

To Latinize or to Evangelize?

By Rev. Paul Donohue, MCCJ

a Comboni missionary, 63, born in Lorain, Ohio, and who served in Africa two years before ordination in 1975, and in Uganda, Kenya and the United States. Father Donohue blends fact and experience for the reader's pleasure and edification.

Whiffs of tension hang in the air as the Catholic Church of Ethiopia celebrates the new millennium, according to the ancient Coptic and Julian calendars, eight years after the Gregorian calendar used in much of the world.

One afternoon I landed in the middle of this tension between the Ge'ez and Latin Rites of the Catholic Church. Leaving the airport of Addis Ababa, I went directly to the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The rector, Father Gebre Mariam Amante, 85, led me into the sanctuary: "as you can see," he said, "we have our own church. Why do you missionaries come here?" The décor, the script, everything in the cathedral spoke of Ethiopia.

In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26ff) there is an allusion to Christianity reaching as far as Ethiopia. Philip explains a text of the prophet Isaiah to a eunuch of the queen of the Ethiopians and baptizes him. Nevertheless, the cultural adaptation of Greek Christianity's biblical-liturgical texts to Ethiopic symbols and language did not begin until Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, ordains Frumentius bishop around 347. In the book, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the 4th-century church historian Rufinus of Aquileia is able to document Frumentius' achievements in the region of Abyssinia, after meeting Aedesius in Tyre, Syria. Aedesius is Frumentius's colleague.

The distance between the Holy See in Rome and Aksum, the ancient capital of Ethiopia, together with the political and religious conflicts in North Africa through the centuries made ongoing communication between the churches difficult, but it did not destroy the "communion of faith." Under

the direction of the Ethiopian priest, Pietro Tesfatsion, the Vatican published in the Ge'ez language a missal for the celebration of the Eucharist according to the Ethiopian rite in 1548.

The current tension between the Ge'ez and Latin Rites emerges in the aftermath of the European Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation. There is no consensus on when to date the start of the Enlightenment. The Protestant Reformation begins 1517, when Martin Luther nails the 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg. These events—however indirectly— influence the modern history of evangelization in Ethiopia, where we see that two Italian missionaries embrace the mandate to announce the gospel, yet disagree on how to evangelize. Much later in 1975, Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, №40, that the "question of 'how to evangelize' is permanently relevant."

Capuchin Cardinal William Massaja and Vincentian Bishop St. Justin de Jacobis announced the gospel in Ethiopia with very different methods. St. Justin de Jacobis labored 1839 until his death in 1860. Cardinal William Massaja worked in Ethiopia 1846 until he retired in 1880.

A Fides Dossier—Congregation for the Evangelization of People, May 2008—characterizes the different methods of De Jacobis and Massaja. Regarding St. Justin de Jacobis, the dossier suggests that he went to Ethiopia because the "Christians of Rome wish to be united with the Christians of Abyssinia." The aim of Cardinal William Massaja, on the other hand, was similar to the earlier policy of Bishop Alfonso Mendez and some Jesuits. Cardinal Massaja did not in-

tend “a renewal of the original Ethiopian Christianity,” but its “*Latinization*.”

The respect St. Justin de Jacobis had for what he found in Ethiopia enabled him to see the fruits of St. Frumentius, who long before had adapted and shaped Christianity for the Ethiopians without compromising either Christian scripture or tradition. Would this approach have worked in other parts of Africa? This question eluded Massaja and many other missionaries, who believe that in order to evangelize it is necessary to *Latinize* people. The reflection on these two religious missionaries applies to lay missionaries as well. In a real sense, Western missionaries created the tension between the two Rites in Ethiopia.

In fact, strains of the *Latinization* process mark other parts of Africa. When I am asked about my life among the Acholi of Uganda, people find it hard to get their mind around the fact that everything—everything in the Christian community of Uganda is the same as it is in Iowa, or Rome. “Well, does it make sense to them? After all, we do things our way; don’t they do things their way?” Let us look at examples of *Latinization*.

The most obvious expression of *Latinization* is the use of language. For example, the catechism for the Acholi people of northern Uganda is replete with Latin words written according to the Acholi phonetics: *sakramento*, *gracya*, *misa*, *konfirmacio*, *matrimonio*, to mention a few. What do the Acholi people understand of these words? The biting sarcasm of the Ugandan writer and poet, Okot p’Bitek, in his 1966 book *Song of Lawino* raises this very question.

“The things they shout
I do not understand,
They shout anyhow
They shout like mad people.

The padre shouts words,
You cannot understand,
And he does not seem
To care in the least
Whether his hearers
Understand him or not;
A strange language they speak
These Christian diviner-priests...

Studies by women scholars of theology, ethics and ritual have helped us recognize how religious language reflects our deepest beliefs, which missionaries have wanted to transmit faithfully. However, people hear religious language on the basis of their experiences and their hopes, which in this case is not in any way part of the Latin or Western culture. Nelle Morton argues that power is really with the listener, not the speaker. I think evangelists intuitively understood this and have attempted to attribute meaning to indigenous languages.

The translation of the Acholi word *ajwaka* is an example of some evangelists attributing meaning to indigenous language. Father J. P. Crazzolaro, who was one of the first Comboni Missionaries to reach Northern Uganda in 1911, believed that in the Acholi language there was no equivalent word for witchcraft—as it is understood in Europe. He rendered in English the Acholi word, *ajwaka*, as “priest or priestess of the spirit.” Comboni Father Alfred Malandra claimed that *ajwaka* should be rendered in English as “witchdoctor.” The difference between these two missionaries could not be greater. Other missionaries have lined up behind one or the other, mainly, the later. The English colonial officer G. A. R. Savage suggested that the Acholi word, *ajwaka*, should be rendered in English as “diviner.”

If the *ajwaka* is a priest or priestess, she or he could rival the evangelists. If, on the other hand, the *ajwaka* is a witchdoctor, it is easy to roundly condemn her or him. The question to ask is:

How much of their own cultural meaning do missionaries project onto the language they use to evangelize?

As Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa points out in his 1997 book *African Religion*, a critique of this kind of prejudicial projection surfaces in the writings of Cameroonian theologians F. Eboussi Boulaga and Jean-Marc Ela. In his 1984 book, *Christianity Without Fetishes*, Boulaga demonstrates “how Christianity of the empire imposes itself only by tearing up its converts by the roots, out of where-they-live, out of their being-in-the-world, presenting them with the Faith only at the price of depriving them of their capacity to generate the material and spiritual conditions of their existence.”

People uprooted and systematically destroyed in this manner, Boulaga explains, “will be able to find their truth only outside themselves, as the utterly-other-from-themselves-and-their universe. The missionary discourse has a habit of propounding God, or the content of the faith, as the irruption into one’s world of the purest Strangeness, and conversion as the snatching of the candidate for Christianity from the jaws of perdition, which is confused with one’s traditional mode of living and being human.”

Latinization has other less obvious expressions. For example, cultures have methods for dealing with tension and division within families and the ethnic group. These methods have been in place for centuries and heal painful divisions. In fact, it is inconceivable that a culture would not have some mechanism to deal with human foibles. Whether missionaries are able to adopt these mechanisms is a question.

Among the Acholi, for example, there is a ritual

named *tumu kir*, which deals with divisions within the extended family. Unless these tensions are resolved through the ritual *tumu kir*, some tragedy other than the division itself would likely befall the family. Early on, missionaries were aware of the ritual, which involves the sacrificing of a lamb. The protagonists of the division are anointed with the lamb’s rumen, which alerts the protagonists to the bitterness which division generates. A meal is prepared with the meat of the lamb and the

two, who were anointed, eat from *one* bowl at the same time, demonstrating their reconciliation.

Even though the missionaries celebrate the Eucharist daily, many can see no religious connection whatsoever with the Acholi ritual of *tumu kir*. Yet, after the consecration in the Eucharist, the celebrant holds up the host and says: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Those

missionaries, who are attempting to Latinize people, do not wrestle with the obvious question: who inspired this ritual of *tumu kir*? Certainly it was in place before the missionaries arrived. It was not brought by slave traders. The Acholi have practiced this ritual, I would like to think, since God scattered this seed of the gospel amongst them. If that is true, however, it begs for cultural dialogue, which may be threatening for missionaries.

While Ethiopia and Uganda present their particular issues regarding *Latinization*, the most appalling example comes from Malidoma Patrice Somé in his 1994 book: *Of Water and the Spirit*. Born in West Africa in the early 1950s—Somé is indefinite about the year—he testifies that a French Jesuit missionary sequestered him at the age of four in order to

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Pope Paul VI,
Evangelii Nuntiandi, No. 40

train him as a priest. For the next 15 years Somé endured the harsh regimen of a seminary where his native language and tribal traditions were systematically suppressed. At age 20, he fled on foot for several days and nights before reaching his home village among the Dagara people of Upper Volta—now Burkina Faso. At this point, Somé could no longer speak his native tongue, his family hardly recognized him and the villagers regarded him with suspicion. To reconnect with his native culture, Somé underwent a month-long initiation, after relearning his native tongue.

In an interview with D. Patrick Miller at the time of the book’s release, Somé said, “the West is going to have to understand one thing: the importance of native spirituality in the life of Africans.” He continued, “Historically the customs and traditions of day-to-day life in Africa have been dismissed by Western cultural anthropologists as primitive, chaotic, pagan activities that should be replaced by Christianity, the only civilized religion,” and then, he added, “The West has long assumed that it should convert tribal cultures to literacy, which is to say an entirely different way of looking at the world, of living in the world.”

Somé, who holds a doctoral degree in political

science from Sorbonne University and another in literature from Brandeis University, is a speaker at men’s movement conferences in the US. He lives with his wife in Oakland, California.

The revitalization of evangelization in Africa will happen when the missionaries—lay and religious—gather in the evening around a fire in the middle of the compound outside the home of the elders. At this special time of the day, the grandparents pass on by word-of-mouth their knowledge and their traditions handed down from the ancestors. What is spoken at this time, is not only heard conscientiously, but is memorized and eventually interiorized. This evening gathering is comparable to the *Areopagus*, the lay and religious missionaries following the example of St. Paul must join this gathering, if they wish to hand on the message of the Gospel from our forbearers of the faith.

In conclusion, the question cannot be repeated too often: how evangelizers approach their ministry is always a relevant question. Imperial approaches do not make connections between the spirituality of the evangelizer, and that of the evangelized. As a result the people of God suffer.

... language reflects our deepest beliefs,...

Periodic Papers are published by USCMA

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