The Legacy of Yohanna Gowon

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Pa Yohanna Gowon (ca. 1880–1973) was one of the earliest Ngas converts to Christianity. Christian contact with the Ngas people (plural Nga/mwa) began in 1907, when missionaries belonging to the Cambridge University Mission Party (CUMP), an affiliate of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), arrived on a survey trip at Kabwir, one of the leading Ngas cities. Kabwir is in central Nigeria, in the Kanke local government area of the Plateau State. (Eight years earlier, the Ngas people had been brought under the control of the British colonial authorities in their attempt to gain control of northern Nigeria. The British district officer had his residence in Pankshin, which was on a hill west of Kabwir.

The leader of the missionary team was T. E. Alvarez, who at that time was the secretary of the CMS Niger Mission. The party met the chief of Kabwir, Bewaran Dimka. To determine the sincerity of these strange visitors and the genuineness of their message, the chief sought the assistance of soothsayers (persons whom the Ngas say have “the power of second sight”) from Tuwan, a neighboring village.2 Led by their chief, Genka, the soothsayers announced that the issue would be resolved by a yerkm (fetish bird) called kikik. If within the next three days this bird appeared at night and cooed, then the supposed Good News the missionaries had brought should be rejected. If it did not, then the missionaries must have brought the message from God, whom the Ngas called Nen. It was usual for the yerkm to appear at that period of the year, but miraculously the bird never appeared, and the Ngas were ready to welcome the missionaries.

With this breakthrough, Alvarez and his team left to make preparations to send other missionaries to the Ngas people. Having earlier opened a station in Panyam among the Mwaghavul, Ngas neighbors to the west of Kabwir, missionaries arrived in 1910 to open a station among the Ngas. What happened later was remarkable. Bewaran Dimka and his household became friends of the missionaries and began to attend a mission instruction class. In addition, almost the whole of Tuwan village, including Chief Genka, was ready to learn the white man’s “secrets” (i.e., gain a Western education).

The traditionalists in Kabwir could not reconcile themselves with the newly found faith of their chief. When Bewaran no longer agreed to perform the traditional rituals expected of him, they petitioned the colonial authority in Pankshin to intervene—lest, so they threatened, there should be a breakdown of law and order. Since Bewaran was not willing to renounce his new faith, the district officer removed him. Facing the real danger of assassination in Kabwir, Bewaran fled to Tuwan. From then on, Tuwan became a refuge for Ngas Christians facing persecution in neighboring villages.

At this time Gowon was a Ngas prince in Lur, a village near Kabwir. His father was Gofwan, the chief; his mother was not remembered by the oldest person I interviewed.3 Gofwan had at least three wives and was wealthy, owning goats and cattle. He was a hardworking man who taught his children the value of work. By the time Gowon was in his early thirties, he had distinguished himself among his peers. He had gained considerable wealth, which is clear from his marriage to four wives.

Gowon was also committed to the traditional religion of his people. As a prince he could not do otherwise. (The proper spelling of his name is Ngo-wong, i.e., one who was born “by the grace of wong,” or on the occasion of the wong festival).4 He is said to have been a great dancer at Ngas festivals.5 He also played Ngas music using the molo, a kind of guitar. Gowon was a highly respected young man and a budding leader in his community before his conversion to Christianity.

Gowon’s Conversion

The news of the mass conversion of Ngas in Kabwir and Tuwan attracted the attention of Gowon. For one thing, the words of the soothsayers were not to be taken lightly. Also, it was clear that there had been a power shift from the traditional rulers to the colonial authorities, who had imposed indirect rule over the Ngas.6 In addition, the missionaries themselves had made a favorable impression on the Ngas, for the foreigners had introduced clear improvements in the society. They had started a school that was attended by both the chiefs and the ordinary people. In 1921 they built a modern hospital, the first in northern Nigeria. Missionaries also sank wells, which meant that people no longer had to fetch water from the stream, which was sometimes contaminated.

It was the school that attracted the young Gowon to the mission compound. The early teachers in the school were two missionary agents who had been recruited from Kpata, one of Bishop Herbert Tugwell’s stations near Lokoja, on the confluence of the Benue and Niger Rivers. One was Moses Ogungbabi Olubi, a Yagba from the ruling house of Afin, a carpenter by trade; about the other, we know only that his name was Abraham.7 These two had learned enough Hausa to be able to teach in it. These young teachers, however, soon ran into trouble in adjusting to Ngas culture. They had taught the Ngas to distance themselves from their traditional background and to destroy objects of traditional worship. In their zeal, the young converts once took the law into their own hands. A group of traditionalists, including some dressed in traditional Ngas wongmaa masquerade, once threatened some Christian women. The Christian young men reacted by overpowering one of men and stripping him of his costume. This action was highly sacrilegious and provoked a hostile gathering of traditionalists from other Ngas villages, who prepared to march against the Christians. Except for the timely intervention of the colonial authorities in Pankshin, few Christians would have survived.

There soon were other problems with these missionary agents. Moses was said to have been dismissed for immoral behavior and later died in Kaduna.8 The need arose, then, to train Ngas themselves to teach their own people the Christian message. As a result, the nascent school was expanded in 1914 to train Ngas evangelists. At this time Gowon became actively involved as a pupil, along with over seventy others. The training began with the Anglican catechism.

It was a major sacrifice for Gowon to attend this school, for he did it against the wishes of his parents. They tried to dissuade him, but he had made up his mind to give up his royal position.

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The opposition from his parents was so intense that Gowon was forced to flee to Tuwan, leaving behind everything he owned. He took with him only Madbwir, the only daughter he had with his first wife.2 Gowon had previously lost one of his wives, and now his other three wives refused to follow him. In Tuwan Gowon lived with an elder brother, Dashwar, who through unknown circumstances also had become a Christian.

Gowon was baptized and christened Yohanna (John) in 1914 and was one of the twenty-two candidates confirmed by Bishop Tugwell in 1915.10 Gowon’s conversion resulted from several factors, foremost of which was what Kalu calls the finger of God, or the direct action of the Spirit of God.11

Evangelist to His Own People

In St. Paul’s Anglican Church in Tuwan Gowon saw and fell in love with a young girl of noble birth, Saraya Kuryan. She was the daughter of Fillibus and Helen Goar, who were among the first converts in Tuwan. Filibus Goar, from the royal family of Walta, later became chief of Tuwan, between 1940 and 1948.12 Gowon and Kuryan were married in the church on April 26, 1923. This marriage was ultimately blessed with eleven children: Ibrahim, Peter (both dead), Rachel, Mary, Yakubu, Daniel, Bala (also dead), Kande, Moses, Dauda, and Ishaya. Four of the boys later enlisted in the Nigerian army. One of them, Yakubu, rose to become the Nigerian head of state from 1966 to 1975.

Gowon’s decision to become an evangelist was partly as a result of the death of Dashwar, who had become one of the leaders of the Tuwan church. One day after leading the morning prayers in the church, Dashwar succumbed to a freak accident. He was cutting down a dry locust tree when it fell on him, crushing him to death. This event deeply shook Gowon. He saw the fragility of life and resolved to serve God fully for the rest of his life. Soon after this experience, he and his new wife submitted themselves to be evangelists and were admitted into the Tuwan Evangelists’ School for further training beyond catechism.

The new school provided a proper theological training in its own right, with some of the best teachers of the day, both European and African. Instruction was in Hausa, but students went out to preach in their native languages. The Gowons thus had to learn to read and speak Hausa. Hausa was becoming popular among Ngas because of nearby Hausa settlements in Chika and at Lungwa in Dawaki.13 Students usually had one year of training and then would go for two years of field experience.14 The Ngas evangelists wore black cassocks and were called gofutadi pmwaa (i.e., those who wore black gowns).15

After the initial training Gowon’s first preaching site was his home village, Lur. His early converts were his cousins, who included Mwata Chindaba, Gwomgwe, Wokshit, Ngwagompwel (later christened Barnabas), and Gwongwel.16 Mwata Chindaba later became a pastor in the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), established by the Sudan United Mission (SUM), British Branch.

The Gowons labored in virtually all the Ngas villages—Amper, Seri, Gugur, Krum, Garam, Lungwa, and Pankshin (then known as Ner). Of all these places the most troublesome was Amper. Here, Kuryan recalled, her husband was once slapped by an onlooker who apparently did not want to hear the preaching. But instead of retaliating, Gowon just smiled.17 Despite this opposition, the Amper church eventually became one of the strongest Ngas churches. A report of the mission work here as supplied by CUMP missionary Charles Wedgewood is indicative: “The work at Per and in the surrounding districts has been going steadily ahead. It has been carried during the last nine months entirely by African agents with very little supervision and reflects great credit on these men.”18 The evangelists used biblical texts translated into Ngas by Wedgewood: the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, as well as the first letter of John and portions of the Psalms. Also translated into Ngas were two collections of Old Testament stories, the catechism, portions of the Book of Prayer, a manual of Christian teaching, a pamphlet on marriage, and a primer.19

By 1930 it was apparent that CUMP could not maintain its three stations on the Jos Plateau—at Panyam, at Kabwir, and at Boi, north of Kabwir, the location of a third station recently opened by Wedgewood. Difficulties arose as a result of a shortage of European personnel and finances. Therefore CUMP, through its parent body the CMS, approached SUM (whose own stations had almost encircled them) with the suggestion that this large field be transferred to the care of SUM.20

The transfer was accomplished on April 19, 1930. SUM received forty-eight communicants from the Panyam station and one hundred from the Kabwir station, but none from Boi, the newest.21 This matter of transferring mission oversight was not unique. For example, in northern Nigeria SUM (British Branch) had handed over to the United Methodist and SUM (Danish Branch) its stations among Mumuye and Chamba respectively.22 What was unusual in this case was the Ngas reaction to this transfer. They objected to it when they noticed the sharp difference in theology and practice between CUMP, which was Episcopalian, and SUM (British Branch), which was more congregational. Although measures were taken to smooth the transition by posting two Anglicans to the stations—Lowry Maxwell to Kabwir23 and E. M. Webster to Panyam—the Ngas were not satisfied. Members of the Amper church, led by Amos Kwashi, the father of the present bishop of the Jos diocese, walked about five hundred kilometers to Wusasa, the headquarters of the Hausa Anglican mission, to register their protest with Bishop Alfred Smith. But the transfer was irreversible. Many of the Ngas evangelists took government jobs rather than continue to work with the new mission.24

The Gowons, however, continued to work with SUM in spite of the difficulties. One immediate complication arose from the SUM policy not to pay evangelists, in strict adherence to Henry Venn’s formula of the three-sells (specifically, that indigenous churches should be self-financing). The Gowons therefore became volunteer workers.

The Gowons were posted to Garam, where Yohanna served as a catechist to a new church. To supplement his income, he resumed his old profession, farming. Before long, however, they were transferred to Pankshin. This move was difficult for the Gowons, for Pankshin was becoming a cosmopolitan town with little farmland.

This was a critical time for the Gowons, for they now had six children to take care of. They were faced with the decision either to take an appointment with the government or to retire and go back to Lur. Gowon had shared this concern with his
friend William Gotom, a member of his church in Pankshin. It was therefore a great relief when the Gowons received an invitation from Bishop Alfred Smith asking them to move to the newly established missionary station at Wusasa, near Zaria. A few years earlier Timothy Gotom, a cousin of William Gotom, had moved to Wusasa to work in the hospital. Perhaps from him the bishop learned of the Gowons’ predicament.

The CMS Wusasa Mission had been granted permission to work among Hausa traditionalists, the Maguzawa, and it badly needed African agents. Thus in mid-1936 the Gowons with their six children moved to Wusasa, Zaria, to begin evangelistic work among Hausa. Meanwhile, one of Gowon’s early converts, a cousin, Barnabas Ngwa Gompwel, had made rapid progress. He had become a cook to one of the missionaries in Tuwan. His intelligence became apparent, and he was sent to CMS Training Institute in Kpata, near Lokoja. There he learned to read Hausa and English. On his return SUM made good use of him as an evangelist. He then moved to join the Gowons in Wusasa, where he later translated the New Testament into Ngas.26

Gowon as an Evangelist to the Hausa

The story of the Hausa Anglican mission is well known.27 Gowon and later Gompwel began to work in the newly established mission stations of Chafe and Maska among the Hausa. They also visited other Hausa villages, such as Dusten Wai, Soba, and Ikara, all in the Zaria emirate. This was very helpful since colonial policy prevented white missionaries from preaching in Hausa villages. Before long, however, it became apparent to Gowon that he was not becoming as fluent in Hausa as he wished; in addition he was getting older. For these reasons Gowon retired in 1940 at the age of about sixty. He returned to Wusasa to begin a new phase of his life.28

The Wusasa mission authorities had no specific work for Gowon to do. The mission helped as much as it could, however, granting scholarships to four of his children and assigning him manual jobs from time to time. One of his jobs was to sink wells. Gowon was skilled in this craft, for he always seemed to know where to dig to find water. The eight wells currently in Wusasa were sunk by him. In addition, he dug latrines,29 though he was never asked to clean them.30 He also dug graves and maintained the mission’s cemetery. Soon the news of Gowon’s skills spread, and people outside Wusasa also began hiring him to sink wells for them. In 1989 the Wusasa Old Students Association honored Gowon posthumously for such service, granting him the Anniversary Award for community development.31

Farming, though, was Gowon’s main job at this time, on which the family depended for its sustenance. Gowon often prayed specifically that the Lord would give him the extra strength needed for this work. His son Dauda says that after praying that prayer, his father would work on the farm from morning to evening without showing any sign of exhaustion.32 He also had a team of helpers in his sons. After morning prayers the boys would go work on the farm before breakfast and then before they got ready to go to school. After school, they were back on the farm. The girls usually helped Kuryan at home with house chores. It is therefore not surprising that the Gowon children all grew up to be hard workers.

In Wusasa Gowon had requested a piece of land on which to farm but was given only a very rocky patch of land33 that the locals considered to be the worst possible land for farming. Gowon, however, would carry in dirt from elsewhere, filling in the spaces between the rocks and planting his crops, such as corn, guinea corn, and millet. Gradually he transformed his rocky land into a fruitful space. His Hausa neighbors marveled as they watched his incredible feat. As a result, Gowon became famous as a great farmer and was given the name Sarkin Noma, or Chief of Farmers. His eldest daughter, Rachel, has inherited this farmland. Another unusual phenomenon was Gowon’s ability to spin. In Hausaland only women spin. But Yohanna would spin, and Kuryan would weave the thread into Ngas gwado, or traditional cloth.

Gowon’s children best remember him for his unshakable faith in God. Rachel remembers that her father taught his children “the value of faith in God and destiny: He taught us the value of honesty in our dealings with our fellow human beings. He taught us the value of hard work and diligence in our daily endeavors. In general, we were encouraged to read the Bible regularly and to obey and practice its injunctions.”34 She also remembers that during family devotions Gowon would often tell them, “Ask God for everything, and he will grant you your request. Never try to get material wealth in illegitimate ways. Trust in God completely, and he will never fail you. He will reward you at last for obeying him.” He never relied on charms, herbalists, witch doctors, or anything similar for protection or for help with problems.34

Gowon was tolerant of those who did not share his beliefs and was well respected by Muslims. One, Mallam Hayaki, said, “Gowon lived an outstanding life here in Wusasa. He was patient. He never fought with anyone.”35 Archdeacon H. O. Mohammed said that in all the time he knew Gowon, he had never seen him angry. He was always jovial, very hardworking, never pompous, and always simple.36

Gowon never missed church. One of his enjoyments was singing; a favorite song was “Onward Christian Soldiers.”37 Even in old age, Gowon would walk to the Hausa villages around Wusasa to share his faith with Muslims. E. Umaru Julde, a Fulani pastor in Wusasa, once reminisced to Rachel about the evangelistic activities of her father in these villages. One day when Julde went to Kufena, he heard a native lament, “Since Mallam Yohanna stopped coming to us to preach, no one has come. He was the only one who used to visit us.”38

Conclusion

Gowon died on January 26, 1973, a nonagenarian who “hardly ever went to the hospital for any treatment [or took any drugs] until the last two months of his life.”39 At his funeral service F. O. Segun, the Anglican bishop of the Diocese of Northern Nigeria, stated that Gowon gave his whole life to God with an overflowing heart, to the extent that he was able to reveal certain aspects of God to others in several ways: “First, [by] his sterling integrity which gives a glimpse of divine righteousness; second, by his purity which gives a glimpse of divine holiness; thirdly,
by his sympathy and fourthly by his tenderness... The work Pa Gowon did, the words he spoke, the character he built and the moral and spiritual influence he set in motion, would outlive the stars.”

Archdeacon H. O. Mohammed described him as a saint. “As far as I am concerned, I have never seen any fault in Yohanna’s life. That is why I call him a saint because of his tolerance... Gowon’s character and life were enough to convert people.”

Gowon would have been shocked to see the level of later religious intolerance in northern Nigeria, which culminated in the desecration of his tomb in Wusasa in 1987.

Gowon’s significance in the history of Christianity in northern Nigeria lies in the role he, along with other evangelists, played in the Christianization of what today is called the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Evangelists such as Gowon left a legacy of inculturation, for they considered themselves to be more Hausa than Nigeras, Nupe, Jukun, Kataf, or Bujju. Their children can hardly speak their mother tongues; some of them would prefer to be referred to as Hausa. These evangelists were helpful in expanding the frontiers of the church in Hausaland; they took the Gospel into areas that were prohibited to European missionaries during the colonial period.

Selected Bibliography

Works About Pa Yohanna Gowon

Notes

1. “Pa,” an honorific term for elderly persons, is often used with Gowon’s name. The ethnic name “Ngar” means “forthrightness.” Colonial documents refer to this people as Angas (plural Angasawa), which is the Hausa corruption of the name.
3. One of Gowon’s children, Dr. Dauda Gowon, says that his grandmother was Fulani, but we have no direct evidence supporting this claim. Ngasawa lived together with Fulani before the colonial period. One lingering cultural influence is seen in the Ngas rearin of cattle as do the Fulani.
4. Wong is a traditional masquerade.
5. Interview with Kashaka Lonji, the oldest man in Lur (Gowon’s birth place) when I visited there in 1990. Unless otherwise stated all interviews were done in 1990.
7. Diary of Dr. G. T. Fox, 1907–9, kept in Theological College of Northern Nigeria Archives, Bukuru, 294. Fox was the founder of the first hospital.
8. Wambutda, Study of Conversion, p. 156.
9. By the time of my research, Madbhir was dead, but I met her daughter Helen, now Mrs. Paul Goar. Madbhir also had a son named David, whom I never met.
13. There were in fact a few Ngas converts to Islam; the best known is the Mohammed family from Chika.
14. A report from 1918 states, “On April 1st we started with five evangelists, four of whom had had a year’s training before going out for two years’ service” (Lightbearch 14, no. 3 [1918]: 44).
16. Interview with Mwata Chindaba, Lur.
17. Interview with Saraya Kuryan Gowon, Wusasa.
18. Lightbearch 14, no. 3 (1918): 44.
23. Jan Boer has noted that Maxwell was in fact a British Presbyterian layman but was ordained into the Anglican ministry to meet the present need (Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Sudan United Mission [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979], pp. 144–45).
24. These included Amos Kwashi and William Gotom.
25. Interview with Mrs. William Gotom, Bukuru.
28. Until the creation of the Wusasa Diocese in 1997, the problem of recruiting local evangelists and training Hausa pastors was acute, for most of the children of the original evangelists had taken up other professions. Interview with Bishop Ali Lamido, Wusasa, 2001.
29. Interview with Mallam Hayaki, Kuregu.
30. Interview with Dr. Dauda Gowon, Jos.
32. Interview with Dr. Dauda Gowon, Jos.
34. Interview with Rachel Nur, Wusasa.
35. Interview with Mallam Hayaki, Kuregu.
36. Interview with H. O. Mohammed, Abuja, now living in Zaria.
37. Interview with Mary Dimka (née Gowon), Jos.
38. Interview with Rachel Nur, Wusasa.
41. Interview with H. O. Mohammed.
43. The Middle Belt is a geopolitical area representing the Christian-dominated areas of northern Nigeria.