayings, drama, dances, and riddles, and missionaries with storytelling skills are harvesting impressive successes in conversions to Christianity amongst the Hausa and the Fulani.¹⁹

There have been some tangible triumphs through social ministries, such as community development and medical missions. Most of the unreached people in Africa lack social amenities and infrastructure. Missionaries enter the land and give free medicare, clothing, food materials, and other gifts, and with the Bible on their other hand, the Christian missionaries are well received²⁰ in many African communities.

16. Nwachukwu, Emma. (2020). "Challenges and Successes of Taking the Gospel to The Unreached Tribes and People of Nigeria and Africa" Compendium: Contemporary Issues in African Missions, Papers in Honour of Rev. Dr. Reuben Ezemadu. Kayode Owojori (editor), *African Christian Centre for Leadership Advancement and International Missions*. Ibadan, 2020, 172-176.

17. Ogunewu, "Travails and Triumphs of Aladura Christianity in Nigeria 1920 to 2010," 66.

18. Ibid 66.

19. Adenike Adeodun, "The Role of Storytelling in Preserving African Traditions: How storytelling preserves Africa's cultural heritage and adapts in modern times," <https://spectator.africa/2025/01/15/the-role-of-storytelling-in-preserving-african-traditions>, 2025, 2.

20. Mipo E. Dadang, "A Century and Twenty-Five Years of Missionary Activities In Nigeria: A Historical-Missiological Appraisal Of Serving In Mission (SiM)", ECWA Theological Seminary Jos,

Today, Christianity has taken root in many lands like Ibwia through social action.

Africans believe strongly in the spiritual world. Therefore, missionaries' manifestation and demonstration of spiritual power and authority have yielded enormous soul-winning results.²¹ Bartianor in Ghana was known as the headquarters of witchcraft in West Africa. When Missions Aid International entered the land in 2004, God manifested His presence through miracles and deliverance power. Not only did power change hands, but the chief priest of the Papla witchcraft deity surrendered his life to Jesus. Similar experiences are happening in many other fields amongst the unreached in Africa.

Many missionaries in the unreached people groups regions use their professions as leverage for missions. Business as Mission is the strategy by which several missionaries have penetrated and lived among unreached people groups doing business while using the opportunity to preach the gospel and win souls among them.²² It is a strategy that provides both access and resources for the missionaries.

CONCLUSION

This paper explains the contemporary issues in African missions by referencing the current situations of African missions' endeavours by Africans. It further elaborates on the missionary activities in Africa by making the case of Nigeria a focus on how it started with the Portuguese traders and, later, by the 19th-century missionaries and now primarily by Africans. Missions in Africa have faced some challenges, such as funding, human resources, and training opportunities, among others; however, they have also experienced some levels of triumph through contextualization, storytelling, power encounters, social actions, and business as mission strategies. There is a great hope that the African missions will have a long-lasting impact in many nations of the world.

Nigeria, 2017, 4.

21. Stephen Jester, 2017, "The Spirit's Role in Mission: Narrative Pentecostal Theology in West Africa, *International Journal of Pentecostal Missiology* Vol. 5, 2017, 7.

22. John Nganga, *Christian Professionals: Leading in the Marketplace*. Taruma Consultants Ltd. Nairobi, 2018, 48.



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