

JAMES NORRIS CHEETHAM AND THE CMS CIVILIZING MISSION TO IGBOLAND: AN EXAMINATION OF HIS 'LETTERS' TO THE SOUTHPORT VISITER, 1899-1931

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Abstract

The 'Letters' of Norris Cheetham, yet untapped by historians of Southern Nigeria, constitute a rich mine of information. Among other issues, they address the following. First: 'Can the African be a good Christian?' Second: 'Is education, particularly higher education, good for Africans?' Third: 'Is it possible that the African can rise to a position equal to that attained by European races, or the Japanese race, or is such development beyond him?' Divided into the three interrelated parts, excluding the introduction and conclusion, the first part deals with Cheetham's perception of the *African Mind*; and it provides justification for the *civilizing mission* to Igboland. Igboland has been perceived as an ideal community for the *civilizing mission* in part because: '... they have no teachers of their own with any authority to lead them astray with false philosophies....' The second part concentrates on the three questions posed above in order to examine 'Cheetham's perception of the *'civilizing mission'* and those of E.W. Blyden, a staunch critic of the *civilizing mission*. Since Cheetham perceived Igboland as ideally suited for the *civilizing mission*, the third part examines his own evaluation of the transforming agenda embarked upon by Europeans in Igboland. Finally, the conclusion examines how Cheetham remodeled Henry Venn's ideas of the *civilizing mission* to suit British xenophobic feelings about context of race and racism in British thought during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Introduction

Historians of the British *civilizing mission* to Igboland in South-Eastern Nigeria-among many other, including C.C. Ifemesia, A.E. Afigbo, E. Ilogu, F.K. Ekechi and O.U. Kalu -have not benefited from very informative written data: a collection of published 'Letters' by James Norris Cheetham-the accountant of the CMS Niger Mission and a key member of its Executive Committee throughout the period in review.¹ Through these 'Letters' to the *Visiter* - newspaper in Southport, England -the author conveyed his thoughts to Salisbury Square, the Colonial Office, and the British reading public, on various matters concerning West Africa: astronomy, geology, meteorology, animal and plant biology, among many others. However, greater proportion of these 'Letters' were focused on the *African Mind*, and the attempts by the agents of the *civilizing mission* to remodel that mind to perceive reality from a Christian outlook.

The 'Letters' discussing the latter issues are interesting for one principal reason: they provide an opportunity to appreciate the ideologically controversial dialogue between the proponents and opponents of the *civilizing mission* in the early decades of the twentieth century. Essentially, that dialogue revolved around three interrelated questions bordering on the larger ideological issue of Africa's social, cultural, and spiritual 'regeneration'. First: 'Can the African be a good Christian?' Second: 'Is Western education (particularly higher education) good for Africans?' Third: 'Is it possible that the African can ever rise to a position equal to that attained by European races, or the Japanese race, or is such development beyond him?'² Directly, or indirectly, these broad questions have continued to inform and influence debates relating to politics, economics, and religion in the latter part of the twentieth century.

In addition to the above questions, however, there are other reasons for probing these 'Letters'. Cheetham was recruited as a missionary during a very critical phase of transition in the history of relations between Africans and Europeans within and outside of the church. Within the Niger Mission this was a period of reconstructing its general character as a 'native mission', in pursuit of an 'Africanized church', to a more 'Europeanized mission'.³ Within the wider evolving colonial state of Southern Nigeria, the year of Cheetham's recruitment -December, 1899 -witnessed the formal inauguration of British rule in the Niger Territories that were previously under the sway of the Royal Niger Company. The initial years of British overrule (1900-1905) in these areas witnessed

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bloody punitive expeditions designed in part to punish those communities opposed to the *civilizing mission*⁴ Like many British politicians and statesmen -such as Joseph Chamberlain, the author of the famous 'Omelet Speech'⁵ -some missionaries perceived these punitive expeditions as inevitable and necessary to facilitate the *civilizing mission*. Cheetham was one such missionary, and he readily expressed his preparedness and willingness to defend Asaba -considered a British stronghold -against an anti-Western organization, the *Ekumeku* movement, in 1904⁶

These 'Letters' vividly express some of the common xenophobic feelings about Africa and Africans in the twentieth century because of the author, like those before him in the nineteenth century, had wrongly assumed a high level of independence between race and culture. As a student of Igbo language, for example, he assumed that language development followed the same course as cultural evolution. According to him, nations think and speak not only with different words but in different ways, and this divergence in thought and speech is much greater when the comparison lies between an African and a European language⁷. As we shall see, this dubious linguistic theory was influenced by this conception -rather misconception -of the *African Mind*.

Not surprisingly, these 'Letters' also portray Cheetham as an unrepentant 'conversionist', a staunch campaigner for British imperialism, and an ardent apostle of the *civilizing mission* to Igboland. He argued, for example, 'that no body of men on the face of the earth could provide a better administrative force for Nigeria than the British Government'⁹ Informed by this ideological position, Cheetham's 'Letters' provide us with additional information to corroborate the following critical standpoints in some published secondary material pertaining to the CMS enterprise in South-Eastern Nigeria. First: from its inception the CMS was engaged in planning a 'church-culture' rather than simply propagating the Bible message. Second: the actions of its missionaries -whether they were black or white -to build up a 'fifth column' for the purpose of assisting the British colonial enterprise in South-Eastern Nigeria increased substantially in the years leading up to the First World War.¹⁰

Cheetham, for example, volunteered intelligence about Igboland to the colonial state; and he was later commissioned as one of the 'assessors' for the Onitsha Assize Court."

To address the issue raised in this introduction, the rest of the paper will be divided into three main interrelated parts. The first part will deal with Cheetham's perception of the *African Mind* and how that perception influenced his proselytizing campaigns in Igboland. This brief background overview of the *African Mind* is necessary because it provided Cheetham and his colleagues with the moral and ideological justification for embarking on the 'soul-saving' mission in Africa. It also influenced the answers to the three basic questions posed at the beginning of this introduction.

The second part will discuss his perception of the *civilizing mission* and the capacities of its agencies -the Mission, the Colonial State, and the European merchants -to remodel the *African Mind*. The third part will discuss Cheetham's assessment of the *civilizing mission* in Igboland from 1899 to 1931 the year he retired from the Niger Mission. The assessment was Cheetham's final attempt to refute the argument that British investment -personnel, money, and energy -in the *civilizing mission* was impolitic economically, morally and culturally.

The conclusion refocuses on the overall theme of the *civilizing mission*. Given the midnineteenth century Henry Venn and CMS idea of the *civilizing mission* that J.A.F.Ajayi and Peter Williams wrote about, it would be interesting to know how Cheetham fitted into or differed from this earlier view. Put differently, given his own perception of the *civilizing mission*, it would be interesting to conclude by examining how much of the earlier view has been rejected or retained, and how much of it has been modified or developed. This would finally underscore the significance attached to the 'Letters' of Cheetham and his contributions to our understanding of the overall subject.

Cheetham's Perception of the *African Mind*

Being a cultural invader, which all missionaries as agents of the *civilizing mission* were, Cheetham sought to understand the *African mind* for one principal reason. He had intended to use that knowledge as a tool for the accomplishment of the Mission's ultimate objective: to remodel the African into perceiving reality from the Christian outlook. When Cheetham became convinced, for example, that 'in teaching African converts -the majority of whom are young -it is little use to suggest that witchcraft is not objective, he argued:

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The best way of helping a person to get rid of the fear of witchcraft is to speak as if one accepted its objective reality, but to insist that while it may be powerful it is nothing compared with the keeping power of God. When this truth is accepted -as it is by many thousands of African Christians -the fear of witchcraft is removed altogether or reduced to a minimum.¹²

Because God in indigenous African cosmology has always been regarded as a remote and distant force that took little or no interest in human fate and security, Cheetham stated that West Africans generally perceived themselves 'as helpless beings surrounded by all kinds of terrific, unseen forces.'¹³ This observation requires redressing in one respect: because Africans never saw themselves as 'helpless victims' of these unseen capricious and whimsical forces, they had constantly sought to appease them through sacrifices and worship. This brings us to the question of worship; but before moving on to discuss how Cheetham perceived indigenous worship -'idol worship' it is necessary to briefly outline his convictions and qualification as a student of African cosmology seeking to uncover, as he put it, 'the secrets of the native'.

To understand the 'black brother' Cheetham advised that: 'it is absolutely useless ...to rely upon interpreters'.¹⁴ Convinced in this way Cheetham became an ardent student of the Igbo language; and by 1928, with a view to 'helping students to get some insight into the Ibo idioms,' he had compiled the *English-Igbo Phrase Book*.¹⁵ But, as -will be seen in the following submission revolving around 'idol worship', this student of Igbo language and oral literature argued that they had no culture. This denial was calculated to justify the goals of the *civilizing mission* to Igboland.

Cheetham and Idol Worship

To begin with, he was critical of fellow European missionaries and other foreign investigators who spoke 'of the native as being superstitious' without trying to probe deeper into the subject. This is because, according to him, 'A very superficial acquaintance with the native mind convinces one that the conceptions of the ordinary European as to idol worship are all wrong'.¹⁶ This is how he illustrated Igbo 'idol worship' for the benefit of Christians in the United Kingdom:

I should say that an idol after it has been 'consecrated' possesses in the native mind something of a mysterious nature which can be said to resemble that of the consecrated elements in our own Holy Communion. By this I do not mean that the native believes in the actual presence in the idol of the creator Himself, but he certainly believes that some lower form of god either resides inside the idol, or in some subtle and inexplicable way endows it with spiritual force.¹⁷

With those comments he moved on to the relationship between idol worshiping and the Supreme Being in indigenous religious thought: 'All natives know that there is one God who created all things', and 'in prayer they will sometimes address Him, but as a rule their religious observances take the form of sacrifices and ceremonies to propitiate or 'buy-off the baneful influences of the lower deities or spirits'.¹⁸ The latter point strengthens the view that West Africans were not just 'helpless' victims of malevolent and vindictive divinities.

Like Joseph Williams, the author of *Ilebrewisms of West Africa*, Cheetham attempted to identify similarities between Jewish and Igbo religious thought-systems. In comparing them, he noted that: 'The most important thing in the big sacrifices involving death in the blood'. In both cultures the blood, perceived as a sacred and potent substance that sustains life, was adopted in high religious rituals for various purposes. In the case of the Igbos it was smeared on the 'idols' of worship, in order to symbolize their sacredness. After using the blood in this way, the body of the sacrificial victim - fowl or goat, for example -'may be cooked and eaten'. In community purification, he continued, 'A turned loose, bearing the sins of the people'.¹⁹ Unlike Williams, however, Cheetham did not try to relate the origins of these social and religious observances to any ancient Jewish influences in West Africa that emanated from the Nile.²⁰

Given the above cosmology, Cheetham commended the Igbos for having achieved 'as much intelligence and commonsense in the management of (their) affairs and the ordering of life under its conditions'.²¹ So, why the *civilizing mission* to transform a society that has shown so much 'intelligence' in the management of its affairs? Cheetham argued that the aforementioned 'intelligence'

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notwithstanding: 'The heathens here (Igboland) have not very deep and subtle minds such as are found in some of the Asiatic countries.'²² The opinion of Cheetham echoes one of the basic assumptions of nineteenth century racist thought: That non-Western civilizations represented earlier stages of human progress, frozen, as it were, while the European world advanced'.²³ These views provided the ideological justification for the *civilizing mission* to uplift the minds of non-European peoples through colonialism, Christianity, and European commerce.

Having appreciated the *African mind*, missionaries on the Niger Mission were advised to be 'simple' and 'clear' in their theological teachings. This is because, he argued that what African converts required was a 'simple, straightforward, and concise statement of the fundamental truths of our religions'.²⁴ (Given the above inferior 'mind' and mental ability of the African, including the fact that they 'are very excitable, and can be easily worked up to a pitch of enthusiasm in almost about anything', Cheetham commented the 'liturgical service' of the Niger Mission as being very useful. This is because:

It is calm and dignified, and the officiating clergyman cannot break away into exciting or elaborate prayers according to his own will.²⁵

It would therefore appear that, among other reasons, 'liturgical services' in the CMS Niger Mission were conducted precisely to *domesticate* the easily 'excitable' African 'mind'. All of the above data also suggest that, by comparison with either Europeans or Asians, the CMS perceived African as being naturally poorly equipped to mentally comprehend philosophical propositions. This racist assumption, as we shall see later, influenced in part the education that was provided by the CMS Niger Mission in South-Eastern Nigeria.

In summary Cheetham's perception of the *African Mind*, which was heavily dependent on his study of Igbo cosmology, convinced him that Igboland was ideal for the *civilizing mission*. Three reasons were adduced in support of this position. First: 'There is no native culture of any kind'. Second: There is no native literature -writing and printing being alike unknown'. Third: 'The fact that they have no teachers of their own of any authority to lead them astray with false philosophies...tends rather to help them to receive Christianity rather than to hinder them from doing so'.²⁶

Cheetham and His Perception of the *Civilizing Mission*

As an outspoken propagandist of the *civilization mission*, Cheetham endorsed the view that:

Whenever the civilization of the West penetrates, without being accompanied by its religious atmosphere and sanctions, it exercises a blighting and fatal influence on other people.²⁷

For this reason he maintained that it was the duty of Christian missions, as partners in the *civilizing mission*, to implant the requisite religious and moral order in Africa 'before they (Africans) ...come into contact with the darker side of our civilization...'.²⁸ In this regard, Cheetham was revisiting a nineteenth century subject that was still agitating the minds of missionaries in the early twentieth. The subject could be framed in the following way. Since what was Christian cannot abide with what was African, should the Westernization of non-European societies not precede their Christianization in the overall interest of the *civilizing mission*?

However, in many communities of South-Eastern Nigeria, history did not afford that opportunity to the Niger Mission, this is because British commerce and secular colonization had traveled in advance of Christianity in these areas.²⁹ Cheetham, who was aware of this fact, was overly critical of the European merchant community and colonial officials who portrayed 'the darker side of (European) civilization'. Like D. Fraser, a missionary of the United Free Church of Scotland in Nyasaland, he wanted to see African 'covered with the white robe of a Christian commerce'.³⁰ For example, because the 'liquor traffic' in Southeastern Nigeria portrayed the 'darker' side of European civilization, the Niger Mission called for a total ban on this colonial state, Cheetham revealed that the 'trade gin' in Southeastern Nigeria 'is not made from good spirits, but contains fusel oil produced from rotten potatoes'.³¹

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The European merchant community was also castigated because: 'A larger number of the younger clerks set out by the mercantile firms was careless, selfish, and loose lives, and this causes the prestige of the white man to be lower than it should be.'³² His 'Letters' persistently reechoed the need for European traders with humanitarian objectives to invest in the socioeconomic development of Africa. In this connection Macgregor Laird has been given as a fine British trader, who 'in all his pioneering work (tried to uplift) ...the people and ...the country.'³³ These comments show that, ideologically, Cheetham perceived 'legitimate commerce' as one avenue of cultural diffusion; but he had very little or no faith at all in the *civilizing* nature of commerce operating by itself.

About the European administrators of the colonial state it was noted that 'It is not now -as it used to be -a dumping ground for 'wastrels', though they are still to be found there in undesirable numbers.'³⁴ Given the damage inflicted on the white man's image and, by implication, the *civilizing mission*, Cheetham called on Europeans with 'high integrity and stainless honour' to carry the 'white man's burden'. This is because only such men 'can lead them (the natives) where he likes, and can prevail upon them to accept laws altogether repugnant to their state'.³⁵ These remarks can only lead us to one inevitable conclusion: Cheetham perceived the Igbo as a race of childlike people. This image of the Igbo reechoes the mind-nineteenth century image of Africans given by Rev. D.J. East.

The European is vehement, energetic, proud, tenacious and revengeful: the African is docile, gently, humble, grateful, and commonly forgiving. The one is ambitious and easily aroused; the other meek, easily contented, and easily subdued. The one is the other as the willow to the oak.³⁶

One quick comment here is in order: the history of anti-colonial resistance within and outside of the church shows that Africans never accepted 'laws altogether repugnant to their taste'.

Critics -white or black -of the *civilizing mission* in general, and the activities of the missionaries in particular, argued that it undermined the indigenous cultural heritage. One such European critic, E.D. Morel, according to Cheetham, stated that:

Native life is interfered with by the missionary propaganda; that its unity is destroyed; and that the result of our work is to 'Europeanize' the people and make them to be out of touch with their fellows and disloyal to their chiefs.³⁷

Cheetham accepted these charges; however, like the politician Joseph Chamberlain, he also took solace in the fact that: 'You cannot have omelets without breaking eggs.'³⁸ Let me return to those questions posed in the introduction in order to fully highlight Cheetham's perceptions of the *civilizing mission*. His comments on these matters overlap considerably, however, they can also be separated fairly successfully.

On the Matter of Being Devoted Christians

Missionaries in general, including some of the European critics of the *civilizing mission*, believed that 'Christianity is ... the highest and best religion'.³⁹ Unlike the missionaries, however, some of these European critics considered Christianity to be so 'lofty and idealistic as to be beyond the comprehension of heathen people'.⁴⁰ In the opinion of these critics, because Islam, Confucianism, and Buddhism are higher than 'heathenism' (African Indigenous Religion) in the evolution of human religious thought:

It is on the whole rather a good idea to let the people of heathen lands come under the influence of one or other of these religions first, with the idea that they will in time be 'lifted up' sufficiently high in civilization and morals to receive the higher teachings of Christianity.⁴¹

However, by the mid-nineteenth century some British writers interested in the implications of culture contact had expressed deep reservation about Islam as a *civilizing* force in societies considered backward. This is because Islam perceived by these persons as being '...merely a religion of *outward*

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observances requiring no *exertion of the mind*⁴² Cheetham, as we shall see, endorsed this perception.

Among the critics of the evangelization programme, some had argued for secular civilization and education before introducing the gospel. ‘(If) we white people find that we are only just beginning to understand the truths of our religion full now’, they lamented, ‘how unreasonable it is to expect the heathen to accept our religion and understand it before they are even civilized!’⁴³ This position, as indicated earlier, negated the view of Cheetham and many of his missionary colleagues.

However, it would appear that certain elements of the opposition argument had made an impact on the missionary mind. For example, Cheetham had earlier said that: ‘The heathens (of Igboland do not have) very deep and subtle minds such as found in some Asiatic countries’. For that reasons, he went on, Igbo converts only needed a ‘simple, straightforward, and concise statement of the fundamental truth of our religion’. This point notwithstanding, he disagreed with the submission that heathens should be exposed to any of the Asiatic systems of thought before Christianity. As he put it:

They lift an ignorant people up to a certain distance, and then leave them in a kind of dream, in which they show little of either the desire or the power to advance.⁴⁴

D. Fraser of the United Free Church of Scotland in Nyasaland had also expressed a similar anti-Arab sentiment and their civilizing influence in Africa: ‘The Arab had no capacity for self-discipline and the idle luxury into which he sank when all labour was done for him by slaves, reduced his civilizing influence to the lowest degree.’⁴⁵ These sentiments, it should be noted, only portrayed things: the prevailing sense of ideological rivalry between Christianity and Islam; and the cultural arrogance of the 19th-century European missionaries. For example, a British traveler in Africa in the nineteenth century who had witnessed the level of literacy in the Islamic cities of Ghat and Ghadames, J. Richardson, condemned the aforementioned cultural arrogance of the British. As it put it: ‘Let us then take care how we arrogate to ourselves the right and fact of civilizing the world’.⁴⁶

On one level the views of Richardson reecho those of E.W. Blyden - one of the African-American critics of the European *civilizing mission* - who argued that: ‘Tire Koran is, in its measure, an important educator’.⁴⁷ In the overall interest of African development Blyden had also argued that: ‘he Christian Negro ...cannot afford to look upon the Mchammedans with indifference and hospitality ..It would be wisdom and good policy in Christians not to reproach them but to find out ways of working with them to mutual advantage’.⁴⁸

Apparently dissatisfied with the condemnation of Islam as a civilizing influence, he went on to attack the proselytizing agenda of the Christian missionaries.

European were spiritually unqualified to Christianize Africans who did not need their theological interference, for ‘the creeds formulated in Europe are not indispensable to Africa’s spiritual development’.⁴⁹

Because of these critical ideological views held by Blyden and other ‘civilized’ and ‘highly educated’ West Indians of African descent, Cheetham advised against engaging them as intermediaries between Europeans and Africans. As he put it: they ‘have ideas of their own as to how far the white man should allowed to penetrate into the secrets of the natives’.⁵⁰

Cheetham made one final point to support the relevance of implanting Christian values before introducing secular civilization by making a direct reference to Europe’s experience.

The history of Europe demolishes the whole fabric of the argument at one below. We -Britons Gauls, Danes, etc -were evangelized when we were merely hordes of murderous savages, and our civilization has followed and been built upon our Christianity, whereas Rome and Greece, which were civilized first and evangelized afterwards, soon decayed.⁵¹

Finally, given the historical reality in Southeastern Nigeria where secular civilization had preceded evangelization, Cheetham argued that to produce *devout followers* ‘the three sides of the African’s nature (the physical or material, mental, and spiritual) have to be developed simultaneously’ according to Christian principles.⁵² The duty of the European trader was to stimulate the business faculties of the ‘natives’; the government officials -soldiers, police, and the law courts -had the responsibility to

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plant the 'seeds of true, civilization'; while the missionaries had to inculcate in the 'natives' 'real the Christian character'. The central argument here is; for the Niger Mission to produce devoted Christians in Igholand, there must be a new political economy based on the 'church-culture' concept. This concept endorses the complete transformation of the indigenous social and religious worldview, including the political and economic structures sustained by that worldview.⁵³

On the Education Question

One question dominated discussions pertaining to education in the years leading up to the First World War in Southeastern Nigeria: 'Is education good for the African'? There were two shades of opinion on this matter in the nineteenth century. Edward Bicker-Steth, Secretary of the CMS, felt that secular education might have the effect of 'fixing the minds of the Natives on worldly advantages', lie therefore advocated for religious, rather than secular, education.⁵⁴ But the preservationists, as represented by Sir William Lawrence, argued: 'Rather let them remind forever in a state of contented barbarism,' because 'by civilizing their minds, ...or by polishing their manners', they might be rendered 'susceptible of desires which you never mean them to gratify'.⁵⁵

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the latter opinion no longer carried much influence in British public opinion. Instead, opinion was divided 'as to how far higher education is suited to the native'.⁵⁶ European merchants on the West Coast were 'opposed to all education except on the simplest lines'.⁵⁷ The colonial state and the Missions provided education which was based on the three 'Rs' -reading, writing, and arithmetic -during the first decade of the twentieth century. Other subjects in the 'Education Code' were English (this was divided into grammar, composition, and dictation), geography, English, history, and hygiene. The government *Annual Report* for 1912 indicated that well over 40,000 pupils were enrolled throughout Southeastern Nigeria in these schools.⁵⁸

On another level these European traders, who were the main employers of labour after the colonial state, were also relentlessly critical of the nature of training provided. They insisted that 'too much *book education* is given, and too little technical instruction'.⁵⁹ They were in essence asking these schools to turn out more artisans and fewer clerks. Cheetham and other missionaries accepted this criticism, but they pointed to the difficulty confronting the providers of education.

If Nigeria were supplied with a large number of highly-trained teachers, and if expense had not to be considered, it might be a good thing to combine literary and technical education in each school, but as things are at present this is quite impossible except in one or two isolated cases.⁶⁰

Beyond this kind of basic elementary education, many Europeans during the period under review, including missionaries, merchants, and government officials, questioned the usefulness of higher education to the 'native'. The problem, according to those opposed to higher education, is that: 'the Africans who have taken courses of advanced study, seemed to be examples of mere *head-knowledge*'.⁶¹ *Head-knowledge*, as defined by Cheetham, 'consists in having one's head filled with mere book-learning and one's memory stored with words learned by rote'.⁶² These Africans, according to their European critics, 'do not seem to get much of that sound commonsense and practical power to do things, so much valued by the white man'.⁶³

What these critics are saying in effect is that Africans are inherently incapable of benefiting from the advantages -for example, creativity, originality, and a sense of initiative -of higher education that are very essential for sustainable development. But there were other government officials -Harry Johnston and P. Amaury Talbot -who viewed matters differently. According to the latter, who contributed an article on the 'Mental Agility of West Africans':

It has always seemed that their brain power has been greatly underrated; probably because we fail to catch the link which to them makes clear and logical thoughts and ideas so different from our own. Given our centuries of education, it appears, with all deference to those who hold other views, that the difference in mentality is rather one of kind than of degree.

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Blyden attributed the alleged lack of creativity and initiative to the quality of education provided by the Europeans in West Africa. 'In the teaching of our youth', he argued, 'far more is made of the importance of imparting information than of training the mind.' 'Their minds' he continued, 'are too much taken possession of by mere information drawn from European sources'.⁶⁵ Regarding 'information drawn from European sources' and its relevance for the African, Cheetham's experience with an Igbo pupil in 1904 is very instructive and revealing.

One day I said to a lad: 'Does it not interest you to read about my country, and learn about the manners and customs of the white man? His reply was: I shall never see your country, so what is the good of troubling about it?'⁶⁶

Blyden perceived Africans as being 'held in bondage by (the) indiscriminate and injudicious use of ...foreign literature' during the colonial period; and it was specifically to correct his situation that the Liberia College for Advanced Studies was established under his intellectual leadership.⁶⁷ In 1897 he also attempted, but without success to establish *The Lagos College and Industrial Institute* in Southwestern Nigeria.⁶⁸

The matter of higher education set aside, there was yet another controversy about the educational programme of the *civilizing mission*: the relevance of Christian religious instruction in the schools. This controversy was between the colonial state and the Niger Mission. The latter argued that:

The African who has been taught to read and write, and who uses his education merely to get rich or to oppress his less gifted brethren, is rather a curse than a blessing to his country, but the man whose training has given in addition to book learning a higher ideal of personal morality and of public duty may be expected (very gradually it may be) to lift his country towards better things.⁶⁹

For the above reason, the Niger Mission insisted that religious instruction should form the core of any training programme in the overall interest of the *civilizing mission*. Being more interested in a liberal and secular training programme, the colonial government decided in 1908 that: 'grants shall not be made available to schools in which religious instruction is compulsory. Like the colonial government, Blyden strongly felt that liberal education was being 'substituted by the narrow and dwarfing influence of ecclesiastical dogmatism.'⁷⁰

On the Matter of Africans Evolving to the Level Attained by Europeans

To many ardent European proponents of the *civilizing mission* the black man was generally incapable of rational leadership. Such persons easily 'point to the failure of the civilized native to govern Ilayti (sic) and Liberia' as 'the final answer to the dreamers who prophesy great things for the black man.'⁷¹ Cheetham held this perception. He had argued that all African employees of the colonial state, their level of education and profession notwithstanding, needed the 'constant oversight by Europeans or they seem at once to fall back into loose and slovenly ways'.⁷² The following comment about Bishop S.A. Crowther was also made by Cheetham as another illustration of the black man's incapacity to govern.

Up to 1890 the (Niger) Mission was entirely in the hands of Africans, and, as usually happens in such cases, abuses of different kinds crept in amongst the agents and converts which certainly would not have been tolerated by Europeans. As I have so often said before in these columns, the *black man almost invariably makes a bad leader*, and Bishop Crowther appears not to have been an exception to this rule.⁷³ (My Italics).

Given the above climate of opinion among Europeans at the beginning of the twentieth century, according to Cheetham, it was not uncommon for both proponents and antagonists of the *civilizing mission* to pose this question: 'Is it possible that the African can ever rise to a position equal to that attained by the European races, or the Japanese race, or is such development beyond him'?

For Cheetham the only solution for advancing the African race was an extensive and benevolent European colonialism. Britain, he urged, must 'not handover to the (African) race while in its child stage powers that only belong to full-grown men'.⁷⁴ The ideological polarity between Blyden and Cheetham is once more very evident over the matter of African colonization. 'The opening of Africa', the former argued, 'is to be the work of Africans' (That is those of African descent drawn from the Western

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Hemisphere); this is because: 'Centuries of effort and centuries of failure demonstrate that white men cannot build up colonies there'.⁷⁵ Because of the views of black activities like Blyden, Cheatham urged Britain to 'prevail upon the *civilized* native to be content with the slow and steady progress, being made by the agents of the *civilizing mission* in the transformation of the continent.'⁷⁶

However, unlike Blyden, Cheatham was never discouraged by the 'centuries of failure' to give up on Africa. As he put it:

The African is not likely to advance at such a speed as to be able to left to himself in a hundred years, but when the time is extended to five hundred or a thousand I cannot see anything unlikely in the prospect.⁷⁷

The time period assigned to Africa's evolution was derived from Cheatham's understanding of European history. 'The untaught native', he pointed out, 'is about as far forward in the way of *progress* as the Briton of Julius Caesar's days'.⁷⁸ Having drawn strength and inspiration from this piece of historical evidence, he went on the offensive against critics such as Blyden: '...if this is so what right have we to expect that in two or three generations he (the African) will advance to a position it has taken us about 2000 years to reach?'⁷⁹

One final point: after nurturing Southeastern Nigeria from 'infancy' to 'adulthood' Britain may now withdraw. In Cheatham's view, however, withdrawal should not bring the *civilizing mission* to an end; it should mark the beginning of another phase in the relationship. 'If West Africa is to be a great country', he argued, 'it must be through the constant and close cooperation of the white and black peoples'. By this means 'it is quite possible that even the black races may develop into something unexpected in another thousand years'.⁸⁰ Since Igboland was considered an ideal environment for the *civilizing mission*, let me discuss Cheatham's evaluation of the achievements of the extra-territorial forces of change there.

Cheatham and His Evaluation of the *Civilizing Mission* in Igboland

By 1913 the various departments of the *civilizing mission* -the government, traders, and missionaries -in Southern Nigeria consisted of '1,840 Europeans, of whom 760 were Government officials and 1,080 non-officials'.⁸¹ Although the torchbearers of civilization were numerically small, Cheatham delightfully observed that they were rapidly transforming an estimated Igbo population of three and a half million. Comparing the pace of transformation with events and experiences in British history, he stated that:

The inhabitants of this town (Onitsha), for instance, have been pushed in six and a half years (1907) from state of life somewhat resembling that of Britons in the days of Caesar, to a condition of modern civilization; in other words they have had compressed into this short time what was in England spread over at least eighteen hundred years.⁸²

This overblown success story was attributed to two factors: the energetic and humanitarian efforts of the Europeans, and the capacity of the Igbo to respond and adapt to change. As the discussion below indicates, Igbo responses and adoptions were achieved at a huge cost.

Having concluded that 'the disintegration of native society is inevitable when brought into close touch with European life', Cheatham tacitly endorsed punitive expenditures as a way of facilitating social, cultural, religious, and political change in Igboland:

The British Government generally moves slowly, but when it does move things forward a step there is rarely any going back. For instance, although the Government officials took minimal possession of the Onitsha district

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eight years ago they did practically nothing in the interior country lying east of us until the end of 1904, and some of us were a little impatient at the delay, blit when everything was ready a column of troops, amounting with their carriers to 500 or 600 men, made a march lasting several months all round the interior to proclaim British law. The proclamation was by no means merely an affair of words. It was accompanied by prompt and vigorous action. The natives were disarmed; roads were made; native courts were opened up and in a few months the country entered upon a new era in its existence.⁸⁴

W. Ofonagoro, following Fox Bourne, has described these exercises as representing ‘a classic example of the doctrine of *civilizing by slaughter*’. ** (My Italics)

Military expeditions against indigenous socio-cultural sites and holy religious shrines exposed the powerlessness of the spiritual forces and divinities in charge of such places; and as this excerpt from Cheetham indicates, they facilitated conversion to Christianity.

The uneducated native out here has such a narrow outlook on life that although he might think the Gospel very beautiful, he would not think of leaving his idols for Christianity unless he was convinced that the idols were powerless to help. Me would argue that the Gospel was good for white men, but that his father’s idol would be good enough for him.⁸⁵

Through coercion and sustained missionary propaganda, among other factors, Christianity began to record a huge following in Igboland. By 1914, according to our source, ‘in such huge towns as Onitsha, Obosi, Ogidi, Nnewi, and Asaba, ...there are large numbers of full church members, (and) the congregations more than support their pastors’.⁸⁶

The educational programme of the *civilizing mission* was perceived as a huge success in Igboland. An article in the official *Diocesan Magazine* had this to say about Igbo response to education:

It is the native (Igbo) Christians all along the coast who are the best educated, most enterprising, and most receptive of new ideas. So that in almost every important town in Northern Nigeria the postmaster, the Government clerks, and probably the sergeant of police are all native Christians.⁸⁷

Elsewhere, F.K. Ekechi has discussed this phenomenal response in relation to a combination of factors: curiosity, inter-communal rivalry among the Igbo speaking peoples, and the attempt to acquire education as an instrument for achieving their political, economic and social objectives in the evolving colonial state.⁸⁸ These Igbo beneficiaries of Western education and Christianity are described by our sources as people who ‘feel new responsibilities and new hopes’. In essence, they were perceived as representing the emerging modernization and *civilization* in Southeastern Nigeria.

In 1912, 262,000 tons of palm oil and palm kernels were exported from Southern Nigeria to Britain for a total value of 4,452,000 pounds sterling. This represented over eighty percent of Nigeria’s total export for that year valued at 5,772,000 pounds. On the other hand, the total value of imports for that year was 5,467,000 pound.⁸⁶ Given the prolific participation of the Igbos in the booming palm oil trade, Cheetham felt satisfied that the economic goals of the *civilizing mission* -to stimulate the business faculties of the ‘natives’ through European capital -was being realized. **He** recorded that booming commerce was enhancing living standards and promoting social change in Igboland:

During the last few years, the people living near Onitsha have been buying great quantities of European building materials. Many natives are putting up good houses with iron roofs, and cemented floors. *In some towns even the small idol-houses are iron-roofed*⁹⁰ (My Italics)

Finally, Cheetham’s ‘Letters’, as represented and discussed in this essay, have clearly portrayed Igboland as a community with the potential of attaining heights comparable to the

'civilized' races. To translate the potential into concrete reality, however, Britain needed to scrupulously carry through the noble goals of the *civilizing mission* in a true humanitarian spirit. Hence Cheetham argued: 'During the period of development we must try and give Africa some of our best men, such men as we have freely given to India...'⁹¹ The history of India's exploitation by Britain and its subsequent postcolonial struggles against poverty and underdevelopment, which is outside the scope of this study, indicates that Cheetham's theoretical assumption here (and in many other instances in this essay) is fundamentally flawed.

Conclusion

The issues addressed by Cheetham, like many of his mid-nineteenth century predecessors as Henry Venn and William Lawrence, revolved around the *native question*: do you 'develop' the natives through a conscious policy of cultural transformation, or do you 'stultify' them under a policy which encourages 'non-intervention' and cultural preservation? Having dealt with how Cheetham, as a developer, related to the arguments of the preservationists, let me conclude by showing how he fitted into or differed from the Henry Venn idea of the *civilizing mission*.

Cheetham's perception of the *civilizing mission* did not exactly replicate those of Venn and the CMS in the mid-nineteenth century. To begin with both men were developers. However, while Venn advocated respect and tolerance for *national culture* in the implication of Christianity, Cheetham tacitly endorsed a thoroughgoing transformation of indigenous cultures in order to produce 'devout' believers of the faith. This position was informed by the racist assumption that the African race was 'in its child stage', and, to 'progress', they have to cultivate mid-Victorian values under the superintendence of Europeans over a longer period of time -at least 500 years! In this sense, Cheetham was a more rabid paternalist than his mid-nineteenth century predecessor.

Venn rejected the idea that in developing the native, including implanting the church, 'everything (should be) done to conform to the English pattern'.⁹² his mid-nineteenth century advice to missionaries sheds more light on the ideology of more 'limited intervention'.

It must be remembered that in Missionary work we are not transplanting...native Christians have been raised from seed -'the seed is the word of God'. Now, seed sown in a new country and climate will not yield a produce precisely the same with the mother plant in the old country.

It will be essentially, yet not identically, the same. There will be variations more or less pronounced, and we must conclude that it -will be so in the propaganda of Christianity.⁹³

As seen in the body of the main narrative, Cheetham and his colleagues in the Niger Mission did not quite accept the above view. Eager to harvest fruits that are 'precisely the same with the mother plant' in Igboland, they 'put out of Communion all those communicants who were not living consistent Christian lives'.⁹⁴

Thereafter, under the auspices of Cheetham and Rev. T.J. Dennis, the Niger Mission published what it considered inconsistent with Christianity in a paper entitled: *'The Church and Native customs'*⁹⁵ These include, among many others, the following indigenous practices: polygyny, mixed marriages between Christians and 'heathens', firing of guns during burial ceremonies, participating in masquerade festivals, and the acquisition of indigenous social honours such as the *Ozo* title. Enraged by such regulations designed to remove Christianity from the African cultural context, Blyden protested: 'The Christ we worship must be an African.. .the Christ revealed in the Bible is far more African than anything else. Hence all the pictures by Europeans to represent Him are false to us.

Venn had envisaged a rapid three-stage process in the evolution of the Native Pastorate Church. First: the European missionary is to organize the first converts in the field into little bands under local leaders; and these converts 'should start as *soon* as possible to make contributions to a Native Fund'. Second: these little bands should be encouraged as *soon* as possible to coalesce into a bigger congregation under a local catechist to be sustained financially by them. Third: thereafter the missionary is only 'to exercise his influence *ah extra*, prompting and guiding the native pastors to lead their flocks...'⁹⁷

Whilst not totally rejecting this process and its underpinning philosophy, Cheetham and his colleagues showed considerable reluctance to handover the reins of control to Igbo clergymen. The first Igbo convert to be ordained between 1892 -the year the Niger Mission was completely taken over by Europeans after the death of Bishop CTowler -and 1903 was George Nicholas Anyaegbunam.

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Anyacgbunam was described as 'a very fine Christian man, with an amount of vigor and commonsense quite unusual among West African natives' at the investiture ceremony.⁹⁸

This reluctance to concede control to an indigenous clerical personnel within the Niger Mission had to do, as pointed out in the main body of the narrative, with the prevailing racist philosophy which underpinned Anglo-African relations within and outside of the church during the period in review. Part of the that philosophy urged Britain, according to Cheetham, 'not (to) handover to the (African) race while in its child stage powers that only belong to full-grown men'.

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