

INDIGENOUS APPRAISAL OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF REVEREND ROWLAND AKINSANYA POPOOLA (1929-1998) TO THE GROWTH OF ANGLICAN CHURCHES IN OYO AND ITS ENVIRONS

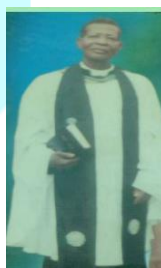
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Historical Framework

There is no gainsaying the fact that some great people who remained as unsung heroes while alive may later become celebrated figures in another generation on account of the discovery of their indelible footprints and the inspiring milestones they reached. As E.H Carr observes; the historian's task is to rescue the past from oblivion.... In the Anglican context of Nigeria, J.F. Ade Ajayi similarly argues for the recovery of indigenous actors as central to the recovery of history itself. Despite their indigenous central role, indigenous Anglican clergy have often been marginalised in historical studies. As J.F. Ade Ajayi noted, the African indigenous clergy were "the backbone of the Church in the interior, yet their role has been overshadowed by the European missionary". Ogbu Kalu later lamented that: the African priest" appears only as "a shadowy figure: in mission-centered accounts and

called for histories “from within” and Lamin Sanneh broadened this argument, insisting that African Christians were “translators, interpreters, and authors” of the faith”. The initiative of Christopher Fyfe for the use of missionary records in uncovering West African history is commendable. It is germane to showcase that, in spite of a few regional studies, the history of indigenous clergy is not well known. There is no wide-ranging exertion on the theme. Apparently, few are conspicuous authors who have spoken on the theme from a comparative perspective. In his deep awareness of African contributions to the evangelisation and growth of Christianity and development of Churches in Africa, Kalu laments that many ‘native agents’ or indigenous people bore the brunt of the enterprise but remained nameless, as unsung heroes, in a missionary historiography that placed the missionary at the center of the story. On this, Ugochukwu recalls that, from the mid-nineteenth century, a certain consistent and encrusted paradigm in African Christian historiography emerged, lamenting the voicelessness of the roles local people played in the evangelisation of their kith and kin during the modern missionary enterprise in that region. In their bid to sing of the unsung roles of indigenous agents in that enterprise, the high pitch of androcentricism drowned a vital but marginalised note. Consequently, in order to boost the historiography of the Church in Africa most especially in Nigeria, commend and document the historic contributions of the indigenous missionaries to the development of Christianity, Bolaji Idowu dissents that the time is now overdue for the Church in Nigeria, in particular, to look at herself; to examine her own soul. She is being called upon to justify her existence in the country; to answer in precise terms the question as to whether her purpose in Nigeria is not to serve as an effective tool of imperialism, a veritable means of softening up Nigerians for the purpose of convenient exploitation by the Europeans. On this note, Popoola Timothy. O. E. asserts that, African indigenous Priests deserve to be celebrated by Africans for their prowess and impressive sacrificial contributions to the implantation and growth of Christianity in their continent and sustenance of the Churches in their domains. If they are not celebrated by Africans, then, who will celebrate them?”

Kehinde Olabimtan expresses his opinion about this complex issue, thus:

As in politics, the Christian mission has discarded number of men and women who, over its two millennial histories, contributed to the expansion of Christianity from its first century, through its modest beginning in the Middle

East to its present reckoning as a world religion. And because it thrived on the individual initiatives over this period of expansion, the field of mission studies is replete with names of people who at various points provided new impetus, blazed new trails, amplified existing efforts, and instituted turning points. In this regard, biographies have illuminated the field of mission studies, and significant volumes of publications - histories, dictionaries, and encyclopedias have resulted from this.

It is within this corrective tradition that the life of Reverend Rowland Akinsanya Popoola is here historically recovered. This biography is undertaken purposely to document his life, times and historical contributions to the growth and consolidation of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), especially at the grassroots level. It serves as an exemplar and encouragement to other scholars and clergy to undertake the critical task of documenting the histories of Anglican clergy who served gallantly, sacrificially, faithfully, courageously and intentionally in the Church, lest their indelible footprints be lost to posterity.

FAMILY ORIGIN AND RISING INTO SUCCESS

Nicknamed 'Pope of Row' by his contemporaries, Revd Rowland Akinsanya Popoola was born on August 21, 1929 to Pa Dapo Ajagbe and Madam Subulade Ajagbe of Gbamongbo Compound, Agbeni Area, Ibadan. Being a Muslim, Pa Dapo actually named his son Aminu Aremu Akinsanya Popoola Ajagbe. Aminu's mother, Subulade, who hailed from an Aladura Christian family, was one of the two wives in the house.

Gbamongbo Compound was named after their progenitor, "Gbamongbo Ko Subu", a man reputed to be a fierce head-butting warrior that emigrated from Ogbomoso land in the 1800s to join the forces of Aare Latoosa of Ibadanland. When Aminu Aremu was born, Gbamongbo Compound and the adjoining compounds were beehives of activities and peopled by numerous fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters (full and half), cousins, nephews and nieces together with their wives, concubines and children.

In the year 1940, Pa Dapo Ajagbe, a water corporation employee and a timber merchant, having run into predicaments with his finances, had to release his young son Aminu Aremu to serve as a steward in the house of one of his creditors in order to fulfill the terms of a

judgement of a debt trial which he had lost. Oh, how true the Scripture that says that "...the borrower is servant to the lender."

But stronger truth from the same scriptures is that the "steps of good men are ordered by the Lord and the feet of those that preach the good news are beautiful and anointed". This eternal scripture stood up to raise the young Aminu, to his future as appointed by His Maker. For it so happened that the very next day after his release from his servitude to his father's creditor, a certain Reverend Emmanuel Taiwo Babatunde entered his family house at Ayeye area in Ibadan from his base in Otan-Ayegbaju. Rev. (later Canon) Babatunde, a typical and cultured Ibadan man, was one of the parsons of the Anglican churches in the then Oshogbo Division. He was on a short furlough and was led to, among other things; visit his younger cousin Subulade in her matrimonial home at Agbeni, Ibadan.

Being an educated man and so, subsequently, one of the lights of that generation, Rev. Babatunde decided to pick a few young people among his relatives to stay with him in order to enable them get the white-man's education (as school was then called). That was how Aminu Aremu, the debt-steward of few days previously, was handed his Godly inheritance as a saint, as Rev. Babatunde insisted on taking him along on his return to his station.

BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION AND EDUCATION

Under his grand uncle Rev E. T. Babatunde, Aminu Aremu Akinsanya Ajagbe encountered Jesus Christ and received Him as his Lord and personal Saviour. Consequent upon his faith and confession of Jesus as Lord, Aminu Aremu got baptised on January 1, 1941, and officially became Rowland Akinsanya Popoola. He was confirmed on April 11, 1949, at St. Philip's Anglican Church, Otan-Ayegbaju, now in present-day Osun State. His Christian life was one of fervency and dedication which had a great positive influence on his immediate and extended families as several among his siblings, parents and relatives became Christians following his lifestyle and ministrations.

In the side of education, Rowland Akinsanya Popoola first stepped into a classroom early 1941 when he was almost twelve-year-old. In 1947, he sat for and passed the Standard Six Certificate examinations at St. Philip's Central School, Otan-Ayegbaju. All along till that time, young Rowland lived in the church vicarage with his father in the Lord, the late

Revd. Canon Emmanuel Taiwo Babatunde, who disciplined and exposed him a great deal to effective Christian ministry. As a student, Rowland Akinsanya Popoola was noted to be of first-rate intelligence, highly diplomatic, a stately built person, an avid reader, and a dynamic person. It so happened that he was also endowed with a strong baritone voice with a distinctly prominent tenor, excelled in middle-distance athletics in the 400m and 800m, and was also a skilled professional cameraman. He was also a member of the Boys Scouts and rose to the rank of Scoutmaster.

Teaching Career, Divine Calling and Indigenous Legacy of Service

Youthful, useful and resourceful Rowland began his working career in 1948 as a teacher at St. Peter's School, Iragbiji in present-day Osun State. In 1952, he was transferred to St. Michael's School, Obaagun. It was at Obaagun that he became aware of the divine call to serve in God's vineyard. And so, in 1953, he became a Church agent under the old Ibadan Diocese and was posted to St. Jude's Anglican Church/School, Iresi, where he worked as both the head of Anglican Church there and was also serving as a classroom teacher until 1954. Whilst serving at Iresi, he used his influence as a teacher to encourage the co-teachers to attend church services and to participate in street-to-street evangelism which promoted the growth of the church there. The underprivileged school pupils, Christians, Muslims and heathens, found solace under him to live in the mission house where they were more opportuned to learn Christian virtues and many later rose to high-ranking positions. Even few of them continued to live with him in other stations and he positively influenced them greatly.

His Marriage

All things work together for good for those who love the Lord. It was at Iresi that God gave him his wife and helpmeet for life. At his first pastoral visit to the house Chief Matthew Orotaye, the holder of Erunran title in Iresi. That day, Rachael Oyeronke, a young pretty spinster who was the first daughter of Chief Orotaye served him a cup of water and subsequently caught his heart. A courtship began and eventually metamorphosed into holy solemnisation at St. David's Church, (now Cathedral) Kudeti, Ibadan on February 2, 1956. This was a historic day when the Queen Elizabeth II of England visited Nigeria. It is a striking historical concurrence that Reverend Rowland Popoola was joined in holy

matrimony on the day Queen Elizabeth II of England set foot in Ibadan. It may thus be interpreted not as chance, but as a divine concurrence, a destiny that situated Rowland's family life within the public memory of a nation on the brink of self-rule. Whether read as mere calendrical coincidence or as providential symbolism, the convergence is historic and significant. For a young indigenous God's servant Rowland to begin his domestic vocation at the precise moment Nigeria hosted the Crown, marks his generation as one standing at the hinge of colonial and national history. As divinely willed, the couple eventually gave birth to twelve children (including a set of triplets) out of which only six survived beyond infancy.

Teaching, Catechist Training and Church Experiences

In 1955, his professional translation to All Saints' Church/Senior primary School, Onipe, via Ibadan, marked a decisive re-sitting of his vocation from the Osun Axis into the heart of Ibadan land, thereby continuing his professional and pedagogical formation within the urban ecclesiastical frontier. From 1956 to 1957, he worked at St. Stephen's Anglican Church/School, Aboyawo as Church's agent and the school headmaster. And from 1958 to 1959, he worked at St. Andrew's Church/ School, Omigbopa, via Ibadan as Church's agent as well as the school headmaster. Other stations where he worked both as Church's agent and the school headmaster included: St. James' Anglican Church/School, Ogundele-Alaho via Ibadan (1962-1964, Ebenezer Anglican Church/School, Akingbile, Ibadan (1965 -1966) and St. John's Anglican Church/School, Igbo-Oloyin, via Ibadan (January to July 1967). In all these rural stations, Rev Popoola served the Lord wholeheartedly among men.

Having resolved to take up the divine assignment with no secular distraction, he became a full-time minister under the Anglican Diocese of Ibadan in 1967. Between 1967 and 1975 with the rank of catechist, he served as the catechist of St. Paul's Anglican Church, Lagbedu, via Oyo, where he impacted lives through his Christian teachings and character. He was especially very generous to the needy. It is pertinent to say here that he sponsored the education of all his siblings despite his meager stipend in the ministry which at times was not regularly paid. In 1974, while serving at Lagbedu, he attended Ibadan Diocesan church workers training at Oke-Are and obtained the Certificate of the same.

From 1976 to 1978, Rowland Akinsanya Popoola served as a pastor (catechist) in charge of St. Mary's Anglican Church, Iyalamu, Oyo, when Venerable Archdeacon Bakare was the Archdeacon of Oyo Archdeaconry and where he made an indelible mark as an industrious and highly committed servant of God. Though he was now living and pastoring in a principal town, he employed pastoral/evangelical visits to the rural areas as a major strategy of advancing the growth of the church. He ministered to and multiplied the congregations of God's people in remote places like Origbemidele, Imini, Idode, Iwo-Ate, Onidundu, Akinmorin, Ajawa and others. At home also, revival services were the order of the day by evangelical students chiefly from St. Andrew's College, Oyo. Between 1979 to 1980, he served curacy at St. Michael's Church (now Cathedral), Esiele, Oyo, under Ven. Gabriel A. Oladetoun and Ven. (later, Rt. Revd.) E.O.I. Ogundana. It was while there in 1981 that he was permitted to attend a three-year advancement course at the Vining Leadership Training Center, Akure, Ondo State.

Having completed his training, he returned to Oyo for another year before being transferred to Ilesa Diocese in 1985. His first place of assignment in that new posting was St. Paul's Anglican Church, (now Cathedral) Ipetu-Ijesa to serve curacy under the late Ven. Emmanuel Olatunbosun Ogunseiju. Between January to June 1987, he became the catechist in charge of St. Stephen's Anglican Church, Omo-Ijesa.

Theological Training and Ordination

In 1987, with the Episcopal approval of Rt. Rev. G.I.O. Olajide, the then bishop of Ilesa diocese, Rowland Akinsanya Popoola attended the selection conference, sat for the examination and was admitted to Archbishop Vining College of Theology, Akure, for more theological studies having fulfilled all requirements which he completed in 1989. He was admitted into the Diaconate Order in December 17, 1989, at St. Matthew's Anglican Church, (now Cathedral) Ijebu-Ijesa by the Rt. Revd. E.A. Ademowo, and was afterwards posted to Ebenezer Anglican Church, Ita-Apa, via Ilesa, as a vicar. In December 16, 1990, he was ordained a priest at the Holy Trinity Church, (now Cathedral) Omofe, Ilesa. In July 1991, he was transferred to St. Peter's Anglican Church, Ogogo-Akaro, via Ifewara as a vicar where he served God faithfully until February 14, 1998, when he answered the call from labour to reward.

His Contributions and Legacy

As a priest, Rev. Rowland Akinsanya Popoola possessed the priestly qualifications- a personal relationship with God, a strong family life, a joyous disposition towards prayer and the word of God, a commitment to evangelism and visitation and a perpetual prepared for hospitality. Also, he was honest and, among other things and kept a clean slate as regards church accounting.

He left his footprints in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) as a pragmatic indigenous church planter, teacher and leader. Under grace, he was able and was always willing to work anywhere in the church ministry not minding the conditions whether befitting or otherwise. He especially had a knack for reviving ailing assemblies with God's given grace, perseverance, and power of prayer, giving, and the spoken word.

As a person, he was a very agile, industrious, firm, highly disciplined, brave and sturdy man who preached the word of God with passion, fearlessness, and made his home Christocentric. He had a formidable partner in his loyal wife, Rachael Popoola who encouraged and spent all her time with him in the itinerant ministry. Professor Olaniran Olajire, a former Vice Chancellor of Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, happened to be one of his old school pupils at Igbo-Oloyin in the 1960s. He remarked Rev Rowland Akinsanya Popoola as 'a committed teacher, sociable, a mentor, a philanthropist, a dedicated pastor and a good sportsman, who always used the hands of his school pupils to write what he taught them'.

It is on record that while he was serving as the vicar of St. Peter's Anglican Church, Ogogo-Akaro which was his last station, Rev. Rowland Akinsanya Popoola displayed an uncommon bravery as a committed soldier and servant of Christ. The Ife-Modakeke conflict is one of the most protracted intra-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria history. Its origins are complex and contested, but they are generally traced to the period following the Old Oyo Empire in the early 19th century. As Oyo refugees, known as the "Akoraye" (meaning: 'the storks have found a place to live'), fled southwards, they sought refuge in Ile-Ife, the ancestral and spiritual capital of the Yoruba people. The ooni of Ife granted them land on the outskirts of the city, where they founded the settlement of Modakeke. The refugees were initially welcomed as allies who could help defend Ife against external threats,

particularly the Ibadan army which was expanding its control over the region. The Modakeke proved to be fierce warriors, earning a reputation for bravery and military skill. Over time, tensions arose between the original inhabitants of Ife and the new settlers. The Ife viewed the Modakeke as tenants or strangers who had been granted land as a favour and who should remain subordinate to the ooni and the chiefs. The Modakeke, in contrast, saw themselves as equal partners who had contributed to the defense and prosperity of the region. They had fought alongside the Ife, shed blood for the town, and deserved recognition as full citizens with their own chiefs and political institutions. For centuries, indigenes of Ife, Modakeke, Gbongan, Ipetumodu, Ode-Omu, etc migrated to the per-urban settlements around Ile-Ife, including, Adeyemo, Ogogo-Akaro, Ogogo-Doja, Ogudu and Arowokomo. Although these areas lay within the territorial jurisdiction of Ile-Ife, they became predominantly inhabited by these settlers. When another Ife/Modakeke crisis erupted in 1997 and escalated in 1998, the hostilities were confined to the town centers. Indigenes of both communities residing in the suburban and hinterland settlements also engaged in reprisals and counterattacks. Consequently, communities such as Ogogo-Akaro, Adeyemo, Ogudu, Arowokomo, which were located on the fringes of Ile-Ife were directly affected by imbroglio.

Thus, mid 1997 was a period of violent crisis between the people of Ife and Modakeke. Murders, arsons and rains of bullets and charms were the orders of the time in settlements where people of these combatant clans located their rivals. This prolonged hot and bloody war negatively affected the Church's attendance and activities resulting in many of the members being massacred on their ways and in their various homes, while some were killed in the farms and their corpses rotten. While war broke out in Ife and Modakeke towns, the negative side effect of it was felt more heavily in rural regions. Villages like: Ogudu, Adeyemo, Arowokomo, Ogogo-Doja etc., were all razed down with fire and guns. Despite this severe war, few members managed to worship in the church though with fear and trembling and were ready to run away while hearing gunshots. It was hard to even carry a corpse for a burial! Most of the corpses were not found.

Rev. Rowland and his wife Rachael, remains a luminous model of pastoral fortitude, priestly courage and ministerial steadfastness in the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion. At the height of the Modakeke/Ife imbroglio in 1997, when many church

leaders from other denominations like Catholic, CCC, C&S and CAC abandoned their posts and congregations were dispersed, this couple refused to abandon their flock at St. Peter's Anglican Church, Ogogo-Akaro in Ifewara Archdeaconry. They remained with the remnant of the Body of Christ, sustaining them through morning and evening services, prayer, incentives, hospitality and pastoral visitation to surrounding villages, even when their own lives were at risk. Their vicarage became a sanctuary for Anglicans as well as other Christians who were fleeing gunfire from the combatants. At a critical moment, combatants from Ife and nearby villages confronted Rev. Rowland Akinsanya Popoola at the vicarage, demanding that he release those under his care or face execution for himself, his wife, and the children. He stood firm and would not betray the flock entrusted to him. Rowland replied: 'I remain resolutely committed to the work of God, even at the risk of persecution. Should my allegiance provoke hostility towards my wife and me on account of our perceived association with your adversaries, we are prepared to face martyrdom. Execute us, if you must, be it within the vicarage or outside it. Jesus will receive our souls'. While other church buildings in the areas were set ablaze after the clergy had withdrawn, the Anglican Church in Ogogo-Akaro, stood under his protection until after his death, when combatants eventually burnt it down. His legacy of love, commitment, endurance and unwavering ministerial dedication remains deeply appreciable and must be preserved as a vital part of Anglican history in Nigeria.

Rev. Rowland Akinsanya Popoola was an outstanding indigenous priest of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), whose ecclesiastical contribution was substantial from formative years as a catechist and headmaster through to his ordained ministry. He died in active service in Saturday, February 14, 1998, having completed his homily for the Lord's Day and entered rest while his household prepared food. His departure, bearing the quiet dignity of whom the angels had come to receive. He was accorded full ecclesiastical burial at St. James' Cathedral, the Great, Oke-Bola, Ibadan. His amiable wife, Racheal, departed this life in 2010. He is survived by six children who have attained significant standing in life, a direct testament to his historic and historical sacrificial labour in God's vineyard; both sons and daughters are engaged in Christian service with one now recognised as a notable clergyman in the Church of Nigeria, (Anglican Communion).

Historically, Rev. Rowland Popoola must be remembered as a rugged, resilient and dynamically committed priest, impervious to retreat, uncompromising in sacerdotal duties and steadfast at the altar of responsibility. His ministry constitutes an essential chapter in Nigeria and warrants permanent commemoration as a paradigm of indigenous priestly fortitude and fidelity.

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14. Psalm 37:23. Revised Standard Version.
15. Romans 10:15 quoting from Isaiah 52:7. Revised Standard Version.
16. *Reverend Canon Emmanuel Taiwo Babatunde was a foundational indigenous priest of the old Ibadan Diocese whose ministry exceeded four decades. Though he superintended multiple parishes and mission stations, including Otan-Ayegbaju, Ikirun, Ada, Ila-Orangun, Oke-Ila, Iresi, Iragbiji, Obaagun, Ede and Kabba in Kogi state, he was never preferred an Archdeacon at a time when the dignity was highly coveted and ceremonially fundamental. He belonged to the generation of Anglican Clergy distinguished by the use of clerical caps and immaculate black cassock during divine service, a mark of liturgical sobriety and ecclesiastical gravitas. Through direct tutelage and household formation, he mentored several clergy, notably his nephew, Rev. Rowland Akinsanya Popoola and one Ven. A.O. Taiwo of blessed memory, and his labours contributed immeasurably to the numerical and institutional growth of Anglicanism in Yoruba land especially at St. Phillip's Anglican Church, (now the Cathedral of St. Philip), Otan-Aiyegbaju of Osun North Anglican diocese where he spent four decades as the vicar. In perpetual remembrance, his siblings built a church structure and named it as Canon Emmanuel Taiwo Babatunde Memorial Anglican Church, Apata, Ibadan and donated it to the Anglican diocese of Ibadan South, this immortalising his name and ecclesiastical legacy.*

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