

A Comparative and Theological Evaluation of the  
Interface of Mission Christianity and African Culture  
in Nineteenth Century Akan and Yoruba Lands of West Africa

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics at play in the nineteenth century interaction between European mission Christianity and the peoples and cultures of West Africa with Akan (Gold Coast) and Yoruba (Nigeria) lands serving as the model theatres of the interaction. It appreciates the fact that in a context such as West Africa, where religious consciousness permeates every aspect of life, the coming of the Gospel to its peoples impacted every aspect of the social and religious lives of the people.

Chapter one sets the agenda for the study by exploring the dynamics involved in the transmission of the Gospel as it spread from Palestine to the Graeco-Roman world, medieval Europe, Enlightenment Europe and, later, Africa in the nineteenth century. It also defines the limits of the study to the period 1820-1892.

Chapter two explores the religious and the cultural environments that gave shape to the modern European missionary movement. It highlights the features of the European Reformation that were factors in defining missionary methods in West Africa. It also emphasizes the subtle infiltration of Enlightenment ideals—the primacy of Reason, the way of Nature, and the idea of Progress—into missionary consciousness about Africa and its peoples.

Chapter three delineates the religious and the cultural milieus of West Africans in contrast to that of European missionaries. It underscores the integral nature of religion to the totality of life among West Africans. It also contrasts the socio-political conditions of Akan land and Yoruba land in the nineteenth century while appreciating the rapid changes impinging on their peoples.

Chapter four explores how the prevailing realities in Akan and Yoruba lands defined the fortunes and the prospects of the missionary message among the people. In doing this, it draws from four model encounters of mission Christianity with West African peoples and cultures. In Mankessim, the

deception associated with a traditional cult was exposed. At Akyem Abuakwa, the contention between missionaries and the royalty for authority over the people led to social disruption. The resistance of the guild of Ifa priests to Christian conversion and the assuring presence of missionaries to the warrior class created ambivalence at Abeokuta. Ibadan offers us an irenic model of interaction between mission Christianity and West African religions as Ifa, the Yoruba cult of divination, sanctioned the presence of missionaries in the city.

Chapter five reflects on the issues that are significant in the interaction of the Gospel with West African cultures. It appreciates the congruence between the Gospel and West African religious worldview. It assesses the impact of missionary methods on the traditional values of West Africans, appreciating the strength and the weaknesses of the school system, the value of Bible translation into mother-tongues, and the contextual relevance of the mission station method of evangelization. It also explores the meaning of Christian conversion in West Africa using the models of A.D. Nock, John V. Taylor and Andrew F. Walls.

Chapter six concludes with Andrew Walls' three tests of the expansion of Christianity. The conclusion is that in spite of the failures and weaknesses of some of the methods adopted by European missionaries in evangelizing West Africa, their converts understood their message, domesticated it according to their understanding and appropriated its benefits to the life of their societies.

## KOKO IWADI\*

Iwadi ti a se agbeyewo re nihin je akitiyan lati ko eko nipa awon ohun ti o sele ni nkan bi igba odun sehin nigbati esin ati asa ibile awa omo ile Iwo-oorun Afrika pade esin awon omolehin Kristi ti won ti ilu awon alawo funfun wa lati wa kede ihinrere Kristi. Lati se agbeyewo yi, a lo ohun ti o nsele ni ile awon Akan ni ilu Gold Coast ati ni Ile Yoruba gegebi apere awon ohun ti o nsele nigbati esin onigbagbo, gegebi awon alawo funfun se ni oye esin na, pade asa awa adulawo. Iwadi na so wipe nitori ni ile adulawo a ko le ya esin ati asa s'oto bi eni wipe won ko tan, wiwole esin awon onigbagbo si ile Iwo-oorun Afrika mu ayipada wa si aiye awon enia, papa julo nipa awon asa abinibi wa.

Ni ori 'kinni agbeyewo yi, a se alaye ni soki nipa awon ohun ti o ma nsaba sele, gegebi iriri awon ajihinrere, nigbati awon omolehin Kristi ba nse akitiyan lati tan esin onigbagbo lati arin awon iran kan si arin awon iran miran. Papa julo ori na wo awon ohun ti o sele nigba ti ihinrere ntan lati ile Palestini si arin awon ara Giriki ati Romu, ti o si fi tan si ilu Yuropu, ati titi ti o fi de ile Afrika, larin awa adulawo, ni nkan bi igba odun sehin. Pataki awon isele na ni wipe nigbati esin onigbagbo ba fe do si arin awon iran kan, o dabi eni wipe esin na a ma wa ona lati lo awon asa awon enia na ati ohun ti o nsele larin won gegebi akaso lati tedo si arin won. Beeni ori yi tun se alaye wipe iwadi ti a nse yi ko ni mo ju awon ohun ti o sele ni arin odun 1820 ati 1892.

Ni ori 'keji iwadi yi, a se agbeyewo ohun ti o nsele ni awujo awon alawo funfun, eyi ti won npe ni olaju, ki o to di wipe awon omolehin Kristi larin won taji loju orun lati maa se akitiyan bi ihinrere Kristi yio ti tan kaakiri gbogbo aiye. Papa julo a wo awon ohun ti o nsele larin awujo awon omolehin Kristi ni ilu awon alawo funfun ti awon kan laarin won si fi lo'di si bi Ijo Aguda ti se nse esin onigbagbo, ti won si ya ara won si oto ti won da awon ijo miran ati awon egbe ajihinrere tiwon sile. Iwadi fi han wipe ohun ti awon alawo funfun npe ni olaju ni o je ki awon Oniwaasu won bu enu ate lu awon asa ati esin ibile

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\* Abstract in Yoruba language.

Afrika ti won si lero wipe omulemofo ti ko fi imo ati ilakaye han ni awon asana.

Ni ori 'keta, a tun se agbeyewo ohun ti o nsele ni ile Iwo-oorun Afrika ni asiko ti awon Oniwaasu alawofunfun de si arin awon enia wa lati wa tan esin Kristi larin won. Nihin ni a gbe so pato wipe esin je ohun ti o ro mo gbo asa ati ise awa enia ile adulawo laisi odi kan larin won. Bakanna ni a tun se iwadi ninu ori naa lati mo kinni awon asa ati orisa ile Akan ni ilu Gold Coast ati ni ile Yoruba ni asiko yi ati awon awon ohun ribiribi ti o nsele, bi ogun abele Ile Yoruba. Bakanna ni a wo dide ti awon alawofunfun de si arin awon enia wa ni akoko yi, eyi ti o mu iyipada de ba gbogbo awujo Iwo-oorun Afrika.

Ori 'kerin iwadi yi ni a ti wo finnifinni bi awon iseles larin awon Akan ati ni Ile Yoruba ti se iranlowo tabi akoba fun titan imole ihinrere Kristi larin awon iran mejeji yii. Fun apere, a wo awon ohun ti o sele ni awon ilu merin kan niigbati awon Oniwaasu esin Kristi mu ihinrere lo si awon ilu wonyi. Ni ilu Mankessim ni Gold Coast, ni wahala be sile ti asiri awon elesin ibile si tu nipa iro ti won maa npa fun awon ara ilu ti won wa wo ise l'odo won. Ni ilu Akyem Abuakwa, ni Gold Coast bakanna, ni ariyanjiyan larin awon Oniwaasu ati awon alase ilu lori wipe tani o lase julo lori awon ara ilu lati se esin kan tabi omiran fa rogbodyan ati wahala ni ilu na. Iyemeji ni a ri ni ilu Abeokuta nigbati egbe awon Babalawo fi aake kori pe awon o ni gba ki awon omo ilu na se esin Kristi ti awon ode ati awon jagunjagun ilu Egba si ndupe lowo Eleda won wipe dido ti awon oniwaasu alawo funfun do larin awon Egba je anfani ribiribi fun gbogbo ilu na. Sugbon ni Ilu Ibadan ni a gbe ri ifowosowopo larin awon elesin ibile ati awon Oniwaasu esin Kristi nigbati Ifa fo're fun awon alase ilu wipe ki won je ki Oniwaasu esin Kristi, eni ti o je alawo funfun, do si aarin awon ara Ibadan ki o si maa se ise re laisi idiwo lati odo eniken.

Ni ori 'karun ni a gbe se asaro lori awon iriri awon Oniwaasu ati awon enia Iwo-oorun Afrika nigbati esin awon Onigbagbo de si aarin won. Lara awon ohun ti a se asaro lori na ni oye awa enia Iwo-oorun Afrika lori iseda ati bi o ti fi ara jo'ra pelu oye kanna ninu esin ti Kristi. Se pele la'ko o si l'abo. A tun wo ona ti awon oniwaasu alawofunfun gba lati tan imole Kristi ati ipa ti

awon ona yi ko lori igbe aiye awon enia wa. Papa julo a wo ipa ti dida ile eko sile ko, ipa ti Bibeli ti a tumo si ede abinibi ko, ati ipa ti dida awon abule oniwaasi ati awon Onigbagbo naa ko ninu titan ihinrere Kristi ja'ke ja'do ile Iwo-oorun Afrika. Ni ipari ori yi ni a tun se agbeyewo oye awon ojogbon A.D. Nock, John V. Taylor ati Andrew F. Walls lati wa idi kinni itumo pipa esin da je, papa julo ni ile Iwo-oorun Afrika.

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To my friends,  
far and near,  
known and unknown,  
who spent and were spent  
to make my warm desire for higher  
theological education a reality.

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When the opportunity came and I was nominated as a candidate for the program that made this essay necessary, the Master of Theology degree in African Christianity, I considered it a pointer to the realization of a long-cherished hope of studying theology at a graduate level. On the economic front, my hope of getting the funds for training overseas was growing dim. My growing family life was also weighing down my prospects and mobility for studies outside Nigeria. I had considered that studying outside would give me more exposure to other contexts of ministry and enrich me as I interacted with materials at the cutting edge of Christian theology. When the opportunity came, I had no doubt that it was going to be a foretaste of the life and ministry to come.

I have tried to appropriate all the learning opportunities that came my way during this program, beginning from Pietermaritzburg in South Africa to Akropong-Akuapem in Ghana. This has been made possible through the confidence I had that my brothers and sisters were filling the gap my sudden departure created at home. For the excellent way they have done this, I am grateful to them. It has also been made possible by the supportive services rendered us students by the retinue of academic and non-academic staff at the Evangelical Theological House of Studies (ETHOS) and the School of Theology at Pietermaritzburg and those at Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Center, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana. In the same vein the assistance of the librarians at Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon, and J.C. Pool Library, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Nigeria, in granting me access to relevant materials is hereby acknowledged. To these industrious men and women I am also grateful.

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## DECLARATION

With the exception of the sources specifically acknowledged in the text and as illustrations, this dissertation is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted to any other university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Olabimtan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kehinde Olumuyiwa Olabimtan

Signed at Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, this 30<sup>th</sup> day of  
August 2002

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AICs	African Initiated Churches
<i>BCT</i>	<i>Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Africa</i>
BM	Basel Mission
CMS	Church Missionary Society
<i>EH</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>
<i>IBMR</i>	<i>International Bulletin of Missionary Research</i>
<i>IRM</i>	<i>International Review of Mission</i>
<i>JACT</i>	<i>Journal of African Christian Thought</i>
<i>JTSA</i>	<i>Journal of Theology for Southern Africa</i>
WMS	Wesleyan Missionary Society

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In its several advances from a rural sect on the fringes of Jewish society of the first century to its present worldwide manifestation, certain features and challenges repeatedly mark the transmission of the Christian faith. Principal among these is the observation that the Christian faith always seeks bridgeheads in cultures and societies from which it can creatively engage them. These bridgeheads often come in two related phenomena, the first being the cognitive world of the intended converts in which the Gospel's essential content can find meaning and expression. The second is the social and the political realities that prevail in the host cultures.

The inescapable and fundamental nature of the requirement that the Christian faith find expression in the cognitive world of its host cultures is expressed in the incarnation of the Son of God. In incarnation, God bridged the gap between Himself and the fallen humanity originally created in His image. By implication, even in its fallen estate, humanity has intrinsic worth, as demonstrated in the fact that God could engage it to redeem it unto himself. Moreover, we also find in the incarnation of the Son of God not a mythical or cosmic human personality, but a culture-specific personality who lived as a first-century Jew and spoke the language of his time and people. This model, that is the particularity of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, presents the Gospel bearer the inalienable requirement of translating it into the languages of the cultures of its prospective recipients.

Jesus did not only speak the language of His time. He also exercised a ministry among His Jewish audience that addressed the needs of persons as He confronted human miseries: fears, oppression, diseases and disabilities, and the ultimate evil—death. Conscious of the restiveness of his age, He urged people to come to him for rest and discover life in its fullness. In these two approaches to communicating grace, that is speaking the language of His time and

addressing the people's concerns for survival, Jesus identified the necessary bridgeheads from which He engaged his audience with the Gospel.

However, in spite of the axiomatic nature of the requirement that the Gospel be translated into cultural contexts of prospective converts, the temptation, and indeed the tendency, for the Gospel to be held captive to cultures that have assimilated its message was always present with evangelized peoples. This holding of the Gospel captive to cultures is not shown so much in holding it back from being communicated; such holding back would obviously be alien to the character of a Gospel for all nations<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, the history of the expansion of Christianity points to the fact that more often than not, evangelized peoples are eager to transmit the message to others. The problem is that after a long period of time in which the Gospel has become assimilated into their cultures, and vice-versa, evangelized peoples tend to identify their cultural idiosyncrasies as intrinsic to the Gospel, and so inhibit the versatility that makes the Gospel adaptable to new situations and contexts.

The first expression of the successive attempts to make the Gospel captive to cultures can be seen in the fiery controversies between the early apostles and the Judaizers who preached that Gentiles could not be authentic Christians unless they observed Jewish laws and customs (Acts 15; Phil. 3). That Paul devoted substantial efforts in his letters to refute this position points to its erroneous nature. More positively, in his untiring effort to see the Gospel disseminated to the wider Graeco-Roman world, he freely employed indigenous Greek philosophical categories to advance the cause of the Gospel. For him, the Gospel must be articulated in indigenous cultural forms for it to be intelligible to its hearers.

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<sup>1</sup> Two classical situations of inertia in Christian expansion were evident in its early Palestinian phase and in mid-eighteenth century England. In the former, the apostles in Jerusalem 'believed that their mission was limited to the house of Israel and that the salvation of the gentiles (sic) would take place by means of the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem, as depicted in the Old Testament' (Bosch 1991:42.43). In the latter, the fatalistic understanding of mission, as a sole prerogative of the divine, soon gave way to what later turned out to be one of the greatest missionary exploits in Christian history.

It comes as no surprise then that subsequent, second century teachers who emerged from among the Gentiles, in the tradition of the apostles, went the full length to appropriate the position to which Paul implicitly gave his blessing as valid for communicating the Gospel. Among these were Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and their lesser-known disciples. For them the Christian faith constituted the true philosophy and deserved to employ the best in the prevailing Greek philosophy. We have an example of this understanding demonstrated in *A Letter from Origen to Gregory* in which the teacher encouraged his students with the plea:

I beg you to draw from the Greek philosophers such things as can be made curricular or preparatory studies to Christianity, for geometry and astronomy, such things as may be useful for expounding Holy Scripture. The philosophers say that geometry and music and grammar and rhetoric and astronomy are the handmaidens of philosophy. Let us say that philosophy itself is the handmaid of Christianity (Trans. in Walls 1999:101).

In so 'building for God with gold from Egypt' (Walls 1999:102) the fathers articulated to their contemporaries the logic of the so-called 'barbarian superstition' and argued that, indeed, it fulfilled the aspirations Greek philosophy sought after, even though it criticized some of the presuppositions of that philosophy.

In the increasingly weakening prospects of the survival of the Roman Empire against the onslaught of the 'Barbarian' invaders, the fourth century fathers presented the Christian faith to their society as the ultimate anchor that would guarantee the future of their peoples. When their pagan compatriots attributed the ominous fate that awaited the empire to the iconoclastic attitude of the Christian populace toward state religion, the fathers, with the tool of reason at their disposal, defended their faith against the allegation. In the imminent collapse of the empire, they affirmed the temporary nature of human, earthly kingdoms. Augustine's *City of God* is an eloquent affirmation of how the Christian populace saw in the national state of emergency a moment of

opportunity for the beleaguered populace to embrace a surer foundation in the Gospel.

So we find again in the Roman world that a creative appropriation of indigenous cultural forms and the appreciation of the social and political realities of the vanishing empire provided the launching pad from which the Christian faith critically engaged the Greco-Roman world. In this way, the Gospel amplified the expectations of Greek philosophy and, at the same time, it sought to attenuate what it considered its superfluities. The Christian faith, through its monasteries and their religious orders of the Middle Ages, later rediscovered Greek learning and, like Islam, proved to be the preserver of Greek intellectual tradition long after the empire had been sacked by the Goths in the early decades of the fifth century.

When Christianity crossed the Rhine and the Danube Rivers, and the empire subsequently collapsed from the incessant assault of the Goths, the faith entered another phase of self-mutation, this time into the thought form of the peoples of Northern Europe. Among the Goths the Gospel encountered a primal world view and, through its emissaries, wrestled with the peculiar challenges of seeking adherents among a warlike people. There it inherited the people's presuppositions about the universe of spirits, extra-terrestrial beings, and the ensuing rituals in worship and exorcism.

The characteristic quality the 'Barbarians' gave the Gospel at this stage was the communal nature of commitment to faith and the binding nature of its obligations on all and sundry once the community adopted it. The logical result of a communal religion is the association of the State with faith, and when it so became the case among the primal societies of Northern Europe the Church and the State became yoked together. This was very different from the order that prevailed in the sacked empire in that while the empire was at home with plurality of every form, the tribal societies of the Northern and Western Europe brooked no personal deviation from communal standards. Thus did the Christian faith become state law as soon as any of the groups adopted it as the religion of the community. The legacy the Barbarians bequeathed the faith,

therefore, was the State Church in which both the State and the Church became coterminous in Christendom (Walls 1996:20).

Still, we may not forget that a peculiar challenge to the social implications of the Christian faith as the Barbarians embraced the Gospel was how to restrain the propensity of the marauding peoples for war. Ulfilas recognized this challenge and so avoided including in his Gothic translation of the Bible sections of Hebrew history of the Old Testament that could continue to fan their belligerence and desire for conquests<sup>2</sup>.

The association of Church and state remained unchallenged in European Christian history for at least a thousand years until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The reformation itself may be seen against the background of the growing challenges to the authority of the Church and the state, especially in the then fledgling scientific revolution of the day. By the time this spirit of discontent combined with other intellectual, social and political adventures of the time, the primal, communitarian spirit that hitherto held European societies together had to give way to a new society. This time the primacy would no longer be on the collective interest of the society but on the right of the human person, hence individualism.

Although the reformers' goal was to bring about reforms in the Catholic Church, this proved impossible on a continental scale. It was at national levels that relative success attended their efforts. In the emerging realities of the European Enlightenment, and their gradual percolation into European life, the individual person became the pivot around which emergent Christian spirituality revolved; that is Christian faith became personal. This personalization of religious experience is one of the legacies Western European Christianity later bequeathed to the nations of the southern continents through its missionaries.

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<sup>2</sup> With the advantage of hindsight, it appears from the history of modern Europe that the Christian faith may have only attenuated the passion of the nations of Christendom for war but never fully brought their peoples to complete harmony. The two World Wars of the twentieth century, which were in reality European wars, exposed the persistence of old ethnic prejudices.

In all this expansion and mutation of the faces of the same Gospel, we may still appreciate that the diffusion of Christianity from Palestine was not toward the Northern Hemisphere alone. Indeed, the faith of the Church equally made advances into the interiors of Africa along the Nile, as far as Nubia and Ethiopia where indigenous churches flourished for centuries. Patterned after Eastern orthodox traditions, it could not free itself from the yoke of the state and so could not fully develop strong reflexes for self-propagation. Moreover, the hostile environment of Arab nationalism and religious fervor starved it of the necessary communication with the wider Christian community of Europe that could enhance its life.

The ultimate percolation of Christianity into the heartland of Africa, and to other peoples of the Southern Hemisphere, resulted from the expansion of Western Europe abroad. The phenomenon, itself resulting from several social and political realities of Europe and the interests of its courts, became the vehicle through which the Gospel expanded to the peoples of the southern continents. In West Africa, in particular, the Gospel began to take root among the indigenous peoples through the initiatives of European missionaries and their African agents in the late 1820s; this was after several false starts.

### **1.1 The Problem**

In the successive expansion of Christianity from Palestine to Northern and Western Europe, the transmission of the Gospel was largely aided and enhanced by its ability to adapt to existing thought forms of recipient cultures. This was made possible because its emissaries creatively employed those thought forms they found in their contexts of evangelization to communicate its content<sup>3</sup>. In this method, evangelists took for granted the continuity between the Gospel and the existing, indigenous traditions of the converts, even if they

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<sup>3</sup>This is not to say that there were no misgivings about or resistance from within Christian communities to this method. Jewish Christians were certainly uncomfortable with Graeco-Roman culture and doubted its value for propagating the faith. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, also had his doubts about their value for Christianity. See Bediako 1992:100-136.

were less concerned with their points of departure from the Gospel. This appropriation of pre-Christian traditions to communicate the Gospel added color to the diversity of the expression of Christianity.

However, the advent of the same Gospel in Africa was marked in many instances by a polemical tension between the existing traditions of the peoples of Africa and European missionaries. Africans had no such privilege to assume that their existing framework of existence was relevant to the faith they were being called to embrace. Consequently, it has become an incessant tendency for the critics of Christian faith in Africa to stress its apparent foreignness to the peoples of the continent.

In the recent years, especially with the rising tide of nationalism among peoples of the Southern Hemisphere, questions have been raised challenging the expansion of Europe into primal societies of the world and imposing the Christian religion on the people. In this vein, some social analyses, as well as historical interpretations, have been done by both European and African scholars on the expansion of European Christianity into Africa. Some have submitted their critiques from within the African Christian community while others have been outside observers. Among the earliest, but subtle, critiques from outside is the one offered by R. S. Rattray when, early in the twentieth century, he enthusiastically praised the Asante culture that:

I sometimes like to think, had these people been left to work out their own salvation, perhaps some day an African Messiah would have arisen and swept their Pantheon clean of fetish (*suman*). West Africa might then have become the cradle of a new creed which acknowledged One Great Spirit, Who, being One, nevertheless manifested Himself in everything around Him and taught men to hear His voice in the flow of His waters and in the sound of His winds in the trees (Rattray 1927:v,vi).

It is significant that Rattray was writing as a British anthropologist in the nascent years of African nationalism. The depth of his fascination with Asante culture can be appreciated when his position is viewed against the background of this time, when British imperial interest was being challenged by a rising generation of West African elite. His was certainly a courageous indictment of

the colonial government that commissioned his research as well as a tacit criticism of the presence of Christianity among the people.

Although they write in the context of the South African experience of missionary encounter with the Tswana people, the Comaroffs (1991) see the encounter more from the perspective of power play between two cultures in which one culture, the missionaries' culture, sought to colonize the other. They are concerned not so much with the tenets of faith but more with the application of critical social theory in the analysis of the encounter between European Christianity and African people. Their analyses have been greatly influenced by the political history of South Africa and are implicitly uncomplimentary about the missionary message.

A loud and critical voice from within has been that of Bolaji Idowu, a Nigerian scholar and churchman whose writings tacitly affirmed the sufficiency of traditional African religions for African peoples (Idowu 1973:206,207). He has been equally unsparing in his criticism of the European coloration of Christianity in Africa (Idowu 1965; 1973:xi), going as far as to submit that 'Christianity, by miscarriage of purpose, makes its own contribution to the detrimental changes in moral values' of his kinsmen, the Yoruba people (Idowu [1962]1996:226).

What we find in these and other critical perceptions of Christianity in African society is a subtle, but sometimes open, protest against the expansion of Christianity into Africa, especially when it came through Europeans. In this vein, various conjectures have been advanced to uncover the motive of European missionaries in Africa; some of these appear logical and probable, others are prejudicial.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, clear that the missionary methods applied

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Rodney places European adventures in Africa in the context of the attempts of Europe to survive economically at the expense of Africans. Indicting European missionaries, he argues that 'Christian missionaries were as much part of the colonizing forces as were the explorers, traders, and soldiers...[and] there is no doubting the fact that missionaries were agents of colonialism in the practical sense, whether or not they saw themselves in that light' (Rodney 1972:252). Consequently, for him, 'in colonial Africa churches could be relied upon to preach turning the other cheek in the face of [European] exploitation, and they drove home the message that

in the evangelization of the peoples of Africa raise some questions which deserve to be given attention. For example, did the Gospel, as represented by mission Christianity, actually serve as an instrument of exploitation in West Africa by paving the way for the eventual colonization of its peoples? Was its advent among the people redemptive to them in any way? How did the religious and social realities of nineteenth century West Africa contribute to the prospects of the Gospel among the people? And how did the Gospel contribute to the fortunes of the people of West Africa in the same period?

This essay is an attempt to explore the interaction between the Gospel and the peoples of West Africa, using the two social matrixes of the Yoruba and Akan peoples as contextual models of the European evangelization of the sub-continent in the nineteenth century. Their cultural similarities and the contrasts in their political realities have determined their selection as models of the interface of mission Christianity and African culture in the nineteenth century. One hopes that this exercise will assist in rediscovering the dynamics at play in the interaction between the Gospel and West African societies as well as offer lessons in the transmission of the Gospel in West Africa.

## **1.2 Delimitation**

The choice of the two contexts of Yoruba and Akan peoples is predicated on four reasons. First, they belong to the same Sudanic group of Africans. Secondly, like other West African peoples, they have developed social affinities that predated European colonialism. Thirdly, under colonial rule, they were administered by the same colonial power, the British government; hence, they were heirs to the same expression of European culture. The fourth reason is predicated on the contrasting nature of their social conditions when the Gospel first made its incursions into their contexts. Yoruba land was disintegrating and its peoples were locked in a stalemated, fratricidal war while the Akan states remained relatively stable. So we have one context

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everything would be right in the next world' (Rodney 1972:253). See more of his diatribe in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Rodney 1972:252-254).

that was in violent transition and another that was relatively stable. The implication of this is the different challenges that confronted the Gospel as it made its inroads into these cultures.

This essay will focus on the period between 1820 and 1892. The 1820s marked the decade in which modern missionary movements began sustained efforts at the evangelization of the indigenous peoples of West Africa. Until then, the few Christians in West Africa were on the coast and were either European traders and administrators of the colonies living in the forts, or returnees from North America and Europe, or recaptives settled at the Province of Freedom, Sierra-Leone. The decade also marked the beginning of the systematic disintegration of Yoruba land as a result of the fall of the old Oyo Kingdom.

The year 1892 marked the British declaration of Yoruba land as a protectorate and the cessation of hostilities among the feuding ethnic groups, a process mission Christianity hastened. With the demise on December 31, 1891 of Bishop Ajayi Crowther, the first African bishop of the Church Missionary Society, 1892 marked the full ascendancy of a new European missionary ethos in Southern Nigeria, in contrast to Henry Venn's vision of an indigenous, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing Church in Africa.

### **1.3 Method**

Since we are concerned with a history whose details have been frequently chronicled, the intention here is not to repeat what has been done already. Rather the approach will be to appreciate the religious and the cultural backgrounds that informed the attitudes of European missionaries toward the peoples of Akan and the Yoruba lands and *vice versa*. This is with the aim of understanding the response of the people to their message. In the light of this, we shall survey and analyze selected encounters and the critical issues that impeded or enhanced the transmission of the Gospel in the two contexts.

In the context of West Africa where indigenous people have no misgivings about the unity of reality, as against the European dichotomy of the

sacred and the secular, every dimension of human existence has a stake in the interaction between mission Christianity and West African cultures. It then follows that to be true to the religio-cultural milieu of West Africa, the method to be adopted here must be holistic.

Perhaps the most germane issue to the encounter between European Christianity and West African peoples was conversion. To appreciate the dynamics at play in this process, three relevant perspectives on conversion will be employed. A. D. Nock's classical perspective will furnish us with a basic understanding. The contemporary perspectives of John V. Taylor and Andrew F. Walls will be used to appreciate the process holistically. To draw our conclusion on the encounter, we shall also apply Andrew Walls' three tests of the expansion of Christianity.

#### **1.4 Definition of Key Terms**

The term 'mission Christianity' is used in the title of this essay rather than the 'Gospel' in recognition that what came to West Africa in the evangelization of its peoples was not just the Gospel, but the Gospel with its European cultural accretions. While one recognizes the difficulty of defining the Gospel as something that can be abstracted from its cultural accruals, just as the incarnation itself cannot be divorced from its intrinsic kinship with humanity, we may recognize that the Gospel is not the same as human cultures and, indeed, transcends them. It is this transcendence of the Gospel over human cultures that enhances its resilience to adapt to any human context and frees it from their limitations as soon as it finds allegiance and commitments in new ones.

However, in spite of the difficulty of defining the Gospel, its flow has been marked by certain strands that qualify it to be so recognized as the one faith of the historic Church through the ages. Andrew Walls (Walls 1996:23-24) mentioned four of such characteristics. The first is that the Gospel is marked by 'the worship of the God of Israel'; the second is 'the ultimate significance of Jesus of Nazareth' to Christian believers, while the third is the

recognition by the adherents of the Gospel 'that God is active where believers are'. The fourth is 'that believers constitute a people of God transcending time and space'. To these, may we not add believers' consciousness of the moral concomitants of following Jesus of Nazareth and the fostering of the same in the larger human society through conversion?

In this essay, culture is not just conceived as expressions of symbols of identity, as in language, art and other cultural forms. It is essentially conceived as the whole process of socializing the human person to conform to what the society would regard as a decent personality, what Yoruba people call *Omoluabi*, as against being wild and untutored.

### 1.5 Literature Review

In recent years, attempts have been made to investigate the dynamics of the interface between African culture and mission Christianity in the nineteenth century. Among these are J.F. Ade Ajayi's *Christian missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The making of a new elite* (1965), F.L. Bartels' *The roots of Ghana Methodism* (1965), E.A. Ayandele's *The missionary impact on modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A political and social analysis* (1966), and H.W. Debrunner's *A history of Christianity in Ghana* (1967). Others are G.O.M. Tasi'e's *Christian missionary enterprise in the Niger Delta 1864-1918* (1978), and Robert Addo-Fening's *Akyem Abuakwa 1700-1943: From Ofori Panin to Sir Ofori Ata* (1997).

The strength of these works lies in the fact that they examined in detail specific, local or national histories and plumbed depths that would otherwise have been impossible. However, most of them focused only on specific themes around which they developed their perspectives. Still they approached their materials with detachment. A theological exploration, as the one being attempted here, cannot be carried out with detached objectivity. It must be committed, as authentic theologizing cannot be separated from the self.

Lamin Sanneh's *West African Christianity: The religious Impact* (1983) exhibits such commitment, but it is essentially descriptive of how the

traditional West African religious worldview engaged the message of mission Christianity. His *Translating the message: The missionary impact on culture* (1989) and *Encountering the West* (1993) are of immense value for this work as they engage with the dynamics of missionary strategies and presuppositions in Africa. Adrian Hastings' *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (1994) has combined in one volume the religious and the cultural dimensions of the interactions between Africans and mission Christianity. Yet, in spite of his profound insights, he embraced too wide a context spanning a period of 500 years, hence his extreme brevity. But his is a fitting model of what is being attempted here on a micro scale.

Perhaps the most elaborate scholarly effort in the attempt to understand the West African past was the international seminar held in Basel, Switzerland, on 25-28 October 1995, in celebration of the centenary publication of Carl Reindorf's *History of the Gold Coast and Asante*. The papers of that seminar have been published in the book *The Recovery of the West African Past: African Pastors and African History in the Nineteenth Century—C.C. Reindorf & Samuel Johnson*. Much of the materials from the seminar and the published works earlier referred to consist of the sociological, anthropological, and historical assessments of this period.

## **1.6 Sources**

Primary materials have been drawn from the literature and documents that emerged during the period in focus, 1820-1892. These include published and unpublished materials like written histories of the period and correspondence documents. These have been supplemented with secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **THE RELIGIOUS AND THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT SHAPED THE MODERN EUROPEAN MISSIONARY MOVEMENT**

In the first chapter, we broadly explored how the fortunes and the prospects of the Gospel, in its successive transmission from culture to culture, were closely tied to the cultural and historical realities it encountered on its way. In this chapter we shall appreciate how the intellectual and the religious dynamics on the European continent, beginning from the 1500s, shaped the cognitive world of the missionaries who came to West Africa in the nineteenth century. Essentially, the two aspects of our exploration will be the Protestant Reformation movement that gave rise to the sixteenth century schism in Western European Christianity and the eighteenth century Enlightenment culture of Europe.

#### **2.1 Religious Antecedents of the Nineteenth Century European Missionary Exploits in Africa**

The antecedents of the expansion of European Christianity to Africa were a complex interaction between the religious, the social and the intellectual conditions of European peoples and the interests of their courts in lands and peoples overseas. Although there were some sequences of cause and effect in the interactions of the forces at play, there were also symbioses between them and their outcome in the Church so that attempting to isolate them may prove reductionistic. In this vein, the Protestant Reformation, as one of the outcomes in the sixteenth century, can be regarded as a culmination of events within and outside the European Church. Before we explore the Reformation as a vital antecedent to the modern missionary movement, it is necessary to appreciate earlier missionary exploits of the Portuguese and the Spaniards.

The earliest European missionary work, aimed at the conversion of peoples overseas, was first carried out by Roman Catholic Orders in the

attempt to overtake Islam's aggressive strides into the Southern Hemisphere. As early as 1402, the Franciscans were making efforts at the conversion of the indigenous Guanches of Cape Verde Islands, on the northern coast of West Africa (Sanneh 1983:19). Even though other similar Orders were to move further south, as far as Angola, the hope entertained that the few educated African converts, and later clergy, would return to their own people and evangelize them did not become a reality. These Africans turned out to be enthusiasts of European cultures and were easily 'sucked' into the expansionist project of the Portuguese and the Spaniards (Sanneh 1983:20). Such hope for indigenous converts returning home as evangelists would have to wait for some two centuries to be realized, when liberated African slaves would be returning back to their peoples having gained more insight into the ideological tensions shaping their future.

Meanwhile, in spite of the failure at evangelizing Africa, European powers were searching for economic prospects in West Africa. Gold and the slaves to work in the plantations in the Americas dominated the resultant trade in which West African human and material resources were exchanged for European goods. In these, the European powers vigorously competed against one another and supplanted one another in the bid to monopolize trade with African chiefs on the coasts. The monuments to this desperate quest for control of trade are the forts and the castles that still dot the West Coast of Africa.

Still, their contacts left their social consequences as a new breed of Africans, the mulattos, emerged as products of the meeting of Europeans and West Africans. With time, the coastal people became urban and sophisticated as they embraced European lifestyle and dress modes. Carl Reindorf, a mulatto of Danish extraction in the nineteenth century Gold Coast, and an African agent of the Basel Mission, lamented the negative effects of this association on Africans living on the coast (Reindorf [1890]1966:272,273).

However, of more significance to this discourse on the early interaction between Europe and Africa was the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Lasting from the 1400s (Sanneh 1983:19) till the early decades of the 1800s, it was to

become the dark night before a bright morning in the evangelization of West Africa. The unfortunate practice of slave trade saw the exportation of millions of able-bodied African men and women to Europe and the plantations in the New World. Nevertheless, in a positive twist of fate, the trafficking later produced the personnel needed to evangelize Africa.

Those who embraced the Gospel among the returnees to West Africa became the necessary bridgeheads that engaged the existing, indigenous traditions with the new, evangelistic agenda. Having been exposed to western thinking and value systems, these African evangelists possessed the capacity to relate their indigenous beliefs to the new faith with which they had gained acquaintanceship in the Diaspora. So disposed, they were to mediate the new in the consciousness of what the old stood for. Hence, their return signaled that fullness of time when the peoples of West Africa would also own the Gospel.

But the 'fullness of time' for the evangelization of West African peoples must certainly take into cognizance the phenomenon of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation. Although it is often seen as an initial reaction to institutional charlatanism, the Reformation was actually a revolt against the mythical speculations that characterized much of mediaeval Christianity. This understanding is pivotal to our engagement when we appreciate that mediaeval Christianity was a synthesis of the Gospel and the folk religion of mediaeval Europe, and the pioneers of Protestant missionary enterprise in the nineteenth century West Africa were purveyors of Reformation ideals which questioned its, that is mediaeval Christianity's, validity.

The significance of the Reformation lies not just in the fact that it marked a departure from the unifying ecclesiology that had prevailed in Western Europe until the sixteenth century. It is in the fact that it legitimized the right to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy and opened the floodgates of diverse and dissonant theological expressions of the one faith of the Church. Its roots can be found in the fourteenth century growing discontent among the sons of the Church like John Wycliffe of England and John Huss of Bohemia. These men challenged the theological and the biblical bases of the Roman papacy and

espoused an incipient nationalist spirituality as they pressed for vernacular scriptures for their peoples. But the non-conformist spirituality and critical intellectual adventures of the early reformers were too radical for their times, hence their incurring the displeasure of the Church. The theological and the ecclesiastical innovations they pressed for were complicated by the politics of survival between the European courts and the papacy.

The quest of the reformers for, and their encouragement of, the translation of the scriptures into vernacular languages offers another reason why the Reformation is significant to our exploration of the interface of mission Christianity and African culture. This is because the idea of translating the scriptures into mother tongues was cardinal to their struggle and became a vital strategy employed by the early missionaries in West Africa in the bid to reach their intended converts. Although the early reformers did not record immediate success in their bid for a dynamic faith for their peoples and nations, their successors would make good their intentions. However, their prodding of the religious and political *status quo* signaled the growing discontent and restiveness that would overtake Europe in the next three hundred years and run aground the pervasive influence of the papacy.

And so it was in the shadow of a declining papal authority that Martin Luther rose in the sixteenth century to re-ignite the passion of Wycliffe and Huss. Although his was a personal spiritual consciousness, it found a more conducive environment to flourish in the growing challenges to the authority of the Church, first in the incipient scientific revolution of the day and, secondly, in the nationalist sentiments that pervaded sixteenth century Europe. The schism that resulted from the German Reformation, and which spread beyond Germany, soon proved to be the beginning of multiple schisms that would later result among the reformers themselves.

The succeeding centuries in Europe witnessed the emergence of splinter groups and revival movements, some with radical departures from their parent bodies, others exhibiting only shades of difference in theological opinions. The reason for these multiple schisms is not far to seek. The churches that emerged

from the throes of the Protestant Reformation soon continued in the old tradition of the union of Church and State. The clergies, as civil servants, had little or no room to depart radically from their religious traditions and formulas. Creativity and venturesomeness so stifled, the history of the churches of the Reformation turned out to be a continuation of the same old order, save occasional disconcerting voices and theological disputations and disagreements between the leading lights. Thus did endless reformation among the reformers give birth to dissenters, sects, and miniature groups on the fringes of the established churches. Of notable influence among these were the Puritans who emigrated to the New World because of persecution. The group of radical reformers relevant to this essay, however, is the Protestant missionary movement that emerged in the British Isles in the closing decade of the eighteenth century.

The emergence of the Protestant missionary movement in eighteenth century Europe came in two waves. The first wave, led by the Continental pietists, emerged under the repressed Moravian Brethren whose roots can be traced to John Huss' radical movement of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Under renewal and sponsorship of Nikolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf, the movement sent missionaries, from 1732, to work among the Negroes of the West Indies and later North America and Greenland.

The second wave of European missionary enterprise, which eventually proved more penetrating, emerged from the British Isles with William Carey's 1792 publication of *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. The significance of Carey's publication was in his intentional challenge to the lethargy of the Church of his time with regard to foreign mission. His personal example in travelling to India with two colleagues, the three friends later earning the epithet '*Serampore Trio*', to pioneer mission work among the Hindus led the way for the emergence of other mission organizations in the established churches of Europe and from among his fellow dissenters.

A distinguishing characteristic of these early missionary movements was manifested in the quality of those involved as they were largely poorly educated dissenters who operated on the fringes of the churches of the establishment. Moreover, some of the dissenters in the established churches were those who by reason of poor education were not qualified for ordination; hence, overseas ministry proved for them to be a means to exercise ministry. The two waves of European missionary movement, that is the Continental and that of the British Isles, were to become mutually reinforcing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Basel trained missionaries were sent out by a British mission agency, the Church Missionary Society, CMS.

However, European churches both in the British Isles and on the Continent were also involved in mission. The involvement came by default through chaplaincy services to trading companies and as Europeans discovered new lands abroad, settled in some of them, and later colonized them. Much of what may be regarded as mission in their efforts were timid incursions from trading forts and settlements into territories of suspicious and calculating African chiefs and kings (Sanneh 1983:20). Still, in the Counter-Reformation enterprise of the Jesuit Order, the earlier missionary efforts of the Catholic Orders also received new impetus.

The third significance of the Protestant Reformation for the European missionary enterprise resulted from the fact that it liberated the ministries of the Church from the exclusive monopoly of the clergy. This is not to say that the laity was not involved in the life of the Church before the Reformation. In fact, as Lamin Sanneh submits, those who sponsored the fifteenth century missionary enterprises were 'independent kings, princes and industrious merchants and bankers, most of them with a devout, if not always altruistic, interest in helping the spread of the Church' (Sanneh 1983:20). But beyond financing the Church, the Reformation opened the ministries of the Church to those who were not ordained but had interest in mission as preachers and teachers, not only of the Scriptures but also of western education. The Methodist and the Baptist movements, products of the continuing fission in the

Protestant movements, as well as the emergent missionary organizations, best exemplified this involvement of the laity in the life of the Church.

It is also significant that the growing European interest in overseas mission was matched by anti-slavery sentiments in England so much that toward the close of the eighteenth century, the plight of African slaves in England and in the New World had become sufficiently glaring to evoke public concern. The ensuing debates for and against the practice became an issue of concern to the churches of the Protestant movement and culminated in the emergence in England of the anti-slavery, voluntary, social organizations like the 'Clapham Sect'. About the same time also, the Methodist Society emerged with its double emphasis on personal conversion and evangelical social concern. The motivating spirit behind the endeavors of these English evangelical movements, both in the established Church of England and among the dissenters, was compassion for the disadvantaged people of England, young and old, indigenous and foreign. It was this spirit that overflowed abroad in the births of the missionary societies—the Baptist Missionary society (1792), the London Missionary Society (1795), and the Church Missionary Society (1799)—and launched what would later become one of the boldest and costliest missionary enterprises in Christian history.

By way of summary, the Protestant Reformation was a radical departure from the medieval Christianity of Europe in that it queried its superstitions and legitimized the right to dissent from the popular orthodoxy of the Roman Church. Moreover, it made demands for the Bible in the mother tongue and liberated the Christian ministry for the active participation of all, ordained and lay. These departures informed the religious backgrounds of the European missionaries who came to West Africa in the nineteenth century and make the Protestant Reformation significant to our discourse.

## 2.2 The Enlightenment Worldview as the Cultural Background of Mission Christianity

The period usually described as modern in Western European civilization began from the 1500s (Kennedy 1988:3). Until the advent of the new perception of reality by Europeans, religion and a religious world view characterized their understanding of life and reality. The medieval period, in particular, operated on the assumptions of primal world views in which reality consisted in a unified whole. Consequently, it was normal for religion and politics, through Church and State, to coexist in a symbiotic relationship although the Church, in its self-understanding, would often lay claim to having a higher authority than the State.

However, in the 1500s, multiple events that were unraveling in Europe began to redefine the thoughts and the way of life of European peoples and their states. Although no one particular event singularly signaled the arrival of the new epoch, certain key events evoked and powered the new currents that later diffused worldwide. Among these were the 'rise of the professional, mercantile, and laboring classes to constantly increasing educational and political influence' (Walker 1959:426) and the scientific revolution initiated by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), timidly sustained by Galileo Galilee (1564-1642), but finally vindicated in the works of Isaac Newton (1642-1727).

To these were added the intellectual adventures of the philosophers 'in the name of reason' (Walker 1959:427), as they celebrated doubt, mathematical certainty, and logic. Among the prominent men who led the intellectual revolt against the *status quo* were Rene Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Gottfried Wilhem Leibnitz (1646-1716) and John Locke (1632-1704). These purveyors of new ideals examined, wrote, and postulated on everything that could come within their imaginations, including politics, religion, nature, and morality. For them, nothing was sacrosanct; including the Church whose teachings and claims were not spared their critical examinations. The exploits of these philosophers and scientists prepared the ground for the social and intellectual environment of eighteenth century Europe popularly

called the Enlightenment, from which the Gospel would advance into the Southern Hemisphere with new vigor less than a century later.

The term 'Enlightenment' is a name that covers a wide range of intellectual and social currents of eighteenth century Europe with different nuances among the different nations. As a continental phenomenon, however, it had its distinguishing characteristics and principles, three of which Crane Brinton brings together to construct his model of the movement (Brinton 1967:520-521).

According to him, the first principle that characterized the Enlightenment was the primacy of Reason. Reason, to the enlightened mind, was 'a kind of common sense sharpened and made subtler by training in logic and "natural philosophy"' (Brinton 1967:520), natural philosophy being science. The movement presupposed that the human capacity to reason functioned the same way in everyone, like the physiological functioning of the human body, and does not vary appreciably from one person to another. However, according to the movement, 'the institutional and cultural environment' of the eighteenth century Europe 'had corrupted the normal physiological working of Reason in most human beings' (Brinton 1967:520). The corrupting influences were attributed to the activities of the 'Church, state, social and economic class, superstition, ignorance, prejudice, poverty, and vice' (Brinton 1967:520). Brinton added succinctly:

'The *philosophes*,<sup>1</sup> could they have been polled in the modern way, would probably have ranked the Roman Catholic Church— indeed, all Christian churches— as the greatest single corrupting influence....[For] at bottom the great evil of the Church, for the enlightened, was its transcendental and supernatural base, which put faith and revelation above reason (Brinton 1967:520).

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<sup>1</sup> The *philosophes* were not necessarily intellectuals involved in systematic philosophizing but those musicians, poets and authors who used their trade to popularise the ideals of the Enlightenment among the masses of European people. The term, however, derived from the French rendition of the English word 'philosopher'.

To the enlightened, therefore, the purity of Reason was a function of the cultural environment. To corrupt the cultural environment is to corrupt Reason, whose source is the human experience in the cultural environment.

Validating the primacy of the human environment in the workings of Reason, John Locke, among other Enlightenment philosophers, provided the grounding for the movement in his empiricist epistemology, wherein he denied the existence of 'innate ideas' in human beings. Positing that the human mind is a *tabula rasa* on which the cultural environment activates Reason and inspires knowledge, he foreclosed the validity of transcendental experiences of religion and revelation. Implicitly, therefore, experience precedes existence in the ontology of the enlightened.

Another block of ideas Brinton highlights is the way of Nature. Again, to the enlightened mind, 'Reason, properly working, enabled human beings to discover, or rediscover, Nature beneath the concealing corruptions of religion, social structure, convention, and indeed, beneath the often misleading impressions of sense experience not properly organized by Reason' (Brinton 1967:520). Arguably, he added that 'this Nature was in part a hypostatized conception of the beautiful and the good...[which] must be understood against two antitheses' (Brinton 1967:520).

The first antithesis is the transcendental 'truths of religion' which the enlightened mind classified as 'figments of the imagination, non-existent, indeed at bottom priestly inventions designed to keep men ignorant of the way of Reason and Nature'. The second antithesis to Nature is the 'unnatural' which, unlike religious truth, actually exists. In the world it takes the form of 'the artificial, the burdens of irrational customs and traditions accumulated through historic time' and constitutes evil.<sup>2</sup> If, according to the enlightened, the 'unnatural' is the form evil takes in the world, Nature is simply the good and the beautiful—'a set of ethical and aesthetic goals or standards' which in

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<sup>2</sup> Crane Brinton noted that the enlightened were as perplexed as Christians on the origin of evil. He wrote, 'How the natural got to be unnatural was a question as difficult to answer as how an all-powerful God allowed Adam to bite into the apple' (Brinton 1967:520).

themselves, according to Brinton, were not different from the axioms of 'Judeo-Christian tradition' (Brinton 1967:520-521).

What does this make of the morality of the enlightened? Worldly but not indulgent as some of them sought to make others attain the pure state of Nature. The idealization of Nature however created the room for speculations and conjectures about a pure state of Nature in the past when people lived free from evil (Brinton 1967:521).

The third significant principle of Enlightenment was the idea of Progress. The essential belief here is that through 'increasingly effective application of Reason to the control of the physical and cultural environment', humanity would steadily rise above its limitations. The idea posits a belief in a linear concept of time in which humankind, in its successive generations, will cumulatively become more rational and harmonious in its interactions with itself. For the enlightened, therefore, the golden age of humanity is not to be found in the past as the 'primitivists' would argue, nor in the endless cycle of Hellenistic speculations, but in a future in which education will guide Reason 'to do its work of reform' (Brinton 1967:521). Education thus became the pivot on which the enlightened hoped to turn around human society.

This model is but a broad outline of a highly complex current whose divergences of opinions and submissions varied according to the national ethos of each eighteenth century European nation. And although it is simple and appears to have reduced what in reality was a complex phenomenon, it is useful for our discourse in the attempt to appreciate the cultural environment from which European missionaries came to West Africa in the nineteenth century. Hence, it may not be out of place for us to evaluate it in the attempt to capture the mood of the period.

By way of evaluation, therefore, certain observations follow the assumptions of the Enlightenment movement. In the first place, it was too optimistic of human nature. It certainly placed humanity, exclusively, at the center of what it hoped would be the triumphant future of human society and set the agenda for what would become secular humanism.

Secondly, its cosmology is monist in that its perception of reality has no place for the transcendent but, exclusively, for the material. Yet, its error here lay in the presupposition that Reason serves everyone the same way, without variation, as every biological organ functions in the human body. In this the movement clearly rejected any innate and subjective dimension of the workings of Reason, hence its contestable claim to objectivity and scientific apprehension of reality.

In the third place, having bracketed out the transcendent dimension of reality, it was brazenly irreligious. Its ultimate legacy, therefore, was a materialist universe with no incomprehensible mystery. Of course, there were reactions to the submissions of the movement from the Church and from among other poets and philosophers who did not subscribe to its irreligious and humanist flavors, not to mention the skepticism of those within its movement about the idea of Progress.

One thing is certain, nonetheless, the eighteenth century Enlightenment culture and its influential developments in the fields of education, politics, anthropology and the biological sciences did not only inform the cultural environment from which European missionaries came to West Africa. It became the guiding principle by which Europe would take its strides into the future, openly and subtly co-opting its willing and unwilling advocates, and shaping their perceptions of reality. But how did European Christians respond to the values of the Enlightenment?

To answer this question, we must first appreciate that both the Protestant Reformation movement and the Enlightenment culture shared a vital similarity and one cannot always distinguish which influenced the other. The similarity was in the iconoclastic nature of their quests for new directions, the Reformation in the Church and the Enlightenment in the larger society. And although the Reformation took place nearly two centuries before the Enlightenment culture became fully-fledged, both were currents of a restive continent whose passion respected no boundaries, either in the Church or in the State.

For its radical departure from existing European values, especially in its being humanistic and irreligious, the Christian Church—in its Catholic and Protestant expressions—repudiated the Enlightenment. They were not, however, uninfluenced by its presuppositions as there emerged compromise strands of Christianity like Deism and Unitarianism. But the Catholic Church responded with a more consciously conservative dogmatic theology. Bernard Lonergan aptly qualifies this agitated response:

It is true that the word “dogmatic” had been previously applied to theology. But then it was used to denote a distinction from moral, or ethical, or historical theology. Now [in reaction to the Enlightenment] it was employed in a new sense, in opposition to scholastic theology. It replaced the inquiry of the *quaestio* by the pedagogy of the thesis. It demoted the quest of faith for understanding to a desirable, but secondary, and indeed optional goal. It gave basic and central significance to the certitudes of faith, their presuppositions, and their consequences (Lonergan 1978:5).

By this response, the Catholic Church shut the door against the potential, wandering errors of Enlightenment that might seek to nestle in its fold, take captive its children, and further rip it apart.

On the Protestant front emerged also the new but vigorous movements of Methodism in the British Isles and Pietism on the continent, especially in Germany. Crane Brinton described them as:

[D]istrustful of reason, as understood by the *philosophes*, warmly evangelical, politically and socially conservative, reached down into the working classes, which were hardly touched by the Enlightenment and are credited...with having helped to preserve Britain from the contagion of the French Revolution (Brinton 1967:522).

Intellectually, still, the Protestants latched on to classical studies and promoted the use of Hellenistic literature much derided by the Enlightenment. But in spite of these reactions of European Christianity, especially in its Protestant strand, it was not totally uninfluenced by the liberal spirit of the age of Enlightenment which the culture fostered, and which the Protestant movement shared in personal experience of religion. And although the

Protestant Movement would largely hold its own against the audacious assaults of the Enlightenment, it would not forever remain immune to its developments. The full weight of the Enlightenment philosophy on European Christianity would wait for the second half of the coming century when its developments in the fields of biological sciences and anthropology would inform missionaries' negative perception of Africa and Africans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in which he detailed the laws of natural selection and the survival of the fittest and E.B. Tylor's anthropological writings were products of Enlightenment philosophy. They provided the "scientific" basis for the European imperial ideology of the late nineteenth century, especially in Africa, and accentuated the shift in European missionaries' attitude towards Africans from benevolent co-operation to domination in the high imperial age.

## CHAPTER THREE

### WEST AFRICA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY— CULTURES IN TRANSITION

While the cultural developments in Europe, starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were rapidly changing social values in the continent from an essentially religious complexion to a secular, humanistic one, West African societies remained largely untouched by the ferment that was reshaping Europe and its peoples. As every step taken by Europeans during this period took them away from their long tradition of religious apprehension of reality and their Christendom continued to disintegrate unabatedly, new kingdoms like Ashanti and Oyo were emerging in West Africa. In these emerging kingdoms, traditional social mores, which were essentially religious, were strengthened by the emerging imperial authorities and gave shape to their sense of value and the administration of their states. The thrust of this chapter, on the one hand, is to understand the religious world of the peoples of West Africa which gave shape to the social polities of the two West African societies in contrast to the growing trend in Europe at this time. On the other hand, it is to also appreciate the opportunities that later beckoned to the emissaries of the Gospel through the religious and the political realities of the peoples of West Africa.

#### 3.1 The Religious World of the Peoples of West Africa

Several attempts have been made to unravel the genius of the African mind. Among the works that readily come to mind in this respect are those of Father Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, first published in French in 1945; John V. Taylor's *Primal Vision*, 1963; and John Mbiti's *African Philosophy and Religion*, 1969. While the works of Tempels and Mbiti, in their philosophical approach, creatively and perceptively delineate what the authors consider Africans' understanding of reality, Taylor's approached the matter from a theological perspective and in dialogue with the Christian faith. Even

though the continental scope of some of their assumptions has been questioned, there is no doubt that the broad outlines of their submissions fairly correspond to the reality generally found among African peoples, including West Africans. It is for this reason that their insights are considered invaluable to this essay in understanding the world of the peoples of West Africa.

Simply stated, the understanding of these scholars is that the world of the African is one in which the objective and the subjective dimensions of reality interpenetrate and cohere into a whole. In this unitary whole exists a hierarchy of power and existence in which the Great Spirit constitutes a 'Wholly Other', supremely above all in power and majesty. This Great Spirit, variously designated among African peoples, as Olodumare (among the Yoruba of Nigeria) or Onyankopon (among the Akan of Ghana) is followed in hierarchy by the lesser spirits of divinities and ancestors. Because the Great Spirit is lofty in position and, *ipso facto*, beyond the reach of human beings, these spirits of divinities and ancestors mediate life and blessing from Him (or Her) to human beings. The lesser spirits are followed by human beings and then other animate and inanimate creations of lower animals, plants and stones, rivers and the earth. Mbiti refers to this gradation as the religious ontology of Africa (Mbiti 1969:15,16), which has allotted the place of relevance to all that exist in the unified cosmos of its peoples.

Although in this cosmology, the objective world of feelings and perception with which human beings engage through the five senses is immediate, the subjective one of the spirit realm is no less real. The two mutually engage one another as natural phenomena receive their causation from the supra-natural, and vice versa. For the African, therefore, reality is one and undivided.

In the objective world of physical realities, human beings procreate and live in the delicate balance between triumph and tragedy, between hope and despair, between success and failure, and indeed between life and death. The forces of nature and its sometimes devastating phenomena constitute the elements against which humankind must strive and survive. Drought, poor

harvest, flood, and inhibited fecundity of beasts and humans, among other natural occurrences, constitute the elements of nature capable of undermining human existence and restraining the attainment of happiness and fulfillment in this life; in fact, they are capable of terminating human temporal existence.

For West Africans, as well as other indigenous Africans, these assailing realities are not seen just as events occurring in the natural order; rather, they are symptoms of brokenness and discontinuity in the ordered universe of human and spiritual existence. For in the spirit realm of the universe exist and operate both malevolent and benevolent spirits, which interfere in the fortunes and destinies of people. And although human beings are subject to their whims and caprices, they can align with the benevolent spirits of their ancestors and divinities by invoking certain rituals and thereby receive protection against the malevolent ones. This protection is guaranteed as long as taboos are not violated and necessary rituals are maintained, with the dividend yielding overflowing harvests, many children, good health and longevity to persons and communities.

Although there are some ambiguities and complexities involved in African understanding of the human person (Taylor 1963:48-74), certain features have been identified as peculiar to human beings. Drawing from Father Tempels' submission, John V. Taylor identifies the principal one as 'the uniqueness of the force that is human', be it that of 'the living or the dead: great ancestors and hero gods' (Taylor 1963:70). This uniqueness consists in 'its possession of creative intelligence and will which can directly strengthen or weaken another human in his life force' (Taylor 1963:70). For the African, therefore, 'any occurrence may be significant for his wellbeing and therefore must be accounted for in terms of some personal will, either of the living or the dead. Life [thus] becomes an unceasing Who-goes-where?'. Taylor further submits that 'this creative intelligence of humankind is weakest in living men, and there is little they can do unless it is supplemented from the vastly greater resources of the dead and the hero gods' (Taylor 1963:70,71).

There may be slight variations from context to context, but in its essence, this is the cosmology of African peoples and the framework that gives meaning and coherence to their existence. Against this broad outline of the ontology of African people, we may now turn to the cultural expressions of this understanding of life and reality among the Akan and the Yoruba peoples of West Africa.

### **3.2 Culture among the Akan People**

The personal and the communal identities of the Akan people are defined and sustained in the quadripartite institutions of the clan, the ancestors, the stool, and the land. The religious and the social life of the people, which are intrinsically woven together in everyday life with their periodic rituals, derive meaning and sustenance from the interactions of these institutions. Even though the people speak the common *Twi* language in their Asante, Fante, Akyem-Abuakwa, Akyem-Kotoku and Akuapem dialects, and have a long history of contention for supremacy and independence among themselves, they are culturally homogenous. Much of what follows here has been gleaned from the observations made on the Asante people in particular, especially as they were recorded by R.S. Rattray (1927), Kofi Busia (1951) and Ivor Wilks (1975). From them we hope to reach some understanding on the way of life of these people.

#### **3.2.1 Religion and Ethics**

As with other peoples of Africa, religion is woven into the fabric of Akan society such that one cannot, and indeed need not, separate the mundane from the temporal, or the material from the spiritual. Everything, living and supposedly not living, has its own life and place in the cosmology of the Akan. All are imbued with vital potencies and can be significant in the quest for abundant life to persons, clans, and communities. The people believe that although some elements of nature like rivers, hills, and mountains may appear

to have no life, they are nonetheless the abode of spirits that need to be placated before doing any thing of significance to them.

Certain trees are held to possess vindictive spirits and so have to be approached with carefulness and be placated with sacrifices before being cut down by the wood carver to make his drum or stool. The propitiatory sacrifices that still follow carvings of stool and drums also signal invitations for the disembodied spirit of the tree, *Nyame dua*, to repossess its abode. Likewise, the drum becomes the dwelling abode of the spirit of the tree and the elephant, 'whose ears form its tense membrane' (Rattray 1927:5,6). Rattray comments perceptively:

Primitive (sic) man thus strives to placate and control the forces which he has been compelled by his needs to anger, whose original abode he has destroyed. He provides a new home which he will endeavor to make acceptable to them. He will keep it free from the pollution of those things which each particular spirit is known to 'abhor'. These spirits, when he has set them free, will learn to know that a new home (now a shrine) always awaits them, where they may 'feed' and be propitiated and tended; to this new abode they will be summoned when occasion arises, with due formalities, upon the drums when...they beat out the...summons (Rattray 1927:6)

Since everything, animate and inanimate, is significant in its own right, they are to be approached with a sense of sacredness and responsibility as against pillage and violation. With this understanding of the sacredness of all that constitute nature and life, a sense of religion permeates the filial, the social and the economic dimensions of Akan society.

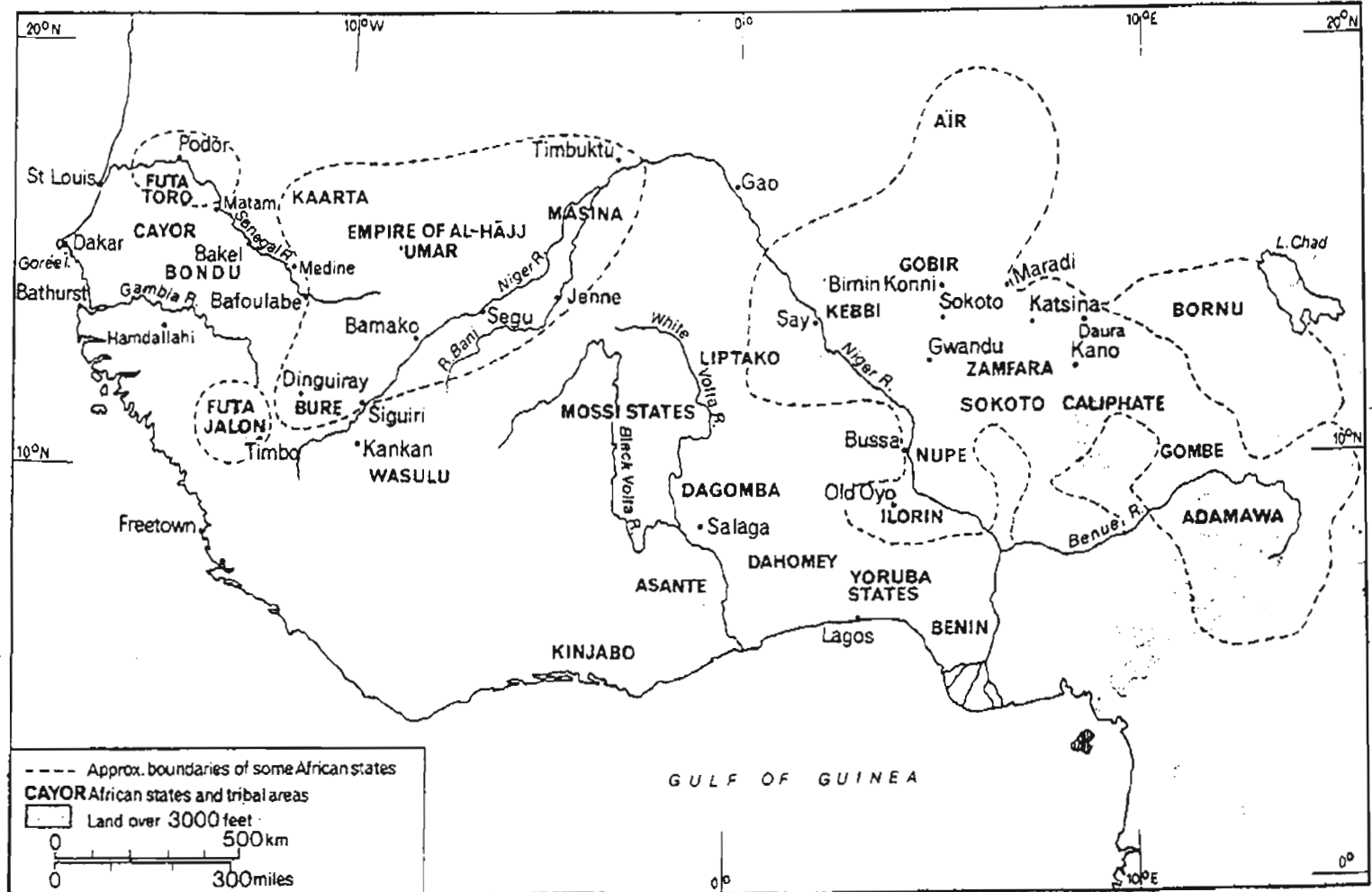
While every rite of passage and community social mores implicitly express Akan religious understanding of life and reality, the religious beliefs of the people are most clearly expressed in the *Adae* and *Odwira* festivals. These are, respectively, the periodic and annual festivals that bind the people together as they mark cycles of time and, in their understanding, seek the renewal of the face of the earth and its people. In these festivals, sacrifices and atonement are made in honor of the ancestors and in deference to the earth that has yielded its increase to sustain life. The weeklong *Odwira* celebration winds up with a

colorful durbar in which the people rejoice at the beginning of a new life for their communities.

In social ethics, the precarious nature of human existence and the consequent need to approach life with reverence have informed the rules governing conduct among the Akan. Violations of taboos and oaths, the practice of witchcraft, treason, stealing, economic extortion, certain kinds of assault, illicit sexual activities, premeditated murder, blasphemy against the chief or an Elder, among others, are conduct capable of invoking the wrath of the ancestors and so are punishable. Contravention is redressed with fines, or with life for another one terminated in premeditated murder; these are done, many times, for religious reparations to cleanse the land from implied defilement and propitiate the ancestors (Busia 1951:65-84).

The seriousness of maintaining order and decency in Akan society makes everyone ultimately accountable to the community through the authority of the stool occupant who sits 'in place' of the ancestors. The authority of the chiefs, notwithstanding, they are expected to treat their subjects with deference and honor. Busia reports of chiefs who were destooled for drunkenness, gluttony, conceitedness, 'dealing in charms and noxious medicines', 'abusive tongues', 'disclosing the origin of...subjects (i.e. reproaching them with their slave ancestry)', and 'excessive cruelty' (Busia 1951:21,22).

It needs to be stated, however, that while Akan people are conscious of the creator Spirit, *Onyankopon*, He is only hinted at in the traditional religious worship; the ancestors and the people's interests dominate their concern for abundant and fruitful life. In essence, therefore, Akan religion is overtly human-centered. Nonetheless, the remoteness of *Onyankopon* in Akan religious worship must not be overstated as references are often made to Him in their philosophies and social discourses. In these references, we find their understanding of His 'otherness' and primacy in all things.



West African States, c. 1865

### 3.2.2 The Ancestors

Occupying a vital position in the graded hierarchy of Akan social intercourse are the ancestors, the living dead. These are the forebears who, having completed their earthly sojourn, become the guardian spirits of the various clans and communities. As guardians of the living, they intervene in the conduct of individuals and communities by sanctioning obedience with prosperity to their earthly kin and redressing omissions and infringements through afflictions, and sometimes calamities.

The veneration of the ancestors is rooted in the belief that there is 'a world of spirit (*asaman*) where all their ancestors live in very much the same way as they lived on earth' (Busia 1951:23). Busia reports that, consequently, among the Asante people,

When a man is dying, water is poured down his throat...to help him climb the steep hill into the world of spirits. When he has died, [soul] food (*kraduane*) is set before the dead body. Relatives and friends give presents of gold-dust, cloths, blankets, mats, and pillows for the deceased to take into the world of spirits, where it is believed he will need these things as on earth<sup>1</sup> (Busia 1951:23).

Consequently, the seeming ostentation attached to funeral ceremonies among Akan people underscores its importance as the ultimate rite of passage that must be carried out as traditions lay them down. Otherwise, improper burial may provoke the anger of the departed kinsman whose spirit, believed to be roving about the homestead, would not be accepted into the community of the departed. When, however, the rites have been faithfully carried out, and shortly before the coffin is finally sealed, the deceased is addressed by a member of the clan:

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<sup>1</sup> The value of the gift received at this passage is usually determined by the social status of the newly departed. Since the spirit world of the ancestors is equally graded into the ranks of 'the chiefs, elders and heads of families, and...clans and *abusua*...when chiefs and important men [are] buried, slaves, favourite wives and others [are] killed to accompany them' (Smith 1966:70, 71). Rattray equally observed that 'It was incumbent upon those left on earth to see the king enter the spirit-world with a retinue befitting his high station' (Rattray 1927:106).

To-day you go. We have fired guns. We have brought sheep.  
We brought cloths. We have made a fine funeral.  
Do not let any one fall ill.  
Let us get money to pay for the expenses we have made.  
Let all the mourners have strength.  
Life to the chief. Let him beget children.  
Let all be fertile (Rattray 1927:159,160).

By these words the living declare their faithfulness to the obligation to give the departed a befitting burial and demand from him or her reciprocal benevolence.

Periodic and regular remembrance of the departed ones continues as morsels of food are offered them at meals and drops of drinks are poured in their memory. At community festivals and significant occasions, the ancestors do not only exact remembrance and due acknowledgement, they are assumed to be present. Busia tells of a personal experience:

At one *Adae* ceremony I attended at Mampong I stood among the crowd of spectators watching the dances. An elderly man, one of the sub-chiefs, suddenly got up and asked to leave to go home. As he passed he explained to me: 'The *samanfo* (spirits) have come; they are all about here; it is too much for me. I am going home.' (Busia 1951:26).

It is with such active deference that Akan people venerate the memory of their departed heroes and forebears and consciously continue to interact with them for their approval and blessings in temporal matters. Much more, the living also anticipate their acceptance into their rank when death finally comes.

### 3.2.3 The Clan

At the heart of the political and religious life of Akan society is the *abusua*, that is the clan, to which persons belong. Although the clan grows through procreation in the basic family units, it is more than the unit as it includes the ancestors, in all their successive train through the generations, and those yet to be born (Smith 1966:66).

An essential characteristic of the Akan clan system is its matrilineal nature; that is natural descent, which governs the law of inheritance, is traced through the mother's lineage. This is based on a traditional anthropology that

the human person is made of two 'principles'—the blood (*mogya*) which he or she inherits from the mother and which actually determines his or her natural descent, rights and responsibilities, and the spirit (*ntoro*) which is inherited through the father. Consequently, since it is assumed that the blood is inherited in the lineage of the women, 'the closest bond is that which exists between siblings: children of the same parents or of the same mother' (Busia 1951:1). In this way,

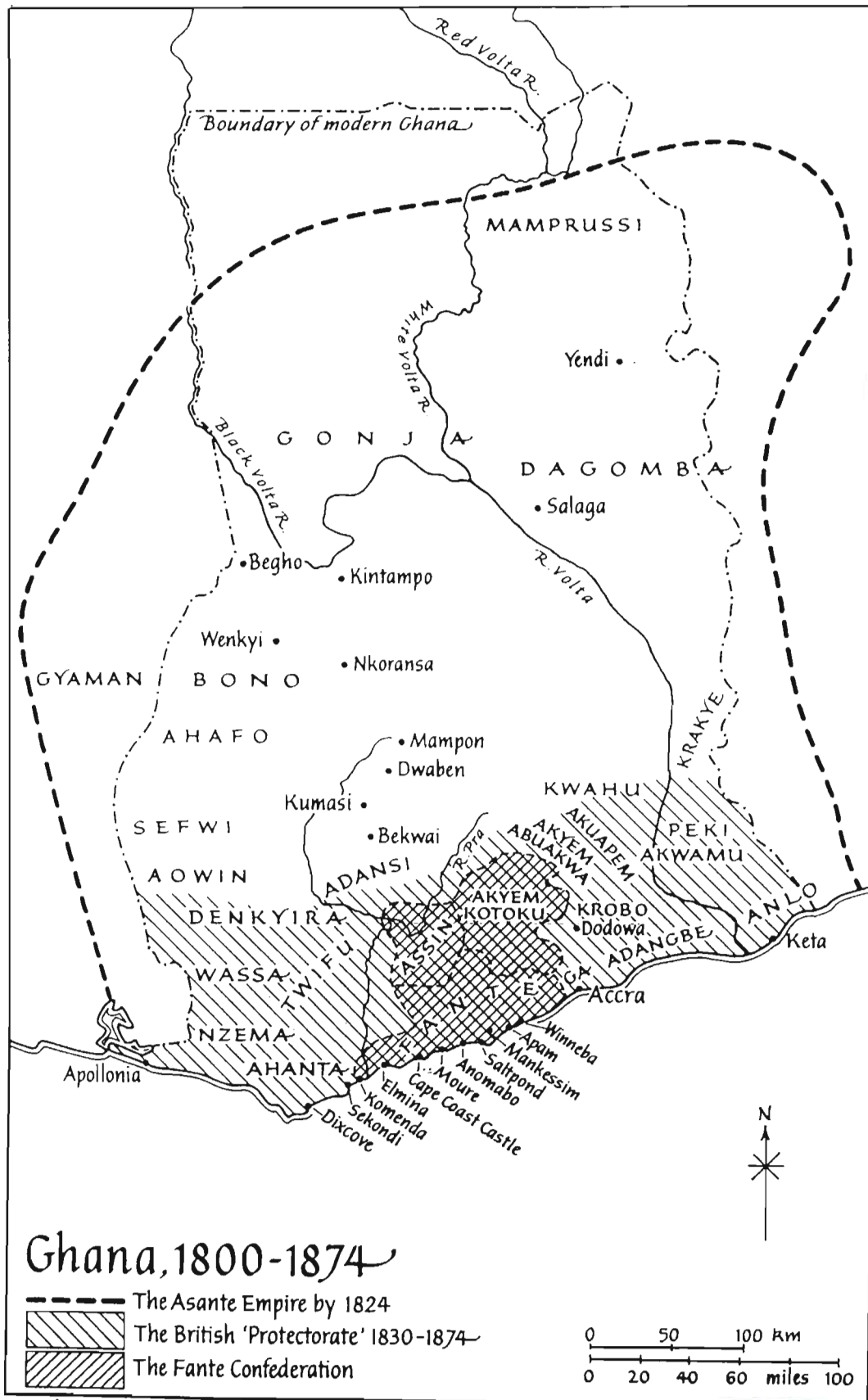
A man is...legally identified with his maternal kinsmen: his maternal grandmother and her brothers, his mother and her brothers and sisters, and his own brothers and sisters. It is his membership within this group that determines his succession to different offices or property, and his jural rights and obligations (Busia 1951:1)

The tie is nurtured and sustained in the daily activities of the members of every clan; hence, as the basic unit of communal life, members of the same *abusua* live in close proximity. Until the exigencies of modern life caught up with the local traditions, the practice was for 'all the men of a lineage to eat together daily in the house of a lineage head'. Even in marriage, the wives of the men were expected to bring evening meals to the residence of the lineage head where all the men, married and unmarried, shared the meals together. Mutual assistance came in the form of house building, farm clearing, road making, and in giving befitting burials to deceased relatives (Busia 1951:6,7).

The head of a lineage, as the political representative of the clan in the larger community, is expected to be mature in maintaining harmony within his clan and ably represent it in its interactions with other clans. The position of the head is especially significant when the clan is the ruling clan in the community.

#### **3.2.4 The Stool**

Another cardinal institution among the Akan people of the old Asante kingdom was the institution of the Stool. Commonly called the black stools, *Akonnwa tuntum*, for the color they acquire after the ritual polishing, they signify a position of authority among various clans and the communities. Among the Asante people, according to Kyerematen,



Ajayi & Crowder 1987, 2:216

The black stools are of historical importance, in that they commemorate the reigns of several of the Ashanti kings. They are also of great significance, enshrining the patriotic sentiments of the people and serving as a bond between the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. This bond is the very essence of Akan culture (Kyerematen 1969:1).

The tradition among the people was for significant clans in the community to institute one as the symbol of authority for their temporal leaders. The leader in whose memory the stool is consecrated must have attained a specific, significant achievement in the clan to deserve such honor. Implicitly, by this institution, successive leaders who occupy the stool are being enjoined to continue in the feat and noble trail the departed leader has blazed for the good of the clan or the community.

The stool, carved from a special tree, is believed to be inhabited by the spirit, *sunsum*, of the dead clan leader for whom it is instituted as soon as it is so consecrated<sup>2</sup>. Believed to possess great potency, it becomes the contact point between the living suppliant and the beneficent spirit of the departed leader, hence the periodic offering of sacrifices and invocation of prayers through it. In its ultimate significance, therefore, the stool is the meeting point between the living and the dead (Kyerematen 1969:1).

Kyerematen's submission on the object of address at stool ritual is very important. He writes that,

[A]lthough the stool belongs to the matrilineage, when sacrifices are made to the stool for and on behalf of the matrilineage and the name of the matrilineal ancestors are called, it is nevertheless the *ntoro* spirit derived from the father of the deceased stool-occupant, and not of the *abusua* or matriclan of the mother, that is addressed. This is because the spirit that is thought to occupy the stool is regarded as inherited from the father (Kyerematen 1969:2).

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<sup>2</sup> Noel Smith describes the stool as a low wooden seat carved out of one piece of wood according to a specific design, but the stool also symbolises the identity, unity and continuity of the group (Smith 1966: 73).

In its essence, the stool represents political authority; hence, to occupy a stool is to sit in the place of the ancestors and exercise authority in their behalf. And when a stool occupant is also the head of the larger community, in addition to his lineage, the stool assumes an authority wider than that of the lineage. Kyerematen adds that '[t]his is the principle which underlies the concept of the Golden Stool as enshrining the soul of the whole Ashanti nation' (Kyerematen 1969:2).

### 3.2.5 The Land

The religious nature of Akan society, as well as the people's social and political institutions, have given shape to their perception of the land as sacred. Although they do not conceive the earth as being governed by a divinity, as we find in Eastern tradition, they conceive it as being governed by 'a female principle, *Asase Yaa* (Earth) whose natal day is Thursday' (Busia 1951:40). This female principle can dispense blessing when given its due reverence and propitiation, but can be equally malevolent if it is violated. Hence, it is forbidden for persons to work on the farm on Thursday, so that no one disturbs her but everyone remains on 'good terms with the spirit of the earth' (Busia 1951:40).

At the regular *Adae* ceremony, which is generally held every twenty-one days, the drummer pays homage to the earth:

<i>Asase damirifa</i>	Earth, condolences
<i>Asase damirifa</i>	Earth condolences
<i>Asase ne mfuturu</i>	Earth and dust,
<i>Twereduampon,</i>	The Supreme Being I lean upon you
<i>Asase merebewu a</i>	Earth, when I am about to die
<i>Medan wo</i>	I lean upon you
<i>Asase mete ase a</i>	Earth, while I am alive
<i>Medan wo</i>	I depend upon you
<i>Asase a odi afunu,</i>	Earth that receives dead bodies,
<i>Odomankoma kyerema se</i>	The Creator's Drummer says
<i>Okoo baabi a</i>	From wherever he went,
<i>Wama ne ho mene so oo,</i>	He has roused himself
<i>Wama ne ho mene so.</i>	He has roused himself

(Busia 1951:40,41)

Since, according to the homage, human life depends so much on the produce and sustenance of the land, mortals must remain indebted to the benevolence of *Asase Yaa*, the earth. It is therefore a matter of principle that libation be poured in appreciation of its generosity when the field yields its increase and when the earth is to receive the remains of the dead. These are considered due reverence for the earth that sustains the living and the dead (Busia 1951:41,42).

In its administration, 'the land belongs to the ancestors' and '[i]t is from them that the living have inherited the right to use it' (Busia 1951:42). Hence, Akan people hesitate to sell their land as the ancestors may call them to give account of their stewardship in its regard. This belief in the ownership of the land by the ancestors is of political import. Since the land belongs to the ancestors and it is the link between them and their descendants, the administration of land lies in the hands of the stool occupant, head of the land-owning clan or the chief who represents them in temporal matters. The clan head or the chief, therefore, is the earthly custodian of the land, the chief administering those belonging to his own clan and the ones belonging to the community as a whole (Busia 1951:44). Busia states the privileges and the responsibility that pertain thereto:

The chief was responsible for the defence (sic) of the land at law or by arms. He had also certain defined rights which were coexistence with the rights of lineages and individuals in his Division. In case of extreme need he could sell the land, but not without the consent of his council and a sacrifice to the ancestors....He was entitled to tributes of fish from those who fish in its rivers; to a certain amount of work on his farm from his people...in the treasure-trove found on the land....He had also the right to impose specific levies, with the consent of his council, on the subjects who lived on his land (Busia 1951:44,45).

To guarantee equity and safeguard the interest of the community, the chief is forbidden by tradition to accumulate wealth. What he receives at the festivals is to be shared among his Elders and subjects who are expected to share with those they lead and represent. The privileges of office, which come in tributes and seemingly

cheap labors 'were to enable him fulfil the obligations of his office, but not to enrich him personally' (Busia 1951:51). These restraints and controls are devices to maintain egalitarianism in spite of the enormous cost to the people of running the state.

Finally, it needs to be stated that among the Akan people, especially the Asante, the land does not belong to individuals. Being the rallying point of clans and lineages, it could hardly be forfeited in perpetuity, not even to the king however despotic he may tend to be (Busia 1951:60). This is because the communitarian nature of the society issues out in the solidarity of the clans and guarantees the protection of individuals against undue exploitation.

### **3.2.6 Political Organization**

The evolution of contemporary Akan societies, beginning from the late seventeenth-century rise of the Asante kingdom, took place in an environment of military conquests. The effect of this on the political organization of Akan states was that state political offices were patterned after a military organization in which the paramount chief represented the highest authority. Hence, the chief was not only an earthly representative of the ancestors but also the military leader of the state.

Moreover, the Akan political system was designed to effect checks and balances to the authority of the chiefs. In this the chiefs take counsel with their councils of Elders and communicate to their communities, as well as get their consensus, through the Elders and leaders of the various clans. Because the chiefs do not communicate decisions directly to members of their communities, their tendency toward despotism was highly curtailed in spite of the fact that everyone is intimately yoked to life in community.

In administration, the Asante Union, which was at the peak of its prominence at the turn of the nineteenth century, remained 'a loose confederation' in which conquered territories continued to govern themselves 'through the lineage, village, and sub-division' (Busia 1951:87). In this manner they remained as tributary states in the Asante Union. But the Asantehene did not leave

conquered territories in the charge of subdued chiefs who could rebel against his authority. To avert such rebellion, he appointed his own men as royal ambassadors to the courts of conquered chiefs to remind them of his authority as well as to keep eyes on any plan to revolt (Reynolds 1987:219). Hence, while it appears as if conquest and domination were benevolent, they were actually sustained by coercion.

While the southern Akan states of the Fantes and Akyem continued to prove difficult for the Asante powers to dominate and control, the Union enjoyed relative stability in its northern sector. As a result, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, Islamic cultural and political influences had become apparent in the Asante court at Kumasi. In addition to these, the effects of the association of the Muslims with the people were manifested in the sales at the markets of amulets ‘valued for the protection they allegedly gave Asante soldiers and other citizens in periods of war or adversity’ (Reynolds 1987:227).

From all these, we can safely conclude that in spite of their seeming arbitrariness and preoccupation with ancestor veneration, when the European missionaries came to the people, reverence for life in community was the hallmark of Akan culture and civilization. As the following section will also show, the same dynamics were at play in the Yoruba society.

### **3.3 Culture among the Yoruba People**

If the Akan people’s existence revolved around the compelling demand of the ancestors for remembrance, that of the Yoruba people was centered around the multiplicity of divinities whose wrath is to be avoided and whose favors are to be sought by means possible. This is not to imply that the Yoruba people do not believe in ancestor veneration; rather, it is subtler in their religious observances and much less prominent in their daily social order as to exact clannish obligations and compel moment by moment attention.

Nevertheless, ancestor veneration is the rationale behind most of the cults, especially the *Egungun* cult, which is practiced in the cultures of the entire peoples of Yoruba land. In its annual festivals, the living solicit the favor and the blessings

of their departed forebears (Johnson 1921:30,31). However, the distinctiveness of the traditional Yoruba social system is the overwhelming plurality of its religious cults to which different persons and communities subscribe. To these are added other countless traditional rites and observances peculiar to different families, *Oro Ile*, by which they seek to ensure the survival of their generations.

### 3.3.1 Religion and Ethics

Although the Yoruba people believe in the existence of the Supreme Being they call *Olorun*, the Lord of heaven, or *Olódùmarè*, the Almighty, He is not offered direct worship. As a matter of fact, He is believed to be immense in honor and majesty and spatially unlimited, hence their not erecting a temple in His honor to worship him. Hints are made in their proverbs, maxims, and anecdotes to His wisdom and ultimate authority to arbitrate, by providence, in the affairs of humankind. For them, as with other African peoples, He is the ‘Wholly Other’ in contradistinction to humankind and the many intermediaries called the *Orisa*, lesser divinities.

For the Yoruba religion, we must certainly speak in the plural for the overwhelming number of the divinities that make up the people’s pantheon. Some of these gods are products of remotest antiquity or mythological kings and apotheosized heroes and villains. This deification of deceased personalities is their own way of immortalizing their ancestors and establishing for themselves identity in a world that is vast and perpetually in flux.

Johnson put the number of the different divinities at 401 although he mentioned only thirteen in fair details.<sup>3</sup> Among these are *Kori*, *Orisa-nla*, *Ori*, *Ogun*, *Esu* or *Elegbara*, *Sopona*, and *Egungun*. Others are *Oro*, *Ifa*, *Sango*, *Oya*, *Erinle*, and *Orisa Oko* (Johnson 1921:26-39). To appreciate the dynamics behind the faiths represented by these divinities, it is necessary to explicate the three

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson certainly drew from the Yoruba oral literature of the *Odu* corpus, but Bolaji Idowu considered as uncertain the number of divinities in the Yoruba pantheon. He argued that such poetic play and embellishment with words and figures, as in oral traditions, cannot be taken as definite in spite of their significance to those who first

principal ones being widely honored among Yoruba people—*Òrìsà-nlá* (or *Obatala*), *Ifa* (or *Orunmila*), and *Sango*.

*Òrìsà-nlá*, also known as *Obàtálá*, that is *Oba-ti-ala*, ‘King in White Cloth’, is believed to be the most senior of the ministers of *Olódùmarè* and was instrumental in the creation of the universe, including other divinities. Also believed to be *Olódùmarè*’s vice-regent on earth, he is said to be His direct offspring, hence the epithet ‘*Ibikeji Edumare*’ (Idowu [1962]1996:71,72). *Òrìsà-nlá* is the arch-divinity of the Yoruba pantheon and is also believed to wield a scepter of authority, *Odu*, given him by *Olódùmarè* while setting out for his earthly assignment of creation. By this, he was imbued with the authority of *Olódùmarè* ‘to speak and act and be implicitly obeyed’ (Idowu [1962]1996:71). In faith and practice,

*Òrìsà-nlá* represents to the Yoruba the idea of ritual and ethical purity, and therefore the demand and sanctions of high morality. Immaculate whiteness is often associated with him—this symbolises ‘holiness’ and purity. He is often pictured as an ancient clothed in white and bedecked with white ornaments. His temple, especially on the inside, is washed white; his emblems are to be kept in white containers and consist, among other things, of white chalk and white beads; his priests and priestesses are robed in white and wear white ornaments (Idowu [1962]1996:72).

For the sacrifices offered at the shrine of *Òrìsà-nlá*, the votaries must avoid blood, while the normal recipe at its annual celebration would be pounded yam served with bloodless snail cooked with shea-butter. The water at the shrine must be changed daily and fetched in the very early hours of the morning by a virgin or an elderly woman who has passed the age of child-bearing (Daramola & Jeje 1967:244; Idowu [1962]1996:72).

Still *Òrìsà-nlá* abhors controversies and detests insults, hence his monogamy in marriage. The story is widely circulated about this divinity that his attention was once brought to the unhappy state of men in the world. Upon his inquiry, he discovered that ‘the reason for that state of affairs was the noises and

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voiced them. For him the embellishments are too equivocal to be accorded any exactitude (Idowu [1962]1996:64).

quarrels of the men's several wives' (Idowu [1962]1996:72). Consequently, he pronounced the philosophy:

*'A o le gbe aarin oji eniyan keni o ma si wi. Òrìsà-nlá ri onigba aya n'le k' o too f'owo mu Yemoo nikan; a o le gbe aye olufe k'orun k'aya je ki ona gun*— It is sheer impossibility to live among forty persons (wives) and avoid saying the wrong things. Òrìsà-nlá sees the possibility of marrying two hundred wives and yet cleaves to Yemo alone; one who bears the responsibility of rulership over the civic life of Ife cannot expect to succeed if at the same time he has to cope with a multiplicity of wives' (Idowu [1962]1996:72).

The concomitant of following Òrìsà-nlá is truth and uprightness hence those who adhere to the cult are expected to be honest and fair in their dealings. Consequent to obedience in this, their lives will be as peaceful, clear and pure like *'omi af'owuro pon'*, that is, 'water drawn early in the morning from an undisturbed spring' (Idowu [1962]1996:72). Because of his endowment with Olodumare's scepter, the *Odu*, Òrìsà-nlá has the power to make his followers great and that also earned him the epithet *Àdìmúlá*, 'One on whom one relies absolutely for prosperity and safety' (Idowu [1962]1996:72,73).

The beliefs and practices of Yoruba people have issued out of their perception of this divinity—'as a very ancient person of very venerable aspect in whom greatness combines with splendor; he is also regarded as being kindly, but holy and authoritative' (Idowu [1962]1996:73). Yoruba tradition assigned his original home to Igbo but that he migrated and became the king of Ìrànjé. His worship was firmly rooted there and from there it spread all over the Yoruba country where people worship him under different names. There is no doubt that his appeal has been his beneficent spirit coupled with moral rectitude.

Another divinity widely consulted by the Yoruba people is Òrúnmìlà. Believed to have accompanied Òrìsà-nlá to the earth as the counselor in the work of creation, Òrúnmìlà is regarded by the Yoruba people as knowing all things and so capable of giving directions on matters that are uncertain. His name, derived from the Yoruba saying, *'Orun l'o mo atila'*— 'Only Heaven knows the means of salvation', accounts for his wide consultation among Yoruba people as the divinity that can guide one through the precarious exigencies of life. His wisdom and

foreknowledge were conferred by Olódùmarè ‘to the end that he may be His accredited representative on earth in matters relating to man’s destiny’ (Idowu [1962]1996:75).

Òrúnmilà is said to be counselor, not only to human beings, but also to other divinities. His capability to divine for human beings is based on the oral tradition that he was present when Olódùmarè created human beings, and so he knew everything pertaining to man. Because he knows every secret of man,

[H]e can predict what is coming to pass or prescribe remedies against any eventuality. He is called Elérii ipín— ‘The witness, or advocate, of destiny or lot’. This refers to the two-fold conception of him as witness of all the secrets connected with man’s being and as one who is in a position to plead with Olódùmarè on behalf of man so that unhappy issues may be averted or rectified....[In this connection], one of his appellations is *Òkítìbìrì, A pa-ojó-ikú-dà*—‘The great changer, who alters the date of death’ (Idowu [1962]1996:76).

The priests of Òrúnmilà are the *babaláwo* who use the *Odu* corpus of *Ifa* to divine in his name. Because Yoruba people are wont to discern the end of their matters from the beginning, they consult Òrúnmilà’s *Ifa* oracle to declare the potential outcomes of imminent decisions and, if need be, help to avert disasters through propitiatory sacrifices. Hence, great decisions such as marriage, childbirth and nurture, house building, and communal decisions of grave import are set before the *babaláwo*, the priests of Òrúnmilà, to discern prospects and give guidance on the course of action to take. Perplexing disasters are also placed before them to discern effectual remedies.

The moral imperatives of Yoruba religion also find expression in the prohibition of the *babaláwo* from taking undue advantage of their clients. Professional ethics require that they provide services to the poor irrespective of their station in life. By no means are they to deny anyone their services on account of money. As a matter of fact they are expected to live lives free from avarice and in the service of their communities as their ultimate reward lies with Òrúnmilà.

In terms of origin, a tradition recounts that the cult of Òrúnmilà was introduced to the Yoruba country from among the Nupe, another West African people immediate to the northern border of the old Oyo kingdom. Reputed to be a

prodigy, Setilu traveled widely among peoples of Benin, Owo and Ado to finally take permanent residence at Ife where he practiced sorcery in his adult years. His gift of sorcery soon brought him fame as many consulted him for his rare gift of discernment. His immense usefulness to people resulted in his deification, hence like Òrìsà-nlá, Òrúnmilà represents another deified hero of the Yoruba people widely appreciated for the hope and succor he brought to his people in times of need.

At the other end of the wide spectrum of Yoruba divinities is Sàngó the god of thunder.<sup>4</sup> Pugnacious in disposition and fiery in temperament, Sàngó was the fourth Alaafin of Oyo, that is the paramount chief of Oyo. His rule extended as far as Benin, Popo and Dahomey where the people still fear his malevolence in death (Johnson 1921:34). Tradition holds that he was a despot who ruled with an iron fist and was dethroned by his people for his unkindly and defiant behavior. On being deposed and '[f]inding himself deserted not only by his friends, but also by his wife OYA, he committed suicide at a place called Koso' (Johnson 1921:34). The priestly family at Koso, Oyo, however holds to a more refined tradition that he did not commit suicide but ascended to heaven with a chain hanged on a tree (Idowu [1962]1996:89).

Consequent upon his 'shameful' death, his friends who sought to undo the reproach of their friend's demise and atone for their deserting him in his hour of need went to Ibariba to procure a charm by which they would conjure thunder and lightening to strike those who would taunt their departed friend. With so many houses in Oyo set on fire from lightening and supposed mischief (Johnson 1921:37), they attributed the widespread disaster to Sàngó's fury and instituted the ritual through which his wrath is placated. Thus driving fears into the people to

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<sup>4</sup> Bolaji Idowu, at length, distinguished Sàngó from Jàkúta, another Yoruba divinity associated with thunder and lightening but of a refined moral disposition. He is said to be more antiquated than Sàngó among the Yoruba as the solar and thunder divinity that exercises Olodumare's wrath against 'children of disobedience'. Although the priests of Sàngó at Oyo worship their divinity every five days according to the traditional calendar of Oyo, that day originally belonged to Jàkúta and the priests at Oyo so recognize that. Justice-sensitive Jàkúta may, therefore, not be confused with malevolent Sàngó as Leo Frobenius erroneously did, Idowu stressed (Idowu [1962]1996:90,91).

restrain them from speaking evil of their departed friend and despot, it became a saying among the Yoruba people that *Eni Sàngó s'aju e wole, ko ni b'oba Koso*—one who sees Sàngó strike will not join people to taunt the king of Koso.

If the rule of Sàngó was oppressive, the cost implication of the ritual that placates his anger in lightening is burdensome. In Johnson's value judgement of the cult, 'The unfortunate sufferers...are often obliged to put their children to service in order to raise money sufficient to meet the demands of the greedy worshippers of this heartless god' (Johnson 1921:36). Yoruba tradition holds that his female consort Oya, described by the people as *Èfùfulèlè tì ì da' gi-òkè-lókè*—'The rushing wind that tears down trees from the top' (Idowu [1962]1996:89)—turned into Odo Oya, the River Niger, after committing suicide in regret for deserting her husband and hastening his untimely death.

In general, Yoruba religious worship is practised on the sacred days of each divinity and at the annual festivals. The annual festivals provide occasions for rejoicing and thanksgiving in appreciation of the blessings of the outgoing year. On the occasion, people put on their best and communities are filled with the spirit of felicitation and goodwill. Idowu reported that the offerings presented at the shrines 'are mostly thank offerings, and the meals constitute an opportunity of communion between the divinity and his "children" on the one hand, and then among the "children" themselves on the other. It is a special renewal of covenants' (Idowu [1962]1996:110).

From these three examples, as representative models of Yoruba religious cults, three things become evident. The first is that many of the Yoruba divinities are deified heroes who, during their earthly sojourn, exhibited awesome or awful propensities that continue to elicit admiration or trepidation. Implicitly, the patronage offered them in worship is meant to encourage heroism as well as restrain villainy in the Yoruba society. The religious traditions, therefore, do not only give the people social identity by keeping in view the memories of significant personages of the peoples' history; they are also didactic in the process of socializing the human person according to Yoruba cultural understanding of life and reality. In this they are utilitarian.

The second is that the patronage represents subtle but creative ancestor veneration. It is subtle in comparison with what we find in the Akan cultural context, and it is creative in that it openly made religion out of the Yoruba ancestors. This will be discussed in detail in the following section.

In the third place, the ethical contrast between the emergence and practice of Sango cult, on one hand, and those of Òrìsà-nlá (or Obàtálà) and Ifá (or Òrúnmilà), on the other hand, signifies the presence of two strands of socializing values in the Yoruba religious traditions. The former perpetuates ignoble values while the latter seeks to enshrine the noble.

### 3.3.2 The Ancestors

If the aforementioned religious cults of the Yoruba nation, among several others, tacitly represent ancestor veneration, the Egungun cult explicitly celebrates them. Again, like other Africans, the Yoruba people believe in the continuity of life after death in which their departed forebears continue to watch over their earthly kin and bestow blessings on them. At the Egungun festivals, these ancestors are remembered with fondness and nostalgia. Although the masquerades feign representation of reincarnated ancestors, hence their being called *Ará Orùn*, ‘the heavenly personage’, it is widely known that they are more of a make-believe tradition than reality.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Egungun masquerade is a make-believe reincarnation of the ancestors does not diminish the spiritual potency of the cult and the importance associated with its institution. The rituals associated with it are believed to be as effectual as those of other cults whose adherents do not clad themselves in exotic apparels and camouflages. In spite of the joy and lightheartedness that pervade Egungun festivals, there are taboos about them. For example,

It is considered a crime to touch an Egugun (sic) dress in public, and disrespectful to pass him by with the head uncovered. Even a boy Egugun (sic) is considered worthy of being honoured by his (supposed) surviving parents, he salutes them as elderly people would do, and promises the bestowal of gifts on the family (Johnson 1921:30).

Still, as part of the awe in which some of them are held, they are not to be seen by women. To do so would amount to a serious violation of some taboos, the cost of which can be the life of the contemptuous violator.

The most high-ranking officer in Egungun tradition is the *Alapini*, 'one of the seven great noble men of OYO (the OYO MESI)', and as one of the counselors to the Alaafin, 'he resides always in the royal city of OYO' (Johnson 1921:30). As a vital office in the politics of Oyo, there can only be one Alapini at a time, and his calling requires that he be a *monorchis*, thus sharing in the privileges of eunuchs as well as those belonging to the Egungun cult (Johnson 1921:30). The office requirement of being a *monorchis* is symbolic of his calling as the head of the cult. By virtue of one of his testes descending into the scrotum of his genital rather than the two, the head of the Egungun physically embodies the two worlds of the living and the dead, which he represents in the politics of Oyo. The Alapini therefore bears in his body the mark of the Egungun cult.

The high priest of the cult, the *Alagba*, is the custodian of the regalia of the Egungun, which he keeps until it is necessary to use them; and various sections in major towns of the Yoruba country have their own Alagba. It is at the Alagba's special room dedicated to Egungun worship in the community, the *Igbale*, that the masquerades dress-up and file out to public view when it is necessary to do so. There also the women enthusiastically throng, during the annual festivals, with the sumptuous meals they have prepared specially and supposedly for the ancestors. Johnson comments that:

These festivals are lucky times for the men, for on these occasions, the women are made to spend largely to feast "deceased relatives," while the food is consumed by the men in the Alagba's department. The number of fowls and goats killed and devoured at such times is simply prodigious. Such is the force of habit...that although in reality the women are no longer deceived, as regards these alleged visits of their dear departed, yet they make their offerings with cheerfulness, and with a sure expectation of blessings (Johnson 1921:30).

The enthusiasm of the women can only be explained by their belief that although camouflaged men are the immediate recipients of their charities, in

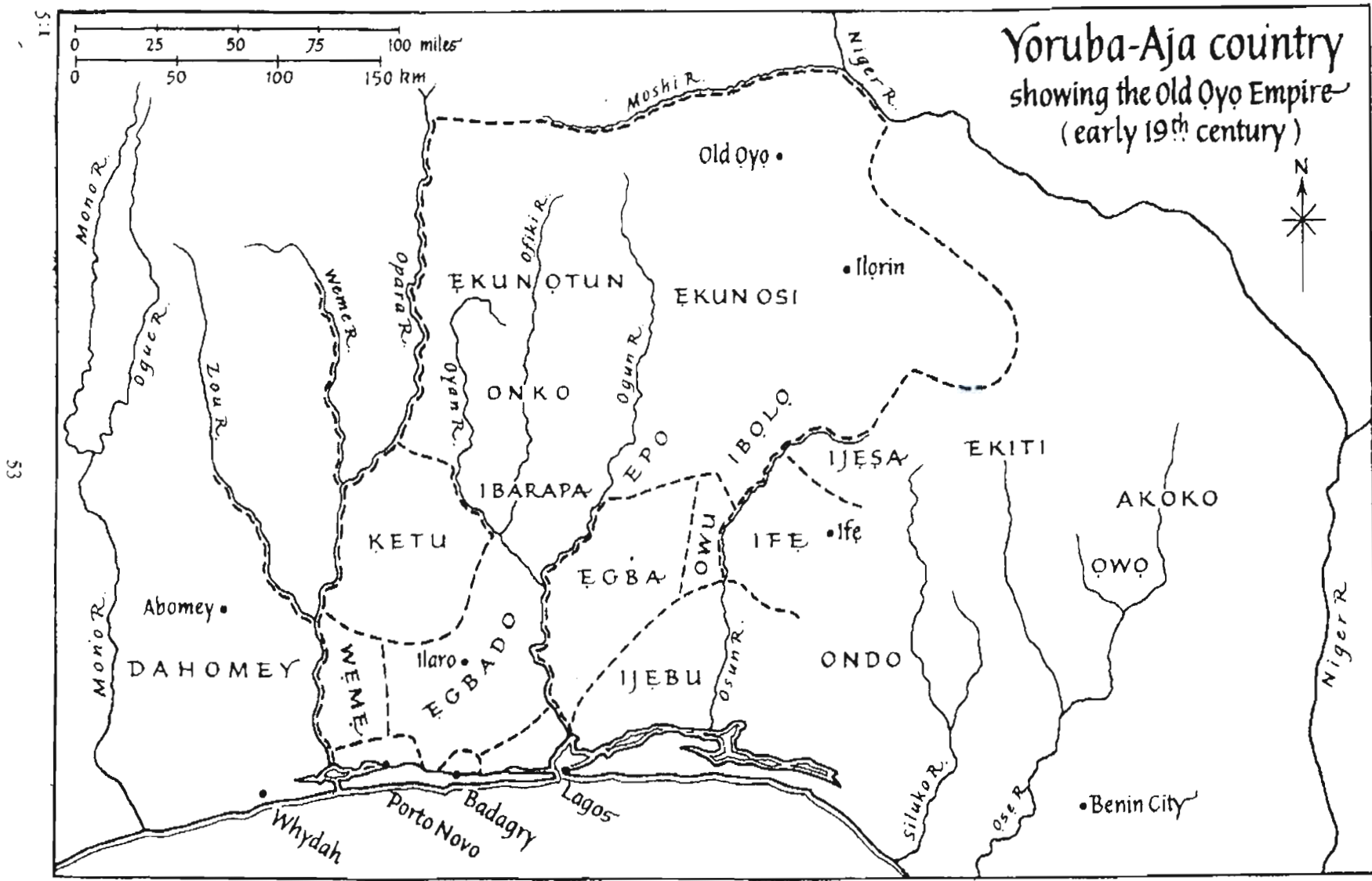
essence they are sacrifices in honor of the cherished, dead ancestors. Thus we find that in Yoruba religion ancestor veneration is both subtle and open, yet in both situations of subtlety and openness they creatively approach the living dead with generosity and reverent dispositions.

### 3.3.3 The Social System

Yoruba people, from antiquity, have lived with one another in close proximity, as opposed to dispersed and isolated settlements; hence, urban living for long has characterized their social life. In this vein, they refer to those who live in isolated settlements with the derogatory term *Ara oko*— ‘Jungle people’. The people of Oyo, whom Johnson often referred to as Yoruba Proper and who until the nineteenth century lived in the open Savannah grassland, referred to the region south of their empire, and occupied by their compatriots in the tropical forest, as *Epo*— Weeds. When the internecine wars of that century forced the Oyo people into the tropical forest to the south, the unsafe nature of the times reinforced this tendency to live in close proximity for mutual defense.

Domestically, Yoruba people live in what they call *Agbo’le*, literally ‘Cluster of Houses’, headed by the *Baale*, the father of the lineage. He is the arbitrator in domestic matters and wields authority in matters that concern the life of the family, nuclear and extended. As head of his domain, he is the official representative of his clan and is privy to all the matters affecting the household. By virtue of his office, he is entitled at meals to the leg of any animal slaughtered in the compound irrespective of the purpose for the slaughtering, ritual or festive (Johnson 1921:100).

At the death of the *Baale*, and after the necessary rites and ceremonies of mourning have been completed, a successor is appointed from the family who steps in as the new *Baale* who then moves into the apartment of the deceased clan head. But this installation does not take place until the roof of the apartment occupied by the deceased in his lifetime is dismantled, irrespective of its state, and re-roofed by the new entrant to the position of *Baale*. The new entrant is therefore called *Arole*, that is ‘One who roofs the House’ (Johnson 1921:100).



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The communitarian nature of the Yoruba society also finds expression in the mutual assistance members of the same household give to one another. In this, it is incumbent on young men, even if they are married, to work on their father's farm each day after which they could work on their own. During harvest, their female friends also render assistance to them. Social obligations like these sustained cohesion among lineages which, unlike those of Akan, was patrilineal.

Yoruba people are believed to have widely practiced monogamy in their earliest years because of the cost of maintaining large families, hence only rich individuals could indulge in the practice of polygamy. In terms of morality, they also place high premium on chastity while ensuring that the intending in-laws do not hail from families with embarrassing ailments like insanity, epilepsy, or hereditary physical deformities. To these is added the counsel of the *Ifa* oracle through its priest as to whether an intending union would be fruitful and enhancing to the future of the clan.

The women had the responsibility of seeking marriage partners for the male members of their households, although marriages were often arranged by parents from the infancy of their children. When the time came for these to be made good, the ceremonies usually took place after the harvest and especially after the Egungun festival, although it could be done anytime during the year. This harvest period affords plenty to entertain guests and keep the celebration lively. Until modern life caught up with their traditions, when eventually the Yoruba bride takes her leave for her new home, she did so 'with her idols<sup>5</sup>, and was furnished from home with every thing that appertains to the female department of housekeeping' (Johnson 1921:113-115).

During the period under consideration, a typical household of the Yoruba included the Baale, that is the head, the wife or wives, the children, slaves bought for service, and sometimes an *Iwofa*, that is a boy or girl put to service in residence

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of the reasons Bolaji Idowu adduced for the multiplicity of divinities among the Yoruba. He argued that the movements of cults and their resultant fusion into new ones are partly responsible for the multiplicity of divinities among the Yoruba people (Idowu [1962]1996:65,66).

for debt repayment by their kith and kin. The Iwofa is very different from the slave in that the former still has his or her freedom and political right in the community while the latter has none. The slave can be punished but the service person cannot be. Sometimes parents put their children to service for debt repayment as means of training their wards in apprenticeship. It was widespread among the Yoruba because of its economic value and it was guided by rules and regulations that protected both debtors and creditors. The conclusion here is that the Yoruba social system is based on filial ideals where parents and children respectively lead and accept leadership based on communal values.

### 3.3.4 Kingship

The Alaafin, the paramount ruler of Oyo, represented the royal institution of Yoruba land in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> His personality was inviolable and he wielded the power of life and death over his subjects; Johnson wrote that as an absolute monarch, he was ‘more dreaded than even the gods’ (Johnson 1921:40). He hinted at the vastness of Alaafin’s political reach at the peak of the prosperity of Oyo kingdom, when he wrote that the Alaafin’s ‘vassal or provincial kings and ruling princes were 1060...which then included the Popos, Dahomey, and parts of Ashanti, with portions of the Tapas and Baribas’ (Johnson 1921:41).

The sacredness of the person of the king made it a taboo to speak of the king’s demise as death, for a Yoruba king never dies; rather, he ascends to his ancestors. In this vein, part of the ceremonies that accompanied his coronation, among several others, was his preparation for apotheosis in anticipation of his ultimate translation to the world of the ancestors (Johnson 1921:48).

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<sup>6</sup> Political development in the 1980s saw a bitter rivalry over the chairmanship of the council of chiefs of Oyo State in the modern nation state of Nigeria between the Alaafin of Oyo and the Ooni of Ife. The people of Oyo claimed to have the primacy of political authority over the Yoruba nation from antiquity while the Ooni had always been the *Pontifex Maximus* to the nation, Ile-Ife being the cradle of most Yoruba religious cults. Those in Ife argued the inseparability of the two offices, especially because Ile Ife is reputed to be the traditional, ancestral home of all Yoruba people. Further creation of new states in the region has put paid to the controversy.

To ascertain the nature of the tenure of every Alaafin at the commencement of their reigns, they are presented with two similar containers, both covered and made from the gourd. One of these often contained money and things that symbolize wealth and prosperity. The other contained 'miniature swords and spears, arrows' and other injurious weapons 'denoting wars and trouble for the country'. Tradition required that the king choose one of these calabashes before seeing their contents and his choice, it was believed, would be 'the fate of the Yoruba country during his reign' (Johnson 1921:46). Again this is not to satisfy mere curiosity. With so many forces, spiritual and mundane, arrayed against man and society, the people could ill afford to be caught unawares by their adversaries, hence their seeming curiosity and survivalist attitude to events at every significant transition in the lives of persons and communities.

The weakness of kingship in the old traditional Yoruba State of Oyo was the unrestrained propensity of the royalty to accumulate wealth and wives, live ostentatiously, and wield the power of life and death over the citizens. Although the king's authority was supposed to have been moderated by the *Oyo Mesi*, his seven-man council of noble men, some of them proved overbearing in their leadership and were actually despotic. This attitude combined with the arrogance and treachery of the Alaafin's military chiefs to later weaken the state. The weakness encouraged the revolt of some of the vassal states and led to the unavoidable collapse of the kingdom and the scrambled retreat of the royal city into the forest to the south.

### **3.3.5 Political Organization**

In a manner similar to the military organization of the Akan states, political organization of the Oyo Empire was also patterned after military formation. In addition to the almost endless retinue of staff, men and women connected with the religious and civil administration of the palace, the Alaafin ruled with two groups of Oyo nobility. The first group consisted of officers who attained their status by heredity while the other consisted of office holders who earned their position by military prowess.

The office holders in the first group were the *Oyo Mesi*, comprising the Osorun, Samu, Alapini, Laguna, Akiniku, and Asipa. Succession to these offices was determined by families but did not necessarily pass from fathers to their immediate sons. The Alaafin had the prerogative to choose from any other lineage in the family when he considered it necessary to do so. The officers constituting the Oyo Mesi together represented 'the voice of the nation' and by virtue of their offices, as either religious cult leaders or administrative personnel, they took decisions with the Alaafin in the running of the state. The most senior of them was the Osorun or Basorun who operated along with the royalty as the Prime Minister (Johnson 1921:70).

The second group, and next to the Oyo Mesi, was the group of the *Eso* which constituted the military guard of the kingdom. Membership of this elite Corps was strictly by merit of valor. The leader of the Eso was the *Aare-ona-Kakanfo*, more commonly called the Aare or Kakanfo. Concerning their temperament, the history of the Yoruba nation reveals that they were defiant and stubborn, never bowing to anyone including the Alaafin. For their audacity, they never resided in the royal city but in one of the provincial towns nearby. Tradition required that at least once in every three years, the Kakanfo must go to war at a place appointed by the king, and he was expected to return in three months victorious or killed in the war. This sometimes complicated state politics as the tradition provided cruel Alaafin the means to eliminate headstrong Kakanfo.

The courage of the Eso often elicited the admiration of the populace and the Corps became representative of the virtues of loyalty, courage and ultimate self-giving for the nation. Samuel Johnson wrote that:

So much is this title thought of by military men and others and so great is the enthusiasm it inspires, that even the children and grandchildren of an Eso hold themselves bound to maintain the spirit and honour of their sires. The Eso is above everything else noble in act and deed (Johnson 1921:73).

It was therefore a popular saying among the Yoruba that:

<i>Ohun meji l'o ye Eso</i>	One of two things befit an Eso
<i>Eso ja O le Ogun</i>	The Eso must fight and conquer (or)
<i>Eso ja o ku si ogun</i>	The Eso must fight and perish (in war)
	(Johnson 1921:73)

Ranking below the Eso in state authority were the provincial rulers and chiefs and their governments. These were vassal states and regional conglomerations that served as buffers in the defense of the kingdom, especially the royal city. Each was headed by a provincial authority representing the Alaafin who led the lesser chiefs to pay him annual homage during state festivals. Among these were Onikoyi of Ikoyi taking charge of the *Ekun Osi*, the left flank; the Sabigana of Igana taking charge of the *Ekun Otun*, the right flank. The Akinrun of Ikirun led the Ibolu Province, while the Oluiwo of Iwo was responsible for the Epo Province. Each of these provincial authorities maintained their retinue of staff in gradations like those of Alaafin though on a reduced scale so as not to rival the dignity of office belonging only to him.

### **3.3.6 The Land**

Yoruba people believe that land symbolizes family and community identities, and while its different departments in nature— forests, rivers and seas— may be inhabited by spirits, they do not ascribe spiritual potency to land. There is no divinity assigned to land other than those associated with the life of Yoruba communities and which come under different names in different localities. This is not to imply that their belief and understanding about land is irreligious, for nothing is really exempted from the purview of religion in African societies. It is only that Yoruba people do not specifically associate any divinity with land although they believe in some cosmic powers that can adjudicate in its abuse and unjust appropriation.

For reason of order and effective administration, certain principles govern land use among Yoruba. The first is the principle that the land belongs to the king— *Oba lo n'ile*. This simply means that community lands are vested in the authority of the king while lineage heads administer those that belong to families. It is the prerogative of the king to allocate lands to immigrants and settlers who so desire them and allow them to continue their use of such lands as long as they wish

to remain in the community. Such lands however cease being theirs when they move out of the community.

The second principle, which the modern attitude of commercialism has modified, is that lands are never to be sold. They are to be allocated, and users are to make annual returns, in the produce of their fields, to their owners and those holding them in trust.

The third principle is that lands pass on from fathers to their sons in perpetuity and no one is allowed to deprive families of their lands. In fact no portion of family lands can be expropriated ‘without the unanimous consent of all the members thereof’ (Johnson 1921:96). This is because of the sentiment attached to land as a family inheritance and as a symbol of continuity of the lineage in the midst of change and decay. In the perpetuity of its inheritance lies the guarantee of the enduring existence of the family as against the possible tragedy of extinction. It is no wonder then that as ‘normally quiet and submissive’ (Johnson 1921:96) as Yoruba people can be, they can be volatile in land matters, because at stake are the family identity and the survival of their lineage.

While every member of Yoruba communities has unrestrained access to the forest to obtain materials for building, herbal medicines, and firewood, the administration of the forest is entirely in the hands of the hunters and their fraternities. Their input is, therefore, always sought in legislating about the use of the forests as such laws can only then be effective.

From the foregoing synopses of the cultures of the two groups of West Africans at the turn of the nineteenth century, and in comparison with what obtained in Europe at the same period, two facts emerge. In the first place, it is clear that both contexts of Akan and Yoruba cultures shared a lot of similarities in the way religion was used to safeguard human existence. Essentially, it provided the binding force for economic, political and social stability and underscored the coherence in which the material and non-material worlds of the people were held together. Religion also revealed the efforts of the people to live in harmony with their environment or transcend the realities that assail their existence. These realities were the world of spirit beings capable of leading human beings and their

societies toward peace, prosperity and abundance or disaster and destruction, hence the potential of everything in nature to serve their good or ill fortune. Their good fortune, the people believed, would be served when they appropriated nature and acknowledged their forebears with reverence; but ill fortune would be courted if they proved prodigal and treated earlier generations with contempt.

In the second place, the conceptual world of the peoples of West Africa in the nineteenth century, in contradistinction to that of Enlightenment Europe of the same period, was a religious understanding of life and reality in which there was no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Rather, for the people, the mundane and the spiritual existed in a symbiotic relationship. This conflict between West African understanding of life and reality, with its religio-cultural implications, and that of the Europeans prepared the ground for the conflict between European missionaries and West Africans in the evangelization of the latter in the nineteenth century.

### **3.4 Disintegration and Transformation**

The religious events that led to new initiatives in the closing decade of the eighteenth century England, in the bid to evangelize peoples overseas, found an equally auspicious opportunity in the social and the political conditions of the peoples of West Africa in the nineteenth century. In the early attempts of the Catholic Orders, European evangelists met African kingdoms that had stabilized and consolidated their religious and political traditions. Although kingdoms and territories had been achieved through conquests, some African chiefs and kings attained a considerable measure of territorial identity to be so respected and acknowledged by other lesser chiefs and authorities.

Not only were territories and spheres of authority recognized; trade brought people together across kingdoms and chiefdoms. There was material prosperity among the people as they bartered their goods one with another, in spite of the menace of slave raiding which made life unsafe in some places. In such a relatively stable environment, the Gospel was superfluous to the people for whom the gods and the ancestors had provided the peaceful environment necessary for

abundant life. However, beginning from the late eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, four major currents began to reshape West Africa and brought about major changes in the lives of its peoples.

The first was the abolition of slave trade in England and the repatriation of freed slaves from North America back to West Africa. Among the earliest resettlement centers for these returnees from England was the 'Province of Freedom', Sierra Leone, established in 1787. Those from North America settled at 'the mouth of the Mesurado River', Liberia, in 1822 (Clarke 1986:32,38). Many of these returnees had converted to Christianity while in America and some were, in fact, ministers. The resettlement in Liberia in particular met with difficulties, first in the unfavorable environmental conditions that led to the death of many returnees on Sherbro Island and, second, in the resistance of the indigenous people to the presence of the returnees. Some of these returnees had in their association with Europeans and Americans acquired some foreign values and, on arrival, maintained a distinct identity in the face of the hostilities of the indigenous people who, in the first place, gave them their land. In consequence, their presence introduced to West Africa a new tension, between the coastal elite and the less sophisticated peoples of the interior.

Moreover, the resettlement in Sierra Leone soon became strategic to the religious, social and political future of West Africa as it turned out to be the intellectual center and cradle for the nascent African nationalism that became full-fledged in the twentieth century. Freetown also provided the educated 'native agents' European missionaries needed to pioneer the work in Yoruba land and in the Niger Delta.

The second current that reshaped West Africa during the century in focus, and which justified the description of the region as one in transition, was the arrival of the missionaries of the Protestant persuasion on the coast. This arrival must be seen, in part, as an act of reparation for the abuses to which Europeans had subjected Africans in the slave trade. But much more, it was a product of a new consciousness among Europeans of the imperatives of Christian mission. The principal teams in the emergent process of evangelization were the Basel

Missionaries (BM) from Continental Europe, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from England and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) or the Methodists, also from England. The American Southern Baptist mission later followed their trails.

In the third place, the nineteenth century witnessed social unrest in the two great kingdoms of Oyo and Asante in the revolt of their conquered peoples and in the imperial dream of English people, consequently leading to the dissolution of their ancient regimes. The dissolution of the Oyo kingdom, in particular, has been attributed to the decay that festered in its politics where the royal authority systematically grew weak, and sometimes despotic, while the princes and the lesser authorities like the Basorun and the Kakanfo became more daring and defiant of the Alaafin's authority (Johnson 1921:188-205). Samuel Johnson stated unequivocally that:

The cup of iniquity of the nation was full; cruelty, usurpation, and treachery were rife, especially in the capital; and the provinces were groaning under the yoke of oppression. Confiscation and slavery for the slightest offence became matters of daily occurrence, and the tyranny, exactions, and lawlessness of the Princes and other members of the royal family, were simply insupportable. Oaths were no more taken in the name of the gods, who were now considered too lenient and indifferent; but rather in the name of the King who was more dreaded (Johnson 1921:188).

Hence, the breakdown of morality, royal authorities that became survivalist, and the consignment of religious institutions to irrelevance contributed indirectly to the collapse of the state while treachery and personal ambitions of implacable warlords ensured its dissolution. W.H. Clark, an American Baptist missionary, captured the distress of the time when he wrote in 1857 that:

In the town of Igboho, on the border of this kingdom, now in ruins, surrounded by three walls...[t]here was depicted in the countenances of the chief and his associates, striking humiliation, and a marked disposition to hear of something better than that in which they hitherto trusted. Standing within this city, not less than fifteen miles in circumference, but now containing only a few scattered towns, I could [not] but feel for the poor deluded (sic) people who, failing to find deliverance in the gods of their fathers, professed to have begged to the

God of the white man to put it into his heart to pray for them (Robertson *Collections* III: 28-29).

The collapse of the old kingdom of Oyo in about 1820 led to the resurgence of slave trading in Yoruba land. In the simultaneous policing of the West African littoral by the British Navy, and the settling of the recaptives at the Province of Freedom, the rank of the Yoruba freed slaves swelled at what later became known as Sierra Leone. This rehabilitation of Yoruba liberated slaves turned out to be a most significant undertaking to the missionary enterprise in Yoruba land. The reason was that some of these later became the needed evangelists and 'mission agents' to Yoruba land after 1841 and were at the forefront of the encounter this essay is addressing.

The anguish that resulted in the collapse of the kingdom of Oyo and the internecine wars that engulfed the entire Yoruba land in this period provided missionaries with the formidable challenge to authenticate the Gospel as the message of peace. In this, W.H. Clark echoed the sanguine hope many European and American missionaries entertained at this time for the day when,

Each man, sitting under his own vine and fig tree, in peace pursuing his own commendable avocation, undisturbed by foes without, [they] may vigorously press forward to the attack of the stronger foe within, whose silence is the embrace of death, and whose reign is the sure desolation of the soul (Robertson *Collections* III:29).

The exigency of searching for peace led to a passionate appeal from the Alaafin to the representative of the British government in Lagos. From the seat of his government now relocated to Ago Oja in the forest to the south, the Alaafin invited the British government on the coast in 1881 to intervene in the state of affairs in Yoruba land (Johnson 1921:462, 463). Samuel Johnson, among other indigenous pastors and agents of the Church Missionary Society, facilitated the communication with the government on the coast as well as the mediation necessary to bring peace to the warring factions.

The eventual attainment of calm in Yoruba land through the British government's force of arms against the Ijebu people, who remained belligerent to

the end, accelerated the declaration of the interior as a protectorate of the British crown in 1892. In the aftermath of the military campaign, more groups in Yoruba land opened up to the message of the Gospel, in addition to the missionary work already progressing very slowly in Abeokuta, Ibadan, and in the eastern frontiers of the country (Johnson 1921:623). Johnson wrote about impregnable but fallen Ijebu land, noting that:

[Those] who hitherto dared not show their faces or profess their religion openly were now released from fear, and when a few months later delegates from Lagos were sent formally to introduce Christianity amongst [the Ijebu]— in an assembly of the King and his chiefs— these Christians came in a body, and in a humble but fervent address assured the King and chiefs of their loyalty and patriotic devotion, that the religion they professed enjoined both....Permission was then given for the teaching of Christianity publicly, and grants of land were made for churches, schools, and mission stations (Johnson 1921:623,624).

Meanwhile, as Yoruba land continued to bleed with violence for the greater part of the nineteenth century, the kingdom of the Asante held out against the incessant revolts of its Gold Coast vassals to the south, and the Asantehene was able to police his state until the imperial force of Britain relaxed his grip in 1874. The situation here provided a contrast to what was happening in Yoruba land. While the Yoruba ethnic groups were locked in fratricidal wars marked by complete breakdown of law and order, the Asante kingdom maintained its dominance over its vassal states. The efforts of the missionaries to reach Kumasi with the Gospel proved formidable and earned the city the epithet 'lion's den'<sup>7</sup> (Reindorf [1890] 1966:219, 235). However, the clash of Asante's ambition for more territories in the south with the British government's determination to reach

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Birch Freeman of the Wesleyan Missionary Society reached the court of the Asantehene at Kumasi as early as 1842. In his letter of April 17, 1842, written to the secretary of his mission in England, he wrote with enthusiasm that 'Prejudice, on the part of the Ashantis, seems to pass away as the morning cloud and the early dew; so that we are all astonished at the pleasing prospect of things in Ashanti'. Later developments, however, seem not to have been favourable to the rooting of the Gospel among the people until several years after. See *Journal of various visits to the kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku, and Dahomi in West Africa* (Freeman 1844:184).

into the interior ended in unmitigated disasters on both sides as they fought eight wars between 1806 and 1900 (Busia 1951:90).

What we have on hand here, then, is a situation in which the Gospel in the nineteenth century was making its advances into two culturally similar societies but in different social circumstances. One was disintegrating and was being overtaken by violence; the other was in relative stability<sup>8</sup>, though forcibly held together with military power.

Fourth, and finally, the most influential disruption for West Africa came in the full colonization of its peoples through the partitioning of the region into modern nation states by European powers in 1884. The process, which first began with earlier relationship of trading partnership between West Africans and Europeans, saw the brazen imposition of European administrative and judicial processes on the indigenous peoples in the Europeans' artificially and arbitrarily defined boundaries. In the full maturation of colonization after 1884, much of the existing traditional structures governing local administration of the people— like kingship and land-use procedures— were modified, and sometimes abrogated, with no regard for the peoples' cultural milieu and what informed their operations. It appears, after the crisis of the violent dissolution of traditional kingdoms, no rapid change in the life of the peoples of West Africa caused so much trauma and despair as this sudden imposition of an alien culture and values on the people.

These currents of religious and political change were the realities that reshaped West Africa in the nineteenth century and brought Europe and West Africa into a decisive contact. From this broad outline of the events that reshaped the region in the nineteenth century, and bearing in mind the nuances we have established on the social and political currents in both contexts of the Yoruba and

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<sup>8</sup> Relative stability here does not mean that there were no restive vassal states or that the Asante Kingdom was an egalitarian one. In fact, the Asantehene had to fight wars with some of the conquered peoples while slave raiding and trading, especially in the domestic front, continued among the Akan ethnic groups throughout the nineteenth century; but there were winners and losers in those wars unlike in the Yoruba Country. The stability was therefore in relation to the deadlocked situation among the Yoruba people.

the Akan peoples, we may now turn to selected moments of the interface between West African cultures and mission Christianity at this time.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MISSION CHRISTIANITY IN WEST AFRICA: CONFLICT, COMPROMISE AND REDEMPTION

In the early nineteenth century when European and American missionaries made contact with the indigenous peoples in the interior of West Africa, the first observation that struck the emissaries of the Gospel was what they saw as the underdeveloped material culture of the indigenous peoples and their apparently exotic social system. The missionaries were bewildered by the cultures of the people and could hardly perceive inherent meanings in their external forms and expressions. Their shock was only mitigated by the veiled effect of Enlightenment perception of Africa and Africans, wherein Europeans saw Africans as people to be colonized and civilized. Thomas Jefferson Bowen conveyed this much in his essay published in *The Southern Baptist* of 24 August 1858 when he justified colonization as giving home to the homeless Africans who lived in ‘squalid hut[s], darkened by superstition and defiled by crime’ (Robertson *Collections* III:51).

To find a way around their bewilderment and gain a foothold among the people, the missionaries considered the growing involvement of European powers in Africa as a tool to prepare ‘the way for the conversion of the whole continent to Christ’ (Robertson *Collections* III:52). Colonization, though being fostered by European temporal powers, was in the opinion of missionaries destined to serve a providential end of civilizing the indigenous peoples of West Africa and aid in communicating the Gospel to them. In this, missionary agencies and their personnel on the field implicitly considered it necessary to Europeanize Africans in the bid to reach them with the Gospel.

The project of Europeanizing Africans in order to convert them to Christianity reached further than cultural imperialism. It found theological and

anthropological underpinnings that are reflected in Jefferson Bowen's comment on American Negroes that:

The civilized free black of America has no home, in the proper sense of the term, on this continent [that is American continent]. The mark of alienism is graven on his brow. He is not a political nor a social equal, and never can be. The decree of Providence is written on the skin and character of the two races, that the negro and the Anglo-Saxon shall remain distinct, as our common Father, was pleased to create us (Robertson *Collections* III:51,52).

Justifying his perceived qualitative distinctions between the European and the African, Bowen submitted that 'The relations of man, as of things, are justly founded on their properties. The properties of the white man and the black, are not the same. [Consequently] Their social relations cannot be practically identical' (Robertson *Collections* III:54). The question we must then ask is what difference does the Gospel make in this relationship of people distinction? Bowen argued that in spite of the qualitative difference, ' "He [that is God] has fashioned our hearts alike", thus decreeing that, distinct as we are, we shall nevertheless be united in one brotherhood of humanity, civilization, and religion' (Robertson *Collections* III:52). This European perception of Africans was the basis of the much touted, nineteenth century missionary trinity of Christianity, Commerce and Civilization.

It is significant here that although European Christendom had collapsed three centuries earlier, Western missionaries were not critical enough in the 1800s to keep a safe distance from their compatriots whose aims were basically commercial and political. In conceiving their project of Christianity, Commerce and Civilization, they unwittingly baptized into their exploits the European value system that considered their cultures superior to those of West Africans. This error of judgement and its resultant, unwary partnership of a mission agency like the Church Missionary Society (CMS) with unconverted European traders was to produce the late nineteenth century dismal failure of the Niger Mission. But the partnership itself was a product of the popular thinking among the missionaries

that everything European was superior to everything African, perhaps including the expressions of paganism on both sides of the cultural divide.

However, in spite of the prevalence of this sentiment, a few missionaries took exception to the prevailing negative perception of Europeans about Africa and Africans. This accounts for the mentoring relationship some of them had with their African agents and their benign attitude toward their African converts.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this section, however, is to explore selected situations in the nineteenth century encounter of mission Christianity with the two West African cultures of the Akan and the Yoruba peoples. This is in the hope that their diversities will provide us with some glimpses into the dynamics at play in the critical encounter of European Christianity and West African cultures in the nineteenth century.

#### **4.1 Akan States: A Variety of Responses**

The Gospel first made its debut into Akan land through the contacts of the people of the old Gold Coast with European merchants, especially the Portuguese and the Danes. In this early contact, the Christian religion was quartered in the forts along the coast where the European merchants and soldiers, with their wives and mulatto children, products of their escapades with Gold Coast women, were taught the Christian faith and given European education. By reason of the permissive culture they fostered among the coastal people, the Gospel did not make remarkable advances beyond the castles (Reindorf [1890]1966:213,214).

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<sup>1</sup>In this respect, the very close relationship between the Hinderers and the Johnson family in Ibadan has been acknowledged in the history of mission Christianity in the city. Ajayi described Hinderer as 'the most humane of men, with a balance, cultivated mind, and a sense of humour that Ibadan people highly appreciated. With him, religion was not an excuse for destroying human values, but for ennobling them (Ajayi 1965:121,164). In the same vein, Johannes Zimmermann's sympathetic understanding of the traditional African society and culture has been documented in the history of Basel Mission in the Gold Coast. In particular, the perceptiveness of his insight into the practice of domestic slavery in African culture, at a time the issue was provoking serious controversies in the mission, reveals a thoughtful and considerate attitude toward African culture (Debrunner 1967:172,173).

In 1768, a Danish Mission was launched to evangelize the Gold Coast, but it ended in massive failure with the deaths of its missionaries (Reindorf [1890]1966:216). In spite of this failure, the Basel Mission entered the same field with four of its missionaries in December 1828, settling at Christianborg, the headquarters of the Danish administration of the Gold Coast. After seven years of fruitless endeavors, partly occasioned by the high mortality rate of the missionaries, but much more by 'the sensuality and the corrupting influence of the "dissolute crowd" of Danish expatriates at Christianborg', the mission, through the initiative of Andreas Riis, moved to Akropong in March 1835' (Reindorf [1890]1966:218; Addo-Fening 1997:56). From Akropong, north-east of Accra, the efforts of the Basel Mission in Akan land began to take roots among the indigenous people.

On the western flank of the Coast, the Wesleyan Mission broke through the idiosyncrasies of the coastal elite when its missionaries entered the Fante country through Elmina in December 1834. There, in the coastal settlement, the missionaries began their work among a fledgling association by name 'A Meeting or Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge' (Reindorf [1890]1966:226) which became the nucleus of the mission's congregation in the Gold Coast.

Whatever advantage this existing initiative may have brought to the Wesleyan Mission, it was not spared, like earlier missions, the loss of personnel that made the evangelization of West Africa a costly enterprise. In fact, its losses were more tragic than those of the Basel Mission as it lost within the first eight years fourteen missionaries and their wives. Still, in spite of the fact that its work started among an existing nucleus of indigenous Christians, the work progressed with great difficulty in the face of local traditions (Reindorf [1890]1966:225-238). Preaching the Gospel in a society that had derived cohesion and stability from its own indigenous religions certainly was an uphill task for the European

missionaries whose peoples had virtually lost the value of religion beyond the confines of church buildings.<sup>2</sup>

The coherence of the Akan universe of reality, which makes for a harmonious understanding of the relationship between everything in the people's material and non-material world, made the entry of the Gospel into the land appear superfluous. The environment, along with its consequent social cohesion, provided a formidable challenge to the missionaries to demonstrate the added value of their faith to the society they were seeking to reach with the Gospel and thereby evoke the commitment of the people. This was in the face of the fact that the emissaries of the Gospel were products of Protestant Christianity, prejudiced by the veiled effects of the Enlightenment, and the society they were trying to reach with the Gospel was thoroughly steeped in local appreciation of the place of elemental and extra-terrestrial spirits in everyday life.

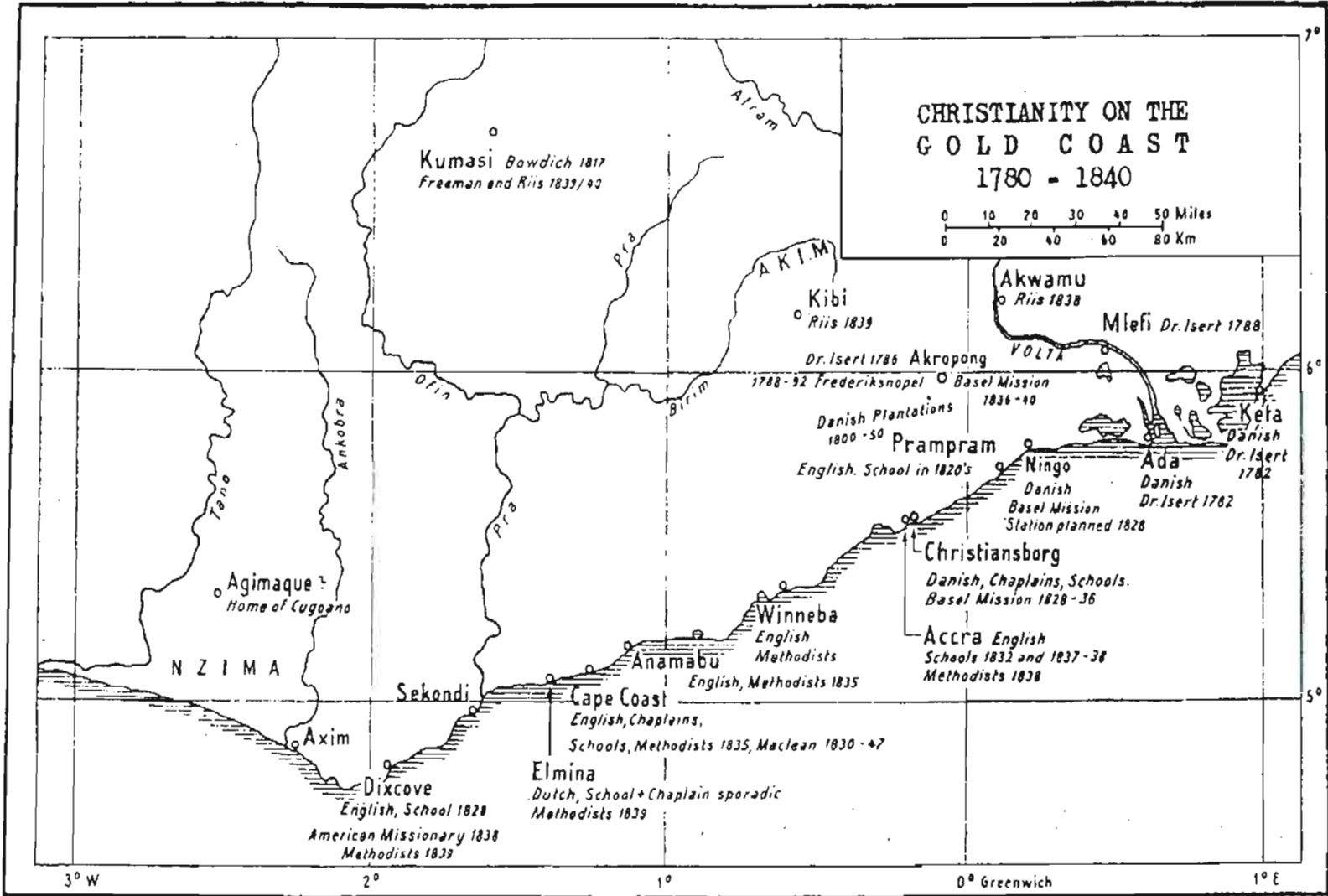
Although, the tension between the missionaries' world view and that of their prospects was enough ground for conflict in the encounter between European Christianity and indigenous Akan society, open hostility and violence, where they happened, were exceptional. They occurred only in a few selective instances. As a matter of fact, the missionaries were often well received, as was Riis in Akropong, and their hosts often welcomed their associating with their communities. But why were they so often accepted? And why did violence break out against them and their cause when it did? This is the subject of this section.

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Debrunner wrote that the nineteenth century Europeans considered it advancement to separate religion and its values from daily life. In a particular reference to Major A. B. Ellis, he quoted the British anthropologist's submission on Akan people when he wrote in the 1880s that:

With most races which are still relatively low in the scale of civilization, it is found that their religion, that is, their ideas and beliefs upon what we term the supernatural, is frequently the mainspring of their actions. Religion is not with them, as with civilized peoples, a matter outside one's daily life, and which is closely interwoven with all their habits, customs and modes of thought.

For Debrunner, 'What [Ellis] intended to be a criticism of Akan religion became a reluctant compliment' (Debrunner 1967:2).



Debrunner 1967: Map III

#### 4.1.1 Mankessim—A Ruthless Exposure

In view of the challenges of evangelizing West Africa in the nineteenth century, the Wesleyan Mission's plan to secure footholds for the Gospel in the Fante country was a daunting task. After about fifteen years of spirited effort, the missionaries wondered at the meager progress they had made despite the enormous investment of resources, especially in the attrition of missionaries.<sup>3</sup> In utter frustration, they lamented, 'We are...dismayed at the utter failure of our plans, we do not understand the thoughts of the Lord in thus deeply afflicting our work' (quoted by Reindorf [1890] 1966:219). However, they would not take it upon themselves to confront the problems militating against their mission; rather, they waited until the opportunity for breakthrough presented itself at Mankessim, some time about 1852 in an encounter with a local cult (Reindorf [1890] 1966:234).

Carl Reindorf recorded that that year marked the turning point in the Wesleyan Mission's endeavor in the Fante country. According to him, 'Prior to that date, advance was slow, owing to the great barrier of paganism lying across its path. But circumstances which occurred in that year connected with the great fetish at Mankesim (sic), exposing fetish tricks, greatly shattered the foundations of paganism' (Reindorf [1890] 1966:234). F.L. Bartels' *The Roots of Ghana Methodism* gives us a fairly detailed account of the incident that led to the triumph of the Wesleyan Mission in the Fante country.

Nananom, a divinity connected with the Fante tradition of origin, had emerged as the national god of the people with its grove located at Mankessim. With its fame developed a cult of priests who held powerful sway over the people and were held in awe. Through these priests, Nananom emerged as an oracle 'able

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<sup>3</sup> The comparatively high mortality rate in the Gold Coast Wesleyan Mission can be attributed to the warm, humid environmental condition that was extremely unfavorable to

to give guidance to men stumbling in the darkness of imperfect knowledge...[and was] expected to give audible advice when consulted' (Bartels 1965:55). But the cult was more than a cult of divination. It included in its operational strategy a 'spy system...set up by the priests', through which 'information of a most detailed kind was collected about all sorts of people' (Bartels 1965:55). The result was such that 'when men and women...came seeking confirmation of their suspicions, the oracle spoke of such intimate details that no doubts arose about the supernatural powers of Nanaam (sic)' (Bartels 1965:55,56). In consequence of their powerful sway over the people, those 'who incurred the displeasure of the powerful priests' were punished with high-handed reprimand. Thus the cult had 'undisputed sway over the minds of many of the men and women [of the Fante Country]' when Thomas Birch Freeman arrived among them in 1834 (Bartels 1965:56).

Events that led to the exposure of the charlatanism of the priests of Nananom began to unfold in the year 1849. That year an old Fante man, Kwesi, left his village, Asafa, ten miles east of Anomabu, to camp at Obidan because of malicious gossip that he was involved in witchcraft. Obidan was located midway between Asafa and Mankessim. About the same time, a member of the Methodist Church at Anomabu, Kwasi Ata, came to found a church in Asafa. In Ata's later contact with estranged Kwesi, they forged a friendship that resulted in the founding of a Christian fellowship at Obidan. Being in the vicinity of Mankessim, the development made the priest of Nananom uncomfortable. In the growth of the fellowship at Obidan and the unrestrained enthusiasm of its members in their invectives against the cult of Nananom, '[t]he scene was set for a clash' (Bartels 1965:56).

The potential for violence continued to build up when in successive events Kwasi Ata shot a deer around the Mankessim grove and one of the junior priests

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Europeans on the coast, especially when they took long residence among the indigenous people. Malaria fever, their principal scourge, had full rein in the swampy environment.

of Nananom, Edwumadzi, embraced the Gospel and joined the growing band of Christians in Obidan. As the priests waited for an auspicious moment to nip in the bud the growing threat to their profession, the renegade priest of Nananom led two other Christians to cut wood from the grove earlier violated by Kwasi. The violation provided the needed opportunity to confront the growing threat, and the priests, with their Fante chiefs, made good use of the opportunity. The chief of Mankessim, Edu, 'led a great company of excited men to Obidan, brutally flogged and imprisoned the Christians, burnt down their houses and destroyed their farms' (Bartels 1965:57).

The arbitration of Brodie Cruickshank, then the Judicial Assessor of the British administration at Cape Coast, in the matter led to more revelations about the traditional cult. Not satisfied with Cruickshank's verdict on their action, Edu, on behalf of the cult, appealed for a re-hearing of the case. Their plan to kill by poisoning three members of the Methodist Church at Anomabu who stood for the Christians at Obidan during the first hearing leaked out and was confirmed to be true during the second hearing. The intended contrivance of the deaths of the three advocates was to serve as evidence of the power of Nananom and its revenge for the violation of its territory by the Christians (Bartels 1965:57). In rapid succession, authenticated revelations came up from former priests of the cult on the deceptions, frauds, and immoral escapades of the priests of Nananom. All these stripped the cult of its awe and cast it in a bad light among the people over whom it had had full sway. In the harsh judgement that followed, public flogging and imprisonment, the myth surrounding the cult evaporated (Bartels 1965:58). The triumph of the Christian community knew no bounds and was captured in the words of the Wesleyan superintendent of Anomabu Circuit as he wrote that:

The confidence of the people here and in the neighbourhood has been much shaken. The national gods of the Fantes, Hanamu (sic), are now forsaken; no one consults them. No human power could have done this, only the preaching of Christ crucified. The people are at this time hesitating between two opinions; all our energies are therefore required

to win them for Christ. In Asafa paganism is tottering and there are hopes of its downfall on some future day, thus making way for the triumphant advance of the gospel chariot (quoted by Reindorf [1890] 1966:233,34).

While the Christians of Cape Coast triumphed at the exposure of the deceitful cult, ‘There were many more people...who felt desolate, deprived of every spiritual trust. Some were who [wondered] “what can we do in sickness and distress? Whither can we fly for succour? Our gods have been proved to be no gods! Our priests have deceived us!” (Bartels 1965:59). In a public act that demonstrated acceptance of defeat, Edu, Chief of Asafa, personally funded the building of a chapel at Mankessim, which also served as a school during the week (Bartels 1965:58).

The episode in Mankessim easily ended in favor of the mission because of the decay that had overtaken the cult of Nananom when the Wesleyan missionaries made their entry into the Gold Coast. But how would another set of missionaries fare in an environment of religious and cultural integrity? This is the concern of our exploration of the Basel Mission’s work in Akyem Abuakwa.

#### **4.1.2 Akyem Abuakwa—A Social Disruption**

The royal state of Akyem Abuakwa is located, with that of Akuapem, in the eastern province of the nineteenth century Gold Coast. The relationship between the two states is significant. First, the ruling clan in Akuapem, the Ofori Kuma dynasty, hailed from Akyem Abuakwa but settled in Akuapem as new lords over the indigenous Akuapem people after assisting them to dislodge the yoke of their Akwamu lords (Reindorf [1890]1966: 85, 88-90). Hence, there is ‘consanguinity’ between the ruling clan in Akuapem and the Ofori Panin dynasty at Kyebi, the principal town of Akyem Abuakwa (Addo-Fening 1997:63).

Second, it was from Akropong that Basel missionaries launched their evangelistic campaign to Akyem Abuakwa, nearly sixteen years after the

Akropong mission station was opened. Their entry into Akyem was hastened by the intimation that Wesleyan missionaries were planning to move into Akyem Abuakwa<sup>4</sup>, supposedly part of their own field (Jenkins *Abstracts*:3). To pre-empt the move, they set-up another station at Gyadam in September 1852 (Jenkins *Abstracts* :6). However, because of the war that sacked the town in March 1860, the station moved temporarily to Kukurantumi before it was finally established at Kyebi in 1861(Addo-Fening 1997:56).

If the incursion of the Gospel into Akyem was motivated by a covert rivalry between two European missionary organizations, its history in the attempt to win indigenous converts was no less checkered. At the outset, the missionaries enjoyed the acceptance and the goodwill of the chiefs and people of Akyem (Jenkins *Abstracts* :515). This may not have been unconnected with the appreciation of the growing improvement in the material culture of the people of Akuapem where the missionaries had hitherto stationed. There, Andreas Riis' building exploits had earned him the title *Osiadan*, the 'house builder' (Reindorf [1890] 1966:218).

Much more, the *Okyenhene*, that is the paramount chief at Kyebi, at the time Rev. Suss made his preliminary trip to Akyem in 1851, had been educated at a Wesleyan school (Jenkins *Abstracts* :14). Now as a ruler, he desired someone to teach him how to read and was seeking the opportunity for his two sons to learn English at the school at Akropong (Jenkins *Abstracts* :21). Thus we find in Kyebi the popular attitude of indigenous peoples toward missionaries, wherein the physical and the social 'progress' early associated with them often predisposed the people to wanting to identify with them until the full implications of their mission dawned on them (Addo-Fening 1997:57,58).

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<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind that the Wesleyan Mission entered the Gold Coast from the western flank peopled by the Fante-speaking Akan, the move to establish a station in Akyem Abuakwa may not have been unconnected with the difficulty posed by the relatively close proximity of the seat of the impregnable Asante kingdom to this area. On the other hand, Wesleyan missionaries might have been attempting to take advantage of the fact that the Okyehene once attended their school.

The result here was that in the first fifteen years of its mission work in Kyebi, Basel missionaries enjoyed a good relationship with the people of Akyem Abuakwa. Addo-Fening's description of the rapport between the missionaries and the state is worth stating here:

[The *Okyehene*, Atta Obuom] readily sold the mission land for the construction of a mission station at Kyebi and even listened to two sermons from Suss on the difference between 'right' and 'wrong'. Obuom counted the Basel missionaries among his political advisors and twice invited them to sit with his Council to debate on pressing political matters. On another occasion, he employed two missionaries as his emissaries. Okyehene Obuom took keen interest in the affairs of the Kyebi Primary School. In 1863 he enrolled his son Apanwia (? Apeanyo) at the school and did not object to his baptism during the third quarter of 1866. Occasionally the *Okyehene* showed signs of hostility towards the missionaries. Such behaviour occurred in moments of aberration and proved transient (Addo-Fening 1997:56,57).

There is no doubt that such an environment of mutual goodwill was what the missionaries needed to plant the Gospel in Akyem. And as long as the missionaries kept away from local politics and added value to the living standard of their hosts by training them in new vocations like carpentry, masonry, and improved farming techniques (Jenkins *Abstracts* :514-526), the goodwill continued. But after the demise of Okyehene Obuom, events took a turn for the worse, unleashing a season of recriminations and social turmoil in Akyem Abuakwa (Addo-Fening 1997:59-87). What went wrong?

Basel missionaries had in fifteen years poured human and material resources into the work in Akyem. Schools had been built, churches had been established, and several evangelistic overtures had been made to the people; but in their estimation, the results did not justify the resources expended (Addo-Fening 1997:58). In the view of the missionaries, the school system did not appear to be making the desired impact of securing converts; the few converts were school pupils, pawns and household slaves who were allowed by their owners to attend church or be baptized (Jenkins *Abstracts* :43). This in itself certainly cast the

church in a bad light as essentially a community for the disadvantaged and the servile. It is therefore not surprising that it could not make much impact at this early stage having drawn its followers from among the un-influential, many of whom were still strangers and unfree.

But Basel missionaries would not, like their Wesleyan counterparts in the Fante country, fold their hands bemoaning their lot in Akyem; rather, they intensified their methods of conservation and vigorous expansion. To conserve the little gains they had made, the missionaries encouraged their converts to move from their homes among their people and settle in their mission stations, which they called *Salem*, but which the local people called *oburonikurom*, Whiteman's village (Jenkins *Abstracts* :504, 511, 518, 535). Occasionally, the missionaries defied the orders of the paramount chief and threatened his authority with that of the British governor on the coast (Jenkins *Abstracts* :538,539). In desperation, the missionaries reached for all the slaves in Akyem society, including those serving in the palace and those dedicated to the gods. The missionaries bought over slaves and encouraged them to pay their ransom fees by rendering to them services in the Salems. Many slaves saw in this the opportunity to buy back their freedom and were assisted to pay-off their masters (Jenkins *Abstracts* :585).

The implication of this was not lost on the people. The laborers to farm the fields were being lost (Jenkins *Abstracts* :581). It was not likely that the missionaries were interested in fragmenting Akyem Abuakwa society, although that was the immediate effect of their strategy at conserving their gains. But in being overly concerned about what they considered as a slow pace in the progress of their work, they drove themselves to desperation and generated chaos where they should have intensified social harmony.

This type of fragmentation may be seen as a product of a religious thinking, which is often popular with revival movements. It is the attitude that encourages young Christian converts to maintain separate identity from their non-believing relations by keeping such people at a distance. The assumption is that regular

intercourse with them will have deleterious effects on the converts. In this vein, the missionaries in Akyem attributed their inability to multiply their ranks to the overwhelming traditional values around their few converts. To eliminate this obstacle, Basel missionaries decided thenceforth to quarantine their converts from the influences of the larger Akyem society until the influence of Christianity would find full expression there. To a society that derived security and stability in filial cohesion and the labor of the servile class, the missionaries' strategy was certainly disruptive.

If the ordinary people of Akyem Abuakwa tolerated the exit of Christians to the Salems, the royal authority did not, since it perceived the missionaries' method of expansion to be too ambitious and ultimately directed at the state itself. What the missionaries had received from the royalty, until the crisis erupted, was tolerance and goodwill but not commitment, the very thing they so much desired. They had reasoned that if the state authorities made a commitment to the Gospel, it would create a bandwagon effect of conversion, what Donald McGavran would later call a 'People Movement'<sup>5</sup> (McGavran [1955]1999:326).

The missionaries' frustration in their inability to generate such bandwagon effect led to their undermining the traditional institutions of Akyem Abuakwa. With effort intentionally directed at the palace, conversion to Christianity meant loss of personnel necessary for state functions. While the *Okyehene*, Amoako Atta I, did not oppose the conversion of persons, slave or freeborn, he could not stand watching his state functionaries abandon their duties and, in his reckoning, undermine the wellbeing of the state.

It appears, to all intents and purposes, that the method adopted by Basel missionaries at this time was not a private, incidental initiative, but a well thought

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<sup>5</sup> In his postulate of 'People Movement', McGavran stated that 'People become Christian as a wave of decision for Christ sweeps through the group mind, involving many individual decisions but being far more than merely their sum. This may be called a chain reaction. Each decision sets off others and the sum total powerfully affects every

out plan in which an indigenous mission agent, David Asante, related to the royal family in Akropong and, *ipso facto*, to that of Akyem, served as the arrowhead (:63). Lodholtz' first quarter report of April 1870 documented, in these words, the vehement objection of the Okyehene to the effects of David Asante's crusade against the Akyem State:

Must I let my horn-blowers, my drummers, my pipers...my sword bearers and executioners, my hammock-carriers etc become Christians? If I do, then I can no longer carry out my (fetish) ceremonies, nor can I receive foreign embassies worthily. Whoever has an obligation to serve me...will never be allowed to become a Christian (Jenkins *Abstracts* :554).

From this objection, it is clear that the chief had a legitimate concern about the functioning of his office and the traditional state for which, he believed, he was accountable to his ancestors. And the issue here was not whether his understanding of reality was right or wrong. The issue was whether the missionaries were sensitive enough to the idiosyncrasies of their intended converts and were willing to use their existing framework of meaning to lead them further on to a better appreciation of reality. As expected, the chief perceived the enduring wellbeing of his state and its people in the continuous functioning of their time-honored institutions, and these must be upheld as a sacred trust. To do otherwise was to invite chaos (Addo-Fening 1997:80). It was therefore logical if he, and his compatriots, considered it dysfunctional to abandon the seemingly sure heritage bequeathed them by their ancestors in a world in which survival was the theme of existence. Furthermore, what would be their self-understanding as a people if they so readily abandoned their past in the face of a future they did not know?

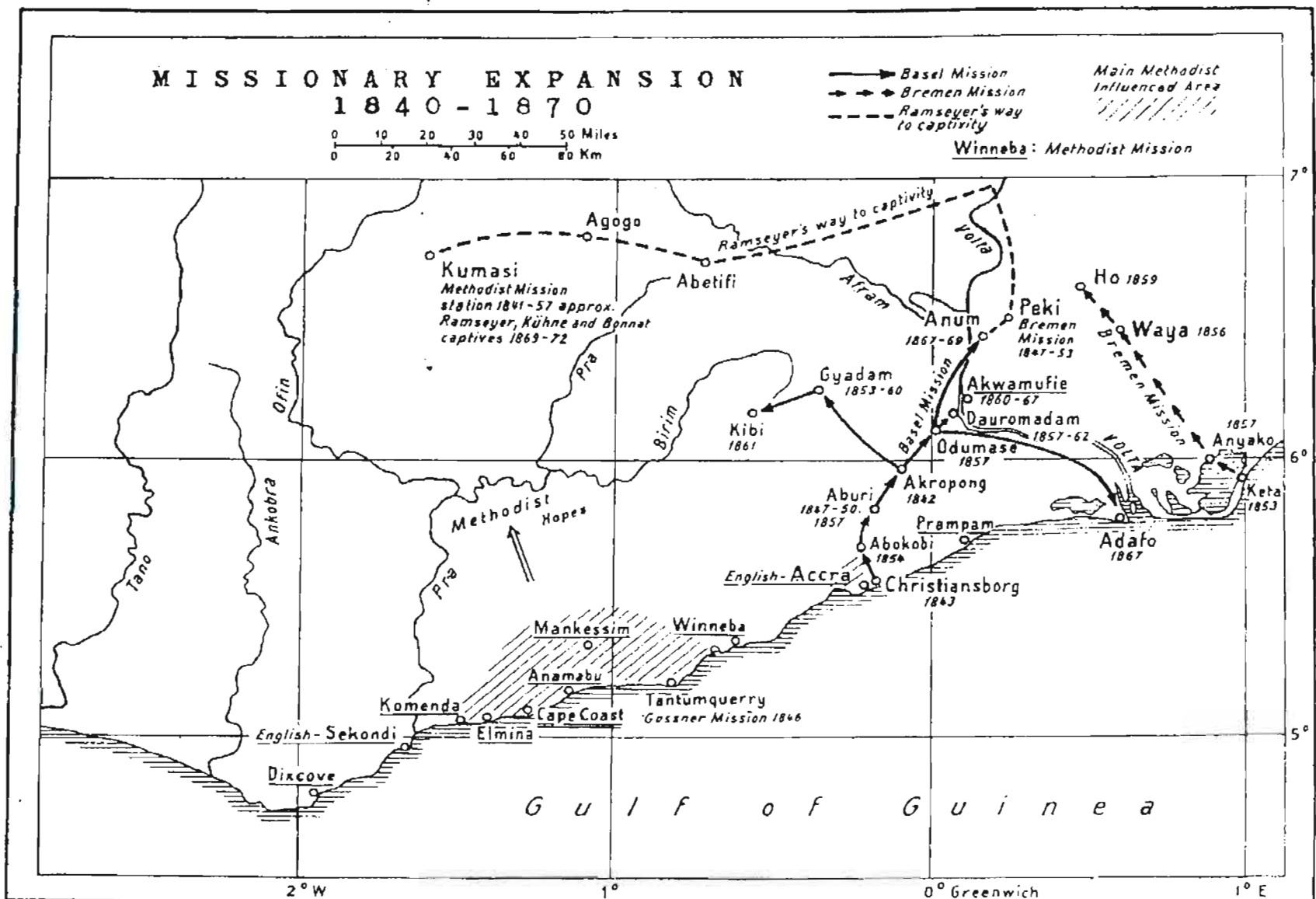
In spite of the social turmoil generated, the missionaries and their agents pursued their goal of evangelization with all disruptive vigor, invoking the authority of the British governor on the coast and goading the administration to

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individual. When conditions are right, not merely each sub-group, but the entire group concerned decides together' (McGavran [1955]1999:326).

legislate against traditional practices in Akyem (Addo-Fening 1997:69-73). When it even appeared as if they acknowledged that their catechist, David Asante, overdid his assignment, they exploited the ensuing crisis to facilitate British imperialism in Akyem Abuakwa through their regular recourse to the colonial government (Jenkins *Abstracts* :529,533,607). At the climax of the crisis, Okyehene Amoako Atta I was banished to Lagos in 1880 and was restored after five years before his 'final show-down' with the mission. In the showdown, the Christian community in Kyebi lost some of their valuables; and in the course of the ensuing trial the king died in February 1887 (Addo-Fening 1997:682).

The colonial government's abolition of domestic slavery and pawning, entirely facilitated by Basel missionaries, created economic difficulties in Akyem Abuakwa, and members of the royal household who could not 'adjust to a new life-style' in the absence of the king 'took to extortion and crime to maintain themselves' (Addo-Fening 1997:75). From all indications, the period of banishment of Amoako Atta I to Lagos was the period Donald McGavran would identify as the period of 'People Movement' in Akyem Abuakwa. According to him, this was when 'outlying chains of families started becoming Christian, and several stations among the Tsui-speaking (sic) tribes began to be surrounded by small Christian groups in scattered villages' (McGavran [1955]1999:336). The fact is that with the exit of the king, the missionaries filled the authority vacuum in the land and were well positioned to provide means of livelihood to those who would take advantage of their resources along with the Gospel. But may we not wonder if these converts really resolved the inherent tension between their abandoned faith and the Gospel they embraced in a moment of social anxiety, a step necessary for continuity and enduring transformation in the encounter between Gospel and human cultures?



Debrunner 1967: Map IV

## 4.2 Yoruba Land: The Search for Peace

If there was a place in the nineteenth century where providence was at work in engaging the newfound zeal among European Christians for missions in Africa, nowhere in West Africa was this better demonstrated than in Yoruba land. The situation there, when European Missions arrived at Abeokuta, via Badagry, in 1842 was such that there was insecurity of life and property as the environment was charged with violence and acrimony among the people. This was in addition to the religio-cultural challenges that naturally awaited the missionaries in all West African societies at this time.

As an urgent reality confronting the missionaries in the evangelization of Yoruba land, continual warfare in the nineteenth century and the people's consequent search for peace, must certainly be taken into account in exploring the interface of mission Christianity and Yoruba culture in this period. This is because it constituted one of the principal factors that defined the context in which European missionaries and their African agents were seeking to plant the Gospel. Moreover, the seemingly interminable warfare provided the emissaries of the Gospel with the challenge to authenticate their message as being capable of achieving for the beleaguered people what the other faiths already in vogue—traditional religions and Islam—could not achieve for them. Their message could ill-afford to prove less valuable, for religion among West Africans must have the utility value of promoting and securing life, and the situation in Yoruba land provided the acid test to so prove the transforming power of that message. As the earliest centers from where the missionaries made their incursions into the interior of Yoruba land, Abeokuta and Ibadan will provide us sample matrixes of how mission Christianity interacted with the realities of the people at this time.

#### 4.2.1 Abeokuta—An Ambivalent Response

Abeokuta, further south of the early, scattered settlements of the Egba people, became the concentrated settlement of the ethnic group sacked by the marauding Oyo warriors and refugees in the wake of the wars in Yoruba land. Until this pillaging, Egba people lived in scattered settlements of the country's tropical forest, with Owu as their largest settlement. In their scramble for safety, the people founded another settlement under a formidable, natural boulder which they soon called Abeokuta, literally 'Under the Rock'. There, in their concentrated settlement they found refuge from their menacing Yoruba kindred from Oyo and their sworn enemies from Dahomey, now Benin Republic.

Although Abeokuta was ethnically homogenous, the people settled according to their Egba origins. The city had the unique privilege of being the first Yoruba town in the interior to play host to European missionaries in the successive visits of Thomas Birch Freeman of the Wesleyan Mission in 1842 and Henry Townsend of the CMS in 1843. However, it was to be the privilege of the CMS mission to evangelize Yoruba land as the Wesleyan Mission expanded westward in the direction of their base in the Gold Coast.

In his visit to Abeokuta in 1843, Henry Townsend, in the company of his 'native' assistant Andrew Wilhelm Desalu from Sierra Leone, met with Chief Sodeke, the Balogun of Itoku and the leader of the Egba of Abeokuta. The warm reception accorded them resulted in Townsend's return from England, the following year, to begin his evangelistic work in Abeokuta (Johnson 1921: 296).

P.R. McKenzie offers some hints on the developments at the early interface of Christianity and Yoruba culture at this time. The CMS missionaries and their African agents, chief among whom was the erstwhile Samuel Ajayi Crowther, made converts through the mission school and evangelistic preaching. But their gains were easily reversed by the overt reactions of the *babalawo*, the *Ifa* priests, whose trade was jeopardized as the mission churches made inroads into the

Abeokuta community. Through their alliance with some members of the *Ogboni*, the Egba council of elders, they made significant success in halting the advance of the new faith, even if temporarily (McKenzie 1976:26-38). Fines were imposed on converts for abandoning traditional religion such that by 1847 'it was...scarcely in anyone's material interest to become a Christian' (McKenzie 1976:30).

Violence eventually broke out in 1849 as the impact of the gains of the mission began to tell on the 'trade' of the *Ifa* priestly class and as the Christian community was declaring their institution as 'superstition' (McKenzie 1976:28). Still, the Christians were accused of contempt for the traditional religion and the *Ogboni* traditional leadership of the city. In October 10, 1847, some converts were arrested and held in stocks at *Ìtòkú* Township.

Ten days after this, further converts were dragged to the council house in *Igbòrè* town, and, after being 'beaten' and 'tormented', were fastened in the stocks where they were exposed to the sun and rain for five days. According to Crowther, over a hundred of them were made prisoners in this way. Women were subjected to whipping and were put in shackles. Houses were plundered (McKenzie 1976:28).

In the days that followed, the attack spread to other quarters of the town as converts' heads were shaved 'to "shave-off" their baptism. The blood of a pigeon was sprinkled on the heads of the women and an image of the divinity *Esù* was set before them' (McKenzie 1976:28). Fines were imposed on the converts and they were forbidden to attend Church service (McKenzie 1976:29). All these were done only to the indigenous converts as returnees from Sierra Leone were allowed freedom to practise whatever faith they professed. What could have been a violent counter-offensive from the converts, to stave-off the public harassment, was averted by Crowther's appeals and counsels to the converts. They, nonetheless, preferred to 'arm themselves with knives to ward off further attacks'. In the end, some of them relocated to *Badagry* (McKenzie 1976:29).

While violence was being meted out to the converts, the warlords at Abeokuta would not want the European missionaries to leave their country, for the

threat of invasion from Dahomey was always present. The inspiration the military class at Abeokuta received from the presence of the white missionaries among them and the threat Christian conversion posed to the religious class justifies the description of the attitude of the people at Abeokuta toward Christianity as one of ambivalence. The fear of Dahomian invasion, however, became a reality in the abortive attempt of March 3, 1851 (Johnson 1921:313).

The intimation of the British naval officer in charge of the Bight of Benin to the missionaries at Abeokuta goaded the city into preparations against the invasion. The officer had been aware of a planned invasion of Abeokuta by the Dahomians. While discouraging the Dahomian periodic raids on their neighbors, Commander Forbes was communicating with the missionaries at Abeokuta to forewarn the Egba chiefs about the malicious intent of the Dahomians. Although the chiefs did not give the matter the serious attention it deserved, the missionaries urged them to 'a vigorous preparation' (Johnson 1921:314). When they eventually decided to take the matter seriously, they had the encouragement of the missionaries among them. According to Johnson, the acclaimed sentiment among the Egba people was 'The God of the white man is on our side' (Johnson 1921:314).

What was special about the God of the white man? The Egba people were among the first Yoruba ethnic groups to have contact with the outside world through the returnees from Sierra Leone. From their experience with Europeans, the white man had demonstrated unusual mastery over the production of sophisticated goods and services that were novel to West Africans. Chief among these was the gun in its various forms with the capacity to wreak havoc on enemies in war, with minimal personal contact. The artillery power of the white man and the consequent invincibility it conferred on him evoked the fancy of nineteenth century Yoruba land whose game was war. The people at Abeokuta reveled in their belief that a God who inspired such a 'miracle' weapon deserved to be followed and trusted. When eventually the invasion was launched, the

missionaries gave encouragement through their urging presence and exhortation to the people to hold out against their adversary. In addition, they actively cared for the wounded (Johnson 1921:314,315).

It was not only at Abeokuta that the missionaries were involved in military warfare. In the intra-ethnic war between the peoples of Ijaiye and their Ibadan neighbor, the European missionaries were no less involved in caring for the disadvantaged. Ijaiye had provoked the war through the obstinacy of its warlord, Are Kurunmi. Although Ijaiye lacked soldiers as skillful as those of Ibadan, it had an experienced strategist in Kurunmi whose bravery and keen perception provided the bulwark that held the town against the heavy assaults of Ibadan, until it finally collapse under its enemy's siege. Throughout the siege, characterized by lack of food and provision for the people, the missionaries provided social services through resources raised for them by their friends at 'home and abroad' as some of them too were held hostage at Ijaiye (Johnson 1921:345).

The fact remains that with the prevailing environment of warfare at the time the missionaries entered Yoruba land, the most viable option for them at the onset of their mission was to seek means of reducing the loss of lives. Against this background, their urging Egba chiefs to prepare for the invasion was to serve the purpose of reducing carnage since the aggressors were bent on their mission. The same principle was at work in the involvement of Jefferson Bowen and Adolphus Mann, American Baptist and German CMS missionaries respectively, in providing social services to the starving Ijaiye community because of the siege laid by Ibadan warriors.

We must however acknowledge that the involvement of the missionaries in the Yoruba warfare of the nineteenth century was sometimes complex. In fact, the conflicting stands of Henry Townsend at Abeokuta and David Hinderer at Ibadan, representatives of the same CMS mission, during the Ibadan-Ijaye war proved how ambivalent to the cause of the Gospel the sentiments of missionaries could be in such a messy warfare (Ajayi 1980:206-209). However, what we see in the

engagement between mission Christianity and the people of Abeokuta at this time was a situation in which mission Christianity proved both to be a menace to the trade guild of the traditional, priestly class and, in the reckoning of the military class, a liberator from external aggression.

#### 4.2.2 Ibadan—‘To Be or Not to Be’

Consequent to the internecine wars that ravaged Yoruba land in the nineteenth century, Ibadan emerged as the military base of Oyo military men and, later, the settlement of displaced peoples of the country. Samuel Johnson wrote that the city, ever at war with its neighbors, was ‘destined by God to play a most important part in the history of the Yorubas, to break the Fulani yoke and save the rest of the country from foreign domination...to be a protector as well as the scourge in the land...’ (Johnson 1921:246). The leaders of the fledgling city were at the height of their belligerence when the Rev. David Hinderer visited them on May 16, 1851, in an exploratory mission of planting the Gospel there (Johnson 1921:316).

The Basel-trained, German missionary of the Church Missionary Society had, shortly after the abortive Dahomian invasion of Abeokuta, received permission from Sokenu and other Egba chiefs to take the Gospel to Ibadan. Although Ibadan was not at peace with its neighbors at this time, Egba chiefs granted the request of the missionary (Johnson 1921:316). Well received by the Baale of Ibadan, the paramount chief, and other four influential chiefs of the city<sup>6</sup>, David Hinderer explained to them his mission in the city. The first rebuttal came from the Baale’s Osi who, being a staunch Moslem, opposed the missionary’s intention.<sup>7</sup> He vehemently resisted the plan in the verbal attack, ‘ *Awon obaiye je*

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<sup>6</sup> The four chiefs were the Balogun (the field marshal), Otun (the Baale’s right flank lieutenant), Osi (the Baale’s left flank lieutenant) and the elderly chief, Lanoso, in whose house the missionary was lodged (Johnson 1921:316).

<sup>7</sup> It is significant that this early interaction between Christianity and African society at Ibadan was not exclusive to the two religions but also included Islam. The significance

*ni iwonyi.*” (These are the world spoilers), “There is no country they enter but misfortune will follow for that place”<sup>8</sup> (Johnson 1921:316).

A dissenting response, and no less forceful, was offered by the Otun: ‘But white men are at Lagos, Badagry, and Abeokuta; why should we be the last to receive them, and whatever be the consequence to others let the same be to us also’ (Johnson 1921:316). The imminent impasse was avoided through the counsel of the Balogun who advised that *Ifa*, the national god of divination, be consulted, and on the basis of its counsel the chiefs could decide the fortune, or otherwise, of the missionary and his message in Ibadan. The outcome of this consultation favored the presence of Rev. Hinderer in the city, and he was soon accorded a warm reception and properly accommodated to carry out his work unhindered (Johnson 1921:316).

Through the patient and painstaking exploits of David Hinderer, the Gospel took root in Ibadan, and through the indigenous pastorate the work was established. A society like Ibadan, already embroiled in wars from different directions, and being managed by warlords, could ill-afford another distraction in religious rivalries. The context of Hinderer’s evangelization in Ibadan was already

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lies in the response of the Osi Baale which was fanned by prejudice against ‘white men’, and which portended an incipient tension between the Christian faith and Islam in Yoruba land. The rivalry has since not abated and, indeed, appears to be the albatross bedeviling the contemporary Nigerian State. Yet, equally significant in post-independent Nigeria also is the recognition of this tension by the Nigerian academic community which, early after political independence from Britain, incorporated into the program of the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Ibadan the study of the three faiths in interaction. The official journal of the department *Orita* is dedicated to the expected dialogue of the three faiths in interaction.

<sup>8</sup> Jefferson Bowen reported that because most of the western Yoruba towns were destroyed shortly after the Lander brothers passed through the country in the early nineteenth century, it became an article of faith among the people that ruins always trailed the visits of white men wherever they went (Bowen [1857]1968:130, 144-146). On the other hand, their presence in Yoruba towns during warfare always brought the people the encouragement that their presence meant victory and survival. Hence, their exits from theatres of war were always taken as bad omens, as it happened in Ijaye where the exit of the white missionaries hastened the fall of the embattled town and the people’s mass exodus (Ajayi 1980:209).

a state of chaos and life had become very unsafe as kidnapping, enslavement, and every form of violence associated with theatres of war were having full rein. In addition to the many wars the people were waging concurrently in different places, the chiefs and their boys in the city were brazenly displaying all forms of villainy, intrigues, and high-handed despotism.<sup>9</sup> So beset by a totalitarian government in an environment of wars in which there were no winners and there were no losers, the immediate challenge to the emissaries of the Gospel in nineteenth century Yoruba land was the search for order and peace.

The search for a final solution to the wars was initiated by the Alafin Adeyemi in his letter of October 15, 1881, to the British governor in Lagos, W. B. Griffiths; this was with the advice of the indigenous church agents at Ibadan (Johnson 1921:462,463). Although it proved to be a long and tortuous search, it marked the involvement of the fledgling Christian community of Yoruba land in the socio-political currents of the time.

David Hinderer, who himself had retired at this time, but continued to take interest in the happenings in Yoruba land, took the initiative to enlist the Yoruba Christians in Lagos to work for the peace of the interior people. Rev. James Johnson, the pastor of St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit, Lagos, popularly known as 'Holy Johnson' for his radical spirituality, led this new movement. Unfortunately, for ten years (1882-1892), the several meetings of the movement yielded no fruit. Samuel Johnson attributed this failure to the fact that the majority of the Yoruba people in Lagos did not appreciate the severity of the condition in the hinterland and the epic battles being fought by the warlords (Johnson 1921:480-483). While the fruitless meetings in Lagos lasted, the Alafin, through his messenger, continued to reiterate to the British governor in Lagos that 'nothing less than an

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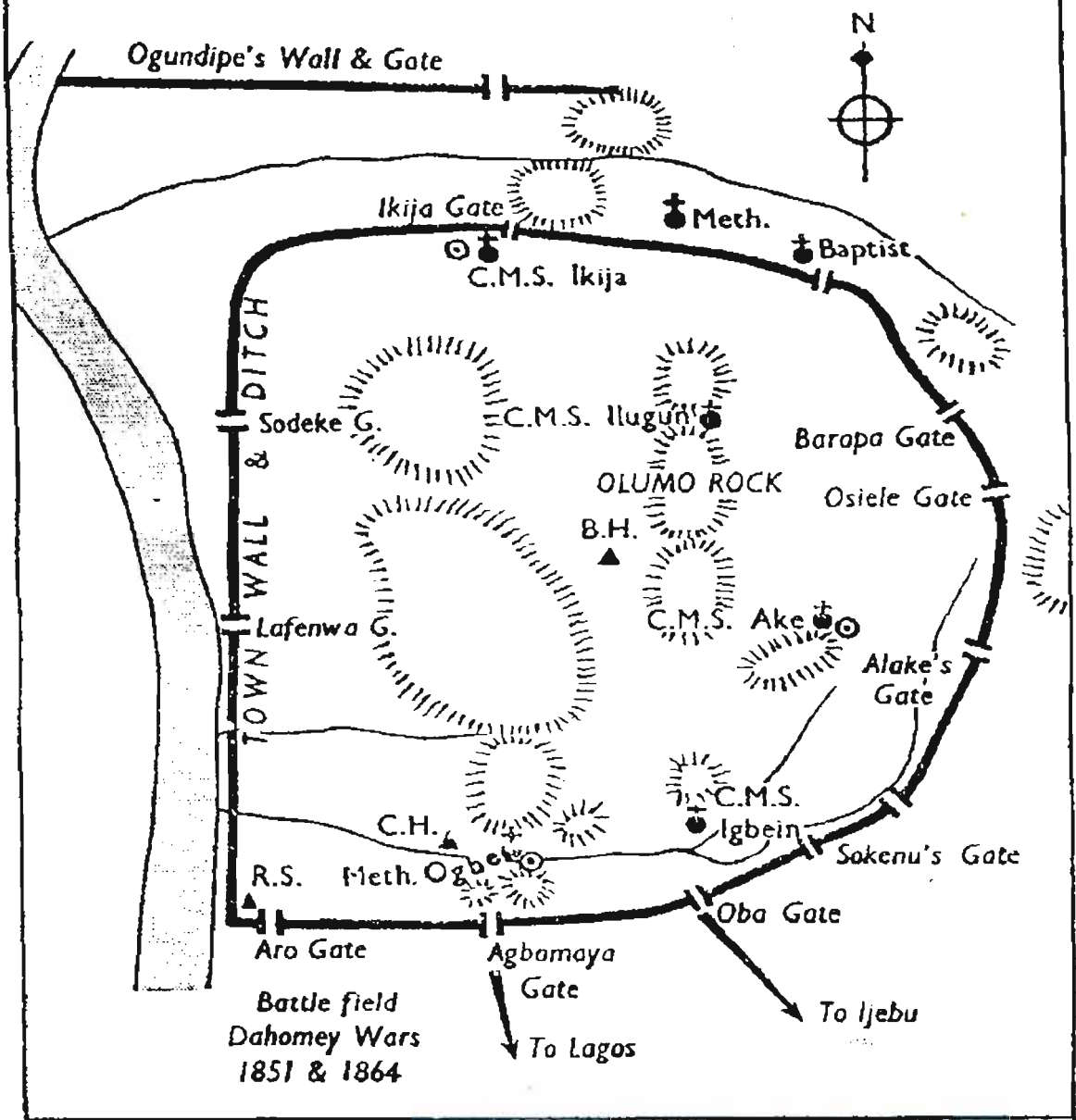
<sup>9</sup> Johnson gave an elaborate account of one of such acts of despotism in the murder of Madam Efunsetan Aniwura, an Egba woman who became the Iyalode (that is the Ladies' Queen) of Ibadan. In her omission to exercise hospitality toward the Are-ona-kakanfo during and after one of his military campaigns, she met her cruel fate in the hand of the implacable Aare Latosisa (1921:391-94).

armed intervention could prevail upon the belligerents to decamp' (Johnson 1921:482).

Another effort launched by Rev. J.B. Woods in the company of Rev. Samuel Johnson, though at the appeal of Ibadan warlords (Johnson 1921:494), proved to be a vulnerable descent into the trenches of battle as they shuttled between the camps of the feuding warlords and negotiated for peace and armistice. But intrigues and mistrust among the factions, nurtured by historical antecedents and the ambitions of the warlords, were too deep for the crisis to be resolved by conference. For calmness to finally prevail in the country, it took a resort to both diplomacy, which led to signing of treaties among the factions, and a British military action against the people of Ijebu land in 1892 (Johnson 1921:613-622). The success of the British expedition against Ijebuland ushered in a new dispensation in which the colonial government would add to its protectorate the territory beyond its Lagos colony. Later amalgamation of the two protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria resulted in the creation of a single federation in 1914.

How do we assess the role of the Christian community in this search for peace? First, we need to acknowledge the dynamics at play in the context of the turbulent nineteenth century Yoruba land. The wars were inspired by the personal ambitions of the warlords to conquer, to establish their legitimacy in their offices, to demonstrate their skills at winning laurels and to capture slaves for themselves and their groups. At other times they were inspired by the sheer recalcitrance of feuding chiefs and treacherous Kakanfo or Balogun, as in the case of the Fulani's takeover of the northernmost sector of the country and the war that sacked Ijaiye in 1862 (Johnson 1921:331-352). But they were sustained by the suspicions among the feuding groups of the Yoruba people. These were born out of the memories of past injuries, mutual betrayals, and the resolve by the groups involved to avenge wrongs unjustly suffered in the struggle. The craving to

**ABEOKUTA 1867**  
 (Based on J.A. Maser's Map  
 in C.M.S. CA2/068)



- |   |                            |                                     |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ✚ | Principal Mission Stations | C.H.= G.W. Johnson's & Custom House |
| ⊙ | Mission Villages           | R.S.= H. Robbin's Score             |
| ☼ | Rocks                      | B.H.= Basorun's House               |

Ajayi 1965:166

revenge, in particular, made the whole struggle a messy one, since every group at one time or another had so suffered betrayals and unjust assaults.

The wars were also sustained by the economic and political interests of the Ijebu people to continue to control the access of interior tribes to the coast and thereby perpetuate their dominance on the trade between them.<sup>10</sup> It is significant that the conquest of the people of Ijebu marked the end of the struggles in their monumental scale and opened the door on a new era in which the entire Yoruba land would come under the rule of a foreign power. Alafin Adeyemi's prognostication finally came true—only a superior firepower could quell the situation and avert the self-destructive tendencies of the Yoruba people.

The implication of all these, especially in the context of this study, is that the missionaries and their indigenous assistants were up against human nature in its basest forms of despotism, cruelty, and ambition in which they themselves were, sometimes, targets or even victims (Johnson 1921:353,495,616-618). Hence, theirs was a difficult strait between a contextual witness that sought to authenticate the Gospel as message of peace and a troubled sea of human ambitions, feelings and restlessness in which their intentions were sometimes misconstrued (Johnson 1921:568,569).

Ordinarily, it appears as if the credit for attaining peace and order in Yoruba land goes to the British government in Lagos whose forces demonstrated with military might, once and for all time, that a new day had dawned on the land (Johnson 1921:623). Yet, we must appreciate that the ground for peace was

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<sup>10</sup> This may also be seen against the background that an unchecked access of war-loving people of Ibadan to sophisticated weapons from the coast would make the entire country unsafe for everyone. The immense success of depriving Ibadan of this access was largely responsible for its people's quick agreement to the search for peace. However, the combination of the need for this safety measure and the economic interest of Ijebu people to continue to dominate trade between the coast and interior country may have accounted for the reprimand both Revs. Olubi and Johnson received from the Awujale of Ijebu-Ode for 'bringing Europeans up country' (Johnson 1921:616).

prepared, first, through diplomacy in which the CMS missionaries and their agents played the principal role as the credible ambassadors between the warring factions. In particular, their continuous dialogue with the various factions, in the face of high turnover rate in the ranks of British officers in Lagos, provided the necessary continuity in the search for peace. This is especially so because when the Alafin, who first made the desperate call for British intervention, lost confidence in their willingness to assist, the CMS agents were the ones who sustained the efforts toward peace. In this, their role in the crisis was redemptive and, in no small measure, contributed to rescuing the feuding nation from its precipitous state to later usher in a festive mood of thanksgiving throughout Yoruba land in 1892 (Johnson 1921:623). Can we then conclude that Ifa's divination was right when it endorsed Hinderer's mission to Ibadan in 1851?

### **4.3 A Comparative Evaluation**

The coming of Europeans to West Africa in the missionary movement ushered in a new phase in the life of the indigenous peoples. This new phase eludes general qualifications, the reason being that there was no uniformity in the range of responses of the people to the message of the missionaries. As can be seen from the four contexts above, it was a time of stress for some of the societies. Still, while it was a timely and welcome entry into one situation, the response was a feeling of ambivalence in another. Because of this range of responses, the comparison and the evaluation of the interface between mission Christianity and West African cultures must be made in the light of the diversities of the contexts.

#### **4.3.1 Mission Christianity in Akan and Yoruba Lands**

In spite of the differences between the socio-political situations in Akan land and Yoruba land in the nineteenth century, and the diverse range of responses, certain currents developed in both contexts as a result of the engagements of the two societies with mission Christianity. The first and most

immediately obvious outcome of this encounter was the facilitation of British influence in the administration of the peoples beyond the Gold Coast and Lagos Colonies.

In Akyem Abuakwa, the intervention of the British Government came in the wake of crises created by the missionaries and the indigenous agent of Basel Mission and found immediate expression in the proscription of domestic slavery. It also secured for the mission the unfettered freedom to make converts across the society without harassment from the traditional state. In essence, the missionaries exploited the presence of the imperial government on the coast to facilitate their own agenda of evangelization with no feelings or scruples for the sentiments and idiosyncrasies of their intended converts.

In Yoruba land, the CMS missionaries and their indigenous agents had no such need to invoke the military might of the British government in support of their evangelization. Because the environment was already distressed, and many of the new towns were still evolving in consequence of this, the emerging traditional institutions of leadership and administration were more fluid, malleable and open to experiments in new religious traditions and commitments. In this light, the revolt at Abeokuta may be seen as an attempt of a section of the society to preserve its own interest. This contrasted with what obtained at Kyebi where the institutions of the state became the missionaries' objects of assault. Moreover, in spite of the reactions at Abeokuta, the Christian populace still enjoyed the sympathy of a few influential leaders of the city. The military class, in particular, appreciated the presence of the missionaries in their midst and reveled in the confidence that their presence meant victory and security. Nevertheless, because of the fratricidal wars, wanton violence and destruction, the missionaries and their agents also facilitated the entry of the British government into Yoruba land.

The involvement of the missionaries and their agents 'in bringing Europeans up country' (Johnson 1921:616) cannot be regarded as necessary for the evangelization of the Yoruba people; in reality, it was not. On the contrary, it

came as a response of the churchmen to a social disaster that had gone out of control. Against this background, we can understand the Alafin's desperate call to the British government to intervene, the reality of which the indigenous agents of the CMS enthusiastically facilitated in the hope that the units would be welded together as in the days before (Johnson 1921:642).

There is still another qualitative difference in the types of foreign incursions the missionaries facilitated in the two contexts. The crisis in Akyem led to the promulgation of laws and statutes regulating local leadership in matters of human sacrifice, domestic slavery, and freedom of religious worship for Christians—matters to which the missionaries drew the attention of the colonial government. In Yoruba land, such a top-down relationship did not immediately exist between the local authorities and the imperial government. Rather, the chiefs signed treaties, though in the full glare of the display of Maxim guns, but with the assurance that the resident British officer would not interfere with local traditions 'so long as they do not conflict with ordinary principles of humanity' (Johnson 1921:639).

The imperial lords went as far as conceding to the Baale of Ibadan the privilege of his community to maintain their tradition of domestic slavery 'so long as it is conducted on humane principles' (Johnson 1921:639). And in signing treaties with the peoples of the interior, the British government in Lagos indicated that the object of declaring Yoruba land a protectorate was 'to preserve peace, to secure open roads and reasonable freedom of action to the inhabitants generally (Johnson 1921:640). This was certainly not the case in Akyem where the local authorities were not consulted about the terms of their new relationship with their British overlords on the coast; rather, they were handed down rules as if they were unruly school children.

How then do we respond to the criticism that European missionaries were agents of colonialism in the exploitation of Africa? First, it is true that there were situations, such as those that happened in Akyem Abuakwa and in Yoruba land,

where the missions and their agents facilitated the declaration of the interior lands as protectorates or colonies of foreign powers. But it was not the case in all such situations that the missionaries were interested in the people being colonized to further the interest of their missions or colonial governments. As it was evident in Yoruba land, there were other situations where the entry of European powers into the interior was adjudged a necessary intervention because local resources to cope with urgent needs had been exhausted. For Yoruba land to survive its vicissitudes in the nineteenth century, it certainly needed help from outside, and the call of its principal chief for external aid in this respect was an acknowledgement of the overwhelming nature of the reality on ground.

The fact remains that indigenous peoples were aware of the grave potential consequences of allowing Europeans to settle among them, especially as political authorities. This accounted for their initial resistance and the hesitation of their chiefs to sign treaties with them until they agreed and felt comfortable with the terms of their relationship. Their call for external intervention must, therefore, be seen as an act of desperation which the missionaries and their agents could not have overlooked.

Walter Rodney's criticism may appear to be right in its indictment of the missionary movement for, wittingly or unwittingly, aiding colonialism in Africa, but its indiscriminate over-generalization is not tenable. In failing to nuance the circumstances that sometimes led the missionaries into such collaboration, he betrayed a lack of understanding of what Samuel Johnson would say of Lagos residents, namely the gravity of the condition in which some of the interior peoples were when the missionaries facilitated the entry of foreign powers into their midst (Johnson 1921:480-483). In the flaming passion of post-colonial Africa, it is easy for those who did not feel the distress of the people and its consequent decimation of their resources to blame the missionaries indiscriminately and harp on their failings. But an alternative to external intervention is still to be reasoned out by the critics in the case of Yoruba land.

The situation in Akyem Abuakwa was however unfortunate as the missionaries failed to appreciate that effecting conversion is not the prerogative of the Christian witness. It is ultimately a divine initiative as the Holy Spirit moves in situations and in the hearts of people when the time has fully come (Taylor 1972). In their failure to appreciate this, the missionaries and their agents led a sustained campaign against the people they intended to reach with a message of love and grace. Their insensitivity and indiscretion were certainly incongruous with their message. Their response to the seemingly slow pace of their work betrayed a lack of understanding of the context and its institutions. Neither did they appreciate the profound dread that often accompanied conversion in a spirit-charged and highly communitarian society like that of the Akan.

There is another phenomenon that was common to both contexts of Akan and Yoruba peoples in the process of evangelization. Other than adopting the names of the Supreme Being found among the indigenous peoples as the God and father of Jesus Christ and the translation of the Bible into the local languages, there was no conscious effort on the part of the missionaries to dialogue with the thought forms of the indigenous peoples. In fact, they did not consider that the traditional religious experience of their converts could contribute substantially to their understanding of the Gospel. This lack of dialogue was the weakness of mission Christianity, and it prepared the ground for the open conflicts that broke out at Mankessim, Kyebi and Abeokuta.

It is necessary that we appreciate here also the dynamics at play in the tension that developed between the missionaries and their converts on one hand and the custodians of traditional cults on the other hand. The background of the missionaries—a complex mix of Protestant Reformation ideals and European Enlightenment perception of Africans—had given shape to their understanding of primal societies. This understanding included the assumption that African cultures—religious and moral—were underdeveloped and incongruous with Christianity or the Enlightenment idea of progress. This misunderstanding resulted

because the emissaries of the Gospel could not comprehend the inherent contents of African rituals whose outward symbols appeared to them as nonsensical.

The result of this misunderstanding was that the missionaries looked down on African religious traditions. Consequently, converts were required to begin their new life as on a clean slate as though they had never had a relationship with the Supreme One whom their ancestors had named according to their intuition and peculiar circumstances. Many of the early converts, including those who were attracted more by the social advantages that came with associating with the missionaries than the content of their message, accepted the missionaries' perception of African religious traditions.

The lack of dialogue between mission Christianity and indigenous African thought forms created conflict between the fledgling Christian communities and their larger traditional societies. With each party locked in its trenches, and acting in its own self-interest and for its self-preservation, the rifts soon developed between the missionaries and the indigenous peoples. The missionaries and their converts fired their salvos of prejudice while the traditional establishments, acting in fear and desperation, engaged the missionaries and their aberrant converts in physical violence. Their fear was a product of anxiety about the possible consequences of abandoning a well-beaten path in a world in which human beings are at the mercy of forces greater than themselves. Their desperate response may then be seen as an effort to bring back into community those erring members they considered to be straying away in embracing a religion thought to be foreign.

While these were the realities at Mankessim, Akyem and Abeokuta, Ibadan offers us a different model of interaction between mission Christianity and African traditional religions where the Ifa oracle gave the permission for David Hinderer to embark on his mission among the people. It is significant that Ibadan did not experience the open violence that characterized the other three contexts. How do we account for this? Could it be that Ibadan was more concerned with the many enemies without than that which might be within, that is mission Christianity?

Could it be that David Hinderer showed an unusual deference for traditional institutions at Ibadan and proved more circumspect than the other missionaries?<sup>11</sup> Or, did Ifa's express permission to allow the entry of Christianity into Ibadan confer on the Christian community an immunity that shielded it from assault, even if conversions appeared provocative? All these are plausible reasons, but we may dwell on the last one in particular.

The entry of Christianity into Ibadan was not facilitated by a mere fancy for whatever advantages the white man might have had over the African. Its domestication there was approved by the national oracle itself which had spoken in its favor. The apparent safety that the Christians in Ibadan enjoyed may, therefore, not be surprising as their religious commitment had been sanctioned by the national oracle of divination. Actually, anything otherwise would have proved irreligious in a society whose people were desperately seeking for salvation from endless wars.

The dialogue at Ibadan is reminiscent of the entry of the Gospel into King Edwin's Northumbria in 627AD. The hesitant king had been under pressure from both his wife Ethelberga and Pope Boniface to embrace the Christian faith. Soon in exile by reason of war, and desperate to be restored to his throne, he made a vow to embrace the faith of the Church if his throne was restored to him. Although his prayer was soon realized, King Edwin could not venture a transfer of allegiance to another deity in defiance of the national one. In such an environment where wars and conquests were the stock-in-trade of nations and survival was premised on the strength of the respective national divinities, it could be fatal to single-handedly take such a decision.

As it would later happen at Ibadan in 1851, Edwin called his council and presented the matter before his chiefs. The proceeding after the royal presentation

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<sup>11</sup> Although Ayandele argued that it was 'a social stigma' to be a Christian in nineteenth century Ibadan because Christians were poor fighting material to the military state

is very significant in that it reveals the dynamics behind religion in primal societies. Coifi, the chief Priest, was the first to respond. He submitted,

Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching; for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of our gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater honours, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them (Bede *EH* 2.13).

On the further argument by other chiefs that 'if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge [about the future destiny of man], it is only right that we should follow it', Coifi requested to listen to the preacher Paulinus. He thereafter submitted enthusiastically that:

I have long realized that there is nothing in our way of worship; for the more diligently I sought after truth in our religion, the less I found. I now publicly confess that this teaching clearly reveals truths that will afford us the blessings of life, salvation, and eternal happiness. Therefore, Your Majesty, I submit that the temples and altars that we have dedicated to no advantage be immediately desecrated and burned (Bede *EH* 2.13).

Coifi's submission rings, repeatedly, with the notion that religion has value when it serves the end of human happiness. This utility value seems to be the driving force behind religious practices in primal societies, whether in mediaeval Europe or in nineteenth century Yoruba land. When the *bàbáláwo* at Ibadan divined that Hinderer's mission would be beneficial to the people, he followed in the footsteps of Coifi, and both custodians of their peoples' religious traditions saw their action as being in the interest of their nations. We need not consider

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(Ayandele 1966:332-333), it appears the relative peace they enjoyed was a fruit of the cordial relationship between the missionaries and Ibadan chiefs.

these responses exotic<sup>12</sup> or suicidal for traditional cults; for religion, in primal societies, is always open to new ideas that will engender life and guarantee the continuous survival of communities. And in this, it does not matter whether that new idea ultimately proves to be a rival cult or even completely displace the old order! Tensions arise when the interaction between the new idea and a tested tradition is not moderated with sensitivity, or when the priestly class in the old order transmute into a trade guild with the primary interest of ensuring its own survival. The former was apparent at Kyebi while the latter was evident at Abeokuta; but a combination of the two found expression at Mankessim.

Still we may not interpret this view of religion as mere opportunism. In societies where life is considered very unsafe as a result of wars and the forces of nature, not to mention those of malevolent spirits, the human quest for survival is potent, and rightly so. Neither the Gospel preached by Jesus nor the teachings of the early Church pretended otherwise; only that, in addition to this, they both sharpened the ethical dimension of life which tends to be blunt in human, social discourses. In this sharpening of human ethical edge, as in its promise of life hereafter, the Christian faith adds value to life, amplifies the noble aspirations of religion, and gives further lead to the human quest for a stable present and an assured future. These are compatible with the primal faith of Africa and they fulfil it; therefore, they cannot but be welcomed as the realization of age-long desires of the people for salvation from the perils that assail human existence.

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<sup>12</sup>Byang Kato, whose *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* criticized the growing appreciation of African traditional religions as a theological tool in the 1970s, also narrated how a possessed woman of traditional religion accurately predicted the coming of the Gospel to the people of Kagoro in Northern Nigeria (Kato 1975:36). Ajayi Crowther also, in spite of the contempt he had for the Yoruba traditional religion, acknowledged the forecast of a *bàbáláwo* to his parents that he would one day worship Olorun, the Lord of Heaven, a strange and uncomplimentary thought among Yoruba people in the days of his parents (NAD, Ibadan, CMS (Y) 4/3/10).

### **4.3.2 Excursus: Representative African Agents—Carl Reindorf and Samuel Johnson**

Hitherto, more attention has been given to the institutions and the processes at work in the encounter of mission Christianity with West African society. And since these institutions were not faceless organizations, a few references have been made to some of the influential persons and missionaries involved. However, because the indigenous peoples themselves also played key roles in the process at work, it may not be superfluous to take a brief look at two representative West African agents of the missions and their perceptions of the tremendous changes taking place among their peoples. The personalities selected for this excursus are Carl Reindorf of the Gold Coast and Samuel Johnson of Yoruba land. They belonged to the earliest generation of West African converts to Christianity, although they may not necessarily be the foremost churchmen who worked with the missionaries in the evangelization of their peoples. Their choice for this excursus has been determined by the observation that, among their contemporary pastors, they most clearly expressed through their locally available writings their concerns and hopes about the changes that were creeping upon their peoples. This is clearly expressed in their passion to reduce to writing the oral histories of their peoples, which were about to be swept into oblivion by the rapid changes of their time.

#### **4.3.2.1 Carl Reindorf**

Carl Christian Reindorf was born on May 31, 1834, at the coastal town of Prampram, some twenty miles east of Accra, the capital city of the then Gold Coast. A 'mulatto' of Danish extraction, and in spite of his European paternal ancestry, he was in his childhood 'made the adopted child of a fetish called Digbla or Ligbla, so as to preserve his life' (Reindorf [1890]1966:5). Because of the frequent mobility of his parents, occasioned by trade, he was entrusted to his

grandmother at the age of six, an experience that was to awaken in him the penchant for the history of his people. According to him,

My worthy grandmother Okako Asase, as duty bound to her children and grandchildren, used to relate the traditions of the country to her people when they sat around her in the evenings. My education and calling separated me from home, and prevented me from completing the series of these lessons in native tradition (Reindorf [1890]1966:ix).

From 1842, he attended the Danish school at the Christianborg Castle where he was also baptized in 1844; he was confirmed in 1852. Leaving the school at the Castle after four years, he enrolled with his elder brother at Rev. Zimmermann's newly opened Basel Mission School. Because he lacked interest in being taught in his native Ga language, he withdrew for active trading. He later returned to the same school at the counsel of his parents; but he enrolled, this time, in the high school where catechists were trained for mission work.

By virtue of the social instability of the time, he and his colleagues put pressure on the school to cut short their training. Reluctantly let out of school, Reindorf and his colleagues were employed as catechists in 1855. Thus began for him a clerical vocation that was to span fifty years, starting from the Teshi village of Damfa, through Abokobi, Akropong, and Christianborg to Mayera, all being Akwapim and Ga speaking peoples of the Gold Coast. He married Miss Ayikai Mansah Djebi on January 8, 1856, and became a full catechist the same year. He was ordained a full minister of the Basel Mission on October 13, 1872.

A man of many abilities, Carl Reindorf was at various times a trader, farmer, teacher, pastor, Bible translator, hymn composer, chaplain and medical assistant to soldiers on battlefields. It is also reported that he traveled extensively, and due to 'the frequent illness of his children, he acquired a thorough knowledge of the native system of herbal treatment' and taught others too (Reindorf [1890]1966:15). Self-characterized as 'one who is "no friend of too many rules"' (Parker 1998:46), his relationship with the mission, like many other African converts who lived at the early interface of Christianity and African culture, was a

checkered one (Haenger 1998:19-29). He died on May 31, 1917, and was laid to rest on July 1, the same year, at the Basel Mission Cemetery, Christianborg.

Carl Reindorf's self-understanding, in spite of his European ancestry and his being brought up in the elite environment of the coast, was unambiguous. In this, he regretted the evil influences of the European merchants of his days on the indigenous people on the coast and his people's neglect of agricultural production in favor of trading (Reindorf [1890]1966:271-274). Although he shared both African and European ancestry, he was very much at home with his African upbringing and saw the advent of missionary activities in the Gold Coast as a timely intervention. In this, and in spite of his occasional disagreement with Basel Mission (Haenger 1998), he had praises for the missionaries.

In his attitude toward the cultures and religions of the people of Gold Coast, Reindorf distinguished one from the other. He was critical of the grip the latter held on their adherents, consequently impeding their embracing the Gospel (Reindorf [1890] 1966:221,222). Yet, with equal passion, he regretted the negative effects of his people's contact with Europeans, especially in the women's 'want of principle' (Reindorf [1890]1966:271-273). He was excited that the late nineteenth century growing British imperialism in the Gold Coast would usher in a new dispensation of 'justice, love, and peace' and prepare the ground for an unimpeded advancement of Christianity in the land (Reindorf [1890]1966:335).

Ultimately, the significance of Reindorf is his emergence as the first, indigenous, African historian (Bediako 1995:39-47). And for him, history is not a detached chronicle of past events but a critical evaluation of the past in the light of the present and the future. He thus exhibited, at this early stage of Christianity in Africa, a balanced integration of academic learning, Christian religious consciousness, and patriotic zeal.

#### 4.3.2.2 Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson was born in 1846 in Hastings, Sierra Leone. His father, Henry Johnson, was a Yoruba freed slave from the prominent family of Abiodun, the last great king of Oyo at the height of its prosperity before the Yoruba kingdom disintegrated. Providence began to shape his future when he was only ten years old as his father entered the service of Rev. David Hinderer. The missionary had recruited him from Sierra Leone as his ‘native’ assistant for his mission in Yoruba land. Under the liberal education of this Basel-trained CMS missionary at Ibadan, and later at the Abeokuta Training Institution, he appears to have developed interest in classical and Biblical histories, an interest that later became for him a passion and influenced his project *The History of the Yorubas* (Ajayi 1998:58).

He became the schoolmaster at the Aremo School, Ibadan, and he was later appointed a catechist in 1876. In the absence of missionary staff, he took more responsibility for the local church and those around Ibadan (Walls 1998:337). In 1886, ‘he was ordained deacon and priest and, after a brief period at Ondo, in 1887 became pastor at Oyo. There he remained until his untimely death’ (Walls 1998:337).

What was his motivation in writing the history of his people? Johnson considered it a reproach that the educated elite of his native Yoruba land were ‘well acquainted with the history of England and with that of Rome and Greece, but the history of their own country they [knew] nothing whatever!’ (Johnson 1921:vii). In some respects, he was very much like the other educated people of his time, many of whom were returnees from Sierra Leone. But he seems to have obtained the rare advantage of being nurtured in the liberal environment of his mentor, Rev. David Hinderer, who shared Henry Venn’s vision of raising Christians who were authentically African, yet committed to the Christian faith. His dedicating *The History of the Yorubas* to the ‘revered memory’ of David

Hinderer underscores the tremendous influence of the missionary on him and the gratitude he felt for it.

Johnson's *History* derives its materials from the Oyo bards, and elderly friends like David Kukomi and Josiah Oni. The former lived in the days of King Abiodun and participated in the many wars that followed his demise; the latter was 'an intrepid trader... who was well acquainted with almost every part of the country, and took part in some of the most stirring events of a later period' (Johnson 1921:vii, viii). Venerable Lagunju whom Johnson describes as 'a gifted and trusty historian of the Yoruba Country', along with others not mentioned, adds to the list of his informants on the early history of the Yoruba people (Johnson 1921:viii). His experiences and observations during his active participation in peace initiatives during the fratricidal wars in Yoruba land between 1877 and 1892, form more than half of the *History*.

A self-effacing personality, Johnson wrote his *History* in the third person and, according to Ajayi, hardly hinted about his private and family life in his writings and journals (Ajayi 1998:60,61). He had a good rapport with the belligerents in the wars and took risks in walking into the dens of ferocious warlords. His was a life lived at the most turbulent epoch of Yoruba people's history, descending into the dangerous trenches of ambitious conquests and, there, deftly negotiating truce where war had become the culture of society. He embodied the mission of the Gospel to bring peace and harmony to the human society. He died in 1901.

How do we appreciate Samuel Johnson's self-understanding in the midst of the rapid changes that were taking place around him, some of which he himself facilitated? Certainly, our appreciation of his perception of the dynamics around him must take into account the European missionary environment in which he was brought up. In this regard, Johnson was like many of the returnees from Sierra Leone who did not have much difficulty in being critical of his Yoruba religious traditions.

Johnson's critical attitude does not imply that he reckoned everything associated with his people as evil; rather, the privilege of his Western education awakened his consciousness to biblical and ancient histories from whose perspectives he judged his own people. It is within the context of this critical evaluation that we must place his hopes, aspirations, and labor in working for the restoration of peace in Yoruba land, along with his ministerial duties. He expressed his wishes poignantly:

...[T]hat peace should reign universally, with prosperity and advancement, and that the disjointed units should all be once more welded into one under one head from the Niger to the coast as in the happy days of ABIODUN (sic), so dear to our fathers, that clannish spirit disappear, and above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land—paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial—should be the wish and prayer of every true son of Yoruba (Johnson 1921:642).

Johnson, no doubt, was conscious of the rapid changes taking place around him, changes whose end he could not himself foresee (Johnson 1921:639). These swift changes certainly fired his patriotic zeal to capture in writing for future generations, not only the history of his people, but also their pre-Christian customs and traditions. From the knowledge of this history, customs and traditions, he surmised that future generations would appreciate the workings of providence in the life of the nation, Christianity having become 'the principal religion in the land'.

Still, Johnson's patriotism, tempered in comparison to that found in late nineteenth century Lagos, was neither anti-European nor oblivious of the utility value his people placed on religion. His sharing in his people's perception of the utility value of religion is evident in his stated opinion that 'paganism and Mohammedanism [having] had their full trial', and having failed to guarantee the future of his people, they deserved to be replaced with a new allegiance to another faith—Christianity. In this conviction that Christianity had the wherewithal to heal

the country and bring prosperity to its people, he came to the conclusion that, thenceforth, the authentic mark of the Yoruba person, ‘every true son of Yoruba’, must be the wish for the triumph of the new faith in the land.

What we find in Samuel Johnson, therefore, is a man who had no misgivings about simultaneously being a Yoruba and a Christian in an age of European imperialism. Rather, while he was critically aware of his cultural roots, he also appreciated the providence that was shaping the future of his people through the Christian faith. Certainly, in him the passing order and the emerging one met in a conciliatory harmony.

#### **4.3.2.3 Comparing the Men—Reindorf and Johnson**

Reindorf and Johnson took up the pastoral vocation in a society in which the preaching of the Gospel was a novelty. And it appears as if the consequent training they received to this end sharpened not only their self-understanding and consciousness but also brought to the fore, for them, the appreciation of their own identity as West Africans, the potentials of their emerging societies, and the tremendous opportunities beckoning to their people. These factors informed their documenting in writing their own peoples’ histories. But how do they compare in their perceptions of the changes taking place around them?

A major factor that shaped both agents of European missions was the evangelical, pietist tradition of the Basel Mission under whose missionary influence both ministers received their education and training in the pastoral vocation. The liberal content of the curriculum to which they were exposed in the mission schools inspired their writing their own peoples’ stories. This comes to light in Reindorf’s references to the histories of the ancient world (Reindorf [1890]1966:17,18,265) and Johnson’s indictment of his Yoruba kinsmen’s ignorance of their own history while brandishing their knowledge of other peoples’ stories (Johnson 1921:vii).

Being among the early generations of lettered Africans, they had the peculiar advantage of not only knowing the histories of their own people, but also the privilege to draw from and interpret them in the light of their reflections on biblical and classical histories. Their education afforded them this privilege to compare their societies with earlier civilizations and, with the advantage of hindsight, to anticipate the future in the light of present realities. In this light, we appreciate Reindorf's vehement concern for his people's response to their contact with Europeans in the Gold Coast, while Johnson was preoccupied with how the wars in Yoruba land would be brought to an end. It may, therefore, amount to error of judgement to consider them as renegade Africans. On the contrary, they sought, by their works, to carve niches for their peoples in the unfolding history of humanity in the consciousness that providence was at work in their contact with Europeans. Hence, it is in this recognition of their efforts to rightly situate the stories of their peoples in the global context of the divine-human encounter that we appreciate their invaluable contributions to the self-understanding of peoples of West Africa; yet, not as belligerent nationalists but as ecumenical personalities.

We may not also lose sight of the fact that both men, Reindorf and Johnson, had exposure that transcended their local African backgrounds as Ga and Yoruba speaking pastors respectively. The former was a mulatto who, early in life, enjoyed the elite education of the fort at Christianborg; the latter was born and received early nurture in the cosmopolitan settlement of Sierra Leone where freed slaves were discharged by the British government. We may not underestimate the value of these exposures to these persons whose training in the humanities taught them to think critically about their peoples and situations, since this greatly enhanced their ability to assimilate the trends around them.

However, unlike Johnson, Reindorf was an impetuous character with many abilities and several engagements at different times. In ministerial training and work, Reindorf experienced moments of conflict with his employers both as a student and as a catechist (Haenger 1998). We find in Johnson a reticent character

who kept his family affairs and project of history writing away from public glare (Ajayi 1998:57,58).

Still, how do they compare in their perceptions and expectations of the events unfolding around them? Generally, both pastors were favorably disposed to the coming of the Gospel to their peoples, a fact underscored by their taking up the ministerial vocation under the tutelage of European missionaries. Having been trained by Europeans, it comes as no surprise that mission Christianity shaped their value judgements as they characterized the traditional religions of their peoples as ‘fetish’, ‘superstition’, and ‘paganism’ (Reindorf [1890]1966:222,234; Johnson 1921:438,642). Reindorf’s descriptions are still more critical as he called them ‘Egyptian darkness’, ‘ignorance and blood-stained superstition’ and ‘murderous customs’ (Reindorf [1890] 1966:213,335). While these appear to reveal a contempt for their ancestral faiths, their attitude must be seen as a response to the degeneracy and exploitation that had become associated with ‘the history of priestcraft all over the world’ (Bartels 1965:56). In the light of their desires for the wellbeing of their peoples, it is not conceivable that they did not share the ideals those faiths stood for—truth, justice, equity, and abundant life.

Both pastor-historians looked forward to the triumph of the faith of the Church among their peoples, ushering them into a new era of prosperity and stability. Johnson’s treatment, in particular, reveals his evaluative assessment of how the two earlier faiths in Yoruba land had fared in the nation. In his reckoning, they had failed to sustain the unity of Yoruba people. Having thus had their day, and having failed, they deserved to be replaced with a new commitment to a supposedly nobler faith in Christianity.

In their *Histories*, the two pastors reveled in the growing influence of Britain in the interiors beyond the Gold Coast and Lagos colonies, Johnson himself being the chief facilitator in negotiating their intervention in the intra-ethnic feuds in Yoruba. He had the notion that the British colonial government, as a neutral party, could help the disintegrated kingdom to stand on its feet again so

that it may thrive as in the days gone by. We even find in Reindorf the jubilation that the entry of a humane British administration into the Gold Coast would usher in 'justice, love and peace'.

With the advantage of hindsight, these certainly were mistaken notions as later activities and interests of British government in West Africa led to new crises, on a far wider scale, in the modern nation states they imposed on the people.<sup>13</sup> In spite of this, however, Reindorf and Johnson authentically embodied the changes that were taking place in the advent of European missionary activities in West Africa and felt no contradictions in being both West Africans and Christians at the same time. If they had been too excited about changes whose ends they could not foresee, it was not because they considered European colonial activities among their peoples as ultimately superior to their traditions. It was, rather, essentially because they thought that in the interaction of their peoples with the new powers, colonial and religious, they would be better equipped to address the stirring events of their days, wherein local resources to cope with present realities and challenges were proving ineffectual. Still, they had thought that in the synergy of local resources with the external ones, the future of their people would be enhanced. Their inspirations were religious and their motives were undoubtedly patriotic.

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<sup>13</sup> In the long run, the ascendancy of the British government in the Gold Coast and the Southern Protectorate of modern Nigeria did not usher in the prosperity Johnson and Reindorf anticipated. Johnson's dream of a renewed and united Yoruba country, from River Niger to the Coast, was subsumed in a Nigeria in which the colonial power intentionally ensured the subservience of his people to Fulani domination, the very thing his people fought against. Thus, for Johnson in particular, Britain worsted his hope.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SIGNIFICANT ISSUES IN THE INTERFACE OF MISSION CHRISTIANITY AND WEST AFRICAN CULTURES**

From the foregoing discussion on the European missionary exploits in West Africa, certain issues become significant in the encounter of mission Christianity with West African cultures. These issues deserve our exploration as the issue of identity and self-understanding of Africans continues to generate intellectual inquiry in the face of the strides that missionary world religions have made through religious conversion. In the light of the prejudice of European missionaries toward West African cultures and religions, the question arises as to whether West Africans can, at the same time, be authentically Christian and African. And we may further ask if there is any congruence between the religious traditions of West Africa and the Gospel that, in spite of the European coloration of the Gospel, can provide necessary bridgeheads for their interaction? If there is, what would religious conversion mean in West Africa? And what would be its implications? These issues, and others, are the concerns of this chapter.

#### **5.1 West African Religious Worldview in Encounter with the Gospel**

It has been stated earlier that the underlying motive behind West African religious traditions is the quest for life in all its fullness, as religion, among the people, serves the end of ensuring the survival and perpetuation of societies. In this vein, religion must be seen as an intrinsic and vital aspect of the larger culture of its adherents, for through its rituals and sanctions it provides the internal mechanism for social control, guidance and cohesion.

To appreciate the encounter between the Gospel and West African religious worldview, we need to acknowledge some dynamics about the development of religious traditions in primal societies. In the first place, religious world view in

primal societies is a human construct in response to perceived reality. This is the central thesis of Bolaji Idowu's contention that African religious traditions constitute an authentic response to God's self-disclosure and that they are not products of idle, make-believe constructs. The pivot of his argument is that:

[God] created man in His own image—a rational being, intelligent will, someone address-able and therefore responsible (=respons-able): someone to whom God could communicate His revelation through his appreciation of the created order and with whose spirit the Divine Spirit could have immediate communication (Idowu 1969a:19).

For Idowu, therefore, although 'nowhere is the concept of God clear in an absolute sense' (Idowu 1969a:22), Africans, like other people created in the image of God, are capable of grasping the idea of his person. Consequently, this accounts for the reality of his person to them and their calling him 'by names which are descriptive both of His nature and of His attributes' (Idowu 1969a:24). Idowu further argued that God is not only real to Africans but that he is also unique in their conception as the incomparable, transcendent, omnipotent and universal One. He contends that these are concepts original to Africans, in spite of language diversity, and are not derived from 'a loan-God from the missionaries' (Idowu 1969a:24-29).

In concurrence with Idowu's argument that African religious understanding is authentic, it comes as no surprise that we find, in their seminal forms, certain central themes of the Gospel in West African religious world view. Themes such as the world of spirits, life hereafter, and the quest for abundant life and moral rectitude are among those latent themes that find congruence in the two faiths, although they have critical points of divergence in their details.

Second, because religious world views and cultic systems are human constructs, though in response to reality perceived, they are susceptible to human foibles occasioned by the Fall. While systems in themselves may point at truth and reality with unmistakable clarity, their further development with time is not immune from human errors, hence Paul's vehement critique in Roman 1 of

‘people who hold down the truth of unrighteousness, who do not honour God, who are given up to dishonourable passions’ (Walls 1996:66). It is very important to acknowledge this susceptibility of religious systems to the pervasive effects of the Fall as some African scholars tend to treat African religious institutions as if they have, in themselves, attained the zenith of religious reality and purity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, every religious system, including Christianity, is susceptible to the consequences of fallen humanity (Walls 1996:66). In the same vein, and in spite of their perceptive insights into the nature of reality, West African religious traditions too are susceptible to this universal predicament of the fallen creation. It then means that for these religious systems to survive the deleterious effects of this predicament and continue to exercise their life-giving functions in human society, they must be able to generate, from time to time, the internal mechanism for self-renewal. When a religious system lacks this, it atrophies.

If we may draw from the Old Testament, the Hebrew tradition offers us a model of a religious system that had built into its operation a mechanism for self-criticism and renewal through the proclamation of the prophets. Virtually all through the history of the Hebrew nation, but especially when the judges ruled the people and the institution of the prophets was very much underdeveloped, the story of the people was one of cycles of decline and renewal. Decline set in each time the priesthood was overtaken by self-serving motives and personal interests and social aberrations compromised the worship of Yahweh.

However, the nation progressively witnessed relative stability as the institution of the prophets gradually took root in the life of the nation. Thereafter, the virility of Hebrew society rose and fell in accordance with the virility of its prophetic sentinels. When the institution of the prophets was also overtaken by corruption, especially through the unscrupulous elements in its ranks, the religious system failed and the enemies sacked the nation. Hence, the failure of the system to sustain its renewal mechanism also led to its near dissolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Bolaji Idowu’s *African Traditional Religion* (1973) tends toward this.

It is in this area of self-criticism that we find West African traditional religions weakest and most vulnerable. Apparently lacking in this essential mechanism *in themselves*, they tend to carry on from generation to generation with the assumption that all is well.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, with the passing of time and generations, they become weighed-down by the whims and caprices of unscrupulous persons, especially priests who constitute themselves into trade guilds in the business of self-preservation and survival. Here lies the fundamental weakness in Rattray's eulogy of Akan religious system, for he failed to understand that West African indigenous religions do not have the tradition of emergence of iconoclastic Messiahs who turn the *status quo* on its head. Rather, their prophets always seek to conserve traditions by ensuring the 'inherent fixity' of 'the collective wisdom of the community' (Nock [1933]1998:1,2); yet, even in this, time has revealed the impossibility of their task.<sup>3</sup>

Ordinarily, West African religions are open to other religious and non-religious traditions that are life ennobling, even if those traditions are not indigenous to West Africa. And where, as in 1851 Ibadan, the priesthood maintains the sacredness and integrity of office, even a seemingly rival cult will be

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to imply that the religions lack the reflexive ability to respond to change; on the contrary, the history of the entry of Islam and Christianity into the Yoruba society, for example, has shown that they are capable of doing that creatively (Horton 1971). But the agents of change have been external and not internal when compared with the integral nature of the institution of the Prophets to the religio-cultural milieu of the Hebrew nation.

<sup>3</sup> This position finds a parallel in the keynote paper presented by the Omanhene of Akuapem Traditional Council, in Ghana, Oseadeeyo Nana Addo Dankwa III, at the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Center's post-graduate seminar held on Monday, November 6, 2000. The paper was entitled 'Christianity and the institution of chieftaincy'. Its position was that many of the interpretations now associated with Akan traditions were later accretions in which spiritual significance was ascribed to them. A social custom like the prohibition of farming on Thursdays was a form of local institution of Sabbath rest for the people while the seemingly ritualistic painting of memorabilia like chieftancy stools was simply to enhance their preservation. He, however, posited that the deification of institutions was introduced because of the incorrigibility of Africans who often need threat to be restrained from tampering with these institutions. While Addo Dankwa III did

welcomed when its mission is judged to be consistent with the society's quest for growth and self-preservation. However, where the priesthood has evolved into a self-serving guild and the perquisites of office take precedence over vocational ethics and the responsibility to watch over the community, religion loses its potency and credibility. Thus becoming sterile, the society is exposed to the risk of moral degradation and collapse. Could this self-serving end of the Ifa priests at Abeokuta (McKenzie 1976) and the priests of Nananom at Mankessim (Bartels 1965) partly account for their resistance to mission Christianity, even if the insensitive contempt of the Christians also partly accounts for the violence that ensued?

It is in their openness to other non-indigenous traditions that the lack of self-critical awareness of West African religions is mitigated as the Yoruba religious itinerary has shown.<sup>4</sup> Yet, where the external agent of renewal is also lacking, or appears not to pose a vigorous enough challenge to the *status quo*, as appears to have been the case with Islam in pre-Christian Yoruba land, decay becomes imminent. Could this have accounted for the dissolution that befell the country in the nineteenth century when the full weight of the ineffectiveness of the traditional religions finally descended on its people?<sup>5</sup>

Before we analyze the encounter between mission Christianity and West African religious traditions, it is also necessary to delineate what the Gospel is and

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not discount the pervasive influence of religion on Akan people, he shared the position of this essay that much that now surrounds old traditions may not be original.

<sup>4</sup> In the interaction of the Yoruba religion with Christianity and Islam, the traditional faith has been forced, as it were, to adapt some of its presuppositions to the innovative interpretations of the prophetic religions. See, for example, Idowu's *Olodumare—God in Yoruba Belief* (1996:57-59, 219-221) for an attempt at interpreting Yoruba religion as monotheistic over against the usual polytheistic interpretation. His argument is a product of Christian thinking reshaping an existing understanding. See also Bediako's *Christianity in Africa* (1995:97-106).

<sup>5</sup> The irreligious disposition of the state and its people found expression in the terror of despotic leaders and the unrestrained ambitions of the warrior class. The resultant internal feuds and dissension were the veritable pointers to the fact that the Yoruba religious-cultural system had broken down (Johnson 1921:188).

clarify its relationship with mission Christianity. The Gospel, as the Good News of the mission of God (*Missio Dei*), has as its essential content God's plan for healing His fractured creation in every dimension of its broken-ness. According to the proclamation of the early Christian community (Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-16), this sovereign initiative of God in mediating wholeness to his fallen creation finds its full expression in the incarnation of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. In this incarnation, the Son of God shared in the broken-ness of creation, felt its woes and appropriated its human category of culture to communicate the goodwill of His Father to His creation.

Although creation is fallen and alienated from God, the divine purpose that culminated in the incarnation of the Son of God attests to the fact that God's redemptive activity always took place in the context of human culture, in spite of all the risks of its imperfection. This is evident in the salvation history of the Hebrew nation in which Yahweh revealed Himself through natural phenomena and employed the human language as a medium of His self-disclosure. Two implications arise from this appropriation of human culture to communicate the divine mission. The first is that while culture remains a human construct, it can serve the purpose of God's self-disclosure. Secondly, the imperfection of human culture makes impossible a complete and perfect human apprehension of God's self-disclosure; human understanding at its best and its resultant religious traditions, as indicated above in Idowu's argument, can only be partial and provisional.

Consequently, when the Gospel is communicated in the thought form of any people, the latter can only reveal with all its inherent luminous intensity the aspects of the Gospel which it is adequate to communicate. And when that thought form has delineated the Gospel with all the lucidity it is capable of, it has only revealed a partial and culture-bound knowledge of a reality that transcends full human cognition (Taylor 1958:252,253; Howell 1997:313,314). It is in the light of this limitation that we appreciate European mission Christianity as a provisional

expression of the Gospel in which its essential Gospel content must be distinguished from its European cultural accretions.

Since Christianity, as a religious system, is such a human, cultural articulation of the Gospel as it is understood from place to place, it is capable of many expressions. The main issue in this diversity of its expression is not its plurality of form but the fact that the Gospel is both contained in these diverse expressions and, at the same time, transcends them. Therefore, although mission Christianity in nineteenth century West Africa came with European cultural accretions, it nonetheless contained the Gospel—the good news of God’s healing power at work in the midst of His creation.

In view of the fact that mission Christianity is the Gospel in European cultural form, how do we assess the encounter between the religious worldview of the peoples of West Africa and the Gospel, as conveyed in that cultural form? In the first place, we must acknowledge that because mission Christianity contained the Gospel, it has a valid presence in West Africa irrespective of any ideological or imperialist agenda that may seem to have undermined its credibility. The validity rests on the fact that its essential content, the Gospel, came to the people who needed its transforming message like other people who share in the brokenness of God’s creation.

Beyond this universal need for redemption, the entry of the Gospel into West Africa was a timely intervention. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in Yoruba land where full disintegration had set in and the indigenous religious systems seemed to have failed the people, as W.H. Clarke observed at Igboho in his November 1857 report to Rev. J.P. Tusting (*Robertson Collections* III:28,29). Although the Akan states remained politically intact during this period, religious and social disintegration was equally evident. The Mankessim revelation attested to this, and the situation in Akyem Abuakwa, with all its apparent cultural

integrity, underscored the need for the healing grace of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> Against this background, it is possible to justify and validate the advent of the missionary enterprise in West Africa and consider too romantic Rattray's eulogy that 'had these people been left to work out their own salvation, perhaps some day an African Messiah would have arisen and swept their Pantheon clean of fetish' (Rattray 1927:v,vi). On the other hand, can we not say that the Gospel, in its nineteenth century entry into West Africa, was presenting to the people Rattray's anticipated *Messiah*, who came not only to sweep 'their Pantheon clean of fetish' but also to show the people the way to the realization of their age-long aspiration for the abundant life?

The congruence that exists between the presuppositions of the Gospel and the worldview of West African primal societies underscores the fact that the entry of the Gospel into West Africa was not superfluous. There is indeed between them affinities which contemporary trends in world Christianity have made clear (Taylor 1963; Turner 1977; Bediako 1995). Although European missionaries, from cultural prejudice, seemed unaware of this affinity, toward the end of the century their African converts began to appreciate and draw from it (Peel 1998:78-79). It was, however, in the twentieth century that this process became fully developed in the emergence of African Initiated Churches (AICs). This interaction, which would later be described as 'the renewal of a non-western religion' (Bediako 1995), attests to the fact that the engagement has been beneficial to both faiths. The benefit comes to the Gospel in its being rooted in the cultural milieu of West Africa, thus authenticating it as the faith of West Africans also. It also comes in the consequent phenomenal growth and expansion of

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<sup>6</sup> Eisenschmid's report for 1864 (Dated 7 Feb. 1865, No. Akim 16) gave, from the missionary's perspective, a hint of what life was like in mid-nineteenth century Akyem Abuakwa. According to him, 'Life in Kibi (sic) is constant...lies and deceit and quarrels and brawls—the annual festival was held on Christmas day, and passed off reasonably on that day but the next day Kibi people quarrelled (sic) with the people of two other villages (unnamed) and they had many wounded to attend to in the evening' (Jenkins *Abstracts*:515).

Christianity among the peoples of West Africa. For the traditional religions the fruit of the interaction can be seen in the Gospel's sharpening of their worldview, especially in imbuing their understanding of the Supreme Being with a more dynamic appreciation. It also comes to the traditional society in the renewal of its vision, hope, and aspiration for the abundant life.

In the light of this argument, how do we respond to the postulate that 'Had the stream of new life issuing from Christ encountered ancient life when the latter was still unbroken, it would have recoiled impotent from the shock?' (Ulhorn quoted in Sanneh 1993:127). This question is relevant to our discourse in the light of the fact that the final breakthrough in the evangelization of West Africa, now known as the third opportunity, occurred at a time when socio-cultural disintegration had overtaken the peoples of West Africa.

To the postulate, we must respond with the acknowledgement that every human culture carries within it the viral debilities of our broken creation. Consequently, every human culture is bound, at one time or another, to come to terms with its inability to continue to function as if everything is well, especially in the face of imminent disintegration. The omission of any people to do this will usher in the dread of its masses, as it happened both to Graeco-Roman culture in the fifth century CE and Yoruba land in the nineteenth century. Hence, just as the Fall necessitated the redemptive plan, cultural disintegration, whether it is incipient or it has already fully set in, will always necessitate the entry of the Gospel into cultures, irrespective of whether they are ancient or modern. Where disintegration has fully set in, this entry cannot be regarded as mere opportunism but one that is taking place at the fullness of time. Briefly stated, therefore, it is a culture's desperate quest for survival that rightly predisposes it to the Gospel when the former becomes diseased and is about to exhaust its vitality.

## 5.2 Missionary Methods and Traditional Values of West African People

When Rev. Suss, the Basel missionary to the Gold Coast, visited Kyebi in 1852, he explained to Okyehene Obuom that he had come:

Because I love you black people, and I had heard in my country that you are an unhappy people, with no peace, and knowing nothing about eternal life, and then I would come to tell you about eternal life...so that you may receive it...and become holy...in time and eternity (Jenkins *Abstracts*: 4).

Nearly thirteen years after Suss made this statement, Eisenschmid, another Basel missionary laboring in the same Akyem Abuakwa mission field, wrote in his report for 1864 (Dated 7 Feb. 1865, No. Akim 16) that ‘deep thinking is not the concern of the local people, they are too much embedded in their beliefs and fetishes and consider that with a few eggs or a hen everything can be settled to their advantage’ (Jenkins *Abstracts* :515). In these accounts of the two missionaries, we find a situation where a sanguine hope of extending the frontiers of the Gospel met with apparent indifference.

In appreciating again the dynamics at play in the encounter of mission Christianity with West African society, we now come to the encounter between European and West African epistemological categories. The seeming incongruity between the two approaches in their apprehension of reality was the bane of European missionary method in West Africa and constitutes the concern of this section. It is, however, necessary to state that the methods of evangelization applied by different missionaries in different contexts of West Africa varied from place to place, although there were common strands that ran through the official policies on methods and strategies of the different missions. Equally important is the appreciation of the fact that the attitudes, perceptions, and sentiments of the

individual missionaries on the field also informed the way the missions went about their project of evangelization.<sup>7</sup>

We do not have any reason to think that Suss meant to spite the religious-cultural milieu of nineteenth century Akyem Abuakwa. However, like many other missionaries of his time, who because of the veiled effects of the Enlightenment held mistaken notions about Africa and its peoples, his statement betrayed the misgivings of Europeans about Africa. Certainly, the people of Akyem had their social and cultural aberrations, like every other people, but would that qualify them as an 'unhappy people, with no peace' any more than other societies? And although the traditional African concept of the life hereafter has shades of difference from that of the Gospel, would that also mean that Africans know 'nothing about eternal life'? How do we explain the variance in the missionaries' understanding of West Africans and the indigenous peoples' perception of them as agents of destruction?<sup>8</sup>

In the aftermath of the ascendancy of Enlightenment culture in Europe, the enthronement and cultural celebration of Reason as the ultimate source of knowledge gradually percolated into the different aspects of European life. This was effected with varying degrees of success, such that even the missionaries may have underestimated its influence on them in spite of their aversion to it.<sup>9</sup> This is

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<sup>7</sup>For example, Ayandele wrote that 'white missionaries as Townsend, Faulkner and Wood, noting that they could wield no influence [in Abeokuta] unless they were members of the [*Ogboni*] cult, joined it with its "heathenish" rites. The cult was highly secretive and comprised of the ruling elders of the city; it was responsible for ensuring order in the Egba State by dispensing justice and holding the monarchy in check' (Ayandele 1966:270). The discretion to be part of such a secretive, traditional cult was certainly that of the missionaries on the field and could hardly have been at the direction of the mission's home office. Basel missionaries applied the same discretion in the raging controversy about domestic slavery in the Gold Coast of 1860s. Their experience in the field pointed in the direction that a faithful application of the home office hard line policy on the matter would be detrimental to their work, hence their soft approach to it (Haenger 1998:19-29).

<sup>8</sup> See objection to Hinderer's entry to Ibadan in chapter 4, pp. 89,90 & footnote 8, p.90.

<sup>9</sup> Although, as earlier stated in chapter two, not every European institution shared the ideals of the emerging culture to which the Christians, in particular, were averse, they

the influence betrayed by Eisenschmid's report about Akyem that 'deep thinking is not the concern of the local people'. Certainly they think, and deeply. For the ordered universe in which they operate, physically and metaphysically, can only be the fruit of deep reflection over time.

Robin Horton (1993) offers a perspective on the distinction between the thinking world from which the European missionaries came and that of their African intended converts. In trying to grapple with the essential difference between them, he explores features he considers as common to both traditions. His basic assumption is that the same principles that guide theoretical thinking are at work in both African traditional thought and 'Western science' and he takes 'at their face value' traditional African religious systems as 'models akin to those of the sciences' (Horton 1993:197-221). He then argues that their essential difference is in the observation that 'in traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to the established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such awareness is highly developed' (Horton 1993:222). The distinction is, therefore, one between 'closed' and 'open' predicaments<sup>10</sup> (Horton 1993:221).

The distinction between the missionaries' understanding of the source of knowledge and that of their West African prospects informed the tension that ensued in the use of the school as an instrument of conversion. The missionaries had thought that through the effective enlightenment of the African, by awakening his rational potential, conversion could be secured and the culture of the people transformed. The reverberative effect of this method on the cultures of the peoples

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nonetheless could not shake themselves completely free from its pervasive influence on the people.

<sup>10</sup> Horton's attempt at pinning down the relationship between and the distinguishing features of the two models of apprehending reality is insightful, but his submission still begs the question of what is their qualitative difference. For example, how 'open' is the Western scientific method when it is tested against its attitude toward metaphysical realities like religion and the miraculous? Moreover, how objective and scientific is the

of West Africa was the crisis that erupted in Akyem Abuakwa. The potential for it was not lost on the people from the beginning, hence their ambivalent attitude toward the school. In fact, an *okomfoo* (priest), in his apprehension about the inroads Christianity was gaining into Akyem society through the school, advised Amoako Atta I to close down the Kyebi School in 1867 (Jenkins *Abstracts*: 532).

The weakness of the school system in the conversion process was not in its awakening the seemingly dormant rational powers of West Africans. It was more in the subtle fallacy that the awakened rational power would lead the people away from their traditional framework of understanding reality and prepare the ground for their conversion. The result of this attitude, as the missionaries expected, was that it created in some of the converts revulsion for their pre-Christian past. They did not, therefore, appreciate the continuity between that past and their new estate as Christians. Yet, in reality, that past was continuous with the new as it continued to inform their cosmology, their place in the world, and the cognitive processes by which they articulated their sense of the transcendent. Their traditional self-understanding as living in a vast world of temporal and supra-temporal realities and their articulation of the person of the Supreme Being were products of this past which now glowed brighter and better in the intense illumination of the Gospel. In the same vein, the entry of the Gospel into Ibadan and the conversion of the people of Northumbria may be understood as occurring in continuity with the peoples' self-understanding. Against this background, as well, must we place the *Ifa* priest's intimation to Ajayi Crowther's parents that he be not dedicated, as a boy, to any of the Yoruba divinities according to the people's tradition, as he was destined to serve *Olorun*, the Lord of heaven (NAD, Ibadan, CMS (Y) 4/3/10).

However, the missionaries' failure to appreciate the continuity of the West African religious past with the entry of the Gospel into their context and the failure

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Western rational method of inquiry, bearing in mind that a person's subjective experiences impinge on his or her mental activities?

to use appropriate educational method to dovetail that past into the new situation created a violent disruption in the social universe of the converts. For example, West African societies had built into their program of socialization ethics and personality formation through proverbs, anecdotes, and stories. Although these took place in informal, relaxed environments, they served a vital purpose of educating and forming the human character. They recounted family and community histories and traditions, heroism of the past, as well as the dreadful consequences of villainy. Some of the stories exploited the human capacity for fear to instill the culture of decency, mercy, truth, justice, and equity. In all these, traditional education was practically didactic.

In the missionaries' lack of understanding and insight into all these, which were also evident in their own pre-Christian past, they discountenanced the value of the people's existing tradition to assist in rooting the Gospel among them and to lead them to appreciate how the Gospel had taken up their concerns. They did not see the divine footprints that preceded their entry into West Africa. The result of their failure was manifested in the difficulty of their early converts to find their niche in the societies in which they were nurtured, as it became difficult for them to resonate with the traditional beliefs and presuppositions.

With the difficulty of resonating with their upbringing came their contempt for the traditional religions and their societies' ethical imperatives. The long-term effect of this attitude was the gradual erosion of the societies' moral values. The individualism inadvertently fostered by their conversion through the school was the ultimate deathblow to the traditional society. Bolaji Idowu may then be right in his view that, in its violent erosion of community, 'Christianity, by a miscarriage of purpose, makes its own contribution to the detrimental changes in moral values' of Yoruba people (Idowu [1962]1996:227).

This is not to imply that the school system failed in all aspects of its intended purpose in mission Christianity. In fact, the reduction of West African languages to written form, the translation of the Bible into mother-tongues, and the

development of written literature were akin to the strategy of quickening the rational power of the African for the purpose of conversion. To the education offered by the missionaries must go the credit of reducing the oral histories of West African peoples to written form by their African agents. To the same must also be attributed the emergence of the elite that overthrew colonialism in West Africa. The problem was that in the missionaries' inability to appreciate the socio-cultural milieu of their intended converts, the changes they introduced into West African societies through the school system proved obtrusive and violent.

However, in learning and using the languages and concepts of indigenous peoples to communicate the Gospel, the missionaries unwittingly validated the peoples' experience of the pre-incarnate Christ who had preceded their entry into the West African milieu. To this revelation West Africans had responded in their traditions, languages and mythologies wherein they named him according to their indigenous apprehension and wisdom. In using these languages and concepts to communicate the Gospel, the missionaries also unknowingly endorsed their inherent propositions and presuppositions, for every language, beyond its apparent verbal symbols, constitutes a world of meaning which may not find exact duplicates in another. This carries serious implications.

First, it follows that in using the diverse languages and concepts found in the diverse contexts of the human condition world over, the Gospel cannot be monolithic in its expression. For in taking up these diverse forms, the Gospel becomes incarnated in each context as it wrestles with the inherent realities and conditions. Vernacular translations of the Bible, accordingly, have proved to be the gateway of the Gospel into the world of indigenous peoples. Through its appropriation of indigenous terms and concepts, it enters into dialogue with cultures and inaugurates the leavening process of transforming and reconfiguring itself and its hosts, and thereby mediates life and vitality to the host cultures. In the process, it strengthens those noble elements of cultures which are about to become

incapacitated while flushing out their weakening excesses. All these take place independently of the exponents of the Gospel although they trigger the process.

In the second place, the translation of the Bible into the mother tongue has proved to be the ultimate catalyst in attaining the acclaimed euthanasia of mission and the emergence of the native pastorate, goals vigorously pursued by the missionary statesman, Henry Venn. In fact, in the translation of the Bible into mother tongues, missionaries had inadvertently built into their method of evangelism the death of missions. Lamin Sanneh, in his *Translating the Message* states that:

Vernacular agency became the preponderant medium for the assimilation of Christianity [by indigenous peoples], and although missionaries did not consciously intend to occupy a secondary position, their commitment to translation made that necessary and inevitable. The preexisting vernacular came to exert a preemptive power over the proprietary claims of mission over the gospel, and when missionaries assumed that mission must occur by scriptural translation, they invoked that preemptive power without knowing that it would at the same time minimize their role as external agents (Sanneh 1989:161,162).

It has therefore become clear that the missionary method of Bible translation into mother tongues is the most profound legacy European missionaries bequeathed to West Africa, as to other peoples. In the words of Kwame Bediako,

The possession of the Christian Scriptures in African languages became...probably the single most important element of the Western missionary legacy. In some cases, the Scriptures became the foundation for a new [literate] culture which did not exist previously, and ensured that there did take place an effectual rooting of the Christian faith in African consciousness (Bediako 1994:246).

In the profundity of this legacy, and in its capacity to liberate and elevate the human spirit, the impact of the Bible on the West African society remains incalculable (Schaaf 1994:147-227).

Another missionary method that deserves attention is the mission station approach to the conservation of converts. The Salems, as the creation of the

missionaries, have been criticized as spheres of communal living for the Christians, away from the authority of the African chiefs. It thus appears as if the missionaries, by this method, were creating their own states out of the existing states and were bringing division among the people (Debrunner 1967:174). It became more apparent in their buying over slaves from the larger Akyem Abuakwa society to live and work in the *Oburonikrom*, where they assumed the Okyehene had no authority.

As a missionary method, the Salem system of conservation was not, in itself, out of tune with Akan society. It may be seen as a designation of a territory 'under the protection of its own titular spirit', as it is with each *abusua*, that is clan, under its own head who is responsible for its welfare and represents it in the decision making process of the wider community (Debrunner 1967:198). But for the missionaries' erroneous thinking that they were independent of the authority of the existing states, the Salems were not really anomalous in the existing social structure of the Akan society. It is in the erroneous sense of independence from the authority of the traditional powers that the Salems became subversive of the state as they turned out to be the hiding place for the rebellious and the contemptuous convert.

### **5.3 Christian Conversion in West African Societies**

Two major paradigms have been at work in analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity in Africa. On the one hand are the social anthropologists who seek to understand and interpret the dynamics at work in the process of conversion. On the other are the theologians who are not only interested in the dynamics at work but also in the way those dynamics can be harnessed for the purpose of communicating the Gospel without violating the cultural integrity of Christian converts. The former are not so much interested in the content of the missionary message, while the latter work within the terms of that message.

Two major contributors in the field of social analysis of African conversion are the Comaroffs and Robin Horton. In their analysis of the phenomenon of conversion, the Comaroffs employ a modified Marxist framework to interpret the engagement of religion with society as a dialectical struggle taking place in the realm of human consciousness. The modification lies in the contending categories and the object of contention. For Marxism, the contention is between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie for the 'means of production' in the society. For the Comaroffs, it is a power struggle between the 'Non-conformist' missionaries' *sekgoa* (Christianity) and the Southern Tswanas' *setswana* ('heathenism') taking place on the plane of human consciousness. Although they do not make a value judgement on the encounter, conversion, for them, is a 'colonization of consciousness' (Comaroffs 1991:243-251).

The Comaroffs' method and assumptions derive from the political history of South Africa. Nevertheless, their weakness lies in their not taking seriously enough that the missionaries' 'civilizing mission' was more than colonizing the African mind. Its ultimate agenda was to introduce to their African converts a certain experience of the transcendent that is concomitant with the *sekgoa* they preached<sup>11</sup>, irrespective of whether that experience was continuous or discontinuous with that in *setswana*. As ultimate reality, this experience of the transcendent is fundamental and inherent to human longing for meaning and so it is, in its essence, beyond the purview of the materialist sciences of politics and social anthropology.

This is not to say that the sciences cannot contribute to our understanding of conversion, especially in the social implication of the encounter between mission Christianity and African people. It is, rather, that their materialist orientation would not allow the reality of religious conversion as *religious* conversion. In essence, they represent another incursion of the hard-line, irreligious

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<sup>11</sup> This includes the redemption of the fallen creation and its transformation into a new creation.

Enlightenment philosophy into the domain of religion, and such an outlook is already prejudiced against the fundamental postulate of religion—the world of transcendent reality.

Robin Horton offers a more moderate social analysis of the dynamics he calls ‘African religious change’ but which, according to him, people ‘glibly called “conversion”’ (Horton 1971:95). His ‘African Conversion’ is particularly relevant to us because its matrix is the Yoruba *Aladura* religious milieu as documented by J. D. Y. Peel in his *Aladura: A religious movement among the Yoruba* (1968). According to Horton, Peel ‘deftly exposes the inadequacies of both “symbolist” and “functionalist” interpretation of conversion while he himself ‘selects a refurbished intellectualism which owes more to Max Weber than to Tylor and Frazer’ (Horton 1971:86). In his appraisal of the work, Horton came to the conclusion that ‘Peel sees the concern with explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events as the central continuity’ between the old, traditional Yoruba cosmology and the encroaching one of mission Christianity (Horton 1971:95).

In agreeing with Peel, he sees the encounter between Yoruba religious cosmology and mission Christianity as an encounter between ‘religions which combine explanation-prediction-control and communion’ and ‘a religion which is pure communion’, the former representing the Yoruba matrix and the latter mission Christianity<sup>12</sup> (Horton 1971:96). He, however, disagrees ‘when [Peel] talks of Christianity as if it were one more cult coming in alongside the existing cults of the *orisa*’ (Horton 1971:100). His counters that:

[O]ne salient feature of Christian proselytization in Yorubaland has surely been the identification of the Christian God with the indigenous supreme being Olorun, and the presentation of Christianity as the ‘true’ way of contacting this being. Indeed, it would seem that missionaries all over Africa have usually striven to discover the name of the indigenous supreme being, and, where

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<sup>12</sup> Communion here, according to Horton, can be ‘this-worldly’ or ‘other wordly’ as both have been realities in traditional Yoruba religious consciousness and in the history of European Christianity (Horton 1971:97).

successful, have then gone on to tell the people of his 'true' nature. Hence the African convert has not accepted an addition to the pantheon of lesser spirits. Rather, he has accepted change and development in his concept of the supreme being (Horton 1971:100).

Horton attempts to further develop Peel's 'intellectualist theory of conversion'. In this, he formulates a thought-experiment in which a macrocosmic modern situation impinges on a microcosmic pre-modern one and predicted possible 'cosmological adjustments' that would take place in the latter (Horton 1971:101-104). Drawing from his conjectures about the possible adjustments, he concludes that in the situation such as we are concerned with here, that is, mission Christianity in encounter with African social matrix, the so-called world religions serve only as a catalyst to a change that is, after all, imminent. Their catalytic role is effective only to the extent that they are mixed with 'features of the modern situation' such that they can help in coping with consequent challenges. In his reckoning, 'Islam seems to have been fairly content with its catalytic role' (Horton 1971:104), but, he writes:

Missionary Christianity, on the other hand, has never been content to play the catalyst. It has been rigid in its insistence on the individual's total acceptance of official doctrines. In particular, having renounced the functions of explanation, prediction, and control, it does not tolerate seers and faith-healers within its ranks, and is equally severe with their followers. Hence, the orthodox churches find themselves continually discomfited by a great many of their adherents; and the latter, in turn, feel great discomfort within the walls of the churches. The result is...proliferation of dissenting breakaway sects...( Horton 1971:105).

A few points become apparent in Horton's understanding of 'African conversion'. The first is that African conversion, in the light of the Aladura phenomenon, was based on survival instincts of the traditional cosmology in a changing social milieu. It has much less to do with personal experience and more with the social adaptation of an African system to a new condition being dictated by foreign encroachment. It is a conversion of a system. And in as much as the

system in view is one in which reality is a whole, and not a cleavage of the secular and the sacred or the mundane and the spiritual, it implicitly concerns the religious and the social.

The importance of the social dimension of religious change in Horton's analysis is, in itself, not irrelevant to our concern. It offers us insight into how the missionary message can impact the social matrix it is addressing. Moreover, it underscores the earlier assertion that religion in West Africa has value, fundamentally, to the extent that it can provide answers to the threats to human existence and guarantee life. However, the analysis has addressed only one side of what is supposed to be a dual approach to the impact of Christianity on the Yoruba milieu—social and personal. The problem is not particularly Horton's; it belongs also to the overwhelmingly communitarian nature of African society. And although this communitarian dimension dominates the personal, both social and personal dimensions of African life are actually in a symbiosis however insignificant this may appear to be.

Secondly, the missionary message is not the issue in Horton's 'African conversion'; its role in the encounter is secondary and useful only to the extent to which it facilitates the adjustment of the traditional cosmology to the challenges of the encroaching culture. Hence, his concern is clearly not so much with theology as with social change.

Thirdly, Horton betrays an inadequate understanding of mission Christianity when he argues that in its not being 'content to play the catalyst...it has been rigid in its insistence on the individual's total acceptance of official doctrines'. Mission Christianity was a product of evangelical awakening in both Europe and North America and it was essentially about personal religious experience in conversion rather than "official doctrines". Many of the mission organizations were voluntary movements and did not belong *per se* to the institutional churches from where the volunteer missionaries came. The issue of

‘official doctrines’ was secondary to their concern for personal conversion, even though they were no less concerned about doctrinal purity.

Finally, while Horton’s analysis is penetrating, it must be acknowledged that he is using as his raw materials a construct that was a much later development in the history of Christianity among the Yoruba. In fact, it came in the second phase of the attempt to indigenize Christianity in Yorubaland, the first phase being the ‘Ethiopian movement’<sup>13</sup>. Still, the Aladura movement represents only one expression of the Yoruba society’s response to Christianity, and in itself comes in different strands as Horton summarizes from Peel<sup>14</sup> (Horton 1971:88-91).

Although Horton’s material for analysis and interpretation is more relevant to our West African context than that of the Comaroffs, it is equally far removed from it in time. Still, while the Comaroffs’ method may be relevant to the violent socio-political realities of South African context, the encounter of mission Christianity with West African cultures and peoples took place in comparatively ‘more eirenic circumstances’ (Balcomb 1998:13). Nevertheless, in both analysts, we find social anthropology’s inability to commit itself seriously to the religious and the theological dimensions of the encounter between African society and mission Christianity.

Before we explore these dimensions, it is necessary to clarify the systems in interaction as well as their propositions. On the one hand is the missionary message with its proposition of ‘the reality of God’ as ‘Creator, Sustainer, Judge, and Redeemer’ (Sanneh 1989:158). On the other is the West African religio-

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<sup>13</sup> The Ethiopian movement was Yoruba Christians’ first popular response to European Christianity even though its emergence was more political and cultural than religious; but it is nonetheless valid as a response to mission Christianity, especially as the first fruit of indigenous resistance to its assumptions.

<sup>14</sup> It is a fact that the Apostolic strand of the Aladura movement is more critical in its use of traditional and extra-biblical materials for Christian worship (Sanneh 1983:186,187) and places more emphasis on personal conversion than we find in the Cherubim and Seraphim strand of the movement. In substance, Horton engaged more seriously the ‘Cherubim and Seraphim’ dimension of the Aladura phenomenon of conversion than its ‘Apostolic’ strand.

cultural milieu with its acute awareness of a distant Supreme Being (*Olorun* or *Onyankopon*), a passion for the good life, and a compelling reality of evil. The former enters into the context of the latter through the missionaries to impart into the host system, and its components, the life-giving grace of the Gospel. As stated earlier, in spite of the failure of the missionaries to see and appreciate the congruence between them, it is now acknowledged that there is really an affinity between the two systems (Taylor 1963; Cragg 1968). The question then is, 'What will conversion mean in their interaction?' To explore the answer to this question, we shall draw from classical understanding and contemporary appreciation of the process of conversion.

### **5.3.1 A. D. Nock and Conversion in Classical Culture**

A. D. Nock presents to us, from ancient history, an attempt at understanding religious conversion. According to him, the importance of religion to human existence is such that even when "Man does not live by bread alone...we cannot estimate aright even his attitude towards bread and bread-winning unless we consider also his attitude towards his god or dream or devil" (Nock [1933]1998:vii). In appreciating this pervasive influence of religion on human existence, Nock tries to grapple with the factors that inform the attitudes of the ancients toward religion and why they add elements from one to another, or even move from one faith to another.

Nock begins by distinguishing a traditional religion from a prophetic religion. According to him a traditional religion has been established and perhaps codified by 'the collective wisdom of the community' (Nock [1933]1998:1,2). The underlying belief is that its tenets 'rest upon some original revelation or revelations' and they are essentially immutable unless new situations arise in its contact with other cultures. Because it serves the needs of its immediate community as those of others serve their communities, it often has no missionary

agenda (Nock [1933]1998:2). This is the class in which he placed virtually all the ancient religions of the Mediterranean world and the East.

A prophetic religion, on the other hand, is one led by a person 'who experiences a sudden and profound dissatisfaction with things as they are, is fired with a new idea, and launches out on a path in a sincere conviction that he has been led by something external and objective' (Nock [1933]1998:2). In the urgency of his message, 'He can do nothing else; the truth has been vouchsafed to him, and his fellows have a need of it' (Nock [1933]1998:3). The listener who receives the message of the prophet 'stands before a choice which means either the renunciation of his [or her] past and entry into a kingdom...or the refusal of this dream as chimerical' (Nock [1933]1998:5).

Between the two extremes of a 'wholly static' response of indifference to the prophet's message and a 'wholly dynamic' one of stepping out for it, Nock identifies a 'middle country' he calls 'adhesion' (Nock [1933]1998:5-7). Here the religious practitioner who has come in contact with another faith, as in the heavy movements of peoples in the ancient world<sup>15</sup>, simply adds elements of other faiths to enhance and consolidate what he or she already has. In contradistinction to this adhesion, Nock defines religious conversion as:

[T]he reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man [or a woman] to the choice set before him [or her] by the prophetic religions (Nock [1933]1998:7).

Nock holds that it was only Judaism and Christianity, among all other religions of the ancient Mediterranean basin, that demanded a radical jettisoning of

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<sup>15</sup> This pattern also finds repetition in the contact of Africans with Europe and North America through the slave trade, a fallout of the unstable nature of West African society in the period between 1500 and 1800. The resultant cultural adhesion can be seen in the English names of the settlements of liberated slaves in Sierra Leone and Liberia and the

the past for a new future with ‘the people of God’ (Nock [1933]1998:13,14). Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that sometimes, even in this radical process of conversion, it is experience that is intensified where the message of the prophet takes a sudden hold of the convert who hitherto has remained only at the periphery of a religious tradition. He writes that in this situation ‘[t]he bottles are old but the wine is new’ (Nock [1933]1998:7). He further amplifies inherent continuity in conversion when he writes that ‘[t]he originality of a prophet lies commonly in his ability to fuse into a white heat combustible material *which is there*, to express and to appear to meet the half-formed prayers of some at least of his contemporaries’ (Nock [1933]1998:9; italics mine).

In *Conversion*, Nock attempts at length to show various forms of inter-religious adhesion in the Graeco-Roman world and conversion from other faiths to Christianity and *vice versa*. But of more relevance to this discussion is his exploration of the conversion of Justin, Arnobius and Augustine. The common thread that runs through their experiences is the passionate longing for meaning: Justin in the true philosophy, Arnobius in a way of escape from mortality and fate, and Augustine in a yearning for a higher life (Nock [1933]1998:254-271). Although their fellow Graeco-Romans considered the Gospel a Barbarian philosophy, by examining its claims and premises, these converts to Christianity found in it the fulfillment of their aspirations and embraced it. In this way, conversion represented for them salvation from their sense of meaninglessness and the realization of a new vitality for living, a realization which in all its essence was profoundly religious while they remained Graeco-Romans and not Palestinians.

As Nock’s perspective sets the pace for our understanding of religious conversion, the contemporary perspectives of Taylor and Walls below attest to the fact that this pattern of conversion is not peculiar to classical culture. Rather, it is

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very names of the returnees to Africa. See Andrew Walls’ ‘Black Europeans—white Africans’ (1996:102-110).

normative to peoples and contexts where the Gospel intersects with deep human longing for salvation from whatever may represent menace to a rich and full life.

### **5.3.2 John V. Taylor and Christian Conversion**

The underlying presupposition of John Taylor's understanding of Christian conversion is expressed in the sub-title of his work *The Go-between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (1972). However, he distils more succinctly his understanding of the process at work in Christian conversion in *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (1958). Essentially, what we find in his understanding of conversion is the appreciation of the place of indigenous understanding of life and reality in the process of conversion, perhaps at what we may regard as the sunset of Western missionary enterprise. It is significant that Taylor himself had been a missionary in Buganda (now Uganda). For from the cumulative experience of Western missionaries in Africa and from his own, he came to the conclusion that an effective missionary method must be germane to peoples' situations and lead to a conversion experience that fulfils their longings. But at work behind this conversion experience, and beyond the conscious efforts of missionaries, are the fermenting activities of the Holy Spirit.

Drawing from the experience of the Baganda martyrs, Taylor provides us a vivid model of such conversion process as the message of the missionaries gradually penetrated the Buganda society in the late nineteenth century, beginning from the royal court of Kabaka Mutesa. He delineates the process of conversion in the quadruple progression from *congruence* to *detachment*, to *demand* and then to *crisis*.

According to him, in the missionaries' identification with the people, there emerged in the consciousness of the people a sense of congruence between the message of the missionaries and their own innate religious aspirations. Independently of these missionaries, but through the Holy Spirit, this led to the converts' detachment from aspects of their past which they considered inconsistent

with the Gospel they had heard. In the progression of their faith, they began to sense and respond to the ethical demand of the Gospel. This in turn led to crisis with Baganda society, a crisis in which some of the converts suffered for their faith (Taylor 1958:43-52).

What we find in Taylor's understanding of Christian conversion is the awareness that while the process draws from the message of its emissaries, or their conversation with the context of evangelization, its realization is beyond their efforts. It begins with the intended convert's perception of congruence between their context (needs and aspirations) and the missionary message and ends with a commitment that is willing to step beyond what they considered the inadequate security of the past, to reach for a future whose prospects are considered more assuring. Such a decisive launch-out cannot be a mere 'colonization of consciousness', for human beings, in their natural instinct of self-preservation, are not wont to desert safe havens for an uncertain future. They do so in the experience of conversion because they consider it real and deserving the risk of all they have for present security, as in the story of the Baganda martyrs. Herein lies the profundity of the experience of conversion, not just as a sociological reality as social anthropologists would want us to believe, but essentially as a religious response that issues from the very being of the converts in defiance of what may seem most rational to the logical mind.

### **5.3.3 Andrew F. Walls and Christian Conversion**

Andrew Walls continues John Taylor's thought on conversion as belonging to context. In 'Culture and conversion in Christian history' (Walls 1996:43-54), he sets the stage for his understanding of conversion in an analogy of the 'Jesus Act' taking place in 'the human auditorium' in which the location of each observer determines his or her perception. With regard to the Gospel as the 'Jesus Act', the central thesis in this model is that:

[The Gospel] has to be received...under the same conditions as we receive other communication, through the medium of the same faculties and capacities. We hear and respond to the Gospel, we read and listen to scriptures, in terms of our accumulated experience and perceptions of the world (Walls 1996:44).

Walls calls this ‘accumulated experience and perceptions of the world’ culture, and describes it as ‘the result of a complex process which includes our whole past’<sup>16</sup> (Walls 1996:45). Describing it equally as ‘the programming of our minds’, he argues that this development of cognition ‘is constituted not only by events and experiences but by relationships’ (Walls 1996:45). For an authentic experience, of the Jesus Act, therefore, ‘it is necessary that we hear the Gospel under, and in relation to, the conditions of our experiences and relationships, our environment and society—our culture in fact’ (Walls 1996:46). The result then is the inescapable paradox that ‘the very universality of the Gospel, the fact that it is for *everyone*, leads to a variety of perceptions and applications of it’. Responsive hearers of the Gospel respond in terms of their own lives (Walls 1996:46).

What makes each expression of this perception and application valid is the incarnation of Jesus as an expression of the translation of the ‘divine Word’ into the human situation and the consequent ‘successive lesser acts of translation into the complexes of experiences and relationships that form our social identities in different parts of the world auditorium’ (Walls 1996:47). This makes culture, our perceptive framework, significant to the commission that the followers of Christ disciple the nations, each nation being a representative framework of perception of God’s acts in history (Walls 1996:48,49).

For Walls, the mandate to disciple the nations is the mandate to convert them to the grace of Jesus Christ. And for him, this is more than ‘simply making the Master’s word known to all peoples’ (Walls 1996:50).

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<sup>16</sup> See William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902]1982) for an attempt to explain personal conversion from the perspective of psychology.

That word is to pass into all those distinctive ways of thought, those networks of kinship, those special ways of doing things, that give the nation its commonality, its coherence, its identity. It has to travel through the shared mental and moral processes of a community, the way decisions are made in that community. Christ is to become actualized—to become flesh, as it were—as distinctively, and...as appropriately—as when he lived as a Palestinian Jew in the early first century (Walls 1996:50).

Walls demonstrated an example of this principle of translation of the Gospel message into new receptor context by drawing from the expansion of the Christian faith into the Gentile world. There the disciples, finding the idea of Jesus the *Messiah* to be meaningless to their audience, found a critical key that struck resonance with the Greek mind in the idea of Jesus the *Lord* (Walls 1996:52,53). With this principle of identifying contextual keys to communicate the Gospel, he identified with the recent developments in the Christian theological enterprise on the African continent, suggesting that ‘The great travail of Christian Africa is over the conversion of the African past’ (Walls 1996:53).

However, Walls does not make this principle of translating the Gospel into the cognitive and experiential contexts of cultures the totality of the dynamics of Christian expansion. He explains that this ‘indigenizing principle, a homing instinct, which creates in diverse communities a sense that the Church belongs there’ is always in tension with another principle; that is the ‘pilgrim’ principle. This is ‘the principle that creates within the Christian community the sense that it is not fully at home in this world, so that it comes into tension with its society from its loyalty to Christ’ (Walls 1996:53,54). The tension, therefore, is between a vision that ‘tends to localize the vision of the Church’ and the other that seeks ‘to universalize it’. The two principles point to the truth that while ‘God accepts us in Christ just as we are, with all our distinctives’ he also accepts us ‘in order that we may become something different; that we may be transformed out of the ways of

this world into the image of Christ' (Walls 1996:54). This, for Walls, is Christian conversion.

#### **5.3.4 Nock, Taylor and Walls in the Context of West Africa**

Four broad outlines on religious conversion emerge from the discussions in this chapter. The first is that conversion can be personal as well as communal; it can take place as an experience of an individual, and it can be a collective experience of a people. The second is that conversion takes place in the context of human aspiration for the ultimate, in the quest for 'the life that is life in deed' (I Tim. 6:19). The yearning may be conscious or subconscious; but however it is manifested, it is always present as personal or communal striving for fulfillment. The inability of the materialist science of social anthropology to grapple with it as a fundamental reality may be due to its transcendent nature.

The third element of the outline that has emerged is that personal or communal conversion involves either intensification or transformation of existing realities; sometimes both are involved at the same time. In intensifying experience, conversion illuminates present realities, affirms their noble elements, and amplifies them. In transforming them, it plays a cathartic role of getting rid of excesses that inhibit healthy functioning of the personality or the community. This is to say that in conversion there is both continuity and discontinuity with the past.

The fourth element is that in Christian conversion, in particular, the agent of renewal and healing is the Holy Spirit who broods over situations to make manifest the Christ who has always been there but unacknowledged. This factor places Christian conversion at the centre of the Christian proclamation that God, the father of Jesus Christ, is the One at work in the midst of his creation through the process. Therefore Christian conversion, as a divine act taking place in the world, is both a religious and a theological issue. It is religious because it belongs to the sphere of human ultimate concern, and it is theological because it manifests God's redemptive work in the midst of his creation.

When these are brought to bear on the situation in West Africa, we cannot but acknowledge that to the extent that its peoples and cultures represent part of a universal reality of fallen humanity they too need the redemptive grace of God through the Gospel. The yearning of the people for full life, as expressed in their various religious traditions as well as in the reality of their social condition of instability, attests to their need for individual and collective appropriation of the Gospel in ways peculiar to their circumstances. Here the perspectives of Taylor and Walls are especially relevant.

If there is any difference in their perspectives, certainly it is not in their attitude to the place culture occupies in the process of conversion, for they both acknowledge the need to root it in context. In fact, for them, conversion begins with taking seriously the cultural context of the intended converts; hence the essential relationship between their positions is one of continuity. The continuity lies in the observation that while Taylor was concerned with the process at work in conversion, Walls was drawing from history and his creative analogy of 'the human auditorium' the principle and goal of Christian conversion.

However, in applying the insights of Taylor and Walls to the West African situation, it is necessary to acknowledge that dialogue with traditional African thought form can only take place when the emissaries of the Gospel understand the world of its peoples and appreciate their concerns and their fears. But the overwhelming cultural prejudice of many of the early missionaries rendered them incapable of entering that universe to uncover its treasures. Although much criticism of Western missionaries has been expressed by African churchmen because of their failure in this regard, the fact remains that only those who have their feet in the two orders of the traditional society and the emerging light of the Gospel could have done this effectively.

This is the pattern that emerged from the Apostolic tradition where a cosmopolitan Apostle like Paul had no misgivings about the appropriateness of the Greek intellectual heritage for communicating the Gospel whereas his relatively

provincial colleagues in Palestine were very hesitant about such risky experimentation. Yet, Paul's bold method was only a trifle in comparison with later believers like Clement of Alexandria who carried forward Paul's method to its full implementation by adopting whatever was good in Hellenistic culture to advance the cause of the Gospel. In other words, the missionaries, even when we criticize them 'in the light of St. Paul's missionary methods' could not have given what they lacked in education and mission awareness (Bediako 1992:239). Hence, their fundamental problem was not prejudice but ignorance for not recognizing and following a method tested and proven by the Apostolic missionary tradition.

The notion that it is those who have their feet in the two worlds of traditional society and of the Gospel who can effectively venture into the dialogue between them finds its corroboration in later developments among West African churchmen. This was in spite of the failure of the missionaries to spearhead the dialogue. J.D.Y. Peel referred to one of such occasions of indigenization of the Gospel at the ordination of F.L. Akiele (Akinyele?) at Ibadan in 1898 (Peel 1998:78,79). It is not certain whether the inspiration for the 'rhetorical shift from polemics to irenics', which Peel noted in the sermon of Rev. Daniel Olubi at the service, was a product of intuition or the inland diffusion of the nationalist feelings among Lagos residents. However, the audacious use of the *Eso* military class of the Yoruba State as a symbol of Christian courage, in the exegesis of II Tim. 2:1, reveals that the indigenous converts were finding their place in the emerging tapestry of Yoruba Christian culture. By this indigenous biblical hermeneutics, they proved, in the words of Peel, their ability 'to move from the margins of society closer to its centre, and able at last to appropriate something of the values of a past which [they] once deemed inimical to it' (Peel 1998:79).

This creative appropriation of indigenous culture, in a militaristic environment like 19<sup>th</sup> century Ibadan, spoke to the Christian audience in a language too familiar to be misunderstood (Peel 1998:79). Certainly, it was a product of a fruitful dialogue between the two worlds of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ibadan and

the Gospel through the thoughtful reflection of the preacher. Is this the conversion of the past that Andrew Walls argues for as a necessary outcome of the encounter between people, their culture and the Gospel?

Still, beyond the anthropological significance that Horton noted in his attempt to explicate the dynamics behind the movement, the *Aladura* may be seen as evolving in continuum with the emerging indigenous Christianity in Yoruba land. If Olubi's exegesis represented a rhetorical shift, the Aladura movement supplied the praxis of contextualized Yoruba Christianity. This is apparent in its transposing into Christian religious milieu the traditional Yoruba cosmology that takes seriously the existence of malevolent, extra-terrestrial, spirit beings, an interpretive tool which mission Churches could not resonate with and which they proved grossly incapable of using in a moment of universal trauma (Sanneh 1983:184). Can we then not conclude, in Taylor's words, that the Aladura movement consequently brought African religious world view to 'fulfillment in terms true to itself through crisis and conversion' to the Gospel (Taylor 1972:190)? Does this not also authenticate Walls' argument for the conversion of the past?

For Walls, the principle for effecting conversion is translation and the goal is restoration of the dignity of being created in God's image as found in Jesus of Nazareth. In complement to this principle, Taylor speaks of Christian conversion as progressing through the categories of congruence, detachment, demand and crisis. Still, both of them make a case for the personal and the corporate in Christian conversion, while appreciating the symbiosis, as well as the tension, between them. We may conclude from this that the error of the missionaries was not in their emphasis on personal conversion but in their omitting the corporate implications of the Gospel to their context of evangelization.

Although Nock, Taylor and Walls appreciate the tension inherent in conversion, it is in Taylor we find most succinctly the acknowledgement that crisis is inevitable to religious conversion. The history of the expansion of Christianity

has shown that crisis cannot be totally avoided as people respond to the Gospel and make the effort to rise to its ethical demand in the human society, however irenic the missionary method. But the resistance that an unconverted culture metes out to its Christian converts must also be seen as an unavoidable trauma that usually accompanies corporate conversion, just as crisis follows the individual experience of conversion. But the hope should always be, in the words of Taylor, that when a culture is finally restored to life and wholeness through this crisis, it also will 'be brought to fulfillment in terms true to itself' (Taylor 1972:190).

Finally, although Walls discussed his 'pilgrim' principle in relation to the status of the Christian community in the world, that principle also applies to the transitory nature of human culture. In other words, the perpetual flux of human society and culture makes the pilgrim principle not only one that exists in the polemical tension between 'our here' and 'our hereafter'; it equally applies to the reality that human culture here and now is in flux. And because it is in flux, the need for translation and conversion is an enduring challenge. This present reality continually makes real the need for Christian communities to keep alert and current as they travel, as it were, with their cultures, translating the Good News of the Kingdom to each generation within the framework of its peculiar circumstances.

The reality of the fluid nature of cultures also has its significance for the identity of Christian communities in West Africa. The significance is that while the expansion of the Gospel must not undermine but preserve the integrity of its host cultures, the impermanence of cultures makes them passing realities. Here, John Mbiti's insight becomes relevant when he writes that:

We live between the polarities of Christian ethics and cultural boundaries. Yet, the process of transformation means, ultimately that we become more and more Christian and less and less African (or Japanese, American, or Swiss). The only identity that counts and has full meaning, is identity with Christ and not any given cultures. Cultural identities are temporary, serving to yield us as Christians to the fulness (sic) of our identity with Christ (Mbiti 1973:94).

The predicament of the West African society in its contact with Europe is that it continues to experience effects that are straining its cultures, generating rapid social changes among its peoples, and raising new questions about human existence. Today, West Africa operates in a tension between its old order and a new, cosmopolitan one. The resultant changes, which have become exacting in the recent years of rapid globalization of culture, will continue to test the resources of the Christian communities of West Africa and their ability to live up to the realities of those challenges. This ability to rise to the challenges will depend on their creative ability to fashion the relevant 'key to conduct' in the midst of change and thereby provide answers to the questions that may emerge from time to time (Walls 1996:89-91).

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

[W]e may...compare the Church to a powerful, living stream which flows into and through the nations, giving of itself to enrich the people and transforming the land, bringing from and depositing in each something of the chemical wealth of the soils which it encounters on its way, at the same time adapting itself to the shape and features of each locality, taking its colouring from the native soil, while in spite of all these structural adaptations and diversifications its *esse* and its *differentia* are not imperilled but maintained in consequence of the living, ever-replenishing, ever-revitalizing spring which is its source (Idowu 1965:12).

In this exploration of the interface of European mission Christianity with the peoples and cultures of nineteenth century West Africa, certain realities prove significant. First, critics of the encounter tend to exaggerate the mistakes and the omissions of the missionaries and read into their endeavors ulterior motives without taking into cognizance the life-affirming value of their message and the invaluable contributions they made to West African societies. While this does not remove the fact that the missionaries were products of the ferments in Europe of their time and, consequently, allowed cultural prejudice to inform some of their attitudes toward indigenous peoples, the fact remains that their intention was largely motivated by genuine concern for peoples overseas.

Second, much more than the influence of Enlightenment philosophy on European Christians in the missionary age, the principles of the Protestant Reformation—especially the emphases on personal conversion, bible translation and liberation of the Christian ministry for the active involvement of the laity—were the guiding spirit of the missionary movement. And although the emergence of the missionary movement was spontaneous and independent of the European state churches, it fed on the expansion of Europe abroad as much as it also, wittingly and otherwise, facilitated the expansion.

Third, pre-Christian West African societies were not a religious or philosophical *tabula rasa*. The peoples' understanding of life and reality, though charged with an acute awareness of the delicate balance between life and death, was actually in congruence with the understanding of reality as embodied in the Gospel. In the peoples' understanding of the unity of all things, animate and inanimate, West African social systems and religious traditions strove to transcend the barriers to abundant life by instituting relevant religious rites and egalitarian administrative processes that would guarantee the lives of persons and communities.

Fourth, the failure of European missionaries to understand and fully appreciate the West African pervasive quest for the rich and full life through the social and religious traditions proved to be the underlying source of tension between them and their message on one hand and their intended converts on the other hand. Where missionaries trod with sensitivity, as in Ibadan, the congruence between the innate aspiration of the people and the Gospel's promise of abundant life provided the situation of irenic engagement between the missionaries and indigenous peoples.

Fifth, by the advantage of hindsight, some of the changes that came upon West African societies in the conversion of some of their people to Christianity proved too rapid and brought some social disruption to the societies. This is without prejudice to the fact that some noble aspects of the people's past were also intensified and amplified as much as the converts also sought to attenuate the ignoble aspects of their pre-Christian past.

Finally, in view of the wider European imperial agenda in West Africa which appears to undermine the credibility of the nineteenth century missionary movement, conversion to Christianity among the people may appear to be a form of 'colonization of consciousness' (Comaroffs 1991) or 'adaptation of concepts' to a changing social milieu (Horton 1971). But it was certainly more than that. It was an authentic religious experience deserving recognition as an objective reality in itself. This is underscored by the fact that the converts, represented by the duo of Carl Reindorf and Samuel Johnson, had

no misgivings about their acquired identity as Christians as well as being West Africans. Their conversion experience is therefore valid, even if there also resulted along with it modifications in their self-understanding and perception of reality.

It is in the light of the validity of Christian conversion as an objective reality capable of being accompanied by modifications in perception of reality that Bolaji Idowu's statement above becomes relevant. Its relevance lies in its acknowledgement that in the transmission of the Gospel from one people to another, it brings along with it cultural insights of other peoples to the successive cultures it encounters in its way as much as it is also enriched by the peculiarities of its new host cultures. Therefore, if West African converts were culturally influenced by the transmission of the Gospel from Europe, it was certainly not because they considered their indigenous cultures inferior to those of Europeans. It was because they found also in the cultural matrix bearing the Christian message materials that could compensate for what they might have considered the inadequacies in their own indigenous understanding of life and reality.

This phenomenon of cultural diffusion along with the Gospel is not abnormal in itself. As a matter of fact, it should be expected and understood as having the capacity to serve the good of peoples by further illuminating their understanding and improving on their quality of life, or to pervert their values and decimate their societies. Is it not possible that through these capacities, and at the fullness of time for each context, divine providence is enriching the nations as he brings them into contact with one another through the emissaries of the Gospel? And would an argument to the contrary, as social anthropologists tend to offer, not make ghettos of human societies?

The question we may now ask is, in the light of the shortcomings of mission Christianity in West Africa, how successful was the set goal of evangelizing the people? To answer this question, we shall apply Andrew Walls' 'Three Tests of Christian Expansion' (1996). In reconsidering Kenneth Scott Latourette's *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Walls developed

these criteria by which we may evaluate 'the spread of the influence of Jesus' in the serial expansion of Christianity from its Palestinian cradle to the modern times (Walls 1996:7,8). His development of Latourette's thought is perceptive and penetrating, and his deduced three tests are relevant to our conclusions in this essay.

The first test of the influence of Jesus, according to Walls, is 'the Church test' (Walls 1996:9-13). By this he means the measurable, numerical test of Christian profession in any particular place. The emphasis here is not on the number of saved individuals but the 'community of people who willingly bear His name' and regularly gather together for worship. In advancing this criterion for testing the expansion of Christianity worldwide, Walls acknowledges that the numerical strength of believers was not always sustained irreversibly even where believers appear to have been well grounded. Instead, such periods of strength are often followed by decline such that both advance and recession have characterized the expansion of the faith.

The second test of the expansion of Christianity, according to Walls, is 'the Kingdom test' (Walls 1996:13-20). By this he means the extent to which the Kingdom life<sup>1</sup> impinges on the Christian community such that, like the fermenting yeast, the life of the community is amplified, 'penetrating...society's culture more deeply, translating Christ into that society more perfectly, making the word flesh within it' (Walls 1996:14). The renewal movements that evolve to effect this may be institutional or less so, but their effects lead Christian communities to higher reaches in discipleship and commitment to the faith. Here also, Walls is not assuming the permanence of the Kingdom signs, for a renewal movement that has in its development demonstrated Kingdom signs can metamorphose into a counter-sign of the Kingdom.

The third test is what he calls 'the Gospel test' (Walls 1996:20-28). If the Kingdom test addresses the life of Christian communities, the Gospel test

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<sup>1</sup>This includes justice, righteousness, wholeness and everything that accords with the integrity of God's creation.

points to the impact the Gospel has directly or indirectly on the larger society. Although this may not markedly result in commitment to Christianity, it reflects the impact of the grace of the Gospel on societies as a result of making known and passing on in social action the ideals of the Christian faith. In the light of these criteria, how does mission Christianity fare in West Africa?

In relation to the Church test, mission Christianity succeeded in planting congregations among the Yoruba and Akan people, which were led and administered by indigenous agents—evangelists, catechist, and ordained ministers. In the years after the pioneering efforts, some of the congregations reproduced themselves in far away fields, to the extent that specific mission churches have almost become synonymous with specific ethnic groups. For example, as the Methodists exercise overwhelming presence among Fante people, the Presbyterians, products of Basel Mission, have become synonymous with other Akan groups like those of Akuapem and Akyem Abuakwa. In the same vein, the fruit of the labors of the Church Missionary Society in Yoruba land can be seen in the dominant presence of Anglican Churches in Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Ijebu-Ode.

If they are to be measured by the Kingdom test, the efforts of western missionaries in West Africa have equally not been in vain. West Africa has witnessed several renewal movements in the historic churches and in their splinter congregations. The exploits of the Aladura movement which evolved from the Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode; those in the Niger Delta and in Cote d'Ivoire, among several other prophetic movements that have sprouted in West Africa, attest to the effervescent presence of the Kingdom life among the people. While some of these have been overtaken by inertia, their successor movements continue to advance the frontiers of the Kingdom in the lives of their adherents and in their congregations.

Measured by the Gospel test, the entry of the Gospel into West Africa has had impact beyond the congregations. The roles of the missionaries and their indigenous agents in bringing to an end the Yoruba wars of the nineteenth century are worth noting. Moreover, the facilitation of the abolition of human

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