

# *Humanities*

## **The Effects of Missionaries on West Africa**

Macy Janney

This paper was written for Dr. Brevik's Humanities II course.

When one thinks of a missionary, he or she mostly concentrates on the task of the missionary to spread a religion, which the missionary believes to be a necessity in the lives of the people he or she is trying to reach. However, missionaries have often resulted in more effects than simply the spreading of a religion but have also brought with them a complete change of lifestyle. The ethnocentric outlook of the missionaries prevented them from completely understanding the natives of West Africa and led to missionaries influencing other areas of the West Africans' lives besides religion. The effects of missionaries on West Africa included a loss of cultural identity, a change in the unity of West Africa, an increase of nationalism, and a spread of Christianity due to trained black missionaries.

The natives of West Africa experienced a loss of cultural identity due to the westernization the missionaries brought along with Christianity. Reid states in "Missionaries and West African Nationalism" that missionaries symbolized "Christian values, western schools, hospitals, and churches" (225). Likewise, Mario Vargas Llosa writes in *The Storyteller* of how the linguistic center, which consists of Christian missionaries in Peru, wants to enforce a new lifestyle upon the Machiguengas and "wipe their culture, their gods, their institutions off the map and corrupt even their dreams" (97). The West Africans who accepted Christianity were automatically westernized while those who maintained the Muslim or tribal beliefs avoided westernization of their lifestyles (DeLombard 324). In *Things Fall Apart*, westernization occurs when the Christian churches accept the twins and outcasts of Umuofia, which completely goes against Umuofian tradition (Achebe 155). The West Africans also lost part of their cultural identity in the field of education, since the tribal history and beliefs were no longer taught. The Christian education used the Bible to teach reading and language skills and western practices and beliefs (Reid 226). Even the government structure changed in West Africa as church and colonial structures tried to enforce parliamentary systems on the West Africans (Reid 228). In *Things Fall Apart*, the white missionaries westernize the Umuofian government by including a court, a district commissioner, and court messengers (Achebe 174). Akpan even states that the Liberians "in spite of their colour, they were, as a rule, as foreign, and lacking in sentimental attachment to Africa as were European colonists elsewhere in Africa like the

British, the French, the Portuguese, and the Spainards" (219). The permeation of western ideas into West Africa made the African unrecognizable to their traditional culture. Christian missionaries could not abandon their ways of life and structures when trying to spread the gospel to the West Africans, which resulted in the infiltration of western life into West African life.

Missionaries from the United States contributed to the cultural loss of the Liberians, specifically, by spreading Christianity and expecting immediate changes in traditions as a result. The American Colonization Society automatically equated the spreading of Christianity in Liberia with the introduction of civilization into the country as well (Akpan 226). As a result, dramatic changes came to Liberia as the gospel began to penetrate more and more into Liberia. Fyfe informs that in the 1980's American missionaries and preachers, such as Billy Graham, came to Liberia and Christianity began increasing in the country (337). Churches became so prominent in Liberia that the Christians began to outnumber the tribal people, and the native tribes began to be classified as the outsiders (Goodwin 337). As a result the Liberian churches began to prohibit the Liberian people from taking part in practices, such as drumming and dancing, which were an important part of the Liberian culture (Fyfe 337). Akpan discusses how the natives began to wear western clothing, which consisted of black coats and silk dresses, after the arrival of the white missionaries. The Liberians even began to build their houses or brick frames like Americans and began to favor American food, such as butter and bacon (219). In Liberia, Christian missionaries felt that if the natives accepted the religion, other changes would also result, such as changes in clothing and traditional practices, since certain customs, such as going about half naked, were considered immoral in the eyes of the missionaries.

Not only did American missionaries change the cultural identity of the Liberians through religion but also through the westernization of government and language. According to Fyfe, Christianity became a necessity for positions of power in the Liberian government. The Masonic Order and the True Whig Party were largely influenced by Christianity in Liberia. Even the president, vice-president, and the chairman of the True Whig Party were all leaders in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches (336). Due to the great American influence in the country, Liberia accepted a Declaration of Independence, and a Constitution containing a Bill of Rights that mimicked the similar documents of the United States government (Goodwin 336). Dalton states that the flag that Liberia adopted even looked just like the American flag except that the Liberian flag only had one star. The United States dollar was also adopted in Liberia, and the English language became the national language of Liberia (572). The government of Liberia was, therefore, leaving behind a more communal government and was leaning toward more of a republic and democracy. Akpan even discusses that the Liberian people

began buying their own land instead of keeping the land as a community (219). Such widespread permeation of the American culture into Liberia demonstrates how aggressive the American missionaries were in spreading the American ideals and shows that the American missionaries had a greater goal than just simple acceptance of Christianity.

The missionaries who came to Liberia and West Africa affected the unity of the natives in positive and negative ways. When the missionaries first came to West Africa and Liberia, the division of the continent made it easier for the missionaries to take control in West Africa. Similarly, the narrator states in *The Storyteller* that “their primitive state made them, rather, victims of the worst exploitation and cruelty” (74). Missionaries taught everyone in West Africa the same language, so communication in West Africa increased as the language barriers decreased (Reid 225). Likewise, as communication increased, unity also increased among the natives of West Africa. As a result of the missionaries’ work and goals, the tribal and ethnic separation began to decrease as well (Reid 225). Reid also states that the majority of the unity which Christian missionaries helped to achieve was nonpolitical (226). However, the work of the Christian missionaries in West Africa also brought division among the families and the tribes between those natives who would, and the people who would not accept Christianity. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe writes of how Nwoye tells Obierika that he no longer considers Okonkwo as his father since he has accepted the new religion of Christianity, and as a result, the family unit is destroyed (144). Also demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart* is how faithful, traditional tribal members want to be completely separated from the new Christian believers in the village. The Mbantan leaders refuse to allow the Christian women in the village to fill their water pots during the Holy Week because the leaders want the Christians to be alienated from the rest of the village after a Christian kills the sacred python of the tribe (159). Even division came among the African American missionaries and the Liberians who had never been to America. Killingray states that the variation of cultures and outlooks on world issues, as well as the contrasting societies that the African Americans and the Liberians came from, contributed to the division between the two groups (10). The extreme ethnocentric view the white missionaries had of the Liberian and West African society also had a great impact on the division among white missionaries and the Africans who refused to accept Christianity. Akpan concludes that white missionaries and leaders often had a superior attitude towards the African people, which made the missionaries disdain some African practices and cause disagreements among the two groups (225). The two-fold effect the Christian missionaries had on the unity of the tribes in West Africa and Liberia contributed to the difficult task of coexistence on the continent of Africa.

Questions concerning equality in the schools and churches that the missionaries formed led to a great movement of nationalism among West Africans and Liberians. Reid states in "Missionaries and West African Nationalism" that "the genesis of most of the independent movements was a struggle for African equality in the churches and elsewhere in society" (233). Many West Africans received their education through churches that the missionaries formed (Goodwin 338). Often white missionaries, who might be more favorable to white people, were in charge of the schools, and as a result, the African people began to want to take control once again of the affairs in their villages. Akpan claims that not only the schools but also the government was originally ruled by white people the missionaries were associated with in Liberia. Liberia consisted of white American governors and a legislative council chosen by the American Colonization Society and the colonists in the country (218). Sadly, at times, the government leaders would treat the tribal Liberians harshly and tyrannize the native Africans by taking their anger out on the Liberians because the government leaders were not paid sufficient amounts of money for their jobs. Missionaries used the westernization and complete control of Liberia to their advantage hoping the Liberian people would convert more easily. For example, white missionaries in Liberia formed the American Colonization society in order to have a greater influence on the country of Liberia (Akpan 220). The Christian principle of equality enforced these feelings of nationalism among the native people of West Africa and Liberia. As a result, nationalism became a primary part of the West Africans' life. Goodwin claims in "America's Only Foreign Colonial Settlement" that Joseph J. Robert finally led Liberia into gaining its independence (336). However, Reid informs that the African nationalists still had similar goals as the Christian missionaries because Christianity symbolized freedom to the Africans and served as the basis for the African nationalists' beliefs. The goals of the African nationalists and Christian missionaries included African unity, westernization, and anti-tribal qualities (229). Although nationalism brought division among missionaries and West Africans because missionaries, at times, did not want to give up their control, Christian goals and ideas were still incorporated into West Africa because of the large influence Christianity had on the people of West Africa prior to independent movements.

The training of black missionaries greatly impacted the extent to which Christianity spread in West Africa. Gray writes that African ministers were very prominent after the white missionaries began training them on how to witness to the people in West Africa. Gray states in "Christianity, Colonialism, and Communications in Sub-Saharan Africa" that "the rapid spread of Christianity resulted from African preachers who had been trained by missionaries" (60). Gray also states in "Christianity and Religious Change in Africa" that African Christians have experiences of "industrialization, and

racism, of protest and nationalism, of the liberation of women and the of the debate with revolutionary socialism and secularism” that other Africans faced (91). Sometimes news and other religions are accepted and have a greater impact on the society when the information and source of change is from a person’s own native people because the native people better understand their own culture. Achebe even writes in *Things Fall Apart* that one of the first actions the white missionaries take involves sending the converted natives as evangelists out to other villages to spread the good news of the gospel (143). Of the six missionaries that come to Umuofia, only one man was a white man and the other five men are black (144). Christian missionaries quickly realized that the training of Black missionaries brought quicker results and conversions to the West African people.

African American missionaries also made a great contribution to the country of Liberia in the spreading of the gospel. Killingray records that African missionary work has been a great influence in Liberia since the nineteenth century (9). According to Killingray, Lott Cary began the African American missionary work in Liberia because he desperately wanted to reach his race and the Richmond African Missionary Society of which he was a part (6). Just as Liberians accepted Christianity more welcomingly when the teachings came from their own people, African missionaries had more desire to spread Christianity among their own people as well. African Americans felt a desperate need to forewarn the native Africans of the continuance of their current traditions, which increased the impact of the work of the black missionaries. The African American missionaries were caring for their people and were more passionate about reaching the Liberians. For example, Edward Wilmot Blyden was a primary African American missionary in Liberia who supported the American nationalist and independent movement (Killingray 13). Blyden wanted to work in a country where the color of his skin would not prohibit his success (Killingray 13). Akpan states, interestingly, that Blyden was different than most missionaries and believed that the tribal African culture in Liberia had practices and ideas that were worth protecting (227). Alexander Crummell was also an important missionary in Africa who pastured and aided in the politics of Liberia (Killingray 13). African missionaries also greatly impacted the country of Liberia more so compared to the other countries of Africa. According to Killingray, the largest amount of black missionaries who spoke English went to Liberia and by the 1900’s sixty-eight black missionaries were in the country (22). Not only did the African American missionaries aid the country in religion and politics, but also in medicine. Malekebu formed a medical mission in Liberia as well (Killingray 5). The similarities of skin color between the missionaries and the natives helped to contribute the vast religious changes in the country of Liberia.

The effects of the Christian missionaries on West Africa and Liberia

definitely brought more results than just the spreading of Christianity but also contributed to changes in government, culture, tradition, language, and relationships. The infiltration of western ideas into West Africa and Liberia through the spreading of Christianity demonstrates how aggressive the western culture is compared to the West African tribal culture. The question arises whether or not the tribal cultures should have been preserved and if coexistence of the Christian beliefs and the tribal traditions and lifestyle, which included outcasts and human sacrifices, was possible. The Christian missionaries decided that westernization and Christianity went hand in hand since some traditions of the tribal Africans, such as outcast, limited clothing, and human sacrifice, went against the principles of the Bible in Christianity. Opposing views, however, would state that the American food, clothing and manners of government are more evil than the savage practices of the tribal Africans that can result in paganism or the abandonment or killing of innocent people in Africa.

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