Response to Christianity in Pre-colonial and Colonial Africa:
Some Ulterior Motives

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1. Introduction

the gods are crying, my father's gods are crying
for a burial -- for a final ritual --
but they that should build the fallen shrines
have joined the dawn marchers
singing their way towards Gethsemane ... 
the gods cried, shedding
cloey tears on the calico
the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan
the cola-nut is shrivelled
the yam feast has been eaten by mice
and the fetish priest is dressing for the Easter service. (1)

Christianity came to sub-Saharan Africa as a new religious movement. The religious background of its hosts had been that of African traditional religions, now largely, though not completely, displaced by the guest religion. This partial displacement of the host religions by Christianity is the theme lamented in the above nostalgic lines written by the Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor.

But to make it possible for Christian missionaries to convert Africans to Christianity in the first instance, certain factors in the background experiences of Africans had to be present to render the prospective converts in some measure sensitive to the message, life-style, promises and prospects of the new religion. This paper attempts to examine the social, economic and religious background of pre-colonial and colonial African communities -- their needs and aspirations -- in order to discover the motives behind their acceptance, in varying degrees of alacrity, of the Christian religion.

Critics of the impact of Christianity on the socio-religious life of pre-colonial and colonial sub-Saharan Africans have often expressed their criticisms in such a way as to give the misleading impression that White Christian missionaries forced Africans to accept Christianity (2). That such an impression is a misrepresentation of historical facts will become clear in the following discussion which attempts to point out the internal factors, or what Richard Stuart calls the "internal variable" (3), that is, elements and motives intrinsic to the traditional "African personality" which helped to make possible the change from African traditional religions to Christianity, or at least accelerated the change, without any necessary force or pressure from White or Black missionaries (4). In effect, this essay is essentially a study of the sociology and ecology of religions and social change, since it assesses the social and religious conditions under which a religion born and nurtured in a specific social and cultural milieu could be transplanted successfully to a soil whose social and cultural background was different from that of the donor.
Social scientists have generally agreed that the magnitude and rate of change in any society is often directly proportional not only to the strength and forcefulness of the external agents of change, but also to the gravity of the society's perceived needs. It is from this point of view that Richard Henderson, for instance, has argued that a valid approach to study social change is to take into account the sum total of the society's historical, social, economic and other experiences before concluding as to what specific factors are responsible for the change (5). In considering the question of the change from African traditional religions to Christianity, therefore, two sets of factors need to be borne in mind: first, the external factors, and second, the internal factors responsible for the change. Or, to state the same point slightly differently, we need to bear in mind first of all the prime agents of change (missionary enterprise and colonial policies), and the arena of change (the nature of pre-colonial and colonial African societies and their felt needs).

Because of their vested interest in missionary and colonial programmes in Africa, both European and some African historians and social anthropologists have often tended to stress subjectively the external agents of change, particularly in terms of missionary ideology, policy and programmes. "This kind of historiography", Prof. Ogbu Kalu correctly observes, "overemphasized the role of missionary agents and ignored the socio-economic and political background of the host communities" (6). And Lamin Sanneh has justifiably lambasted that method of studying religion in Africa in which no attention is paid to "the process of religious change and adaptation in which the African environment has to play a formative role" (7). Indeed, we agree with Sanneh further when he says elsewhere that "to detach the African factor in this way is to misunderstand the history of Christianity in its African transformation" (8).

That the accounts of the historians committed to the Christian and colonial course have often been biased in favour of Europeans and the Church, may be due to the fact that in many cases the missionaries, and not African themselves, have usually provided the information used by these historians (9). On the other hand, there is a dearth of information on the internal factors responsible for the ready acceptance of Christianity in pre-missionized, pre-colonial and colonial Africa, because, as Geoffrey Parrinder has rightly observed, "remarkably little study has been made ... even today, of the reasons why Africans became Christians" (10). Indeed, whatever little information there is on this subject, is usually the by-product of research on some other aspect of society by some social or cultural anthropologist, or by a researcher in some other field of study.

Of the several social and psycho-religious factors in the African environment which facilitated the acceptance and spread of Christianity during the period under discussion, the following are analyzed here: (1) belief in the divine origin of power and rulership; (2) the desire for a larger community; (3) social and psycho-religious motives; and (4) love for mission-cum-colonial education.

II. Belief in the divine origin of power and rulership

It is common knowledge that in primal, undifferentiated societies religious beliefs and political ideologies belonged together in supplementary relationships. In these societies it was inconceivable to think of politics and religion as separate entities, as is done in modern, industrialized, differentiated, "secular" societies. Indeed, Classical political thinkers like Aristotle believed that religious homogeneity was crucial for political stability. Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889) who studied the Classical cities of Rome and Greece, came to the conclusion that the social and political foundations of these