Church and Community: Church Of God among the Idakho of Kakamega County Kenya

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Abstract: This study seeks to examine how the Idakho interacted with Christian values by focusing on Church of God Mission. The end product of the rapid acceptance of Christianity among the Idakho was broader social and economic transformation. Education as taught by missionaries of Church of God became an avenue for accumulation of wealth, through employment as teachers and government employees as well as through involvement in commercial activities. The specific objective of the study is to analyze the role of Church of God mission in Idakho societal transformation. The initiatives and the struggles of the Idakho for betterment of their educational status are given special attention. Methodology for this study involved data collection from secondary sources and mostly primary data derived from archival and field research. The study concludes that the difficult financial situation that had faced Church of God missionary board hindered the expansion of the church in Idakho. Therefore the survival of the Church of God depended on the influence of the teacher-evangelist and the educated elite. Moreover, the early success of education and other programs like health and agriculture led to the development of the educated elite who became agents of transformation.

Key words: Church of God, Christianity, Education, Idakho

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Church of God (COG) stations in Kenya was a slow process. The early missionaries endured hardships such as uncertain safety as strangers in a foreign land, personal tragedies and diseases. The first two decades of the COG’s work were thus primarily a pioneer homesteading operation. By the 1920s, however, the COG had established vibrant and growing Churches among the Luyia. Idakho was one of the areas in Kenya that had earlier contact with the COG, thus, this study affords an opportunity to examine the Church’s role in transforming the area of contrasting historical circumstances, social and physical environments. This study argues that it was the reluctance and the presence of other mission particularly the Catholic Mission that hindered COG missionaries to think of establishing a station in Idakho. Despite the reluctance by majority of the Idakho to embrace the COG, nevertheless the church went ahead and established a station at Bushiangala in 1919 in the area. It was from this station that COG missionaries hoped to transform Idakho culture so as to convert them to Christianity. Christianity would involve not only an acceptance of the gospel, but also the adoption of western culture. The converts were thus expected to abandon their traditional ways of life, and adapt Christian values. It was COG education that would have a long lasting impact on the Idakho. The presupposition underlying this view was that, if the Idakho were trained on the above attributes, they would find it easier to accept the gospel. For the COG missionaries, education was a deliberate, systematic and sustained effort to transmit new ideas which would ultimately lead to the transformation of the Idakho society. It was thus education that produced the pioneer teacher-evangelist, who in turn worked hard to transform the society. The efforts of the pioneer teacher-evangelists in the propagation of the Christianity values that is also noteworthy. These pioneer Christians established a Christian village at Bushiangala, which they used not only to house the increasing number of converts, but also as a centre of new innovations, particularly the development of education. Consequently, the effects of the efforts of teacher-evangelists and the colonial demands like wage labour requirements all meant that an increasingly minority among the Idakho began to enroll in schools. Idakho thus increasingly began to view missionary education as a method of adapting to the new colonial situation. It was through this elite class, together with the pioneer teacher-evangelists, who became agents of the transforming of Idakho. Specifically, this paper examines the following three issues: the establishment of COG Mission in Idakho, the reactions of the Idakho towards the COG and lastly the initial impact of the COG in Idakho and these constitute the theme of this study.

THE STUDY AREA

The Idakho are a Luyia sub-ethnic group that resides in Kakamega South district within Kakamega County, Kenya. The Idakho occupy the area between the Maragoli and Isukha. According to the 2009 Kenya population and housing census, the population of the district was 104,699. The major economic activity is small scale farming. Maize, beans, sweet potatoes, finger millet, cassava, bananas, fruits and vegetables are mainly grown as food crops, while livestock rearing is practiced by a few individuals in the district. The area has poor physical infrastructure due to heavy rainfall, poor maintenance and low funding.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to establish the impact of the COG among Idakho.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher was guided by the following specific objectives:
1. To examine the establishment of COG Mission in Kenya and particularly in Idakho,
2. To explore the responses of the Idakho to Christianity.
JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

From the existing literature, the Idakho have not constituted a substantial subject of the study on the impact of the COG in the area, none illustrates the important role played by the pioneer converts of COG in the transformation of the area. For example Makhoa’s study on the COG in Kenya, as an innovator and agency of change concentrated on the historical development and evangelism at Kima in Bunyore with very little on Idakho yet the area was one of the region that had earlier contact with the COG missionaries in Kenya. The writing of this history therefore arose from two reasons:

1. To find out the contribution of COG in Idakho, only to find out an alarming dearth of written records.
2. Due to the rapid passing of the first generation believers who had the primary information leaving those unfamiliar with earlier years of the church. Hence there arose a need to capture available information from those who were still alive.

The researcher picked on the Idakho, one sub-ethnic group out of sixteen sub-ethnic groups of the Luyia; to enable an understanding of a profound analysis of a concrete case of social change. This study, therefore, was significant as it attempted to contribute to our knowledge of understanding the culture of Idakho before they interacted with Christian values. The study also attempted to broaden our understanding of Idakho reaction to the COG when it was established in the area. Lastly, the study on its part addressed the impact of the COG in Idakho and the active role that the Idakho pioneer converts of the COG played in the history and development of the church in the area. The issues discussed therefore, help in making a critical judgement on the impact of the COG among the Idakho.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a historical study, which utilized the historical methods of analysis to investigate and interpret past events in order to understand the present. As a result, much of the analysis revolves around primary sources. The primary sources utilized were oral information gathered from the field as well as archival sources, which were accessed at Kenya National Archives (KNA) in Nairobi. The library research was also utilized and included a review of both electronic and non-electronic materials. For the purpose of the study on the impact of COG in Idakho, the interview method was the most appropriate. In this method there is a choice of doing “narrative” interviews that gives the interviewees maximum room for telling their personal story or to do “semi-structured” interview that all follow a set of questions in more or less the same order. The narrative approach was chosen for the first question which was intended to learn something of the life history of the interviewee. The questions following after that were then asked within the framework of a semi-structured interview. During field work, purposive sampling technique and snowball technique were used. A COG pastor was of much assistance, through her connections in Idakho was personally known to many of the church leaders. She was able to advice on who to visit and where to find the desired interviewees. Most of the interviews were done in Idakho language, which the researcher was able to speak and understand to a passable extent. For the purpose of overcoming the limitation of geography of the region, the service of a guide was engaged. The criteria for the above mentioned companion having the exceptional knowledge of the area. The interviews were all recorded on voice recorder. Some limitations were encountered during oral interviews. For instance, there were distortions and variations of information on personal recollections, posing many of the problems that arose while dealing with more formal and oral interview. The other limitation encountered while collecting data from oral evidence was that the interviewees were not able to provide a specific date when an event occurred. These was eventually settled by recourse to corroborative evidence from archival sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Arrival of the Church of God in Idakho:

In the early 1900s the Africa Compound Interior Mission (ACIM) having established itself in South Africa, began seeking expansion opportunities into East Africa. A missionary, Baker11, was sent from South Africa to explore mission opportunities in East Africa. His expedition led him to Bunyore, at Vihiga County, Kenya, where he appropriated a large parcel of land where the missionaries were to set up a church.12 Baker returned to South Africa and another missionary, Robert Wilson together with his wife, were sent to begin the work in the area.13 Consequently, in 1905, Robert Wilson together with his wife and their two sons and some Ugandan porters went to Bunyore. Upon their arrival, the chief of the (Nyore), Otieno Ndale, received Wilson warmly and after consultation with the elders, identified the specific location for the land, locally known as (esikomooli) a fig tree for the establishment of the mission post. This location later came to be known as “Kima”. In addition, Robert Wilson was moved by the Bunyore’s high elevation and especially dense population.15 Sizeable pieces of land, owned by different people in Bunyore were identified and allocated to the missionaries. The Wilson’s began working immediately. As soon as they had pitched a tent, they started looking for building materials with which to put up a church to evangelise the surrounding community (Kisa Kakamega (Idakho and Isukha) and Butsotso). They offered salt to the Bunyore in exchange for grass for thatching the house. The local men under chief’s direction donated trees and offered labour for the construction of the wall and the roof structures while the women provided labour to mud the walls and smear the floor. Thus, the Wilson missionary outreach among the people of Bunyore had began in earnest.16 A cathedral was put up at “Kima” to serve Bunyore Kisa Kakamega (Idakho and Isukha) and Butsotso (BKKB) and from there, it initiated the spread to the neighbouring communities.

Whereas, the work of the mission flourished in the area of BKKB, Baker realised that ACIM was busy ministering
among the miners in Johannesburg and did not have sufficient funds at its disposal to meet the additional costs for impending growth and expansion of the Kenya based ministries. Baker, therefore, considered the transfer of ACIM to someone else with the appropriate doctrinal, adequate financial resources and organisational network, to run the church in East Africa. Consequently, the ACIM was compelled to cede its East Africa mission to the auspices of United States of America (USA) based COG, headquarter at Anderson in the State of Indiana. Subsequently, in 1926, the entire church of ACIM was transferred to the COG Missionary Board in America. From 1926 the Church continued to be headed by the white missionary Board of the COG until 1972 when leadership responsibilities and properties were transferred to the indigenous General Assembly of the COG in East Africa (Kenya). 

The mission established its first station in Idakho, in 1919. Converts of the COG in Idakho had found “Kima” to be far, and therefore demanded the establishment of a Church in Idakho. Land was, therefore, identified at Bushiangala for the establishment of the church that served (Abakakamega) (Idakho and Isukha) region (Oral Interview, Silas Ingonga 19/09/2012). Controversy however surrounds the question of the establishment of COG in Idakho. According to Makokha, the Church reached the area through a convert Joshua Amunga from Kisa (a neighbouring community of the Idakho), who went to Bushiangala in 1919 to spread Christianity in the area. While according to informants they pointed out that it was through Alfaso Makhosi, Timothy Lihala, Thomas Etemere, Harun Shimenga, Saul Aluvala, Ruben Kizikwa, Stephan Maleche, Norman Ingonga and Nelson Luseso Shiramba, converts of COG, who pioneered the establishment of the church in the area (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumnwamu Muyeka, 19/09/2016). These pioneers, led by Alfaso Makhosi and Thomas Etemere, went to Henry Kramer to allow them to establish their own church in their area. Kramer was impressed with their proposal and he approved the establishment of the church in Idakho (Oral Interview, Elkana Muhalia, 20/09/2012). From the oral interview, it is probable that this contact with the early converts of Idakho attending the services at “Kima”, is what facilitated the establishment of the church in the area because of the long distance they travelled to attend the church service at “Kima”.

There are, however, several accounts for why Bushiangala was chosen for COG. First, it was because of availability of land about 33 acres that was initially a communal land for holding public meeting (baraza). Secondly, Bushiangala being located near “Kima”, made communication and management of the Church easier. Further, no missionaries had established themselves at Bushiangala and this made it conducive for the mission activities. Lastly, the people of Bushiangala had responded positively to the establishment of the COG (Oral Interview, Silas Ingonga, 19/09/2012). However, converting the locals was not without considerable obstacles. This is best illustrated by Makokha in his book when he wrote:

“The Friends Church headquartered at Kaimosi never wanted the church at Kima to infiltrate Idakho. The local chief Shivachi, (a Quaker but later converted to Catholicism) maintained that Kima –based church was meant to evangelise in Bunyore; that if it penetrated his area, it would cause his people to come under paramount chief Mumia who at the time had administrative authority over the Wanga, Bunyore, Kisa, Butsotso and Marama.”

One of the informant also pointed out that:

When the COG mission was established at Bushiangala, chief Shivachi sent his assistant chief, Mukoto Shiamwama, with his (Askaris) (local police attached to the chief) to beat up the believers at Bushiangala, who identified with the Kima based church and even set their houses on fire. (Oral Interview, Philip Nabwangu, 17/09/2012).

Some of the believers were arrested and confined at the chief’s camp. Church members went to Kakamega to report the matter to the District Commissioner (DC) who instantly sacked Mukoto for his action. He also directed that the Church adherents at Bushiangala were to freely congregate for worship under a tree for four years before putting up a permanent church. Later, Henry Kramer, from “Kima” visited the believers to mark out the plan for the church to be constructed. Then the DC on his own accord sent some prisoners from Kakamega to help the believers at Bushiangala in their construction work (Oral Interview, Elkana Muhalia, 20/09/2012).

Bushiangala Station:

COG Mission activity at Bushiangala in Idakho was, therefore, a poor stepchild to the parent post at “Kima”, and it operated for a while without resident missionaries. The steady loss of the establishment of the COG in Bushiangala area was compounded by the establishment of a Catholic Church at Eregi in 1913, having established itself in Idakho area. Colonial administrators too complained about recurrent problems that had to be moderated between antagonist missions. This was embarrassing to missionaries and administrators alike, since colonialists sought to present to Africans with the illusion that Europeans formed a solid front towards the indigenous population. It was such situations that compelled the colonial administration to establish spheres of influence, granting each denomination exclusive rights to certain regions. In 1913, a government directive stated that “no two mission stations could be established at a distance of less than 10 miles (16 kilometres) from one another”, though already established mission stations were exempted from the rule. This was to prevent competition for converts and duplication of efforts and expenditures.

With the demarcation of spheres of influence among the Protestants, conflict among COG and the Catholic quickly emerged. COG had been established in the eastern part of Idakho, while the Roman Catholic Church considered themselves free to establish mission stations anywhere depending on the availability of missionary personnel. This friction persisted and was a major factor in limiting the influence of the COG in Idakho area. All the missionaries concerned apparently had the goal of converting the “heathen and saving the Soul”.

The Catholics compared to
COG “made few demands from their converts” and tended to be more tolerant to the Idakho culture. Consequently, the Catholics made serious inroads into the COG efforts to win converts. Catholic converts were permitted to retain traditional practices such as dancing, smoking and beer drinking while the COG sternly insisted that their converts had to stop such practices. Further, the question as to whether members of polygamous families could be accepted as converts brought a lot of controversies among the Idakho. The hard stance that was taken by the COG towards the issue of polygamy was the source of grief and annoyance among the Idakho. It was not only the polygamous men that were excluded from baptism, but also the second and subsequent wives, and even their children. This factor militated against the total acceptance of COG among the Idakho, since polygamy was essentially an integral part of their culture (Oral Interview, Elkana Muhalia, 20/09/2012). However, the real success of COG mission effort in Idakho largely depended on Idakho pioneer converts such as Thomas Etemere, Alfaso Makhosi, Timothy Lihala and Saul Aluvala who became evangelists among their people and propagated the gospel from Bushiangala station to other parts of Idakho. In-fact, these pioneers became the first teacher-evangelists among the Idakho and were credited for establishing preaching centres at Shikunga, Imusali, Ishikumu and Burenda 29 (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumbwamu Muyeka, 19/09/2012). It was therefore at Bushiangala station that provided the nuclei of COG mission work and converts in Idakho area.

Early Converts Of COG:

In order to be truly converted, COG missionaries demanded that the Idakho reject those cultural practices that were deemed to be opposing Christian tenets. These included rejection of the practice of the ancestral propitiation, prohibition of traditional dancing, drinking alcohol, and polygamy, seeking out the assistance of diviners or traditional healers among others. 30 The pioneer missionaries at “Kima”, therefore, argued that if African leadership was to be realised, an effective educational programme needed to be developed along with direct evangelization. From its inception, missionaries put an effort to evangelize the people of Idakho, a commitment to provide education so as to ensure a lasting response to the gospel. The first objective of the missionaries of the COG was to teach the Africans to read the bible, in Swahili. The term “catechetical school” was often used to designate these early literacy classes, where Arithmetic, reading, writing and religion (3RS) were taught as inter-related subjects. The Idakho had acknowledged the importance of western education provided by missionaries groups and colonial government. Further, the reputation the COG missionaries had on the neighbouring communities in Bunyore and Kisa during the early periods, attracted many to learn how to read and write, and to be able to teach with conviction, as they saw the missionaries doing in Bunyore (Oral Interview, Silas Ingonga, 19/09/2012). Others came seeking employment, having learned of wage labour opportunities, such as working on the establishment of the mission station. They were also eager for money with which to pay taxes (Oral Interview, Peter Makhotso, 18/09/2012).

The Christian teachings of the COG that the converts were taught, however, remained somewhat of a mystery to the converts. After life on earth, a person had to take, two roads; “one leading to heaven and the other to a great darkness, where people wait for a fiery judgment” (Oral Interview, Eda Okang’a, 19/09/2012). To become a convert and to go through literacy and catechism was a form of training. The literacy and catechism classes thus involved living their homeland and going to stay at the village school at Bushiangala station to avoid mixing with other members who were not members of the COG. Emphasis was placed on memorizing biblical verses. Hymns were learned along with other practices of Christian worship (Oral Interview, Elkana Muhalia, 20/09/2012). Considerable emphasis was placed on the life one had to conform to in order to be counted among the true believers. A complete break from the past “pagan” practices was required, and the specifics of what this entailed were made very clear to the pupils. 31 Teaching of Christian marriage and family was emphasized as was instruction on the significance of Christian baptism. Finally, the importance of sacrifice in giving of one’s efforts as well as one’s produce for the advancement of the church was stressed. Prospective converts were taught that there was no earthly pay that could sufficiently compensate them for the work they were being trained to perform, but that God would richly reward them in heaven for their efforts. Upon successful completion of training, pupils were baptized at “Kima” (in a ceremony that eventually became a large annual event), after which they became teacher-evangelists (Oral Interview, Meshack Anjioni, 17/09/2012).

At the mission station, any breach of the moral code was quickly dealt with. Culprits would be brought before the missionaries and the elders of the church if accused of smoking, drinking, stealing, lying or adultery they were chased from the church. A guilty person who confessed, could remain in the community but were prohibited from the Holy Communion for several months. If they didn’t repent, they were immediately evicted from the station. However, the rate of conversion among the Idakho was low despite the efforts of preaching and concerted attempts at conversion by the missionaries. Consequently, though a few of Idakho including Zakaria Shiholo, Joshua Imbai, Agumba Ikakasi, Daudi Luteya, Makumba Likhasashe Jeremiah Manuni, and Musungu Andambi were put on probation status of those who were yet to be baptized they resisted attempts by the missionaries to change their lives and the rate of conversion subsequently remained low (Oral Interview, Noel Nabwangu, Meshack Anjioni, Gladis Thomas Shihemi & Silas Ingonga).

But why did the COG mission in Idakho experience such delayed success? Several factors can explain the delayed success. The central hindrance was the financial constraints that the mission faced since the establishment of the COG in the area. As noted, COG mission had its background from ACIM having established itself in South Africa. Due to lack of finances, the church could not afford to expand its activities in East Africa, thus, the management of East Africa was transferred to COG Mission Board in
USA in 1926. The salaries of evangelists, the cost of building the churches and accommodation for evangelists were supposed to be met by COG management. Further, the chronic financial problems were reflected at the level of staffing and logistics; the church depended on COG board in Anderson for churches and other necessities like financing medical care and education. Lack of finances, therefore, forced Bushiangala to hold their services under a tree for a number of years before they built their own church (Oral Interview, Gladis Thomas Shihemi, 17/09/2012).

Secondly, when the COG began its work in Idakho in 1919, the staff of missionaries consisted of African evangelists without a white missionary. The presence of the COG depended on fund donations by the Idakho. The number of evangelists employed were four between 1925 and 1929, and a fifth one in 1932 was directly linked to funds available (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumwamu Muyeka, 19/09/2012). Purchases such as benches depended on donations from members and fund raising. The shortage of staff meant that a few people had to cover a great distance and above all, there was the problem of alternatives offered by the Catholics, which created the problem of continuity for COG converts (Oral Interview, Silas Ingonga, 19/09/2012). Evidence of COG missionary intolerance of Idakho practice of polygamy, alcohol drinking and arrogance significantly influenced the attitude of many Idakho. One informant complained that COG evangelists were quick to attack and condemn “wrong doers”. He noted that evangelist needed to respect people more. What the COG neglected was to take into consideration the significance the Idakho attached to their cultural practices as well as the positive role that alcohol drinking and dances played in their lives (Oral Interview, Peter Makhotso, 18/09/2012). While there were many Idakho who wanted to join the church, they did not want to abandon traditional of their customs. Certainly, many Idakho abandoned COG because of this problem. In addition, the influence of Chief Shivachi, who thought that if the COG penetrated into Idakho it would cause his people to come under Paramount Chief Mumia who at the time had administrative authority over Wanga, Bunyore, Kisa, Butsotsoto and Marama, played a significant role to undermine the spread of the COG into Idakho.32

Lastly, the geographical factors combined with population density explain the reason for the delayed success of COG in Idakho. The occupation of the COG in Bunyore meant that the church was quite moved by Bunyore dense population unlike Idakho which was sparsely populated.33 Statistics indicated that Bunyore had a population of 29,612, while Idakho had a population of 14,149.34 Therefore, the occupation of the post at Bunyore meant that the COG now had a foothold among the densely populated Bunyore people. This qualified the COG to take the lead in setting pace in Bunyore unlike in Idakho. Bunyore was near Kisumu, (a railway terminus) and for the steam ship services with Uganda and all regions bordering Lake Victoria”. This proximity to Kisumu enabled the Bunyore to easily engage in trade. For example, the Bunyore took their surplus commodities to buyers in Kisumu, where they obtained higher profits than Idakho. The Bunyore were thus exposed to colonial economy, earlier than Idakho, to the pressures undermining traditional clan society. Thus, the COG missionaries considered the Bunyore as the most eager group for new learning unlike the Idakho (Oral Interview, John Beti, 20/09/2012).

Western Education:

Literacy introduced the Idakho converts to a new “world” and a different sense of self. Literacy meant a paying job, better social status and authority over those who could not write. The COG missionaries felt that converts needed to be literate in order to be able “to read the bible and to serve as teacher-evangelists”. Pupils were also engaged in a variety of training, which gave them manual skills. Such training included brick-making, building modern and improved houses, hygiene and improved crop production (Oral Interview Meshack Anjioni, 17/09/2012). It was through such industrial training that the COG missionaries intended to introduce more than just the Bible to the Idakho. The COG missionaries were chiefly concerned with reaching out to the youth, although they always consented to educate everyone who showed an interest in learning. The emphasis on the youth was due to the belief that young people were less entrenched in traditional beliefs and activities and, therefore, were more open to new ideas. The COG missionaries, despite resistance against them by the conservative Idakho elders, worked in collaboration with colonial administration to get parents enrol their children in schools. Accordingly, the early converts of the COG saw education as an important step towards acquiring a better paying job. This was attested to by the fact that the children of COG evangelists joined schools that were not only established by the COG Mission but by other missions, some of which were located outside Idakho area (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumwamu Muyeka, 19/09/2012).

As the advantages of western education became apparent, an increasing number of the Idakho began to demand for more access to educational opportunities. Education was regarded as means of social mobility.35 Several reasons can explain this increased demand. The first was the experience that Africans had acquired from the First World War. The war had shown that Africans could only compete effectively in the colonial situation if they acquired western education, leading to an increasing number of Idakho who desired to share in the white man’s civilization (Oral Interview, Enoek Shivachi, 12/11/2012). The demand for western education was further crystallized by the introduction of the special labour circular which made Africans, particularly Christian converts, to demand an education that was functional, which could equip them with training such as teaching, clerical work; jobs that were paying and prestigious according to the village standard rather than doing manual labour on European farms (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumwamu Muyeka, 19/09/2012). In the early 1920s, for instance, clerks could earn as high as Shs. 17/- per month while farm labourers were earning only Shs. 3/- per month.36 Since education provided a most important avenue in the acquisition of better paying jobs, the Idakho therefore increasingly joined mission schools. At the end of
World War I, there had emerged a growing hostility to the denominational control of education and a frustration that missionaries had done little to develop education. Educated elite began to perceive that manual training and agricultural education could only lead to manual employment, and hence subordinate and low paying positions in the emerging colonial order. The income of the elite then meant that they were financially able to send their children to superior schools, where they received the highest education then available to Africans. Young men in Idakho thus wanted to join schools not only to know how to read, write and do arithmetic, but also to get well-paying employment. Consequently, a growing number of converts of the COG were going outside COG institutions to obtain more advanced education since education had become an important tool for economic betterment. More parents, therefore, began to send their children to schools in the hope that they would benefit from expanding colonial opportunities (Oral Interview, Edward Okang’ a, 19/09/2012).

The COG missionaries also made a major contribution to western education in Idakho by insisting that boys and girls should have equal access to education. According to the Idakho culture, women and children were considered as “objects and not subjects.” For instance, most of the Idakho traditions stated that “women and children shall be given care and protection.” Consequently, when the male head was not at home, his wife would say “there is no one here except me and the children (Oral Interview, Philip Nabwangu, 17/09/2012).” This traditional view is what was opposed by the COG missionaries. When they instituted education for women. Accordingly, women were now supposed to be given privileges which they were previously denied for example, the right to eat chicken and eggs. COG thus, encouraged girls to go to schools where reading and writing, elementary arithmetic, cooking, knitting, laundry and child-care were taught. However, changing the community’s perception towards girl child education was not that easy. This was largely due to the fear that educated women might “question the privilege of elders to select husbands for them (Oral Interview, Enock Shivachi, 12/11/2012).” Initially, women seeking education were those who had convinced their fathers that education was necessary for a girl child or who had run away from home in order to pursue education at missionary centre. But after the 1930s, fathers who had converted to Christianity and received COG training began to push for the education of their daughters and sent them not only to Bushiangala school, but also at Bunyore girls at Kima and Butere Girl school (Oral Interview, Elkanah Mulahia, 20/09/2012).

In the school, therefore, the most pressing problem was availability of teachers. Due to shortage of teachers, the most promising pupil served as a monitor cum-teacher, for the beginners. Another problem that confronted the pioneer school of COG at Idakho was learning materials. Lessons focussed primarily on reading and writing skills, although during the mid 1930s, village schools also imparted agricultural knowledge. Few books and supplies were available in the classroom. This forced students to go to “Kima” to access textbooks. Lessons were run with the aid of charts and pencils being used by pupils for writing. The bible was used for reading. The classes were also rounded off by hymns singing and praying (Oral Interview, Philip Nabwangu, 17/09/2012). The third problem, perhaps the most serious one was that the COG mission saw literacy classes as an instrument of conversion. This meant, of course, that if conversion generally was failing, such a school was also likely to suffer. Similarly at Bushiangala station, the pupils attended day and night classes where they were taught to read and write and thereafter, the pupils were baptised. Pupils were expected to not only accept conversion but had also to abstain from alcohol (Oral Interview, Edward Okang’a, 19/09/2012). Yet interest in literacy appears to have been one of the principal factors that attracted the Idakho to the church and not the other way round. Missionaries without exception exploited this opportunity and required all their pupils to attend prayer meetings and church services. They treated schooling as an inherently Christian affair.

But despite these teething problems, the expansion of the COG can be attributed to several factors; the influence of evangelist-teachers, the influence of educated elite and the influence from the neighbouring communities such as the Bunyore, Kisa and Butsotso. Early converts of the COG in Idakho took an active interest in the social welfare of their workers and provided classrooms, desks, chalk and chalkboards from their own funds. Although the COG at “Kima” played a role in financing education, it was slowly diminishing as the Idakho were now being employed as teaching staff. Literacy was a source of power and influence in Idakho. At best, a literate person stood a chance of obtaining white collar jobs, or clerical and other better paying jobs within the colonial system. Despite poor educational standard in the COG schools, the mission laid the foundation for future educational development in the area. And largely, due to their efforts, education transformed Idakho people.

Initial Societal Transformation:

For this study the reason why the Idakho converted to COG rests in its relation to the intersection between religious conversion and economic transformation. The first and most frequently mentioned explanation for conversion is that it allowed people to escape economic deprivation at personal and societal levels. Converts joined the mission in search of wage labour. Missionaries offered employment opportunities at their station and this prompted some of the pioneer converts to become Christians so as to continue earning a wage and living at the mission stations as cooks, teachers or construction workers (Oral Interview, Joseph Lumwanu Muyeka, 19/09/2012). Missionaries also used economic enticement such as food and clothing to win converts. These items made the converts stand apart from the rest in the community and thus became an envied class. For instance, the administrative report of 1918 noted that, “The natives as a whole were anxious to be taught and a marked advance in civilization is noticeable among mission pupils. Clothes were becoming the rule rather than the exception; this was partly due to mission influence.”37 Since conversion was a pre-condition for receiving clothing and
education, a number of the Idakho initially began to see the economic advantages that accrued from the new religion. Moreover, through education, early converts became teacher-evangelists. Teacher evangelists were “generally more informed than the average locals. They were better clothed and more polite”. Carpenters and masonries also enjoyed considerable higher salaries and they were able to write and read. Consequently, the early converts became a wage-earning class and an incipient elite, with money to buy European commodities. Consequently, these early Idakho pioneer Christians used Christianity to demonstrate the role of conversion as a means towards social betterment and advancement.

Marginalized members of the society e.g. witches, women escaping from forced marriage converted to COG with the aim of gaining a new identity. To these people, therefore, conversion constituted a therapeutic act of self-aggrandizement. Where an individual with a strong drive to affirm himself or herself could not achieve adequate gratification of that drive utilizing traditional socio-cultural means, conversion to a new religion in the face of a strong disapproval became the beginning of achieving the greatest gratification. Consequently, in the 1930s, the COG operation in Idakho, social prestige could be gained through service in religious matters and the association with COG (Oral Interview, Lawi Masinjira, 21/09/2012). Social prestige was thus used by the early Idakho converts to attract more Idakho to this new religion. (Oral Interview, Wilfred Vichondo, 20/09/2012). To the new converts, their lives were now ordered on what was perceived to be a Christian life and hence “modern” way of life, replacing traditional training and socialization. As Christianity took root among the pioneer minority, conversion and association with the new Christian culture began to be seen as a means of economic advancement and success which, in turn, created inequalities in the society. Consequently, the perceived economic and social benefits of conversion were attractive and the new converts were important for attracting others into the new faith. For instance pioneer converts claimed that they became better individuals after conversion by acquiring items like European type permanent houses and gaining knowledge of reading and writing they set the stage that economic and social benefits could be gained through service in religious matter and with the association with missionaries. The acquisition of western education and material items turned them into some of the most influential people in their modern techniques in agriculture, investment in trade, and other activities, leading to economic prosperity and societal transformation. Acceptance of missionaries education by the minority pioneer Christians meant that the Idakho were open to many new innovations that helped to ignite the process of cultural transformation opportunities that they could take advantage of (Oral Interview, Elkana Muhalia, 20/09/2012). In fact, many pioneer converts enthusiastically reported positive post-conversion, economic changes and prosperity. Even those who did not experience any personal financial improvement were quick to identify with other beneficial changes like better health, less anxiety, stronger marriages, a new self-confidence, new insights as parents, or greater peace with Christian neighbours. Converts, therefore, interpreted their decision in a positive light and believed that their lives had improved in important ways because of their new faith.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined three key issues; namely, the establishment of COG in Idakho, the reaction of the Idakho towards the COG and the effects of COG programs on the social life of those who had converted to Christianity. The COG had very little success in winning converts. The lack of success was due to the problems associated with limited personnel and financial constraints from COG mission Board on full sponsorship of management of the church in Idakho. Strength of Idakho culture, and the new alternative offered by the Catholic Church also proved more effective in realizing conversion in Idakho. Those converted during the COG initial stages in Idakho, were thus, non-conformist individuals of independent character, who were willing to leave behind their homes and customary way of life. But the vast majority of Idakho remained conformist. Considering the fact that education was mainly provided by the missionaries, most Idakho ended up joining the church in order to be educated. Secondly, the material advantages that accrued to pioneer converts had demonstrative effect that encouraged others to join the church and school in order to gain the benefits. The early success of education together with other programs like health and agriculture were primarily viewed by missionaries as closely bound up with the central aim of saving souls, and creating an African self-supporting church. Education thus led to the emergence of advocates of modernity among the Idakho who became agents of social transformation.

REFERENCE

NOTES

1 Ph.D Candidate in the Department of History, Moi University, Kenya. Currently working as a Tutorial Fellow in the Department of Humanities, at Karatina University, Kenya.

2 Luuya form part of Western Bantu peoples who include the Abagusi and Abakuria in Kenya. Luuya - speaking people occupy the following counties which are part of Western Kenya: Vihiga, Kakamega, Busia, Bungoma and Teso. There are eighteen sub-groups which constitute the community having a common background, common customs and speak closely related dialects of the same language. Abaluyia sub-groups are as follows: Ababukusu, Abalogoli, Abetiriki, Abitakho (Kakamega), Abesukha (Kakamega), Abawanga, Abasotsoo, Abashisa, Abanyole, Abatara, Abaramama, Abanyala, Abakabalasi, Abasamia, Abakhekhe, Abamarachi, Abakhayo and Abatachoni. For more detail see Kenya’s Ethnic Communities: Foundation of the Nation.


5 One of the four districts carved out of the larger Kakamega District at the start of 2008 that made up Western Province. For more detailed information on Kakamega South District, see Republic of Kenya, Kakamega South District Development Plan 2008-2012 (Nairobi Government Printer, 2009).

6 W. Ngang’a, Kenya’s ethnic communities foundation of the nation (Nairobi: Gatundu Publisher Limited, 2006), 34.


9 Ibid., 9.

10 A Swahili word meaning “monkey” because of the presence of monkeys that populated the adjacent hills.

11 He was the director by the Africa Compound Interior Mission (ACIM) of East Africa region for the mission activities in the area.


14 Many Ugandans used to carry cotton on their heads from Uganda to Kisumu to be transported by rail to Nairobi and to Mombasa. While in Kisumu, therefore, these Ugandan porters would be involved with some other chores in Kenya for their livelihood.

15 Ibid., 2.

16 Ibid., 2-3.


19 Is a location in Idakho within Kakamega South District for more detailed information see B. Makokha, A History of the Church of God, 13.


21 A white missionary who by then was in charge on the management of COG Mission at Kima.

22 These are the sub-ethnic groups among the Luuya community.


30 These are location within Idakho area.


34 Ibid., 2, and Oral Interview, Joseph Lunwuwanu Muyeka, 19/09/2012.

35 Nyanza Provincial Annual report 31/3/1911, KNA, PC/NZA/1/6.