

African Christianity Rising

STORIES FROM GHANA (77:00)

AND

STORIES FROM ZIMBABWE (73:30)

A DOCUMENTARY FILM SERIES

Christianity's explosive growth in Africa was totally unexpected at the dawn of independence from colonial rule. It is part of a startling reversal in world history. Christianity is no longer the religion of the West. Over two-thirds of the world's Christians now live in the global South—with Africa growing the fastest—and all signs point to this trend continuing. We are turning a page in world history. What does it mean? What is Christianity becoming, and what new, perhaps surprising, developments will it foster?

With guidance from leading scholars in the field and major funding from Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, we have been documenting the vitality and changing nature of Christianity in Africa. We have explored, among other things, the ways in which it is becoming increasingly popular by becoming increasingly *African*—that is, by becoming rooted more authentically in local cultures, as Christianity has wherever it has effectively expanded. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, we saw that this means emphasizing healing, for instance, or dancing as spiritual discipline, or addressing the multiplicity of spirits that are part and parcel of the world most Africans know.

The stories we filmed bring viewers into this African world through the personal dramas of ordinary people wrestling with unmistakable, and at times gripping, human problems: for example, a young pentecostal woman struggling to overcome bitterness toward her mother, or a teenager wracked by poverty, depression and guilt, who has been persuaded by a traditional healer that hateful relatives have placed a curse on her life. Her Methodist pastor brings in the church's "prayer group" to pray against any spiritual powers she and they suspect might be at work.

Such stories are illuminated by leading thinkers on the subject, like Archbishop Peter Sarpong of the Catholic Church in Ghana, a pioneer in introducing African culture into Christian worship, and Kwame Bediako, one of Africa's leading theologians, or Eben Nihwatiwa, a Zimbabwean theologian and bishop in the United Methodist church, and Trevor Manhanga, the Pentecostal head of Zimbabwe's Council of Churches. Filming some of our characters on routine "missions" to North America points to certain impacts African Christianity is having in the West, at a time when African congregations are taking over old churches in Holland, Norway and Sweden, and the ten largest churches in Britain are African. That the recent heads of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and academic head of the largest theological school in the United States are all Africans, further testifies to African Christianity's importance on the world stage today.

For this project we filmed over 350 hours in Ghana and Zimbabwe—half in Digibeta and DVCAM by leading *cinéma-vérité* cameramen including Tom Hurwitz (cameraman for many of Barbara Kopple's award-winning films). In both countries we followed stories in all three kinds of churches typically found in sub-Saharan Africa today: mission-founded churches, old-style independent or "spiritual" churches, and new Pentecostal or charismatic ones.

From this footage we edited over 2 1/2 hours of roughcut portraits of each church community we filmed. After lapses in funding, we returned some years later to both Ghana and, then, Zimbabwe, in 2011, in the wake of the economic and political crisis there, to see what has happened to the churches and characters we originally filmed. From this footage we created two full-length films: *African Christianity Rising: Stories from Ghana* (77:00) and *Stories from Zimbabwe* (73:30).

Producer/director James Ault is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and author educated at Harvard and Brandeis University (Ph.D. in Sociology), who began his career living and working in Africa. His first film, *Born Again: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*, an intimate portrait of a Jerry-Falwell inspired church in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the 1980s, won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and was broadcast nationally on PBS, on Channel 4 in the UK, in Europe and around the world. His book about that project, *Spirit and Flesh* (Knopf 2004) was named one of the 5 best nonfiction books of the year. He has produced, directed, and sometimes shot, *cinéma vérité* documentaries on diverse subjects for foundations and non-profit organizations in the United States.

Editors Kate Purdie has worked in New York with David Grubin, Robert Drew and *60 Minutes*. Jean Boucicaut edited the award-winning *Secret Daughter* and *Liberia: America's Stepchild*.

EARLY PRAISE FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY ROUGH CUTS:

"The most penetrating and informative material I have ever seen on African Christianity, bringing out its vitality and variety without ever sensationalizing or exoticising."

Terence Ranger, Professor of African History, Oxford University

"A striking portrait, revealing a Christianity poised to renew the vitality of a faith once received from Europe and America."

Al Raboteau, Professor of Religion, Princeton University

"The depth and scale of the work is truly remarkable and I believe that it makes important statements about the development of Christianity in Africa."

Ed Worster, Programming Director, South African Broadcasting

PRAISE FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY RISING FILMS:

"These two films . . . offer a remarkable degree of insight into the way the Christian faith is developing in Africa, perhaps its most critical contemporary theatre. They show the range of religious activity, tradition and innovation; but they also indicate determining conditions and prevailing directions. The representative African commentators are of the highest quality.

I have watched these films with audiences of specialist scholars, of students at various levels

and of general public. In every case the effect has been striking, powerful and clarifying. These films pack more information and present it more tellingly than would vast areas of print. Their potential for good is immense.”

Andrew F. Walls, Founding Director, Centre for the Study of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh, & of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*

“Magnificent and often really moving. . . I know of no comparable material that raises so many of the critical issues in contemporary African Christianity . . . By far the most useful aspect is that all these ideas and beliefs - which Americans might find strange or off-putting - are presented by likable and intelligent interview subjects: the ideas are, in short, given human faces. I have vastly enjoyed using these films in undergraduate classes, where they evoke intense interest and stir excellent discussions. But I find it hard to think of any audience, whether professional, academic or political, that could not benefit from these superlative examples of documentary filmmaking.”

Philip Jenkins, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Humanities, Pennsylvania State University, & Senior Fellow, Institute for Studies of Religion, Baylor University

“Very inspiring . . . and terribly informative.”

Samuel Kobia, former General Secretary, World Council of Churches

“Teaching how Africa's world religions intersect with indigenous belief systems pose daunting pedagogical challenges, especially in the West. Ault’s impressive documentaries effectively challenge the sensationalism notoriously persistent even among intelligent lay learners. They deftly engage the creative agency among the masses of African religious adherents in national and transnational contexts and are essential teaching tools in African studies.”

Olufemi Vaughan, Geoffrey Canada Professor of Africana Studies & History Director, Africana Studies Program, Bowdoin College

Distribution Details

The *African Christianity Rising* films are being distributed, for personal home video use, by Vision Video, P.O. Box 540, Worcester, PA 19490, (610) 584-3500, www.visionvideo.com.

For educational uses in schools and churches, *Institutional* and *Complete Educational Editions* (the latter including 20 “extras” running over three hours)—both carrying Public Performance Rights—are being distributed by James Ault Productions.

For Public Performance Rights editions, for special screenings & speaking engagements, additional uses of project footage, continuing releases of project materials in video & text, and interactive discussions of the film materials & their educational uses, visit or contact us at:

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