

THE ROLE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA IN THE PRESERVATION OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Reuben Kigame

ABSTRACT

Several African governments are grappling with the need to increase local content in Africa's electronic media. The tendency is to focus on sourcing CONTENT from recent productions stretching as far back as the independence era.

In this paper I propose the possibility of meeting this need by turning media attention to the neglected African past, not just the colonial era including the scramble and partition of Africa, but farther back to the rich early African Christian tradition of the first fifteen centuries of our common era.

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KEY WORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Africa's electronic media is full of expatriate content. Operating from urban cosmopolitan cities, the FM radio stations beam majority music content from American and European bands and solo artistes. Television stations air Western music videos and documentaries and flood the evening broadcasts with soap operas from South America or Bollywood. To fill the gaps in content, global channels such as CNN, BBC or Al-Jazeera are brought in. Infotainment is largely provided by digital satellite broadcasts of National Geographic, Animal Planet or the History Channel. Local African content in most of the countries is dominated by local comedies or Nigerian movies showcasing the power of witchcraft, traditional domestic intrigues or Christian themes showcasing the power of prayer.

While governments and content development and distribution companies continue to decry the shortage of African programmes, obvious sources of this content lie unexploited before the eyes of producers. While it may be easy to notice the lack of productions showcasing the African past and the underlying programme content that can be produced by creating movies, songs and documentaries to retell the scramble and partition of Africa and the various social dynamics of the colonial era, the production of material from Africa's ancient and medieval

history and culture is totally absent. Folk lore, migration narratives and early African poetry and dance are missing in Africa's media. Although numerous producers are trained in great African colleges and universities and many others in great schools overseas which offer great academic programmes, hardly do we see any interest in producing content that tells the stories of ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, Nubia, Cyrenaica, the Monomotapa Ruins or the Great Trek of the Boers in South Africa. Even Christian media houses simply rebroadcast sermons by American televangelists, Western worship music and movie series with white faces and settings. The Jesus Film has a lot of Western settings and idioms. There is a clear disinterest in themes such as how Christianity spread from Palestine into Africa, the persecution of African martyrs in Libya, Uganda, etc, the victory of King Silko, the exploits of King Ezana, the Arab conquest of North Africa or monastery life by African monks such as St. Anthony of the desert.

In addressing this problem, we raise three questions. First, why is this the case? In other words, what factors have contributed to this neglect? Second, to what extent can the mediatization of Early African Christianity become the answer to Africa's content gap? Third, how can Early African Christianity be employed to fill this content gap? Here, we will identify a number of thematic areas that the media can draw from in developing content from the interesting aspects of Early African Church history. We will examine what production options Africa's media has in dealing with this content challenge. Here we will showcase the role of mediatization in helping Africa understand how she may employ media as a tool of communicating her message to an audience that is already waiting to consume the untold story of Early African Christianity.

FACTORS BEHIND DISINTEREST IN EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

It is obvious that a majority of Africans, including faithful believers, do not know that Christianity has been on the African soil for nearly two millennia. Because of college education that is built on a distorted historiography and media narratives that present Christianity as a white man's religion, it is assumed that Africa has only experienced about three centuries of Christianity. Again, it is common to see media and academic portraits of Christianity in Africa as an extension of a Graeco-Roman tradition or a Palestinian religious appendage. In other words, it is thought that if any Christianity is found on the continent, it is not just foreign but unafrikan.

David Wilhite (2017) correctly observes that historians can fall into problems such as overgeneralization and misrepresentation. Or end up “losing the proverbial forest for the trees.”¹ He adds that there is no need to fragment Africa's Christian story. It should be told as one story. He thinks it has been eclipsed by larger historical narratives. He laments that, too often, the fact that Africa was a western Roman province has made some people think that it can be categorized as the history of western Christianity while neglecting the uniqueness of Christianity in this region. Viewing African Christianity this way has made many scholars disinterested in Early African Christianity as an independent brand growing out of unique missionary efforts by Africans. It is also thought that one cannot be African and a Christian. As shall be seen later, it is also thought that to be a Christian is synonymous with being Western or unafrikan. Wilhite (2017) has made an important observation to this effect:

“While there are many commonalities between ancient African Christians and ancient Italian Christians, for example, there are also many differences. These differences are important. Just as one could not adequately understand the apostle Paul without identifying his commonalities with Greeks, so one should also identify his differences from Greeks. Paul, “the apostle to the

Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13), could become “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:21–22), and yet he always remained “a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil. 3:5).”²

In three books, (2007, 2011, 2012), Thomas C. Oden gives us several reasons as to why the early African Christian story remains untold. In *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* (2007) he says some Westerners naturally turn away from hearing about the Ancient Christian heritage of Africa because of their assumed unimportance of Africa to world history. To this he adds political barriers such as those in Libya, Algeria and Sudan which prevent researchers from going in to carry out studies on religion, especially if they are from the West. This may involve denial of entry as the case has been for Oden as a researcher. From a Western angle, any attempt by African scholars to tell the story is met with accusations of exaggeration and distortion of facts. To this, Oden adds the challenge of illiteracy in ancient languages such as Arabic, Coptic and Ge’ez in which most of the early historical documents are written. What is more, African parents are ignorant of Early African Christianity and so do not tell the story to their children. African Christians have also tended to neglect Christian pilgrimage sites in North Africa and postpone the search for their ancient roots. Her scholars need to delve into existing texts, decipher and avail them for posterity. Oden observes:

“Scratch the surface of the archaeology of the North African coastal and inland Christianity in Numidia, Mauretania, Byzacena and Libya, and you will find the remains of ruins of many martyrial oratories and cemeteries and churches that date to the fourth and fifth centuries, and some as early as the third.”³

Besides the foregoing, Oden also mentions terrorism, persecution and other upheavals which give the impression that there is no story to be told especially in North Africa. Because of the

Islamic dominance from the 7th century A.D. it is assumed that North Africa has always been Muslim and that there is no Christian history to be told.

My own discovery of this Arabocentric view of North African history was prompted by a study I was carrying out on the evidence of Early Libyan Christianity. As I tried to piece the bits together for the period covering the first six centuries of our era, I was excited to find the *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East* only to realize that there was no discussion on Christian North Africa anywhere in the publication and that the discussion of Early Libya jumped deliberately from Prehistory and Graeco-Roman colonization to the Arab conquest of the region. This Arabocentric view of North African history continues to be buttressed by contemporary efforts to bury tonnes of pre-Islamic historical artifacts under the waters of dams along the Nile and the displacement of ethnic populations such as the Nubian community. If UNESCO had not intervened in the preservation of these historical artifacts when the Aswan High Dam was being constructed, the world would have lost many centuries of early African history.

In *The African Memory of Mark*, Oden decries the overlooking and undermining of the place of tradition in the preservation of early history. This undermining tends to reduce much about Early African Christianity to myth. This then prevents a much-needed appreciation and celebration of Mark as an African Jew whose story needs to be retold to Africa's youth and children as a narrative of one of their own. He defends the position that there is agreement between the African memory of Mark and the biblical portrait of John Mark who played a leading role in the Early Church. Oden puts forth the claim that Mark was born in Libya in the region of Cyrenaica, established the Church in Syrenaica and Egypt and then died in Alexandria

where he was martyred. In the book, Oden also cites three reasons why the story of early Christianity in Africa is curtailed. He states:

Much divides Christians in Africa but the memory of Mark unites them. They are divided by:

- (1) Protestant suspicions and stereotypes that Coptic liturgy is out of date or worse, phony,
- (2) Long-standing conflicts since the fifth century between Catholics and Copts, and
- (3) Coptic pride that hesitates to concede any measure of apostolic authorization to either Protestants or Catholics.⁴

In *Early Libyan Christianity* ... Oden gives us one of the most prevalent factors in the neglect of Early African Christianity. He says that right from the independence period of the 1950s, there has been a great concentration on condemning Christian missionaries and their history that is intertwined with colonialism. Consequently, this attitude has prevented them from seeing their own heritage that comes from Early Christianity on the continent. Oden complained:

Even my esteemed "black theology" friends and colleagues who have rediscovered many fertile aspects of "traditional African religion" seem to have consistently ignored the intellectual depth of the deposit of faith in early Africa itself. ... These African texts are among the most dear gifts, costly in blood, of the first millennium to this new third millennium. They are now lying at our feet unnoticed, and in our archives unread. They seem almost too near to us to allow us to get them into clear focus as uniquely African gifts. The rhetoric remains preoccupied with the outrage of anticolonial revulsion."⁵

Several post-colonial African writers have sustained this anti-missionary crusade. Their writings have provided much of the fodder for Africa's media hostility to Christianity, viewing it as a white man's religion. This hostility has made many college students drop biblical names in preference for what they view as African names. They would be appalled upon a closer look to discover that the names they drop, such as John Mark, Augustine, Cyprian, Athanasius and Clement are actually African names.

Some of the authors that have contributed to the rejection of Christianity in Africa include Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Okot P. Bitek of Uganda and Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya. The latter dropped his biblical name, James, because of this belief that the bible names were unafrikan and because of mistakes made by certain Europeans leading to a misunderstanding of the African culture. Chinua Achebe (1958) in his *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964) decries the misunderstanding of the Igbo culture and the attitude of the Western colonizers in pronouncing African culture as foolish and pagan.⁶ In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe, through his character, Okonkwo, argues that everything was in order among the Igbo until the missionaries came, making their society to "fall apart."

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), *Weep Not Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1972) present what seems an irreconcilable tension between African religious traditions and biblical Christianity, arguing that the Church was an intruder in a cohesive Kenyan society. Okot p'Bitek in "Song of Lawino" (1966) and "Song of Ocol" (1970), hails the superiority of African village life to European urban ways and in his book, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1979) decries the emptiness of Christianity, seeing it as inferior to traditional African religions.

There is also a peculiar prevailing definition of African traditional religions that assumes that Christianity cannot be counted among traditional religions of the continent. This view places the Christian presence on the African continent from the arrival of the Portuguese to the coastal areas of West, South and East Africa somewhere in the 15th Century. Most place this at the scramble and partition of the continent in the 19th Century, arguing that it is missionaries who set the stage for Africa's colonization. Even veteran scholars like Mbiti (1975, 1969); Parrinder (1954) and Idowu (1973) place a razor between what they call "traditional African religions" and Christianity.

On the other hand, there are a few but compelling voices that challenge the above view of Christianity as a Western religion. They argue that the Judeo-Christian faith has had a long contact with Africa right from the days of Abraham's sojourning in Egypt to the presence of African Christians from Libya, Tunisia and Egypt in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost as documented in the Book of Acts Chapter 2; hence putting the first converts to Christianity in Africa to less than two months after the ascension of Christ.

H. C. Felder (2017), in his article on whether Christianity is a white man's religion, argues that such a belief is based on an unsupported assumption that the Jews in the Bible were white. James Orr (1915) in his *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* adds that, for the Hebrews, the southernmost point of Africa was Cush or Ethiopia, which the Assyrians and Babylonians called Kusu and Meluhha, the latter regularly referred to in the Nile Valley documents as Meroe (found in present-day Sudan). Numerous scholars ignore or downplay the fact that Christianity has been on the African soil from as early as about 50 A.D. a fact evidenced through the Pentecost representation and the Old Testament contacts between Israel and countries such as Ethiopia and Egypt. Thomas Oden (2007) indicates that the Christian faith was brought to

Alexandria, Egypt, by the Apostle Mark and propagated Northwards and Eastwards by early Church fathers.

A logical reading of the two views demands a closer look at the historical and documentary evidence available to unravel this conflict. Both positions cannot be true. If even a small body of historical evidence were to prove that Christianity has been on the African continent as early as claimed, then there is need to urgently reconstruct the discourse on the view of Christianity as a “white man’s religion,” as advanced in a majority of texts on African literature, history and theology.⁷

This reconstruction is needed across the spectrum, but in view of the bankruptcy by the media in representing Africa’s historical past, Africa’s media priorities in content development and production need a serious reappraisal. There is no good reason to reject the rich Christian heritage of Africa on the basis of a distorted interpretation of historical facts.

THE MEDIATIZATION OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

In discussing the importance of Early African Christianity as a neglected area of media content, it is important to realize that the African society extensively utilizes media for just about everything under the sun, from advertisement to politics and even to religion. It is hard to imagine an Africa without the media. Everywhere you go, Africa’s populations consume print, electronic and social media to enviable proportions. Notably, the Church has also embraced media so much that, besides putting content on radio and television, some congregations have established media houses of their own. There is an increase in experimenting with electronic media all over Africa, but sadly, the content remains predictably the same, i.e. sermon after sermon, music and the publicity of Christian meetings. The convergence of media and Church

are thus unavoidable. When media and Church meet, the question is, which of the two institutions absorbs the other? From a recent research at Moi University, Kenya, my conclusion was that adopted by Stig Hjarvard (2008, 2011) to the effect that this convergence is ubiquitous but tends to work in the direction of media subsuming social institutions under her logic.⁸

Early African Christianity is not just an uncultivated historical ground. It is full of narratives and personalities that can provide endless imagination and content for the media, whether for the preparation of historical and geographical documentaries or whole movies, cartoons, music and poetry for the Church and the wider society. All the media needs to do is utilize her technologies to retell the forgotten stories of migration, liturgical expression, martyrdom, exorcism, pilgrimage, doctrinal disputes, monastic living, ancient architectural marvels, inter-religious wars, Bible translation, ancient methods of reading and writing, family life, etc. The life of St Augustine, the martyrdom of women such as Perpetua and Felicitus, the debates leading to the Nicene Creed, etc. would form interesting and educative content for millions beyond the African continent. Mediatizing such content would usher in a new era of media creativity and an unmatched freshness in content production.

Mediatization in this discussion has been adopted both as a theory and as a conceptual framework. As a theory, it is an agent of change, which provides an unlimited avenue of possibility for the transformation of social institutions especially by subsuming such institutions under media logic (Hjarvard, 2008, 2011). As a concept, Mediatization has been applied as a process of explaining the results of this agency. (Stromback, 2008). While most of the recent scholars (Morgan, 2013; Hepp, 2009; Hjarvard, 2008; Meyer, 2002; Stromback, 2008) see the theory as a recent media influence, spanning, perhaps thirty to fifty years, the study prefers to read it in the light of Sonia Livingstone's understanding where Mediatization plays an annexing

role towards the other socio-cultural institutions the same way Napoleon Bonaparte annexed institutions of the 19th century under his imperial rule.

As an agent of religious change, Mediatization has significantly altered the form and appeal of the traditional Church and introduced a new phenomenon, i.e. the Electronic church along with media as the pulpit that redefines preaching and Church in general. Indeed, most of Africa's radio and television programmes readily fall under this new format. As a process, experimentation with technology and new ways of branding religion is going on. This process implies that the Church continues to adapt to new media formats as time progresses.

The convergence of media and religion is real and affects many aspects of social culture. Scholars during the last twenty years have directed attention to both the ubiquitous nature of this convergence and the resulting symbiotic relationship with various social institutions, for instance, media and politics (Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008), media and performance (Auslander, 1999, 2008), media and cinema (Justice, 2014) Media and Communication (Lundby, 2014), media and aesthetics (Meyer, 2006), media and the public sphere (Passitau, 2008), as well as media and religion, which is our interest here. Several studies on this phenomenon have concentrated on Televangelism and a good amount of reflection in this direction done by scholars such as Quintin Schulz (1987) and Richard Kyle (1991) and with a most recent effort by Esther Nyaboke Mokaya who approaches the discussion in her thesis of 2015 from a quantitative approach focusing on TV consumer behavior in relation to worship in Nairobi. Other Afro centric efforts have been ethnographical concentrations such as Birgit Meyer's study of the Pentecostal movement in Ghana (2003) and Damaris Passitau's discourse on Kenya's religious public sphere (2008).

The missing link in all these concentrations is relating mediatization to institutions before the modern era. It is assumed that only themes within contemporary culture can be mediatized. Worse still, it is assumed that Africa has no early history that is worth mediatizing. While there have been attempts to retell narratives such as Homer's Iliad and the Indian epic poems of the Mahabarata and Ramayan, Early African Christianity is viewed either as non-existent or insignificant as a media source. This discussion aims to sensitize the need for such mediatization. We shall now briefly outline possible areas of mediatizing Early African Christianity.

POSSIBLE CONTENT THEMES FROM WORLD CHRISTIANITY

Africa's media is sitting on a goldmine of sources that would glue her diverse audiences to fresh content if understood and exploited. Early African Christianity offers a world of variety in media sources. We shall briefly identify four possible fertile content areas. The first two of these have to do with media production and the last two with sociological tools that the media can employ in dispensing with the first two.

1. Child narratives

Instead of drenching Africa's children in series such as Harry Potter, Chronicles of Nania, Vegetales or Tom and Jerry, it is my considered opinion that archaeological discoveries of Early man as coming out of Africa, the construction of Nubian and Egyptian pyramids, the presence of the baby Jesus in Egypt, the birth of Moses, the falling of Mana, the burning bush, and indeed the entire four hundred years of the Israelites in Egypt can be retold from an African perspective. Africa's children would greatly be educated and entertained if a cartoon series on the ten plagues was given to them in the place of The Little Mermaid or Harry Potter. Such series packaged from an African perspective would help African children to see biblical Christianity as an African

faith. The exploits of King Silko, the life of Frumentius or St. Anthony's battle with evil spirits in prayer and fasting in the Sahara would form excellent material for endless episodes. African as well as Western media houses can certainly make economic fortunes from these episodes while encouraging the world to see aspects of Africa's Christianity that is removed from the people of the continent. Instead of teaching Nursery rhymes such as "London Is Burning" and "Jack and Jill went up the hill", or songs such as "Were you ever in Quebec" which promotes Canadian patriotism, Africa's media could promote new African music complete with nursery rhymes that tell about Nubian cathedrals, the Monomotapa ruins and their magnificence under new titles like "Were you ever in Zimbabwe" or rhymes about River Nile and the Jinja Waterfall. Story lines and cartoons about Simon of Cyrene and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, or the work of Mark in Cyrene and his martyrdom in Alexandria would be revolutionary to the respectability of the African Church as well as her history.

2. Film production

In his paper titled *Culture, Art and Film in an African Society ...* Durotoye A. Adeleke (2003) observes that art is an integral part of culture and that the artist can express himself through literary arts, plastic arts, visual arts and performing arts. Adeleke says that that film is "a new literature", a literary art and possesses its own characteristic features including plot, suspense, conflict, characterization, themes and language and may be characterized by violence. To this I would like to add traditions and social values which are closely weaved with the plots. Adeleke adds an important point that helps us see how mediatizing social culture helps us preserve our past. He says:

“The literary imagination is... an important key to the process by which the texts about reality are created, including the retrieval of past events, since its creative play is mainly the source of our knowledge of the idols who sustain our historical and political faiths.”⁹

It is my argument that making films about Early African Christianity will serve not just the education and entertainment role, but the more significant role of entrenching our past history in our minds and hearts while reconstructing the misrepresentations of African Christianity. Religion is a key ingredient of social culture and films would do well to preserve this culture for Africa’s posterity. Going to a film theatre or watching a film on “Pentecost” highlighting the Cyrenaic or Egyptian connection to the event would make a great family time. A documentary or emotive portrait of Augustine of Hippo and his struggles with Manichaeism or his victory over lust would be a great film. What about making a film depicting the life of Monica, Augustine’s mother and how her love, prayer and devotion to the wayward Augustine led to the emergence of the greatest scholar, philosopher and literary genius of any age? Who is making such films, anyway? And why are they not being made? And how wonderful it would be to watch such films in African languages complete with African characters! What a difference would be made for the whole of Africa’s media to televise or do radio dramas for incidents such as the killing of Ugandan Christians by Kabaka Mutesa or the capturing of slaves in West Africa for sale in the Americas? Where are the films about John Speke, Ludwig Krapf, Johannes Rebmann, Richard Burton, Robert Moffatt or David Livingston and their exploits on the African continent? Where are the films about the voyages of exploration and the construction of Fort Jesus by the Portuguese? Why do we not see these films on African screens?

3. Identity in a global context

If there is one aspect Africa's media must bring to the limelight, it is the question of identity and how such identity can be upheld within a global context. The greatest sufferers when it comes to this question are African Christians. As seen earlier, they have been estranged from their continent by being deemed Western and have been denied a faith that was hatched and grown on the African continent. The media can help the African Christian own his rightful heritage by retelling the story of Early Christianity in Africa. The African Christian is made to live within a duplicity that forces him to defend his right to being a Christian as an African, but also staying objective by viewing himself as a global Christian.

On identity, perhaps the contribution of scholars such as John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako and the issues they grapple with can be put to film or televised as discussions on radio or television. The tension points between writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Byang Kato could be brought to the table for discussion. Even the theological tension between Kato and Bediako on the place of tradition in the salvation story complete with the place of ecumenism in Africa's Christianity could form great panel discussions in Africa's radio and television programmes.

On the question of globalization, because of its massive consumption, the media could pick up what a number of scholars have put forth regarding Africa's inclusion in god's plan of salvation and then package it for the continent's millions of viewers and listeners. Media is capable of bridging today's African audience with the biblical tradition they pride in for a heritage. Looking at biblical history and the missionary movement that succeeded it, we discover that "the Word becoming flesh" is more than the Christ simply taking on humanity. It is really about God reaching humanity everywhere by using their language, culture and identities to redeem the world and make people from all nations citizens of God's eternal Kingdom. God's mission has remained to avail the Gospel to all mankind by purifying their cultural

predispositions through the Cross of Christ and redeeming men and women everywhere by transforming them to become citizens of His Kingdom. The final portrait is John's vision in Revelation 7 of a multitude of worshipers before the throne of God from every tribe and tongue on earth. Irvin extends this global worship to Revelation 18's focus on merchants who bring their goods to the city of Babylon the Great conjecturing that the mention of silk (verse 12) points to China because that was the land from where silk could be obtained in the 1st century. He adds that this global vision terminates in the goods being brought to Jerusalem in Revelation 21:24.¹⁰

In his essay titled "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" Andrew F. Walls demonstrates not only the historic thread that runs throughout the spread of Christianity, but its global nature that transverses many periods and cultures. He demonstrates that God has used rituals, intellectual discourse, translation and literacy, monastic living, voyages of exploration, parliamentary discussions as well as charismatic expressions to incarnate the Christ and His message to the world.

Walls asks the reader to imagine with him a "long-living, visitor—a professor of comparative inter-planetary religions" who visits the earth every few centuries for field studies in comparative religion. This visitor decides to conduct research on Christianity by observing the practices, habits and concerns of representative Christians across the centuries.¹¹

In their work that tracks twenty-five gravitational points of Christian growth from 33 to 2100 A.D. Johnson and Chung (2009, p.166) explain this spread by demographic and geographical expansion data. They employ the "gravity" model. To show that in the early Christian centuries, the trajectory revolved around the Eastern Mediterranean, but that after 600 A.D. it steadily moved Northwards and Westwards. However, from 1500 A.D. Christianity slowly began to move to the South, picking up a rapid pace from 1800 to cover most of the

global South before starting to move Eastwards again from the 1970s. Johnson and Chung project that by 20100 the concentration of Christianity is likely to be in Northern Nigeria.

Who can tell this story of growth and expansion of Christianity in Africa better than Africa's electronic media?

4. Reconstruction

Africa's media must take a leading role to portray Christianity as an African faith by bringing to light and correcting the misunderstandings that have been propagated by numerous scholars from the West as well as Africa. Too many myths have been constructed to deprive the continent of her roots. This must be clearly explained and substantiated. In short, the media must play a leading role in reconstructing a proper image of African Christianity by using media objectivity and proper historiography because both African and Western voices have tended to fall out of balance when looking at early African Christianity.

Although certain western writers have missed the mark by putting a wedge between Christianity and traditional African religions which they see as pagan, Afrocentric scholars have ended up doing exactly the same thing. While Western scholars create this dichotomy in order to elevate Christianity, Afrocentric scholars do it to elevate African religions above Christianity. The end result is the same. Despite the zeal of Christian missionaries to proselytize the populations of Africa, they, too, missed the fact of Africa as the seedbed of Western Christianity and championed the notion that they were bringing the faith to Africa for the first time.

These Western missionaries not only viewed Africans as pagan and in need of conversion, but tended to equate Western civilization and culture with Christianity. They saw Africa as a

“dark” continent in need of salvation and enlightenment. The difference between these missionaries and the African scholars who view Christianity as non-African is that while the latter argued for the superiority of non-Christian African religions, the former viewed the West as being superior in both social culture as well as mental capacity. This must be reconstructed.

Another important consideration is for the African Church itself. It is evident that the numerical growth of the Church worldwide tends to lean South of the Equator. Philip Jenkins (2002) in his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, has some important discussions pointing to the fact that the world is moving towards Africa, Asia and Latin America becoming the combined mass centre of world Christianity.

Jenkins is intrigued by the possible results of the many poor populations in these regions embracing the faith and especially how they naturally respond to prosperity preaching. This spread is interesting in view of the South having previously been neglected in the spread of early Christianity. David Barrett, the author of *World Christian Encyclopedia*, presented a similar picture but even went ahead to estimate that the global South was having approximately 3000 converts to Christianity daily. The implication is that Christianity is not just an African religion but a global faith to reckon with, spanning nearly two millennia. More importantly, however, is the need for the church in Africa to re-embrace the patristic fire of articulating Christianity especially in a world that has perfected both indifference and outright opposition to the Gospel message and Christian foundations in general. The Church owes posterity the fervor and clarity of doctrine developed by the fathers of the Church who lived and taught in Alexandria and Carthage.

Thomas C. Oden has made some moving observations that the Church in Africa needs to pay attention to. He says that Christians of the Global South have had far less opportunity to

appreciate or even learn about their history than have Western Christians. He says that this is particularly the case for Africa. Oden concludes that *“the remedy is better historical inquiry, not slipshod history or the ideologically charged tweaking of historical evidence.”* He adds:

“All Christians on the continent of Africa have a birthright that awaits their discovery. But in subtle ways they seem to have been barred access to it as a result of longstanding preconceived notions and biases. So their heritage has remained sadly unnoticed, even in Africa. ...tragically many African scholars and church leaders also have ignored their earliest African Christian ancestors. Some have been so intent on condemning nineteenth-century colonialist missionary history that they have hardly glimpsed their own momentous pre-modern patristic African intellectual heritage.”¹²

Once the African Church arises to this opportunity, it will take up its position in articulating a faith that is indigenous to the continent and research is bound to vindicate this forgotten heritage.¹³

Last but not least, African scholars who discuss traditional African religions concentrate on Sub-Saharan Africa and completely black out the religions of Egypt, the Maghreb and the Nile Valley in ancient Nubia. Besides, it is stated again and again that these religious traditions are transmitted orally. Once the religions north of the Sahara are factored in, though, one realizes a strong written tradition. Time has come for African scholars to take the North a little more seriously than the case has been. This would automatically lead to the conclusion that Christianity is one of the best documented of Africa’s religions which does not rely on oral passage but on numerous written records. This must be revisited in African scholarship.

Again, a new philosophy of history is needed to save African scholarship from the fallacies of hasty generalization and the building of a “straw man”. Having articulated an anti-Christian philosophy that reduces a faith to a political ideology, scholars have been beating a non-existent entity. Not only does history vindicate Afro-Christianity, but if religion has got to do with man’s quest for the supernatural, then the Yoruba religions and the faith of Mount Kenya are not any nobler than Christianity in Africanness and in this kind of quest.

If Christianity was viewed colonial from pure hegemonic considerations, then what would one say of Islam which, unlike Christianity, converts through the sword? Then again, something is African if it is of Africa. Such is Christianity. Engaging in counter-discourse must include coherent and non-contradictory grounds. The African writers must exonerate themselves from incoherence and the myopia of writing in one African language to prove the universality of their message. They cannot challenge hegemony by condemning Eurocentrism and then replacing it with Afrocentrism or even Marxism.

CONCLUSION

Let us conclude our discussion by reiterating and emphasizing a few points. Africa’s media needs to do more to enable and facilitate the retelling of early African Christianity. It must also be noted that electronic media are some of the most powerful avenues of inculturation. Just like the bible was translated into different languages for greater ownership and printed on paper for preservation, the medium can become the message as Marshall McLuhan (1964) once declared.

The Nile Valley is full of great untold stories and inquiries that can form part of great investigative journalism. Early Egypt, Ethiopia, Cush, Nubia, Meroe, Axum, Carthage, etc can keep documentary journalists busy for many years. Besides, Africa’s media needs to complement

African writers in expanding the repertoire as well as the genres of story-telling from Africa's past by going beyond the animal and ogre stories of four hundred years or so in African folklore and give our children something new and fresh from the continent.

Indeed, Early Christianity in Africa is full of towering figures such as monks, martyrs, craftsmen, kings, travelers, warlords, love stories and inventions that can transform our folklore radically and refresh posterity with real history. Whole films could be made on Axumite kings like Ezana and his interactions with Frumentius, the Nubian resistance of Arab invasions as well as the visit to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. In an African media environment saturated by Hollywood, Nollywood and Bollywood, the reigniting of passion about Africa's past will encourage reality movies that will retell the migration of the bantu, Nilotes and Cushites into their current settlements as well as how the pyramids or the Great Zimbabwe stone monuments were made.

We would move from reading the historical narrations by William Ochieng, Ali Mazrui and Bethuel Ogot and enter a media age dominated by a retelling of these histories for our children and posterity, by our own African media practitioners. Even Muslim children would benefit from accounts and dramatizations of occurrences and personalities that the media knows little or nothing about and such media efforts are bound to benefit even Western audiences. Entire research projects by communication and media scholars can be launched on communication and language themes in Early Africa. The impact of the Coptic language on populations especially as a common man's language, pitted against Greek and Latin which dominated monasteries and palaces, complete with studies in early hegemonic manifestations would make interesting media research. Glad will be the day when these narratives are brought

to film, cartoon call-in discussions to bridge the gap between past and present for the sake of posterity.

Endnotes

¹ David E. Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity: An introduction to a unique context and tradition*, Routledge, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind*, InterVarsity Press, 2012, 11.

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *The African memory of Mark: Reassessing early church tradition*, InterVarsity Press, 2011, 7

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*, InterVarsity Press, 11.

⁶ Reuben Kigame, *Christian apologetics through African eyes*, Posterity, 2018, 242.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Reuben Kigame: *The Mediatization of Religion: An Analysis of Kenya's Electronic Pulpit from 1990 to 2015*. A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for MSc in Journalism and Media Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. 2018, 27.

⁹ Durotoye Adeleke, “Culture, Art and Film in an African society: An evaluation,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2003, 45-96.

¹⁰ Dale T Irvin, World Christianity: An introduction, *The Journal of World Christianity*, 2008, 1-26.

¹¹ Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as prisoner and liberator of culture”: *The Journal of World Christianity* 2008, 1-26.

¹² Thomas Oden, *How Africa shaped the Christian mind*, InterVarsity Press, 2008, 11.

¹³ Reuben Kigame, *Christian apologetics*, 240-274.