

Book Review

Faith, Power and Family: Christianity and Social Change in French Cameroon by Charlotte Walker-Said

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Review by *Jude Fokwang*

In *Faith, Power and Family*, Walker-Said details Christianity's role in reconfiguring African marriage and family-building among French Cameroonians in the southern forest, coastal zones and the western grassfields. She aims to accomplish two broad objectives; first, to uncover the interplay between spiritual (both indigenous and Christian-inspired) and secular forces as experienced by individuals and groups and how these forces shaped people's actions in changing socio-political and religious contexts. Secondly, to paint a portrait of the localization of Christianity through a critical analysis of the choices individuals and groups made concerning marital and familial relationships (41).

Walker-Said contends that the reconfiguration of African marriage lay at the heart of the evangelizing mission as the monogamous family was believed by missionaries to be the principal vector of propagating the Christian worldview (8). Christian marriage and family-building under French colonial rule and mission activity, she argues, reveal the ambiguities of collective and individual religiosity, social mobilization and the tensions of resistance and obedience (12). While missionaries played a leading role in reforming African marriages, Walker-Said argues, it was in fact African Christian leaders (especially catechists in both Catholic and Protestant missions) who crafted and circulated ideas that

shaped significant reforms - the popularization of Christian marriage as the "essential rite through which to receive God's grace" (9). She submits that these Christian leaders "acted as buffers against radical change, but also intentionally propelled it" (27), thereby contributing to the emergence of what she calls *Christian publics* - cross-cultural confessional units - that "led their members toward new forms of personal piety, collective worship, and cultural expression" (27). These points, I believe, constitute the thrust of Walker-Said's argument - one which accords agency to the role of African converts in telling the African story of conversion.

During the early period of French colonial rule, Christian missions registered an exponential increase in the number of catechists, many who would become the most passionate bearers of the new religious ideologies. Given their staggering numbers (over 2000 amongst the Catholic and Protestant missions), the question may be justifiably asked - what attracted people to become catechists? The clues lie in the deep structures of indigenous society. In precolonial Beti and Bulu societies, Walker-Said suggests, status and prestige were marked by the ability to outperform one's peers through speech - understood to be the "substance of life" (83). In Beti society, men who wielded authority often had command of mystical and charismatic power but what le-



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gitimized their authority was their “command of language” (82). Christianity thus added another layer of power to the pre-existing arsenal of political capital. Consequently, conversion and becoming a catechist accorded a number of advantages that rivalled the authority exercised by the orator-leaders of precolonial times. Catechists could read the scripture aloud, attract a following in local society and command prestige. In many of the Catholic and Protestant communities, catechists heard confessions (88), scrutinized Christians’ behaviours, maintained records of “good standing” and supervised the reintroduction of repentant Christians back into the mission.

With their new-found powers, catechists inevitably found themselves on a collision course with colonial administrators and their locally-appointed chiefs. Colonialism and the market economy bolstered the status of chiefs who reinvested their growing wealth by acquiring more wives, paying larger bridewealth (102) and expanding their plantations. Young catechists blamed their inability to acquire wives because of chiefs’ “bride avarice” and the fact that they were poorly paid (108). Missionaries and especially catechists therefore had a vested interest in promoting monogamy as the surest pathway to localizing Christianity. To this end, polygamous men and chiefs would only be accepted as catechumens on the condition that they renounced polygamy (128).

An issue that could be developed further rests on a claim Walker-Said makes about the status of women during the interwar years. According to her, reforms in marriage and the family ultimately undermined women’s autonomy in the forest zones of French Cameroon (20). What does autonomy mean in a society structured by sociocentric ideas of interdependence? If indeed a critical analysis of women’s autonomy is to be achieved, one would have to consider the twin forces of colonialism and capitalism, as well as how Christian missions with their varying ideologies all played different roles to undermine women’s social standing. Such an analysis would also warrant more data from the western grassfields of French Cameroon, given the significant differences in their cultural traditions and worldviews, compared to the forest or coastal zones.

This notwithstanding, Walker-Said has provided a superb analysis of how French colonialism and successive Christian missions targeted and sought to reform African marriages and family systems. While European missionaries played a pioneering role, Walker-Said argues that it was indeed African evangelists who took over and managed the pace at which everyday life was reconfigured (276). Ultimately, this thoroughly-researched book is a celebration of the role African catechists, priests and pastors played in reconfiguring marriage and the African family during the interwar period.