



Christianity among the Ninkarse of Burkina Faso: How it influences their beliefs about God

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In this paper I will consider what the Ninkarse beliefs about God are,
how they accepted Christianity, and thence were confirmed in some aspects
of their beliefs and how they changed others.

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I. Introduction

During the years 1996 -2003 my husband and I lived and worked with the Ninkarse of Burkina Faso (see map in appendix), also called Nankanse by Zwernemann (1961, 248–49). We helped them to do language development, elaborate literacy material and translate the New Testament. We assisted two important Christian celebrations: In 2004 the dedication of the New Testament in their language and in 2006 the celebration of 50 years of Christianity in the Ninkarse area.

What marked me at the first of these occasions was the exclamation of an African colleague of another people of Burkina Faso: “In these people you can see how they really have been set free [by the gospel]” (Adama Boro, personal communication). For the second occasion, the Ninkarse Christians wrote a locally published celebration brochure (*Assemblées de Dieu 2006*).

Williamson wrote about the establishment of Christian churches in the Akan region of Ghana that the Christian faith was implanted by western Missionaries and “expressed itself in western modes” (1965, 165). The strategy of some missionary societies (such as the Assemblies of God), however, was to educate a local clergy. This matches with McVeigh’s opinion for the situation in Uganda: “...Africa must be evangelized by Africans who are supported by their own people” (1974, 47). This was also the case in many parts of Burkina Faso. The first missionary arriving in the Ninkarse region in 1956 was not a westerner but a Burkina pastor, a Mossi named Belco SAWADOGO (*Assemblées de Dieu 2006*).

In this paper I will consider what the Ninkarse beliefs about God are, how they accepted Christianity, and thence were confirmed in some aspects of their beliefs and how they changed others.

2. Some Aspects of Ninkarse Traditional Religion

2.1 The notion of God

The most important element in Ninkarse belief on which Christianity is building is the concept of God. The Ninkarse call him *Nawēnne* (King God/Heaven). The word *wēnne* designates also the sun, which is often called *wēntule* (God's/Heaven's ball). God was there in ancient times before anything else existed. He is outside of time and he is in contact with every being and everything. He is located above the sky *wēngānne* (skin of God/Heaven). He is the Supreme Being who created the sky, sun, moon and stars, the earth with everything on it, the first man and his wife. The lightning, thunder and rain are his voice (Zwernemann 1961, 249). The same Supreme God/Heaven or God/Sun is found in many of the Voltaic people groups (see Zwernemann 1961; Koabike 2003, 10).

This corresponds with Parrinder's view that "African peoples have had a belief in a Supreme being as an integral part of their world view and practised religion." (1969, 39). He attributes to God the primary function as creator, as the Ninkarse and related people groups do, contrary to others who argue that the conception of God as creator did not exist within West African belief systems. (Greene 1996, 123). Most authors, however, agree that the notion of a Supreme God who reigns over everything existed in West Africa long before Christianity was introduced; and Mary (1998, 13) states that the debate concerning the existence of God in African view is due to a lack of knowledge concerning intercultural reality.

2.2 Heaven and Earth

Ninkarse beliefs are concentrated on two main areas or powers: God/Heaven and Earth. All other powers are in some way related or subordinate to these. The Ninkarse view the Earth as the wife of God/Heaven, as do other related groups, such as the Namnam, the Nuna, the Kassena and the Sissala. The conception of the divine couple formed of God/Heaven and the Earth is a characteristic feature of West African people groups (Zwernemann 1961, 253, 258–59, 262, 269). God/Heaven is the husband who causes the Earth to be fertile through rains in order that she produces crops. When the Earth receives a sacrifice, she brings it to God/Heaven, just like a wife prepares food for her husband. It is the earth priest who sacrifices on the earth shrines *têngãna* (skins of earth); he receives this hereditary power from God.

Parrinder states:

Heaven and earth provide the stage where the human drama is played out. Men lift up their eyes to the sky and naturally regard its spirit as transcendent and mighty. But they live on the earth, plant seed in it, derive food from it, and in its depths the dead are buried. So mother Earth is nearest to men and linked with them by many bonds (1969, 53).

Consequently, the Ninkarse, together with several other African cultures see the earth as a mother, the land is generally sacred and cannot be sold.

2.3 The relationship between God and man

God reigns from above but does not normally intervene in human affairs (see also Zwernemann 1961, 247). He is far away and thus only very few sacrifices are offered directly to him (Zwernemann 1961, 249). As a rule, man can only reach him through an

intermediary. Sacrifices offered to the earth or the ancestors finally arrive in the presence of God who is above all, as Zwernemann states also for the Dagari (1961, 255).

In West Africa, there are several different explanations why God is far away from human beings; there seems to be a common understanding that the ideal would be a relationship with God and that something happened that destroyed this relationship. “The belief in God’s absenteeism from the ordinary affairs of men’s existence is a cardinal belief in African Traditional Religion” (McVeigh 1974, 38).

Williamson (1965, 88) wrote concerning the Akan region of Ghana that long ago God lived on earth or at least very near to human beings but was annoyed by a certain old woman who, when using her pestle knocked up against him and so God left and went up into the sky (see also McVeigh 1974, 23). Apouri (2008, 23) relates a similar myth from one of the neighbouring and related people groups of the Ninkarse. Further investigation is needed to know if the Ninkarse themselves have something comparable.

3. The arrival of Christianity

In August 1956 the Mossi Pastor Belco Sawadogo from the Assemblies of God started to preach the Christian gospel in the market town of the Ninkarse, in Guelwongo. He preached it in the chief’s compound right in front of important people with roles in the traditional religion. According to an eye witness account “lots of people gave themselves to the Lord and several people were healed from diseases. A man supposed to be possessed by demons heard about the preaching and came to listen. The pastor prayed for him and the demons left. Subsequently he burnt all his fetishes. This astonished the people and they believed that God’s word has power” (Assemblées de Dieu 2006, 3

translation mine). One year later, the first church was built in this place and in the same year people became Christians in several villages of the Ninkarse region.

By 1992 there were about fifteen churches in the region and Christians decided that they would like to have the New Testament in their language and asked SIL, the organisation I work with, to help them.

4. Continuity and rupture concerning the notion of God

On one hand Christianity built on the traditional view of the Supreme Being who created everything and is above everything. On the other hand the arrival of Christianity induced a process of changing. Beliefs that were held by the people changed with conversion to Christianity and even more when the New Testament was translated into their language. A group of Ninkarse Christians including pastors and laypersons, men and woman, older and young people read through every verse of the proposed translation and decided what words to use for the different Biblical concepts.

The Ninkarse's name for this Supreme Being was retained: *Nawěnnε* (King God/Heaven), as it was done in most people groups in West Africa, such as the Yoruba (Peel 1968, 126).

The notion of God, who was distant because of a fault of man, fits with the Christian message, even if the reason why there was a rupture between God and man is accounted for differently. Christians could build on this basis to express the message that this relationship has been re-established. This "adaptation" or "reposition" of what they already believed before has been described by Laurent for the conversion of the Mossi "more as a continuum than as a rupture". (1998, 69 translation mine).

So we can see both, continuity and rupture. The change comes from Christians preaching that God became near and expressed concern for people through Christ, who is the source of all power and will now help them in their needs. People do not need to pass through intermediary powers any more but can reach God and worship him directly.

5. Some other Aspects where Christians adapted their beliefs

The Ninkare's Traditional Religion is anthropocentric, as people use it to influence supernatural powers in their favour for their personal welfare. They are "concerned predominantly with easing the conditions of living in this world"(Peel 1968, 124; see also Greene 1996, 123).

After having become Christians the Ninkarse move towards a more theocentric view: they see God as sovereign who is at the origin of man and has all rights over him. God's view and will is all-important, so people are concerned about God and man, their characteristics and their relationships.

In traditional religion the Ninkarse offer sacrifices to the earth or the ancestors. This is necessary in the case of a crisis like an illness, an accident or death. As these are caused by an offended ancestor or by witchcraft, the relationships and peace needs to be re-established through sacrifices. The aim of a sacrifice is also a means for human beings to restore a good life with health, wealth and prestige. The goal of the sacrifice is to influence the existing powers and to get their favour. "Sin" is an antisocial act, the disrespect of social and ritual norms, and "salvation" means to be reaccepted in the community of the living by complying with the social demands and to be accepted by the ancestors through sacrifices and accompanying invocations.

As Christians, however, they see a need to be saved from "sin", both from the power "sin" has in human life and from the guilt and the future punishment because of it.

They see “sin” as acted mostly against God and the need for reconciliation with him. Although Christians read in the Old Testament that sacrifices were offered directly to God in the past, they also read that these sacrifices can never really remove “sin”. The New Testament teaches that Christ came and offered the ultimate sacrifice and there is no need to sacrifice any more.

6. Conclusion

As said in the introduction, an African, knowing traditional religion from his own background saw that Christianity liberated the Ninkarse Christians. As I showed in this paper, in traditional religion crises are often caused by an offended ancestor or by witchcraft. People go to a lot of effort in making sure that the living comply with all requirements of the unseen world and they are often concerned that they did not do enough. The fear of witchcraft, especially when somebody’s economic situation is improving, pushes them to do more sacrifices or to look for more powerful witchcraft to protect them. Christians, on the other hand, usually believe that God is good and almighty, and wants the best for people. He can protect them, which relieves Ninkarse Christians from their fears.

Ninkarse Christians themselves wanted to translate the Bible into their language and decided which words and notions they continued to use and which concepts needed to be changed or adapted in order to live according to what they accepted as truth for their lives.

Peel (1968, 127–28) talks about two approaches how missionaries presented a new religion, emphasizing either discontinuity or continuity between the old and the new.

I would see the Ninkarse in the middle of these two, a bit like the case of the Yoruba, where the African leaders accepted Christian theology, but changed the way they organised church towards more local forms (Peel 1968, 129).

In this paper I have presented how continuity between Ninkarse traditional religion and Christianity has been preserved through the notion of God while there is also a certain rupture and change to adapt to the new religion.

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8. Appendix



Google Map



Map by Urs Niggli



Google Map