



ISSN 1522- 5668

Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 23 (2021)

Authentic Contextualization and Church Growth: The Case of Catholicism in Malawi 1889–2000

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Abstract

Malawian culture was denounced and demonized as irrational and unbiblical by the early Catholic missionaries from the West. However, this negative attitude toward Malawian culture largely succeeded in hindering Catholic expansion during its nascency in the country. In this paper, I argue that contextualization of the gospel can provide a fertile ground for proliferation of Christianity in any cross-cultural setting and that effective contextualization is expediated by local leaders. To buttress my argument, I mull over the history of Catholicism in Malawi from 1889 to 2000. Catholicism faced fierce resistance in Malawi during its inception but later surged exponentially to become the dominant force in terms of demographics in the country. I argue that the Roman Catholic Church surged in Malawi because the converts could appropriate Catholicism in a meaningful way to their culture. That is authentic contextualization. My main contribution in this paper is that Christian witness in a new setting is more effective when indigenous people are agents of contextualization.

Keywords: Christianity, contextualization, Malawi, Catholicism, White Fathers, Nyau

Introduction

Catholicism was the most resisted form of Christianity in Malawi during the colonial era, yet today it tops all other churches in the country in terms of demographics. Within a period of twenty years from 1950, Catholic demographics boomed from 277,457 to 838,892 (Cheney 2017). The Catholic Church has since maintained dominance on Malawi's religious landscape to this day. Presently, the Catholics boast of over 3.5 million Christians, representing 18.4 percent of Malawi's total population (GCatholic 2021). While Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Jehovah's Witnesses put together represent 39.5 percent of Christians, no individual

denomination in Malawi can claim such a huge membership like the Roman Catholic Church. Reflecting on this continued dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, one may wonder: What attracted Malawians to Catholicism? This is the question I seek to address in this paper. I will contend that contextualization was the impetus for the cordial espousal of the Roman Catholic Church and its demographic proliferation in Malawi. While the role of contextualization in effective witness in cross-cultural mission fields is widely recognized among scholars (Nida 1964; Kraft 2005; Shaw et al. 2016; Sunquist 2017), my original contribution in this paper is that the process of contextualization is successful when it is facilitated by local leaders.

In attempting to explain why Catholicism became dominant in Malawi, I will carry out three tasks. First, I will present a brief geographical background to locate Malawi on the map. This background will be followed by a description of the traditional setting of Malawi to provide a scenario in which the early Catholic missionaries encountered Malawian culture. Second, I will draw a synopsis of early Catholicism in Malawi to identify the major factors that impeded Catholic expansion and how the church defied the odds to find a niche among Malawians. Finally, I will discuss key themes drawn from the survey to understand the relevance of contextualization and how to facilitate it effectively before stressing my argument in the conclusion. To achieve these tasks, I will survey the history of Catholicism in Malawi covering the period 1889-2000. This period is crucial for the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi because the first Catholic missionary visit to the country was made in 1889, while the year 2000 provides a better picture of the state of Catholicism and how it has survived in Malawi in the post-colonial era. Unfortunately, the literature on this topic is scanty because most scholars have given it little attention.

Background and Setting

Malawi, formerly called Nyasaland, is located in southern Africa. It is bordered by Zambia to the Northwest, Tanzania to the Northeast, and surrounded by Mozambique from the Southeast to the Southwest. It is known for one of the deepest freshwater lakes on earth, Lake Malawi, which lies on the eastern side of the country, running from the northern tip to Mangochi district in the southern region. It has one outlet, the Shire River which joins Zambezi River in Mozambique. Shire River is important in the history of Christianity in Malawi because it provided the early European missionaries with access to the country from the Indian Ocean through Zambezi River (Neill 1964, 433; Sindima 1992, 1). Its population is estimated at more than 19 million. Christianity is the main religion with 86 percent of the population identifying themselves as Christians, although a majority still uphold traditional religious beliefs (Malawi Government 2014, 4). The dominant tribe is Chewa, which represents 35.1 percent of the country's population (GCatholic 2021). The Chewa are a remnant tribe of Maravi, an ancient kingdom from which the country's name Malawi was derived. The language of the Chewa, Chichewa, is Malawi's lingua franca and Chewa traditions constitute an integral part of the country's cultural identity.

Malawians were religious people even before the Catholic missionaries arrived. Their culture was constituted by several traditional religious practices. Among the powerful traditional religions were the M'bona cult and the Nyau masked dance society that were popular among the Chewa tribe. Although M'bona is commonly associated with Amang'anja

tribe, the Chewa and Amang'anja originally belonged to one tribe. They separated and took different names as they migrated to different places within the country (Wills 1985, 48–49). The M'bona cult was controlled by the Phiri clan. Its adherents believed in a transcendent God who could only be reached through M'bona, a slain magician believed to be a prophet inspired by God. M'bona, also known as the rainmaker, had the ability to bring or hold rains. When he died, two sacred shrines were erected at Khuluvi in what is today called Nsanje district where people would go to ask God for rain (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 468).

The Nyau or vinyau dance society is another major traditional religious practice that was influential in Malawi during the early years of Catholic missionary activity. It was shared by all Chichewa speaking peoples of Malawi (Linden 1974, 117). Adherents of Nyau society believe that all living things were created by a transcendent being called Chauta, meaning God. According to their legend, the creation event took place at Kapirimtiwa mountain located on the boundary of central Malawi and Western Mozambique in which God appeared in the form of thunder (Aguilar n.d.). Unlike the M'bona cult, which did not require special admission, Nyau was beyond a system of religious beliefs with extensive claims over its membership. Nyau dance performances were accompanied by songs that were played with traditional instruments such as drums (Linden 1974, 122). Dancers dressed in costumes with masks symbolizing animals or humans. It was believed that behind the masks were spirits of humans and animals that would join with the living in harmony during performance (Linden 1974, 118). These dances were performed during female initiation ceremonies, funerals, and other special occasions (Linden 1974, 117). Nyau membership was restricted to boys who had reached puberty (Paas 2006, 201).

While different traditional religions existed before Catholicism in Malawi, it is important to note that most of them shared the belief in a transcendent being who could perform great things that humans could not. As seen in the M'bona cult, Chauta was understood as a transcendent being who could bring rains through M'bona as a mediator. Similarly, the Nyau dance society understood God as a transcendent being who created all things. This understanding does not completely depart from the God of the Bible, yet the Catholic missionaries condemned these Malawian traditions as we shall see below.

Early Catholicism in Malawi

The initial attempt by the Catholics to establish mission stations in Malawi was made in 1889 by the White Fathers (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 478). In fact, the Catholics had been present in neighboring Mozambique as early as the seventeenth century. By 1612, Mozambique was already a Vicariate under the Jesuits (Neill 1964, 198). However, Catholicism could not expand beyond Mozambican boundaries because of hostile neighboring kingdoms. This hostility was perpetrated by the impression that to become a Christian meant to be subservient to Portugal, since the Catholic missionaries were backed by the Portuguese. The ambition of the Catholics to expand their presence was thwarted when King Kaprazine of Monomotapa killed a Portuguese envoy in 1628 and declared war against Christians (Neill 1964, 199). Thus, Malawians would have to wait for more than two centuries before the Catholic missionaries would make their first visit to the country in 1889.

Before surveying the activities of the early Catholic missionaries in Malawi, it will be helpful to provide some background to the antecedents that inspired the Catholic missionary

enterprise in the country. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, two major events dealt the Roman Catholic Church a big blow. First, over 2000 Jesuit missionaries resigned, thereby crippling Catholic missionary activity. Second, the French Revolution paralyzed the French church through outward hardship and inner dissension, frustrating all efforts to send out missionaries (Neill 1964, 397). Napoleon executed pope Pius VI (1717–1790) and kept Pope Pius VII (1740–1823) under arrest. This era appeared to mark the end of the papacy and the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church (Neill 1964, 397).

However, Napoleon's ill-treatment inflicted upon the papacy only succeeded in awakening myriad sympathizers across the world who restored the prestige of the papacy and elevated it to a greater height than ever before (Neill 1964, 398). Due to pressure from Catholic sympathizers, Pius VII was released in 1814 and reestablished the Jesuit order in the same year. Later, all the other orders that had been suppressed reorganized themselves and went back to the mission fields (Neill 1964, 399). In addition, more new orders were established. One of the new orders that emerged was the White Fathers formed by Cardinal Lavigerie of Algiers in 1868 with the strict aim of winning Africans for Christ (Neill 1964, 399). It was the White Fathers that brought Catholicism to Malawi with their first attempt made in 1889.

Catholicism was introduced in Malawi by the White Fathers in 1901. Their first attempt to evangelize Malawi was made in 1889 but did not produce the desired result. The Catholic Fathers were deployed to Malawi by the Vatican following a request from the Portuguese to ostensibly expand Catholicism. However, while the White Fathers' aim was to further the growth of Catholicism, the Portuguese had interest in usurping control over Malawi. As such, the White Fathers' presence in Malawi was viewed as politically motivated due to their identification with the Portuguese. They faced resistance both from the Malawians and the British colonial authority. In the end, the White Fathers' attempt to establish mission stations failed (Mbaya 1997, 17–18). They abandoned Malawi and relocated to Tanganyika (present day Tanzania) where they were able to establish a mission station in the same year 1889 (Neill 1964, 433). But their failure in Malawi did not mean forgetting the country.

Twelve years later in 1901, the White Fathers were joined by the Montfort Fathers and went back to Malawi (Vezeau 1989, 54). Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the order, extended the sphere of the White Fathers to Malawi in the hope that the route to the hinterland through Mozambique would be shorter and safer than through Zanzibar (Neill 1964, 433). This idea marked the beginning of the Catholics' second attempt to establish mission stations in Malawi. This time they went without any outside political backing. Instead of collaborating with foreign political authorities like Portugal, they turned to the British colonial authority in Malawi for help. Support for the White Fathers was facilitated by the Catholic laity that were in the British administration for Malawi, and this enabled the Catholics to successfully establish their mission stations (Mbaya 1997, 29–30). The first mission station was established at Nzama, West of Central Angoni Land, in February 1902 by the Montfort Fathers (Linden 1974, 44). In the same year, the Catholics extended their presence to most parts of central Malawi through construction of schools to attract Malawians to convert to Catholicism (Linden 1974, 105). However, as much as the Catholics were increasing new mission stations, expansion in terms of new converts was slow due to resistance from the local people (Mufuka 1977, 38). But why were Malawians resistant to Catholicism?

Catholic Attitude Towards Malawian Traditional Religions

The Catholic missionaries had strong resentment for Malawian traditional religions, especially Nyau dance. In contrast, the latter seemed interested in assimilating Catholicism (Linden 1974, 120). But even that did not convince the Catholic Fathers to tolerate Nyau dancers. They condemned Nyau as evil, asking Catholic converts to completely divorce from traditional religions. However, this negative attitude cost the Catholic missionaries a heavy price.

Nyau Dance Society: A Historiographical Perspective

Nyau dancers have often been portrayed as violent and hostile by historiographers. A case in point is the work of Ian Linden (1974). Noting that Nyau torched Catholic prayer houses at some point, Linden concludes that Nyau tradition was violent (1974, 117–21). While this is not the right place to defend Nyau, one question must be asked: Why did Nyau dancers burn down Catholic prayer houses? Linden seems not to pay attention to this question. But considering that the Nyau dance society assimilated certain traits of Catholicism, it might be suggested that Nyau dancers were not hostile to Catholicism as Linden claims. For instance, the Nyau dancers made costumes to depict St. Peter and Mary the mother of Jesus (Mufuka 1977, 38). Since the Catholic Fathers depicted these iconic figures as Europeans, a Nyau dancer imitating St. Peter would wear a mask painted red with animal fur as hair to respectively represent the complexion and hair of the Europeans. Also, since the Catholic missionaries were always seen reading newspapers, the Nyau characterization of St. Peter would appear to the public carrying an old newspaper to mimic the Catholic Fathers. For Mary, the Nyau rendition had breasts made from *magnegeve* (fruits of the palm tree). She always appeared to the public with a baby, symbolizing Jesus (Linden 1974, 120). While this distorted the Christian message, the Catholics should have been impressed because it demonstrated the Nyau dancers' great interest to enrich their traditional religious thinking with Christianity.

The Nyau dancers were not alone in being attracted to Catholicism. Some adherents of the M'bona cult found Catholic Christianity attractive and embraced the name of Jesus to call M'bona as the way to reach God for rain (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 469). Thus, M'bona came to be called *Jesu wakuda*, meaning black Jesus (Linden 1974, 5). Catholic reverence for Mary influenced the Chewa to hold great respect for motherhood. This is conspicuous in traditional expressions such *amayi wako ndi Mulungu wachiviri* (your mother is second only to God) (Linden 1974, 6). In addition, the Chewa incorporated statues of Catholic saints in their traditional religions. For example, in the 1920s, the Montfort Fathers found statues of the saints taken from a ruined Catholic church being used for rain-calling in the region of Massingire prazo in the lower Shire valley (Linden 1974, 6). Despite this evidence against the claim that Nyau dancers were hostile to Catholicism, the Catholic missionaries illtreated Nyau dancers.

Catholic Missionaries' Response to Nyau Dancers

Under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Methurin Guilleme in 1920s, the Catholics banned Nyau dancers from their mission stations. Whether Christian or not, Guilleme declared that if one was connected to Nyau, they must not participate in Catholic liturgical practices. The leadership of Reverend Dr. Guilleme was also known for encouraging Catholic priests to harass Nyau dancers (Mufuka 1977, 37). One example is the 1918 case of Father Chateauvert

of the Mua mission who attacked Nyau dancers. He was playing the harmonium during benediction, but the music could not be heard due to a deafening noise of Nyau drums outside the church. He went out and shoved the dancers away and destroyed the Nyau drums with a knife. However, these harassments reached a point where the Nyau dancers could not bear them anymore. They complained to the British colonial authorities, who responded by demanding compensation from the Catholic missionaries for the damages they had caused to the Nyau society. For Catholics, this was a humiliating experience as it ironically put Nyau dancers on the pedestal. Following this event, Nyau dancers rose with force in the whole region (Linden 1974, 122).

In 1920, Nyau dancers revolted against the Catholic missionaries and began to present themselves as guardians of Malawian tradition from disruption by foreigners (Paas 2006, 201). They torched Catholic prayer houses and declared war against the Catholic missionaries (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 469). Also, they relaxed their rules to accommodate children of school age who were initially not allowed to join the Nyau society (Paas 2006, 201). As a result, children were not only kept from attending Catholic worship services, but also from attending school. In the end, Catholic expansion was slowed down, and school attendance dramatically dropped in the period from 1917 to 1922, as shown in Table 1. Schools in Buluzi, Msewa, and Santi villages were closed in 1922 due to zero attendance. Schools in Mbingwa were the only survivors, although attendance fell heavily from 76 in 1917 to 25 in 1922. Nyau resistance hindered Catholic expansion until Malawi's independence in 1964 (Linden 1974, 131).

Table 1. School Attendance in Catholic Schools (1917-1922)

Village	Year 1917	Year 1921	Year 1922
Mbingwa	76	87	25
Buluzi	78	9	0
Msewa	44	0	0
Santi	56	14	0

Source: Linden 1974, 121

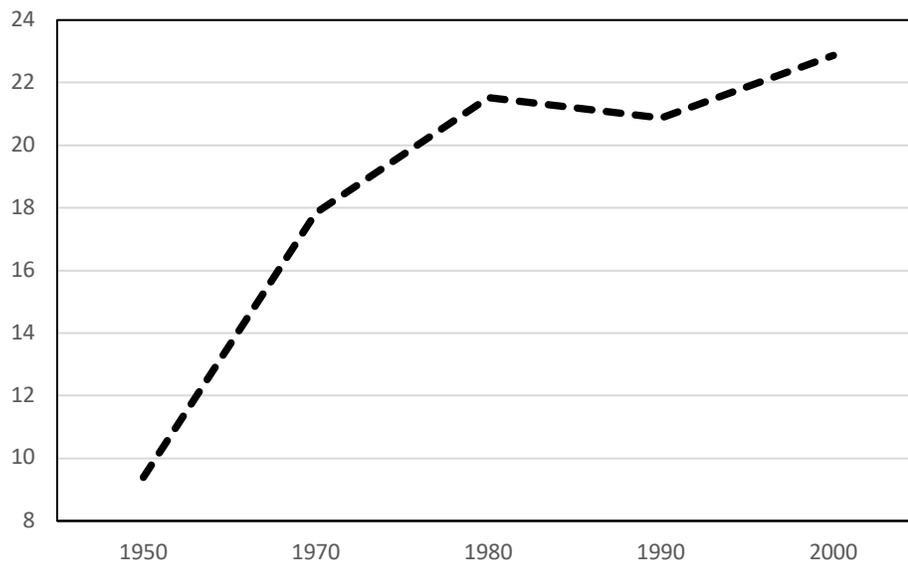
The population of Catholic converts in Malawi skyrocketed to 838,892 in 1970, representing 18 percent of Malawi's total population as shown in Figure 1 below. From 1970, Catholicism continued growing and reached over 2.5 million Christians in 2000, representing 23 percent of Malawi's total Christian population. Today, Catholic Christians account for 20.6 percent of the entire population of Christians in Malawi, which is still much higher than the percentage of Christians from other denominations (Malawi Government 2014, 1). Most fascinating is that twenty years before 1970, Catholics only represented 9.4 percent of Malawi's population. Considering that Catholic expansion was frustrated by Nyau resistance, one may ask: How did the Catholic Church defy Nyau resistance to win more converts?

The Impetus for Catholic Growth in Malawi: 1950-2000

The most conspicuous factor to which the Catholics owe their triumph over Nyau resistance seems to be contextualization of Catholic Christianity. However, this is not to

suggest that contextualization was initiated by the Catholic missionaries, but rather it happened more like a fortunate coincidence when Malawians began to take senior leadership positions in the Malawian Catholic Church hierarchy. As much as adaptation to local culture was enshrined in the White Fathers' cardinal policy, they chose not to pursue it wholesale (Linden 1974, 51). Where the Catholic missionaries can claim credit is their change of policy to start considering local Malawians for senior church positions, although this was politically motivated. Since the Catholic missionaries identified with the British colonial government because of the latter's support (Mbaya 1997, 29–30), the rise of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) as a major force against the British colonial rule threatened survival of the Catholic missionary enterprise in Malawi. The Catholics were ready to do anything to frustrate the MCP. They even sponsored Chester Katsonga of the Christian Democratic Party (CDP) to contest for the presidency against the MCP (Mbaya 1997, 175). But all this effort only succeeded in cementing hatred between the MCP and the Catholic Fathers. The MCP's inevitable ascendancy to power in 1964 meant no more government support for Catholic missionaries. A question which needs close attention here is: Why did the Catholic Fathers, who were once hostile to Malawians, suddenly open the door for local people to assume leadership positions in the church?

Figure 1. Roman Catholic Expansion in Malawi (1950-2000) (percentage of population)



Source: Computed from Cheney 2017; World Population Review (WPR) 2020

Two possible suggestions can explain the Catholic Fathers' sudden change of posture in favor of local people to rise to leadership positions. First, considering that the rise of the MCP was immediately followed by the Catholic change of leadership policy to include Malawians, it is possible that in the post-colonial era, the Catholic Fathers had only ordinary Malawians to turn to for empathy, hence appeasing them with leadership positions in the church's hierarchy. Another possible explanation is that the rise of the MCP attenuated the influence of the White clergy in the Catholic church, thereby creating an unprecedented opportunity for

Malawians to chart the course for shaping the kind of Catholicism they wanted to see in the country. Either way, the bottom line is that the MCP and the Catholic Fathers were at loggerheads and the rise of the former put survival of the latter on the line. A helpful alternative for Catholic survival was to surrender power to Malawians. This was a shrewd move considering that before the rise of the MCP, the White Catholic clergy drew their power and influence from the British colonial government that sympathized with them. Now that the British colonial rule had been ousted, handing over church leadership to local people whose compatriots were also in government leadership made sense to ensure continued government support. Nevertheless, inclusion of local leaders in the Catholic church's hierarchy had more important implications than intended.

After independence in 1964, the Catholics intensified training of Malawians to assume top leadership positions in the church. But this is not to say that the Catholics did not consider local leaders before independence. By the 1920s the Catholics had already started training Malawians to serve in the church (Vezeau 1989, 117–18). These early efforts to empower local leaders seem to explain the steady growth of Catholicism in Malawi which increased the number of converts to 838,892 in 1970, accounting for 18 percent of the country's population. However, top positions were almost entirely restricted to Europeans (Mbaya 1997, 96). It was not until after independence in 1965 that Malawians would rise to the office of bishop (Vezeau 1989, 117–18). This development culminated in unintended contextualization of Catholic Christianity whereby local traditions and Catholic practices were blended. The Malawian Catholic leaders who were rising through the church hierarchy did not make a complete break with their traditional religious beliefs and practices. A case in point was Rita Kafulama who maintained her traditional role as the descendant of the Mwali Shrine, while serving as head of the women's section of the legion of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church (Linden 1974, 202). But Kafulama was not alone.

Others were Cornelio Chitsulo, Alfred Finye, and Andrea Makoyo, who were the first local ordained priests in the late 1930s (Bilima 1987, 26). These and a majority of Malawian converts did not relinquish their traditional religious beliefs (Korpela 2011, 101). As a result, the form of Catholicism that emerged was different from the one which the White Fathers had attempted to impose on Malawians. As Linden (1974, 202) has noted, post-colonial Catholic Christianity did not displace Chewa culture, but rather grew up alongside it. This allowed for a healthy inculturation whereby Catholic Christianity and local traditional practices shaped each other. Malawian clergy who had risen to top positions in the church had power and influence to mold Catholic Christianity to suit local traditions. They assumed full ownership of the church and championed its refashioning to resonate with Malawian local practices. They made sure that older explanatory frameworks that were typical of Malawian tradition were integrated into the church.

Several examples attest to integration of Malawian tradition in the Roman Catholic Church. First, dancing and use of traditional drums during church gatherings were incorporated as part of worship. Second, villagers would attend mass without abandoning local traditions. For instance, a girl might receive her first communion in a white dress, and later undergo a traditional initiation ceremony (Linden 1974, 202). Third, some of the traditional songs for Nyau dance made their way into the church's hymn book with some alterations to include biblical figures like Mary and Jesus. Also, European languages such as English and

Latin that were commonly used during church worship due to the influence of the White Fathers were muted. Instead, the local language of the Chewa called Chichewa was promoted in the church to allow the worshipers to express themselves freely. While the White Fathers previously forced Malawian parishioners to learn and use their languages during worship gatherings, this time the White clergy were the ones to learn Malawian culture including Chichewa. This practice is still encouraged to this day. Every foreign clergy serving in the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi is expected to learn Chichewa.

This contextualized Catholic faith made the Chewa identify easily with the Roman Catholic Church and expedited Catholic expansion as evident in the demographic increase after independence. The local parishioners felt at home in the Roman Catholic Church in the same way they felt when attending traditional practices like Nyau dance. There was a real sense of ownership of “Malawian-made” Catholicism among the local parishioners. They viewed the Roman Catholic Church as their own, not a foreign faith shipped from the Vatican like a cargo because of the familiar Malawian traditions that constituted part of worship in the church. Today, Catholicism boasts one-third of the Christian population in Malawi (Malawi Government 2014, 1).

Discussion of Key Themes

Two themes worth noting in the history of Catholicism in Malawi are the role of contextualization in effective witness in cross-cultural mission fields and the importance of empowering local leaders as a critical step in the process of contextualization.

The Role of Contextualization

For a church to thrive in a cross-cultural context, contextualization is pivotal as seen in the history of Catholicism in Malawi. Contextualization is a broad and complex concept with a long and rich history. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to note that contextualization involves grounding an idea or a practice (in this case, Christianity) in a new setting to make it function meaningfully without conflict with existing traditions. This definition is derived from the insights of Christian anthropologists who contributed substantively to advancement of contextualization theory in mission practice. They include Eugene Nida (1964), Allan Tippett (1967), and Charles Kraft (2005). Paying serious attention to local language and culture is key to effective witness in a cross-cultural mission field (Nida 1964). It allows new converts to express their faith using their own culture. This is exactly what contributed to Catholic growth in Malawi. In contrast, condemning and undermining local traditions can be disastrous and may elicit undesired consequences as Tippett (1967) discovered in Fiji. Similarly, the Western Catholic Fathers’ negative attitude towards Malawian traditions and their attempt to impose their culture on Malawians as the only expression of Catholic Christianity was met with resistance and threatened survival of the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi.

Several cases provide overwhelming evidence that Christianity flourishes when it is contextualized. For instance, Charles Kraft (2005, 101) was successful in his work as a missionary in Nigeria where he served among the Kamwe people. His success resided in encouraging the Kamwe to develop a Christian faith that was meaningful and harmonious to their local context. Similarly, by the early decades of the seventeenth century, the growth of Christianity was promising in China following the contextualization approaches of the Jesuits

that accommodated local cultures. However, Chinese Christian demographics experienced a dramatic fall when the form of Christianity that was emerging was revoked by the papacy. In Japan, Christianity suffered a similar experience and has never been able to recover to this day (Sunquist 2017, 17). The importance of contextualization is highlighted further by the Indian Christians who rejected the Portuguese attempt to impose European culture as the only expression of Christianity (Sunquist 2017, 16).

Surely, a studied awareness of local language, culture, religions, and society is foundational to effective cross-cultural ministry (Nida 1964; Sunquist 2013, 48). The papacy's rejection of the forms of Christianity that emerged in China and Japan for integrating local traditions was a grave oversight because, by its very nature, Christianity is a blend of different religious traditions. It should be recalled that Christianity emerged and developed its beliefs amidst other religions (Hedges 2010, 87–88). When Christianity spread to Alexandria in Egypt, which was as important commercial city during the first century, it found Greeks, Jews, Persians, Indians and other immigrants from different cultural and religious backgrounds including Buddhism (Irvine and Sunquist 2001, 86). Those who found Christianity compelling strove to integrate it into their religious traditions, leading to the emergence of a variety of ways of understanding and expressing the Christian faith (Irvine and Sunquist 2001, 47, 88). Perhaps, Amos Yong (2014, 50) settles this conundrum when he suggests that instead of asking why one should choose Jesus rather than the Buddha or Western Catholicism rather than Nyau (in the case of Malawians), the question should be how does my Buddhist or Nyau identity inform my commitment as a Christian. As such, claiming that the Christian faith can only be expressed through Western culture is not only inappropriate but also misleading. It is therefore not surprising that allowing Malawians to express Catholicism through their local traditions attracted more people, leading to exponential growth of the Catholic Church in Malawi. But how can Christianity be contextualized in a cross-cultural mission field successfully?

The Importance of Local Leadership in Contextualization

As much as contextualization is widely recognized as integral to effective witness in cross-cultural mission fields, how to facilitate it successfully remains a highly contested question in missiology. Since Shoki Coe coined the term contextualization in 1972, the process was understood as adapting the Christian faith to new cultural settings which involves translation, teaching, and dissemination of Scripture by missionaries (Sanneh 1987; Coe 1993). William A. Dyrness (2016, 22–23) has challenged this approach as a colonial view because it implies that the missionary (usually from the West) is the one to interpret Scripture and decide what the Christian faith should look like in the new setting. Considering that hermeneutics cannot be divorced from one's cultural baggage, Dyrness (2016, 22–23) argues that contextualization results in imposing the interpretation of the gospel which is embedded in the culture of the interpreter. To avoid this colonial problem as Dyrness calls it, he suggests replacing the idea of "contextualization" with "intercultural theology" on the basis that the latter allows people in any cultural setting to read Scripture on their own and apply it in ways that are meaningful to their culture. For Dyrness, that is non-colonial contextualization, although the people may not realize that what they are doing is contextualization. While I do share Dyrness' understanding of contextualization, I do not think that giving up the language of contextualization would help to get things straight. Perhaps we can call it authentic

contextualization to distinguish it from the colonial approach. Indeed, contextualization facilitated by people in their own cultural context is authentic. This was also true for Malawians.

Mulling over the history of Catholicism in Malawi, empowerment of local leaders seems to be a critical step in going about a successful contextualization process. Though politically motivated, empowerment of the local clergy helped to expediate contextualization of Catholicism which spurred Catholic expansion in the country. As noted, most Malawians resisted Catholicism throughout the colonial era because of the Catholic Fathers' negative attitude towards Malawian tradition. In contrast, Malawians easily identified with a contextualized Catholicism because they found it analogous to their tradition. For example, Catholicism honored the saints in much the same way Nyau dancers recognized their ancestral spirits. Also, Malawian tradition believed in a transcendent creator like the God which the Catholics believed in. It was, therefore, a question of using these parallels to graft Catholicism into the Malawian tradition to allow Malawian culture to witness to Catholic Christianity as a way of contextualizing Catholicism in the Malawian context. The expansion of an uncontextualized Catholic Church remained moribund until the local clergy emerged on the scene and took charge of the process of refashioning Catholicism to make it meaningful and functional in the Malawian context without undermining local traditions. Thus, empowering local leaders is an important step for contextualization of Christianity to be effective in a cross-cultural mission field.

Conclusion

The ability to contextualize the Christian gospel is integral to effective witness in a new cultural setting. People appreciate and easily identify with the gospel and find it meaningful when it is grounded in their culture. Reflecting on the history of Catholicism in Malawi, Catholic expansion would have been a smooth process considering that Malawians did not find Catholicism unparallel to their indigenous religious traditions. However, failure to contextualize Catholicism encumbered growth of the Roman Catholic Church in the early beginnings. The church burgeoned only after allowing the local converts to live out Catholicism in ways that were meaningful to their traditions. It is, therefore, recommended for missionaries working in cross-cultural settings to take contextualization seriously. Based on the lessons gleaned from the history of Catholicism in Malawi, this article proposes empowerment of local leaders as an important step in the process of contextualization. Contextualization takes its course more effectively when the local people can appropriate the gospel in ways that are meaningful to their cultural context. That is authentic contextualization. As much as the Catholic White clergy empowered local leaders for a different intent, it expediated contextualization of Catholicism which culminated in the Catholic Church's growth in Malawi.

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