

A Concise History of Christianity in Nupe Land

By

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Introduction

The Nupe people of Nigeria, live in the lower basin that is formed by the valleys of the Niger and Kaduna rivers, between 10° 30' and 8° 30' north latitude. It is a low-lying country, in most parts not more than 300ft above sea level. "A few low ridges of broken, rocky hills stretched out. Rib-like, from the river valleys and curiously symmetrical flat-trapped hillocks rise abruptly here and there from the plain. The highest points are no more than 500ft above sea level" (Nadel, 1951). The geographical position of Nupe country makes it typical area of transition from southern forest to the arid savannahs of the north. Describing the climate, Nadel says "Nupe, lower lying than any of the neighboring districts, with its two big rivers, their dry blazing sand-banks in the dry season, and their vast swamps in the rains, is one of the hottest and at the same time, most humid districts in Nigeria." (Nadel, 1951). The unfavorable climate brings health problems. The area has an abundance of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and the forests are infested with tsetse flies. Most of the water sources are polluted with bilharzias, and the swamp areas have myriads of sand flies which can cause a great deal of discomfort.

The unfortunate climate of the region was principally responsible for the great health challenges the early Missionaries faced in their quest to bring the gospel of Christ to Nupe Land. During the period the pioneer Missionaries arrived Nupe Land, Africa was referred to as the 'Dark Continent' and West Africa 'the white man's grave'. It was interesting and comforting that one of the pioneer Missionaries of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Walter Gowans, wrote before he died, that "God uses deaths as well as lived to further His causes".

System of Government

According to Turaki (1993) quoting Professor Aliyu A. "Nupe Land was extensive and physically divided into two parts by the rivers Niger. These geographical features could have obviously inhibited communication links and effective administration. Hence, it was politically expedient to move the seat of government around until such a time an over-all effective administration was established firmly. This appears to have been achieved by the eighteenth century when Raba became the permanent political capital of the Nupe Kingdom. It continued to serve this purpose until the advent of the Jihadists and the subsequent overthrow of the Edegi dynasty" (Turaki, 1993) in early 1800s.

The structural organization of the Nupe Kingdom was under the leadership of the Etsu who was very influential and powerful. This indigenous Nupe political and administrative structure was maintained for centuries until 1810 and subsequently 1897, at the advent of

Fulani Jihadist (1810), who were also conquered by the British imperialist in 1897. The Nupe kingdom, however experienced schism before the two aforementioned events terminated its mono structural system of government. There were succession disputes among the ruling class which culminated into easy overthrow of the original kingdom of Etsu system by the Fulani Jihadist who consequently took over ruler-ship and forcefully imposed the Islamic religion. Historical it can be concluded that the Nupe Kingdom was colonized, first by the Fulani Jihadists and later by the British imperialist.

The Coming of the Christian Missionaries

The Nupe people, before the advent of Islam, were traditional religious worshippers. Islam as a religion was foisted on the people through the teaching and practice of the Muslim religion. The emirate system that was introduced as a new structure of government further entrenched the belief and practice of Islam in Nupeland. Islam also became a powerful uniting force in Nupe land i.e. Islam as a creed and Islam as education. Many Koranic schools sprang up, especially in the big towns. According to Nadel (1951), “many parent tenaciously wanted their children to attain the status of a Mallam (Teacher), rightly or wrongly”. “By and large, Islam had been the societal religion in Nupe land since the middle of the nineteenth century’ (Turaki, 1993).

The first generation efforts to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in Nupe land was by European and North American Missionaries. By the time Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) both now Anglican Communion and the Evangelical Church Winning All, respectively came into Nupe land, a large proportion of Nupe people have embraced Islam as a religion. A few Nupe communities however stocked to the practice of their traditional religion. Some combined both faith i.e. Islam and traditional worship.

The history of Church planting in the Nupe land by the Missionaries dates back to 1841 when through the activities of great men especially, William Wilberforce who campaigned against the abolition of slave trade for more than twenty years. Three days before his death, the emancipation bill was passed by the House of Commons of the British Parliament. He turned the leadership of his movement over to another great man of God and Christian statesman, Sir Thomas F. Buxton.

Sir, Buxton was so much burdened about the evils of slave trade in Africa to the extent that he could hardly sleep at night. According to Frank Goertz, “Sir Buxton was deeply concerned about the evils of the slave trade in Africa, that sometimes he couldn’t sleep at night thinking about it and how to find a way to stop it. He wrote a book called, The Slave Trade and its Remedy. Through the society he brought pressure to bear upon Parliament to send out an expedition up to the Niger River. The government voted €60,000 for this project. In 1841, the government commissioned three ships named; the ALBERT, the WILBERFORCE, and the SOUDAN to explore the Niger River, establish trade relations with important chiefs to trade with goods instead of slaves, create settlements, on the river

bank, to improve agriculture and to expose the people to the civilizing influences of the gospel” (Goertz, 1983).

While this commissioning was taking place, none of the explorers knew where Nupe land was located. However, because God had plans to evangelize Nupe land, one of the three Ships, the ALBERT, got as far as Eggan on September 1841, which is only 17 miles from Kpada, in town located very deep in Nupe land.

Their diary reads, “On September 28th, Eggan was reached, the largest and best town they had seen yet. Here we found a slave market. Under one shed were fifteen human beings exposed for sale. Rev. Schoen was so stirred that he there and then addressed the people around him on the sinfulness of slavery in the sight of God. The ship was forced to return down river” (Goertz, 1983). They were the first ones to ever preach the gospel to the Nupes. Continuing their exploration along River Niger, land was purchased for a model farm project at Lokoja, and probably the gospel was preached to the Nupes there also. However, much sickness and many deaths among the Europeans did not allow them to stay more than a few weeks and they had to leave.

Frank Goertz (1983), reported that, this expedition stayed only about two months in Nigerian waters, yet the loss of life was very heavy. Of the personnel on board the three ships, 145 were Europeans and 158 were Africans. Of the 145 Europeans, 130 developed malaria fever and 48 of them died. Of the 158 Africans, only 11 got malaria and none died. Schoen and Crowther both survived. So ended the first effort of taking the gospel to the Nupes. Because of so many deaths, no further attempts were made for many years.

The misfortune did not deter Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Dr. Baikie (a white Missionary) who in 1857, sailed up the Niger on the DAYSPRING, and then up the Kaduna river as far as the ancient capital of Nupe kingdom. They proceeded to Bida to see the Etsu Nupe, Usman Zaki and his brother Masaba to seek permission to minister to Nupe ‘pagans’. The permission was granted. They made further efforts to Jebba where they experienced ship wreck. These interactions gave Crowther the opportunity to study Nupe language. He was able to work on a grammar, a dictionary and Primer in Nupe. Great honour and appreciation goes to him being the first Missionary of CMS stock to work among the Nupe people. Etsu Masaba who took over from Etsu Usman Zaki was busy building the city of Bida and was not interested in the activities of the gospel and Crowther had to return back.

By 1862, there were nine baptisms, the first in Northern Nigeria at the edge of Nupe country at Gbebe. During a Nupe war the Mission Station was destructively attacked. Unfortunately, Samuel Ajayi Crowther was attacked and captured and a ransom of €1000 was demanded. Arrangements by colonial Consul stationed at Lokoja to rescue him was made by ordering Mr. William Tell to go and rescue Crowther. Crowther was able to escape to the ship but Mr. Tell was hit by a poisoned arrow and died on his way back to Lokoja. The Work station in Baro in 1867 with resident Missionaries was later closed.

Frank Goertz (1983) further wrote that “in 1890 seven missionaries of the CMS arrived at Lokoja. In 1891 two more joined them. One was a medical doctor and two were nurses. They were so determined to win their way into the interior that they renounced British citizenship to become Northern Nigerians. They dressed like the people and lived as close to them as possible. Two of them, J. Robinson and G. Brooke settled at Eggan and lived there for a year. They studied Nupe and made good progress in the language. They also started to preach. They evidently made a trip to Kpada and preached there. Shortly after I was stationed at Kpada in 1943, an old man told me that when he was a boy, two white men came from Eggan and preached in Kpada. It is almost certain that it must have been these two men. Robinson died in 1891 and Brooke a year later. By 1893 there was not one of the nine left. They had either died or been invalided home. There are about ten missionaries buried at Lokoja. That is the situation to which the pioneer missionaries of the SIM came”.

The Coming of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM)

On December 4, 1893, three pioneer Missionaries; Walter Gowans from Canada, Thomas Kent from the USA and Rowland Bingham from Canada arrived Africa, with the goal of carrying the Christian message to the Sudan, that is, the sub-Sahara region, specifically between the Niger and the Nile rivers. Before their arrival in Nupe land, only Lokoja had experienced small work by the European missionaries.

On arrival in Lagos, they were discouraged by the Missionaries they met. They were ‘prophetically’ told by one of the leaders that, “young men, you will never see the Sudan; your children will never see the Sudan; your grandchildren may” (Turaki, 1993).

After fervent prayer and great conviction, they set-off for the interior. Through much hardship and sicknesses, Mr. Gowans got to Zaria, and died of dysentery in 1894. Mr. Kent suffered similar fate, with stones thrown at him for proselyting. With much sickness he died in 1905 in Bida. Mr. Bingham stayed for five months and due to the hardship he had to return to go home i.e. the United States of America.

However, Mr. Bingham never gave up and by 1909, he came back with two other young men but took ill and the other young men were advised to go back with him. The same Mr. Bingham continued his efforts and within a few years mobilized four Missionaries. Thus, Messrs. A.F. Taylor and A. W. Banfield from Canada, and E. Anthony and C.H. Robinson took up the challenge. Sir F. Lugard, the Colonial Governor of Northern Nigeria, graciously allowed them sail on the same boat with him and facilitated their movement into the interior of Nigeria. He was also to advise them in getting up the Niger and to locate their first station. They successfully arrived Lokoja, which is on the eastern edge of Nupe land. The CMS (Anglican Missionaries) had been working in Lokoja for a number years and had converts who were Bassa-Nge speaking people (a branch of the Nupes). They made trips to nearby areas but God in His plans lead them to open a station at Patigi among the Nupe people.

The team arrived Gbaradogi, a small village on the waterside less than three miles away from Patigi on March 18th 1902. After having unloaded all of their baggage and bidden farewell to the boat crew, Mr. Banfield wrote: at this time, we realized as never before that we were pilgrims in strange land. We did not know where we were going to sleep that night, we could not speak to the people... as soon as the boat had left us, we knelt down under a tree and asked God to direct us in our new life and lead us to a place where we could put our goods and also sleep for the night... we came and saluted the king of the place the best way we could. By signs and every possible means managed to get him to understand that we wanted some house to sleep in. We succeeded very well in this, for we got three small mud houses, and all our goods stored in them that same evening.

God also used the Muslim Nupe Emir (Etsu Patigi) Muazu Isa, who gave them a cordial reception and facilitated their settling down. Their first year of stay was spent on getting materials ready for putting up more permanent building and learning the language. Mr. Banfield was intent on learning the Nupe language such that for two years he never read any book in English except his Bible. He was able to translate one of the gospels into Nupe within 18 months and was able to translate the whole English Bible into Nupe language after 25years. He also produced a big Nupe language dictionary, an excellent grammar, two books of Bible stories, and a book of Nupe literature. He is well remembered among Nupe people as the Nupe white man (Zabokun Nupe).

Though the Missionaries were faced with great health challenges and other setbacks, they reached out to villages, spreading the gospel of Christ. Within a short time, they were joined by several other missionaries. However, Messrs. Anthony and Robinson had return to Europe because of repeated attacks of malaria. By 1903, eight new Missionaries joined. Mr. Taylor and four of the new arrivals went to Bida to open a new station. They met several setbacks and the SIM Mission was eventually closed to give way to the CMS that had already began work in Bida. Meanwhile, work progressed in Patigi and its environs. In addition to the SIM and CMS, Missionaries from other denominations made initiatives in Nupe land

The Initiative of United Missionary Society (UMS) (United Missionary Church of Africa) UMCA

The United Missionary Church was the third Missionary organization or denomination that made in road into Nupe land. Mr. W. A. Banfield who came with the team that arrived in Patigi in 1902 under SIM, was responsible in establishing the United Missionary Church of Africa (UMCA) (Madugu, 2009).

Mr. Banfield while serving under SIM, went on leave in October 1904 but returned with another team from the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, later known as United Missionary Society (UMS) in 1906 to launch the work of UMCA in the eastern part of Nupe land. He was later joined by other committed faithful, which culminated into the

formation of the United Missionary Society in North America. Prominent among areas of the spread of the gospel by UMCA in Nupe land are: Mokwa, Tsaragi, Jegga, Muwo, Kpaki, Egbian and other villages. The UMCA Missionaries also faced the same challenges and struggles, sickness, death and local opposition in the course of their work.

Second ‘Generation’ Efforts

Sequel the efforts of the pioneer Christian Missionaries who brought the gospel into Nupe land, during the 18th Century, other Churches sprang up in Nupe land. Some of these denominations like The Apostolic Church, The Christ Apostolic Church, were established by some non-Nupe speaking Nigerian tribes that were involved in commercial activities in Nupe land. They have fair sizeable number of Nupe Christians as members. Similarly, a good number of Pentecostal Churches have also sprung up in Nupe land with a few Nupe converts. Worthy of difference however, is the Nupe Kalvari Church of Nigeria (NKCEN). The NKCEN, was established in May 1969, with the main objective of meeting the spiritual needs of Nupe Christians, whose medium of communication was mainly Nupe language in Minna and its environs. Minna was the then capital of Niger Province of Northern Nigeria. It is therefore, a Nupe speaking Church where services and worship are conducted in Nupe language. It was initially meant to address the need of Nupe Christians who find themselves in towns where English is the medium of worship even in the Churches of their denominations. The denomination gradually grew and has today become evangelical.

A few Churches have been planted in various parts of Nupe land by the Nupe Kalvari Church. The denomination is noted for its efforts in promoting the teaching and reading of Nupe language. The Church also promotes the development of Nupe Christian literature as well as undertaking social responsibilities.

Persecution of Missionaries and Converts

The history of Christianity will not be complete without highlighting a few records of persecutions and tragedies that the pioneer Missionaries and early converts went through. The convert activities of foreign and local slave traders, who were bent on continuing in the inhuman trade, despite its abolition served as a great opposition to Missionary activities. For example, by 1859, when Crowther returned to Bida and met a new Emir, Etsu Masaba, who reneged in his support for the Missionaries and their activities lead to his closing the already established station at Raba. This was because he was influenced by the Brazilian and Portuguese slave traders as well as some Yoruba business men who craftily slandered the Missionaries as agents of British colonialists.

The opposition by Islamic leaders to the spread of the gospel limited the acceptance of Christianity among the Nupe people. Towns where Emirate system of Government were entrenched have fewer number of Christians to date. This is so in towns such as Bida, Patigi, Lafiagi, Agaie, Lapai and Shonga in both Niger and Kwara States.

While early Missionary trips were most difficult and faced both human and natural hindrances, the true story of the persecution of early converts requires a complete historical documentation that is beyond this brief history of Christianity in Nupe Land. Suffice it to say the persecution ranges from denial of life partner, land for farming, physical torture, spiritual attacks and imprisonment. In the post-independence era, the second generation Nupe Christians were often denied admission into government schools and discriminated against in government appointment.

Conclusion

The Missionaries through their activities established schools, colleges, dispensaries, leprosariums, theological schools, Churches and agricultural extension services in Nupe land. Through the efforts of the Missionaries that good news of salvation through Jesus Christ was brought to Nupe land. Many Nupe people received formal education and have become great men and women in God's service and in the secular world. The labour of the Missionaries have not been in vain. The Nupe Christian Fellowship International continues to work towards a greater effort of evangelizing the entire Nupeland for the salvation of Nupe people and making heaven.

25th July 2018

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