20 January 1482 has been accepted as the date on which Christianity was first introduced to West Africa in modern times. However it was not until the nineteenth century that effective and sustained missionary activities in West Africa were undertaken. In the twentieth century, some major western missionary societies such as the Church Mission Society and the Basel Missionary Society succeeded in re-introducing the Christian faith to the region beginning from Sierra Leone. These missionary societies endeavoured to improve the socio-economic development and growth of the region. Missionaries who have worked in the West African countries after these pioneering ones adopted the strategy of holistic approach to mission thus affecting the lives of the people through both evangelistic and developmental projects. The contemporary Korean missionaries are no exception to this strategy. Early missionary presence was Caucasian and came from the north to the south. However recently, there has been an influence of Asian (Korean) missionaries and they form the focus of this discussion.

Korean missionaries have been carrying out their missionary activities in West Africa since 1979. Literature on their activities is virtually non-existent. This essay attempts to provide some information and assessment of Korean missionaries in the West African region from 1979 to 1999. We look at the paradigm shift in Korean cross-cultural missions, the typology of Korean missionaries in West Africa, Agents of Korean mission in West Africa, challenges of the missionary enterprise and suggestions as to how the challenges could be faced.


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Paradigm shift in Korean cross-cultural missions

Prior to the 1980's, Korean missionary endeavour was mostly targeted at Korean Christians in the diaspora. Thus Korean understanding of mission was limited to offering chaplaincy services to Korean nationals outside Korea. As such it produced ethnic churches. In recent times however, there has been a major transformation in the policy of the Korean Church with regard to world evangelisation. There has been a shift from focusing only on Koreans in the diaspora to other nationals as well. The world map is seen on a board, with lights blinking at spots where a particular church in Korea has “mission fields” at the entrance of Korean churches. This conceptual change can be attributed to a number of factors.

Firstly, there was a major spiritual renewal experienced by the Korean Church around the 1970’s and 1980’s. This renewal found a major expression in the tremendous numerical growth of Christians in Korea. For instance, there were only 1,516 Christians in Korea in 1906, but the number shot up to 300,000 by 1930 and then from a total number of 3,000,000 by 1974, it shot up again to 10,000,000 believers by the 1990’s. This spiritual renewal overflowed in missionary enterprises thus giving a major impetus to mission and evangelism. Andrew Walls corroborated the positive correlation between revival and mission when he wrote that “without revival it would be inconceivable to think of missionary societies .. The modern missionary movement is an autumnal child of the Evangelical revival”.

Secondly, many international missionary conferences were organised by the Korean Churches as well as by international missionary societies in Korea and elsewhere around the 1960’s and the early 1970’s. Koreans fully participated in these conferences during which the need to cross to foreign lands to preach the Gospel was impressed upon them. For example, in 1966 and 1974, the International Conference for World Evangelism was held in Berlin in Germany. An Asian continental equivalence was held in Seoul in 1973. These conferences awakened Korean Christians who participated to evangelize the world at large.

Thirdly, about the same period, some international missionary societies such as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), the Worldwide Evangelisation Crusade (WEC) and the Society of International Ministries previously known as the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) started recruiting Korean missionaries into their organizations. This move by the missionary

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4 Cf. Chun Jae Ok, Analysis on the Mission Strategy and Activities of the Korean Church, Yi Hwa University, 1986.
7 Lee Tae Wung, Mission of Korean Church, 17.