

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Yoruba of West Africa

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Overview

The Yoruba number among the most populous peoples in West Africa with approximately 38 million people.[1] Nearly 37 million Yoruba reside in southwestern Nigeria in a cultural region known as "Yorubaland" whereas more than a million populate southern areas of Benin. Yorubaland also includes Lagos - Sub-Saharan Africa's most populous metropolitan area with 13.2 million people.[2] In the 1990s, the estimated number of Yoruba speakers totaled nearly 20 million.[3] In Nigeria, approximately 60% of Yoruba are Christian and 40% are Muslim whereas in Benin 45% of Yoruba are Christian and 48% are Muslim.[4] Yoruba constitutes one of the three major indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, the other two being Hausa and Igbo. Many Yoruba residing in urban areas speak English as a second language whereas few Yoruba residing in small cities and rural areas speak English. The LDS Church has maintained a presence among the Yoruba for more than 30 years and has experienced slow to moderate growth in most locations during this period.

This case study reviews the history of the Church in areas of Nigeria and Benin where the Yoruba traditionally reside. Past church growth and missionary successes are identified and opportunities and challenges for future growth are discussed. The growth of the Church among other major ethnic groups in Nigeria is summarized and the size and growth of other Christian groups that proselyte the Yoruba is compared to the LDS Church. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

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LDS Background

The first Yoruba converts likely joined the LDS Church in the late 1970s or early 1980s following the Church lifting its prohibition on blacks holding the priesthood and participating in temple ordinances and the establishment of formal missionary activity for the first time in Nigeria. In 1980, the Church organized its West Africa Mission with headquarters in Lagos (later renamed the Nigeria Lagos Mission in 1985). In 1992, the Church organized a second mission headquartered in Yorubaland in the city of Ilorin but discontinued the mission the following year. In 2002, the Church organized a second mission headquartered in Yorubaland based in Ibadan. In 2007, the Nigeria Ibadan Mission was relocated to eastern Lagos and renamed the Nigeria Lagos East Mission but was ultimately consolidated with the original Nigeria Lagos Mission in 2009.

In 2007, the Church published a Yoruba translation of the entire Book of Mormon. In 2013, the Church had several Yoruba translations of church materials online, including the full edition of the Book of Mormon and translations of General Conference.[5] Proselytism and gospel study materials translated into Yoruba include Book of Mormon Stories, Our Heritage, The Family: A Proclamation to the World, The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood (Part A), Latter-day Saint Women (Part A), a few Primary resources, a family guidebook, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith pamphlet, and the 13 Articles of Faith.[6]

During the 2000s and early 2010s, the Church experienced mixed congregational growth trends and moderate rates national outreach expansion within Yorubaland. In the early 2000s, the Church operated congregations in 10 cities within traditionally Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria including Lagos (12), Abeokuta (6), Ibadan (6), Ijebu-Ode (6), Ile-Ife (3), Akure (2), Ondo (2), Ilorin (1), Imodi (1), and Osogbo (1). In late 2013, the Church operated congregations in 16 cities and towns within traditionally Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria including Lagos (25), Ibadan (7), Abeokuta (6), Ile-Ife (5), Ijebu-Ode (3), Akure (1), Ikorodu (1), Ilesa (1), Ilewo-Orile (1), Ilorin (1), Imodi (1), Ipetumodu [Edunabon] (1), Odeda (1), Ondo (1), Osogbo (1), and Sagamu (1). The total number of congregations in Yoruba-speaking Nigeria increased from 40 in the early 2000s to 57 in late 2013. However, the

net increase in the number of congregations in Lagos accounted for 13 of the 17 unit increase experienced during this period. Church services appeared to be conducted in English for most, if not all, congregations that operate in Yoruba-speaking areas. In 2013, two new branches were organized in the Abeokuta Nigeria District and branches in Akure and Ondo were reassigned from the Nigeria Lagos Mission to the newly created Nigeria Benin City Mission.

The Church in Benin established its first official branch in 2005 and assigned the first proselytizing missionaries in the mid-2000s. As of late 2013, there appeared to be very few Yoruba Latter-day Saints in Benin as LDS outreach only occurred in Cotonou and missionaries primarily proselytized in French.

Successes

The Church has achieved rapid growth in Lagos within the past decade as evidenced by the creation of the first three stakes within a 14-year period, the steady organization of new wards and branches, and increasing numbers of active priesthood holders. Yoruba and non-Yoruba Nigerians have both appeared to join the Church in large numbers in Lagos. In 1997, the Church created its first stake in Lagos with five wards and four branches.[7] Two additional stakes were organized in Lagos West (2005) and Lagos South (2011). In late 2013, the Lagos Nigeria Stake had six wards and one branch, the Lagos Nigeria South Stake had seven wards and one branch, and the Lagos Nigeria West Stake had eight wards and three branches. In recent years, the Church has made a greater effort to organize additional branches and wards in lesser-reached areas of the city to reduce travel times and the size of burgeoning congregations and increase the penetration of LDS outreach.

Yoruba priesthood leaders have regularly served in stake leadership positions in Lagos and have on a couple occasions have served as area seventies. This finding suggest that the Church has established a strong and qualified base of Yoruba leadership capable of meeting their own administrative and leadership needs with little to no outside support. Notwithstanding this accomplishment, the prominence of Yoruba members in stake presidencies has declined within the past decade possibly due to greater numbers of non-Yoruba members relocating to Lagos from other areas of Nigeria or from larger numbers of non-Yoruba Nigerians relocating to Lagos and later joining the Church. Yoruba members appeared to constitute the entire stake presidency of the Lagos Nigeria Stake in 1997[8] and when the presidency was reorganized in 2003.[9] In 2003, a Yoruba member from Lagos was called as an area authority seventy.[10] In 2005, Yoruba members appeared to serve as the stake president and the first counselor of the newly created Lagos Nigeria West Stake whereas the second counselor serving in the presidency appeared to be Ibibio.[11] In 2010, the newly called Aba Nigeria Temple president resided in Lagos prior to his call but was not of Yoruba ethnicity.[12] In 2011, none of the stake presidency members from the Lagos Nigeria West or Lagos Nigeria South Stakes appeared to be Yoruba but rather of Edo, Ibibio, and Igbo ethnicity.[13] In 2012, a Yoruba member was called as an area seventy.[14]

Within the past decade, the Church made progress expanding outreach into additional locations within Yorubaland through organizing official congregations in previously unreached cities and through organizing member groups under district branches and mission branches. In the 2000s and early 2010s, the Church organized its first congregations in six additional locations (Ikorodu, Ilesa, Ilewo-Orile, Ipetumodu, Odeda, and Sagamu); two of which (Ilewo-Orile and Odeda) were the first small cities and towns in Yorubaland to have an official LDS unit operating. The opening of branches outside of metropolitan areas and large to medium-sized cities constitutes a significant advancement in reaching Yoruba populations that exhibit little to no fluency in English. In the late 2000s, the Church organized "district branches" in two of the four districts within Yorubaland (Ijebu-Ode and Ile-Ife). These district branches appear to service members who assemble in member groups or who are unassigned to a particular group or branch. Mission leaders organizing these district branches signals efforts to effectively administer isolated members and engage in outreach expansion through organizing additional member groups or facilitating member groups to become branches. The Nigeria Lagos Mission Branch services members residing in areas outside the boundaries of stakes and districts and provides the administrative support and resources to organize member groups in additional locations when warranted.

The translation of the Book of Mormon into Yoruba stands as a major accomplishment that has potential to significantly improve gospel comprehension and missionary activity among Yoruba speakers who do not speak English sufficiently well to study the English version of the Book of Mormon. Only two other indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria have translations of LDS scriptures (Efik and Igbo).

Opportunities

Yorubaland is one of the most densely populated areas of Nigeria, presenting good opportunities for LDS missionary expansion into lesser-reached and unreached locations. The Nigeria Lagos Mission significantly increased the size of its missionary complement in the early 2010s as a result of the worldwide surge in the number of members serving missions. In late 2013, there were approximately 200 missionaries serving in the mission whereas there may had been as few as 100 missionaries serving in the mission just a couple years earlier. This substantial increase in the number of missionaries serving in the mission provides the needed manpower for mission leaders to identify cities and towns that appear favorable for opening to formal missionary activity. There are approximately two dozen cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants without an official ward or branch functioning and scores of small and medium-sized cities that are totally unreached by the Church. There are likely many locations without a ward or branch nearby where multiple Latter-day Saints and interested investigators reside. These individuals can provide a base from which to establish the Church in these communities. The Church has experienced some success opening congregations in several previously unreached locations within the past decade and many, if not most, of these instances likely occurred through active members moving to these locations and mission leaders visiting these individuals and organizing member groups and branches.

The Church in Nigeria has experienced high receptivity in most locations where official congregations operate and missionary

activity occurs. However, safety and security concerns prevent the assignment of non-African missionaries to Nigerian missions. Any increase in the number of missionaries serving in Nigeria and the Nigeria Lagos Mission requires larger numbers of Nigerian and black African members serving missions. Focus on missionary preparation for youth and young single adults has tremendous potential to augment the size of the Nigerian full-time missionary force, particularly in other areas of Nigeria where the Church has experienced more rapid growth and has established a more widespread presence. Utilizing Edo, Ibibio, and Igbo missionaries to proselyte in Yorubaland appears the most practical and realistic method for expanding missionary activity. Considerable progress may also occur increasing the number of Yoruba youth and young single adults who serve full-time missions if church leaders emphasize seminary and institute attendance and missionary preparation. The Church may experience greater growth among the Yoruba if missionaries actively learn the Yoruba language sufficiently well to teach the missionary lessons and maintain basic communication skills.

There are opportunities to begin Yoruba-specific outreach in Benin. In 2011, the Church organized its first mission in Benin and has since experienced rapid membership and congregational growth. Today scores of full-time missionaries serve in Cotonou. Prospects appear favorable for mission leaders to open locations with sizable numbers of Yoruba sometime within the near future such as Porto-Novo.

Challenges

The Yoruba appear to exhibit significantly lower receptivity to LDS outreach compared to other major ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria and Benin. Within the past two decades, the Church has attempted on multiple occasions to augment the size of the missionary force in Yorubaland and make other accommodations to improve receptivity but these measures have yielded frustratingly few results. Efforts to create a second mission to better service the massive population of southwestern Nigeria have thus far been unsuccessful as evidenced by the Nigeria Ilorin Mission operating for only one year, the Nigeria Ibadan Mission operating for only five years, and the Nigeria Lagos East Mission operating for only two years. Safety and security concerns regarding active proselytism in areas with a mixture of Christians and Muslims and ongoing religious conflict between these two groups in central Nigeria may have impacted past decisions by the Church to consolidate missions and exercise caution in expanding outreach. The translation of the Book of Mormon into Yoruba has appeared to have little impact on reversing slow to stagnant growth trends outside of Lagos within the past five years. Slow growth in Yorubaland is also illustrated by only the Lagos Nigeria District becoming a stake within the past 20 years. Three of the four districts (Abeokuta, Ibadan, and Ijebu-Ode) have operated for 20 years and continue to fall short of meeting the minimum requirements to function as stakes. Although data is unavailable on the circumstances surrounding the consolidation of branches in some cities in Yorubaland (Ijebu-Ode, Akure, and Ondo), few convert baptisms, local leadership development challenges, active members relocating elsewhere, and inactivity problems appear to have contributed to the closure of branches in these locations.

The increased prominence of non-Yoruba members serving in stake leadership positions in Lagos and the assimilation of Yoruba and non-Yoruba members and investigators into the same congregations may pose challenges for some Yoruba to join the Church. The significantly larger LDS presence among the Edo, Ibibio, and Igbo than the Yoruba may present the illusion that the Church is less compatible with Yoruba culture and society than among other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The relatively small size of the LDS Church in Lagos (one LDS unit per half a million people) combined with many Yoruba members being bilingual in both Yoruba and English reduces the need for Yoruba-specific congregations. Depending on local conditions and needs, mission and stake leaders may need to consider whether organizing Yoruba-specific branches and wards would help strengthen the Church and provide more effective outreach or whether this would be an unnecessary feat that consumes too many resources that could be more efficiently utilized for other purposes.

Many other missionary-focused Christian groups maintain a major presence in Yorubaland. These denominations have likely shepherded many individuals and families who would have been receptive to LDS outreach but at present are socially entrenched in their congregations and express little to no interest in joining another church. Some of these groups have spread misinformation about the Church and engaged in counter-proselytism efforts.

Translations of LDS materials into Yoruba remain limited. The Church has yet to translate the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price into Yoruba as well as the missionary guide Preach My Gospel.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Nigeria has experienced more rapid growth and currently maintains a larger church presence among several other ethnolinguistic groups native to Nigeria that have at least one million people and significant numbers of Christians. The Church operates three stakes, five districts, and at least 86 wards and branches within areas where Igbo is traditionally spoken. Within the past decade, rapid congregational growth has occurred in virtually all predominantly Igbo areas of Nigeria. Igbo translations of all LDS scriptures have been available since 2007.[15] The Church operates five stakes, five districts, and approximately 90 wards and branches among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State although there are no translations of LDS scriptures or materials into the Ibibio language. Rapid growth has occurred among the Ibibio as the number of congregations in Akwa Ibom increased from 54 in 2002 to 89 in 2012. Currently 0.75% of the Ibibio people appear to be LDS. The Church operates five stakes and one district in areas where Edo is traditionally spoken although there are no translations of LDS materials or scriptures into this language. The Church operates one stake and one district in areas where Efik is traditionally spoken in Cross Rivers State. The Church has translated select passages of the Book of Mormon into Efik in addition to a few gospel study and missionary materials. Within the past decade slow growth has occurred in the Efik areas of extreme southeastern Nigeria.

Other nontraditional proselytizing Christian groups who operate in Nigeria report a significantly more widespread presence among the Yoruba than the LDS Church. Evangelicals claim 37% of Nigerian Yoruba and 13% of Beninese Yoruba.[16] These groups have also appeared to experience significantly more rapid growth within the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses operate Yoruba-speaking congregations in Nigeria and Benin. In Nigeria, Witnesses operate nearly 900 Yoruba-speaking congregations in Ogun State (221+), Lagos State (180), Ondo State (154), Oyo State (124), Osun State (107), Ekiti State (47), Kogi (24), Kwara State (19), Edo State (5), Niger State (4), Kaduna State (3), Delta State (1), and Kano State (1). In Benin, Witnesses operate 16 Yoruba-speaking congregations in the southern half of the country.[17] The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Nigeria reports 66,000 members, 216 churches (large congregations), and 326 companies (small congregations) within the eight Nigerian states where the Yoruba traditionally reside (Ekiti, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Oyo). Over 2,000 converts joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church in these eight states during 2012.[18] Adventists maintain a small presence in Benin and appear to have a minimal presence among the Yoruba in the country as in 2012 Adventists reported only 16 churches and 43 companies.[19]

Limitations

The lack of data from current and returned missionaries and local members and church leaders constitutes the greatest limitation to this case study. Reports from full-time missionaries serving in Yoruba-speaking areas of Nigeria were unavailable as only a handful of these missionaries maintain missionary websites or blogs during their service and none completed surveys or interviews with church growth researchers. Ethnicity of stake leadership for stakes in Lagos was ascertained by the language origin of the first or middle names of presidency members and not from official data released by the Church or reported by these individuals. The Church does not publish any language or ethnicity statistics for the number of Yoruba members in the Church. No state-by-state membership data is available for Nigeria. The Church does not publish a list of the official proselytism languages of each of its missions. Consequently it is unclear whether any formal Yoruba-language missionary outreach occurs in the Nigeria Lagos Mission. The Church does not publish any member activity or convert retention statistics. No data is available providing annual numbers of full-time missionaries serving in each country or assigned to each mission. The Church does not publish the number, location, and names of member groups.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS growth among the Yoruba appears favorable within the foreseeable future as larger numbers of missionaries have recently begun serving in the Nigeria Lagos Mission, the number of locations in Yorubaland with an LDS congregation has steadily increased, and translations of the entire Book of Mormon and limited numbers of LDS materials are available. Prospects for future growth appear greatest in Lagos due to close proximity to mission headquarters, recent successes organizing additional stakes and congregations, and many Yoruba speaking English as a second language. The Church may organize additional branches in lesser-reached areas of Lagos and other major cities with an LDS presence and utilize surplus missionary manpower to expand outreach. Several cities and towns currently unreached by the Church may have member groups and branches organized within the foreseeable future depending on whether many active priesthood holders relocate to these cities and if mission leaders actively advocate for opening additional areas to formal proselytism. Districts in Abeokuta and Ibadan appear most likely to become stakes within the next five years. The Church may translate remaining LDS scriptures and Preach My Gospel into Yoruba within the next decade.

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