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Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Era: Evidence from Kenya

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Abstract: *Christianity came in Africa through five trajectories. The first trajectory was the evangelization of North Africa in the first seven centuries of Christ Era. The second was from Europe was through the West African coast. The third was through the East Coast of Africa. The fourth was through the Southern Coast of Africa and the final trajectory was during colonialism. The purpose of this study was to examine transformation of Christianity in Kenya. The paper adopted a desktop research design. The design involves a literature review of existing studies relating to the research topic. Findings revealed that Christianity was introduced to Kenya by Europeans and later American missionaries during the 19th and 20th centuries. It was then indigenized after the 1960s after most of the African states gained independence. Since indigenization, Christianity has gone through various transformations.*

Key Words: *Transformation, Christianity*

I. Introduction

Europe was the center of Christianity for several centuries and now the center has moved from Europe to the southern hemisphere. Certainly, the center of Christianity is going to move from Africa to somewhere else. What we do not know is where that center will gravitate to. It may move to China and the regions surrounding it or to any other part of the world. When this happens, the center today will become the periphery. Christianity was introduced in Africa in the 19th century by missionaries from Europe. Since then Christianity has experienced explosive numerical growth transforming communities with its Gospel message. Christians in Africa as whole have increased from about 9% of the population in 1900 to about 48% by 1970 and to 57% in 2010 (Pew Research Center April, 2010). In 2010, 24% of global Christians lived in Sub-Sahara Africa while it was less than 2% in 1910. As the number of practicing Christians dwindle in the West, the center of Christianity has shifted towards the Southern

hemisphere. A research conducted in 2010 sharply shows the decline in global Christians in Europe from 66% in 1910 to about 26% in 2010 (Pew Research Center April 7, 2015). Today, African Christianity is mainly found in the Sub-Sahara Africa after it was spread by the missionaries. The mainline churches are Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical confessions, and African Independent Churches.

a. Christianity in Kenya during the Colonial Era

J. L. Kraft, the pioneer missionary, introduced Christianity at the coast province in Kenya in 1844. The missionaries expanded inland in 1897. Most of the missionaries arrived between this period and early 1900's. Kraft believed "Africans to be (sic) 'fallen men' who had to be civilized as well as converted" (Oliver, 1952: 9). Kraft did not distinguish conversion to Christianity from civilization to adopt European culture. He thought Africans should first conform, then convert, a notion adopted later by missionaries of all persuasions.

During the colonial era, Christian communities in the mission stations provided Christian teaching, basic education, and healthcare among others (Sabar-Friedman, 2002).

Robert Strayer observes that: It is in fact difficult to think of any important aspect of the modern history of Kenya which did not in some way involve these mission communities. In terms of institutional development, they gave rise to schools and churches.... They participated in most of the political crises of the colony and reflected within themselves many of the tensions and conflicts of our colonial society. They were in a position to channel and direct, if not control, those multiple processes of social and cultural transformation that everywhere accompanied a mission of economic structures. (Strayer, 1978:2).

The mainline denomination missionaries zoned Kenya into spheres of influence (Shaw, 1996: 191). These churches concentrated most of their resources in specific parts of the country where they had influence. For example, the Church Province of Kenya (CPK) and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), have most of their schools and activities in Central Province (Sabar-Friendman, 2002). Due to church zoning, some of the mainline churches were perceived as belonging to particular ethnic groups, thus strengthening ethnic division. The impact of missionaries in Kenya is still being experienced in the African Christian communities. The missionaries' abhorred the African's belief system, culture and customs without putting much effort to understand African's worldview. The missionaries' primary focus was to civilize and convert Africans, which created tension (Oliver, 1952; Temu, 1972). Some of the Africans formed indigenous churches such as "Akorino and Anaabii, which were formed to resist perceived missionaries' oppression, while others are splinters churches from the mainstream churches. For instance, NomiyaLuo Church split from Anglicanism in 1914, and Maria Legio of Africa from Roman Catholicism in 1962 (Barrett, 1973). The missionaries proclaimed the gospel, but in the process, they gradually destroyed many of the African cultures (Temu, 1972; Shaw, 1996). The missionaries did not develop a theological foundation that could connect with African culture. Tite Tienou attests this when he says that "Christianity came to the continent in the garments of Western cultures. This Western imprint on Christianity has had a negative effect on the development of African theology" (Tienou, 1990: 24). Due to lack of appreciation of the African culture, the missionaries

lost a great opportunity to ground African Christianity theologically.

b. Christianity in Kenya in Post-Colonial Era

After independence, there was a focused process of indigenization of the church leadership. By early 1970s, most of the mainstream churches had African leaders. Some of the Africans who took over the church leadership were determined to break away from the colonialist legacy, a main barrier, which had hindered church growth. Some of the African church leaders established church and mission structures that gave people freedom of worship, rebuilt a sense of community, and met people's needs. Africans got an opportunity to practice Christianity with limited imperial baggage. However, the mainstream churches retained established church patterns which unfortunately mirrored the sending Western church culture. This is progressively changing as the charismatic movement permeate the mainstream churches giving them a new twist of noticeable evangelicalism. Though many Westerners had thought Christianity will die after they left, Jenkins observes that "church growth in Africa has been phenomenal after independence (Jenkins, 2002: 57). The church's exponential growth seems to suggest that African church leaders frame the Gospel message in language and communication forms that are appropriate and meaningful to the local culture. They focus the message on crucial issues in the lives of the people, a link missing with Western missionaries. The post-colonial Gospel message has brought back a growing shift from personal and community values. Christianity has become meaningful since it meets specific needs of the people within their cultural context.

In addition, the removal of regional boundaries enabled churches to plant others churches across the country. This has helped develop extensive social network structures that permeate all social strata of the societies (Putnam, 1995). This is truly a kind of deliverance from a domineering Westernized Christianity. Adapting a phrase coined by theologian Marcus Borg, it is as "if we are seeing Christianity again for the first time" (Jenkins, 2002: 215). Many church leaders and lay-Christians have fine-tuned the art of evangelization in open air crusades, door to door campaigns, witnessing in office buildings, and in all other areas of their lives. "The explosive growth of new churches since independence in the twentieth century is enough of a hint that colonialism had inhibited the gospel in many parts (Sanneh, 1989: 112). The churches in Kenya are keenly building educational centers, constructing hospitals, engaging in agriculture, vocational training, and setting up

theological education centers. The churches use these institutions in addition to the ministry of preaching, teaching, and praying to engage and influence society. The Anglican Church of Kenya, formerly, the Church Province of Kenya (CPK) report, affirmed that, “the church is charged with the commission to make the truth entrusted to it available to each generation.... the spread of education is not therefore a secondary consideration of the church, but stands at the very core and center of the Christian message (Sabar-Friedman 2002, 89). The African Inland Church (AIC) headquarters at Kijabe in Kenya has one of the best church-managed hospitals in Kenya, publishing operations, radio programs, and a reputable mixed school—Rift Valley Academy for missionary kids. The AIC built the Scott Theological College in Kenya to train African church leaders. The National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) established St. Pauls Theological University, The PCEA church owns and runs Presbyterian University, The Anglican Church owns and runs Anglican University and Kigari Teachers College, the Methodist Churches of Kenya owns and runs Kenya Methodist University (KEMU) and Maua Methodist Hospital. Not least, the SDA church owns and runs Baraton University. The Catholic Church in Kenya has established many schools, hospitals and owns Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). In short, the church has been at the forefront in transforming society through formal education and provision of healthcare.

II. Conclusion and Recommendations

The rapid numerical growth of Christians in Kenya has had mixed influence in Christian life and society. The quantitative growth of Christians without matching qualitative growth has had limited impact on society. The church should provide adequate discipleship training based on a well-developed theological framework. In addition, the church should have enough trained pastors to shepherd the congregation.

However, the role of the Holy Spirit is very important in holistic growth of Christians because without the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Christians will not meet God’s intended purpose for their lives.

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