

## THE SIERRA LEONE CHURCH: LOCAL OR FOREIGN?

It is a matter of historical fact that the Church was first planted in Sierra Leone by foreigners from another culture who had their forms of Christianity already well-developed as part of their own culture. But it could not yet be part of the culture of the people to whom they came. Sierra Leone was, however, initially founded as a colony for people who had been partially ejected, partially wrenched by force from their own culture to be sold as slaves and who were then equally arbitrarily deposited there on the West African Coast as a 'return' to Africa. They were already separated from their own culture and could not return to it as before, in an alien area. Christianity was largely adopted in place of their religious background though they inevitably and rightly carried over aspects of that background as far as their personal religious orientation was concerned and carried on family and social ceremonies of a traditional religious nature, separate from official church functions. Such ceremonies are still carried on and the people of whom I speak are now generally called Creoles.<sup>1</sup>

These comprise the vast majority of members of the Sierra Leone Church, which is part of the Anglican Province of West Africa, as well as of the other major 'Western' denominations – English Methodist, American United Methodist (formerly Evangelical United Brethren), as well as Roman Catholic – to which the majority of Christians belong. Smaller bodies include the West African Methodist, the African Methodist Episcopal and Countess of Huntingdon Connexion. These cannot be simply designated 'Creole churches', despite the significance of the Creoles in developing and administering at least the major protestant denominations. Several clergy belong to tribal groups despite the European names of some of them. A good many Christians from these groups belong to so-called tribal churches, largely of the Pentecostal variety, or to the Independent African churches, which are less in evidence in Sierra Leone than in other West African countries. Both of these are entirely local to West Africa. If some Independent churches spread from Nigeria it was largely Creoles from Sierra Leone who were responsible for the spread of the Anglican Church in Nigeria. Creoles also undertook much missionary work in the provincial areas of Sierra Leone as well. In this sense the main churches too could be described as 'native churches'.<sup>2</sup>

The question of indigenization has, however, been raised on a

wider front than simply being locally staffed and controlled, though the idea of the Native Pastorate in the last century was the way the issue was first raised. Even then that was not in itself intended to be the end of the matter, as far as Africans were concerned. Indigenization can also mean that the services, vestments and ceremonies should be in local languages, materials and forms, while the doctrines should remain those of universal Christianity. An African Anglican Church (not the Church of England) seemed to be the passionate vision of Bishop James Johnson.<sup>3</sup> Bolaji Idowu's book *Towards an Indigenous Church* (O.U.P., 1965) sees indigenization as implying that language, theology, liturgy and dress must meet Africans where they are so that the Church can indeed be seen to be their very own. This further aspect of indigenization has not proceeded far in Sierra Leone, despite local traditions in the conduct of the services of 'Western' origin. African, though not Sierra Leonean, languages are used in two Anglican churches in Freetown for the Prayer Book services and hymns, and a translation of the Prayer Book into Mende exists, though it is not used. It is mainly the Pentecostal and Independent churches in Sierra Leone which use local language and music though not really local dress. New hymns in African languages, though found in Nigeria, are not common in Sierra Leone, and translations, if set to European tunes, result in nonsense in tonal languages.<sup>4</sup> Many English hymns are of course in any case a little incongruous, if not unsuitable in Africa, even if perfectly understandable in some ways. The Bible has not yet been translated into local languages in accordance with the results of modern textual study or directly from Hebrew and Greek. But Krio lessons, as well as carols with words in local languages have been used at a service of Nine Lessons and Carols. Whether an even more fundamental approach, which translated Christianity into terms of a Black Christ – as described, for example, in Sundkler's *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (O.U.P., 1961), pp. 278ff and 323ff – is valid, would lead us beyond the scope of this paper but the question of the relation between the cults of ancestors and the Communion of Saints or prayers for the dead, or between sacrifices and the Eucharist, are, for instance, living issues which demand attention even within the present liturgical framework and pattern of beliefs.

Outwardly the visitor from Europe will not notice much that is different, at least in a specifically African direction, in the services of the main denominations. The Anglican service will be Mattins, or the old type of truncated Mattins leading into the Holy Communion service on a first Sunday in the month, although Series II is now widely used in Freetown. The College chapel now even uses Series III on its own. The Methodist service will usually be the Morning Prayer of the Book of Offices rather than the usual Methodist

Service in England, with an Anglican type choir in surplices facing crossways and an altar-type holy table. The visitor will be interested in the formal tail-coats of the sidesmen on the first Sunday of the month and the smart uniforms of sideswomen and of the other mainly female organizations who hold annual thanksgiving-services. Apart from the general collection and communion offertory – usually kept separate – there may well be, on the first Sunday, a special offering as well as thank-offerings on New Year's Sunday, Easter Sunday, Whit Sunday, at Harvest, and at special thanksgiving-services. These will be deposited individually before the altar. There is a good tradition of attendance at church and a strong tradition of having full and enthusiastic choirs. Services are often shared between several lay-readers or clergy.

Apart from this main service in the morning held around 9.30 a.m., it is usual in Anglican churches in Freetown to have an early celebration each Sunday at 7.30 a.m. This is well attended, especially by mourners and those keeping an anniversary. A tendency to move more in a Catholic direction is evident and is seen in the growing custom of having a Requiem Mass or 'memorial service' with general Communion as part of the practice of a funeral service, which, preceded by the laying out of the corpse, either at home or in Church, accompanied by special prayers, is a characteristic of Freetown life and a social occasion. Another very popular service is the Watch Night at New Year when there is a superstition which requires one to be present in church at least for the last few minutes of the year.

Cults connected with the dead occur (outside the Church services), such as the wake held before a funeral and the visits to the grave subsequently, as well as in the ceremonies at fixed points after death. These are characteristic of the Creole's carrying over of older ideas into Christianity, as seen in the fact that liquor can be poured out in libation when the dead are invoked at the open and public graveyard ceremonies, such as those at Christmas, but also the Lord's Prayer is said and the doxology is sung.<sup>5</sup> The dead are in a real sense still present and exercise an especially potent influence in the life of the family but without dispossessing God. Yet much of this is not integrated with the ceremonies in church or controlled by them. This is an aspect of the duality which seems to exist in much of Creole life,<sup>6</sup> though this is not necessarily a criticism of it. Professor Harry Sawyerr has in many ways attempted to fuse the African tradition and Catholic practice, for instance in his attempt in 1970 to stress parallels between local initiation rites and confirmation preparation, in terms of discipline, instruction (covering religious, moral and social factors), the rite itself, and what followed in the Eucharist, being understood in terms of dedication, participation, sacrifice and the resulting responsibility of a new relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Of course there are things which one might regard as foreign, such as towers, organs, stained-glass (with white apostles and Holy Family) and different coloured cassocks for the choir. Special dedication services are held to unveil new acquisitions, solemnly and gradually.<sup>7a</sup> But these things need not remain foreign nor is the proper alternative necessarily a stress purely on what is African. What is foreign need not be the same as what is imported if it is adopted and used locally. The Independent churches adopt various vestments from elsewhere and use them in entirely their own ways. The important thing in the main denominations is that the control over the things used is exercised by Africans in African ways, yet acknowledging continuity with historic Christendom whilst also asserting that all this belongs to the African as his very own. There is a different situation here from the strict return to the original practices of Arabia stressed by orthodox Islam.

What is involved is a paradox of Christianity itself, especially as it meets people. It is brought and carried by others, but then becomes local, affecting and being affected by what it finds. It is no longer foreign, yet never any people's possession; it possesses them. As well as being local it must be world-wide, catholic in terms of a catholicity made up of and including all local forms and leading them into one Head, who is universal and cancels out divisory identities whilst fulfilling each (Col. 3:11).

The expression of this is difficult in the tensions preceding the *eschaton*. Real issues must be faced such as whether rice and palm-wine should be used instead of pressed wafers and sanctuary wine in the Eucharist. The use of palm-wine was suggested by missionaries during World War II, but the church in Biafra was not happy about using local substitutes and it has not happened in Sierra Leone to my knowledge. But it has been suggested that a local red juice could be obtained and processed. It is partly a question of keeping biblical symbols and imagery and affirming a historical faith derived from a particular place and time. One can question whether the wine need be red or whether what we now use is in any case what was then used.

Apart from this, symbolism has to be understood, and bread has no traditional meaning in Africa. What is African should no longer be dismissed as pagan since it can be a vehicle for the Christ who claims all men. There can be a continuity in conversion, and no need therefore to take Western names at Baptism. (One clergyman was actually baptized Mohammed Rogers). The Old Testament approach to Christ if made universal must include all men's prior religious quest. Yet the matter of the Eucharistic elements is not a question of what is 'Western' since the bread and wine of the Eucharist represent what is given to all of us, as well as our unity in Christ. It is at this point inappropriate to emphasize cultural divi-

sions. Let it never happen that tea is used in Britain because wine is less often drunk today. What is common becomes holy, not vice versa. This is the case with the bread and wine of the Eucharist. We should not seek to turn the holy into the common and drink tea or eat rice. This would emphasise ourselves not God who gave or the Lord who is present to all. Africa can appropriate universal Christianity and also contribute to it, but not change it or make it cease to be universal.

And so indigenization has limits. Emphases in doctrine may derive from local concern and be given new dimensions; symbols may be surrounded by new ceremonies and perform new tasks. But these should not be changed. Is it enough, however, with regard to the Christianization of Africa simply to Africanize personnel, music or ceremonies? Probably the two should not be distinguished but seen as complementary. The African can become a Christian without losing his identity as an African or his culture. Indeed he can make these Christian. This does not change Christianity but it makes it more real to the African, belonging as much to him as to any one else. This does *not* mean that the 'Western' forms of Christianity reveal that, except for the sects, it is a veneer, because the people are able to make what comes from outside their own. But it does mean that Christianity is not yet accepted, even by Christians in Africa, as an African religion just as much as a European one. It is so, however, despite all that is marginal, but the fact that these things are marginal has not yet been fully grasped, hence the need still felt to hold on to what has been. The days are nearly gone when a man without a jacket would not be admitted to church, yet despite all the attempts in Sierra Leone, even in the last century, to assert the validity of African dress, this is not fully realized. This point might equally apply to Europe but in Africa religion and the Church are still central to people's lives and it is a duty for instance in Freetown to attend the thanksgiving services of schools, professions, societies and bodies of all kinds and to be properly dressed. This is also the case with regard to national and political occasions.

There is much public religion in Freetown, and not only on Sundays, but probably a lack of private spirituality. There is little occasion for private prayer in the early celebration of the Eucharist because hymns are always sung. But neither is there the cold individualism of services in Britain. Worship is a communal thing in Africa, though personal devotion is not unknown with regard to the supreme God in traditional religion. Cults are associated with aspects of community life, including in particular the ancestors. So it is not surprising that public worship is communal, especially at funerals. In the main churches there is little resort in personal problems to the priest, unlike the medicine man or the imam.

Yet there is the felt need to supplement the central services, with regard to both God and the dead. This is so with prayer-meetings and evangelistic meetings. But also several members of the Cathedral congregation are found in the evening, when scarcely anyone attends the main denominational services, except for Sunday afternoon funerals, at a Pentecostal type 'temple'; this is true especially of women, even if professionally trained, showing that the clapping, swaying, singing and dancing satisfies the need for an outlet for genuine religious emotion. This is so despite the fact that services in Sierra Leone are much more well attended, with real participation, than in Britain. Attempts have been made to get over the poor attendance on Sunday evening at the main churches but, except for rare occasions of musical performances of traditional British Church music, (which are enjoyed), without success.

Undoubtedly what Harry Sawyerr has to say in chapter 5 of his *Creative Evangelism* (Lutterworth Press, 1968) about the transformation of what is African in worship with regard to God, the Spirits and cultic practices in terms of Christ, the Saints and the Eucharist, points in the direction of Africanizing Christianity whilst Christianizing Africa in terms of universal Christianity.<sup>8</sup> With regard to the question with which I began, the often overlooked positive contribution of the Creoles has been to show how what is imported from elsewhere can itself become indigenous, and hence African. The Christianization of Africa is the indigenization of Christianity, when these are properly conceived. Indigenization of personnel, as already achieved, should itself ensure this eventually. Africa will then make its essential contribution to world Christianity, and has begun to do so, but there is still the pressing problem of extending Christianity further in Africa so that it might become, as James Johnson hoped, the means by which Africa rediscovered herself and her unity. The relation between religion and life, so fully appreciated in Africa, will be clearer when marginal things cease to cloak that relation so that it becomes fully expressed in the services. Then the apparently ambivalent position of the Creole will cease to appear so and all will express their unity in Christ. Then too the question of indigenization will have been solved.

This, finally, raises the question of imported denominational differences. In so far as they mean anything locally a Sierra Leonean can be as good a member of a particular church as any elsewhere whose affiliation is simply inherited, though unofficial intercommunion is common.<sup>9</sup> There is also much official oecumenical activity in terms of participation in each other's consecrations of Bishops and ordination of other ministers, as well as exchange of pulpits. This is a recognition of each other's ways but the churches are tenacious about their connections with world communions. A

united African Church would need to be part of the Church Catholic and not an end in itself. It is clear that both the local and universal dimensions will influence oecumenical advance in Sierra Leone and this is vouched for by the churches of foreign origin which have become local manifestations of something world-wide.

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#### NOTES

1. How quickly and readily these people came to like and accept the practices of the English Church is shown, for example, in Bishop Ingham's book *Sierra Leone after a hundred Years*, (new impression) (Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 301.
2. Cf. E. W. Fasholé-Luke, 'Religion in Freetown' in *Freetown: a Symposium*, ed. Fyfe and Jones (S.L.U.P., 1968), p. 132; and H. A. E. Sawyerr's review of R. S. Foster, *The Sierra Leone Church*, in *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1962), pp. 37-9.
3. See *Holy Johnson*, by E. A. Ayandele (F. Cass, 1970), p. 41.
4. See Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
5. See H. A. E. Sawyerr, 'A Sunday Graveside libation in Freetown after a Bereavement', *S.L.B.R.*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1967), pp. 43, 49.
6. Bishop T. S. Johnson in *The Story of a Mission* (S.P.C.K., 1953), speaks of a 'comfortable syncretism' (p. 137).
7. Cf. for East Africa, the account of Christianized initiation rites in Ranger and Kimambo *The Historical Study of African Religion* (Heinemann, 1972), pp. 221 ff, esp. 238 f.
- 7a. i.e. veils with pieces of coloured paper attached are used so that each is removed one at a time by a succession of unveilers, in the context of the service.
8. Whilst in many ways anticipating Series II, Harry Sawyerr (*Creative Evangelism*, pp. 151 ff) introduces some interesting suggestions of the shape of a probable liturgy for Africa in placing the *Non dignus sum* after the *Kyries* as the first stage of the healing process; Confession, Absolution and Prayer of Humble Access before Communion to signify the washing before a communal meal; *Gloria* at the end for the joyful note at the end of African rites; and some dismissal as at the end of the 1928 Confirmation Service to give the sense of release and restoration and also the 'martial note' of a moral code.
9. As called for by T. S. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 137.