

Converting to Christianity through Leaders: A Comparative Study of King Clovis and King Nzinga Nkuwu's stories of Conversion

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Abstract

The story of conversion to Christianity puts in the foreground the role of leaders who have influenced their peoples' adherence to this religion. This article examines the process of conversion of two great kings in the history of Europe (King Clovis) and Africa (King Nzinga Nkuwu) by raising the points of resemblance and dissimilarity of their conversion to Christianity. The purpose of this article is to show, from historical facts, why there were more Christians in one region than in another at a given period of Christianity's expansion in the world. It also opens the debate on survival and motivations of current adherents to Christianity in our country.

1. Introduction

Many people have converted to Christianity in different regions of the world through different means at different time in history.

Their culture has been transformed by the bonding to the Christian faith. The question of genuine conversion at community level may sound very difficult to be addressed.¹ According to Calvin B. Kendall, "conversion" refers to two religious phenomena: the first phenomenon is currently called "being born again" or regenerated but the other phenomenon has to do with the replacement of one belief system by another.

[The latter] applies to the individual who has been brought to abandon his or her old religion and to substitute for it a new and different one. Rarely is the movement simply from unbelief to belief. Like the first, this phenomenon involves a transformation of *mentalités*. The adoption of Christianity by whole

¹ Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant, eds., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Issues in Contemporary Religion (London ; New York: Cassell, 1999), 7.

peoples at different historical moments around the globe is, by and large, an aspect of this second type of conversion.²

That is why exploring the stories of community leaders conversion will allow us to better understand the cultural and historical dynamics of conversion for a given people. Converting to Christianity is a process of turning every aspect of life towards Christ. This experience has personal dimension as well as collective dimension. In the case of some kingdoms, in Europe and in Africa, conversion took place through leaders' influence on their peoples. The present study is a comparison between two stories of leaders' conversion: King Clovis and King Nzinga Nkuwu.

2. King Clovis' story of conversion

In 476, the western part of the Christian Roman Empire collapsed but Christianity survived. The invaders who put an end to the Western Roman Empire were, in their

majority, Pagans or Arians. In fact, "of these new Germanic kingdoms, the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, and most of the Burgundians, were Arians, while the Franks, Angles, Saxons and Jutes remained Pagans."³ They were thus controlling a large area that will become the western nations of Europe. Their conversion to "orthodox" Christianity would ensure its subsistence among the people of Europe to the extent that Christianity would soon impact their social, intellectual and cultural life. When we reflect about how Europe outside of the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity, one of the stories that are well attested emerges. That is the conversion story of the leader of the Franks, namely King Clovis.

Clovis was born in 466 to the royal family of the Merovingian dynasty named after his grandfather Merovech. His father Childeric⁴ decided to name him Chlodovech/Chlodovocar (or Clovis), meaning 'a praised fighter.' At age 15, his father died at the battle field while helping the Romans to face their enemies, the Visigoths in 481. The same year, Clovis was

² Calvin B. Kendall and University of Minnesota, eds., *Conversion to Christianity: From Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas*, Minnesota Studies in Early Modern History, no. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: CEMH (Center for Early Modern History), University of Minnesota, 2009), 1.

³ Nicholas R Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power* (London: Grace Publications, 2016), 322.

⁴ Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001), 237.

crowned King of the Franks and started to expand his territory and his power all over the Gaul and northern portions of the old Roman Empire. Through his conquest, many Germanic tribes of that region came under his authority. In 493, he married a Burgundian princess called Clotilda who was a Catholic Christian (not an Arian given that most of the Burgundians were Arians⁵). Clotilda, the queen tried to persuade her husband to become a Christian but Clovis, the king resisted. However, in 496 a crucial event happened which was to transform the religious destiny of the new West.

As the Frankish king Clovis was subduing and uniting other kingdoms under his leadership by alliances or by force, he found himself in a serious military trouble fighting another Germanic tribe called the Alemanni. The battle was extremely perilous and death-defying. In his desperation, Clovis prayed to the Lord about whom his wife had so often told him, promising that he would become a Christian if Christ gave him victory in that battle.⁶ This is what he said:

O Jesus Christ, Clotilda holds that you are the Son of the living God. You graciously pour out your assistance on people in trouble, and victory comes to people who put their trust in you. In faith I cry for your glorious aid. If you will hand me victory over those who attack me, and I get proof of the miracles tasted by those committed to your name (as they say), then I will exercise faith in you and submit to baptism. I have cried to my own gods to help me, but it is painfully obvious they are not going to help. So I cannot credit them with any power. They do not intervene to rescue people who trust in them. So now I cry out to you. I long to believe in You, especially that I may escape my foes.⁷

At the end of the battle, Clovis was victorious by killing the king of the Alemanni. The remaining Alemanni soldiers submitted to his dominion. When he came from the battle, he reported to Clotilda her wife what had happened and his decision to embrace Christianity. Clotilda informed quickly St. Remi, the bishop of Rheims who came to instruct King Clovis in the Christian faith. In order to keep his promise, Clovis abandoned

⁵ For the difference between Arians and Catholics, read Dana Lee Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion Series (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 20.

⁶ Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 322.

⁷ Needham, 322–23.

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the practice of his ancestral religion and accepted to be baptized as a Catholic Christian in opposition to Arian Christian in 496,⁸ indicating a new alliance with the Roman form of the faith.⁹ This decision was significant not only for the Franks but for other Germanic peoples as well.¹⁰ After having made his profession of the orthodox faith, the King was plunged thrice in the waters of baptism in the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost – and the prelate Remi consecrated him with the divine unction. He spoke eloquently to the King: “Gently bend your neck, Sigamber; worship what you burned; burn what you worshipped.” Two sisters of the King and 3000 soldiers and a great number of women and children were likewise baptized.¹¹

Moreover, the folk and the chieftains were assembled by the command of the King. He arose in the midst of them, and spoke to this effect:

Lords of the Franks, it seems to me highly profitable that you should know first of all what those gods which you worship are. For we are certain of their falsity: and we come right freely into the knowledge of Him who is the true God. Know of a surety that this same God which I preach to you has given victory over your enemies in the recent battle against the Alemanni. Lift, therefore, your hearts in just hope; and ask the Sovereign Defender, that He give to you all, that which you desire - that He save our souls and give us victory over our enemies.¹²

When king Clovis, full of faith, had thus preached to and admonished his people, one and all banished from their hearts all unbelief, and recognized their Creator. According to Needham, “the tribe [of the Franks] followed the religious allegiances of its chief. Hence, the Franks became the first Catholic kingdom among the Western nations. Catholics praised Clovis as a new Constantine who had led his people out of

⁸ The date of Clovis' baptism is under debate; some historians think of 498, others put it even in 508.

⁹ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 21.

¹⁰ Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 238.

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<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/496clovis.asp>
accessed on June 5, 2018.

¹²

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/496clovis.asp>
accessed on June 5, 2018.

Pagan darkness into the light of orthodox Christianity.”¹³

It is also reported that Clovis showed vast zeal for his new faith. He built a splendid church at Paris, called St. Genevieve, where later he and Clotilda were buried. Faith and religion and zeal for justice were pursued by him all the days of his life. Certain Franks still held to paganism, and found a leader in Prince Ragnachairus but Clovis put him to death. Thus all the Frankish people were converted and baptized by the merits of St. Remi.¹⁴ Clovis's new religion impacted the future course of Western and Central Europe, as he spread his Christian religious beliefs throughout nearly the entire region. The Catholic Church soon became the richest and most powerful institution in the Frankish society.¹⁵ King Clovis died at age 45 in the year 511.

This conversion story of King Clovis will be compared to that of King Nzinga Nkuwu.

3. King Nzinga Nkuwu's story of conversion

Christianity is known to have reached the coastal parts of the sub-Saharan Africa during the Middle Ages. One of the contact points in Africa is the Kingdom of Kongo that was located in west central Africa south of the Congo River, it extended over the western part of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Angola.¹⁶ Researchers have come to conclude that “it is not easy to know about the origins of the Kingdom of Kongo because of the shortage of consistent sources.”¹⁷ Paul H. Gundani quoting Sigbert Axelson states that “practically all historical research on sub-Saharan Africa is seriously hampered by the lack of original sources.” He continues asserting that “the records that are available, however, are generally provided by non-African sources, that is, by European and Arab visitors to the subcontinent, who came as explorers, conquerors and missionaries. As such, sources are laden with ideological

¹³ Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 323.

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<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/496clovis.asp> accessed on June 5, 2018.

¹⁵ Robert Bruce Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 93.

¹⁶ Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1.

¹⁷ Elikia M'Bokolo, *Afrique noire: histoire et civilisations* (Paris: Hatier-AUF, 2008), 149. and Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 31.

biases and prejudices that were common during the times of the writers.”¹⁸

In the midst of all the contradicting and incomplete sources, I have tried to write the conversion story of King Nzinga Nkuwu by attempting to organize logically the historical facts. It is also noteworthy to be aware that few things are told about Nzinga Nkuwu himself but much has been written about his son Afonso I whose traditional name was Mvemba Nzinga, the well-known Christian king of Kongo. Thus, I have focused my attention to Nzinga Nkuwu because he is the first historically known king of Kongo who, as a ruler, accepted the penetration of Christianity into the Kingdom of Kongo.

Nzinga Nkuwu's conversion to Christianity is unclear and not straight to the point. It came as a result of several encounters, based on the exchange of gifts, between Portugal expeditions to Mbanza Kongo, the capital city of Kongo¹⁹ and Kongo ambassadors to Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal. The starting point of Nzinga

Nkuwu's story of conversion begins in 1482/3 when people at the mouth of the great Congo River caught sight of huge ships out of which white-skinned men came ashore. They came from over the ocean where the Bakongo thought that ancestors lived in transformed bodies of white color.²⁰ This was the first expedition led by Diego Cao that reached the Congo River estuary, in search of the maritime passage to India and of new allies for Christendom.²¹ For this first time, Diego Cao did not get in touch with the King but he only erected a stele of stones on the south shore and called the river Rio de Padrao. When he came for the second time in 1485, he came along with some missionaries and black people from Guinea. They found kind people from whom, as they were showing signs and gestures, they understood that there should be a mighty ruler in that region. Diego Cao sent four messengers in that direction but as they delayed to come back, he embarked with four hostages of that community who had got into the ship. Thus, four “Christian messengers” were retained at Mbanza Kongo and Diego Cao, the captain of the expedition, took four hostages with him to Lisbon. But both sides acted kindly and

¹⁸ Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: An African Story*, Perspectives on Christianity, v. 3 (Pretoria: Dept. of Church History, University of Pretoria, 2005), 173.

¹⁹ Robert Cornevin, *Histoire Du Zaïre : Des Origines à Nos Jours* (Bruxelles: Hayez, 1989), 45.

²⁰ Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, Rev. 2nd ed (Oxford : New York: Macmillan Education ; Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 144.

²¹ Fromont, *The Art of Conversion*, 5.

exchange brought about positive results. The Mani Kong treated the Portuguese messengers – friars of the Third Order of St. Francis – “like his sons,” and King Joao II received the four African hostages with greater honor and had them trained as interpreters.²²

The expedition of 1487 was crucial because of its two particularities: on the one hand, Diego Cao came back with those “hostages” wearing white clothes because they were already baptized and would work as the first evangelists. The King Nzinga Nkuwu presented also the missionaries he took as hostages. On the other side, the King sent an official embassy to Lisbon which included young men for training, and asked for missionaries. They were well received as royal ambassadors and were also baptized.²³

According to Adrian Hastings, the fourth expedition of 1491 was the decisive one. It had been prepared upon both sides. There had been a few Portuguese in the Kongo (including, probably, a priest in Soyo) and Kongolese in Lisbon for some years. Priests, monks, stonemasons, militaries,

carpenters, horses, and a few women were all unloaded, together with plenty of cloth and other useful objects.²⁴ When the expedition arrived, the missionaries found the Mani Soyo, the ruler of the coastal province, as well as the Mani Kongo ready for baptism.²⁵ The Mani Soyo was at once baptized with his son while a large symbolic bonfire was made of the implements of traditional religion. Two months later the Portuguese reached the capital, Mbanza Kongo, where the king himself, Nzinga Nkuwu, the Mani Kongo, welcomed them and was baptized, receiving the name Joao I, in honor of the reigning king of Portugal, Joao II²⁶ and his eldest son Mvemba Nzinga were baptized under the name Afonso I on May 3, 1491. One source adds that their example was followed by such a big crowd that “the arms of the missionaries became tired” from administering the holy sacrament to all of them.²⁷

Unfortunately, anything is documented about when and how Nzinga Nkuwu accepted to embrace Christianity.

²² John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 56.

²³ Cornevin, *Histoire Du Zaïre : Des Origines à Nos Jours*, 49.

²⁴ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450 - 1950*, Reprint, The Oxford History of the Christian Church (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 73.

²⁵ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, 57.

²⁶ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 73.

²⁷ Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*, A BGC Monograph (Grand Rapids, Mich. : Wheaton, IL: Baker Books ; Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, 1996), 128.

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According to John Baur, there was “an oral tradition which says that there were already some Portuguese established at Mpinda, including a priest, who had instructed the Mani Soyo and this one in turn, had discussed this new religion with the Mani Kongo.”²⁸ We can also think of the four messengers that Nzinga Nkuwu retained as hostages at Mbanza Kongo during the second expedition of 1485. They may have brought him to confess the Christian faith. However, the exchange of gifts between Portugal and the kingdom of Kongo reached its honey moon for a short time because the baptized king went back to paganism even if he did not officially abdicate or start persecution against Christians on his territory.²⁹ Hastings’ comments on Nzinga Nkuwu’s backsliding status are closed to what might have happened:

Nzinga Nkuwu was tired of the Christian insistence upon burning fetishes and restricting oneself to a single wife. Both insistences were socially and politically disruptive and he returned to the ways of his fathers.

The function of the fetishes present in

every village was to secure rain and health, to protect against witchcraft; the function of the king’s many wives was to link him with different sections of his people. A few Portuguese priests performing their rituals in an incomprehensible language and hastily constructed buildings in the capital might add a novel prestige to the court, but it in no way substituted for what was lost in the experience of the people and the authority of the king. Like many other African rulers hurriedly baptized, he returned to ‘paganism’ as soon as he began to detect the implications of Christian conversion.³⁰

Even if Nzinga Nkuwu backslidden, Christianity has already penetrated his kingdom given that his returning ambassadors and many other nobles of his courts were by that time baptized. Christianity will flourish under Afonso I after his father’s death in 1506 and after defeating his cousin Mpanzu Kitima, the favorite pagan son of King Nzinga Nkuwu.³¹

In the remaining part of this article, I am going to highlight some points of

²⁸ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, 57.

²⁹ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l’Afrique Noire: D’hier à Demain* (Paris: A. Hatier, 1978), 183.

³⁰ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 76.

³¹ Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo*, 53–54.

comparison between the above two stories of conversion through leaders.

4. Comparison of the two stories: A lesson on model of conversion

Converting to Christianity is an aspect of God's story working around people's lives to make everything new. In his sovereignty, God uses any means to turn a given community to Christ. At a time in history, he used leaders to make Himself known in Europe as well as in Africa. When one carefully reads the conversion stories of King Clovis and King Nzinga Nkuwu, one finds some similarities and differences even if the events occurred in different places at different times.

In fact, what is common for the two stories is that they are about power encounters: pagan idol worshippers meeting Christians who spread the Gospel of salvation. In other words, Christianity was encountering traditional religion.³² The result of such an encounter is the King's personal decision to

embrace the Christian faith.³³ This is confirmed through the public baptism. Then, to show how Christianity has penetrated a community, people accept and adhere to their leader's new faith. Hastings observes that "in the mind of the Portuguese and in the mind of the people of Kongo religious conversion was dependent upon a royal decision..."³⁴

However, the two stories are somewhere very different. The following facts can help us to perceive the points of separation. Firstly, the vessel of the Gospel: a woman, Clotilda in the case of Clovis but men, priests or missionaries in the case of Nzinga Nkuwu. Secondly, the purpose of conversion:³⁵ while Clovis needed victory in battle over his foes, Nzinga Nkuwu, on his side, searched for friendship with newcomers in his kingdom. Thirdly, concerning perseverance in the Christian faith, both stories tell us that Clovis achieved an outstanding progress to the extent that he endeavored for the conversion of his whole kingdom; but Nzinga Nkuwu, after some days, backslid because of the heavy implications of his conversion to his culture.

³² For Rambo and Farhadian, conversion is the name for all forms of 'religious change'. In their model of conversion, it is a complex process involving seven stages. Those stages are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, committing, and consequences. See, Lamb and Bryant, *Religious Conversion*, 23-24.

³³ Fromont, *The Art of Conversion*, 1.

³⁴ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 75.

³⁵ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=52872>.

Fourthly, the spacio-temporal setting: even though this last underlined difference, it doesn't have any impact on the end of the two stories. It is relevant to notice that the first event took place in Europe in the 5th century while the second happened in Africa in the 15th century.

5. Conclusion

Converting to Christianity has been a process triggered through different means in history. This article pointed at leaders as vessels of conversion of their peoples in Europe (King Clovis) and Africa (King Nzinga Nkuwu). Some scholars think of such a type of conversion as a "Constantinian" model.³⁶ The stories of these Kings highlight some factors and motivations of the adherents to Christianity. Hence, Clovis converted thanks to her wife Clotilda because he was looking for victory over his enemies while Nzinga Nkuwu, after probably being instructed by missionary priests, converted in order to establish friendship ties with the Portuguese kingdom. Then the peoples followed the religious allegiances of their leaders to Christianity.

Finally, it is obvious that all Congolese today should consider those motivations and assess their own adherence to the Christian faith. Though King Nzinga Nkuwu fell into apostasy, Christianity survived in the Kongo kingdom and reached later almost the whole DRC country. This implies that there are many other factors to explain why and how Congolese have embraced Christianity. Scholars are therefore urged to pursue research on this topic together with finding causes for Christianity decline in Europe many centuries after King Clovis' era.

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³⁶ Kendall and University of Minnesota, *Conversion to Christianity*, 26.

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