In March 1888, Church Vaughan, his sons, longtime fellow Baptists Sarah Harden and Moses Ladejo Stone, and several others convened a meeting to discuss their relationship to the Southern Baptist Church. For years they had endured slights and insults from its missionary William David; now he was insisting that he could treat one of their number, a popular preacher, practically as one of his servants. Yet one of the principles of Baptist organization was that ministers served their congregations, not the other way around. Vaughan had been a Baptist for more than thirty years, and Baptist missionaries from the American South had brought him to Yorubaland and given him his start there. He still believed in the denomination’s key tenets: salvation through faith, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the Bible as the word of God and final written authority. But Vaughan and the others were fed up with missionary racism and convinced they could better lead the Lagos Baptists themselves. Since it was clear that Reverend David would never share church authority, they determined to do something West African Christians had never done before: secede. Together they formed the Native Baptist Church (later known as the Ebenezer Baptist Church), which became the first nonmissionary Christian congregation in West Africa and one of the earliest on the African continent. Soon nearly all of the Lagos Baptists joined it, eviscerating the white-run mission.¹

Vaughan’s bid for religious autonomy heralded a movement that became widespread in Lagos and well beyond. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, independent African Christian churches proliferated in Yorubaland and all over colonial Africa. The phenomenon became known as “Ethiopianism,” from the biblical passage “Ethiopia shall stretch forth...
her hands to God" (Psalm 68:31) — Ethiopia standing in the Bible for Africa in general. Through the medium of Christianity, Ethiopianism expressed African self-assertion and, some scholars have argued, early anticolonial nationalism.² Religious protests in Lagos, however, rarely targeted the colonial government. The town’s king and chiefs had felt the weight of British intervention from its beginnings in 1851, of course; and in their general reluctance to intervene in local slavery, British administrators had offered little hope for Lagos’s most downtrodden. However, African Christians appreciated the colonial government’s guarantee of law and order, which made their prosperity possible. Rather than oppose the administration, they struggled within and against the mission bodies, institutions that more closely affected their lives and identities.³

Vaughan’s personal conflict between loyalty to the Baptist church and frustration with missionary racism mirrored that of other Lagosian Christians. Nether Vaughan nor any other leader of the independent church movement ever repudiated Christianity itself, nor did they aim to alter its basic theology or organizational structure. They were not only committed Christians, but they owed their very identities as educated elites to the mission churches. The Church Missionary Society, or the Wesleyans, or even the Baptists, had helped make them what they were, whether traders or teachers, clerks or catechists. For nearly two generations, missionaries in Yorubaland had described their project as spreading Christianity and educating Africans; and by the 1880s some Lagosians and others were declaring that work a success. Already “civilized” themselves, they were ready — eager, in fact — to take on the leadership of the churches and continue that vital project.

The trouble was that the ground was shifting under their feet, as the European “scramble for Africa” got under way in a new ideological climate. Even before European representatives met at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 to stake their African claims, the character of British involvement in what is now Nigeria had begun to change, a process that continued through the end of the century. A new, more open racism brought condescension and European attempts to separate themselves from the Africans among whom they lived. Increasing numbers of European personnel pushed Africans out of their posts in the civil service and foreign-owned commercial firms. Though elite Africans continued to prosper, their opportunities became more circumscribed than before; moreover, they were offended by the new attitudes. These they felt most keenly in the mission churches, whose white leaders sought to reverse decades-old policies and monopolize control over African congregations. Increasingly, missionaries asserted that African
capacities were inherently limited, and thus intensive European oversight was necessary.⁴

The new missionary attitudes struck especially hard at diasporic Lagosians. Immigrants from Sierra Leone, Brazil, and elsewhere, as well as their children, had formerly seen foreign missionaries as their liberators and advocates.⁵ Now, however, they felt abandoned, as the antislavery ideologies and policies that had benefited them were replaced by a general disparagement of Africans and their capacities. They responded in two overlapping ways, both with important effects for Nigerian history. On the one hand, educated Yorubas, especially those with diasporic connections, began to highlight and celebrate some of their cultural differences from Europeans, even as they struggled to maintain and extend their roles within the mission churches. On the other, diasporic Africans also spearheaded the movement for Christian independence, beginning with Baptists connected to the United States and including Saro in the Anglican and Methodist churches. Understanding the new racism as a phenomenon of the wider Atlantic world, Vaughan and the other Christian rebels drew on a strategy of separation from white establishments, which African Americans had been pursuing both at home and abroad. As the independent church movement progressed, it was fed both by Yoruba cultural nationalism and links reaching well beyond Yorubaland.

Vaughan celebrated his sixtieth birthday during the upheaval within the Lagos Baptist Church. Though he led the opposition to missionary racism, he left the new church’s further development to younger men. Throughout his adult life, what he most valued was autonomy. From his days in Ijaye and Abeokuta, he had tried to separate himself from the Baptist mission, only to find danger when he did. During his early years in Lagos, he not only worked to establish his own business, but he engaged in religious worship without missionaries. In his profitable self-employment, in his family life unconnected to any local kin group, in his limited participation in the social life of Victorian Lagos, and now in his separation from the mission church, Vaughan revealed how important it was to him to be his own man, not part of any given collectivity. Perhaps it is somewhat ironic, then, that in asserting his independence Vaughan placed himself at the helm of an increasingly widespread movement. More characteristic may have been his subsequent distance even from the church he helped to create.

In 1872 when the Lagos Baptists had prevailed upon Church Vaughan to request a missionary from the Southern Baptist Convention, he had done so with little enthusiasm. Since the departure of Richard Stone in 1869, the
congregation had largely looked after itself. Initially, a resident Methodist missionary had performed some services for the Baptists, but after he left for England, the little church was in local African hands. Moses Ladejo Stone, trained as a carpenter by Vaughan and as a Baptist by the missionary Richard Stone, was emerging as a first-class preacher; Sarah Harden, the Sierra Leone-born widow of the African American missionary Joseph Harden, gave him advice and encouragement; and Vaughan provided some financial support. As the Foreign Mission Board back in Richmond struggled to raise funds in the postwar American South, Vaughan and his fellow Baptists experienced by default what they—and members of every other denomination in Lagos—would struggle for in the racially charged era to come: African autonomy.

Yet this religious independence was fleeting. Not one but two new Baptist missionaries arrived in 1875, each named William, each objectionable in his own way, and each displaying a different characteristic of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Twenty-five-year-old William (“Willie”) David had grown up in white privilege outside of Meridian, Mississippi, his wealthy, slaveholding grandfather urging him to take up a more gentlemanly profession than the ministry. In school he had distinguished himself by his piety, zeal, and family connections rather than his intellectual accomplishments. William Colley, a year his senior, was a new graduate of the Richmond Institute, a training school for freedmen originally located in a former slave mart. Born and raised in rural Prince Edward County, Virginia, he and his mother had likely been enslaved before emancipation, though Colley’s “light brown” complexion may have come from a white father, listed on an application for a Freedman’s Bank account simply as “Mr. W.” Willie David was an obnoxious racist, imbued with a deep sense of white supremacy even if he did want to help save black souls. His colleague William Colley chafed under David’s condescension but also lorded himself over Lagos Christians. Ultimately it was to him rather than David that local Baptists most objected, at least in print. Colley’s dual conflicts—with David and with local Africans—would prompt his formation of a separate, African American missionary society, drawing from a long black American tradition of autonomous institutions and also serving as an example for Lagos Baptists.

Neither Church Vaughan, Sarah Harden, nor Moses Stone were part of the reception when the two new missionaries arrived in Lagos, so David and Colley had to communicate with the spectators through a local interpreter. This did not, however, diminish their sense of self-importance as saviors for Lagos Baptists. “I do not think I ever saw people so rejoiced,” David wrote of
his initial welcome in the city. “Immediately they had a meeting in their bamboo chapel to thank God, who had answered their prayers. It was a mutual thanksgiving.”

If Vaughan was keeping his distance until he knew more about the newly arrived Americans, he did not have to wait long for news to travel through town about what kind of men they were. Though David rented seemingly suitable accommodations from a wealthy African merchant, “The workmen who have been engaged in repairing and whitewashing the house have progressed so slowly that I have not been able to get in my room yet,” as the missionary wrote in his diary. “So this afternoon I stood by and derided them.” Verbal abuse did not improve the workers’ pace, however, so David tried the next strategy a Mississippi planter might use to exert his will: “Before I could have my way I had to use a club upon one of them, which settled the matter. They worked splendidly and were quite obedient.” A few days later, David reported that “the usual number of men have been working around the house with their characteristic laziness.” This time he asked Colley to supervise them, with no better results: “Pretty soon we heard him flogging one of them, who the first opportunity afterwards, ran from the room into the street, where he met his employer who asked why he left, and after telling that he had been flogged, was ordered back. After that there was no more trouble with the men.” It is hard to fathom how a recently arrived African American, who may well have felt the lash on his own back at one time, so readily beat an African workman, except as some grisly enactment of the relationship between owner and slave driver, or perhaps as a performance of equality with his white associate. It is even harder to imagine that this new graduate of a training institute for freedman would have shared David’s patronizing view of African education. “Some persons might think this a poor way to Christianize them,” the white missionary wrote in his diary, “but these claim to be civilized. One (the one I clubbed) told me today he had studied Greek and Latin. I suppose they also belong to the Church Mission Society.”

In Lagos’s stratified society, raging against a hired worker was not so unusual. But David’s sense of superiority extended to Lagosians more broadly, including Christians of other denominations, stalwart Baptists, and even the top of the city’s African elite. After David and Colley undertook their first public baptisms in a river in January 1876, rumors spread that oyinbós (whites) were drowning people, and several Lagosians connected with the Church Missionary Society came to confront them. David related the incident as a battle of wills in which he emerged victorious over the doubters.
“After a short discussion,” he wrote, “they were made to confess their error before a large crowd of heathen who had gathered to listen; and a little later they left, vanquished, amid the jeers of the populace.”

His attitude was similar within his own congregation, where David insulted the venerable Sarah Harden by breaking a long-held pattern of calling her name first on the Sunday roster. Challenged on the point, he defiantly asserted his authority as leader of the church.

Even more publicly, David entered into an ill-tempered dispute with his landlord James Pinson Labulo Davies, at one time the wealthiest and most influential African in the city. Captured in Yorubaland then rescued from a slave ship and taken to Sierra Leone, “Captain” Davies had been trained there in navigation and employed on one of the vessels in the British Navy’s anti-slavery squadron, from which he witnessed the 1851 bombardment of Lagos. After his navy service, Davies captained merchant vessels owned by liberated Africans from Sierra Leone, trading on their and his own behalf along the West African coast. He settled permanently in Lagos in 1856 and soon became the most successful of the immigrant merchants, shipping cotton and palm oil in his own boats (condemned slavers he had purchased at auction) and employing dozens of workers. In London in 1862, Davies married Sarah Forbes Bonetta in a service led by Henry Venn, honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society. Davies’s new wife had as a child been virtually adopted by the British naval captain who liberated her from a slave ship. She became a protégée of Queen Victoria, who later served as godmother to the Davies’s first child. In fact, Sarah Davies and Rev. Samuel Crowther were the only Africans whom the Royal Navy had orders to evacuate in the event of an uprising at Lagos. In 1872, Lagos’s governor chose J. P. L. Davies as the first African (unofficial) member of the legislative council; he was also the first African Justice of the Peace. Though Davies’s businesses were affected by economic recession by the time he rented a house to the Baptist missionary Willie David, he nonetheless represented the top of the city’s African elite—wealthy, politically influential, and closely connected to the Church Missionary Society.

Reverend David was aware of Davies’s position—he referred to his former landlord, perhaps with sarcasm, as the “adopted son-in-law of the Queen of England”—but treated Davies as brusquely as he did all other Lagosians. Three months after his arrival, the missionary broke his lease with Davies in order to move into lodgings he considered more comfortable, “as there are not any natives around as to be quarreling and fighting, nor are there so many nuisances, etc.” When Davies insisted on three months’
notice, David “caught some of his spirit, threw the keys down in front of him and walked away.” Davies sued the missionary in court for the money due and, not surprisingly, won. A show of sympathy from some of the women in his congregation consoled David, who reassured himself that some Africans did appreciate his work in Lagos and that black Lagosians were essentially the same as the African American slaves he had known in his youth. “I have heard Africans charged with ingratitude, which is true in certain cases as may be found among my race,” he wrote, “but as a general thing they have a great deal of gratitude, which I have noticed in American slavery and African freedom.” 13

By the time of the lawsuit, Church Vaughan was becoming personally acquainted with Reverend David, who not only made purchases at Vaughan’s Kakawa Street hardware store as he began to build a new chapel, but essentially turned Vaughan into his personal banker. In order to provide the Baptist mission with local currency, its parent organization in Richmond arranged to send money to the Bank of England, credited to Vaughan’s account and used by him, presumably, to pay his British hardware suppliers. In turn, Vaughan advanced the equivalent in local currency and store credit to David. It was a measure of Vaughan’s economic status as well as his American identity that he was the only merchant in Lagos willing and able to make this arrangement. 14 His relationship with the mission was not entirely business, though: in early 1876, it was Reverend David who visited little Emily Vaughan when she was ill, and both he and Reverend Colley conducted her funeral. Further, two young men in whom Vaughan had taken a fatherly interest—Moses Stone and Sarah Harden’s son Samuel—became closely associated with the mission: Stone as a preacher later sent to reopen the old Baptist station at Ogbomosho and Harden as a Lagos-based assistant and private pupil. Yet David referred to Vaughan as an “ex-member of our church,” and Vaughan showed no signs of rejoining. 15

Church Vaughan could well remember a different kind of missionary attitude than the Reverend David’s. A generation earlier, Thomas Jefferson Bowen and William Clarke had worked assiduously to understand Yorubaland and its people, on their own terms, as part of their evangelical mission. They respected African ways and views even when they disagreed with them; and they were convinced that everyone was capable of spiritual and intellectual development. When Vaughan accepted baptism from Clarke, it was an induction into a religion that offered him salvation on equal terms with other believers. God is no respecter of persons, Baptists insisted; each
individual is competent to communicate with God through Jesus Christ and responsible for his own faith and actions. But now, Willie David’s brand of missionary work was steeped in condescension for black people, who, he believed, should be spiritually saved, but whose prospects for civilization were otherwise limited.

David was not alone in these views, which reflected not only new forms of white supremacy in the United States South, but also changing ideas about race in the wider Euro-American world. Already, physical anthropologists, some of the skull-measuring variety, endeavored to differentiate and rank the “races” of humanity, producing titles such as Charles Hamilton Smith’s *The Natural History of the Human Species* (1848), Robert Knox’s *The Races of Man* (1850), and Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s four-volume *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1854). Though Charles Darwin intended no such interpretation, his *Origin of the Species by Natural Selection*, published in 1859, was taken to confirm racial hierarchies that could not be eliminated by cultural change. A massive mutiny within the British-controlled army in India in 1857 and an uprising among Jamaican freedpeople in 1865 dramatically suggested to intellectuals and policymakers in the empire that perhaps people of color could not be “civilized” in a European image after all—a conclusion shared by many white Americans after the Civil War. When David wrote to the Foreign Mission Board requesting additional white missionaries, he argued that the other denominations, particularly the Church Missionary Society, as well as the British colonial government all reserved their leadership posts for whites. “The European missionaries were beginning to see themselves as rulers,” a Nigerian historian wrote of Lagos in the late 1870s, “and the word ‘native’ was acquiring a new and sinister meaning.”

Though the missionaries David and Colley had arrived together and shared an evangelical project, they were divided not only by race and background, but by David’s refusal to treat a black colleague as anything other than subordinate. David blamed his difficulties in working with black Americans on “that sensitiveness so characteristic of the African race, and especially so of the Negro of the South.” In other words, it was not that African Americans had legitimate grievances, but simply that they refused to accept their presumptive inferiority. “What would be taken by one of us [white men] from the other as brotherly suggestions for the good of the work,” David continued, “would be regarded by a colored colaborer as an assertion of authority or superiority.” Of course David *did* assert authority and superiority: in the same breath, he suggested to the Foreign Mission Board that
“if you are going to the expense of sending out and supporting men from America, let us have the best. Let us have white men.” Meanwhile, Colley sent out his own call, writing in 1876 that “I hope the colored brethren will begin their work in Africa this year, either by sending a man or supporting one. This is their field of labor. I ask when will they obey their Saviour’s commission?”

If David was animated by racist self-importance, the Baptist congregation also found William Colley objectionable. Colley took charge of the Lagos station while David, determined to reestablish the Baptist mission in the Yoruba interior, based himself in Abeokuta, which had again opened to foreign missionaries. Soon thereafter, David’s health deteriorated and he embarked on eight months’ leave abroad, returning only briefly before beginning a two-year stint in the United States. While David was away, Colley patched up relations with Sarah Harden by arranging to send her eighteen-year-old son Samuel to the United States, where in 1877 he enrolled at Colley’s alma mater, the Richmond Institute. Yet like his white co-missionary, Colley also considered himself superior to local people and at times treated them with contempt. In this respect, the African American may have reminded Church Vaughan of settlers he had known in Liberia—and in fact, Colley would later end up in Liberia. Over two years in the late 1870s, as Colley penned letters to the Foreign Mission Board complaining about the privations he endured in Lagos, his African parishioners repeatedly denounced Colley through the same channels, charging him with unjust conduct, immorality, and violence.

Their complaints largely centered on Colley’s dismissal in June 1878 of Lewis Murray, a popular local Baptist who had been hired to teach at the small mission school. Murray had done nothing to merit the loss of his job, his defenders insisted, and was being punished for having earlier complained to the board about Reverend Colley’s conduct. Moreover, “since the time that Colley came here there was a woman brought with them and until now the woman is still living with the said Colley.” Actually, it seems that there were two women, a Mrs. Parmer hired as a housekeeper for the mission and residing in a room adjoining Colley’s, and her young adult daughter Sallie, who slept in a different bedroom on the other side of her mother’s. The parishioners insinuated that the unmarried Colley enjoyed an improper relationship with one of them, though it is not clear from surviving correspondence which one. Finally, the Lagos Baptists asked, “Is it right for a minister of God to be beating and horsewhipping any of his converts?” Colley had
inflicted such treatment on a woman named Mary, “who is trying to give her soul to Christ,” and who had come to clean the church. Altogether, at least twelve letters of complaint about Colley reached the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond. Some of them were composed on behalf of other parishioners by emergent Baptist leaders Levi Green and Samson L. Milton, both of whom would, a decade later, work with Church Vaughan to build their own Christian institution, independent of foreign missionaries.23

Colley’s own words on the matter have not survived, but he clearly interpreted the conflict in light of the racial slights he had been enduring from David and the Southern Baptist mission board. After all, he was even better positioned than the Lagos parishioners were to observe David’s behavior and attitudes. (Indeed, local Baptists did not write letters of complaint about David, only about Colley.) In late 1879 Colley either resigned or was fired, depending on the account, and he returned to Richmond.24 Soon he began to canvass the American South promoting the formation of a national black Baptist foreign mission organization. Black churches in several states had already formed missionary societies in reaction to white racism as well as a conviction that African Americans had a special role to play in evangelizing their distant African relatives. Now Colley worked to unite and expand their efforts. In November 1880, 151 ministers and active laypeople from eleven states met in Montgomery, Alabama, to found the (African American) Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, with William Colley as the first corresponding secretary.25 It began sending missionaries to Liberia, including Colley and his new wife, in 1883.26

In the United States, the formation of such separate institutions as churches and schools had begun among small groups of free black people after the American Revolution. By the Reconstruction era, they pervaded the South. Though black churches were the most obvious of the independent bodies, thousands of fraternal, benevolent, educational, and mutual-aid societies sprang into existence. By creating their own organizations, black Americans were responding both to the refusal of whites to offer them equality and to their own quest for self-determination. As W. E. B. DuBois later wrote, the black church was “the first social institution fully controlled by black men in America.”27 In Lagos, Africans had of course long formed and led organizations of various kinds. However, within the Christian churches—institutions vital for African economic mobility and social identity—African leadership was now limited and increasingly under threat. As new forms of white supremacy similar to those in the American South became more and
more evident in Lagos, there too, Africans began to consider separation. To do so, however, meant risking the value so clearly attached to missionary institutions.

By and large, Lagos Christians remained committed to the mission churches out of longtime loyalty, because the missions connected educated Africans to a global religious community, and, most of all, because thus far the missions had offered ample scope for African advancement through education and leadership. They were, in fact, the institutions most responsible for creating a Western-educated elite in Yorubaland, able to profit from new commercial opportunities and reproduce generations of literate professionals. Over time, however, new developments within and outside of the European-led churches undermined the status and prospects of African Christians. They were appalled, for instance, when the Church Missionary Society reversed its decades-old policy of support for African clergy, spectacularly humiliating its most venerable African leader. Other Africans were pushed out of European trading firms or the civil service. As colonialism tightened its grip on Lagos and its hinterland beginning in the 1880s, elite Africans protested against racial discrimination, in part by celebrating elements of local culture. They also continued to press for authority within established institutions, including the Christian churches. Only a few voices began to call for an end to missionary domination altogether, Vaughan’s — tentatively at first — among them.

The most obvious indication of the changes afoot was the treatment of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Africa’s Anglican bishop. Crowther represented the highest aspirations of Yoruba Christians for personal development and church leadership: he was a brilliant linguist and published author as well as a devoted Christian evangelical. He had been one of the two pioneers of the Church Missionary Society in Abeokuta, shaping and benefiting from its explicit policy of training Africans who would one day take over its work. He accompanied the first British Niger expedition in 1841–42 and subsequent expeditions along the river in the 1850s. On behalf of the CMS, Crowther founded the Niger Mission in 1857 with an all-African staff. Seven years later, the Sierra Leonean repatriate became the most powerful African Christian in the world when he was appointed bishop of “the countries of Western Africa beyond the limits of our dominions,” according to the royal license authorizing his consecration. Though in practical terms his focus was the lower Niger River, Crowther made his home much of the time in Lagos, a location central to his broad purview. Because of the dispersed nature of his diocese as well
as personal temperament, he supervised the African clergymen under him fairly lightly, and this became the rationale for CMS authorities to strip him of his authority. His residence in Lagos also made his treatment one of the city’s most closely followed issues.29

Although in 1875 the CMS had created a “native pastorate” in Lagos, bringing in the Yoruba-descended Sierra Leonean clergyman James Johnson as its head, it also began around that time to undertake a new policy regarding African church leadership, particularly targeting Crowther. In 1879, a newly formed finance committee, composed largely of white missionaries based at Lagos, removed the financial oversight of the Niger Mission from Bishop Crowther’s hands. A year later, the bishop was summoned to defend his management of the mission before a commission of inquiry convened in Madeira. Though Crowther acquitted himself to the satisfaction of the society’s London leadership, the incident was widely regarded as a grave insult to the revered churchman and to African Christians more generally. Then in 1882, in a move that no European bishop would have ever faced, a white general secretary was appointed to supervise Crowther. Though the aged clergyman labored on, his real and symbolic authority within the Anglican Church was nearly extinguished—and was not again exercised by an African church leader to a similar degree for another fifty years.30

In Crowther’s travails, elite Lagosians saw worrisome portents of other new developments. Several newly formed, African-owned Lagos newspapers reported incidents of racial discrimination, for example the 1885 removal from Christ Church of a memorial plaque in honor of the Saro doctor and CMS stalwart Nathaniel T. King while one honoring a European clergyman was allowed to remain.31 Recently arrived European personnel, many with inferior qualifications but all at higher pay grades, displaced local people from the civil service.32 European-owned commercial firms began to extend their reach into the interior, attempting to bypass coastal African middlemen while importing new white staff members. In fact Crowther’s son Josiah, after marketing cotton from Abeokuta in the 1850s, had entered the Niger Delta palm oil business. There, by the early 1870s, he served as agent-general of the West Africa Company; but he was dismissed, along with all African staff, when the four British companies on the Niger amalgamated into the United African Company in 1879.33

Immigrants from Sierra Leone, Brazil, and elsewhere, as well as their children, had formerly seen the British as their protectors and advocates. Now, as the antislavery ideologies and policies that had benefited them were replaced by a general view that African capacities were limited and even
educated Africans required white leadership, their protests became more frequent and insistent. Their outrage is best expressed in an 1881 letter to the secretary of the Church Missionary Society written by Henry Johnson, archdeacon of the Upper Niger (and thus one of Crowther’s lieutenants), who had been educated in Sierra Leone, England, and even Palestine (to learn Arabic). “You in England cannot fancy how some of those who come here inflated with the idea that they are the ‘dominant race,’ do treat with something like contempt the natives of the country,” he began. “The truth is that they regard us this day in pretty much the same light as our forefathers were, who were rescued from the ironpangs of slavery by the philanthropists of a former generation.” Yet “Eloquent Johnson,” as he was called by Lagosians, made clear that his generation did not need saving, and he resented the implication. “We are not oversensitive,” he continued, “but at the same time we are not unduly pachydermatous. . . . But does anyone think we have no feelings at all, or no rights which are to be respected?” And then the real issue, expressed in the gendered language of the day: “Having educated us, you will not allow us to think and speak and act like men.”

In the face of mounting affronts, Lagosians began to emphasize and celebrate some of their differences from Europeans. Yoruba culture, they asserted, was as rich and as capable of spurring great advancement as European ways, which local people perhaps had adopted too uncritically in the past. Beginning in 1881, James Johnson, the African head of Lagos’s largest Anglican congregation (known as “Holy Johnson” for his religious enthusiasm and to distinguish him from “Eloquent” Henry Johnson), campaigned against the use of English names in baptisms. Notices began to appear in newspapers of names changed from European to African. Though English still predominated in the public life of the Lagos elite, they introduced Yoruba songs in compositions and entertainments. In 1885, two African leaders within the Baptist mission, S. A. Allen and David Brown Vincent, published Ìwé Òwe (Book of Proverbs) and Èwè Àló (Book of Riddles) to great popular acclaim. By the end of the century, cultural nationalism would flourish into a robust movement in which many educated Africans not only cast off their European names in favor of Yoruba ones but replaced their shirts and trousers with Yoruba dress, investigated and disseminated Yoruba history and culture, and worked to give Christianity a more African basis. In the early 1880s, however, Lagosians asserted the value of their African heritage primarily when they perceived it to be under attack, such as when the government proposed a new education ordinance in 1882.

Because the Christian missions were the only institutions offering West-
ern education, the colonial government had for the previous decade been making modest grants to their schools. According to the new proposal, mission schools receiving grants would be required to teach exclusively in English rather than the current mix of English and Yoruba. Reading and writing the English language, arithmetic, and needlework (for girls) would also be compulsory, while the teaching of English grammar, English history, and British Empire geography were especially encouraged. Though at least one local newspaper editor reminded readers of the utility of an English education, other Lagosians were furious. The wealthy Saro merchant and publisher Richard Beale Blaize referred to the contemporary European encroachment in Africa when he asked, “Is the ulterior object of the Education Bill to promote the conquest of West Africa by England morally through the English language, and secure that morally which African fevers perhaps prevent it acquiring physically?”

Like Henry Johnson, Blaize referenced the slave past of the town’s repatriate community, while insisting that current initiatives went too far. “Is there a purpose to throw around our souls chains heavier than those which had, before emancipation, bound our bodies?” he asked. “Surely the way to elevate a people is not first to teach them to entertain the lowest idea of themselves and make them servile imitators of others.” Though the Lagos elite in many ways owed their current positions to British antislavery, they now were in a better position to question British policies toward them: “We are British subjects, and are grateful for England’s protection and all its beneficial work for Africa. We respect and reverence the country of Wilberforce and Buxton [leaders in the British antislavery movement] and most of our Missionaries,” Blaize explained, “but we are not Englishmen. We are Africans, and have no wish to be any other than Africans, and in Lagos, Yoruba Africans. We shall not sit tamely to witness the murder, death and burial of one of those important distinguishing national and racial marks that God has given to us in common with other tribes, nations and races, and not protest against it with all the energy that we can command.”

Vaughan had entered the public discussion himself the previous year, albeit anonymously, with his involvement in the publication of a pamphlet directed to African Christians called The Hamite’s General Economy. Widely circulated in Lagos and summarized in a letter by the leading African Anglican there, the unsigned publication—which unfortunately does not survive—“invites African clergy and Christian Laity together to establish a church for themselves on their own national and racial line in which both polygamy and slavery should be fully tolerated.” Intervening in theological
issues that had been contested among Anglo-American Protestants for decades, the pamphlet also was said to deny the divinity of Christ, question the necessity for clergy as mediators between believers and the divine, and disparage the right of church leaders to discipline members. The pamphlet was addressed to Christians in the interior Yoruba towns, but it also resonated with a portion of the Christian, largely Saro, community of Lagos who were beginning to assert the value of African culture. “The growing idea,” as James Johnson summarized the pamphlet, “is that practical Christianity is not inconsistent with either polygamy or slave holding; that these are among the social customs, the national and racial habits that Christianity is not expected to disturb wherever it finds them to exist; that men are free, left free by God and the Controlling force of circumstances to elect between polygamy and monogamy as it suits their tastes dispositions and conveniences; that Europeans have of their own accord elected monogamy; that Africans have found polygamy and slave making and slave keeping indispensable to social life in their own country; and that these states and conditions of social life are not to be considered sinful or treated as social evils but rather as permissible and lawful states and conditions.”

Because, according to Johnson’s summary, “Its authorship is credited to an African or Negro born in America but who has been now many years resident in the country,” at least one historian has attributed the publication to Church Vaughan. Yet a number of clues suggest that it was not in fact him but a close associate who wrote the pamphlet. The author, according to Johnson, “had long lived at Abeokuta and been employed as a missionary mechanic in the service of the S. American Baptist Missionary Society. There, it is said he had lived in Polygamy, no doubt after he had left the mission service, [and] had bought slaves and made wives of them. He resides now at Lagos and professes to live in monogamy.” Though the lack of evidence that Vaughan purchased slave wives in Abeokuta is not necessarily conclusive (and his wife Sarah Omotayo may have once been enslaved), it is doubtful that his couple of years’ residence there could be interpreted by a contemporary as a “long” time. Moreover, Vaughan was sufficiently well known in Lagos that if Johnson were referring to him, the clergyman would probably have used his name. Finally, Johnson heard “that the author of Hamite’s Economy had the help of some person in setting up his work.” Vaughan’s letter to the Foreign Mission Board, written a decade earlier, certainly does not indicate a lack of literary skills that would necessitate such assistance.

Rather, *The Hamite’s General Economy* may well have been written by Vaughan’s old friend from as early as their Liberia days, Henry Sewell Petti-
ford. The historical record had last placed Pettiford in Abeokuta defending the city from attack in 1864 and then joining Egba forces against the Ibadans near Ijebu territory. Pettiford apparently did not leave Abeokuta for Lagos when the missionaries were expelled in 1867. But at some point he did move there, because in the early twentieth century his descendants lived near the Vaughans on Igboosere Road and were considered practically as relatives.\textsuperscript{42} Given that someone with his distinctive last name was listed as a member of the Lagos Baptist church in 1881, Pettiford must have moved to the city by then, perhaps driven by the interior warfare that erupted again in 1877.\textsuperscript{43} Church Vaughan probably took him in or helped him find a place to live. And when unknown circumstances—perhaps the news of Colley’s new African American mission society—compelled Pettiford to pen his public address calling for an independent, culturally sensitive church, the more literate Vaughan offered assistance. Even if they were not alone in their views, however, neither of them was willing to risk the personal attention and potential controversy that might come with affixing their name to the work.\textsuperscript{44}

Although the pamphlet irritated “Holy Johnson,” it did not have much of an impact otherwise. As early as 1872, Edward Blyden—now Liberia’s foremost intellectual, with a wide following on the West African coast—had written in favor of an independent African church and a West African university. But most Lagosian Christians were deeply loyal to the parent churches, in spite of the growing white supremacist attitudes of European missionaries through the 1870s and ’80s.\textsuperscript{45} Even as Europeans undertook their voracious “scramble” for Africa, in fact, elite Lagosians debated whether this would ultimately be of benefit or detriment to the continent. One month after the conclusion of the Berlin Conference, in which European delegates drew lines on maps to divide Africa among themselves, David Vincent objected to further colonization at a public meeting sponsored by the Lagos YMCA, but he was careful to distinguish the laudable aims of missionaries from the avaricious schemes of “murders and whoremongers, thieves, and robbers.” “It was commercial Europe that invented slave labour and discovered the victims of slavery,” he specified in February 1885, “but it was evangelical Europe that promulgated the edict of universal emancipation. It was adventurous Europe, under the title of the ‘Anthropological Society,’ that placed us, the inhabitants of this good land, in the category of the brute creation; but it was Missionary Europe that proved us men.”\textsuperscript{46} A year later, CMS members calling themselves “Paul, Silas and others” railed in the pages of the Lagos Observer against “haughtiness, absolutism, stubborn persistencies and dictatorial proclivities” within the mission church, ending their call for a breakaway
African Anglican congregation with the cry, “Secession! Secession!! Secession!!!” But it was not until the end of the decade that a small group of rebels finally made a bid for congregational independence, and it was not the well-established, though frustrated, Anglicans who did so. Instead, the American Baptist mission suffered the first defection, with Church Vaughan and his comrades leading the way.

Notwithstanding his possible involvement in Pettiford's pamphlet, Church Vaughan generally tolerated the Baptist missionaries and the changing climate of the early 1880s. After all, he was doing much better than his relatives in South Carolina. His business was growing, at least partly because of contracts from the Baptist mission as it undertook several building projects in the first half of the decade. And for some time it was possible to imagine that not all missionaries shared the same sense of superiority as Reverend David or his CMS counterparts. In fact, Vaughan formed a friendship with one of the three white recruits who joined David's mission in 1884. But when that man, apparently the only sympathetic white missionary he knew, was fired, Vaughan's tolerance began to give out. And by 1888, when David undermined the Baptists' own version of Bishop Crowther, Vaughan's longtime protégé Moses Stone, and defended his actions in terms of white supremacy, Vaughan declared his independence.

Vaughan's relationship with David and the Baptist mission remained relatively cordial through the first half of the 1880s. He supplied building materials and banking services as David built a new Baptist school building beginning in 1883 and a substantial new brick church three years later. It may be no coincidence, in fact, that Vaughan was able to purchase three new properties in 1884, as the new schoolhouse was completed. Vaughan's fourteen-year-old son Burrell enrolled as a pupil. Given these connections to the missionary, Vaughan may have kept his disapproval to himself that year when David embarked on a trip to the United States, bringing a ten-year-old boy, Manly Ogunlana Oshodi, with him. Oshodi was to serve as the exotic centerpiece of a fund-raising campaign through the American South, reciting from the Bible in English and Yoruba while wearing the outlandish costumes of traditional Yoruba masquerades.

However much he did business with the mission, made financial contributions to its building fund, and even attended services, however, Vaughan could not have been impressed with most of the American personnel who arrived in the 1880s. In 1882, twenty-five-year-old Peyton Eubank and his new wife became Reverend David's first white reinforcements, fulfilling re-
quests he had made for years. Eubank was as condescending about Africans as David was, soon writing back to the Foreign Mission Board attributing the difficulty of spreading Baptist Christianity in Yorubaland to insurmountable African shortcomings. In Eubank’s view, these included: “1. The African’s satisfaction with his condition. 2. His lack of veracity and the consequent distrust of him. 3. His ignorance and superstition. 4. The adverse power of family influence. 5. Native slavery to base passions. 6. The low moral and spiritual life among professed Christians.” On the other hand, the young missionary was encouraged by the fact that “Christianity [was] attracting the attention of the more thoughtful”; and in general, he thought that “the Yoruban’s confidence in the white man” offered possibilities for evangelization.51 Three more white missionaries—Wiley W. Harvey, Charles Edwin Smith, and Strother Moses Cook—were recruited during David’s American tour with the young African on display and arrived in 1884.52 Harvey soon reported from Abeokuta, “It is not from the goodness of their [Africans’] hearts that we are permitted to go among many of them, but [from] their cowardice, superstition and their notions of the whiteman’s strength.” Later he produced a brief book about working in Africa entitled, predictably, “The Dark Continent.”53

Strother Moses Cook, however, was a man Vaughan could appreciate. The two got to know each other when Cook rotated to the Lagos mission from the interior along with Moses Ladejo Stone, whom Vaughan had known since the Yoruba preacher’s youth. The best educated of the Baptist missionaries, Cook had attended the National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio, and worked as a teacher before entering the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Unlike his colleagues, Cook mixed freely in local society and took the time to get to know Africans, forming an enduring friendship with Moses Stone. “The only way to know a country and its people,” he wrote, “is to become interested in it sufficiently to make an effort to find out some facts, and know a few things that are true.” Before coming to Lagos, Cook and his comrades had been told “strange stories about the people and the dangerous climate,” but he later realized that he had been misled. “If you ever come to Africa,” Cook recounted, “you will find that about one half of the strange and hideous stories you hear are untrue.” Rather than trafficking in stereotypes, he exchanged courtesies with local chiefs and listened sympathetically to the complaints of African teachers and mission agents about their low rates of pay. As an approving Lagosian later wrote of Cook, “He was without affectation and without prejudice.”54

Cook’s fellow missionaries, however, were appalled by his liberal atti-
tudes, and they complained both to him and to mission superiors back in Richmond. Charles Smith alleged that Cook suffered from “weakness and childishness of mind,” the only possible explanation for his breaking ranks with other missionaries. “One day Bro Eubank was very justly punishing a mission boy,” Smith charged, “when bro Cook rushed into the room and said ‘I want this stopped.’” Cook sympathized with “native” complaints about other missionaries “and sometimes was very outspoken in his approval.” In what must have been both galling and scandalous to his white comrades, Cook proudly proclaimed “that he was raised by a Negro woman, and reared up to human consciousness on a Negro’s breast.” For the other missionaries, Cook’s disavowal of white supremacist discipline was unacceptable. At their request, Cook was fired from the mission and recalled to the United States in mid-1886. There, after unsuccessfully pleading his case before the Foreign Mission Board, he maintained his interest in Yorubaland from his home in Kentucky. The next year, Cook returned to Lagos on his own initiative, staying some six months and vowing to remain in touch with the African Baptists there after his return to America.

For Vaughan, the dismissal of its only white man who treated Africans with respect was the beginning of the end of his relationship with the Baptist mission. Because their spacious new church building was reaching completion, the missionaries no longer placed frequent orders at Vaughan’s hardware store. And in mid-1887, he terminated his role as their banker. Several months earlier, Vaughan’s English purchasing agents had declined to take any more bills of exchange forwarded from the missionaries, complaining about the five weeks’ time it took to receive payment on them. Vaughan agreed to continue exchanging the bills himself, but only on condition that the missionaries pay a 1 percent surcharge to protect him against the risk that he might not be able to redeem them. No longer as inclined as he may have been earlier to extend credit to the missionaries, Vaughan now acted the hard-nosed businessman. David looked elsewhere for financial services, arranging by the end of the year to exchange bills with the American shipping company Yates and Porterfield, which occasionally sent a vessel to Lagos.

By this time, David was not only financially estranged from Vaughan, but he was becoming increasingly alienated from Vaughan’s longtime fellow Baptists. After the new Baptist Academy opened, for instance, Sarah Harden’s little school for girls had to close for lack of pupils, and she asked that as a missionary widow she be paid a pension to replace her previous salary. Such payments were standard practice; and furthermore, as even Reverend Eubank had written earlier, “she is certainly deserving.” David rebuffed her
request, however, leaving her so “much displeased and grieved” that she con- sidered appealing directly to the Foreign Mission Board. “I think the Board should take no notice of such letters from native agents,” David wrote back to Richmond. “Let us manage them.”

It was precisely in “managing” local personnel that David most antago- nized Vaughan and other leading Baptists. Just as newly arrived Britons with the Church Missionary Society connived further to sideline Bishop Crowther and other African agents—who, in David’s view, caused “much trouble and grief”—so did David undermine the leading African in his own church, Moses Ladejo Stone. Vaughan’s onetime apprentice, Stone had been a dedicated Baptist since the 1860s. He, along with Sarah Harden and Church Vaughan, had kept the congregation together after the departure of the last missionaries in 1869. Shortly after David’s initial arrival in Lagos in 1876, he had sent Stone as an interpreter to Abeokuta and then to Ogbomo- sho. Stone remained for seven years as pastor of the Ogbomosho church, enduring personal attack as war again engulfed the region beginning in 1877. In 1880, at the behest of his African parishioners, David ordained Stone as a Baptist minister. When Reverend David left on furlough to America in 1884, Stone served as pastor of the Lagos church, which he managed on his own. But David’s views were clear that black people should be supervised by whites. By late 1885, he designated Stone as “assistant pastor,” under the supervision first of Strother Moses Cook and then, after Cook’s forced de- parture, David himself. Though both men were thirty-eight years old, mar- ried fathers, and respected preachers, David viewed Stone as a perpetual subordinate, and treated him accordingly.

In spite of Stone’s crucial role as the only African minister in the Baptist church, the “assistant pastor” hardly earned a living wage and his attempts at educational advancement received no encouragement. His salary of sixty pounds per year was less than two-thirds of what “native” Methodist and Anglican preachers in Lagos were paid, in spite of his repeated requests to Reverend David for a raise. From the time he and his family arrived there from Ogbomosho, Stone relied on money borrowed from Vaughan to make ends meet, and Cook advanced money to him as well. Further, though Stone was the least educated of the eleven “native” preachers in Lagos—seven of whom held university degrees—David also refused his requests for higher education. Stone captivated audiences with his eloquent Yoruba sermons, heavily peppered with parables and proverbs from the language’s deep reservoir, yet his English was extremely weak. His Western education had been spotty and informal, beginning with the missionary Richard Stone and

* Vaughan’s Rebellion
Vaughan when he was a child, continuing when David and Colley arrived in Lagos, pausing during the years he was in Ogbomosho, and resuming briefly when he and Cook shared the Lagos mission station. During that time, he gave Cook lessons in the Yoruba language in exchange for tutoring from the missionary. But this fell far short of Stone’s educational ambitions.60

Even within the Baptist mission, other Africans were better educated than Reverend Stone. David Brown Vincent, the headmaster of the Baptist elementary school, was the son of a CMS catechist of Yoruba origin from Sierra Leone, and he had attended CMS schools in Ibadan and Lagos before becoming a Baptist in the early 1880s.61 And in 1886, Samuel Harden became principal of the newly opened Baptist Academy upon his return from nine years in the United States.62 The son of Sarah Harden and her long-deceased African American missionary husband Joseph Harden, Samuel had studied at the Richmond Institute in Virginia and the Worcester Institute in Massachusetts through the efforts of Baptists in Africa and America. For his part, Stone wondered aloud why he might not be given similar opportunities, given his long service to the mission.

Although David continued to refuse Stone’s requests for American education or better pay, he may have agreed that the mission would build a house in Lagos for the assistant pastor and his family. With a £150 mortgage financed by Church Vaughan, Stone purchased a plot of land on Wesley Street and began to construct a comfortable house on it. Yet either David reneged on their deal or it had never been made in the first place, because Stone was left entirely responsible for the cost of the house. Anxious about his finances, he took up trading to earn extra money. When David objected on the grounds that a preacher ought to devote all his time to the ministry, Stone yet again asked David for a pay raise. David again refused.63

One Sunday in February 1888, Church Vaughan became suspicious when he did not see Stone at morning services. Together with other elders of the congregation, Vaughan sought out Reverend David to ask what had happened. Stone had resigned, they were told, and David had accepted his resignation on behalf of the congregation. Vaughan and the others were appalled: shouldn’t they be involved in decisions about Stone’s salary, they wanted to know, since in fact contributions from the congregation financed part of it? And more importantly, according to Baptist principles of congregational decision-making, shouldn’t they have been consulted before David accepted Stone’s resignation? The priesthood of all believers, a central tenet of Baptist faith, implied that the affairs of the church were the concern of all members.
David answered that since he was in charge of the mission, he could dismiss Stone “as he would any of his servants.”

David’s sense of entitlement to run the mission as his own private estate stemmed at least in part from the fact that he was funding it with his own resources. After his first wife died of fever, David had married a second time in 1886 to Justa Greer, a wealthy widow from Shugualak, Mississippi. When they were ready to return to Africa from America, the Foreign Mission Board was short of the funds for their fare. Drawing on the estate of Mrs. David’s first husband, the missionary couple loaned fifteen hundred dollars to the board, more than enough to cover their travel costs. Then when the new Lagos church was being built, Reverend David drew again on the funds he and his wife had loaned the board: five hundred dollars toward the construction of the building. In his view, any money spent to augment Stone’s salary would in essence come out of the missionary’s own (or rather, his wife’s) pocket.

David may also have chosen his words deliberately when he referred to mission personnel as his “servants,” knowing that his listeners would take “servants” to mean “slaves.” Nearly all of those who came to see David that day had seen captivity or forced servitude up-close, either in their own lives or through the memories of their parents. Levi Green Agbelusi, who in 1876 had been ordained as the first African Baptist deacon in Nigeria and had been one of the chief complainants against William Colley, had originally come to Lagos as a slave and had been baptized by Rev. Joseph Hardin, the Baptist missionary who himself was the son of freed American slaves. Agbelusi’s nephew and former ward David Vincent, later known as Mojola Agbebi, was the son of Yoruba returnees from Sierra Leone. Others present, including Moses Stone, John Ajala Stone, W. L. Mills, and J. B. Clay, were onetime Ijaye refugees who had evaded capture themselves. Was David reminding the Baptist delegation of his own background as a member of a white master class and their own personal familiarity with slavery? Was he in essence telling the black Baptists, “I could own you”? Certainly Vaughan and the others took it this way. If your church is intended to be a barracoon, they told David at the next meeting—using the word for a slave pen in the Atlantic trade—then they wanted no part of it.

Within days, sixty of the Baptist church’s eighty members met at Stone’s house on Wesley Street to form a separate congregation. Though they considered severing all denominational ties, Vaughan convinced them to remain Baptist—especially since the denomination’s structure was based on
independent, self-governing congregations. Instead, they fired off a report of their actions and the precipitating circumstances to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. At Sarah Harden’s suggestion, they called their new organization the Native Baptist Church, a name they considered more inclusive than something with “Yoruba” in the title. Stone was their pastor, paid by contributions from the members (though they amounted only to three pounds per month, leaving him even more impoverished than before). Soon the rebels were joined by Samuel Harden and David Vincent, whom Reverend David fired from the Baptist Academy when they refused to make a public statement in support of the missionary. A committee of elders was elected, including Levi Green Agbelusi as foreman, James Wilson Vaughan as treasurer, and Samuel Harden as financial secretary. A few weeks later, the separatists appointed David Vincent and Church Vaughan as deacons. Vaughan had a temporary shed constructed in the backyard of Stone’s house, where the congregation began holding its services.68

At this point, as Samuel Harden later recalled, the separatists were willing to return to the missionary church if he, Stone, and Vincent were reinstated to their former positions.69 But animosity increased on both sides, fueled by long-simmering resentments as well as a new war of words. Cryptically reporting the dispute, the Lagos press declined to offer particulars, “as representations have been made to us which, from their conflicting nature, we would consider it most prudent not to meddle with.”70 Rumors—which the missionaries attributed to Moses Stone—circulated that David had referred to church members as goats and beasts, and that it had been David, not Colley, who had the improper relationship some years earlier with the mission housekeeper Mrs. Parmer. Attempting to regain the initiative, Reverend David along with his fellow missionaries Eubank and Smith drew up and signed a leaflet, which they then circulated by hand throughout the town. It proclaimed that the Baptist mission had withdrawn fellowship from Stone because he was unqualified for the ministry, having been repeatedly untruthful. The same day—April 30, 1888—the missionaries met with remaining members of the mission church and passed a resolution excluding Stone from the pulpit. They also reported their actions to Richmond, complaining in particular about the “ungrateful, unkind, unjust and untrue utterances” of the separatists. Stone defended himself over the next month, writing both to the Foreign Mission Board and circulating in Lagos a printed document titled “A Protest Against and Denouncement of Statements Made in a Paper Which Had Been Privately Circulated in Lagos to Injure the Reputation of Rev. M. L. Stone.”71
After associating with Baptist missionaries nearly all of his adult life, Vaughan now stood as the senior member of the rebellion against them. He signed as “chairman” at least two letters to the Foreign Mission Board expressing support for Stone and complaints about David, with Harden as vice chairman and Sarah Harden a member of the committee. When renewed negotiations over returning to the parent church broke down and the secessionists determined to form a new institution of their own, Vaughan provided money for the construction of a more permanent building in Stone’s compound. The former carpenter personally supervised the building project, which was completed in November. Though Vaughan had become the “big man” of the Lagos Baptists, however, his patronage still had its limits. The money for the new church building was specified as a loan, just as Vaughan’s assistance to Stone had been. As treasurer of the new church, his son and business partner James Wilson Vaughan was to see to it that the funds would be repaid once the congregation got on its feet.

Nevertheless, Vaughan’s influence was so great that David identified him as the principal obstacle to reconciliation with the breakaway members. In July 1888 he opined to the Foreign Mission Board—without further explanation—that many of the secessionists would “gladly return, but I doubt whether any will be able to break away from Vaughan and the other leaders for some time yet.” Alluding to past debates within the church about whether to accept polygamists, he continued that “Vaughan has the kind of church he has long wanted—one of tares, adulterers etc., and will not let any come away, as he holds them responsible for the money he spent in building the church for them.” Three months later, David reiterated—seemingly protesting too much—that the majority of those who had left his church were undesirable Christians anyway, but then complained again of Vaughan’s alleged financial hold over the Native Baptists. “Stone is in debt personally to Vaughan,” he wrote, “and the members with him are also in debt to V for the chapel he built for them. The members are tired of their new Master. V is dissatisfied with his unruly church and is demanding his money from them.”

It was not only Vaughan but other diasporic Africans whom the Baptist missionaries blamed for their troubles, ignoring their own role in offending local Christians. “I regret to say,” David wrote during the dispute, “that in Lagos racial prejudice against all white men—Government, missionaries is strong, and growing rapidly. It has been engendered by Sierra Leone emigrants to this place.” In this he agreed with agents of the Church Missionary Society, who were particularly annoyed by the educated Saro: the missionary Graham Wilmot Brooke referred to them in 1889 as “swarms of
ragamuffins.” But David’s colleague Charles Smith complained that African Americans in Africa were also a problem, because they “introduce American (Negro) notions and prejudices.” As evidence, he asserted, “Our trouble in Lagos has been made much worse by an American Negro (Vaughan) and one educated in America (Harden). . . . In the present trouble in Lagos, I have already expressed my views. Except for Vaughan the American Negro and Harden educated in America, the trouble would have been settled at first.”

Whether or not Vaughan’s and Harden’s enthusiasm for church separatism was stronger than that of other leaders of the Native Baptist Church—or of Saro within the CMS—both of them certainly were familiar with African American self-run institutions, and both had experienced better treatment from white colleagues than they were currently getting. At the Richmond Institute, Harden had studied theology among some seventy Virginia freedmen who would later staff the state’s black churches and schools. By the time he had arrived there in 1877, the institute no longer held classes in the former slave barracoa known as “Lumpkin’s Jail”; still, Harden was surrounded by African Americans with strong memories of slavery, opposition to white supremacy, and commitment to black uplift through their own institutions. After two years in Virginia, he moved north to continue his studies in Massachusetts. At the Worcester Academy boarding school, Harden lived with his three teachers and nine fellow students, nearly all of them white New Englanders. He taught school in Massachusetts for several years after his graduation, again living largely among white people who had not been raised in a slave society. Returning to Lagos in 1886, Harden must have found in his near-uncle Church Vaughan the only other person with a sense of what he had observed and experienced. Both men owed their educations to the Southern Baptist Church, but now they chafed at the racism of its white missionaries and could well imagine a congregation without them.

If the missionaries thought that diasporic Africans were its only supporters and that the Native Baptist Church might not last, though, they were mistaken. Reverend David left Lagos permanently in November 1888 ostensibly because of illness, but likely because he had had enough of struggling with the rebels. The Lagos newspapers implied that he had been recalled by his mission board. His successor C. C. Newton spent the next several years trying to effect a reconciliation between the mission and breakaway church. Native Baptists told him, again linking the missionary church with slavery, that they would “not go back into bondage.” In 1892, four years after the split, Newton did convince Moses Stone to return to the parent church.
as preacher (in part by paying off his debt to Vaughan and thus following through on the promise David may have made to fund Stone’s mortgage). The native Baptists appointed David Vincent as their new minister, and in 1893, now calling themselves the Ebenezer Baptist Church, they moved into a brand-new brick building financed by James W. and Burrell Vaughan, Church Vaughan’s sons, in honor of their father and located on the site of his first house in Lagos. “The Native Baptist Church has exhibited such a spirit of determination and power of energy and enterprise as has evoked the admiration of the whole community,” reported a Lagos newspaper. “And now, possessing a beautiful Chapel and a Native minister of their own, it is to be hoped that their continued progress will be assured being unfettered with foreign money and mandates.”82 That building at the corner of Joseph and Campbell Streets was demolished and replaced beginning in 1974, and the Ebenezer Baptist Church endures today, with a Vaughan descendant still serving as a deacon.83

Like the missionary church from which it broke away, the Native Baptist Church never attracted as many members as the CMS or the Methodists, mission societies connected to Britain. Yet its foundation is considered a watershed in the history of Nigerian nationalism. The native Baptists opened the door for Christians to escape from missionary oversight, offering a local model of institutional separation in response to the new colonial and missionary racism of the late nineteenth century. Other breakaway churches followed in 1891, 1901, 1906, and 1917. As a historian of Nigerian missions put it, the continuing struggles within the mission churches as well as the new independent bodies reflected “the desire of Nigerian converts to manage their own affairs in the institution to which they had become most closely associated and thereby demonstrate their ability to rule, to evangelize and to administer.”84
By the time the Native Baptist Church celebrated its third anniversary in 1891, the trends it encapsulated—separation as a response to white supremacy, influenced by the African diaspora—were on full display in Lagos. The Church Missionary Society’s white-majority finance committee replaced nine African missionaries on the Niger with Europeans, so antagonizing Bishop Crowther that the long-suffering octogenarian finally resigned. According to the Baptist missionary C. C. Newton, “When those who were dismissed from the Niger Mission arrived in Lagos and filled the air with the talk of the wrongs which they had endured at the hands of the white missionaries there were many sympathizers here, among them Stone’s people.” Within the Lagos CMS church, its African leader James “Holy” Johnson organized financial support from wealthy Lagosians in order to make the Niger Delta mission independent, with Crowther at its head. Though Crowther agreed to the plan, he suffered a stroke and died in late 1891, leaving the autonomous Delta pastorate to live on without him until a reconciliation with the CMS in 1897. Meanwhile, as Newton put it, “a wave of bitter race feeling has swept over Lagos this year.”

British imperial expansion only worsened the antagonism. As the controversy within the CMS unfolded in 1891, colonial forces seized Ilaro, part of the Egba kingdom near Lagos. British officials publicly made plans for an expedition the next year against the kingdom of Ijebu-Ode, which had thus far resisted missionaries and European traders. Missionaries strongly supported what they saw as the military prelude to religious expansion, and this pushed some Lagosian Christians even further away from them than before. The Baptist Reverend Newton, for example, finally given a chance to preach at the Native Baptist Church, was hissed and scoffed at when his sermon included support for the British expeditions.

As the tension built in Lagos, Edmund Wilmot Blyden—the pan-African intellectual with whom Vaughan had crossed paths in Liberia three decades earlier—visited the city to offer moral support in connection with the Niger Mission dispute. This “most distinguished negro philosopher,” as even the American missionary Newton acknowledged, was well known in West Africa and its diaspora for his two decades of publications celebrating the character and potential of Africans and their descendants. Now his appearance in Lagos helped to solidify incipient desires there for religious autonomy and cultural assertion. His first public appearance, in December 1890, was a speech at the Hope School, which David Vincent had founded in part to train teachers and preachers for the Native Baptist Church. Just over a year earlier, at a sermon marking the church’s first anniversary, Vincent
had insisted that local Christianity must be clearly African. “To render Christianity indigenous to Africa, it must be watered by native hands, pruned with the native hatchet, and tended with native earth,” he had exhorted. After the sermon’s text was published, Blyden endorsed Vincent’s views in a letter to the *Lagos Weekly Times*. Blyden made a similar case in his January 1891 public lecture in Lagos, entitled “The Return of the Exiles and the West African Church.” Before a large and enthusiastic audience, Blyden called for the establishment of a nondenominational African church purged of the foreign cultural influences he believed had sullied the pure Christianity of the Bible. Blyden insisted that “the Christ we worship must be an African . . . the Christ revealed in the Bible is far more African than anything else.”

Several months later, frustrated Lagosians from the CMS, Wesleyan, and Baptist churches formed the United Native African Church, an ecumenical congregation “founded for the evangelization and amelioration of our race, to be governed by Africans.”

David Vincent became their minister, a post he held until he took up the pulpit of the Native Baptist Church in 1894.

Church separatism was one way that Lagosians responded to late nineteenth-century colonialism and racism; Yoruba cultural nationalism was another, though the two movements overlapped in practice and personnel. On an 1894 trip to Liberia for religious ordination, for instance, David Vincent changed his name to Mojola Agbebi and replaced his European ministerial costume for native dress, which he wore even when he toured Britain and the United States in the early 1900s. Agbebi more than nearly any other Lagos-based clergyman worked to reconcile Christianity and African institutions. As he put it on the first anniversary of the Native Baptist Church in 1889, “To be successful we have to study the names, designs, and influences of the stone and wooden gods of our fathers . . . The lives and doings of our heathen sages, the origin of the several gods of whom our brethren worship will be useful instruments in the hands of the aggressive missionary.”

Soon, a number of works of Yoruba history were in production, including Otonba Payne’s *Table of Principal Events in Yoruba History* (1893), J. O. George’s *Historical Notes on the Yoruba Country and its Tribes* (1895), and Samuel Johnson’s monumental *History of the Yorubas* (completed in 1897). In response to the persistent denigration of African culture by European missionaries and officials, these efforts—all by active Christians—showcased the richness, vitality, and legitimacy of Yoruba traditions. Perhaps ironically, this “minor cultural renaissance” was spearheaded in large measure by Saro and Brazilians with origins both in Yorubaland and the African diaspora.

Church Vaughan’s own diasporic affiliations tended to reach back to the
Americas rather than to an African past. He never pretended to be a Yoruba man, and he left the celebration of local culture to others. Instead, he reconnected with an old friend from the United States who shared his Baptist faith and independent spirit. Around the time that Blyden came to Lagos in 1890, so did Strother Moses Cook, the white Baptist who had earlier been hounded out of the mission for too closely fraternizing with Africans. Cook had remained in contact with Moses Stone and had recently left the Baptist Church himself. Now a minister of the Harrodsburg, Kentucky, Church of Christ (a so-called Cambellite church), Cook had come back to support the Native Baptists—and perhaps, as a rueful missionary charged, “widening the breach between them and the mission”—taking up residence in Vaughan’s house on Igbosere Road. Lodging with Vaughan, his wife Sarah, their son Burrell, little daughter Aida, and the family servants (James W. Vaughan lived in his own house nearby), Cook could witness the comings and goings of Vaughan’s business associates and keep in close touch with the African Baptists. He attended services at the Native Baptist Church and assisted Stone as he could, though the congregation’s members insisted that no white missionary would lead them. After several months, however, Cook established his own small Cambellite (“Disciples of Christ”) congregation, which met for devotionals in Vaughan’s backyard. Though Vaughan himself remained a Native Baptist, he saw no harm in providing a space for Cook and his dozen or so followers, especially since the Disciples of Christ shared many Baptist beliefs. Indeed, his association with Cook, who continued “talking matters that affect the character of some of the missionaries who were here with him when he was a Baptist,” represented Vaughan’s past links to the Baptist mission as well as his repudiation of white supremacy within it and his autonomy even within his own congregation.

Now an old man, Vaughan had been connected with Baptist missionaries for more than half his lifetime. They had given him his real start in life, bringing him to Yorubaland, offering him protection, opening his mind and spirit, and developing the skills that enabled him to make a living. At the time, Lagos had been a weak outpost of British colonialism surrounded by independent African polities. The missionaries of the 1850s and ’60s—Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist—had seen their role as spreading “civilization” to Africans, who would then take it up themselves. They concentrated in particular on African refugees from slavery and the slave trade, who generally came to share their reverence for Christianity and education. For Vaughan, working and learning with the missionaries had been a crucial step in attaining the autonomy that in his view formed the essence of freedom.
But now a new generation of white missionaries and British officials was convinced not that Africans should be educated for leadership and autonomy, but that all black people were permanently inferior to whites. Moreover, instead of an isolated colony with few Europeans, Lagos was now the beachhead from which the British were moving to annex all of Yorubaland and beyond, a process they would complete in the 1914 amalgamation of “Nigeria.” Vaughan had achieved considerable material success, but along with other African elites he resented the burgeoning new colonialism and its accompanying white supremacy. Though Vaughan remained steadfast as a Baptist and refused to dismiss the intentions of all white missionaries, he also took his stand against them—not by embracing a somewhat imagined Yoruba cultural identity, but by asserting the independence and capabilities of people of color, as his contemporaries in the United States were also doing.

In mid-1893, Church Vaughan was nearing the end of his life. He had prepared for it with his characteristic prudence. Four years earlier he had made a will, naming as executors his eldest son James Wilson Vaughan, the merchant Juan A. Campos, and his longtime associate and former apprentice Christopher B. Vaughan. Because he had already transferred considerable assets to James Wilson by that time, Church identified his other children, Burrell and Aida Vaughan, as the primary recipients of land, houses, and cash. As was customary, his wife Sarah was bequeathed the use of one of his houses (next door to the family house on Igbosere Road) for the rest of her life, when it would pass to their son Burrell. Vaughan must have been imagining his legacy, for he stipulated that his residence on Igbosere Road should be inherited by his daughter Aida when she married or turned twenty-one, but that neither she nor her heirs could sell or dispose of it until the third generation.94

More recently, in January 1893, Vaughan had added a codicil to his will. At that point he anticipated becoming a grandfather, for James Wilson and his wife Clara were expecting their first child. The addendum to the will granted “a specific legacy” of a thousand pounds to James Wilson, a huge sum to be taken out of the portion of the estate that would otherwise be divided among the three Vaughan siblings. It also directed that Burrell Vaughan should inherit a piece of property that Church had recently purchased (for fifteen pounds) on the waterfront of Ebute Metta.95 The codicil did not state Church’s reasoning behind these new bequests, though they seem intended to solidify James Wilson’s place as the new head of the Vaughan dynasty. Church surely approved of his eldest son’s comportment as a husband, soon-
James Wilson Vaughan (seated) and Burrell Carter Vaughan (standing), probably early 1920s. Photo in possession of the author.
to-be father, head of the family business, and church leader. Burrell Vaughan, at twenty-three, may have been harder for Church to relate to. Though he too was active in the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and he eventually made a fortune in business and land speculation, he enjoyed sports, music, and parties. In addition to his “church wife,” he ultimately had children with two additional “outside wives,” a common practice among Yoruba “big men.”

It may have been around the time he revised his will that Church Vaughan

James Churchwill Vaughan. Courtesy of Rotimi Vaughan.
hired one of Lagos’s commercial photographers to produce his portrait. An impressive new building for the Ebenezer Baptist Church, financed by the Vaughan brothers specifically in honor of their father, was nearing completion; perhaps he intended for his image to hang on one of its walls. More than a century later, the resulting large print was preserved in a gilded frame, possessed by Vaughan’s grandson Oladenji Vaughan and reproduced in the homes of other Vaughan family members as well. It shows Vaughan as a prosperous, Western-oriented elder, seated in a cushioned armchair and wearing a dark woolen suit, starched white shirt, waistcoat, and bow tie. His thickset frame suggests past physical strength as well as a plentiful diet. Vaughan wears round spectacles, and his hairline is receding. His beard is nearly all gray, though his hair still has some brown in it. Vaughan sits straight, neither looking directly at the camera nor smiling. In his hand rests a folded piece of paper or placard, facing the viewer so that its lettering may be read:

No. 1 MANUSKRIPT OV
The Humathist Bul.
Ritten bi J. C. Von
ov
Lagos West Afrika
1881

Clearly an intentional message for viewers of the portrait, this short text presents a mystery now. Why would the literate J. C. Vaughan use phonetic spelling and render his name differently than he did elsewhere? Perhaps the writing was added to the photographer’s glass plate negative by a less educated person such as the photographer or his assistant after the portrait was taken. But even more tantalizing is the question of the “No. 1 MANUSKRIPT” of “The Hamathist Bul.,” surely an abbreviation of “Bulletin,” written by J. C. Vaughan of Lagos in 1881. Did Vaughan produce a publication, or even a series of publications, that has not survived? In the Old Testament, the Hamathites were a Hamitic family, included among the descendants of Canaan. “Hamathist,” then, could be used here as a stand-in for African or black. It also brings to mind the title of The Hamite’s Economy, the pamphlet circulated in 1881 presumably by Vaughan’s friend Sewell Pettiford. The photograph itself is unlikely to have been taken then, when Vaughan at fifty-three was younger than he appears in the portrait, and when photography studios were rare in West Africa. If instead it dates from the early 1890s, then the sign Vaughan held was a deliberate reminder of an earlier time. By invoking his “Hamathist” publication from 1881, in fact, Vaughan may
well have been reminding viewers of his early support for a separatist Christian church and, along with it, his venerable role among the Native Baptists. Regardless of his hospitality to Strother Cook’s “Cambellites,” or his strict accounting of the Church’s debts to him, or any other difference of outlook, Vaughan wanted to be remembered as a Baptist who dared to promote independence.¹⁰²

James Churchwill Vaughan died at his home on Igbosere Road in Lagos on September 13, 1893, at the age of sixty-five. He had lived long enough to meet his grandson, James Churchwill Omosanya Vaughan, born three months earlier. (Omosanya means “the child compensates for my suffering”—seemingly a reference to the premature death of James Wilson Vaughan’s first wife.) By the time he breathed his last, the elder Church Vaughan had outlived by far all of his eight siblings in America, and he left his widow and three children in material comfort. Vaughan’s passing was announced in Lagos newspapers, and he was buried under an imposing monument in the town cemetery.¹⁰³

If in his last moments Church Vaughan thought back on his life, he surely must have been satisfied with his successes. He had survived South Carolina, Liberia, Ijaye, and Abeokuta, and he had thrived in Lagos. A stranger to
Yorubaland, he had built a solid business, a respected family, and a venerable reputation. He had led a renewal of the church that had helped to make him who he was. Vaughan would be remembered with affection and pride, and not only in Nigeria. In the United States too, younger generations of his family would keep his name alive for more than a century—a prospect he probably never anticipated. What would surprise him even more, if he were able to look out from the land of the ancestors, was what his descendants remembered about him: that Church Vaughan was a Yoruba man who had finally found his African roots.