

Book Review: *The Prophet Harris*, by Gordon MacKay Haliburton. Longman, London, 1971.

Gordon MacKay Haliburton has done a considerable service for scholars of West African history and religions by presenting a factual and clear account of one of the most original and influential figures of early twentieth century West Africa. The Prophet Harris, William Wade Harris, was a Grebo from eastern Liberia who felt himself to have been visited by the angel Gabriel in 1910. Directed by God, Harris journeyed along the coast of the Ivory Coast and Gold Coast, in 1913-1915 denouncing fetishes, preaching brotherly love and baptizing entire villages of people. Because he was viewed as a threat by the French colonial administration he was deported to Liberia in 1915 and never allowed to return. During his brief sojourn in Ivory Coast, he is said to have baptized and converted 120,000 people. He represented no church but saw himself as one sent by God to bring the Christian gospel. European missionary impact was practically nil, especially in the Ivory Coast, where the missionaries had a difficult time staying alive. From 1893 to 1913 the *Societe des Missions Africaines de Lyon* had managed to make only 1100 converts.

Haliburton has given a good focus to the whole development by his use of biography. Too often African history is presented in terms of impersonal forces such as Christianity or colonialism which seem to act without human participation. By using various government archives and by interviewing people who had met Harris, the author gives a lively and engaging presentation which clears up many of the factual questions left by most other accounts.

The explanation of Harris' background, very important for an understanding of his message, is very clear. Harris' participation in the political crisis between Liberia and Great Britain in 1909 and his subsequent prison term were the immediate context in which Harris was visited by the angel Gabriel. While he had been baptized and educated by a Liberian minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Harris joined the Protestant Episcopal Church to work as a teacher. This Episcopal Church, it is significant to note, "looked for generous outpourings of the Holy Spirit." This shows the importance of specific information about the bearers of the Christian message. It is as entirely inadequate to view the Christianity brought to Africa as a monolith as it is to study a generalized gloss of African traditional religion.

The conceptual framework in which Haliburton presents the tremendous response to Harris, that of Anthony Wallace's theory of a revitalization movement, does not adequately answer all the questions posed by Harris' success nor does it allow for the vitality of the traditional Akan religion of the people he converted.

This theory is based on a thesis that the old culture is in crisis, that in fact "the culture is near death" and is breaking down because of rapid social, political and economic change and that the religion of the culture is unresponsive to the needs of the people in a period of great stress. While not denying the importance of the changes which were going on along the coast, I do not feel that this is the reason why mass conversions took place. In fact, the continuity of life style in the lower Ivory Coast would seem to indicate the adaptability and vitality of Akan culture, even in the face of today's pressures of modernization. C.G. Baeta has suggested in his *Prophetism in Ghana*, quite rightly I think, that reasons for change in the religious thought of the Akan people should be in religious terms rather than in terms of an economic and social crisis. Robin Horton has suggested such an idea in his article, "African Conversion" in *Africa*, April, 1971, where he postulates that the development from a microcosmic view of the world in a village oriented society to the macrocosmic view necessary to take into account developments in early twentieth century Africa corresponds with the emergence of a traditional high god cult. That this high god cult was embraced in Christian terms rather than in traditional terms might be explained by the close connection in Akan thought between religious power and sovereign power.

Traditionally, the power of the high priest validated the power of the chief. With sovereignty assumed by the French and the British, this nexus was broken until Harris put it back together again. Harris' power lay not in his personal charisma nor in his preaching, but in the power behind him, that of a God able to protect His representative and his disciples and to render helpless the fetishes and evildoers (witches). The manifestation of this power, that of the high god (Onyame in Akan religion) indicates a change in Akan religion and a revitalization in the sense that God (Onyame) is more involved in the lives of the people in a macrosmic situation. At the same time it means that there is a revitalization of Christianity which makes its message more meaningful to the people. The fossilized, moralistic Christianity preached by the Catholic fathers whose demand of a long period of instruction and memorization of Christian dogmas, whose attack on the family institution of polygamy and whose refusal to deal with such spiritual problems as spirit possession, sickness and death made them irrelevant to the needs of the people.

In sum, the book is a very useful presentation of a subject often referred in the study of African Independent Churches but not dealt with adequately or justly. I do not see as clear a connection between social and political changes in Ivory Coast

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-124-

and the mass conversions achieved by Harris as the revitalization concept supposes. I think that a more accurate picture of Harris' impact will be gotten by studying the whole phenomenon in the context of developments in Akan religion. For this, the book is an important and useful beginning.

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