SETTING THE SCENE

By ADRIAN HASTINGS

AFRICA IS EVERYTHING, HUGE IN AREA, huge in diversity. The greatest of mistakes is to reduce it to some single stereotype. It remains a continent in which large groups of people in the less accessible parts live, intellectually, culturally and economically, in ways scarcely affected by the impact of the colonial and post-colonial regimes which have so powerfully transformed most other areas. Many millions of people still hold to forms of religious belief and ritual that existed before the long marches of Livingstone, Stanley and their contemporaries 'opened' Africa to an inrush of late Victorian modernity. Such rituals and beliefs, together with family structures, marriage customs, forms of cultivation and so much else are essentially local to particular places and language groups, and often profoundly different from those of neighbouring peoples. One cannot generalize about them without grave peril of becoming wildly unrealistic. What such people have in common is that they live in a deeply rural world, far from tarred roads, electricity or television, though not from radio.

Africa is no less a continent of huge sprawling towns, largely unplanned beyond their central areas. They are mostly capital cities, surrounded by ever larger shanty suburbs, reflecting the political fact that Africa is a continent of very many different countries. The population explosion has affected Africa over the last thirty years more than any other part of the world. It is the principal factor behind both urban expansion and the damaging of the environment in the many areas where limited rainfall restricts growth in cultivation and severely punishes the cutting down of trees required for the provision of fuel.

Few of Africa's large towns have any considerable industrial base and many of their inhabitants have little, if any, regular employment. Yet there is also a decisively important middle class: urbanized, educated, English-, French- or Portuguese-speaking, fully at home in the culture, techniques and aspirations of the western world. They too are in their millions. Most outsiders visiting Africa and almost everyone meeting Africans outside Africa are likely only to get to know people at this level, which does, inevitably, include almost all the Catholic clergy. Nowhere is there a larger contrast in earnings and lifestyle than in Africa between people who are in some way geared into

the international economic system and all the rest who are not, but it is also true that the line of division runs down many extended families where traditional duties of kinship assistance continue to ensure that poor relatives are assisted by rich ones. But, of course, most people have no rich relatives. The power of a system of kinship clientele within a society where the number of people vastly outruns the number of jobs inevitably produces further pressures to link employment and preferment to the kin of the powerful and the rich.

While western medicine has been the cause of population growth, it now stands almost helpless to face one of the continent's principal killers: AIDS. No other part of the world is so deeply affected and there are large parts of eastern and central Africa, in point of fact the most Christian parts, where hardly a family has escaped. But there are many other special killers. Despite the optimism of thirty years ago, leprosy has not been eradicated. Malaria thrives, tuberculosis spreads, feeding on the malnutrition of millions. Nevertheless, none of this has hitherto much affected the speed of growth in the size of population. It is the combination of this growth with a stagnant or actually declining economy which has ensured that in many parts of the continent most people are actually poorer than they were thirty years ago.

The political, cultural and religious complexity is mirrored most strikingly in the field of languages. Most countries have many languages, even many scores of languages. Some are mutually intelligible but many are not. It is true that very many uneducated people understand and speak at least one vernacular other than their own. Nevertheless, the extent to which most ordinary people primarily identify themselves by their maternal language should never be underestimated. In many languages, though by no means all, the Scriptures, hymns and other prayers have been printed. In most languages there is little else. Both in colonial and post-colonial times nearly all governments have followed the policy of making use only of a European language for secondary education and everything else within the official arena. In most African countries any other language policy could prove bitterly divisive. Even in places where many millions of people do speak a single language and much has been written in it, and one can think of Yoruba in western Nigeria, Luganda in Uganda and Shona in Zimbabwe, it remains politically unacceptable to give the language an official or national status. Perhaps only for Swahili in Tanzania (and, far less effectively, in Kenya) and Chewa in Malawi has this been attempted. While in most countries mass is celebrated in many different languages, in Tanzania it is almost always in Swahili. Everyone

studies Swahili at school, almost everyone can now speak it. The effect of this for the creation of a single national community and a church community which is more than local has been enormous, even if it may have lowered the standard of what is taught in other subjects considerably. In Tanzania a politician or archbishop can speak in Swahili on the radio and know that almost everyone will be able to understand. In almost every other country such a person is forced to use English, French or Portuguese, languages which most of their people will not understand but which will at least be understood by someone in every part of the country.

Politically Africa is no less diversified. The legacy of diverse colonial policies remains manifest throughout the structure of government, but so do many other things as well. Some countries have been blessed with peace and good order since the arrival of independence thirty or forty years ago. They include Botswana and Tanzania. At the other extreme are the many countries which have experienced years, even decades, of civil war, sometimes genocidal civil war. They include Sudan, Uganda, Angola, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Liberia, among others. In between stand many where there has been no precise civil war but where the situation is little less fraught owing to the incompetence of military, one-party or dictatorial government or to large-scale corruption. Such widespread political dislocation is in large part a result of the haste with which colonial states withdrew around 1960, leaving governmental machinery manned by people with next to no experience. It is also the result of economic and population pressures tearing apart states whose people had never really thought of themselves as a nation anyway.

Academically and educationally, the effects of the economic and political predicament of most countries are very obvious. In the 1960s and 1970s there was an immense growth in the number of secondary schools and even of universities. While the institutions remain, their libraries, equipment and – in many places – standards have suffered severely. The book famine all across the continent is now a well-recognized phenomenon. It means that schools can be left almost without books, and universities without many of the latest books and journals. The low salaries academics receive in most universities ensure that the abler scholars depart for America or Europe.

All in all, no part of the world has been worse affected than Africa by developments, both mondial and local, of the last two decades. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe means that Russia's interest in Africa has gone and, with it, the interest of the West in investing in

Africa in order to prevent a Communist take-over. The policies imposed on African governments as a condition for help of a sort by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been almost universally disastrous because wholly unadapted to the realities of the continent. They prove to be little more than a tool to squeeze Africa yet more for the benefit of international capitalism. What is remarkable is the way life goes on all the same, people make do, small-scale cultivation and the informal economy ensure a measure of survival and a great deal of happiness, just as comparable things ensured happiness in the past. If Africa's present troubles derive overwhelmingly from one phase or another of the modernization process, Africa's answer to its troubles – a resilient cheerfulness, based on closeness to the soil, the ability to survive on very little, the acceptance of death as a close companion to life, the insurance cover of collective communal responsibility, is almost wholly traditional. The quality of humaneness may be enhanced, rather than diminished, by the extreme remoteness of most people from the sort of ceaseless rat-race which dominates more economically and politically successful societies.

Only within such a context can one begin to portray religious and Christian life. And that too is as varied as can be. The North is overwhelmingly Muslim, the south predominantly Christian. In much of the centre of the continent, as along its coasts, the two are interplaced, sometimes dividing up families and often dividing up societies. Both are everywhere interwoven with earlier local religion to a greater or lesser extent. A great society like the Yoruba is completely impossible to understand without studying all three – Yoruba traditional belief and ritual, Yoruba Islam and Yoruba Christianity are all near the heart of Yoruba identity, difficult as that may be for the outsider to imagine. In most places a triple identity is not so decisive but it is present even in so dominantly a Christian society as that of Buganda. In many places relations are good and nowhere in the world is there so large an overlap as in Africa between the two world religions. But there is also a considerable degree of tension, and that is probably growing almost everywhere. In Sudan the civil war between North and South, which has continued over most of the last thirty years, has to a large extent been caused by the determination of the Muslim north to Islamize the non-Muslim, and increasingly Christian, south. Large sums of money come from Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries to build mosques even in places where there are very few Muslims. That, of course, is what often happened in regard to the building of Christian churches in the past. But almost everywhere in the continent today Christian

leaders are at least made nervous by the growing pressure of Islam and suggestions that Sharia law should be enforced to some extent, as has been done in Sudan. African Christians are in fact far more attuned to the idea and practice of pluralism than African Muslims. But they often feel themselves caught between western Christians stressing the value of dialogue and a sense at home of being besieged by very undialogical Muslim advances, and even claims, that profoundly mixed societies such as Tanzania are to be regarded as predominantly Muslim. In the field of Christian–Muslim relations, however, as much as anywhere, it would be highly dangerous to generalize or to suggest that the way they have developed in one country is likely to be applicable to another.

The African Christianity of today has grown almost entirely out of beginnings datable between the late eighteenth and the late nineteenth century. Those beginnings were closely related to the Evangelical Movement within Protestantism and the revival of missionary activity in the Catholic Church in the years following the Napoleonic era. As such they owed nothing to the ancient churches of Egypt and Ethiopia, and missionaries were often anxious to divert the attention of their converts from what they tended to regard as rather debased forms of Christianity. And yet Alexandria and Ethiopia remain immensely important for the modern African Church. They guarantee Christianity's African integrity: it is not just a colonial religion. African churches are in fact more ancient than west European churches. The Patriarchate of Alexandria, Greek-speaking as it mostly was, represents an historic bridge between early Mediterranean Christianity and Africa. The Copts in many ways constitute an 'African' rather than a 'western' kind of society, and the vibrant emergence of the monastic movement from the late third century within the young Coptic-speaking Church offers many analogies with modern religious movements on the frontiers of African Christianity.

Again the Catholic–Donatist struggle in North Africa has important messages to offer about the tensions between universalism and localism. Ethiopia has even more. Here an entirely self-supporting Christian Church has survived and grown over fifteen hundred years within a black African, rather than a Mediterranean, culture. It is not at all surprising that from the late nineteenth century many local Christians in mission churches in both South and West Africa began to see themselves as 'Ethiopians' and to regard the Church of Ethiopia, surviving at the heart of an independent state which had successfully resisted European colonial attack in the 1890s, as a symbolic model of what they would want to be – emphatically African Christians rather

than western colonial-type Christians. Ethiopia guarantees furthermore that black African Christianity predates African Islam and that, too, is important when one remembers how many European observers have tended to declare rather facilely that Islam was a religion which suited Africa, while Christianity was but an irrelevant importation of the modern missionary. African Christianity must not, then, be defined in terms which ignore either the theoretical significance or the actual practice of the Ethiopian Church.

The local realities of Christian life are as differentiated as everything else. Here, as elsewhere, it is safest to start from the particular. The church of Villa Maria in western Buganda is one hundred years old this year, 1997. Its predecessor, which had been built just a few years before, was burnt down in 1897 during the last revolt of the Baganda against British rule. The great church which was then built with its cross form, twenty massive white pillars, small rounded windows and wonderful rafted roof, is one of Uganda's principal architectural gems surviving from history. It was built as the mother church for the county of Buddu, the main Catholic area in the country and the core of the later diocese of Masaka. Since the early 1930s it has been served only by African priests except for fifteen months in the late 1950s when I was privileged to be a curate there, assisting the parish priest, Fr Kabuye. Close below the main altar lies the tomb of the outstanding missionary bishop, Mgr Streicher, who built up the Catholicism of this area, ordained the first African priests within its walls in 1913, and was buried there only a few years before I arrived.

When I was at Villa the Diocese of Masaka had already been ruled by an African bishop, Joseph Kiwanuka, for twenty years. Among my fellow diocesan priests was Victor Mukasa, one of the two to be ordained in 1913. I was there for his golden jubilee of priesthood in 1963 but had left Uganda before he celebrated his sixtieth jubilee in 1973. Mgr Victor was born before the Baganda martyrs were burnt at Namugongo in 1885. He had seen the coming of British rule in the 1890s and its going in the 1960s. He had known and been taught by the early missionaries and had witnessed the multiplication of African bishops, generations younger than himself, after 1960. He was a very gentle, lovable priest, continually faithful to his spiritual duties as he had been taught them by French missionaries in the pre-1914 world.

Mgr Mukasa was wholly an African, knowing little of a European language except Latin, but it would be hard to find anything in his beliefs or religious practice which was not common to the European clergy of his age. His perfection as a priest lay in the docility, the

obedience, the fidelity with which he held to what he had learnt. And there were many like him. Elizabeth Isichei has written a beautiful account of the life of the Nigerian priest, Michael Iwene Tansi, ordained in 1938 (*Entirely for God*, 1980). Here again was a man of exceptional devotion and selflessness. 'Choose nothing, refuse nothing' was his motto, though in the end he did choose something – to become a contemplative monk at the Cistercian monastery of Mount St Bernard's in Leicestershire in 1950. He died there in 1964. The holiness of Michael Tansi seems exceptional – the complete abandonment to God's will, the care of others, the sacrifice of self, the longing to pray. He taught people the prayer, 'O my God, I am a piece of cloth bought for your clothes. You are the tailor and the weaver. Make the clothes therefore in the style and fashion to suit you.' That prayer expresses his spirituality as well as anything. And so did he live. But with Michael Tansi as with Victor Mukasa there is little you can put your finger on as very specifically African about his spirituality. Indeed if there had been they could have been in trouble in the eyes of white missionaries. If they were the bridge carrying the western Catholic tradition of priesthood across to Africa, they could only succeed in being so by showing that, despite their black skin, they had very white souls! Where, in the 1950s, there were only a handful of Victors and Michaels, there are now a great many more and they must not be disregarded. The central tradition of modern African Catholicism has certainly not wanted to repudiate the legacy of the missionaries of the past and it has not wanted to seek to establish some suddenly discovered rapprochement with pre-Christian religion. The explicit pursuit of such a rapprochement is often in fact rather the characteristic of university people who have delved far deeper into western culture than have Mgr Mukasa and his successors.

In the first half of the twentieth century, if you sought some visible expression of a specifically African type of Catholic spirituality, you might well have found it most obviously present among the more devoted of catechists. And many catechists were very devoted. Here was a way of life, a form of ministry, which actually did not exist in the western Church. Its development as the cornerstone of African Christianity was bound to produce a spirituality of its own, a more obviously vernacular spirituality. Few catechists knew any foreign language. Mostly married men of very limited education, they were the local teachers and ministers of a village church.

Perhaps the most remarkable of all catechists, however, lived a single life. Joseph Kitagana, another Muganda, had in fact had five

wives. When he was baptized, in 1896, the year before the building of our church at Villa Maria, he abandoned them all: 'God must suffice for me', but, at first, he continued to hold a minor chiefdom. Then in 1901 he announced his desire to become a missionary to some people other than his own. Having resigned his chieftainship and distributed all his possessions to the poor, he set off to preach in Bunyoro. Later he was placed in Bunyaruguru and then in Kigezi. Here he preached and was itinerant across its mountainous territory for years before there was any resident missionary. Staff in hand, rosary around his neck, but dressed otherwise simply in an animal skin, apart from the white gown he donned on a Sunday, he became the true apostle of Kigezi, a man ceaselessly concerned to proclaim God, the value of hygiene, and the importance of destroying the images of traditional religion. Kitagana sounds remarkably like his contemporary, the Prophet Harris, preaching and baptizing in Ivory Coast and elsewhere and, in fact, like many other 'Prophets', founders in most cases of independent churches. But Kitagana remained ever faithful to the instructions of his White Father missionaries.

He may also be compared with the Anglican apostle Apolo Kivebulaya working at much the same time a little to the north, to Bernard Mizeki in Zimbabwe, and to many other catechists and early clergy of the Protestant churches. Perhaps he does not sound so different from the Irish or Saxon apostles of Europe a thousand years ago. And yet he was utterly African. Acceptance of so much from outside the continent, including an actually rather rigid evangelical message, such as Kitagana or Kivebulaya undoubtedly preached, must not be used to exclude them from an account of what it means to speak of an African Christian spirituality. And yet one can recognize as well that the evangelical framework as laid down by the early generations of missionaries, Catholic or Protestant, was unreasonably exclusive of much that a later generation of African Christians would wish to reclaim.

The vast expansion of the African Church in the last thirty years has been built in most places on foundations laid by missionaries lacking the ebullient confidence in Africans demonstrated by Streicher. Nevertheless as the African Church has multiplied and the half-dozen black bishops of the 1950s have become many hundreds, the best of the early tradition easily becomes the core of a general ideal.

Conversion models have always to include both confrontation (without which change seems pointless) and continuity. The early African model certainly included both. Tansi's confrontation of a masquerade,

stick in hand, declaring undauntedly, 'The spirit has been confronted by a more powerful spirit', encapsulated the attitude of many a prophet, like Harris or Babalola, often hailed as presenting the quintessence of a truly Africanized Christianity. It was certainly not un-African. Movements of 'eradication' and the destruction of 'fetishes' were internal to the dynamic of African tradition which was far from static or monolithic. Yet such confrontation, sharp as it was, must not mask a genuine degree of continuity guaranteed by the hugely important retention of African names for God: Nzambi, Mulungu, Leza, Katonda and others. In that retention lay the bridge for openness to a larger sympathy with African tradition which was bound to arise once Christianity was established and the need for confrontation had receded.

The pursuit of continuity has been central to Religious Studies departments in African universities over the last thirty years. Its weakness has often lain in imagining a homogeneous and sanitized 'African Traditional Religion' which never really existed but to which the churches are now expected to do reverence. The deepest difficulty in this way forward may lie, however, in the field of language. Inevitably such work is done in a European language and in books intended for a western market, but the deepening of African Christian spirituality must surely take as its primary medium an African language, accepting the limitations of particularity as inherent in the attainment of cultural convergence. The example of a Victor Mukasa or a Kitagana retains its power precisely because it was constructive of a truly vernacular model of Christianness. African Christianity today requires the mellowing of convergence between language, culture and faith in a hundred different linguistic forms.

That is not to say that the element of confrontation is no longer needed within African spirituality. On the contrary. But the confrontation required is of a new kind, one related precisely to challenging many of the things outlined at the start of this article. If Victor Mukasa was born before the first Baganda martyrs perished, he was still alive when his fellow priests Clement Kiggundu and Clement Mukasa were murdered by the thugs of Amin. Kiggundu, the brave young editor of a vernacular Catholic newspaper, was burnt to death in his car; Clement Mukasa was actually dragged from an altar at Kitovu while celebrating mass. All across Africa recent decades have seen a multiplication of martyrs, people like the brilliant young author priest, Michel Kayoya, executed without trial in May 1972 in Burundi, one of Africa's most Catholic countries, in a Tutsi genocide of educated Hutu.

That is why the example of Mukasa Balikuddembe and his fellow martyrs of the 1880s remains so relevant a part of African Christian

spirituality. It is not, and at present cannot be, a spirituality only of continuity, rural harmony or communal solidarity. It is also a spirituality of challenge, of firm retention of a pearl of great price, of standing seemingly alone, often in material poverty, against the greatest odds. And that may well be the most universally relevant side of the message it offers to the world Church.