

African indigenous Christianity in a geo-historical perspective

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Abstract

In this article the need for a geo-historical survey of the history of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa from the time of the first circumnavigations of the continent up to the present day is argued. It is important to compare the evolutions in the regions affected by Christianity in the long and the short term. Apart from the pioneering but still incomplete work of authors such as Adrian Hastings and Bengt Sundkler, this type of comparative work has never really been undertaken. In the article five themes are examined from a geo-historical perspective: African missionary initiatives, African Christian communities, indigenous clergy, African independent churches and women's Christian movements. The study concludes that there are spatial and chronological differences regarding the spread of the process of indigenisation of Christianity. For example, it has been shown that with regard to the ordination of indigenous priests or pastors, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and South Africa demonstrated – from the second half of the nineteenth century – developments which were seen much later elsewhere. Variations in the number and strength of African independent churches depended on the greater or lesser presence of Protestant missionary societies at the time of their foundation and the number of European or North American colonists in the population.

Introduction

The thoughts presented in this article originated in a conference organised by the Bologna-based Foundation for Religious Sciences in April 2011 during which the idea of a geo-historical survey of the history of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, from the time of the first circumnavigations of the continent in the fifteenth century up to the present day was mooted. Despite the work of authors such as Adrian Hastings and Bengt Sundkler, comparative work has always been scarce in the study of African Christian history. My intention here is to survey the literature and make suggestions for future research.

I use the term “geo-historical” to draw attention to the spatial environment of the five-and-a-half-century-long history of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. The areas in which Christians have entrenched their practices never ceased to change. We will examine the expansion and reduction of these areas along with the changes that took place in them. It would perhaps be too ambitious to propose a typology of geo-historical changes, but we can at least attempt an analysis of the long-term or short-term evolutions which occurred in the regions affected by Christianity.

With the exception of the introduction to this article, we will not engage on a history of the missionary movement in Africa but rather on a history of indigenous forms of Christianity – that is to say the forms of life inspired by Christianity that were accepted, adapted and spread by Africans. The contribution of European and North American missionaries, Protestant as well as Catholic, is in no way questioned. Its importance is obvious. But the missionaries were far from being the only bearers of the evangelical message in Africa as an obsolete missionary historiography would have us believe. The missionary sources stress, sometimes exclusively, the work of the men and women who came from Europe or the United States and underestimate or even deny the role played by natives. The following pages adopt an opposing view as they deliberately enhance the African initiative in evangelisation.

Apart from the author’s research over a period of twenty years which has concentrated on the history of indigenous Christianity in Southern Africa, the article primarily relies on the work of two great historians of African Christianity, namely the English Catholic, Adrian Hastings, author of *The Church in Africa 1450 – 1950*¹ and *A history of African Christianity 1950 – 1975*,² and the Swedish Lutheran Bengt Sundkler, mostly known for his pioneer study on South African independent churches but also the joint author of *History of the Church in Africa*³. Both writers emphasised, in the words of the latter, that “in whatever part of Africa where he went the Western missionary discovered that he had been preceded by a group of African Christians”.⁴

We will begin by looking at a periodisation in African Christianity; then we will examine five themes from a geo-historical perspective: African missionary initiatives, African Christian communities, indigenous clergy, African independent churches and women’s Christian movements.

¹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450 – 1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

² Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity, 1950 – 1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

³ Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Sundkler, *A History of African Christianity*, 299.

Periodisation

The periodisation which we suggest is based, with a few modifications, on that posited by Adrian Hastings in his most recent book. It is founded on four important events:

- Early conversions to Christianity on the coast of West Africa (circa 1450)
- Foundation of main missionary societies in England (last decade of the eighteenth century)
- Division of Africa by the Berlin Congress (1885) and the establishment of an extensive plan for the colonisation of the African continent
- Movement towards independence (circa 1960) and the establishment of local churches.

The padroão period (1450–1790)

The period of the first evangelisation of sub-Saharan Africa – which we will call the *padroão* period because of the influence exercised by the Portuguese throne on missionary work in Portuguese-held territories – began in 1458 when Diogo Gomez, the leader of an expedition sponsored by the Portuguese king, converted Nomimansa, a Gambian prince and sent for a Portuguese priest, the abbot of Soto de Casa, to baptise him. Subsequently, Portuguese men married indigenous women and built villages on the European model – each with a church. Twelve priests from the Cape Verde Islands visited them on a regular basis. At the same time a convent was established at Cachau on the Rio Grande.⁵

This pattern was duplicated, with small variations, in the kingdom of Warri; a small enclave in the kingdom of Benin; the kingdom of Congo, the territory between Sofala and the island of Mozambique on the Indian Ocean coastline; along the Zambezi River in the kingdom of Monomotapa; Lamu, which is on the coast of present day Kenya and in Kilwa off the coast of the Comoros Islands.⁶ In geographical terms, Christian penetration was limited to a few points on the perimeter of the African continent. There were, however, two exceptions: the kingdom of Congo, where a wave of Christianity unfurled in the seventeenth century and in south-eastern Africa, where during the same period, an extensive network of missionary stations was established, run by Dominicans or Jesuits. In 1619 the bishop of Saõ Salvador could

⁵ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 45.

⁶ For an overview of the history of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries see Philippe Denis “L’Afrique” in Marc Venard, ed, *Histoire du christianisme*, vol. 9 (Paris: Desclée, 1997), 737 – 54.

count on the support of 80 priests and the canons chanted services “according to the custom in Europe”. Between 1645 and 1820 no less than 434 Capuchins, mainly Italian, ministered in present-day Congo and Angola. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dominican Order had 13 priories, houses and missionary stations along the Indian Ocean coast on the banks of the Zambezi River and in the kingdom of Monomotapa. The last of these establishments closed in 1835.

Accounts of this early wave of evangelisation are scanty. The combined effect of illnesses, difficulties of communication, compromises struck between the church and political powers and the acceptance of slavery ruined any chance of development. The influence of Christianity in all regions penetrated by missionaries was minimal. Its true impact was felt in syncretism. In Upper Guinea Congo and the Zambezi valley new religious forms came into being combining elements of traditional religion with the mysteries of Christian dogma.

The period of the missionary impulse (1790–1880)

With a few rare exceptions, in Ivory Coast for example, where Dutch Calvinists briefly had a few mission stations in the eighteenth century,⁷ the first mission establishments in sub-Saharan Africa were those of the Catholic faith. The situation changed from the end of the eighteenth century with the foundation in the wake of the emerging colonial movement of several Protestant missionary societies, English at the outset, then German, French, Scandinavian and North American. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholic missions, albeit present, were less numerous than those of their Protestant rivals.

In 1799 the first representative of the London Missionary Society landed in the Cape where the English had just gained a foothold. A group of Anglican missionaries arrived in Sierra Leone five years later. In 1833 the Society of Evangelical Missions of Paris sent its first missionaries to Lesotho. It was not until 1844 that the first missionary, a German employed by the Church Missionary Society, arrived in Zanzibar and in Mombasa. The beginning of the missionary movement among the Hausas and the Igbos in present-day Nigeria as well as in Cameroon dates from the same period. More centralised, the Catholic missionary movement benefitted from the impetus of Pope Gregory XVI who from 1845 called for the formation of an indigenous clergy. In 1841 François Libermann founded the congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary in order to convert the blacks. This congregation soon joined with the old congregation of the Holy Spirit. In 1850 the first

⁷ It was there that the first black pastor on the African continent Jacobus Capitein, was assigned. See David Kpobi, *Mission in Chains. The Life, Theology and Ministry of the ex-slave Jacobus E. J. Capitein (1717–1747)*. (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1993).

oblates of Mary Immaculate, an order founded by Eugène de Mazenod during the Restoration, arrived in Natal. A few years later Charles Lavigerie, an advocate for the abolition of slavery and a supporter of what was not yet called inculturation, founded the Missionaries of Africa who were also known as the White Fathers in order to convert territories situated south of the Sahara.

Up until the 1880s when the European countries embarked on a systematic colonisation of the African continent, the work of conversion was concentrated in coastal enclaves which were held by Europeans: Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gold Coast (Ghana), Nigeria and South Africa. For obvious reasons the missionaries favoured the sectors where their countrymen were already settled; the French were active in Senegal, the Americans in Liberia and the English in Sierra Leone. But the link between missionary presence and colonial implantation was not constant: Swiss missionaries worked in Gold Coast, Germans in South Africa and French in Uganda and Basutoland.

During this period the majority of African populations escaped the colonial grasp either because they were governed by indigenous chiefs or kings or because they belonged to leaderless societies with different forms or degrees of cohesion. There were few missionaries who lived at great distance from one another. They did not obviously maintain links with their countries of origin. Still rare, conversions implied a transition to a European way of life.⁸

The period of colonial conquest (1880 – 1960)

Swept along by Belgium and Germany (two countries, which up until then had not formed part of the international scene) England, France and Portugal engaged – hesitantly to begin with and then, caught up in the impetus of the Berlin Congress (1885) with determination – in establishing their presence throughout the African continent. Military, administrative, economic and educational infrastructures were progressively established. Missionary societies benefitted enormously from the new order. While African chiefs had maintained their hold over their tribes, support for Christianity had posed a problem because it entailed abandoning indigenous culture for which the chiefs had been responsible. Once their power had been broken, nothing prevented the rapid diffusion of Christianity and Islam in the northern part of the continent.

After the colonial conquest the function of Christianity radically changed. Instead of manifesting a desire to break away from dominant indigenous political and cultural structures, local populations demonstrated

⁸ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 97.

an eagerness to adapt to the new colonial order, which in future would dominate, by making the most of the colonial innovations such as teaching and health care while simultaneously maintaining areas of autonomy. For the subjects in the new empires being baptised implied the possibility of finding a new position, albeit inferior, in modern society.

Relations between missionaries and the indigenous population evolved at the same time. During the early colonial period, for lack of other company, the missionary often shared the living conditions of his flock and fluently spoke their language. Later on the development of an urban colonial society, of which through his functions, became a dignitary took him away from grassroots work which was entrusted to the catechists. The institutionalisation of the mission with its church, school, hospital and orphanage made him an administrator rather than an evangelist and for this reason what became known as “verandah Christianity”⁹ developed. However, missionary presence was also maintained in remote posts not only by catechists, but also priests, pastors and members of western religious congregations.

Although they were imbued with colonial prejudices and associated with colonial officials, in daily life, the missionaries maintained a certain distance from colonial institutions. In South Africa John Philip, a director of the London Missionary Society vigorously denounced the treatment inflicted on indigenous populations by the British colonial power.¹⁰ In West Volta the White Fathers impeded the application of official directives in many places. They half-heartedly opposed the rebellions against the forced labour system and favoured the use of vernacular languages to the detriment of French.¹¹ The case of the Congo remained an exception where, at King Leopold II’s instigation and later that of the Belgium government, the missionaries were almost without exception placed in the service of the colonial government.¹²

Even if the majority of missionaries avoided being totally identified with the colonial administration the Christians at the mission stations regarded them as representatives of the government. The missionaries’ opposition to traditional cultures reinforced the impression that they were associated with the colonial conquest venture. The colonial period witnessed the development of centrifugal movements resulting, as we shall see, in the creation of African independent churches. In many instances the development of an indigenous clergy strengthened frustrations and tensions because the priests and pastors were better educated than other converts and were,

⁹ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 563.

¹⁰ Roger B. Beck, “Monarchs and Missionaries among the Tswana and Sotho”, in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 109.

¹¹ Magloire Somé, *La christianisation de l’Ouest-Volta. Action missionnaire et réactions africaines, 1917– 1960* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004).

¹² Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, p. 563

therefore, a better gauge of the distance which separated Christian discourse which was fundamentally egalitarian, from the racial prejudices and discriminatory practices of colonial society.

The period of independence and local churches (1960 -)

In 1928 the second World Missionary Conference met in Jerusalem to address the theme of relations between young churches and mother churches. Ten years later in Tambaram near Madras, the same body invited missions and churches to join hands and to rethink the training of indigenous clergy. These discussions prepared the churches for the transformation in African Christianity which was taking place, in the rush for political independence, during the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century: the constitution of local churches and, in the case of the Catholic Church, of national hierarchies depended on the Congregation for Bishops for the propagation of faith and no longer on the Congregation.

During the same period missionary personnel changed in nature and function. From the sixties European and North American churches slowly stopped sending missionaries to Africa. This policy was faster and more clear-cut in the Protestant churches. On the Catholic side *Fidei Donum* priests¹³ continued to serve African dioceses, although in smaller numbers, for several years after the Second Vatican Council. But by this time missionary theology had changed as much as the vocabulary used to talk about it. It was no longer a question of *missions*, a project of churches from the north targeting those from the south, but rather of *mission* – a project of the whole church. Rather than speaking of missionaries one talked of pastoral agents and, in some cases, of development workers.¹⁴

Up until the 1950s, all the sub-Saharan countries of Africa fell under colonial domination either as colonies or as protectorates. The only exceptions were Liberia which had never been colonised other than by American slaves who had been freed from 1820 onwards and Ethiopia which had been independent since the battle of Adoua in 1896 and briefly recolonised by Italy under Mussolini. The first country to gain independence in the twentieth century was Gold Coast, renamed Ghana, in 1957. The independence movement speeded up in 1960 and the following years. The last countries to gain independence are all in Southern Africa: Angola and Mozambique in 1975, Rhodesia (renamed Zimbabwe) in 1980, South West Africa (renamed Namibia) in 1990 and South Africa, which was declared independent in 1990.

¹³ Diocesan priests sent to missionary countries for limited periods of time.

¹⁴ Maurice Cheza, Monique Costermans and Jean Piroette (eds), *Nouvelles voies de la mission (1950 –1980). Actes de la session conjointe du CREDIC (XVIIIe session) et du Centre Vincent Lebbe, Gentinnes, 1997* (Lyon : Centre de Recherche et d'Echanges sur la diffusion de l'inculturation du christianisme, 1999).

but imposed at the time a form of internal colonisation to its black population, in 1994.

These political changes radically modified the role of Christian churches. When liberation movements were fighting for freedom the churches were divided: a portion of the clergy and the faithful supported the dissidents; the remainder stood firm behind the colonial power. After the granting of independence, the churches, which were now separated from the missions and managed by bishops or indigenous synods, adopted an attitude of critical loyalty towards the new governments. Some of them, for example Zaire or Malawi, strongly opposed the new political power when it became authoritarian and corrupt. The weaker the state, the more powerful the church became particularly with regard to matters such as education, health care, communication and development.

Aspects of African Christian history

Indigenous missionary initiatives

The idea that, because of their zeal and courage, the missionaries from Europe and the United States were, somehow, solely responsible for the introduction of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa with the African “auxiliaries” only being accorded inferior tasks in the missionary undertaking, is challenged by recent scholarship into the history of evangelisation on the African continent. Another interpretation of this history which attributes a much more important role to the indigenous missionary initiatives is possible. We will mention only a few examples. A full study, along the lines of the work of Hastings and Sundkler, remains to be written. The problems arise from the fact that written sources – reports and correspondence periodically sent to missionary societies – tend to minimise the contribution of local participants so as to stress the role of foreign missionaries thereby obtaining the necessary funding.

The cases which we will present here involve the four periods mentioned above and cover all regions in sub-Saharan Africa. The first example concerns the beginning of the *padroão* era. When King Nzinga Nkuku, who had been baptised by the Portuguese during their second stay in the Congo at the very end of the fifteenth century, reverted to paganism on the advice of traditional counsellors, his son, known as Don Afonso, resisted. He received Christian instruction from two priests and when he acceded to the throne on the death of his father, he became an ardent propagator of the Christian faith. He built a school for 400 boys and another school for girls. At his request, the king of Portugal sent him fifteen canons of Saint-Eloi as

missionaries. In 1509 Don Afonso sent his son, Henrique, to Lisbon from where he returned some ten years later as bishop.¹⁵

Without Don Afonso the Portuguese priests, a few in number and with no knowledge of the country, would not have been successful. The same can be said of the members of the Church Missionary Society in the Yoruba part of present-day Nigeria before the establishment of colonial rule. These English missionaries played a part as trainers and catalysts but the true evangelists were the “Sierra Leonians”, Yoruba slaves or sons of slaves who had been freed by the English and who had settled in Sierra Leone in the 1820s and in whom the missionaries had inculcated a passion for the gospel. From the end of the 1830s the Sierra Leonians, many of whom were of Yoruba descent and who continued to speak their native language, returned to their country of origin. In 1851 they numbered 3000 in Abeokuta in present-day Nigeria. The most well-known was Samuel Crowther who was ordained in 1846. He rediscovered his mother in 1846, close to Abeokuta, and baptised her. In 1854 he became bishop of Niger at the suggestion of Henry Venn, the secretary of the Church Missionary Society.¹⁶

No less interesting is the case of the Ugandan kingdom. Early in the nineteenth century, the *kabaka* (king) had rejected traditional religion, opening the door for a religion of the book. Islam had begun to establish itself in the kingdom when Stanley presented himself at the court of the *kabaka* Mutesa and succeeded in convincing him to choose Christianity. The decisive argument was the indifference of Christians towards circumcision—a Muslim practice which the *kabaka* adamantly refused to accept. Stanley was accompanied by a black interpreter, Dallington Maftaa, a student of the Anglican missionaries in Zanzibar who stayed on at the court for two years and began the task of evangelisation. In 1877 the first Anglican missionaries arrived followed by the French White Fathers in 1879 with whom they engaged in a bitter rivalry. But the remarkable spread of Christianity in the Buganda kingdom cannot be explained by the presence of European missionaries at the court for they were few and their visits infrequent. The determining factor was the rapid diffusion of the new faith among the king’s pages and the dispatching of young recruits throughout the kingdom who spread reading and prepared souls for the new religion. Those who were baptised – relatively few because a catechumenate of four years was required – became catechists and founded new communities without any help from the missionaries.

Although he favoured Christianity, Mutesa was not prepared to relinquish his many wives and concubines. On the advice of Cardinal Lavigerie, the White Father, Siméon Lourdel, agreed to consider himself as a

¹⁵ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 51.

¹⁶ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 338–340.

postulant, thereby avoiding compromising the success of the mission by adopting too rigid an attitude towards the question of marriage. Things took a turn for the worse when he died in 1885. After having executed the Anglican bishop, James Hannington, wrongly considered as an invader, in June 1886 his son and successor, the young Mwanza, had 32 Christians, Catholics and Protestants put to death most of whom were pages in the king's court. It would appear that they were not executed because of their faith – despite his whims, Mwanza remained Christian – but rather because they had refused the sexual advances of the *kabaka*. Two years later he was deposed and the kingdom briefly returned to Islam. This change resulted in the exile of approximately 2000 Ugandan to Ankole west of the kingdom. With no help from the missionaries (who themselves had taken refuge to the south of Lake Victoria) apart from the occasional sending of religious books, they developed indigenous Christian practices which, after their return to Uganda in 1890, decisively affected the development of Christianity in the region.¹⁷

Further south, in Northern Transvaal, currently Limpopo province in South Africa, a similar event caught the attention of Paul Berthoux and Ernest Creux, two Swiss missionaries who arrived in the region after a three-year stay in Basutoland. In an area which they believed to be devoid of any Christian penetration, they discovered African evangelists who had been working for several years. These men had been initiated into the Christian faith during their peregrinations to the Witwatersrand which was experiencing the beginnings of the gold rush. The task of the Swiss Mission messengers from then on consisted of training and developing the temporary pastoral workers. They undertook the same work in Mozambique where itinerant evangelists, originally from the Transvaal, had preceded them.¹⁸

A little known but equally significant episode occurred in the Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century. While paddling up the Kasai River in a canoe, the Scheut Father, Emeri Cambier, came across a group of African Christians, Bimbadis from Angola who said that they were prepared to help him as interpreters. They had arrived in the area six years ago as servants of the German explorer, Wiseman, and had remained in Kasai where they had learnt the local language, Luba, and had taken wives. On their own initiative they had shared their Christian faith with the locals some of whom had thrown their fetishes into the Lulua River.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sundkler and Steed *A History of the Church in Africa*, 526–587; Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 371 – 385.

¹⁸ Jan Van Butselaar, *Africains, missionnaires et colonialistes. Les origines de l'Église presbytérienne du Mozambique (Mission Suisse) 1880–1896* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); Patrick Harries, *Butterflies and barbarians: Swiss missionaries and systems of knowledge in South-East Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Marcel Strome, *Het ontstaan van de Kasai-missie* (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outremer, 1961), quoted in Sundkler, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 299 – 302.

We can also mention the case of the Dii from the Amadoua region of northern Cameroon. This tribe lived in a state of semi-slavery under the authority of the Lamidos (Peul chiefs) from Rey Bouba without the colonial authorities doing anything to protect them. As the Lamidos were Muslims, Christianity was illegal. Despite this, Norwegian Lutheran missionaries, with whom the Dii had sought refuge, obtained permission from the colonial government in 1936 to establish a school in their territory. As the missionaries did not have permission to administer these schools, they sought aid from indigenous assistants who had been sent to them by the American Presbyterian mission. These assistants worked not only as teachers but also as catechists. They preached messages of freedom which enabled their flock to become integrated into colonial society as freemen. It was only in 1950 that the Norwegian mission received permission to establish a mission among the Dii.²⁰

African Christian communities

Once converted – with all the ambiguity the word conveys – African Christians adopted a new way of living which varied according to time and geographical areas. We will merely skim over a subject which needs to be examined in far greater depth.

The first model was the Christian village – the African equivalent of the Jesuit reductions in Paraguay. The aim was to isolate the new converts of the pagan population and instil European values and culture. One of the first to adopt this method was Charles Lavigerie, the bishop of Algiers and founder of the Missionaries' Society of Africa, the so-called White Fathers, in 1873. He invited adult orphans to settle in a vast terrain which he had acquired to the west of Algiers and to start Arab and Christian families.²¹ The results of this novel experiment were diverse but the idea of gathering Christians in a separate place quickly expanded.

As a result the Jesuits at Father Henxthoven's instigation created "chapel farms" (*fermes chapelles*) for the orphans of the Kwango mission in the Congo Free State from 1893. There the children were taught agriculture and crafts while at the same time receiving a catechetical formation. The system rapidly expanded; by 1900 no less than 134 chapel farms, housing 3800 children, had been established. Two years later there were 250 with a population of 5000 children. Internally criticised by the Congolese, who saw this as child theft, as well as by the outside world – Belgian and international opinion denounced them as practicing a form of slavery – the model of

²⁰ Thomas Sundnes Drønen, *Communication and Conversation in Northern Cameroon. The Dii People and Norwegian Missionaries 1934–196* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

²¹ Jean-Claude Ceillier, *Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs). De la fondation par Mgr Lavigerie à la mort du fondateur (1862–1892)* (Paris: Karthala, 2008), 50–53.

chapel farms was eventually abandoned,²² but not the idea of concentrating the converted in an area protected by the mission. For example, at Mariannahill in Natal, Franz Pfanner's Trappists drew new converts to their monastery and missions by offering them technical tuition and work.

Also in Natal, but this time under the aegis of Protestant missionaries, similar pastoral methods were used. The early converts were for the most part marginal people – Zulus who lived in unstable conditions or migrant workers who came from neighbouring regions. Of 197 Africans who lived in a mission and whose origins could be traced, Norman Etherington counted 91% or 96% who came from foreign countries. The new converts – or *amakhowa* (believers) as they were called – lived on the mission's grounds and depended on the missionaries for everything, economically, culturally and educationally.²³

However, despite all the great Christian villages or other sites reserved for the converts, they were unable to absorb a Christian population which continued to grow. During the last years of the nineteenth century a new missionary strategy emerged which was to have important consequences on the manner of being Christian in Africa. Instead of gathering Christians together and isolating them from the rest of the population, the missionaries, Protestants as much as Catholics went out to the people or, if they were unable to do so, they trained catechists who developed autonomous Christian communities in their own villages.

This change in policy was certainly deliberately implemented by some missionaries. When he arrived in the Congo in 1900, A. Simplaere, a Belgian Redemptorist, who would shortly be elected general superior of his congregation, learned during a conversation with the Baptist missionary, Bentley Holman, whom he met by chance on a train, of the opportunities available if catechists were sent into remote areas of the mission. Up until then the chapel farms had seemed the only option. Simplaere opened a school for catechists in Tumba, not far from Matadi. The men who were trained there, initially Christians who came mainly from the Upper Congo, were sent throughout the missions territory.²⁴

Indigenous clergy

“The village catechist, with his meagre salary and his poor qualifications, is the real hero of Christianity in Africa,” wrote Stephen Neil in a report

²² Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 247.

²³ Norman Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978).

²⁴ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 659.

destined for the International Missionary Council in 1950.²⁵ Simultaneously religious instructor and teacher, it was he who was in charge of the Christian community in the most remote areas, far from the mission station where the European missionary resided. From the beginnings of evangelisation in the sixteenth century the question of ordination of catechists had been raised. Why not promote these men, who played such an essential role in the missionary scheme, to the status of ordained minister?

In spite of a few regional studies²⁶, the history of indigenous clergy in Africa is little known. There is no comprehensive work on the subject. Authors, who have addressed the topic from a comparative perspective, following the example of Adrian Hastings, are few and far between.²⁷ Referring to Protestant missions, the English historian noted regional differences regarding the arrival and development of an indigenous clergy. The movement began in West Africa with the Anglican and Methodist pastors in Sierra Leone- their Presbyterian colleagues in Gold Coast and the Lutherans in Togo. In 1910, the year of the Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Protestant missionaries in these West African countries had a large and relatively well trained indigenous clergy. East Africa was no different. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) had ordained 33 priests in Uganda and the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) 23 in Tanganyika and Nyasaland. From South Africa the first ordination of a black priest – the Presbyterian, Tiyo Soga – took place in Glasgow in 1856. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Methodists were the largest group followed by the Anglicans, Congregationalists and, late comers to the idea that Africans could be ordained as ministers, the Lutherans. Protestant churches in several other African countries, on the other hand, were characterised by their tardiness in ordaining black pastors and the paucity of their numbers. In 1910 Cameroon, Congo, Angola and South West Africa together had ordained only 16 indigenous ministers. In 1925 the Belgian Congo, where there were 16 missionary societies, had only five ordained indigenous pastors. In Kenya, where the African Inland Mission had been working since the 1890s, the first ordination took place in 1945.²⁸ Hastings does not explain these differences. More in-depth studies are required in order to understand why the ordination of black pastors is more prolific and took place earlier only in certain churches.

²⁵ Stephen Neil, *Survey of the training of the ministry in Africa: Part 1* (London and New York: International Missionary Council, 1950), quoted in Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 659.

²⁶ See, for example, Philippe Denis, ed. *The Making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa, Pietermaritzburg, 1995*.

²⁷ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, p. 454.

²⁸ Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa*, Uppsala, 1960, quoted in Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 455

In the Catholic missions the situation was as different from a chronological as from a geographical point of view. The ordination of indigenous priests occurred both earlier and later than in the Protestant churches. Indeed, an indigenous clergy existed in Portuguese possessions during the *padroão* period. We have seen that the son of the king of Congo, Don Henrique, was consecrated as bishop in Lisbon in 1521. This occurrence was not repeated – certainly not before the twentieth century – but this did not prevent a relatively large number of African converts from acceding to the priesthood. The Portuguese missiologist, Antonio Brasio, discovered the names of 1120 priests who were born in Africa between 1549 and 1800. If many were of European origin quite a few come from African stock.²⁹ The first of these was João Pinto, a Wolof resident who lived in Cape Verde and who did several stints of duty in his country of origin at the end of the sixteenth century. The majority of African priests in the modern era practiced their ministry in present-day Congo and Angola in association with Italian Capuchins whom they often outlasted because they were better adapted to the climate. Some of them came from south-east Africa. The best known is Miguel Apresentação, son of a Monomotapa prince defeated in battle who was sent to Goa and then Lisbon by his protector in order to study. In Lisbon, towards 1630, he entered the Dominican Order and – despite the colour of his skin which made him the target of racist incidents – embarked on a brilliant career, not in his country of origin to which he never returned, but in India as a doctor in theology and a prior.³⁰

Initially pioneers in the promotion of indigenous clergy, the Catholic missionaries subsequently lost impetus and waited for the end of the nineteenth century before ordaining black priests while their fellow Protestant churches made a start during the 1840s in Sierra Leone and in South Africa a decade later. As far as the Catholic missionaries were concerned, the African catechists and teachers were never sufficiently educated or mature to be received into the priesthood.³¹ There was, however, one exception in Senegal. From 1820, Abbot Baradère, the prefect apostolic of Senegambia, recommended the training of indigenous clergy and in 1840 the first three Senegalese priests were ordained. These efforts were never halted despite setbacks. By 1925 only ten of the 300 candidates who had passed through the seminary of Ngasobil had acceded to priesthood. Religious life saw a parallel

²⁹ Antonio Brasio, “A Promoção sacerdotal do Africano”, *Portugal em Africa*, 19 (1962), p. 12 – 22; 20 (1963), p. 135 –155, quoted in Philippe Denis, “Indigenous Clergy in Portuguese South-East Africa (1550–1835)”, in Philippe Denis, ed., *The making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg.: Cluster Publications, 1995), 26.

³⁰ Philippe Denis, *The Dominican Friars in Southern Africa: A Social History (1577– 1990)* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 30 –33.

³¹ For an example of this phenomenon see Jérôme Skhakhane, “The beginnings of Indigenous Clergy in the Catholic Church in Lesotho”, in Denis, ed., *The Making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa*, 115–123.

development especially among women; the first two indigenous sisters took their first vows in 1860. A fleeting congregation of indigenous brothers came into being in 1865 but only began to develop from 1923. The interest shown by the Senegalese church towards African vocations can perhaps be explained by the almost uninterrupted Christian presence in the region – something that was almost without equivalent in sub-Saharan Africa.³²

The movement towards the ordination of indigenous priests and pastors speeded up at the beginning of the twentieth century; firstly in the Protestant churches and then in the Catholic Church at a later stage. According to the *World Christian Handbook*, the number of ministers ordained in sub-Saharan Africa grew from 1200 in 1900 to 4208 in 1957. During the same period the number of unordained pastoral agents such as catechists, lay ministers and teachers of religion grew from 6000 to 82 433. Today, European and North American ministers have almost disappeared with the exception of the Catholic Church which continues to depend on metropolitan churches for its personnel and its financing as well as some Pentecostal churches which are being financed by sister churches in the United States. On the whole, African churches have become completely autonomous.

With the exception of Don Henrique in the sixteenth century and Samuel Crowther in the nineteenth century, it was not until the second third of the twentieth century that the ordination of African bishops was envisaged in sub-Saharan Africa. This long delay says much about the difficulty in missionary circles of having complete confidence in African clergy; here, the Catholic Church took the lead. From 1920 Willem van Rossum, the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and his successors endeavoured to implement the encyclical *Maximum Illud* of Benedict XV (1919) regarding the need for developing an indigenous clergy and episcopate. A bishop was consecrated in southern India as early as 1923. In 1939 Pius XI consecrated Joseph Kiwanuka, a seminary lecturer, who had been educated by the White Fathers as bishop of Masaka in Uganda (in 1961 he became the archbishop of Rubaga) and Ignace Ramaosandratana, a Jesuit-trained priest, as bishop of Miarinarivo in Madagascar. By then Masaka already had 46 priests and over 200 indigenous sisters.³³

African independent and Pentecostal churches

In a country like South Africa, when combined, the African independent churches and the Pentecostal churches (two groups which are not always easy

³² Joseph Roger de Benoist, *Histoire de l'Église au Sénégal. Du milieu du XV^e siècle à l'aube du troisième millénaire* (Paris: Karthala, 2008).

³³ Stephen Neil, *A History of Church Missions* (London, Penguin, 1990), 521– 527; Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, p. 630 – 632.

to distinguish) constitute, according to the census of 2001, more than half of the Christian population which, itself, accounts for at least 75% of the total population of the country³⁴. The missionary churches are on the decline even the Catholic Church which had continued to flourish up until the 1980s. This phenomenon is perhaps less pronounced in other parts of Africa but it exists everywhere. As noted by Allan Anderson in Africa like in other parts of the world, the expansion of Christianity no longer relies on the labours of missionaries from the north but on the: “spontaneous contextualisation of the Pentecostal messages by thousands of indigenous preachers who traversed [this] continent with a new message of the power of the Spirit, healing the sick and casting out demons.”³⁵

Characterised by close ties with the world of spirits, a strong emphasis on therapeutic practices, a great sociability and a deep-rooted tendency to scissiparity, the African independent churches have become a cornerstone of African religion. Over a long period the missionary churches treated what they called sects with great distrust; sometimes appealing to civil powers to suppress them and denouncing their syncretism in their sermons and publications. Subsequently, the African independent churches gained more respect. Their theology and practices have evoked a growing interest and new ways of ecumenical cooperation have been established.

In truth, indigenous Christian movements are not a novelty. As proof, there is the little-known but significant story of Kimpa Vita, called Dona Beatriz, in the ancient kingdom of Congo. In 1704 this twenty-year old woman began to burn crosses and claimed that she died every weekend to be reborn on Sundays. She maintained that she was a reincarnation of Saint Anthony, a figure who had become popular as a result of the Capuchins’ sermons. She began a movement of religious and political restoration claiming that Jesus Christ was born in Saõ Salvador, the capital of the kingdom. The venture came to an end in 1706 when it was discovered that she was pregnant. She was arrested by the king’s soldiers, interrogated by a priest and burned alive. But she was remembered in the region far beyond the seventeenth century.³⁶

The expansion of African independent churches dates from the end of the nineteenth century. The movement began simultaneously, but apparently

³⁴ Allan Anderson made a similar point when he observes that the proportion of “Pentecostals/Charismatics” in the world’s Christian population increased from 6% in 1970 to 28% in 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa the majority of Pentecostal churches can be classified, according to him, as independent churches. See A. Anderson, “The Mission initiatives of African Pentecostals in continental perspective”, *Missionalia*, 28 (2000), p. 83.

³⁵ Allan Anderson, “The globalisation of Pentecostalism and the reshaping of Christianity in the twenty-first century”, *Missionalia*, 29 (2001), p. 441.

³⁶ John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

without mutual influence, in South Africa and Nigeria – two regions which were colonised and occupied by the English and which came under Protestant influence. The first known break-away movement in South Africa occurred in 1883 under the leadership of Nehemiah Tile, one of the first ordained Methodist ministers in the country. He founded an ethnic church, the Tembu National Church, which did not last long. In the following decade, other secessionist movements appeared in the region of Pretoria and in Natal. Political differences and financial problems played a role in the decision to break away.³⁷ The leaders of the new churches belonged for the most part to the Methodist Church but there were also Anglicans, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. One of the most famous was Mangena Mokone who founded the Ethiopian Church in 1892. With the help of James Dwane – who would soon leave him to create, within the Anglican Church, a semi-independent church known as the Order of Ethiopia – he developed ties with the American Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church), an Afro-American church which had been founded in the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In Nigeria, David Vincent Brown, one of the Sierra Leonean whom we earlier mentioned, left the Baptist Church in 1888 after a disagreement with the white missionaries to found the Native Baptist Church. This was one of a lengthy series of secessions. Brown rapidly abandoned his Christian name – he became known as Mojola Agbedi – as well as his European clothing. In 1913 he became president of the African Communion of Independent Churches. Generally speaking, these African independent churches diverged little from Christian dogma with the exception of the issue of polygamy. In 1920 they had attracted a third of the Christian Yorubas. Their evangelisation campaigns were effective but they were undermined by divisions.³⁸

By the following generation the movement had reached Liberia, Uganda and the Belgian Congo. In 1913 William Wade Harris, a Grebo from Liberia, saw the angel Gabriel in a dream and began an active evangelisation campaign in West Africa; banishing evil spirits in the name of Jesus and baptising large numbers of new converts. Contrary to the South African secessionists, Harris was not a schismatic. He had been accused of baptising people too quickly but he encouraged his followers to remain in the Catholic Church in the Ivory Coast and the Methodist Church in Gold Coast. Some of his disciples, Latta Gwandajoué for example, founded independent communities which accepted polygamy.³⁹

The first secessionist movement in Uganda appeared in 1914. It attracted mainly Anglicans who belonged to the Bamalaki tribe. Initially very

³⁷ Philippe Denis, "Financial management and economic agency in the early history of the African Independent Churches", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37/2 (2011), 29 – 49.

³⁸ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 493.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 505 –506.

strong with tens of thousands of followers, the movement gradually weakened to the point where, today, there are only a few faithful.⁴⁰

A final example is Simon Kimbangu, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth, apparently the most important African independent church in sub-Saharan Africa. In April 1921, a member of the Baptist church, Kimbangu, founded a healing ministry which was very popular in the village of Nkamba in Lower Congo. Six months later, incited by the missionaries who were hostile towards him, the Belgium colonial authorities arrested the prophet and condemned him to death for posing a threat to the safety of the state. This sentence was subsequently commuted to life sentence and he spent the last thirty years of his life in a Katanganese prison. After his death, strongly supported by the government of independent Congo, the movement which he had founded spread substantially.⁴¹

Were certain countries more disposed to begin African independent churches than others? Adrian Hastings thought so. In his work on the church in Africa he developed the theory that there were two types of countries, those where the phenomenon of African independent churches was significant (South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria and Congo) and those where it was not (Lesotho, Botswana, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Cameroon). In general, he stated, “the rule was that where Christianity was the result of a multiplicity of Protestant churches and where there were great numbers of white colonists and Protestants, the African independent churches saw the greatest development.”⁴²

Christian women's associations

Gender issues cannot be neglected in a study of the forms of Christian life in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, as with other subjects, we will undertake only a cursory reflection.

In their work on the church in Africa, Sundkler and Steed speak of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of women in Africa. They are invisible because, according to deeply rooted cultural prejudices, they are banned from public forums. They do not have the right to speak. They are visible because, in reality, it is they who control domestic economy which guarantees the integrity of family structures given that the men are usually absent. It is they who, in the final count, support the action of the churches not only because of their presence at religious services where they are far

⁴⁰ Ibid., 532.

⁴¹ Jean-Luc Vellut, “Simon Kimbangu, itinéraire d’un prophète », in Jean-Luc Vellut, ed., *Simon Kimbangu 1921 : de la prédication à la déportation. Les sources*. Vol. I : *Fonds missionnaires protestants* (Bruxelles : Académie Royale d’Outre-Mer, 2005), ix-xxvi.

⁴² Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, p.533.

more numerous than the men, but also because of the pastoral support which they offer to the male priests and pastors who lead the Christian community.

The same authors highlight three important forms of female Christian sociability which we will consider briefly: the congregations of religious sisters, African independent churches founded by women and the *manyanos*.

Female congregations were not the prerogative of the Catholic Church. They existed in the Anglican Church and, to a lesser degree, in the Lutheran Church; but they certainly were more numerous in the Catholic Church. Reacting to the call of a bishop or the superior of a male missionary congregation, they took charge of hospitals, schools and orphanages thereby bolstering the work of the missions. They also took the lead in evangelical work in remote mission stations. A party of six sisters of the Assumption from Paris arrived in Grahamstown in South Africa in 1849 in response to the request of Bishop Aidan Devereux.⁴³ The first Agricultural and Nursing Sisters of the Venerable Geronimo began what was soon to become the Congregation of Missionary Sisters in Africa by practicing their profession in Algiers in 1871 under the direction of Archbishop Lavigerie.⁴⁴

The first African sisters took vows in 1860 in Senegal as we have already seen. Their main promoter was Bishop Aloys Kobès, the vicar apostolic of Senegambia. Another pioneer was Frantz Pfanner, the abbot of Mariannahill who envisaged a body of African priests, monks and nuns as early as the 1880s. The Sisters of Our Lady the Queen of Africa, a congregation of African sisters was founded in Karema in Tanganyika in 1907. By 1925 the number of African sisters was close to 1000 throughout the continent. This number had doubled by 1933 and quadrupled by 1949 and by 1960 had reached 6000.⁴⁵

Initiatives by women are just as important in the African independent churches. There is little information on this subject, but we can nevertheless give a few examples. In 1923 in Nigeria a woman called Abiodun Akin-sowon founded the Society of Seraphims – later called the Cherabims and Seraphims – a group of *Aladura* (people who pray), who practised an innovative form of Pentecostalism in West Africa.⁴⁶ Similarly, Gaudencia Aoko founded the Mario Legio in Kenya, Alice Lenshina the Lumpa Church in Zambia and Ma Nku the St John's Apostolic Church in South Africa.⁴⁷

Lastly, we will mention the *manyanos*, another example of the dynamism of Christian women in Southern Africa. The question could be asked whether an equivalent existed in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

⁴³ Philippe Denis, *The Dominican Friars in Southern Africa*, 81.

⁴⁴ Ceillier, *Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique*, 209.

⁴⁵ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 681 – 683.

⁴⁶ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 515.

⁴⁷ Sundkler and Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa*, 683.

From the first third of the nineteenth century, groups of seamstresses drew the first African women converts together. It must be remembered that clothing and baptism was a sign of conversion. In 1865, Joseph Gérard, the evangeliser of Basutoland, founded the Association of Women of the Holy Family for women he had converted. Protestant missionaries were no different. In the 1880s they established a number of female associations for abstinence and for the promotion of Christianity mainly in the Transkei and Basutoland. These somewhat informal groups were the forerunners of the *manyanos*, women's Christian associations found in all Christian denominations with tens of thousands of members in Southern Africa today. The word *manyanos* comes from the Xhosa *ukumanya* which means to meet. Strictly speaking, the word is only used for the women's Christian associations of the Methodist Church but its usage has spread to include other denominations.

The *manyanos* appeared in urban settings during the first decade of the twentieth century. By this time, the number of Africans who had converted to Christianity in South Africa had already reached one million. In 1907, the wife of a Methodist pastor in Potchefstroom, S. Gqosho, founded the first Methodist Prayer Association soon called a *manyona*. Others followed on the Rand. Similar associations were created in the following years in the Anglican, Congregational and Catholic churches. White women, the spouses of missionaries or unmarried apostolic workers, played an important role in their development. They took their inspiration from English, American or Canadian models. The Sodality of Saint Anne's (Catholic) was founded in Canada in 1956. The Mother's Union (Anglican) was created in 1876 in Hampshire in order to teach women "the spirituality in the wife and mother's situation, the responsibility of parents towards their children as well as the power and example of prayer". The founders' intention was to save African women from the dangers of urban life and to inculcate ideals of Christian wives and mothers.

The dates on which the weekly meetings of the *manyanos* were held bear testimony to the urban origin of the associations. For washerwomen, the most common form of employment for women in Johannesburg, Thursday was the day off. On Mondays they collected the washing, on Tuesdays they washed and they ironed on Wednesdays. The ascendancy of the white founders of these burgeoning women's Christian societies was strong. It was only in 1937 and 1974 respectively that a black woman was elected president of the Methodist women's association and of the Mother's Union, its Anglican equivalent.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ On the *manyanos* in Southern Africa see Mia Brander Syrier *Black Women in Search of God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962); Deborah Gaitskell, "Power in Prayer and Service: Women's Christian Organization", in Elphick and Davenport, eds, *Christianity in South Africa*, 253–267; Beverley Haddad, "African women's theologies of survival: intersecting faith, feminisms and development, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Natal,

From the very beginning and despite the opposition of the white founders, the *manyanos* resolutely adopted an African style. Their prayer meetings and evangelical campaigns bore witness to a double influence: that of revival campaigns which were very popular in Protestant South Africa and that of traditional religion which continued to pervade bodies and souls under the cloak of Christianity. Loud prayers, groans, night-time vigils, sung processions – all signalled the Africanisation of the movement. The name given to women's Christian associations of the American Mission Board, *isililo* (tears) is, from this point of view, very revealing.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this geo-historical overview of Christianity in Africa? We have seen that Christian space has continued to grow, spreading from the perimeter of the continent to its very centre. Up until the eighteenth century, with the exception of the Congo and Monomotapa kingdoms which extended towards the interior, only a few isolated stations on the Atlantic Ocean on the west and the Indian Ocean on the east catered for indigenous Christian communities. For the most part Christianity was the preserve of settler communities. In the nineteenth century Christian space continued to grow with the first breakthroughs in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and South Africa. From the 1880s, benefitting from the colonial undertaking, evangelisation entered a new phase, reaching into the most remote corners of the southern part of the continent and vast areas of the north.

The five aspects of Christian life which this study has chosen to favour: African missionary initiatives, African Christian communities, indigenous clergy, African independent churches and women's Christian associations, cover all the periods defined and all the geographic sectors mentioned. One cannot state that Christianity was, qualitatively, more or less African in a given period or a given region than in another.

However, there are spatial or chronological differences regarding the spread of the process of indigenisation of Christianity. For example, it has been shown that with regard to the ordination of indigenous priests or pastors, when compared to modern times, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and South Africa demonstrated – from the second half of the nineteenth century – developments which were seen much later elsewhere. According to Adrian Hastings, geography affected the establishment of African independent churches in sub-Saharan Africa. Their growth rate depended on the greater or lesser presence of Protestant missionary societies and the number of European or North American colonists in the population. The phenomenon of

Pietermaritzburg, 2009; Philippe Denis, "African traditional religion and Christian identity in a group of *manyano* leaders, *Missionalia*, 32/2 (2004), 177 – 189.

manyanos would seem to be specific to Southern Africa. Further studies are needed in order to prove these hypotheses.

