

JOSHUA DIBUNDU, LOTIN SAME AND THE NATIVE BAPTIST CHURCH: RESISTANCE AND NATIONALISM IN CAMEROON'S HISTORY OF RELIGION

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Abstract: This article sets out to present Joshua Dibundu and Lotin Same, two clergymen and contemporaries of John Chilembwe of Nyasaland and Simon Kibangu of the Congo, who stood out against European missionary pressure and colonial administrative oppression in an effort to establish and sustain the first African Independent Church (AIC) in Cameroon: the Native Baptist Church (NBC). I argue in this article that unlike the Cameroon kings and chiefs who resisted European occupation of the territory, and nationalists who fought for independence, the leaders of the Native Baptist Church represent another type of early nationalist and change-oriented agents who deserve their place in the historiography of the country. I have privileged the use of archival documents, structured interviews and some critical empirical literature to establish this account.

Keywords: *Native Baptist Church, African Independent Church, Nationalism, Basel Mission, London Baptist Missionary Society*

Introduction

The establishment of African Independent Churches was epoch-defining and transformative on Christianity... a new Reformation, which must not be glossed over (Makhanya 2017)

The history of missions is fairly documented in the general historiography of Cameroon (Ngoh 1987; Fanso 1989; Tazifor 2003; MacOjong 2008). Often narrative, it tells the story of the arrival of Baptist missionaries like Reverend John Clarke, Dr. GK Prince, Joseph Merrick, Johnson Fuller and Alfred Saker on the coast of Cameroon. They were said to be motivated by the religious

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fervour that gripped Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries to spread the “good tidings” to the rest of the world. In the process, they were to bring African “heathens” out of darkness alongside other subsidiary activities like abolishing slavery, idol worship and human sacrifice. With an obvious chronological approach, the narrative continues to the beginning of German colonialism, the exit of the London Baptist Missionary Society (LBMS) and the transfer of their property to the Basel Mission which became the major agent of religious pacification of German *Kamerun*. The third phase follows naturally with the British and French Mandates and Trusteeships (1916–1961) in which major foreign missions like the American Presbyterians, the American Baptists and various Roman Catholic Missions added to the picture. The accounts often end with the post-independence period characterised by the establishment of national church bodies such as the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and the departure of their parent Euro-American Missions. The rest of the history of religion in the country either focuses on the Islamisation of northern Cameroon, the rise of Pentecostalism, or the interface between Christianity and traditional African religions (Walker-Said 2018; Lang 2017; Ndille and Ngome 2016; Gifford; 1998; Balz 1984; Jumbam 1980; Bureau 1978; Njuema 1978; Ittman, 1957).

Essentially missing in the history of Christianity in Cameroon is the story of the independent churches; the first of which was the Native Baptist Church. Although the names of their founders are mentioned in some of the general historical accounts, their exploits in defying missionary and colonial straight jacketing which led to the resilience of these churches is not fundamentally captured. While contributing to filling this gap, a prime motivation for the present article is the need to establish a link between resistance and nationalism on one hand and the establishment of early indigenous Christian churches on the other. This perspective is important in view of calls for decolonisation of historical knowledge and transformation of educational contents with which most African states are currently engaged. It is even more important for that historical epoch which has in the majority been dominated by the story of European activities on the continent. While such a perspective has provided historical knowledge on Christianity in Cameroon, there is no doubt that it obliterates local agency in the making of missionary history in the country.

Like most historical accounts, I have privileged the use of archival documents and structured interviews alongside other critical empirical literature. The documents were screened for relevance to the theme, actors and theoretical position of the paper. The analysis follows the critical decolonial perspective which presents Euro-African contact (economic, social and political) as exploitative and emphasises the need for indigenous actors to be the central focus in the reconstruction of African history. Most importantly, it captures resistance as an African response to colonial/missionary oppression which paid off. The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I establish a background to the foundation of the Native Baptist Church and the role of Joshua Dibundu as its head clergy. Secondly, I discuss the period of Lotin Same and his relationship with the French colonial authorities and the French Baptist missions.¹ In the third part I establish the founding and sustenance of the Native Baptist Church within the context of resistance and nationalism.

This approach to the history of religion in Cameroon may be maiden but, it cannot be treated in isolation. Since the late 1950s, a significant volume of literature on African Independent Churches (AICs) and their leaders has emerged (Sundkler 1948, 1961; International Missionary Council 1963; Turner 1967; Barrett 1968; Oosthuizen 1986; Zwane 2017; Kealotswe 2014; Oluwola nd; Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997). Focus has been on capturing their origins, principles, organisation and liturgy. As far as the nationalist role of AICs is concerned, Mandla Makhanya (2017) has explored the transformative role of AIGs in South Africa capturing their emergence in the context of a new reformation similar to the one Martin Luther led against the Catholic Church (2017). Nmah (2010) on his part has pictured the rise of Independent African churches in Nigeria between 1890 and 1930 as an ethical-genesis of Nigerian Nationalism. Regarding the story of AIC leaders as change agents, Michael Harper (2020) has presented a short story of Simon Kibangu's fate as an AIC founder in the Congo and how his prowess had made him a threat to the Belgian colonial government and the Catholic mission. Derick

1 Very little information is available about Pastor Joshua Dibundu's early life other than the fact that he was one of the early three locally trained and ordained Pastors of the local London Baptist Missionary society in Cameroon, Thomas Horton (1855); Georges Nkwe (1866) and Joshua (Josue) Dibundu (1876), and that he was a contemporary of Alfred Sakar with whom he had worked to plant the Baptist Church in Douala upon the death of Joseph Merrick. His story ends abruptly after the tussle with the Basel Mission. Neither his later life nor his death are mentioned. Aldof Lotin Same was born on 9 august 1881 at Bonamouti in Akwa Douala to Same Mouloube and Ndongo Anna. He went to the local mission school at Bethel and married Engome Berla Catherine.

Peterson (2017) reviews the way the Chilembwe uprising is captured in John McCracken's book, *The History of Resistance in Colonial Nyasaland*. What one gathers from these accounts is that there has been a shift in presenting AIC leaders from villains to nationalists and their organisations from syncretic movements to Christian churches and that attempts to eclipse this role are being recognised and responded to (Phoya 2015). As Joseph (1980) asserts, how we assess the dominant tendency of any particular church will depend on the empirical historical record as well as the ideological outlook of the particular researcher. Like Makhanya and Nmah, my approach to discussing Joshua Dibundu, Lotin Same and the NBC is similar.

Joshua Dibundu and the Foundation of the Native Baptist Church of Cameroon

Missionary work in Cameroon started in 1841 with the arrival of the London Baptist Missionary Society (LBMS). From then on, the LBMS, in the majority, manned by volunteer ex-slaves from its Jamaican branch became the dominant vector of religious and social transformation in the area until the Germans annexed *Kamerun* in 1884. In fact, although backed by Britain, they enjoyed four decades of proselytizing free of interference from any state power. The annexation of Cameroon in 1884 by Germany brought its own challenges, especially regarding traders and missionaries of other European nations. In 1886, the German authorities expelled the London Baptist Missionary Society from Cameroon (Johnson 2012: 99). This can be accounted for by many reasons.

First, the Germans were aware of the role that the LBMS had played in the scramble for Cameroon. They had favoured Britain's annexation of the territory. Some of the letters supposedly written by local chiefs and kings on the coast of Cameroon requesting British annexation between 1879 and 1884 were said to have either been inspired or out rightly written by missionaries of the LBMS. They had established the "religiously enlightened colony" in 1858 and named it Victoria to attract British imperial and colonial interests. Its constitution was recognised by the queen of England in 1863 and Horton Johnson, a Baptist catechist (ordained Pastor in 1865) was appointed Her Majesty's Consul. Therefore, LBMS sponsored missionaries played a major role in the embryonic administration of the area. They served as witnesses for the various treaties between the British Naval Squadron and the local chiefs regulating trade, slavery, "immoral practices," and freedom of worship.

In the wake of the failure of the British annexation of Cameroon, they had encouraged the British authorities to keep hold of the area surrounding their colony of Victoria (Ndille 2018). In the eyes of the German colonial government, they had stood in the way of the German efforts to acquire Cameroon.

Apart from the above, each colonial power in Africa preferred to work with a missionary organisation from its home country especially that which supported its colonial agenda. It is for this reason that, each change in the ruling colonial power in Cameroon was followed by changes in the missionary corps. Before 1884, it was Great Britain that exercised suzerainty around the Gulf of Guinea. The privileged mission was the London Baptist Missionary Society. During the German colonial period it was the Basel Mission; being one of the favoured protestant churches in Germany. In the succeeding French colonial period, it was the Paris Mission that took over the work of the respective German missions. This was a similar practice in the British sphere of the Cameroons dominated by Anglo Roman Catholic and American Baptists (Lang 2017; Joseph 1980).

This makes for the conviction that even though most of the European missionaries claimed the non-political nature of their work, they were outright arms of their colonial governments (Ndille 2018; Mbu 1991). Mbu (1991: 88) has shown how from around 1743 the Southern German State of Wurttemberg controlled the Basel Mission as if it was a secular organisation in exchange for economic and financial privileges. To him “the Basel Mission adventure in Cameroon was as a response to requests from the German government.” The Mission did request, and receive, a special financial grant from the German Chancellor for this purpose (Rudin 1938: 366–367). According to Belinga (2017: 136–137), the desire for colonial governments to select and work with missionary bodies from their metropolises was based on the fact that they both shared the same vision of the world.

The departure of the LBMS set in motion new developments in the evangelical landscape of the colony. The German colonial authorities had transferred all LBMS work to the Basel Mission and required the local Baptist community to be integrated into the new mission. This was bound to be problematic considering the differences between the local Baptist and Basel mission principles, forms of worship and interpretation of the scriptures.

Before the London Baptist Mission left the territory in 1886, they signed a protocol agreement with the Basel Mission which stipulated that the indigenous Baptist communities would be allowed to keep their churches, their Baptist faith and their independence (Ngoh 1987: 58). No sooner had the dust raised by their departing feet settled than the local Baptists began to experience what Mbu has called “disturbing ecclesiastical and dogmatic, political and economic, social and cultural problems with the Basel Mission... some of which came as a result of the Basel Mission’s tactless approach to problems...” (1991: 90). In what may be termed a package of purification measures the Basel Mission authorities set out to revise the organisational structure, and the principles of worship of the indigenous Baptist churches, which were not congruent with the Basel Mission practices.

The first of these reforms came in the administration and organisation of the churches and the kind of relationship that would characterise the congregations under Basel Mission authority. The LBMS had maintained the practice of having a union composed of largely self-governing Baptist churches, with a certain degree of indigenous administrative, liturgical and financial autonomy. The local church was free from commitment to any colonial power and exhibited a limited reliance on external funding. This abated the culture of dependence and subservience in the church. This approach to church organisation and administration was not circumstantial but drawn from the English Baptist evangelical revival which emerged from the puritanism of the 18th century and which was incumbent on Joshua Dibundu to jealously protect (Nelle 2006).

The Basel Mission with its background in pietism desired to institute a kind of conservative ecclesiastical and administrative uniformity (Mbu 1991: 72–73) with a supervisory body that would place European Basel Missionaries above the local clergy in decision making. They felt that the system put in place by the LBMS was irregular and didn’t make the indigenous Baptist churches “Christian” but a misled, pagan corruption of the Christian faith; a rouge phenomenon which had to be stopped before it went out of hand (Sundkler and Steed 2000: 264). A racial superiority-inferiority thread was visible in the Basel Mission decision to place all LBMS churches under their control. Apart from autonomy, the LBMS missionaries had successively allowed the indigenous people to play important roles in the church from which they developed leadership qualities. Within ten years of their evangelisation in

the Cameroons, they had begun recognising the potentials of indigenous Cameroonians and went on to ordain them (Thomas Horton 1855; George Nkwe 1866, Joshua Dibundu 1876). Thus by 1886, when they left the territory, the local church they established was independent in all respects. The departing missionaries had not only considered them as equals in rank, but as ordained ministers, they were confident that local leaders like Dibundu were qualified to perform all church rituals and capable of sustaining it.

The Basel Missionaries viewed the leadership role of the local leaders of the NBC as “giving the Africans too much ecclesiastical freedom.” They had not come to Africa to share with the Africans their exposure to and experience in Christian testimony and its lifestyle as the Jamaican LBMS missionaries had done. They had come to “bring out a heathen race from darkness by introducing them to western life patterns. They were preoccupied with ideas such as white supremacy, the Whiteman’s burden and the civilizing mission” (Mbu 1991: 78). Such ideas not only accounted for the need to place white missionaries over the local clergy but justified their reluctance to recognise the ministerial gifts of the African ordained priests and accept them as equals. As in their Indonesian Mission, the Basel Missionaries in Cameroon wanted that local pastors should only prepare candidates for baptism while the administration of the right should be left for the occasional visit of the white missionary (Mbu 1991: 94). To the ordained ministers of the LBMS this was unacceptable. They regarded this as a joint plot by the Basel Mission and the German colonial authorities to assimilate them and rip them off their most cherished independence. To Sundkler and Steed this was the real cause of tension:

the apparent threat to the congregational administration; a strong tradition of lay initiatives and leadership that had been fostered by the LBMS and which the local leaders of the Baptist churches felt was being eroded through Basel Mission superimpositions. (2000: 264)

Closely linked to the above, the local Baptists were used to baptizing by immersion, but the Basel Missionaries insisted that baptism would be performed through the sprinkling of water (Ngoh 1987: 58). The local Baptists argued that the Basel Mission was attempting to forcefully impose in their church what they felt was a completely unbiblical, unauthorized form of baptism. They held that Baptism by sprinkling had long been revised by reformation teachings and that the only acceptable form of baptism

was unquestionably immersion. This to them, was not only evident in the writings of the early church fathers and in the rituals of both the Latin and oriental churches but was justified in a seaside town like Douala which was also blessed with numerous streams and rivers.

The Basel Mission and the Local Baptists also differed on issues such as child baptism, and the admission and baptism of polygamous men and women. The Basel Missionaries held the position that monogamous marriages had to be the norm in the Baptist churches because throughout the centuries the teaching of the Christian church about marriage had emphasised one man one wife. They argued that any recognition of polygamy in Christian circles was at best the embodiment of Old Testament theology and at worst the practice of syncretism or outright paganism. Pastor Joshua Dibundu was himself singled out for marrying three wives. He was asked to send away the last two or lose his position as leader of God's people. The need to strictly observe this principle by the Basel Mission was to later see the massive movement of Christian converts from the Basel Mission churches of Mwetug-Nyasoso to the Native Baptist Church of near-by Ndoum (Ejedepang-Koge 1996).

To make matters worse, the Basel Mission intervened in the school system left behind by departing London Missionaries. In addition to the essential mission of introducing Christianity, this system had advocated the development of practical skills and the use of indigenous languages in the churches and schools and the adaptation of curriculum to local needs and realities. The early LMBS men had entrenched in the indigenous converts the idea that practical skills training as an educational philosophy could not be downplayed by spiritual priorities. Alfred Saker was a mechanic, Alexander Fuller a carpenter and his son Joseph-Jackson Fuller had some medical and building construction experience. Joseph Merick was a linguist and educationist with experience in printing and along with Alfred Saker operated a brick factory (MacOjong 2008).

Basel Missionaries insisted that schools were to follow rigorous German colonial education policies; of German as language of instruction; of a German culture dominated curriculum (history and geography) and of service to the German colonial interest. As was expected, the German colonial authorities waged a relentless campaign against the widespread use of the English and Duala languages by Africans, traders, missionaries and even its

own administrators. Teachers who couldn't show a significant mastery of German within a short period of time were to face dismissal. Schools which didn't use German as language of instruction could not benefit from grants in aid from the German colonial authorities (MacOjong 2008).

By 1888, the problems had come to a head. Joshua Dibundu presented a memorandum to the Basel Mission in which he expressed his followers' disapproval of adult baptism by aspersion; disapproval of the baptism of children who were not yet of an age to personally confess and profess their faith; disapproval of the use of German in the schools which was deemed a foreign language and the recognition of the autonomy of the Indigenous Baptist Church (Ngoh 1987: 59). At a time when the Germans were engaged with wars of pacification all around the Cameroons, ideas such as advocated by the indigenous Baptists community were not to be taken kindly by the colonial authorities and the Basel Missionaries. In their response, the Basel Mission authorities called on the indigenous Baptists to strictly submit to the authority of the Basel Mission and its mode of operation. In addition to adhering to the issues pointed out above, they required the Baptists to prohibit the sale and drinking of alcohol for which its leaders were again held as accomplices. They were also asked to stop the practice of admitting and baptizing polygamous men and their wives in church and to abolish what they termed the custom of purchasing women (certainly the practice of paying a bride price and or dowry) (Ngoh 1987: 50).

The response of the Basel Mission was a clear indication that while colonialism was geared towards imposing European ideals and standards on the Africans, European missions were not ready to sacrifice the package they had brought with them to the continent; worst still allowing Africans to operate an indigenous Christian church on their own terms in a place where they had attributed themselves the responsibility for evangelisation. Based on this stalemate, Joshua Dibundu declared the independence of the Bethel Church (in Akwa-Douala) in May 1889 (Sundkler and Steed 2000: 264). The independence of the Bethel Church was followed by that of Victoria in 1890. This came after several petitions to the home board of the Basel Mission had failed to result in responses (Keller 1969: 14). Thus, the final note of independence of the Victoria Church read

The Church does not agree that anything is taken out of the hand of Mr. Wilson by whom the church will be conducted and continued

exactly according to the laws and mood of the Baptist Mission, from which the church will not move one inch. (Keller 1969: 14)

This frantic nostalgia for baptistism saw the birth of the Native Baptist Church (NBC), later known in French as *Eglise Baptiste des Natifs du Pays*. The NBC (Douala and Victoria) jointly posed a bond of moratorium on any outside aid and carried on church and schoolwork without any help from the outside. In Douala, the Basel Missionaries created their own mission station and church not far away at Bonalembe-Akwa and called it the New Bethel; pejoratively referred to by Dibundu's followers as *Baptist ba Bakala* – The Whiteman's Baptist Church (Nelle 2006). A few indigenous Baptist catechists such as Epe'a Kwan, Johannes Deibol, David Mandessi Bell, Ngango'a Itondo, Rebecca Ebenye, Modi Din, and Joseph Ekollo joined the Basel Mission. A majority of them were to become the pioneer pastors of the Basel Mission in Cameroon (Ndumbe III 2012).

As a result of the establishment of the NBC, the Basel Missionaries evangelical influence declined greatly as evident in the losing of converts, congregations and parishes. They collaborated with the German colonial authorities to destroy the NBC. Through their efforts, the colonial authorities proceeded with a series of measures aimed at reducing its influence. It banned the NBC from competing in the Basel Mission's area of activity. This meant that wherever the Basel Mission had established a station, school or any sort of mission influence, the NBC was not to operate in the area. In fact, according to Ngoh (1987: 59) the colonial authorities restricted the NBC only to the area around Douala. They were not to receive any support from the Basel Mission or the colonial administration and were not consulted or made part of the colonial administrative council which often included missionaries, traders and planters (Buell 1928: 333). This greatly limited their opportunities for expansion and growth during the German colonial period.

Despite the above restrictions, the Native Baptist Church under the stewardship of Pastor Johnson Dibundu successfully established itself as an African Indigenous Church with its own principles and system of operation unique in its interpretation of the Bible, its church practices and its conception of Christianity. The NBC sustained itself under the leadership of Joshua Dibundu throughout the turbulent years of German colonial administration. According to Joseph (1980: 9), it is clear that part of the self-confident rejection of Eurocentric Christianity can be related to its

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establishment before the imposition of colonial rule, and to its formation by ex-slaves, ex-colonial subjects and European missionaries having no commitment to the colonial powers which subsequently ruled the country. In 1891, another Baptist Mission – the Berlin Mission – arrived the Cameroons. It collaborated with the NBC until the end of German rule in Cameroon. Prominent as indigenous leader in this mission was Pastor Lotin Same who was ordained their pioneer indigenous pastor in 1908. He joined the NBC in 1915 and later led it through the even more difficult years of the French colonial administration.

Pastor Lotin Same and the NBC in the French Colonial Period

The First World War saw the end of the German colonial administration of Cameroon. It also saw the persecution of German nationals in the territory. Most of them including missionaries were taken as war criminals and interned in Nigeria while those of Swiss nationality were expelled (Lang 2017). Apart from the American Presbyterians, the missionary terrain of the wartime period was characterised by the emergence of local leaders who were determined to sustain the various missions they were affiliated to. The defeat of the Germans in Cameroon and the partition of the territory installed the French as new colonial authorities of the Douala area. The French authorities were not prepared to leave the extensive Swiss-German (Basel) and German Protestant (Berlin Mission) work to the expanding American Presbyterian Mission in the south of Cameroon nor to the “gallant but greatly overstretched African pastors trained by the former missions” (Joseph 1980: 11). As a solution, four French pastors headed by Pastor Allegret under the canopy of the Paris Mission, *Societe des Missions Evangeliques de Paris* (SMEP), were taken away from the warfront in Europe and dispatched to French Cameroons. After complex negotiations, the stations of the Basel and Berlin Missions were taken over by the Paris Mission.

The takeover of the German and Swiss Missions by the French was not welcomed by Pastor Lotin Same, indigenous pastor of the Berlin Mission (Messina and Slageren 2000: 63). In 1915, he left the Berlin Mission and joined the NBC in protest of its leadership conceding to the Paris Mission take over and the formation of the federation of Baptist churches, the United Baptist Church. According to Nelle (2006), the NBC fitted its temperaments and future aspirations. Lotin Same had rejected the formation of the United Baptist Church on the grounds that such a union would give the Paris Mission

an upper hand in church matters in the territory since it had played a major role in its formation. Besides, having been handpicked by the French colonial authorities, there was no doubt that the Paris Mission through the United Baptist Church would be serving French colonial interests. According to Johnson (2010: 245), it was clear that the United Baptist Church had as its religious vocation the reestablishment of European missionary control of all evangelical activities in the area. It also marked the beginning of another process to extinguish the autonomy and vigour of the Native Baptists church.

Lotin Same became the president of the NBC in May 1921. As soon as the United Baptist Church was formed, its leaders began to pressure him to place the NBC under its auspices. Same refused to submit to the authority of the Paris Mission and the United Baptist Church. Same accused them of wanting to impose European control through their new constitution as well as their European cultural practices, such as monogamy (Bensa 2005: 114). In his public message of May 1921, Lotin Same expressed his resolve to defend and promote a local autonomous church with a liturgy free from foreign influence. He called on his audience to resist imperialism which to him was not sparing the colonial church (Nelle 2006). He also told them he had written to the French parliament, the American government, the Federation of Negro Baptist Churches in America and the London Baptist Missionary Society on the topic. He even went ahead to read some of the letters to the crowd. This meeting caused the whole town of Douala to boil in revolt as people paraded the streets singing anti-European hymns (Buell 1928: 303).

Lotin Same's personal philosophies and position regarding the Union of Baptist Churches made him an enemy of not only the colonial authorities and European missionaries but also the local clergy such as Tobbo Deido and Ngando Nsangue who had conceded to the federation of Baptist churches (Nelle 2006). Influenced by the Black American Baptist tradition, he developed an admiration and taste for Negro spirituals. He developed African melodies, as church hymns and translated some negro spirituals from English to Duala. These songs, collections of which are known as *Esewe Bosangi* or *Meinge ma Bosangi*, are still in use today in most Baptist and Presbyterian Churches in Cameroon. On doctrinal matters Same came to distinguish true Christianity from what he believed to be Eurocentric encrustations. While he persistently refused to follow the French Protestants in their policy of baptising children, and maintained that the pastors in his

church had to be monogamous, he refused to entertain the Euro-Christian idea that polygamists should first divest themselves of all but one of their wives before they could enter the church (Ejedepang 1996).

The conflict between Lotin Same and French Protestants therefore ranged from ecclesiastical and liturgical to more culturally related questions. He was known as a pastor who spared no effort in adapting Christianity to the sensibility of his people. He was much noted for the power of his sermons, his fervent prayers which suffused people with emotions, and for the melodious and emotive quality of his hymns which were to be heard at such ceremonies as funeral wakes (Slageren 1969: 101). A contemporary of Lotin Same appreciates his tenacity thus,

His work was undertaken at a time when everything that was Negro was taxed with savagery, with primitiveness at a time when the white missionaries, in particular, exercised themselves to get us to destroy our masks and to abandon our dances, customs and chants. In short, it was the epoch when everything was set in motion to bring us to deny ourselves publicly. (Quoted in Joseph 1980: 30)

Before the Basel Mission arrived in Cameroon, all except one of the Baptist Churches, Bethel, had been built on communal rather than mission land; the indigenous Christian communities had developed the tradition of providing for all the operating expenses of their churches and schools, as well as workers' salaries. A dynamic group of African pastors and elders had emerged alongside the missionaries to lead the church (Joseph 1980: 21). Following such a long history of independence, there was no doubt that the NBC was a truly Indigenous Christian African Church which would not risk being compromised. Evidently with such an anti-colonial and anti-European missionary stance, there was no doubt that Lotin Same and the NBC, like in the German colonial days would become victims of attacks from the French colonial authorities and the French missionaries.

From the 1921 public meeting in which he lashed out at the colonial underpinnings of the United Baptist Church, the French missionaries felt that the decisive moment had come to deal with Lotin Same and his followers. On March 19, 1922, in a long decision posted throughout the town of Douala in French and Douala, authorities of the United Baptist Church banished Lotin Same from the Baptist Christian community (Buell 1928: 301; Slageren 1969:

152). They accused him of earning money through trade, his sawmill and plantations which they maintained had a detrimental effect on his religious work (Joseph 1980: 25). They also accused him of conspiracy against the United Baptist Church; that he baptised polygamists and made them elders in church and most importantly that he mixed religion and politics in an effort to win himself more followers (Buell 1928; Slageren 1969: 12). Both Bensa (2005: 114) and Joseph (1980: 26) agree that Pastor Lotin Same was generally looked upon as the first nationalist leader in French Cameroon. For that reason, repression against him and the NBC came hard with several jail terms, the refusal to recognise the NBC as an independent organisation and the closure and destruction of many of their churches and schools (Yaoundé, 1931; 1934; 1945). According to Nelle,

To the French colonial authorities, any church which didn't have a European at its head was subversive and dangerous. [consequently] the NBC was banned in 1922, their churches closed and Same placed under house surveillance and then taken to the New Bell Prison. (Nelle 2006: 2)

Between 1922 and 1932, it is said that Pastor Lotin Same faced the most trying moments of his life. Once his prison sentence was over in 1924, he continued evangelizing clandestinely and writing hymns in the Douala language. The pastor's rejection of proposals for his integration into the Union of Baptist Churches in 1927 made matters worse. Initially seen by the colonial authorities as "a man with great skill" who only sought to expand his work, they were gradually convinced that such an attitude was apparently deceitful, especially towards government established regulations (Yaounde 1931). As his position grew stronger and his prestige greater, he continued to be seen and treated as a threat not only to European missionary work but to the French colonial administration. A strong advocate of Marcus Garvey's ideas, the pastor pronounced with pride that only a liberated black race would liberate the world from sin (Joseph 1980: 28).

In 1930, the French commissioner, Theodore-Paul Marchand, issued a decree to the effect that, before any church could be established by an indigenous catechist or pastor not under the permanent supervision of a resident European, he had to seek authorisation from the commissioner via the local administrator (Yaounde 1931). Such a policy became a potent weapon used by French colonial administrators to suppress undesirable associations among

their subjects, including the NBC. In 1932, the NBC made efforts to establish itself as a formal organisation with a constitution of 32 articles. This was in a bid to apply for the transfer of ownership of 13 of the former churches of the Berlin Mission to the NBC. Even when members of the said churches had left to join Lotin Same in the NBC, the court ruled that the NBC was not a legally constituted body competent to bring an action for the retrocession of its church buildings (Slageren 1969: 195; Joseph 1980: 28).

Similar repressive measures followed in the subdivisions of Mbanga and Yabassi, where the church had expanded. There, the local administrator, Verges, first banned any further services of the NBC churches and, in December 1938, ordered the destruction and burning of all their chapels in these areas. The burning of NBC property also took place in Wouri, Pongo, Bakoko and Balong (Ngoh 1987). The French colonial administration accused Lotin Same of being pro-German (Yaounde 1934) and attributed the destruction of the NBC chapels on this fact. But the matter was beyond this as the administrator Verges had also mentioned the rapid expansion of the church in his area with the opening of nine chapels in ten months as a major reason for the attack on NBC churches (Joseph 1980: 29). The destruction of these NBC assets could therefore not be unconnected to the mastermind of rival European missionaries. Lotin Same was amongst the many Cameroonians detained on the charge of being pro-German in 1940 (Joseph 1980: 29). This charge was used in a general manner against individuals who had taken part in any form of anti-French activity and especially those who belonged to the former German trained elite in the territory like him.

Following his release from prison in 1944, Pastor Lotin Same began to make efforts to start his ministry all over. In January 1945, he requested authorisation for his church to resume work in the areas from which it had been violently expelled. The request was denied. It was in 1949 that the NBC was recognised as an autonomous Church body by French colonial authorities under a new name *Eglise Baptist du Cameroun* and leadership (Baptist World Alliance 2020). That year its membership totalled about 13,237. Pastor Same had died on December 26, 1946. While the NBC in French Cameroon relinquished the English name it had persisted with for over sixty years of German and French rule, the church in the English-speaking regions of the country still retains the name Native Baptist Church. In 1972, the Cameroon

government recognised the NBC as a church body. According to the Baptist World Alliance (2020), the church today counts a membership of 55,000 with 60 pastors in the whole country. Despite this growth, in the usual Eurocentric discrediting manner of African autonomous efforts, Gifford holds that “but for all its glorifying African culture and its independence, the NBC seems to be largely dying with not many villages and towns having congregations. Where they exist, the church houses are old, in a state of disrepair and often scanty” (1998: 286).

The above notwithstanding, the leaders of the Native Baptist Church had proven a point in history: that of sustaining an indigenous Christian church in the heat of combined missionary and colonial governments’ turbulence. The NBC remains an African Indigenous and Independent Church which still sets great store on African culture. They still do not forbid polygamy and are said to include many who have close links with the African traditional religions. Services are conducted in indigenous languages where the churches are located, especially Douala with no translations. They stress the motifs of resisting colonisation and remaining true to one’s indigenous identity and cultural authenticity. They set great store by the word Native in a rather cumbersome way (Gifford 1998: 286). Even if the church is a shadow of its original self, as Gifford contends, the basis of its establishment, its resistance to the assimilation of European missionary churches and its adherence to its original principles speak volumes when viewed within the contexts of African nationalism and decolonial thinking.

The Native Baptist Church: A Symbol of Colonial Resistance and Nationalism

Historically, African Independent Churches (AICs) have been around for a long time. Evidence of religious schism abound in North Africa in the early centuries of Christianity. In 1819, the Settlers Meeting of Freetown seceded from the Wesleyan Mission of Sierra Leone, becoming the first ecclesiastical schism south of the Sahara. Although not all African Independent Churches emerge as breakaways from European established churches, by 1960s, AICs were in existence in almost all parts of Africa. This notwithstanding, they remained on the margins of Christianity as a result of a combination of colonial government and missionary opposition. They were neither accepted by the ecumenical churchmen nor the evangelicals and were never included in church councils (Kombo 2001). However, in the post-1945 era, and following

the emergence of the New African Historiography, some research about AICs began to emerge which has facilitated their understanding and recognition as Christian churches in their own right (Sundkler 1948, 1961; International Missionary Council 1963; Turner 1967; Barrett 1968; Oosthuizen 1986).

The common threads uniting all the AICs include the fact that they were all established by African initiative; emphasise a biblical justification to include African cultural norms into their models of worship, theology and practice (Makhanya 2017); fought against the paternalism of the missionaries which disadvantaged many African emerging Christian leaders; were opposed to the imperial and colonial role of missionaries (Kealotswe 2014: 227–228); and desired to bring Africans to Christ via media that are understandable to Africans and based on local realities (Olowola nd: 26). These justifications reveal a trend in edgy and disparaging relations between parent mission bodies and missionaries in Africa on one hand and the African followers and the emergent indigenous clergy on the other. According to Ayegboyin and Ishola (1997) this trend assumes a resistance position on the part of the latter which is interpreted as deconstruction and decolonisation of Christianity (Zwane 2017); as nationalism (Nmah 2010) and/or a “new reformation” (Makhanya 2017). It is undoubted that the various manifestations of AIC ideologies and the overt pronouncements against colonialism and European missionary approach to the evangelisation of African people may have ignited nationalist tendencies be they of the nature of local ethnic identities, the proto nationalism of the interwar years or the post-World War II drivers of self-government and independence (Walker-Said 2018; Peel 2003; Welbourn 1965). However, nationalism is construed here as a justification for the emergence of AICs and not a consequence of their establishment.

One of the determining factors for the establishment of the NBC has been language. In this case language played a dual role. In the first instance the attempt at suppressing the indigenous Duala language in favour of German and later French brought disagreement between the Native Baptist Church leaders and the Basel/French Missions and accounted for the determination of the NBC to declare independence. The use of these European languages in the successive stages of colonialism and missionary work in Cameroon was seen as a form of linguistic imperialism. Language was one of the distinguishing features of German and French colonialism so inseparably bound up with it. For the German and French colonisers teaching colonial subjects in these

alien languages was never to take second place to getting them to honour German or French sovereignty over their territories or putting their labour to the service of the greater European master (Joseph 1980: 18). The use of Duala in the NBC churches could therefore be pictured as a form of resistance to colonial assimilation and a form of national assertiveness.

In the second instance there was the understanding that the local languages brought a certain form of completeness in the understanding of the scriptures. This enabled the indigenes to distinguish between scripture and missions and helped them form their own understandings, interpretations and practice of Christianity. Through Alien languages most European missionaries had the same absolute control over the scriptures as they had over the church. They alone had access to the Hebrew and Greek sources and their interpretation was final. With the publication of African translations, a momentous change took place. In Cameroon, this had been achieved long before the Basel Mission came to the territory. The first Duala version of the Bible was completed by Reverend Alfred Saker of the LBMS in 1872 alongside a book titled *the grammatical elements of the Duala language* (Saker 1929) used in the local schools. In Bimbia, where Saker's colleague Joseph Merrick had established the Jubilee Mission, the Baptist converts were already reading the gospel of Mathew in *Isubu*, the local language which he had translated and printed before his death in 1849 (Ngho 1987: 9).

In their translation efforts, both Saker and Merrick, had not just replaced English words with Duala or Isubu but specifically put the gospel message into these vernacular idioms. Therefore, apart from the feeling that God addressed people in their vernacular through translated scriptures, it was possible for the indigenes to see alternative interpretations of what the missionaries criticised in their cultures through bible translations. The missionaries may have hoped that the translated word would bring more people and villages to Christianity; hence a numerical increase. But the indigenes, on their part, saw in it a means of owning and indigenizing Christianity (Masondo 2005: 93). This involved a determination to reject foreign interpretations. This is what Saneh (1995: 173) means by "appropriating the gospel without running it through western filters first."

Closely related to the above is the failure of the missionaries to adapt the Christian teachings to the local customs and practices of the people. This, coupled with indigenous interpretations of the bible and distinctions between

mission and scriptures, could be said to be the foremost reason for the conflicts between the NBC and the German missions in the 1880s. The advent of Christian missions had aroused widespread hopes among indigenes; reason for the quick reception of the message and the wide influence it had had on the coast of Cameroon in the four decades prior to German annexation. As a result of their swollen membership in the early days, the missionaries were often overwhelmed by their task of church building and had little time to see the rationale in adapting their message within the context of African indigenous beliefs and systems of thought (Nmah 2010: 487). In the days of the LBMS in Cameroon, a certain level of adaptation/acclulturation of Christianity was tolerated. But it was rather the failure of the succeeding missions to sustain it that led to resistance.

In the case of polygamy, for example, the policy of one man one wife and that of sending away the other wives as the Basel and French missionaries advocated resulted in an unending string of abuses. Part of this policy involved the setting up of sanctuaries, called *sixtas*, around mission stations in which wives of polygamists could seek refuge (Ejedepang-Koge 1996). It resulted in an increasing string of abuses of the women and complaints, protests and litigations by polygamists deprived of their wives. There were also criticisms of the unremunerated labour to which the women refugees were subjected to by the churches; claims of sexual dissolution of these freed women, as well as the inducement for women to leave their households on this religious pretext (Walker-Said 2018; Ejedepang-Koge 1996; Joseph 1980:15). The awareness of this, amongst others, had been a major reason for the early LBMS toleration of polygamy; a practice continued by the NBC which, unfortunately, brought antagonism with the Basel Mission.

To the NBC, there was no problem if a church decided to grant church membership to male polygamists or women in polygamous marriages, especially because it was an embodiment of Old Testament practices. As Gold (2007 cited in Baloyi 2013: 173) asserts, interpreting and applying the bible in the light of the African culture and realities furnishes powerful and relevant insights into the biblical text that transcend Africa in their significance. He went on to argue that Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas taught that simultaneous polygamy is not in itself evil, since it was permitted by God in the Old Testament. They viewed it as being contrary neither to the law of nature nor to the nature of the bible. The fact, therefore, of the

major European missions in Cameroon insisting on monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage, was viewed as imposing European culture on the indigenes and not spreading Christianity (Baloyi 2013: 173).

The relevance of the resistance the NBC waged against the Basel and French missions' insistence on monogamy is still seen today in the continued debates about polygamy and Christianity. As Baloyi (2013: 166) reveals, the Anglican Church of West Africa has allowed the wives of polygamists to be baptised while the Liberian Lutheran Church has also elected to accept polygamists and their wives to baptism and Holy Communion. In 1967 the regional conference of the Roman Catholic Church held in Nairobi recognised differences in traditions amongst people and sought to encourage the Vatican to recognise them in Christian religious practice. The Catholic churches position in this regard had long been established in discussions of nature, culture and grace; inculturation in the history of salvation and the transcendence of Jesus Christ to all cultures (International Theological Commission 1988). As Okonkwo concluded,

If we seek to identify the main distinguishing feature of African customary marriage as compared with European marriage, there will no doubt be general agreement that the most obvious of such features is the toleration and even approval accorded to polygamy. (Okonkwo 2003: 5)

The final point on the question of the NBC's resistance and nationalism was their understanding that the colonial state and the missions were inseparable and that fighting for the independence of the church could not be separated from the fight to end colonial occupation. This fact justifies Lotin Same's political utterances and his generally negative attitude towards the French colonial administration. According to Nmah (2010: 487), with the understanding that the human beings to whom the gospel is proclaimed are not abstract, apolitical beings but members of a society marked by injustice and human exploitation, there is no doubt that evangelisation supports nationalism as it situates liberation in Christ in the context of transforming concrete historical and political conditions. In fact, Makhanya argues that the establishment of Indigenous churches should be seen primarily as a reaction to colonial conquest and European domination. To him, many Africans embraced Christianity and converted but reacted against colonial dispossession and missionary domination by establishing their own churches

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with a strong African heritage and cultural flavour in the hope of using it to dismantle colonialism (2017: 1).

In the history of the Native Baptist Church in Cameroon and especially in the period of the French mandate, one could see that the quest for the autonomy of the church was not unconnected to the fight for independence as resistance took the form of joining the anti-French cause in the territory with the hope that the end of French rule would lead to the end of oppression by European missionaries. Besides, the colonial authorities showed overt signs of hatred towards the NBC through containing measures such as imprisoning their leaders, closing their churches and schools and burning others. It is in such contexts (to add to their already recognised role of establishing independent churches), that NBC leaders easily fit the profile of social and political change agents. According to Makhanya (2017: 1) they used an adapted Christian platform to define not only social change but also political change. When one reads this in the context of Pastor Lotin Same, for example, it is possible to insinuate that being a pastor and leader of the Native Baptist Church, was less the reason why he got into conflict with French colonial authorities than his involvement with pro-German groups and other anti-French political affiliations.

Conclusion

The relationship between European missions in Africa and the colonial states on the one hand and the Indigenous people who received the Christian gospel on the other can be seen to range from close collaboration in some parts to open resistance in others. I have attempted to present the NBC resistance to European missions and the various colonial authorities partly as a rejection of European models of Christianity and partly as resistance to white hegemony; hence nationalism. Picturing the NBC and its leadership in this light fits the church in the definition of African Indigenous Churches and both Pastors Joshua Dibundu and Lotin Same as true nationalists of church history and heroes of the nation who deserve to be inscribed in such a wall of fame in Cameroon. There is therefore a need for historians, researchers and teachers of history to pay more attention to the role of the founders of the NBC as national historical change agents of the likes of Kuva Likenye, Rudolph Duala Manga Bell, Emmanuel Lifafa Endeley and Rueben Um Nyobe, more than in discussing them within the context of missionary social constructs which eclipses that role. This reversal is necessary and constitutes an essential part

of my motivation for this article; to articulate missionary history alternatively through the lens of the often excluded and unrecognizable role of a particular kind of African elite who interpreted and voiced inherent contradictions in the civilizing mission of European missions; rejecting them in most cases and espousing a new non-culturally hostile space for the African to experience and express Christianity. It is therefore my hope that, if not for purely academic knowledge, the current generation of societal and church leaders can draw some lessons about agency and change for social justice from pathfinders like Dibundu and Same in their effort to confront the challenges of our times even though the contexts may be different. It is also a call to the consciousness of those who possess the mantle of power in the NBC to ensure that resilience is guaranteed.

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