

2016-11

Michael Timneng and Jeremiah Chi Kangsen: Christianity beyond the missionary presence in Cameroon

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/50782>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

**Michael Timneng and Jeremiah Chi Kangsen:
Christianity Beyond the Missionary Presence in Cameroon**

Dictionary of African Christian Biography (www.DACB.org)
Journal of African Christian Biography
Volume 1, Number 6 (Nov. 2016)

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* explores the life and work of two men—Michael Timneng and Jeremiah Chi Kangsen. In their youth, they were both captivated by the Christian missionary message in Cameroon. As earnest and diligent converts, both of them carried the gospel beyond the reach of Western missionaries and they played a key role in establishing Christianity in Cameroon. Timneng was a Roman Catholic who courageously nurtured a young community of believers in the face of opposition from an unfriendly ruler. He worked as a pioneer in the absence of white missionaries, and he challenged positions of power from below. Kangsen, on the other hand, transformed power structures from the inside. First, as a member of the House of Assembly and then as a chief of the Kesu people, he worked to govern according to his Christian convictions. He went beyond the reach of foreign Christian missionaries, leading the well-established Basel Mission to independence as the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon. Their stories demonstrate the role that indigenous Africans played in rooting Christianity in the African soil.

Missionary Background in Cameroon

In 1472, the Portuguese reached Douala and sailed up the Wouri River. They found it teeming with shrimp, and aptly named it the Rio dos Camarões—or Shrimp River. Since that time, the surrounding country has been known as Cameroon. Originally, Europeans were only interested in the economic capacities of the area. They exploited the rich volcanic soil by establishing plantations, which inevitably increased the slave trade that spanned the Atlantic world. Missionary activity in the region was slow to start. It was only in the 1830s and 40s that Jamaican and Creole Baptists in cooperation with the Baptist Missionary Society of London began work. Their efforts, however, were limited to the coast and outlying islands. Malaria and other tropical diseases left

the interior cut off from the growing population and trading centers on the coast. [1]

The real Christian impact was felt after the arrival of Alfred Saker in 1844. He built schools and churches in Douala. While he is remembered as the “father of Christianity in Cameroon,” he only lived there four years before his death, and his influence remained limited to the coast. Missionaries began to imagine ways of expanding into the interior. Saker’s successor, T. H. Johnson, envisioned reaching the interior through a chain of mission stations. But even before he could embark on this scheme, African Christians themselves began to spread the gospel to the interior. Recaptive slaves who were brought to Douala converted to Christianity and then returned to the interior with the Christian message. [2] This was a model that would be repeated throughout the history of Christianity in Cameroon and Africa more broadly. Africans themselves came in contact with the Christian gospel, and then they began the work of mission and evangelism in the absence of foreign missionaries. It was not uncommon for western missionaries to arrive and already find small communities of Christians.

The Heyday of Imperialism

European leaders at the Berlin Conference in 1884 divided the African continent among themselves. Their objective was to spread commerce and civilization to the “dark continent,” an end that seemed to justify any number of brutal means. Cameroon was granted German Protection (Schutzgebiet) in 1884, which had the benefit of military protection against the whims of other European trading powers, but it also gave Germany far reaching authority. With the consolidation of the German presence on the coast, the hinterlands were gradually explored not only in search of ivory, rubber, palm oil, and cocoa, but also to spread the Word.

The advent of German rule also meant a change in missionaries. The British Baptist Missionary Society stations were turned over to German and Swiss missionaries. In protest, some African church leaders hived off to form the Native Baptist Church. The Basel Mission was established in Cameroon in 1886 under the name German Missionary Society—and later the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society. Besides preaching the gospel, one of its major concerns was the improvement of the quality of life of the people in the areas where their mission stations were located. To attain this

objective, they provided practical skills in a number of areas. They built a number of smaller mission stations over a widely diffused area. Likewise, they were noted for further reaching white missionary control. By contrast, American Presbyterians in Cameroon built fewer mission stations that were larger and emphasized local leadership. [3]

Germans placed missionary activity under strict control. They were not eager to allow non-German missionaries to operate in the territory. French Catholic Missionaries were refused permission to establish stations in Cameroon. When the Pallottine Fathers from Germany and Switzerland asked for permission to work in Cameroon, the colonial government instructed them not to compete directly with the Basel Mission and to receive no orders from non-German authorities. When they arrived in 1890, they were required to establish their mission stations far removed from areas already occupied by earlier arrivals. The Pallottine Fathers set up their stations in Marienburg near Edea and moved later to other areas as they began to open schools and mission stations. The priests of the Sacred Heart, arrived in Cameroon in November 1912 and were assigned to part of the Western Grassfields. Working under the same policy of avoiding missionary competition, they were posted to the Grassfields especially to Nso and Kom countries, far away from the well-established Protestant societies. They set up mission stations at Shisong in 1912 and in Fujua in the Kom country in 1913, the place of origin of Michael Timneng.

Roman Catholics

Historian of Christian mission Stephen Neill observed, "Perhaps the most successful of all the Roman Catholic missions in West Africa was that of the Cameroons." He noted that missionary efforts were slow to pick up until the turn of the 20th century, at which point "progress was rapid." Neill continued, "With a missionary force outnumbering that of all the Protestants put together by four to one, Roman Catholics were able to establish themselves throughout the territory, in which certain areas gave the impression of being an entirely Christian country." [4]

Neill's use of the term "missionary force" is unfortunately vague. It carries the connotations of white foreign missionaries, when in fact it was local young men and women who did most of the

grunt work in establishing Catholicism in Cameroon. Beginning in 1896, German colonial administrators sent the sons of chiefs to the Catholic school at Kribi, where they learned Catholic doctrine in addition to the “three ‘Rs.’” When they returned to their home villages, they were eager to share their faith with their friends and families. In Cameroon, the young Christians had the urgent zeal of youthful converts. They were often uncompromising with the “pagan” past, seeking to make a break with practices of polygamy, secret societies, and witchcraft.

Michael Timneng was one such convert. With little assistance from foreign missionaries, Timneng stood bravely by his convictions in the face of a hostile ruler and nurtured the young Catholic Church among the Kom. But the direct challenge to Foyin Ngam did not come from foreign missionaries, but rather one of his own difficult subjects. Timneng’s story sheds light on the relationship between foreign missionaries and indigenous initiatives in African Christianity. It also provides an example of the tensions that can develop between traditional religion and Christianity in Africa. Ultimately, however, Timneng’s story is one of the key players in what made Catholicism such a vital force in Cameroon today.

Independence and Christianity Today

When the Allied forces defeated the Germans in Cameroon in 1916, the German missionaries (Pallottine, Sacred Heart, etc.) fled south to Equatorial Guinea with the German forces. At the end of First World War, Cameroon was divided between British and French administration. Not surprisingly, new missionaries, usually from France and Britain, replaced the missionaries from Germany. Apart from yet another change in missionary nationalities, the war also led to an increased awareness of African national consciousness. In the early part of the 20th century, African nationalism was not directly antagonistic to colonial rule. Many early nationalists demanded more say in the colonial government and access to land. They were perfectly willing to accept a qualified franchise. But as the century wore on, it became increasingly clear that African nationalism was turning in the direction of full independence. The former colonial powers were badly battered during the Second World War and their

colonial subjects, who had now fought in two major world wars, were eager to determine their own destinies. Independence was the watchword of the day, and it extended into the churches.

As the sun set on European empire in Africa in the middle of the 20th century, Christian missionaries were also ceding control over their missionary outfits. Formerly white dominated missions began to turn more control over to local church leaders. The Basel Mission turned control of the church over to the hands of Kangsen. He made the ideal leader. He was highly educated, an experienced teacher and preacher, and he had the political experience necessary to govern a large church body. He was also humble, meaning that he would not be corrupted by a position of power in the church hierarchy.

Today, the population of Cameroon is estimated at over 23 million. For over 100 years, Christianity has succeeded in transforming not only the lives and souls of the different ethnic groups, but it has also delivered a better quality of life by establishing schools, hospitals, clinics and other social services that have made meaning in people's lives. Today, there are three major religions in Cameroon, namely Christianity, Islam and indigenous African religions. At least 70% of the Cameroonians are Christians while 30% are either Muslims or those who still hold the religious beliefs and practices of their ancestors. The two dominant Christian groups are Catholics (32.4%) and Protestants (30.3%). Kangsen's Presbyterian Church in Cameroon is the largest English-speaking Protestant Church in Cameroon. It has between 1 and 1.5 million members who worship in 1,475 congregations, divided into 29 presbyteries. There are roughly 1,400 pastors. Behind these facts and figures are the lives of those people who worked tirelessly to champion the cause of the gospel.

Contrary to the popular image of mission work in Christianity, the conversion of Cameroon and the African continent was not a "foreign affair." Africans like Timneng and Kangsen were directly responsible for making Christianity in Africa the vital force it is today.

Paul Nchoji Nkwi

Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda
DACB Advisory Council member