Indigenous Conceptions of Conversion among African Christians in South Africa

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Abstract
The paper explores the meaning of conversion for African Christians in South Africa by looking at some of the indigenous terms that have populated the Christian vocabulary. The paper focuses on terms like *ukuguquka, ukukholwa, ibandla, ikholwa, igqobhoka, inkonzo,* and *inkolo.* These terms are found among people who speak Nguni languages. It shows how they were used in pre-Christian context and traces their evolution in Christian contexts. Research conducted in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, St John's Apostolic Faith Mission, and Methodist Churches in Cape Town between 1997 and 2001 has indicated that conversion was not a simple religious process but involved diverse political, economic and social aspects. Conversion involved a transformation of an African Christian identity from the margins to the centre. It also involved extensive negotiation of what it means to be Christian through the translation of Christian content into an African idiom. The paper goes through various terms and how their original meanings were discarded for new ones.

Keywords: Conversion, Christianity, indigenous, tradition, believe, belief, ancestors, a convert

Introduction
Christianity has managed to take root among Africans in South Africa. Arguably, this arduous and controversial process has been centuries in the making. Although there are many contributing factors, one of the major

reasons for this apparent rootedness is that Africans adopted Christianity as an indigenous religion (Gray 1990: 80; Gray 1982: 61); and through this adoption, Christianity seized to be solely a white man's religion. But how did this adoption occur? And how did it manifest within the African community? The success and growth of Christianity among Africans was greatly dependant on translation. Africans managed to translate foreign concepts into local idiom and used these idioms as a means to acclimate beliefs and practices into indigenous life. Even though missionaries were excited by African conversion, they were not aware that Africans had a different conception of their Christian faith. This paper is an exploration of some of the terms that were borrowed or taken from African languages and populated or filled with Christian meaning and content. Historian of missions Lamin Sanneh (1983) has argued that both Christianity and Islam in West Africa were able to take root by using the religious infrastructure of traditional religions (see also Gray 1990: 65). Furthermore, 'they proceeded to adopt local vocabulary to preach the gospel' (Sanneh 1995: 158). Jonathan A. Draper (2003: 2) also points out that '... recent studies have emphasized both the resilience of oral culture in the face of subjugation and also the agency of the conquered people'. The selected terms for analysis demonstrate ways in which Africans created a continuum between the traditional worldview and Christianity. In this paper it will be shown how, to a certain extent, African religio-cultural infrastructure created conditions for Christianity to take root and eventually viewed as an indigenous religion. This paper will also discuss the significance of language as an instrument for adapting, understanding and transmitting information. Thus, we will find Christianity translated and reconstructed to make sense in an African context.

Theorizing Conversion in an African Context

This paper uses various approaches grouped into two broad categories of social-psychological, and social-historical. Within the ambit of the social psychological approach, conversion is studied as self-transformation. The importance of the agency of the individual in this process is clearly evident. The individual plays a pivotal role in his or her conversion. By contrast, social-historical explanations tend to look at· conversion within a broad social, economic, political and historical context. Social structures play a

crucial role in the study of conversion for these scholars. But, as Robert W. Hefner (1993) has suggested, these two approaches would·be strengthened by being brought together. He was restating a point made earlier by Emefie Ikenga-Metuh (1987:23) that 'conversion in Africa is a multi-causal phenomenon, therefore; a multi-causal explanation is necessary. In developing a working model to understand conversion it is important to look at how Africans conceptualised and understood that process. That is, what did it mean to them? Then a better understanding of the process can be established'. It is, therefore, important for us to say what we mean by conversion.

David Snow and Richard Machalek (1983; 1984) used a socio rhetorical method to theorise about conversion. They argued that a convert is a social type, i.e., he or she is a product of a social context or social reality. Converts can be identified through their talk and reasoning, in other words, through their discourse. According to Ricoeur (1995:46) 'faith never appears as an immediate experience but always as mediated by certain language that articulates it'. In other words, faith is couched and cloaked in the language of the faith community in order for it to have any meaning. Thus, for Snow and Machalek, conversion is change in the universe of discourse. These are 'socially constructed frameworks of meaning imbedded in language and other symbols that provide a system or 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1967) for making sense of the world'' (Staples & Mauss 1987: 135). In other words, they are the property of social groups. The universe of discourse establishes, constitutes, and sustains the social world in which the individual participates' (Wanamaker 1999:20).

For Staples and Mauss, 'conversion can be viewed as a *process;* that this process is fundamentally one of *self-transformation;* that self-transformation is primarily through *language* (Mead 1934; Schwalbe 1983); and that the convert plays an *active* role in his or own transformation' (1987:146). Self-transformation is said to be a change in the 'real-self'. The real-self being 'who we really believe we are when all our social roles and self-presentations are stripped away' (1987:137). Clearly, language plays a crucial role in conversion. It is through language that an individual achieves self-transformation. In fact, 'ideological language functions as a resource, which in enabling believers come to terms with ending problems of meaning in their lives, brings about a sense of being transformed' (Stromberg 1990:43). Inevitably, individuals use discourse to transform themselves.

Robin Horton (1971; 1975a; 1975b) proposed an intellectualist approach to the study of African conversion. Earlier theories were premised on the idea that Africans were passive recipients of either Islam or Christianity. Horton begins his analysis by acknowledging the vibrance and dynamism of African cosmology. Inherent in African cosmological thought was the ability to change, develop, move forward and adapt to changing socio-structural factors. Horton proposed that 'no human group is a *tabula rasa* which automatically registers the imprint of external cultural influences' (1975a:221). ·Each human group has its set of ideas methods of knowledge generation.

Ikenga-Metuh (1987) understands conversion as a socio-religious phenomenon. It has social as well as religious causes. He further pointed out that the period of massive conversion to Islam and Christianity corresponded with a period of rapid socio-cultural change, i.e., colonialism, industrialisation, and modernisation. All these factors contributed to conversion in Africa. In fact, 'African conversion is both a process of adaptation of elements of traditional beliefs and adoption of new beliefs' (1987:25). Thus he calls for a multi-causal approach because each of the approaches proposed emphasised one or the other cause.

Ikenga-Metuh does not share Horton's view that Christianity and Islam only benefited from changes that were in the air, in that, 'exposure to the Christian faith and Islam and their missionary preaching and welfare programmes, are factors which are often underplayed in favour of supposedly underlying factors' (1987:23). He is of the view that no fair assessment of the conversion phenomenon in Africa can be undertaken without any reference to Christianity and Islam as major contributors. A multi-causal approach requires more than theological speculation or anthropological 'thought experiments', but detailed historical, sociological, and ethnographic investigations.

Terence Ranger's (1993) starting point in taking this approach is that precolonial African religion was not localised but was very fluid. The idea of a shattered microcosm made redundant because African religion had both microcosmic and macrocosmic orientations. In African societies identity was not conceived in terms ethnicity but it was constructed politically. Ethnic boundaries were a late colonial invention. People identified themselves more as members of polities that had fluid boundaries. There was movement and interaction among people from different areas, which resulted in the

exchange of ideas. In fact, 'men interacted with others as traders, as hunters, as pilgrims .... People constantly moved out of their microcosmic homesteads and villages, and other people as constantly passed into and through them' (Ranger 1993:73).

The movement, interaction, and exchange of ideas by people from various areas and polities had an impact on religious forms of belief, practice and identity.

> African religions were symbolic of relationships, and cults were often a means of articulating such relationships, the complex patterns of society' and economics matched by equally complex religious pattern .... one can see that African religions were multilayered and dynamic, with a history of contradiction, contestation, and innovation. From this perspective one might replace the model of total organic collectivity with something else -a model of creative and resilient pluralism. Such a model helps to the adaptability of African societies and individuals during the changes of colonial capitalism (Ranger 1993:73).

Ranger dispelled the myth of an organic, localised African society that was centrally controlled and waiting for something to happen. The microcosm was said to be safe and characterized by its shielding of members from the effects of macrocosm. He argued that prior to colonialism, Africans operated at a microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic level; they had exposure to a wider world and alternative ideas. Religious development was, to a large extent, influenced by the fluidity of movement by people from different polities. Polities did not have rigid boundaries; they could expand or decrease due to war and other natural phenomena. Furthermore, 'the locus of symbolic innovation and mythic creation was macrocosmic region rather than the microcosmic village or chiefdom' (1993:75).

As for Christianity, Ranger argued that it 'was much *less* macrocosmic than the conventional model supposes. The problem is that the best known missionaries and missions are the ones that were the most committed to the transformation of Africa'. However, 'most of the twentieth century missionaries were anticapitalist, hostile to urban life, anxious to rebuild rural societies. … A majority of missionaries were concerned with building local communities' (1993:89). The works of John L. and Jean

Comaroff (1987; 1991; 1992) demonstrate how missionaries among the Tswana got involved in local struggles and contests over symbols and meaning. Missionaries were involved in contests over rainmaking, gender roles, agriculture, and how society had to be ordered. They appropriated local symbols in order for their message to have more appeal to the local. Eventually, appropriations were important in making Christianity an indigenous religion.

Sociologist Robert Hefner (1993:25) suggested that conversion is a process of identity transformation and he relates it to the process of identity development called reference-group formation. The reference group offers individuals a basis for self-definition and self-identification, a way of affirming their humanity. It gives individuals a sense of who they are in relation to other people. Once a person's identity has been established he or she is able to negotiate space, obligations, and entitlements. In Hefner's words,

> Reference group theory emphasizes that self-identification is implicated in all choice, matters of self-interest, in myriad conflicts and solidarities of human life. More specifically, reference group theory stresses that in the course of their lives individuals develop a real or imagined reference group- an anchor for their sense of self and for the entitlements and obligations thought to characterize relationships - and refer to reference evaluating people, and life (1993:25).

Hefner further argued that the central part of personal identity is connection to others and the capacity to be responsive. Individuals derive their self-worth, self-identification and self-definition in relationship with others. Their individuality is recognised and affirmed. They are thus accorded status and allocated space within the context of a group.

Reference group orientation is a dynamic process of affirming human value, it does not start and end with one becoming a member of a reference group. It, however, ‘involves 'reflexive monitoring' ... of one's self image and goals in social action’ (Hefner 1993:26). This is an ongoing process of revisiting belief and values held in the light of social and political dynamics. Group membership does not necessarily mean that people share the group's outlook on reality in its entirety. There is a strong element of human agency

involved here; individuals have the ability and capacity to make conscious decisions and choices about the course their lives should take. Some people 'look elsewhere than their community of origin for alternative notions of self and self-worth' (1993:26). Therefore, 'conversion implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-definition, anew, though not necessarily exclusive, reference point for one's identity' (1993: 17).

Conversion does not take place in a vacuum; 'it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics, and morality' (1993:4). Hefner is of the view that for a much fuller understanding of conversion there is a need for an exploration of the interpenetration between the psychological and socio-political models.

> Accounts of conversion that emphasize putative psychological reality-such as the essays by Nock (1933) and James (1982) or a surprising number of studies in contemporary American sociology (Snow and Machalek 1984) -remain incomplete if they neglect the broader context that informs the self- and situational-evaluation of the converted. Politics and social ethics are *intrinsic* to the psychocultural reality of conversion informing an agent's commitment to an identity and moral authority the that commitment implies (Hefner 1993:28).

While underscoring the point made by Ikenga-Metuh about the multi-causality of conversion, Hefner located conversion in the identity politics of the reference group. It is more than the psychology of conversion, but more than language, rhetoric, or discourse.

African Terms

Conversion is a complex subject which different faith communities interpret differently. It is also possible that individuals within a faith community will have different ideas about the meaning and substance of conversion. The term to convert in IsiXhosa is *ukuguquka* (*inguquko* is conversion), literally meaning to turn around or to make a turn or to change direction. During times of tribulation, AmaZulu say *abaphansi basifulathele*, literally meaning that the ancestors have given their backs to us, that is, our ancestors have turned

away from us. By turning away, the ancestors were no longer giving protection to that family. Once the ancestors have turned their backs on a family it meant that that family could experience a misfortune. There is vast literature in the area of ATR that underscores the importance of ancestral protection. From the perspective of the traditionalists this act of turning leaves tradition behind, which is seen as an act of betrayal. Furthermore, this act of turning towards the missionaries and their message challenged and even undermined traditional authority of the chiefs and elders (Switzer 1993: 113).

Ukuguquka is a multi-faceted term, it means turning away and towards, re-turning and returning. However, *ukuguquka* has to be located within a socio-historical context in order to be helpful in our analysis. As we discuss *ukuguquka* in its different contexts, we will also come across other African terms which will address in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

First, *turning away and turning towards* is a simultaneous process, e.g., when an individual converted to Christianity he or she turned away from African religion. During early encounters with the missionaries in the nineteenth century, when African polities were still independent, *ukuguquka* meant turning away from tradition towards Christianity. In fact, 'conversion for the first generation converts involved nothing less than a complete break with the old way of life' (Switzer 1993: 118). Commenting on his observations of Christians among AmaQadi of the Valley of Thousand Hills in KwaZulu Natal in the 1950s, Absolom Vilakazi (1962:97) said,

> It is a very common thing in many Zulu churches for people to declare, during 'witnessing time' in church, or in their prayers, that they have given up kinship bonds ('I have left father and mother' or 'I have left my people' *ngashiya abakithi*) and have chosen for themselves the new community of followers of Jesus Christ.

Traditionalists understood such an act as betrayal because it meant the rejection of traditional customs and practices. Among AmaZulu, converts were referred to as *amambuka* (traitors) because they were seen to be rejecting the ways of their forefathers, as well as, their community. They literally ran away and settled in mission stations. 'In the nineteenth century Christian converts tended by and large to be ex-slaves, outcasts from their

society, refugees looking for a safe haven' (Hastings 1994: 61). The make-up of early converts re-enforced the negative characterisation of this group.

AmaXhosa refer to the Christian convert as *igqobhoka.* This term comes from the word *gqobhoza* that designates an act of piercing or opening a hole. From a Christian perspective, *igqobhoka* is someone who has been pierced and penetrated by the gospel. In contrast, supporting a distinct traditionalist perspective, traditional healer and academic Nokuzola Mndende (1998: 9) described *igqobhoka* as a container with a hole, letting out what is good and valuable while letting in what is evil and undesirable. She asserted that *amagqobhoka* are untrustworthy because they serve two masters. In her mind it is impossible for one to be loyal to both masters, and as such, she proposed that people have to choose which master to serve and then be loyal to that master. Her critical stance seemed to be motivated by what she regarded as double talk by *amagqobhoka*. They are like bats (*amalulwane*), she suggested, because one cannot make out whether they are mice or birds. On the ground they are as tricky and treacherous as mice but in the air they fly majestically as birds. When they are among traditionalists, they profess to depend on the provisions of their ancestors for good health and fortune. But among Christians they profess dependence on the blood of Christ and the commands of the Bible, thus making them untrustworthy.

Certainly, this traditionalist characterisation of *amagqobhoka* is highly derogatory. It emanates from feuds between the Red and School people, but goes well beyond a conflict of religion. As Mayer (1971: 24) recounted, Red people 'will speak *of ombolo mbini*, a 'two sided' person or *ilulwane*, 'a bat'*'*. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a strong rivalry between the two groups in the Ciskei area. School people, many of whom were converts, saw themselves as embracing 'civilisation' and being progressive while on the other hand, the Red people were seen as anti-civilisation and anti-progress. They held onto useless traditions of the past. The rivalry between these two groups is an indicator that there was no uniform response to Christianity and modernity. The School people were willing to accept the Gospel as well as the Western values it came with, while the Red people were only willing to incorporate certain elements of modernisation into their worldview. In other words, Red people wanted to have control over how Christianity and modernity were made part of their reality.

In IsiZulu the term for a convert is *ikholwa*, coming from the word *kholwa* (believe). *Ukukholwa* is to believe in someone or something, that is,

ngiyakholwa nguwe (I believe in you or I have confidence in you or I trust you or I have faith in you). Moreover, *ukukholwa* has connotations of loyalty and allegiance. In this light conversion to Christianity was considered as a betrayal to the group (the living and the dead), because it meant a transference of loyalty and allegiance to the missionaries and colonial authorities or simply a foreign worldview and political establishment. Converts instantly became enemies of the group and ceased to be *umuntu* (person or human being) in the eyes of the community; ultimately, the process of conversion created an undesirable 'other' within the community. In the context of exchanges between Africans and missionaries there was rivalry. Both groups wanted to secure their material and intellectual interests. Therefore the act of going to the other side was seen as a serious violation as it exposed each side to their rival. Converts were thus called *amakholwa* or *amagqobhoka* not *abantu* (people, human beings). They were classified in the subhuman category. However, over time the meaning and intention of the terms *ikholwa* and *igqobhoka* altered and came to be someone respectable in the community. Hlonipha Mokoena (2005: 5), in her excellent thesis on Magema Fuze, makes the point that 'Being an ikholwa was a political and social, rather than just a religious identity'. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries ordinary Christians were proud to call themselves *amakholwa*. The meaning of this term changed due to historical developments and the recognition of Christianity as an indigenous religion. The *kholwa* identity became desirable as a result of the weakening of African traditional authorities and the emergence of a powerful educated black elite. *Kholwa* status continued to gain more currency among many Africans as both Western education and Christianity were seen as important aspects for Black liberation and progress.

In fact, mission Christianity provided a platform for the development of a pan-African identity which became a major pillar of the liberation struggle in South Africa. Such an identity embraced what is beyond the immediate group or clan. Norman Etherington (1976) observed that in Natal some mission stations had people from various ethnic groups who were strangers to the Nguni majority surrounding them. In Edendale he also observed that the *Kholwa* community was multi-ethnic due to intermarriage and pursuance of issues of common interest. Christianity in this case helped these communities to forge a common identity distinct from non-Christian Africans and White settlers.

Inkolo is a term that AmaZulu gave to socio-religious changes brought about by the missionaries. During the twentieth century Christianity was perceived as part of a larger order or an alternative worldview that included Western education, colonial administration, commerce and industry. For example, among the BaTswana,

> The mission emphasized practical reconstruction, seeking to lay the basis for conversion by transforming the person through mundane activities of everyday life .... Here they demonstrated the utility of the plough and pump, preached the virtues of sober discipline, and installed the clock and bell to mark out routines and ensure that time was well spent …. Here too, as the other side of their spiritual coin, they taught the value of the 'varied treasures of commerce' .... and the supreme enabling power of money (Comaroff & Comaroff 1987: 195).

The word *inkolo* that is loosely used for religion means *a belief*. How should we contextually understand *inkolo*? After resisting conversion to Christianity for a long time, there were those who decided to align themselves with what the missionaries were advocating. But was this experience a *belief* in the Christian God or was it a belief in what one could gain materially once one was a member of the new religion? Were people persuaded by the preached word and the efficacy of the new religion or by the idea of living in a square house or gaining access to 'white power'? Ifeka-Moller (1974: 61) suggested that 'Christianity promised a new kind of power, the power of the white man, which people could use to discover the secret of his technological superiority'. In Ikenga-Metuh's words 'missionaries had access to and in many cases controlled a large proportion of the instruments of social change: schools, welfare services, and mass-media' (1974: 61). In fact, 'for most Africans conversion to Christianity is associated with securing access to modern skills and superior social status, rather than with developing homely virtues defined by dour, atavistic missionaries' (Beidelman 1982: 12).

The lure of western goods, technology and what missionaries could offer diplomatically did not go unnoticed. For Richard Gray (1990: 60) missionaries were also seen 'as potential alternative sources of supernatural power'. Early on some missionaries realized that there was a problem with

non-engaged religiosity. As Simensen (1987) demonstrated the approach of most Norwegian missionaries among AmaZulu was to offer gifts, show the efficiency of their medical technology, and offer humanitarian work where possible. This was against the directive from the Norwegian board to confine their work to preaching the word to the common people.

The term conversion implies an adoption of a different stance from the one that you had before. In terms of religion, conversion takes form as a change to a new religion, which implies an adoption of new values, symbols, and a new worldview. Implied also is the notion of resocialisation. An individual or a group will be resocialised into a new reality. Resocialisation provides the convert with new lenses with which to see and interpret reality. These newly acquired tools are very important in the process of engaging with the world as well as self-definition in determining one's place in the world. Literature on the encounters between missionaries and Africans suggest that for the majority of missionaries, Christian conversion required disowning African religious and cultural practices and then accepting Christianity together with Western cultural practices. In other words, Africans had to become European before becoming Christian, both in terms of their behaviour and outward appearance. Beidelman (1982: 5) was of the view that missionaries were an important part of the colonial project:

> Christian missions represent the most naïve and ethnocentric, and therefore the most thorough-going, facet of colonial life …. Missionaries invariably aimed at overall changes in the beliefs and actions of native peoples, at colonization of heart and mind as well as body. Pursuing this sustained policy of change, missionaries demonstrated a more radical and morally intense commitment to rule than political administrators or businessmen.

In order to assert their aims and reinforce the necessity for conversion, missionaries cast African culture, tradition and customs in a negative light. According to Simensen (1987: 96),

> Most aspects of Zulu culture came under the definition of sin, based not only on Christian but also on specific European cultural criteria. This naturally kept the cost of religious change high in terms of conflict with family and local society.

Among AmaXhosa, in the second half of the nineteenth century, missionaries insisted that their members should have nothing to do with any of their traditional customs or they faced the possibility of being expelled. Mills (1995) pointed out that the missionary campaign against customs like circumcision (male initiation), *lobola*, *intonjane* (girl's puberty rites), and polygamy promoted 'deception, breaches of discipline, disobedience of children and hypocrisy'. For example,

> Revd J.J.R. Jolobe said that he and his brothers had all, under the guise of visiting relatives, arranged to be circumcised and had been successful in hiding the fact to their father, Revd James Jolobe, did not learn about it until years later. Mr Zizi Mazwai said that he and his brothers had also quietly arranged operations at hospital, in spite of the Revd Ambrose Mazwai's denunciation of the custom (Mills 1995: 165).

Simensen recalled another example of dishonesty by a man called Isaac as a result of an anti-African culture missionary policy (see also Switzer 1993 115 - 117 for a discussion of missionary cultural discrimination; and Fast 1993: 158 on a discussion on the attack on African culture by missionaries). Isaac came to the mission station where he acquired business skills and became successful. He was baptised and confirmed into the church. After acquiring some wealth he decided to take a second wife. Given Isaac's wealth and other achievements, in a traditional context, it would have been morally acceptable for him to take a second wife. For him, polygamy was not a question of morality, but instead, it was duty to his clan and lineage. It was a question of transmitting vital force Magesa 1998).

> One tempting opportunity to convert profit into status based on the criteria of Zulu society was to take several wives. At his cattle farm Isaac entered into a relationship with a girl who was to become his wife number two. To deceive Oftebro and the congregation he brought along this girl to Eshowe and registered her as a school pupil. He declared himself free from sin, and joined in Holy Communion as usual. When the truth was brought home to Oftebro through rumours and reports from other Christians, Isaac defended

himself by pointing to the polygamous practice of Abraham and Isaac in the Old Testament (Simensen 1987: 98).

Kirby (1994) reported that missionaries did not want to understand African religion, institutions, and culture. A veteran missionary told him not to bother learning native languages because he had to continue speaking English in order to help Africans improve their command of English. Christianity, as presented by the missionaries, carried with it a baggage of Western cultural practices and values, and these were presented to Africans as part of the furniture of Christianity.

Second, *ukuguquka* means re-turning. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Christianity was fully entrenched in African life and been able to attract a large following, the term *ukuguquka* was used by Christians to mean turning away from evil as defined by Christian theology of their particular denomination. For Christians it also meant being enlightened, acquiring the knowledge of the 'truth' that made them realise that their lives up to that point had been meaningless. During revival services at Presbyterian, Methodist and other black mainline churches, people stand up and declare that '*ndiyaguquka phansi kwelizwi elibekiweyo* (I convert in the light of the read text)'. In this context people's intentions are to recommit and rededicate themselves to the project of the church. It is also an acknowledgement of new insights gained through the preacher's exposition of a biblical passage. Others stand up to -*hlaziya* (renew, revive or recommit) their membership to various church organisations or their faith. This type of discourse indicates that the conversion process is an ongoing, lifelong 'turning' in which people continue to learn new things about their faith. Rather than signifying a dramatic change, *ukuguquka* in these Christian contexts represents an ongoing 're-turning' to the faith; especially considering that the majority of those who stand up to make such a declaration are confirmed members of their church who have heard the same text being explained before and have often renewed their commitment. This is a very important reinforcement strategy. Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2001) are helpful in this case- their explanation of personhood among the Southern Tswana is useful in gaining insight into what such people are doing. The act of turning and re-turning is part of the process of becoming. Personhood can never be in a state of being. A state being assumes that something is static, fixed, unmoving, and unchanging. A state of becoming, on the other hand, refers to something

dynamic, vibrant, full of life, and active. As long as a person is alive, they never stop 'becoming'. Layer upon layer of who they are keeps on being removed- assuming that there are many facets to a person. Along their path of faith they come across obstacles that de-rail or destabilise them and they lose their way a little bit, but find stability and meaning reaffirming their place in the church and community.

Finally, *ukuguquka* refers to the return of the prodigal sons and daughters of the church. These are individuals who for some reason abandoned the church by joining other churches or became inactive. On their return they declare their commitment to the particular church and state the reasons why they have been away.

Critique

In many studies of conversion in Africa, researchers have tended to follow a line of demonstrating how missionaries undermined and destroyed African belief systems, or the reasons for African conversion (a number of theoretical formulations), or the goodness of missionary intentions and their contribution to education and development in Africa. These studies paint Africans as passive in their Christianisation. None of them explain what Africans did to translate Christianity into their language and idiom, to organise their church structures in ways that are consistent with their indigenous religious, cultural and social beliefs. The leadership structures and church arrangements were consistent with acceptable and widely held beliefs and practices. As Paul Landau (1995: xxi) observed among the Tswana that,

> The Tswana activity of learning about Christianity and determining its social and political performance was then a series of collective and contradictory acts of creation. People took what was alien into familiar societal roles and frameworks, which they then transformed or exploded. They managed and developed the messy results, and elaborated new needs as old ones were met.

In the next section we will further elucidate the tangible forms of this translation, and the means through which Christianity developed and was adopted as an indigenous religion.

African Performance

The process of translation resulted in many terms being given new meaning. *Inkonzo* means service, from the word *ukukhonza* (to render service or to serve or to give allegiance to someone or something). This term has assumed new meaning in the context of Christian conversion; it means a Christian worship service (at times it is used to refer to a denomination, e.g., Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.). A typical Christian service includes singing, praise, prayer, and the preaching of the Word. The style of preaching has its roots in African praise-poetry and oratory. This is confirmed by Walter Pitts (1989: 139) when he traced African American preaching to West African praise poetry where he discovered that 'several ethnographic studies, … indicate further parallels between African panegrytic poetry and black folk sermons'. The voice of the preacher changes in ways that appeal to the emotions of the congregants. The delivery of the sermon resembles the delivery of a praise poem by *imbongi*. According to Cope (1968: 28-28) 'the praiser recites the praises at the top of his voice and as fast as possible'. When *imbongi* sings praises to the king, celebrating his heroic achievements, people feel a sense of loyalty to the king as well as to the nation. Duncan Brown (1998: 91) commented that 'the position of the imbongi is in fact perceived to be an extremely responsible one, …, the izibongo of the chief are considered to be the highest poetry in African communities'. A praise poet is an historian as well as a social critic (Msimang 1975: 367-403; Jordan 1973: 21-27). As 'he reserves the right to criticise the chief or the people if he sees fit, a criticism designed to moderate excessive behaviour or to exhort his audience to emulate an ideal' (Opland 1980: 299). He would say who the king is in terms of his genealogy; say how he defeated his internal and external enemies, as well as adding criticism for wrongdoings and injustices. Through the praise-poem the audience is also reminded of who they are through references to ancestors and historical events, especially those that were the defining moments in the history of the group, for example, the battle of Isandlwana for AmaZulu. In this mixture of narration and analysis *imbongi* uses colourful language. The Xhosa *imbongi* performs a complex function in society. There exists an intimate bond between poet and chief: he usually forms part of the chief's entourage and announces the chief's arrival by declaiming his *izibongo*. The praise poem is a creative piece of work aimed at reinforcing loyalty to their king as well as instilling confidence and nationalistic pride

among the people. Mazisi Kunene (1981: xi) writing about Zulu praise poetry in the mid twentieth century observed that,

> The Zulu poet *(imbongi)* when declaiming the heroic epics addresses the epics not only to the living but also to the dead. His poem is more than a frivolous comment on the heroic deeds of men and women; it is a cosmic address, a prayer to life, a celebration of the great accomplishments of all the generations of man. The individuals in the poem become symbols of a greater belief in the national ethic and in the continuity of life.

A sermon is a creative piece of work whose aim is to present Jesus Christ as a saviour. Its expressed intention is to render converts resolute and steadfast in their beliefs as well as to convince those who fall outside of 'the grace of God' (*ngaphandle kofefe lukaThixo*) to accept Jesus as 'Lord and Saviour'. Most preachers are good orators. Even if what they say has little or no substance, people are impressed by the way they say it. In other words, a sermon, like praise poetry, is a performance that both informs and entertains. It is delivered in the praise–poetry style to make an impression on the audience. Like praise-poetry, preaching is a performance. It has to convince the audience that being part of the church is something good, while at the same time reinforcing people's commitment to the project of salvation. The performance aspect is essential to the African church experience.

The sermon includes an explanation of a selected passage from the Bible, at times, supporting it with other passages, including the application of the passage to contemporary situations, such as children who disobey their parents, people's obligation to care for the elderly, pre-marital pregnancy, the use of drugs, and so on. The sermon uses Black cultural experience to make sense of the Biblical narratives. In this case the preacher uses phrases and idioms familiar to the people to get the message of the gospel across. In a normal Sunday service in a typical mainline church, one person from the pulpit delivers the sermon. The majority of these churches have an established tradition of lay preachers. This practice was necessitated by the fact that a single minister had to be responsible for a large area, making it impossible for him to be in all congregations at the same time. Lay preachers are very important in the life of the church because they provide spiritual leadership in the absence of the minister.

Preaching in a revival service (*imvuselelo*) is different. An appointed person opens the service and then opens a text (*abeke ilizwi)*. This text will serve as a theme for the service. Everyone who stands up to preach has to speak within the confines of the set text. People bear testimony to the truth and authenticity of the text by offering their interpretations or their personal stories or what they have witnessed. Such stories are used to demonstrate that the Bible is alive. Although it might have been written thousands of years ago, it has contemporary relevance. Since the aim of *imvuselelo* is to revive people's faith, the telling of such stories helps to bring an understanding that at some point all people experience problems, whether financial hardships or difficult relationships. There is a particular way of giving a testimony or sharing a story. New members learn from the old members how it is done. This ritualized practice acts as mutual reinforcement and is crucial to the formation and unity of a congregation.

The term *ibandla* originally meant a congregation at *induna's* (headman) or *inkosi's* (chief) place. This congregation was empowered to discuss important social and political issues and to resolve disputes. In isiZulu there is a proverb which says *injobo enhle ithungelwa ebandla* (literal meaning: a perfect/ beautiful loin strip is sewn in the company of others. Symbolically: a complex issue is shared with *ibandla* in order to find a solution). The proverb implores an individual to seek counsel from other people in case they are in trouble. The collective wisdom of *ibandla* has potential to resolve a complex issue and arriving at a solution that would satisfy the majority. This is one of the ideas that were embraced by the African National Congress and applied it during the pre-1994 negotiations with the National Party government. The term was appropriated to mean a Christian congregation. In that appropriation, a term for dealing with this-worldly matters was transferred to other-worldly matters. The gist of the proverb is that there is merit in seeking advice from other people to resolve a complex issue.

In the mainline churches it is common practice for individuals to have *'ingoma yakhe*' (his or her favourite song/hymn). It is metaphorically referred to as *'induku yami*' (my stick or my weapon), thus invoking a warfare metaphor. Robert J Houle (2011: 46), in his study of African Christianity in colonial Southern Africa observed that '… Christian men also tenaciously held onto the habit of carrying wooden 'walking' sticks some of which were knobbed and could be used as weapons'. These men carried these

sticks probably as a way of defending themselves against wild animals, as well as against attacks by enemies. It is an effective weapon that one unleashes in the face of adversity. In the contemporary Christian discourse, whether in the AICs or mainline churches, reference to warfare and enemies stresses the spiritual nature of the warfare that is why the practice of carrying a stick has been de-gendered. Women also have their sticks. In some Zionist Churches the idea of weaponry is taken very seriously and each member is given his or her own *isikhali* (a stick)[1]. This *isikhali* is of a symbolic nature but it has far reaching spiritual meaning. Because of a number of spiritual threats members are encouraged to be in a state of readiness for any eventuality. This particular song that is 'my stick' is a major source of spiritual inspiration for the individual. As a result, in funerals of members it will be sung repeatedly as a way of bidding farewell to a departed soldier.

Coercion and Conversion

Jean and John Comaroff (1991) argued that the encounter between African religion and missionary Christianity was more of a conversation than conversion prior to the use of force by the settlers. Africans dialogued with the missionaries about religion. There were aspects of African practice that were brought into the Christian church through this dialogue. The process of converting Africans was a negotiation until settlers used force. Africans devised other mechanisms for dealing with Christianity.

Africans were generally tolerant of other points of view about reality. In Botswana, in a place called GammaNgwato, for example, Kgosi Khama III initially 'approached Christianity as if it were a variation of the practice of *dingaka* or priest-healers' (Landau 1995: 113). There was willingness to listen and understand what the missionaries and settlers had to say. As Opoku (1993: 67) observed,

> The tolerant attitude of African traditional religion towards other approaches of the Divine as well as to other interpretations of the origin and destiny of human beings bears out the truth of the proverb, that African traditional religion is a single person's hand which

[1] For expanded discussion of how this concept is used in the AICs refer to Obed N. Kealotswe (2005), James Kiernan (1974; 1976; 1979).

> cannot embrace the totality of the divine wisdom and essence. And, since the divine truth is beyond the reach of a single religious tradition, wisdom recommends openness to truth, which comes from other traditions.

It was not the same with the missionaries because they saw themselves as God's servants with a mission to save souls, especially those of Africans. Racist notions about Africa also played a part in shaping their attitude towards things specifically African. Some of them did not think that they could learn anything from Africans. Etherington (1987) reported that Bishop Henry Callaway, a missionary among AmaZulu during the middle of the nineteenth century, initially tolerated and even valued African input and understanding of medicine. He knew his shortcomings and appreciated the knowledge of local specialists. He was determined not to remove people from their comfort zones but to take the gospel to them, i.e., he believed in the power of the gospel to change people. The subsequent failure to have substantial impact on people's lives forced him to question his earlier stance and went on to endorse European attacks and occupation of land. The alleged superiority of European justice and religious purity was used to justify European domination. He saw British dominance of AmaZulu as the precondition to Christianisation, a view shared by Norwegian missionaries (Simensen 1987: 90-93). It is clear that Callaway had failed in his attempts to convert Africans through dialogue and now resorted to force. This was a pattern which missionaries embraced because it meant Africans lost all political power and new religious views could be imposed with significantly less resistance (see also Gray 1982: 60). The relationship between religion and political power is demonstrated here. Missionaries had failed in their religious mission and thus decided to unleash the military power of the state to change people's beliefs. Often it was claimed that this was done for the good of those who were subjugated.

What is often referred to as African conservatism or resistance to Christianisation should, in fact, be understood as African defence of their right to carry on practicing their religion without undue influence by outsiders. The supposed conservatism was an effort by Africans to continue with practices that missionaries sought to destroy and replace with Western ones- thus creating a homogeneous society.

Simensen (1987: 91) says that Norwegian missionaries concluded after a long time of persuading King Mpande of AmaZulu in the 1870s that the obstacle to Christianisation was Zulu independence. They then felt British overrule was a precondition for their mission. And as a result, a number of Norwegian missionaries took part diplomatically in the British conquest of 1879.

> After the conquest of 1880 the missionaries received a new strong card in the transaction game in that they were given rights of property over considerable land areas around the stations. This attracted people in search of land and also made it possible to apply pressure for good purpose. On several occasions parents who refused to send their children to school were threatened by eviction (1987: 89).

Zulu parents resisted sending their children to school because they feared that education was the first step to religious change. The fear by parents to send their children to school was based on the fact that parents viewed education as part of the process of Christianisation, which in their minds was the same as Westernisation. One can argue here that it was not religious change that they feared but the whole package that was introduced alongside Christianity. The fear was that once their children tasted some of the things they would turn their backs on traditional norms and customs and be like whites.

However, Africans did not suddenly forget where they came from and who they were. There are those who quickly imbibed the new faith with its customs and fashion, and those who rejected it. In fact,

> When people first settled on mission land, they often came more or less as outcasts willing to accept what was offered and the way it was offered. They were certainly not to be counted among the prosperous, Africa's natural polygamists. But as their ploughs multiplied and they grew richer and older, they thought and behaved increasingly like their non-Kholwa cousins. By 1871, six years after the opening of the sugar mill, Mvoti had so many polygamists that the missionary in charge was turning to government for assistance to drive them out (Hastings 1994: 362).

Africans continued to practice some of their rituals albeit without the knowledge of the missionary authorities. Sacrifices would be performed at night and feasts would be held during the day. These traditional rituals would be referred to as either 'tea' or 'dinner'. Many Christians were uneasy with the use of the traditional terms *umsebenzi* or *tirelo*, that is, 'service', because these terms ('tea' and 'dinner') were part of the missionary discourse.

Conclusion

African conversion to Christianity was a complex process characterised by both innovation and borrowing of symbols. The African concepts and terms discussed in this paper were re-oriented to reflect a Christian worldview in an African context. Christianity and Western civilization became part of the basket of cultural concepts and aspects at the disposal of African converts in their attempts to define themselves. The *Kholwa* had to negotiate being African and Christian at the same time. As it was stated by Mokoena (2005) *kholwa* was initially not a religious but a socio-political identity. The *kholwa* recognised that there were benefits that could be derived from aspects of European civilization. A conclusion that can be drawn from our observation is that the concepts discussed above were used to create a continuum between African and Christian worldviews. The perception of a continuum allowed for the *Kholwa* to embrace their Africanness, albeit not in the traditional sense, as well as, their Christianity. The process did not only end with the conversion of Africans to Christianity but Christianity was also altered to respond to the needs of indigenous people. Christianity was then embedded within an African cultural milieu. The translatability of Christianity resulted in the emergence African Indigenous Churches (AIC) and other post-Christian formations.

This paper has demonstrated through looking at a few African terms and concepts that the relationship between Africans and the Christian faith as introduced through western European missionaries was a complex one. There was no uniform response to Christianity. There was both acceptance and rejection- both responses sought to deal with this new reality in their own way. For those willing to accept, traditional African concepts were borrowed and filled with Christian content. This paper also demonstrated the evolution of an African Christian identity from its origins of being despised to being

embraced. This research has confirmed that conversion was not a simple religious process but involved complex political, economic and social aspects. Conversion involved a transformation of an African Christian identity from the margins to the centre. It also involved extensive negotiation of what it means to be Christian through the translation of Christian content into an African idiom.

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