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**ARTICLE**

**Research Paper**

- Attitudes of Christian missionaries towards African traditional religious beliefs in East Africa during the British colonial rule** 193  
Tugume Lubowa Hassan

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Attitudes of Christian missionaries towards African traditional religious beliefs in East Africa during the British colonial rule

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This article focuses on the religious encounter between European Christian Missionaries and the African traditional religious beliefs in East Africa. The area of study is Buganda in Uganda. The scope of the study is 1877-when Christianity was first introduced in Uganda to 1962 when Uganda got her independence; the period when Christian missionaries lost influence together with the colonial rulers. Using the qualitative historical research design, the study re-examined the philosophy of African religious beliefs namely the concepts of god, ancestor veneration, divinities and religious rituals. This analysis is based on and aided by secondary sources written on European Christian activities in East Africa. The study contends that the crusading mentality embedded in Christianity underpinned and reinforced the views and attitudes that European Missionaries constructed around African religion and rituals. The perceptions that Christianity was superior to, and in no position to negotiate and dialogue with African religion, contributed significantly towards their failure to understand and to evangelize fully the societies they came in contact with. Moreover the failure to appreciate that traditional religion was a centrifugal force around which all life, and kingship, gravitated, resulted in their disillusionment and immature abandonment of the mission field. The study concludes that failure of Christian missionaries to appreciate and integrate African Traditional beliefs within Christianity contributes to the current rejuvenation of African traditional religious beliefs and practices in Africa.

**Key words:** African god, ancestors of veneration, divinities, diviners, heathen Rites, African religion, conquista mentality.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article we revisit Christian Mission to East Africa with a view to examining the rethinking of the missionaries towards the African world, and African religion in particular. Through open coding process (Seaman, 2008)

of the sources of information, both primary and secondary form, we unveil the underlying perspectives and values that informed the views and attitudes of missionaries and traders to the African world. The area of study is Buganda

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kingdom in Uganda. The choice of Buganda is underpinned by the loyalty expressed by the Baganda towards traditional beliefs (Kyewalyanga, 1976 and Waliggo, 1976).

Resources indicate that missionaries argued that the African people neither had any religion nor any form of beliefs (Taylor, 1958). Missionaries thus often preached that African beliefs were devilish, satanic, demonic to mention but a few (Russell, 1966). Further, resources reflect the intensity of religious tensions that often degenerated into confrontation between Christianity and African Traditional religion that eventually led to the murder of early Christian converts on orders of the King of Buganda, Mwanga (Faupel, 1962).

### The advent of Christian missionaries in East African

The period that we focus on ranges from 1870's to 1962. The period from 1870s marks the early penetration of missionaries in Uganda which reflects a watershed that ushers in East Africa a new era of modern mission in Africa. The period too, is characterized by different groups of Europeans in East Africa; the traders, administrators, explorers and above all Christian missionaries. 1962 is the period where the influence of different groups of Europeans was lost; the period when Uganda got her independence.

In his chronicle de Guinea 'The chronicle of the discovery and conquest of Guinea,' translated by Beazley and Prestige (1899) offers five reasons why Prince Henry the Navigator sent sailors down the East African coast. Our focus in this paper is one of the five reasons that he offered, which was, "to make increase in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ and to bring to him all the souls that should be saved (Groves, 1999). According to Tom Tuma and Phares Mutibwa (Tuma and Mutibwa 1978), on 30th June 1877 the Vanguard of the Church Missionary Society Missionaries (C.M.S) in persons of Lt. Shergold Smith and Revered C.T Wilson arrived in Buganda at Mutesa's court. With their arrival, there opened a new chapter in the history not only in Buganda but also of Uganda as a whole of the British protectorate was eventually to be called.

By the time of the arrival of the C.M.S missionaries, Buganda had already become a compact state and her momentum of territorial expansion had been exhausted. At the apex of the hierarchical structure of the Kingdom sat *Kabaka* Mutesa I whose long reign had matured him into a statesman of undoubted ability. Below him there were a variety of state functionaries, all of whom held their positions during the *Kabaka's* pleasure. It is true that there were some traditional wielders of power such as the clan heads but these, like other functionaries in Buganda governmental system, had been reduced to depending on the *Kabaka's* favors a process that had begun way back in the 17th century and was fairly compete by the

time of the accession of Mutesa 1 in 1856.

For a century, a unique relationship was struck between Christian Missionaries and Buganda kingdom. This relationship was exemplified by *okutuuzza ku Namulondo* or coronation of the *Kabaka*. According to Ssekamwa (Ssekamwa, 1993), the *okutuuzza ku Namulondo* was combination of the rights, privileges and duties, granted by the institution of kingship in Buganda. It is precisely because of the special relationship that existed between the 'cross' and the institution of kingship that we treat missionaries and traders as bed fellow in their sojourn to Africa. They shared the same faith and world view, and bore one mandate from the crown. As they traveled to Africa, Asia and America, they shared the common belief that religion (Christianity) was absolutely true and therefore all others were radically false (Boxer, 1978). They regarded heathens as unwilling precursors as unregenerative enemies or miserable souls in need of light (Boxer, 1978). It is these particularize which informed the thinking of missionaries and traders to African that we investigate in this paper. Incidentally, this bigotry that was confused for conviction guided the views and attitudes of missionaries and traders during the whole period that historians have characterized as colonial era. As in South Africa, Boxer contends, the Portuguese came to Africa to convert the 'benighted heathen.' it is certain that they possessed the sole key to salvation in this world and in the next one (Boxer, 1978). It is our contention that the deeply rooted conviction by Christians that their religion alone represents 'the way, the truth, and the life'<sup>1</sup> can be abused, and indeed was, in the past abused by missionaries in Africa. The corollary to this conviction, that all other creeds are either inherently false sadly distorted' is not only naïve but dangerous theology of the mission. It generates unnecessary confrontation and aggression to the human and spiritual integrity of the communities targeted for 'conversion' essentially, this conviction can be a hindrance to genuine mission as we illustrate below:

### METHODOLOGY

The nature of the study deserved employing a historical research design (Shafer, 1974). Historical research enables the researcher to systematically collect, evaluate, and describe data to explain, and understand actions or events that occurred sometime in the past (Lawrence, 1984). It also permits investigation of topics and questions that can be studied in no other fashion (Golder, 2000). Historical research is necessary to define the situation of the past and its meaning in the light of the present problem. Besides, there are arguments that issues are better understood and probably better dealt with if the

<sup>1</sup> Bible John 10 :10

historical perspective is known (Barzun and Henry, 2004). In this case, it can provide a perspective for decision making about problems and it assists in understanding why things are as they are; as the situation in the current study (Brooks, 1969).

The historical method enables the researcher to give an account and report events and/or conditions that occurred in the past. It involved establishment of the facts as provided by the secondary and primary sources, and interpretation of the events in order to arrive at conclusions concerning past events or predict future events (Golder, 2000).

Uganda museum and private sources were the major focus of data collection supplemented by interviews with key traditional leaders particularly those who interacted with missionaries during the colonial days.

A purposive selection of primary informants was done and this included 30 participants. 5 survivors *kawonawo* of world war two provided critical data concerning the encounters of Christian missionaries and African traditional religious beliefs (Dray, 1974). 25 traditional religious leaders such as clan heads, *abakulu b'ebika*, lineage heads *abolunyiriri*, mediums *abasamize* were also key informants as they are both custodians of the traditional religious beliefs and some are regarded as religious leaders in categories of priests, priestesses, fortune tellers, rain makers and traditional healers and counselors.

Data collection produced thick volumes of data. Data analysis involved identifying patterns and themes which later were coded and synthesized (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Several attitudes and perceptions that emerged from the secondary sources were synthesized with responses from the primary sources.

## THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY CONCEPTS OF "TRUE GOD" VERSUS THE "AFRICAN GOD"

The missionaries who operated in Buganda were, by and large, predisposed to consider themselves as bearers, not only of a superior religion but a superior culture, the two being inseparably intertwined (Boxer, 1978). The superiority complex was a by-product of centuries of European prejudice about Africa. Fantasy and Fiction about Africa was an integral element of the perception embedded in the European mind of the middle ages. The missionaries in East Africa as well, found themselves a victim to this perception. A fixation with evil prevented the missionaries from seeing that God had been in Africa before them (Mbiti, 1991). Although the *Baganda* believed in one God, whom they called *Katonda*, the missionaries dismissed this God as pagan deity. The fact that the *Baganda* addressed *Katonda* through intermediaries, *Lubaale* further confused the missionaries (Ssekamwa, 1993). They took this to mean that the *Baganda* had no

clear concept of God, and that they were steeped in 'ancestor worship.'

Many anthropologists and missionaries have dispensed the existence of the Supreme Being among the Africans, the *Baganda* not being exclusive. In their estimation, the *Baganda* religion was no more than a pernicious superstition deserving condemnation. In spite of the various appellations that the missionaries gave to the *Baganda* god, which may reflect the *Baganda* dialectical variations, most works affirm the monotheistic character of the *Baganda* religion (Mbiti, 1971).” However, they tend to deprecate the religion as a poor shadow’ of Christian concept, God invariably resulted in the reductionist fallacy that the religion of *Baganda* was a superstition. Mbiti makes a remark on Africa God that applies to the *Baganda* as below:

It seems to me that the new God of Christianity was taken by many African peoples as just another deity and added to the long list of the ones they believed in. So many African Christians are also practitioners of their own religion (Mudenge, 1988).

It is not surprising therefore that most Africans still cling on traditional religion, honor Africa places of worship simultaneously with Christianity. The commonest traditional beliefs include the following;

### Ancestors of veneration

In Buganda kingdom, the veneration of ancestors was the hallmark of the people's religious life. The ancestors among the *Baganda* were highly respected as mediators between the living and *Katonda*. In Buganda, the ancestors were believed to inhabit the underworld and in the entire environment that is, in the water masses, that include rivers, pools and the sea, mountains, trees and many others. They were believed to maintain contact with their clans to the extent of participating in the day today affairs. Through them, the members of the clan could access the profound sources of life, and above all the supreme beings. Throughout religious rituals like traditional worship *okusamira*, the living tried in different ways to win the good will of the ancestors and protection from wizards (*abalogo*).

Associated with ancestor veneration were the diviners (*abalaguzi*) and *Lubaale* or divinities. Among the *Baganda*, the belief in divinities up to date is still very strong. The divinities were especially associated with the ruling elite and played a big role in matters of succession, rain making, children bearing, hunting, protection against enemies and many more. The *Lubaale* too, played a big role in enthronement of the *Kabaka*. The *Kabaka* was the peoples religious-political leader, the mediator between the living and the dead and for that matter sacred. The *Kabaka* was considered as the owners of the land and head of all clans- the *Sabataka*. The *Kabaka's* role was



spiritual. He had powers to appoint and dismiss any office bearer in the kingdom.

In Buganda today, the coronation of kings has been incorporated within the Anglican Church. The following kings of Buganda have been enthroned by both *Baganda* religious leaders and the Mcn Bishops; Daudi Chwa, Mutesa II and Mutebi II. After *Baganda* traditional rituals, the *Kabaka* have been handed bibles.

### The missionary concept of lubaale —divinities

The *Baganda* had over 72 divinities, each with a particular department. The Christian missionaries did not clearly conceive the institution of divinities not only in *Buganda* but elsewhere in Africa. In Central African, they viewed the *Mhondono* as agents of the devil (Mudenge, 1988). Such a description seems to be an attempt to impose a Judaea-Christian theological framework on the Shona religion and the world view (Gerhard, 2004). The condemnation of *lubaale* by missionaries and their chroniclers was based on the spiritual function of their office. The fact that they were possessed by the royal ancestors and received inspiration from the ancestors, convinced missionaries that they were 'frauds' and performed sorcery (Gerhard, 2004).

Kagwa speaks at length about the possession of *lubaale* among the Buganda (Kagwa, 1918).

According to Kagwa, the spirit enters the *Muganda* and claimed the soul of an ancestor or father of who is engaged in ceremonies. In the missionary's mind the *Baganda* were possessed by demons and the devil. The missionaries' interpretation of these actions with reference to *lubaale* among the *Baganda*, has been of undermining African belief and strength of African religion.

They failed to appreciate the role of *lubaale* as the facilitator of consensus in case of any problem.

Generally, according to Okot P'Bitek, African peoples, their cultures and religions were considered by early missionaries and anthropologists, as 'primitive,' 'heathen' and 'pagan'. These were derogatory terms formulated and used by people who assumed un questioned superiority.

My husband (Ocol) treats me roughly.  
The insults, words cut more plainly  
Than sticks! He says my mother is a witch.  
c4 fd1

Refers to my clansmen as fools  
Because they eat rats  
He says we are all *kaffirs*  
We do not know the ways of God  
We sit in deep darkness  
And do not know the Gospel,  
He says my mother hides her  
Charms and that we are all  
Sorcerers (Okot, 1984)

It is on the above background that Okot B'tek brings

out, the missionaries' conception of African religion. The song is not only for drama but brings out clearly what has always been on ground as regards the attitude of Christians towards the native religion. The writer further illustrates how the African products of missionary education have as well come to justify the degradation of their own kith and kin on grounds of ignorance, illiteracy, backwardness through such derogatory descriptions.

### The diviners (*Abalaguzi/Abajanjabi*)

Missionaries also viewed diviner-healers as purveyors of lies and fraudsters. This sector was given most attention by Christian missionaries. The whole institution was targeted for eradication and extermination. A typically confrontational and crusading approach was adopted by the Christian Missionaries African divination. Like the divinities (*lubale*) discussed above, the divine-healers were believed to be capable of involving the spectacular and supernatural. They were the central in the execution of what missionaries called 'heathen rites'. They played a role comparable to that of priests within the Christian Church. However, instead of treating them as counterparts, the missionaries treated them as worst enemies. They vilified them and worked towards their extermination. Little wonder that through Africa, a holy war was openly declared and waged against the divine-healers.

In Buganda, Christian missionaries were notorious for their zeal to eradicate the traditional healers. The *Baganda* custom, the *Abalaguzi* and *Abajanjabi's* principal task was to maintain good health, therefore harmony within the community and ensure that the old traditions were maintained and respected (Kagwa, 1918). The diviners were not only repositories of community wisdom by religious virtuosos. The diviners were intermediaries between the people and their ancestors. They protected the society from evil, especially witchcraft, and restored the society's harmony through protective charms. Indeed since the diviners cared for life, the life among the *Baganda* depended on them. In this way, one could protect oneself from the wizards and hazards with their aid.

On baptism, the *Baganda* were required to adopt Christian names and renounce those of their divinities (*Lubaale*). The two types of divorce shook the foundation of the society as it ultimately concerned the harmony or balance within the society. For the above reason, the missionaries vehemently condemned the diviners and sincerely believed that they worshipped the devil. Hence, all those who believed in the efficacy of their rites, including healing, were worshippers of the devil and were boycotted in Christian functions. A few missionaries, however, grudgingly accepted that he diviners knew how to use medical herbs which succeeded in curing some diseases. This was not only in Buganda but in central African as well (Exelsion, 1970).

The missionaries looked at protective charms as idols being worshipped. They simplistically labeled the *Baganda* as idol worshippers. This, of course, was a fallacy, in the strict sense; the vocabulary idolatry does not exist in Buganda: no image or statue is regarded as a deity among them. Nevertheless, the missionaries unleashed a zealous campaign against traditional healers on theological ground by dragging the Christian dualism of God and Satan into the argument. They took it for granted that since the *Baganda* did not worship God as understood by them, they worshipped the Devil via traditional cults and the rite of *okusamira*. Hence, in their opinion, the traditional healers were the church's worst enemies. The iconoclastic approach to African religion and its sacred objects can be manifested in activities of the converts to Christianity up to date. The Christian have ruthlessly burnt down traditional houses of worship, sacred places and many others. However, because, the traditional healers command confidence among their people, they still stand strong.

#### Declaration of war against heathen rites

One of the expressions of African religion that the missionaries had to contend with were the rites of passage and religious festivals that the *Baganda* participated in regularly. The eradicating of rites was not just left to individual missionaries but even to the colonial government.

In Acholi, according to Okot P'Bitek, the Christian mission to African was double edged. The missionaries came to preach the Gospel as well as to 'civilize' and in their role as civilizers they were at one with the colonizing forces, indeed they were an important vehicle of western imperialism, which readily lent to the churches its wealth.

In Buganda kingdom, a variety of rites were observed. Common among them were naming, marriage, funerary and others. Among the Acholi, in songs of Malaya (Okot, 1988) P'Bitek brings out a clear attitude of missionaries towards Africans. He exposes the consequences of rigid morality which Christian missionaries introduced with regard to marriage. Monogamy was introduced in a society where polygamy was allowed, and owing to the artificial norms within the new family of such people as *Ocol*, the family in fact breaks up, although the two partners remain together owing to the indissolubility of marriage and the impossibility of divorce according to the Christian teaching as introduced by missionaries. Always, they required on marriage to renounce any wife Africans above the first and marry in church, however, the Africans evoked opposition and resistance<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly, the *Kabaka* presided over kingdom rituals. By

virtue of being kingdom rites, everyone, including Christians, was supposed to participate in them. It is this inclusiveness of African religion that the missionary failed to understand and felt very frustrated by the missionaries' target to these rituals for eradication at all cost. An intense religious war was thus waged against the rites during the nineteenth century. P'Bitek in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* brings out clearly the missionaries attitude towards African beliefs as below:

To Hell  
With your pumpkins  
And your old homesteads,  
To Hell  
With the husks  
And meaningless customs.  
We will smash the taboos  
One by one  
Explode the basis  
Of every superstition  
We will uproot  
Every sacred tree  
And demolish every ancestral shrine (Okot, 1984)

The above experience is similar throughout Africa. The result of such attitudes has been burning down African places of worship, *Amasabo* in Buganda by converts to Christianity with the backing of Christian missionaries. Equally, missionary zeal was also directed against traditional healing rites and dances which missionaries associated with "Sexual debauchery" and "grave superstition"<sup>3</sup>

In their war against the *Baganda* religion, the missionaries saw themselves as the defender's of the faith and were committed to martyrdom Deuteronomy 12:3 which referred to Moses' commands to Israel to overthrow their alters, and break their pillars, and bum their groves with fire; and ye shall how dom the graven images of their gods! They also saw themselves as Elijah in a crusade against the prophet and prophetesses of Baal.

#### UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE FOR MISSIONARIES' NEGATIVE PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

There are many reasons to explain the iconoclastic approach of missionaries during the European colonial rule towards African religion and their subsequent failure to eradicate the African religion completely.

Reasons such as the unworthiness of the clergy, who were often at odds with each other, and at odds with the

<sup>2</sup> Up to date, you still find a number of Christians in Buganda with two or more wives as culture demands.

<sup>3</sup> The twin ceremonies are widely spread thought Africa .They have been abused by missionaries especially for these two reasons.

gospel values that they purported to convey (Isichei, 1955). That some missionaries were poorly trained and sometimes sent out to Africa as punishment for misbehaving at home, (often called the degradado theory) helps us to understand the credibility crisis associated with the Christian activities in general. However, there is something more of the general explanations which motivated the missionaries in Africa to behave in so atrocious a manner as we have characterized above. Below are three factors that we consider critical to understand the iconoclastic attitudes that characterized the missionaries' encounter with African religion.

### **The conquista mentality**

The missionaries who worked in Africa as Mudenge in Central Africa rightly observes, with exception of a few Italian Capuchins, acted more as patriotic Europeans than men of the Holy book (Boxer, 1978).

They identified themselves with colonizers. They acted like Lords and rode on the powers of European states. Thus, their sense of patriotism inhibited them from interrogating their national identity and values from the point of view of gospel values. The close contact and collaboration of European governments with the church contributed to the arrogance of missionaries in their work. Within the political and ecclesiastical context, the church manifested itself to Africa in form of imperialism. Imperialism, by nature and character, is inimical to dialogue since the latter presupposes some degree of equality and respect for the interlocutor. These conditions never existed during the colonial era.

### **Re-living the crusading mentality of medieval Christianity**

The missionary who came to Africa during the colonial era have to be understood as vestige and by product of turbulent medieval Christianity. Christianity had become a victim of many forces which include, Islamic and taught in Eastern and Central Europe, a rapid fear of Judaism. One way of restoring the erstwhile greatness of the church was to appeal to martyrdom and extreme expression of crusading favor. This crusading mentality was endemic within the missionary movement to Africa. While the enemy of the church in Europe was Muslims, in East Africa the enemy was the divine-healer and all his paraphernalia and accoutrements. The missionary saw it as his duty to destroy all forms of 'pagan belief, and to instill an unadulterated form of religion in Africa. Because of the exclusiveness associated with this crusading mentality, the missionary of this era was not in the least inclined to show respect for the value of the African to choose his/her religion, what to believe, and what not to

believe. The missionaries finally ravaged African culture and religious systems and history.

It is clear that the negative attitude of African religion by the missionaries in Africa has to do with allotted position of African civilization in the classification of civilization. Boxes states that, by the early seventeenth century, when Iberian expansion in most regions had reached it's apogee, the western intruders were inclined to rate the Asian cultures as highest; through still below the level of American civilizations as next best; and Black Africans jostling for the bottom position with the Caribs, the Tupi, and other untamed "savages" of the new world (Boxer, 1978).

This classification of civilization and cultures was proposed by Fr. Mose de Acosta Sj, whose view was certainly shared by majority of missionaries who worked in Africa, and who were not in contrast unfavorably the half- civilized, or the uncivilized Bantu (as they saw them) with the highly civilized Japanese and Chinese (Gerhard, 2004). Western scholars (including Christians) have never been genuinely interested in African religion. Their works have all been part and parcel of some controversy or debate in the western world (Gerhard, 2004).

Because of this European prejudice, which the missionary was part of, there was no interest in studying the beliefs and cultures of Africans as there was for the Asian. Consequently, there is nothing written on Africans that compares with the writings of the Dominacan Bartolome dela casa on the Amerindians, or the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagun on Mexicans, or Metteo Rici on the Chinese and Roberto de Nobili on the Indians. All that motivated the Europeans missionaries were the deep conviction that Africans were 'bocais' (i.e clowns) best fitted for the conversion of their immortal souls.

For this reason, Christian missionaries in Africa were not African world view; they were thus not prepared not to adopt themselves to local conditions and environment. Rather, they were only prepared to give what they believe and what they knew. This attitude was totally inimical to dialogue, and goes to explain the ultimate failure to eradicate totally the African religion.

### **Conclusion**

The failure of Christian Missionaries in African to eradicate the traditional religion should be viewed as having been caused by the strength of African religion; the guiding philosophy underlying the African Traditional religion and failure of Christianity to satisfy the African desires. Further, lack of respect for African Traditional religious beliefs and practices by the Christian missionaries contribute to the contempt of the African worldview, culture, religious autonomy and finally has resulted into current waves of rejuvenation of the same

beliefs and practices in Africa today. This paper argues that a recognition of that autonomy would naturally have led to dialogue, harmonization and contextualization of Christianity in Africa. The iconoclastic approach resulted in a regrettable despoliation of African cultural, capital and an unavoidable failure of the mission to a certain extension. On the other hand, it led to strengthening the African beliefs. This research has observed that African traditional religious beliefs and practices provide African with a purpose and meaning of life, therefore, I recommend that further research carried out on /African traditional religious beliefs within a Christian perspective. Further research should come up with better descriptive terms of African traditional religious beliefs other than derogatory terms in the foregoing text. The possible beliefs that are shared between African traditional beliefs and Christian missionaries can be harmonized.

### Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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