

The Non-Conversion of the Anufo of Northern Ghana

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1. Background

In *Go . . . and Make Disciples* Rev. Al Krass chronicled his mission to an isolated people of Northern Ghana—the Anufo. His efforts were unusually successful and attracted considerable public attention in *TIME* magazine¹. Seven short years after Krass the author was assigned to establish the Catholic Mission there², but having read Krass's book, he was little prepared for what he was to find. All but one of the chapels built³ by Krass had literally fallen down. Most of those baptized by Krass (about 1600) had either returned to traditional beliefs or become Muslim. The other programs started by Krass fared little better. The literacy instructors now refused to pass on their skills and most of the evangelists had become Muslim. One who had managed to hide from Krass the fact that he had been Muslim, now openly practiced his first faith. The two Anufo pastors whom Krass sponsored for the ministry had been deemed unfit for the profession and suspended. Only the agricultural program continued with some success⁴, although less dramatically because of lack of inputs.

It soon became apparent that I was expected to be a kind of saviour and bring the good times back. Agricultural inputs, hoe blades, fertilizers, bicycles, lorry services, wells, sanitation facilities, relief goods, food supplies

and salaries had “been provided by Krass”⁵ as the people said, and, being a “*Nasalanie*” (lit. follower of the Nazorean, or “white-man”), I was expected to provide them too.

However, I had no intention to compete with Krass and thereby earned the title “useless white-man” (*Nasalanie ngbengbe*). People even accused me of smuggling the relief goods that I supposedly had across the border to Togo to enrich myself. Pointing out that I was living as modestly as they (I had no vehicle, ate local foods and lived mostly in the villages) only served to annoy them the more. “At least I could have had the decency to share some of it with them.” The words still ring in my ears: “you are a useless white-man; you do not give us things.”

Others too suffered in the aftermath. The feelings of betrayal were considerable among Krass's own Churchmen—the Evangelical Presbyterians. There was no more money. Services in the villages discontinued because the new pastors were more burdened and less provided for.

2. Thesis: Christianity is not perceived as a Religion

The contributing factors seem clear enough at first glance. Since Krass's departure Ghana had fallen on hard times. The Krass era (1963-1969) coincided with what must have seemed a boundless flow of government spending in the district. Schools, a post office, assembly hall, market stalls, an extensive well-staffed health clinic and a water pumping station and filtration plant had all been installed at government expense. But the word for “government” in Anufo is “white-man”. Krass rode the crest of a euphoric wave of modernization engulfing the North of Ghana.

¹ Time 1974

² Father Charles Erb opened Chereponi Mission Nov. 1961 and built a multi-purpose hall for services and as a temporary residence for visiting priests. I was the first priest assigned there full time in 1976.

³ Although Krass maintained that people must build their own churches and care for them it seems that the people interpreted the fact that he supplied the cement and iron sheets at subsidized prices as a seal of his ownership. At any rate I have heard people call them “Krass's storehouse.”

⁴ Due mainly to the efforts of Mr. Bob Thelen a UCC agriculturalist who worked together with Krass but stayed on until 1978.

⁵ Krass actually sold the inputs, bicycles, etc. at subsidized price and the relief goods were provided by the Christian Service Committee. Nevertheless these too were perceived as being provided by Krass.

A new political awareness, the promise of a healthier, longer life and of economic prosperity all went along with being educated and learning Western ways. Their word for it was “*anyunuteke*” (getting one’s eyes opened). His departure coincided with the gradual local mismanagement and deterioration of these plants and services, and with the worldwide petrol crisis slump.

I found all of this most puzzling. While back in the area doing anthropological fieldwork from 1979 to 1981⁶ two fundamental questions occurred to me. One was why the upsurge of converts to Islam? And this led to a further question: had Christianity dealt with their everyday problems as well as Islam? I began to see that it wasn’t simply what Christianity offered that was at the root of the “non-conversion” phenomenon but perhaps more importantly what it did not offer.

In the 60’s perhaps Islam was no match for “getting one’s eyes opened” but compared to traditional life, it offered some obvious opportunities for advancement. Islam controlled the trade syndicates and it had become a major factor in northern politics. But perhaps even more importantly for the Commoner, it also offered a valid, satisfactory alternative to traditional beliefs and values, and the practices that flowed from them. Christianity, on the other hand, did not seem to offer any satisfactory alternatives to traditional beliefs and practices but rather ignored these entirely.

While doing anthropological research, it became necessary for me actually to become a diviner in order to learn more about their problem-solving procedure. People were pleasantly surprised. “We didn’t know you were interested in religion (i.e. the way we solve problems with shrines)”, they said. It then occurred to me that Christianity might not be regarded by most as a religion, i.e., as a system for problem-solving. To understand how this could be possible we must examine the traditional beliefs of the Anufo—especially

⁶ The author received a PhD in Social Anthropology at Cambridge UK (1978-1983) returning to do fieldwork in his former station 1979-1981. Since 1983 he has been working to establish a cross-cultural research centre in Tamale, N Ghana.

as regards problem-solving. But first a short description of the Anufo.

3. The Anufo

The Anufo, or Chakosi⁷ are a conglomerate of people tracing their descent to a band of mercenaries who struck out from the middle of Ivory Coast in the mid-18th C and finally settled in Sansanne Mango⁸, Northern Togo, and gradually spread to the surrounding area including a part of Northern Ghana called “Nalori”. Until the German colonizing force put a stop to it in 1911⁹, they had subsisted entirely on slave raiding, marauding, and tribute squeezed from the original inhabitants—the various Paragurma peoples¹⁰ of the area. Gradually these people become ‘Anufoized’ in language and culture and it is the group in Nalori, now numbering around 80, 000¹¹, among whom both Rev. Krass and I worked.

4. Anufo Social Structure

Being ‘Anufoized’ Kombas and Konkombas, the Nalori Anufo retain some aspects of Paragurma life. Like the Paragurma peoples, they live in villages of 300-1000 which are divided into compounds (*awulu*) in which all males and unmarried females claim to be a unitary agnatic kin group descended from a man living 4 or 5 generations back. But unlike the Paragurma groups, these lines of descent are not pure but include subgroups of strangers, in-laws, and the descendants of slaves. These hierarchies within the kin groups also rigidly mark political, economic, and religious institutions. The son of a slave holds the calabash when pouring libations as a

⁷ The Anufo or “people from Anou” in the Ivory Coast east of the Comoe river around present day Prikro speak an Anyi-Bawule dialect (cf. J. M. Stewart 1965:71) and are also called “Chokosi” (lit. cut and sell) by their enemies.

⁸ “Sansanne” means “camp” in Hausa. “Mango” is the name of the capital in old Anou.

⁹ Cf. Graf Von Zech’s comments concerning the Anufo “wok’ of slave-raiding. ANT, FA 3/4009, v. Zech to DC, Mango Yendi 10/61911.

¹⁰ Cf. Cornevin 1961:81, 30-31. A general category for Konkomba, Komba, Bimoba.

¹¹ By own census in 1980 (of Kirby 1983:51) there are 27, 794 Anufo in Nalori, Krass notes that in 1964 there were about 15,000 on either side of the border (1974)

group. Only the son of a freeman may become the compound or village headman.

The Anufo, like the nearby Gonja, are organised into a tripartite “Estate” system (cf., E. Goody 1973) consisting of “Nobles” (ruling estate), “Commoners” (foot soldier /proletariat), and “Muslims” (professional clerics). Each of the original 13 households¹² in S. Mango belongs to one of these groups. Each Nalori village claims kinship affiliation and estate membership with one of these original S. Mango compounds to which it formerly sent tribute. However, the S. Mango Anufo regard all Nalori Anufo as their “slaves.”

5. Religion and Problem-Solving among the Nalori Anufo

As with all African peoples, the Nalori Anufo religious experience is part of the warp and woof of everyday life. There are two dimensions to reality—the seen and the unseen, the tangible empirical world, and the world of the ancestors, various spirit entities and God. Unseen realities are ever-present affecting relationships and events, and moving things in the visible world. Relationships with unseen agents can be maintained directly and through one’s external relationships with agnates, affines, friends and enemies.

Any misfortune, illness, or suffering experience may have a number of causes—the immediate or extrinsic cause (e.g., a boy loses his balance and falls from tree breaking his arm), and one or more fundamental intrinsic causes (e.g., the unseen entity causing the fall through negligence or directed action; a further agent may include the enemy who employed the spiritual agency responsible (cf., also Beattie 1980). Solutions must therefore be applied to all the levels of causality (e.g. setting the arm, controlling or appeasing the active spiritual agents and dealing with the supposed enemy). Disrupted relationships in the seen world cause and are affected by similar disruptions in the unseen, especially with regard to the ancestors. Misfortunes and illness are understood primarily as signs of such disharmony and therefore they signal the need to re-establish a former balance. A

¹² Cf. Asmis 1912:77, also von Zech (Bundesarchiv R 150 3/4009, 10/6/1911).

continuous balance is maintained through ritual action at various shrines—the points of contact with unseen agents.

Although shrines are never approached without cause—a problem or misfortune, either apparent or anticipated—hardly a day goes by without some sort of sacrifice being made by a compound member. Life itself is interpreted as a problem-strewn passage towards ancestorhood which must be carefully negotiated using shrines. Indeed we may say that it is always a problem or misfortune set within the network of relationships that is the central focus and *raison d’etre* of their religious thought and action.

6. Shrines and Shrine Custodianship

For the most part, ritual office is co-extensive with political. There are three levels of ritual office governing shrine custodianship: the territorial level, the kin-group level, and the individual level.

- 1) At the territorial level the village headman (*miekpie*) and in some “Commoner” villages the ‘Landowner’ (*miefo*), is the custodian of the territorial shrine and is responsible for maintaining harmonious relations between the various kin groups (including their ancestors) of the village.
- 2) At the level of the basic kin group, the head of each compound is also the ritual head of the “house”. He is the custodian of the kin shrines—those agnatic shrines passed down in the patrilineage, the shrine brought from a mother’s or father’s mother’s patrilineage, and the Fertility (*nda* or “twin”) shrines and Medicine shrines (*ayili*) which have accrued through the generations to the kin group as a whole.
- 3) At the individual level, any adult male may be the custodian of a number of shrines for himself, his wife and children. These may include personal shrines like the Spirit Guardian Shrine (*nyeme*) to one’s tutelary, the Divination shrine (*kuruku*) (*mburugu* for women), or the various shrines of the Spirits of the Wild (*jinam*), and Medicine shrines including any number of privately owned cults (e.g.

Tigare), Rain shrines (*nsue*), a multitude of offensive and/or protective shrines, and finally the simple personified herbal remedies having some preternatural power.

7. Influence of Islam

Although the old Doula Qadiryya patronymics which make up the Muslim estate did not permit converts, they always recognized true Nobles as automatically Muslim. And although the Anufo were culturally a blend of many peoples, perhaps the most visible and unifying influences have been Islamic.

The Islamic lunar calendar directed non-Muslims when to make regular sacrifices (e.g. *Jomana* “fire festival”, *Panje* “guinea-fowl festival”, *Nyemefili* “the great prayer” or “New Year”, and *Kulubi* and *Songi*, “feast of maidens” and “festival of the young men” at the end of Ramadan). Some Islamic rituals and practices were accepted without much alteration (*yasi*, Ar. Ya’sin, calling upon Malams for special offerings and prayer, and *salaka*, Ar. Sadaqa, gift offerings and almsgivings). The Islamic calendar also specified for all Anufo, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, when not to make irregular sacrifices, when not to have marriages, betrothals, funerals, when not to renew one’s tutelary shrines, make sacrifices to divination shrines, twin shrines, or ‘catch’ the “Spirits of the Wild” (*jinam*).

Besides these overtly religious connections there are numerous influences in dress and etiquette: fashion in clothing, hats, urinating while squatting, touching the heart after handshake and Arabic greetings. But most of these cultural and contextual forms simply provide a matrix within which traditional processes in religious problem-solving can be carried out. They do not replace these processes.

There are two ways, however, in which Islam has entered and influenced these problem-solving networks: (1) through the concept of accumulated merit (*lada*) and (2) through the ritual apparatus for approaching the High God after all other means of problem-solving have failed.

The possibility of accumulating blessings (*baraka*) translated into the Anufo non-Muslim problem-solving procedure as an opportunity to store up sacrificial power against unseen adversaries or a reservoir against misfortune. The affects of this can be seen more among Nalori peoples who have been Anufoized over a relatively longer period of time than among their purely Paragurma neighbours¹³. Levels of certainty are increased making continual reference to divination unnecessary and lessening the preoccupation with spiritual entities as a whole. Merit could be obtained by almsgiving (*salaka*), offerings to Malams, and through prayers offered by Malams—all of which increased Islamic cultural visibility and eroded the dependency on shrine manipulation.

Among the Anufoized Paragurma people and the non-Muslim Anufo one can only approach God the Creator (*Nyeme*) obliquely through one’s personal tutelary shrine¹⁴, also called “*nyeme*” (note that the words for both are the same and I distinguish between them by capitalizing the former), and even then only in dire circumstances (cf. Kirby 1983). It was quite appropriate then for village headmen routinely to call on Malams to perform their communal prayers to God along with the sacrifices of their own Earth Shrine custodians whenever drought, famine or other general disasters threatened.

These two cross-cultural borrowings had in the past and continue to have the effect of introducing the idea of a more “active” superordinate High God into the standard pantheon and they give the old “otiose/unknown” image a bit of personality. These transitions in the understanding of God among the general populace have been less connected with Christianity than with Islam. Nevertheless such a preparation by and for Islam is, in a fundamental sense, also an appropriate preparation for an inculturated Christianity.

¹³ This was especially apparent from the divination methods of the more heavily Islamized groups which allowed far greater leeway in interpreting the cowries than did the more “traditional” Nalori Anufo (cf. Kirby 1983:171).

¹⁴ This is done when every other possibility has been tried and has failed. It is described in detail in Kirby 1983:262.

8. Political influence

In order to assess better the extent that Islamic tradition was a factor in the recent Nalori conversions we should be more familiar with some important political factors of the colonial period. At the turn of the century the German colonizers forced the S. Mango Anufo to free their slaves. Having no other community identity, this group could only be absorbed into the fringes of the Tijani Muslim Hausa community in the “strangers” section. When this group became politically powerful in the 1930s under the French, a Hausa Imam was appointed causing the S. Mango aristocracy to “convert” to the Qadiriyya Islam of the “Muslim Estate”. Since Nalori villages identified with their S. Mango “origins” it wasn’t long before Nalori overlords also became Muslim. But being “slaves” in the eyes of the Qadiriyya group, they became Tijani “Hausa” Muslims instead. Thus the Imam of Chereponi is Hausa, not Anufo. Even so the majority of Nalori “Commoners” remained non-Muslim until the Krass era. Most of Krass’s Christians came from this group and it is this group that is now increasingly drawn to Islam. While it is true that the political, economic and cultural pressures to convert to Islam are only now becoming stronger as people have become disillusioned by the apparent failure of the whole phenomenon of “getting your eyes opened”, I believe that most decisive factor is its appeal at the level of religious problem-solving.

9. Research plan

I came to suspect that the Anufo never regarded Christianity as a religion, i.e., a religion as they would define it in terms of problem detection, analysis and solution, whereas Islam is and has always been regarded as a viable religious alternative.

To test this I chose some 58 Anufo problems for which there exist traditional non-Muslim patterns of analysis and solution involving spiritual entities (e.g. “bad death” *fui tie*¹⁵).

¹⁵ It is a common feature of West African societies to control admission to the ancestors through mortuary rites. For certain anti-social deaths or lives normal mortuary rites are withheld thereby socially excommunicating the deceased. The name is forgotten and it is condemned to “wander the

These 58 are not exhaustive but they occur most frequently. They can be grouped into three types corresponding to the hierarchical structure of their social organization and shrine custodianship described above: (1) community problems, (2) household problems, (3) individual problems. These problems are normally solved at their respective levels by means of shrines. For example such problems as woman dying in childbirth (a “bad death”), or the pollution of the earth caused by a murder (“spoilt earth”), or general famine, drought and epidemics are all “community” problems and must be solved on that level i.e. through the intervention of the “landowner” or Earth Shrine custodian (*miefio*). There were three community level problems, twenty-one household level problems, and thirty-four individual level problems represented.

My Muslim helper interviewed 150 Muslim converts while my Christian helper asked 100 Christian converts what they do about their problems now that they’ve converted. The helpers took no notes but reported back to me after each interview. Normally only one or two could be interviewed per day.

Four analytic categories gradually emerged from the answers:

- 1) traditional solutions
- 2) syncretistic solutions
- 3) orthodox solutions
- 4) no solution (no longer a problem)

Traditional solutions are those involving shrines mentioned above. Syncretic solutions are those using Muslim or Christian forms without their content or objective, e.g. using amulets, rosaries etc. with a traditional problem solving intent. True orthodox solutions were those prescribed by West African Islamic convention or by accepted practice in the mainstream Christian churches. Many responded that they no longer had this or that problem though the reasons tended to be as much culturally conditioned as religious.

10. Interpretive Criteria

To the extent that traditional solutions were used it was assumed that there was no true

bush.” Society must be protected from these alien enemical forces.

conversion, to the extent that syncretistic solutions were used there was only minimal conversion and to the extent that orthodox solutions were used, or that it was no longer a problem, a true religious and/or cultural conversion had taken place.

The problems were not all of equal importance religiously. Those of the community and household were of greater significance because greater numbers of people were involved and the problems tended to be more serious. Although numerically there are more instances of individuals working out their problems on the individual level, serious personal problems invariably begin to involve the household and even the larger community. Therefore choices regarding community and household problems gave a relatively greater indication of conversion or non-conversion than choices on the individual level.

Variables were noted but they had less significance than I had anticipated. Length of time converted, faith of the surrounding community and urban vs. rural setting were the most significant for the Muslims.

11. Results

The majority of the Muslims chose a traditional solution to 27 (out of the 58) problems, a syncretistic solution to 18 and an orthodox solution to 10 problems. There were 3 “no-solution.” Of the 27, 1 is on the community level, 10 are on the household level and 16 are on the individual level. Of the 18 syncretistic choices, 0 are community, 2 are household, and 16 are individual. Of the 10 orthodox and 3 “no solution” group, 2 are on community level, 9 are on the household level and 2 are on the individual level (cf. Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of response by the type of problem among Muslims

	Traditional	Syncretistic	Orthodox	No Solution
Community (3)	1	0	1	1
Household (21)	10	2	7	2
Individual (34)	<u>16</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>
	27	18		13

Table 2
Frequency of response by type of problem among Christians

	Traditional	Syncretistic	Orthodox	No Solution
Community (3)	3	0	0	0
Household (21)	20	1	0	0
Individual (34)	<u>31</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
	54	4		0

An overwhelming majority of Christian converts chose a traditional answer to 54 (out of 58), a syncretistic answer to the other 4 and never gave an orthodox or “no-solution” response to any of the problems.

12. The Interpretation of Muslim data

The Muslim data showed that (1) large percentages of the test group always chose the traditional solution regardless of the socio-religious level of the problem (33 percent communal level, 48 percent household level, 47 percent individual level), (2) syncretistic solutions were offered only on the level of individual problems, (3) Muslim converts were more orthodox (include “no-solution”)

than traditional when dealing with problems on the important levels of community and household, whereas on the individual level they were seldom orthodox. It would seem that although Muslim converts never leave their traditional solutions far behind, when it comes to the community or household they are fairly orthodox. But individual action is mostly traditionalist or syncretistic. This was further confirmed by cross-tabulating with the rural/urban variable, length of time converted and others. It was also found that those longer converted showed significantly higher orthodoxy on all three levels.

Most of the Nalori Anufo Muslim converts, then, tended to be religiously orthodox where

community and household problems were concerned, and less so with individual problems. Comparisons with those longer converted suggest that as the community becomes increasingly orthodox on all levels converts are made to conform on the individual level as well. Throughout this process the Islamic *ulama* continue to recognize Anufo problems and to offer their own Muslim solutions.

13. Interpretation of the Christian data

Table 2 gives a startling picture indeed. Almost everyone chose the traditional solution for every problem. Isolated individuals, however, did respond in a more orthodox way to certain problems. These tended to be problems which Christianity actively addressed and had solutions for even though they were not always promoted with enthusiasm (e.g. what to do before a journey, what to do when anticipating a “palaver” or court case, what to do when moving into a new house). In most cases even catechists and evangelists were hard pressed to offer Christian solutions for there simply weren’t any. The answer given by one trained catechist was “there must be a Christian solution to this but I don’t know what it is.” Almost none of the Christian solutions involved compound members let alone members of the outside community.

From our data it seems quite obvious that Christianity has not been presented or perceived as problem-oriented and that the problems of the vast majority of the Anufo Christians are not being ministered to by the churches. The Muslims, however, offer their own solutions for every traditional problem listed and even new converts have no difficulty abiding by orthodox solutions, at least on community and household levels. The Islamic stress on the group over the individual corresponds strongly with the Anufo social psychology and communal moral orientation. It offers support for individuals who would like to go against the traditional practice in favour of Muslim orthodoxy, and when it values group decisions over individual ones it confirms existing priorities in the traditional order. The very fact that Islam recognizes and offers a solution to traditional Anufo problems already puts it in the running as a viable alternative approach, for the Anufo are always

looking for new solutions. When Muslims insist on “their way” during communal or kin group problem-solving sessions, non-Muslims tend to rest assured that the problem is being dealt with. Not so with Christianity.

14. Conclusion

We have postulated that the heart of Anufo religion involves a problem-solving process and deduced from this that religious conversion must entail a change in problem-solving procedures and/or mentality. Our data has shown this to be true of conversion to Islam but not true of conversion to Christianity. Most of the respondents were surprised that they were even asked what they do to solve their problems “now that they have become Christians”. Their whole demeanor expressed “what does Christianity have to do with problem-solving?” I would therefore strongly conclude that Christianity has never been perceived as a religion. Rev. Krass stayed in Nalori for only 6 years. Not enough to sew the seeds of Christianity? Maybe it was ... had he first set about understanding and meeting their real problems.

POSTSCRIPT

Identifying religion with problem-solving is not only characteristic of the Anufo but of other peoples in Africa. Indeed, in a sense, it is done everywhere. After all, has not Christianity taken as its preponderant form a set of solutions to Western problems? Yet even where the “mission” population has been Christian for generations, problems persist unnoticed and untouched by Christian solutions. More often than not Christians are ashamed even to mention the problems. For they are problems which “should not be there”. African Christians continue to deal with their problems outside the boundaries of Church authority (and hopefully without anybody noticing). How may we speak of the growing “African Church”, or “indigenization”, or of “contextualizing the gospel” without first opening our eyes and ears to people’s problems as they are experienced and understood by them?

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