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***CHRISTIANITY VS ISLAM
IN BRITISH WEST AFRICA
UP TO 1920***

ABSTRACT :

Islam and Christianity are among the best known religions ever practised in Africa. The former was introduced to the Africans as early as the seventh century by Prophet Mohamed, and the latter became familiar to the Africans during the fifteenth century with the Europeans' explorations of the West African coasts. In fact, through the introduction of Christianity in West Africa, the Europeans and the Portuguese more particularly wanted to carry the Iberian crusade against Islam. Their ultimate goal was to convert the African coastal people to Christianity and to side with the Christian people of Ethiopia against Islam.

The Christian missions started their religious activities in Africa along the coasts and started to move inland throughout the interior. Their religious activities were successful on the coasts due to the Africans' long experience with the Europeans. However, the religious Christian missions became more complicated in the interior because of the presence of Islam. The interior people were Muslims and were strongly attached to their Islamic faith and refused categorically any contact of any kind with the Christians.

Both of the Muslims and the Christians did their best to spread their respective religions throughout the African continent. They worked very hard for the advancement of their religious beliefs and strove to widen their influence throughout the black continent. What did they do to accomplish their religious purposes?

For many centuries the African continent had been unknown to Europe. It was not until the end of the thirteenth century with the inauguration of the Italian interests in exploration that the Dark Continent started to be discovered to the outside world.

The Italians were the first Europeans to inaugurate the voyages of exploration towards the African continent. Their purpose was to reach the Red Sea, India and Ethiopia through an eastward exploration of the Dark Continent. However, they soon found their ambitions blocked by the existence of the Muslims' control over the Nile Valley who categorically refused any European contact with the native Africans whether for trade or for religious purposes.

Because an eastward exploration of Africa seemed to be impossible, the Italians attempted to explore the African interior through North Africa. It is said that a European mission reached North Africa by the end of the thirteenth century. In addition, in 1469, a Florentine pioneer named Benedetto Dei had reached Timbuktu. Nevertheless, no other successive attempts had been made because of the Muslims who swept throughout the African mainland too. The Italians who did not have a strong army at that time to resist against the Muslims' power in Africa, preferred to direct their explorations westward by circumnavigating Africa. They initiated their voyages of exploration by discovering the West African coasts.

In 1231 Genoese sailors like Vadino Vivaldi attempted to reach India through a westward sailing round Africa. However, the sailors were lost and the ships never came back. In 1320 a Genoese adventurer could plant a Spanish flag in the Canary Isles. Other adventurers from Portugal, Spain, and Genoa sailed down the West African coasts by 1340. However, no further journeys were undertaken as Genoa's power started to be weakened by the fourteenth century. Nonetheless, sailors from other emerging nations of Western Europe like Portugal started to replace the Genoese.

Through the exploration of the West African coasts, the Portuguese wanted to establish a direct sea trade with West Africa and then with the Indian Ocean, and to direct this trade for their own profits. At the

same time, they wanted to carry the Iberian crusade against Islam. The aim was to convert the African coastal people to Christianity and to side with the Christian people of Ethiopia against Islam.

Western education in British West Africa was initially introduced by religious missionaries as early as the fifteenth century with the exploration of the West African coasts. However, it was not until the late eighteenth century with the revival of the evangelical movement in Europe that serious attempts had been undertaken by the Europeans in the conversion and the education of the African heathens.

The introduction of the Christian faith was very slow in West Africa by the end of the middle ages because the African coastal people could hardly accept the contradictory character of this new religion which taught equality and brotherhood and at the same time allowed the transportation the black natives in cargoes to serve as slaves on the American plantations.

It was not until the late eighteenth century that the early Christian missionaries of the London Missionary Society landed in West Africa in 1797. They were followed by the Christian Missionary Society's members in 1804 and the Wesleyans in 1811. In the 1840's the Protestants established themselves in the Gold Coast (modern Ghana), Dahomey, and in eastern and western Nigeria. Another group, the Roman Catholic Church, reached West Africa between the 1840's and the 1880's.

Through the introduction of Christianity in West Africa, the Europeans wanted to apologise for the atrocities the Africans had been subjected to through the business of the Atlantic slave trade. The Europeans claimed that the Africans had seen much of the bad side of the Western civilisation, so it was time to provide them with the good knowledge of the European culture. Above all, the introduction Christianity in Africa was a vehicle to extend the Europeans' Christian crusade against Islam.

The Christian missionaries started their religious mission of converting and educating the African blacks from the coastal areas and then they moved further throughout the interior. To achieve their ultimate goal of converting the natives, the religious men formed people to help them in

their religious activities. The former slaves of Sierra Leone, for instance, were among the first converts. They played a pivotal role in the conversion of the Africans, especially in the Yuruba lands and the lower Niger region where they could settle down.

In their task of converting and educating the African blacks, the Western Christian missionaries also established Christian communities in which they provided facilities such as education and medical services to attract the natives. Furthermore, they also set up schools and churches to teach the Africans the European Christian principles and aspects of the Western culture. It is worth noting that literacy was primordial for the conversion of people. This is the reason why the missionaries insisted on the establishment of schools before they set up churches.

The missionaries were not interested in the establishment of secondary and high schools since their objective of converting and teaching the Africans was achieved through elementary teaching only. In fact, the missionaries were more interested in the training of the Africans rather than their education. Nonetheless, the Fourah Bay College, a secondary school for boys only was founded in Sierra Leone in 1827 to train the Africans in theology. The school provided an access to higher education. Advanced education at that time was limited, expensive, and out of reach of African ambitious people.

By and large, the African coastal people responded positively to the Christian faith. The long experience between the Europeans and the coastal natives throughout the Atlantic slave trade made the contact possible between both people. However, the missionaries' activities in the African interior came to be more complicated because of the presence of Islam. The northern Nigerians, for instance, were Muslims. They were strongly attached to the Islamic faith and avoided any contact of any kind with the Christian missionaries because they feared their influence on the natives. The Muslim governors and emirs, therefore, strove to restrict the missionaries' activities.

By converting the African people of the interior into Christianity the missionaries were trying to restrict the expansion of Islam. They were especially attracted by the conversion of the northern part of Nigeria. The northern Nigerian people were among the most enlightened people in West

Africa during the nineteenth century and their conversion would lead to the conversion of other natives of the other parts of Africa.

Until about 1900, the education of the Africans was mainly undertaken by the missionaries who had more motivations and more financial means. The colonial government which had to pay for its colonial administration in Africa did not want to spare money in the development of education. Money needed to be spent in a more important and immediate issues such as the maintenance of law and order for instance. However, the colonial governments needed clerical staff to fill the different posts and the missionaries' trainings were not adequate for those purposes. As the demand for clerks tended to exceed the supply, the colonial government made the decision to undertake supervision over education. In fact, the colonial government had a dual purpose. It strove to provide clerks for the different administrative posts. In addition, the colonial government was afraid of the non controlled education provided by the Christian missionaries which could have a bad impact on the Africans' minds. As a matter of fact, the colonial government aimed at forming efficient and law-obedient people to maintain law and order in the colonies.

The colonial government kept the process of education very slow in West Africa to prevent the natives from awareness. However, the Africans who started to get used to education asked for more educational opportunities. The National Congress of British West Africa (N. C. B. W. A), a political organisation established in 1920 by African leaders from the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone had one of its main reforms education. The members of this organisation asked the colonial government to build more primary schools. In the 1920's the Achimota Secondary School was established in the Gold Coast and Katsina College was built in Nigeria.

Little by little, the number of the educated elite started to increase. These educated people were indoctrinated with bogus ideas about Africa and the Africans. The Europeans implemented in the Africans' minds a feeling of degradation and inferiority with regard to the black race, and referred to the white race as a pure and a superior race. They further stated that the introduction of Christianity in the African society brought salvation to the natives and saved them from darkness. It is worth noting that the Europeans believed in the backwardness of the darker races. They

believed in inner biological differences between the black and the white races, and associated the African tribal culture with primitivism and infantilism.

A number of the educated elite were provided with missions commissioned by the British crown throughout the African interior. These missions offered the educated people the opportunity to get into contact with Black Muslim thinkers who helped them to construct a vision of Africa's place in the world. Their exposure to African religious, cultural, and political backgrounds changed the educated elites' visions towards the Western milieu. Through their discussions with the black Muslims, the educated elite resented the influence of Islam on the society's members. This helped them to break away from Christianity for a more African oriented belief.

Islam and Christianity in British West Africa represented the two greatest faiths engaged in a life and death struggle for the control of that area. However, they were not the only religions practised in West Africa. Other old religious practices formed a part of the natives' lives and customs. The Africans, as their ancestors, believed in many divinations and had different cult practices. They were strong believers in witchcraft and superstition and believed that they could enter into communication with the spirits of the dead dwelt in the family land, the sky above the community, and the trees and rocks in the community of the kinship group. Furthermore, sacrifices, libations, prayers and songs were performed by the worshipers as a manifestation of adoration of the indigenous worshiped forefathers.

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