


The Coptic origins of the Yoruba

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The theory according to which the Yoruba ancestors were Coptic Christians seemed unpopular amongst many Yoruba people despite the fact that the theory was proposed by the most revered Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson. The aims of this research are firstly, to study Johnson's Coptic theory of the Yoruba origins and secondly, to highlight the circumstances that might have informed him to associate the Yoruba people with the Coptic Church. This research is achieved through a historical study of a possible interaction between certain ethnic groups in Nigeria and the Coptic Church, and through a comparative study of Church liturgies amongst the Copts and those of the Yoruba traditional churches. The researcher explained that Johnson's Christian background influenced his narrative of connecting the Yoruba origins with the Copts. The researcher is of the opinion that there is no evidence provided by Johnson according to which the Yoruba people originated from the Copts.

Keywords: Africa; Ancient Near East; Copts; Egypt; Nubia; South-West Nigeria; Yorubaland.

Introduction

The Yoruba people are amongst the most populous ethnic groups in Africa. In Nigeria alone, there are over 40 million Yoruba (Ayandele 2004:121). Their history is one of the most researched amongst other ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. The Yoruba are also indigenes of West African states such as Togo and Benin Republic (Lange 2004:39). This research however, will be centred on the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The Yoruba people of Nigeria occupy the south-western region of the most populous African country comprising of six geographical states: Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Ekiti. The Yoruba people are also found to be indigenes of Kogi and Kwara states in north-central Nigeria. Despite the achievements they have made with regard to the writing of their history and in the preservation of their culture, there is yet to be an absolute conclusion as to where the Yoruba people originated (Afolayan 2004:32). A renowned writer of Yoruba history, Samuel Johnson, described the origin of the Yoruba people as one that is still not clear and full of obscurity (Johnson 1921:3). There are various theories pertaining to the Yoruba origins. Whilst some say the Yoruba people originated from Mecca or Arabia, others say Egypt or Monroe or North Africa or Etruria (Agai 2013b; Olojede 2011:344–345; Oyebade 2004:53–54).

Samuel Johnson is likely the first Yoruba person to document the Yoruba history extensively. He said that the original Yoruba ancestors were Coptic Christians who originated from Upper Egypt (Johnson 1921:6). After Samuel Johnson, many other Yoruba writers such as Lucas Olumide, Toyin Falola, Fani-Kayode (2013:1–3), Afolayan and many more have continued to associate the Yoruba origin with Egypt. Whilst Johnson emphasised a Christian origin of the Yoruba from Upper Egypt or Nubia, Lucas went to associating the Yoruba origins with the ancient Egyptians. He thought that the pre-dynastic and dynastic Egyptians had similar cultural practices with the Yoruba people of Nigeria. He said that the Yoruba religious practices, body mutilations, funeral rites, names, sacred numbers, social practices, knowledge, dress, hieroglyphics, emblems and language are similar to those of the ancient Egyptians (Lucas 1970:411–418). Lucas added that a possible contact between the Yoruba ancestors and the ancient Egyptians took place during the pre-dynastic and dynastic Egyptian periods (Lucas 1970:291, 352). Unlike Johnson who linked the Yoruba origin with the period after Christ lived, Lucas was of the opinion that the Yoruba ancestors lived before the emergence of Christianity.

There might have been certain circumstances that made Johnson to connect the Yoruba people with the Egyptians. Firstly, it is likely that the perception of the Egyptian civilisation or the rise of Egyptology in the 18th and 19th centuries influenced his thinking to associate the origin of Yoruba with the Egyptians (Reynolds 2012:1; Tyldesley 2005:1–8). Secondly, his interest in Christianity may have influenced his views as well. This research examines Johnson's view of the Coptic origin of the Yoruba and the circumstances that might have influenced his thoughts

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to suggest that the ancestors of the Yoruba people were Coptic Christians.¹

The Coptic Christians

Some contemporary Egyptians think that their ancestors were not Africans. They think so simply because many of them are light-skinned and are politically and socially connected to the people of the Middle East than the people from other African countries. This is not surprising because a number of 19th century scholars have declassified ancient and contemporary Egypt as an African territory (Agai 2013a:88). Blumenbach, an anthropologist in 1865, regarded the ancient Egyptians as non-Africans (Adamo 2013:73). In this research, the ancient Egyptians, the Nubians and the Coptic Christians will be classified as light-skinned and dark-skinned Africans.² It therefore becomes pertinent to know the time through which Christianity entered Africa and especially Egypt. It is also relevant to know how Coptic Christianity began and how it possibly spread to West Africa as perceived by Samuel Johnson.

According to Mark, the word 'Copts' has a Greek origin (Mark 2009:1). This could likely be so because in the past, when a nation subdued another, they changed the country's or city's names and the cultures of the people subdued. For example, Alexander the Great captured Egypt in 332 BCE and he made Greek language and culture prominent in Egypt (Redford 2006:xiii). The Romans also captured some regions of the Ancient Near East around 30 BCE and at that time, Egypt was included administratively as a part of the Near East. The Romans developed Egypt and built formidable communication systems including the development of the Nile. This development contributed to the Early Church's accessibility to travel and preach in Egypt (Boer 1983:1-7). With regard to the connection of the word 'Copts' with Egypt, Marcus said that the Greek word for 'Copts' is *Aegyptus* and meant Egypt (Marcus 2011:4). Similarly, Mark said that the Greek word *Aegyptus* meant Egypt and that the word originated from the Egyptian name *Hwt-Ka-Ptah* meaning the house of the spirit of an Egyptian god Ptah (Mark 2009:1). Another word for Egypt is *Kemet*, which could be associated with black land (Johnson 1978:10-11).

1.Despite the fact that the Coptic origin of the Yoruba is not emphasised specifically, yet, the theory of the Egyptian origin of the Yoruba in general is gradually becoming popular amongst Yoruba scholars and amongst people who are interested in knowing the Yoruba history. The Egyptian theory is a view that is categorised into the predynastic and dynastic Egyptians, the Nubians and the Upper Egyptians. Samuel Johnson associated the Upper Egyptians with Coptic Christians. Johnson did not give any detail about how the Coptic Christians influenced the Yoruba people, yet, he implied that the Coptic theory of the origin of the Yoruba was his priority. This research is a discourse about Johnson's perspective of the Coptic origin of the Yoruba. Students of African history will find this research to be of a great benefit because it spelt-out the socio-political conditions of Johnson that prompted him to associate the Yoruba origin with the Copts.

2.The ancient Egyptians might have been classified as dark-skinned people because of the similarities of their culture with other Africans such as the Yoruba and also because of their geographical location in Africa (O'Connor & Reid 2003:11). Adamo and Eghubare had earlier observed that the entry of many nationalities into Egypt such as the Hyksos, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Palestinians, the Syrians and other Africans led into intermarriages between the Egyptians the listed foreigners. The intermarriages might have resulted to the Egyptians including the Copts to have light-skin (Adamo & Eghubare 2010:415). This researcher is aware that the Coptic Christians are not necessarily people of dark-skin yet some of them might be of dark skin. Skin colour whether dark or light is not a priority in this research. The topic that is relevant precisely in the case of this research is on whether the Egyptians were Africans or not.

In addition, Adamo and Eghubare associated the residences of Kemet or the ancient Egyptians as a people with black or dark skin (Adamo & Eghubare 2010:415). The points mentioned here encourage the view according to which the Copts were possibly people of an African descent; yet, this classification of the Copts as Africans is open for further investigation to ascertain its truthfulness. Marcus observed that the Copts were not foreigners from the ancient Near East but direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians. Before the emergence of Christianity into Egypt, the Copts practiced their traditional religions and lived mostly in rural areas shepherding their flocks (Marcus 2011:4). Sanneh said that Christianity in Egypt was at first received by the elite groups that lived in urban areas until the middle of the 3rd century CE, when the Egyptians who lived in the Nile began to accept and spread the faith within Egypt and this led to the building of more Coptic villages and towns (Sanneh 1983:7). But how did Christianity spread to Egypt and who were the role players in the spread of the Christian faith in Egypt? Scriptural sources, historical sources and oral traditions are the main sources of information we can rely on to know about the spread of Christianity in Africa and especially in Egypt (Sanneh 1983:1).

With regard to scriptural sources, the Book of Matthew records that after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, he was hunted by Herod, the district governor of Rome and as a result, Mary, Joseph and Jesus left Bethlehem for Egypt (Mt 2:1-23). Although Jesus was yet to start his ministry when they went to Egypt with his family, Sanneh believed that the coming of Jesus to Egypt with his parents marked the first connection of Africa with the Christian faith '... [*Jesus' first appearance in Egypt*] is the first tradition connecting the African continent with the Christian story' (Sanneh 1983:1-2). In addition, in the story of the crucifixion, the Book of Mark records that a particular man by the name Simon of Cyrenia (a province in Libya) was forced to take the cross after the trial of Jesus (Mk 15:21-32). Other role players identified in the New Testament as having an African origin or connection include Rufus, Lucius, Simeon, Apollos and Judich (Ac 18; Rm 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19; Ac 11:26; Ac 18; Rm 16:21) (Sanneh 1983:2).

The Coptic Church of today is mostly centred in Egypt only with a few extensions or offices in other parts of the world, still dominated by the Egyptians who travelled to those countries. There are about 5 million members of the Coptic Christians in Egypt (Harrington 2011:1-2). The Coptic Christians in Egypt are still regarded as a minority group because of their low population size that is incomparable with those of the Muslims (Sanneh 1983:13). It is not known precisely who started the church in Egypt (Boer 1983:24). However, there is a tradition amongst the Coptic Egyptians according to which John Mark or Saint Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark founded the Coptic Church when he went to preach in Egypt in a date or year that is contestable (Boer 1983:24-25). Notwithstanding this fact, most authors agree that Saint Mark might have arrived in Alexandria in 68 CE (Marcus 2011:1):

And they say that this Mark was the first that was sent to Egypt, and that he proclaimed the Gospel which he had written, and first established churches in Alexandria. And the multitude of believers, both men and women, that were collected there at the very outset, and lived lives of the most philosophical and excessive asceticism, was so great, that Philo thought it worth while to describe their pursuits, their meetings, their entertainments, and their whole manner of life.³

Eusebius of Caesarea also said that Saint Mark was the first bishop of the church in Alexandria.⁴ The Copts have a tradition according to which there were four evangelists that came to preach in Alexandria at the emergence of Christianity and that Mark was the first. They thought that the establishment of the Coptic Church is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 19:19: [i]n that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border (Is 19:19) (The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt 2020:1–2). There is also another unpopular tradition that the apostle Thomas preached the gospel in Egypt around 52 CE before he went to India to preach (Sanneh 1983:4). Alexandria became a significant place in the training of popular Christian apologists some of whom became martyrs. Origen and Clement, for example, all received formal theological training in Alexandria (Boer 1983:24–25):

One of the strongest centres of Christianity in Egypt was Alexandria. ... It was in Alexandria that a serious attempt was made to interpret Christian teachings in the light of Greek philosophical thought, a process begun under Jewish scholars. Clement made his mark there, though he was not a native of that city; belonging to an elite, he stressed the element of reason in religion and established it as an important foundation of faith. ... One of his [Clement] pupils was Origen (c. 185–253), who was to eclipse him in learning and fame. In 203, after Clement left Alexandria, Origen, then only eighteen, was appointed to succeed his teacher at the Catechetical School which he successfully guided through a time of fierce persecution and gave it an enviable pre-eminence in the Christian world. (Sanneh 1983:6)

It is important to note that the capturing of Egypt by Rome brought about some developments around the Nile and this resulted in easy access to communication in Egypt. The Early Church benefitted in this project to the point that they found it easier to travel and preach in Egypt (Boer 1983:1–7). Contrary to the given development on the growth of the Coptic Church, the Coptic Christians also faced persecution by many people including a number of Roman Emperors. The Romans were worried at the fast rate at which the Coptic Church or Christianity generally was growing in Egypt and they had to check the influence of Christianity. Emperor Diocletian (284–305) persecuted the Coptic

Christians very harshly (Marcus 2011:5). The Roman edict of 202 CE in Egypt was meant to stop the Egyptians from converting to Christianity and the edict of 250 CE forced all Egyptians including the Coptic Christians to carry alongside a certificate indicating that they made sacrifices to the Roman gods. The aim was to deny Coptic Christians the worship of their own God but the Roman gods (Marcus 2011:4–5).

Unlike the Early Church and the Apostolic Fathers who spread the gospel because they were persecuted (Boer 1983:49–53), the case-study of the Coptic Christians was different. Sanneh said that that around 300 CE when the Coptic Christians were persecuted, they did not travel to other countries to preach the Gospel. Instead, they used the time of their isolation to develop lengthy and sophisticated liturgical church orders used locally during their daily and weekly church programmes (Sanneh 1983:7–8). Around the 7th century CE and precisely in 642 CE, some Muslims attacked the Coptic Christians in Egypt and subdued the Christian faith. As a result, Islam continued to grow capturing the different tribes in Egypt and, by 702 CE, the Berbers were also Islamised (Skolfield 2001:142–143). The question that matters for this research is: Did the persecution of the Copts by the Romans and the rise of Islam in Egypt contribute to the migration of the Coptic Christians to other parts of Africa or the world? Considering the low spread of the Coptic Christians to other countries especially Nigeria, why did Johnson associate the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians?

The Connection of the Yoruba Origins with the Coptic Christians

Before Samuel Johnson, Mohammed Belo, the son of Uthman dan Fodio who was not a Yoruba indigene wrote that the Yoruba people originated from Arabia, around 1812 (Lange 2011:583). Johnson said that Belo was responsible for linking the Yoruba origin with Arabia (Johnson 1921:5; Olojede 2011:343–44). Samuel Johnson is the first Yoruba indigenous writer to write about the Yoruba history. He was born in 1846 to his Christian missionary parents Sarah and Henry Johnson, both of whom served as missionaries with the Church Missionary Society (CMS). His parents were slaves who were freed or returnees who lived in Sierra Leone after the abolition of slave trade in 1807. Rev. David Hinderer, a missionary with the CMS who worked in Abeokuta and Ibadan visited Sierra Leone and liked Johnson's parents. Hinderer requested Mr. Henry to return to Ibadan to serve in the mission centre as a teacher (Falola 1999:37).

Samuel Johnson attended the Abeokuta Training Institution between 1863 and 1865. He was influenced by the school principal Gotlieb Bühler to admire liberal education alongside the Bible. He studied General education, History, Philosophy, Mathematics, Greek, Religious Studies and Latin (Falola 1999:33–37). He served as a school teacher in Ibadan, Aremu and Kudi around 1865 and 1866. He became a deacon with the CMS in 1867 and a catechist at Aremu church in 1875.

³Eusebius of Caesarea ~ 340 AD CHURCH HISTORY: L.1, C.17, from file:///D:/Documenta%20Chatolica%20Omnia/99%20-%20Provvi...ibrary/001%20-Da%20Fare/01/EusebiusChurchHistory1-16.htm2006-06-03 11:29:32.

⁴Ahmed Osman said that a tradition in Egypt together with Eusebius's book *History of the Church*, written in Greek around 310 AD confirms Eusebius argument that Saint Mark started the Coptic Church or the first Church of Alexandria (Osman 2014:1).

He mediated and served as a translator during the early and mid-19th century Yoruba wars. He mediated between the Yoruba leaders and the British administrators that came to serve in south-western Nigeria before Nigeria got her independence in 1960. His experiences with the Christian communities, the Yoruba traditional leaders and ordinary citizens together with the foreign missionaries and the British staffers who worked in Nigeria exposed him to having a wider knowledge and understanding of the Yoruba people and their culture (Omolewa 2008:124–133).

Samuel Johnson developed interest in the writing of the history of the Yoruba people. Through his experiences, his interests and exposures, he wrote *the History of the Yorubas: From the earliest times to the beginning of the British Protectorate* (Johnson 1921:ix). Johnson's book is regarded by many Yoruba people as the most detailed, the most respected and seemingly the most *accurate* or *sacred* up-to-date document on Yoruba history (Doortmont 1991:167).

Johnson discussed the Yoruba oral tradition according to which a mythical personage by the name Oduduwa came from the 'East' or 'Mecca' to Yoruba land to form the Yoruba nation. The East in Yoruba oral tradition meant Arabia or Mecca or North Africa or Meroe or even Iraq (Johnson 1921:5; Olojede 2011:343–345). Johnson disputed this theory that associated the Yoruba origin with a Muslim country. He believed that the Yoruba ancestors might have originated from Upper Egypt or Nubia or that they might have been Coptic Christians. He said the following:

1. That they sprung [*sic*] from Upper Egypt, or Nubia.
2. That they were subjects of the Egyptian conqueror Nimrod who was of the Phoenician origin and that they followed him in his wars of conquest as far as Arabia, where they settled for a time. It might probably then be shown that the ancestors of the Yorubas, hailing from Upper Egypt, were either Coptic Christians or at any rate that they had some knowledge of Christianity (Johnson 1921:6–7).

It is clear that Johnson specified two possible geographical sources that narrate the various views of the origin of the Yoruba people. The geographical sources are Upper Egypt and Nubia. In this research, I shall concentrate on Johnson's interest regarding the Coptic Church. Although he mentioned Nubia and Upper Egypt, it is likely that he preferred to associate the Yoruba origin with Coptic Christianity in order to dissociate the Yoruba origin from Islam. Johnson said the Coptic Christians he referred to in his book originated from Upper Egypt (Johnson 1921:7). He also mentioned Nubia that comprised of the areas from Aswan in the southward direction to the present-day Khartoum in Southern Sudan. There were Christians in Nubia from the beginning of the 6th century CE. The Byzantine missionaries preached in Nubia around 540 CE, but the 7th century Arab conquest interrupted the spread of the gospel out of Nubia by the Nubian Christians (Bowers 1985:2, 6).

More so, Information about them [*the Nubian Christians*] was scanty until the 1930s when Nubian archaeologists started to find possible traces of the practices of Christianity in Nubia (Bowers 1985:2–3). It is not known whether Johnson was aware of the Nubian Christianity but his connection of the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians and with the Nubians suggests that he might be aware that Nubia had some Christians who were possibly contemporaries of the Coptic Christians after the 6th century CE.

Johnson's background as a pastor or a clergy, his parent's background as missionaries and his faith in Christianity might have motivated him to promote Christianity above any other faith. Moreover, so, during the Yoruba wars, the Hausa and the Fulani people were also involved at some instances in fighting with the Yoruba people. For example, the Fulani people invaded Oyo in the early 19th century (Doortmont 2001:253) and after 1812, Ilorin and other parts of Yorubaland were captured by the Fulani jihadists (Omolewa 2008:111–112, 117). Johnson was aware of the Hausa and Fulani influence on Yorubaland (Doortmont 2001:1–2). More so, The Yoruba people also fought against one another from the early 19th century until the end of the century (Peel 2000:27–29). In the midst of the Yoruba's internal conflicts, Johnson had to promote his Christian faith, which he believed promoted human civilisation and enhanced peace and unity amongst humanity (Olabimtan 2009:253). Falola said Johnson's '...greatest wish was to see the triumph of Christianity over other religions' (Falola 1999:46) and Olupona described Johnson's connection of the Yoruba's origin with the Coptic Church as Christocentric (Olupona 1993:242).

It is still not known whether the Yoruba ancestors were Coptic Christians or not and Johnson might be right or he might not be right in his classification of the Yoruba ancestors as Coptic Christians. What is clearly known is that his Christian background influenced his association of the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians or probably some Christians who lived in Egypt and his dissociation of the Yoruba origin with Islam. He was adamant that the Yoruba ancestors were Christians to the point that he discussed a Yoruba legend that has a link with the Jesus' story of sacrificing himself for the sake of rescuing all humanity from some form of sinful nature or from an enemy:

If so [*that the Yoruba ancestors were Coptic Christians*], it might offer a solution of the problem [*of the Yoruba origins*] of how it came about that traditional stories of the creation, the deluge, of Elijah, and other scriptural characters are current amongst them [*local Yoruba people that were not Christians*], and indirect stories of our Lord, termed 'son of Moremi'. (Johnson 1921:7)

There is a Yoruba legend according to which the goddess Moremi had only one begotten son by the name Ela or Olurogbo. The legend has it that the Igbos through some spiritual means tormented the people of Ile Ife in Yorubaland. Moremi sacrificed her only son Ela in order to redeem the Yoruba people who lived at Ile Ife. The story is similar to biblical account of God sacrificing his only begotten son Jesus

for the entire human race (Jn 3:16) (Johnson 1921:148). Johnson did not provide further details on the specific identities of the Coptic Christians who allegedly came to Yorubaland. He did not say about the date or the migration routes the Coptic Christian used to arrive in Yorubaland. He only mentioned that the ancestors of the Yoruba people might have been Coptic Christians in only one page of his over 740 pages of *the history of the Yorubas*. He only mentioned the Coptic Christians once in his book yet it is likely that he meant to emphasise the Coptic theory of the Yoruba origin above any other theory. This is allegedly possible because, despite his interest in the knowledge of writing the Yoruba history, he seemed to emphasise a Christian perspective of reading the Yoruba origin.

It is likely that Johnson had to connect the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians in order to check the influence of Islam on the Yoruba people in the 19th century. Also, some Yoruba oral historians in the 19th century associated the Yoruba origins with the 'East' or 'Arabia' or 'Mecca' (Johnson 1921:7). There is a Yoruba oral tradition according to which the original ancestor of the Yoruba is Oduduwa and that he came from Mecca or Arabia and was a Muslim before he became a pagan. The tradition has it that Oduduwa came to Yorubaland with a relic called *Idi*, a copy of the Koran. Johnson disputed the tradition and said that the *Idi* was not the Koran, but a copy of the Christian Holy scripture built in rolls (Johnson 1921:7).

Did the Coptic Christians spread Christianity to Yorubaland?

It is not known with precision the first time Christianity found itself into the Nigerian soil and particularly into Yorubaland (Sadiku 2004:124–136). However, historians of West African history believe that there are two possible phases by which Christianity might have found its way into Nigeria. The business of slave trade and commodities such as pepper, palm oil and other spices opened up Nigeria to the Europeans and the Americans for exploration, expedition, research and Christian missions (Omolewa 2008:134–136). The Portuguese were amongst the earliest to trade for slaves in Nigeria around the 15th century. Ruy de Sequira, a Portuguese explorer and trader led the first voyage to Benin in south-south Nigeria in 1475 and by 1480, about 400 Benin slaves were captured. The activities of early traders and explorers in Nigeria had opened the country for the entrance of Christian missionaries (Sanneh 1983:36–37).

The first missionaries to have preached in Nigeria during the first phase of the spread of Christianity were from Portugal. They came to Benin in 1515 and to Warri in 1570 and in 1538; the Oba (king) of Benin welcomed and accepted to be baptised by the missionaries (Omolewa 2008:136). The first phase of the spread of Christianity in Nigeria yielded poor results because the Nigerians at that time and within the specified areas listed were not sincere in their acceptance of the Christian faith. The missionaries failed to understand the culture of the Nigerian people, and consequently some

Nigerians thought that the missionaries worked together with the slave traders (Adewale & Abu 2013:122; Omolewa 2008:137). The missionaries left Nigeria mostly around the end of the 18th century through the early 19th centuries for their poor performances (Omolewa 2008:137).

The second phase of the spread of Christianity to Nigeria started around the 19th century when more and richer documents were found that explained the activities of early Christian organisations in Nigeria (Stevens 2015:1–2). The abolition of slave trade in 1807 contributed to the spread of Christianity in Nigeria. Sierra Leone, Brazil and Liberia became major centres where returnee slaves were hosted. It was in Freetown, Sierra Leone that Samuel Johnson became exposed to meeting foreign missionaries (Adewale & Abu 2013:122). It was during these periods, that is, from the mid-19th century that the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic missions, the Qua Iboe missions, the Scottish Presbyterian Church and many others extended their mission work to West Africa and to Nigeria in particular (Fyfe 1979:39–41; Omolewa 2008:139). Subsequently, the slaves who were freed from Sierra Leone and from Brazil helped to spread Christianity in Yorubaland in the 19th century. Around the middle of 1850s, the Brazilian returnees who had received Christianity came to Yorubaland to preach. They came to Lagos in 1859 and in 1872. They built a Catholic Church in Lagos, which became famous in 1881 (Sundkler & Steed 2000:947, 959).

The Sierra Leonean returnees also referred to as the *Aku* as they were called in Sierra Leone played a great role in the spread of Christianity in Yorubaland around the mid-19th century (Sadiku 2004:125). Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman came to Badagry to preach on 24th September 1842 where he met 300 other returnees who had settled in Badagry (Adewale & Abu 2013:124). During the second phase of the spread of Christianity in Nigeria, many foreign mission organisations preached and established humanitarian centres such as hospitals and schools in Yorubaland. The Wesleyan missionaries established mission centres in Lagos, Ibadan, Badagry, Ilesa and Abeokuta from 1842 to 1845. The Roman Catholics through their subsidiary mission originations such as the Society of African Mission and the Holy Ghost Fathers established their mission stations in Lagos, Ibadan and some parts of Eastern Nigeria from 1860 to 1871 (Adewale & Abu 2013:124, 127).

Also, at Ogbomosho, Lagos and Abeokuta, the Southern American Baptist Mission founded their mission stations since 1862 (Adewale & Abu 2013:126). The Qua Iboe Mission was founded by Samuel A. Bill in 1887. The mission organisation now has branches distributed all over Nigeria (Adewale & Abu 2013:128). The Scottish Presbyterian Church also established branches in some parts of Yorubaland (Omolewa 2008:139). Significant to the spread of Christianity in Yorubaland are Samuel Johnson and Bishop Ajayi Crowther. Crowther translated the Bible into Yoruba in 1843 and he preached Christianity in Yorubaland (Ume 1980:154). The

second phase of the spread of Christianity in Nigeria and in the Yorubaland in particular was more successful than the first phase.

Some problems were encountered during the second phase of the spread of Christianity in Nigeria and especially in Yorubaland. Nigerian priests were not respected by foreign priests who came to preach in Yorubaland. They did not also submit themselves to the church leaders who were indigenes of Yorubaland and certain cultural practices like polygamy were discouraged by foreign missionaries. The foreign missionaries discouraged the use of local or traditional names by the Yoruba people (Adewale & Abu 2013:126). The poor relationships between foreign missionaries and local Yoruba pastors in the mid- and late-19th century made some Yoruba people to start their own indigenous churches that will accommodate their cultures and allow respect for the Yoruba people. Some Yoruba Christian leaders started churches such as the Aladura in 1918 and the Aladura is divided into four groups: the Apostolic Churches, the Cherubim and Seraphim Churches, the Church of the Lord and the Celestial Church (Sadiku 2004:127–128; Sundkler & Steed 2000:950–951).

Considering the history of how Christianity came to Yorubaland, the role players in the spread of Christianity are first, the Yoruba indigenes themselves and second, foreign missionaries from Europe and America. There is virtually little or no information that the Copts from Egypt came to Yorubaland to preach before or after the 19th century. Samuel Johnson mentioned that the Yoruba ancestors might have been Nubians, which may either be Nubian Christians or not. Paul Bowers said that in the 1930s, archaeologists have found traces of Nubian monastery in western Sudan near the border of Chad. He said that during the 1930s search, Nubian artefacts were found around the north of Lake Chad. Bowers did not say that the finding have had any some connection with Yorubaland. He further pointed out that it is likely that Franciscan missionaries in 1700s preached in Borno and Katsina all in northern Nigeria. Bowers (1985) said that:

Christian symbols were reported in the last century among the royal regalia of a tribal kingdom on the Benue, south of Hausaland, though the religious meaning of the symbols had been forgotten. (p. 4)

Bowers' emphasis had been on Nubian Christians whilst Johnson emphasised on the Coptic Christians as the major influencers of the Yoruba origin.

Lucas pointed out that there are traces of contact between the Egyptians and Nigerians from the 11th century. He added that a number of Muslims from Borno in Nigeria travelled to Cairo for pilgrimages in the 11th century. More so, He also said that in the 1870, the Egyptian adventurer Rabeah came to Borno for a visit and was chased away by the Sultan of Borno in 1893 (Lucas 1970:400–401). Despite all the travels that connected the Egyptians and the Nigerians, there is still no mention that the Coptic Church came to

Yorubaland or that the Yoruba people went to worship amongst the Copts in Egypt. There might have been or there might not have been a possible contact between the Coptic Christians and the Yoruba ancestors. This view ought to be opened for further research because evidence of a possible contact in Yorubaland or in Egypt is not available now except for future researches.

It is important to note that Yoruba local churches were strictly founded by the Yoruba people and not the Egyptians. More so, there are wide differences in the order of worship between Coptic Christians and the Yoruba local churches. For example, the Coptic Christian emphasises proclamation of the Athanasius creed in every worship service whilst the Yoruba local churches do not. Although the Copts split from the Catholic Church in 451 AD, yet their liturgical orders and especially worship have many similarities with those of the Catholic Church (Zavada 2019:1–2). The Yoruba churches on the other hand worship with many local instruments, they sing loudly, they are vibrant at churches and they dance vigorously during church services without high liturgical observances as the Coptic Christians do. Even if there are similarities in religious practices between the Coptic Church and the Yoruba indigenous churches, there is no evidence that the Yoruba churches originated from the Copts. This again raises a question on Johnson's connection of the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians. So, why did Johnson say that the Yoruba people originate from the Copts?

Conclusion

At the moment, there is no evidence that the Coptic Christians came to Yorubaland to preach the gospel of Christ before or after the time of Samuel Johnson. Johnson might have been in haste to connect the Yoruba origin with the Coptic Christians because he never took time to explain or give further information about the Coptic Christians and Yoruba connection. In his over 740 pages book *The History of the Yorubas*, the words 'Coptic Christians' are only mentioned once (Johnson 1921:7), yet, the Coptic theory of the Yoruba origin was paramount to Johnson because of his Christian background.

There are no evidence that Johnson ever travelled to Egypt so he might have been influenced to have the knowledge of Egypt from his school principal who knew about the popularity of Egyptology in the 18th and 19th centuries. The school Principal Gotlieb Bühler taught Johnson about the histories of Egypt, the Near East and of Alexander the Great (Brier 2013:20; Olabimtan 2011:1–5). Johnson's interest on Egypt might have been influenced by the rise of Egyptomania in the 18th and the 19th centuries.⁵ It is not surprising that he compared and claimed similarities between the Yoruba Ife Marbles and those of the Egyptians, which he said are still found at the Egyptian Court of the British Museum

5. Napoleon's expedition and archaeological discoveries in 1798 promoted further archaeological interests and researches in Egypt. The love for Egypt increased around the world. The Europeans and the Americans, for example, were fascinated at the findings and they began to visit Egypt frequently (Thompson 2015:1).

(Johnson 1921:6). His emphasis of the Yoruba's origin from Upper Egypt or Nubia or from the Copts supports his unflinching interest about Egypt, which he might or might not have regarded as an African country. The fact that Johnson expressed his displeasure and frowned at the Yoruba educated people who knew the histories of Europe and America and not the history of the Yoruba (Johnson 1921:viii) suggest that he was Afrocentric and might have appreciated linking the Yoruba origin with another African country and another African people, the Egyptians. This suggestion is open for further interpretation.

Furthermore, J.D.Y. Peel⁶ said that in the mid-19th century, there was an ongoing competition between Islam and Christianity in Yorubaland. The seeming competition necessitated the need for each of these two religions to provide a more unifying and attractive identities for the Yoruba people (Peel 2000:187–200). It was compelling for Samuel Johnson to link the origin of the Yoruba people with his faith in Christianity, thus he chose the Coptic Christians. Before Johnson, Mohammed Belo suggested an Arab or a Muslim origin of the Yoruba whilst Johnson suggested a Coptic or Christian origin of the Yoruba. Peel's view about the competition between Islam and Christianity suggests that the two religions influenced Johnson in his narration of the Yoruba origin. This is why it can be hypothesised that the Coptic theory of the Yoruba origin was paramount and preferred to Johnson because the theory accommodated his faith in Christianity.

In addition, Johnson, a Christian missionary needed to unite the Yoruba people and to proffer to them an identity of origin he found worthy. This might have motivated his interest to participate as a mediator in curbing the Yoruba wars. Peel explained that the spread of Christianity in Yorubaland contributed immensely to creating a consciousness of unity and oneness amongst the Yoruba people. He said that before Christianity in Yorubaland, the Yoruba people never saw themselves as one ethnic group (Peel 2000:27, 88–89, 152–155). Johnson saw the ethnic tension amongst the Yoruba people in the 19th century and he decided to unite them by associating their origin to one source, the Coptic Christians. His association of the Yoruba origin with the Copts is an expression of his dissatisfaction with the theory that associated the Yoruba origin with Islam.

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6.J.D.Y. Peel was born on 13 November 1941 and he died on 02 November 2015 in London. He used to be a highly respected scholar and historian of religions in Africa with specific interest on the religions of the Yoruba. He served as a faculty member of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He has written broadly on the history of the Yoruba people.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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