Radio Missions: Station ELWA in West Africa

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Missionaries have long served as agents of globalization. As early as the sixteenth century, European missionaries imagined the globe as a unified space for cultural action. In turn, the missionary encounter implied a particular set of power relations based in space that changed over time. Beginning with William Carey’s pioneering venture, evangelically minded missionaries sought to convert the unsaved around the world through a set of labor-intensive methods that involved face-to-face interaction under the framework of direct European colonial rule. In a general pattern that reached its apogee before the First World War, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and other mainline Protestant groups from Europe and North America formed mission enclaves—initially, mission villages; later, outstations in European-controlled territory. Brick-and-mortar mission “stations” drew prospective converts out from socially marginalized groups (such as widows, childless women, former slaves, and the extreme poor), severing them from their native environment and submerging them in a thoroughly Westernized milieu. Compounds typically included a dispensary, school, and church, from which missionaries administered medical services, provided basic education, and engaged in personal evangelism. While missionaries held a complex, at times conflicting, relationship with colonial authorities, their fieldwork, grounded in geographic space, assumed the territorial control, administrative stability, and cultural prestige afforded by European imperial power.

By contrast, missionary expansion in the twentieth century included evangelical use of radio airwaves and took place under the aegis of a postcolonial and postterritorial American “empire.” Missionary activity in the American century demonstrated American exceptionalism in two related areas: (1) the increasing dominance on the mission field of conservative evangelical workers from the United States and (2) the prevalence of the private American system of broadcasting in the field of transnational religious radio. Unlike earlier missionary methods, global expansion of religion by radio required “detrerritorialization”—that is, a disembodiment of the Gospel from its point of origin in physical space and its transposition into an electronic message that could then be communicated universally by broadcast “stations” around the world. “Radio revivalism,” as developed by evangelical preachers for the American market of the 1920s, fit this purpose well. Crafted initially for listening audiences in the United States, evangelical programs combined music and preaching in a highly personalized form of religion that was freed from physical space and its transposition into an electronic message that could then be communicated universally by broadcast “stations” around the world. “Radio revivalism,” as developed by evangelical preachers for the American market of the 1920s, fit this purpose well. Crafted initially for listening audiences in the United States, evangelical programs combined music and preaching in a highly personalized form of religion that was freed from corporate church requirements of priest, liturgy, or sacrament and was oriented instead to individual experience and conversion.

Easily reproducible by mechanical means and hence readily expandable, radio programming facilitated American evangelical expansion on a global basis. Pioneer American broadcasters tied “radio revivalism” to a voluntary, parachurch form of faith missions, relying on a loose worldwide association of broadcasting organizations funded by private donations to extend their influence abroad. Radio Vatican began worldwide Catholic broadcasts from Rome in 1931. The same year, conservative evangelicals in the United States launched the first full-time Protestant religious radio station overseas—Station HCJB in Quito, Ecuador. By the mid-1950s, conservative religious broadcasters had established sixteen radio beachheads on medium wave and shortwave transmitters in the major regions of the Global South (Central and South America, the Caribbean, Asia, sub-Saharan and North Africa), as well as in Europe. In countries where privately owned religious outlets were not available, radio missionaries purchased airtime on government or commercial establishments. By 1970, conservative Protestant radio stations comprised “a far-flung gospel radio network around the world” that easily trumped its Catholic or mainline Protestant counterparts in its size and influence. Electronic communication made it possible for the first time in the history of world missions simultaneously to reach mass audiences around the planet with the Gospel in real time. For enthusiastic supporters in the United States—donors, radio preachers, and even average churchgoers—missions by radio routinized the central missionary task of evangelization, reducing the need for field personnel and thereby facilitating the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Popular evangelical enthusiasm for missionary radio in the United States assumed that broadcast technology presented a universal solution to the task of world missions. Yet global missions by radio required not only propagating the Christian Gospel over the airwaves, but ensuring its proper reception as well. Missionary broadcast communication necessitated reembedding the evangelical Gospel from the United States within diverse churches, cultures, and communities around the world. As we see in the history of Station ELWA in Liberia, the predominant religious station in Africa during the continent’s transition from colonialism, producing converts through a spaceless electronic medium entailed complicated work on the ground that strongly echoed the labor-intensive evangelistic methods of an earlier era. Between 1954 and 1970, ELWA station workers and their national partners constructed transmission platforms, established language services, developed political relations, created receiver distribution programs, and organized community efforts in order to translate the “universal” meaning of midcentury American evangelicalism into a postcolonial West African environment. Blending Western technology, programs, and personnel with local knowledge and partnerships on the ground, American radio missionaries formed hybrid, transnational arrangements that blurred geographic boundaries across space as well as chronological boundaries backwards in time.

Establishing Station ELWA

Liberia provided an extremely challenging platform for private American missionary broadcasting on the continent of Africa during the postwar period. To begin with, African countries lacked radio facilities; in 1950 the continent had only 140 transmitters and only 1,100 kilowatts of total transmitter power—the second lowest totals in the world. Furthermore, the meager facilities that existed in Africa were government-run. Broadcasting in Africa in
the mid-1950s was under the tight control of French and British colonial authorities—"a pattern of public ownership that would be carried over by postcolonial African governments." Missionary enthusiasm fueled the establishment of Station ELWA in Africa’s austere postwar broadcasting environment. In April 1950, united by a common vision to evangelize Africa by radio, three American mission students from Wheaton College, outside Chicago—William Watkins, Abe Thiessen, and Merle Steely—formed the West African Broadcasting Association. In February 1951, following the government’s failed attempt to start a station, Liberian officials generously granted the American students an unrestricted broadcast franchise, along with a sizable grant of coastal property and a waiver of import duties on imported station equipment. Watkins and Thiessen interpreted the assigned call letters ELWA—“Eternal Love Wins Africa”—to describe the evangelical mission of Africa’s first full-time religious radio station. In November 1952 the station’s organizers merged with the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), a North American faith mission headquartered in Toronto, Canada, and operating out of

An early ELWA postcard, reading, “Located in West Africa about 10 degrees north of the equator, ELWA, the radio voice of the Sudan Interior Mission, broadcasts in 40 languages to Africa and the Middle East."

Jos, Nigeria. SIM had long sought a broadcast outlet to supplement its extensive West African print operations, extending its influence across the African continent. Launched in January 1954, ELWA rapidly increased its transmitter power and expanded its language programs, acquiring worldwide audiences. Before long, the “Radio Voice of the Sudan Interior Mission” reached deep into Liberia, a thousand miles along the West African coast, and across the African continent on long wave, medium wave, and shortwave transmitters. Liberia’s official use of the English language facilitated ELWA’s early growth, providing an immediate market in Monrovia. The station aired nearly thirty different sponsored Gospel programs each week, featuring prominent American radio preachers such as Charles Fuller, Billy Graham, and Theodore Epp. ELWA also produced its own studio programs, employing local Liberian musicians and announcers, as well as broadcasting Liberian government material. In 1955, only its second year of operation, ELWA received more than 11,000 letters from forty-four different countries, including twenty-one countries in Africa, various European nations, and the United States, attesting to the strong presence on the continent and the global reach of its transmitters.

Producing Regional Vernacular Programs

Missionaries at ELWA rapidly specialized in regional and vernacular broadcasting. Shortly after adding its first shortwave transmitter in March 1955, ELWA launched its first programs in French, Arabic, and the Nigerian tongues of Hausa and Yoruba. Soon listeners could hear over 100 programs per week on each of ELWA’s long wave and shortwave services in twenty different languages overall, mostly tribal dialects from Liberia and Nigeria. By the mid-1960s, ELWA was broadcasting in an astonishing forty-nine regional languages, including the principal tongues of Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Congo, East Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. To produce regional material, North American missionaries at ELWA relied on an extensive network of mission groups and workers across Africa. To meet the demand for local Liberian programs, ELWA trained its own local announcers, recruiting candidates from Bible schools in the country’s interior. By 1964 the station had ten full-time Liberian “dialect broadcasters” who translated daily news, produced regular programming, and interpreted biblical texts from English, since their native tribes rarely had complete translations of the Bible in their own tongues. Vernacular programming incorporated earlier, face-to-face, evangelistic methods. “Dialect broadcasters” frequently visited their language areas to meet radio listeners and new converts, attend church conferences, conduct evangelistic campaigns, and record popular materials for retransmission on the air. By the start of its third decade in 1970, ELWA had significantly indigenized its operations in order to meet the demand for local material. The station employed more than three times as many local workers and technicians as Western missionaries—200 Africans, mostly from Liberia, compared with 60 expatriates from North America.

Accommodating Liberia’s Political Elite

ELWA’s success depended on its highly favorable political relations with Liberia’s governing elite, the minority Americo-Liberians. Descendants of the former American slaves who originally settled in Liberia in 1822 and later organized the Liberian Republic in 1847, pro-Western Americo-Liberians monopolized political power in the country through the True Whig Party. The small elite imposed centralized governmental rule from Monrovia over Liberia’s tribal interior, where 90 percent of the population lived. Through their broadcast operations, ELWA’s organizers helped to consolidate the cultural hegemony and political control of Liberia’s leaders. In its original license, ELWA’s founders agreed to distribute free radios in Liberia’s hinterland and to evangelize the populace there, which overwhelmingly practiced African traditional religion. ELWA contracted to air government programs regularly, including a variety of “public service” broadcasts, and to publicize the Tubman administration’s two economic development plans—the Open Door policy and the National Development Campaign—in the country’s rural regions. Finally, ELWA promised to promote the public image of Liberia abroad; by 1958 the station had provided broadcasting services to a lengthy list of the country’s government departments and agencies. In return, Liberia’s Protestant elite provided ELWA with “an open door for Gospel radio,” as the station’s first director boasted to supporters. High-ranking members of the Liberian government, including President William Tubman himself, attended ELWA’s inaugural ceremony and frequently participated in the station’s prayer services and anniversary celebrations. Tubman pronounced ELWA to be his favorite
radio station, calling it “a vital part of the nation’s religious, educational, social, and cultural progress,” and commonly sang its praises in public declarations and speeches.\textsuperscript{20} Political accommodation with Liberia’s leaders allowed ELWA to survive periodic political unrest in the country and to continue broadcasting continuously for over thirty-five years until the outbreak of civil war in 1990.\textsuperscript{21}

**Building Reception for Local Audiences**

In the period following WWII, centralized transmission of radio programs posed little technical difficulty for missionary broadcasters. Wartime advances in high-frequency transmission, as well as the availability of surplus military equipment and the strategic location of American bases around the globe, ensured American missionaries access to the airwaves worldwide. Radio reception, however, proved a far different story. In most regions of the Global South, missionary broadcasters had to work hard to provide audiences with the physical means of reception for their religious message. Throughout Africa, radio receivers were extremely scarce during the postwar period. In 1950 the fifty countries surveyed in Africa possessed a total of 1.4 million radio receivers—a mere 7 radios per 1,000 inhabitants and a miniscule 1 percent of the world’s total, the lowest of any continent.\textsuperscript{22} According to estimates by Voice of America, only 4,000 sets existed in Liberia in mid-1953.\textsuperscript{23} ELWA officials initiated a receiver distribution program after it started transmitting in January 1954, handing out freely tunable vacuum-tube radios in Monrovia in an attempt to immediately build local audiences for its programs.\textsuperscript{24} By April 1957, ELWA had distributed 225 receivers in Liberia—a small but significant number in light of the negligible size of the Liberian radio market and Liberians’ communal usage of receivers.\textsuperscript{25}

ELWA missionaries sought to align usage of its radios in Liberia with standards of efficiency and mission priorities. Vacuum-tube radios were difficult to maintain in the mission field, consuming large amounts of battery power that was hard to acquire and replace. When ELWA initiated its receiver program in 1954, officials decided to lend, rather than sell, radios to Liberians, assuming that this would allow the station greater control over how borrowers used the sets. Officials insisted on two lending conditions: they lent radios only to Christians, identified through a written questionnaire, and they sought to restrict usage of receivers to communal settings in order to maximize audience size.\textsuperscript{26} In late 1959, ELWA officials began to purchase large quantities of a special pretuned commercial transistor set manufactured by Philips N.V. of Holland, attempting both to expand its missionary audiences in Liberia and to control their activities. During the 1960s, missionary stations around the world followed suit, adopting the universal technological standard of pretuned transistor sets in their growing radio receiver departments. Pretuned transistor radios provided a dual benefit to missionary stations. Hard wiring ensured that borrowers used sets solely for religious purposes, since they could pick up only a single station, while transistors dramatically reduced power consumption, significantly expanding battery and radio life.\textsuperscript{27} By 1970, when ELWA ended its receiver program, it had placed a total of 2,400 sets in West Africa, 90 percent of which were pretuned and transistorized.\textsuperscript{28}

**Forming Radio Church Communities**

As early as 1945, missionary broadcasters such as Clarence Jones of Station HCJB in Ecuador had attempted to address the “receiver problem” in the developing world by mass producing a single radio receiver for use worldwide. Missionary interest in a receiver for the masses peaked in 1954, when conservative evangelical engineers organized a five-year project to custom design and build a single pretuned “missionary transistor radio” for the global mission field. Yet evangelical attempts to craft a proprietary solution to the world shortage of radio receivers foundered on evangelicals’ contradictory objectives of expansion and control. By insisting on the use of pretuned radios, which utilized myriad bandwidths and frequencies, broadcasters segmented the global missionary market and eliminated the possibility of producing a single radio model worldwide. Instead, American missionary broadcasters targeted a range of narrower, more geographically circumscribed audiences, identified with ethnic language areas, rural villages, national church workers, and even individual missionaries. To reach these potential listeners, broadcasters frequently collaborated with established mission organizations and indigenous groups. ELWA’s most fruitful area for radio mission work lay in Liberia’s eastern hinterland, where the country’s tribal populations lived. Expansion into Liberia’s frontier areas meant reliance on Protestant mission groups to distribute ELWA’s radio sets. ELWA’s receiver department worked with almost half of the forty American mission organizations operating in Liberia.\textsuperscript{29} Officials provided pretuned, battery-operated radios to mission stations, which then placed the radios with indigenous pastors and evangelists for use among their native peoples to grow radio church communities.\textsuperscript{30}

The case of the Elizabeth Native Interior Mission (ENIM) illustrates how broadcasters, missionaries, and indigenous workers joined together around radio receiver technology. Originally founded as an agricultural, industrial, and religious training institute in Sinoe County by a black Baptist schoolteacher from Texas, ENIM was subsequently taken over by Augustus Marwieh, a prominent Liberian Christian leader. Marwieh petitioned ELWA for twenty-five pretuned receivers, which he then placed in the hands of indigenous pastors and evangelists for use in townships in Liberia’s southeastern Grand Cedeh County. Touring rural districts that lacked electricity, itinerant evangelists used battery-powered sets known as “Portable Missionaries” (PMs) to attract audiences, convert nonbelievers, and grow village churches. In Kudi Town, the township met on a daily basis for two and a half hours for the PM radio service in the Krah language. After the radio service concluded, the pastor conducted an evening meeting, preaching to the whole town that had assembled. Women rearranged their traditional cooking hours so they could attend radio services, preparing food in the afternoon rather than at night. After hearing PM services, church members in Gbahu occasionally spent the entire
night “singing, praying, and testifying.” Radio listening and church attendance could lead to changes in lifestyle; village women in some cases turned from behavior seen as immoral, stopped eating lice, and abolished traditional animistic medical practice as a result of religious revivals sparked by radio. Itinerant ENIM evangelists thus used portable technology in the form of pretuned transistor radios to transport missionary programs from Monrovia into rural Liberian village life, utilizing a mix of modern electronic and traditional missionary methods.

Conclusion

The case study of Station ELWA from 1954 to 1970 exemplifies how conservative evangelical radio missions operated worldwide during the postwar period. Radio missionaries with Station ELWA demonstrated a capacity for creativity in communication, forming part of an historic pattern among American evangelicals that dates back to the Great Awakening. On a continent nearly devoid of radio facilities and where government controlled broadcasting, private religious entrepreneurs from North America channeled their missionary zeal into a technological form, forging a long-lasting regional voice on the nascent postcolonial African radio dial.

ELWA’s diverse activities illustrate the transnational and hybrid character of the radio project undertaken by conservative evangelical American missionaries after the Second World War. ELWA brought together local, regional, national, and global scales of operation, as the station broadcast simultaneously to greater Monrovia, the Liberian interior, West Africa, and the African continent, as well as to other regions of the world. A private organization, ELWA connected supporters, radio preachers, and broadcasters from the United States directly with church workers and villagers in Liberia, as well as indirectly with listeners worldwide. ELWA’s transnational operations over the airwaves rested on hybrid missionary practices on the ground; to transcend spatial boundaries, modern missionary radio stations required grounding their operations in physical space. Global missions by radio involved more than simply transmitting a Gospel message or broadcasting standard prerecorded materials from the United States; it also required building audience receptivity, which ELWA broadcasters did through creative technological and cultural efforts. Receptivity necessitated, first, possession of a radio, the physical means of reception—a major obstacle in Africa as well as most of the developing world following World War II. But conversion required cultural receptivity as well, which entailed framing the evangelical message in vernacular idioms familiar to local West African audiences. To be heard, American officials at ELWA thus indigenized their transnational radio operations—training tribal translators and partnering with local church workers—and reached out to sister missionary organizations in the field. In a pattern repeated by other missionary stations around the world, ELWA broadcasters, scriptwriters, announcers, studio personnel, national church workers, and partner mission agencies worked together to translate American evangelicalism at ELWA into terms that were recognizable to local West African listeners. Blurring demarcations in time as they had in space, missionary broadcasters across the globe combined virtual, electronic forms of outreach with earlier labor-intensive approaches in order to ensure reception of the Gospel message.

As a global project emanating from the United States at the peak of postwar American power, radio mission raises the question of cultural hegemony. Missionary translation obscured the foreign origins of American program material, as well as the source of American influence in Monrovia. The effects of English-language broadcasts outside West Africa and the global impact of missionary radio as a whole are hard to assess. Like the printing press in the sixteenth century, electronic media in the twentieth century vastly expanded the geographic reach of evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity, well beyond the direct control of missionary broadcasters, and facilitated the experience of evangelical Protestantism around the world. Radio broadcasting supported the historic spread of evangelical Christianity on a global scale during the second half of the twentieth century, legitimizing American evangelicalism in the minds of audiences in the Global South through the sheer force of its presence on the radio dial. As a transnational project originating from a homogenous American market yet translated into a range of local practices, missionary radio consolidated the trend toward a worldwide Christianity that was at once global and diverse.

Notes


5. The concept of translation is a rich trope found in the work of numerous scholars. In missiological studies, see Lamin Sanneh, Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).


18. The complete list includes the Booker Washington Institute, Bureau of Fundamental Education, Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, Bureau of Information, Department of Defense, Department of National Defense, Department of Public Instruction, Department of Public Works and Utilities, Department of State, House of Representatives, Liberian Senate, National Police Force, National Public Health Service, Post Office, Supreme Court, Treasury Department Customs Office, and University of Liberia (“Here is some interesting information for your files, Ray,” February 25, 1958, Newspaper Clippings [1951–60] folder, Box 1, Liberia Information, LC-SIM).


20. William S. Tubman to Ray de la Haye, February 18, 1964, Public Information Office—Publication Reviews (1964–69) folder, Box 13, Administration, LC-SIM.

21. The station fell prey to the civil war that broke out in Liberia in 1990, which disrupted its transmission capabilities.


25. ELWA’s total distribution of radios by 1957 approached 20 percent of the Voice of America’s figures for the country in 1953.

26. United States Information Service, “Facts on Liberia Communications Media,” September 1, 1960, 974.60/1–6,246, Box 2088, General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, 1960–63, Record Group 59, National Archives Records Administration, College Park, Md. (henceforth NARA); T. W. Chalmers, “This is the Nigerian Broadcasting Service,” from Nigeria, no. 40, 1953, pp. 280–96, Folder 6, Box 29, Collection 86, BGCA.

27. Graber, “Portable Missionary Radio Project.”

28. Of roughly 2,400 total sets distributed, 2,187 were transistorized (“PMR Proposal,” September 26, 1970, MRR Minutes).

29. These included the Lutheran Mission, Methodist Mission, Mid-Liberia Baptist Union, World-Wide Evangelization Crusade, and several Pentecostal groups.


31. Augustus B. Marwieh to Dick Reed, November 1, 1967, Public Information Office—Publication Reviews (1964–69) folder, Box 13, Administration, LC-SIM.

32. It is worth noting that with outside help ELWA resumed operation after the country’s crises in 1990 and 1996. Liberian Christians now carry on the station’s activity on FM and shortwave. See www.elwaministries.org/AreasoMinistry/RadioStation/tabid/60/Default.aspx.

33. For a history of international organizations in the twentieth century, see Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002).
Carolyn Moore, Asbury Seminary M.Div. graduate, is impacting the world through Mosaic United Methodist Church in Evans, Georgia. Eight years ago she faced a unique challenge—planting a church as a woman in the South. Since then, Mosaic has grown to nearly 250 members and 180 have become followers of Christ or recommitted their lives. Carolyn is paving the way for other women called to plant churches. People’s lives are being changed.

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