HOLDING ON TO MISSION CHRISTIANITY: CASE STUDIES FROM A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN MALAWI

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Introduction

In recent years studies of mission Christianity have been few and far between. As Lesley Stevens in her paper 'Religious Change in a Haya Village, Tanzania' states

Compared to the burgeoning literature on new religious movements, there has been little empirical or explanatory investigation of the ongoing interaction of rural African people and their traditions with the former mission churches, their teachings and their practices. (Stevens 1991: 2).

Stevens's article is one of the exceptions in that, instead of analysing the pluralism of modern Christianity in Africa, the multiplicity of independent and pentecostal churches and the effects of urbanization on both traditional and modern religious practice, it focuses rather on a situation in which mission Christianity, in this case Catholicism, has become the dominant religious system in an African society. The present paper is another exception to the 'burgeoning literature'; this time with a focus on the socio-religious life of the Loudon Presbytery of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (C.C.A.P.) in northern Malawi, which until 1960 was under the control of the Livingstonia Mission of the Free Church of Scotland.

The Livingstonia missionaries came to Malawi with a message, both religious and social, that many people found significant and relevant in a rapidly changing world. Over the years the religious communities of the C.C.A.P. have, however, imbued the church with many of their own values and practices, thereby making it more meaningful to them as a social and religious institution. Take, for example, the Ncemo ceremony described below. This ecclesiastical event, where a minister is called for a life-long
ministry to one particular congregation, is quite clearly celebrated as if it were a Christian marriage. Throughout the proceedings traditional wedding practices are demonstrated and vows of commitment between the parties involved, in this case a minister and a congregation, are exchanged and consecrated.

In the normal course of events, however, life in a church community is only punctuated by events such as the Ncemo. In its everyday life the community has to deal with more mundane activities and all the trials and tribulations of its existence. Sometimes struggles and conflicts can develop between members; and these struggles and conflicts are exacerbated when those involved are not only fellow members of the church but tied by bonds of kinship, as I shall show in the case study, 'Chirwa versus Chirwa'. The uncomfortable situation which develops here between the two Chirwa brothers reveals the extent to which the personalities and ambitions of individuals can clash in a small, close-knit community and how the ramifications of the conflict extend to the social community of the principal actors, as well as to the Kirk Session, or ruling body of the local church, to which they both belong. Furthermore, it enables us to see how the local church manages to deal with what may appear to be irreconcilable differences among its members.

When all is said and done, a religious community needs to be able to lay its problems aside and focus on those aspects of its life which join the members together; which gives them a sense of identity. This cannot be seen more clearly in the C.C.A.P. than at the funeral of a full member, where life and death are so openly displayed and the church community finds the essence of its existence. The common belief in the assurance of life after death for all members of the church has become a symbol of identity for all C.C.A.P. members and is considered a principle by which full members are differentiated from others. As we shall see from the final case study, this identity is continually affirmed and the boundaries of the religious community reasserted throughout the proceedings of a church evangelist's funeral. Furthermore, we shall see how a funeral provides an opportunity for the church to act as a social community, upholding those traditions which it accepts as important, discarding those which seem irrelevant, and including practices which are in keeping with its particular Christian perspective.