

TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND SPIRITUAL  
CHURCHES IN GHANA: A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

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Rudolf Otto, in his book, "Das Heilige", defines religion as "the experience of the holy." He called this experience a "mysterium tremendum fascinosum" - an awe-inspiring mystery, a fascinating mystery. All such experience of the holy was characterized as "numinous", for they are induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power. This "experience of the holy" constitutes a veritable matrix from which all that men call good, true and beautiful take their origin. It is also an experience which defies adequate objectification, and hence every religion has to be approached with considerable caution, and in terms of its own perspective. Such an enlightened approach would yield profitable results for scholarship as well as human understanding much more than the often biased and thoroughly misleading accounts that have been made of African traditional religion. The many opinionated assertions and the rather heavy label "primitive", which was attached to traditional religion, made it seem to be an obsolete religion, a fossil religion, which had no relevance for contemporary Africans. But the evidence points to the contrary.

Traditional African religion is part of the religious heritage of mankind, It has something universal about it, like all religions; but in addition there is something of local origin which gives it its distinctive African flavour. It needs hardly to be stressed that to those who practise this religion, it is the recognition of a superhuman controlling power which commands their obedience. This power is symbolized in a Supreme Being, who is often in covenant relationship with a tribe; but at the same time, individuals could call on him in personal terms. William Temple has pointed out that: "Every religion maintains that it is not only a state of mind in those who practise it, but an apprehension of a Truth which is independent of their minds altogether; and its whole significance for them lies in this".<sup>1</sup> For a further word on religion we turn our attention to William Cantwell Smith who wrote: "What we view in contemplating religion lies not only below

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1. Relations Among the Religions Today, editors E. Moses Sung, S. Nikhilananda & W. Schneider, E.J. Brill 1963.

us, stretching on and on without bounds, but around us. And not only does it lie passively: here is something active, momentous, with its own initiative".<sup>1</sup> In religion we encounter an all-embracing phenomenon which is at the nerve-centre of every culture, and to understand a people and to appreciate its way of life, one cannot do without a thorough knowledge of their religion.

A close observation will show that social organization is reflected in religious belief and practice. In our traditional religion, the essential exercise of ritual and the functions of priesthood, at the lowest level, are centred in the Elder or head of family (Abusuapanyin). At the highest level is the head of state, the Ohene or Omanhene, just as in the political organization the Omanhene is the political head, at the top, and the "Abusuapanyin" represents the family at the chief's council and oversees his own family.

In the area of worship, at the highest level, is the Supreme Being, and then there is a gradation of lesser gods and spirits, as well as the spirits of the dead. The Supreme Being is identified by a name and is thought of in personal terms. Among his names are the following: Ga - "Nyonmo"; Eve - "Mawu"; Mamprusi - "Nawuni"; Frafra - "Naayine"; Gonja - "Eboore"; Akan - "Onyame". Included in his many attributes among the Akans, for example, are: Odumankoma - Creator, the All Grace Giver, or He who alone is full of abundance; Twedumpong - one leans on Him with complete safety; Borebore - Architect of Being, Maker of all things.

The Supreme Being is accessible but invisible to all, as the Akans say if one wants to speak to God, he should tell it to the wind. He is believed to be a God of justice and fairness, and the maxim says that since God does not like wickedness, He gave each creature a name. His unfailing providence is enshrined in the maxim if God gives you a cup of wine and an evil-minded person kicks it over, he fills it up again; while His power over creation is affirmed in the maxim, the earth is great but God is chief.

There are no temples for the Supreme Being, and the explanation could be that since He is everywhere it would be foolish to confine Him to one place. Moreover He is accessible to all and does not need priests or mediums. Communal prayers to Him are rather rare, but this could be an expression of the belief that everyone has a direct access to Onyame. According to Akan belief, for example, God gives "nkrabea", destiny, and this fact relates God directly to the individual. So then

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1. The Meaning and End of Religion, Mentor book, 1964.

every individual has the right of direct access to Onyame; hence the maxim: no man's path crosses another man's.

The Supreme Being is good, but He does not brook evil and wickedness. What Afolabi Ojo wrote about "Olodumare" of the Yoruba<sup>1</sup> could with equal justification be said about the tribes in Ghana and their conception of the Supreme Being. He wrote:

"In Olodumare they found the final answer to all the problems of life and living. All-wise, all-knowing, Judge, Immortal. He was not associated with the sky, He was not a nature deity or a Sky God as observers mistakenly thought. Rather he was associated with the world beyond, of which the sky was the gate, and the world which was the last abode of the settled spirits of ancestors who had previously wandered through many temporary homes.....

Therefore by virtue of his inaccessible abode which was detached from the immediate environment, Olorun was worshipped and propitiated most of the time through minor deities. For the same reason neither images nor temples of him are known to have been made. Nevertheless he was called upon both in the emergencies of life and in the ordinary day to day blessings and invocations and salutations. As a result Olorun came into contact with Yoruba life at many points, thereby showing that he was indigenously conceived and not borrowed through culture contact"

Busia wrote:

The Ashanti, like other Akan tribes, esteem the Supreme Being and the Ancestors far more above gods and amulets.... The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods and with contempt if they fail; it is the Supreme Being and the Ancestors who are treated with reverence and with awe."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Yoruba Culture, University of Ife & University of London Press, 1966.
  2. Position of the Chief in the Modern Political Development of Ashanti, Oxford 1951.

What is the basis of the respect and awe? The ancestors are believed to be our predecessors and elders and for that reason they command our respect. In traditional African society, and still to a large extent in the present, old age had a touch of venerability. Moreover the ancestors enter into a spiritual state after death and since this puts them in close touch with the real essence of things they can see and know more than the living and are therefore in a position to mediate between them and the Supreme Being.

Not all ancestors however serve as mediators between the living and the Supreme Being. It is the good and great ancestors, those who have led exemplary lives, who become "Nananom Nsamampon", the good and great ancestors. Dr. J.B. Danquah cites evidence in the High Court of Accra, that of 31 kings who had ruled a particular state in a period of some 500 years, only 8 had been adjudged good and had been honoured as ancestors. The rest had just passed away and their descendants were only reminded of them but not expected to follow their example.

The fact of selectivity has led many to liken the Africans' attitude towards their ancestors to the Christian idea of sainthood. Parrinder<sup>1</sup> suggests that the attitude towards the various gradations or classes of spiritual beings might be expressed approximately in terms used in Roman Catholic theology. Thus he suggests "dulia", which is the reverence or homage paid to the saints and angels, for this would approximate the relationship to the ancestors. And as to whether the attitude towards the ancestors amounts to worship, Professor Abraham maintains that, "The rites of ancestor worship are not rites of worship but method of communication. There is no feeling of self-abasement and self-negation on the part of the living during such rites".<sup>2</sup> But whatever the relationship between the ancestors and the living may be, the essential point is that the ancestors cannot be separated from belief in the Supreme Being.

The lesser gods are also believed to be messengers or children of the Supreme Being, and they usually reside in the environment of the people. Mircea Eliade points out: "For homo religious everywhere, all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a hierophany."<sup>3</sup>

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1. African Traditional Religion, Hutchison 1954.

2. The Mind of Africa, Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1962 p.63.

3. The Sacred and the Profane, Harper Torchbook edition, 1961.

By hierophany he means the act of the manifestation of the sacred.

It is interesting to juxtapose Eliade's statement with the lines:

"The heathen in his blindness Bows down to wood  
and stone."

What is involved is not the worship of stones or wood, it is rather that the sacred can manifest itself in stones or trees. The experience shows something that is no longer stone or tree but the SACRED. Men bow before these natural objects because they are hierophanies, to use Rudolf Otto's expression, they are something "ganz andere". Eliade further elucidates this point:

"What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man ..... is that the world exists because it was created by the gods, and that the existence of the world itself "means" something, wants to say something, that the world is neither opaque nor mute, that it is not an inert thing, without purpose or significance. For homo religiosus the cosmos lives and speaks. The mere life of the cosmos is proof of its sanctity, since the cosmos was created by the gods and the gods show themselves to men through cosmic life."<sup>1</sup>

It is believed that these gods constitute certain portions of the power and virtue of the Supreme Being which are sent to men to aid them in their daily lives and that it is through the intervention of priests, who are the guardians of these gods, that the bounty of the Supreme Being reaches men. But it seems that the gods are somehow enslaved in ritual, for when the correct rite has been performed, the recipient of the rite is left with little choice but to comply with the request.

Personal ritual plays an important role in the life of homo religiosus. These rituals centre around the crises of life - birth, puberty, marriage and death. At puberty, which amounts to spiritual maturing, the sacred, death and sexuality are revealed to the initiate. And at death, the rites which are performed carry the soul ritually to its new abode, where a new spiritual existence begins.

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1. Ibid, p.165.

Then there are spiritual forces, among which may be mentioned magic, which is the attempt to force the numen to grant what is desired. It may be mentioned that as a rule magicians have very little to do with the cultus. In contrast to magic is religion, which is submission or worship of the divine power upon which man feels dependent.

### Spiritual Churches

Most of these churches broke away from historical or missionary founded churches, and other independent African churches in search of a more "spiritual" way of life and worship. A leader of one of the spiritual churches replied in response to the question why spiritual church: "We are directed by the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit does not reveal something to us we do not do it. All that we do is by revelation. How can we help people except by the spirit of God. In Acts 19:2, the Apostle Paul asked the people at Ephesus, "did you receive the spirit when you believed? We have received the spirit, you can tell by our actions."

Studies made of such break-away churches elsewhere, for example in South Africa, indicate that the fact of white domination has a great deal to do with the emergence of many of the separatist churches. Sundkler<sup>1</sup> described such churches as "Ethiopian"; the others, "Zionist", are purely revivalistic in origin and patterned after the independent denominations and Churches of Afro-Americans in the United States. In Ghana, there is little or no evidence of the former, that is, Ethiopianism; the latter may however have its counterparts here.

The reason for the rapid rise of these churches are many and varied, and attention can only be paid to a few for the purposes of this article. A study conducted by the Presbyterian Church of Ghana gave the following reasons: These churches proclaim with considerable strength what miracles happen in their churches; they offer people what they want whether biblically good or not. A very important point, however, is that they care for people, everybody is asked about his personal needs - spiritual or material - and prayed for. People are assured of salvation and help and proofs and guarantees are also given. A large

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1. Bantu Prophets in South Africa, 2nd edition, Oxford 1961.

number of Christians join spiritual churches because they are disappointed with their former churches. The complaint is often aired that there is no spiritual power, that worship is dull, that church agents are hypocrites and that there is not sufficient prayer in the old churches. Such persons therefore seek younger and more zealous religious fellowship.

Many non-Christians find their way easily into these churches because their worship is less intellectual, the educational standard of the ministers are usually lower and there is less respect for the status of people. Moreover regulations are not too strict and converts are quickly admitted to baptism. Their worship is usually very appealing and people take an active part in it, and besides, the services are enriched by dancing, hand-clapping and the use of rhythmic instruments. The great stress on the Bible is reminiscent of the Reformation and its ideal of "back to the Scriptures".<sup>1</sup> It must be emphasized that their appeal to the Bible does not necessarily lead to conduct that is strictly and essentially of biblical inspiration, nevertheless it may be noted that the appeal is constantly to the Bible and not to traditions and regulations. The absence of traditions may be a handicap, but at least it frees them to select whatever is desirable and useful for their people. Also by their divine healing, which plays a predominant role in all the spiritual churches, they are helping to draw attention to the spiritual side of sickness and healing.

On the whole, the development of spiritual churches could be seen as a response to the changing times, an attempt to answer to the needs and crises of the contemporary world. The spiritual churches do serve the purpose of re-orienting certain individuals, who otherwise would have gone off the cliff, back into society, and help them to maintain social and personal equilibrium. Also, in responding to such needs as promotion, need for jobs, successful business undertaking, these churches demonstrate the effect of social change on contemporary life. For, needs have changed with the impingement of industrialization, urbanization, population growth and the increase of contact with the outside world.

Theologically speaking, the spiritual churches attempt to do what the historical churches have often failed to do: to graft the Gospel on to African tradition, and thus showing, in effect, that cultural continuity is very much

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1. In most cases, the Bible is the only literature possessed by members and the Holy Book remains the only source of legitimation in their posture against the historical churches.

extant; for much of the older life still persists and is given a place in Christian life and worship. Indigenous beliefs are often syncretized with Christian and Islamic beliefs. Allen and Mary Spitzer wrote: "When one religious structure is superimposed upon another, an older religious structure, a reorganization of religious expression occurs. There is a tendency for the symbols of earlier beliefs to grow through the overlay of new concepts, resulting in a syncretic fusion of what are regarded to be absolutes in both systems, which may or may not be in conflict".<sup>1</sup> Busia also wrote: ..... "as one watches the daily lives and activities of the people and takes account of the rites connected with marriage, birth, death, widowhood, harvest and installations to traditional offices, one learns that a great deal of the normal communal activities of the converts lie outside their Christian activities, and that for all their influence, the Christian churches are still alien institutions intruding upon but not integrated with the social institutions."<sup>2</sup>

What needs to be appreciated is that what the missionaries brought to Africa and elsewhere was not only the Gospel, but the values and techniques of an entire civilization, and that no culture worth its name would not resist to some degree, the invasion of another culture, no matter how many benefits and advantages the invasion might bring. In a major sense we could look at the spiritual churches as the response of one total culture to another, for they combine in themselves the acceptance and resistance, on the part of Africans, of what the missionaries brought, hence of Christianity and westernism.

### Reflection of African beliefs in Spiritual Churches

Closely related to traditional religious beliefs are those involving medical practices and the two concepts are so intertwined that attempts at medical cure originate in religious practices. The belief is firmly held that "since every illness has a spiritual cause, it should be dealt with 'spiritually'".<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Religious reorganization among the Montana Blackfeet" in *Sociology of Religion*, ed. Knudten, Richard D. Appleton, Century and Crofts, New York 1967.
  2. Sekondi Takoradi Survey 1951, p.79.
  3. Baeta, C.G. *Prophetism in Ghana*, SCM 1965, p.55.



As in traditional religious belief every serious illness is believed to be caused by some sin and some atonement has to be made before healing and recovery can proceed. The leader of the Mameneda Gyidifo (the Saviour Church) expresses himself thus: "My main aim is not to heal but to preach. However, if people come for healing I receive them and pray for them. I always ask them first of all to confess their sins which they have committed, because every serious illness is caused by some sin. Occasionally we hold fasts to aid the prayers for healing".<sup>1</sup> This practice of confessing sins is the rule with medical practice by herbalists and priests at shrines who engage in healing.

Usually a sacrifice is made to atone for the sins of the patient, and either a fowl or sheep, depending on the gravity of the illness, is slaughtered either before or after healing. This is reminiscent of the practice in the Church of Messiah of the "Ram Offering". The patient offers a sacrificial animal and through the sacrificial ritual he is supposed to participate in and realise the forgiveness of God. The shedding of the blood symbolizes the sacrificial animal going up to God; the person making the offering thus identifies himself with the sacrificial victim and through this act a reconciliation is effected between him and God, and this either prepares the way for healing or assures eventual recovery.

In connection with the "Ram Offering", there is a symbolism which needs to be taken into account. After the ram has been sacrificed, the legs, head and neck are presented to the Spiritual Father or leader of the Church. This represents a carry-over from traditional sacrificial ritual at shrines in which the aforementioned parts of the sacrificial victim go to the priest who "carries the god", as he in fact does on occasions during public worship. The idea is that the priest who carries the god needs to have his head, neck and legs strengthened in order that he may carry out his ritualistic duties much more efficiently.

It is also the practice in the Church of Messiah for the congregation to partake of the sacrificial animal in the temple. The ceremony of eating together helps to establish a fraternal community between the sacrificers and God. Moreover, the sacrifice of the ram certainly represents a transformation in the significance of the old notion that to rend and consume a strong animal enables the eaters to absorb its potencies.

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1. Ibid. p.73.

Rites of passage play a prominent role in the life of homo religiosus, and of particular importance in this regard is the rite of "Naming the Child" in the Church of Messiah. As is customary in Ghanaian communities, a new-born child is brought into public view a week or so after birth. On this occasion, "kpodziemo" or outdooring, the child receives a name and thereby acquires the status of a true and living person. He is then incorporated into the community of the living, but before then he has only a physical existence, and until the outdooring ceremony is performed, the child remains nameless and outside the ranks of society, so to speak.

A week or so after a child is born, his parents take him to the temple of the Church of Messiah. Usually the Spiritual Father makes "spiritual enquiries" about what name should be given to the child, and it is believed to come to him during meditation. For the ceremony itself, water, salt and honey are used (in the traditional Ghanaian custom water and wine or an alcoholic beverage are used). The Spiritual Father dips his forefinger into water, calls out the name of the child, and says: "This day I give you water, as a flower planted in the Garden of Jesus Christ; that you may grow to yield a flower to his teaching; that the flower may be as a rose to all mankind." With the salt he says: "This day I give unto you salt, and according to the interpretation of the Bible - you are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot. Therefore from this day, may your life be like salt and may all trials and temptations which may come your way be wiped away now and forever." Finally with the honey the Spiritual Father says: "This day I give unto you honey, which is the sweetness of all mankind. May this honey wipe away all trials and temptations. Now we do not give you this name to be lazy, but rather you should take up the Cross of Christ and follow Him in the wilderness, in the bush and in the villages. In the Akan outdooring ceremony too the child receives some moral instruction.

Some of the leaders of Spiritual churches borrow the pattern of Akan chieftaincy, sitting in state and surrounded by their assistants. Their linguists carry large crosses as staffs and their court criers shout Amen - amen. And in many instances also, the church is patterned after traditional social organization, with various elders to whom power has been delegated, the leader being approached only in extreme cases, as far as the internal organization of the church is concerned.

Some of the superstitious features of traditional religion can be seen in the Spiritual churches in the use of Florida water, handkerchiefs with written

Biblical quotations put under pillows to ward off evil (Brother Lawson's Divine Healer's Church, Mamprobi, Accra). Many prophets foretell the future as a regular feature of their worship, the same as in traditional religion; they make confident promises, point out the dangers of life and show how they can be avoided. In this way people's fears and anxieties are dispelled and they are provided some security in their insecurity. Religion thus becomes, in Reinhold Niebuhr's words, "a citadel of hope built on the edge of insecurity."

People who have found help with a leader continues to come to him, but sometimes if he fails they move on to another church. The number of attendants at Spiritual church services as well as the number of people who consult prophets vary considerably from time to time, depending on the prophets' ability to deliver the goods. The practice is reminiscent of the attitude to priests and mediums of shrines; usually the god who delivers the goods retains his following, otherwise people flock to other more powerful gods with effective mediums.

Certain traditional taboos are also carried over into the religious observances of the Spiritual Churches. A notable example of this is the taboo regarding women in their monthly period, though some leaders cite the Old Testament for their support. But practically among all the tribes of Ghana, in the olden days and still to a large extent today, women during their period had to live and sleep outside the house. In the Musama Disco Christo Church, for example, there used to be special regulations excluding women from participation in worship services and all other public functions during their monthly period, and although such regulations have been abandoned or greatly relaxed, the women voluntarily keep themselves apart during this time "in order to increase their own purity".<sup>1</sup> In the Prayer and Healing Group of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church at Etodome however, "no woman is allowed to enter the house of prayer during her monthly period".<sup>2</sup> Likewise in the Aladura Church the following regulation is strictly observed: "No female member of the Church working under the aegis of this Organization, who shall be after the manner of women, that is to say, observing menstruation, or who have borne a child (if a boy, shall continue in their blood until after thirty-three days, or if a girl, shall continue in their blood until after sixty-six days until the day of their purification shall be fulfilled) shall while in such circumstances enter into the House of Prayer to worship or otherwise; such female members may however attend the services of the church and

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1. Ibid. p.54.

2. Ibid. p.99.

take their seats in the appropriate place or places provided for them."<sup>1</sup>

Polygamy, sanctioned by the old religion, has reasserted itself in some of the Spiritual Churches, although it cannot be said to have been the major reason for their breach with established churches. In the Memeneda Gyidifo (Saturday Believers) Church, polygamy is normal and on one is restricted as to the number of wives he could have. The concern of the church is not how many wives a person should have but rather with the ability to maintain peace, harmony and good order in his home and family.<sup>2</sup> The Musama Disco Christo Church, according to Professor Baeta, practices "controlled polygamy". It is generally assumed in the church, that polygamy is the form of marriage willed by God, and the church regulation simply states that everybody is to marry "according to God's will". The church regulation says: "We believe that (as an Afri can Church) polygamy is not a moral sin."<sup>3</sup> Control, however, is exercised in the choice of partners by the fact that each marriage in the church must be approved of by the leader and be blessed by the Church. Also in the Apostolic Revelation Society, polygamy is allowed without any limit being placed on the number of wives. Loose living in sexual matters is however prohibited. The Church of The Twelve Apostles also allows polygamy. Baeta writes: "There is no limit to the number of wives that a man may have, provided only that he is in a position to make reasonable provision for them. Whereas no divorced person may marry another in the same local congregation, there is no objection to re-marriage with fellow members from other places, or with non-members. There is no compulsion on members to bring their partners in marriage into the group, though they are expected to try to win them."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid. p.124.

2. Ibid. p.72.

3. Ibid. p.58.

4. Ibid. p.18.

Most of these groups which allow polygamy do cite the Bible as their authority. Such passages as Gen. 16:2; 11 Sam. 12:8; 1 Cor. 7:36 are often used. This is done in order to give the practice a "Christian" flavour and support. However, polygamy as a form of marriage is so accepted in African tradition that it does not need Biblical support which in this case is a later addition. It may be said that the Bible however gives additional support but is not the source of the practice. It may also further be pointed out that not all the Spiritual Churches practice polygamy; others like the Church of Messiah in Madina, are strictly monogamous in marriage practice, and do not even allow polygamists to partake of the Eucharist.

Mention must also be made of the removal of footwear before entering the sanctuary which is the practice in the Church of Messiah, Memeneda Gyidifo Church, the Prayer and Healing Group of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Aladura Church. Various reasons are given for this, but of primary concern to us is the practice in African tradition where a person removes his shoes before a chief or a shrine, as a sign of reverence. Other groups cite the story of Moses and the burning bush "No footwear of any kind can be taken into our house of prayer. This is God's law, made plain without any possibility of useful controversy over it, by the biblical example of Moses and the burning bush."<sup>1</sup> The same practice may also be of Islamic origin, and this is particularly the case in the Aladura Church and the Church of Messiah.

### Conclusion

The syncretic fusion of ideas both Christian and African, evidenced in the Spiritual Churches, contributes in making them an acceptable mosaic to their adherents. As was said earlier, the Spiritual Churches combine in themselves what was accepted and what was rejected by the recipients of the Christian Evangel. The large number of people flocking to these Churches would seem to indicate that some need is being met. More important, however, is the familiarity which one finds in these independent Churches. Membership does not compel or demand the radical break with tradition, as it was the case in the mission-established Churches, so that converts find the transition relatively easy to make. This fact contributes significantly to the "bridging" function served by Spiritual Churches which are on the crest of a new wave of expansion.

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1. Ibid. p.98.

What this study reveals is that there exists a continuity of traditional African culture, despite the fragmentation and other influences which contact with Western culture has effected within it. And yet what one finds is not totally in line with unadulterated tradition, which can no longer be maintained, but a blending of both old and new, a synthesis of the apostolic "kerygma" with authentic African insight.