

## Early Christian Expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa

In the fifteenth century, Portugal began sending sailors down the west coast of Africa. There were a number of motivations for these early voyages. The most commonly recited motivation today is the desire to find a sea route around Africa to Asia. In this way Portugal could bypass the Italian and Middle Eastern middlemen that had guarded these trade routes for centuries. This wasn't the only motivation. In fact, it may not have even been the most important for the Portuguese at the time. Another important motivation was the desire to bypass the powerful Muslim states of North Africa and gain access to the gold of West Africa. The Portuguese and Spanish, while largely ignorant of the peoples and cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, knew of the great wealth of Akan goldfields. Indeed, the Medieval Iberian map known today as the Catalan Atlas (1375) marked West Africa with a depiction of the great Malian king, Mansa Musa holding a large gold nugget.

## Establishing Settlements

Beginning with the first voyage in 1419, the Portuguese gradually moved further and further south down the West African coast. As they did they made contact with coastal African peoples so as to trade and otherwise replenish their supplies. Over time, the Portuguese established a number of trading and supply ports along the coast as well as along the many islands not far off the coast such as Madeira and Azores. By 1482, the Portuguese had finally established a base in tropical West Africa south of the Akan gold fields. They called this settlement Elmina (the mine), a reflection of the primary motivation for its establishment.

## Propagating the Faith

Not all of the Portuguese endeavors in Africa were directly focused on trade or gold. The Portuguese were also interested in the propagating their Christian faith. As devout Christians, they felt it was their duty to teach Christianity to the Africans they met. One tactic these early Portuguese evangelizers used was to convert important community leaders in the African



societies they came in contact with. The logic here was that others in the community would naturally follow this lead. One example of this strategy occurred in Elmina. Not long after the Portuguese arrived, a local African leader came out to meet them and ask them to move on. The Portuguese responded by asking the African leader to convert to Christianity. Instead, the Portuguese established a settlement and the leader refused conversion.

### **Christian Successes in the Kongo**

Not all attempts at conversion ended in failure. In the years following the establishment of Elmina, the Portuguese began sailing to and up the River Zaire. With each voyage to the river, the Portuguese established further contact with the Africans in the area. As they learned more about the kingdom of the Kongo, the Portuguese became more convinced that making trading and religious connections with this powerful kingdom would be in Portugal's interest. In 1491 a large expedition set out to the Kongo with a load of trading goods, skilled Portuguese workers, horses, and priests. Soon after landing, the leader of the coastal province of Soyo, along with his son, was baptized. Following the baptism, the symbols of the local religion were gathered together and burned as tools of heresy. Other similar baptisms took place, most notably that of the Kongo king, Nzinga Nkuvu, just a couple months after the baptisms on the coast. Following this important conversion, the king's son and his mother were baptized. The next month, the first church of the Kongo capital, Mbanza Kongo, was established.

These early successes, however, proved to be short lived. The king soon grew to regret his hasty decision to convert to Christianity. His people resented the aggressive condemnation of their local religions and customs. The king himself resented the prohibition on multiple wives. More importantly, the substitution of one set of rituals with another proved to be greatly disruptive. The people didn't understand the new rituals and masses given in a strange foreign language. They didn't understand why their local customs proved to be so insulting to the Portuguese. After just three years, many of the initial religious changes had been rolled back. Christianity remained in the Kongo largely because the king's son continued to cling to the religion even as those



around him abandoned it. After his father passed away in 1506, he marched on the capital to take over the kingdom and reclaim it for Christianity. During his rule he kept in contact with the Portuguese king and instituted a series of modernizing reforms in the areas of education, religion, and medicine.

### **Slave Trading in West Africa**

In addition to saving souls in Africa, the Portuguese were also interested in enslaving them. In 1483, just a year after the establishment of Elmina, the Portuguese also settled the previously uninhabited island of São Tomé. The island was soon turned into a thriving sugar-producing plantation society that used slave labor taken from the mainland. By the beginning of the sixteenth century São Tomé had become the largest single producer of sugar for the European market. Indeed, its system of plantation slave labor became the model that was eventually reproduced in the Americas. But even before trans-Atlantic slavery became a major focus of Europeans, the Portuguese were engaged in trafficking slaves around Africa.

### **Christian Failures in Benin**

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Portugal's slaving enterprises were diametrically opposed to its evangelical goals. In fact, these two pursuits often went hand-in-hand, as Christianity was typically used as a vehicle for establishing relationships that would ultimately secure new slaves. To demonstrate this relationship, consider the example of Benin. In 1514 the ruler of Benin, Ozolua, sent a letter to Lisbon asking the Portuguese king for both missionaries and guns. Ozolua, however, was not actually interested in Christianity. His real goal was to secure guns and canons. But he knew enough about the Portuguese to realize that cloaking his request for guns within a request for conversion would be more effective. The Portuguese weren't so easily fooled. They sent the missionaries, but held back the guns. Ozolua's men soon grew tired of both the missionaries and Ozolua, and when they assassinated him the missionaries left.

While these setbacks were surely frustrating for the Portuguese missionaries, the failures did not dull the evangelical interest in West Africa. In



1534, the church established a diocese of São Tomé. The purpose of this diocese was to oversee the southern portion of West Africa. Over time, the bishops that controlled the diocese fostered strong relationships between Portugal and the African mainland. There were also some attempts at evangelization in East Africa, especially the island of Mozambique. But, for the most part, the expansion of Christianity in Africa would not take place in earnest until the nineteenth century. And, it wasn't the Portuguese, but rather the British and the Americans that lead this endeavor.

### Reading Analysis

Answer the following two short answer questions using the information in the reading above.

1. How would you rank the Portuguese motivation to expand Christianity in comparison to the other motivations the Portuguese had at this early stage? Explain your answer.

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2. What were some of the early successes and failures the Portuguese experienced while trying to expand Christianity in Africa?

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## Long Essay

In a few paragraphs, explain the role of Christian evangelization in the context of early Portuguese colonization in Africa. Think about how the Church spread, how its spread was frustrated, and how the purpose of spreading the religion. Be sure to use your answers from the short answer questions above to help inform your position. Submit your response on a separate sheet of paper.

