Learning What it Is to Be a Christian
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Résumé

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A number of recent scholars have argued for a more processual approach to the phenomena of conversion. Such an approach stresses the active roles of the convert in responding to a proselytizing agent. Geertz (1968), for example, made the important observation that Islam is neither an independent variable nor a monolithic entity. His point is that it is idiosyncratic in every sociocultural system in which it is found and therefore cannot be used as an explanatory model in itself. Rather Islam must be explained as part of a process of interaction which we can call Islamization. The particulars of Islamization may vary because of local sociocultural elements, but the ‘etic’ features used by all Muslims to distinguish themselves from non-Muslims are rather consistent and so allow comparisons to be made, which then allow us to separate sociosyncratic responses from more universal ones. Barkow (1970) offers a Nigerian example, the Hausa-Maguzawa relationship, that aptly illustrates the advantage of this approach.

Like Islam, Christianity has a well-developed ‘etic’ code of belief and behavior that in practice allows for great variation. Recent research (Sahay, 1968) has indicated some ways in which this process occurs. In any event, it is clear that the convert is not a passive recipient of a pre-packaged faith, as early acculturation theory tended to suggest. Rather, the convert chooses to identify himself as a Christian or a Muslim because of ‘emically’ perceived advantages. Conversion is, ‘emically’ at least, a very rational process. Whether the advantages in any particular case are real is a matter for further empirical research, as I have discussed at greater length elsewhere (‘Structural Factors...’, n.d.). In fact, many of the disadvantages that may accrue from conversion result just because conversion is a process and not an event; i.e., it takes place over a period of time and requires constant learning of ‘Christian’ behavior. A convert

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often discovrs after conversion that such behavior conflicts with internalized values or his society's norms.²

It is important to point out that Christianity is no more a monolithic entity than is Islam. It is also important to make clear that there is no 'typical' convert or 'typical' missionary approach, unless we are talking about stochastic relationships. Unfortunately, no one has yet supplied us with the data needed to produce these mathematical models. As a step toward gathering that data I would like to offer the following research approach and then to give an example of its application. An important research strategy is first to discover what kind of people are learning what kind of Christianity. I grant that this should be stating the obvious, but the literature is filled with examples that prove that this is not an obvious statement.³ Too often stereotypic views of missionaries replace solid empirical research. Therefore, solid analysis of the entire missionary situation, its ecological texture, is sorely needed.

Barkow (1970) has already indicated how an approach combining that of Le Vine and Barth can advance our understanding of cultural change. Such an approach emphasizes conversion as a process, in fact as a number of processes, rather than as an event. It has the further advantage of working out from the individual without sacrificing the 'etic' framework. Such an approach relies heavily on the work of Barkow (1970) and Barth (ed., 1970).

The northern area of Nigeria provides a laboratory rich in ethnic diversity, an area that provides adequate data to illustrate the approach I suggest. Barkow has clearly analyzed, for example, methods used by two subcultures of the Hausa to distinguish themselves from one another. The most minute differences are overplayed and large similarities are ignored in much the way Goffman (1959) predicted that groups attempting to preserve separate identities would do. Groups which, at one level are 'etically' similar, will, because of the differences in the environment, be 'emically' different. The desire to preserve these differences may greatly influence the responses made to similar ecological changes, and the presence of Christian missionaries in an area is an ecological change of great importance. Groups, then, that appear to outsiders to be mere 'variants' of one another are frequently to insiders 'foreign' people, simply 'not like us, at all'.

This is exactly the case in Yelwa Emirate, Nigeria, for the Dukawa and Gungawa. Harris (1930: 283-334), among others has suggested that these 'tribes' are sub-groups of one another, but Gunn and Conant (1960: 10) point out incisively that the 'traditional ability of the peoples of the Middle Niger region to adjust to one another within larger political units may constitute their chief significance for Nigeria as a whole'. If we dwell on the more sophisticated Barthian approach, we shall

understand better how ethnic groups operate rather than be bogged down in outmoded theories of biological transference of culture. As even Harris (1930) makes clear in his excellent detailed descriptive account of the Gungawa in Yauri (Yelwa), the Gungawa and Dukawa, whatever the truth of their common 'origins' may be, have in Bateson's terminology a different ethos.

The above point has been perhaps somewhat labored for I wish to show that the two groups I have chosen to discuss from the Yelwa area are indeed two distinct ethnic groups. That is important because part of my research strategy consists of studying the ways in which two different ethnic groups use ethnicity in exploiting different ecological niches in the same general area and how this conditions their response to two variants of missionary influence. Unfortunately, in the past the tendency has been to forget the importance of differences among groups in an area as small as Yelwa. A number of other considerations may have justified such an approach in the past, but this can no longer be the case if we wish to avoid the pitfalls of both the grossly macrocosmic approach of too much social science and the microcosmic approach of our own past that too often ignored interaction between groups in a fruitless search for the 'pure' structure unpolluted by 'culture-contact'. In the real world, as Barth (1970) and his disciples have so clearly shown, groups do interact and change because ethnic boundaries are permeable. It makes anthropological work complicated, but it also makes it much more interesting.

This paper presents a discussion concentrating on the advantages that conversion to Christianity might have, in their own eyes, for members of two particular ethnic groups. In so far as possible, the total context of the missionary contact is at least sketched. The differential response of two groups in the same area to two different missionary strategies is presented; viz., that of the Gungawa to a Baptist missionary approach and the Dukawa to a Dominican Catholic approach. To make the comparisons clearer only one aspect of the ethos of each group will be considered, i.e., values regarding women.4

The Yelwa Area

Although not all Dukawa and Gungawa live in the Yelma Emirate, there have been Dukawa and Gungawa there for at least two-hundred years (cf. Harris, 1930). The people I am comparing live in two villages that have been in the Yelwa area for at least two-hundred years and show little difference from Dukawa and Gungawa outside the Yelwa area,

4. A logical next step would be to take the same ethnic group and discuss the responses of its members to two different religions. Lack of space prevents this from being done here. Simon Ottenberg (1971: 231-260) has, however, done this for the Igbo. He found that the important variable operating was wealth-prestige.
at least as described in the works of Gunn and Conant (1960). Father Ceslaus Prazan, O. P., has done a great deal of ethnographic work among the Dukawa. He has assured me that there are no significant differences between the Dukawa I studied and those outside Yelwa (personal correspondence and a taped interview). In so far, then, as any segment of a larger group, the two groups compared here are typical of Dukawa and Gungawa settlements.

Both the Dukawa and Gungawa fled to Yelwa, long a haven for those forced to seek refuge. Both seem to have come from the Kontagora region to escape Fulani slave raids. If one believe the myths of origin, both are of the same ‘stock’ (cf. Harris, 1930: 291 and 321). Today, however, they are culturally distinct ethnic groups who use their alleged genealogical ties as a means of ordering their mutual relationships in the complex interethnic world that is Yelma. Whatever the facts of their common cultural origin, each group has become a distinct ethnic group by emphasizing different cultural traits and values, values that have a high ‘survival’ role in the complex Yelwa world. By first describing that world briefly and then focusing on one set of values, responses to two groups of missionaries are made more clear.

Yelwa is one of a number of emirates in what, under British rule, was Northern Nigeria. More specifically it was part of Sokoto Province. Today it is a small emirate in the Northwestern State of Nigeria. It has an area of 1,306 square miles and is located along the Niger River. Its total population is 72,000, or about 58 persons per square mile. Bin Yauri, population 10,000, is its largest city. Most of the inhabitants of Bin Yauri identify themselves as Hausa and look down on the totally non-Hausa rural inhabitants. Unlike other emirates, Yelwa has no rural Hausa farmers. This scorn for the rural people enables the inhabitants of Yelwa to verify to themselves their own Hausa identity. This verification is necessary in the face of the scorn shown to them by more sophisticated Hausa from Katsina or Sokoto whom they encounter on their many trading expeditions and who occasionally pass through Yelwa. Barkow (1970) has done an excellent job in describing the psycho-culture processes involved in maintaining and establishing self-identification in striving to achieve a ‘more perfect’ ethnic identity. In southern Zaria, Moslem Hausa (both rural and urban) and the pagan Hausa (the Maguzawa) established patterns of behavior that served as boundary markers. Those in the lower ranked groups, the rural Hausa and Maguzawa, borrowed behaviours from the urban Hausa. The rural Hausa, however, were torn by events, for they feared being identified with the pagan Maguzawa Hausa yet felt strong emotional pulls to Maguzawa way of life. The Maguzawa served for the rural Hausa as living proof of their Hausa identities, for they were all that a good Hausa was not. They were pagans. They were drunks. Their women worked

in the fields, etc. The Maguzawa played up to, and exaggerated the stereotypes hold of them by the Hausa.

The same process is at work in the Yelwa area even though the ethnographic details are different. The minority groups in Yelwa are not subgroups of the Hausa. They are separate ethnic groups. While in southern Zaria Barkow's three groups form part of continuum on a scale measuring 'Hausaness', at Yelwa the situation is one of ethnic pluralism. At Yelwa, the Hausa regard the pagan minority groups as inferior and emphasize their differences from them. Individuals may now and then pass as Hausa, but even after Islamic conversion it would be hard for groups to pass through the Hausa ethnic boundary in Yelwa.6

The majority of Yelwa's peoples are, therefore, politically 'minority' groups; i.e., they have less access to power than do the ruling Hausa-Fulani. The minority peoples live either in the bush, like the Dukawa, or on islands like many Gungawa. Decisions made in town are sent to the bush via representatives of the rulers. These representatives carry on all business in Hausa, the lingua franca of the area. In a number of ways, the Hausa-Fulani impress on minority peoples their inferior status vis-à-vis themselves. Since the Hausa, by definition are Muslims, the minority people tend to identify Islam, Hausaness and power as interchangeable entities. They do not, however, perceive Islam as a means to power for themselves, for Islam has long been the religion of their oppressors. The fact that the current emir is a wise and generous ruler means less to them than the fact that Muslims enslaved people and are still their tax-collectors.

Within this complex interplay of ethnic groups, the Dukawa and Gungawa must survive. Each group has chosen (in Barth's phraseology) to exploit a different ecological niche and has entered into symbiotic relationship with other groups. If Christianity has adaptive and exploitative potential it will be chosen to the degree to which it interacts with other elements of Dukawa and Gungawa life. The Dukawa, for example, have adapted to the area as horticulturalists who are also the best hunters and leather workers in the area. The primary work team for all these activities is male. More importantly, all the male members of the work team are tied together primarily through having done bride service together. They are tied together in a relationship commented by female links. Each man feels closest to those who have helped him gormu, bride service. Those who have formed gormu teams hunt together and farm together. Logically, then, women are the external signs of male solidarity in Dukawa society and divorce is never permitted. Adult-

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6. A full discussion of the reasons for this fact would take a separate article. In brief, the town-Hausa need other ethnic groups to exploit the many ecological niches in Yelwa. They fear that for them to do so would cost them their identification as true Hausa (Hausa gaba da bayya), an identification often endangered because of their alleged Kanuri and 'mixed' origins. To people in Katsina and Kano the inhabitants of Bin Yaura are bushmen, mulamin da'ji, or 'hicks'.

ery is rare and Dukawa informants considered it a crime that struck at the very fiber of Dukawa society. Anything, therefore, that might interfere with the organization of male work teams would be resisted by Dukawa, for it is through these work teams that the Dukawa defines himself vis-à-vis other ethnic groups. For the Dukawa male gormu service, a seven to eight year project functions as a rite of passage. It is never performed alone, but always with the assistance of one’s age mates. Young work teams travel from place to place working on gardens in widely scattered parts of ‘Dukawaland’. Such teams, obviously, perform many functions, not the least of which is tying the acephalous Dukawa together by affirming their ideals openly and facilitating communication and contact among the small compounds.

The Dominicans threaten the Dukawa ethos in a number of ways not at first parenly obvious. Certainly the Dominicans cannot help but admire the chastity of Dukawa women. They do realize the vital importance of the institution of gormu in cementing Dukawa ties. They have, however, alienated the Dukawa by insisting that potential converts adhere to the Catholic definition of marriage. By that, they mean that no sexual intercourse is permissible before the performance of the exchange of vows. While the missionaries have ingeniously patterned the Catholic ritual after the Dukawa ritual, they have failed to realize the importance of the Dukawa distinction between ‘having a wife’ and ‘being married’. Any young man doing gormu ‘has’ a wife. He is not ‘married’ however, until the completion of his bride service. In fact, he will not complete his bride service until he is sure that his marriage is sexually satisfying, a fair precaution in a society that strongly prohibits adultery. Usually, he also demands proof of his wife’s fertility before becoming fully married, another reasonable precaution in a society with a low incidence of polygyny. To tamper with the institution of the gormu in any way threatens to change it significantly.

While the incidence of polygyny is low, it does exist and its most frequent type is leviratic. The levirate, as anthropologists have stressed for some time now, serves a number of functions. It maintains alliances; it provides for widows and their children; it serves various religious purposes, etc. The Dukawa, like other people, consider it a secondary form of marriage; i.e., no one is expected to have only a wife obtained through the levirate. But Christianity forces one to have but a single wife. The convert therefore, who has a wife, would have to refuse to honor his solemn obligation should the levirate situation present itself. The convert doing gormu and facing the necessity of the levirate would

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7. A full discussion of gormu can be found in the soon to be published manuscript on the Dukawa by Father Ceslaus Prazan, O.P. I have treated it at some length in ‘Structural Factors’ (1972).
8. Unfortunately, I do not have exact statistics on this point. I have only an ethnographer’s impression. I tried to find some exact number but was unable to do so. I returned to the field from May-September, 1972. There were 50 Christians at Shabanda, about 50 Muslims, and 150 Traditionalists.
have to withdraw from Dukawa society since he would be forced to cancel his bride service contract lest he have two wives.

So long as the Catholic emphasis is on individual converts and demonstrable knowledge of the faith, the individual will learn, often after conversion, that he is somehow 'less' a member of his society than he was previously. If the advantages in remaining a convert are high enough, enough other members of one's society may become converts to effect changes in Christianity that will make the convert more comfortable. A wiser missionary approach among the Dukawa would be to emulate that used among the Gungawa.

Whatever their 'ancestry' the Gungawa of the peninsula of Shabanda are today one people with a widely uniform culture, as the following quotation from Harris makes clear.

'One would have expected to find much greater differences seeing that off-shoots of several differing tribes — Shange, Kambari and Bussa — are to be found in the islands having been driven there during the raids from Kontagora in the 19th century. The position appears to be that whatever a man's tribe may have been, once he has joined the island community his children become islanders both in name and custom.' (Harris, 1930: 291.)

What Harris is describing, is of course the cultural basis of 'descent' and the formation of new ethnic groups to adapt to new environments. The Gungawa are different in significant ways from any of the other ethnic groups from whom they drew their members. They are different because they must retain their distinct ethnic identity to exploit their particular niche in the wider milieu. While the Gungawa are horticulturists, their main importance to non-Gungawa is found in their fishing activities. The Gungawa are remarkable for their 'fearlessness of the Niger' and supply a valuable source of needed protein to members of other ethnic groups. While male work teams are the basis for the work organization, unlike the Dukawa situation women and their chastity do not form the valuable tie linking men together. The Gungawa form their male work teams on a patrilineal-patrilocal basis, with a chain of authority highly articulated on a kinship basis from the most minor of officials to representatives to the Hausa emir.

The chastity or lack of it of Gungawa women only becomes important if a question of paternity should arise. No Gungawa family is willing to lose any potential members. A woman who leaves one of its members while pregnant or who appears pregnant shortly thereafter is a cause of concern, for there is danger that the child will be lost to the kinship group of the man she left. By prohibiting divorce and proclaiming the sanctity of the family, Christianity strengthens Gungawa social organization. It does so by reinforcing its underlying principles. The need for families to remain together was recognized by the first Baptist missionaries to the area in the late 1940's.

The approach used was that of converting entire families or large sections thereof. Since the Gungawa do not have either the gormu or
the levirate and since polygyny is relatively rare, there was little to interfere with the Baptist stress on monogamy. Further, the business ethic of the Gungawa found much to gain from the United Mission Society. From the first, Gungawa preached the faith to other Gungawa. Indigenization was thus facilitated since one did not have the barrier of European presentation. Unlike the Dominicans, outside ethnic groups were not brought in to preach as catechists. The Gungawa ran their own church on the island of Shabanda. They have translated the Bible into Gunganci after first creating a written language. The practical advantages of a written language for a trading people became readily apparent. The advantages of having some members practice the old faith and others practice Christianity seem readily apparent also. While Christianity continues to grow in Shabanda (in 1970 about 50% of its 1,000 people were Baptists) a sizeable number of people remain traditionalists in religion. Every family has Baptist and traditionalist members who live in perfect harmony with one another.

Shabanda is renowned in the Yelwa area for its rapid acceptance of modern methods. Its people travel the seven and a half water miles to the Dominican hospital for preventive checkups while other ethnic groups will not travel there from down the road for serious illness. People from Shabanda send large numbers of students to institutions of higher learning. For example, ten young men were in universities and teacher training schools in 1970. No other minority group in Yelwa had even one in an institution of higher learning. The elementary school on Shabanda is a major reason for the success of its young people. As good Baptists the Gungawa on Shabanda stress reading the Bible. That literacy has other obvious advantages does not, of course, hinder the popularity of education.

The Baptist faith first gained a foothold in Shabanda by reinforcing family ties. It did so in a way compatible with Gungawa society. That it has other advantages for the inhabitants of Shabanda became rather evident as time has passed. The converts learned of these advantages after conversion. But their successes served as positive feedback to other Gungawa who in about twenty years have made the island one of the major centers of Christianity in Northern Nigeria.

The Dominicans by stressing individual commitment and by cutting converts off from ties formed by the gormu complex have tended to isolate their converts from their ethnic groups. It is granted that the Dominicans and Baptists faced different problems, but the Dominicans have failed to set up an indigenous clergy and have demanded a high initial knowledge of Christianity from Dukawa converts. As negative

9. They do have a four-day bride service that a man and his young male-kin perform immediately after his first marriage. But the lengthy service of the Dukawa is foreign to them. Gungawa bride service stresses the solidarity of the patrilineage and the acceptance by one's patrilineage of one's spouse. The emotional tie of the Dukawa is missing in Gungawa service.
feedback is sent to the Dukawa system by converts, one can predict a low conversion rate, at least so long as the gormu complex remains adaptive for Dukawa social organization.

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