RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN A HAYA VILLAGE,
TANZANIA

BY

LESLEY STEVENS
(Concordia University, Montreal)

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a contribution to the discussion of the nature and
direction of religious change in the former colonial societies of
Africa. Much of the social scientific investigation of African religion
to date has focussed on peoples, communities and aspects of life least
touched by the social changes associated with colonialism. Classic
examples are the influential studies of the cosmologies of peoples
such as the Nuer, the Dinka, and the Dogon, and the many intensive studies of symbol systems associated with particular ritual com-
plexes, often no longer practiced. As Geertz (1973) has observed,
the classical anthropological approach, however rich its literature,
may have hampered our understanding of the process of religious
change because of its emphasis "on social homeostasis and on
timeless structural pictures." Change, when dealt with at all, is
seen in terms of "progressive disintegration ... disorganization of
the culture, secularization and individualization" (1973: 143).

The major exception to this is some of the literature devoted to
the most dramatic phenomenon of religious change in Africa: the
development of new religious movements with strong elements of
prophecy and sometimes of protest (see the bibliography of new
religious movements by Turner, 1977). What I want to focus on is
a far less spectacular area of religious research. Compared to the
burgeoning literature on new religious movements, there has been
little empirical or explanatory investigation of the ongoing interac-
tion of rural African people and their traditions with the former
mission churches, their teachings and practices. In this paper I
hope to bridge that gap in two ways: first, by examining the
evidence of religious stability and change in the current religious
practices of Christian Haya villagers in North-west Tanzania, and
second, by assessing the utility of classical European theories of social evolution (functionalist and historical materialist) in explaining those changes.

II. BACKGROUND—ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN HAYALAND 1860-PRESENT

Haya contact with Europeans dates from the 1860’s, when the British explorer Speke, seeking the source of the Nile, arrived in Karagwe (the westernmost kingdom) and established relations with King Rumanyika. Assuming that the royals were in fact displaced Ethiopians, Speke assured Rumanyika that he would still have been a Christian “but that unfortunate accidents had caused his ancestors to forget their traditional faith” (Swayne, n.d.: 188). The first Christian missions (evangelical Anglicans from Uganda in the 1880’s, the Catholic White Fathers in 1892, and the Bethel Lutheran Mission in 1911) were given land and protection by the German colonial government and mission activity (principally Catholic and Lutheran) accelerated under British rule (1916-1961).

The chief economic change under colonialism was the introduction of a cash crop (coffee). However, a plantation system was not set up: the cultivation of coffee is still done within a pre-capitalist mode of production, on small (average 2 acres), intensively hand-hoe cultivated plots planted with plantain bananas, beans, and coffee. The plots continue to be inherited through a (patril)lineage group or enda (Reining, 1965; Smith, 1987). The relative stability of the village land tenure and subsistence cultivation system has been maintained through extensive out-migration of young people, a strong factor among the Haya since at least the 1940’s (Hyden, 1980: 85, 91).

The British practiced “indirect rule” through the Haya kings (bakama) who from the 17th century had gradually instituted a system of tenancies and tribute (nyarubanja). However, by introducing coffee as a peasant crop (it had formerly been a royal monopoly), the colonial government effectively divorced the kings from an economic basis of power, and made them, in effect, civil servants. After independence (1961) the bakama and their kingdoms, and eventually the nyarubanja system itself were abolished, leaving the village populated by independent peasant producers. The ruling Revolutionary Party (Chama cha Mapinduzi or CCM) organized all