Conforming To Christianity Essay, Research Paper

CONFORMING TO CHRISTIANITY

Jomo Kenyatta’s ethnography, Facing Mt. Kenya was written in the 1930’s about Kikuyu society during 1890-1910, the early years of British colonialism in Kenya. Since the coming of the early colonization the Kikuyu people have tried to develop a religious attitude that would define it’s own culture while adapting forcefully to the European conforms of religion.

The preconceived European ideas about the African natives were unjust and unsubstantiated. The missionaries viewed the Africans as savages and that everything that they did was evil. Missionaries that were sent to spread the view of Christianity would have to change their beliefs and their social interactions to save them from the “eternal fire”(p.259). Interesting enough the missionaries overlooked the higher educated and the more well to do and focused on the more ignorant and less educated. Many Mzungu (Europeans) were, interestingly enough, often very uneducated in the process they were about to embark upon. Europeans felt that it was unnecessary to have formal training when dealing with such savages as the Kikuyu people. Intelligence would suggest that if you were dealing with people who are uneducated and ignorant you should have some of your most qualified people on the task.

Missionaries who were devoted to the change of the Kikuyu people took into account none of groups’ communal life, due to traditions and customs. One of the most principal attacks on the Kikuyu people was the attempt to demolish polygamy. In order for them to be accepted by the missionaries, they would have to cease in this practice which was at the heart of the tribes social structure. Despite these reckless attacks on their culture the natives saw the chance of an education, a white mans’ education. In order to receive this small amount of reading and writing lessons from the missionaries the Kikuyu would have to convert to Christianity and totally disregard most of their religious and communal beliefs. Missionaries tried to break up the any polygamous relationships that existed between Kikuyu men and women without any concern to what it meant to the two sexes and the community. The need for women to be mothers and wives was rooted deep in traditional collective beliefs. In Kikuyu communities the raising of a family is great cause for rise in social status. The larger a mans family the better it was for the community as a whole. This principle now being thwarted by the white missionaries was hard on the whole family unit. Men would have to send away some of their wives and children whom were a part of the community. Without polygamy, women would be driven away and risk being unmarried then shunned out of the community.

The Kikuyu people tried to show the missionaries that the bible itself had polygamy prevalent throughout and that some of the most religious men had several wives. Kikuyu men even tried to take on name of biblical men who practiced polygamy to help prove themselves in front of God and the missionaries. To the dismay of the clan these attempts to prove that polygamy was just, were ultimately ignored and thrown out by the missionaries.

In order to keep their cultural and religious heritages existent new adaptations of religions begin to form after the invasion of the Europeans. The Kikuyu people formed a religious sect called the Watu Wa Mngu or People of the God. They developed a religion in which aspects of both Christianity and their old religion could survive. The Watu Wa Mngu prayed to god with animal cries instead of scripture they also worshiped their ancestors, not unlike the Europeans worshiped their ancestors as in Saints. In this religious order polygamy was allowed explaining that the Europeans interpreted the Bible to suit their own needs and to decrease the Kikuyu population. The tribe believed that if people were to accommodate the notion of monogamy then their population would cease to exist. Thus they have an explanation as to why the Bible has forms of polygamy and why they can continue to preserve it in their culture.

In contrast, I fell that Kikuyu people were not a savage people as the Europeans had claimed. They seemed to be very intelligent, shown by the way in which they used the missionaries to gain valuable education the art of reading and writing. They were also able to use the Bible to reinforce their former beliefs in polygamy and that it was not only allowed in Kikuyu society but they proved it was allowed in Christianity. Although the religion of Christianity was forced upon them they made the best of the situation and later some groups were able to adapt to the form of Christianity and reshape it into a religion that would fit into the communal life as in traditions and customs.