

Catholic Mission in Sub-Sahara- Africa, especially Gold Coast (Ghana)

Prince Henry as a devout Catholic had been honored with the title "Grand Master of the Order of the Knights of Christ"¹. He made it a policy that all Portuguese ships would have priests on board, who would use every opportunity to preach the Gospel wherever they went. The king of Portugal also stressed Portugal's Christian duty in the explorations. The prince was known to have said that the possibility of "getting even one soul to the faith by baptism out-weighed all inconveniences."² The Catholic Church saw this as a new opportunity to re-establish Christian presence in Africa. The Pope immediately granted Letters of Indulgence to the traders along the coast, urging them to act "for the destruction and confusion of the Moors (Muslims) and the enemies of Christ, and the exaltation of the Catholic faith."³ The impact of the Catholic mission on the African population can be considered from various perspectives: A number of Catholic adherents could always be distinguished on the coast up to date, especially in Elmina.⁴ But considering the length of time during which Iberian Catholicism held sway over West Africa, it is a sad commentary that their impact was neither greater nor more enduring. The reason for this can be mostly seen in the domination of trade with its corrupting influence. But of equal importance was the reaction of the African population to the Catholic Gospel. African culture and religion appear to have shown much resilience, making the transmission of the Gospel message rather difficult. The African chiefs, who were often the missionaries' first contact, had mixed motives when converting to Christianity. In the socially and religiously integrated African society, the conversion of the chief was bound to upset the delicate balance between the living and the dead as well as negatively influence social norms and taboos. Often, the chief and his elders were unable to accept the conditions set for conversion by the missionaries. As Lamin Sanneh puts it: "The intrusion of Christianity into royal courts and palace circles threatened the position of the traditional religions whose keepers would be anxious to try to prevent their further erosion..."⁵ There is the example of Behemoui who was asked to submit to baptism. He was the chief of the Wolof, seeking a military alliance with the Portuguese. He refused to get baptized because he was aware that his people were not in favor of Christianity and his conversion would further jeopardize the loyalty of his troops⁶. Again, the practice of mass

¹ Latourette K.S. , *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. III, *Three Centuries of Advance A.D. 1500- A.D. 1800* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), p. 241

² Debrunner, Hans. *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1967). p.17

³ Groves, C.P., *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948-1958), p.21

⁴ Kpobi , David Nii Anum: *Mission in Chains* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993),p. 135

⁵ Sanneh, Lamin. *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1983,p 28

⁶ Groves, C.P., *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948-1958 p.126

baptism by Catholic missionaries could be cited as a reason for the low impact of Catholicism, since the supposed converts easily lapsed into their former religion without much persuasion. The Dutchman Willem Bosman (1672- ?) emigrated as a 16 year-old and became a high-ranking Dutch official in Elmina. After his return to Utrecht/ Netherlands in 1702, he wrote a detailed report about the so-called "Coast of Guinea"⁷ which became very popular in Europe and for long time was regarded as the most reliable descriptions of West Africa of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was being republished in 1709, 1719 and 1737 and translated into German, English and French, and only in 1974, Albert van Dantzig criticized these writings.⁸ Bosman confirmed in it that the indigenous people were rather resistant to the Catholic mission. "(...) Whilst I was there, there was also an Augustine monk which came from St. Thome, in order, if possible, to convert the Blacks to Christianity, but in vain. Polygamy is an obstacle which they cannot get over. (...) This Priest invited the King to be present at Mass, which he also did. And when I saw him next, asking him how he liked it, (...), he said very well (...), but that he chose rather to keep to his Fetiche. This Priest (...) said in a menacing Manner, that if the Finasians (Today "Fantis") continu'd their old Course of Life, without Repentance, they would unavoidably go to Hell (...); To which the sharp Fidasian reply'd: 'Our Fathers, Grandfathers, to an endless Number, Liv'd as we do, and Worship'd the same Gods as we do, and if they must burn therefore, Patience, we are not better than our Ancestors, and shall comfort ourselves with them.' After this the Priest left off, and perceiving that all his Pains at Fida were likely to be fruitless, he desir'd me to introduce him to the King to take his Leave of him, which I did shortly after."⁹ However, one of the interesting aspects of Catholicism was the influence it had on the local religion in Elmina. The Catholic heritage, whilst retaining some of its original characteristics, also lent itself to some rather unusual adaptations. There are two interesting remnants of the religion in and around Elmina existing to this day. When the Dutch attacked Elmina in 1637, the local people are said to have fought on the side of the Portuguese, and when it became clear that Elmina would fall to the Dutch, "the African Catholics of Elmina hid away missals, vestments, candlesticks, statues and sacred vessels."¹⁰ The statue of St. Anthony of Padua¹¹ (1195-1231)

⁷ Willem Bosman: „Nauwkeurige Beschrijving van de Guinese Goud-, Tand- en Slavenkust“; Utrecht 1704

⁸ Albert van Dantzig: „'New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea': How Accurate Is It?“ in: Albert van Dantzig: "Willem Bosman. History in Africa", Band 1, 1974, pp. 101-108

⁹ William Bosman, *Description of Guinea Coast* (first published in Dutch 1704, first English edition 1705; New Edition with an Introduction by John Ralph Willis and Notes by J.D. Fage and R.E. Bradbury, New York, 1967). Bibliografia: J. G. Platvoet, Dutch Merchants, Missionaries and Academics on African Religions, 1594-2000, in: Ludwig/Adogame, pp. 75-96

¹⁰ Debrunner, Hans. *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1967). p.33

¹¹ Purcell, Mary (1960). *Saint Anthony and His Times*. Garden City, New York: Hanover House. pp. 19, 275–6.

which the Portuguese said had miraculously healed a mentally sick person; found its way into a local shrine and was worshipped as the “Ntona Shrine”.¹² Another group of devotees, later known as Santa Mariafo (“Santa Maria people”), kept the statue of the Virgin Mary as an object of worship. A third statue of St. Francis of Assisi was said to have turned black on arrival in Elmina (a supposed indication of the saint identifying himself with Africans), has not survived. Many people in and around Elmina have invoked the saint's name up to date.

¹² Wiltgen, Ralph M. 1956. *Gold Coast mission history, 1471-1880*. Techny, Ill: Divine Word Publications. pp.43-46