CHRISTIANITY IN BENDEL STATE OF NIGERIA: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

by S. U. Erivwo

1. GEO-POLITICAL AREA

The geopolitical area of Nigeria now known as Bendel State was up till 1963, a part of the Old Western Region, from which it was created in 1963. This was in consequence of a referendum taken in the area which had agitated for its own separate political existence even before Independence, for fear of domination by majority ethnic groups. The Wilking commission set up by the colonial Government to look into the problems of minorities, did not however concede to the further splitting up of the country. Rather it recommended ways by which the fears of minorities could be allayed.

But, shortly after Independence political upheavals in the Western Region created an atmosphere which made it possible for a Mid-western Region to be created on 25th August 1963. The state is thus now 25 years old. The name of the region was changed to Midwestern State when General Gowon introduced a 12 state structure to the government of the country on 27th May 1967. In 1976, when General Murtala Muhammed, further increased the number of States from 12 to 19, the name of the State was further changed from Midwestern State to Bendel State, to reflect the two Provinces - Benin and Delta Provinces - which constitute the state. Only last year, November 23rd 1987, General Ibrahim Babaginda again further increased the number of States in Nigeria to 21, by creating two other states - Akwa-Ibom and Katsina States. In other words, the present Bendel State is the oldest, even if not the largest state of the Federation. It is now 25 years old. Its projected population is 4.5 million. Its geographical area is about 40,000 square kilometres.

The people of this area are undoubtedly amongst the most developed and articulate in the country. By virtue of the fact that they are the oldest state, the so called Federal character by which admission and employment into Federal Institutions and Establishments (like Federal universities, the Federal Civil Service, the Police and the Army) which operate on quota basis works to the disadvantage of Bendel State. The State is classified as an educationally advanced State by the Federal Government. That it is educationally advanced, may be accounted for by its very early contact with the Western world.

Bendel State is, in fact a congerie of ethnic groups: it is sometimes described as a miniature Nigeria, being made up of no less than 12 ethnic groups. These include the Bini, Esan, Etsako, Owan, Uneme, Western Igbo, Ijo of Ovia Local Government Area, in the Benin Province; and the Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ijo and Ukwani, in the Delta Province.
Politically, the area is now divided into 19 Local Government Areas as will be seen in the map. There are two universities -- the University of Benin which is a Federal University and the Bendel State University sited at Ekpoma, with a campus at Abraka. It is the story of Christianity in this geopolitical area that this paper intends to treat.

2. DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The paper is captioned "Christianity in Bendel State: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow". Clear as the concepts of yesterday, today and tomorrow, may be to the author, they still need clarification for the benefit of the reader. The terms are used to indicate periodization of the ages considered in the paper. It was Kwesi Brew who wrote:

"The past
Is but the cinders
of the present;
The future
The smoke
That escaped
Into the cloud-bound sky.1"

In other words there is a vital connection between the past and present, and between the present and the future. We are therefore using the concepts of yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow to designate certain periods of the history. Dr. M.E. Andrews in concluding his lectures on the Prophets stated:

"Whithout the past we stand in a vacuum. But without radically interpreting the past for the present, we are dead, as far as being God's people is concerned. This was the message of the Prophets. And we still need ears to hear it."2

Because the past is so vital for our understanding of the present, and for planning for the future, we are in this paper delving into the past history of Christianity in Bendel State. By yesterday we mean the period between 1472 and 1960, i.e. the story of Christianity from its beginning in the area, up till Nigeria's attainment of political Independence, while today will cover from 1960 up till now. Tomorrow is from the next day until the 3rd millennium or until the Lord's return. Obviously, while the story of yesterday can be narrated in parts, and that of today, if time permits, in full, that of tomorrow, can only be prophetic or forecasting, since it still lies in the womb of time.

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1 See Kwesi Brew's Poem "The Search" in Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (eds), Modern Poetry from Africa (Penguin Books, 1963, P. 96

2 Dr. M. E. Andrews, himself a student of Von Rad, was my Old Testament Lecturer at the University of Ibadan in the mid 1960's.