

Cultural Conflicts in Christian Conversion: The Talensi Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the conflicts between the Christian faith and African traditional religion with particular reference to the Talensi of northern Ghana. It examines the religious and cultural experiences of Talensi Christian converts. Through interviews and participation of participants, the study set out to examine the phenomenon of religious conversion and Christian expression among the Talensi. African scholars believe that whenever a new religion comes into contact with African cultures there is always conflict. Christian evangelization involves the propagation of the Christian faith and the establishment of churches. The study revealed that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, it engages local cultures, and the result has always been conflict or accommodation. Critical to this encounter is the way the new faith is propagated and appropriated in the traditional society. The study concludes that since African traditional religion is part of the African ethos, an understanding of it should be considered in Christian evangelization. Ignoring the traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices of traditional people has implications for the way the Christian faith can be transmitted, accepted and appropriated in traditional societies. For Christianity to gain deep roots in traditional contexts such as the Talensi, the study recommends that proper bridges be built between the Christian faith and traditional cultures.

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Publication History

Received: 14th June, 2024

Accepted: 9th September, 2024

Published online:

18th October, 2024

Keywords: Culture, Gospel, Evangelization, Conversion, Syncretism, Discipleship.

INTRODUCTION

God's missionary agenda for the church has at its heart the discipling of all people. Christian evangelization is informed by the Great Commission which mandates all Christians to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt.28; 19-20). This includes people of all cultures all parts of the world with languages and cultural distinctiveness of their own and who share common ideologies and ethnic identity. The explicit command of Jesus, contained in the Great Commission demands that people of every race, ethnicity, and language are reached with the good news of salvation. Christians generally believe that Jesus Christ was born into an existing culture that is, the Jewish culture. He accepted and lived in that culture and influenced it for God. Asante maintains that Jesus, being a Jew, made use of the available cultural categories in his unfolding of the mystery of the kingdom of God. He concludes that had Jesus been born into some other culture, he would have made use of the available cultural elements in his proclamation of the Kingdom.¹

¹ Emmanuel Asante, *Culture, Religion and Development* (Kumasi: Willas Press, 2007), 49.

However, it is clear from the New Testament record that Jesus came into confrontation with the Jewish authorities with respect to the way he carried out his ministry. The relationship between Christian faith and traditional culture has become a subject of scholarly discussion, especially in relation to the mission of the church. Martey believes that the gospel that is preached does not come to people in a vacuum; it must be understood and accepted in the context of the language of the culture.² This means that if the Christian message can make the needed impact and achieve the desired results, it has to be understood and accepted in the cultural contexts of the recipients. Thus, the content of the message must be tailored to meet the needs and aspirations of the recipients within their cultures. Therefore, an understanding of the culture will help us to shape the content of the gospel we are to communicate.

Generally, scholars, especially those engaged in Christianity and traditional culture, are of the view that whenever the Christian message is proclaimed among traditional people tension or conflicts arise. Conflicts arise from a lack of understanding of the traditional beliefs and practices on the part of the missionary, and second, from a lack of understanding of the tenets of the Christian faith by the indigenous people. Omenyo intimates that when Christianity was first introduced on African soil, the early missionaries failed to recognize the significant role of the indigenous cultures and as a result, the converts that they made were not able to match their new-found faith with their traditional worldviews. This, according to Omenyo constitutes a “theological deficit.”³

Bediako observes that the cultural partiality that accompanied the Western missionary transmission of Christianity indicates a theological problem in missionary theology, which failed to correctly apprehend the universality and the freedom inherent in the gospel.⁴ Consequently, this has given rise to a situation whereby Christianity is viewed as an alien religion and not suitable for indigenous Africans.

In light of the forgoing discussion, this study seeks to find out the implications of the church’s mission in traditional societies. Using the Talensi of northern Ghana as a case study. It investigates how the gospel has been proclaimed and accepted among the Talensi, and the impact of Christianity in the Talensi homeland. The study recommends measures to help Talensi Christian converts live out their Christian faith in a relevant way in their cultural setting without conflicts.

Location of the Talensi

The Talensi can be found in the Upper East region of Ghana. The Talensi district was created in 2012 by a legislative instrument with Tongo as its capital. It is bordered to the north by the Bolgatanga Municipality, to the south by the West and East Mamprusi districts of the North East Region, (separated by the back Volta), to the west by the Kasena- Nankana Municipality, and to the east by the Bawku West and Nabdum Districts. The population of the Talensi District, according to the 2021 population and housing census, is 87,021 representing 7.8 percent of the region's total population. Males constitute 50.3 percent and females 49.7 percent of the population, while eighty-four percent (84.1%) of the population is rural. The district has a higher sex ratio of 101.2. The population of the district is youthful (41.2%). There is a relatively low dependency ratio of 93.0 in the district. The age dependency ratio for males is higher (96.7) than that of females.⁵

The Talensi and their Culture

It has been established from scholarly sources that few records on the Talensi people are available. Available information is what has been passed on by the forebears to succeeding generations and remains as, a matter of oral tradition. However, the writings of Meyer Fortes, an anthropologist who studied the Talensi in colonial times are informed by oral information provided by the elderly people of the time. Despite the attempt by Fortes, much of the oral history has been preserved over time and passed on to subsequent generations. The Talensi are an indigenous people of northern Ghana extraction. They are

² Emmanuel Martey, “The Logic of Evangelisation; Cultural Challenges Facing the Evangelist and Church Worker in Ghana.” *Trinity Journal of Church and Theology Volume XI, NO. 1 & 2* (2001): 29-41.

³ Cephas N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism*. Zoetermeer: Uitgeverji, Boekencentrum, 2002), 1.

⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Renewal of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 2512.

⁵ Ghana Statistical Service, *Population and Housing Census 2021, Talensi District*.

made up of different clans, each with its own history. For instance, the Namoo, clan traces its ancestry to one Musuol, an immigrant from Mamprugu who came to settle in Tongo.

According to Fortes, these people claim remote kinship with the ruling aristocracy of Mamprugu, hence their chiefship is derived from that of the paramount chief of Mamprugu.⁶ These clans who refer to themselves as Nayir-dem (people of the chiefship) or Musuol-biih (children of Musuol), are located in different areas in Tongo but see themselves as belonging to one stock. They include Dikpieng (Gung), Siog, Puhug, Kuoreg, Yamerig, Shiega, Poso- Namoo, and Tong-beog. The royal skin or paramouncy rotates among these clans or gates. In the event of a vacant skin following the death of a sitting Tongorana, members of these royal gates present candidates to be considered by the Nayir (Paramount Chief of Mamprugu) for the position of a new chief of Another group of clans in the Talensi society include those referred to as Tengdan – biih (children of Tengdana). These are believed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the land or the country. The ritual sanctions of their office are derived from the teng (Earth Cult) and hence are the custodians of the rituals associated with the sacred groves and ponds which ensure, sumaahom (peace) and wellbeing of the society and its peoples. These clans include Zubiong, subdivided into Pulien, Saapeog and Dubaam, Zuo and Baare, consisting of Bagung, Lakung – Yil, Sakwar and Baare–tenget. These clans are also identified with the Yong dance which is their traditional dance, which is played on important occasions including the Daa festival, as part of the rituals.

Another group of clans of the Talensi called the Hill-Tallis. are located in Tongo Hills. According to tradition, these clans are believed to be settlers who chose these locations as places of refuge from the British and the slave raiders in the early years. These clans have lived on the Tongo Hills for centuries and have been assimilated into the Talensi society. According to tradition, the people of Sepat, Wakii, Tengzuk, Yindur, Santeng, Sii, Gorogo, and Gbeogo are identified as settlers who migrated from other areas. They are also identified with the Goleb dance which is a war dance that serves to commemorate the resilience of their forebears in the consolidation of their land and people in the early years of wars. As part of the rituals for this festival, the Goleb-dan, (owner of Goleb) is responsible for all the malema (rites) regarding the Goleb dance and the success of the festival which often comes off every year in March.⁷

Marriage Practices

The Talensi place a great deal of emphasis on the continuity of the clan or family, hence their respect for marriage. Being a patriarchal society which emphasises male authority, the males marry women from other clans and the female members marry outside the clan. Mbiti underscores the significance of marriage in African societies when he says that “through marriage and childbearing human life is preserved, propagated and perpetuated. Through them, life is also deepened vertically and spread horizontally.”⁸ He concludes that “marriage and childbearing are the focus of life...”⁹ In the same sense, Asare-Opoku observes that the purpose of marriage in African societies is procreation, without which marriage is incomplete.¹⁰

When a young man reaches marriageable age, his father would have to search for a wife for him. On the other hand, the young man can engage a lady and introduce her to his father for approval. It can be stressed here that the various processes leading to successful marriage rites are very much dependent on the families of both the young man and the lady. Therefore, among the Talensi, marriage involves not only the marriage partners, that is, the husband and wife, but also the families from both sides. This is underscored by Mbiti, who posits that the African relatives of the husband and the wife establish a close relationship through the exchange of visits and gifts.¹¹ According to him, “This is an important African view of marriage, that it is not an affair between two people only but between those two people together with their families and relatives.”¹²

It is also significant to note that among the Talensi, one can marry many wives provided he has the resources to cater for them. The reason for this seems to be the need for comfort when one’s wife gives

⁶ Meyer Fortes, *Dynamics of Clanship among Talensi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 22.

⁷ Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: A History of a West African God*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 41

⁸ J.S. Mbiti, *Africa Religion and Philosophy second edition* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 106.

⁹ Mbiti, *Africa Religion and Philosophy second edition*, 106.

¹⁰ K. Asare-Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Singapore: FEP International Ltd., 1978), 124.

¹¹ J.S. Mbiti, “Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa.” *International Review of Mission*. Vol. 59, No. 236 (1970): 431-439

¹² Mbiti, “Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa”, 431-439.

birth or the need for additional hands in farming operations. The practice of polygamy is highly regarded to the extent that a husband of one wife is often ridiculed. The Talensi often say *poayeng dan mwame dakuol*- which means “a husband of one wife is like a bachelor.” This practice has attracted variant views from scholars. Muthengi, for instance, examines the factors that motivate the practice of polygamy in Africa by saying that traditionally, polygamy was accepted all over Africa as a cultural norm., as a means of raising more children.¹³ Accordingly, this meant that the more wives a man had, the more would be his children, and this would also determine his being remembered long after his death.¹⁴

Religious Beliefs and Customs

To understand the context in which Christianity has been embraced and appropriated among the Talensi, it is necessary to study the traditional customs, and beliefs of the Talensi. The way the Christian message was communicated, understood and practised among the Talensi, to a large extent may have been influenced by these customs and beliefs.

The Belief in Naawun/Nab Wunaam (the Supreme Being)

The Talensi, like all other indigenous people of Africa, have led a religious life based on their belief in the supernatural. Traditional religion imbued their faith and continued to do so in such a way that their daily lives were controlled by religious practices and customs. In traditional African understanding, the concept ‘God’ refers to the eternal living Being who is the source of all living and whose life existed from the dateless past. He is self-existent and is the one whose power sustains the universe. He is an all-knowing Being who knows and sees all things at the same time without any modern instrument. He even knows the end from the beginning.¹⁵ It is clear from the experience of the Talensi that they believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, whom they refer to as Naawun (chief God) or Nab Wunaam (eternal God). According to Barker, Naawun is believed to be “above all other gods; he knows all, sees all, and is all-powerful.”¹⁶

The strong belief in Naawun is reinforced by the daily experiences of the Talensi and the tithes they give him. For instance, in daily speech, the Talensi will wake up in the morning and respond to greetings by saying, *Wunaam pang, la-a som- ma* meaning by God’s power it is well. When one is embarking on a journey, he or she is bid farewell in the words, *wunaam nam-mare paa som-ma* meaning God lead you safely to your destination.

Child naming among the Talensi also tends to indicate their strong belief in God. For instance, one can be named Wunaammi, meaning God knows everything Yinteso, meaning one whom God has blessed and Yinnbot meaning God wills, these names among others are expressions of the belief in the existence and workings of the Supreme Being. They believe that Naawun does not do evil, but rather like a good mother, takes care of all her children without discrimination and provides rain for all people to plant and grow their crops. Thus, the Talensi believe that Naawun who possesses all power and controls all events, is the source of all protection, and sustenance.

Naawun is believed to be the Creator and sustainer of the universe and all that exists. This universe, in the Talensi belief, was created out of nothing. When a newborn baby dies, it is said that God has taken it away to indicate that it is from God and has gone back to him. However, the Talensi will always find cause for events such as this unfortunate one. Naawun is considered as one who loves and cares for his creation. He thus controls the whole cosmos and orders all that pertains to it. This is what Idowu means when he posits that: Africa recognized only one God, the Supreme, Universal God. Even though she has a picture of him which is of various shades, she calls him by various names and approaches him in various ways; he nevertheless, remains one and the same God, the Creator of all.¹⁷ The observation advanced by Idowu indicates that Africans have a Supreme God who is universally accepted and acknowledged. This idea underscores the Talensi religious position as they regard Naawun as superlatively great, unchanging and lastly, unsurpassable in his cosmic power.

¹³ J.K. Muthengi, “Polygamy and the Church of Africa: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (1995): 55-77.

¹⁴ Muthengi, “Polygamy and the Church of Africa: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives” ,55-77.

¹⁵ E.C. Ekeke and C.A. Ekeopara, “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology.” *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* No. 2 (2010): 209-218.

¹⁶ P. Barker, *People, Language and Religion in Norther Ghana* (Accra: Asempa Publishers/GEC, 1986), 102.

¹⁷ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12.

Yaabnam (The Ancestors)

Much as the Talensi believe in the Supreme Being, they also believe in the spirits of the ancestors referred to as Yaabnam. Anderson observes that the ancestors are believed to be those who have died, who exist in some usually undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access. There, they look after their descendants' welfare and expect their cooperation in return. They have the power to help and harm their wards. Ancestors can be angered and thereby can bring calamity to their descendants, especially when their instructions are not carried out.¹⁸

According to the Talensi cultural standard, an ancestor is one who died at a mature and responsible age or as a parent. Unmarried and infants who died could not be accorded the status of ancestry after death, as they had no offspring to minister to. The ancestors are not on the same level as Wunaam or the Supreme Being. This is because the ancestors were people who lived, and after death, have joined the spirit world. The ancestors believed to have some delegated power from the Supreme Being to administer the affairs of the living earth. The Talensi associate more with the ancestors than with the other divinities because they were once human and are believed to know the human condition and needs very well and thus are in a better position to solicit help and blessing from the Supreme Being. Moreover, for the Talensi, there is a strong link between the ancestors and their living descendants, and this explains why shrines dedicated to the ancestors are located in the homesteads of most Talensi settlements usually in front of the houses.

The ancestors are highly regarded as the mediators between living descendants and the supernatural. This explains the high moral standard that qualifies one to be an ancestor. The ancestors are believed to be the embodiment of the moral code rewarding good deeds and punishing evil conduct and thus constitute the standard of morality among the Talensi. The place of the ancestors in the religious life of the Talensi is cemented by the sacrifices that are offered to them periodically to solicit their help and the intercession of the Supreme Being. They are sometimes invoked to bless and curse depending on the situation. In line with this, Fortes believes that ancestors "though dead and gone from the physical world of the living are invisible but effective and are accessible through the special medium of religious ritual."¹⁹

The belief in the ancestors which constitutes the cardinal point of the Talensi worldview, determines and influences every aspect of their socio-religious activity including marriage, child naming, funerals, festivals and chieftaincy. The Yaabnam are highly respected because their wishes constitute the basis of morality and ethical standards and spirituality among the Talensi. Compliance with their wishes and directives is believed to bring about blessings such as fertility for the land, animals and the people, and ensuring peace, and good health. On the contrary, disobedience to ancestral wishes incurs their wrath and can result in toog (sickness), wolog (drought), kom (famine), kum (death), and also miscarriage among women and livestock animals.

Teng (The Earth Cult)

The belief in divinities is very much embedded in the Talensi tradition just as the belief in the Supreme Being. The Talensi believe that other divinities exist and have some level of power which can influence their lives. Unlike the ancestors, these divinities are never in human form and their origin is unknown. However, in Talensi mentality, they perhaps believe that everything including the divinities originated from the Supreme Being and has some divine power. Idowu believes that divinities and ancestors form separate homogeneous categories of their own. Divinities and ancestors could be described as domesticated spirits. The ancestors have always been a part of the human family, and the divinities are intimately a tutelary part of the personal or community establishments.²⁰ It can be inferred from Idowu's observation that divinities can be associated with the history of the village, community or clan or families. They are often linked with the names of the communities or clans due to their connection with the founding ancestors of those communities.

These divinities may be associated with the history of the village or community or clan or families and are what the Talensi recognise and venerate as the Earth cult. The Earth cult in Talensiland is

¹⁸ A. Anderson, "African Pentecostalism and the Ancestors: Confrontation or Compromise? Paper read at the Annual Conference of the Southern African Missiological Society, January 1993 and Published in *Missionalia 21:1* (1993): 26-39.

¹⁹ Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on the Talensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22.

²⁰ Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction*, 186.

represented by sacred places such as tongbana, (traditional groves), koleh, (ponds), tanhe, (rocks), and special grounds perceived to be the abode of deities. These sacred groves include Leong, Laatee, Gayen, Takuuk, Zunnuo, Dayelog, Limihil, Tenkurug, Sielog, Zukok, Duun Kpaleg, Baat-daa, and Kupiela among others. The ponds which are also located in different settlements include Kolkpeng, Kpaala, Sanii and Bulugkpet. Other sacred sites or grounds from where rituals are periodically carried out include Gbeog Tangzuo, Baartoo Bilimbi, Tenzuk-nnuo, where the final rites of the Goleb festival are performed, as well as Musuol-ni, which is the ceremonial grounds for the Gingango dance during the Daa festival. The Tengdana is the religious official mandated by custom to offer the prescribed sacrifices to the Earth cult of which he is the chief priest. He has attendants who assist him in all the ritual activities related to the sacred sites.

Religious Practices

The various rites and ceremonies of the Talensi constitute an expression of their religious beliefs, and the religious practices are an expression of their worldview as a people. The tribal unity based on the religion's bond of the ancestral cult has been demonstrated over time and continues to shape the Talensi society. These practices are passed on to the younger generation, as part of their traditional education. This provides continuity in the religious life of the Talensi from generation to generation.

Bakolog (Divination/Soothsaying)

The religious life of the Talensi finds expression in the traditional rites or Malema and the ceremonies that often take place. As much as they believe that the spirit world is the pivot around which the physical life revolves, they do not take chances with the cause of events. In their belief, whatever happens in the physical world is already determined in the spiritual realm, hence their practice of finding out the cause of those events through divination. The traditional act of determining the cause of an event or reading into the unknown is often known as divination. Divination provides African traditional societies the means to commune with the spiritual realm and to come up with prescriptions for a better and harmonious life.

According to Peek, throughout Africa, whether in the city or in the country, no matter the religion, sex, or status of the individual, questions, problems, and choices arise for which everyday knowledge is insufficient and requires action to be taken. The information necessary to respond effectively is available, but often only through a diviner. In his view, that is why divination continues to provide a trusted means of decision-making, a basic source of vital knowledge.²¹ Among the Talensi, an elder in a family would often go to a diviner to consult the oracle on the state of the family. It is often said *okyeng ne obua bakolog*, which means he has gone to consult the oracle. This saying emphasises the Talensi resolve to understand the unknown and to take steps to correct all wrongdoing to ensure harmony in the spirit realm and the well-being of the family, clan and community.

Divination among the Talensi is of tremendous significance to the extent that matters related to the spiritual realm are not taken for granted. It is against this background that the Talensi will always attempt to find the cause of every event. Since the ancestors are the guardians and custodians of the living descendants, their permission and blessing must always be sought before undertakings such as embarking on a long journey, building a new house, marriage, among others. Some people are believed to often have problems as a result of ritual disobedience or mistakes. Such acts often bring about misfortune that affects not only the individual but also the family and the entire community

Kaaba (Sacrifices)

The element of sacrifice is an important aspect of traditional religion just, as well as other practices. Africans, and for that matter the Talensi, place much premium on sacrificial acts because they believe that they are the means of cementing relations with the ancestors and divinities. They are a means of communion by which the family seeks to establish good standing with its ancestors and to seek help in times of need. According to the Talensi custom, the Kaaba can take many forms depending on the situation. The Talensi consider two main forms of the Kaaba, which include the blood sacrifice involving animals and chicken and flour sacrifice. The situation often calls for a particular type of animal that needs

²¹P.M. Peek, *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1&2.

to be offered. As blood signifies life, it is believed that the blood of a particular animal or fowl that is offered on the shrine can provide what is good for the offerer. Thus, for the Talensi, Kaaba constitutes a pillar in their worship experience and much emphasis is placed on it.

Another form of sacrifice is the flour medium. This is often carried out using millet flour and mixing it with water popularly called Zomkuom and is offered at the shrines to bring about gosom (peaceful sleep) for the family and the clan. In extreme situations, dry flour may be offered to some deities to solicit rain in times of drought. For instance, in extreme dry periods, it is believed that when the official Tengdan of the Kpaala Ponds offers dry flour, to the ponds, it would result in rainfall. This form of sacrifice is symbolic in that it causes the particular divinity to act on behalf of the community by providing them with rain. On other occasions such as festivals, sacrifices are offered to thank the deities for protection and good harvests.

Child Naming and Initiation Rites

Among the Talensi, it is believed that the birth of a child marks the re-birth of a particular ancestor. Through divination, the particular ancestor who has been reborn is determined, and thus reflects in the name that is normally given to the particular child such names as Mbawomya, (my father has heard), Mbalebna, (my father has returned) among other tend to reflect the Talensi belief in the ancestor. In such cases, personal shrines are raised for such children right from infancy and are believed to be their guardians. Therefore, child naming not only gives the child a family identity but also establishes a religious bond with the ancestral world. This is because the soul of the child is dedicated to a patron deity for its protection and guidance throughout life, and such a link is maintained through regular sacrifices.

Mbiti believes that almost all African names have meanings. The naming of children is therefore an important occasion, which is often marked by ceremonies in many societies... are regarded with religious feeling and experience that another religious being has been born into a profoundly religious community and religious world.²² In the Talensi religious thought, the male child is regarded a religious figure and considered a priest to offer sacrifices in his father's stead. When initiated into the ancestral cult, male children, especially the firstborn ones, can ascend to the position of lineage or clan heads, or eventually become tendan-dem (Chief Priests) within their clans. Again male children are often initiated into the bayaah sexton cult responsible for the digging of graves and all mortuary rites regarding the dead.

Early Christian Mission in Talensiland

The emergence of Christianity in Talensiland resulted in the establishment of churches. Some of these churches came to the area through the efforts of foreign missionaries, with the collaboration of some native Talensi. The churches in Talensiland belong to the mainline tradition Pentecostal tradition, the charismatic tradition and others. The mainline churches are those which belong to the Christian Council of Ghana including the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, Evangelical Church of Ghana and the Methodist Church Ghana as well as the Roman Catholic church. The Pentecostal churches include the Apostolic Church of Ghana, Assemblies of God, the Church of Pentecost, and Deeper Life Bible Church. Charismatic churches include the Fountain Gate Chapel, Amazing Power Chapel International, Resurrection Power and Living Bread Ministries International, Divine Favour Church. Fruitful Life Chapel and the Christ Vision Chapel. Other churches include the Ghana Baptist Convention, the Salvation Army Corps and the Church of Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church

The early Fathers of the Church came to the Talensi area during the reign of Tong-Rana Nanaaneong. Even though there was initial resistance from his elders, he vetoed and received the missionaries in his palace hall where the discussions regarding the establishment of the church were concluded and the grounds of the Takuk grove (a shrine believed to be the ancestral abode of one of the Zubeong Clans) were allotted to the visiting Fathers. The first Christian worship was under the trees in the "Takuk" grove. A chapel built of mud and thatch was erected but collapsed due to heavy rainfall that year. Even though Tong-Rana Nanaanbeong accepted and convinced the Zubiong tendana who allowed the Fathers to settle

²² J.S. Mbiti, *Africa Religion and Philosophy second edition* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 115-117

at Takuk, there was still strong opposition from the indigenes. This resulted in the move of the church from Takuk to Kubaih (a rocky ground at Kuoreg). At Kukbaih, a chapel and a residence for the catechist and visiting priests were built with bricks. The visiting priests were often from Bolgatanga or Walewale. The first catechist was Elias Atampugiri from Daporitindong, and the first Talensi convert to the Catholic faith who contributed greatly to the spread of the faith was Kpatiran from Tongo-Dekpieng.

The church finally moved to its present location from Kukbaih under the stewardship of Rev. Fr. Lapointe. During this period, the need for more catechists became necessary and as a result, four (4) young men were sent to Binduri for training as catechists. These included John Badiwon, Martin Nan-Engwala, Lawrence Nabii and James Daanwalankora (son of the first convert, Kpatiran). These catechists taught in the schools and also enthusiastically spread the good news in accordance with the command of their Lord and Saviour Jesus (Mt. 10:2-10). As stated earlier, the church was firmly established with a resident catechist and visiting priests from Bolgatanga and Walewale. Rev. Fr. J. Simard often came from Walewale to assist the church in Tongo. Indeed, all these activities took place at the time of Bishop Bertrand of the Navrongo Diocese. Beginning in 1958, Fr. J. Simard's visits were very frequent, and this led to Bishop Bertrand to formally appoint him and Rev. Fr. E. Rioux as resident priests. A durbar was held on 26th October 1959 to welcome and introduce the missionaries to the community which symbolized the indigenes' acceptance of the gospel. This durbar was attended by the then Tongo-Rana, Naab Salimaandhis sub-chiefs, the then Member of Parliament, D. D. Balagumyetime, Msgr Abatey, Fr. Anoaah, Fr. Marneffe and Fr. Lapointe. The day marked the formal establishment of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus Parish in Tongo.

The Apostolic Church of Ghana

The Apostolic Church emerged as the first Pentecostal church in Tongo through the initiative of Felicia Tegbehkawol, a native of Dikpieng in Tongo Central. Recounting her story behind the emergence of the Apostolic Church in Tongo, she said she got converted and joined the church at Assin Kushea in the Central region in the early 1980s. It was the result of a miraculous healing that occurred in the life of her daughter who had been taken ill for a long time. In her opinion, "The miracle that occurred as a result of the prayers of the church leaders, encouraged her to join the church and remained a committed member after her water baptism."²³ Following the death of her husband who before then was a police officer, she decided to return to Tongo with her children. Upon their arrival in Tongo, she sent her eldest daughter to Bolgatanga to search for the Apostolic Church there; she returned to Tongo without locating the church, much to her disappointment. Another time, she went personally to Bolgatanga to look for the church, but could also not locate it. One Saturday, she decided to go to Bolgatanga to once again continue with her search for the church. Again she was unable to find it and had to stay overnight with her relative in Bolgatanga.

Going to Bolgatanga for the worship service on Sunday mornings became a regular feature for Felicia and it encouraged her so much that she requested that a branch of the church be opened in Tongo. The request was granted and the elders including Enoch, Agyemang and Twumasi, came to Tongo to find out the possibility of opening a branch there. Together with Felicia, the leaders approached the then Tongoran Kosaug Nandiwo bog and his elders at the royal court through Kpana Buchi. Tongoran Kosaug received the delegation warmly and indicated his readiness to accept visitors to his land. Therefore, the idea of opening a church in Tongo was welcome news and he blessed them giving them permission to go ahead and open the church. While in the chief's court, the chief had requested prayers for two of his wives who had been paralyzed for some time. After the prayer, the two women were miraculously healed and there was jubilation at the chief's court that day that attracted many people. The church leaders returned to Bolgatanga and returned another time with a team to organise the church in Tongo.

The first group of converts of the Apostolic Church in Tongo included Ben Boayeng who was made the caretaker and Felicia Togbehkawol as organizer. At that same time, Boal Nambunam, Bavi Teng, Malik Kpemvi, Zong Perks, Ojuku Soldier and Bismark Boabil became members of the church. Ben Boayerig and Felicia began to move from house-to-house in the settlements canvassing for people to join the Apostolic Church. It was not an evangelistic meeting as such so altar calls could not be made for

²³ Interview with Felicia Togbehkawol, Founding Member, The Apostolic Church Ghana, 22nd April, 2019.

people to give their lives to Jesus. Rather, people were called to join the church as members. These efforts brought such persons as Robert Putoyin, Kojo Tobeg, and Kwabena Saawung. The church began its first service in 1984 at the Community Centre. However, social events that were periodically organised in the centre, disturbed worship services. The church members later had to build a mud hut in front of the Community Centre where they worshipped. It was after some years that the present chapel which is under expansion was constructed. Before then they had to move to Puhuug to a location near the sacred dancing ground. There too, they were asked to relocate because the place was sacred ground, and the activities of the church could disturb the deities there. The first pastor of the Apostolic church in Tongo Central was Pastor Enoch Togba. Being a native of the southern part of the country, he often communicated with the Church in English and Asante-Twi, which were translated orally into Talene. This raised many concerns among the natives who considered the church as an Akan denomination. This phenomenon affected evangelism and church expansion in the early years. Since then, many pastors have come and gone, but an indigenous pastor is yet to be appointed for the church.

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana emerged in the Talensi area in 1960 through the initiative of Joseph Eicholzer, a German and Basel missionary. He first went to Yameriga to meet the local community and to announce his intention of establishing a church there. Before then, the people often saw the Catholic Father in Tongo pass through their community to Shiega for mission work without stopping over of the Yameriga. In the view of Mercy Teng Yin, the only surviving founding member of the church at Yameriga, Pastor Eicholzer asked the community members who had gathered around him if they accepted his proposal. The people responded positively by saying “We will follow the Pastor and not the Father. The Father passes here every day, sees us but does not border to talk to us.”

In response to a request from the people of Yameriga, Eicholzer came from Bolgatanga to establish a formal school in the community to train the children of the natives in education and religion. The school started under a baobab tree close to the house of one Mankab. Among the first teachers of the school were Sombaal and Wanguu Kumase who taught the children of the community in Primary One. The children often sat on kitchen stools they brought from their homes for their lessons. According to Mercy Teng Yin, it was difficult for the children, but they had to cope with the situation.²⁴ The school was later moved from under the baobab tree to a mud structure. This became the classroom for the pupils for some time until later Eicholzer constructed a three-room structure. This building is there to date and is being managed by the Talensi District Assembly. The Presbyterian school became the nucleus of the church in the early days. Pupils were often mandated to come to school every Monday morning with numbered cards collected from church that indicated that they actually attended church service the previous day which was Sunday. Anyone who did not have a numbered card was canned, and therefore the schoolchildren considered church attendance as a means of avoiding canning at school. The first group of adults who became the founding members of the church included Abraham Toot and his two wives, and Mercy Teng Yin. One Alando, a native of Zuarungu, became the first Catechist. Toot is remembered to have burnt his idols publicly which indicated his conversion from traditional religion to Christianity. Later on, Samuel Naafo and Samuel Kurug also joined the church bringing, the founding adult members to six.

Assemblies of God

Following the successful opening of the Assemblies of God Church at Duusi by George Apasera in 1983, the doors were opened for other branches to be opened in the Talensi area. Initial attempts were made to open a branch in Baare, but these attempts were not successful. At an Easter convention at Zuarungu it was decided that the church cross over to Baare to open an assembly in the Talensi area. This first evangelistic meeting which became unsuccessful was organised by a group called Aflames for Christ from Kumasi. A second attempt to open a branch in Baare was initiated in 1986 by the late Pastor Job Tindanbil, who was then the Pastor of the Assemblies of God at Sandema but saw the need to have a branch of the church opened in his home village. In collaboration with the church at Zuarungu Moshie, an evangelistic

²⁴ Interview with Mercy Teng Yin, Founding Member, Presbyterian Church of Ghana Talensi, 8th February, 2019.

meeting was organised at Baare. The tengdana (Priest of the Earth cult) of the area came out to chase them from the grounds because that they were causing a nuisance to the ancestors of the area. Later one Kambonab Moot, an indigene from the Sakwar settlement, offered them an area to organize their worship services. This area was called Buugni near, the sacred dance ground.

The church began at Buugni and the initial converts met there for some time until they constructed a mud hut, in which they met for worship on Sundays. Later, land was donated by the late Pastor Job Tindanbil for a permanent chapel which has since been completed where the church now meets for worship till date. It is recorded that this chapel was roofed with aluminium sheets donated by Kwabena Darko. Among the founding members of the church are Paul Sapak, David Damaha, James Nasaara, Francis Bonsalegya and Bernard Zoot. Other people who joined the church later include Kenneth Ananga, Timothy Liame, Baba Kankani, Simon Naaho, Samuel Samare, Joseph Zahaga, Enoch Manyiya, Esther Mansimme, Mary Atiologo, and Azoa Nasaara. The current Pastor of the church is Samuel Butias.

Following the successful establishment of the church at Baare, attempts were now geared toward the opening of branches in other settlements in Talensiland. The first of such branches was opened at Tongo Central in 1998. An evangelist from Kumasi by the name Kojo Boateng was the brain behind the work. He came to Tongo for missions and after courtesy calls on the traditional leaders and the Assemblyman at the time he was permitted to carry out his Mission work. Among the founding members of the church at Tongo Central are Matthew Kagre and his family, Mercy Yiranbon and her children, and Grace Pambe and her children. The need for a Pastor to take charge of the new church came up, especially as the evangelist had to return to his base in Kumasi. It was decided by the executives of the church in Bolgatanga that Francis Kutiyees, then a student Pastor at the Northern Ghana Bible Institute should be brought to Tongo to administer the church. He arrived to meet eight (8) members who met in a room at the Community Centre. The church now worships in its own permanent chapel and has a mission house that accommodates the Pastor and his family.

Responses of the Talensi to the Gospel

Evangelisation seeks to make Christ part of the people's culture by making him part of their worldview. The most crucial question confronting the Talensi people is: Who is Jesus Christ and how can they identify with him? Therefore, the proclamation of the Gospel and the responses envisaged are determined by the recipients' understanding and how they articulate the Gospel in their personal or community setting. The proclamation of the Gospel among the Talensi sought to focus on Jesus as the provider of salvation, healing, security and prosperity for the entire man. The Gospel preachers presented Jesus as one who is sufficient to meet every human need in the present and in the future. The Gospel preachers stress the power of God inherent in Jesus Christ which is greater than that of the shrines or divinities. As a result, people are called to abandon their old traditional religious practices and embrace Jesus Christ. The peoples' view of salvation refers to freedom from fear and the assurance of security and hope after death. The Gospel therefore re-orientates the perception of the people to come to appreciate eternity as more significant as against their belief in the ancestors.

Full Embrace

Many of the people interviewed gave different accounts of how they came to embrace the Christian faith. Some reported that their conversions occurred through personal conviction, while others were achieved through divine intervention in times of crisis such as disease, accidents, and others. They had come to realize that there is some power in Christianity to meet all their needs and freedom from fear and the security they so dearly strive for. To sum up, it is expedient to state that Christian conversion can truly take place as people come to appreciate the person of Jesus Christ and what he offers. To the Talensi, the quest for freedom from fear, security against spiritual forces especially witchcraft, and the hope of eternity, greatly determine, their decision to "shift camps."

Syncretism (Partial Embrace)

Syncretism in religious circles means, living with double ideas or adhering to different faiths without being loyal to any of them. For many people, attending church was viewed as a means of getting the good things offered by the white man. It is recorded that in the early years of Christian presence in the

Talensiland, the pioneer churches offered food and other items to the locals and set up schools and health facilities for the betterment of the people. Many people joined the church in those early years. They considered church attendance to be the means to receive the blessings of *fadayil* (father's house). However, many still patronised traditional healing shrines and divination shrines to determine the cause of every misfortune that they encountered.

It is worth noting that the proclamation of the Christian faith by the early missionaries bore little resemblance to the pragmatic brand of problem-solving mechanisms that the Talensi are used to. Church structures and personnel did not address the kind of problem that traditional shrines faced. In this sense, one could "convert" to Christianity by attending church services without having to change anything about one's traditional past. It can be noted that giving mental assent to the Gospel is not enough, because, in the event of crises, people will go where they feel they are spiritually connected. In this sense, it is common to find many people who profess Christianity, contract plural marriages, offer sacrifices, and libation to their ancestors, participate in initiation rites, observe taboos, and maintain shrines for their family and personal gods; as well as observe funeral rites such as the rites of the orphan which involves head shaving or widowhood rite.

Conflictual or Negative Embrace

The Talensi consider conversion to Christianity an indoctrination and a denial of one's cultural identity and a betrayal of one's ancestors. Therefore, Christian converts are regarded as useless people in society. For older people, Christian conversion is identified with alienation and must be avoided. This is because the Christian faith demands a complete break with traditional religion, which they consider a risky adventure. Gung Nakoring maintains that the social and religious customs are valid and unchangeable not because they are made to achieve the desired results but also because *tibanam ni te yabnam ndaa piil na* (our ancestors sanctioned them). These notions are very perfectly explicit in the behaviour and thoughts of the people and carry a profound moral value. The Talensi always stress the importance of passing on to their descendants the way of life bequeathed to them by their forefathers. They place an extremely high premium on their social order, such that no one would dream of trying to set aside the entire social order or agitate against the existing customs and values. This explains the peoples' resistance to new ideas that call for change in their belief systems. The reason for this state of affairs is based on the belief that the traditional customs are very much binding on the people with compelling power as the legacy of the ancestors.

Challenges of Talensi Christian Converts

The proclamation of the Gospel demands a personal decision and response. People would have to accept the message and commit themselves to the Christian faith or reject the message. On what basis will the Gospel message be rejected? When proclamation of the Gospel calls for separation from one's old ways consisting of the traditional religious belief and customs regarded as incompatible with the Christian faith, the native people would have to make decisions about where to go either the way of the Gospel or stay in the traditional religious institution. The reason for this state of affairs is perhaps a lack of understanding of the Gospel and its demands on the traditional culture and this has been so throughout the history of the people.

The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches often called on their converts to separate themselves from their religious practices and subject themselves to 'deliverance' to become Christians. Men in polygamous marriages were asked to divorce all but the first wife and this did not go down well with many people. Again those bearing traditional names were asked to go through "deliverance" to free them from ancestral curses. It is interesting to note that many parents warned their children to disassociate themselves from the churches, whose members were considered to be "lost" people. Some others faced the risk of being banished from their families and others were also denied rights of inheritance or assistance in marriage. It is significant to note that conflicts tend to occur because the proclamation of the Gospel calls for separation. However, the management of these conflicts is very vital to the growth and maturity of Christian converts, as well as to the survival of the church. Much tolerance and understanding are required in this respect.

The Gospel and the Talensi Culture

It is generally believed by Christians that the Bible is the revelation of God for man and constitutes the blueprint of His self-disclosure and how He wants humans to respond to Him. Edusa-Eyison is of the view that the scriptures being a particular historical and cultural document of a people, were meaningful and relevant to other people when applied to their cultural settings.²⁵ The aim is to establish bridges or points of contact for the communication of the Gospel to the indigenous people.

Social Arrangements

The concept of solidarity of the group among the ancient Israelites played a significant role in their social organisation. This illustrates the basic group to which every Israelite belonged. There was the clan system which comprised several families. All of these emphasised the sense of corporateness that was very much evident among the Israelites and is also part of the Frafra culture. Mbiti notes that for African peoples the family has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America.²⁶ In traditional society such as the Talensi, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and other immediate relatives. It should be noted here that the ancestral cult of the Talensi informs their family system.

How will the people who have traditionally maintained an intimate relationship with their departed relatives, communicating with them, honouring them with offerings, depending on them for guidance and reckoning on their presence, cope with the teaching of the Christian Church concerning the ancestral spirits? The Talensi society regards polygamy as a status symbol. They regard a husband of one wife as a bachelor. How will Talensi Christian converts with plural wives be accepted by the church which stresses monogamy as an ideal form of marriage for Christians?

From the Bible, it is evident that the Prophetic writings emphasise monogamy (the practice of having one wife). The symbolism of monogamous marriage is considered as the basic relationship between Yahweh and the nation of Israel. (Hos. 2:18, Isa. 1:1, Jer. 2:2, Eze. 15:8). By the New Testament times, monogamy was considered the basis for any man dressing to hold Church office. (1 Tim. 3:2, 12, Tit. 1:16). If polygamy was part of Israel's heritage, and also remains a legal form of marriage among the Talensi, then why should some churches deny the full membership status of Talensi Christian polygamists? What biblical basis do they have for "stubbornly" denying such polygamist participation in the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper)? What should the Talensi Christian polygamist do with his plural wives? Is polygamy a sin in the biblical sense? Since the church comprises every person who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, why should other people be excluded based on marriage? These questions remain unresolved and seem to constitute a hindrance to the evangelization efforts of the churches among the Talensi.

Frafra Culture as *Preparatio Evangelica*

Mbiti has noted that the African religious background is not a rotten heap of superstition, taboos and magic as has been the perception of the early Christian missionaries to Africa. Rather, it should be regarded as having a great value that can enrich Christianity.²⁷ As far as the Talensi are concerned, there is a need to identify aspects of their culture that can constitute a valuable preparation for the Gospel and what is not. It is against this background that Bediako says that the "positive evaluation of the pre-Christian tradition, and an attempt to derive insights from it for the declaration of Christian convictions, need not imply a theological syncretism."²⁸ Like all other African societies, the Talensi religion and social life lay much emphasis on communal welfare, values, concerns and kinship. Fortes in examining the festivals of the Talensi, is of the view that they serve to affirm the belonging together, the solidarity and unity of a community, making its members aware of their dependence on one another and the need for some basis of mutual trust in their pursuit of common ends and values.

²⁵ J.M.Y. Edusa-Eyison, "The Bible in Dialogue with African Life and Thought and the Role of the Mother Tongue: The Contribution of Kwesi Dickson to a New Creative Stage in History." *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 10, No. 2 (2007): 8-16.

²⁶ Mbiti, *African, Religion and Philosophy*, 69.

²⁷ Mbiti, *African, Religion and Philosophy*, 69.

²⁸ Kwame Bediako, "Scripture as the Hermeneutic of Culture." *Journal of African Christian Thought* Vol. 4, No. 1(2001): 2-11..

A careful study of the African worldview of the community as Koinonia (fellowship) shows a remarkable model for an effective re-definition of the church. The clan system within the African community set-up can be an invaluable paradigm for the identity of the church as the community is called into being by God for His glory. In line with this, Bediako citing Mbiti says that we must therefore seek to make the church the centre of existence from which African people may derive the fulfillment of their life's aspirations whether in time of need or in times of feasting, and where they may experience a communal life which has a vaster scope and meaning than tribal life without Christ could ever provide. The church will become for them a community in which their corporate aspirations are not destroyed but fulfilled and intensified, in which tribal foundations are not simply shaken and replaced with a vacuum but are made more secure in Christ. The God who made man and provided him with children, life and rain will now become man's light, and man will have fellowship with his creator.²⁹ It then follows that Jesus will become for African people the access to God whom they already acknowledge in their traditional ideas as the Creator of all things, as the one who strengthens kinship between man and man and also establishes kinship between man and God. It is only in this sense that the Gospel of the incarnation can find a place in the African traditional societies.

CONCLUSION

Christian missions cannot be carried out in a vacuum. It involves an audience that constitutes the end of the mission. The message of missions should be well packaged to achieve the desired results. It should be delivered in such a manner that it will be understood by its intended audience. The messenger in the missionary process should demonstrate a sense of purpose in delivering his or her message. The messenger should have a full knowledge of the message he or she has to deliver and must deliver it properly and accordingly taking into consideration the audience, who constitute the recipients of the message. It is therefore crucial that the proclamation, expression and interpretation of the Christian message in indigenous contexts take into consideration the religio-cultural context of the intended audience.

People do not need to stop being members of their tribes when they become Christians. Rather they should express their faith relevantly in the light of their culture. Building the right bridges between Christianity and traditional culture is the right approach to the success of evangelisation and the growth of the church in traditional contexts. This can be done through seminars, workshops, theological training, and a renewed emphasis on the interface between Christianity and traditional culture.

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²⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Boosk, 2004), 10

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