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Christian beliefs in the worldview of local healers in Malawi

Abstract

From the beginnings of missionary work in Africa, the ideas of Christianity have often been in conflict with established traditional beliefs by local communities. Many rites and beliefs about spiritual world, transmitted for generations, were declared as incompatible with Christianity by missionaries and it was the aim among some of them that such rites and beliefs should be extinguished. Until now, traditional healing practices figure among these cultural traditions that are not accepted in many Christian congregations. However, in spite of such strong rejection on the part of church communities, they have resisted extinction. Instead, new adapted forms have arisen, integrating some elements from Christian beliefs. In Malawi today, it is therefore hardly possible to encounter healing practitioners (*asing'anga*) who would not at some stage in their practices refer to Jesus or use some Christian symbols and songs.

My dissertation project envisages a study of the historical processes underlying the changes in the healing practices of Malawi, with a focus on the time period from the 1960s until now and on the role of implanted Christian worldview in these changes. It is intended to identify in great detail the modifications of the healing practices taking place during this period and how they are related to the increasing Christianization process of large sectors of the population in Malawi. In particular, I intend to investigate how and why an amalgamation between these rather different worldviews has come about. The background and the factors leading to convergence between elements of the two systems of ideas are to be identified and examined in great detail. I will look at the development and use of Christian-influenced ideas in their adaptive modifications among present-day healing practitioners and religious innovators under social pressure. To unfold this theme, I will undertake ethnographic fieldwork and also archival work in the country. Oral narratives will be an important part of the source material.