

Reading Bodies, Reading Lives: Yoruba Women in Church Missionary Society Periodicals, 1840–1880

Leidy Marcela Alpízar Alpízar

Universidad de Costa Rica

leidy.alpizar@ucr.ac.cr

Abstract :

During the nineteenth century, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) played a central role in spreading Anglican Christianity throughout British imperial territories in West Africa. British anti-slavery patrols intercepted thousands of Yoruba captives, many seized in wars that devastated the Bight of Benin and resettled them in Sierra Leone. Under the CMS, “Liberated Africans” entered apprenticeships, which constituted another form of unfree labour. Many converted, trained as catechists and missionaries, and returned to their homelands through the Yoruba Mission. The institutions developed in Freetown, including schooling, clerical training, and domestic organization, were later replicated in missionary ventures into the Yoruba interior, often staffed by African clergy educated in Sierra Leone or England. The movement included clergy, wives, and children, whose presence was integral to missionary work. Women rarely appear as central figures, making their experiences difficult to recover. This paper examines Yoruba women in these missions through wood engravings and narratives published in CMS periodicals between 1840 and 1880. The narratives offer fragments of these women’s lives and, together with the images, bring particular attributes into focus, helping reconstruct the contexts in which they were embedded. They make visible the processes of enslavement, liberation, and conversion to Christianity, while also revealing women’s origins, labour, and religion, the categories of information central to the records assembled in the Freedom Narratives database.