



Double Identities and Identity Struggles in Kongolese Catholicism of the 1700s: Kimpa Vita, Antonian Movement, and a Kongolese Interpretation of Christianity

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Abstract

Among many Central, West, and East African countries, Kongo/Angola was the earliest to have modern European missionaries. Portuguese catholic missionaries arrived in the Kingdom of Kongo in the 1400s during European exploration, conquest, colonialism, and missions. These early encounters brought about the double identity that Africans would generally wrestle with in the contemporary period. Starting from the former Nganga Marinda priestess, Kimpa Vita, who later converted to Christianity and wanted to integrate some of her African cultural and religious practices but was persecuted, rejected, and burned at the stake, questions of identity, contextualization, and African consciousness have always been raised in African Christianity. Although Kimpa Vita was killed because of her beliefs, her movement continued to resurface in modern times in African consciousness, feminism, religiosity, resistance to colonialism, and black consciousness. This paper uses the theory of the double consciousness of W.E.B. Du Bois to examine the story of Kimpa Vita in her rejection of western colonial religion for a more Kongolese contextual Christianity.

Keywords: Double consciousness, double identity, Nganga Marinda, colonialism, missionary.

Introduction

In Kongolese *Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*, John Thornton explains how the former Nganga priest known as Kimpa Vita serves as an example of people of African descent's resistance to Catholic Christianity and colonialism in the late 1600s and early 1700s. Thornton explains how many Kongo people were lured into accepting Catholic Christianity after converting two important Kongo/Angola kings in the 1400s and 1500s.¹ Still, the turning point for the Kongo people was when Beatriz converted to Christianity in the early 1700s and would not let her past Africanness go after her visions were rejected. She was persecuted and stereotyped by European missionaries who were in the main voluntarily or involuntarily agents of European imperialism (See also Nicolaides, 2011 writing on the Mutapa Empire). For

¹ John Thornton. *The Kingdom of Kongo and Palo Moyembe: Reflections on an African American Religion. Slavery and Abolition*. Vol 37, No. 1, 1-22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014403>, 2016, 2



example, her harsh experience with the colonial missionaries made her create a new religious order drawing fifty percent from Catholicism and the other half from the Kongo religion. Beatriz transformed some Catholic songs and hymns, removing any reliance on sacraments and works, which were fundamental to European Catholicism.² Beatriz sought to revive pride in the Kongo culture destabilized by European missionaries and colonizers.³ Beatriz was among the earliest Africans to demonstrate resistance to European Catholic missionaries and religion in the consciousness of her Africanness. Today, some scholars of Africana, African American Studies, and African Studies call this form of resistance "double consciousness." Thornton's work fits into many theoretical frameworks of Africana Studies. I use W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of "double consciousness" to examine double identity in medieval Kongolese colonial Christianity and contemporary African Christianity. I argue that Dona Beatriz and the Antonian Movement were the earliest to exemplify "twoness" of identity, mind, thought, and "two unreconciled strivings" in the seventeenth century after Roman Catholic missionaries in the Kingdom of Kongo arrived. So, my usage of the double consciousness theory in this paper is not to celebrate Beatriz's ability to incorporate her Africanness into western ideas and Catholicism but to show the burden and the struggle the entire Saint Antonian Movement experienced because of colonialism.

Theory of Double Consciousness

W.E.B. Du Bois first developed the idea of double consciousness in his most famous book, *Souls of Black Folks*, in 1903. In recent years, this theory has become more popular than the book, especially in the United States, among humanities scholars attempting to understand African American, immigrant, and marginalized groups. Through the history of enslavement and colonialism, Du Bois's theory explores the feeling of divided identity, the divided self, and divided consciousness that make it difficult for enslaved groups, even after colonialism, to have a unified identity. Double consciousness suggests that it is difficult for African Americans to regain their identity because of the marginalization and stigmatized experiences they have historically experienced in the United States. The middle passage and hostile colonialism caused African Americans to view themselves in two ways. The first way considers how they understand themselves, their history, and their culture, and the second explains how others view them. In the words of Du Bois, "the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others." By other people's views," I mean people of European descent who make up the majority and still control power in the United States.⁴ The following quote from *Souls of Black Folks* best describes the theory of double consciousness,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being born in asunder.⁵

Although black people in America were affected and influenced by the colonizer's view of them, they would not give up their Africanness. Black people in America still held onto their African past even though they knew little of their African ancestral religion, culture, history, and even name. For example, many scholars of African American religion, including Du Bois, argue that protestant

² Benjamin Hendrickx. *Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) and "Afro Catholicism": re-examining controversies and unsolved problem*. Pharos journal of theology [online@://www.pharojot.com](http://www.pharojot.com) 2021, 1–14.

³ Hendrickx,

⁴ W. E.B Du Bois. *Souls of Black Folks*. (Orinda: Sea Wolf Press, 2004), 3

⁵ Du Bois, 2004, 3



African American Christianity was influenced by African religions and beliefs such as Vodou, worship of Shango, and Santeria. Double consciousness explains this sense of twoness, two souls, two feelings, and two applications of philosophy to life due to Slavery.

Africans were affected by colonialism and imperialism that, left their culture, history, and identity divided. They lived between struggles to speak good English or French to the detriment of their native languages. They aspired to western education and culture to the detriment of their ancient African history. Also, they aspired to western religions from missionary conversion to the detriment of the religions of their forefathers. Colonialists, imperialists, and missionaries have stereotyped African religion, culture, and history like African Americans in America by categorizing them as idol worship, paganism, and witchcraft. Colonialism has broken African people into two halves in a way that could never be amended or united again, "two unreconciled strivings."⁶ Every African carries two identities and burdens: Africanness and western colonial identity. Dona Beatriz's story is an example of an African woman, a former Nganga priestess who found herself between this twoness that W.E.B. Du Bois describes, her Africanness, and westernization. Beatriz would not give up all her Africanness in exchange for a new European religion manipulatively introduced to Kongo during early colonialism. Beatriz's struggles and resistance brought about the reinterpretation of Jesus in the Kongo way and the construction of theology in the philosophy of Kongo cultural tradition.

The Conversion of the Monarch of Kongo

One strategy missionaries used to convert centralized kingdoms in Africa was to go through the monarchs and kings of those regions. This comes with the assumption that if the monarchs are converted, most people in that kingdom would either find interest in the king's religion or be forced into it. This method worked for the Christian church in 325 A.D. when Constantine converted to Christianity and passed "the edict of Milan" within the Roman Empire. That helped make the then-Roman Empire a Christian kingdom. Similarly, in Kongo, the conversion of King Nzinga (1491) and later of his son Afonso Nvemba, Nzinga (1509-1542) helped in making Kongo a strong Roman Catholic kingdom from the fifteenth century C.E. until the present. According to Thornton, Afonso Nvemba embraced the faith wholeheartedly and moved quickly to make it his own. Not only did Afonso institutionalize the church, creating a countrywide network of schools, providing it with financing, and integrating it into the structure of the kingdom, but he also worked with Portuguese advisors and Kongolese students. They studied in Europe to integrate it into Kongo's religious tradition.⁷ Afonso promised to maintain Christian beliefs and practices over his brother, who was not a Christian, and Afonso became king of Kongo after his father's death. According to Thornton, "Kongo's second Christian king, Afonso, was struggling for his throne against rivals he would later define as pagans when a dazzling vision of Saint James Major appeared over the battlefield and scattered his enemies."⁸ Afonso seems to have kept to his promises and even did better than his father in making Kongo a Christian territory.

The relationship between Lisbon and the Kongo capital was good during these years. A significant development took place in the Kongo during Afonso's reign. In 1512 Manuel, king of Portugal, sent five ships with masons, carpenters, and building materials to construct churches in Kongo.⁹

⁶ Du Bois, 2004, 3

⁷ John Thornton. *The Kingdom of Kongo and Palo Moyembe: Reflections on an African American Religion. Slavery and Abolition*. Vol 37, No. 1, 1-22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/014403.2>

⁸ John Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 258

⁹ Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 78



According to Falk, "there were at least six churches founded in Sao Salvador, and churches and schools were founded in other country provinces." ¹⁰ The relationship between Kongo and Portugal continued to wax more substantial and better during the time of Afonso and even after.

In later centuries, the Kongolese came to make the Catholic faith their faith. They saw themselves as Christians and took pride in it. Thornton notes, "all the lay and clerical observers, who wrote about Kongo from 1760 to 1860, agreed that the Kongolese took great pride in their Christian identity. This was not just the elites but ordinary people all over the country, as we see in the lengthy assessment of the Portuguese secular priest Rafael Castello de Vide in 1781-1788."¹¹ In the words of Thornton, "the Kongolese were proud to call themselves Catholica and had been so for six generations- nearly two centuries. Christianity set true Kongolese apart from their neighbors and, in their view, made them superior to the "heathens," even those to the north and East who spoke the dialect of the same Kikongo language."¹² In the eighteenth century, Kongolese artists created great crucifixes with an African Jesus on the cross, identifiably Kongolese, which were widely made and distributed. Alongside these images of Jesus, they also made several statues of Saint Anthony, less identifiably African but part of the Christian spiritual inventory of the Kongo church.¹³ By the eighteenth century, the Kongolese did not just see Christianity as a European religion but as a Kongolese religion. This could be partly because so many generations of Kongolese were born Kongolese Catholics that there was no need for a priest to convert them.¹⁴ So the Kongolese Catholic faith survived to modern times because their earlier monarchs embraced Christianity and made it the religion of Kongo. Another reason Christianity survived in Kongo/Angola is the zeal and effort the people of Kongo put together to defend and identify with it.

Internal Wars of Kongo

Perennial internal wars engulfed the Kingdom of Kongo/Angola after the death of King Nzinga, the father of Afonso, and Afonso himself. These inner wars were a tussle for power and a quest to dominate one territory over another. Thornton describes this internal war between Sao Salvado and Kibangu and then expanded to other parts of Kongo. This internal war later negatively impacted the entire people and the history of the people of Kongo. Because of those wars, many Kongolese war captives were sold to the Americas as enslaved people. According to Thornton, "Some of these captives remained in Kongo, now integrated into the families and villages of the rulers of their opponents, but the majority were exported."¹⁵ Between 1700 and 1709, around seventy thousand people were shipped from Kongo. On average, nearly seven thousand per year from a population of about six hundred thousand.¹⁶ According to Thornton, "the prisoners of those wars fed the slave trade mightily, especially the trade to Saint Domingue, Haiti on the eve of its great slave revolution of 1791, as France became the leading buyer of Central Africans."¹⁷ This could be one reason historians think enslaved people were transported from the Kingdom of Kongo/Angola more than from any other part of the continent of Africa from the 1700s to 1800s.

¹⁰ Falk, 2015, 2.

¹¹ Thornton, 2015, 4

¹² Thornton, 2009, 17

¹³ Thornton, 2015, 5

¹⁴ Thornton, 2015, 5

¹⁵ John Thornton. *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Don Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100

¹⁶ Thornton, 2009, 100

¹⁷ Thornton, 2009



The wars served as the primary source of getting slaves from Africa. In the context of internal conflicts, enslaved peoples became an important commodity because they could be traded for ammunition. As muskets and gunpowder became more prevalent as weapons, having a large stock on hand was essential for a monarch who wished to retain power. Because these items were not produced in Kongo, they had to be purchased from Europeans or those with access to European markets on the coast. Some scholars have observed that Europeans' interest in buying enslaved people from Kongo for economic reasons has further boosted these internal wars.

Another thing worth noting about the slave trade in Kongo is the church's participation. According to Thornton, the church had made religion a crucial element in the competition over the export of enslaved people. The bishops of Angola had determined in the 1680s that it was wrong to export enslaved people to those powers or places in the hands of the "heretics," as they called protestants, or "heathens," as they reached the Vilis.¹⁸ The church of Kongo must have created this policy to protect the faith of enslaved people to be transported to the Americas. Another important event to remember in the history of the Kongolese and Christianity is the rise of the prophetess Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita. The following section will briefly examine Kimpa Vita's life and the Saint Antonian Movement.

The Rise of Kimpa Vita and Antonianism

In chapter one, Thornton introduces the book's main character, Dona Beatriz, who was born into a noble family during the early wars of the Kingdom of Kongo. Her father was well respected in society. Beatriz's story is very pertinent to the history of Christianity in Kongo from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. Beatriz was among the earliest people who attempted to look at Christianity from a Kongolese lens due to internal wars in Kongo that continued to supply enslaved people to the Americas in exchange for weapons and the persecution she went through at the hands of Portuguese missionaries.

Beatriz was born in 1684, and she grew up to see many internal wars in the kingdom. Thornton uses a large part of the book to explain the context in which the Antonian Movement unfolded. Its origins and goals were inextricably connected to the turbulence of the times, to a desire by ordinary people to return to political stability and an end to destitution. Throughout the period, Kongo was embroiled in civil wars as contenders from three factions in the royal lineage fought each other for recognition as the paramount ruler.

The emergence of the Antonian Movement was not in the context of peace, cultural advancement, or renaissance. The Antonian Movement emerged due to a constant internal war that European missionaries and traders used to feed the need for enslaved people in the Americas. Therefore, double consciousness fits well into the resistance of Dona Beatriz to Roman Catholicism. However, Du Bois's idea comes directly from the suffering and burden black people experienced in the United States. Like Du Bois, Beatriz's double consciousness shows the suffering of black people in Kongo, from internal wars to European missionary subjugation and trans-Atlantic Slavery. Phyllis Martin notes, "Such wars both encouraged and were a product of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which shipped thousands of captives annually to the Americas. Interventions also complicated Kongo politics from Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese missionaries and traders, each with their agendas and rivalries."¹⁹ Thornton said, "while Beatriz was twenty years old in

¹⁸ Thornton, 2009, 102.

¹⁹ Phyllis Martin. Review works: *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706* by John Thornton. *The American Historical Review*, June., 2000, Vol. 105, No 3 (June., 2000) 1054–105, 1054



August of 1704, she lay deathly ill upon her bed. For seven days, she had been sick. Sweat poured from her feverish body, and wild visions flashed in her head. She knew now she was dying.²⁰ Beatriz claimed that Saint Anthony, the first son of Saint Francis, appeared to her in a vision. She said Saint Anthony told her that God sent him to commission her to go and preach to her people and lead the restoration of Kongo. Whoever dared to stop her was to be punished by God.²¹ The vision and ministry of Beatriz came with many challenges because before she claimed to have received this vision, she was a member of a local divination group, the *Kimpassi* Society. Spirits possessed her, and she told fortunes.

According to Thorton, it was soon after the Capuchins came into Kibangu that Beatriz stopped her practice as *Nganga Marinda* in the 1700s. She concluded that the practice was too close to “evil kindoki” and devoted herself to living a more private life.²² However, soon after she received her vision, she began preaching to the people of Kongo. Because of Beatriz's previous association with evil spirits, European missionaries failed to acknowledge her visions and dreams. The missionaries concluded that she was possessed by an evil spirit (*Nganga Marinda*).

Beatriz wasted no time in putting her revelations into practice: she led thousands to repopulate the capital city of Mbanza Kongo (or as the Portuguese called it– Sao Salvador), claimed that Jesus and his entire family were of African descent from Kongo, incorporated traditional African drumming and dancing into Roman Catholic liturgy, and discarded crucifixes and traditional Kongolesse amulets as “unnecessary fetishes.” Combining former African religious practices into Kongolesse Christianity was a response to the double consciousness that she developed because of the rejection and persecution she and her followers experienced at the hands of European missionaries. Beatriz did not give up her Africanness completely, although she loved the new Portuguese Catholic religion introduced to her by western missionaries. She found herself between two religions, two identities, two cultures, and two feelings. Thornton says, “[in her sermons] Saint Anthony was the most important saint. It was not difficult to convince people of this, for Saint Anthony as patron of Portugal, was regarded as being patron (along with Saint James Major) of Kongo.”²³ Beatriz also said that she saw a lot of black people in heaven.

First, why should an African assume that Kongo was the holy land described in the Bible or declare that Mary is originally from Kongo and that even Jesus himself was a Kongolesse? In the history of early colonial missionary activities, colonists have fought hard and received the same level of resistance in West and West-Central Africa from the 1600s to 1700s. Similar interpretations of scripture and cosmology have emerged among enslaved people in the Americas because of the Slavery experience that led to double consciousness. However, such interpretations and consciousness started with Beatriz and the Antonian Movement. With specific examples of this double consciousness, the Antonian Movement, as early as the 1700s, first declared that the European church was not beneficial to the Kongolesse. Second, Mary was a slave of a Kongo Marquis. Third, the Kongolesse capital, Mbanza Kongo, also known as Sao Salvador, was the actual site of Bethlehem. Fourth, the heavens were for Africans; Jesus, prophets, apostles, and saints were black Kongolesse. Fifth, Jesus was born in Mbanza Kongo and baptized not in Nazareth but in Nsundi, Kongo.²⁴ Although not to be equated with the African

²⁰ John Thornton. *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Vita Kimpa and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 10.

²¹ Thornton, 2009, 10

²² Thornton, 2009, 74

²³ Thornton, 2009, 112

²⁴ Benjamin Hendrickx. *Kimpa Vita (Dona Beatriz) and “Afro Catholicism”: re-examining controversies and unsolved problem*. Pharos journal of theology [online@://:www.pharojot.com](http://www.pharojot.com) 1-14. 8-9



American experience, the colonial religious experiences of Beatriz and the Antonian Movement are an early example of double consciousness evident in their two views of European Catholicism and Kongo African religion.

The attempt to contextualize Jesus, Mary, and the Catholic rituals aggravated the Portuguese missionaries. According to some accounts, Dona Beatriz, her companion Barros, and the baby she insisted was the product of "immaculate conception" were burned at the stake on July 2, 1706. Her mortal remains were burned twice to ensure no relics could be salvaged from the flames.²⁵ The movement she founded, Antonianism, survived her death and became profoundly influenced by future rebellions against oppressive and superimposed European dominance.

The Antonian Movement that many Kongoleses Christians embraced reveals the double consciousness struggles among many Kongo Christians during early western colonialism. Martin notes, "He [Thornton] also deals in some detail with the traditional religious response to societal traumas and the appropriation of Catholicism into local belief systems, an essential part of the Dona Beatriz story."²⁶ The Antonian Movement emerged out of struggle, thriving, and suffering. It was a response to oppression, colonialism, and black suffering. Beatriz and her followers had difficulty deciding between Kongo, Europe, blackness, whiteness, Christianity, and African religion. During this unreconciled struggle, they made a decision and interpretation that depicts their twoness and struggles. In the United States and South Africa, a reinterpretation of theology emerged in the 1960s to that of Beatriz, in the form of Black Theology founded by James Cone and championed today by Dwight Hopkins, Anthony Pinn, and many black theologians. Dona Beatriz's legacies and impact are prevalent in African Christianity and the Afro-American religion.

The history of 1600s-1700s Kongoleses Christianity can be considered a micro-history, but Beatriz's movement cuts across race, culture, gender, and religion. After her execution, this movement became of immense pride to the African people and the people of Kongo. This is because Beatriz was one of the earliest to preach racial equality for blacks and whites. Beatriz's movement could be reinterpreted alongside the works of Diop, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, James Cone, and W.E.B. Du Bois. According to Thornton, "Dona Beatriz's followers began to build a new political order based on her teaching." Among the enslaved people transported from the Kingdom of Kongo to the Americas were staunch followers of Kimpa Vita. The following section will explain this.

Kongoleses Christianity in the New World

At the apex of the wars in Kongo, many Kongoleses were taken to the New World as enslaved people. They initiated several slave revolts, such as the Stono Revolt. Thornton affirms that most enslaved people were taken to various parts of the Americas after the Antonian Movement emerged with a different perception of race, religion, and culture. Double consciousness, inspired by Beatriz, influenced them. They never believed in white racial superiority, just as Beatriz preached. They reinterpreted religion and African culture amid the new western socio-political culture they had to live in. Thornton also explains why enslaved people from Kongo and other parts of Africa could quickly integrate into the Christian religion in the New World. Kongoleses enslaved people in the New World easily looked at similarities between Christian beliefs and practices and the religions of Kongo, especially the concept of *revelation*. In African traditional religions, dreams, visions, and revelations were familiar to the adherents of those religions. Every community and people had gods, traditions, priests, and revelations that may not apply to other

²⁵ Hendrickx, 8-9

²⁶ Martin, 2000, 154-155



communities. According to Thornton, for example, in Africa, most people were followers of a particular religion and cosmology that was fixed and stable. There was a specific body of revelation they accepted as legitimate and from which they constructed a religion and theology.²⁷ Slavery in the New World and colonization from their country Kongo left them in this religious divide, Christianity, and Kongo religious practices. Double consciousness by W.E.B. Du Bois must be viewed from the grassroots, the early colonial experiences of West Africa, and the Kongolese.

Kongolese and Other African Christianity Today

Africa today has the most diverse Christianity after the western missionaries' evangelization and Christianization of many parts of Africa. Africa is gradually moving from the former Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, SIM/SUM, and African independent churches to Pentecostalism and the charismatic styles of Christianity. Catholic and Anglican priests are gradually becoming more like Pentecostal pastors they once accused as prosperity preachers and miracle workers. For example, in Nigeria, the likes of Rev. Father Mbaka, who is into prophecies and miracle performances, work like his Pentecostal counterparts. So, Christianity has become more diverse than western missionaries want it to be. Still, with the diversity of Christianity in different parts of Africa, African Christianity is not entirely free from the earliest colonial influences and construct. Most churches still practice their religion on the mantra that colonialists and missionaries planted in Africa. With the Roman Catholics, yes, they look up to the Pope and Italy for their bishopric appointments. Bishops hardly visit Africa to see the contextual needs of Africa different from those of the West. Many African Catholics revere white Jesus and white Mary and would not want to critique or question them.

Rarely could young people differentiate between what is western in their Christianity from what is indigenous and African. With other denominations, most churches, although situated in Africa, value western hymns and songs more than local African songs and drums. White Jesus has permeated the religious thinking and practices of even Pentecostal churches, unlike Beatriz, who questioned why Jesus of ancient Asia is depicted as white. Although the historical experience of African Americans, as explained by Du Bois, may not be the same as that of their African brothers and sisters, modern colonialism has a long-lasting, unrecognizable effect on Africans.

Immediately after the twentieth century colonization and missionary evangelization of Africans, few individuals and academics examined the colonial impact of Christianity on today's Christianity. Kwame Bediako has referred to the movement known as *Afrikania* that started in Ghana, intending to critique the inclusion of too much western culture into the religious practices of Africans.²⁸ The leader of the Africana Movement is Osofo Okomfo Kwabena Damuah. Engaging the critical work of Damuah, Kwame outlines his five leading ideas: 1. The profundity of Traditional African Religion and how it permeates every aspect of traditional Africa. 2. How this characteristic is ingrained even in twentieth-century non-westernized Africa. 3. How Christianity and Islam do not adequately satisfy Africa's quest for identity and self-determination. 4. How a reconstructed Traditional African Religion may be considered a likely answer to Africa's search for freedom and self-determination. 5. That Traditional African Religion can exist in its own right on equal terms with other religions within an ecumenical framework.²⁹

²⁷ Thornton, 1998, 262

²⁸ Kwame Bediako. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. (New York: Maryknoll, 1995), 17

²⁹ Bediako, 1995, 24



Damuah, like Beatriz, seems to see the parallels between past African religions with Christianity like many other theologians would do. Damuah expressed extensive dissatisfaction with why Africans continue to neglect their ancestral religion and values for western Christianity.³⁰ Damuah observes that the biggest challenge of African Christianity is the interpretation of most African Christians today as the "white man's religion."³¹ Some African Christians view Christianity as a white man's religion because of when and how it was brought to Africa. European enslavers, missionaries, and modern colonialists arrived in Africa in similar ways. Very few Christians remember that Christianity has been on the soil of Africa for generations before colonial encounters.³² For example, Yusufu Turaki opines that "western missions were closely related to western colonialism."³³ Colonialism as a modern socio-political movement, which developed out of the historical consciousness of European society, is an important subject that stands uniquely on its own but with substantial implications for Christian missions, whether in terms of reciprocal influence, cooperation, or conflict.³⁴ Matthew Omolewa observes that "one of the strongest criticism of the missionaries has been in the area of the assistance provided to the conquering forces of imperialism."³⁵ The missionaries served as clerks, messengers, and interpreters during the negotiations of treaties and the proclamation of protectorates. They admitted British rule and pleaded to establish a British presence in Nigeria. Therefore, missionaries have been accused of being the servants of imperialism.³⁶ In apropos to the collaboration of the missionaries and the colonialists, Elizabeth Isichei notes, "... where there is a large settler community, there has always been a tendency for the missionary to turn into a colonial vicar."³⁷ Some Africans could not differentiate between colonialists and missionaries.

Colonialism, like Christian missions, is a product of the historical consciousness and development of the European society or any organization that exhibits such characteristics but has its distinct social force as manifested in politics, economics, culture, and developing civilization.³⁸

Bediako notes that the predominant concern with the pre-Christian religious traditions of Africa in the early literature of African theology has sometimes been characterized as an unhealthy, inward-looking preoccupation with an imagined African past. Until today, Western Christians continuously deny that the African past religious experience is essential in understanding modern African Christianity. Like the early Catholic missionaries to Kongo, Western protestant theologians have rejected the idea that Africans could integrate their values, practices, and heritage into their Christian traditions. In what Europeans called "syncretism," they see a complete dichotomy between the two religions. So, Africans needed to abandon their forefathers' faith, values, and practices to be genuine Christians.³⁹ Bediako cites Desmond Tutu as one of the modern African church fathers who argued against the notion of total discontinuity between past African religious practices and African Christianity. According to Tutu, African theologians have demonstrated that the African religious experience and heritage were not illusory and should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa.⁴⁰ However, Tutu's idea of the need for the African religious experience to serve as a vehicle for modern African Christianity may differ from how

³⁰ Bediako, 1995, 25

³¹ Bediako, 1995, 26

³² Bediako, 1995, 26

³³ Turaki, 1999, 35

³⁴ Turaki, 1999, 35

³⁵ Michael Omolewa. *Certificate of History of Nigeria*. (Lagos: Longman, 1989), 145

³⁶ Michael Omolewa. Page, 145

³⁷ Elizabeth Isichei. *A History of Christianity in Africa*. (Lawrenceville: African World Press, 1995) 233

³⁸ Turaki, 1999, 35

³⁹ Kwame Bediako. *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 50

⁴⁰ Bediako, 2004, 50



Beatriz wanted to contextualize her Catholic Christianity to indigenous Kongo Catholicism. Tutu and Mbiti wanted the experience and good values of African people to be reminiscence and integrated into Christianity in areas such as ceremonies, theology, doctrine, and liturgy, not constructing a theology that sees Jesus as black, Mary as black and Jerusalem somehow situated in Africa.

Modern African Christianity has so much to claim from the early African church without comprising their Africanness. Early African church fathers and Christians did not compromise their African identity to become Christians.⁴¹ Perhaps Vita Kimpa and modern African Christians who seek to see the blackness of Jesus, Mother Mary, or biblical cities could have contextualized Christianity historically, looking at its African roots. Thomas Oden suggests that Africans from West, East, and Central Africa have every reason to claim the originality and root of Christianity themselves.⁴² The definition and boundary of what it means to be an African both in the past and today are the same. So, Africans of the North and all other parts are Africans.⁴³ As Lamin Sanneh rightly observes in his book, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* Every Christian could claim roots in Christianity since it is a religion of all and for all.⁴⁴

One reason why the debate on colonial Christianity continues to be debated is the inability of modern African Christians to build a scholarship that reclaims the early African church history that western scholars have set a dichotomy between the then-African church fathers and the now-African church fathers. Not until the 1900s early African church fathers, Augustine, Tertullian, and Cyprian, did not see Christianity as a nonindigenous African religion or more of European religion.⁴⁵ Yes, they acknowledge that Jesus was a first-century Jew and all his disciples, but they saw themselves as carriers and contributors to the Christian faith right from the first century A.D.

Another reason modern African Christians continue to carry two identities in their religious practices is their adoption of all western theologies and theologians. Contemporary African Christians must carefully study the contributions and theologies of Augustine of Hippo, Tertullian, Origen, and others and consider how it relates to Christianity today.⁴⁶ They must also make this history personal, teaching it in churches, schools, and even homes.⁴⁷ Most of the best African theologians and historians of recent times would instead make references and build their theologies around the works of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Schleiermacher, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and Emmanuel Kant than Augustine, Tertullian, and Origen.⁴⁸ Most seminaries in modern Africa are shaped by the ideas of these theologians rather than those of early African church fathers. Oden has called modern Africans to return to histories of early Christianity in every area since Christianity has grown again after its return to the African continent in the twentieth century through born enslaved Africans and western missionaries.

Conclusion

The theory of double consciousness is one of the best theories that show the damaging impact of colonialism on people of African descent. Whether in Slavery, Christianization, or western ideas

⁴¹ Thomas Oden. *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 11

⁴² Oden, 2007, 11,

⁴³ Oden, 2007, 13

⁴⁴ Lamin Sanneh. *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 22

⁴⁵ Oden, 2007, 43-45

⁴⁶ Oden, 2007, 46

⁴⁷ Oden, 2007, 11

⁴⁸ Oden, 2007, 70-71



about African people, colonialism damaged them. Du Bois opines, "the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-consciousness manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. He wishes neither of the older selves to be lost in this merging."⁴⁹ Through colonialism, African Americans, Caribbeans, and Afro-Brazilians lost touch with Africa's original heritage, culture, and religion, and they will never get it back. Africans lose their cultures, history, religion, and heritage through modern colonialism and never get it again. Thornton shows this continuous struggle and battle in his book, exemplifying Dona Beatriz and the Antonian Movement. As early as the 1700s, the people of Kongo were losing their history, values, and indigenous religions to internal wars that fed European Slavery and missionary activities by European missionaries. It was amid this thrive that tore Kongo apart. The leader of the Antonian Movement, Beatriz, was burned to ashes by European missionaries and Kongo elites. The execution of Beatriz correlates with the lynching of black people during Slavery in the United States.

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⁴⁹ Du Bois, 2004, 3



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