

The Challenge of Africa

M. NEFF SMART

THE CITY WAS LAGOS, NIGERIA, in the early 1970s. The place was the upstairs cinder-block apartment of Sabath Umoh, branch president of the Lagos "Mormon" church. On the card table pulpit was a black, hard-cover Bible alongside a well-worn Lowell Bennion manual, *The Church of Jesus Christ in Ancient Times*.

It was time for Sunday School. Sixteen persons were present, all black Nigerians. Independently of Salt Lake City they had organized a branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of Nigeria. Shortly after my arrival at the University of Lagos, I had been invited to attend the meetings. Now I was the Sunday School teacher.

They sang the opening song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," as it never was sung at my ward in Utah, with an earnestness and fervor that brought tears. We knelt for Brother Umoh's opening prayer. It was forceful, graceful and punctuated by "amens" which suggested unanimity.

Then I had an hour. Nothing special about it, but the New Testament lesson made points about universal and unqualified grace, about the fatherhood, the brotherhood, about community and about the acceptance of each other. Class members did not press me about the denial of priesthood to blacks.

I enjoyed the fellowship that came with Sunday services among black Africans, not only in Nigeria but in Ghana and Ethiopia where I also had teaching assignments. I also suffered a feeling of hypocrisy and guilt at avoiding an open acknowledgment that my church did not share certain of the Christian ideals we discussed at Sunday sessions. The church position on the equality of blacks, even if I were equivocal and clever with words, would read "racist" to Africans.

However, my feelings of anguish and guilt at failing to "level" with black Africans were modest compared with the pain and pity I have suffered in observing the struggles that typify their life style. I often think of a statement made by Bertrand Russell in his autobiography. He identified the three passions which governed his life—the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind—and he described his anguish:

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

"And I too suffer." How well that describes the reaction one has—the feelings

one *must* have—when visiting Africa and when remembering what one has experienced there.

Three out of every four Africans live in what sociologists call the “subculture of peasantry.” They exist through subsistence agriculture. Survival itself is the primary struggle. The people are illiterate. They are not integrated into national institutions of any kind. They are hostile to government authority. They have limited aspirations, and they often succumb to resignation and fatalism. They are likely to be infested with parasites and to be plagued by malnutrition and disease.

For generation after generation these people have been the victims of a cruel fate. They are born into a world of misery, a world totally unready to offer them the rights we describe as human. Illiteracy, malnutrition and pain are the “rights” of their heritage, and they have little opportunity even to dream of change, let alone work to bring it about.

And it has been my fate to teach these people, to share with them a religion which extols human freedom, human rights, human dignity and human compassion. Thus, I have struggled for half my life with the problem of my personal responsibility to the unfortunate human beings who are my companions in history and who need to be freed from the strictures of their birth.

Now, at last with the acceptance of blacks into full church fellowship, the problem of dealing with Africa’s subculture of peasantry—between 200 and 300 million people—is strikingly relevant to all Mormons. Mormons must now make decisions about Africa, and they are not easy decisions. The Catholics, the Anglicans, the Seventh Day Adventists and other church groups have struggled with those decisions for more than a century. What direction will evangelism take in Africa? Will missionary work include food production, health clinics and programs to induce reading and writing, or will the emphasis be entirely upon the spiritual deliverance of Africans?

I have had the enriching experience of an LDS mission during which my principal goal was to make converts. In the process I sought to widen spiritual horizons, to insure spiritual salvation, and I saw the process as one of liberation—of setting people free. Fortunately, most of those with whom I labored already possessed their fair share of freedom. They were economically secure; they enjoyed the attention of doctors and dentists; they had been the beneficiaries of formal schooling, and they had participated freely in elections. The missionary work had elements of love and knowledge, leading “upward toward the heavens.” My mission experience was heart-warming and satisfying.

I have since had the equally enriching experience of working among Africans in equatorial, or black Africa and thus have fraternized with and traveled among the voiceless and the dispossessed. These efforts too led upward toward the heavens, but pity, as Russell predicted, always brought me back to earth. And my anguish has not abated in the years since.

Africa has been called the dark continent because so little is known about it and its people; however, the continent is now demanding the attention of the world. Out of Africa come growing numbers of bizarre and dangerous events. The continent is rapidly becoming a symbol of the hopes and hazards of a changing and dangerous world—the hinge between East and West, between the backward and the modern, the rich and the poor. Africa is the most illiterate

continent on earth, one of the richest in natural resources; yet it is impoverished, diverse, fragmented, the most diseased, and politically the least experienced.

Africa now has nearly 400 million persons. Approximately 75 percent of those over 15 years of age cannot read, and fewer than one-half the school-age children are in school. The birthrate is nearly triple that of the United States; the death rate is more than double. The texture of African life is described by Waldemar Nielsen in *Africa*:

An African boy of 16 has lived nearly half his life, statistically speaking. It is unlikely that he can read or write or that he has finished primary school. There is only a slight chance that he will enter or finish high school and less than one chance in a thousand that he will be able to enter college. His diet, even when sufficient in quantity, is starchy and seriously deficient in vitamins and protein. He will probably be stricken by serious disease in the course of his life, and in that event it is unlikely that he will have access to medicine, a doctor or a hospital.

The Church's decision to accept blacks provides a new challenge in a new environment. Until now, black Africa has not existed for the Church. Now, church leaders must begin the process of discovering Africa and finding ways to penetrate the darkest of continents. It will not be easy.

Black African activists and those African patriots who led the fight for independence during the fifties and sixties believe Christianity and the expatriate churches are not true friends of Africa but the agents of imperialists, the handmaidens of colonial masters. Because the churches arrived in Africa with the colonizing forces, the missionaries carry, for many Africans, not only the sign of the cross but the stigma of the colonial curse. The new black governments, therefore, have begun the process of nationalizing parochial schools and discouraging the western clergy.

University students in Africa are also suspicious of and negative about western religion. Many who received their secondary educations in Catholic and Protestant schools are now Africanizing their given biblical and English names. Students who came to the campus as Paul, Robert or John are officially taking African names as a sign of their rejection of western culture and tradition. Africanization is the wind that is sweeping the continent, and the entry of the white man's institutions is being resisted.

I believe, therefore, that discovery of Africa by Mormonism and the possibility of its gaining a foothold of influence must necessarily be by indirection.

It is the black country of Africa that cries for deliverance. It is in the so-called "bush" that three-quarters of black Africans live, and it is in that hostile environment that they scratch out a subsistence living, contending against the extremes of weather, resisting the southward sweep of the Sahara, dealing with their pains and ill health through herbalists and witch doctors, valuing their children in terms of domestic labor and clinging to faith through a variety of gods and spirits. Africans have many gods to entreat and cultivate, many demons to identify and exorcise, but the main struggle is against human misery, hunger, debilitating diseases and ignorance. The enemies are not yet manageable, and they are in full view. More Africans are illiterate today than a year ago; the number of malnour-

ished children grows larger; the gap between the haves and the have-nots grows wider.

The Christian calling and responsibility is to receive and to uphold all our companions in all relationships of life—in food, housing, education, employment, health, family and spiritual salvation.

If Mormonism is to succeed in Africa, it will think past the religious options open to the blacks. It will refrain from setting its truth against that of others. There are multiple truths in Africa, and all are demonstrably in the right. Africans are a believing people, generous in their loyalties. They like to believe and to ritualize beliefs. Though they are eager to join, their membership may mean little.

The acceptance of blacks by the Church makes feasible to Mormons the inclusion of Africa in the New Testament admonition "Go ye into all the world." A missionary effort in black Africa will also provide the opportunity to disperse a tradition and to expiate publicly the injustice of a century of racial discrimination. It will offer the Church and its members a new challenge to effectively meet human needs. It will permit all of us to act on our compassion for unfortunate companions with whom we share the planet.

Our goals must be to set people free—to do whatever we can to make certain that life's passions are limited to those that lead "upward toward the heavens," so that the next generation's Bertrand Russell need not cry, "And I too suffer."

