

American Missionaries in Africa: Evangelism, Conversion and Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the impact of the evangelistic and conversion approach to western education. Europeans and Americans used their administrative power through direct and indirect rule, particularly in Central Africa and East Africa. It will examine and reflect on the cultural encounters brought about by foreign intrusion. Colonial rule and religious missions transformed African peoples to accept Christianity. New contacts led to a tremendous transformation of the continent by Americans and Europeans. Colonial powers replaced African systems of authority and administration with European ones. The establishment of colonial rule had a great impact on the religious, political, social and economic lives of people. New insights are revealed about the Luyia of Western Kenya. Oral interviews, primary and archival sources indicated that the opportunities for education expanded with the coming of the missionaries.

The Luyia were evangelized and converted to Christianity by the Church of God Mission (Anderson, Indiana). Traditional ways of life was changed and challenged with the onslaught of evangelism, conversion and western education. Education was an instrument of evangelism. The western education brought to Kenya, East Africa by the Church of God fit within the framework of colonial rule and the colonial economy. It reflected the views of the mid-western evangelists as to the type of education that conversion required. Africans were asked to give up their traditional religion, culture, identities and family relationships. Christianity took firm root in Africa, but it needed to reflect the culture and traditional religion of Africans. The result has produced the blending of cultural ideas in the spiritual realm that fits into African society.

Theme: Christian Churches and the Colonial Order in Africa

American Missionaries in Africa: Evangelism, Conversion and Education

Africa is a continent and not a country as many think of it. It is so large that the countries of China, Europe, Alaska and the United States can fit within it. Ota Benga must have possessed a feeling of melancholy in one moment and the thrill of wonderment of his homeland in another. He had recollections of family, freedom and the majesty of his beautiful country. What is its spell? I cannot tell you, nor wherein lies, its strange and unfathomable charm. It lays its hand upon you, and having once felt its compelling touch, you never can forget it.¹ Historians and tourists find it mesmerizing in the same manner as Ota Benga and an impression of Princess Marie Louise in 1925 according to her quote on it. I can relate to it with fondness and loving

memories of my journey to live in Africa. The resiliency of the human spirit connects you always to the heritage of the Motherland left behind, but carried in your heart forever.

The focus of the Lynchburg International Conference on Ota Benga and the Empowerment of the Pygmies is to pay tribute to a man, his family, people, country, continent and his spirit of survival in the face of adversity. We have many questions that we are seeking to answer. Hopefully this paper will answer some of them. This paper will examine and reflect on the cultural encounters brought about by foreign intrusion through colonial rule and religious missions in transforming African peoples to accept Christianity.

Africa is the second largest continent behind Asia. It is the cradle of mankind. The beginning of the story of humankind begins with the discoveries of Louis and Mary Leakey in the Great Rift Valley in East Africa. It is the place where agriculture had its origin and the beginning of the smelting of metals. It is home to kingdoms, empires, rulers and great river valley civilizations. To appreciate the present and the future, we must connect and recall historical events of the past. The Motherland has been challenged with numerous success stories across the continent in the midst of miserable conditions and circumstances. However, new information and stories are coming to the forefront every year as continuous research data is being revealed and appreciated. Africa has long been connected to America in a variety of ways influencing the course of world history.

Living in Kenya, East Africa for two years was a transformative experience of making the connection to my heritage. I conducted my dissertation research on the American Church of God in Anderson, Indiana and their missionary activities in Western Kenya. This journey brought me in touch with the early generation of converts, who had been evangelized by the American Church of God Mission in Anderson, Indiana. I taught in an academic institution that was training teachers for the Republic of Kenya. The establishment of colonial rule had a great impact on the religious, political, social, and economic life of peoples on the continent of Africa, particularly in Central and East Africa.

Other regions of Africa was impacted by Europeans. In addition to missionaries, explorers from Portugal came for adventure. Christianity assisted the spread of colonial rule.

A Portuguese explorer named John Affonso d'Aveiro visited Benin City for the first time in 1485-1486. Oba Ewuare of Benin was the first to come into contact with Europeans, for Ruy de Siqueira visited in 1472. Aveiro introduced guns and coconuts into this country. It is said that John Affonso d'Aveiro came to Benin city for the second time during this reign. [That of Oba Esigle, beginning in A.D. 1504.] He advised the Oba to become a Christian, and said that Christianity would make his country better.²

This is one example of the advent of Christianity and its impact by converting African leaders, who would in turn convert their people. The Portuguese explored the combination of mission stations and trading posts as a part of their colonial rule, as a new wave of explorations into the interior of Africa began in the 1800s by European explorers such as David Livingstone.

David Livingstone, a Scottish member of the London Missionary Society, humanitarian, and medical doctor, left England in 1840 and traveled across Southern and Central Africa three times from 1851 to his death in 1873, thus becoming the most celebrated European explorer.³

Within the space of three or four decades Africa was to be explored and conquered by Europeans and finally evangelized. Although explorers such as Barth and Livingstone were humanitarian at heart, most had traveled to Africa for cultural and scientific curiosity as well as for profit....⁴ Ota Benga's story of being brought from the Congo to New York has the components of new contacts, enslavement, profit and a tourist curiosity without the opportunity of humanity.

Until the middle years of the nineteenth century, Eastern Africa was little known by Europeans. The explorers had come for adventure and wealth, whereas others came with objectives of a different nature in mind, referring to themselves as missionaries. The first missionaries came to East Africa seeking both adventure and souls to save. Perhaps the earliest example of this dual approach so far as Kenya is concerned was Johann Ludwig Krapf and his colleague Johann Rebmann.

They were the earliest European explorers of the Kilimanjaro and Kamba regions,⁵ and Krapf provided one of the three or four most significant accounts of nineteenth century Africa according to historians and ethnologists, in his book, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours During an Eighteen Years' Residence in East Africa*.⁶ While his historical accounts of Pre-Colonial East Africa are invaluable to scholars, he converted very few African to Christianity, according to his accounts. Krapf's accounts are important for the "earliness of his acquaintance with the region means that he was the only source of written evidence for the history of certain parts of East Africa in the 1840's and 1850s..."⁷ The missionary society groups from Europe which sponsored Krapf, Rebman and others developed midway through the eighteenth-century.

The evangelical movement was taking place at this time led by, among others, Charles Wesley. The development of missionary societies reflected a European desire to evangelize among those who had not heard the teachings of Jesus Christ. The evangelical movement also magnified humanistic ideas through the expression of the equality of man before God.⁸

This latter ideal would have an impact on missionary work in East Africa in that it led to an interest in the promotion of the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. It paved the way for Christian missionaries in all parts of Africa.

Christian missionaries believed that it was their responsibility not only to spread the Gospel, but to help eradicate the slave trade since reports of the slave trade in East and Central Africa had been sensationalized in Europe, thus inflaming sentiments there over the issue. European explorers unwittingly paved the way for the eventual conquest of Africa, initiated formally at the Conference of Berlin in 1884-1885. No Africans were represented at the Berlin Conference in 1884.

Until 1884, Europeans had not formally divided Africa among themselves, although, as early as the sixteenth-century, some governments had claimed spheres of influence and economic and political monopoly over certain areas. King Leopold II of Belgium since 1876 had

maintained brutal control over the Congo (to be known as the Congo Free State).⁹ Only two African nations were not affected by the partition. Only Liberia, which remained protected by the United States and Ethiopia (except for the period 1935-1941).¹⁰ Colonial rule would have a revolutionary impact, and nowhere would this be more apparent than in Kenya, East Africa. The British would choose indirect rule for Kenya. However, the Congo would also be affected with new transformative encounters.

In the Congo, they came under the guise of adventurers. Many other adventurers, such as Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, who traveled to the Congo (later Congo-Brazzaville) under French auspices, and the Portuguese Alexandre Serpa Pinto

(who crossed Central Africa from Angola to Pretoria, South Africa, in 1877) scattered throughout the continent of Africa, most of them supported by governments and scientific societies such as the Geographic Society of Lisbon, and Leopold's II's International African Association. Overall, therefore, this proved to be a period of excitement and novelty for the Europeans (and not the Africans who knew their continent), as they established new contacts and satisfied their cultural curiosity.¹¹

The new contacts lead to a tremendous transformation of Africa leading to the domination of the continent by Europeans. Subsequently, it is important for us to understand a few facts.

Europeans did not conquer Africa because of any inherent superiority they enjoyed. Rather, they did so because for a time they were the only ones who had access to the tools and weapons created by industry. Once their monopoly on industrial weapons was broken, colonialism was abandoned. And it was just Africans who fell behind technologically and so suffered the humiliations of conquest.¹²

New methods of technology and weapons enabled the Europeans to dominate Africa under colonial rule. The French and the British were the predominant colonial powers.

The British chose indirect rule for their domination of Kenya. Colonialism brought a temporary end to African sovereignty. Most colonial powers replaced African systems of authority and administration with European systems of governance. In others, particularly those in colonies under British indirect rule, Africans structures were subjugated to European

authority.¹³ In the view of many, the impact of such foreign dominance could not help but be profound.

Colonial rule would indeed have a revolutionary impact, and nowhere would this be more apparent than in Western Kenya. Western Kenya is generally used loosely to refer to the whole section west of the Rift Valley, the provinces of the Lake region, but particularly, to the Western Province.¹⁴ Western Province was initially included in Uganda which Britain assumed control of in 1894. The Uganda Protectorate, as the new colonial entity was known, included within its boundaries the western half of present-day Kenya. The eastern half of Kenya became a British dependency officially known as the East Africa Protectorate in 1895.¹⁵ The establishment of the colonial administrative structure in Western Kenya was a process that went hand in hand with the British conquest of the region and missionary activities.

Prior to the advent of Christianity and the coming of the missionaries, African societies practiced traditional religion. In fact, religion was a central part of the cultural heritage of Africa. One of the earliest leading authorities on African Religion was John Mbiti. According to John Mbiti:

It has dominated the thinking of African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic activities....religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life.²⁹

Religion was an important part of the lives of the Luyia. This was certainly true of the Luyia in Western Kenya. Gideon S. Were has written extensively about the traditional concept of the role of religion among the Luyia in his book, *Essays on African Religion in Western Kenya*. He begins his first chapter with a passage from John S. Mbiti which summed up the beliefs of many African peoples in respect to God's manifestation in their lives.

It is to be remembered that for many African peoples God's active part in human History is seen in terms of his supplying them with rain, good harvests, health, cattle and children; in healing, delivering and helping them, and in terms of making His presence felt through natural phenomena and objects.¹⁷

In Luyia society, God was important because he sustained them.

In times of adversity, the Luyia people continued to practice their traditional religion remembering the importance their ancestors. However, the acceptance of Christianity made them turn away from their traditional religious practices and their way of life. In the face of numerous changes brought by the challenges of evangelism, conversion and western education, the Luyia were transformed into Christians by the missionaries of the Church of God. The approach to missionary activities was centered on the theme of proclaiming the Gospel according to the ideals and teaching of Jesus Christ. Men and women were called to the mission field by the “Great Commission,” according to Matthew 28:19-20:

Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching the people to observe all things whatsoever he had commanded them, and he would be with them to the end of the world.¹⁸

Men and women went forth to carry out their mission.

At the same time, an industrializing nineteenth century Europe was becoming increasingly interested in East Africa as a source of needed raw materials and a market for its manufactured goods. Most European merchants agreed with humanitarians that initiatives to promote European trade were “linked closely to efforts to promote Christianity and stop slavery in East Africa....”¹⁹ This provided important support for early missionary efforts, and it meant that the initial missionary thrust in East Africa was never completely devoid of commercial motives, for example the desire to replace the slave trade with “legitimate” commerce. As a result of these motives primarily, Christian missionaries descended upon East Africa from the middle of the nineteenth century. These were sponsored by British societies such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Holy Ghost Fathers, and the London Missionary Society (LMS). The American missions, such as the Church of God, would follow later.

There were barriers against those who came as missionaries, such as diseases and other conditions that existed in East Africa that created problems for Europeans. Malaria was a major problem, but it ceased to be a threat midway through the nineteenth century with the discovery of anti-malarial drugs such as quinine. Another factor which caused problems for the Europeans was the East African climate. However, the greatest barrier against missionary work was the unreceptive attitude with which most peoples of the Kenya interior greeted the efforts of nineteenth century European and American missionaries.

The conquest of Western Kenya had a tremendous impact upon indigenous peoples. The most successful missionary activity in the region took place after the establishment of colonial rule in East Africa which began in the period spanning the 1880s to 1890s. During these two decades, Germany and Great Britain colonized East Africa. Germany put mainland Tanzania under its rule, and Great Britain placed Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar under its rule.²⁰ Thus, colonial rule had become complete all across the African continent. Missionaries progressed in British colonies, such as Kenya giving legitimacy to colonialism as they evangelized and converted Africans to Christianity.

Evangelism and Conversion were interrelated with each other. The evangelical revival movement was taking place at this time led by, among others, Charles Wesley. The development of missionary societies reflected a European desire to evangelize among those who had not heard the teachings of Jesus Christ. The evangelical movement also magnified humanistic ideas through the expression of the equality of man before God. However, Africans would recognize that the missionaries' attitude towards them and their customs and cultures were negative. The concept of evangelism, first of all, involves conversion to Christianity. Evangelism is defined as the organized propagation of Christian belief and practice, the "good news" described in the New Testament.²¹ Conversion is an aspect of living as a Christian. Therefore, persons or missionaries who proclaim the Gospel of Christ by gaining converts for Christ are called evangelists.²²

Evangelism involved the same steps in Africa as in other parts of the world. God's word is made known through preaching using the scripture.

Arlo Newell wrote that "Missions is the heartbeat of the gospel and the life of the Church."²³ Most missions never made an attempt to be adaptable to the needs of Africans, however this concept eventually changed. Education was an instrument of evangelism. Education and evangelism are intertwined as a means to an end and one is a stepping stone to the other. All denominations carved out spheres of influence as they established churches, missions and schools. This was initiated to avoid competition and conflicts over the same converts in a location. Preaching the gospel and the provision of western education were important in winning converts for the mission and in the establishment of new congregations.

The missionaries used various incentives to win converts to the gospel. In order to become converted people were asked to give up their culture, identities, family membership. They were separated out and away from their families to mission stations to begin as new creatures. In Kenya, for instance they were sent to the Bunyore Boys and Girls School at Kima Station. The missionary enterprise was a great undertaking of the Church of God and many other denominations. Education as defined by the missionaries of the Church of God was simply to teach Africans how to read the Bible. It was interpreted for them in their vernacular. This also included teaching them the alphabet and their sounds. The converts questioned in their interviews, only remembered being taught the vowels. Some of them recalled being taught to write them on the ground in the dirt and the others used chalk and chalkboards.

Christianity involved western education as a major component. Mission schools would become the most important institutions spreading the message of Jesus Christ abroad through conversion in Africa. Western education was a means to an end which involved teaching converts to read followed by the rudiments of writing. It was important to the missionaries to convert the indigenous people to Christianity.

Christianity would bring certain advantages and new opportunities for converts such as western education. There is an African proverb which states that it takes a whole village to raise a child, which includes education. Education prior to the advent of the Europeans was in the hands of traditional Luyia society. According to Jomo Kenyatta, the first Prime Minister and President of Kenya:

Education begins at the time of birth and ends with death. The child has to pass various stages of age groupings with a system of education defined for every status in life. The parents take the responsibility of educating their children until they reach the stage of tribal education.²⁴

Thus, it is the duty and responsibility of the parents to provide the education of their children.

Education would make them contributing members in their communities. For example, in Kenya, the early converts were used as interpreters for the missionaries and assisted them in spreading the gospel to their people. Eventually, some were trained as evangelists, ordained ministers, lay leaders, elders and teachers. The first Nigerian Anglican Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the author Chinua Achebe, who wrote *Things Fall Apart* were educated by the missionaries. He recollected the role of missionaries in Igboland. However, the missionaries that Achebe wrote about in his novel were Africans. In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* telling the story of his people, the Kikuyu. His book challenged the negative views of Africans. In Kenya, the Kikuyu fought for their own schools and land. The previous discussed men were educated in mission schools. Western education was a channel for evangelism, but land would be an issue to be dealt with in Western Kenya.

The Church of God sought to implant western culture in place of African culture in the name of evangelism, conversion and western education. Education in Kenya has developed through three overlapping historical phases of development such as pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Each of the three areas broadly reflected certain principles, aims and objectives of education.

The political and economic changes noted earlier would have significant impact on the Luyia response to the Church of God and western education. Some Luyia would provide land for the establishment of mission centers, churches, hospitals and schools, and the provision of such land could create problems. In regard to mission stations and schools, free land was given by the community for the schools, mission stations and hospitals. In Western Kenya, specifically at Kima, land was given for the Church of God's mission station by Chief Otieno. Subsequently, the first contact in obtaining land for the mission was through new converts. Once people had given land to missions or schools they could not reclaim it.²⁵ Wycliffe Etindi recalled that there emerged the scheduled areas for mission stations and also demarcated areas for the schools.²⁶

Another aspect of the land issue was how it was obtained:

Sometimes a person's shamba [farm] would be taken for the expansion of schools. Individuals had problems accepting the proposal and would request that other choices be made because in some instances, it would be the only shamba that they had to reside in along with banana plantations and trees. The individual believed that the taking of their land would ruin his family's progress in the future.²⁷

The final result for the Luyia people was that while they welcomed the services offered by the missions, such as the institution of churches, schools and hospitals in Kenya, some felt keenly the loss of land. The start of mission work and western education by the Church of God followed the establishment of colonial rule that brought with it far reaching transformative changes. Learning from its past mistakes,

Christianity in Africa today is becoming an action-oriented institution-sometimes preaching liberation theology, making strides to preserve those cultural elements which are not specifically condemned by the Gospels, and allowing the laity to take an active part in matters and decisions that affect their various dioceses, parishes, congregations and churches.²⁸

The result has been the blending of cultural ideas in the spiritual realm that fits into their society.

In fact, as David Thebehali asks (in *A New Look at Christianity*, 1972):

Why should not a black man be called to church by a big drum, as he was generally called to any public meeting? Why in the name of reason and common

sense should not a black man bear his name, and wear his own garments? Why, indeed, other than that the simple missionaries had from the beginning ruled that all these things were against the spirit of the Gospel which they saw as inalienable wedded to their western culture.²⁹

Some missions realized that inevitably, Christianity would have to reflect the culture of Africans for its manifestation and survival on the African continent. Knowing our history is an opportunity to connect with our heritage through action any where there is injustice and genocide. It is the humane thing to do as humanitarians reaching out to our brothers and sisters around the world, particularly in Africa. W.E. B. Du Bois stated that we are stronger together than we are separate.³⁰ Let us continue the struggle to uplift with a greater awareness and appreciation of all people. The Ota Benga experience should never happen again on any continent. All of us working together and connecting across humanity is the answer.

ENDNOTES

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. Ludwig Krapf, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours During an Eighteen Years' Residence in Eastern Africa*, Second Edition, (London, 1968), Preface.

² Ibid.

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⁸ Dorothy Smith-Akubue, "Evangelism and Western Education in Western Kenya: Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), 1905-1949," (Ph.D. dissertation, West Virginia University, 1995), 63.

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²⁴ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London, 1959), 99.

²⁵ Reverend Neftali Tsumah, Church of God Questionnaire by Dorothy Smith-Akubue, Western Kenya, July 15, 1992.

²⁶ Wycliffe Etindi, Q 28 November 1992.

²⁷ Jonathan Opeywa to the District Commissioner, North Nyanza, 17 October 1950, Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA) DC/KMG/ 1/4/10.

²⁸ Azevedo, *Africana Studies*, 396

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 238.
