DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE:  
THE TRANCE AND CHRISTIANITY 
IN SOUTHERN GHANA

In southern Ghana, Christianity appears to be in a state of spiritual ferment, and the manifestations of this are proving somewhat unsettling for the orthodox faiths.

Two young relations of mine, a girl and a boy, recently came down on school vacations and recounted in conversations certain experiences they had had in Christian services. The girl recounted how at various prayer-meetings her schoolmates had behaved in strange ways, suggesting that something had occurred to them or taken hold of them. The boy, thirteen years old, told me how in a similar prayer-meeting he had felt a sensation of dizziness and mild bodily vibrations as other boys started shaking and uttering words in very strange tongues. Strange things—in Roman Catholic schools.

In the Roman Catholic Church of Accra, a similar incident occurred when a prominent ecclesiastic was saying mass for some charismatic groups. As the host rose over their heads at consecration, the silence of the moment was broken with a sudden commotion. A woman had fallen into a swoon, kicking and shaking, and she had to be carried out as the mass continued. The elderly gentleman who recounted this incident to me asked in dismay what the Church was heading for. He was convinced in his own mind that what had occurred was a trance (Akan nti), something that belonged to traditional religion. And such incidents are now becoming commonplace among Christian groups.

While some pastors and priests of the orthodox churches treat trance manifestations with caution and even cynicism, others appear quite ready to accept them and go as far as to encourage the formation in their parishes of charismatic and spiritualist prayer groups, believing that this would check the movement out of their own churches and into the mushroom spiritual sects and prayer groups springing up all over southern Ghana. The anxiety of the churchmen suggests that the tendency of believers to move openly or secretly from one religious group to another is quite widespread in southern Ghana and out of their control. Are the trance and the space of conversions reactionary—delayed, maybe—to orthodox Christianity?

Rudolf Otto has defined the essence of religion as the quest for the experience of the divine, such as mystics obtain through contemplation. In Divinity and Experience, Godfrey Liebhard observed that for the Dinka divinity is apprehended in the experience of order in reaction to disorder, life in relation to death, and in other experiential opposites. Divinity is comprehended in and through natural experience. In the implied perspective of this observation, Liebhardt not only uncovered how in many other cultures ordinary mortals, people who do not see themselves as mystics or divines, apprehend divinity; more than this, he also affirmed that the experience of divinity, much like natural sense experience, is received in the conceptual categories and socially approved dispositions and expectations of a people's culture.

In this light, one can assume that, as the level of religious consciousness, there would occur reactions to Christian modalities of apprehending divinity, especially where, as in the socio-cultural ambience of southern Ghana, there is a strong awareness of a contrasting, ethnic religious mode of apprehension. And it is this I intend to explore, as, indeed, trance manifestations and frequent conversions are elements related in ethnic religious praxis to the modes of apprehending divinities.

The Logic of the Trance Response: From Doubt to the Certainty of Belief

To many southern Ghanian converts to Christianity, and for many Christians who appear to achieve reconversion in maturity (the 'born again'), some


declaration of the basis of their faith is often asked for. To the question, 'To what do you owe your belief in Christ?',...it no longer seems sufficient to declare such a faith on the basis of the truth of the Church's teaching and the truth of the Bible. What the faithful apparently desire is evidence that affirms one's faith; and this leads to testimonies of a personal kind that enables one to claim to have come to know that Christ is the Lord.

The crucial aspect of the justification of faith demanded of converts—by others and by themselves—is that the evidence proving personal apprehension of the unseen is often derived from a specific cultural milieu and often based on a premise central to the religious framework of that culture. The question at the basis of this urge to justify one's new-found faith comes down to this: what is the evidence that is required by, and within, the pre-existing system of belief to justify personal conviction that an 'unknown divinity' exists or possesses the power and charisma to merit devotion and personal allegiance.  

Genius that he was, St Paul saw the importance of this epistemological issue. He saw that as peoples with strong traditions, the Greeks and Jews would withhold faith in Christ pending conviction on their own cultural premises. And these premises were different. Thus, as he remarked, Jews required miracles and Greeks reason. And he added, certain of a perplexed and cynical response, 'We proclaim the crucified Christ.' To the Jews, this was a scandal—a dead divinity is inconceivable; and to the Greeks, an absolute irrationality—the non-material cannot die. The Christian faith demanded belief that was out of this world. credo quas absurdim.  

On this basis, what might we point to as the kind of evidence on which faith in an unknown divinity might rest among devotees of southern Ghanaian traditional religion? This is most likely to be the same sort of evidence they would use to judge any new faith or cult based on belief in a new divinity. Signs, miracles or wonder events (Akan anoonwaa, Ga naakpee zene, Ewe nukunu) they would greedily consume with their eyes and ears and believe. They would also demand the wisdom behind accepting such a cult—and reason that a god migrated from somewhere, protected themselves, or get money, a child, or a higher god. Thus, when giving testimony for their faith, people attempt to point to some incident which appears miraculous, or to something beneficial, a windfall, that might suggest a coincidence with a religious act; and this conforms to traditional practice.

Personal testimonies or declarations, however, reveal the power of divinity in a subjective manner. Few testimonies stand up to critical rational examination. Many testimonies too are no more than stories, some being highly flavoured if not exaggerated, others being downright falsehoods. Be this as it may, such experiences as are reported constitute only an indirect revelation of divinity. The presence of divinity is inferred from them; they scarcely ever indicate which divinity it is that granted one the special favour, or in what special way it seeks to relate to a particular individual or society. Moreover, wonder events could be the works of evil spirits and the gods.

Even if the stories are true, peoples of southern Ghana seem to distinguish, as all believers do, between indirect means of knowing divinity, a person, a thing—knowledge that—and direct means of knowing divinity, a place or thing (knowledge by direct experience); and the culture suggests that the ultimate proof of the bond of faith to a divinity should derive from, and rest in, direct experience and knowledge of the divine. The cultural mode of experiencing direct communication of divine power is the trance. Apparitions, dreams and visions are perceived by individuals; it is only the trance that reveals the identity and power of a deity for others to witness.

The Trance in Southern Ghanaian Culture

In southern Ghana, the rhythmic bodily vibrations and the physiological changes identified everywhere as the trance are taken as the manifestation of a vibrant force (Akan amo, Ewe ames). While the phenomenon persists, the agent loses self-awareness and has no responsibility for the altered behaviour. To explain the behaviour, traditional belief claims that the agent is seized and controlled by a power and a consciousness that are divine.

While men and women may devote themselves to a divinity, it is only possession that grants the individual the repu of an agent of a particular divinity. The trance is thus the means by which individuals justify their allegiance to particular divinities and establish conviction in the need to pay reverence to such divinities. Also, to be a priest, priestess, an important votary of a cult, one has to be possessed, and one has to undergo a course of training in order to learn to use the trance as a means of getting the unseen to reveal the unknown. By marking a calling to the priesthood of a particular divinity, the

6. As among the Dinka, 'experience of living is here clearly the basis from which comes such theoretical or purely cognitive apprehension of Divinity and Powers as the Dinka have, for moral and social disorder are more immediately known than Divinity...' (Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience, p. 158).

7. Emphasizing the immediacy of the experience of the divine, Bevan wrote (Symbolism and Belief, p. 254): 'it seems to be the making acquainted with something really there, to be an objective feeling'. Cf. also Odd Nordland, 'Shamanism as an Experiencing of the Unreal', in Carl-Martin Edman (ed.), Studies in Shamanism, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1967, p. 177.


5. Good News Bible, v Cor. 92.2.
trance thus often serves as the only means for creating a new sect and converting people to join a cult of an 'unknown deity'.

But in southern Ghanaian cultures, anyone may become possessed anywhere and at any time. During the Gba and Fantii Yam festival of twins, twin spirits are believed to come to ride in the pans and palm in which the garbage of the day’s cooking and feasting are carried to a riverside or lagoon for disposal. Persons who carry such palms are expected to go into trance, and such trances often occur. If the expected trance does not come, the explanation given is that the persons are either not clean or their heads are 'heavy' (Akan dura). When the trance occurs too readily, the usual explanation is that the persons have a 'light head' (Akan nri ni je fa). Some of the techniques used to stimulate the heavy-headed to go into trance are to increase the tempo and volume of singing and clapping, to drop herbal infusions and decoctions into the eye, or to invite the spirits with copious libations. When such techniques fail, great anxiety is expressed about the state of society, and consultations and sacrifices ensue.10

Episodes of possession also occur when devotees carry their gods and other ritual objects on ritual occasions. They occur on state occasions when the black chiefly stools are carried. And they occur in necromancy. Often, however, ordinary young girls and boys are spontaneously seized with the convulsive movements of the trance at funerals, at cult celebrations and even at market-places. And these incidents are taken seriously. On such occasions, attempts are made to 'wash the mouth' of these individuals to enable the possessing spirits to speak.

A possessing spirit might reveal a hidden sin in the society and order the appropriate punishment to be meted out to the culprit or the cleansing rite to be performed. Through the trance, a god or ancestor might indicate the presence of conflict in society and ask for its resolution. A possessing deity might tell of an impending danger to an individual, a family, a village or a state, and suggest appropriate sacrifices. In a positive, constructive way, a possessing god might suggest how a ritual performance might be altered, or give approval for new social arrangements between individuals and groups, especially regarding customs. The trance serves also to purge the individual and society of emotions of hostility, ill will, sorrow. It often serves as the climax of an intense social or ritual celebration. When the gods come to dance it creates excitement, and the people go into paroxysms of joy.11 Through these means, the trance directs and regulates personal and collective lives in society.

Possession is not always expected to lead to prophetic pronouncements. Those who carry ritual objects and festival garbage and fall into trance need not speak and prophecy, nor need priests and priestesses when they perform the akom (trance) dance. The fact that people often compete to carry the twin garbage, for example, attests to the belief that those who do so receive special blessings or some good fortune. Their trade might prosper, they might become successful, or their much criticized character might show a sudden change for the better—a charismatic conversion, so to speak—and thus bring them a new respect in their homes. The collective body might find in the trance a source of satisfaction, the trance being a clear sign that some celebration or event has received the approval of the divinities.12 This possession is viewed most generally as an end in itself, and it is desired for its own sake. This intrinsic value of the trance rests on the belief that the trance brings divinities into direct contact and communion with society—humbankind acquiring gifts akin to the divine, the divine becoming humanized.13

In southern Ghanaian cultures, possession thus serves to establish order in the lives of the people.14 It illuminates the noumenal, enabling persons to reach the desired end of religious quest everywhere—the experience of the divine. It enlarges the universe of the unseen by revealing unknown divinities and creating new and more relevant relationships between the human world and the unseen. It structures and renews the moral framework which is the bedrock of social order; and it checks or canalizes disruptive forces in society, especially in situations of social change or distress. It enables individuals to make decisions that help them adjust to their roles and statuses in society.15

The trance possession thus assures certainty in a state of religious, conceptual, normative, institutional and emotional confusion and uncertainties. It gives positive direction and support in situations of needed change. It transforms a situation of negative liminality into one of positive liminality.

On account of these vital functions, the trance is likely to be misused to dominate and misdirect society. Especially, it might be misused. Southern Ghanaian cultures therefore protect the trance from adulteration and abuse. The frigid sanctions that were applied in the past indicate why the Amanfo priest or priestess prayed to his or her gods: 'When I become possessed and prophesy for a chief grant that what I have to tell him may not be bad (akombeone).16 This, of course, often made the pronouncements of the possessed so vague and ambiguous that their true import became a matter for interpretation. Such pronouncements often gave riddles rather than clear directional statements.


11. The excitement is often enflamed by the wonder feats performed by the possessed—walking through fire, jumping over a cow, swallowing a sword.

12. Events might build up public expectation of divine approval or disapproval. In such cases, a trance utterance might fulfill a public wish.


15. The life of St Paul is the more dramatic form of role conversion. The trance might assist people to adjust to roles—as father, mother, professional—or dictate new roles.

Where pronouncements of the possessed are directional, especially in matters affecting families and individuals such as some pronouncement on a death, kinship conflicts, the sharing of the property of a deceased relative, there could not be tolerated any hint of self-interest. Thus, in most places, it is by custom and law enjoined that the spirit of a dead person should possess a total stranger before the directions it gives with respect to the distribution of family property can be accepted and treated as binding. If the possessed is a member of the family, the rite of washing the mouth is not performed. This ritual cleansing of the mouth of a person spontaneously seized by a spirit serves to check the use of the trance for personal wish-fulfillment. 17

The Trance as a Christian Phenomenon

The trance is considered by many Christians as the form by which the Holy Spirit manifested its nature and power on the day of Pentecost. It was through possessing the Holy Spirit that the apostles of Christ acquired the spiritual gifts and special insights to preach the word of God and announce the good news of the risen Christ. The occurrence of the trance among the Gentiles strengthened the early Christians in the conviction that non-Jews were also to be accepted and baptized into the community of the faithful. And among sectarian, spiritist, and charismatic Christians of Ghana, these biblical references serve as the charter of legitimation for seeking the trance experience when they meet to worship and pray. 18

In both the southern Ghanaian and Christian belief systems, then, the trance seems to have significance as a vehicle for revealing the nature, power, and approval of divinities, and also for establishing and spreading new religious groups and observances in society. In both systems, the trance is the means for divinizing the individual and society. In both systems, it has a constructive directional force in relation both to stability and change. These similarities might give the Akan, Ewe, or Ga a reason for considering traditional trance a religious phenomenon validated by and not contrary to Christian traditions.

Southern Ghanaians are, however, aware of a definite contrast between the traditional form of the trance and the phenomenon that gave birth to Christianity. While the traditional trance experience is attributed to the actions of the ancestors and the spirits of the dead and to the traditional deities, known and unknown, the pentecostal event is held to have been caused by the Holy Spirit. There is, in consequence of this difference, a cognitive shift in the comprehension of the nature of the trance as it occurs now among Ghanaian Christians. As the received Christian faith did not come with the trance phenomenon (which was in fact condemned), possession and its physical manifestations can be seen only in terms of their identity with, if not derivation from, Ghanaian traditional religious forms and experiences. But the Christian faith demands rejection of traditional deities. In stories of possession experiences in Christian worship, the Ghanaians therefore allude to forces recognized in the Christian faith—first the Holy Spirit, and secondly to the angels and saints.

The trance as it occurs in Christian places of prayer is therefore a synthetic religious phenomenon. It combines in itself the phenomenological aspect of African religious consciousness and the supernatural elements of Christian belief.

The Marginalized in Urgent Pursuit of the Divine: The Reaction to Conversion

Christian trance and conversion phenomena relate to the mass and almost total marginalization of the Ghanaian populace—economic, social, political, and religious. In a society in which wealth gives power and prestige, poverty is now pervasive and opportunities for advancement also limited. The sense of personal inadequacy is not relieved even with increased academic qualifications, wealth, and higher status. Indeed, increased qualification, wealth, and status may make life more precarious. The professional classes and the wealthy live in constant fear of their lives and positions. Political and economic instability have brought sudden and cruel falls to many persons in high positions; and most people cling to their statuses in life with a great sense of insecurity, even the law to which they could appeal for security has itself become most insecure. All classes of people, both high and low, are therefore marginalized in material and qualitative terms. In the human domain, one clearly has no power to alter one’s condition for the better. 19

To order one’s life, now and for the future, most people thus feel the need to open themselves up to supernatural aid and therefore seek a channel of communication to forces outside the human domain. Those strongly moved in this quest are those most pressed by straitened circumstances. Under social stress, people outside the Christian faith might seek the Christian denomination or prayer group. Those who are already Christian might seek the church that is more depth of commitment either in their own denominations or, as often happens these days, in another church, sect, or

17. In many African cultures the intrusion of wish-fulfillment is avoided through institutional checks (see Esene, ch. 4), but not, however, in Christian spirit possession.


19. The spread of the spiritual churches and charismatic prayer groups in urban centers has made the phenomenon of possession more an urban than a rural one. In rural life the rhythm of life is more settled, and social security appears assured by the traditional way of life. Men have also limited aspirations.
prayer group. And the expected return for this ‘turning’ or conversion is to have a personal and intimate knowledge of the divine.

In its formal occurrence, the trance is a state of mystical experience induced through a community of worshippers worshipping together and creating a oneness of mind through rhythmic music and synchronized bodily movement or dance that unifies and concentrates emotion to a high level, to dizzy heights that bring ecstasy.24 As this form of worship is seen more or less as the cause of the mystical experience which some individuals obtain, where these experiences are not manifested there is thought to be something amiss in the mode of worship; and this has become the basis of the most widespread reaction to Christianity in the organized form in which we find it in the more orthodox traditions.

The reactions arise mainly in respect of the level and extent of participation that organized worship permits. In this regard, many Christians feel their socio-economic marginalization exacerbated in their religious congregations. The state of poverty, illiteracy and lack of doctrinal education makes the socially marginalized less suited to leading roles in the established churches, though their desire to serve God, which tends to be very high, seeks an outlet in some activity that might reflect their individual charisma and spiritual development and bring them social respectability. Further, in worship, the institutionally marginalized again tend to participate at the periphery. The wealth of spiritual gifts lodged in the Bible, prayer-books and hymn-books are foreclosed to them. The more spontaneous approach to prayer and singing which would win their involvement has no place in the formal ceremonies of the established church; at best, it is restricted. It is to this unspoken rejection that people respond by seeking spiritual fulfilment outside orthodoxy.21

This reaction to the mode of worship in some denominations expresses itself in the growing conviction that the mode of orthodox Christian worship is not ‘inspiring’. Obviously, there seems to be a state of emotional refreshment which Ghanaians expect as a consequence of their participation in worship and which some do not get because of the intellectual and contemplative nature formal ceremonies assume. While every mode of worship would have both emotional and intellectual levels and content, formal orthodox Christian rituals and services appear to be dominated by the intellectualist and contemplative content.22 The great silence, the prescribed and fixed postures forbidding physical stimulation and expression of the emotions, are definitely not generally characteristic of African rituals. Thus in their orthodox forms, Christian sacramental acts become more the means of expressing ideas and getting the theological significance of an article of faith reaffirmed than a means of getting the emotions and anxieties of ordinary men and women purged. In reaction to orthodox forms of Christian ceremonies, many Christians therefore seek a more or less as the cause of the mystical experience which some individuals obtain, where these experiences are not manifested there is thought to be something amiss in the mode of worship; and this has become the basis of the most widespread reaction to Christianity in the organized form in which we find it in the more orthodox traditions.

The Trance and Christianity

Whether reacting to the organized nature of the Church, the lack of excitement of Christian worship, or the non-manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, there is implicit in the attitude of southern Ghanaians Christians to a culturally toned religious expectation. Conditioned by their culture, they are seeking a process which leads to the kind of experience of the divine that they perceive can be found within the modalities of their cultural religious expression. They are seeking a more or less loosely framed religion that gives leeway to individual self-expression; they are craving for catharsis as experienced in traditional forms of worship, and they are seeking that evidence which spirits give when in the traditional situation ‘a god comes’ at the height of traditional worship. And in their culture, the trance is the form in which such aspirations find fulfilment.

As philosophical paradoxes and dilemmas seek solutions by compelling speculative ascent to higher, more abstract levels of thought, so do life’s existential paradoxes demand, for the religious, a search for solutions through ascent to levels of existence that transcend the realm of the sensate, the senses themselves being the source of many of the paradoxes. While conversions express changing convictions in the capacity of different religious frameworks to resolve the paradoxes of human living, it is the different methods by which religions bring people to experience and know the transcendent reality their symbolic systems express that often constitute the radical means for changing people’s religious allegiance.

In terms of the comparison that can be made between the West African trance and Christian (or Islamic or Hindu) mystical experiences, Christian conversions represent the abandonment of a mode of experiencing divinity in which the faithful, recognizing that their faculties are too limited to raise them

20. In children’s play, the whirling associated with the trance dance in Ghana normally creates dininess; see Gell, ‘The Gods at Play’, p. 32.
21. Catholic charismatics are using the element of spontaneity more and more in worship.
22. Since the message of the Christian faith is the basis for the affective content of worship, it will always remain important in worship.
up to the divine, see themselves as 'receptors', passive entities of the divine, and seek, through collective effort, to induce divinities down from the transcendent plane to make contact with them and surmise them with qualities of the divine. Orthodox Christianity taught a mode of access to divinity that relied on the mental and contemplative efforts of individuals, who should induce themselves to rise beyond their base human nature, through activities that arrested bodily appetites and functions (e.g., fasts and abstinence), to achieve contact with divinity on a higher plane of existence. The latter is most difficult for most people; whence the return to the former, represented by pentecostal, spiritualist and charismatic religious expressions.

Conclusion

By identifying the trance as a Christian mystical form, the southern Ghanaian has acquired a vehicle for impressing some of the modalities of traditional religion on Christianity:

1. 'Affective mysticism' has gained emphasis, restoring some balance with 'contemplative mysticism' in Christian religion.
2. Community worship as a vehicle of spiritual transport to the realms of the divine has assumed a new significance.
3. Different denominations are credited with special charisma, and one might seek spiritual relief in them according to need.
4. Life-long allegiance may be pledged to the religion of one's parents or infancy, but individual experience may indicate participation in other worshipful groups.

In consequence of all these, southern Ghanaian culture is giving a new mould to the Christian faith, as people experience divinity, as Godfrey Lienhardt described it, through natural experience and their own cultural lenses.

FRANCIS M. DENG

Dinka Response to Christianity: The Pursuit of Well-Being in a Developing Society

Introduction

Among the Dinka, as with many other African peoples, the reception of the Christian message of salvation has been ambivalent. As Godfrey Lienhardt has persuasively argued in his article 'The Dinka and Catholicism', Dinka reaction to the Christian mission was a complex process in which paradoxes, contrasts, acceptance and rejection were all intertwined. In this essay I will focus on Dinka ideas of well-being as they have operated in both traditional and Christian religious life. I will aim to demonstrate how Dinka values and cultural patterns interplayed with Christian principles in a process which, though frequently mutually supportive and reinforcing, was also fraught with cross-cultural misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts. Drawing mainly on songs, we will see how Christian education has positively transformed traditional notions and at the same time subtly undermined Dinka confidence in their ability to achieve the well-being they seek.

The Concept of Well-being in Dinka Religious Thought

Studies of Nilotic religions, among them the classic work of Godfrey Lienhardt on the Dinka, Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka, show that the religious beliefs and practices of the Nilotes reflect the social, cultural, economic and political realities of their world. The ultimate objective of their
religion devotion is not so much to ensure salvation in a life hereafter as it is the physical and spiritual well-being of life in this world.

Well-being among the Dinka is expressed in the word wei, which as a verb means 'to breathe' and as a noun means 'breath', but unlike the English equivalent, wei as a noun is conceived of as a plural. This is because by wei, the Dinka do not mean a single act of breathing, but the continuing chain that constitutes life. Nor is wei as an objective confined to the condition of breathing or being alive. As a goal, wei requires physical and moral well-being at its best. Dinka greeting nearly always involves the rhetorical question, 'wei kii? Are those wei? which is an acknowledgment of a satisfactory state of health or well-being. When one's appearance betrays poor health, whether as a result of a known illness or for some intangible reason, the interchange would then involve some acknowledgment of the weakening of wei, or general health. Edge dwe wei te kii, 'Why do your wei look so pale?', is one popular response to seeming ill health. But as long as there are wei, however weakened, one is said to be 'alive', ap. Death is the absence of wei in the body. But in Dinka usage, such absence is expressed in terms of non-existence rather than of departure: aum te wei, 'there is no wei in him' (or 'in it' if an animal). So, while the soul or the spirit in Christian usage is conceived of as a non-physical reflection of the person it has left, to the Dinka, wei is intrinsic to the living being and merely ceases to exist when a person dies. Of course, the dead person in her/his full integrity, body and soul, is believed to be then transformed into a different kind of existence in the world of the dead. That continued existence, especially whenever it comes back to the living in the form of dreams or affictions, is expressed in the intangible term of aaiop, literally 'the shadow' of the dead. The Dinka, of course, know that the body without wei lies decomposing in the grave, so that it is the memory of the dead person, conceptualized in the form of aaiop, that reconstitutes the dead person as a whole being with body and wei.

The Dinka believe in a supreme being which they call Nhtalic and whose attributes are similar, if not identical, to those of the Christian God, which is why the two words are used interchangeably in this essay. To the Dinka there is only one Nhtalic, the creator of the human race and all things in this world.

The Dinka usually assert positively, 'Nhtalic ate thit', which implies that he is watching human behaviour and will sooner or later uphold and sanction the principles of the moral order of his authority. To say that 'Nhtalic exists' is therefore a way of expressing confidence in God's ultimate justice in rewarding virtue and punishing evil. Occasionally, when disillusioned by God's seeming indifference, inaction, or what appears to be a whimsical infliction of harm on the innocent, the Dinka will wonder rhetorically, 'Where has the Creator [swt] (or God) gone? Why have you abandoned us?' But the issue is never posed in a way that denies his presence somewhere. In so far as his power is unlimited in time and space, Nhtalic is everywhere, not in the sense of physical presence, but rather of effective control.

Apart from God and the ancestors, the Dinka believe in two sets of spirits. Faith (sing. jatak) are clan spirits, usually symbolized by totems of animate or inanimate existence and treated as relatives to whose cattle are dedicated and sometimes slaughtered in sacrifice. Like the ancestors, jatak are essentially virtuous and will harm a person only as a punishment for wrongdoing. Jak (sing. jak) are spirits which are essentially not related to specific clans but can be acquired from those possessing them or may fall on individuals of their own choice. Although they can be adopted, tamed and used for good, jak are essentially evil and destructive. They are generally the cause of illness, misfortune and death. The Dinka, indeed, generally refer to a serious illness or disease as jak. When God, the clan spirits or the ancestors are angered by wrongdoing, they will recruit jak to inflict harm, even death, as a punishment.

Because of the procreative foundations of Dinka religious thought, the ancestors and the clan spirits are generally referred to as 'grandfathers' or 'ancestors'. God may also be referred to as 'Ancestor', 'God of my father', or 'God of my forefathers'.

The hierarchy of spiritual authority in this world is headed by the father as the representative of God and the ancestors. The values of ancestral continuity give the father seniority over the mother. But dominant as men are in Dinka society, women occupy a paradoxically pivotal role not only because they are the main source of wealth through marriage, but especially because society depends on them to rear children and inculcate in them the values on which the lineage system is founded. Women have also been known to play a legendary part in the history or mythology of their people and have gone down as founders of lineages or ancestresses whose names have been added to the hierarchy of ancestral spirits. We will see how this pivotal role of women is demonstrated through Christian prayers to Mary.

The moral principles by which spirits and humans interrelate and mutually serve each other's interests are embodied in a complex concept known as sing—'order, custom, behaviour'. At the core of sing is living together in mutual understanding and co-operation. Sing not only advocates unity and harmony through attuning individual interests to those of others, it requires positive assistance to one's fellow men. Consistent with the deferential ideals of human relationships, sing favours persuasion against violence or other means of coercion. This is revealed particularly well in Dinka concepts of leadership.
and education. The leader is seen, not so much as one with absolute control as one who makes adjustments to correct whatever might have gone wrong and then maintains the continuity and stability of the corrected situation. Similarly, knowledge is expressed not so much as an achieved state but as a process, age or 'knowing'. A person learns to know through counselling and advice, obtaining moral knowledge rather than just technical skills. Both leadership and education help to maintain deng, and within this concept of moral order great emphasis is placed on the attributes of deng—personal pride, honour, dignity.1

A remarkable feature of Dinka culture is that it gives virtually everybody some avenue to dignity, honour and pride. The degree varies, and the means are diverse: there are the obvious means concerned mostly with appearance, bearing and sex appeal; there are the qualities of virtue in one's relations to others; and there are the acquired or achieved values, material or spiritual, which help determine one's social standing. These ways are interrelated and cannot really be separated, but only by seeing them as alternatives and by realizing that all ways lead to the same end can we fully understand why every Dinka has some share in the values of self-esteem, inner pride and human dignity.

To summarize, then, the Dinka believe that their value system is ordained and ultimately sanctioned by God and the ancestral spirits. Religion is not an affair of the 'soul' in a world yet to come; it is rooted in the quest for a secure life in this world and continued participation after death. Divine leadership and religious functionaries play a critical role in interpreting and applying the will of God and the ancestral and other spirits. The Chief is a spiritual leader whose words are believed to express divine enlightenment and wisdom and form the point of consensus and reconciliation. In order to reconcile people, the Chief himself must be a model of purity, righteousness and, in Dinka terms, 'a man with a cool heart', as opposed to a hot-tempered and impatient man. The Chief must show restraint in his own ways; society at large is traditionally polite and even serene in its public dealings. When something goes wrong, he must take responsibility for it, and the end education among the Dinka is both informative (in the transmission of facts) and morally prescriptive. Individual and societal goals, even to the optimum degree, were considered part of experience, achievable and, indeed, as one time or another, actually achieved.

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4. In those songs cited here which also appear in F. M. Deng, The Dinka and Their Songs, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1974, I have made minor revisions in translation, partly to illustrate the meaning in this context.
May the Earth make us meet
May we meet with our Mother;
I wish we could meet and see her,
Our mother whom we have forgotten.

We say, 'Greetings, greetings, our Lady Chief,
Creator, our Lady Chief,
Mary, our Lady Chief,
Our me come from you.
No one has taught us well;
Help us, Mother
Help us, Creator Mother;
It is not we seek, it is not.
No one has shown us the way,
Our Creator Mother as white as the sun.'

Initially, the Dinka were reluctant to send their children to school not only through fear of cultural alienation, symbolized by the fact that schoolchildren became known as 'the children of the missionaries', mish abuw, but also because of fear of moral corruption. The so-called mish abuw were looked down upon by their illiterate age-mates as having lost the dignity of tradition. There was an ambivalence about learning, which was often shared by the students themselves. At the root of this ambivalence lay not only a conflict between moral values, but scepticism about the skills the school taught. Slowly the significance of the school began to make itself felt. So miraculous was writing and reading in the eyes of the Dinka that children with this accomplishment had cause to brag. In our house, whenever we read letters coming to our father from other chiefs about inter-tribal cases, it was common for the bearers to listen with utmost interest, then remark, 'Exactly, that was what the Chief told his clerk to write', and an impressed audience would burst into admiring laughter. And with that discovery came the realization of the hidden powers of modern education.

The implication was a revolution in knowledge and the power accruing from it, even though the educated youth— unlike their traditional counterparts, who prided themselves on their physical courage and obstreperousness as warriors—saw their dignity in obedience and ordinariness. This was indeed a reversal of roles; for in traditional society, knowledge was presumed to accumulate with age and proximity to the ancestors. Now, according to the new code of learning, the Dinka as a culture group not only had a lot to learn, but should indeed be ashamed of where they stood in the newly postulated scale of progress. This had direct implications on religious notions of well-being, as the song to Mary cited above demonstrates. A preponderance of the prayers in schoolchildren's songs are addressed to Mary. In fact, she seems to have replaced the Holy Ghost in the Trinity. The Dinka could accept the idea of God the Father and God the Son being two in one, but the term used for the Holy Ghost, Wei Santo, said virtually nothing to them. Here, Mary not only replaces Wei Santo in importance but is presented as the source of wei, which, in one sense, was a somewhat surprising fact that the Dinka were ignorant of until now, but in another sense was intelligible to them, since the mother is a vital partner in the creation of life. Mary, now presented as the Mother of God, had to be even more pivotal as a source of wei to all mankind, a power superior to all the practitioners of traditional religion.

Dinka schoolchildren begin to express in their own songs contempt for the illiterate 'pagan priests' of their own society. Paradoxically, although Dinka traditional religion was condemned as a source of evil from which Christian education was the saving grace, missionaries recognized and made use of the sacred chiefs of the Dinka not only for the pragmatic purpose of reaching their people, but also because of the colonial policy of devolution. A number of prominent chiefs from Bahar El-Ghazal Province were flown to Rome to meet the Pope and, at least according to this song, seek his blessing for their people:

- When they took Gir into the sky by a plane
- Women alarmed in dismay.
- 'O O ee ee
- Our chief is taken away
- What will return him to us?'

The chief was asked, 'What do you want?'

'Father, it is not.'

'What do you have to say?'

'Father, it is wei.'

'What do you want?'

'Father, it is wei.'

It is not that we, of Ajang, are seeking.

The Dinka have a relative view of religion that recognizes the significance of race, ethnicity, culture, lineage or language in man's relationship to the divine order, but they also believe that mankind as a totality is subject to the One Supreme Power of God, for it is He who creates and destroys all human beings irrespective of race or religion. Because of the combination of their religious devotion with the universality of their conception of God's relationship to man, what matters most to the Dinka is not so much what religion one adheres to as how religious one is. A holy man—of whatever race, religion or language—who appears to reflect unusual spiritual powers and divine will is revered as a man of God capable of rewarding good and punishing evil. Christian missionaries among the Dinka had the distinct advantage of being seen as people who were there for the sole purpose of spreading the word of God to do good among men. Even the designation of the Catholic priests as Fathers was well suited to Dinka notions of spiritual leadership. Indeed, in the references to the Bishop or the Priest which have been translated as Lord or Master, the word used by the Dinka is the same one they apply to their divine

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7. Ibid., no. 139, p. 238.
chefs—here. Their functions were viewed as comparable. Many of the schoolchildren's songs were indeed personal exaltations of the missionaries as benefactors in all the values associated with well-being and moral order. One song, composed in honour of Bishop Edward Mason of Bahri el-Ghazal, declared:

We are honouring the keys of see.
We are honouring the Bishop.
We are honouring the keys of see.
We shall beseech the keys of see.

But the inspiration behind the moral and religious exaltation of the missionaries was directed not so much toward a new spiritual order or the worship of God as towards the new notions of 'going ahead', or 'progress' associated with modern education. As Godfrey Lienhardt has pointed out, by the 1940s many Dinka had come to appreciate 'that lacking in education their people were lacking in some of the essential skills for political survival in the modern Sudan'. In so far as they were at a disadvantage in the modern world, they were also 'backward'. This idea was suggested to them by missionaries and administrators alike, and education began to be perceived as a way to protect Dinka autonomy through producing enough Dinka 'capable of thinking in foreign ways, of meeting foreigners on their own ground while remaining Dinka in their loyalties'.

Dinka chiefs, most of whom were illiterate, continued to be honoured not only for their leadership, but also for their role in facilitating the progress of their people through the modern instruments of education and administration of law and order. Competition between the tribes as represented by their chiefs was the most striking driving force in the process of 'going ahead'. In this adventitious set of values, the literate chief was viewed as having more going for him and therefore more to offer to his people than the illiterate chief. While the messages of literacy and scientific enlightenment, with their attendant value to well-being, were a major theme of schoolboys' songs, an equally preoccupying, yet obsessive concern was with the supposedly inherent evils and dangers of non-Christian life and social conditions. The supposedly 'evil spirits' of traditional religion and even 'Mohammedan', which was morally equated with paganism, were seen as posing a serious threat to see, and Christianity was extolled as the only tool of redemption. Again, it was to Mary that Dinka converts appealed:

Maria, Mother, is feared by evil spirits [jil]
Cries arose in the middle of the day.
Mother
Help us
The war of evil spirits,
Our mother is feared by spirits.

8. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', pp. 85, 86.
9. Cries of war symbolizing fight with evil spirits.

Missionaries introduced a new concept of wrong which intensified Dinka moral indignation and apprehensions about wrongdoing as a provocation against God. Of course, the Dinka traditionally believe in the original wrong that offended God and made Him withdraw from man; they also recognize that many forms of wrongs are offensive to God and could result in spiritual contamination that might cause illness and maybe death, but they do not have a particular term comparable to the word 'sin' for those wrongs. The word adumwumuk, which the Dinka converts now apply to sin, is a Christian invention which connotes 'darkness', a contrast to the 'whiteness' with which Mary's purity is conceived:

We praise Santa Maria, our exceedingly White Lady,
Maria, White Lady, redeem us from sin,
The sins of our ancestors
And the sins of our own,
Redeem us from the war of evil spirits,
Show us the dhong of the spirits above
Show us the dhong of God in the sky.

Although the dangers of sin were seen in relation to see in this life, the fear of the hell to follow death was also deeply ingrained in the young converts. Conversely, the dream of the heaven to come was also inculcated as a supreme compensation for the suffering in this world:

Maria, Mother, White Lady.
We are all your children,
Help us to go to the home above.
O O, the home of fire
That is the place for suffering and misery!
We are afraid; we are afraid.

We shall meet in the home above
Yes, Yes, we shall meet in the home above
We shall meet with Jesus Christ, the eldest son of God
The lamb who redeemed our see.

As the fruits of education continued to materialize more visibly with increasing employment opportunities and participation in the power institutions of the modern state, the cultural traits of Christian missionary influence began to be gradually assimilated by the Dinka as part of the inevitable process of modernization. But modernization for the Dinka also involves social disintegration as a result of the adversities of north-south relations in the Sudan and the renewal of civil war. With independence, the Dinka experienced yet another stereotype of racial, religious and cultural development in which Arab-Muslim identity replaced the European-Christian mould as the official model for 'progress'. Since independence also, many Dinka have had direct experience of their own subordination to this stereotype as more and more of them were brought into the modern economy as migrant labourers in Sudanese cities such as Khartoum. These negative aspects of change are viewed as part of the moral degeneration Dinka society has undergone, in
sharp contrast to the religious ideals of their tradition represented by their sacred leaders believed to be now gone. As a result of the increasingly subordinate role to which they have been relegated in the pluralistic context of the nation-state, the Dinka have reluctantly come to accept that they occupy an inferior status than they had realized in the homogeneous context of traditional society.

The Dinka have a saying, 'Dignity, dheng, remain; indignity, your, let us go.' In the following verses from a recent song, the singer is painfully conscious of the indignities he has suffered, and attributes the hardships of urban labour to the inequitable distribution of resources among the races at the time of creation. He berates the ancestors who, according to myths now being told among the Dinka, chose the gift of cattle rather than knowledge. Other myths referred to in the song are the ones that ascribe the suffering of man to wrongs allegedly committed by the woman who either threw a shard of broken pot into the river and cursed mankind to suffer and die, or bit the sky with a pestle while pounding grain and forced God to pull back into the sky:

The Arabs divided us for labour;
Some men carried buckets of water,
Others cultivated the fields;
And yet others worked for women at home;
Those of us who worked for women at home,
No one is like me;
I severed my tentacles,
And handed them to Arab women.
I took the beam,
And swept the floor until my neck hurt,
Like a man carrying a heavy load.
Why does each year come and appear the same as last year?
God hates us for the things of the past.
The ancient things he created with us in the Byre of Creation,
When he gave the black man the cow
To crawl out on to the shores of the river,
Leaving behind the Grain and the Book of his father,
To be kept in the cities.
A prosperity which denied water to the towns,
So that people remained drinking from wells.
We shall ask Bol Riang to extinguish the fire of the towns into which we black Dinkas met with Arabs on the way.
And filled the lorries going to Wau.
The Arab is going to distribute his sacks of grain to the South.
Our curse goes to the elders of the original land;
The man who threw the Book away,
It is he who has given us into slavery;
And the woman who threw the pot into the river.
My heart is as dark as the black berries in the forest.
The Arabs have bound us to a tight plan.


A plan as tight as a cow which has lost its calf,
Bowed to surrender milk.
In the evening, he shouts at us,
Like the thundering of a rain threatened by a dry spell.
Leaving only clouds in the sky,
To carry words between god and man;
He pacés up and down with a face like a cloud.
The sun appeared.
Is it dawn?
Or is it dusk?
We gathered in large varieties
Like maize which mixes white and brown,
We were taken far away.
We found the place full,
We stood and searched our hearts like the Arab who abandoned his spear
And then cried, 'I wish I had a spear!'
We are pacing up and down.
There is no prosperity in what has been praised:
We found the land bare,
Like the drums of the fox and the ground hornbill,
The drums they followed to the sky to dance,
And found that their things hurt;
They were drums which afflicted men with pain.
An Arab woman shouted, 'Man who wants work, come and take gerbal.'
I went and directed my ears,
I thought she was accusing me of sin.
It is the sifter which the Arabs call gerbal;
A wire screen with wood on the edges.
The language of the Arabs is confusing our heads,
Let us abandon it,
It is the language of uninitiated boys.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the foregoing analysis of Dinka responses to Christian education is a complex amalgamation of tradition and modernization in a process that was primarily geared toward 'development'. Mutual cross-cultural accommodation went side by side with contradictions and unwitting disregard, if not disrespect, of each other's values and institutions. The Christian missionaries took the inferiority of traditional religious beliefs and practices for granted, while the Dinka pragmatically and selectively benefited from Christian educational and medical services, which they at first resisted but eventually learned to appreciate. Although the converted youth

10. An instrument for sifting flour, here used as a pun in relation to the Dinka word sat, sexual promiscuity.
embraced Christianity with a religious fervour, their elders accepted the
conversion of their children as a tolerable component of the more significant
benefits that were accruing through missionary work in the area.

There were many mutual misconceptions. Sometimes they were most
striking, even though no one seemed to be bothered, either because the
language in which they were communicating was so alien to both sides that it
provided no discourse, or because they seemed to realize that in the world of
cross-cultural communications, certain voids were inevitable and tolerable.
One hymn for the souls of the dead, presumably a translation from the Latin
or English version, included the words:

Lord, let them rest in peace,
Let them rest forever,
Let them remain resting, O Lord.
Save them from the house of the dead.
Let them remain resting, O Lord,
And let your sun shine upon them.
Let it shine forever,
Lord, let them rest in peace.

Although the prayer was accepted at face value, I doubt that the Dinka would
have appreciated the words had they reflected on the meaning. In Dinka
thought, the world of the dead is a mythical extension of the world they know.
There is no particular quest for rest associated with death. As far as praying for
sunshine, although it might be argued that what is intended by the word used
in the Dinka text is 'light', that word is used only with reference to the
sun, and no Dinka would pray for that except very occasionally to break a
menacing downpour of rain. Quite the contrary, the heat of the sun which
accompanies its light is associated with ill health. Indeed, the Dinka pray for
rain and a cool breeze as sources of well-being or net.

These subtleties in meaning and cultural orientation were not, however,
significant for what was essentially a dynamic interaction and mutual influence
in which the Dinka became gradually disposed towards the objectives of
self-enhancement through education and Western scientific and
technological development. From the viewpoint of traditional elders, what was
threatening and became increasingly disturbing was the more blatant
disregard for traditional knowledge and the superior wisdom of the elders. They
now feel as if they are being pushed aside by the 'educated youth'.

It would be wrong to conclude that the Christian missionaries were
insensitive to the Dinka cultural context. Indeed, it could be argued that they
used Dinka culture, perhaps even exploited it, quite effectively, especially in so
far as they related the benefits of education and modern medicine to the
enhancement of well-being in the physical, spiritual and moral sense of net.
The last sacrament was often administered by priests not so much to save the
soul after death, but as a manifest effort to save the life of a supposedly dying
man, and when occasionally that objective was achieved, the Catholic message

benefited from the miracle in a dramatic way. But it would also be too
complacent to say that both sides understood one another in a profound way
and sought to reinforce each other's values and institutions through a process
of equitable cross-cultural fertilization. What seems to have occurred is that
because of Dinka conservatism and pride in their race and culture, their values
were so deeply rooted and resilient that they persisted against the onslaught of
missionary intervention.

The irony is that the British colonial administration and Christian
missionaries made a more effective use of this eclectic process through
a conscious policy than the national governments have done since independence.
The result has been that the Dinka sense of pride and independence—which
still shines through in the songs composed by schoolboys—has been more
infringed upon under post-colonial administrations than was the case under
the British and missionary influence, as can also be seen in the last song I have
quoted. Nevertheless, the resourcefulness of the Dinka for a self-sustaining
process of development with a degree of coherence and cohesion was far
greater under the colonial administration and their missionary partners than
has been the case under national governments. The result has been a violent
reaction to the racial, religious and cultural inequities of the modern Sudan,
evidenced by two civil wars, with a devastating effect on the overriding
objective of nation-building in a country of awesome diversity.

The tragic fact is that even as the Dinka reveal a determination to resist
external domination, whether reflected in blatant political terms or disguised
in cultural and religious forms, they are beginning to show signs of succumbing
to the assumptions of racial and cultural stratification that underlie their
rejection to an inferior status in the multi-racial and multi-cultural context of
the modern Sudan. The lesson one is tempted to draw from this is that
concepts of tradition or change which tend to be linear or one-sided are too
simplistic to be representative portraits of the interacting realities. A degree of
give and take seems indispensable, whether it is planned, recognized, or even
ignored. The process would, however, be far more enriching if the postulate
and the practical mechanisms of cross-cultural integration were better
understood, clearly articulated and more deliberately and selectively aimed at
enhancing the quality of life and the dignity of the human being on a racially,
culturally and religiously equitable basis. The issue is even more pertinent and
challenging to the independent Sudan than it was under the British and their
religious partners, the Christian missionaries.
DIVINITY ABROAD:
DINKA MISSIONARIES IN FOREIGN LANDS

Goreny Lienhardt begins his discussion of the activities of free-divinities in Dinka society with a vivid account of the tribulations of a young man, Ajak, son of a spear-master. Ajak had left home to find work and had then become estranged from his father, who died before the two could be reunited and reconciled. Ajak was troubled by his father’s death and by his separation from his home and family. Late one night he was seized by a ‘creator’ (ađak) in his body and began rushing about, apparently oblivious to all about him. Those who gathered around speculated on the nature of the thing which possessed him, whether it was a Power, a divinity or a ghost. A minor spear-master tried to elicit some response by addressing it in turn as three but received no reply.

The master of the fishing-spear then began to talk to the Power which troubled Ajak, as follows: ‘You, Power (j̄ak), why do you seize a man who is far away from his home? Why do you not seize him at home where the castle [sic] is? What can he do about it here? He is travelling in a foreign place, and he is with this European’. . . . Ajak mumbled unintelligibly; the spectators were clearly expecting something to speak through his mouth, and to tell us its name and business. . . . When I asked what it was, I was told variously that it would be his (ađak) divinity (j̄ak), or the ghost of his father, or the free-divinity DEBox, or ‘just a Power’ (j̄ak j̄is). Since it would not announce itself, how could one know? By this time Ajak had become quieter and seemed to be becoming aware of his surroundings. The master of the fishing-spear, who had previously been speaking to the Power in the body of Ajak, now began gently to admonish him personally, as a man. Why had this happened? What secret wrong had he done, or what had he failed to do that he should have done? And why did he behave in this way when he was far away from his home, where it was impossible to deal

with the master by bringing out a calf, invoking over it, and either dedicating or sacrificing it to the Power which troubled him?

Ajak became possessed twice more, and each time there was similar speculation among the outlookers about just what was troubling him. Finally Ajak returned to his home and sacrificed to Divinity, his clan-divinity, and his father’s ghost. After that his mind was at rest, and he was troubled no more.

By the late 1940s, when Geoffrey Lienhardt observed and recorded Ajak’s trials, the experience of possession by an unknown spiritual agent was familiar to the Dinka. Not only did family disputes bring out the worst in ancestral ghosts and clan-divinities, but there were now a number of independent and unattached Powers and free-divinities multiplying and seizing persons at random. It had not always been so. There had been a proliferation of Powers and free-divinities as well as persons who ministered to their desires or ameliorated their effects. The Dinka themselves attributed the spread of these new influences to the expansion of contacts with other peoples, beginning during the last half of the nineteenth century. The increased mobility of individual Dinka during the upheavals which began in mid-century brought with it exposure to other peoples’ spiritual practices and ideas. Spirit possession

and spirit divination do seem to have clustered around the new slave camps and slave communities of the Sudan during this time. The experiences of such persons as Ajak, traveling abroad, cut off from their homes and families and often anxious about those they left behind, were multiplied several thousand times with the extensive slave-raiding of this period. Ajak was able to return home and re-establish contact with his family and their personal diversions, thus freeing himself from the threat of a persistently troublesome Power. Many others before him were unable to resolve such contacts. They had to create their own solutions wherever they were and among whomever they found themselves. It was in this way that new divinities and Powers became known, their attributes defined and the methods of dealing with them developed. All of the first Dinka Christian converts in the nineteenth century were persons who similarly found Christianity in foreign lands. Many became actively involved in propagating their new faith. The very first Dinka priest, for instance, Daniel Surur Farim Deng, was a Ngak Dinka who had been captured by Bagasa Arab raiders and taken to El Obeid, in Kordofan, where he met and was converted by Mgr. Comboni. Daniel Surur Deng was a gifted scholar, but by his own account his later life was spent mainly as a language teacher at Catholic schools in Beirut, Snakin and Egypt, rather than as a

2. Ibid., pp. 69–73, 74, 105, 163–3, 166.
preacher of the gospel. For this reason we will instead concentrate on two other Dinka Christians, both contemporaries of his, who were the first to have the opportunity to preach their new faith to some of their own people as well as to others. Caterina Zenab and Salim Wilson both claimed to be children of Dinka spear-masters. Both were involved, in their different ways, in translating Christian beliefs into Dinka, though neither was formally incorporated into any religious order or hierarchy. Their lives are paralleled in some ways by the career of another Dinka exile, Deng Laka, the first prophet of Dinka among the Guwar Nuwer. Here we will compare their personal religious experiences as exiles from their homes and as missionaries of new divinities. It is through the lives of these first proselytes that we may gain some insight into the earliest response to Christianity by individual Dinka.

Caterina Zenab

Caterina Zenab was born at the Kir Dinka village of Gog in about 1848, the daughter of a chief, a pitradu (small king), Manyen e Agol. It was near her home that the first Catholic mission, Holy Cross, was founded in 1854. The Austrian and Italian missionaries who worked there and at the mission among the Bari in Gondokoro suffered a higher mortality rate. Those few who survived, led by Mgr. Comboni, struggled on, studying the Dinka language and customs, exploring such of the country as they could reach, and preaching wherever they could. 'The foot of the trees are our pulpit,' Comboni reported, 'which is always surrounded by chiefs and naked Africans armed with spear. They listen to God's word with great eagerness.' But in January 1860 the missionaries packed up and returned to Khartoum, taking with them four boys and six girls, Caterina, or Zenab as she was then known, among them. Unlike the Bari, the Dinka expressed sorrow at the priests' departure.

The fate of Holy Cross and Gondokoro convinced Comboni that Christianity could best be spread in Africa by Africans. It was in this spirit that Caterina Zenab, baptized into the faith at Shellal in Egypt on 24 June 1860, became the first Christian Dinka evangelist. There had scarcely been a dozen Dinka baptized before her, and it was Comboni's intention that she should be educated to teach the Dinka. We do not know any account of her own which explained the attraction of Christianity which made her leave home when still a girl, but we do know from other accounts that as a young woman she was an energetic Christian. In Egypt she assisted Fr. Beltrame in compiling his Dinka dictionary and grammar and helped translate 'a bulky catechism containing the matter of dogma and Catholic morals' into Dinka. Being fluent in both Dinka and Arabic, she was then sent for further education in Verona, where she was confirmed in 1862. She returned to Egypt following Comboni's opening of two schools in Cairo in 1867. In Cairo she showed an apostolic fervour and was especially assigned to assist the catechumens of her own tribe. She returned to Khartoum in 1873, where Comboni described her as una gran missionaria abilitissima (a highly skilled missionary).

In Khartoum, as in Cairo, she taught at the mission and assisted at baptisms. She married an Italian carpenter, Cesare Ongaro, in 1874 and gave birth to his daughter the next year, only a few months before his death. She then returned to the mission, where her daughter died in 1878. She continued her work in the mission until she went to live with the Austrian explorer, Ernest Marno, who was then employed by the Egyptian government. They had a son, Jacob Ernst, in Fleshoda in 1880, and though they never married, the son was baptized in Khartoum the next year. Marno died in Khartoum in 1888, just as the Mahdiyya was gathering strength in Kordofan. Caterina and her son survived the siege of Khartoum and remained in the Sudan throughout the Mahdiyya. On the reconquest of Omdurman in 1898 she went to Cairo but returned to the Sudan in 1902 to act as an interpreter for the revived Catholic mission. It was then proposed to employ her in the mission among the Stalluk, but her health did not permit. By now she seemed a disappointment to the missionaries who had returned to the Sudan. The Church had never been so happy about her unsanctioned union with Marno (for which she was also denounced as a 'bad lot' by general Gordon); there had been rumours that she and others had renounced Christianity during the Mahdiyya; and despite the Church's willingness to take her on in its work in the Sudan, she seemed to prefer to do no more formal mission work and live instead on a grant from the Egyptian government at Marno's widow. She died in Khartoum in 1912.

This bare outline of her life gives us much to speculate on, without, however, enabling us to reach many firm conclusions. We know she was a skilled linguist, fluent at least in Arabic and Italian, and that at an early age she helped translate Catholic dogma into Dinka. She was specially trained to

9. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
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instruct her own people in Christianity and did so with enthusiasm. Her entire career as an evangelist was spent in Cairo, Khartoum and Omdurman, all cities with sizable slave and ex-slave communities—the population of Khartoum was about two-thirds slave by 1883. It was among this population that she worked, and it was this population which was amalgamating, at precisely the same time, a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices, some of which were incorporated into such urban spirit-possession cults as the zay. After the reconquest of the Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian government repatriated as many slaves as possible, and it was during this time that a number of Dinka returned to their home areas and were reintegrated into their societies. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Christian tales of creation (some of which Caterina helped to translate into Dinka in the early 1860s) were brought back to Dinka society at this time by the former slaves she had tried to instruct. Christianity did not take root within Dinka society through Caterina, but with knowledge of her work in the nineteenth century it is not necessary to propose an ancient Christian link to account for Christian stories now told by Dinka elders as received from their fathers. 12

Salim Wilson

Salim Wilson was born Atoabil Macar Kathish (which he transcribed as Hatarsh Masha Kathish) among the Gok Dinka in the mid-nineteenth century. Of all early Dinka Christians we know most about him, because after settling in England he published three books giving various accounts of his life, and there are numerous references to him in missionary archives in this country. 13 He lived for a considerable time in Wakefield, Barnsley and Scunthorpe and became known as the 'Black Evangelist of the North'.

14. Hatarsh Masha Kathish, 'Juhana Nisai', The Life Story of Hatarsh-Masha-Kathish, of the Dinka Tribe, Sudan: Birmingham: C. G. Casswell 1901 (2nd edn.); The Ethiopia Valley: The Story of the People Called the Dinkas, Birmingham: C. Casswell n.d. [c. 1908]; Salim Wilson, I Was A Slave, London: Stanley Paul & Co. n.d. [c. 1954]. See also the archives of the Bible Society in the Cambridge University Library and the CMS archives in the Birmingham University Library. Daniel Appiah-Kubi, a Ghanaian student at the University of Hull and later at the Institute of Social Anthropology, Oxford, undertook some investigations in Scunthorpe in 1970 at the request of Geoffrey Lindhardt. His notes have been made available to me. I would also like to acknowledge the kind assistance of Miss Kathleen Curn, the BMS Society's archivist, for generously providing me with copies of the Society's correspondence.

According to Salim Wilson, his father was a chief (whom he subsequently elevated to 'Chief of the Gok province of the Country'), and it was from watching his father perform sacrifices that Salim first learned about God. In around 1876, his village was railed by Arab slavers. Salim witnessed his father's murder and was carried off as a slave and given his Arabic name. He spent about three years as the personal slave to an Arab merchant until the revolt of Sulaiman Zabair in 1878-9. Salim's master was induced by Romolo Gare's successes against Sulaiman to side with the government, as a result of which Salim was eventually freed by the Egyptian army. His village having been destroyed and his family killed, Salim, still only in his early teens, had nowhere to go and elected to stay with the army until the two CMS missionaries, Charles Wilson and R. W. Felkin, passed through Daim Zabair on their return to England from Uganda. Salim was taken on as Wilson's servant and went with him to England in 1881. It was there that he was baptised and confirmed in 1882. He retained the name Salim as his Christian name, but added to it his benefactor's name, Charles Wilson. Thus he became Salim Charles Wilson.

Salim describes his gradual coming to God by reference to his early religious experiences before being abducted into slavery. The Dinka, he later explained, knew and worshipped 'God as the Father of men—as the Creator of the Universe—and as a Spirit whom they addressed as 'Yash,' [paul] that is, 'reverend,' 'holy,' 'pure.' 'The breath of God.' As a child he and others used to imitate the religious rituals they observed, and I often played the part of the Priest', using small shells as cattle, pretending to sacrifice them, repeating the incantations he had heard his father use. 14 As a slave, however, he found himself mixed up with many other peoples, removed from the worship of his own clan-divinity (paul). What he could remember did sustain him:

Our day I climbed a tree, and while I sat and watched the cows, I began to think of home. The remembrance was too much for me, and as I thought upon the happy days of childhood—as my mother and father came back to my mind, I burst into tears, and wept as though my heart must be broken. At this time I recalled my Father's prayers, as with uplifted hands he would cry, 'Oh, Thou great Eternal, Unknown Creator of Heaven and Earth.' Then I cried to God of my Father, and asked Him to consider my affliction. My tears and prayer proved the means of greatly relieving my mind... 15

Once in the employ of the Revd Wilson, he did not immediately return to the Christian God. At the village school in Pavenham, where they first lived, he was somewhat slow at learning and occasionally quarrelled with the local boys: 'what I read in the Bible I did not understand. Like my countrymen mentioned in the Acts, I needed the teaching of God's Holy Spirit.' 16 This Holy Spirit, he later claimed, was already known to the Dinka as 'the cause of

15. Ibid., p. 55.
16. Ibid., p. 46.
life, existing 'in the air, which we drink in or breathe'—in other words, word. It was this Holy Spirit which gradually penetrated his soul and overcame his ignorance, until at last 'I asked God to make me better.'

With Salim Wilson, to accept Christianity was to become an evangelist. He attended Home Cliff College, a missionary training institute in Derbyshire, before accompanying the Revd Wilson to Palestine in 1883. He returned on his own and rejoined the college. During the Sudan troubles of 1884-5 he toured the north of England with the superintendent of the college, exhibited in a leopard skin, jilabasor and turban as a Sudanese redeemed by Christ. After leaving the college in 1886 he lived in London and worked on behalf of the YMCA and the British Women's Temperance Journal. In 1887-8 he accompanied Graham Wilmot Brooke to the Congo in a vain endeavour to penetrate the Sudan and bring the gospel to the Azande and Dinka. Back in England, he spent some time addressing CMS missionary gatherings in the Forest of Dean. In 1893 he went on an independent mission with two evangelists from Bolton to Tripoli, again with the intention of penetrating the Sudan. There, to his surprise, he met a small group of Dinka residents in Tripoli and found he could still communicate in their mother tongue. He eventually returned to the north of England and made at least part of his living as an evangelist, at one time holding a bishop's licence as a lay reader in the diocese of Wakefield. By 1901 he was already known as 'the Black Evangelist of the North'. During World War I he moved to Scunthorpe as an itinerant jeweller, stayed on as a grocer, continued his preaching with some success and married a local widow. He died in the mid-1940s.

It was his great desire to return to the Sudan to bring the gospel to the Dinka but, aside from his brief encounter with Dinka slaves in Tripoli, this never took place. The closest he came to presenting the word of God to the Dinka was his correction of a translation of the Gospel of St Luke for the British and Foreign Bible Society. This itself was based on an earlier translation published by Dr J.C. Mitterrutzner in 1866, which was in turn based on the work of the Catholic missionaries from Holy Cross, derived in part from Caterina Zenab and other Dinka informants.

It is somewhat puzzling that he was never chosen for missionary work in the Sudan, given his oft-expressed desire to return to his people. The CMS had used him for 'missionary exhibition work' in England but ceased this after the reconquest of the Sudan, hoping 'that genuine missionary zeal would take him back to his own country now that it is free from all restrictions'. Yet there seems to have been no serious proposal to include him in one of the CMS's own missions, and Salim continued to do what he described as 'missionary' work in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and even Buckinghamshire, attracting many audiences.

It was, perhaps, his very determination to adopt Christianity on his own terms which made him appear an unreliable and contentious man to his benefactors. Journeys abroad with English missionaries tended to end in disputes. His trip to Palestine with the Wilson family was curtailed by 'circumstances' which 'compelled' him to return home. In the Congo with Graham Wilmot Brooke, he again returned home on his own because 'Mr. Brooke had been for some time gradually changing his theological views, and we were no longer able to see eye to eye in matters of doctrine'. The correspondence from both missions now in the CMS archives throws little direct light on these clashes. Charles Wilson refers to Salim only indirectly, as his servant, and it is clear that in Jaffa the servants were dissatisfied with their accommodation. Graham Wilmot Brooke was a zealous missionary with a grandiose but ill-informed scheme to evangelize Africa. He had an unrealistic and exaggerated perception of the importance of his mission and his own capacity to achieve it. There was a painful disagreement between Brooke and Salim, which was part of Brooke's disillusionment with his project, is clear from the fragments of Brooke's letters and diaries which have been preserved. At the time, Brooke thought Salim had 'done wrong', but all details of the dispute were carefully omitted from his papers which were later deposited with the CMS. Perhaps on reflection he later concluded that the dispute did him little credit as well.

The picture which emerges, then, seems to passage the experiences of many Dinka in the modern Sudan which Dr Deng describes in the preceding chapter. In Palestine, Salim Wilson found himself a servant among other local Arab servants; an ex-slave speaking slave Arabic among persons who would be contemptuous of his race and his slave background. In the Congo, he began as an equal partner in Brooke's missionary enterprise, but he had no equal voice in the direction the mission was to take. We can imagine him thinking—if not saying—'Dignity, please, remain; indigisity, you, let us go! Back in England, he continued to annoy his colleagues by refusing to accept the subordinate role offered him. One wrote of him somewhat disparagingly, 'I believed him to be a

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44. Letter from H. G. Mainaker, 7 January 1905, Bible Society archives.
45. "John Niel", pp. 55, 73.
46. See the records of the Palestine mission, G3 FO/1884; and Wilmot Brooke MSS, Acc. no: F2, F3/1, F3/3 and F5, bundle 3, letter to 'My dearest Pappo', 3 March 1888, all in the CMS archives, Birmingham University Library.
Christian man but he was so very full of life—and so excitable that he was not the quiet sober minded man whom I have met with in other Africans…. He is a clever man no doubt. 12 He lacked the deference which was expected of an African subordinate in an English mission at this time. He was fully confident in his own ability to spread God’s word, even to the English themselves. The explanation for his confidence, or perhaps his justification for it, is revealed in his recollections of Dinka religious life.

It was in England that Salim Wilson was taught about African ‘heathenism’. The late Victorian Sunday-school image of the heathen was of a person devoid of love, ignorant of God’s love and supremacy, who worshipped idols of wood and stone. By this definition, which Salim accepted, the Dinka were not heathen. Salim referred to the love he felt for his parents, and they for him. He also noted that the Dinka knew no idols but had direct experience of God the creator, and even the Holy Spirit and the afterlife. Dinka life, before the Arabs came, was marked by honour, morality and temperate living—very much an Eden before the Fall of Man. 13 The chiefs—of which his father was one—were priests and warrior-leaders in the Patriarchal style of ancient Israel, performing blood-sacrifices in a manner reminiscent, so he thought, of the Hebrew patriarchs. 14 The Patriarchal comparison was one he returned to again and again. Since the Dinka were not ‘heathens’, they must be either ancient Israelites or ancient Egyptians. He proposed this tentatively in his first book and developed it at greater length in his second. 15

By the 1930s, when his first two books were amalgamated and expanded into a single autobiography, he had the additional authority of Charles Seligman to which he could refer. His general account of the Dinka borrows many phrases from Seligman, such as a ‘congeries of tribes’, ‘rainmaker’ and ‘divine king’. He cites Seligman’s description of Dinka facial features as evidence of the Dinka’s ‘Semitic’, as opposed to ‘Negroid’, origin. 16 He then elaborates on his very first comparison between the Dinka and the Patriarchs:

...the Dinkas worship an imaginary and spiritual god of their own, who they call ‘Yahit’, which signifies ‘holy’ or ‘pure’, and they regard their god much as the Jew of the Old Testament regarded Jehovah—the Creator of the Universe, the Father of Man, and as a spirit whom they know and address personally.

All these points, it will be noted, convey a strong suggestion of a Semitic origin, and this is further strengthened by the fact that the high priest of the tribe (who is usually also the chief) uses invocations in addressing Yahit which bear a strong resemblance to those used in similar Jewish ritual even as they usually embracing the names of some of the founders of the nation, as ‘the God of

47. Letter from T. F. Allison, 1 February 1909, Bible Society archives.
50. ‘Jumaara Kiwo’, p. 17; The Ethiopian Valley, pp. 27-8.
51. I Was A Slave, pp. 9-16.

Deng Laka 13

Deng Laka was a Ngok Dinka from the Khor Fulfuth area in modern Upper Nile Province. As a boy, he and his mother and sisters came as refugees to the Gaawar Nuer. His religious experiences help us to assess further the cultural response to Christianity of the early Dinka converts, as there are a number of intriguing parallels.

Deng Laka was born Deng G fooled, but when he was brought into Gaawar society in the late 1850s or early 1860s, he was adopted by a man named Lek and thus became known as Deng Laka. When he grew up, the local Gaawar ally to the Arab slavers, Nuur Mer, abducted Deng’s mother and sisters and sold them into slavery. Deng Laka thus joined a growing band of Gaawar who had a grievance against Nuur. After Nuur Mer’s allies were forced to leave the
region, one Gasawar claimed possession by a divinity and organized a raid to try to kill Nuur and seize his large herd of cattle. Deng Laka joined this party but was disappointed that the erstwhile prophet thought better of his audacity and aborted the raid before reaching Mogoph, Nuur's village. Before returning home with his companions, Deng Laka climbed on top of a large termite mound and sat facing in the direction of Mogoph. Just as the sight of his master's herd at nearly the same time reminded Salim Wilson of his lost father and Divinity, so the thought of another herd of looted cattle brought to Deng Laka's mind his lost mother and Divinity. "Why did Divinity [Jessek] catch a coward?" he asked aloud. "If it caught me, me Deng Laka, would I leave those cattle behind at Mogoph?" He then raised his hands to the sky, saying, 'Father, you keep all of yourself in the sky without providing me with the thing you can give me.'

On returning home, Deng Laka immediately fell ill and for some time would go out into the bush at night in a state of possession. He was seen playing with snail shells as cattle, much as the young Salim Wilson played at being a priest. Finally, Deng Laka's age-mates arranged a sacrifice to cure him of his malady, and it was then that he announced that he was possessed by a new divinity called diu, by whose name he then became known. He proved his possession by successfully castrating Nuur Mer, killing him, scattering his following and seizing his cattle. This was the beginning of Deng Laka's career as the main prophet of the Gasawar Nuur, which lasted from about 1870 till his death in 1907.

The Gasawar had never heard of a kuath called diu before, and to this day assume it is a Ngok Dinka divinity—for which there is yet no proof. But they explain Deng Laka's contact with divinity in another way, claiming that he came from an 'earth priest' (amai nuur) lineage among the Dinka, which was why he was able to assume the role of earth priest, and prophet, among them. This is the standard explanation the Nuer often give about any Dinka who becomes a Nuer earth priest, and it is perhaps significant that it usually refers to persons whom the Nuer have displaced in their own conquests of Dinka land. The Dinka 'earth priests' are brought in to give Nuer conquests legitimacy and safeguard the land they now occupy. In any case, it was important for the Nuer to establish reproductively a link between Deng Laka and the 'earth priest' lineage, just as it was important for Salim Wilson to establish a link between himself and an ancient priestly lineage. This link having been made, Deng Laka was able to speak on behalf of kuath to the Nuer, in Nuer.

**Conclusion**

The religious experiences I have described were individual, but not entirely unique. All three of the persons described here brought with them into exile something from their own culture of the direct experience of Divinity which, certainly in Salim Wilson's and Deng Laka's case, they clung to for the rest of their lives.

It was in the nineteenth century that the communal worship of clan-divinities among the Dinka came under repeated strain. The sacrifice of cattle from family herds maintained the link between the clan-divinity, the individual and the community. In the twentieth century, captives in slave raids and tribal wars were removed, not only from their kin, but from their herds, thus inhibiting the maintenance of their ties with their clan-divinities through sacrifice. In the cases of both Salim Wilson and Deng Laka, it was in contemplating cattle which belonged to someone else that their own cattleless state overpowered them, and they turned first to despair and then to Divinity.

The bond between man and yath, already loosened by human action, was freed by divine action. The yath freed themselves, freeing persons independently, becoming the 'free-divinities' which Godfrey Lienhardt describes. The same term is used in Dinka for both: some well-known clan-divinities (Deng, Garang) now appear as free-divinities. The persons possessed by them can announce their names and speak their words, just as Deng Laka did when seized by diu. Though possession is typically the choice of the new divinity or Power, it can be sought, as the example of Deng Laka shows us. A person can deliberately choose a new divinity, even if that choice is represented as compulsion.

With Christianity, the seeking of a new divinity can be more openly deliberate. Baptism replaces possession, and as in possession a new name is adopted by which a person both announces and identifies a new relationship with Divinity. The adoption of new names by our three protelytes brought with it not just the ability but the responsibility to proclaim the words of that new divinity. For both Salim Wilson and Deng Laka, acceptance of a new personal divinity (Jesus in the one case, diu in the other) was a way each could incorporate his previous religious experience into an ideology which spoke directly to his new circumstances. In adopting the religion of his hosts, each made it peculiarly his own and repaid his benefactors with an interest which was unexpected.

Caterina Zonah and Salim Wilson were, or claimed to be, the children of sheepbreeders. Deng Laka was also assumed to be from a similar priestly lineage. The priestly lineage of Flesh, inherent in all members of the lineage, even if active in only a few, can impart an extra ability to experience Divinity and speak on its behalf. It is perhaps significant that the first ordained Dinka Christian priest, Daniel Farim Deng, did not claim to come from such a lineage. Rather, he traced his descent from a Nuer family absorbed into the Dinka following an earlier war. It may be stretching the point to suggest that this was a reason why he did not become a noted missionary—he was not a jang in either the traditional sense, or the Christianized sense the Dinka later adopted. We need only suggest that membership of a priestly lineage probably

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had an important influence on two of the most renowned Dinka Christian evangelists of the last century, as well as on a Dinka who became one of the first Nuor prophets. An inherent experience of Divinity was translated by them into new religious expressions. 'Free-divinities' found them in their exile, and made them truly free.

GODFREY LIENHARDT:
A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following select bibliography represents those of Godfrey Lienhardt's publications which deal most directly with the anthropological study of morality and religion.


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