

## Article

# “No Fiancé, No Baptism”: Historicizing the Education of Girls through a 1953 Episode in the RCM Convent Girls School, Benin City, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** In 1953, officials of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) Church in Benin City, Nigeria, requested schoolgirls of Benin–Edo ethnic origin at the local Convent Primary School preparing for baptism to bring their fiancés to school as a condition for baptism. The demand for the presentation of their fiancé was the first time such a condition for baptism was given to young teenage girls since the establishment of the RCM in Benin City in 1923. The condition and demand affected the girls’ relationship with the RCM denomination. In examining and historicizing this episode, this paper asks and answers the following questions: Why did the local RCM officials change their policy to demand fiancés as a condition for the baptism of schoolgirls of Benin–Edo origin? How did the policy affect schoolgirls, particularly their relations with the Catholic faith, and their response? This paper uses archival documents, personal interviews with some former Convent school girls and Catholic church members, and written sources to find answers to these questions and reconstruct the history of women’s education under the RCM in Benin City Parish under colonial rule.

**Keywords:** Benin; fiancé; girls; baptism; convent; Roman Catholic; nuns; interdenominational rivalry



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## 1. Introduction

In 1953, officials of the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) Church in Benin City, Nigeria, requested schoolgirls of Benin ethnic origin at the local Convent Primary School preparing for baptism to bring their fiancés to school as a condition for baptism. The demand for the presentation of their fiancés was the first time such a condition for baptism was given to young teenage girls since the establishment of the RCM in Benin City in 1923. From the arrival of the RCM in the late 19th C, they signified their intention of winning and sustaining their female converts and molding them in Catholic doctrines and values. The RCM had arrived at a time when many missions were already establishing themselves and developing their policies toward women and girls. Their arrival soon led to fierce competition between the various denominations for the souls of the women and girls. The denominations employed various strategies, and nearly all prioritized establishing schools and training centers for girls and women. But what was of utmost concern to the various missions was the post-school life of the girls, which was critical to the future of the missions in the community. This concern was at play in the policies and practices of the agents of the various missions in their schools. It influenced the inter-denominational rivalry that characterized the relations among the missions and affected the local people, including the pupils of their schools, particularly the girls.

The Society of African Missions (SMA), the agency of the RCM that brought the Catholic Church, was a latecomer to the missionary field in Benin City, arriving only in 1923, twenty-four years after frittering away the opportunity of being the pioneering mission in Benin city. By 1923, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Baptist Mission were already settled with their churches and schools. Similarly, some other missions entered Benin simultaneously with the RCM and shortly after, such as the Salvation Army, the Apostolic, United Native African Mission, Methodists, and so on.

Though a latecomer, the RCM was viewed as a significant threat in the Benin mission field. The RCM took advantage of the presence of some Catholics in the city to start its work. Yet the RCM had to compete with other missions, particularly the already established ones, to win converts from the majority indigenous population of Benin City and the vast Benin Division (of over 4000sq. miles) that constituted Benin City station. To this end, the RCM, like its rivals, adopted the school as an instrument of conversion strategy and established schools to entice children with girls as unique targets. They were able to attract enough girls to compete in establishing a girls-only school, and many of them were baptized annually, almost without incident. However, in 1953, the policy towards the baptism of Benin girls was changed to include the girls' presentation of their fiancés as a condition for baptism. This paper interrogates and historicizes this change in policy by asking and trying to find answers to the following questions: Why did the local RCM officials change their policy to demand fiancés as a condition for the baptism of schoolgirls of Benin-Edo origin? How did the policy affect schoolgirls, particularly their relations with the Catholic faith, and their response?

To answer these questions, this paper uses the oral testimonies of a few Benin women who recounted the incident and their experiences to the author during another study.<sup>1</sup> In addition, archival and other written sources were also employed to interrogate and historicize the development of girls' education, particularly by the RCM in Benin and other missions.

The paper is divided into four sections, with the first section discussing the second coming of the Roman Catholic Mission and its implications for Benin women and girls, while the second section examines how inter-denominational rivalry influenced the RCM activities toward the education and training of girls in Benin Division. The third section looks at how the church's view of girls as the future of the church influenced their policies towards girls and is demonstrated in the fourth section, which discusses the no fiancé no baptism episode of 1953 and its effects on some of the girls.

## **2. The Second Coming of the Roman Catholic Mission and Implications for the Benin Woman**

The Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria was one of the earliest places in Africa to receive Catholic missionaries. The Portuguese, Spanish, and Italians tried to spread Roman Catholic Christianity in the 16th and 17th Centuries, but it failed to take root (Ryder 1969, Chapter 4). It was only after the conquest and colonization of the Benin Kingdom by the British in 1897 that Christian missionaries entered the territory for evangelization work. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was the first mission that entered Benin in 1901 and remained the only mission for the next two decades. A dispute in the Benin CMS in 1921 with the European Priest Rev. Ralph Kidd forced many in the congregation to leave, after which these separatists invited the Southern Baptist Mission to take over their affairs (Uwagboe 2004, pp. 152–62). The CMS did not view the Southern Baptist mission as a significant threat and only complained about the Baptists accepting “the congregation which they know has broken away from us” and polygamists into their fold (NAI CMS Y2/2 15 Payne Report 1922). The Southern American Baptist Mission lacked the financial muscle to compete effectively with the CMS. Between 1922 and 1930, there was an influx of Missions, including The Apostolic, the RCM (1923), the Salvation Army (1926), United Native African Church (1930), and so on.

The Missions' agenda was the establishment of their roots in the community and women were primarily viewed as the means to pursue and achieve this agenda. This required conversion of women to the faith and doctrine of the denomination and turning them into makers of exemplary Christian families that would guarantee a future for the denomination. Though the denominations saw the Christian family as the foundation of the Christian community and church and essential for their future, their attitude to women and girls' education varied.

From the beginning, the SMA Fathers in the Prefecture Apostolic of Western Nigeria (to which Benin belonged) were interested in women's conversion. Father Carlo Zappa, the Prefect (1896–1917), stressed the importance of women and girls in evangelization work and stated that “only they (sisters) have the vocation and the special capacities to work successfully on the rehabilitation of the woman and the Christian education of the young girls. As long as this gap is not filled, our task will not be complete” (*Les Missions Catholiques* 1912, p. 508). Father Zappa and, to some extent, his successor Bishop Thomas Broderick (1918–1933), were said not to be great fans of schools as instruments of conversion because of their fear of the “young people whose family loyalty and traditions would be disrupted thereby.” (*African Missionary* 1965, November–December page 5). The insistence on maintaining “family loyalty and traditions” was likely to influence the church's attitude towards the marriage, education, and training of women. To this end, the Nuns of Our Lady of Apostles from France were brought to start evangelization work amongst women and girls (Ibewuiké 2006, pp. 148–49). However, these nuns who were to assist in implementing the RCM's policy towards women were to arrive in Benin much later, after the CMS had started winning girls and women into their fold.

The CMS under Bishop James Johnson, who introduced the CMS to Benin in 1901, had depended on the influence of royal women for land acquisition (Aisein 2002, pp. 204–5) but was constrained by funds to address the issues of women and girls. His African Catechists successors, who managed the station before 1918, and Rev. Kidd, who ran the Mission until 1922, continued to depend on the membership of the few women who had joined the church and wives of their members in the possible hope that their male members would eventually adopt a monogamous Christian family.

The issue concerning women that the Missions had to contend with was mostly about marriage. Firstly, the Benin culture endorsed polygyny, practiced infant betrothal marriage,<sup>2</sup> and eschewed divorce. These issues, particularly polygyny, conflicted with the belief of all the missions, while the RCM converged with the Benin people on divorce. In addressing these issues, the CMS encouraged young women to break infant betrothal marriage contracts, refuse forced marriages to “heathens,” and seek divorce from non-Christian husbands. These Benin customary practices, namely infant betrothal and arranged marriages, were contested by the CMS with the colonial administration (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Motions 29 and 30 October 1925). The colonial administration and the Native Administration were consequently pressed to reform the indigenous marriage and divorce practices through some rules (NAI BP 199/22 Oba and Council 28 October 1924). The RCM did not seem in any position yet to engage the colonial administration on the issues of marriage and the right of divorce by women on the refund of dowry because of late arrival. Nevertheless, the RCM registered its opposition at a meeting of Catholic missions in Southern Nigeria (with representation from the Prefecture Apostolic of Western Nigeria, which administered Benin) held at Akure in 1927, where it resolved and appealed to the Governor

that Native Courts be not allowed to grant a divorce to Christians who, before conversion, were married according to native law. The granting of divorce by Native Courts is a source of disturbance to the stability of marriage, and this could at least be restricted by removing those who have accepted Christian principles from their jurisdiction in this matter” (NAI RCM BD 5/1, Catholic Mission Akure 27 April 1927).

It remained just their viewpoint without changing the policy line that the government had enunciated. The RCM had views of the Benins as a people who were stuck in their customary traditions, including infant betrothal marriage, and therefore threw its resources into winning the hearts and minds through girls' education. Education of girls seems to be the key to the future of the missions, particularly the RCM in the territory.

### 3. Inter-Denominational Rivalry and Girls' Education and Training

The issue of girls' education and training as instruments of conversion by the missions did not seem of major concern before 1922/1923. This was probably because the CMS

virtually monopolized the field and their African agents lacked the funds to address it. The coming of Rev. W.J. Payne and his wife in 1922 and the entry of the RCM in 1923 changed the attitude and approach towards girls' education and training. The SMA arrived when the CMS was changing its operations in Benin under the newly appointed Rev. William Payne, ably assisted by his wife. Rev. Payne's wife was very concerned with women's issues. Mrs. Payne initiated various strategies to attract women and girls to the church and schools. Immediately after she arrived in Benin in 1922, Mrs. Payne started to organize classes for the women on Sundays and teach sewing to the girls twice a week. The RCM's establishment of a Church and a school in 1924 and 1925 galvanized the CMS into becoming more upbeat about women and girls with resultant inter-denominational rivalry. This inter-denominational rivalry was exacerbated by the influx of many other Protestant missions immediately after the arrival of the RCM ([Usuanlele 2002](#), p. 52).

The CMS quickly went into a frenzy, as the resource potential of the RCM, doctrinal differences, and the CMS's experiences of rivalry with RCM elsewhere made the arrival of the RCM in Benin in 1923 a significant challenge to the CMS. The CMS had to brace for intense rivalry. Rev W. J. Payne of the CMS was greatly alarmed by the arrival of the Southern Baptists and RCM and quickly reported in 1923 that "there are many opportunities of advance [of the CMS], but the polygamous churches [Baptist Mission]<sup>3</sup> and the Romanists [RCM] will take our people unless we provide them with proper teaching and supervision." (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report, 1923). Rev. Payne was advised by the CMS headquarters to "go full steam ahead" (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report January 1924) in the provision of education and training to neutralize the activities of the RCM. Rev. Payne monitored every move of the RCM and reported on them, including the acquisition of land by the RCM in Benin City in 1924, which he interpreted to mean that "they [RCM] are evidently intending to begin aggressive work" and he, therefore, reminded the CMS headquarters again that "it is all the more important that we should adequately occupy the opening before us." (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report May 1924) Although this began the battle for the soul and body of the people of Benin, the CMS headquarters did not seem to act fast enough to neutralize the RCM.

Rev. Payne had complained that "We are both [Payne and wife] very much concerned about the fewness of girls attending school." (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report January 1925) As a result of this problem, the CMS intensified its activities amongst women and girls, particularly among the wives of CMS school teachers and clergy. The CMS employed an African seamstress who joined with Mrs. Payne and another European woman, Mrs. Melville Jones, in teaching sewing to the women twice weekly. (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report May 1927). The emphasis on sewing was part of the domestic education policy of the CMS aimed at creating wives for educated Christian men. As Laray Denzer argued, needlework and sewing fit into the traditional Yoruba women's weaving and dyeing artisanship and were welcomed as an additional skill ([Denzer 1992](#), p. 118). The same craft skills were also obtained by Benin women who embraced the opportunities of these new forms, which created self-employment for women as seamstresses.

Although a Diocesan Women's Guild was also organized for Benin women, CMS work among women gave less emphasis to elderly women because they were feared to "have a bad moral influence over the young women and girls" (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report January 1929). More attention was given to issues affecting young women and girls. For example, they developed welfare schemes to attract young mothers and their infants. By 1928, the CMS reported that the number of girls attending its two schools had increased from six to thirty-two within the year because of the teaching of sewing by Mrs. Payne and her African seamstress, while another thirty children and above school-age girls were in a Kindergarten school (NAI CMS Y2/2 15, Payne Report January 1929).

In addition to sewing lessons to attract girls, the CMS sent a girl to the CMS Girls Training Centre, Akure, for Domestic Science training in 1928 and another for midwifery training at CMS Hospital, Iyi-Enu, in 1933. To attract more girls to schools in rural areas, the CMS abolished the fee payment by girls in rural schools in 1931 (NAI CMS Y2/2 15,

Payne Report January 1933). By 1933, the CMS strategies had yielded high dividends. The CMS boasted of sixty-seven girls in their infant and primary schools and a female pupil teacher for Domestic Science, while Mrs. Payne's Kindergarten classes had over one hundred children and above school-age girls.

The RCM could not join the rivalry over girls' education on arrival because of its different working strategies and inadequate personnel. The RCM immediately built the Holy Cross Church (now a Cathedral) in 1924. The following year, they built the Holy Cross RCM Primary School and started aggressive evangelism to win converts for the church and children for the school. The RCM could not immediately tackle the problem of educating women and girls as they did it through their nuns. However, they did not have enough nuns to go around their stations at the time. Even some of the nuns in the vicariate lacked the requisite educational qualifications to engage in such work for it to be recognized by the government and qualify their institution for a much-needed government grant in aid. In 1938, Bishop Leo Taylor had cause to inform the Mother Superior that "the days of unqualified sisters teaching in our schools are passed; there is more useful almost necessary work of other kinds." (OLAAC IEOLA/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 6 July 1938) Despite this lack of education qualification problem, a sister arrived from Ireland in 1932 without a certificate and was sent to the classroom without prior training. However, she later enrolled for a City and Guild Certificate in Domestic Science, which she did not complete, and was sent to work in Benin in the 1940s (OLAAC IEOLA 2/4/3/2/1 Geary 27 April 2001). The problem of getting nuns was further compounded by the departure of members of the OLA France Province and their replacement with the Irish Province (created only in 1932). It was against this background that the RCM went into rivalry with the CMS in trying to use education and training to win the girls and women into their fold. See the Table 1 for details.

**Table 1.** No of registered pupils in christian mission schools showing low enrolment of girls.

Mission (Enrolment)	1928		1932		1934	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Baptist	120	4	354	30	145	26
CMS	431	40	926	15	748	211
Evangelical Band	16	4	-	-	-	-
RCM	403	7	514	18	-	-
UNA	20	4	248	13	-	-

Source: National Archives, Ibadan File BP6/27 Education Returns, and BD27 Vol. II Education: Reports and Returns 1931-5.

As shown in the above table, the population of girls in schools owned by the various denominations was small compared with boys. It was not different in the government-owned schools, whose officials also complained, "Everywhere there are long waiting lists for admission to government schools, but girls make few applications." (NAI BP 6/1927 Superintendent of Education 4 February 1927) Out of 2099 pupils in the mission schools in the Benin Division, only 66 were girls in 1932 (NAI BP 27/Vol II Education Reports and Returns 1931-1935). This problem was caused by many factors, amongst which was the lack of employment opportunities for female school leavers,<sup>4</sup> which made such investment materially unrewarding. There were also sexual violations of female pupils by missionary agents,<sup>5</sup> resented by parents, ignorance of the value of female education, and distant locations of some of the all-girls mission schools from the many rural communities.<sup>6</sup> In addition was the cost, especially of sending female children to schools in distant places such as Akure, Abeokuta, and Iyi Enu, where the Mission institutions for secondary and training schools were located. To further worsen the situation, the Girls Training Centre at Akure and Iyi-Enu in Onitsha were far and over a hundred miles from Benin City.



In trying to address some of the problems that kept the population of girls low in the 1920s, some missions, particularly the CMS and RCM, resorted to the establishment of single-sex girls-only schools in Benin City. In 1933, the CMS decided to build a girls-only school. They claimed to have received a promise of contribution from the Benin Oba (monarch), and a committee of men (which included non-CMS) was formed to plan for the building of the school (NAI CMS 2/2 Y15 Payne Report January 1933). The CMS girls' school was opened in 1934. The opening of the CMS girls' school seemed to have prompted the RCM to work hurriedly toward the same end. The RCM quickly brought two nuns, Sisters Demetrius and Lella, to Benin without proper accommodation arrangements in early 1935 (NAI RCM BD 3/5/5 Bartley, 4 March 1935). By August, they demarcated a section of the city's mixed Holy Cross Catholic school to start Our Lady of Apostle Convent Girls' School with fifty girls (OLAACI IEOLA/3/2/10 OLA Convent Notes).

With the establishment of these girls' schools, which also provided training opportunities and were particularly staffed with only female teachers, the attitude towards girls' education started to change. This development seems to have contributed to increasing awareness of the value of girls' education, especially among the local women. According to a report from the OLA/RCM

“The women seem easy-going and indifferent but not where their children are concerned. Every mother wanted life to be brighter for her daughter than it had been for her, so they brought their girls to the sisters for education . . . The school had to charge fees, but these were very low . . . the value of education was becoming recognized” (OLAACI IEOLA/3/2/10 OLA Convent-Notes).

The opening of the girls' schools had the immediate effect of boosting female school enrolment. See the Table 2 for details.

**Table 2.** Increase in the number of Girls registered in Christian Mission-owned Girl's Only Schools.

Mission (Enrolment)	1935	1938
	Girls Sch.	Girls Sch.
CMS	211	98 (Excluding the infant school and Rural schools)
RCM	100	212 (Excluding the Rural schools)

Source: National Archives, Ibadan File BD 27 Vol. II Education: Reports and Returns 1931-5 and File BD 27 Vol. VI, Annual Report of Benin Division, 1938, 17.

The increase in girls' enrolment was, in addition, influenced by a combination of factors: the removal of fear of sexual violations in mixed schools staffed by male teachers, reduced cost by having their education in their hometown, and increasing awareness of the value of education of girls, particularly with their employment as teachers, midwives, and seamstresses.

With the arrival of the OLA nuns, the rivalry took on a new dimension as the RCM added domestic science training (which the CMS had been doing since 1922) to its work among women and girls. To this end, land was secured from the Oba on which the OLA nuns built their Convent on Dawson Road in Benin City. It is recorded that the funding for the building of the convent in 1944 was mainly from the savings and earnings from the work of the nuns. The OLA Convent served the dual purpose of training above school-age girls for Catholic marital lives and providing boarding facilities and schools for school-aged girls. The Convent's boarding section also catered to girls from the mixed Government School. According to Sister Arcade Harding in her memoirs, they trained the boarders “to be good housewives and gave them the means of home industries by dressmaking, embroidery, and cookery. . . . Our aim was to form real Catholic homes from where we could expect religious vocations. The school children got a thorough training in our faith.” (OLAACI IEOLA/3/2/10 Arcade Harding memoirs). To this end, the nuns concentrated their efforts more on unmarried girls.

The all-girls schools had been established to provide education and training for girls, but they were also used to establish control over the lives and bodies of the girls. The Convent school completely shielded the girls from males, including fellow Catholic pupils. According to a former pupil who had attended both the mixed school and all-girls Convent school, Princess Mrs. Aiyevbekpen Katherine Oronsaye:

The boys in the Holy Cross RCM School and the girls in the OLA Convent school were separated in 1935. If you were seen talking to a boy or a boy was speaking to you, and the story got to the Convent, you will be driven from the Convent. The boys and we were as far from each other as the earth and the sky (Interview with Princess Oronsaye, 2005).

The goal of the OLA Sisters was the “rehabilitation of the woman,” a euphemism for complete immersion in Catholic doctrinal values as the only guide and way to living their lives. This goal of complete immersion in Catholic doctrinal values was what the Convent was supposed to achieve through the nuns.

Once in the convent school, all the girls came under the guiding influence of the OLA nuns. Some of the girls were already teenagers and their moral and religious lives were put under close and constant scrutiny. The girls in the Convent’s hostels were under the total control of the nuns. Girls who could not afford the hostels were under the watch of the local catechists who reported on them. These catechists visited converts and schoolgirls at home to observe their home lives. To drive home the point that the new religion wanted to uphold sexual purity or reform sexual activity, unmarried girls who were not virgins were forbidden entry into the convent’s Chapel and church’s sacristy (Interview with Mrs. Usuanlele, 2005). They were made to believe that violating this rule by sexually active unmarried girls would earn them eternal damnation. The Convent and its school kept growing. In 1948, it boasted three sisters, eight African teachers, and 700 pupils, and the school offered classes up to Standard Seven (OLAACI IEOLA/3/2/10 OLA Convent notes). In addition to the regular school, the Convent offered vocational education for illiterate girls to learn domestic science for two years, after which they were awarded a government certificate.

Another dimension of the training and social services introduced by the missions in their unending struggle over women and girls was maternity services and midwifery training. The CMS established a maternity home in a rented house in Benin city in 1935, and this got Bishop Taylor so furious that he wrote to Cork,

“The CMS has just opened maternity in Warri; three years ago, they opened one in Benin City . . . we must get Asaba going. I hear the CMS wants to start one at Ogwashi Uku . . . now see how our absence is taken advantage of. If I could have a few sisters (nursing) and a maternity house in Osoro, I could have plenty of conversions (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 17 June 1938).

The RCM could not respond immediately as it lacked trained nurses and midwives and wanted to build permanent structures. The situation was not helped by the fact that the OLA congregation in the Vicariate was going through a transition in which the OLA French Province was being replaced by the newly formed OLA Irish Province (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 6 July 1938). Bishop Taylor soon got desperate and again wrote to Cork that “there is great work to be done in dispensary (sic.) and infant welfare . . . a work in which we are behind other missions” (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 6 August 1938). As OLA Cork could not immediately deploy trained sisters, a nun at Asaba, Sister Laserian, was sent to Benin work on dispensary and midwifery work. Sister Laserian commenced training of the girls in hygiene and first aid. In 1939, one of the girls, Princess Aiyevbekpen Katharine Eweka (sister to the Oba -King), was recommended for midwifery training in the Catholic hospital at Abeokuta.

By 1941, when the St Philomena RCM Maternity Home was opened in Benin City, the first of the locally sponsored midwives, Princess Eweka, who had graduated from Abeokuta, became a pioneer staff member. The Maternity Home also doubled as a midwifery training

school. It became the practice for some of the graduates of the convent school to proceed to the Maternity Home for midwifery training. In 1945, it was reported to be turning out three to four pupils per year for the Grade Two Midwifery Certificate (NAI BP 934 Hoskyn-Abrahall 15 August 1945). The Maternity was patronized by the Benin Native Administration, which supported it with £100 per annum and sent girls for midwifery training for its local dispensaries and maternities, which were being established in the Benin division (NAI BP 934 Assistant District Officer 30 August 1948).

Since not all the girls could become midwives or nuns and there was a great need for teachers, the RCM also ventured into teacher training for girls. Although teacher training (St. Thomas Ibusa, Asaba Division) for men had been established in 1928, and another, St John Bosco at Ubijaja Ishan Division, in 1942, there were none for girls, and the girls' school depended on its graduates and female teachers from elsewhere. In 1944, the Sacred Heart Teachers College was opened in Ubijaja (Ishan Division) under the OLA to produce female teachers for the growing number of Catholic schools. The Sacred Heart Teachers College became another recipient of the products of the convent school in Benin City and female pupils of the rural Catholic schools. It was in 1959 that a secondary school, St Maria Goretti College, was established for girls in Benin City. Before then, the girls who opted for secondary education could only attend Mary Mount College, Agbor (Asaba division), which was opened in 1953.

The slow pace of establishing post-primary schools for girls was not unconnected with the unavailability of trained teachers and funds. Things started to change in the late 1940s and 1950s, mainly because of the changing policy of the colonial government towards African welfare. This change in the policy of the colonial government manifested in the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940, which voted for more money for social infrastructure and amenities, resulting in grants to Missions. For instance, in the 1940s, the government gave a grant of £26,000 to the mission towards establishing colleges and another £2000 for building St Maria Goretti College in 1959 (O'Shea 2006, p. 187). In addition, the RCM started to request lay-trained personnel for its educational and medical work, where religious personnel were unavailable from Nigeria and Europe. By augmenting with lay personnel, it became easy to expand and advance the educational work of RCM among women. These developments provided training and employment opportunities for Catholic girls and increased control over women. The provision of post-primary educational institutions and welfare amenities further consolidated the RCM influence among the female population.

Despite the expansion and advancement, a snag remained in the production of local nuns. The major snag was that *Propaganda Fide* disapproved of African girls joining European congregations and required Africans to form their own congregations (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 26 June 1939). In the 1930s, Bishop Taylor was enthusiastic about starting an African congregation of nuns and kept requesting nuns from Ireland to assist him in this endeavor. Apart from the fact that he did not want "Rights claimers, clock watchers, and dyspeptics" that "are more likely to do more harm than good" (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Taylor 6 September 1938), qualified nuns were not readily available in the Irish Province to send to the Vicariate. This non-formation of a local African congregation in the Vicariate lingered into the 1950s, even though some African nuns had been trained elsewhere. Apart from the District being unable to meet all the conditions, it was not clear if the local Benin girls were ready for the celibate life of nuns. This was because celibacy was unknown to Benin culture. Even if the girls volunteered to become nuns, their parents might object. Bishop Kelly, in the late 1950s, was still pursuing the issue, as he was hoping that the presence of African nuns from other districts such as Lagos "would be an encouragement for other girls to join." (OLAACI IEOLA2/4/3/2/1-14 Kelly 27 November 1956) Apart from trying to win African girls into religious vocations, the RCM had other pressing concerns.



#### 4. School Girls and the Consolidation of RCM in Benin City

The concern of the RCM Missionaries after winning female converts through schools was how to keep these girls and their future families in the Catholic Church and use them to entrench the church in the community in perpetuity. These girls held the key to the future of the Catholic faith in Benin as future mothers. Still, the major problem was that the girls' parents and/or guardians were often not Christians and could not reinforce, at home, the doctrines in which their daughters had been immersed in the school and church. This problem of lack of reinforcement of the doctrinal values of the church at home was exacerbated because most pupils were not boarders and the Nuns could not effectively monitor their lives outside the school and church. Many girls' families were believed to be practitioners of indigenous religions and associated customs, including infant betrothal and arranged marriages (NAI CMS Y2/2, 15 Payne Report January 1925 and NAI RCM BD 5/1 Catholic Mission, Akure to The Officer Administering the Government of Nigeria, 27 April 1927).<sup>7</sup>

The missions tended to lose control over the girls after they completed school. Some of the girls either stuck with the faith or fell under the supervision of their parents/guardians in matters of faith. In contrast, others drifted to other denominations or faiths depending on their circumstances. The RCM had to contend with the problem of sustaining the girls' faith after their education and/or training and ensuring the passing of the Catholic doctrine to their offspring. For this reason, the RCM Missionaries worked assiduously to discourage any influences that could threaten their doctrinal values among the girls and invariably threaten the church's future.

The fear of losing their girls to other denominations and religions by the RCM was most serious in Benin City. This was because most of the Benins continued to practice their indigenous faith. In 1945, Oba Akenzua II further reinforced the indigenous belief by building a Cathedral-like structure called *Aruosa N'Ohuaren* in Benin, writing books of worship and hymns for the indigenous religion, appointing priests robed in cassock-like dresses, and building schools to support and promote the indigenous faith. These were all modeled along the lines of the Catholic Church (Welton 1969; and Akemien 1979). The establishment of *Aruosa* made the indigenous religion attractive again, and competitive, and a sizeable population of Benin people sent their children to the schools and worshipped at *Aruosa* on Sundays (which was also their day of worship). Similarly, the Ahmadiyya Muslims established formal schools for similar reasons, attracting many pupils.

A sizeable population of the Benins who embraced Christianity was divided among the various Protestant Christian missions that predated the RCM. The RCM, because of its later arrival, had fewer Benins than the Protestant missions. Most RCM laity comprised immigrants, particularly Igbo and other ethnicities (NAI RCM 3/5 Kelly undated 1952). Thus, the challenge for the RCM was securing the few indigenous Benins adherents of the Catholic faith, winning more converts and institutionalizing the Church among the indigenous population. The reason for wanting to secure the indigenous Benin population was primarily because the migrant population was usually a floating one without much stake in the society under the indirect rule system of an administration which prohibited migrants from the administration and their ownership of landed properties.

The Benins' incessant challenges to the established authority of the colonial administration and the European Christian missionary hierarchy further heightened the fears of the RCM. The Benins had challenged the autocratic tendencies of the church authorities in the CMS in the early 1920s, the colonial administration since 1930, and the Southern Baptists in the 1940s (Uwagboe 2004).<sup>8</sup> This political activism made the missionaries dislike the Benins for not being docile and servile followers. Consequently, it was believed in some missionary circles that the Benins would not make sound and steady Christians (Interview with Pa Augustine Emumwen 2005). The reputation of the Benins was further tarnished in the eyes of the Irish RCM Clergy when, in 1951/2, the congregation of Benin City Parish led by the Benin indigenes demanded the removal of the local parish priest Rev. Fr. Thomas Bartley. The refusal of Bishop Patrick Kelly to accede to their demands led to their petitions

to Rome, bad publicity in the nationalist newspapers, a boycott of some aspects of mass, interdiction of some of the petitioners, and eventual physical confrontation and police intervention (Usuanlele 2019). Although the crisis was resolved in 1952, it brought ridicule and embarrassment to the missionaries. Against this background of distrust of Benin people by the missions, the RCM denied some Benin girls the sacrament of baptism in 1953.

### 5. The ‘No Fiancé, No Baptism’ Episode of 1953

The ‘No fiancé, no baptism’ episode of 1953 was not the first time the RCM in Benin denied individual Benin girls the sacrament of baptism. Princess Oronsaye claimed that she was denied baptism four times in the 1930s. She further averred that some elderly ladies interceded on her behalf and she had to promise to marry in the church before she was finally baptized (Usuanlele 2005). The case of Oronsaye was explained by her royal status, which customarily entitled princesses to divorce. However, the 1953 mass denial of baptism to Benin girls stemmed from the interdenominational rivalry, the struggle to sustain the loyalty of its former pupils (and their future offspring), and the future of the RCM in Benin.

The genesis of the 1953 episode has been attributed to the action of one Miss Alice Obazuaye, a graduate of the Convent school who was employed as a teacher in the school. As a Benin, her position at the Convent school placed great responsibility on her as a role model and example of a good Catholic to the pupils, particularly the Benin girls. However, in 1953, Miss Bazuaye married a member of the rival Anglican church in the public registry, to the consternation of the RCM clergy. This development might have been seen as a further affront to the already bruised ego of the local clergy, who were still recovering from the immediate past crisis of 1951/2. The marriage of Miss Bazuaye outside the church further added to the sins of the Benins. It also confirmed the unreliability of the Benins as Catholics, especially in the face of rivalry with protestant missions.

With Miss Bazuaye’s act, the local clergy led by Rev Fr. Thomas Bartley, who had been described as a very rigid person (Higgins 2003, p. 27), decided to find ways of securing the girls who had been converted through the schools. As a result, in 1953, a new rule mandated that girls being prepared for baptism that year present their fiancés for interview and confirmation of their Catholic faith before they could be baptized. This demand of the clergy to present their fiancés for an interview before the baptism of their fiancés was similar to what the Holy Ghosts Fathers practiced among the Igbo of the Eastern Provinces before the 1930s (Ejikeme 2003, p. 135). It was only in this way that girls with Catholic fiancés would be known and baptized as Catholics. This seemed to be the only way to guarantee that the baptized girls would remain Catholics, marry in the Catholic Church, and impart their faith to their offspring.

In addition to the mature and above school-age girls who were being prepared for Catholic family life and vocational training, a few girls in the convent school were known to be already engaged (Ekeh 2008, p. 90). Although the child betrothal marriage tradition existed among the Benins, it was already waning in the city by the 1950s. Most of the girls in the convent school were teenagers, not yet engaged, and opposed to the customary practice of infant betrothal. Many of these girls were looking forward to continuing their education after graduation. There was the case of a girl who wrote a petition to the Provincial Resident to convince her parents to stop pestering her with marriage proposals because she wanted to continue her education (NAI BP 545/XII Asemwota 2 December 1953). No schoolgirl would want to miss the educational advancement opportunities provided during this period. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act Of 1940 and 1945 largely used Nigerian funds to establish teachers’ training colleges and other institutions and programs to provide secretarial, nursing, and midwifery training for girls, and the gradual opening of employment opportunities for women in the colonial service (NAUK CO 583/272/4 and NAUK CO 583/272/2). The parents also increasingly realized the value of female education and investing in it. Some girls whose parents could not support their school fees

engaged in trading after school to finance their education (Interviews with Mrs. Usuanlele and Mrs. Edomioya 2005).

These changes in the attitude of parents and girls towards customary practices and education, on the one hand, and the colonial administration's new policies towards African welfare, on the other, were taking place against the background of a worldwide phenomenon that has been described as the modern girl. The modern girl phenomenon was characterized by declining domesticity and marriage, increasing professionalism, work outside the home, and consumerism of beauty products (Weinbaum et al. 2008, p. 96). Many schoolgirls of this period were not insulated from these ideas and were exposed to modern Western ideas about life, marriage, and womanhood. They acquired these in school and from books and popular women's magazines, and local newspapers with special pages for women's issues. There has also been a cinema house in the city since the 1930s. Some of the girls, such as Princess Oronsaye, went to the movies and watched western movies, which had some influence on them. According to Princess Oronsaye, (Interview with Princess Oronsaye, 2005), their aspirations as schoolgirls were to have a Western-style marriage, particularly in the Church, and have a monogamous marriage and nuclear family life. However, a condition for church marriage, which the girls aspired to, was baptism, and this made baptism dear to them.

Another attraction the Churches held for the girls apart from elementary education was their professional training opportunities in teaching and midwifery/nursing. These professions held promises of a better life and career for these girls. They were aware of the salaries members of these professions earned and their employment prospects. These young women did not want to live in drudgery as petty traders and farmers like their mothers. The preconditions for sponsorship for training in any of these new professions were baptism and the recommendation of the missionaries. Consequently, baptism and confirmation were life-changing milestones for many girls, and they prepared hard and looked forward to it.

The request to produce a Catholic fiancé was impossible for many of the girls. This was because Catholicism came late after the Benin elite had embraced other denominations. The crème of Benin society in this period was either Anglican (CMS) or Baptist<sup>9</sup> because of the longer establishment of the CMS and the mass exodus from CMS to Baptist in the 1920s. The adherents of the indigenous faith were also sizeable among the elite, as they constituted the bulk of title holders or chiefs who monopolized political power under indirect rule of the administrative system. Another difficulty was that the demands and doctrines of Catholicism—prohibition of divorce and polygyny—made adherence and willingness to marry in the Catholic Church unattractive to some young males. As a result, Catholic male suitors were few. Even the young men were not sticking to the infant betrothal marriage arrangements that formerly made teenage girls have fiancés.

The catechumens (having prepared for three years), many of whom had no fiancés, were shocked by this new rule requiring them to produce fiancés on baptism eve. Parents, particularly in the urban areas, had increasingly, over the years, abandoned infant betrothal practices. Given the danger that involvement in relationships posed to the educational and career aspirations of the girls,<sup>10</sup> many avoided involvement in relationships. As a result of these developments in the lives of girls and their education, the demand of the local clergy for the girls to produce fiancé, preferably Catholic, before baptism was viewed by the young girls as an obstacle to their progress and, therefore, retrogressive.

The new condition challenged the girls' agency, as some of them had chosen the Convent school and Church of their own volition. As a result, some of the girls ably supported by their parents were reported to have bribed Catholic friends and relations to pose as their fiancés. The clergy had no means of detecting the trick, especially as some parents came with the girls to affirm the betrothals to their impostor fiancés. Not all the girls resorted to such tricks. Others either did not have the courage or chose not to engage in such antics. Mrs. Edomioya, for instance, claimed to have waited until the day of baptism, hoping that the clergy would change their mind and allow the girls to be baptized.

However, the clergy remained resolute; as a result, the girls who could not produce their fiancés were denied baptism. Mrs. Edomiya claimed to have fallen ill because of the denial. She consequently withdrew from the Catholic Church and became a protestant.

The policy was discontinued in subsequent years. The discontinuation of the ‘no fiancé, no baptism policy’ would not have been unconnected with the apparent bad press it was giving the church in the community. The local laity also was not happy with the development, especially as they were only just being won back after the crisis of 1951-2. More so, the policy seemed to have backfired as some girls left the Church because of this episode.

Such withdrawal from the schools and church was made possible by the increased opportunities and alternatives available to women during this period. The churches no longer held the key to training opportunities for girls. The Provincial colonial authorities opened a teachers’ college. The Native Administration also opened many schools and maternities and sought educationally qualified girls for training in government-owned institutions. Mrs. Edomiya, a victim of the RCM policy, was sponsored by the Benin Divisional Council for training as a Midwife. Many others went to the Benin Provincial Teacher’s Training College, which opened in 1952. Three years later, the Western Regional government introduced free universal primary education and started awarding overseas educational and professional scholarships to people in the region. The development of alternative opportunities in the secular Native Authority and government institutions gradually neutralized the missions’ influence. It made their methods unworkable and less attractive to the local people. Given the limited impact of the missions on the emergent African nationalist politicians who took over the administration in 1956, the missions had to find other ways of winning and sustaining the membership of female members.

## 6. Conclusions

The paper examined the development of girls’ education in Benin with particular emphasis on RCM education and their use of education to establish control over the girls who were viewed as key to the future development of the church and its values. It shows that the development of Catholic girls’ education was undertaken in the context of inter-denominational rivalry with the CMS, whose earlier arrival on the scene gave a relative advantage in producing a local elite. Although the RCM matched the CMS in providing education and training for the girls, the Catholic mission’s late arrival resulted in a slow development of a local Catholic male elite class to match the girls for marriage and build to strong Catholic families. A Catholic-trained girl’s contracting of a mixed marriage with an Anglican man in 1953 aroused the ire of the local clergy, who ruled that the catechumen (girls) of the Convent school must produce their fiancés before baptism. The policy of ‘no fiancé, no baptism’ was implemented at a time when infant betrothal marriage had been abandoned and was being shunned by both young men and girls. There had also developed secular alternative schools and training opportunities for girls in the territory. The girls’ responses went from fakery of fiancés to non-presentation with resultant denial of baptism to those who presented no fiancés. The backlash of the further bad press made the RCM discontinue the policy in subsequent years. The damage was already done as it led to the withdrawal of some of the girls from the church and mission institutions. It is unclear if the local infant betrothal marriage practice influenced the Church’s policy, but if it did, the RCM misread the attitude of the Benin people toward the marriage practice (which was already abandoned) when the policy of ‘no fiancé, no baptism’ was employed, and that was why it backfired with the loss of some girls by the church. It concludes that the RCM’s provision of education for girls achieved the objectives of establishing and securing the future of the church in the territory with the conversion of girls, but the context of inter-denominational rivalry drove the church into a practice that made retention of all the girls as builders of Catholic families unrealizable.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The records of this event have so far not been found in the Mission archives, but the incident cannot be dismissed for lack of archival validation as it is corroborated by some local Catholics. Moreso, only some of the activities of the mission agents were officially documented.
- <sup>2</sup> Infant betrothal is a marriage arrangement in which an adult approaches the father of an infant girl to propose marriage and engagement to the girl. A man can also engage his infant daughter with any man of his choice. Before the marriage is consummated, the man gives gifts and provides occasional labor services to the girl's parents. The girl is obliged to marry the man or his son or another male relative that he so chooses when the girl attains puberty.
- <sup>3</sup> The Southern Baptist Mission in Benin City in the early 1920s allowed alleged polygamous men into membership of their church and it was in the 1940s that American Missionaries prohibited polygamous members who evicted the Americans and renamed the church as Benin United Baptist Church, while the Southern Baptist established a new church without polygamous men. Uwagboe, *The Baptist Mission in Edoland, 1921–2003, A history of Christianity and the Southern Baptist/Nigerian Baptist Convention Missionary work in Edo State, Nigeria*.
- <sup>4</sup> The colonial administration gradually began the employment of women in the 1930s in restricted positions, and amongst other factors was the pressure from educated African elites. National Archives, Ibadan, CSO 26/1 File 03571/S.1-4 Employment of African Women in Government Service, Vols. I and II 1922–1940.
- <sup>5</sup> The files of the CMS contain numerous reports of the sexual dealings of mission agents. See National Archives, Ibadan, CMS Y2/2 File 15 Reports on Benin District.
- <sup>6</sup> There was only one Government School and many mission schools in Benin City, while the many communities scattered over 4000 square miles of Benin Division had few schools, which were mostly infant schools till the 1940s and as a result, those who desired complete primary education had to go to Benin City. See Usuanlele, "Colonial State and Education in Benin Division, 1897–1960" Adebayo Oyeade(ed.) *The Transformation of Nigeria*, 64.
- <sup>7</sup> The rival CMS had opposed and championed the abolition and dissolution of infant betrothal and arranged marriages, particularly those between Christian girls and non-Christian men. These practices were not opposed by RCM because of their doctrinal opposition to divorce.
- <sup>8</sup> Uwagboe, *The Baptist Mission in Edoland, 1921–2003, A history of Christianity and the Southern Baptist/Nigerian Baptist Convention Missionary work in Edo State, Nigeria*.
- <sup>9</sup> The earliest converts were Anglican; hence the first University Graduate was the son of a CMS Catechist.
- <sup>10</sup> Girls who became pregnant were expelled from elementary and midwifery schools, while those who were pregnant out of wedlock were dismissed as mission teachers and midwives. Interviews with Princess Mrs. Aiyevbekpen K. Oronsaye, Mrs. Bernadette Emumwen, Pa. Nicholas Idahosa and Mrs. Edomioya.

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Mrs. Esther E. Edomiyoa, aged 69 years, retired Nursing Sister at her Benin City Residence, 10th June 2005  
 Pa. Augustine Emumwen, aged 91 years, Retired (and Pioneer) Catholic School teacher/Principal at his Benin City Residence, 14th June 2005  
 Mrs. Bernadette Emumwen, aged 84 years, retired Catholic School Teacher at her Benin City Residence, 14th June 2005.  
 Pa Nicholas Idahosa, aged 94 years, retired Catholic School Teacher at his Benin City Residence 3rd October 2005  
 Princess Mrs. Katherine Aiyevbekpen Oronsaye, aged 82 years, retired (and pioneer Catholic trained) Midwife and social worker at her Benin City Residence, 15 June 2005.  
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