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Brian Schmidt

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Christianity as a Double-Edged Sword in Colonial Africa

by
Brian Schmidt

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In his book, *The African Experience*, Vincent B. Khapoya defines imperialism as “the desire by European patriots to contribute to their country’s grandeur by laying claim to other countries in distant lands.”¹ Coming from a similar place of reasoning, Christianity also emphasizes the importance of proselytizing, not for the grandeur of one’s country but rather for one’s religion. It is written in the Bible that Jesus said to his followers: “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”² During the earlier periods of colonization in Africa, Christian missionaries were spreading through the continent along with explorers and merchants. Despite the fact that these missionaries were not officially sent out as agents of colonial governments, Christianity can be seen as a force of pacification that helped to enable colonization and the cultural assimilation of Africans. Over time, however, the people of Africa began to reject the version of Christianity being spoon-fed to them by Europeans, and instead began to see the religion as a tool for their own liberation from their colonial oppressors. The purpose of this paper is to explore the complicated role of Christianity within the history of Africa.

The “Scramble for Africa” began in 1880, when European nations rushed to acquire the most economically viable parts of the continent. Although many European nations were no strangers to the idea of colonization at this point, Sean Stillwell explains that a sudden increase in the practice was enabled by a new philosophy known as scientific racism. “According to this philosophy,” Stillwell writes, “it was possible to ‘scientifically’ rank the various human races in order from the most primitive to the most advanced. This ideology helped to justify European expansion by suggesting that the conquest of Africa was ordained by nature and science because

¹ Vincent B. Khapoya, *The African Experience: An Introduction* (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 1998) 101.

² “Matthew 28:9.” Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996.

Africans were, according to this ideology, inferior to Europeans.”³ This ideology, drenched in ethnocentrism, was apparent in the Europeans’ treatment of Africans, as colonial efforts were partially seen as an exercise in curing Africans of their primitiveness, and Christianity played a key role in their attempts to assimilate Africans to their presumably advanced ways of life while the African continent was being exploited for its resources.

African people and their ways of life were being suppressed on multiple fronts, while the language and mentality of the time enabled the Europeans to see their efforts as “civilizing missions.” Certain aspects of Christianity initially served to encourage a sense of passivity among the Africans, as the religion held high the virtues of forgiveness, submissiveness, and patience. Khapoya writes that “Humiliation and suffering, such as were being endured by Africans during colonialism, were thought to be ennobling and spiritually cleansing. The relationship between the missions and the colonial governments was truly a symbiotic one.”⁴ Khapoya alludes to the rather convenient aspects of Christianity that would encourage Africans not to worry about the insurmountable suffering and humiliation placed upon them by the colonial powers, that these aspects of life were actually beneficial to their standing in the eyes of God. Christianity played an important role in the colonization not necessarily of the African continent, but rather the hearts and minds of Africans, whose potential for revolt was seen as an obstacle to the imperial takeover of land and resources.

In Falola’s *Colonial Africa*, Joel E. Tishkin addresses the symbiotic relationship between colonial governments and Christian missionaries. He explains that those in favor of this view believe that “missionaries provided geographic and cultural information, weakened indigenous

³ Toyin Falola (ed.), *Africa, Volume Three: Colonial Africa, 1885-1939* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002) 5.

⁴ Khapoya 102-103.

states, undermined indigenous culture, and enforced colonial law,” while Christianity “came to represent the supernatural source of the white man’s power and assisted in delegitimizing indigenous sources of supernatural power such as kingship, chieftainship, and priesthood.”⁵ It is perhaps important to address the issue of intention here, because while missionaries surely helped to kick out the legs from under African civilization and thus weaken the notion of resistance, this was arguably an accidental result of their main purpose, which was to save the souls of Africans as was their perceived duty.

There were, however, missionaries who were aware that their efforts were more than spiritual in nature. Richard Gray tells of one missionary’s description of an ideal African convert: he “must ‘live in a permanent upright house, with a chimney in it’; he must no longer be befuddled by his hut’s smoky atmosphere or degraded by creeping into it; he must be ‘decently’ clothed, an individual ‘independent of everybody else.’”⁶ This is a clear example of one missionary’s intention to introduce Western ways of life to Africans, using language that clearly paints these ways as superior. Missionary groups, at the request of Africans, also offered educational programs. Gray notes that while these programs “often impart[ed] to many of its participants only a smattering of literacy, it was nevertheless summoning the youth, and sometimes the adults, of Africa towards a positive encounter with modernization.”⁷

This positive element was of course kept in check, however. While Africans were living under European administration and being taught Western religions and Western ways of life, they were still prohibited from the kind of mobility that would allow them to thrive within that system. At the heart of colonialism is the exploitation of land, and Africans themselves fit into

⁵ Khapoya 162-163.

⁶ Andrew Roberts, *The Colonial Moment in Africa: Essays on the movement of minds and materials, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 143.

⁷ Roberts 144.

that system. They were exploited for their land, their labor, and their money. They were denied basic rights and prohibited from trade or assembling unions.⁸ There may have been the collectively held notion that Christianity was the “supernatural” force enabling Europeans to achieve prominence in the world, but Africans were still being denied that prominence despite buying into it (or being forced into it). As a result, Africans who did not accept the “scientific superiority” of whites began to make their voices heard, and perhaps the best example to portray this shift is a man named John Chilembwe.

Chilembwe traveled to the United States with his mentor, an English missionary named Joseph Booth, where he was heavily influenced by Afro-American Baptist militants. He broke his partnership with Booth and returned to his native Nyasaland in 1901, where he formed the Providence Industrial Mission and began speaking out against the oppressive colonial establishment.⁹ He also collaborated with other European-educated Africans. Chilembwe’s life, “by example, suggested he believed himself every bit the equal of the Europeans, who increasingly found his presence suspicious.”¹⁰ Instead of focusing on the Christian virtues of passivity and asceticism, Chilembwe focused on its ideas of egalitarianism and used these as evidence against colonial powers for their inhumane (and un-Christian) treatment of Africans. By 1915, he had enough followers to be considered a small army, and in January of that year he gave a monumental speech in which he encouraged them to rise up in violent revolt against their oppressors, knowing full well it would lead to their deaths. Chilembwe was essentially asking his followers to sacrifice themselves in the hopes that European forces would fully realize their

⁸ Khapoya 125-134.

⁹ Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. (ed.), *The Horizon History of Africa* (American Heritage Publishing Co. Inc., 1971) 172.

¹⁰ F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (eds.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

mistreatment of Africans and change their ways. Chilembwe's instance that his followers seek no individual gain whatsoever is perhaps influenced by the characteristically African obligation toward the collective, while the fact that his mentality was strengthened by his religion alludes toward the new schema of Christianity taking shape.

Chilembwe's position within the framework of Christianity and the collision of two cultures is noteworthy because the religion was being used to embolden African resistance to colonial rule, rather than placate them toward it. It emphasized the importance of a specifically African nation, bolstered by a religion that Africans had taken and made their own. While Chilembwe is one of the earliest (and perhaps most extreme) examples portraying this shift in African beliefs, he was certainly not alone. Further explaining Africa's evolving relationship with colonialism and Christianity, Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote of the African's position within the culture being imparted by European missionaries: "Since Africans cannot share the ideals, interests, and full benefits of cooperative activities with the Whites, they naturally fall back on their own systems of belief, value and sentiment."¹¹ They did, however, bring key elements of Christianity and Western culture with them, resulting in a new kind of hybrid African culture. Slaves were freed, old gods were outlawed, bigamy was forbidden, Western medicine was in high demand, and houses were built to European designs; but Africans also retained certain cultural practices such as polygamy, funeral ceremonies, culinary traditions, and the use of magic by Christian priests. Welbourn explains that "individual groups have to make such adjustments as they can by selective rejection of the old and selective acceptance of

¹¹ F.B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels: A Study of Some Independent Churches* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961) 181.

the new – a process which of course also involves selective adherence to the old and rejection of the new.”¹²

As it could be argued that religion played an incidental, albeit significant, role in the disintegration of African culture and identity, it later played an equally significant role in its restoration. Most of the African leaders springing up within the continent were products of missionary education. In 1912, for example, African pastors in South Africa organized a nationwide political movement to address racist legislation by the colonial government. African religious leaders in Kenya opened schools that were openly political and vocal about their grievances with imperial rule.¹³ The Christian notion that all people were equal, as taught to Africans by missionaries who largely did not practice what they preached, was a light shined on the hypocrisy of the colonial system, and it could be used as philosophical ammunition against such an establishment. In this context, it could be argued that this new form of Christianity now served the Africans better than their indigenous spirituality – both socially and individually.

G.C. Oosthuizen wrote:

In the African Independent Churches the individual has greater scope for development in that he is concerned about his/her own progress. The old fatalism and traditional hierarchical structure have been overcome to a certain extent...According to the traditional worldview nature cannot be controlled, but in the African Independent Churches they believe it is possible...The standard of living as well as health conditions for many African Independent Church members improved...Their emphasis is on a simple life and a definite democracy in sharing...The income of these Churches is largely used to assist needy fellow members. A healthy social and moral instinct reigns...¹⁴

Christianity as taught by the European missionaries enabled colonial rule, coincidentally or not, by encouraging passivity among the Africans. Africans had previously used traditional

¹² Welbourn 182

¹³ Khapoya 146

¹⁴ G.C. Oosthuizen and Irving Hexham (eds.), *Empirical Studies of African Independent/Indigenous Churches* (Lewiston, UK: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992) 303.

indigenous spirituality to invoke the powers of oracles, spirit mediums, or magic to combat colonial oppression. In Tanzania, for example, a priestess concocted a medicinal potion that was meant to turn German bullets into water during the Maji Maji Rebellion. Needless to say, things did not go as planned.¹⁵ This new version of Christianity, however, rather ingeniously coopted by the Africans, was being utilized toward effective change. It helped lay the groundwork toward African nationalism, unification, and personal empowerment. Within this specific framework, they were able to see themselves as in control of their place within the world as they lived. Christianity was not the only factor that led to the eventual decolonization of Africa, as there were many political issues swirling that led to such a development, but it could be argued that the religion provided legs to stand on, as well as much needed spiritual nourishment, for the resistance.

It is of course easy to look back on the European usurpation of a continent and declare it an altogether *bad* thing. It is now, in the twenty-first century, easy to see the rather imperialistic mindset of Christian missionaries, one intent on saving the souls of poor hapless Africans from their animalistic ways while simultaneously obliterating their sense of cultural identity and minimalizing any sense of worth, as inherently racist and a prime example of ethnocentrism. From a more humanitarian view, there are so many negative aspects to the story of the rather complicated relationship between Africa, its colonial governments, and the religion of Christianity. But perhaps what is most notable about this story is the *resilience* of the African people; how they were, as a people, forcibly subjugated and broken, yet they still managed to take the sword from the hands of Europeans and use it carve a path toward their own liberation, preserving the strengths of their culture while creating a distinctly new identity for themselves.

¹⁵ Falola 42

They were able to turn their unbearable situation, one in which John Chilembwe saw a mass suicide mission as the only resort toward change, into one that benefited Africans collectively. Khapoya argues that the African spiritual heritage, perpetually centered around rituals to pacify or supplicate the spirit world, may have stunted the development of rational thought and science. He goes on to say that modern Christianity liberated the African from this increasingly fatalistic cycle by placing an emphasis on individual salvation. While Khapoya states that the language of individual salvation within Christianity “undermined the collective ethos and the social fabric of the African traditional community,” it could also be argued that these specifically African threads were woven into the tapestry of the new Christianity that evolved in response to European colonial rule, as religious organizations “created a new basis for Africans to come together and assist one another as they had traditionally done.”¹⁶

Christianity was undoubtedly an important factor in the colonial takeover of Africa, and it later proved to be an equally important instrument of resistance. Africans were given a means to spiritual salvation that was pregnant with ideas of European superiority, and then turned those ideas into a system of beliefs that is perhaps closer to the intended purposes of the religion itself – a Christianity that, in 1969, the pope referred to as “genuinely African.”¹⁷ While it has been debated that the European missionaries were bedfellows with colonial governments of the region, it is hard to argue against their eventual positive, if perhaps not entirely intentional, impact on the people of Africa. The missionaries planted the seed, and the Africans took the fruit from that tree in order to plant an orchard of their own, one in which they could regain stability and form new identities for themselves in order to achieve their independence.

¹⁶ Khapoya 136

¹⁷ Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press Inc., 2007) 291.

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