AFRICAN PROPHETISM AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

A healing prophet among the Mbula of Adamawa 1927-c. 1932, as seen by Danish missionaries 1)

BY

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a healing prophet among the Mbula people living about ten miles east of the confluence of the rivers Benue and Gongola in Adamawa, in Northeast Nigeria. The prophet emerged in the 1920s in a period of crisis characterized by failure of crops and epidemics. By analysing the personal career of the prophet and the background and development of his movement we will point out a number of similarities and differences between him and other healing prophets in West Africa.

By the term “prophet” we understand a charismatic man who better than others perceives the problems of his society. He preaches a specific course of action, found intuitively or by revelation, to be followed if the problems in question are to be solved 2).

We shall also analyze the attitudes to the prophet of Danish Christian missionaries in Adamawa and the consequences of the prophetic movement for Mbula-missionary relations.

II. SOURCES

Data on the Mbula prophet derive from unpublished and printed material from Dansk Forenet Sudan Mission (the Danish Sudan Mission). I wish to thank Senior Lecturer Ole Justesen, cand. mag., Senior Lecturer Holger Bernt Hansen, cand. theol. and Ms. Margit Warburg, stud. mag., the University of Copenhagen who read my manuscript and suggested several improvements. I also thank the Board of the Dansk Forenet Sudan Mission for permission to use the archives of the mission.

United Mission) which initiated missionary work in Adamawa in 1913. Its main field of work was the Bachama people, the close neighbour of the Mbula.

The unpublished primary sources of the mission are deposited at the National Archives in Copenhagen 3). In addition, notes on the Mbula prophet have been published in magazine journals and books.

So the paper is based upon European sources, or on information derived from Africans, but passed on by Europeans 4). Therefore the account is marked with a certain bias which has influenced the description and explanation of the Mbula prophet movement to some extent.

Owing to the lack of multifarious sources we have had to renounce a comprehensive analysis of the internal character of the movement. We are, however, able to present certain aspects of this problem which are combined with an analysis of the attitudes of the Danish missionaries to the prophet.

Furthermore the nature of the sources has influenced the kind of explanation we can offer of the emergence of the movement and its support among the Mbula. We can point out some structural prerequisites for the rise of the prophet movement but we are unable to explain the specific motives of individual Mbula for supporting or rejecting the prophet.

III. BACKGROUND

During the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the Mbula were subjected to various external influences which brought about radical political and socio-economic changes. From the 1890s the Mbula had traded with the Royal Niger Company 5). After the turn of the century the British conquered the region and the Mbula were subjected to external political control and numerous political and socio-economic innovations 6).

From 1909 to 1911 the South African branch of the Sudan United

3) Private Institutioner, No. 10.248, Dansk Forenet Sudan Mission 1906-1961. References to the files are indicated by "RA", Rigsarkivet. Sudan, published monthly by the Dansk Forenet Sudan Mission from 1913, was examined in the Royal Library, Copenhagen (Det Kongelige Bibliotek).

4) We have examined the relevant source groups at the Public Record Office in London without finding data on the prophet. Further information may be found at the Nigerian National Archives, Kaduna.
