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Christian Confrontations with Indigenous Beliefs in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

After centuries of deep embeddedness within macrocosmic social structures, including trade with Europeans and other communities along the Niger, the macrocosmic tiers of Brass' and Bonny's cosmologies were not as prominent as Robin Horton's Intellectualist Theory would predict. Rather, this article suggests that a process of microcosmic-tiered condensation precipitated conversion in Brass and Bonny. Church Mission Society archival materials that recount cosmological confrontations between Christian and indigenous beliefs under Bishop Samuel Crowther in Bonny and Rev. Thomas Johnson in Brass are examined, arguing that for individuals that abandoned contested beliefs, the microcosmic tier of their cosmology became smaller with each belief that was disowned. A cosmological lacuna was thereby created that could be filled in a number of ways, including conversion to Christianity. This article suggests that this process of microcosmic-tiered condensation became a contributing factor in conversion in Brass and Bonny.

KEY WORDS: Niger Delta, Conversion, Church Mission Society, Bishop Samuel Crowther, Intellectualist Theory, Robin Horton

Introduction

In his renowned 1971 review essay "African Conversion," Robin Horton presents a conversion theory that remains popular even today.[2] Horton observes that "typical traditional cosmology… provides an impressive instrument for explanation, prediction, and control,"[3] famously delineating two cosmological tiers within this exceedingly broad "traditional" framework: the macrocosmic, in which a Supreme Being creates the cosmos, and the microcosmic, which consists of "lesser," everyday divinities and spirits that directly and regularly interact with communities. Since the Supreme Being rarely

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[2] See Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 41, No. 2 (1971): 101-107. For a very recent example in which Horton's theory is not only taken seriously, but also presumed to be more or less accurate, see J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orişa: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

[3] Horton, "African Conversion," 101.

possesses "a direct concern with human morality," "few events are directly attributed to him [*sic*]… Techniques for approaching him are poorly developed."[4] Yet since "most events, fortunate or unfortunate, are attributed to [the 'lesser' spirits' and divinities'] agency," most African societies have developed "a wealth of techniques for approaching and manipulating them."[5]

Horton contends that when small African societies live in social microcosms largely closed off to the wider world,[6] "lesser" divinities more or less particular to their local communities remain dominant. Yet increasing participation in macrocosmic social structures (e.g., long-distance trade) erodes microcosmic social boundaries,[7] foisting indigenous societies into an international, macrocosmic world—thus causing indigenous communities to begin bringing a macrocosmic Supreme Being to the forefront of their cosmologies, typically one believed to hold sway over the wider world in which such societies suddenly find themselves.[8] Significantly, Horton maintains that this shift of emphasis from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic tier within an indigenous cosmology is a natural consequence of participating in macrocosmic social structures—and a Supreme Being's increase in significance would transpire even without exposure to Islam or Christianity, "reduc[ing] Islam and Christianity to the role of catalysts—i.e., stimulators and accelerators of changes which were 'in the air' anyway…"[9]

The first section that follows pushes back against Horton's theory, demonstrating that it does not accurately predict Brass' or Bonny's cosmological trajectories since after centuries of deep embeddedness within macrocosmic social structures, the microcosmic-tiered dimensions of their respective cosmologies still vastly overshadowed the macrocosmic-tiered Supreme Being. In the second section, I argue that it was not integration into macrocosmic social structures in general, as Horton supposes, that increased the macrocosmic tier's significance in Brass and Bonny, but rather exposure to Christianity in particular that did so.[10] More specifically, I examine cosmological confrontations between Christian and indigenous beliefs, arguing that when individuals abandoned the microcosmic-tiered beliefs that these encounters called into question, their microcosmic tier condensed with each belief that was disowned. While contested microcosmic-tiered beliefs were surely not rejected by everyone, for those that discarded them, a cosmological lacuna was created that could be filled in numerous ways based on an individual's personal inclinations, with conversion to Christianity being one option.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Horton often refers to Africa as a whole, buttressing his theory with examples from North, West, East, Central, and South Africa. My broad use of 'Africa' in this article reflects Horton's.

[7] Horton deals with macrocosms in both socio-spatial and cosmological terms. For clarity's sake, I sometimes employ the term "macrocosmic social structures" to denote Horton's socio-spatial use of "macrocosm."

[8] For a fuller account, see Ibid., 102-103. See also Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 45, No. 3 (1975): 219-220.

[9] Horton, "African Conversion," 104.

[10] Christian encounters still involved social macrocosms, at least insofar as missionary efforts were funded and overseen by missionary societies in the metropole (and in cosmological terms, Christianity was also macrocosmic in scope). I contend that encounters with this *specific* macrocosm—and not social macrocosms in general, like long-distance trade—precipitated conversion.

Macrocosmic Encounters in Bonny and Brass

By the time Horton penned his theory, the Niger Delta had already been exposed to the wider world's macrocosmic structures for at least 300 years—and perhaps for more than 500. G.I. Jones reports that the *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, a Portuguese navigational text composed around 1505, recounts events that can be dated as early as 1450; it mentions the "Rio Real," the Portuguese name for a river in West Africa that "was an important trading river in the Portuguese Empire." [11] The Rio Real almost certainly referred to the Niger, especially since the text's "description of the coastline on the Eastern [Niger] Delta… was substantially the same as today…"[12] The *Esmeraldo* also reports an unnamed large village that Jones believes was likely Bonny, in which the pernicious slave trade would have been "already well established."[13]

While Bonny, and perhaps even Brass, *likely* began trading with Europeans in the mid- to late fifteenth century, Bonny and Brass *certainly* traded with Europeans by the late seventeenth century. Jones also examines relevant portions of the 1686 French version of Olfert Dapper's *Description de l'Afrique*, which was originally published in Dutch in 1668. According to Dapper, the Dutch trade on the Rio Real included "the district of Bani," or Bonny.[14] Nembe is also mentioned as a trading port, which, by 1871, was considered to be Brass' "capital."[15] John Barbot paraphrased Dapper's *Description*, adding his own material about "Great Bandy," or Bonny, in 1699, noting that Bonny's residents traded slaves with both Europeans and "their own countrymen" along the Niger's "upper markets."[16] Significantly, Bonny's residents even acted as brokers between Europeans and other African communities in commercial transactions.[17] Thus by 1699, Bonny and Brass had established inveterate trading economies replete with domestic and international markets. In the 1830s, British explorers even observed that Brass denizens did not grow their own food apart from plantains, importing yams and other food products from elsewhere, funded by "the very considerable profits which accrue to them from their trading transactions…"[18]

Barbot also reported that before docking, several of Bonny's residents sailed out to meet him—speaking English, Portuguese, and Dutch.[19] Two oral traditions report that Bonny's King Asimini's son Ebi learned Portuguese in Portugal, intending to serve as a translator in Bonny between the Portuguese and the Ịbanị.[20] Further, Crowther reports

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[11] G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria* (London: Published for the International African Institute by Oxford University Press, 1963), 34.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 36.

[15] Church Missionary Society Archives: CA3/O20, "Journal extracts of Thomas Johnson for the three quarters ending December 31, 1871," 22 April 1871. All CMS archival references are taken from Section IV of the CMS's microfilm collection.

[16] Jones, 39. Jones is quoting John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South-Guinea; and of Ethiopia Interior, vulgarly Angola: Being a New and Accurate Account of the Western Maritime Countries of Africa* (1732), 381.

[17] Barbot, 381.

[18] Richard Lander and John Lander, *Journal of An Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger: With a Narrative of a Voyage Down that River to Its Termination*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1837), 254.

[19] Barbot, 380.

[20] See Ebiegberi Alagoa and Adadonye Fombo, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972), 7.

that in addition to Ijo, both Bonny and Brass residents spoke Igbo,[21] and, given the extent of their trade along the Niger, many more African languages were likely spoken.

Significantly, Barbot brokered deals not only with Bonny's King William, but also with Bonny's non-royal residents,[22] and so, like Lander's record of Brass, Bonny's whole community was caught up in trade. Bonny remained a highly-trafficked slave trade port for the next hundred and forty years until signing an antislavery treaty with the British in 1839.[23] Presciently perceiving, years beforehand, that Britain might significantly obstruct or even halt its slave trade, Bonny diversified its market in order to maintain the European trade upon which its economy depended. Bonny delved so deeply into the palm-oil trade that by 1836 the British navy felt compelled to sign a trading treaty with Bonny to protect its commercial interests.[24]

Accordingly, Bonny and Brass engaged in steady trade with Europeans and other communities along the Niger for hundreds of years, perhaps as early as 1450, but certainly by 1668. For centuries, then, Bonny and Brass came to depend upon macrocosmic long-distance trade, even developing multilingual denizens. Hence Brass and Bonny communities surely fulfill Horton's stipulation of "go[ing] to work outside [their] own community, as well as engaging in a 'modern' occupation," [25] being initiated into macrocosmic social structures that necessitate "wider communication (for instance, a development of long-distance trade)…"[26] According to these provisos from Horton, one would expect both Brass and Bonny to have exceedingly prominent macrocosmic tiers, yet according to both Rev. Dandeson Coates Crowther and Horton himself, writing nearly a century apart, the Ijo of Brass and Bonny's conceptualization and veneration of the Supreme Being was not nearly as pronounced as it could be.

In February 1876, missionaries met for an interdenominational conference in Gabon, pooling together knowledge of West Africa to further their common cause of conversion.[27] In a four-page appendix to conference notes that appears to be written in D.C. Crowther's hand, elements of "African Superstition," more positively recognized as indigenous religions today,[28] are summarized. Crowther rightfully—and astutely, for that time—observed that "we find that as there are tribes, so many are the superstition[s] coined by each…"[29] In other words, there are at least as many indigenous religions as there are ethnolinguistic groups. Growing up along the Niger and sometimes accompanying his father, Bishop Samuel Crowther, on journeys in the Niger Delta before being installed as Bonny's pastor in 1871, D.C. Crowther observed firsthand both

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[21] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 2 May 1865.

[22] See Barbot, 460, 463. This is noteworthy since Horton argues that only those directly involved in macrocosmic social structures like trade would experience an increased focus on a Supreme Being. For instance, in areas in which only rulers engage in trade, only royal families would be likely to develop their macrocosmic cosmological tier. See Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 226.

[23] Dike, 83.

[24] For a copy of the treaty, see Jones, 221-222.

[25] Horton, "African Conversion," 103.

[26] Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 220.

[27] CMS: CA3/O13, "Subjects for discussion at the Conference to be held at Gaboon [*sic*] in January 1876," 27 September 1875. The conference was ultimately held in February 1876.

[28] While I quote missionaries referring to sub-Saharan religions in terms that are often derisive, whenever I am not quoting another source, I use the term 'indigenous religions' to denote the integrity of Bonny's and Brass' religions as complex and coherent belief systems. Similarly, I capitalize 'Supreme Being' unless quoting another author.

[29] CMS: CA3/O13, "Conference of the undernamed West African Protestant Missions, held at Gaboon [*sic*] February 1876," Appendix No. 6: "Abstract. African Superstition."

differences in microcosmic-tiered beliefs among the Niger Delta's various ethnolinguistic groups and striking similarities regarding their conceptualizations of a Supreme Being. Thus Crowther reports:

> We all know that the notion of a Supreme Being is universal in this part of the country, and it is on this great truth that we find the whole fabric of African Superstition is based. The heathen have the idea that the Supreme Being is so high, great and terrible, that he cannot be approached… therefore inferior [supernatural beings] are given which can be approached, and which they classify under different objects of worship.[30]

By Crowther's lights, the Supreme Being was deemed to be withdrawn, having created the world before rescinding into cosmic hinterlands; such a remote Supreme Being had little to do with day-to-day existence, and therefore had little relevance for everyday circumstances. This is why practitioners turned to "inferior… objects of worship." These "inferior"—or as Horton puts it, "lesser"—divinities could be persuaded to intervene in day-to-day life.

Crowther goes on to elaborate upon the prominence of these "lesser" divinities in several communities along the Niger, including Bonny and Brass. Bonny's local divinity is "said to be the protector of the people there, [and] can give them richer children and all good things; besides these there are clusters of gods supposed to possess the spirit of their forefathers..."[31] Further, there is "worship of guanas [*sic*] at Bonny," and at Brass, the "boa constrictor [is] worshipped…"[32] In addition, in both places "images of wood rudely carved in sundry forms, clumps of stone, bundles of stick, lumps of clay, and a variety of other absurd things are looked upon as objects of veneration, all tending either to protect from evil or to bring good and riches; to these the heathen bow and pray."[33]

Crowther's belligerent dismissiveness of indigenous religions and their practitioners notwithstanding, his 1876 description coincides nicely with Horton's theory insofar as two cosmological tiers are evident in both Brass and Bonny. Yet given Bonny's and Brass' intricate enmeshment within social macrocosms through long-distance trade, Crowther's description of the macrocosmic tier's Supreme Being as withdrawn and not regularly approached calls into question the applicability of Horton's theory to Bonny and Brass. The timeline is especially important here, since Horton maintains that these changes could occur relatively quickly—indeed, within an individual's lifespan.[34] Since these cosmological shifts did not occur in Bonny or Brass over hundreds of years, it seems that exposure to macrocosmic social structures like trade did not necessarily lead

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Horton writes: "The particular position taken up by a given individual will depend largely on the degree to which, in his [*sic*] own personal life, the boundaries of the microcosm have ceased to confine him," and so cosmological change is a "matter of individual cosmological adjustment…" Horton gives an example of an individual moving from (microcosmic) farming to (macrocosmic) long-distance trade, claiming that the individual's move is accompanied by a shift in cosmological emphasis, with the microcosmic tier becoming "overshadowed" by the macrocosmic tier. See Horton, "African Conversion," 103. This correspondence between subsistence farming and microcosmic-tiered emphasis and between long-distance trade and macrocosmic-tiered prominence is maintained in his follow-up article. See Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 220, 225-227.

to cosmological changes, or perhaps these changes could take much more time than Horton supposes.[35]

In his more robust follow-up article, Horton himself locates the Ijo, who lived in Brass and Bonny during Crowther's era,[36] in a "middle position" between indigenous cosmologies "which include almost nothing in the way of reference to a supreme being… [and] those which are almost dominated by the concept and cult of this being."[37] In this "middle position," "religious life still primarily focused on the lesser spirits, but with a more elaborate concept of the supreme being," brought about by "considerable trade beyond the boundaries of the[ir] territories."[38] While Crowther's general description of the Niger Delta's concept of a Supreme Being is slightly less elaborate than Horton's, Ebiegberi Alagoa recounts an oral history of Brass' Nembe that suggests a Supreme Being was venerated infrequently even before Christianity's arrival, with residents possessing a strong—yet rather inchoate—concept of a Supreme Being.[39]

Despite small discrepancies regarding the Supreme Being's status, Crowther's, Horton's, and Alagoa's accounts all report that the microcosmic tier still eclipsed the macrocosmic tier in indigenous cosmologies. Yet Horton's theory contends that increased participation in macrocosmic structures means "[l]ess attention will be paid to the spirits, and more to the supreme being,"[40] even to the point that "the cult of the lesser spirits is likely to be overshadowed by that of the supreme being."[41] Indeed, a basic premise of Horton's theory is that the greater the degree of participation in macrocosmic social structures like trade, the more prominent a Supreme Being would become.[42] Yet given Brass' and Bonny's remarkable integration within—and even economic dependency upon—international trading structures across multiple centuries, it is difficult to imagine sub-Saharan communities from that era with greater participation in macrocosmic social structures. By Horton's lights, then, a Supreme Being should have "overshadowed" Bonny's and Brass' microcosmic tiers. Since the macrocosmic tiers of their respective cosmologies did not become prominent—even in ideal macrocosmic interaction through longstanding long-distance trade agreements—Brass and Bonny present historical scenarios that Horton's theory does not account for or explain.[43]

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[35] It is entirely possible that cosmological changes from macrocosmic exposure could sometimes take much longer than a single lifespan and that the "middle position" of Brass' and Bonny's macrocosmic tier was only possible from centuries of long-distance trade. This would render such changes nearly imperceptible and—since there are no extant descriptions of Bonny's and Brass' religions before European trade began, and hence no baseline for quantifying cosmological changes—virtually impossible to measure.

[36] CMS: CA3/O4, "Instructions to the Mission Agents of Bonny and Brass Missions," 5 May 1868.

[37] Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 225.

[38] Ibid., 226.

[39] Although defunct for over a decade by 1964, Ebiegberi Alagoa reports that a three-day Creator festival occurred once every seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years as determined by a priest, whose only non-festival duties entailed maintaining the Creator's "temple." Despite a having a dedicated priest, Alagoa writes of Nembe: "The idea of the Creator is strong among the Nembe [Brass] people, but ideas of what he is like and how he operates are not always worked into integrated systems. There are apparent contradictions…" See Ebiegberi Alagoa, "*Idu*: A Creator Festival at Okpoma (Brass) in the Niger Delta," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 34, No. 1 (1964): 2-3.

[40] Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 220.

[41] Horton, "African Conversion," 103.

[42] See Ibid., 102-103.

[43] Further, while Horton identifies the Nuer and Dinka as being among those furthest along the spectrum of macrocosmic-tiered expansion, Brass and Bonny share the very features of participation in social macrocosms that Horton claims caused a Supreme Being to "loo[m] very large." More specifically, like transhumance cattle herders among the Nuer and Dinka, Brass and Bonny residents also regularly "not

In Humphrey Fisher's second rejoinder to Horton, he helpfully registers his opinion that he and Horton "propose general principles, leaving it to regional and other experts to decide whether the principles fit the circumstances of this or that particular case."[44] In this vein, it seems that Horton's theory does not explain adequately the historical cases of Brass and Bonny. At most, these cases call either for revisions, however slight, to Horton's theory to account for Bonny's and Brass' cosmological states or for an explanation of how Brass' and Bonny's circumstances actually conform to Horton's theory. As they stand, these historical scenarios delimit, however slightly, the scope of this theory's applicability. However, it could be rather important to note that Brass and Bonny's embeddedness within macrocosmic social structures stemmed directly from their involvement with the slave trade. It is quite possible that dozens of other major slave ports along Africa's coasts—especially those that, like Bonny, acted as brokers between Europeans and other African communities—would have developed economies and other social structures dependent upon international trade. If, like Bonny and Brass, the macrocosmic tiers of other slave ports' cosmologies did not become patently prominent, as Horton's theory would predict for such macrocosmically-integrated communities, then such a bevy of counterexamples beyond Brass and Bonny could significantly circumscribe the scope of this theory's applicability across sub-Saharan Africa, further questioning its efficacy.[45]

Challenging Microcosmic-Tiered Beliefs Precedes Conversion in Bonny and in Brass

In this section, I suggest an alternative explanation for events that precipitated conversion in Bonny and Brass based on archival research. Conversion to Christianity in both locales followed cosmological confrontations between Christians and practitioners of indigenous religions, encounters that caused Brass and Bonny denizens to reassess particular microcosmic-tiered beliefs. Of course, only a handful of microcosmic-tiered beliefs were challenged—and never the microcosmic tier itself—but for those who disowned these beliefs, their microcosmic tier condensed, becoming further compressed with each belief that was abandoned. While not everyone rejected each of these beliefs, those that did faced a cosmological void that could be filled in a number of ways, including conversion to Christianity.

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only leav[e] the microcosm physically," in their case by travelling to other Niger-area communities for trade, but "also for[m] relationships which breach… boundaries socially," even speaking multiple African and European languages. The Ijo of Brass and Bonny thus share with the Nuer and Dinka the characteristics that Horton claims paves the way toward macrocosmic-tiered development, yet a Supreme Being is only prominent among the Nuer and Dinka—not the Ijo of Brass or Bonny. Accordingly, encounters with macrocosmic social structures—in and of themselves—do not necessarily lead to a Supreme Being's heightened importance. For his brief account of the Nuer and the Dinka, see Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 227.

[44] Humphrey J. Fisher, "The Juggernaut's Apologia: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* Vol. 55, No. 2 (1985): 154.

[45] Further study, of course, would be needed to substantiate such a claim, which could, perhaps, begin with Barbot, who describes his perceptions of a Supreme Being's remoteness in certain ports. See, for instance, Barbot, 124.

Cosmological Confrontations in Bonny

King William Dappa Pepple of Bonny wrote to Samuel Crowther in 1864, requesting that a school be opened in Bonny.[46] Crowther arrived to begin preparations the following March.[47] A temporary schoolroom was constructed and a teacher was installed by May;[48] after attendance rose to 54 children, a permanent school and teacher's quarters were built in 1866—which is where the story gets interesting, but difficult to recount in full ethnographic detail. Crowther's journals that would have recorded this specific encounter are not listed in the Church Missionary Society (CMS) archives or in any major databases, but two early twentieth century sources seem to have drawn from them; given their accurate reporting of other events—such as the killing of sacred iguanas in Bonny, which is recounted below from primary sources—their portrayals of the events surrounding a CMS building's construction are likely accurate.

A local priest made clear that the building site was a "juju bush," and Bonny's "fear-stricken people" reiterated: it was a "*very bad* juju bush."[49] The priests declared that its "spirits must not be disturbed" while the people averred: "The Christians will die if they go there."[50] Crowther maintained that this was to be the building site; practitioners of indigenous religions were to leave Christians with the "juju to settle the remaining palaver."[51] The king's son George helped oversee construction, but he was so nervous about disturbing the bush that he had Christian scripture read and prayers recited before bones of adults and of infant twins were unearthed.[52] When Christians did not die, as Bonny's residents and indigenous priests supposed, an indigenous microcosmic-tiered belief was shown to be wrong. While it seems that no conversions followed this incident, Crowther reports that shortly thereafter: "The adult population seem[s] to be more and more interested in our mission work; though they do not come forward to join us, yet, they feel and confess boldly that they have been in error."[53] That is, they "confess boldly" that some of their microcosmic-tiered beliefs had been shown to be erroneous.

As of September 1866, Bonny had no church—just a Christian King, George, whose father passed away,[54] and a solitary convert.[55] Yet D.C. Crowther reports that "from the time I got here [in 1871], we have never had below 250 persons" attending Bonny's church,[56] evincing incredible growth within that five-year span. My contention that Christian confrontations with indigenous beliefs impacted this high conversion rate is furthered by two other cosmological encounters—the killing of Bonny's sacred iguanas and a sacred grove's destruction.

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[46] CMS, "New Mission in the Bight of Biafra," *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, November 1865, 125.

[47] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 5 April 1865.

[48] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 2 May 1865.

[49] F. Deaville Walker, *The Romance of the Black River: The Story of the C.M.S. Nigeria Mission* (London: Church Mission Society, 1930), 133; original emphasis. See also Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Adjai Crowther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 203. I should note that Walker reports that teachers' quarters were to be built while Page reports a "school-chapel," yet both agree that the building was commissioned by the CMS.

[50] Walker, 133. See also Page, 203.

[51] Page, 204. See also Walker, 133.

[52] Page, 204; Walker, 134.

[53] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 30 January 1867.

[54] CMS: CA3/O4, King George Pepple to Crowther, 3 November 1866.

[55] Samuel Crowther, *A Charge Delivered on the Banks of the River Niger in West Africa* (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1866), 13.

[56] CMS: CA3/O13, D.C. Crowther to Venn, 9 November 1871.

As of February 1867, Bishop Crowther had not yet reported any conversions or baptisms, yet he maintains: "I have observed evident tokens of a silent but mighty struggle for mastery between demon worship"—a pejorative term he sometimes applies to indigenous religions—"and Christianity."[57] Since there were not yet struggles between Christians (again, at this point there is only one non-royal convert) and practitioners of indigenous religions, Crowther is likely referring to Bonny residents grappling with their belief systems—which would likely have been a prerequisite for the next major event, Bonny denizens killing sacred iguanas.

Based on Crowther's reports, the CMS explains that "spirits" sometimes "take up their abode in animals… at Bonny the iguana was the sacred animal;"[58] indeed, these iguanas "are sacred to the gods, and… have been worshipped…"[59] Supposedly English merchants were killed for "rolling casks of oil over some iguanas in 1787," but by the 1860s, there were likely heavy fines to be paid for injuring or killing one.[60] King George, after consulting Bonny chiefs, decreed: "the Geedee or Iguana, Bonny Juju, be declared to be no longer Bonny Juju…"[61] Upon hearing this pronouncement, many Bonny denizens indiscriminately slaughtered the lizards, with 57 iguana carcasses strewn across one Bonny market alone.[62] Further, it was decided that "lest any should hereafter say he had not partaken in the blood of the sacred reptile, it was decided that some of the blood be sprinkled into all the wells of water in Bonny Town," indicating not only shared complicity, but also that iguanas were now considered edible.[63]

It seems Crowther rightly detected "tokens of a silent but mighty struggle" with microcosmic-tiered beliefs, and Crowther believed these acts of divinicide to be "proof of their conviction of former error…"[64] This remarkable event is a clear-cut sign that microcosmic-tiered beliefs regarding divinities and spirits were undergoing serious restructuring in Bonny, and the timing of this decree—issued on Easter Sunday—coupled with King George's next-day dispatch of a letter to Crowther informing him of Bonny's divinicide suggests that Bonny's collective encounter with Christianity occasioned the extirpation of this long-held belief. Indeed, Bonny's microcosmic tier became visibly condensed, eliminating a central feature of Bonny's indigenous religion.

Yet despite this momentous cosmological change, no conversions resulted immediately—perhaps, in large part, due to a heinous act of a Christian schoolteacher in Bonny, who was caught molesting an eleven-year-old schoolgirl. King George admonished Crowther: "The people of Bonny expected that the mission tends to the improvement, not the corruption of their people."[65] Many parents withdrew their children from school; disturbed, Crowther strongly condemned the teacher's actions, letting King George know that the teacher had broken the laws of Bonny, England, the Church, and God—and must be punished.[66] This abominable act likely gave Bonny residents justifiable pause about Christianity, halting cosmological restructuring.

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[57] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 27 February 1867.

[58] CMS, "The Juju House, Bonny," *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, August 1867, 87.

[59] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 1 May 1867.

[60] E.M.T. Epelle, *The Church in the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: CMS Niger Press, 1955), 10.

[61] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 1 May 1867. Crowther is reporting verbatim a short letter King George sent to him on April 22, 1867.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] CMS: CA3/O4, King George Pepple and Chiefs of Bonny to Crowther, 10 May 1867.

[66] CMS: CA3/O4, Crowther to Venn, 27 May 1867.

A new teacher seems to have rebuilt trust between the mission station and Bonny, but it was not until April 1868, when Crowther brought a pony to Bonny, that excitement around the mission was rekindled, drawing a crowd of 500 and transforming the mission into a "zoological garden."[67] This excitement lasted for days, and Crowther capitalized on it by proposing a road be built between the Niger and Bonny missions—one that went through a sacred grove in Bonny. Crowther could then travel by horse, allowing him to visit more frequently. This was "a bold request that had been made to the king and chiefs," especially since, ostensibly, "[n]o sacrilegious axe had ever profaned it, and the gods… had been left in undisturbed possession of it."[68]

Surprisingly, King George and the chiefs consented, and Crowther lost no time, beginning to clear the grove the following morning. A large snake came at them, yet it was killed. Then swarms of bees attacked, and "native agents" fled the painful stings—yet Crowther endeavored to fight through the pain, for he knew that "if they all fled from the wood the people of Bonny would be sure to say that the gods had driven them out."[69] Crowther knew what he was doing: contesting the belief that Bonny's divinities would let no harm come to this sacred grove. While eventually Crowther also had to retreat, he had fires lit in the grove that night. The smoke killed the bees, and by the next day's end, the grove was cleared, "no doubt to the great discomfiture of… [Bonny's] priests."[70] Crowther and company faced no consequences, significantly challenging yet another indigenous belief.

It is only after this cosmological confrontation at the sacred grove that Bonny's church attendance began to grow. Although attendance records are scant, Bonny missionary W.E. Carew occasionally recorded attendance in his journals, for instance, observing that in addition to 40 school children, 15 adults attended church on July 5, 1868.[71] This number appears to have amassed weekly, and by September 20, 1868, 105 adults attended.[72] This church growth followed a succession of indigenous beliefs being abandoned—namely, that local divinities would harm or kill those that violated the sacrality of a grove, iguanas, or a "juju bush." At this juncture, it is important to reiterate that not all microcosmic-tiered beliefs were challenged, and I am in no way suggesting that all were abandoned—many microcosmic-tiered beliefs were likely alive and well in Bonny's churches, but underreported by missionaries.[73] Further, some Bonny residents might not have held the bush, iguanas, or grove to be sacred in the first place, while others might have retained beliefs in their sacrality after these encounters.

Rather, I am suggesting that cosmological confrontations between indigenous and Christian beliefs created an occasion for Bonny's residents to reconsider certain microcosmic-tiered beliefs.[74] For those that abandoned beliefs after these encounters, the

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[67] CMS, "The Bonny Mission," *The Church Missionary Intelligencer*, July 1868, 224.

[68] CMS, "Bonny, Brass, and Akassa," *The Church Missionary Gleaner*, March 1869, 28.

[69] Ibid., 28-29.

[70] Ibid., 29.

[71] CMS: CA3/O10, "Journals of W.E. Carew," 5 July 1868.

[72] Ibid., 20 September 1868.

[73] My sources are primarily missionary journals and letters, which not only contain clear biases, but also tend to accentuate, one-sidedly, perceived 'triumphs' while omitting or downplaying events that could be regarded as questionable or unfavorable.

[74] By maintaining that these cosmological confrontations provide an occasion for reassessing microcosmic-tiered beliefs, I am in no way suggesting that changes in indigenous cosmologies are *only* possible through Muslim or Christian encounters, nor am I implying that indigenous religions are static. Indeed, as Horton himself contends, indigenous religions could regularly adapt to meet new needs

microcosmic tier of their cosmologies condensed with every discarded belief, opening up new cosmological possibilities. Although many did not convert, conversion to Christianity was a likely option, especially since encounters with Christianity called into question the efficacy of these microcosmic-tiered beliefs in the first place. Similar events transpired in Brass, providing another case study to explore these claims further.

Cosmological Confrontations in Brass

After years of serving as Brass' catechist, Thomas Johnson was installed as Brass' pastor by Bishop Crowther in 1871, at which point weekly church attendance seemed to average in the low to mid-100s.[75] However, these numbers would soon increase—often in tandem with challenging indigenous beliefs at the microcosmic level. This subsection explores two encounters between Christianity and indigenous religions that contested microcosmic-tiered beliefs in Brass.

On May 9, 1871, a pregnant female convert to Christianity who was given the name Susanna at baptism visited Johnson. A few months beforehand, her three-year-old child died, and "her mother and relatives said she was the cause of its death, because she had been converted to the Christian religion." For this offense, "she was severely flogged and put in irons, and they threaten[ed] to drown her if she will not renounce her faith… she candidly told them that she was ready to submit to any punishment, or any kind of death rather than recanting."[76] Susanna did not deny her faith, and, surprisingly, she was acquitted: since other children recently died whose parents did not go to church, it was determined that her child's death was not necessarily a punishment from a local divinity, and so she was not held responsible.[77] Although she was not executed, according to local custom, her family stalwartly believed that she would not survive childbirth.

Yet on November 24, Susanna "gave birth to a son to the surprise of the heathens [*sic*], for they had said that she will die on the child bearing as she had denied their juju, and all the midwives refused assisting her because she is a Christian, her mother who had persecuted [her] sometime ago, was there, and was in despair that her daughter will die…"[78] Yet when Susanna did not die during or immediately after giving birth, her mother "exclaimed that she now [saw] that the God whom her daughter is serving is the true God, she willingly consented that the child her grand son should be baptized, and called him a name which signified that he is not her's [*sic*] but God's."[79] Moreover, "The father who also was totally against his children being baptized is now a regular attend[ee] at Divine Service every Sunday, one of his wives had since been baptized and another is a candidate for the same holy sacrement [*sic*]."[80] When the indigenous belief that Susanna would die during childbirth from having "denied their juju" was determined to be fallacious, at least four astonished adults began regularly attending church, likely with their children. Yet again, a cosmological confrontation with Christianity caused individuals to reject a microcosmic-tiered belief, precipitating conversion to Christianity.

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occasioned by new circumstances. See Horton, "On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I," 222. Christianity could be seen as but one such circumstance, one that did not force change, but rather one that a number of Brass and Bonny residents found useful enough to incorporate into their own cosmologies.

[75] See, for instance, CMS: CA3/O24, "Journal extracts of Thomas Johnson for three quarters ending December 31, 1871," 7 May 1871.

[76] Ibid., 9 May 1871.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 24 November 1871.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

A second Brass incident, much like Bonny's, involves sacred animals. Writing for the CMS, E.M.T. Epelle reports that boa constrictors were believed to be possessed by spirits in Brass, and "[s]o sacred were these snakes… and so deeply rooted was the[ir] worship" that the paramountcy of their protection was recognized in a treaty between Brass leadership and the British Consulate in 1856.[81] As late as 1871, punishment for killing one—even inadvertently—entailed either paying a large fine or being executed. In fact, a man that accidentally killed a sacred boa but could not afford the fine was awaiting execution before Johnson brazenly intervened.[82]

Significantly, Epelle also discloses that the "deification of the snake… caused the people much economic hardship as they were disallowed planting, and as they could not freely rear livestock."[83] This explains why Brass traders grew nothing beyond plantains, importing yams and other foodstuffs as the brothers Lander reported in 1831: even though their land was cultivable, they could not disturb their boas' natural habitat. It also explains why Johnson writes that "farming… was prohibited by juju,"[84] and why:

> …the law of the gods, which forbad the inhabitants of Brass River to grow yams in their own soil, and to cut the stems of certain creepers, or climbers, or large trees, on pain or punishment of paying a heavy fine of some casks of palm-oil for the offence committed to the gods. This breach of the god's laws must be committed if any attempt is made to clear the jungles for plantations…[85]

Brass' tremendous reverence of sacred boas, then, was profoundly embedded in Brass' social order.

This is why it is exceedingly remarkable that in his Annual Letter of 1874, Johnson reports that "farming… is now tak[en] up by every one in Nembe," Brass' capital—even "the chiefs are now farming. I asked Bokola [the head priest] on his visit whether it does good or evil to the country he said it does good and that he himself will soon begin to make [a] farm. Bokolo himself is now doing many things which he himself said that the juju forbids to be done…"[86] It is clear that Johnson attributes this cosmological shift in Nembe to Christianity's influence, including this incident in a list of Christian 'triumphs.' This development likely stems from an agreement Bishop Crowther struck with the kings of Ogbolomambiri and Bassambiri, Nembe's two political divisions, who consented to allow the Brass Mission to begin "the cultivation of the land for plantations…"[87]

When Brass residents saw Christians not being harmed but prospering after openly contravening "juju prohibitions," deep-seated indigenous beliefs were called into question. When *many* (not likely *all*, as Johnson hyperbolically reports) Brass residents—including chiefs and the leading indigenous priest—began farming without reprisal, not only had another microcosmic-tiered belief been effaced, but Brass' social order had been upturned: Brass' principally trade-based economy became an admixture of trade and agriculture, radically altering Brass' social ontology. The number of Christians in

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[81] Epelle, 23.

[82] CMS: CA3/O24, "Journal extracts of Thomas Johnson for three quarters ending December 31, 1871," 5 May 1871.

[83] Epelle, 23.

[84] CMS: CA3/O24, "Annual Letter, Brass Station," 4 November 1874.

[85] CMS, "Brass," *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, November 1877, 676.

[86] CMS: CA3/O24, "Annual Letter, Brass Station," 4 November 1874.

[87] Epelle, 22-23.

Brass increased by nearly 50% that year, moving from 204 in 1873 to 300 in 1874.[88] This alacritous increase likely resulted from the cosmological changes that followed confrontations with microcosmic-tiered beliefs regarding the efficacy of indigenous divinities' punishments for cultivation-based offenses. Much like Bonny, it seems quite likely that the abandonment of specific beliefs, which caused the microcosmic tier of Brass' indigenous cosmology to recede for some, paved the way for a macrocosmic-tiered turn through conversion—a process prompted not by encounters with macrocosmic social structures like long-distance trade, but with Christianity.

Conclusion

Centuries of long-distance trading did not cause the macrocosmic tiers of Brass' and Bonny's religions to "overshadow" their microcosmic tiers, as Horton supposes. Active cosmological restructuring due to heightened macrocosmic participation, then, could hardly be said to be "in the air" when widespread conversion to Christianity began in the late 1800s, suggesting that different phenomena precipitated conversion.

Accordingly, I examined a series of cosmological confrontations that preceded conversion in Bonny and Brass, contending that for those that abandoned contested beliefs, their microcosmic tier became smaller, creating a cosmological void that could be filled in multiple ways based on each individual's predilections. While many did not convert to Christianity, those that did likely had varied reasons for doing so, reasons that other conversion theories might very well account for. Yet my proposal is that the process of compressing the microcosmic tiers of those that disowned disputed beliefs became a contributing factor in conversion. Further research would be needed to determine whether cosmological confrontations led to microcosmic-tiered compression outside of Brass and Bonny, but at least for these two settings, it seems the inverse of Horton's theory is manifest: rather than macrocosmic-tiered expansion, microcosmic-tiered condensation precipitated conversion.

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