

William Wade Harris: An Example and a Symbol of African Involment in the Propagation of the Christian Faith on the African Continent

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Abstract: This paper is about Prophet William Wade Harris, an excellent example and a model of an African indigenous initiative in the expansion of Christianity on the African continent. As an African Christian, Harris portrays what it takes to get a village on fire for Jesus Christ. He demonstrated a strong sense of agency, knowledge of and conviction about the gospel truth. He also displayed a clear grasp of the African condition and its desperate yearning for a change. He upheld a spirit of partnership and that his leadership and organization skills allowed for a development and involvement of the native agency. In addition, his understanding of the African culture and application of the gospel to the same was outstanding. These qualities are what today's African church leaders and ministers need for the task of expanding the kingdom of God. It is clear that Prophet William Wade Harris received a clear call to reach out to his fellow Africans bound in traditional religions. Therefore it is important for the contemporary African Christian leaders to seek clarity and specificity of their ministry call in order to make an indelible impact as was with Prophet Harris.

Keywords: Gospel, Ministry, Christianity, Context, Baptism, Traditions, Missions, Conversion, Leadership, Contemporary, Church

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I. INTRODUCTION

Prophet William Wade Harris is an example and a symbol of African initiative in Christianizing the Africa continent. His single-handed expedition to Christianize the coastal part of Ivory Coast in a matter months (Sheila 1983,12) beckons a study. The study of the life and ministry of Prophet Harris reveals a great wealth of knowledge that the contemporary African leaders need to emulate in order to accomplish our Christian mandate of reaching and making disciples of our African brethren.

This paper is a result of a library research on one man, Prophet Harris, a Liberian who like most of the contemporary African Christian received a call to serve God by reaching out to his fellow Africans who were entranced in their traditional religions. His background was a difficult one. Yet there was so much influence his name still command as a result of the impact of his brief ministry. The question here is what prompted such a success amidst odious conditions? This paper therefore will consider his biographic sketch, experiences he brought with him to ministry, the context of his ministry, his ministry, evaluation of his ability and finally make an application. It is clear from the study of Prophet William Wade Harris' life and ministry that the effectiveness of Christian ministry is a contingent to heeding a clear and specific call to a specific task.

II. A Brief Biographical Sketch

A study of an individual's biography lends a window through which one can understand his or her world and subsequent achievements. Prophet Harris's life is one of great success that begs for a serious consideration.

Birth and Early Life

Most authorities differ on the Prophet's exact year of birth. Some put it at 1865 while others prefer a 1850 to 1865 arrange (Omulogoli 2002, 4).ⁱ Prophet Harris was a native of Half Graway, a village near Cape Palmas in Liberia, close to its border with Ivory Coast. He was born to African traditionalist parents of Greboⁱⁱ tribe who had neither Western education nor its 'faith' as Christianity was commonly perceived.

Harris's parents wished that he acquired the learning, which had come from the West. When he attained twelve years of age his parents organized and sent him to stay with their fellow Grebo, Rev. Jesse Lowrie to pursue it. Rev. Lowrie who lived in the neighbourhood Sinoe, served both as a minister in the

American Methodist Episcopal Mission and as a superintendent of the mission schoolⁱⁱⁱ. He diligently and successfully pursued his studies in reading and writing in Grebo and English. However, in the course of his stay in Sinoe, Harris as any other Grebo villager with such an opportunity and exposure did not only adapt to the Afro-American life-style but also internalized Christian values which made his uncle Rev. Lawrie^{iv} baptize him as a Methodist.^v Walker captures Harris's conversion clearly by citing his recollection to Benoit, a Methodist missionary that,

I was first converted here, at Cape Palmas, when the minister preached in the church on Revelations 2:4-5: 'That which I have against you is that you have abandoned your first love; turn then from whence you have fallen; repent and do your former works....' The same year I began to preach. I felt the Holy Spirit come upon me and change me at the moment of my conversion in the church.^{vi}

Career Development and Working Life

Prophet Harris is not one of those preacher men with a mean career development. On the contrary, Harris's life is full of credentials that attest to him as a man headed for a brighter future in the Liberian government and beyond. He acquired credentials such as a successful and effective ship attendant, teacher, lay preacher, administrator, interpreter, activist, mediator, and church planter.

After his schooling in Sinoe, Harris started out life as a crewman on the British ships plying on the West Coast of Africa.^{vii} He later returned home and established himself as a brick mason after accumulating some financial resources from the for career. However, as it would happen with any young Christian beginning his career and exploring the world, Harris had lost his touch with the church and so its moral values.

His return to Cape Palmas provided him an opportunity to reconnect with the church. He rejoined the American Methodist church at Cape Palmas at the age of twenty-one. At Cape Palmas, he coupled his masonry work with lay ministry in both the Methodist Church and American Protestant Episcopal church. However, "his message was same as the American missionaries: the need to give up indigenous beliefs and practices and to worship only the Christian god."^{viii} At this time Harris married Rose Bodock Farr around 1885/1886^{ix} and together they had six children.^x

During his stay and ministry in Cape Palmer, Harris taught in various schools and held different responsibilities. He got his initial assignment as an assistant teacher with his former school that was a project of the Methodists. At this station, Harris taught reading and writing for close to ten years. Moreover, after his fall away with the Methodist and subsequent confirmation with the Episcopalian mission, the mission gave Harris a teaching responsibility charged with the care of the Spring Hill School in Graway. He later administrated a boarding school in Half Graway where he was responsible for sixteen students.^{xi}

Harris' teaching career put him at the best footing among the Greboes and in the entire Maryland County. He landed another job as a government interpreter of Maryland County authorities.^{xii} In this capacity entailed a task of acting as a peacemaker between two warring groups in Graway. Harris failed to undertake this task due to conflict of interest leading subsequent dismissal as a government interpreter. He declared himself the "Secretary of the Graway People," a position that led to a suspicion that he was involvement in the coup d'état that the Greboes were organizing. To make his point to the government, Harris, in accompany of others, lowered Liberian flag and raised the British^{xiii} one in its place while insulting Americo-Liberian onlookers. This act earned him a jail sentence in 1909^{xiv} following a conviction of treason charges.^{xv} Thus by any standards, Harris was among the "Christianized Greboes" who played "a prominent role within the indigenous communities."^{xvi}

III. Experience Harris brought with him into Ministry

By virtue of such an enormous career and practical involvement with the people both in church and in government business, Harris commanded a rich experience that he definitely brought to bear in his evangelistic ministry. First, his literacy in both Grebo and English was very handy in the reading and exposition of the scripture during his preaching itineraries. Second, as a crewman he had an exposure to different peoples and cultures which put him at a better position in dealing with the 'other' people groups. This he coupled with his skill as a cultural mediator while he served as a government interpretation and educator.

Third, Harris' administrative and teaching skills from school ministry were very much needed while dealing his converts. They needed training and organization where churches did not exist. Finally, his preaching skills acquired from his lay ministry from his former local churches. This skill became critical in his preaching itineraries where he was to preach every time and whenever there was opportunity. Thus, we can say that Harris was an intelligent and influential social and political leader with deep Christian religious conviction, extensive Bible knowledge and an understanding of an African audience.^{xvii}

IV. His Call to Ministry

Prophet Harris' involvement with Christianity started back during his stay with Rev. Lowrie. This stay with Lowrie made him literate, a baptized Methodist, and a "civilized" Grebo but it did not get him "converted."^{xviii} Harris' actual conversion experience took place in the Methodist Episcopal Church at Cape

Palmas at age 21 or 22 under a Liberian minister Rev. Thomas and confirmation done by Bishop Ferguson as he narrated it to Pierre Benoit.^{xix} He started preaching immediately following his conversion. In the Protestant Episcopal Church, lay ministry was greatly encouraged. This could have been the reason as to why Harris engaged in preaching ministry immediately following his conversion.^{xx} Alternatively, he was under a divine compulsion to witness to the goodness of God in delivering His people. Nevertheless, there was yet a definite call of Harris into a prophetic ministry.

Harris' definite call for ministry came through a trance-visitation in 1910 while he was serving a prison sentence.^{xxi} Harris went back to fetish worship when in prison due to the hostility he had received in his Christian service, among his Grebo people, especially the elite, and finally prison condition. This made him give up on Christianity and embraced traditional religion as he had earlier threatened following his sacking from Maryland County.^{xxii} Duncan and Ogbu captures referring to this experience report that, "During his incarceration, he experienced a vision of the Archangel Gabriel who identified him as a prophet to prepare the way for Christ, and instructed him to abandon his European ways"^{xxiii} However, Platt puts in a "proper context,

One day, while praying, he had a vision of the Angel Gabriel telling him that he had been chosen by God to preach his Word to all people who had not yet heard the Christian message.... Gabriel told him that his role was to be like that of the prophets of the Bible, "like Elijah who burned all the priests of Baal." He was told, "Go and teach to all nations, baptizing them.... So I go and baptize"^{xxiv}

V. Ministry Context

Prophet Harris is a product of a particular socio-political background. This includes the social, political, economical, and religious conditions prevailing at the time of his life and subsequent ministry. In order to understand Harris' ministry we must consider the prevailing condition in both Liberian and Ivory Coast.

Liberia

Liberia (Land of freedom), the black American colony^{xxv} found its name from the freed slaves who were settled there. It was the first independent country south of Sahara (26 July 1847) and became the Republic of Liberia under Afro-American, freed slaves from America. Its ruling "power rested on the tripod of church, Masonic Lodge and True Whig Party."^{xxvi} The Afro-Americans, as the freed slaves were commonly known as, denied the native Kru people any civil rights. There also tension between church and state in Liberia on who actually hailed power. The tensions degenerated in the Grebo wars of 1856 and 1875.^{xxvii}

Liberia had three major social groups: the indigenous, settlers and the missionaries. The settlers formed the ruling and affluent class while the indigenous Kru remained underdeveloped and downtrodden by this African settlers. Consequently, the Kru people were embittered and agitated for a British rule they saw in other territories. Afro-Americans also felt dominated by their former masters and so they greatly opposed the missionaries from the West. They "championed for polygamy, communalism, and indigenous African religious forms."^{xxviii} The changes during this time greatly affected the Kru people calling for adjustment. They were to adjust to the "New economic production system, changes in currency, the salary system, and domestication of cash-nexes in exchange."^{xxix} This state of affair destabilized Liberian state as each of these groups sort to find their footing.

The indigenous Liberian people were staunch indigenous traditional African religions adherents with some embracing the new faith brought from the West. Two mission teams, Methodist, and Episcopal came to the ground. The Methodists concentrated to the indigenous while the Episcopal Church mission concentrated on settlers in their schooling and ministry involvement. The other phenomenon that was taking place on the religious scene of the time is that the Afro-Americans opposed to Euro-American churches and missionaries.^{xxx} This confused the indigenous opting for Christianity and challenged its impact among this people group. However, the indigenous who became Christians passionately took the Gospel Message to their family members and communities.^{xxxi}

Ivory Coast^{xxxii}

The Ivorian people lived in villages according to their various ethnic groups. Their economy was fishing and subsistence farming. They shared social and cultural traits such as religious systems and age-group structures because of proximity and intermarriage. The Ivorians like any other Africans believed in a creator god, Yankan, a deity far removed from their daily life and nature spirits that controlled their every day affairs to ensure posterity. They indigenous people strongly believed in witchcraft and bad spirits. This explained their misfortunes and provided for a platform for seeking solutions from the spirit world.

Politically, the British usurped the sovereignty of the Ivorians living at the coastal lagoons and later the French who colonized them. This carried with it an economical implication. The British controlled the business at the coast and when the French took over they even worsened by penetrating to the interior bypassing the intermediaries to deal directly the inland tribes. This led to wrangles between the lagoon tribes and the French

traders culminating into signing of treaties and chiefs ceding their land to the French. Consequently, these ethnic groups became poor and powerless and the French established themselves in Ivory Coast that was hitherto their colony. To pacify the indigenous, colonial government send for Roman Catholic to come and train them on how to be “loyal and obedient French subjects.” However, they were not very successful just as in the other two previous attempts.^{xxxiii} The French masters closed down English-speaking congregations of the American Episcopal mission who were at least thriving in the interior villages of Ivory Coast. Thus, Duncan and Ogbo concur with Hustings who observes, “Throughout West Africa there was “a mysterious ripeness for conversion”^{xxxiv}

VI. Prophet Harris’ Ministry

Harris launched his preaching campaign in Monrovia, Liberia immediately following his release from prison. His preaching expedition in Liberia was not successful as he met ridicule and hostility from the Afro-Americans and elite Kru people. He preached to the Liberians, the settlers, and whites alike. However, their response was not good and so he opted for the neighbouring Ivory Coast in 1913 in accompany of two women.^{xxxv} In 1914, he crossed briefly to Ghana to a place known as Apollonia where he had massive conversion and baptism. He directed the converts to Methodist Churches there. In 1917, he crossed into the territory of Sierra Leone but as it were in Liberia, he was not successful here too.^{xxxvi} After thwarted efforts to visit Ivory Coast converts, Harris settled in Liberia preaching and baptizing but in a low tempo. He kept a communication with his converts and other yarning disciples in the surrounding nations through special emissaries that they send to him to hear the word from him and latter teach them.^{xxxvii}

Harris dressed distinctively, carried a Bible, a cross, a guard rattle, and a bowl for baptism. He was a charismatic evangelist who successfully built his ministry a round prophecy and healing. He ministry focus was among staunch African traditionalists.^{xxxviii} Harris preached simple and direct message that represented no particular denomination but Christian faith calling for abandonment of traditional religion to the “worship one true God and salvation in Christ.” He was particular on the fetishes of the traditional religions that he insisted on the power of Jesus, which was able to destroy.^{xxxix} Harris insisted on a radical conversion followed that he consummated immediately by baptism. After baptism, he always encouraged his converts to join any existing churches. If there was none, he charged the converts with forming a Christian community of their own.^{xl}

Harris’ ministry specifically geared toward breaking of new grounds. He worked among traditionalists with great success.^{xli} In his preaching, Harris called upon his hearers to total commitment to the Christian faith by breaking with their traditional religions demonstrated by the destruction of fetishes. He initiated his covert into the Christian faith by laying the Bible on their heads and immediately baptizing them. More so, he instructed them in the elementary truths of the Bible and appointed assistants for a follow-up program who instructed them about leading ethical and moral upright lives. He never establish his kingdom, so send his converts to the mission churches around for Christian nurture and only encouraged converts to establish a church where there was none. He consequently assigned Methodist clerks to care for the churches he had established. Harris arranged that each house of prayer to have a minister assisted by 12 apostles. He spoke to, baptized and commissioned his converts to preach the gospel into their villages, counselled his converts into “steadfast faith, while waiting for” the coming teachers with Bibles who would train them in its content. Harris insisted in keeping of the day of worship and rest. In addition, he organized with the Methodist clerks he secured a Bible for each church.^{xlii}

VII. Evaluation of His Ability

Prophet Harris was indeed a messenger send of God to the African people. His call was specific and his message clear: to convert Africans from their traditional religions to faith in Jesus Christ.^{xliii} His background placed him well culturally for the task, enabling him to appeal to his hearers’ contemporary concerns.^{xliv} His approach to evangelism was totally new, “indiscreet, imprudent, and undiplomatic. When he attacked traditional religion he directed his message to the root of the matter.” Harris engaged the “native teachers” in “Pidgin English,” thus, identifying with his audience. He gave rise to and encouraged a new force of native agency in the spread of Christianity on this continent.^{xlv}

Harris went in to breaking new fields. He had a clear understanding of the nature of his mission.^{xlvi} He therefore never wasted time on those who felt satisfied with their status. His audience was those Africans bound in traditional religions who practiced fetish worship for fear of the powers of the spirits and witchcraft. On conversion, Harris insisted on a radical life change followed by baptismal that initiated one in the Christian faith. He always kept the sense of immediacy of the gospel. He insisted on audience making up their mind in view of the gospel message. As an evangelist, Harris understood partnership in ministry. He never went into the details of Christianity but left it to others - the missionaries and Ivorians. He also sent his converts to missionary churches for nurture. He nurtured his converts by instructing them to follow the Ten Commandments, reject idols, accept the authority of the Bible, and join the nearest church. Concerning church organization and

leadership, a minister assisted by 12 apostles led the Harrists church. Therefore, as Duncan and Ogbu observe, Harris demonstrated clear leadership ability by living a simple moderate lifestyle, observing the Day of Lord, and organizing leadership in new churches that he founded.^{xlvii} Moreover, Harris did not only display a sound knowledge of the scripture but also commanded its application to the African context by not condemning polygamy but adultery.^{xlviii} Finally, Harris knowing his mission, never sort favours from people or sort alliances that could thwart this noble mission. He pursued it to the end that he died poor and lonely, having written no book, but now many books are written about him, and having no substantial following in Liberia but now the biggest known African initiated Christian church, the Harrists, has been established after him and in his name.

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VIII. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, Harris was indeed a Godsend servant to bring Christianity among Africans who were wallowing in fear of the spirits and witchcraft. He committed himself to God who had called him and to the course and subject of his mission. He remained alert to God's divine direction knowing the specific people for whom he was called. He served with all his heart not holding back anything and never pursuing selfish gains. When tides rose up against him, he chose to obey God by submitting to his will. He seized every opportunity available for the cause of the gospel yet not being opportunistic in his approach. He wholeheartedly supported the course of the gospel even when those who would have been his partners seemed to be against him. He knew how to contain pride and to give glory to God when he experienced unequalled conversion. He also knew how to keep his soul alive during evangelistic expedition failure.

Harris knew the gospel to the African realities and never shied from proclaiming it. He attacked fetishes when duty called. He demolished sickness and powers of witchcraft when it was necessary, he prophesied to the African heart God's will for their lives. Harris sense of agency wooed many into making decision to be Christians. He never hesitated to baptize any. He taught them, found resources for them, organized them into prayer houses, and pointed them to the missionaries for further assistance. Within their specific groups, Harris showed them how to live like brothers when he distributed to the needy all that they had given to him as gifts.

Indeed, we have an excellent example and a model of an indigenous initiative in the expansion of Christianity. Harris portrays what it takes to get our village on fire for Christ. Harris shows a strong sense of agency, knowledge of and conviction about the gospel truth. He also displays a clear grasp of the African condition and its desperate yearning for a change. He upholds a spirit of partnership and that his leadership and organization skills allows for a development and involvement of native agency. In addition, his understanding of the culture and application of the gospel to the same is superb. These qualities are what today's African church leaders and ministers need for the task of expanding the kingdom of God. It is clear that Prophet William Wade Harris received a clear call to reach out to his fellow Africans bound in traditional religions. Therefore it is important for the contemporary African Christian leaders to seek clarity and specificity of their ministry call in order to make an indelible impact as was with Prophet Harris.

ⁱ Watson Omulogoli, "William Wade Harris: Premier African Evangelist" in *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2002), 4. Cf. Sheila 1983, 12. See also Sheila S. Walker, "The Message as the Medium: The Harrist Churches of the Ivory Coast and Ghana," in George Bond, Walton Johnson and Sheila S. Walker eds., *African Christianity: Patterns of Religious Continuity* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; San Francisco: Academic Press, 1979), 9. See also David A. Shank, *Prophet Harris, The 'Black Elijah' of West Africa* (Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill 1993), 57. This author postulates 1860 as a probable Harris' year of birth.

ⁱⁱ Some spell it Glebo. See Shank, 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13

^{iv} Sometimes spelt Lawry see David, 57

- ^v Sheila S. Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 9. Cf. Shank, 57
- ^{vi} Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 18.
- ^{vii} Sheila S. Walker, "The Message as the Medium," in *African Christianity*, 9
- ^{viii} Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13.
- ^{ix} Graham Duncan and Ogbu U. Kalu. "Revival Movements and Indigenous Appropriation in Africa Christianity," in Ogbu U. Kalu ed., *African Christianity: An African Story*, (Pretoria: University of Pretoria 2005), 286. See also David, 62. David notes that Harris' wife was a daughter of John Farr a former catechist and teacher at Spring Hill. Their wedding was celebrated by Rev. O.H. Shannon, a superintendent of the Graway work.
- ^x Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 13.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.* 14.
- ^{xii} See also Shank, *Prophet Harris, The 'Black Elijah' of West Africa*, 3.
- ^{xiii} E.O. Babalola, *Christianity in West Africa: An Historical Analysis*, 2nd ed., (Ibadan: Book Presentation and Publishing Co. 1988), 231. This author refers to the British (flag) here as the Union Jack. Cf. Harvey J. Sindima, *Drums of Redemption: An Introduction to African Christianity*, (London: Praeger 1999), 85.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.* Babalola sees the political activism of Harris as being responsible for his three imprisonments in total, 1893, 1896 and 1910. Cf. Harvey, 84-85.
- ^{xv} Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 15-16. See also Watson, 6.
- ^{xvi} E.O. Babalola, 69.
- ^{xvii} Sheila S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 17-20.
- ^{xviii} Shank, 55; see also p. 57
- ^{xix} *Ibid.* 57
- ^{xx} *ibid.* 61
- ^{xxi} *ibid.* 104
- ^{xxii} *ibid.* 105- 106. Cf. Shaila, S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 15. This sentiments differ from Sheila's who follows Platt to underscores that Harris' call into ministry came following long hours he spend in prayer and reading of the Bible. I think Shank's perspective is reasonable owing to Harris' immediate context.
- ^{xxiii} Graham and Ogbu, 286
- ^{xxiv} Shaila, S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution*, 15
- ^{xxv} John, 114. See also E.O. Babalola, 71-72 and Sheila 1983, 14-15
- ^{xxvi} Graham and Ogbu, 286
- ^{xxvii} John, 114. See also E.O. Babalola, 71-72 and Sheila 1983, 14-15
- ^{xxviii} See Sheila 1983, 5, 9, 11, 15 and 1979, 9-10. Cf. Omlogoli, 7; E.O. Babalola, 321
- ^{xxix} Graham, 286.
- ^{xxx} Sheila 1979, 9-10. Cf. Sheila 1983, 11
- ^{xxxi} Sheila, 1983, 6, 12.
- ^{xxxii} See Sheila, 1983, 22-34. The materials here are owed to Sheila who has an extensive treatment on this subject.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.* 33-34. Cf. Graham and Ogbu, 285
- ^{xxxiv} Graham and Ogbu, 286
- ^{xxxv} Sheila, 1979, 10-11; see also Omulogoli 10.
- ^{xxxvi} Sheila, 1983, 16
- ^{xxxvii} For further readings on the delegations visiting Prophet Harris, see Sheila, 1983, 64 ff.
- ^{xxxviii} Graham and Ogbu, 286
- ^{xxxix} Sanneh, 123
- ^{xl} Sheila, 1979, 12
- ^{xli} *Ibid.* See also Sheila 1983, 16
- ^{xlii} Omulogoli, 15-16; Sheila 1979, 14-15; Sheila, 1983, 44-45.
- ^{xliiii} Sheila 1983, xiii
- ^{xliv} *ibid.* xv-xvi
- ^{xlv} E.O. Babalola, 232-233.
- ^{xlvi} See Sheila 1983, 16 where she cites van Bulk on the nature of Harris' mission as he explained it to Father Hartz, the director of Catholic missions in the Ivory Coast.
- ^{xlvii} Graham and Ogbu, 287-288.
- ^{xlviii} Sheila 1983, 20, 16.

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