“Stretching Out Hands to God”
Origins and Development of Pentecostalism in Africa

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Africa at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

A sea change to both the significance and nature of Christianity in Africa took place during the course of the twentieth century. In 1900 there were fewer than nine million Christians in Africa, less than 2 percent of the world's Christians—but a century later, that figure had jumped to 357 million, 19 percent of world Christianity and almost half of Africa's population, including the predominantly Muslim north (Johnson et al. 2012). What is often not appreciated in these bare statistics is that there is not only a remarkable growth in Christian Africa but also a change in the character and orientation of these Christians. African Christianity as a whole—Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and independent—has moved considerably in a “Pentecostal” or Charismatic direction, quite apart from the enormous growth among Pentecostal churches themselves. There are many complex factors involved in this seismic shift, and this essay will attempt to unravel some of them. Although there are a small number of Pentecostals in North Africa (Anderson 2007:152–157), this is a region predominantly Arab and Muslim, and the focus here is on the situation south of the Sahara.

Imperialism was at its height at the end of the nineteenth century but did not always go the way of imperial forces. Although Britain defeated the Ashanti in the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1874, the Battle of Isandhlwana in South Africa in 1879 was the first military engagement of over-confident British forces in the Anglo-Zulu War. It resulted in their routing by a numerically superior but militarily disadvantaged Zulu army. This battle rocked Victorian Britain and showed that the colonizers were not as invincible as they thought they were, and that African weaponry and tactical manoeuvres could repel them. Similarly, the decisive defeat of Italy by Ethiopia in 1896 at the Battle of Adowa had profound significance for western-educated Africans, including those few who had become church leaders. For them it represented the future liberation of African peoples from colonial oppression. But it was not yet the time; for by the end of that century the Europeans had acquired superior communications, weaponry, new medicines against tropical diseases, and knowledge of the interior brought by explorers and missionaries. The political
and religious ferment in Africa in this period created serious tensions and instability across the continent by the beginning of the twentieth century. This ferment was a stimulus for increasing European involvement and the growth of both European Christian missions and independent African churches. European settlers were seeking to expropriate vast areas of African land, to exploit Africa’s rich natural resources for their expanding industries, and to control cheap African labour for their own advantage. The “scramble for Africa” had begun (Hastings 1994:397–405; Neill 1986:454–455; Pakenham 1992).

Africans themselves stood by helplessly or—when they resisted as they sometimes did—they were easily defeated by superior weaponry, technology and political determination, and by the divide-and-rule strategy of the colonizers. Africa was rural and agrarian, and the vast majority of Africans would have been blissfully unaware of the large machinations and intrigue being initiated by European powers. The continent was in a period of rapid change. During the nineteenth century, Portuguese traders were followed by ivory poachers and European explorers and finally, by western missionaries. African societies began to adjust to the new situation and rapidly lost their autonomy and territory as a result. Religious turmoil was taking place as the ancient tribal religions were brought face to face with a militant Islam on the one hand and a highly-motivated Christian missionary movement on the other, following in the wake of the encroaching and often brutally aggressive colonizers. Africa had neither nation-states nor fixed borders before Europeans began to partition it—and even then, boundaries were usually vague or disputed and often cut across former tribal territories. France and Britain in particular were in constant competition to exert the most influence in the continent. At the Conference of Berlin in 1884–85, most of Africa was carved up arbitrarily between France and Britain, who between them acquired more than half of the continent. Portugal retained two large colonies in southern Africa and two smaller ones in West Africa; Belgium subsequently took a large part of Central Africa in the Belgian Congo as the personal property of its King Leopold (1893); and Germany, Spain and Italy also received large parcels of land. Only Abyssinia (Ethiopia) was independent; and Liberia was a quasi-independent, quasi-colonial state ruled by descendants of former African American slaves. The Sultanate of Sokoto was a Fulani Muslim empire that expanded by waging jihad (holy war) over much of the present-day interior of Nigeria and southern Niger until the 1890s. Islam had become a counterforce to European colonial conquest but for the most part was unaffected by it. In some cases Islamic regions were protected by colonial rulers from Christian missionary activity (Hastings 1994:406–408; Overy 1999:238–241).