A History of 19th Century European Missionaries in Colonial Africa with Specific References to the Impact of Missionary Schools

Chinelo Ezenwa

University of Western Ontario, cezenwa2@uwo.ca
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This paper reflects on the impact of 19th century European missionary work in Africa by drawing attention to the ways in which missionary tools, like Bible translations and schools, facilitated colonial rule there.

Apologists of the European missionary enterprise separate missionaries’ humanitarian work from colonial brutality. However, such arguments ignore the fact that missionary agencies helped to foster the mental domination of colonial subjects. The arguments also ignore the derogatory attitude of white missionaries towards Africans. According to Albert Memmi, colonialism (including missionary colonialism) exists because the colonizer deliberately builds and maintains a “mythical” picture of the colonized as “backward” and “uncivilized” (The Colonizer and the Colonized 79-83). By doing this, he provides a reason for himself to take over and control the physical, economic, and mental resources of the Othered group. Similarly, in Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said reminds us that colonialism does not only happen through physical force of occupation. It is when a hegemonic group creates a cultural dependence in a target society through schooling and other forms of acculturation. In other words, when people’s minds, thoughts, and way of life are colonized, they accept that the new culture is not only beneficial but essential to their existence.

Nevertheless, contemporary postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha contend that the colonizer was not completely successful in dominating the colonized (The Location of Culture). In the specific case of the Bible (“Signs Taken for Wonders”), he writes that the English book or the English Bible becomes hybrid, a mixture of the dominating culture and others. This means that in the African context, for instance, the Bible can become “Africanized” and African readers are able to read it from their own cultural perspectives. His point is that colonization (mental or otherwise) is never complete.

Because of the popularity of this notion of hybridity in postcolonial thinking, formerly colonized peoples risk becoming self-congratulating in the belief that they are free or able to free themselves from the lingering traces of colonization. Like 19th century African educated “elites,” they are only able to see their roles as decolonial activists without questioning the ways in which colonization and imperialism continues to influence even their decolonial thoughts and actions. The danger in this is that while we bask in the euphoria of “post”-coloniality, we forget that, as Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o warns, even the use of a hegemonic language allows the colonizer to maintain hold over our “mental universe” (Decolonizing the Mind 16). Consequently, we neglect the importance of critiquing archives written from the viewpoint of the dominant gaze.

By re-visiting the history of 19th century missionaries in Africa, specifically schools, my paper emphasizes the relevance of re-reading history and literature from the perspective of the formerly colonized. In European historiography, missionaries narrate how God assisted them to take light to Africa. This paper re-examines this history from the viewpoint of the African.