

Advent of the Baptist mission in Oyo, the strategies, impacts, and challenges

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Abstract

The establishment of the Baptist Mission in Oyo was as a landmark event in the town's history, spirituality and development. Although the missionaries came with a clear purpose of Christian evangelisation, they combined the preaching of the gospel with social services such as education, health care, and moral etiquette. Through the establishment of churches, schools, and training centers, they created platforms for both spiritual growth and intellectual enlightenment. Their use of the Yoruba language in worship, Bible translation, and catechismal teaching made Christianity more accessible and relatable to the local population. However, the mission's progress was not without difficulties. Cultural resistance, rivalry from other denominations, financial constraints, and political interference posed serious challenges to their work. Despite these obstacles, the Baptist Mission succeeded in laying a strong foundation for Christian faith, formal education, and community reform in Oyo. Using both the primary and secondary data sources, and historical analytics, this paper examined the origin, strategies, impacts, and challenges of the Baptist Mission in Oyo from its early beginnings to its lasting influence on the community, it revealed how the Baptist Mission not only introduced a new faith but also transformed social attitudes and helped shape a new generation of leaders. The paper, which showcased the rich history and development of Oyo, vis-à-vis the Baptist mission, concluded that the church's influence remained deeply rooted in Oyo's religious and educational landscape, serving as a lasting testament to the resilience and vision of the early Baptist pioneers.

Keywords: Oyo, Christian missionary in Oyo, Christianity in Yorubaland, Baptist mission in Nigeria

Introduction

Oyo town, the seat of the Old Oyo Empire, was a hub of Yoruba culture, politics, and commerce. However, by the mid-19th century, the once-powerful empire had declined due to internal conflicts and external pressures from neighboring states. The sociopolitical disintegration of the Oyo Empire created a fertile



ground for the introduction of new ideas, including Christianity. Traditional religious practices, such as the worship of *Sango* (god of thunder), *Ogun* (god of iron), and other deities, dominated the spiritual life of the people. These indigenous beliefs were deeply intertwined with the social and political structures of the society.¹ The arrival of Baptist missionaries in Oyo represented not only a spiritual incursion but also a challenge to the established order.² Oyo Empire's belief system was part of Yoruba religion, yet they developed their own traditions. The native religion is based on the concept of *Orisa* and various gods who helped the empire thrive. Long before Christian missionaries arrived in Oyo, one of the ancient Yoruba cities in what today we know as Nigeria, it was already an important cultural and political hub. Oyo people were deeply religious and their sensibilities were expressed in the worship of deities and the spirits of their ancestors. Prior to Baptist missionary activities, the religious practice in Oyo was predominantly polytheistic in faith (*Orisa*), with ancestral worship.

Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the Yoruba people, including the inhabitants of Oyo, enjoyed a human populace that practiced a complex and systematic traditional religion. They were polytheistic, with supreme god *Olódùmarè* being the top god of their various gods. Under *Olódùmarè* were many deities (*Orisa*), each with unique characteristics and functions. Idowu, in his work *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* for example, has done considerable work documenting Yoruba practice which illustrates how *Orisa* mediate between humans and divinity. *Sango*, the god of thunder and lightning, was one of the most important deities in Oyo.³ *Sango* is a historical figure himself, a king and fourth *Alaafin* of the Oyo Empire, who was later deified as a god.⁴ His captivated audience followed him with faith in his justice and will to punish the criminals. *Ogun* was another significant deity, a god of iron and war and worshipped especially by soldiers, blacksmiths, and hunters. *Esu* was the trickster and messenger god who carried sacrifices to the gods and tested human morality. These and revered others, including, *Obatala* (god of purity) and *Yemoja* (goddess of the sea and motherhood), perform essential functions in both Oyo's spiritual and social life.

Prior to the arrival of the Baptist missionaries there in Oyo, religious observance was widely regarded as something rooted in ritual and looked like undergoing multiple ceremonies, sacrifices and festivals. Shrines were built to particular gods, and priests and priestesses acted as go-betweens for the god and the people. Common rituals including sacrifices of animals, food, or more to please the gods and gain their support. Festivals were an indispensable part of religious life, offering space for communal worship and cultural expression. The *Sango* Festival, for example, was one of the most significant events in the Yoruba calendar, and included activities such as drumming, dancing and fire-spitting exhibitions to celebrate the thunder god. Similarly, the *Egungun*

¹E.B. Idowu. African Traditional Religion: A Definition. SCM Press. 1973

² J.A. Atanda. Baptist churches in Nigeria, 1850-1950: accounts of their foundation and growth. Ibadan: University Press. 1988 pp. xv-4. ISBN 978-9781549847. OCLC 19106556.

³ E.B. Idowu. *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*. Longmans, Green and Co.1962

⁴ R. Law. The Oyo Empire c. 1600 - c. 1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Clarendon Press.1977

Festival honored ancestral spirits, which were believed to return to bless and guide their descendants. These festivals strengthened communal ties and allowed Oyo's religious practices to endure. The *Alaafin*, king of Oyo, was regarded as a deity king installed by the gods. Religious ceremony legitimated his power, which includes oath taking and he was meant to rule in accordance with religious principles. The *Oyo-Mesi*, as a Council of Chiefs who advised the Alaafin, also played religious roles, consulting diviners and receiving spiritual guidance on matters of state.⁵ These oaths taken in the name of gods such as *Ogun* were binding and played a significant role in the enforcement of justice. In certain instances, legal disputes were settled by religious measures. This theocratic political system implied that religion was inherently involved in political power and law enforcement.

It is important to note that even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, Islam had made significant inroads into *Yoruba* society through trans-Saharan trade networks and interactions with *Hausa* and *Fulani* Muslim merchants. By the early 19th century, Muslim communities were already established in Oyo, although their influence was initially limited to trade. Before the arrival Baptist missionaries in Oyo town, the Anglican and Methodist churches had already begun their missionary work there. The Methodist missionaries and the Anglicans, through the Church Missionary Society (CMS), were among the first to arrive in 1853-1856 respectively, bringing not just the Christian message but also schools and new ideas that would later shape the community. It was on this prepared ground that the Baptist mission, led by Mr. T.A. Reid, began its own work in 1858.⁶ So, the story of Christianity in Oyo did not start with the Baptists; the Anglicans and Methodists were the pioneer missionaries. By 1858, Baptist missionary made their first appearance in Oyo. The missionaries introduced Christianity, Western education, modern medicine, and new social values that transformed the town. While some aspects of traditional life persisted, the influence of the missionaries shaped the development of Oyo into a modern urban center. This work is aimed to analyse the strategies adopted by the Baptist Church to establish a foothold in Oyo, it assess the impact of the Baptist missionary and Church on education and social services while identifying challenges.

Literature review

Scholars like Idowu E.B. in his work *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, contextualizes the Baptist mission within the larger framework of religious encounters, explaining how Baptist missionaries adapted their approach to accommodate or challenge Yoruba religious practices Christian missionary activities in Yoruba land began in the early 19th century, with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) playing a leading role. The Baptist Mission, however, commenced in 1850 with the arrival of Reverend Thomas Jefferson Bowen, an

⁵ R. Law. *The Oyo Empire c. 1600 - c. 1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Clarendon Press. 1977

⁶ J.F. Ade Ajayi. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. London: Longman. 1965. https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Christian_Missions_in_Nigeria_1841_1891.html?id=YTehMQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

American Baptist missionary. Scholars like Ayandele E.A.⁷ and Olayiwola R.O.⁸ agreed that Bowen's pioneering efforts laid the foundation for Baptist missions in Yoruba towns, including Oyo. Bowen's strategies, which emphasized establishing schools and translating the Bible into Yoruba, were pivotal in introducing Christianity to the region.⁹ Ogbu Kalu's in his work "Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian Story, delves into the role of Bible translation and how the Baptist missionaries, like other Christian missions, emphasized the need for the Bible in local languages. This facilitated deeper engagement with the Yoruba people in Oyo and allowed for the integration of Christian teachings with local cultural expressions.¹⁰

Scholars as Ayandele¹¹ and Ajayi¹² have extensively chronicled the advent of Christianity in *Yorubaland*, situating Baptist missionary activities within broader evangelical trends in West Africa. According to Ayandele, the Baptist Mission commenced its work in Yoruba territories in the mid-nineteenth century, spearheaded by Reverend Thomas Jefferson Bowen, who arrived in 1850 and initiated outreach in *Ijaiye* and later *Ogbomoso* before extending efforts to Oyo in 1858.¹³ Key works such as Badejo's *The History of the Nigerian Baptist Convention* provide detailed accounts of early Baptist activities.¹⁴ Ade Ajayi in his work *Christian Missions in Nigeria: The Making of a New Elite*, offers a foundational understanding of how Christian missions, including the Baptist Church, sought to create a Western-educated elite in Southern Nigeria. Peel in his book *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, argue that the use of indigenous clergy was crucial in bridging cultural gaps and ensuring the long-term sustainability of missionary efforts.¹⁵ According to Ogbonda J.F. in his work, *the Growth of Christianity in Yoruba Culture*, these schools became centers for training future leaders, thus embedding Baptist influence in the socio-political fabric of Oyo society.¹⁶ According to Omolewa M. the Baptist schools in Oyo produced many of the region's future leaders, civil servants, and professionals. The integration of Christian values into the educational curriculum meant that many of the graduates were not only literate but also deeply influenced by Christian ethics.¹⁷ However, despite this array of ideas

⁷ E.A. Ayandele. *Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1966*. London: Longmans; 1966

⁸ R.O. Olayiwola. *Christianity and Yoruba Culture*. Ibadan University Press. 1999

⁹ L. Sanneh. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1983

¹⁰ U.O. Kalu. *Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian Story*. Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1978.

¹¹ E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. London: Longman, 1966.

¹² J.F. Ade Ajayi. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. London: Longman. 1965. https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Christian_Missions_in_Nigeria_1841_1891.html?id=YTehMQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

¹³ E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*: London: Longmans. 112-115

¹⁴ D. Badejo. *The History of the Nigerian Baptist Convention*. Ibadan: Baptist Press, 1993.

¹⁵ J.D.Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Indiana University Press. 2000. <https://iupress.org/9780253215888/religious-encounter-and-the-making-of-the-yoruba>

¹⁶ J.F. Ogbonda. *The Growth of Christianity in Yoruba Land*. Heritage Press. 2008

¹⁷ M. Omolewa. *Education in Nigeria: Historical Perspectives*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books. 2007

about the Baptist mission in the Nigeria area, not much attention has been devoted to the introduction and growth of Baptist mission in Oyo. Hence, this work is an in-depth study of the growth of Baptist mission in Oyo.

Background of the Baptist Mission in Nigeria

Baptist missions in Nigeria had been on the road of development since the pioneering work of Thomas Jefferson Bowen of 1850 which however keep growing from era to era by diverse leadership who drove the vision and mission for decades. Nigerian Baptist was born as a result of the sponsorship of the Southern Baptist Convention in United States. Its birth and growth in turn led to the in flocks of highly intellectual foreigners and highly trained nationals who have prolong the vision and mission of reaching the unreached with the gospel. The spread of Christianity in Nigeria during the 19th century was significantly influenced by missionary movements from Europe and America. Among these, the Baptist Mission played a vital role in introducing and sustaining Christian beliefs and education, particularly in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The history of the Baptist Mission in Nigeria is deeply connected to the transatlantic slave trade, African-American missionary efforts, and the expansionist vision of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the United States.

African-American missionary, Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen was commissioned by the SBC Foreign Mission Board in 1849 to explore West Africa for missionary work. He arrived in *Badagry* (in present-day Lagos State) in 1850 and later moved to *Abeokuta* and *Oyo*, regions in the *Yoruba* hinterland that were experiencing both internal conflict and cultural revival.¹⁸ Bowen's decision to enter Nigeria was driven by a vision to evangelize indigenous populations and establish self-sustaining churches. Bowen and his successors placed a strong emphasis on indigenous leadership and education. His mission was significantly aided by Yoruba returnees from Sierra Leone and Brazil, who had acquired literacy and Christian values during their sojourns. The presence of these returnees made the initial propagation of Baptist ideals more effective. Following Bowen's initial efforts, the Baptist Mission expanded its presence through the establishment of churches, schools, and theological institutions. The first Baptist church in Nigeria was established in Oyo in 1855. This was soon followed by others in *Ijaye*, Lagos, and later throughout southwestern Nigeria. One of the hallmarks of the Baptist Mission was its commitment to education as a tool for spiritual and social transformation. In 1898, the mission established the Baptist College in *Ogbomoso* for the training of pastors and teachers, an institution that later evolved into the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in 1920, a prominent center for theological education in Africa.¹⁹

The mission also established numerous primary and secondary schools, which provided western-style education and helped to raise a generation of literate Nigerians who later played critical roles in the nationalist and independence

¹⁸ J.F. Ade Ajayi. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. London: Longman, 1965. https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Christian_Missions_in_Nigeria_1841_1891.html?id=YTehMQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

¹⁹ A.O. Oladejo. *The History and Growth of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso (1898-2010)*. Ibadan: Baptist Press, 2013

movements. The Baptist educational model integrated religious instruction with vocational training and general education, fostering moral and intellectual development among Nigerians.²⁰ The Baptist Mission emphasized believer's baptism by immersion, the autonomy of the local church, and a congregational form of church governance. These theological distinctive influenced the structure and development of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), which was formed in 1914. The NBC became a symbol of indigenous ecclesiastical authority and cooperation among Baptist churches in Nigeria.²¹ One of the strengths of the Baptist Mission was its early focus on training indigenous leaders. From the beginning, Bowen and his successors believed that Africans should eventually take over the leadership of the church. This vision was realized in the early 20th century, as Nigerian pastors and administrators increasingly took control of church affairs. By the mid-20th century, the NBC had become a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating body, aligning with the mission's original goals.²² Nigerian Baptist was born as a result of Baptist Missions and the growth gives birth to a lot of developed and highly intellectual foreigners and nationals to prolong the vision and mission of reaching the unreached with the gospel.

The background of the Baptist Mission in Nigeria is a story of vision, perseverance, and cultural engagement. From the pioneering efforts of Thomas Jefferson Bowen to the formation of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, the mission's development reflects broader themes in African Christianity, including indigenization, education, and socio-political transformation. The Baptist Mission's enduring legacy is evident in the vibrant Christian communities, robust educational institutions, and empowered leadership that characterize the Nigerian Baptist movement today.

The pioneering Baptist missionaries in Oyo Mr. T.A. Reid (1858-1864)

The first missionary who can be referred to as the first pastor of *Isokun* Baptist Church, Oyo, was Mr. T.A. Reid. He was the first missionary in Oyo and was sent to Nigeria by the Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of America in 1857. The job of locating missionaries to ready areas was the responsibility of the Mission of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nigeria. Mr. Reid was therefore located to Oyo where he was to begin working 1858. Upon his arrival, Rev. Reid founded the First Baptist Church in *Oke-Isokun*, Oyo, in 1858. This church became the first Baptist congregation in the town and served as a central hub for missionary activities. Reid's work laid the foundation for the spread of Baptist Christianity in the region, marking a significant milestone in the religious history of Oyo. As a pioneer, he faced a lot of difficulties. During this period the people of Oyo were mainly Muslims and worshippers of indigenous religions. Christianity was entirely new to them. The period was also marked by

²⁰ U. O. Kalu. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008

²¹ D.O. Ogungbile. "The Role of Indigenous Agents in the Development of the Nigerian Baptist Convention." *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 4(1), 2014. 45-60.

²² J. Gat. *Mission or Submission? African Churches in the 20th Century*. Nairobi: Uzima Press. 1971

political instability and intra-tribal conflicts within the Yoruba kingdom, which posed significant obstacles to missionary work. Additionally, the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 affected the operations of American missionary societies, leading to a reduction in support and personnel. After some concerted efforts at making his mission recognized, he succeeded in securing a piece of land from the then *Alaafin* of Oyo, *Alaafin Atiba Atobatele* (1837-1859) to build a church. He was given a piece of land very close to *Iseyin* gate. He was in Oyo till 1864 with a few converts. He was however able to be the forerunner for other missionaries coming after him. He endured till 1864 when he retired.²³

Despite the challenges, Rev. Reid's contributions had a lasting impact on the religious landscape of Oyo. The First Baptist Church he established continued to grow and became a mother church to numerous other Baptist congregations in the region. His pioneering efforts paved the way for subsequent missionaries, such as Rev. S. G. Pinnock, who expanded the Baptist mission's reach in Oyo and its environs. It should be noted that, there was no missionary for Oyo station between 1864 and 1889. This was as a result of intra-tribal wars (*Kiriji* war) among the *Yoruba*, which lasted between 1860-1889. Rev. T. A. Reid's mission in Oyo town from (1858 to 1864) represents a significant chapter in the history of Christian missions in Nigeria. His dedication and pioneering spirit laid the groundwork for the growth of Baptist mission and Christianity in the region, influencing the religious and cultural landscape of Oyo and its surrounding areas.²⁴

Rev. P.A. Eubank (1889 - 1891)

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board Commissioned Rev. P.A. Eubank and his wife to Nigeria, aiming to rejuvenate the Baptist mission in Oyo. Their arrival marked the end of the mission's dormancy. Revd & Mrs. P.A. Eubank were transferred from *Abeokuta* to Oyo to re-open the station in 1889, after the war. Rev. Eubank's primary objective was to re-establish the Baptist presence in Oyo, focusing on evangelism, church planting, and community engagement. After a few days' rest, they went to the site earlier occupied by Mr. T.A. Reid and started preparation of erecting a house there. Mr. S.G. Pinnock joined the Eubanks in January 1891 when they were busy on their building. The walls of the building had got up to six feet by the time Mr. S.G. Pinnock joined them. These missionaries worked together until the roofing was completed in March of the same year. Mr. P.A. Eubank did some work in Oyo, but his work was crippled by the despotic powers of the reigning *Alaafin* of Oyo (*Alaafin Adeyemi* I), who held absolute sway over his people. Rev. P.A. Eubank's missionary work in Oyo between 1889 and 1891 was instrumental in reviving the Baptist mission in the region. His dedication amidst challenges not only re-established a spiritual institution but also laid a foundation for future growth and

²³ First Baptist Church, Oyo. (n.d.). Missions & Evangelism. Retrieved from <https://fbcoyo.org/ministries/missions-evangelism/>

²⁴ First Baptist Church, Oke-Isokun, Oyo, "Our History," First Baptist Church Oyo, accessed August 8, 2025, <https://fbcoyo.org/our-history/>. 4

development. The enduring presence of the Baptist Church in Oyo stands as a testament to his impactful, albeit brief, missionary service.

Rev. S.G. Pinnock (1891-1909)

The third pastor of *Isokun* Baptist Church was Rev. S.G. Pinnock. It is necessary to know a little about the background of Mr. S.G. Pinnock, who was at Oyo station for a period of seventeen years, the longest service ever rendered by any of the reign missionary pioneers. He came to Nigeria as a Methodist missionary but later became a Baptist. Mr. S.G. Pinnock was sent out in 1888 under the auspices of the 'Joyful News Mission', an auxiliary of the Wesleyan Missionary Society of England. He landed in Lagos in 1888. It was a result of his association with Revd & Mrs. P.A. Eubank that he had the idea of the issue of an adult believer's baptism. In October 1891, he was ordained into the full Gospel Ministry in the hands of the Revd. P.A. Eubank, C.C. Newton and W.T. Lumbley. The ordination took place in Lagos. Rev. S.G. Pinnock got married to former Miss Madora Corshin in January 1892, at the Baptist Church, *Isokun*, Oyo. This was the first ever legal marriage contracted in the church.²⁵

After the departure of Rev. & Mrs. P.A. Eubank to America in 1891, Oyo station became vacant again. However, after the marriage of Rev. S.G. Pinnock, he took charge of the station from 1892 to 1909. It was during this period of seventeen years that the foundation for a strong Baptist religious movement was laid in Oyo and its environs. It should be remarked that *Alaafin Adeyemi I* was on the throne when the Rev. S.G. Pinnock arrived Oyo. The king was renowned to be very friendly with the Pinnocks.²⁶ As earlier stated, *Alaafin Adeyemi I* was very friendly with Rev. S.G. Pinnock but *Alaafin Lawani* who reigned after *Oba Adeyemi I* was very hostile to Pinnock. The conflict between Pinnock and *Lawani* arose mainly from the cruel treatment meted out to the poor by the king. Many of the wrong doings during the king's reign were credited to the king's servant, named *Oyerinde*, who came from exile with the king. *Oyerinde* was the 'keeper of the privy purse'. He later assumed the office of '*Kudeefu*'. He was the brain behind all the wicked deeds during *Oba Lawani's* reign: the poor were mercilessly treated, while the innocent were heavily taxed. These oppressive acts were carried out in all nooks and crannies of the Yoruba kingdom by the king's messengers.

An individual who perceived he is being oppressed by the *Alaafin* was sent to the colonial Resident in Ibadan by Rev. S.G. Pinnock. This annoyed the King and so sent for Rev. S.G. Pinnock. The king asked Pinnock why he referred the case to the Commissioner instead of him. Rev. Pinnock replied the king that he thought it was the best way left to him because many people were involved, and in order to avoid his being charged with interfering in the civil and political affairs of the Africans, he had to report it to the Resident. But *Alaafin Lawani*

²⁵ First Baptist Church, Oke-Isokun, Oyo, "Our History," First Baptist Church Oyo, accessed August 8, 2025, <https://fbcoyo.org/our-history/>. 5

²⁶ First Baptist Church, Oke-Isokun, Oyo, "Our History," First Baptist Church Oyo, accessed August 8, 2025, <https://fbcoyo.org/our-history/>. 5

told him that, as the king of *Yorubaland*, he could do what he liked with his people. He further told Pinnock that as the leopard fed upon the bush pigs and they had no right to question the authority of the leopard, so also were the poor, his food. The king then queried what Pinnock work was in Oyo. He replied that he was to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the poor, heal the broken-hearted, preach deliverance to the captives and set at liberty those that were bruised. The king then warned him not to interfere any more with the way he treated his people. Rev. Pinnock still appealed to the king to be lenient in his treatment of his subjects. A few months after this incident, Rev. Pinnock was in Ilorin when he received a letter put in a blue envelope with a red seal from the *Alaafin*. In the letter, the *Alaafin* ordered Rev. Pinnock to leave Oyo in March 1909, because according to the *Alaafin*, there could not be two kings in Oyo. This action was supported by the British Government. The *Alaafin* was advised not to use any act of violence against him and to allow him to remain till June 1909.

The European community in the town felt that if Pinnock had done anything which justified his ejection from Oyo, it should have been undertaken by the British Government, and not by an African king. The quit order was later challenged in the court of law. The Chief Justice declared that there was nothing in the conduct of Rev. Pinnock which could involve the British Government in his ejection. An incident which prompted the British Government to uphold the decision of the *Alaafin* was a sermon preached by Rev. Pinnock on one Sunday, Unfortunately, for Pinnock, a British Government spy was in the worship service. The parts of the text of the sermon which were inciting were reported to the government by the spy. As a result of this sermon, the decision of the *Alaafin* to eject Rev. Pinnock was upheld by the British Government.

The last days of Rev. Pinnock in Oyo were remarkable. Firstly, the *Alaafin* sent carriers to Rev. Pinnock to help him with his loads, but he rejected them, that he was not making any journey. The same message and replies were repeated for many days. On the final day, the king sent his clerk with two hundred carriers. When Pinnock remained adamant, at about noon of that day, two doors in Rev. Pinnock's house were forced open and their goods carried out. They were carried in hammocks into a motor vehicle waiting nearby. They left for Ibadan and were received by the Rev. and Mrs. Webster of Wesleyan Missionary Society Training Institution.

Rev. Pinnock's departure from Oyo affected the progress of evangelism in the city. All the missionaries of other denominations felt sad about the way Rev. Pinnock was ejected from Oyo. A sense of insecurity gripped them and they felt they too could be ejected upon similar pretexts. It was the common belief among the missionaries that the ejection of the Pinnocks from Oyo caused a set-back of at least fifteen years to Christian missionary work in Oyo city. The departure of Rev. Pinnock was therefore a great blow to the Baptist missionary work in Oyo. The perceived oppressed from the hands of the king, who used to run to the Pinnocks' Mission House for protection, had nobody to help them any longer. The king and the servants were therefore free to persecute their subjects without hindrance. As a result of such persecutions, many Christians fled the city and many went into hiding.

The Evangelical Strategies Used by the Missionaries

The story of Baptist missionary work in Oyo town is not just one of spiritual conquest, but also of thoughtful strategy, deep cultural engagement, and unwavering commitment. From the arrival of Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen in 1858 to the establishment of enduring churches and institutions, the Baptist missionaries employed a combination of practical, spiritual, and educational tools to spread the gospel. The missionaries' methods were not always met with open arms, but through patience, they managed to lay a strong Christian foundation that endured for generations.

Language and Cultural Adaptation

One of the most effective strategies the Baptist missionaries used was learning and using the Yoruba language. Unlike some European missionaries who insisted on preaching in English or other foreign languages, Baptist missionaries made a conscious effort to learn the local language and even translated portions of the Bible into Yoruba. Rev. Bowen, in particular, understood that preaching in the people's tongue was critical to breaking spiritual and cultural barriers. In his writings, Bowen emphasized the importance of cultural understanding in mission work. He believed that Christianity could not take root unless it spoke to people in the language of their hearts.²⁷ The use of Yoruba in sermons, hymns, and Bible studies not only improved communication but also showed respect for the people's heritage. This approach fostered trust and gradually softened resistance to the Christian message.

Education

The Baptist missionaries recognized that education could be both a social service and an evangelical tool. They established schools where reading, writing, arithmetic, and Bible knowledge were taught. In Oyo, education became one of the most powerful means of drawing families into contact with Christianity. The mission schools were often the first place where children and youths were introduced to Christian ideas, discipline, and values. Through the curriculum, Baptist teachings were subtly but consistently embedded in everyday learning. The missionaries understood that to shape a new generation of Christians, they had to start with the mind, and the school was the most effective place to begin.²⁸ Girls' education was also promoted, which was revolutionary in a society where formal education for females was rare. By educating girls, the Baptist missionaries empowered future mothers to pass Christian values on to their families, creating a generational ripple effect of influence.

Health-care and Social services

²⁷ T.J. Bowen. *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa, from 1849 to 1856*. New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857. 121

²⁸ E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. London: Longman, 1966. 202

While not as heavily resourced as other mission societies, the Baptists did not ignore the health needs of the people. Where possible, they incorporated basic medical care into their evangelism. Simple treatments for malaria, wounds, and other common ailments were provided to show Christian compassion and create goodwill. Even more powerful was the Baptist stance against inhumane cultural practices. They openly opposed the killing of twins, ritual sacrifices, and harmful widowhood rites. By taking a moral stand and protecting the vulnerable, they distinguished Christianity as a religion of life, mercy, and dignity. These actions did not go unnoticed, and many people began to reconsider their view of the missionaries. The ethical courage of the missionaries often won them the respect of even their fiercest critics.²⁹

Church planting and use of indigenous leaders (Clergy)

Rather than concentrating all activities in a single central church, Baptist missionaries focused on church planting. They established small congregations in different parts of Oyo and surrounding villages. These churches became centers of worship, learning, and community support. Crucially, the missionaries trained and ordained indigenous pastors and evangelists. Men like Rev. Moses *Ladejo* Stone and others became pillars of the local church. The emphasis on training locals ensured that the gospel was not perceived as a foreign religion. Indigenous leadership also made the churches more sustainable in the long run. By raising Yoruba Christians to lead their own churches, the Baptists made Christianity culturally relevant and spiritually authentic to the people of Oyo. It was a strategy grounded in humility acknowledging that the work could not be fully successful without the active participation of the people themselves.

The impacts of the Baptist mission in Oyo

The development of literacy and education in Oyo

The arrival of Baptist missionaries in Oyo brought with it more than religious teachings. Among their most lasting contributions was the “introduction and expansion of formal education”,³⁰ they brought a new way of learning. At a time when Western-style schooling was almost nonexistent in Oyo, and Oyo’s indigenous knowledge systems had been transmitted by elders, palace schools, and apprenticeship rich in oral tradition, proverbs, and practical skills. Their work went beyond evangelism; they built schools, trained teachers, and opened doors of opportunity for children and adults alike, particularly in reading and writing. The significance of this development was that it gave Oyo a new educational identity without erasing its cultural heritage. In the early years, education served as a key tool for spreading the gospel. “The missionaries

²⁹ J.D.Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000 112

³⁰ First Baptist Church, Oke-Isokun, Oyo, “Our History,” First Baptist Church Oyo, accessed August 8, 2025, <https://fbcoyo.org/our-history/>.

realized that to spread Christianity effectively, people needed to be able to read the Bible. This belief drove them to open schools where literacy was taught alongside religious instruction. These early mission schools were often built close to church compounds and became centers of learning in the town.³¹ These mission schools taught reading and writing, initially focused on scripture and the Bible but soon expanding into arithmetic, basic geography, and practical subjects. The missionaries' approach was hands-on: teachers came from mission houses, local converts were trained to teach, and lessons often mixed religious instruction with literacy practice. The result was a steady increase in people who could both read and write a foundational change for any community. The gradual rise in literacy was not just a religious milestone; it became the beginning of Oyo's transformation into a literate society that could engage with colonial administration and global ideas.

By the early 20th century, the mission's educational system had matured. Schools affiliated with the Baptist mission in Oyo began to produce students who would go on to secondary schools in *Ibadan*, Lagos, and even abroad. Some of these students later returned to Oyo as teachers, pastors, and civil servants, contributing further to the town's educational development. The story of "Olivet Baptist High School illustrates how missionary schooling moved from small mission huts to enduring institutions".³² Founded in the mid-20th century on the site of an earlier mission post, Olivet grew into a full secondary school at a time when Western education was still expanding in Oyo Province. The school became an anchor for the town's educational life producing teachers, professionals, and civic leaders who in turn invested back into local education and social development.

Finally, the long arc of missionary education in Oyo shows how literacy can be transformative without erasing identity. While mission schooling introduced new languages and literacies, people of Oyo absorbed these tools and used them selectively for trade, for civic engagement, and for negotiating power with colonial and later national authorities. In this way, Baptist missionary education contributed to a plural educational landscape that continues to shape Oyo's public life today.³³

Establishment of health stations (clinics) and social services

One of the major breakthroughs in health care provision came with "the establishment of small clinics and dispensaries".³⁴ These early medical outposts, often attached to mission houses or churches, provided free or affordable treatment to the local population. The Baptist missionaries recognized the lack

³¹ Baptist Missionary Society Records. "Mission Reports and Correspondence on West Africa," 1896.

³² . "Olivet Baptist High School," Wikipedia, accessed August 8, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivet_Baptist_High_School.

³³ "Ladigbolu Celebrates Olivet's 80-Year Legacy," OyoInsight.

³⁴ E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. London: Longman, 1966. 128

of structured medical services in the region and responded by introducing health care infrastructure that was otherwise unavailable. In these clinics, common diseases such as malaria, yaws, smallpox, and dysentery were treated. Missionaries also offered treatment for injuries, pregnancies, and childbirth complications. This was particularly important in a time when many women died from preventable conditions due to a lack of maternal care. Women began to see the mission clinics as safer alternatives to traditional birth practices, which were often risky or based on superstition.

The clinics also acted as centers for health education. Nurses and mission doctors educated patients about personal hygiene, nutrition, and disease prevention. They promoted practices such as boiling water before drinking, washing hands regularly, and isolating those with infectious diseases. "These basic but revolutionary practices began to shift community norms and reduce mortality over time".³⁵Beyond health care, Baptist missionaries in Oyo were deeply involved in providing "social services to vulnerable groups".³⁶ Widows, orphans, slaves, and the physically disabled were often neglected or mistreated in traditional Yoruba society. Missionaries sought to change this by creating safe spaces and support systems for these individuals.

Baptist church and the challenges of missionary growth in Oyo

The journey of Baptist missionaries into the heart of Oyo in the 19th century was marked by devotion, hardship, and resilience. These missionaries soon found themselves facing a complex web of challenges.

Socio-cultural challenges

One of the first and most enduring hurdles the Baptist missionaries encountered in Oyo was cultural resistance. The Yoruba people had a well-established religious worldview that was deeply woven into every aspect of their lives. "Religion was not just a set of beliefs; it was identity, history, and heritage". The deities of the *Yoruba*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, etc held spiritual, social, and political significance. Ancestral worship formed the backbone of family values and community cohesion. "When the Baptist missionaries preached the rejection of idol worship and called for the abandonment of traditional rituals, they were seen not just as foreigners but as people trying to erase history".³⁷ Also the traditional religious custodians saw the new Christian faith as a threat to their ancestral beliefs. To abandon the gods of their forefathers was considered not only disrespectful but also dangerous, as they feared it might bring misfortune upon their land. The missionaries' "condemnation of rituals, sacrifices, and festivals associated with traditional religion was perceived as an

³⁵ L. Sanneh. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989. 73

³⁶ J.D.Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 122

³⁷ J.F. Ade Ajayi. *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*. London: Longman, 1965. https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Christian_Missions_in_Nigeria_1841_1891.html?id=YTehMQEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

attack on the very identity of the Yoruba people”.³⁸ For example, festivals like the *Egungun* and *Oro*, which were central to social cohesion and ancestral reverence, were discouraged or outright condemned by the missionaries. This led to growing hostility, especially in communities that were deeply committed to traditional worship.

The missionaries, despite their sincerity, initially misunderstood the depth of this cultural entrenchment. Early converts were treated as traitors by their own people, and in some cases, families disowned children who embraced Christianity. “Funerals, naming ceremonies, and marriage rites often created friction between Christians and traditionalists, making it difficult for converts to fully integrate into either world.”³⁹ Furthermore, language posed a major cultural barrier. At first, many missionaries struggled to communicate effectively with the locals. Though they later made great efforts to learn *Yoruba* and even translated the Bible into the language, the initial period was marked by frequent miscommunication and suspicion. The challenge was not just about language, but about meaning understanding proverbs, gestures, and the significance of events in Yoruba cosmology.

Political and economic challenges

Oyo was not just a cultural center; it was a political powerhouse of Yoruba land. The *Alaafin*, as the supreme traditional ruler, held both spiritual and political authority over the people. His power was supported by the *Oyo-Mesi* (Council of Chiefs) and numerous local traditions. The arrival of Baptist missionaries, with their different worldview and values, threatened the status quo. Initially, the missionaries tried to gain the goodwill of the *Alaafin*, offering medical help and education as a sign of partnership. However, political tension soon emerged. Baptist teachings about the equality of all men before God, the dangers of polygamy, and the rejection of certain royal rites indirectly undermined the authority of the traditional hierarchy. “Missionary schools began to produce literate young men who questioned long-held customs and resisted submission to traditional demands.”⁴⁰ Some chiefs and titleholders saw this growing influence as dangerous. There were incidents where land disputes emerged, especially where churches and schools were being built. Baptist missionaries sometimes found it difficult to secure land without provoking political tension. There were also threats both veiled and open against converts who refused to participate in community rites or contribute to certain traditional levies. At a time when colonial powers were also beginning to interfere in local politics, the missionaries were sometimes mistakenly associated with foreign domination. Though most Baptist missionaries did not come as agents of the colonial government, “their Western identity and style of dressing often created confusion among locals who could not clearly separate the missionary agenda from political colonialism”.⁴¹

³⁸ A. Oladejo. *Yoruba Responses to Christian Missions*. Ibadan: Impact Press. 2007. 35

³⁹ E.A. Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*: 1966.

⁴⁰ L. Sanneh. *West African Christianity*: 1983.

⁴¹ J.D.Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

The Baptist missionaries also faced resistance from slave owners when their message included “the call for the emancipation of slaves and the equal treatment of all persons”.⁴² This created tension in a society where slavery was still a part of the economic system. The idea that a slave could worship alongside a freeborn Yoruba man was difficult for many to accept. Slave owners feared the Christian message would inspire rebellion among their slaves. Consequently, some owners prohibited missionaries from preaching to their households. Despite this, many slaves found hope in the gospel. Some of the early converts were slaves who sought refuge in mission houses or schools, where they were treated with dignity. Their “defiance of their masters”⁴³, however, was interpreted as insubordination. In retaliation, some slave owners petitioned the town chiefs to restrict missionary activities, arguing that they were encouraging disorder and disrespect among the servant class.

Environmental challenges

Beyond cultural and political struggles, the natural environment itself posed serious obstacles to Baptist missionary activities. The climate of Oyo was unforgiving. Missionaries had to contend with tropical heat, seasonal flooding, and unpredictable rainfall patterns. The dry season brought intense heat and dust storms, while the rainy season often resulted in water-borne diseases and impassable roads. Malaria, yellow fever, and dysentery were constant threats. Many missionaries fell ill shortly after arriving, and some died within months. The lack of clean drinking water and poor sanitation conditions in some areas made it difficult to maintain consistent health. The mortality rate among early missionaries was high, and their families also suffered. “Women missionaries, in particular, faced immense difficulties during childbirth and in raising children under harsh conditions”.⁴⁴

Feeding was another concern. The missionaries were unfamiliar with the local diets, thus, many initially struggled with nutrition. Importing food was expensive and unreliable, and the absence of refrigeration meant that perishable foods spoiled quickly. Over time, the missionaries learned to adapt by incorporating local foods into their personal menu, this was born out of hunger and the necessity to survive. Isolation also played a role in the environmental challenge. Mission stations were often located far from major roads or town centers. Travel was difficult and dangerous, especially in the early years when there were no formal transportation systems. This isolation not only hampered their work but also affected their mental health. Also, “loneliness, cultural alienation, and the burden of unmet expectations wore heavily on many missionaries.”⁴⁵

Despite these challenges, Baptist missionaries in Oyo displayed remarkable resilience. Instead of withdrawing in defeat, they began to listen more closely to

⁴² T. Falola, and M. Heaton. *A History of Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008. 161

⁴³ K. Akinsola. *The Slaves and the Gospel in Yoruba Land*. 2013. 97

⁴⁴ U. O. Kalu. *African Christianity: An African Story*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.

⁴⁵ A. Ogunrinade. “Baptist Missionaries and the Challenge of the Yoruba Environment: A Historical Perspective.” *Journal of African Missiology* 12, no. 2 (2019): 34–51.

the people. They recruited local converts who understood the terrain and could help bridge the gap between mission and community. They trained Yoruba preachers, teachers, and health workers who would eventually take over many aspects of the work. In dealing with political tension, the missionaries became more diplomatic. They sought ways to honour Yoruba culture while staying true to their message. For example, they adapted certain Christian practices to align with cultural expectations, such as incorporating traditional music and local idioms into worship. To counter environmental difficulties, the missionaries established mission compounds with wells, clinics, and sanitation programs. They partnered with other missionary bodies to improve infrastructure and share resources. By the turn of the 20th century, the Baptist mission in Oyo had grown in strength not because they had overcome all resistance, but because they had learned to adapt without compromising their core values.

In conclusion, the story of Baptist missionaries in Oyo is not one of smooth triumph, but of endurance through challenge. Culturally, they faced a proud and sophisticated people who were not ready to discard their heritage. Politically, they walked a fine line between influence and intrusion, often misunderstood by both locals and colonial agents. Environmentally, they battled sickness, hunger, and isolation. Yet, through it all, they remained committed. Their legacy today is not just in the churches they planted or the schools they built, but in the lives, they touched and the bridges they built. The people of Oyo remember not only what the missionaries taught but also what they endured. Their story remains a testimony to the power of patience, respect, and unwavering faith in the face of overwhelming odds.