1

Global Christianity and the structure of power

Colonial civilisation and the adoption of Christianity

The majority of the world's Christians no longer live in Europe or north America but in the countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa south of the Sahara. Christianities of one sort or another are taken for granted aspects of the lives of billions of people in diverse communities that retain collective memories of non-Christian traditions and, frequently, continue to perform practices associated with them. The present constitution of different local Christianities is highly varied, reflecting in part the different forms and context of its promotion, adoption and ongoing transformation in and through practice. While these Christianities may appear to have very little in common beyond a belief in Jesus Christ they share to an extent a common origin and history. What informed and facilitated the remarkable and comparatively recent globalisation of Christianity was colonialism in its myriad forms (Hefner 1993, Burridge 1991). Colonial *conquest* created the preconditions for the kinds of political and economic contexts with which foreign missionaries could engage relatively unchallenged. Colonial *governance* formalised specific niches for missionary action that complemented the evangelisation endeavour.

Of course, neither colonialism nor missionary evangelisations were unitary projects in any simple sense (Thomas 1994). However, affinities in goal and purpose fostered a synergy that was to enhance the expansionist capabilities of both. Colonialism is essentially concerned with the establishment and consolidation of control over subject populations through their transformation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 235). The aims of evangelical mission were similar. Certain kinds of people needed to be converted from a flawed system of belief to another perfect one if they were to achieve salvation. Evangelical notions of 'salvation' encompassed not only the non-Christian person but the society in which he or she lived. Salvation was not merely a matter of saving 'heathen' souls but

amounted to a totalising endeavour in the name of civilisation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Fernandez 1982: 87). For most European missions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conversion to Christianity was viewed as an essential part of a global project of modernisation premised on a particular notion of civilisation as the culmination of an evolutionary progression away from barbarism and savagery. Christian notions of the human body and of perfectible humanity provided the ideological legitimation for widespread mission involvement in service delivery, as did the need for funds (Vaughan 1991). Christian missions in Africa were frequently engaged as contractors to governments for the supply of health and education services, extending the reach and presence of colonial regimes even into remote areas. [1]

Western notions of civilisation, of which missionary constructions were part, held that scientific knowledge was an indicator of intellectual superiority and saw appropriate education as the means to effect a literal transition out of the darkness towards the light. Achieving this transition depended on a critical foundation stone in the form of Christianity, without which there could be no real common ground of trust nor 'civilization', but education was central as the means through which converts could become knowing Christian persons. The primacy of conversion meant that missionary education was generally limited to basic reading and writing so that converts could study Christian texts. Those individuals classified by missions as suitable were permitted to study Christian theology as a basis for entering the ranks of, depending on the denomination, evangelists, catechists or preachers. Nineteenth and twentieth-century missionary imaginations of modernity and the progress with which it was associated imposed a programmatic vision of transition on societies outside Europe which was ultimately premised on difference. Even where missionary orders were committed to the notion of perfectible humanity and, by implication, a belief in the potential inherent equality between themselves and those they intended to convert the achievement of equality necessitated prior Christian status (Thomas 1994: 134). Civilisation as an attribute of humanity and as a basis for equality did not inhere within the non-Christian person. It had to be effected, administered, through the dual strategies of conversion and governance. As in the colonial project more generally different nations, races and classes were to play different roles in the future development of society and economy in the countries in question.

Visions of progress and of civilising mission were influenced by the origins and culture of missionaries (Hasu 1999: 37). In Africa protestant missionaries from England and Scotland promoted a model of the modern for an evangelised community, albeit one which in its rurality bore little relation to the contexts from which many such missionaries had travelled (Comaroff 1985). English Protestant missions gained reputations for introducing what were considered

to be progressive scientific farming techniques and technologies, as well as education and ideas which challenged existing hierarchies and inequalities, notably the abolition of slavery (Hastings 1994: 175). The vision of European Catholic orders assumed different forms, ranging from the conquest and conversion model of the Spanish in Latin America and the Philippines (Rafael 1992; Sallnow 1987) to the indigenised conversion strategies of the White Fathers under Lavigerie (Nolan 1977) and the monastic communities of the Benedictines and Franciscans in twentieth-century Africa.[2] These sought, perhaps unwittingly, to recreate the social forms of a pre-industrial Europe, a peasant society of which the Church was patron (Strayer 1978:2). Whichever mission, and irrespective of the kinds of technological innovations they introduced, the certainties of colonial Christianity were arguably antithetical either to the scientific enquiry or epistemological relativism which are today bound up with Western understandings of modernity and the post-modern. In the words of James Fernandez, missionary Christianity was essentially 'pre-enlightenment', obscuring from converts 'what were the essential achievements of Western enlightenment . . . the rational technical, that is positivistic scientific control of the world on the one hand, and the acceptance of diversity of cultural worlds on the other' (1978: 196–7).

The exponential global growth in the number of Christians and in the reach of missionary churches between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century was not merely a function of the inherent expansionist logic of a religion which promulgates salvation through the medium of conversion. The scale and extent of growth owed its success to the institutional systematisation of evangelisation through the creation of specialist organisations and the infrastructure to support them. Missionary orders dedicated to overseas work multiplied from around the second half of the nineteenth century across the countries of Western Europe (Sundkler 2000: 97–124). Fundraising for overseas missions was an accepted obligation for parishioners and clergy across denominations. Missionary service was romanticised in popular fiction and in Christian ideology as an heroic, but necessary, sacrifice. This historical association of Christianity with colonialism and the foreign has implications for the ways in which ex-missionary Christianity in particular is perceived in post-colonial settings, as well as for the place of Christianity in contemporary discourses about history, transformation and power (Cannell 1999; Fernandez 1982; Comaroff 1985; Stirrat 1992).

The anthropology of Christianity

If Christianity as a global project owes its foundations to colonial conquest and to the development of institutions for evangelisation, what then of anthropology, its Enlightenment alter ego? Although apparent opposites in the sense that

Christian missionaries set out to convert colonial subjects' views of the world and of their place in it while anthropology set out to describe the world views which the missionaries set out to replace, both had a role to play in effecting and, on occasion challenging, colonial rule (Asad 1973). Anthropology is as much a product of colonial mentalities as missionary Christianity and also played a part in the management of colonial occupation. While the respective contributions of missionary Christianities and of anthropology and anthropologists to the colonial endeavour are well documented the relationship between anthropology and Christianity is less so (Van der Geest 1990). At first sight this is perhaps surprising, given the historical congruence of the second wave of colonial mission with the consolidation of colonial anthropology. Anthropologists conducting fieldwork in the very communities which were the targets of missionary activity seem to have paid them very little attention. Christian missions do not inform the backdrop of the bulk of functionalist monographs produced at the height of the colonial period. Their presence is notably absent, for example, in Evans Pritchard's Nuer trilogy (1940, 1951, 1962), even though one book explicitly addresses issues of religion.[3] Where the missionary presence is noted in anthropological accounts, the mission hovers at the margins of the narrative, a peripheral if threatening influence, poised to embark on a devastating assault on what both the anthropologists and their hosts have come to objectify as the domain of authentically 'traditional' culture and custom. A generation of anthropologists who were, if not practising Christians, wholly immersed within a Judaeo-Christian tradition seem to have viewed the Christian future as a foregone conclusion. Where this future seemed dubious, as among the Sudanese Dinka in the 1950s, the anthropologist Godfrey Leinhardt, himself a committed Christian, could only assume it was because of the theological continuities between the 'local' religion and Christianity (1985: 147).

Despite the often aggressive evangelical posturing of colonial missionaries keen to eradicate practices they deemed to be un-Christian and to promote the spread of particular constructions of Christian religion, the practice and assumptions of colonial mission escaped anthropological scrutiny until long after the event. The 1980s saw the publication of two important retrospective studies of the evangelisation process and its cultural legacy in Africa. Jean Comaroff's *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance* (1985) and Beidelman's *Colonial Evangelism* (1982), the latter addressing a more recent historical period and based on fieldwork in a Tanzanian community which perhaps enjoyed a slightly less ambivalent relationship with missionaries than did the anthropologist. These studies exposed the break between the Christian message and evangelical practice through an examination of the kinds of political and economic relationships on which missionary influence depended. They paid less attention to the kinds

of ritual and other practices performed by people in those communities who defined themselves as Christian, or in Comaroff's study, to the kinds of practices deriving directly from missionary Christianity. The contemporary legacies of colonial forms of Christianity were not addressed, except in so far as these influenced breakaway Christian movements.

Ethnographic accounts of European and Latin American communities in the 1970s and 1980s gave increasing recognition to Christianity; assisted by the rural focus of Mediterranean anthropology (Pina Cabral 1981; Christian 1972) and the prominent place of Christian derived ritual and syncretistic practice in the Americas. The emphasis of studies of post-colonial Africa was different. Christianity was either ignored altogether or, if mentioned, treated as peripheral, an option made practicable by the fact that in many places members of Christian communities continue to perform non-Christian practices alongside their Christianity.[4] Where Christianity was central, the emphasis was on the Christian derived cults and sects (Peel 1968; Fernandez 1978; Fabian 1971), numerous in some countries, but hardly the exemplar of Christianity throughout the continent. Ethnographic studies of Christian derived sects have tended to focus on syncretism and symbolic meaning, and the practice of adherents interpreted as both derived from, and a critique of, colonial Christianities and their referents (Comaroff 1985; Fernandez 1982). Such groups continue to be popular in many African countries (Hoehler-Fatton 1996; Allen 1991), alongside the persistent expansionism of contemporary Evangelical Christianities as part of an ongoing missionary endeavour driven from the United States of America (Gifford 1991; Hvalkof and Aaby 1981). Despite these efforts, the majority of people who define themselves as Christian in Africa are still likely to be affiliated to the mainstream Catholic or Protestant churches historically associated with colonial conversion. Their significance is increasingly acknowledged in the recent proliferation of anthropological and historical studies of processes of missionisation, indigenisation and identity, of which this book is part (Pels 1999; Hasu 1999; Spear 1997; Bravman 1998).

Mainstream Catholic and Protestant churches have undergone radical change since the formal end of the colonial period. Most have indigenised to some extent, although financial dependence on missionary churches remains. They are less likely to retain previous monopolies in health and educational provision, although they remain engaged in service delivery, often as part of an expanding not for profit sector which may provide an alternative to lower quality state-managed services (Semboja and Therkilsden 1995). And their role is changing. In the aftermath of ongoing economic adjustment programmes and the shifting balance between state and private service provision Christian churches have gained an opportunity for a more formal re-engagement with the state. In many

countries ex-mission churches are seeking recognition for themselves as a legitimate component of the kind of civil society promoted in international political discourse as a significant agent in the facilitation of social and economic development and as a potential means through which wider participation in this process can be effected.

Civil society and rural Africa

If the indigenisation and the localisation of ex-missionary churches has to an extent reinforced their claims to be accepted players in the civil society game in Africa it has also transformed the political significance of Christian churches and their personnel. This is particularly evident in countries where churches stand as independent organisations, formally free of government control, but which are strongly associated with particular ethnicities and regions and subject to manipulation by local and national elites (Gifford 1998). Further, in post-colonial Africa, both local and national elites are fostered by and within post-missionary churches (Simpson 1996) which have become power brokers in a translocal political scene claiming to represent specific areas and interests (Bayart 1993: 189). While the political influence and material power of Christian churches has always been substantial in parts of Africa, the gradual erosion of state capacity and control since the 1980s combined with the post-missionary localisation of institutional Christianity has contributed to a situation in which local and national political processes and power struggles continue to be mediated through ex-missionary churches, which retain strong links to international sources of cash and support. Mission agencies and organisations continue to exert enormous influence, often in collaboration with secular development organisations. The institutional structures established by colonial mission perpetuate the consolidation of particular political relations in rural areas. Ironically, the context of apparent post-coloniality is characterised by the persistence of mission. The increased role for missionary Christianities is not confined to Africa. According to one observer, 'The grand era of Western missions was not in the last century or during colonial times. It is now, during the era of development aid in the period after World War 2' (Tvedt 1998: 217).

This perpetuation of foreign influence in many African countries is paralleled by the massive expansion of the Aid industry and the continued importance of foreign donors and multilateral agencies as initiators and underwriters of the policy basis of post adjustment reforms. Liberalisation, a key moment in the reform process, has begun to prise open the stagnant markets long closed off to foreign investment. In countries such as Mozambique and Tanzania, where formal sector companies fear risk, entrepreneurs from other developing nations as well as illegal operators are taking advantage of the free-for-all

which characterises sections of the economy, especially in profitable sectors such as mining. Inequality is growing, between rich and poor, rural and urban and between those with access to foreign opportunities and capital and the majority without. Tanzania is no exception. Research conducted by the World Bank and others (Naryan 1997) has shown that the areas with the most poor people are those in marginal rural districts with restricted access to markets and a resource base which does not permit taking advantage of limited agricultural opportunities. These rural districts are precisely the kinds of places where the power of ex-mission churches is strong, and growing. In such places, like the one described in this book, alternative forms of local association may be unable to compete in the struggle for influence. Those opposing church power may resort to the guerrilla tactics of a politics of evasion and, on occasion, resistance to the imposed hegemony of the church through such strategies as participation in witchcraft suppression movements, the formation of independent churches and the perpetuation of explicitly anti-Christian practice. Some of these tactics are explored in detail in the chapters which follow.

The situation in which ex-missionary churches have come to have enormous political significance and power in contemporary rural communities in Africa is the outcome of the kinds of complex social and historical processes which are described in this book. Perhaps the most significant factors contributing to the persistence of mission in the post colony (as both place and representational space, for example the role accorded ex-missionary Christianity in contemporary African fiction) are first, the particular forms of administration which colonial rule imposed and, second, the post-colonial form of governance through, until recently, single party states. Colonial governance in Africa used 'indirect rule' through Native Authorities and the institution of the tribe as a body united through customary law and tenure regimes to ethnicise and localise political control (Mamdami 1996). 'Native' administration over 'tribal' areas combined with the demarcation of missionary spheres of influence created situations in which specific ethnic groups came to be associated with specific Christian identities. This geographical and cultural positioning enabled Christian missions to consolidate themselves as service providers and patrons to specific ethnic groups through various partnerships with those recognised by colonial regimes as 'traditional' authorities. These relationships were often tenuous, breaking down over points of mutual disagreement, as for example the female circumcision controversy in Kenya that lead to the establishment of independent churches (Strayer 1972). Elsewhere, mission churches continued to consolidate themselves, accumulating new members through population growth rather than evangelisation. Evangelical mission does continue to be an important part of the religious scene in Africa, although its focus has shifted. It

is now largely the prerogative of Baptist and Fundamentalist churches seeking to convert people who are already Christians from other denominations.

Independence and the transition to single party regimes were accompanied by the outlawing of potential opposition groups and organisations, or their incorporation into the government system. It was not unusual for Christian churches to be left as virtually the only formal organisations with the capacity to mobilise large sections of the population without recourse to government resources or control. The roles assumed by ex-missionary churches in the formal one-party era were varied. In some countries, notably Kenya, Christian churches became, and continue to be, enmeshed in formal sector national politics from an anti-state position, acting as foci for popular opposition to the ruling Kenya African National Union regime. Elsewhere, as in Rwanda, ex-mission churches and their personnel were sometimes so thoroughly co-opted by government or opposition forces that certain sections seem to have become adjuncts to political movements, occasionally indistinguishable from those movements themselves. The formal transition to multi-party politics and the promotion of 'democratisation' have also had an impact on the place and power of ex-missionary churches as they seek to regain legitimacy in the reform context, not merely as the apolitical providers of social services but as an authentic part of 'civil society' with a positive and necessary role in the new national order. Concepts of civil society are problematic to apply in many countries where the institutional separation between family, state and market which would allow the easy identification of the space occupied by civil society does not exist. Politically driven models of civil society intended to promote the kinds of development policies of which the drive to democratisation is part have tended to focus on the formal sector organisations which mirror in their composition and objectives the kinds of organisations that comprise 'civil society' in the West (Tripp 1997: 199; White 1994). Consequently, most of the emerging swathe of what are classified as civil society organisations in Africa are urban in membership and in orientation, with the exception of Christian churches. The implications of this classification are significant, authorising church involvement in politically motivated development, obscuring the political structure of ex-missionary churches as top-down organisations and camouflaging into invisibility alternative forms of political action and modes of engagement in rural areas which do not conform to officially recognised civil society models.

Rural power and modes of domination

The question of what constitutes the nature of political engagement in rural Africa has recently undergone a revival in African studies more generally with the publication of several influential books examining apparent attributes of

states, the constitution of civil society and political participation throughout the continent (Bayart 1993; Mamdani 1996; Chabal 1986; 1994; Rothschild and Chazan 1988; Migdal 1988). Despite differing interpretations of the peculiarity, or otherwise, of political processes and institutions, a commonality of themes situates these studies, not merely as part of a particular Western academic discourse on Africa and politics, but as interlocutors of historical processes which seem to recur across several African states. Admittedly, the characterisation of these processes is informed by a particular Eurocentric perspective, on the one hand exoticising Africa and, on the other, viewing political phenomena there as pathological and exceptional (Chabal 1996: 45). Despite these shortcomings, the studies have the advantage of a broad comparative sweep. All remark on the significance of patronage and clientelism as a core idiom through which political relations are conducted and which links effectively rural and urban, the elite and the ordinary. In the views of Bayart (1993) and others, it is this which accounts for the problematic characteristics of African states and modes of governance – weak, patrimonial, unaccountable states dominated by single-party regimes (Callaghy 1987; Hyden 1980).

The significance of patronage and associated relations of dependence has been accentuated by the emphasis of international donors on governance and accountability which dominated the discourse of reform throughout the 1990s. Fundamentally entwined with the extractive state imagined as a peculiarly African phenomenon, patronage is blamed for the misappropriation of public funds through the short-circuiting of formal redistributive mechanisms for the reallocation of public money. Linked with alleged corruption and maladministration, patronage is judged by Western observers, academics and development agents alike, as both bad and pathological: pathological in that it is assumed to be inherently bound up with indigenous systems of kinship and traditional local level politics, and bad because it has supposedly precluded the emergence of the kind of democratic meritocracy which could lead to effective governance and development.

Mahmood Mamdani has forcefully argued against this view of states in Africa as inherently pathological and has challenged the explanation that apparently 'traditional' kinship-based modes of sociality, what Goran Hyden has referred to as the 'economy of affection' (1980), are responsible for the political significance of patronage. He argues that, on the contrary, contemporary forms of political engagement and institutions throughout the continent are not the legacies of *African* cultural forms, but of the specific institutional structures through which colonial governance was affected. In Mamdani's view, systems of dual administration created a split between Native Authorities governed by a codified and rigid customary law and urban centres where civil law was applied to

citizens, leading to the constitution of conservative ethnic mini-states controlled by local administrations in the name of custom. The pathological attributes associated with politics in Africa are legacies of this particular institutional form of colonial governance. According to Mamdani such institutional forms persist where dual administration has not been fully dismantled, despite significant changes in legal systems – in countries such as South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania. In such places, rural areas continue to be governed by customary laws, particularly in relation to land tenure, and their access to justice is ultimately mediated by local administrations. In contrast, residents of urban areas have access to national laws and as citizens, the language of rights (1996: 18–22). The problems of politics and administration in Africa will not, Mamdani rightly contends, be resolved unless these structures are replaced with unified national systems of administration.

An enduring legacy of the Native Administration system was the persistence of codified custom and conservatism which consolidated new forms of social relations and property regimes legitimated by customary kinship (cf. Moore 1986). Although it is undoubtedly the case that pre-colonial relations of patronage and clientship *were* significant in informing the future direction of political dependency in Africa, for example through the elaboration of institutions such as pawnship and the incorporation of incomers as dependants of local powers (Douglas 1964; Wright 1993), Mamdani's argument is suggestive. It points to the importance of colonial institutional structures and their persistence, rather than cultural representations, in accounting for the constitution of specific kinds of social relationships in contemporary Africa, in particular for political relations. Rather than posit a radical break between the colonial and the post-colonial, or view the post-colonial in abstract philosophical terms as a kind of conceptual and representational space, perhaps situated outside the post-colony itself (Mbembe 1992), Mamdani's account alerts us to the persistence of colonial institutional forms and their associated power relations well into the post-colonial period. That is, contemporary political relations in Africa are determined not so much by the ideological legacies of colonialism or post-colonial struggles for national sovereignty as they are the outcome of the dynamic of relationships between the specific institutional forms of governance late colonialism introduced and the social contexts of governance. It follows then that there is no absolute or necessary disjuncture between colonial and post-colonial social and political forms (1996: 26).

This line of analysis can apply equally fruitfully to the study of post-missionary Christianities which may reproduce what are essentially the institutional forms of missionary Christianity long after the formal end of colonial mission. This book explores the implications of the persistence of mission for