The Emergence and Growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Calabar, Nigeria

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Abstract
Calabar is one of the first cities in Nigeria that came into contact with the early Christian missionaries. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in Calabar more than a century after Christianity was planted in the area. The Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, and Anglican churches had dominated the struggle for religious relevance in Calabar in the 19th century. They were later overwhelmed by the “Aladura type” of churches which arrived Calabar in the 1930s. By the early 1970s, the Aladura fame in the area began to fade as it was overtaken by the aggressive evangelical approach of the Pentecostal churches. Following the challenge of the Pentecostal to the historic churches, the later began to evolve internal reformation and strategies to survive the onslaught of the former. It was in the heat of this struggle for religious relevance by the historic and Pentecostal churches in Calabar that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in the area. The movement has since grown from strength to strength. This paper investigates how a new religious movement with foreign background and ideologies is able to sustain its growth in a competitive religious space such as Calabar.

Key words: Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints; Church growth and development

Introduction
Christianity had taken root in Calabar as far back as 1846 (Ajayi, 46) before the arrival of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the area in 1987. The Scottish Presbyterian missionaries led the first entry into Calabar. They were followed by the pioneer Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist and the Qua Iboe missionaries (Nnochiri 3). The Aladura type of Christianity emerged in the area led by the National Assembly church in 1952. This was followed by God the Host Prayer Temple (1954); Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (1958); Christ Apostolic Freedom Church and the Church of Christ in 1964, followed by the Holy Chapel of Miracles (1966); Church of Christ the Good Shepherd (1967); Christ Salvation (1974); Crystal Cathedral Church (1975); Church of Lamentation of Jehovah (1976); Christ Faith Evangelical (1976); Christ the Shepherd New Kingdom Flock; the Temple of Eternal Blessing (1977); Mt. Olive Church of Christ; The Foundation of Love and Peace (1978); Holy face Church (1979); Jesus Christ Healing and Evangelical Movement (1982); Holy face Spiritual Church (1982) and the Temple of God Church (1982) (Offiong, 109).

The historic churches and the Aladura/spiritual churches continued to struggle for converts using different evangelical methods. The historic churches were overtaken by the Aladura/spiritual churches in terms of membership strength. The Aladura/spiritual churches emphasized miracle healing through prayer which attracted more people than the western
medical approach of the historic churches. By the early 1970s the Aladura/spiritual churches faced intense rivalry from the Pentecostal churches which started in Calabar at this period. The city has since 1970 witnessed the outbreak of Pentecostal/revivalist activities.

The earliest of the Pentecostal organization in Calabar is the Revival Valley Ministries (1973); followed by the Redeemed International Calvary Mission (1975); Full Gospel Businessmen’s fellowship International (1975); Christ for the World Mission (1975); Truth and life Church International Inc; (1977) and the Deeper Life Bible Church (1979). The Pentecostal churches and organizations in the city have continued to grow in arithmetical progression. The phenomenal growth of these churches and organizations in the city is partly as a result of their vigorous evangelical activities and emphasis on healing and deliverance miracles. The impact of these churches and organizations in Calabar has had far-reaching effects on the religious and social life of the area. They have literally taken over both converts and areas of influence of the historic and Aladura/spiritual churches as well as drawing members from the traditional African religion, Ogboni, and other secret cult.

The Pentecostal churches and organization in their teachings referred to the Historic churches as “dead churches” and advised their listeners to attend “living churches” by referring to the historic churches as being “dead churches”, they mean that they (historic churches) are “spiritually dead” in content. In reaction to the exodus of their members and the admonition of the Pentecostals, the historic churches adopted some elements of Pentecostalism in its teachings and practices. They embarked on spiritual revival crusade to transform their churches to “living churches”. Prayer meetings, effective Bible classes, seminars and conferences are now constantly organized in the historic churches. They also organized fasting and tarry nights. The role of the Holy Spirit is now frequently highlighted in the liturgy of the historic churches.

The Pentecostals criticize the Aladura/spiritual churches for mixing up Christian beliefs and practices with African traditional beliefs and practices which they (the Pentecostals) considered to be demonic. In their teachings the Pentecostals warn Christians to stay away from “demonic” and “white garment” churches as they refer to the Aladura/spiritual churches. However, with their aggressive religious activities, the Pentecostal churches and organizations seem to have overshadowed the Aladura/spiritual churches in Nigeria. The Aladura/spiritual churches lost their converts to the Pentecostal churches and organizations. This fact is shown by the numerous testimonies made by converts from the Aladura/spiritual churches in the Pentecostal churches and organizations. The Aladura/spiritual churches also adopted strategies to attract new members and keep old ones. Some of them adopted Pentecostal terminologies in their names but still maintain their Aladura/spiritual beliefs and practices. Such terminologies include “Bible church” and “Bible ministries”. Others advertised on the television and radio inviting members of the public to attend their tarry nights and seminars. Some of them pretend to be Pentecostal organizations by not wearing white garments as uniforms.

It was this kind of religious landscape that greeted the arrival of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Calabar in 1987. The church has since then made considerable number of converts and impact in spite of some of its strange teachings and practices which may be considered to be antithetical it Christianity. The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint is historically new in Calabar. It is a transnational religion and the product of globalization (Nye, 201). Again, in spite of its American origin it is beginning to take root “through conversion in traditional context.”

**Origin of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded by Prophet Joseph Smith in 1830 at Fayette, New York. Smith claims that God the father and Jesus Christ the son
appeared to him while he was praying and told him not to join any of the existing religious denominations (our heritage 4). Three years after this first vision, Smith was visited by Angel Moroni who told him that he was chosen to be “an instrument in the hands of God to bring some of his purposes in this glorious dispensation” (Smith 6). Moroni is said to have directed Smith to a nearby hill where he was to dig up a compilation of ancient writings, engraved on gold plates burred by the ancient prophets” (6). The sacred work was to be translated into English by Smith. He was entrusted with the plates in 1827. Smith employed the help of Oliver Cowdery and they began to translate the work (6).

The work translated is the book of Mormon. The book is a volume of Holy Scripture comparable to the Bible. “It contains information on God’s relationship with the ancient inhabitants of America”. It is said to include “the fullness of the book of gospel” (Introduction in the book of Mormon). The book is said to have been written by many by Mormon, a prophet-historian. It also contains the ministry of Jesus Christ among the Nephrites after his resurrection. Furthermore, it outlines the doctrines of the gospel, the plan of salvation and also teaches men on how to obtain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come. Mormon handed over the completed work to his son Moroni who also added his revelations and hid the plates in the hills of Cumorah. Moroni having become glorified and resurrected being appeared to Prophet Joseph Smith and directed him to translate the work into the English language.

During the period of the translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery sought God’s guidance on baptism as they prayed at the river Susquehanna. They were visited by a heavenly being that introduced himself as John the Baptist and conferred upon them the Aaronic Priesthood as well as advised them to baptize and ordain themselves. in fulfillment of John the Baptist’s promise the Apostle Peter, James and John appeared to Joseph and Oliver and ordained them Apostle as well as “bestowed upon them the Melchizedek priesthood”(8). The Book of Mormon, the Holy Bible, Doctrine and covenants and the pearl of great price are used in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day saints.

**Doctrines and Practices**

Some of the teachings and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are at variance with that of the orthodox and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria while many are similar. The Book of Mormon, the Holy Bible, The Doctrine and Covenant and the Pearl of Great Price are the main sources of authority of the teachings and exhortations of the church. The church believes that the Bible is the word of God “as far as it is translated correctly”. It holds that through Joseph Smith, God expanded man’s understanding of some passages in the Bible because the Lord inspired him to restore lost or changed truths to the Bible text. These inspired corrections are what is called the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. The Latter-day Saint edition of King James Version of the Bible includes selected passages of the Joseph Smith Translation (Gospel principle 46)

The Book of Mormon which is a sacred record of inhabitants of America between 200BC and AD400 include the fullness of Jesus Christ. It also narrates the story of the visit of Jesus Christ to the people of America after his resurrection. It is believed that the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith through the gift and power of God. According to Joseph Smith, this book is “the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than any other book” (Gospel principles 46).

The Doctrine and Covenant is a collection of revelations by modern prophets of the Church. One of such revelations is in respect of the restored church of Jesus Christ these last days. There are sections that contain lost glorious truth. Again, there are sections that throw
more light on the teachings of the Bible and prophesy of coming events (Gospel Principles 47).

The Pearl of Great price is made up of the Book of Moses, the book of Abraham and the inspired writings of Joseph Smith. The book of Moses gives account of some visions and writings of Moses as revealed to Joseph Smith. Lost doctrines and teachings in the Bible are clarified and added information on the creation of the earth as revealed to Joseph Smith are found in this book. The book of Abraham is taken to be another work translated by Smith from a Papyrus Scroll taken from the Egyptian Catacombs. Information about the creation, the gospel, the nature of God and priesthood are found in this book. Apart from the books, the inspired words of the living prophets are also regarded as scriptures. These words are conveyed to the church through conferences, magazines and instructions (Gospel principles 47).

The scriptures discussed above are the main sources of authority of the beliefs and teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some of their beliefs and teachings backed up by these scriptures may be seen as a “corruption” of the Christian beliefs and teachings. these include; the Church of Jesus Christ in the Americas and the Church of Jesus Christ today, helping the ancestors and family history as well as post mortal spirit world.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that Jesus Christ visited the Americas after he resurrected and organized his church as well as taught the people for three days. Members of the Church of Christ are said to have lived righteously for two hundred years after Christ ascended into heaven (Gospel principles 91). The people in the Americas were the happiest people in the world until the work of God was destroyed by false pagan teachings or Jewish beliefs. Some members of the church rebelled. Eventually, the church which Jesus Christ had organized no longer existed on earth. Latter-day saints refer to this period of the absence of the church as the Great Apostasy (Gospel principles 92).

Following this final dissolution, confusion and contention over religion set in. people lived in spiritual darkness for several years. However, according to the teaching, the saviour had promised to restore his church in the latter days. Some people saw that the true gospel of Jesus was no longer taught on earth. They began to seek the truth about God and religion. Joseph Smith is said to be one of those people who wanted to know what the true Church of Jesus Christ was. God, the father and Jesus appeared to him in the woods and asked him not to join any of the churches because the true church was not on earth (92). God also described the creeds of the existing churches as “and abomination in his sight” Joseph was appointed to help restore the true gospel of Jesus Christ. This appointment was confirmed by the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthood on Joseph Smith. According to the teaching of the church, John the Baptist conferred the Aaronic priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in 1829. Furthermore, Peter, James and John gave the Melchizedek priesthood and keys of the Kingdom of God to Joseph and Smith. Finally, the saviour instructed that his church be inaugurated on earth on April 6, 1830. This church is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Christ is the head of the church today (96-97). The church organization includes; apostles, prophets, seventies, evangelists (patriarchs), pastors, high priests, teachers, and deacons.

Another belief and teaching that is of interest to this study is “helping our ancestors”. The belief and teaching surrounding “helping our ancestors” is contrary to the beliefs and teachings of Christianity. It is close to the African traditional religious beliefs and practices of ancestor veneration. Christians in the country are admonished by the Pentecostal and Historic churches to sever their relationship with their ancestors. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages their members to perform temple ordinance of baptism of their ancestors. They are to investigate their family history and identify which of their ancestors
that did not perform temple ordinances of baptism when he or she was alive. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints members are taught to believe that their ancestors in the spirit world are anxious to receive their temple ordinance. Children of twelve years old or more can receive the blessings of temple ordinance by being baptized and confirmed for their ancestors (237).

In African Traditional religious beliefs, the ancestors have survived death and are living in the spiritual world from where they still take interest in the family affairs (Parrinder 58). Hence, they are part of the social group. The ancestors are believed to watch over their families. The living performs their filial duties of offering regular libations of wine and food to them. Consequently, they receive blessings of good health and fertility. The similarity between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints beliefs and that of the Traditional African religious beliefs about ancestors attracts some people in Calabar to the Church.

Again, the teachings about post mortal spirit world are strange to Christianity but closer to African traditional religion. In the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in order to fulfill his plan of salvation God sent man from heaven to receive mortal bodies of flesh and blood on earth. Man’s mortal body will eventually die and man’s spirit will return to spirit world where it will be waiting, working and learning. However, for the righteous, resting will mean staying away from the care and sorrows of this world. Man’s spirit will remain in the spirit world until it is ready for resurrection, when it will receive the degree of glory it had prepared for (241). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prophets believe that the spirit is close by and is here on earth. For example, President Ezra Taft Benson is quoted to have said that “sometimes the veil between this life and the life beyond becomes very thin. Our loved ones who have passed on are not far from us (Gospel principles 241). Again, President Brigham Young in his teachings explains that “the post mortal spirit world is on the earth around us (Gospel principle 241-242). The spirit by nature has bodily form identical to that of the mortals but has acquired perfect forms. They still carry over from this earth their attitude to the spiritual world. Those who are righteous still remain so while those who are unrighteous still remain unrighteous. In the spirit world all spirit are adults even if they die as infant because they were adult before their mortal existence. Their desires in the spirit world are the same as it was in the mortal existence (Gospel principles 242). In this respect, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shares with African traditional religion the belief in Spirit and Spirit world which is here on earth.

In African traditional religion a deceased person who is not given proper burial rites or who died during pregnancy or by drowning is not admitted into the abode of the ancestors. The soul of the deceased person becomes a ghost-spirit finding temporary abode in material objects such as trees, rocks, hills, rivers and water courses (Idowu 173-175). They leave this abode and wander in the spirit world from time to time. Thus, the pre-existing beliefs in ancestors and post mortal spirit world in Nigeria as a whole and in Calabar in particular provides a fertile ground for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day saints to grow.

The Emergence and Growth of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Calabar

Calabar is a metropolitan city in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. The indigenous dwellers are the Efik, Qua and the Efut. It also accommodates stranger elements from other parts of the state and country. The city serves as the capital of Cross River State. Christianity has made its impact on the indigenous dwellers so much so that almost every family is identified with each of the Christian denominations, such as the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches. A few of them are members of the Aladura and the Pentecostal churches. However, the non-indigenous elements who make up the largest numbers of the population in the city patronize the new religious movement.
There are different versions in respect of the advent of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Calabar. Nevertheless, they all agree that the church started in the area in 1987. Bishop Lawrence Ekpezu maintains that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints started in Owerri, a town in the eastern part of Nigeria and from there it spread to other parts of Nigeria, including Calabar. According to him a man from the Obioma family in Owerri had a dream and sees the temple of the church. Some years later he read about the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day saints in a magazine. He wrote to the church in the United States of America requesting for missionaries to be sent to Owerri. Two missionaries were sent to Owerri. It was from here that they came to Calabar.

Dr. S.J. Okure gives another version of the origin of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Calabar. He claims that he brought the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to Calabar. Okure became a baptized member of the church while he was studying in the United States. Although Okure was on federal government scholarship the church took care of his entire welfare. When he returned to Calabar, he started a branch of the church.

Since its inception in Calabar, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has made sizeable growth. It has a branch and eight wards in Calabar municipality. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has recently established another branch in Akampa, a small town near Calabar. The majority of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are young dynamic non-indigenous elements. This group of members range from the age of 10-45. There are fewer older men and women. The young men are the bulwark of the church. They exhibit a sense of commitment and orderliness. Members from the age of 18-27 are involved in missionary service financially supported by their parents. In spite of the competition for converts in the religious market, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has continued to grow in Calabar. Several factors are responsible for its growth.

Growth Factors

Several factors account for the growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Calabar in spite of its late arrival in the area. It is important to reiterate that the majority of the converts of the church are youths of stranger elements extraction as well as a few middle age men and women who have no previous attachment to any religious denominations. These people are attracted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for different reasons. The reasons are the appreciation of church beliefs and teachings, church programmes and the esthetic of the church environment.

Some converts of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints find the church doctrines about ancestors and post mortal spirit world appealing and easy to understand because they are similar to African traditional beliefs. Teachings about ancestors and post mortal spirit world are not part of the doctrinal emphasis of Christianity. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Calabar feel comfortable with these doctrines because it gives them hope that when they die they will also live in the spirit world here on earth. Thus they see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doctrines about ancestors and post mortal spirit world to be “more liberating and less constricting” than the Christian doctrines of salvation (Nye 203).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints social welfare programmes have also impacted considerably on some people in Calabar. The Church embarks on donation of wheel chairs and financial support to orphanage and old people’s homes. Several books are donated to schools in the municipality, including the University of Calabar. It undertakes community services. It is the policy of the church to provide borehole water to neighbours around its church premises. It provides library and recreational facilities in its church premises which
are open to all for use, including non-members. The recreational facilities available include, table and lawn tennis court as well as basket ball pitches.

The architectural and environmental beauty of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints buildings attracts the attention of many visitors to the church. Its buildings are well designed and built according to international standards. The flowers and trees planted around the premises give the environment a serene aura. Added to this clean environment is the orderly disciplined conduct of members of the Church. The human capacity building programme of church attracts many youths. The youth in Calabar are besmirched by all manners of crises, fear and political tension. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides them the platform to realize themselves through job training programmes. Jobless youths are trained in different vocations such as carpentry, tailoring, motor repairing and driving. Church projects and programmes are sponsored through money raised from tithes, donations and fast offerings. The door-to-door approach of their missionaries also contributes to the growth of the organization. The Missionaries appear decent and simple in their uniformed black trousers, white shirt and black ties. They are organized and dedicated to the services of God as revealed by their readiness to offer answers to questions ask concerning The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doctrines in the Book of Mormon and other sacred literatures of the church. The factors discussed above have given the church the strength to survive in a competitive religious market economy, such as Calabar.

Conclusion

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in Calabar several years after the historic, Aladura and Pentecostal churches had been established in the area. The church is able to win a sizeable number of converts in spite of its strange beliefs and teachings, the church beliefs about the Church of Jesus Christ in the Americas and the Church of Jesus Christ today, helping the ancestors and family history as well as postnatal spirit world are antiethical to the teachings of Christianity in Nigeria. The Bible does not state that Jesus Christ visited the Americas and established a church three days after his resurrection. There is nowhere in the Holy book that says that Jesus established a church on earth which men changed its ordinances and doctrines. Following this, God promised to restore his true church with the help of Joseph Smith. Again, Christianity does not accept the baptism of the ancestors.

However, the beliefs and teachings of latter-day saints appeal to some people in Calabar because of their concern for the ancestors and post mortal existence which are also the concern of African traditional religion. Some converts are attracted to the movement for this reason. They see Latter-day Saint’s beliefs and teachings as being more liberating since it identifies their ultimate state of rest to be here on earth. This doctrinal attitude of accommodation of some aspects of African religious beliefs by Latter-day saints cannot be ignored as one important factor of conversion by the organization in Nigeria in general and Calabar in participation. In African traditional religious beliefs the ancestors and spirits are very close to the people. The ancestors participate in the affairs of their families.

Latter-day Saint’s social welfare programme and community services have also attracted people to the church. The prospect of being trained in some vocations encourages young men to join the church. The attitude of the church missionaries projects a good image of the organization. Latter-day saints have so far enjoyed a harmonious relationship with the people of Calabar. However, the historic and Pentecostal churches have continued to watch latter-day saints with suspicion and have not made any official public statement against them.

In view of the youthfulness and dynamism of members of Latter-day saints and its social welfare programme as well as community services the church as a good prospect of growing further in numerical strength on Calabar.
References


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