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## Christianity in Atlantic Africa before 1800

Globalizing processes that transformed villagers in Little Popo on the Gulf of Guinea in what is now Togo or along the shores of the Malebo Pool in the modern Republic of the Congo and elsewhere into Atlantic Africans began long before the first so-called Africans came to the Americas. By the late fifteenth century the people who lived in parts of the African continent adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean began feeling the influences of an expanding Christian European culture. Their reactions to it varied greatly, from accepting Christianity in its wholly European form to synthesizing it with their own indigenous faiths to making it just one more cult among many traditional ones that helped them survive and prosper in a dangerous world to rejecting it completely.

This complex process is documented in the work of eighteenth-century German Moravian missionary C.G.A. Oldendorp, who wrote meticulously of what captive Africans in the Caribbean told him about what he believed was the practice of Christian ritual in Africa. In the religious services by which the West Central African Sokko people celebrated the seventh month of the year, “one can see,” according to Oldendorp, “traces of their contact with Christian missionaries. Throughout that month, practices such as a daylong fast and a suspension of all work activities until sunset are observed. On those occasions, a priest addresses the assembled people by reading to them from a book, exhorting them to believe in God as the source of all that is good and warning them to obey his word.” Moreover,

Oldendorp's African source told him that the "priest also kneels and prays with the people who touch the earth three times with their foreheads during prayer and cross themselves three times after the conclusion of the service." The Moravian missionary-turned-ethnographer was convinced that this was a clear example of how the Sokko had incorporated into their religious practices the Western Christian belief in the tripartite nature of God. A perhaps less biased observer would note, however, that while strains of Christian traditions are present, much of what Oldendorp relates about contemporaneous Sokko spirituality had firm roots in many traditional African religions as well.<sup>1</sup>

Another, more fraught example of Christian influence in Africa was related in the 1760s by recently arrived Moravian missionaries August Spangenberg and Friedrich Martin on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas. They "experienced great joy" when they met Marotta, whom they described as "an old Guinea woman from the Papaa nation" who said that in her African homeland she regularly prayed in the morning before she ate and at night before she went to sleep. On both occasions, Spangenberg notes, "she falls on her knees" and "lowers her face to the earth" before giving thanks to the deity. When asked, however, she said she had never "yet heard the gospel of Jesus Christ," but she did have some vague notions about the trinity. She probably learned about it while living in or near Great Popo along the Slave Coast from African Christians or the occasional Portuguese priest who visited the area from time to time. This Papaw (also spelled Papa and Popo) woman proclaimed that there was only one God, the Father, to whom she referred as Pao, and that he had a son named Masu, who was the "only door . . . through which it is possible to come to the Father." Marotta was, though, unfamiliar with the idea that Jesus, or Masu, had become a man and sacrificed himself to redeem all mankind. Before joining the Moravians, Marotta routinely sacrificed a goat or a lamb to placate her god and thereby ensure her own well-being. She was not a Christian in Africa, but the influence of Islamic and Christian ideas is clearly evident; if she was not an African Christian while living in Great Popo, Marotta was certainly an Atlantic African. Spangenberg and Martin were happy enough to use whatever entre they could to spread their brand of the faith.<sup>2</sup>

As the spiritual practices of the Sokko and of the Papaw illustrate, multiple influences helped to shape Atlantic-African spirituality in the early modern era. They are especially important here because they illustrate well the presence and hybrid character of Christianity in Africa as well as in the

Caribbean during the eighteenth century. Christianity's influence among Atlantic Africans, however deep or shallow, began as early as the fifteenth century and endured as a largely indigenous movement over the following three hundred years. Discovering how they came to be Christians, how many black Christians there were in Africa during this period, how contact with African culture changed Christianity, and whether Africans brought their version of Christianity with them to the Americas when they went there as forced migrants are the objects of this chapter. Christianity's history in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa extends to the fourth century CE and over the millennia has inspired the conversion of millions of adherents. Intriguing new evidence supports the idea that many Africans in the diaspora were not only well acquainted with Christianity in Portuguese Kongo, Angola, and elsewhere but also knew about the black Christians of Ethiopia and Egypt and therefore thought of Christianity as an indigenous faith initially independent of and not wholly dominated by white slave owners, making them more likely to embrace it once in America.

In assessing the origins of African American Christianity it is important to keep in mind a number of ideas. First, the development of black Christianity was an Atlantic-world phenomenon. There were black Christians in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean long before people of color were converted in large numbers in North America. Afro-Christians, moreover, moved around the Atlantic basin with startling regularity.<sup>3</sup> Most went unwillingly to work, struggle, and die on New World plantations; others began their lives as slaves but used their wits and sometimes their religion to gain freedom and new homes; some, already free, traveled the Atlantic in search of opportunity.

There were far more Christians in Africa before 1800 than previously recognized by most scholars of the Americas. At a peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries up to two million African Catholics lived in Kongo and Angola. Though less successfully, white and black Christian missionaries from the Caribbean, Europe, and Britain brought their versions of true faith to the people of West Africa's Atlantic littoral. Operating out of trading factories or castles run by slave traders, Caribbean, European, and Eurafri- can missionaries brought an unknown number into Christian churches from along the region's Atlantic coast over the course of three centuries. Theirs was a remarkable feat considering the scant resources afforded them, the small number of evangelists involved, and the inescapably obvious con-

nection in the minds of many Africans between Western Christianity and the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>4</sup>

Those who attempted to spread Christianity in Africa faced real and durable obstacles, and the task would have been nearly impossible without the assistance of Africans and mixed-race Atlantic Africans. Both groups took the lead in propagating the faith in the absence of sufficient numbers of European missionaries, most of whom died soon after they arrived in tropical Africa from diseases from which they had few natural immunities. African Christians, moreover, did not merely translate European Christianity word for word to their catechists but developed a series of regional hybrids that existed alongside indigenous faiths and served the particular spiritual needs of diverse sets of Africans in varying locales. They created, in the process, a uniquely African Christianity that was then carried in the hearts and minds of at least some enslaved Africans to the Americas, where it flourished, simmered below the surface, or died as circumstances dictated. Though not the only source for Christianity among blacks in North America and elsewhere, Africa, because of Christianity's long presence there and the large numbers of Africans converted, must be included as one of the regions that influenced its development and growth.

Religious members of the Sokko and countless other groups from all over Atlantic Africa constructed a complex religious superstructure that included traditional African spirituality, Christianity, and Islam, as they strove to deal with the brutalities of the transatlantic slave trade. When they found themselves thrust into the slave markets of Bahia in Brazil, Savanna-la-Mar in Jamaica, or Stono River in South Carolina, some were already Christians. For a variety of reasons, they did not identify their beliefs as Christianity, but under the right circumstances some of them found it beneficial to embrace a faith whose rituals had a certain pleasing familiarity.

## **The Role of Atlantic Africans**

Some of those most responsible for fostering this unique form of African Christianity before 1800 were the mixed-race offspring of European men who came to Africa to profit from the slave trade and the African women they found there. Most children of these unions who grew up in Africa were maligned by white European observers as merely nominal or semi-Christians whom they damned for never completely separating themselves from their African social and religious heritages. It should be noted that many