

History of Ereko Methodist Church

METHODISM found its way to Lagos in 1894 when the Revd: E. A. Gardiner was appointed to Lagos by the Methodist Conference. According to a later record, "the late friendly King of Lagos, Dosunmu, made over to the Methodist Missionary Society, a piece of land on which the Mission House at the Marina now stands."

The earliest mention of "Ereko" in the records of this early period of Methodism in Lagos runs thus: "It is interesting to note that in 1856, services were being held at Faji Market, Ereko Market and near the King's Home." (referring presumably to Faji, Ereko and Obun-Eko).

The Spiritual Mother of the then Wesleyan Ereko Methodist Church was Madam Efun-yelu, popularly known as Mammy Efun ("Efun" being a white symbol of the heathen god she and her people knew and worshipped).

Mammy Efun was said to have been born at Abeokuta sometime in 1840, that is two years before Christianity first saw the light of day in the town, now the capital of Ogun State. She was converted to Christianity and was baptized at an Open Air Service at Abeokuta conducted by Revd. Champness sometime in 1861.

She later came to be known as Amelia Bickersteth although Mammy Efun remained her popular name for the rest of her life. History records that -

"Ever since her conversion she had developed to be a zealous Christian attending Sunday School regularly at Ogbe Methodist Church".

It was at the Sunday School that she was taught the Yoruba alphabet (A. B. D.) and this in course of time enabled her to read the Yoruba Bible and other religious tracts available in Yoruba.

The Gathering Storm

By the early sixties of the nineteenth century missionary work was being done in Abeokuta by the Methodist, the C.M.S. and the Baptist Missions. Their work would appear to have been flourishing as shown by the several converts to Christianity in the

town. This success might justifiably have given satisfaction to the various Missionary workers but the fetish priests saw in it the waning of their traditional grip on their people and took umbrage at it. Before long their ire exploded into an outburst of violence.

The Great Persecution and Exodus

The outburst of violence came on Sunday, October 15, 1867 when a wave of lawlessness directed by the pagans against the Missionaries, their workers and converts swept through Abeokuta. Several of these Christians especially the converts who would appear to have constituted the principal target of the murderous persecution were thrown into prison on one pretext or the other and some were even put to death. Such Christians as were able to, and these included some of the Missionaries, fled the town for dear life to Lagos leaving all their personal belongings behind for looting and destruction.

Resettlement in Lagos

On arrival in Lagos some of them, especially those who belonged to the C.M.S., stayed at Ebute-Metta on the mainland and later became known as "Egba Refugees". They inhabited areas like "AGO EGBA" and "AGO IJAIYE". Through the instrumentality of the highly respected King Dosunmu of Lagos and the influence of the then Officer Administering the Government of Lagos, the late Governor J. H. Glover, Chief Akinyemi, the Oloto of Oto agreed to allot to the refugees a large area of land at Ebute-Metta for their resettlement. A sizeable portion was in later years carved out of this land for a place of Christian worship, first in the form of a temporary building until what is now known as St. Jude's Church, Ebute-Metta marked the final stage of development.

One of the Methodist refugees who would not part with their European spiritual fathers and chose Lagos island for their new life was Mammy Efun. She was heartily welcomed along with her comrades -- the other unfortunate victims of unprovoked persecution -- and was found a lodging at Idurnota near Ereko market from where she carried on her

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trade. She soon became a prominent trader but it was her piety and devotion to Christian worship that clearly marked her out as a conspicuous and leading figure among her comrades. It was reported that she usually worshipped at Olowogbowo Church but she soon found a snag in that. Divine Services at Olowogbowo were usually conducted in English- which obviously was "Greek" to Mamfry Efun and her Yoruba speaking comrades. That situation soon engendered a disturbing element of disgust as they could not enjoy services conducted in a foreign language.

The Birth of Ereko Society

Mammy Efun did do something about their difficulty in worshipping at Olowogbowo. She appealed to the Minister in charge, Revd. John Rhodes, for bilingual form of worship, that is, for one of the two Sunday Services to be conducted in Yoruba, for the benefit of the Yoruba-speaking members. At first, Revd. Rhodes did not agree to this and that understandably as he himself could not conduct services in Yoruba. After some time, however, Revd. Rhodes agreed to Open Air Services being conducted by Mammy Efun in Yoruba under market stalls at Ereko. This continued for a while until sometime in 1869 when a temporary thatched roof chapel was built on a piece of land very kindly donated by the respected Prince Kosoko of Ereko. That was the very first structure to be known as Wesleyan Ereko Church. The few items of furniture comprising bamboo chairs and benches made from packing cases were all supplied by voluntary donations.

Revd. Rhodes appointed Mammy Efun a class Leader - the first Class Leader to be appointed in Ereko Methodist Church - and handed to her an empty Class Book with, as it were, the charge to "go into the world and win souls for Christ". That precisely was what Mammy Efun did and God was with her.

As she had endeared herself to her comrades she had no difficulty in making enrolments from amongst them and other converts who, for her sense of humour, pleasant and approachable disposition, quite readily accep-

ted her leadership. That she was very successful in her work at Ereko is borne out by these comments of Revd. John Rhodes himself.

"... in the course of a few years, through the instrumentality of Mammy Efun who instructed and trained the new converts who have surrendered their idols and have turned to the Living God, forty and fifty each time, all of whom have been won for Christ by Mammy Efun's efforts ... It was after baptising the second batch of the converts that I made my first attempt to preach in Yoruba language addressing the converts from a text to be found in Galatians Chapter 5 Verse 1".

That then was the humble beginning of Ereko Society in the Methodist Church but before long it was reported that it was the most successful of all the Methodist Religious Units operating in the area. Whereas Tinubu (Faji) also organised a small Yoruba section which was separated and transferred to Bangbose Street sometime in 1886 - an arrangement which resulted in considerable improvement whereby the conversion of a "priestess" was recorded - it was Ereko Church that catered for and embraced the bulk of the indigenous christians (of Methodist persuasion) and their converts who quite naturally preferred to worship God at all Divine Services - Sunday Mornings and Evenings as well as week-nights - in their own native tongue, Yoruba. Olowogbowo could only count, for membership, on the English-speaking immigrants - notably the "Creoles" of "Daddies" - from Sierra-Leone most of whom live in the civinity.

Progress at Ereko

There was progress on all fronts and in due course a monster petition was addressed to the Methodist Conference in England making an effective case for the Lagos area to be separated from the then Gold Coast District. The reply was favourable and so in 1875 (or 1879 according to another authority) Lagos and Yoruba Section was separated from the Gold Coast under the first Chairmanship of Revd. John Milum.

By 1880 Ereko Church Divine Services had moved from the temporary shed to a more commodious thatched-roof construction on the very site of the present building. In 1885

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the building was involved in a conflagration which started in a neighbouring bamboo house. On the sad news reaching Revd. Milum at his Marina Mission House, he immediately jumped on his horse and in a terrific haste galloped to the site shouting alarm for help in what must have been distorted Yoruba - "Fa Koriko, Fa Mokole O'.orun si Ereko" (Help, help to remove the thatched roof from the house of God I built at Ereko).

In a short while another temporary building but of an improved standard and better materials was erected to replace the one destroyed by fire. Although the new building was slightly larger than the old one the ever-increasing membership soon inspired consideration for a larger, permanent and more commodious building. An impression of the pressing situation around this time can, perhaps, be better gathered from the following comments (quoted verbatim) in the (i) Annual Reports of the Wesleyan Methodist Missions in the Lagos District etc. (a) printed publication) and (ii) Annual Report on the Religious state of Societies (in manuscript) issued for each year ending 31st December in respect of each Society usually to wind up the Minutes of the Annual Methodist Synod Meetings -

1886 Report on Religious State of Societies

Ereko - "This Society continues to prosper - overflowing congregations have compelled us at last to look to the necessity of enlarging our borders - a Building Committee was formed during the year - Building Steward appointed and a good sum of X60 raised. As soon as we can obtain the sanction of the Circuit and District Meetings we will proceed to work in earnest... ."

1887 10th Annual Report

"Ereko Church is far too small to contain the people who flock thither on Sundays ... The need of a more commodious building is painfully felt and attempts are being made towards erecting one." '

1887 Report on Religious State of Societies

"The society continues to make its flourishing reputation in every way... . A circum-

stance peculiar to this Church is the uncommonly large members that congregate there to worship God on Sunday evenings consisting of, besides the regular worshippers our own people of the other Societies and of the other protestant denominations in the town. The small building is regularly crowded to suffocation. The congregation on Sunday evenings often number more than 600. The only way that presents itself for accounting for the attractiveness of the Ereko Church Sunday Evening Service is that it is conducted in Yoruba. . . . Some earnest preparations have been made in order to enlarge and improve the present building and it is hoped the work will begin in the course of the ensuing year."

1888 11th Annual Report

"The old Church at Ereko is demolished and a fairer and more commodious structure is rising on the site."

1888 Report on Religious State of Societies

"As intimated in last Year's Report the edifice within which our people of this Society had been worshipping, instead of being enlarged and improved as was originally anticipated, had to be completely pulled down and an altogether new building of larger dimensions is erected in its place. In the meantime, the congregation have had to repair to our other places of worship on Sundays and week nights - some to Olowogbowo, some - the greater proportion -- to Obun Eko; the Leaders' Meeting is held in the house of one of the Male Merkbbers in the neighbourhood. The cause for pulling down the old Church was the discovery that its foundation not having been protected with cemented basis had been considerably washed away and sapped by the heavy rains for so many years. The corner-stone of the New Building was laid on Thursday 25th August, in the presence of a vast concourse of people of all creeds. Oyekan the Native Prince of Lagos with a large retinue of heathens and Mohammedans not excepted. The building of the walls has progressed with uncommon rapidity as generally remarked by the public. This Church when completed will stand unique among all our Churches in Lagos, the distinguishing fea-

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ture being a Tower attached to its Northern Gable."

N.B. *A descendant of the Native Prince of Lagos referred to is now Oba of Lagos - Oyekan H. The Oba and his family are valued members of the Church.*

1889 Report on Religious State of Societies

"The building of the Ereko Church remaining incomplete, the congregation of this Society continued to worship in other Churches. Every effort has been made to complete and open the Church at this season but the want of funds has rendered the realisation impracticable. That the work has arrived at its present advanced stage is mainly owing to the untiring efforts and exertions of Mr. J. E. Leigh, the Building Steward, and it is the earnest prayer and ardent hope of all that he may soon be enabled to accomplish this object of this and every heart's strong desire."

1890 Report on the Religious State of Societies

Ereko - "The New Church on this station has been happily completed and it is hoped before many days are past this beautiful edifice will be opened for Divine Worship."

When this last reference in the 1890 Report is read with a reference on page 101 of the 1892 Report of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (which refers to work done in the previous calendar year) which says simply - "The new Ereko Church was opened in January." It can be concluded that the existing building of Ereko Methodist Church was dedicated for Divine Worship some time in January, 1891.

The Existing Church Building

From the above it is clear that the present building was started in August, 1888 and was dedicated in January, 1891. It had therefore, taken some twenty-nine months from commencement of work to the dedication of this magnificent building of unique architecture. What a glorious achievement!

There are, unfortunately, no records of the

progressive stages of construction or even of the names of the Architects, leading workmen; etc. It is, however, known for certain that the contract for the entire brickwork (masonry) was executed by the late Josephus Lucas (the revered grandfather of the late Lagos Diocesan Church Historian - the Revd. Dr. J. Olumide Lucas) whilst that for the entire woodwork (carpentry) was handled by the late David Erastus Williams (the respected father of the late J. Tychus Aganga-Williams a one time Organist and Choirmaster, at different periods of Ereko Church Choir). The bricks used for the Tower Section of the Church were, according to information received, imported from overseas and donated by the said D. E. Williams. It is thought that the bricks used for the body of the Church might have come from the brick-making industry established by the C.M.S. at Ebute-Metta sometime before 1870. The Building Steward noted above was no other than the then Consul in Lagos and he also acted as Overseer until the completion of the building.

*Madam Amelia Bickersteth (alias Mammy Efun;
Founder and First Class Leader of Ereko Methodist
Church in 1869*