

# BEWILDERMENT, SPECULATIONS AND BENEFACTION: AFRICANS' INTERPRETATION OF WORLD WAR ONE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE SUDAN UNITED MISSION BRITISH BRANCH1

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## ABSTRACT

The Sudan United Mission British Branch<sup>3</sup> (henceforth SUMBB) was an interdenominational mission society which was founded in Britain in 1902. It began its Christian mission work in 1904 in the present day North Central Nigeria. In an early 20th century world, bereft of sophisticated information technology, news of WW1 came to the missionaries of the Mission, as it did many parts of Africa, slightly late. Information about the war filtered to Africans through colonial agents and Christian missionaries. The Africans reacted to, and interpreted the War in a

variety of ways. This paper examines Africans' interpretation of WW1 as portrayed in the literature of SUMBB. The paper seeks to answer the following questions: Why did Christian missionaries take the pain to tell their converts news of WW1? How and why did the literature of the SUMBB capture the response of the Africans to news about WW1? To answer these questions the present writer has examined, *The Lightbearer*, a bi-monthly magazine of the Mission covering the period 1914 to 1918; *Half a Century of Grace*, the Golden Jubilee book of the Mission, among others. In the literature of the Mission, news about WW1 was communicated to national Christians in spiritual garb to prevent anti-British feelings among Africans. As a result, some Africans saw the War largely through the prism of the teachings of European Christian missionaries. Consequently, these Africans spiritualized the War. By so doing, they were able to find a basis for empathy and solidarity with the British Empire through the Christian missionaries and colonial agents. In this way the Africans were made to support a cause that was largely not their own. This solidarity, in a way, contributed to Britain's success in the war. Although the Christians were not politically active at this time, the attitude prevented anti-British feelings and provided the necessary atmosphere for conscription. The missionaries therefore became unarmed combatants of the war. The responses of Africans were documented in the literature of the Mission to probably show readers in the home constituencies of the missionaries how British missions, or

missions from countries in sympathy with Britain, also contributed to the war cause.

## INTRODUCTION

In Africa, information about the War came only in bits and pieces as there was no sophisticated information technology as we know today. It seems, when Africans got fragments of the news of

the War, they were deeply confused. They could not reconcile what they were taught from the Holy Bible and what they were hearing. This was probably reminiscent of the great disillusionment painted by the legendary Cape Coast Poet, Kwesi Brew, in his poem "Lest We Should Be the Last." As Africans listened to the fragmented stories, they tried to fill in the blank spaces. In so doing they found themselves making speculations about the War. In their interpretation of the War they necessarily had to see it through the prism of the teachings of their European mentors who had come to share their faith with them.

## THE PAPER IN THE CONTEXT OF EXISTING LITERATURE

There are great literary works on World War I such as the one we find in Man's Unfinished Journey.<sup>4</sup> There are also reference to Africans' involvement in the Great War in some Church History texts such as the one by Peter Falk and a co-authored work by Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed. But there is no single available material on how missionary literatures captured African's interpretation of the Great War. This attempt at discussing how missionary literatures capture African's conception of the War, therefore, is probably a field that is still being explored.

## THE SUDAN UNITED MISSION BRITISH BRANCH: A BRIEF HISTORY

The Sudan United Mission was founded by Hermann Karl Wilhelm Kumm (henceforth Karl Kumm) and his wife, Lucy, in Sheffield in November 1902.<sup>5</sup> From the outset the Mission was called Sudan Pioneer Mission. By May 1904 the organisational structure of the mission consisted of a central committee and four local committees in Ireland, London, the Midlands and Scotland. In June 1904 the Scottish council suggested that the name of the mission should be

changed from Sudan Pioneer Mission to Sudan United Mission. Between July and November 1904 three missionaries of the mission were led by the founder to Nigeria where they opened their first station at Wase in present day Plateau State. This became Sudan United Mission British Branch (henceforth SUMBB).

Meanwhile, the perceived spiritual crisis in the Sudan, and the desire to quickly build a chain of mission stations from the Niger to the Nile in order to stem the advance of Islam into "pagan" territories, led to the global promotion of the spiritual need of the Sudan. Thus between 1906-1912 Kumm visited USA, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark with his characteristic crusading rhetoric in the form of ‘ “To the help of the Lord against the mighty.” ’<sup>6</sup> This led to the formation of American, South African, Australian/New Zealand and Danish branches of the Mission.<sup>7</sup> In the years that followed, more branches were formed.

Each branch of the S.U.M. was autonomous, but served in a federation with the other branches. Each branch had a field committee, except for the British and South African branches which had a joint field committee for many years.<sup>8</sup> There was a Field Council that brought the branches together. Similarly an International Committee which was consultative in character brought the national offices together.<sup>9</sup> Each branch had its own geographical sphere of influence on the field. The sharing out of spheres of influence among the branches was occasioned by the desire to cover much ground against the advance of Islam. By January 1916 the four branches of S.U.M. working in Nigeria had 37 missionaries working in ten mission stations in what is today North-Central Nigeria. In contrast, there were only four missionaries of the Australian branch of

S.U.M. working in one mission station in Southern Sudan among the Dinka (SUM Roll Call 6; From Pioneers to Partners 6). The Australian Branch of S.U.M. was not the only Christian mission society that was working in Southern Sudan. There were also the Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians (Sundkler 148-149).

The SUMBB took leadership role over the other branches of the S.U.M. because of two reasons: it was the British branch that invited all the other branches to work in the Sudan Savannah and; the other branches were non-British so they relied on the SUMBB in dealing with the colonial government (Boer 116).

During its history the Sudan United Mission British Branch had a bi-monthly magazine called The Lightbearer. The Mission also had many other literatures.<sup>10</sup> It is from a few of this body of literatures that the main thrust of the paper is built. But before focusing on this, it is important to look at a sketchy picture of the war and the role of European missions in Africa.

## WORLD WAR ONE AND EUROPEAN MISSIONARIES IN AFRICA

Although the war was between white men beyond the Oceans, Southern Cameroon, Tanzania and Namibia seem to be principal theatres of the war in Africa. By the time the war ended it is estimated that about 120,000 African soldiers and over a million African "carriers and other labourers" were involved in the war in Africa. Contingents of African soldiers in France

also run in thousands, with Andre Matswa of Congo who emerged as a warrior of repute and was rewarded sergeant.<sup>11</sup>

The European missionaries, for their part, took part in it in varying degrees depending on the proximity of their location to the principal theatres of the war. In French West Africa Fr. Dubernet warded off an African rebellion against conscription; and "In both Kenya and Tanzania British missionaries took the initiative in forming a mission carrier corps of their own..."<sup>12</sup> For their involvement in the recruitment campaign in French West Africa, the French Government rewarded a French mission led by Bishop Lemaître with subsidy for mission schools.<sup>13</sup>

#### AFRICANS' INTERPRETATION OF THE WAR IN THE LITERATURE OF SUMBB

For the missionaries of the Sudan United Mission British Branch, as was probably the case with most European Christian missions in Africa, there was a dearth of news about the War. In the words of Lowry Maxwell, one of the pioneer missionaries of the Mission:

And then, as the summer was at its height, the war came. I remember well the day when we first heard of it. Of its probability, or its causes, we had heard nothing. Our newspapers from home were already old by the time that they reached us [...]

We were sitting at lunch-quite a group of us [...] An orderly from the Government lines then appeared at the door, and I was handed a little note. It was curt, official, and appalling in its stern announcement:- "His Excellency the Governor announces for general information that war has broken out with Germany." That was all. No details; no explanation [...] What could we do? What was going to happen? In those days there was no B.B.C. to give us any explanation, or to warn us what to expect.<sup>14</sup>

As news of the war came to the missions in Africa in pieces and bits, so was the communication of same by those missionaries who were willing to tell their converts.

At first the missionaries that were working among the Dinka of the 'White Nile' were in a fix as to whether or not they should tell their indigenous converts news of the war. In the end they concluded that if they do not tell the converts they might get to hear it anyway, and maybe '...with an anti-British bias.'<sup>15</sup> The political situation in some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa in the years leading up to and during the Great War was such that in a number of spots there were already in existence ill-feelings against some colonial policies. This was occasionally voiced out by people like Garrick Braide of the Niger Delta Area and Mairigankarfe (Hausa word for Iron-shirt) of Jukun land.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for these missionaries the motive for telling the converts news of the war was to prevent the rise of ill-feelings among Africans against the British Government<sup>17</sup> in the way that Africans became rebellious to the French government over the conscription of their kith and kin in a part of French West Africa.<sup>18</sup>

With this motive in mind, the missionaries used the simplest terms possible to disclose news about the war to their converts:

So the situation was explained to one or two of the more intelligent "boys"; a small nation was threatened by a big one against previous treaties. The Great Chief of the British had telegraphed to the Great Chief of the Germans, to desist by such time that the sun should be in such a position. The German Chief had refused to listen, and so the Great Chief of the British had called all his men to go and support the weak and small nation.<sup>19</sup>

To ensure that their message was understood, the missionaries selected '...the more intelligent "boys;" ' and they used such phrases as 'the Great Chief' and '...by such time that the sun should be in such a position.'

It seems the missionaries' brief explanation of the war paid off. The converts understood the message and; comparing British motive with the teaching they had received from the mission on upholding the weak and not to oppress them, they approved Britain's role in the war and concluded "...the English are so good..."<sup>20</sup> Margaret Nissen, writing about forty eight years after the first world war, says this Africans' perception of the British continued for decades after the War.<sup>21</sup> In this way the mission achieved its objective for disclosing the news about the war.

In the weeks and months that followed, the converts often went to the missionaries for update about the war. During one of such visits, the converts asked why the war was not over. In their estimation the war was taking too long. The Europeans had taught them about forgiveness so they wondered why the war could not be over. Even from the stand-point of their own intra and

inter-tribal wars in days before the advent of European missionaries, which lasted for only days or weeks, they expected the European war to end quickly.

In their bid to satisfy the Africans' curious questions about the war the missionaries gave the converts the impression that Britain is a saintly country and Germany is a land of savages like Africa in days of yore. This caused the Africans to raise two fundamental questions: "Have no missionaries been sent to the Germans?" "[...] the English are so good, why does God not hold back the spears of the Germans?" To both of these questions no recorded answers were given to the Africans. From their interaction with the missionaries they were taught that mission societies could convert savage tribes into peaceful and useful members of a society; and if the

Germans were savages then missionaries could not have been to their land. Although the African converts knew nothing about German religious history, it seems their logic was not too far from being correct; but, as an editorial notes, Germany's problem was not one of lack of missionaries but one of want of trust for the Christian scriptures. In the words of the editorial,

Well, shortly after the teaching of higher criticism [...] into those young inflated minds of Germany these critics instilled distrust of the scriptures, and [...] taught that the Bible has no right to dictate to armies of men [...] It is because of that undermining of the standard of right [...] that Protestant pious people, as many of the Germans are, are found prepared to tolerate and condone acts that make humanity shudder.<sup>22</sup>

But it is difficult to tell whether this was the answer the missionaries gave the African converts. To the question '[...] the English are so good, why does God not hold back the spears of the Germans?' The editorial admits that 'This was...difficult to explain.' One wonders whether this question hinged on some understanding or misunderstanding of some teachings they had received from the missionaries or on their reminiscent of the protective power of the gods in African Primal Religions. That the Africans were able to hear and relate means that at this point some Christian teachings had left a deep impression in the mind of many Africans. This also shows that they had the ability to synthesize, analyse and to ask sensible and logical questions without having been to Cambridge or Oxford; contrary to Europeans' Darwinian conception of Africans during the last days of Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

But not all Africans were as fortunate as the Dinka of the White Nile to occasionally have an update of the war. In Jukun land in Northern Nigeria, as the information the people got about the war were in bits and pieces, they could not figure out what was exactly happening. An old man, lacking information or

not very satisfied with the answers he got as to what could have cause such a large scale conflagration, came up with an ingenious theory deeply rooted in

Christian missionary teaching to explain the cause of the war and why the war lasted so long. According to the old man, as captured by an editorial in *The Lightbearer*,

The dead all rose and stood before God and said, "Lord, we are tired of waiting, you must bring the resurrection day:" but God replied that he could not bring the resurrection for there were still the living on the earth. Then the dead returned to the earth and rose up in the midst of men to set them to war on each other, and ever fresh hosts of dead rise up to fan the flame of war that it may not die until every man is killed. Then the dead will return to God and say, "Lord, there are now no living, deliver us therefore from our prison," and God will command the resurrection and the dead will enter into their rest.<sup>23</sup>

If this was not meant to be a joke then it was a sincere attempt to fill in the blank spaces owing to a lack of coherent information about the war. At this time the Sudan United Mission was only about ten years old in Jukun land. At the risk of value judgement, it seems that this old man was a brilliant student of the mission. He seems to have understood very clearly the missionaries' teaching on the intermediate state<sup>24</sup> and the parousia. The intermediate state is somewhat akin to the world of the living dead in African Primal Religion (henceforth APR); and don't the ancestors in APR sometimes cause trouble for the living? Probably his background in APR promoted his understanding of the intermediate state as taught by the mission, and perhaps even helped him to come up with this theory; a theory that did not point accusing fingers at any one particular nation for starting the war.

As in the 'Dinka Ideas of the War' this theory, that does not indict any particular nation, had the potential of preventing anti-British feelings when propagated among the Jukuns, one of the largest minority tribes of Northern Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> In Northern Nigeria about 25,000 people were

conscripted and sent to Cameroon during the war.<sup>26</sup> Jukun nationalities could not have failed to be among those who were conscripted. So such none anti-British bias theory which has roots in missionary teachings seems to have provided the needed atmosphere for conscription.

In the 'Dinka Idea of the War' the editorial ends in the following words: "[...] so Christian missions prove to be one of the strong links binding the Empire."<sup>27</sup> This, no doubt, captures the reason for including Africans' interpretation of the war in the literatures of the Sudan United Mission British Branch. The article's

inclusion in the literatures of the mission sought to show that Christian missions were not only passively praying for Britain's victory in the war but were also actively involved in binding the Empire into a compact whole necessary for success in the war. It also seems the article's inclusion in the literature was intended to make a point against colonial policy of restricting the activities of Christian missions in Southern Sudan. Sundkler and Steed tell us that the colonial government in Khartoum had restricted the activities of missionaries in Southern Sudan for fear of an uprising as the people were still being 'pacified' through military expeditions. By means of the story the missionaries seem to say that the presence of missions can tame and not incite a savage people contrary to the colonial office's thoughts.

Both the Dinka and the Jukun stories obviously point to the influence of Christian missionaries in creating a conducive atmosphere for conscription. Like Crowther, many writers on world war one fail to see the missionary factor in the absence of local resistance against conscription in British West African (Crowther 254-255).

## CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to show that the influence of European Christian missionaries made many Africans to see world war one through the prism of the Christian religion. This helped prevent anti-British bias necessary for conscription. This partly explains why there was no significant protest against the conscription. The missionaries therefore became unarmed combatants of the war. The responses of Africans were documented in the literature of the Mission to probably show readers in the home constituencies of the missionaries how British missions also contributed to the war cause. In this way mission and colonialism stood together to protect the castle of Caesar and Christ's in the British Empire; as was the case in the collaboration of church and state in Ethiopia to resist Arab conquest.

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