

Social Class Conversion: Socioeconomic Status of Early Christian Converts in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Apart from North Africa, where Christianity took an early foothold until Islam dislodged it in the eighth and ninth centuries, Christianity reached the shores of Africa in the fifteenth century, following the European explorers whose main aim for coming to Africa was commerce. One bogging question about the inception of Christianity in what is commonly called *Africa south of the Sahara* is what class of people were first and foremost converted to the new religion? Was it kings and nobles in the African kingdoms, or was it the common people, particularly slaves and the disenfranchised group in those kingdoms? Emerging from this are two opposing views: (1) that the pioneer converts were made up mainly of the traditional rulers whose influence was essential to the growth of the religion on the continent; (2) that the first converts were mainly commoners, especially slaves and outcasts or simply rebels against their traditional religions. In this paper it is my aim to discuss both views as they relate to socioeconomic determinants in order to come out with a plausible answer to this dilemma. Before I go on to do this I would like to give a brief account of the religious partition of Africa as a whole particularly of the two main foreign religions in the continent in the context of the wider African scene. Therefore, in the introductory section of the paper, this Africa-wide dimension will be addressed. Later in the paper I shall pay attention to the important question of how Christianity spread on the continent. I shall restrict my discussion to the socioeconomic classes of people who were the Christian pioneers on the continent, and geographically on the area referred to as sub-Saharan Africa. I hope to argue that the clarification of the blurred notion of classification of "first Christian converts" on the continent should take into account the various eras through which Christianity spread in Africa, the predominant Christian missionary groups at work during those eras, as well as the social structure existing in a particular ethnic group.

1. THE RELIGIOUS ALIGNMENT IN AFRICA

Three main types of religion can be found in Africa. These are African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity, and Islam. Each of these three has its divergent forms

of expression. The oldest and the most widespread of these religions on the continent is of course the ATR, which seems to be on decline as our data shows. See table 1 below. However, for the fact that ATR, in its various forms has never been organized into what can be referred to as 'church' or congregation in the Christian sense of having registered membership, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to document the extent of its numerical strength, although its influence is easily seen. Christianity seems to be on a steady rise on the continent. Writing in 1986, Mandivenga notes that it is even feared that "the Muslim majority of nearly 50 million in the continent may be halved by the year 1990. It is also estimated that Christians may, if present trends are sustained, actually enjoy a majority of 37 million by the year 2000" (Mandivenga 1991: 15).

All over the African continent there are, in Assimeng's words, "a galaxy of religious precepts and practices, and denominational and sectarian allegiances and commitments" (1991: 5). The phenomenon of the plurality in religious allegiances is seen in the mushrooming of the African indigenous churches¹ founded by African converts. Most of these are splinter groups from established missionary churches. Others emerge originally as independent establishments. This turn of events is seen in some quarters as "the revival of African spirituality", drawing its strength from traditional African spirituality (Ikenga-Metuh 1991: 29-30). In Ikenga-Metuh's estimation, there were about 8000 such indigenous African churches with about 14 million believers in 1979; and these are just "a fraction of the thousands of renewal and revival movements which typify the vitality as well as the instability which characterize the nascent African Christianity" (1991: 29).²

Islam arrived in West Africa from the Maghrib, and East Africa from Hadramaut (Southern Arabia). In the era of the Muslim expansion to these African areas these two Islamic regions were "both among the less developed parts of the Arab world, and the legalistic aspect of Islam was so strong that visiting students in al-Azhar [in Cairo] remained insulated against other aspects of the Islamic culture in the seething Cairene world around them" (Trimingham 1980: 3). Furthermore the basic factor in the expansion of Islamic culture is urban civilization. Unfortunately, Africa had comparatively few cities and large towns. It follows then that where these did not exist, it failed to penetrate completely.

The Islamic presence in Africa can be divided into seven cultural zones, following pre-existing geographical, ethnological and cultural background of the people together with the historical aspects of the expansion and influence of the religion: (1) Mediterranean Africa - (i) Egypt (ii) the Maghrib, (3) Western Sudan,

¹ The term 'church' here and elsewhere in the paper is used not in the theoretical Troeltschian sense in structural comparison of religious organizations. It is used here in general terms referring to individual Christian groups, without any reference to their organizational, or ideological and doctrinal orientations, and developmental stage on the church-sect continuum.

² Refer also to Barrett (1979).

(4) Central Sudan (5) Eastern or Nilotic Sudan, (6) North-eastern Ethiopia (or, Plains of the North), (7) East Africa (Swahili).

It may be said that Islamic Africa south of the Sahara was a very marginal region in relation to the wider Islamic world. Could one of the reasons for this situation be that the Sahara imposed both a cultural and physical barrier between both regions? But from time immemorial the Sahara has been crisscrossed by many caravan trade routs linking the north with the south. Or, further still may it be the fact that Islam adopted the strategy of accommodation and integration instead of encounter and confrontation in its mission work among the indigenous Africans (Mandivenga 1991: 16-17; Ikenga-Metuh 1991: 110-113). But Ikenga-Metuh may be stretching the point beyond reality when he praises Islamic missionaries who he said "admired certain cultural practices and even condoned them". It was not a matter of admiring and condoning, such practices as polygamy, most of those practices are already African traditional way of life. What appears to be Islamic tolerance is just coincidence with African values. Muslim missionaries were only fortunate to have met such conducive environment to propagate their message. Islam merely settled in the welcoming environment. On the other hand we cannot deny the fact that generally there exists a high degree of tolerance of other religions by the Sufi Islamic tradition. Below (table 1) is the demographical distribution of the major religions in Africa cited from Barrett (1982: 782). The statistics on the religious make-up on the continent is debatable. Barrett's figures cited has been contradicted by Folala (1988: 11)³ who gave 23.74% to Islam and 22.83% to Christianity. This imply that less than half the population of Africa (in 1988) adhered to the two major foreign religions. This may also mean that ATR occupy perhaps a more significant position in Africa than credited for in the more than the remaining half of the population who are neither Christians nor Muslims (Pobee 1991: 58).

Table 1. Distribution of religions in Africa.

Religion	% of Population			
	1900	1970	1990	2000
African Traditional Religions	58.1	18.3	13.9	8.9
Christianity	9.2	40.6	44.2	48.4
Islam	32.0	40.3	41.2	41.6
Others	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.1

³ Cited in Pobee (1991: 58) from Lubbe (1990: 208-216).

1.1 THE HISTORICAL STAGES OF CHRISTIAN EXPANSION IN AFRICA

In a broad sense the Christian missionary project in Africa went through approximately four phases.⁴ The first phase, extended from about 1444/5 to about 1790. This period was more or less equivalent to an exploratory stage of mission work. This stage had been essentially dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, sponsored financially and politically mainly by Portugal. A small number of Protestant missionary societies were to join in the eighteenth century. In 1498 when Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut⁵ he declared the purpose for his exploration: he went out in search for Christians and spices (Isichei 1995: 53). This spells out the aim of Catholic Portuguese exploration as well as their missionary counterparts. But Catholic missions may have failed due to the costly experiment of linking missionary activity with political imperialism in the system of the *padroado*. This was a structural system within the Portuguese missions. This system originated through papal bulls and proclamations (1452-1514). These gave the Portuguese crown substantial leverage in appointments to all Catholic benefices in all Portuguese overseas holdings in exchange for financial support for Catholic missions. However, Kongo kings rebelled against this close link of church and state, but the system saw the introduction of the Italian Capuchins from the 1645 onwards (Isichei 1995: 54). The Catholic mission project sunk together with the Portuguese imperial possessions and power as it lacked the resources to sustain the *padroado*.

This first phase was the first modern attempts at missions in Africa. It went on for about two centuries "but all vanished eventually and there is no continuity with modern times" (Parrinder 1969: 122). From the close of the first phase, missionary patronage changed, from exclusively Portuguese and Spanish to other European nations, eg. Britain, Germany, France, Netherlands, Denmark, and hence from Catholic to Protestant.

The second phase (c. 1790 - c. 1840) could be described as the modern Christian missionary attack on Africa involving a greater number of Protestant missionaries signalling a renewed missionary interest in Africa as a whole. This time it was the Protestant societies which dominated in the initial stages of the thrust. Generally in the second phase there came an overall change of missionary strategy on mission expansion covering financing, organizing, and administration.

The third Phase extends from 1840-1890 when there was a move towards the establishment of "self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating" African

⁴ Although some authors choose three phases. See Isichei (1995).

⁵ Calicut is the former name for Kozhikode a port in Western Kerala (South Western India) on the Malabar coast. It was an important European trading post from about 1511-1765.

churches. This was the period when conscious efforts were made to develop the churches to become independent in all aspects from external European controls; that is as much independence as the European missionaries would allow.

The fourth phase stretches from c. 1890 to c. 1960 when there was full scale colonization in the whole of Africa. This was the colonial epoch when most African countries were under one or the other European imperial control. As a result from about the 1890s the expansion of Christianity took two main forms following the two main colonial divisions: French and British. The few former Portuguese colonies follow the French pattern. From the 1960s to the present, further developments have taken place which make it a distinct period on its own. Discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

2. THE SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN CONVERTS IN AFRICA

As stated earlier, two contending views have emerged while considering the social class of early Christian converts in Africa south of the Sahara. These in intellectual terms may be referred to as: (1) the Royal Conversion hypothesis, and (2) the Masses Conversion hypothesis. I shall discuss these one after the other and then end with my concluding remarks.

2.1 THE ROYAL CONVERSION HYPOTHESIS

The early history of the Christian religion shows a contentious relationship between the new religion and the kings (rulers) of that time. Kings persecuted the early Christians mainly because the religion was seen as a threat to the stability of their kingdoms and empires. This was done despite the clear declaration by the founder of the religion, Jesus, that his kingdom is not of this earth. Also because of the link such rulers made between the new religion and its founder on the one hand and the ancient Hebrew prophecy of the Messiah who would come to deliver the Jews from Roman political oppression. And Jesus testified that he was that messiah but stressed that his kingdom was of a different kind and that the Jews had got it wrong in the interpretations of the prophecies. So even in some quarters, it is alleged that Jesus was tried and executed on treasonable political charges.⁶ The stance of political rulers towards Christianity at that time was therefore oppressive and the relationship anything but cordial. But all this changed in the early years of the fourth century with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. From

⁶ There are arguments for and against this assertion. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion so I cannot go into that now. Interested persons may refer to, for example, Hendrickx (1984).

around this time the Christian religion got some respite and really begun to grow in the then Roman world. Has this been the trend in the history of the religion in Africa too? First of all, let us look at some examples of African kings and rulers who are on record to have been converted to Christianity.

I have mentioned already that the history of Christianity is chequered with conversions taking place in the royal palace with serious consequences for the development of the religion in the Roman world. Similar things happened in Africa too when the first missionaries arrived in Africa. The first of these I shall mention was the Wolof chief Behemoui (of present day Senegambia). He and twenty-five of his companions went to Portugal where they got baptized in 1489. Unfortunately, on his return he expelled the missionaries who converted him in the first place.

In Sierra Leone the baptism of the king and many of his people marked the turning point in Jesuit missionary work after the first hundred years (Parrinder 1969: 120). A Bollom ruler was baptized with the name Philip Leonis together with other family members. But he was said to have been converted by one of his wives "who was already a Christian having been raised by the Portuguese".⁷ (Isichei 1995: 58 cited from Hamelberg 1964: 1-8). However, the Jesuit missionary Balthasar Barreira was not fast enough and was beaten to it in his bid to convert a Susu king (Sierra Leone) by a rival Muslim missionary. In Benin the crown prince converted to Christianity, but maintained his faith when he succeeded to the throne under the royal name Oba Orhogbua in 1550.

In the Congo belt, the Manikongo and some of his chiefs converted to Catholic Christianity in the early sixteenth century. Many young men were sent to Europe for education. Nzinga Mbemba, the Manikongo became king in 1507 taking the baptismal name Alfonso. He is the only African king who is reported to have ruled as an ardent Christian until his death in 1543, trying to fashion his kingdom on European lines. His efforts may not have been in vain for his own son Henry became the consecrated bishop of Utica in 1518.

In south eastern Africa Tonga chiefs were reported to have been baptized by Jesuit missionaries in 1560. The Jesuit Gonzalo da Silveira baptized Tonga rulers and four hundred subjects at Sotala. The missionaries proceeded to Monomotapa (in present day Zimbabwe) and baptized the King and his mother. But tragedy broke when their Muslim advisers suggested that the missionary was on an espionage mission for India. He was strangled, becoming the first Christian martyr in southern Africa (Parrinder 1969: 122). Following the Tonga chiefs another King was also baptized in 1667.

In Botswana, Khama Boikano of the Bamangwato got baptized in 1862 while still a prince. His father (the king) however drove him out of the royal palace for refusing to take part in the traditional initiation ceremonies. When Boikano succeeded his father he ruled for fifty years until his death in 1923. It is not clear however how much Christianity grew under his rule. Certainly he did not turn his

⁷ Cited in Isichei (1995: 58).

kingdom into a 'Christian kingdom' as Mbemba of Kongo tried to do. In southern Africa, Isichei (1995: 45) declares, several Mutapa princes became friars. In Christian Ethiopia emerged a local saint called Gebre Christos the son of a wealthy king who donated much to the poor and prayed for leprosy in order to share the sufferings of Christ, and his request was granted (Isichei, 1995: 50; see also Iliffe 1987: 10).

Without question royal conversion did take place. This was necessary for the benefit for both hosts (the various kingdoms) and quests (the Christian missions and their sponsoring European nations). This was vital for the success of the political, economic, and religious colonization of Africa. This demanded that representatives of all three segments court and win the approval of the powers that be in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Africa in order to carry out their activities. Note that all three, but particularly the traders and missionaries needed land, accommodation, and security (protection). Where else would they have got these services but from the kings and rulers of the various kingdoms who most of the time controlled these resources. In certain places it is clear that some of the rulers and persons in responsible positions in society, e.g. the royal courts, got converted. But the question was whether these nobles were the first to be converted and then followed by their subjects. If this was the case the spread of Christianity, discounting other hindrances like the harsh climate and disease and death, would have been faster than it had been. Perhaps this was the case in many parts of Africa but this did not help the cause of Christianity in its early years. As I have hinted at already the inability of Christianity to spread faster than it did may be attributed to several debilitating factors. Among these are the inhospitable climate for the European missionaries coupled with the tropical diseases particularly malaria from the dangerous but patriotic African mosquitoes.

Granted that the first converts were kings and the people of nobility why is it that there have not been any 'Christian kingdoms' in Africa after the pattern in Europe? The answer may lie in the fact that not many African royalties full heartedly converted to Christianity for fear of (1) deposition, (2) harm from ancestral spirits and gods, and (3) the sheer patriotic spirit of holding dear to what is tradition, most of which are an anathema to the Christian religion. Even if a king or ruler dared to convert against all these odds, his action would have been considered as an act of rebellion against the norms of tradition, a sacrosanct, and would rather have caused a backlash against the Christian religion.

What happened was that there was some cordial relationship between the kings and the church (missionaries) who were, after the initial mistrust and intolerance on the part of the Africans, seen as messengers of progress: remember the Christian legacy of education and European life-style? This was demonstrated in Lesotho where King Moshesh welcomed Roman Catholic missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Catholic finance in the kingdom and surrounding region was substantial, and eventually came to dominate education and much of public life. But it is not on record that king Moshesh himself converted to Catholicism. His endorsement of the missionary activities of the Catholics may certainly have enhanced their efforts. He

accorded the same treatment to missionaries from other Christian groups as well. Already thirty years before the arrival of the Catholics, French and Swiss Protestants were already evangelizing there (Parrinder 1969: 135).

Also king Mutesa received Protestant (Anglican) missionaries well but was not a convert himself. His son Mwanga, his successor, persecuted the Baganda (Uganda) Christians, and even Bishop Hannington died in one of the disturbances. It was not until his banishment sometime after 1886 when the church revived in Uganda. In Malagasy (Madagascar) king Radama gave a friendly hand to David Jones (1818) on the condition that artisans were sent to improve Malagasy living standards. But in 1835 the new Queen Rahavalona persecuted Christians.

It is evident that in certain cases the missionaries became confidants and even advisors to some of the kings just as some Muslim religious leaders were to Asante Kings in particular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Protestant missionary Edouard Casalis and Coillard had this relationship with King Moshesh of Lesotho.

In many cases conversion of rulers was a means to an end: a means for securing political protection from Europeans. For example the baptism of prince Jelen of the Wolof people (Senegambia) who visited Lisbon and returned with a substantial Portuguese force (Isichei 1995: 57). At times the kings and rulers clamour for the missionaries or even offer conversion in view of the political and economic benefits that were expected from their actions (Parrinder 1969: 122; Clarke 1986: 11; Isichei 1995: 157). One of the most interesting cases of the pragmatism on the part of African rulers is to be found in the kingdom of Benin (Nigeria). Beginning from their King (Oba) Uzulua when the Portuguese made their first contact in 1486 to about 1532 when the Portuguese station at Awato was closed and long after Uzulua's death (in 1517), Bini kings played the pragmatic card but did not convert to Christianity (Clarke 1986: 20). Kings like Frederick William Koko of Brass (Nembe) in the Niger Delta apostatized and reverted to African religion because "they had lost faith in the white man's god, which had allowed them to be oppressed, and their trade, their only means of livelihood, to be taken away from them without just cause or reason."⁸

It was not always so however. Perhaps a case of genuine conversion could be seen in the conversion of King (*Olu*) Sebastian of Warri (Itsekiri). He remained a Christian under severe circumstances, and carried on missionary work himself and helped convert some of his courtiers (Clarke 1986: 21). But Christianity in Warri as in many parts of West Africa never had any strong following outside the palace, comparable to the situation in the courts of Asante kings in the nineteenth century when Muslim scholars served not only as secretaries to the kings but also as advisors.

⁸ PRO FO 403/216, "Statement made by chiefs, after the meeting of June 10, 1895". In: *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, S. Crowther, FO Confidential Print 1881: 420-22, cited in Isichei 1995: 175.

It seems the theological doctrines based particularly on eternal rewards and punishments rather than socioeconomic factors were at work as in the case of Chief Okwuose.⁹ After his dream/vision he became a Christian taking the name Michael.

As Parrinder (1969: 122) asserts when the first Christian missionaries arrived, "the field was wide open to them, for African rulers in general welcomed the strangers, whose educational work was appreciated. Sometimes there were mass baptisms, but this meant superficial conversions, and on the other hand rulers were usually too involved with ancestral rituals to break with the past."

2.2 THE MASSES CONVERSION HYPOTHESIS

The second model put forward concerning how Christianity spread in Africa, especially in sub-sahara Africa is that the first converts were of the low class social status. In 1970, Ramond F. Hopkins asserted that:

In spite of obvious values which missionaries offered in the form of skills, well-being and perhaps prestige the ties of traditional life prevented most Africans from accepting this new religion, at least at first. Early recruits to Christianity came, therefore, largely from those already disaffected from traditional society, such as slaves and outcasts (1970: 46).

This is a reiteration of the view among some authors before his time of writing (e.g. Groves 1958: 210-237). Writers supporting this view of the spread of Christianity apply social psychological paradigms to explain their view points. Hopkins made use of "learning and role conflict" theories to conceptualize and interpret his point of view (1970: 53), and at the same time referring to Chinua Achebe's novel *Things fall Apart* (1959) claiming that "Achebe's novel points out that early converts were largely 'efulefu,' that is men who were considered worthless or empty by the traditional society." While doing this he relied heavily on the theory of (relative) deprivation, using arguments developed by Robert Frank Weiss (1963: 7, 12) on defection and the "differential extinction of belief and participation" in association with Miller and Dollard's (1944: 1-90) idea of the "classical formula of learning theory - drive, response, cue and reward."¹⁰ His main arguments are that "Drive or motivation was supplied for early recruits by deprivations and loss of security suffered in traditional society and/or by the anticipation that rewards would be available through contact with Europeans" (Hopkins 1970: 47). For this reason he

⁹ Okwuose was an *Obi* (Chief) of Asaba (Eastern Nigeria) who "saw, as it were a very dark figure, with flowing hair, chained by the neck, while its body appeared as blazing fire. The Chief begged not to be punished as that figure." Culled from "A remarkable Conversion", *The African Missionary*, (1925: 13), quoted in Isichei (1995: 158).

¹⁰ Cited in Hopkins (1970: 47), footnote 10. Refer also to note 19 in Hopkins (1970: 48) on Robert F. Weiss (1963).

attributes the recruitment into the new Christian community in terms of socioeconomic indicators, discounting personality factors.

Writers in this school of thought therefore draw heavily on social psychological theories prevalent within the period 1950s to 1970s. It was during this period that the *relative deprivation* theory (and its close associate *social comparison* theory) was formally formulated and popularized by writers like J. A. Davis (1959), W. G. Runciman (1966), T.R. Gurr (1970), and Fanny Crosby (1976).¹¹ The *relative deprivation* theory states that an individual (or a group of individuals) may seek a redress of their situation when they perceive a discrepancy between what they think their situation ought to be and what it presently is. This is referred to as the discrepancy between people's perception of their expectations (perceived entitlements) and their capabilities (actual outcomes) (Gurr 1970). Although the theory has a number of models for the explanation of behaviour, the most significant one up to date is the five factor model. In this Crosby (1976) proposed five necessary and sufficient 'preconditions' for feelings of egoistical relative deprivation. The conditions for an individual to crave for an object X, that fellow must (a) see that someone else possesses X (comparison other), (b) want X, (c) feel entitled to and deserving X, (d) think it possible to obtain X, and (e) lack a sense of personal responsibility for not having X. This by extension means that (a) there must be a discrepancy between what one has and what one wants or desires, (b) there should be the craving perception that the other person or group is better off relative to oneself, (c) the perceived discrepancy between what one has and what one is entitled to, (d) the difference between past expectations and present realities-generating pessimism or optimism, and (e) the absence of self-blame for the present condition (Crosby 1984).¹² This theory has been applied to religious conversion especially to African conversions to Christianity.¹³

The slave conversion hypothesis poses some theoretical questions which need addressing. The conversion of slaves although theoretically possible, may be difficult practically, for it to serve as a nucleus for the Christian community in the African setting. Of course slaves had been converted to Christianity in the long history of the religion. Obviously, domestic slaves seem to form an important segment of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) church in the Niger Delta (Nigeria) in the nineteenth century (Isichei 1995: 174). The point is that just as

¹¹ There are others in this field who have produced excellent works since the period in question. See for example, Crosby (1984), Dibble (1981), Dion (1985), and Herman et al. (eds.) (1986).

¹² Refer also to Olson and Hazlewood (1986: 3).

¹³ It is, however, surprising that this theory is rarely, if at all, applied to African converts to Islam. This underlines the suspicion that it has been used to emphasize the economic reasons for the conversion which seem to be absent from Islamic conversions. It is also a subtle reference to the so-called superior economic source and culture (European) within which the Christian religion was presented as compared to the African situation on the one hand, and the Islamic source (Arabic and/or North African) on the other.

anywhere, in most parts of Africa, slaves were normally found in king's courts. They had no real rights let alone the right to the freedom of worship. They had to follow the religion of their masters. For that matter unless the slave-master converted, the slaves were unlikely to have the chance of listening to the sermons of the missionary let alone getting converted, until he/she gained his/her freedom. The situation in Benin (Nigeria) may serve as a good example. The interpreters and go-between for the Portuguese in the *Oba's* courts in the seventeenth century "consider themselves slaves of the King & would not dare to become Christians until the King himself is converted" (Ryder 1969: 71). On the other hand in Warri (Nigeria) in 1620, "[a]lthough very many of them are nominally Christian, true Christianity is almost wholly confined to the King and the Prince; the rest only call themselves Christians in order to please the King" (Ryder 1960: 8).¹⁴ Likewise in Asante in 1843 the Methodist mission suffered "from the circumstance of the people being afraid to expose themselves to the ire of the King, whose frown is indeed death for people becoming Christians".¹⁵ Therefore, it may be more plausible, in the absence of hard evidence, to assume that *free slaves* were converted rather than the blanket generalized *slaves*. A cogent example of this situation is what happened in Southern Africa from 1648 onwards. For a short period converts to the Christian religion were mainly slaves who had been imported from Angola and Guinea. They were educated together with Hottentots. The first Hottentot convert, Eva, was baptized in 1662, and got married to a Danish surgeon. Not long, opposition to conversions of slaves surfaced because they could no longer be bought or sold, perhaps because they had become 'brothers and sisters' to the slave masters, and that was not permitted (Parrinder 1969: 123).

On the other hand it is equally plausible that the first converts were social misfits. On this the application of social psychological theories especially the *relative deprivation* concept is useful as applied by Hopkins, and others. This could be very advantageous to the Christian cause for several reasons. First the so called persons of the fringes of society have nothing to lose by their conversion, and may have a lot to gain by their new found image in their attempt to redress their deprived situation. And certainly there might have been many dissenters in the traditional societies then, as it is now. Secondly we know that Christianity has been a bed fellow of commerce and education. Even missionaries themselves urged their home governments to help foster the bonds between the three (religion - Christianity, commerce, and education), as the famous missionary and explorer David Livingstone pleaded with Victorian England for Africa to be opened to "commerce and Christianity" (Parrinder 1969: 130). With the magnet of commerce and education it would be much more attractive to the commoners to convert as they have no restrictions on their conversions as would be on the kings and rulers. Thirdly a positive change and upward mobility in the social life of this group of

¹⁴ Quoted in Isichei (1995: 61).

¹⁵ Cited in Isichei (1995: 169).

people would have sent a welcoming signal to others to join them. My view is that Christianity seemed to have worked down to top: from the populace to the palace rather than from the palace to the populace. Therefore, in my opinion the outcasts and rebels in the traditional societies formed the initial recruiting grounds for the missionaries when attention was turned on the broader masses. Having said that it does not mean that there had not been converts among the ruling classes. Surely there had been some but their number might have been very limited with little effect on the evangelistic drive of the missionaries.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The confusion over which class of Africans were the initial nucleus of Christian converts in sub-saharan Africa may be cleared by considering three factors: (1) the various phases in terms of epochs through which Christianity got established in Africa, (2) the brand of Christianity operating during those periods, and (3) the societal structure in each community.

Early in the history of the religion in Africa, especially in West Africa, missionary work was restricted to the European forts and settlements on the coast. This was the result of the fact that both priests and other Europeans were more preoccupied with commercial interests than evangelization of Africans (Clarke 1986: 19). When attention was turned to converting Africans the focus was first on the conversion of kings and other members of high social status. This was during the first missionary phase when the Christian missionary project was mainly Catholic shared among various orders.

On the other hand after some lapse when Protestant missionaries started arriving in their droves, following their Protestant explorers from Protestant European countries, eg. Britain, Denmark, Sweden, and France (an exceptionally Catholic country), their concentration was mainly on the masses. That does not mean they did not make the effort to convert the ruling classes but on the whole they worked on the masses more. Isichei (1995: 168) makes this clear when she states that:

The first converts were drawn largely from the marginal, ex-slaves; the widowed; the childless; and those with some kind of physical abnormality. A small, but influential category of converts were drawn from princes, who, in a matrilineal society, could not succeed to their father's office; the first catechists and pastors were often drawn from their number.

This statement is in respect of the spread of the religion in West Africa (especially in Ghana) in the second missionary period. Her earlier comments (1995: 72) about the conversion of kings and rulers, however, are based on examination of the history of Christianity from 1500-1800 a period when Catholic (Jesuits) missionaries dominated missionary activities in Africa, when they were supported mainly by Portugal and partly by Spain through the *padroado* system. Secondly the

thinking was that by the conversion of the ruling class their subjects might follow. But as we saw this experiment failed. Although it is evident that Catholic missionaries concentrated very much on men and especially on the ruling class, records show that it was easier to convert women and children (Theal, 1964: 402 cited in Isichei 1995: 56). That is why we read about the many Christian quarters or communities during this time (from the beginning of the nineteenth century), and not much in the periods before then.

The change of tactics was forced on them by certain historical developments as the slave trade and the struggle to stop it, the missionary strategical evolution (eg., the introduction of the school system), and the sheer preoccupation with the attempt to halt the spread of Islam by reaching the 'pagans' first and converting them to Christianity before Islam shows its head. Obviously the missionaries sensed the insurmountable barrier of Islam to their mission work. This emphasis emerged mainly during the fourth phase although it was first a continuation of a previous era such as in Senegambia and northern Nigeria and other Muslim dominated areas particularly of French West Africa. Mission societies from c. 1909 onwards concentrated their efforts on the so-called 'pagan' areas of northern Nigeria such as the Jos Plateau, apart from the few missions established inside Muslim towns, eg. the CMS missions at Bida and Zaria, the SIM at Patigi and the SUM at Wase, abandoned in 1909.

It is worth noting also the sort of social structure existing in the target community in each individual case. For example, in a decentralized society where there are no kings and chiefs, it is obvious that no such people were converted.

In my opinion both the *royal conversion* and the *masses conversion* hypotheses as I call them are correct depending on which time frame, what form of Christian mission, and the form of social organization in terms of government one is talking about. Putting it bluntly as one or the other would be a demonstration of the proverbial three blind men describing an elephant basing judgement on what part of the animal each manages to be holding. These points are often either ignored or not made clear by some authors. This leads to misunderstanding by the reading public. Sometimes readers take the unqualified statements on this issue out of context (as people do in many situations). On September 18, 1996, a contributor on *Okyeame* (a Ghanaian discussion network on the Internet) was at loss when he came "across two diametrically opposed views about how Christianity spread in Africa", and wishes to know "the more correct view." He cited Hopkins (1970: 46) as supporting the *masses conversion* position, and Isichei (1995: 72) as supporting the *royal conversion* position. One has, therefore, to take into account the two forms of Christian missionaries that operated in Africa and their time frames on the one hand, and the kind of society in each one case on the other. Secondly, the use of social psychological paradigms or models popular in their time, to explain the conversion patterns in African Christianity had influenced the analysis of authors who focus on later converts of different social class status from those of the nobility stock.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to David Westerlund and Leuben Njinya-Mujinya, both of The Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University, for their useful suggestions on this paper.

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