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**Northeast African Christianity:
A Socio-Historical
Analysis of Connectional Independency
and Missiology**

This paper will attempt to give a brief socio-historical analysis of Northeast African Christianity in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Djibouti, and Seychelles. The theoretical orientation is informed by a connectional independency missiological perspective. While the development of Christianity in Africa may seem independent, it is all connected in a fantastic Pan-African web.

As stated by Lemin Sanneh, "the African as an agent of religious adaptation has played a far more central role than his European missionary counterpart whose role as a historical transmitter has often been exaggerated."

Early Christianity was non-white to a greater extent than most of us dare to admit. This independent Christianity has been expanding rapidly in Africa, with Africans as the historical transmitters. Many scholars and observers have now admitted that the continent may soon become the world center of Christianity. Our Pan-African challenge is to utilize a new "Hamitic" connectional independency missiological perspective beyond the 21st century.

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Northeast Africa: Gateway To The Ancient World

In North Africa, different communities of Greeks, Romans and Muslims were formed at different periods in history. In the east, trade continued with Arabia, China, India and Persia. Hence, the continent was never completely isolated from the outside world. Despite the fact that most of the interior was closed to foreigners and hardly probed from the exterior, African peoples were always and constantly on the move and mingled with each other. Furthermore, Africans were never inhibited by the Sahara desert (the great North and South divider) since this region was once fertile with oases that kept many travelers and traders alive.

Based on the Biblical traditions and the facts that are best known to us, we could say with certainty that Christianity reached Africa before Europe or the West. The Bible tells us of the infant Jesus, the Virgin Mary and his father, Joseph, in Egypt. As stated in the New International Version:

...When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord said through the prophet, (Hosea 11:1) "out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:13-14).

The Savior Jesus Christ came to Africa in his early life and was nurtured by the Egyptian wisdom and the waters of the River Nile. At Pentecost, two African peoples were present among the fourteen groups mentioned.

... "Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabians —

we hear them declaring the wonderful works of God in our own tongues (Acts 2:9-11).

Again in the book of Acts we find the names of two Apostolic Africans mentioned. "Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers; Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch) and Saul (Acts 13:1).

We can say that Biblical tradition affirms the imprints of Christianity in Africa in the first decades of the Apostolic era. After all, Africans were there in Antioch where the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Libya) went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20).

As we have mentioned, during the Apostolic era trans-Saharan camel caravans forged fragile but effective links between "Romanized" North Africa and Southeastern African communities. Another avenue of communication was the Nile River which provided thousands of miles of navigable waterways and also acted as a highway for boats and riverside caravans, thereby expanding trade up the river source in (Buganda) Uganda. In the East, substantial commercial ties linked the Mediterranean world with India and China. There is no doubt within reasonable probability that we can say that among the first missionaries of the early church were Africans.

Both Simeon called Niger and Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1-31) were very likely present and participating in the selection and commissioning of Paul and Barnabas as the first missionaries to the Gentiles. The book of Acts gives another account of an African — an Alexandrian Jew, the eloquent Apollus, who after being converted through Priscilla and Aquilla in Ephesus, became a missioner to the Greek peninsula, serving especially in the cultural centers of Athens and Corinth.

Early Christianity in Africa

The aforementioned events suggest that in the beginning, Christians from Africa were transmitters of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world and were, thereby, significant participants in Asian and European church development. The missiological pattern was the transmission of the gospel from Africa to the world, and then back to Africa from other parts of the world.

While Africans were transmitting the gospel to the world, others from the rest of the world also brought the message to them. Deacon Phillip, an Asian Christian, went to the Gaza wilderness in Southern Palestine where he encountered the Ethiopian eunuch who was in transit from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. Historian Eusebius, writing two and a half centuries later, reports the legend of a eunuch named Judich, a treasurer (or Finance Minister) of Queen Candace of the Ethiopian Kingdom which was located west of present day Ethiopia and in present day Sudan, between Aswan and Khartoum, on the Nile where Meröe was its capitol.

John Mark is also alleged to have been an active missionary in Egypt and established churches in Alexandria, arriving there before A.D. 68. Another tradition suggests that Apostle Thomas took much the same route to India as the one described in the *Periplus*. He was allegedly sent by the church in Egypt as missioner to India. Apart from these legends and traditions, nothing much about the beginning of the Church in Africa can be said to have been recorded.

By the third century, adequate historical records show developed Christian communities in Carthage and Egypt. The Jewish communities living in Egypt maintained close religious and cultural ties with Jerusalem. They were firm believers in one God called Yahweh, and it is they who partially transmitted the gospel to Egypt. While the Carthagian church was built by Roman immigrants, the Egyptian church was very much an extension of the Palestinian church. It was sometime later that it penetrated westward

along the Libyan coast and southward, far up the Nile Valley. Meanwhile, the church at Carthage never assimilated the indigenous Berber inhabitants of rural areas, nor did it evangelize the trans-Saharan regions. Its internal and persistent Roman influence conflicted with the people's independence and resulted in factions, decline, and strife. In contrast, the Egyptian church progressed and took firm indigenous roots.

Egyptian missionary involvement in the mid-fourth century led to its participation in the development of the first Christian kingdom in Africa, on the western shore of the Red Sea, namely Axum, East Africa. During this period, Frumentius was ordained the bishop of Axum by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, thereby planting the historical roots of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Northeast Africa. Before the end of the first millenium the church of Nubia was established.

Egypt and Nubia have much in common. Both are desert lands that depend upon the Nile River for life. Nubia had linkages with other lands of the south, especially with Uganda. During the 4th century B.C., Meröe on the upper Nile Valley had become a prominent kingdom; its Black civilization developed an alphabet of its own and learned to use iron weapons in warfare.

Christians from southern Ethiopia came into the area and evangelized the Nuba—the people of Nubia. In about A.D. 542, Julian of Alexandria, a Presbyter of the church arrived at Nobatia, the most northerly of the three states of the former empire of Kush, which included Makuria, in the middle and Aludia in the South.

After A.D. 600 Nubia dominated upper Egypt. Because of its strength, it withstood the Muslim conquest and enjoyed centuries of church development. However, Muslim invaders defeated these kingdoms. Aludia held out the longest before being conquered in 1504. Thus, the last traces of Northeastern Christianity practically disappeared from Nubia (Sudan),

although there is evidence that it persisted in pockets well into the 16th century.

On the issue of how Christianity entered into Sudan, scholars partially disagree that it could have entered from Egypt or from the kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia) which had destroyed the kingdom of Kush, on whose ashes Nubia had sprung. The reason for the disagreement is that strong evidence has been found supporting the fact that a knowledge of Christianity had already been established as far as the highlands of Northeast Ethiopia, even before Frumentius and Aedisius (official Church missionaries) had been sent. Furthermore, merchants and sailors seemed to have been the first Christian influence. Greek Christians trading with Egypt had found their way along the Nile southward and eastward from Alexandria to the highlands of Ethiopia.

At first the early missionary thrust in Ethiopia and Sudan reveal some connectedness which we do not find in the later missionary thrust in Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Tanzania, Uganda, and Seychelles. Christianity as a movement may not have flourished or extended beyond Ethiopia and Sudan in those early periods, but certainly its ideas found their way into areas that are interrelated. It is incredible to suggest that in Uganda, Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, and even Seychelles, the Christian worldview never found its way through day-to-day trading links.

While we await further research on the influence and spread of Christian ideas through the medium of the Afro-cultural religiosity that so many Africans adhered to, we may safely conclude that rather than opposing Christianity, our Afro-cultural traditional religiosity welcomed it. The reported hostility between Christianity and our Afro-cultural ideas at the later stage of missionization was in the strategy of the European missionaries themselves who declared a total war on our ideas, values, culture and worldview by utilizing Christianity as a movement. Their strategy, rather than expanding the gospel of Jesus Christ, hindered its acceptance. What we can say is that the paradigm has changed outright in that by 1900 Africa

was more than half (58%) Afro-cultural and almost 10% Christian. By 1988, Africa is almost half (46%) Christian and 10% Afro-cultural. Islam also claims most of the remainder. However, in areas that are predominantly Muslim (Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti) one finds a great dose of Afro-cultural religiosity existing side by side with the Islamic worldview. Furthermore, Islam itself is not devoid of Christian influences.

The translation of the Bible in the vernacular has also made it easier for the gospel to be accepted by the majority of our people. The vernacular of the diverse ethnic groups carries with it the culture, worldview, values, and ideas of the people, hence, their religiosity. The reported decrease of Afro-cultural religiosity relates to the level of institutional or organizational religiosity, based on reported membership statistics, rather than on the level of knowledge or assimilated ideas and values.

The nature of Northeast African Christianity, just as Christianity elsewhere in Africa, reveals this Afro-cultural religiosity. Furthermore, the African contribution to the development of Christianity not only as a movement but as an ideology is enormous. Almost all of the great church fathers were either Africans or had a great deal of African influence. Tertullian (160-225), Origen (185-254), Antony (251-356), Cyril (?-444), Athanasius (296-373), Basil (350-400), Augustine (354-430), Cyprian (?-258). These are considered, among others, as the vanguard of the early church. Amongst them were the Africans who actually laid the ideological foundation on which the Christian movement found its course. Therefore, the Afro-cultural factor can be located right at the ideological base of Christianity which the church fathers laid.

Conclusion

If there are lessons that Northeast African Christianity can teach us, a few of them seem obvious. Christianity in its very inception was a universal message of salvation, as revealed in the person of the Palestinian Jew, Jesus.

Africans find connection with Jesus Christ through his earthly Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph, whose stock stems from Noah's son Shem, the brother of Ham, our ancestor, and Japheth the other brother, father of the Europeans and Eurasians. Both Shem and Ham are of significance to us in the sense that Africa is predominantly occupied by children of those two brothers. But Japhethites are still linked to us. According to Scripture (Gen. 10:6-20), Ham's sons settled in the Eastern and Southern Mesopotamian areas. That means Arabia and Africa, which includes Egypt.

The Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Philistines, Jebusites, and Amorites were some of our ancestors. Obviously, the Old Testament tells more of their bitter enmity with the descendants of Shem than of their affinity. If you accept this Old Testament analogy, you will then accept being related to Cush, the son of Ham and father of mighty Nimrod, (Gen. 10:8-11) the revolutionary linked with "Babel" and Babylonia (Gen. 11:12). The sons of Shem (the Semitic peoples) at a later stage migrated into Babylonia and most likely the later Hebrew nation, whose God was Yahweh, does not include the children of Cush. This brings Jesus Christ even closer to us, the darker race of humanity. It is worthy also to note that at the time of its very critical move after his birth (that is, for the first four hundred years A.D.,) Christianity in membership was 85% non-white. It became predominantly white or Caucasian about nine hundred years later, around 950-1350, when it became 58.8% white.

The late 18th and the 19th centuries witnessed the Caucasian domination of Christianity (which became 85.2% white). But the paradigm changes again in the 20th century when non-whites seem again to have become increasingly Christians. Further study needs to be done to explain why such changes have occurred.

As an African people we cannot afford that Caucasian receptacle that carries with it the chains of our underdevelopment, our enslavement and servitude. But we cannot avoid the content of the gospel which is our key to liberation, fulfillment and salvation. Our dilemma is how to be

African Christians *and* accept the universalism of Christianity. Somehow when we accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the "Genesis of God" and the Parenthood of God, then all humanity becomes one. We are the children of Ham, the brothers of Shem, and Japheth. We can all believe, worship together and reach out to one another with love. That type of Hamitic connectedness and relationship underlies the mission of Pan-African Independent Christianity.

The Shemitic factor claims to have given us the birth of Jesus, the Christ, yet rejected him. The Japhetic missionaries of 18th and 19th centuries, in the name of that Jesus, brought us their retrogressive ideologies and successfully chained us to poverty and servitude. The 20th century has brought us back to our ancient Hamitic identity and renewed our 1st and 2nd century Christian initiative. We have witnessed our successful struggles for liberation and independence all over the continent and in the diaspora. The Hamitic salvific factor brought us the prophetic messages of great African American Christian leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Jesse Jackson and our African leader Dr. Julius Nyerere, echoing the call for justice, world peace, civil and human rights. Our mission for the 21st century is just beginning what we somehow abandoned in the 20th century. If the world has to be made more humane, more habitable and disciplined for God, the Pan-African "Hamitic" factor of connectional independency cannot be ignored as a missiological factor in that development.