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**DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE:  
THE TRANCE AND CHRISTIANITY  
IN SOUTHERN GHANA**

IN southern Ghana, Christianity appears to be in a state of spiritual ferment, and the manifestations of this are proving somewhat unsettling for the orthodox faiths.

Two young relations of mine, a girl and a boy, recently came down on school vacations and recounted in conversations certain experiences they had had in Christian services. The girl recounted how at various prayer-meetings her schoolmates had behaved in strange ways, suggesting that something had entered them or taken hold of them. The boy, thirteen years old, told me how in a similar prayer-meeting he had felt a sensation of dizziness and mild bodily vibrations as other boys started shaking and uttering words in very strange tongues. Strange things—in Roman Catholic schools.

In the Roman Catholic cathedral of Accra, a similar incident occurred when a prominent ecclesiastic was saying mass for some charismatic groups. As the host rose over their heads at consecration, the silence of the moment was broken with a sudden commotion. A woman had fallen into a swoon, kicking and shaking, and she had to be carried out as the mass continued. The elderly gentleman who recounted this incident to me asked in dismay what the Church was heading for. He was convinced in his own mind that what had occurred was a trance (Akan *si*), something that belonged to traditional religion. And such incidents are now becoming commonplace among Christian groups.

While some pastors and priests of the orthodox churches treat trance manifestations with caution and even cynicism, others appear quite ready to accept them and go as far as to encourage the formation in their parishes of charismatic and spiritualist prayer groups, believing that this would check the

movement out of their own churches and into the mushroom spiritual sects and prayer groups springing up all over southern Ghana. The anxiety of the churchmen suggests that the tendency of believers to move openly or secretly from one religious group to another is quite widespread in southern Ghana and out of their control.<sup>1</sup> Are the trance and the spate of conversions reactions—delayed, maybe—to orthodox Christianity?

Rudolf Otto has defined the essence of religion as the quest for the experience of the divine, such as mystics obtain through contemplation.<sup>2</sup> In *Divinity and Experience*, Godfrey Lienhardt observed that for the Dinka divinity is apprehended 'in the experience of order in reaction to disorder, life in relation to death, and in other experiential opposites... Divinity is comprehended in and through natural experience.'<sup>3</sup> In the implied perspective of this observation, Lienhardt not only uncovered how in many other cultures ordinary mortals, people who do not see themselves as mystics or divines, apprehend divinity; more than this, he also affirmed that the experience of divinity, much like natural sense experience, is received in the conceptual categories and socially approved dispositions and expectations of a people's culture.

In this light, one can assume that, at the level of religious consciousness, there would occur reactions to Christian modalities of apprehending divinity, especially where, as in the socio-cultural ambience of southern Ghana, there is a strong awareness of a contrasting, ethnic religious mode of apprehension. And it is this I intend to explore, as, indeed, trance manifestations and frequent conversions are elements related in ethnic religious praxis to the modes of apprehending divinities.

*The Logic of the Trance Response: From Doubt to the Certainty of Belief*

To many southern Ghanaian converts to Christianity, and for many Christians who appear to achieve reconversion in maturity (the 'born again'), some

1. As far back as the 'twenties, Christian spiritual sects were practising possession: see M. D. Field, 'Spirit Possession in Ghana', in John Beattie and John Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1969, pp. 8-9; also G. G. Baeta, *Prophetisms in Ghana*, London: SCM Press 1962.

2. Rudolf Otto (*The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (transl. John W. Harvey), London etc.: Oxford University Press 1931) stresses mystical experience in God-centred religions. Ninian Smart has indicated that Buddhist mysticism is similar to that of the West, but it is mysticism without belief in God (*Philosophers and Religious Truth*, London: SCM Press 1964, p. 113).

3. Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961, p. 158. The book has been one of the strongest influences on the study and analysis of African religion. Its current relevance to the understanding of contemporary Afro-Christian religious belief and experience is self-evident.

declaration of the basis of their faith is often asked for. To the question, 'To what do you owe your belief in Christ?', it no longer seems sufficient to declare such a faith on the basis of the truth of the Church's teaching and the truth of the Bible. What the faithful apparently desire is evidence that affirms one's faith; and this leads to testimonies of a personal kind that enables one to claim to have come to know that Christ is the Lord.

The crucial aspect of the justification of faith demanded of converts—by others and by themselves—is that the evidence proving personal apprehension of the unseen is often derived from a specific cultural milieu and often based on a premise central to the religious framework of that culture. The question at the basis of this urge to justify one's new-found faith comes down to this: what is the evidence that is required by, and within, the pre-existing system of belief to justify personal conviction that an 'unknown divinity' exists or possesses the power and charisma to merit devotion and personal allegiance?<sup>4</sup>

Genius that he was, St Paul saw the importance of this epistemological issue. He saw that as peoples with strong traditions, the Greeks and Jews would withhold faith in Christ pending conviction on their own cultural premises. And these premises were different. Thus, as he remarked, Jews required miracles and Greeks reason. And he added, certain of a perplexed and cynical response, 'We proclaim the crucified Christ.' To the Jews, this was a scandal—a dead divinity is inconceivable; and to the Greeks, an absolute irrationality—the non-material cannot die.<sup>5</sup> The Christian faith demanded belief that was out of this world: *credo quia absurdum*.

On this basis, what might we point to as the kind of evidence on which faith in an unknown divinity might rest among devotees of southern Ghanaian traditional religion? This is most likely to be the same sort of evidence they would use to judge any new faith or cult based on belief in a new divinity. Signs, miracles or wonder events (Akan *awanwade*, Ga *nakpee sane*, Ewe *nukunu*) they would greedily consume with their eyes and ears and believe. They would also demand the wisdom behind accepting such a cult—and reason that a god might help them protect themselves, or get money, a child, or a higher post. Thus, when giving testimony for their faith, people attempt to point to some incident which appears miraculous, or to something beneficial, a windfall, that might suggest a coincidence with a religious act; and this conforms to traditional practice.

Personal testimonies or declarations, however, reveal the power of divinity in a subjective manner. Few testimonies stand up to critical rational examination. Many testimonies too are no more than stories, some being highly flavoured and exaggerated, others being downright falsehoods. Be this as it may, such experiences as are reported constitute only an indirect revelation of

4. On this issue, see Edwin R. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1938, p. 308.

5. *Good News Bible*, 1 Cor. 22.

divinity.<sup>6</sup> The presence of divinity is inferred from them; they scarcely ever indicate which divinity it is that granted one the special favour, or in what special way it seeks to relate to a particular individual or society. Moreover, wonder events could be the works of evil spirits and the gods.

Even if the stories are true, peoples of southern Ghana seem to distinguish, as all believers do, between indirect means of knowing divinity, a person, a thing—'knowledge that'—and direct means of knowing divinity, a place or thing (knowledge by direct experience); and the culture suggests that the ultimate proof of the bond of faith to a divinity should derive from, and rest in, direct experience and knowledge of the divine.<sup>7</sup> The cultural mode of experiencing direct communication of divine power is the trance. Apparitions, dreams and visions are perceived by individuals; it is only the trance that reveals the identity and power of a deity for others to witness.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Trance in Southern Ghanaian Culture*

In southern Ghana, the rhythmic bodily vibrations and the physiological changes identified everywhere as the trance are taken as the manifestation of a vibrant force (Akan *tumi*, Ewe *nuse*). While the phenomenon persists, the agent loses self-awareness and has no responsibility for the altered behaviour. To explain the behaviour, traditional belief claims that the agent is seized and controlled by a power and a consciousness that are divine.

While men and women may devote themselves to a divinity, it is only possession that grants the individual the repute of an agent of a particular divinity. The trance is thus the means by which individuals justify their allegiance to particular divinities and establish conviction in the need to pay reverence to such divinities. Also, to be a priest, priestess, an important votary of a cult, one has to be possessed, and one has to undergo a course of training in order to learn to use the trance as a means of getting the unseen to reveal the unknown.<sup>9</sup> By marking a calling to the priesthood of a particular divinity, the

6. As among the Dinka, 'experience of living is here clearly the basis from which comes such theoretical or purely cognitive apprehension of Divinity and Powers as the Dinka have, for moral and social disorder are more immediately known than Divinity...' (Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, p. 158).

7. Emphasizing the immediacy of the experience of the divine, Bevan wrote (*Symbolism and Belief*, p. 254): 'it seems to be the making acquaintance with something really there, to be an objective feeling'. Cf. also Odd Nordland, 'Shamanism as an Experiencing of "the Unreal"', in Carl-Martin Edsman (ed.), *Studies in Shamanism*, Stockholm: Alonquist & Wiksell 1967, p. 177.

8. Cf. Alfred Gell, 'The Gods at Play: Vertigo and Possession in Muria Religion', *Man* n.s., Vol. XV, no. 2 (1980), pp. 219-49, at pp. 232-3.

9. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969, ch. 4; idem, *Ashanti*, London: Oxford University Press 1963.

trance thus often serves as the only means for creating a new sect and converting people to join a cult of an 'unknown deity'.

But in southern Ghanaian cultures, anyone may become possessed anywhere and at any time. During the Ga and Fanti yam festival of twins, twin spirits are believed to come to ride in the pans and pails in which the garbage of the day's cooking and feasting are carried to a riverside or lagoon for disposal. Persons who carry such pails are expected to go into trance, and such trances often occur. If the expected trance does not come, the explanation given is that the persons are either not clean or their heads are 'heavy' (Akan *dur*). When the trance occurs too readily, the usual explanation is that the persons have a 'light head' (Akan *ne ti ye ha*). Some of the techniques used to stimulate the heavy-headed to go into trance are to increase the tempo and volume of singing and clapping, to drop herbal infusions and decoctions into the eye, or to invite the spirits with copious libations. When such techniques fail, great anxiety is expressed about the state of society, and consultations and sacrifices ensue.<sup>10</sup>

Episodes of possession also occur when devotees carry their gods and other ritual objects on ritual occasions. They occur on state occasions when the black chiefly stools are carried. And they occur in necromancy. Often, however, ordinary young girls and boys are spontaneously seized with the convulsive movements of the trance at funerals, at cult celebrations and even at market-places. And these incidents are taken seriously. On such occasions, attempts are made to 'wash the mouths' of these individuals to enable the possessing spirit to speak.

A possessing spirit might reveal a hidden sin in the society and order the appropriate punishment to be meted out to the culprit or the cleansing rite to be performed. Through the trance, a god or ancestor might indicate the presence of conflict in society and ask for its resolution. A possessing deity might tell of an impending danger to an individual, a family, a village or a state, and suggest appropriate sacrifices. In a positive, constructive way, a possessing god might suggest how a ritual performance might be altered, or give approval for new social arrangements between individuals and groups, especially regarding customs. The trance serves also to purge the individual and society of emotions of hostility, ill will, sorrow. It often serves as the climax of an intense social or ritual celebration. When the gods come to dance it creates excitement, and the people go into paroxysms of joy.<sup>11</sup> Through all these means, the trance directs and regulates personal and collective lives in society.

Possession is not always expected to lead to prophetic pronouncements. Those who carry ritual objects and festival garbage and fall into trance need

10. Ghanaian traditions make singing and drumming, rather than drugs and contemplation, the vehicle of transition. Percussion is strong in Ghanaian musical form. Cf. R. Needham, 'Percussion and Transition', *Man* n.s., Vol. II, no. 4 (1967), pp. 606-14, at p. 606.

11. The excitement is often enforced by the wonder feats performed by the possessed—walking through fire, jumping over a cow, swallowing a sword.

not speak and prophesy, nor need priests and priestesses when they perform the *akom* (trance) dance. The fact that people often compete to carry the twin garbage, for example, attests to the belief that those who do so receive special blessings or some good fortune. Their trade might prosper, they might become fecund, or their much criticized character might show a sudden change for the better—a charismatic conversion, so to speak—and thus bring them a new respect in their homes. The collective body might find in the trance a source of satisfaction, the trance being a clear sign that some celebration or event has received the approval of the divinities.<sup>12</sup> Thus possession is viewed most generally as an end in itself, and it is desired for its own sake. This intrinsic value of the trance rests on the belief that the trance brings divinities into direct contact and communion with society—humankind acquiring gifts akin to the divine, the divine becoming humanized.<sup>13</sup>

In southern Ghanaian cultures, possession thus serves to establish order in the lives of the people.<sup>14</sup> It illuminates the noumenal, enabling persons to reach the desired end of religious quest everywhere—the experience of the divine. It enlarges the universe of the unseen by revealing unknown divinities and creating new and more relevant relationships between the human world and the unseen. It structures and renews the moral framework which is the bedrock of social order; and it checks or canalizes disruptive forces in society, especially in situations of social change or distress. It enables individuals to make decisions that help them adjust to their roles and statuses in society.<sup>15</sup> The trance possession thus assures certainty in a state of religious, conceptual, normative, institutional and emotional confusion and uncertainties. It gives positive direction and support in situations of needed change. It transforms a situation of negative liminality into one of positive liminality.

On account of these vital functions, the trance is likely to be misused to dominate and misdirect society. Especially, it might be feigned. Southern Ghanaian cultures therefore protect the trance from adulteration and abuse. The frightful sanctions that were applied in the past indicate why the Asante priest or priestess prayed to his or her gods: 'When I become possessed and prophesy for a chief, grant that what I have to tell him may not be bad (*akombone*).'<sup>16</sup> This, of course, often made the pronouncements of the possessed so vague and ambiguous that their true import became a matter for interpretation. Such pronouncements often gave riddles rather than clear directional statements.

12. Events might build up public expectation of divine approval or disapproval. In such cases, a trance utterance might fulfil a public wish.

13. A. M. Hocart, *Kingship*, London: Oxford University Press 1969, p. 166.

14. Evan M. Zuesse, *Ritual Cosmos: The Sanctification of Life in African Religions*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1979, ch. 10 *passim*.

15. The life of St Paul is the more dramatic form of role conversion. The trance might assist people to adjust to roles—as father, mother, professional—or discover new roles.

16. Rattray, *Religion and Art*, p. 46.

Where pronouncements of the possessed are directional, especially in matters affecting families and individuals such as some pronouncement on a death, kinship conflicts, the sharing of the property of a deceased relative, there could not be tolerated any hint of self-interest. Thus in most places, it is by custom and law enjoined that the spirit of a dead person should possess a total stranger before the directions it gives in respect of the distribution of family property can be accepted and treated as binding. If the possessed is a member of the family, the rite of 'washing the mouth' is not performed. This ritual cleansing of the mouth of a person spontaneously seized by a spirit serves to check the use of the trance for personal wish-fulfilment.<sup>17</sup>

#### *The Trance as a Christian Phenomenon*

The trance is considered by many Christians as the form by which the Holy Spirit manifested its nature and power on the day of Pentecost. It was through being possessed by the Holy Spirit that the apostles of Christ acquired the spiritual gifts and special insights to preach the word of God and announce the good news of the risen Christ. The occurrence of the trance among the Gentiles strengthened the early Christians in the conviction that non-Jews were also to be accepted and baptized into the community of the faithful. And among sectarian, spiritualist and charismatic Christians of Ghana, these biblical references serve as the charter of legitimation for seeking the trance experience when they meet to worship and pray.<sup>18</sup>

In both the southern Ghanaian and Christian belief systems, then, the trance seems to have significance as a vehicle for revealing the nature, power and approval of divinities, and also for establishing and spreading new religious groups and observances in society. In both systems, the trance is the means for divinizing the individual and society. In both systems, it has a constructive directional force in relation both to stability and change. These similarities might give the Akan, Ewe, or Ga a reason for considering traditional trance a religious phenomenon validated by and not contrary to Christian traditions.

Southern Ghanaians are, however, aware of a definite contrast between the traditional form of the trance and the phenomenon that gave birth to Christianity. While the traditional trance experience is attributed to the actions of the ancestors and the spirits of the dead and to the traditional deities, known and unknown, the pentecostal event is held to have been caused by the Holy Spirit. There is, in consequence of this difference, a cognitive shift

17. In many African cultures the intrusion of wish-fulfilment is avoided through institutional checks (see Zuesse, ch. 10), but not, however, in Christian spirit possession.

18. M. J. Field, *Search for Security: An Ethno-psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana*, London: Faber and Faber 1960, pp. 84-5.

in the comprehension of the nature of the trance as it occurs now among Ghanaian Christians. As the received Christian faith did not come with the trance phenomenon (which was in fact condemned), possession and its physical manifestations can be seen only in terms of their identity with, if not derivation from, Ghanaian traditional religious forms and experience. But the Christian faith demands rejection of traditional deities. In stories of possession experiences in Christian worship, the Ghanaian therefore alludes to forces recognized in the Christian faith—first to the Holy Spirit, and secondly to the angels and saints.

The trance as it occurs in Christian places of prayer is therefore a synthetic religious phenomenon. It combines in itself the phenomenological aspect of African religious consciousness and the supernatural elements of Christian belief.

#### *The Marginalized in Urgent Pursuit of the Divine: The Reaction to Conversion*

Christian trance and conversion phenomena relate to the mass and almost total marginalization of the Ghanaian populace—economic, social, political, jural and religious. In a society in which wealth gives power and repute, poverty is now pervasive and opportunities for advancement also limited. The sense of personal inadequacy is not relieved even with increased academic qualifications, wealth and higher status. Indeed, increased qualification, wealth and status may make life more precarious. The professional classes and the wealthy live in constant fear of their lives and positions. Political and economic instability have brought sudden and cruel falls to many persons in high positions; and most people cling to their statuses in life with a great sense of insecurity, as even the law to which they could appeal for security has itself become most insecure. All classes of people, both high and low, are therefore marginalized in material and qualitative terms. In the human domain, one clearly has no power to alter one's condition for the better.<sup>19</sup>

To order one's life, now and for the future, most people thus feel the need to open themselves up to supernatural aid and therefore seek a channel of communication to forces outside the human domain. Those strongly moved in this quest are those most pressed by straitened circumstances. Under social stress, people outside the Christian faith might seek Christ in one or another Christian denomination or prayer group. Those who are already Christian might seek Christ with a new depth of commitment either in their own denominations or, as often happens these days, in another church, sect, or

19. The spread of the spiritual churches and charismatic prayer groups in urban centres has made the phenomenon of possession more an urban than a rural one. In rural life the rhythm of life is more settled, and social security appears assured by the traditional way of life. Men also have limited aspirations.

prayer group. And the expected return for this 'turning' or conversion is to have a personal and intimate knowledge of the divine.

In its formal occurrence, the trance is a state of mystical experience induced through a community of worshippers worshipping together and creating a oneness of mind through rhythmic music and synchronized bodily movement or dance that unifies and concentrates emotions to a high level, to dizzy heights that bring ecstasy.<sup>20</sup> As this form of worship is seen more or less as the cause of the mystical experience which some individuals obtain, where these experiences are not manifested there is thought to be something amiss in the mode of worship; and this has become the basis of the most widespread reaction to Christianity in the organized form in which we find it in the more orthodox traditions.

The reactions arise mainly in respect of the level and extent of participation that organized worship permits. In this regard, many Christians feel their socio-economic marginalization exacerbated in their religious congregations. The state of poverty, illiteracy and lack of doctrinal education makes the socially marginalized less suited to leading roles in the established churches, though their desire to serve God, which tends to be very high, seeks an outlet in some activity that might reflect their individual charisma and spiritual development and bring them social respectability. Further, in worship, the institutionally marginalized again tend to participate at the periphery. The wealth of spiritual gifts lodged in the Bible, prayer-books and hymn-books are foreclosed to them. The more spontaneous approach to prayer and singing which would win their involvement has no place in the formal ceremonies of the established churches; at best, it is restricted. It is to this unspoken rejection that people respond by seeking spiritual fulfilment outside orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup>

This reaction to the mode of worship in some denominations expresses itself in the growing conviction that the mode of orthodox Christian worship is not 'inspiring'. Obviously, there seems to be a state of emotional refurbishment which Ghanaians expect as a consequence of their participation in worship and which some do not get because of the intellectual and contemplative nature formal ceremonies assume. While every mode of worship would have both emotional and intellectual levels and content, formal orthodox Christian rituals and services appear to be dominated by the intellectualist and contemplative content.<sup>22</sup> The great silence, the prescribed and fixed postures forbidding physical stimulation and expression of the emotions, are definitely not generally characteristic of African rituals. Thus in their orthodox forms, Christian sacramental acts become more the means of expressing ideas and getting the theological significance of an article of faith reaffirmed than a means of getting the emotions and anxieties of ordinary men and women

20. In children's play, the whirling associated with the trance dance in Ghana normally creates dizziness; see Gell, 'The Gods at Play', p. 232.

21. Catholic charismatics are using the element of spontaneity more and more in worship.

22. Since the message of the Christian faith is the basis for the affective content of worship, it will always remain important in worship.

purged. In reaction to orthodox forms of Christian ceremonies, many Christians therefore seek Christ elsewhere, for they believe that their denominational forms of worship have ceased to be efficacious and have become empty.

Beyond this, many Christians ask, why is it that conversions marked by 'the Holy Spirit and fire' which many people undergo are not marked by the manifest descent of the Holy Spirit, which as 'Gentiles' we need to be given evidence of, as in the early Church? Why is it that the phenomena of prophecy, speaking in tongues and healing, which are the marks of the Holy Spirit as it renews the face of the earth, are no longer experienced in the places of orthodox worship? For the Ghanaian brought up in a culture whose central veridical divinizing experience is the trance, if a divinity to which a cult is devoted does not possess anyone from time to time, it is assumed to be dead or to have vacated its place in the cult. The cult, its ritual objects and its ceremonies cease to be sacred: they are powerless, otiose and profane.

#### *The Trance and Conversion as Constructive Responses to the Riddles of Life*

Whether reacting to the organized nature of the Church, the lack of excitement of Christian worship, or the non-manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, there is implicit in the attitude of southern Ghanaian Christians a culturally toned religious expectation. Conditioned by their culture, they are seeking a process which leads to the kind of experience of the divine that they perceive can be found within the modalities of their cultural religious expression. They are seeking a more or less loosely framed religion that gives leeway to individual self-expression; they are craving for catharsis as experienced in traditional forms of worship; and they are seeking that evidence which spirits give when in the traditional situation 'a god comes' at the height of traditional worship. And in their culture, the trance is the form in which such aspirations find fulfilment.

As philosophical paradoxes and dilemmas seek solutions by compelling speculative ascent to higher, more abstract levels of thought, so do life's existential paradoxes demand, for the religious, a search for solutions through ascent to levels of existence that transcend the realm of the sensed, the senses themselves being the source of many of the paradoxes. While conversions express changing convictions in the capacities of different religious frameworks to resolve the paradoxes of human living, it is the different methods by which religions bring people to experience and know the transcendent reality their symbolic systems express that often constitute the radical means for changing people's religious allegiance.

In terms of the comparison that can be made between the West African trance and Christian (or Islamic or Hindu) mystical experiences, Christian conversions represent the abandonment of a mode of experiencing divinity in which the faithful, recognizing that their faculties are too limited to raise them

up to the divine, see themselves as 'receptors', passive entities *vis-à-vis* the divine, and seek, through collective effort, to induce divinities down from the transcendent plane to make contact with them and suffuse them with qualities of the divine. Orthodox Christianity taught a mode of access to divinity that relied on the mental and contemplative efforts of individuals, who should induce themselves to rise beyond their base human nature, through activities that arrested bodily appetites and functions (e.g. fasts and abstinence), to achieve contact with divinity on a higher plane of existence. The latter is most difficult for most people; whence the return to the former, represented by pentecostal, spiritualist and charismatic religious expressions.

#### *Conclusion*

By identifying the trance as a Christian mystical form, the southern Ghanaian has acquired a vehicle for impressing some of the modalities of traditional religion on Christianity:

1. 'Affective mysticism' has gained emphasis, restoring some balance with 'contemplative mysticism' in Christian religion.
2. Community worship as a vehicle of spiritual transport to the realms of the divine has assumed a new significance.
3. Different denominations are credited with special charisma, and one might seek spiritual relief in them according to need.
4. Life-long allegiance may be pledged to the religion of one's parents or infancy, but individual experience may indicate participation in other worshipful groups.

In consequence of all these, southern Ghanaian culture is giving a new mould to the Christian faith, as people experience divinity, as Godfrey Lienhardt described it, through natural experience and their own cultural lenses.

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### **DINKA RESPONSE TO CHRISTIANITY: THE PURSUIT OF WELL-BEING IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY**

#### *Introduction*

AMONG the Dinka, as with many other African peoples, the reception of the Christian message of salvation has been ambivalent. As Godfrey Lienhardt has persuasively argued in his article 'The Dinka and Catholicism', Dinka reaction to the Christian mission was a complex process in which parallels, contrasts, acceptance and rejection were all intertwined. In this essay I will focus on Dinka ideas of well-being as they have operated in both traditional and Christian religious life. I will aim to demonstrate how Dinka values and cultural patterns interplayed with Christian principles in a process which, though frequently mutually supportive and reinforcing, was also fraught with cross-cultural misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts. Drawing mainly on songs, we will see how Christian education has positively transformed traditional notions and at the same time subtly undermined Dinka confidence in their ability to achieve the well-being they seek.

#### *The Concept of Well-being in Dinka Religious Thought*

Studies of Nilotic religions, among them the classic work of Godfrey Lienhardt on the Dinka, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, show that the religious beliefs and practices of the Nilotes reflect the social, cultural, economic and political realities of their world. The ultimate objective of their