

# Chapter One

## Introduction:

### The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography

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#### I. CHRISTIAN ROOTS IN AFRICAN PRIMAL RELIGION

Darkness has hit Africa at noon. As Henri Marou would say, the historian is a “missionary dispatched to the past to strike a hyphen between the past and the present.” The Igbo people have a proverb that says that a man who does not know where the rain met him is unlikely to know where he is going. There is no brand of African scholarship that can be done in our times without a concern to explore the dilemma and seek a solution for our continent’s condition. This is what Eduardo Hooanert calls, “re-animating the memory of Christian communities so that it defines their social consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> History could be a certain type of memory that evokes liberative power; not mere knowledge of the past but one that is commitment. It should lead people to the truth of their condition in a scientific manner, not violated by cant or propaganda.

Therefore, in every enterprise, the historian must ask afresh, why do I write, for whom and for what purpose? Commentators have characterized Africa as a laboratory in which new dimensions of Christianity are being explored amidst life-threatening conditions and among ancient peoples and cultures. The soil has the same texture as Jesus walked on; so, his message pulsates with vivid reality in technicolor. The responses of Africans must

<sup>1</sup> E. HOORNAERT, *The Memory of the Christian People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 9.

have serious import for World Christianity. Significant in this regard are the shifts in contemporary church historiography designed to interpret the events more clearly and to enable the church in Africa to critique her faithfulness in witness. Some say that Christianity in Africa is like a river that is broad but shallow. Internal criticism (*metanoia*) is of the essence of the Christian race because sanctification is a process but it must be acknowledged that some of the criticisms are rooted in an old racist bias that equally calls for repentance. Here, we shall focus on only four key concerns in modern African church historiography: first, the continuity of African primal religion in African Christianity; second, a strong theological and Christocentric understanding of the church and its story; third, a shift from missionary and nationalist genre to ecumenical historiography; and fourth, the emergence of theology of political engagement which postures the life and ministry of the church as mission-to-culture or “baptizing the nations”. The memory of the people of God could become a tool for engaging the public space.

The importance of doing church history which starts with African primal religion and culture is that both the church and her enemies, namely, the politicians and other religious forms, derive their character and source, their idiom from the interior of African worldview. For instance, the dominant political culture is often a deliberate attempt to weave the modern state into traditional ethics of power; however, often done in a manner to vitiate the salient aspects of the traditional. The dominant theory of obligation is rooted in traditional values. This is why rulers in Africa act as chiefs and wield symbols such as the fly whisk, the leopard skin and the “big man’s” walking stick. The effort is a form of villagization, the transfer of patriarchal ethics from the village to the town and to the modern state, a deliberate manipulation of public space in the quest for legitimacy. African rulers deliberately create two publics so as to escape the accountability that the modern state demands. Other religious forms, in their symbols, invented histories, goals and demands on the state, radicate themselves in primal culture.

This means that we should explore how African Christianity is essentially rooted in primal religion, whose cults are manipulated to sustain the contest for the dwindling resources of the modern states. It can best be understood within the strand that explores the endurance of primal religion in the forms of Christian allegiance. Some brands of African Christianity have shown a creative response to the deep-level challenges of our environment by applying the spiritual resources of biblical theology that the missionaries muted. Working within African maps of the universe, they have shown how the biblical promises could serve as tools of hope. They

have exploited the elasticity in African worldview, its capacity to make room, within its inherited body of traditions for new realities, which though seemingly from outside, comes in to fulfill aspirations within the tradition. Kwame Bediako says that this is what Paul did with Jewish tradition in the letter to the Hebrews, providing a conceptual scheme for interpreting African Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Bediako has stepped on a creeping plant that is entangled with much of African church historiography, namely, the specific identity, or the “Africanness” of our Christianity within the African worldview. During the Edinburgh-Yale seminar in 1992, Andrew Walls, a doyen of African Church History, observed that in the history of religions:<sup>3</sup>

“African Christianity appears in two capacities: first, as a new period in the history of African religion, continuing the story begun in the primal or traditional religions; and the second, as a new period in the history of Christianity, in which the tradition is being expressed in intellectual, social and religious milieus which it has not previously entered.”

He compares this to the relationship between early Christianity and the religion of old Israel. Thus, in doing modern church history, the concerns, agenda and the responses of people to the gospel can best be traced through the reordering of worldview and the introduction of new symbols and sources.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Walls could easily have pulled together a dozen or varieties of the argument from existing literature even though the proponents were pursuing other interests. For instance, right from the beginning of the nineteenth century missionary enterprise, a certain consistent and encrusted paradigm in African historiography emerged accusing missionaries of failing to weave their message into the primal worldview. It portrayed missionaries as “imperialists at prayer”. E.A. Ayandele castigates them as “pathfinders for colonial boots” and A.E. Afigbo, in *Ropes of Sand*, intones that “it was not one of the aims of the colonialists to preserve the cultural

<sup>2</sup> Kwame BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> A.F. WALLS & C. FYFE, *Christianity in Africa in the 1990's* (Edinburgh: Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1996), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

identity of subject peoples. In fact, the opposite was the case.”<sup>5</sup> John Ngugi in his novel, *The River Between*, paints Christianity as a dysfunctional, iconoclastic force that disrupted communities and robbed people of their self-identity. From here, it was a short step to ridicule indigenous collaborators. Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson* calls them “Black Englishmen”, and the film version is indeed a painful career of a schizophrenic buffoon who was used and dropped by those whose magic circle he sought in an illusionary quest. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel laureate, caricatures them as interpreters who watched white men from the periphery and endeavored to mimic what they saw in their home communities. The chorus of the historians and novelists hark to a strain heard among the “Ethiopian” nationalists of the nineteenth century who felt that missionary Christianity was struggling too vigorously to install a pre-packaged hardware of Enlightenment agenda that would destroy the indigenous African religion and culture.

It consisted of a dualistic mind-set, scientific racism and the verdicts of arm-chair theorists who disengaged the dreamy origins of primitive religion from Christianity. It was decorated with ethnocentrism and hubris. The nationalists saw their task as calling for an indigenized alternative. They had heard the priests of many shrines announcing godly whispers of new covenants and warning that people should eat with prospective visitors with long spoons. Indigenization was a call for continuity in change, rooting Christianity in the soil of Africa. Kofi Awoonor, in his poem, *Easter Dawn* sang of the discomfiture which the guardians of the ancestral calabash feared:<sup>6</sup>

“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 clayey tears on calico, the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan and the fetish priest is dressing up for the Easter Service.”

Of course, the missionary enterprise was not that successful but white power and cultural iconoclasm constituted an enduring theme in church historiography. Cross-cultural mission as civilization project created a bad

<sup>5</sup> A.E. AFIGBO, *Ropes of Sand* (Lagos: Oxford University Press, 1981), 384; E.A. AYANDELE, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914, A Political Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> In Ullier BEIER, *Modern Poetry from Africa* (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

press for the gospel and may have emasculated the full impact. This fact stands at the backdrop of African charismatic agency and response to missionary Christianity.

A variation of the diatribe on the collusion between the commissar, trader and missionary focused on the jaundiced perception of African traditional religion. E.B. Idowu<sup>7</sup> catalogued the inappropriate terms used in western literatures of various genres to the extent that a reviewer accused him of quarrelling with dead men. But Idowu was a child of the cultural renaissance that came at the heels of political nationalism and raised the question about the role of primal religion and culture in Christian living. Perhaps, this is because culture stands at the gates, market squares and gable ends of each community. As a new religion comes, the tensile strength of the culture of the people may determine the prospects. The relationship between religion and ecology is extensive and ecology could be geographical, human and cultural. Idowu was concerned that the purveyors of change paid scant and unstudied attention to primal spirituality, declaring it to be mumbo-jumbo. This attitude made Christianity a foreign religion or as D.I. Nwoga dubbed it, *Supreme God as a Stranger*.<sup>8</sup>

Some apologists rose in defense to argue that Africans had the knowledge of God before the missionaries came. They utilized the Greek concept, *spermatikos logos* precisely because they were educated in missionary schools. Okot p'bitek cried foul against the hellenization African primal religion. But John Mbiti ignored the red flag and prospected with the concept of *praeparatio evangelica*, arguing that:<sup>9</sup>

“We can add nothing to the Gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings.”

The incarnational nature of the gospel provided African theologians with much food for thought through many years because culture loomed large in the enterprise. Soon, Roman Catholic theologians shifted the terminology to inculturation arguing that the discussion should go beyond

<sup>7</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SPCK, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> D.I. NWOGA, *Supreme God as a Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought* (Ekwereazu in Imo State, Nigeria: Hawk Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> J.S. MBITI, “Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa”, in *International Rev. of Missions*, 59, 236, 1970, 430-441.

the initial insertion of the gospel into cultures and deal with making the gospel “a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture; transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation.”<sup>10</sup> Even in biblical studies, scholars such as Kwesi Dickson, the out-going moderator of the Methodist Church in Ghana, sought to establish the kindred spirit between the Old Testament world and the African.<sup>11</sup> The elements of continuity not only served to restore the bashed image of the African but pointed to evangelical models. The most thorough and extant work is Kwame Bediako’s *Theology and Identity: The impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*. He essentially urges a shift from a paradigm that conceives Christianity and African primal religion as the correlation of two entities thought to be independent.

It would appear so in the Christianity written by intellectuals. But living faith, in real-life situations and in field experience, operates differently. In the very process of indigenous assimilation, the decoders weave a new pattern following the lines of congruence, making their religious experience an organic, unified one. This is reciprocity that enables us to study the fate of the gospel in a community from the perspective of the receiver—the decoders of the message. Attention should therefore, turn of from the mode of *transmission* towards the mode of *assimilation* or *appropriation*. However, the fact that many Africans bore the brunt of evangelization meant that, quite often, the pursuit of elements of continuity was an ongoing task. In *Christianity in Africa*, Dickson sets out to show the prospects and adequacy of the faith for the realities of African life: to root it by claiming for it a past in the spiritual harvest of African pre-Christian religious heritage.<sup>12</sup>

Lamin Sanneh’s seminal contribution explores the irony that the missionaries were forced by the logic or exigencies of the mission field to realize the debilitating effect of iconoclasm and turn to translating the message. Translation of de-stigmatized indigenous languages and cultures as proper vehicles for conveying the gospel, opened the innards of cultures, preserved them from extinction and became an instrument of uplifting many people.<sup>13</sup> Whenever the name of God was rendered in an indigenous

<sup>10</sup> Aylward SHORTER, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Kwesi DICKSON, *Theology in Africa*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Kwame BEDIAKO, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Press, 1992); BEDIAKO, *Christianity in Africa*, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Lamin SANNEH, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

tongue, the Almighty was brought into the centre of the people's lives and woven into their pre-Christian past. Translation was a potent evangelical tool. Thus, the pursuit of the strands of continuity has always been a response to the exigencies of the field, of power encounter, a realization that certain kinds of iconoclasm can be self-defeating even as an evangelical tool. It was more than these, because, translation introduced new aspects to African Christianity by buttressing certain elements in African religious experience which the Enlightenment had forced missionaries to abandon. For instance, Africans saw that there is biblical support for revelatory phenomena such as dreams and visions and prophetic utterances. They discovered the possibilities of new modes of church polity; the ethics in Leviticus underpinned their precarious vision of the universe. Christianity may have introduced the figure of Jesus obtrusively but the enlargement of the God component of their cosmology came to their aid. Translation raised the issue of discontinuity by providing exits that will be pursued later.

These factors became clearer in the implosion of the spirituality of African indigenous churches: their re-constructive, pneumatic challenge to mainline churches tapped the vibrancy of primal African spirituality, substituted black for white power in church matters and incorporated ingredients of African culture in polity, liturgy, ethics and doctrine. The literature has burgeoned to the point of romanticization in spite of the fact that some of these are not Christian. As Andrew Walls would say:<sup>14</sup>

“The effectiveness of Christian faith, or of any particular manifestation of it, is accordingly open to the test whether it gives access to power and prosperity for protection against natural or spiritual enemies, purposes to which much traditional practice was directed, and satisfactorily enforces familial and social unity.”

It was the career of Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo (Lusaka, Zambia) that brought this pursuit of spiritual continuity into the ambits of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. It touched off a furor characterized by the writings of Aylward Shorter. Happily, scholars such as Adrian Hastings and M.L. Daneel rose to interpret Milingo with more nuance.<sup>15</sup> The pursuit

<sup>14</sup> A.F. WALLS, *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> A. SHORTER, *Jesus and the Witch Doctor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); A. HASTINGS, *African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery*, (London: SCM Press, 1989); M.L. DANEEL, “Exorcism as a Means of Combating Wizardry”, in *Missionalia*, 18, 1 1990, 220-247.

of continuity, not only raised the discussion on exorcism or deliverance but introduced another conceptual scheme, namely, the covenantal idea in African church history and theology. This postures the relationships between Africans and their gods as binding covenants; rituals and festivals become re-energizing sacred moments. This explains why the spirits that guard the gates of communities have remained unconquered, creating a dilemma and calling for a revisit to inculturation theology.<sup>16</sup>

Covenants can only be reversed by recognizing their existence, potent reality, character and appropriate rituals of disengagement. They are legally binding and may not be simply wished away without due processes. The net effect of all these has been a new method of studying African Traditional Religion, no longer as fossilized or exotic religion but as a living faith to be taken seriously. It contains both elements that proffer abundant life as well as those which threaten life. This is what Laurenti Magesa has argued recently in his, *African Religion: The Moral Foundations of Abundant Life*.<sup>17</sup>

Christianization process must take cognizance of the element of continuity in the religious lives of Africans instead of banding everything under the umbrage of syncretism. Undoubtedly a dirty epithet, the word began life in the search for an appropriate quality of the mix—the enduring problem of Christ and Culture.<sup>18</sup> Africa is currently boiling with much religious ferment. In summary, these dozen strands have informed the theology, character and witness of African Christianity. They give a peculiar flavor as she seeks to share the gospel with power amidst the pulsating problems of the ecosystem. Modern African church historiography is buttressed in the efforts by African Christians of various hues, scholars, novelists and political nationalists to interpret the gospel from their meaning system. Admittedly, some of these efforts arose from antagonism and others from an anti-structural intention to install a different but more kerygmatic Christianity than missionaries envisaged.

<sup>16</sup> O.U. KALU, “The Dilemma of Grassroot Inculturation of the Gospel, in *Jnl. of Religion in Africa*, 25, 1995, 48-72.

<sup>17</sup> L. MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Foundations of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> O.U. KALU, “Gospel, Culture and Mission: Revisiting an Enduring Problem”, in *Skrif en Kerk*, 19, 2, 1998, 283-300.

## II. WHAT IS CHURCH HISTORY?

### THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The type of church history which one writes is a function on the definition of the church. For instance, *edha* in Hebrew and *kuriakon* in Greek refer frequently to the assemblage; that is, the institution of assembling. But *qahal* and *ekklesia* move beyond the institutional perception to those people who have assembled. It is people-sensitive. The Greek, *ekklesia* speaks of those who have been called out of the world into the kingdom. The world, *kosmos* has three meanings including the world order, worldly goods, endowments, riches, pleasures and allurements (*kosmetikos*) which seduce from God. Thus, behind the classical idea of *kosmos* as orderly arrangement, is a mind behind the system, a world system established after the fall by a *kosmokrator*, a world ruler, the prince of this world, in rebellion. Friendship with him is enmity with Christ. The church, therefore, is a special people of God, a pilgrim people with a mission. Mark 3:13-15 spells out why they are called: (i) to be companions of Christ; (ii) to hear and preach the good news which will be (iii) confirmed with signs and wonders, confrontation with the forces of darkness. These could be poverty, corrupt ethics of power, false religiosity, social marginalization or environmental degradation. The church's task is to bring the gospel to bear on all the things which concern the well-being of the human person and carry a spiritual warfare against forces which deface. This theological context for political engagement must be clearly stated because those who go to war without clear commitment lose. It also informs how to do church history in an African context.

Within this perspective, mission is imaged as the mustard seed. It is sensitive, fragile and challenged by strong forces. But it is a divine mission with assured victory. Vertically, the fragile seed will shoot out branches; these quantitative indices of growth are measured by computing the number of parishes, priests, baptized, communicants and so on. Horizontally, the roots will spread, nurtured by the soil of the community and yet will affirm and challenge the "soil of communities", that is, their cultures, values and allegiances and all the things that constitute the identities of the communities. The primal worldview, core values and allegiances will be tested as the gospel spreads out her roots and as Christian values are domesticated.

Church history is a different genre of history with a distinctive goal, a theological meaning and deep concern for people. Institutions remain important organizational vessels; but must be seen as being made for

people. It is an orientation that tells the story of how laughter is being banished in Africa by predatory politicians. It confronts these “possessed” agents of a *kosmokrator* with the festival of a new life in Christ. To do this type of thing would require (a) a clarification of the nature of the enterprise and a shift to an ecumenical posture which triumphs over crass forms of vested confessional interests. At issue are deep questions of fundamental intellectual clarity and methodological identity. What are the values, presuppositions and basic orientations that have consciously or unconsciously shaped the prevalent methods and theories in the study of church history? It is both a question of what the discipline is and how it is to be done.

Recently, the history of religion has gone through the in-house criticism with one side struggling to discount the supernatural dimensions of life and concentrate on the natural and real. If one were to discount religious experience and concentrate on religious expression would that constitute an accurate history of a lived faith? Others would pool all canons in one basket and give them equal rating and employ a scientific inquiry that would avoid concern for the quality of what people believe. This “hermeneutics of suspicion” could serve the study of comparative religions but would be unhealthy for Christian history. The dominance of social sciences that originated and still maintain the atheistic roots has become a problem for church history. There is a crisis of identity that is not solved by ignoring it.

Let us begin with clarifications; for instance, what is church history? The question is complex, partly because of the differing understandings of what history is. History could be understood as the record of the past; both the distant and contemporary past. In ancient times this view produced chronology or the recording of events against time-frames when they occurred. But it was soon recognized that facts were not necessarily history. A story must be told and, as literary historians such as Trevelyan insist, the story must be told in a fascinating, entertaining and educative manner. In the nineteenth century, German idealists formulated the idea of history as a scientific reconstruction of what happened (Lat. *res gestae*), a task performed with intense archival research. This perspective also was flawed not only because it assumed that all historical facts existed in written records but because it pretended that all historical facts could be accessible to the practitioner. Much to the contrary, historical facts are fragmentary. They can be likened to the story of Humpty-Dumpty who sat on a wall, fell down, and broke into pieces. All the kings men could not put Humpty-Dumpty together again. They each built their own versions, because some pieces were irretrievably lost. The historian, as a detective,

works from fragments to reconstruct the past for the benefit of the present and future. Even Ranke could not follow his own precept but became the most vigorous propagandist for the Prussian monarchy.

Two elements dominate the writing of history: the historian who is performing the task and his interpretation. Thus, E.H. Carr in *What is History?*<sup>19</sup> admonishes readers to know about authors' backgrounds. As Rudolf Bultmann asserted at the close of his Gifford Lectures:<sup>20</sup>

“Always in your present lies the meaning in history and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions.”

All histories are written from an interpretative perspective. Some have, therefore, drawn a distinction between history representing the idealist posture and history as a more realistic acceptance of the practitioner's subjective involvement. Does this make historical writings relative? Not necessarily. There are rules of evidence by which the validity and quantity of data can be judged exegetically. Exposed biases can be accepted and critically tested by moral standards. Moral judgment in history is a problem to the extent that making such a judgment is not invalid. Trevor-Roper could dub a Stuart Bishop, Montaigne, a canary-eating, honey-sucking prelate. Ayandele could study missionary enterprises in modern Nigeria only in terms of their impact on traditional societies and portray them as pathfinders for imperialists. History can, from this perspective, be an ideology used for various purposes to legitimize, govern, dominate, oppress, liberate, or predict the trends of the future.

In his inaugural lecture, “History and Society”, B. Olatunji Oloruntimehin emphasized the ideological and purposeful use of history in African societies. History was used to relate the past to the present and future in all aspects of life. History was not just a record and interpretation of the past but was lived and felt. The griots among the Mande or the arokin among the Oyo, Yoruba had a very ideological perception of history. History was a means of transmitting and preserving culture, an instrument for organizing and interpreting collective and individual experiences so as to provide understanding of the present and a guide for the future. It was a means of providing political education and leadership

<sup>19</sup> E.H. CARR, *What is History?* (London: Penguin Books, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in John W. MONTGOMERY, *Where is History Going? A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1970 ed.), 199.

elites. History served as a means of promoting understanding and respect for the institutions and practices of the community. The court historians combined oratory with historical expertise and would have won the applause of a Trevelyan.<sup>21</sup> But their goals determined their bias.

The question of bias becomes much clearer when we deal with different branches of history, for instance, church history. The adjective constricts as much as it creates complications.

The first complication relates to the many images of the church. There are over 96 in the New Testament covering a wide range of metaphors drawn from the physical structure of the human body, from the mineral world, the animal world, the vegetable world, and the world of nature. Beyond the biblical images are the myriad denominations. The ecclesiological map looks like the shell of a tortoise!

A third problem arises from the particularistic, unique claims of Christianity. Does the pursuit of faith imperatives clash with the need for the objective, irenic, scientific practice of history? Montgomery<sup>22</sup> argues that the way the term history is used betrays the fact that the Christian faith imposes a certain perspective on interpreting history. It imposes a certain underlying meaning which forces theological perception of historical events. Its time-frame, for instance, links the “here-and-now” period to the “not-yet” period and thereby subjects the former to the latter. It subjects our understanding of the past to the ultimate reason for creation as well as the future of creation. It is in this undergirding conceptual scheme where the difference between church history and other genres of history can be found. Church history interprets facts from an understanding of what God was doing in Jesus in each peculiar environment or ecosystem.

T. McIntire has, therefore, avoided the term church history for Christian history. He argues that Christian understanding of history has existed for a long time and:<sup>23</sup>

“Radically transformed the conception of history and historical reality which prevailed in the Greek and Roman worlds. The writings and Christian perspectives of Sextus Julius Africanus, Eusebius of Caesaria, Orosius, and Augustine provided alternatives to classical pagan views of Polybius, Plutarch and

<sup>21</sup> B.O. OLORUNTIMEHIN, “History and Society”, in *Inaugural Lecture Series*, 18 (Ile-Ife: University of Ife, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> MONTGOMERY, *Where is History Going?*, 187.

<sup>23</sup> C.T. MCINTIRE, *The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography* (Toronto: Institute of Christian Studies, 1974), 7.

Livy.”

He demonstrates how the legacy and contributions of Christian historiography are within the central concepts of historical time; periodisation; history as a process; historical universality; historical contextuality; human-beings as the makers and creators of history; and the coherence and meaningfulness of historical reality. He argues that the notion of church history as the study of churches was a nineteenth century phenomenon paralleling the “schism between Christianity and the predominant patterns of Western culture. Christianity increasingly came to be associated primarily with churches while most of the rest of culture came to be regarded as essentially secular and properly unaffected by Christian motives.”<sup>24</sup>

Christian historiography is a means of showing the unique Christian perception of reality:<sup>25</sup>

“[It] refers not simply to history written by Christians, nor to historical studies of the church and theology but to a historiography which itself examines the histories of peoples, societal structures and institutions, ideas, things mores and patterns of life, according to the sort of insights and values provided by a Christian view of man, society, norms, history, the world and the whole of created reality...Christian historiography involved self-conscious reflection on foundational things in order that the vocation of Christian histories may more readily be transformed by the motivation of the Gospel and that the product of their labors may carry implicitly the marks of the Gospel.”

McIntire’s views are a good take-off point and critique of a number of conceptual schemes or goals in church historiography: the first is the institutional approach. This view assumes that church history begins when missionary X arrives in a community, sets up shop and builds up a congregation or a church. From that point, church history reconstructs the vertical and horizontal growths of the institution, the pattern of responses and the impact of the change-agent on the community.

A number of problems arise from the institutional understanding of church history: It reinforces the notion of church history as an extension of salvation history (*heilsgeschichte*). The church is portrayed as the custodian

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

of saving grace. This is a short step from the exclusivist clause: “extra ecclesiam nulla salus est” (there is no salvation outside the church). The church is idealized, and a dichotomy is created between the institution and the people. The idealized entity now serves as the spiritual ally of the sword-wielding state. Church history may even derail into civilization history. Thus the pioneering enterprise of 1841 to the Niger River was dubbed a “Civilizing Mission of 1841.” Fowell Buxton’s *African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* urges this close relationship in the quest for Glory, Gold and God.

A worse effect of the institutional approach is its support for denominationalism. Many contemporary parish histories are forms of denominational propaganda. They make it difficult for Africans to see themselves as Africans instead of products of warring confessional groups in Europe. Official histories that must win an official nod before publication are the least likely to be critical and inspiring to Africans.

Rather, the institutional approach to church history imprints the image of God as a stranger to the Africans’ world. The argument is that the gospel cannot be indigenous to Africa in the true meaning of the word because the arrival of the missionaries could be dated. So, the gospel is imported. Nationalists, therefore, perceive the church as the hand-maid of disruptive foreign agents. This position has been strengthened by the exposure of the sad history of church co-operation with oppressive regimes. We must be recalled to Livingstone’s assertion: “Already Africa is God’s. God did not wait for me to bring Him. I found Him in every village.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the institutional approach to church history diverges from the biblical images of the church. The biblical images pay more attention to a people who have discovered something precious and are joyfully sharing, proclaiming and publishing the good news. They are the people of God, the body of Christ, a band of pilgrims, a leavening yeast, salt of the earth, a light on the hill. These images purvey openness, dynamism, uncluttered and unsequestered existence, uncluttered with pomp and hierarchy. Indeed, they suggest a non-institutional, critical, prophetic voice. The church’s

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hoger B. HANSEN, *Mission, Church and State in a Colonial Setting: Uganda, 1890-1925* (London: Heinemann, 1984). The dichotomy and its effect has been tackled by a research group in France led by Jean Delumeau in the series entitled, *History as Lived by the Christian People*. Their inspiration comes from the *Annals* tradition founded by March Bloch and Lucien Febvre. See, Francesco CHIOVARO, “History as Lived by the Christian People” in L. VISCHER (ed), *Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective*, Papers and Reports of an International Ecumenical Consultation, Basle, 12-17 October 1981.

*raison d'être* is to bring salvation to the poor. Within this perspective, church history is about the understanding to God's activity among the poor and their responses to the presence of the Kingdom in their midst. It is a people's history of their perception of God's saving grace in the midst of their struggles for survival. But the church is not for the materially poor only. It may be as difficult to win over a rich man as it is to pass a camel through the eye of a needle, but it is clear that the exercise of power affects both the wielder and the victim. The definition of the term poor (Gk. *ptokhois*, Heb. *hanavim*) must include the poor in spirit who may nonetheless be rich in material things or in power. The church is the whole people of God and church history is the past of the whole people, the powerful as well as the marginalized.

Very close to the institutional approach is a genre dubbed *missionary historiography*.<sup>27</sup> This refers to histories of missions written by missionaries and their protégés. These accounts are usually suffused with missionary ideology, based on missionary sources—archival and personal recollection—and designed to tell the story of how a particular missionary or a group crossed the culture barriers with the gospel. They detail the labors of nurturing the message and the level of success. The ulterior motives might be to preserve and record, boost morale and material support, provide entertainment or build up the ego of the author. The motivation may also be evangelical or the work may carry the hidden agenda of showing how Europeans have borne the White Man's Burden that Manifest Destiny laid on them. Missionary ideology tended to share the scientific racism of the nineteenth century. Thus, missionary historiography is often hagiographic, triumphalist and disdainful of indigenous non-European cultures. As Peter Foster put it, a premium was upon distortion and degradation of receiving cultures.<sup>28</sup>

There are at least seven categories of missionary historiography mostly distinguished by who wrote and why:

- Histories of missions written by someone who is still serving;

<sup>27</sup> See, O.U. KALU, "Over a Century of Christian Presence in Africa: A Historical Perspective", in *Bulletin de Theologie Africaine*, 1, 1 (January-June, 1979), 112-126; See also ch. 1 of Robert W. STRAYER, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> P.D. CURTIN, "Scientific Racism and British Theory of Empire", in *Journ. of the Hist. Soc. of Nigeria, (JHSN)*, 2,1, 1969, 40-51; Peter FOSTER, "Missionaries and Anthropology: the case of the Scots of Northern Malawi", in *Journ. of Rel. in Africa*, 16, 2, 1986, 102.

- Recollections of a past officer either autobiographical or about a whole period;
- Histories of an individual or a mission written by a non-participant e.g. Livingstone on Slessor, Jordan on Shanahan, Kendall on Charles New;
- General histories of missions e.g. by Lautorette, Stephen Neill, Adolf Harnack, C.P. Groves, Morehouse, Roland Oliver, Max Warren;
- Official histories especially of denominations e.g. Eugene Stock, Hewitt Gordon, Bartel on Ghana Methodism;
- Historical accounts by the protégés of missionaries or “literature of tutelage”;
- Scholarly works which are unaware of the undergirding missionary ideology.<sup>29</sup>

This last category may appear to have some critical approach but in fact tells the story of missions with the focus on the institution. These can be written by whites as well as Africans. They are the staple diet of bad church history curricula.

The propagandist value of the first category seems obvious. Some missionaries took the cue from government officials who were encouraged to write. Works under the second category are usually full of anecdotes, for instance, *The River Highway* by the Scottish Presbyterian J.A.T. Beattie or *Pilgrim with a Limp* by the Apostolic Church Welshman Idris Vaughan, or *Ibo Opening* by the indomitable Primitive Methodist, William Dodds. Hagiography predominates in the third category especially when compared to the critical biographies such as Murray Steele’s on Arthur Shelley Cripps or John Weller’s on Alston May, Bishop of Northern Rhodesia.<sup>30</sup>

The broad sweep, scholarship and even commitment in works under the fourth category have blinded some to the undergirding conceptual schemes. Recently, it has become fashionable to point out that these works ignored the roles of the African agents. A number of church historians

<sup>29</sup> Vestiges of Missionary Mentality are as persistent as colonial mentality. See, Thomas O’TOOLE, “The Persistence of Colonial Thinking in African Historiography” in *UFAHAMU* (California), 7,2, 1977, 43-52; P. TURNER, “The Wisdom of the Fathers and the Gospel of Christ”, in *JRA*, 4, 1, 1971, 45-68.

<sup>30</sup> (i) These are discussed in O.U. KALU, *Embattled Gods, Christianization of Igboland, 1841-1991* (Trenton: World Press, 1996), ch. 1; (ii) They are discussed in Part II of T.O. RANGER & John WELLER (eds), *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

have, therefore, set out to fill the gaps: Ajayi, Ayandele, Isichei (Nigeria), Jenkins and Odamtten (Ghana), Temu and Nthamburi (Kenya), Tuma and Waliggo (Uganda), Ranger, Byzavaire, Maxwell (central Africa) and others. Concern for unsung “native agents” and cultural revivalism are predominant motifs of nationalist historiography especially.

There is a minor debate on the categorization of “native agents”. Some would exclude the West Indians and Black Americans, Liberians and Saro people—who pioneered the spread of Christianity either by direct emigration from the West Indies and North America or through Sierra Leone (Saros) and Liberia. This would be a pity. They themselves subscribed to the battle cry that “Africa must be evangelized by Africans” and made immense contributions, as Jean Herskovitz has shown in *A Preface Modern Nigeria* and Okon Uya in the study of the career of Alexander Crummell and Lamin Sanneh in his *Abolitionists Abroad*. A broad cross-section of native agents includes:

- i. Noble patrons, men of local prominence who on their own initiative invited and patronized missionaries.
- ii. Interpreters and wards that influenced expansion.
- iii. Converts, including traders, migrant workers, acting in groups or individually to use their social powers in aid of missions.
- iv. Catechists, evangelists, church elders and school teachers, who bore the brunt of running new parishes; poorly-paid and poorly-trained, they constituted an important cog in the wheel.
- v. Congregations that pioneered expansion through evangelical crusades to neighboring areas and paid for the upkeep of ministers.
- vi. Local communities that built and maintained church and school infrastructures.
- vii. Charismatic, prophet figures that quickened the pace of Christianization in their brief careers.

The irony in nationalist historiography is that while condemning missionaries, the authors fail to see that their own people, the Africans, were the real agents who spread Christianity. Many of these agents would have worn Frantz Fanon’s label, “Black Skin White Mask” with much pride.

The real problem lies in the seventh category occupied by writers who should have benefited from the changing vistas of historiography. Many betray a lack of concern with methodology and secular history. Thus, with eyes closely fixed on archival sources, they pose non-relevant, non-creative

questions and fail to relate the history of the church to the secular political, economic and social realities of the day. It is as if church history operated in a closed plane with no underlying meaning and lesson.

Indeed, novelists and sociologists have made more contributions than historians in redressing the sad situations. The Heinemann-based African Writers Series has a number of novels which have focused on the religious change agent in the encounter between Europeans and Africans: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and *Arrow of God* (1964), Mongo Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba*, Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965), Munonye's *The Only Son* (1966), Nzekwu's *Blade Among the Boys* (1962), and Echewa's *The Lands Lord* (1976). The novelists wove the activity of the church into the fabric of the life of the community. As Father Higler in *The Land's Lord* reflects:<sup>31</sup>

“Before he came here he used to think of hauling them (i.e. converts) in net-fulls. But the forces held them back, the soil, their gods, and jujus, rampaging devils. He could fish only with a line here, not a net. And the line often tangled in the weeds ... The new church, conceived in the highest hopes, hopes so heavy they seemed to weigh down the walls and forever keep them near the ground.”

In Achebe, Beti, Echewa and Ngugi wa Thiong'o failure bred reflection and the willingness to dialogue with the cultural contexts. Unburdened by concerns of time-frame and drudgery of facts, novelists waded into the heart of the matter.

African Christian scholarship has been dominated by sociologists and anthropologists such as Beidelman, Peel, Horton, Jon Miller, Ranger, van Djiik, Meyer, Maxwell, ter Haar and their protégés. At one level, they provide very insightful analyses. As Beidelman's social theory of mission and his *Colonial Evangelism* demonstrates, the importance of sociological method and insights in painting a fuller, critical history of missions cannot be over-emphasized.<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, historians have always been suspicious

<sup>31</sup> Echewa, T. OBINKARAM, *The Land's Lord* (New York: Laurence Hill & Co, 1976), 84.

<sup>32</sup> O.U. KALU, *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 6-7; See, Ph. D. Thesis of my student, S.C. CHUTA, “Africans in the Christianization of Southern Igboland, 1875-1952” (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1986).

of sociological models. Thus, Lamin Sanneh, explained his new venture into a history of *West African Christianity* with a strident plea:<sup>33</sup>

“The second reason for a fresh initiative lies with the nature of the subject. Christianity in Africa has had more than its share of the attention of Western writers, including throngs of social scientists and their disciples. It is as if in our concern to describe the sunlight we concentrated on the shadows, using that derivative relationship as the justification for a reductionist approach. This book, by contrast, is concerned with the straight religious aspect of Christianity.”

To a certain extent Lamin Sanneh is correct. The Norwegian Jarle Simensen once applied transactional analysis in social theory to the study of the Norwegian missionary enterprise to Zululand, South Africa, 1850-1906. At the end, he admitted:<sup>34</sup>

“Our approach to the question of religious change has been a partial one. We have concentrated on its *outward manifestations* in the form of change of religious adherence, registered in the growth of station society and Christian congregations. Without discarding purely religious motives we have tried to define the role played by African material and political needs and the missionary offer in this respect.”

He recognized that sociological methods that concentrate on the secular effects of missions, that is, both in the social, economic and political field, often fail to deal with the internal or purely religious dimensions. They focus on religious expression because the method cannot adequately handle religious experience. Functionalism has bred a strong interpretative model that fails to take people’s religious longings seriously. Thus, we are told that those who flock to Pentecostal movements are questing for modernity as if these churches are better purveyors than secular institutions such as finance houses and other vestiges of Western structures.

<sup>33</sup> Lamin SANNEH, *West African Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), p. XI.

<sup>34</sup> Jarle SIMENSEN, “Religious Change as Transaction: The Norwegian Mission to Zululand, South Africa, 1850-1906”, in *Journ. Of Religion in Africa*, 16,2, 1986, 82-100.

In the African world, however, the religious is inextricably intertwined with the political, economic, ecological and other social forces. Indeed, history has been compared to a jade who renews her vigor by marrying new spouses. For instance, the philosophy of history became fashionable when historians endeavored to avoid the stigma of sloppiness by strengthening their conceptual framework. Similarly, the quantitative analysis of social scientists that Laslett make famous with his book *The World We Have Lost* opened new vistas in the study of past societies. The methods of social science will continue to enhance the historian's understanding of man in society.

There must be a balanced concern with the inward level of the religious as well as the outward level of political and economic interests, because religious expression as opposed to religious experience operates within cultural forms. Thus, the gods of forest dwellers emerge from the dank forest while the gods of riverine communities visit from the depths of the sea. Following from this is a second aspect, namely, that the explanation for religious change must consider both the purely religious factors as well as the ecological, political, cultural and economic factors. The reactions of African communities to Christianity were influenced by a host of these factors. The key questions in African church history are why and how Africans abandoned the gods of their fathers for Christianity? The answer cannot come from looking at the "straight religious aspect of Christianity."

To state the central premise: the organizational structure does not constitute the total character of the church, even though it is undeniable that the church operates as an institutional organization. Thus, church history is more than the history of the institutional structure. It is the story of the pilgrim people of God and their experiences of God's redeeming grace in the midst of their existence in various cultural and ecological milieus.

The role of those engaged in cross-cultural mission in spreading the gospel and message of salvation is equally undeniable. The historian must reconstruct the profiles of the home bases of missionary groups. However, the idealization of missionary agents and structures distorts the history of the church. Ronald Allen in 1913 queried this model, and in recent years McGavran, Wagner and their colleagues in The School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, have proposed a wider understanding of both types and strategies of evangelization.

Indeed, studies on the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelization process and church dynamics further rebel against contemporary missionary historiography. Finally, the perspective given by the renaissance of African historiography turns the institutional and missionary historiographies on

their heads. The story begins among African communities that had viable structures for existence. It then delineates the permeation of Christian influence into the values and structures of the communities, attentive to the varieties of the reactions, however ambiguous, of the communities to the Christian change agent. Doing church history from this perspective could become a liberating enterprise. Attention shifts from the process of insertion to the process of appropriation.

### III. THE ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE:

#### STORY-TELLING AND MOBILIZING AGAINST POVERTY AND OPPRESSION

The perspective suggested here is to pursue a scientific study of history with a theological bias and goal. One concept that describes the goal most aptly is ecumenism, from the Greek word, *oikumene*. It is a geographical term referring to the whole inhabited earth. In its theological usage, it refers to God's creation, lordship and ruler-ship over the whole inhabited world and human history. The root is in the Pentateuch tradition, especially in the Genesis myth of creation. The implication is that human history consists of the out working of divine and continued revelation of God in human life, human situations and nature. Church history is, therefore, the story of God's presence in human communities and the responses to divine love in time perspective. It is a new understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ, who invites us to a new and wider vision, learning, commitment and action.

A certain problem arises: the universal idea involved in the concept has often been challenged by constricting, particularist views. In the Genesis saga, the story details into the history of a single people, Israel. But it soon escapes this narrow bound with the concept of a new Israel, an assertion of God's love for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, and an affirmation of the mandate to corporately express the Christian hope for the fullness of life.

The implications are immense:

Firstly, ecumenism calls for a wider understanding of the church. The unity of all Christian peoples challenges the African to contribute to the task of stewardship and mission. Church history is, therefore, not the story of the role of white missionaries in cross-cultural mission. Missionary incursion into a living African context must be put in its proper perspective. The church is not the denominations transferred from Europe to Africa. African church history is the study of the past and present experiences of the people with the gospel, both during and at the end of the missionary

period. As K.O. Dike intoned, “African history must be the history of African people and not merely the history of the invaders.”<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, the study of church history must eschew elitism. Every period, every aspect of culture, every community, every class of people is an ingredient in a holistic approach to history. This approach precludes insular, non-comparative, nationalist historiographies which lack universal perspective.<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, since Christ came for the poor, Enrique Dussel, therefore, argues that “the task of the historian is to trace out the history of the gospel in relation to the poor and oppressed.” Thus, events must be “viewed from below”, and ecumenical church history can be a perspective on the world as seen by the suffering, poor and marginalized.

Fourthly, an ecumenical approach calls for a dialogical methodology. It rejects the easy condemnation of non-Christian religions and spiritual traditions. African church historiography starts with African religious and material cultures not simply as an introductory background but because God has created those communities in His own image. This approach recognizes the resilience of the force of African religiosity among Christians. It demands that the Christian engage the interior of the indigenous worldview and reclaim it from Christ. This is not merely breaking from the past.

The ecumenical perspective in church history, therefore, reconstructs, from the grassroots, the experiences of men and women in a community and the meaning of Christ in their midst. It assumes that as the spirit of God broods over the whole inhabited earth; men increasingly recognize the divine presence and their lives are changed in the encounter. In spite of particularistic claims, Christianity should not become a *River Between* as the African novelist Ngugi characterized it.

Beyond the hortatory and ideological dimensions, is the argument proffered by T.O. Ranger on the need to understand the inner history of African traditional religiosity as a means of assessing the encounter with Christianity. He saw four aspects: Firstly, conversion to Christianity was possible because of the general openness of African religions to new myths, rites, symbols and techniques. Thus, in the second place, responses to missionaries varied because what was needed from them in terms of myth, ritual, symbol and technique varied. Thirdly, in the conflict of

<sup>35</sup> Cited in A.E. AFIGBO, *K.O. Dike and the African Historical Renaissance* (Owerri: RADA Publ. Co., 1986).

<sup>36</sup> For a critique of nationalist historiography in Africa, see, A. TEMU & B. SWAI, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique* (London: Zed Press, 1981).

religious ideas between rulers and the ruled, intruders and indigenes, each party sought the advantage of alliance with the missionaries. Fourthly, the functional and structural differences between the various types of African traditional religions produced different responses to missionary Christianity. Ranger uses the changing concepts of God amidst the enlargement of scale, the powerful rituals of eradication and cleansing and the usability of Christian symbols and themes as illustrations. This carries further Robin Horton's urging for a historical approach to the study of African religion in an effort to explain why Africans abandoned the gods of their fathers.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, an ecumenical approach should make the writing of history a process of liberating, self-discovery for the individual as well as the community. In the midst of legitimacy crises and the poverty unleashed by predatory states on the masses, only an ecumenical mobilization of countervailing forces will suffice. In contemporary African churches, the capacity to respond adequately to the social violence, poverty and legitimacy crises in the public space has been vitiated by the trauma of growth. Christianity has grown so rapidly that the resources have been challenged: modes of ministerial formation, the maze of theologies, the competition from other religions, and the rise of ethnicity are only a few of the traumas. The church historian has a difficult job in understudying the large numbers of churches and their activities. Meanwhile, fraudsters as wolves in sheep's clothing have entered the field and the energy of the churches have like molten lava flowed out into the western world as Africans escape from the collapsed economies. It is both an exciting and challenging period.

<sup>37</sup> R. HORTON, "African Conversion", in *Africa*, 41,2, 1971, 87-108. See also *Africa*, 45,3, 1975, 219-235; *Africa*, 45,4, 1975, 373-399; T.O. RANGER & B. OGOT (eds), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London, 1972), RANGER & WELLER, *Themes in the Christian History*. For a summary discussion on the literature on religious change in Africa, see, O.U. KALU, "Gods in Retreat: Models of Religious Change in Africa", in *Nigerian Journal of Humanities*, 1,1, 1977, 42-53.