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Experiencing West Africa: What a Semester on the Mission Field Taught Me

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Experiencing West Africa:
What a Semester on the Mission Field Taught Me”**

written by

Logan Turner

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, thesis director

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I. Introduction

During the spring of my junior year of college, I had the opportunity to spend five months on the mission field in West Africa through the International Mission Board's Hands-On semester, a program where college-aged students spend approximately five months abroad working with career missionaries in their ministries. I had no idea what to expect going into the program, and I had very little understanding of what missionary life really looked like. I spent time researching the spirituality and history of the area I would be living and working in in the months before I left; I wanted to go into the semester with a foundational understanding of the culture, religious backgrounds, and people that I would be interacting with and living among. My research was helpful in giving me a historical understanding of West Africa and a general picture of what life there would be like, but I also realized that a lot of what I had learned through my studies was not accurate to what I would encounter during my time there. In this paper, I will discuss the different topics I studied in my pre-trip research and recount my experiences during my Hands-On semester in order to communicate the things I wished I would have known going into the program, the parts of my research that were beneficial in helping me adjust to and understand West Africa, and the lessons I took away from the whole experience.¹

In the fall of 2014, I began my college experience at Ouachita Baptist University. I was a Christian Studies major seeking to go into full-time ministry after graduation. I had little to no interest in or experience with missions, and I would have never imagined that I would spend a semester in a foreign country working with career missionaries. Throughout my freshman year, I began to really enjoy the academic study of the Bible and world religions; I entered college

¹ For security purposes, names have been changed and the specifics of my location will remain vague throughout this paper.

boasting that I was very knowledgeable about ministry and Scripture, and I was quickly humbled in that thinking. I fell in love with the classroom and what I could learn there, but I developed an apathetic attitude toward applying what I was learning outside of school and lacked a desire for experience. This all changed when I was felt a pull toward spending a semester abroad.

I have always had a heart for Muslims and reaching them with the gospel, and I began to strongly consider taking a semester off to participate in the Hands-On program. As I sifted through different job requests across the globe, I focused on areas with predominately Islamic populations. Initially, I looked at opportunities in the Middle East, but as those continued to fall through or be unavailable, different countries in West Africa began to consume my thoughts and initiate excitement. I applied for three jobs in different West African countries during the summer and walked into my junior year of college with assurance that I would be spending a semester working in an Islamic setting in some capacity.

II. Research

The specifics of my Hands-On project would not be assigned until the middle of the fall semester, but I wanted to learn more about the area that I was fairly sure I was about to spend five months living and working in. I had the opportunity to study a topic of my choice one-on-one with a professor, and I took this time to investigate the religious background and history of West Africa and the effects that the presence of foreign religions had on the traditional belief systems and practices of the area. I began by focusing on the beginning of Christianity and Islam coming into the region and quickly found that the introduction, acceptance, and practice of these new religions was not an easy or seamless process because of the African Traditional Religions indigenous to the area. This seems very obvious, but I was ignorantly assuming that the places that embraced Christianity and Islam were completely abandoning their previous beliefs to

practice their new-found faith. My understanding of the interactions between the ancestral faiths of the region and the missional introduction of new, foreign belief systems was shallow at best. Diving into a semester of research on this topic gave me a foundational understanding of the people I was about to encounter during the following semester and the interwoven nature of the beliefs that reigned throughout the western area of the continent.

My initial interest in researching the religious dynamics of West Africa was influenced and fueled by my understanding of the different theologies of Islam and Christianity. At their theological core, Islam and Christianity differ in their understanding of the human problem, salvation, and grace in their purest forms. Christians understand the human problem to be sin and separation from God, which occurred when the first humans God created, Adam and Eve, rebelled against him. Because of this separation there was a need for a perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of people and to bridge the separation between God and man. Thus, Jesus, the second person of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) took on flesh, being fully God and fully man, lived a perfect, sinless human life, took the sins of the world upon himself on a cross, died under the wrath of God, and rose from the grave conquering sin and death providing a future hope and promise for those who believe in and follow him. To inherit eternal life in Heaven in the presence of God, one must submit his or her life to Christ in obedience to what he has done for them on the cross and live to glorify God. Christians are saved by the grace of God and nothing of their own doing.

One of the biggest confessions a Muslim holds to is the *tawhid*, or complete oneness of God, which rejects the Christian Trinity, and thus Jesus as the divine savior of humankind. Ultimately, there is no need for a savior in Islam. Muslims understand the human problem to be ignorance of Allah and how to live a life that is pleasing to him. Prophets were sent throughout

history to remind the people of Allah and his statutes, and Muhammad was the final prophet who received the Qur'an through revelation from Allah through an angel, Gabriel, and became the ultimate example of what it looks like to please him. An adherent of Islam must merit paradise. Jesus was simply another prophet sent by Allah, and to consider him to be God is *shirk* or idolatry, an ultimate offense in Islam.

My semester of independent study opened my eyes to the long history of religious introduction and interaction throughout the different areas of West Africa. Today, the religious make-up of this region has in many areas shifted away from traditional beliefs and is predominately Islamic with small percentages of Christianity, including Catholicism, and indigenous religions that are focused mainly in coastal countries. However, even with the shift away from traditional beliefs, the indigenous religions that helped establish the culture, government, and society of the region continue to shape and influence the practice of Christianity and Islam.

Islam entered West Africa through the trans-Saharan trade with Arabs during the early eighth century. As the development of trade centers began and increased, they morphed and merged into Islamic centers of learning and civilization. The religion began to grow strong roots in the region during the reign of the Ghana Empire in the eleventh century. Muslim men established relationships with the ruling class of the empire, which initiated the process of Islamization of Western Africa.² The King employed Muslim interpreters, ministers, and treasurers to assist in his ruling the empire. The introduction of devout Muslims into

² Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, Ohio University Press: Athens, Ohio, 2000, 3.

authoritative positions within the empire began to establish international relationships between West Africa and the Islamic world.³

In the fifteenth century, the Mali Empire rose from the ruins of the Ghana Empire. Two emperors from this era played a crucial role in continuing the roots of Islam in West Africa. First was Sundiata, the founder of the Empire of Mali. Islamic historians wrote of Sundiata's weak adherence to the Islamic faith and how he introduced syncretic beliefs and practices into the empire. Because of this, he was not held in favorable opinion or highly revered by Islamic scholars of the time. The later reign of Mansa Musa began the true architecture of Islam in West Africa. He was a devout Muslim, and is most famously known for his hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon returning, he brought back Islamic scholars and architects to construct and manage mosques in the empire. This gave Islam a strong hold in the region for years to come. Like Mansa Musa, Emperor Muhammad Toure came to power after overthrowing the syncretic Islamic ruler of the Songhay Empire, Sunni Ali, in the fifteenth century. He was intrigued by Islamic law and theology; he established Islamic judges in the empire and is credited with creating the first Muslim university in West Africa.⁴

Islam continued to spread and morph over the centuries. One of the biggest steps in the establishment of Islam in West Africa was the reformation period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Islamic scholars and military leaders. Frustrations with the nominal Islamic governing of the area inspired the reformation period that would be new administrations to be founded based upon Arabic Islamic Law.⁵ During the period of French colonialism of the

³ A. Rahman I. Doi, "Spread of Islam in West Africa: The Empire of Ghana," [islamreligion.com](http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/304/viewall/spread-of-islam-in-west-africa/), (October 16, 2011). Online: <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/304/viewall/spread-of-islam-in-west-africa/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ J. F. A Ajayi., and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*. Vol. II, Columbia University Press: New York, 1974, 23.

region, literate Muslims became increasingly aware of Islamic doctrine and theology, which led to demands for reforms within the Islamic communities. This increase in knowledge and understanding marked a shift in what Islam looked like and how it was practiced in the region. Longstanding tradition began to give way to a mindset and practice that was more Arab-Muslim.⁶ Sharia Law was introduced into areas that had previously practiced a pagan version of Islam that weakly upheld the teachings and statutes of the religion, and despite French rule in the region during this time, Islam continued to spread even more rapidly than before, due to the increase of modern forms of communication and transportation. Many aspects of government, trade, and beliefs have shaped the Islam that exists today in West Africa. Because of this, Islam continues to be a significant part of the West African culture, government, and landscape.⁷

Christianity already had a presence in Africa, but the introduction of Christianity to West Africa came mainly through Atlantic contact by Europeans. The European/New World slave trade left a lasting impact on the region. Affluent, upper class Africans provided men for sale (supplied by captives from lower class areas or as a punishment for criminals), and in return they received compensation in payment and goods from slave traders. There was mutual respect and understanding between European slave traders and the sovereign West African authorities, where white buyers and black vendors were of equal moral standing.⁸

A number of previously enslaved West Africans eventually returned home, mainly to Sierra Leone, Gambia, and Liberia, where churches and philanthropists played a key role in assisting with the relocation of freed slaves. Devout Christians developed the mission strategy of

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Margari Hill, "The Spread of Islam in West Africa: Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century," spice.fsi.stanford.edu, (January, 2009). Online: http://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/the_spread_of_islam_in_west_africa_containment_mixing_and_reform_from_the_eighth_to_the_twentieth_century

⁸ J. F. A Ajayi., and Michael Crowder, 33.

preaching the gospel to the African middlemen in the slave trade in order to stop it. To do this, missionaries transported European-Christian culture and way of life into the West African region through systems of education, government, and law. There was a desire and motivation to establish Christian communities in West Africa that would also spread European ways of life throughout the area. Along with this, Roman script was introduced to the purely oral culture. Western literacy began to grow and spread throughout West Africa because of European style schools, which eventually led to Bible translation. Because of the missionary work in Sierra Leone, Gambia, Liberia, and later Ghana, Nigeria, and others, nationals were equipped by pastors and missionaries to continue evangelism and discipleship. They believed they were conducting God's work throughout West Africa, specifically focused along the coast. However, there was also a great deal of foreign influence on their expression of worship and beliefs that did not align with the culture of the region, creating a foreignness and distance from the God they were being taught to serve and worship. For many locals, there was still the desire to practice their traditional beliefs. There were efforts made by missionaries to enforce European Christianity, but still, old customs such as burial rites and communication with the spirits of dead family members were fused into the Christianity that was practiced by many people.⁹

There are major differences in how each of the prospective religions entered the West African region. Since Islam came through trade from the Arabic North, Islam today is dominant in the landlocked countries of West Africa and is more strictly adhered to the further north you travel in the region. Christianity today is mainly present in the coastal countries of West Africa, because of its arrival by sea from Europe during the slave trade and colonialism. Islam is the

⁹ Ibid, 48-49.

clear dominant religion of the area, but Christianity has a definite presence with large communities of believers that can still be found in the predominantly Islamic countries. Both religions long for converts and allegiance to their faiths, and they are not only battling each other as the absolute truth, but also struggling against the tendencies of individuals to intermingle different aspects, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, of their faiths.

West Africa is not only a religiously pluralistic region itself, but is also the middle ground between Christianity and Islam for the continent as a whole. It is centered as the dividing line between the majority Islamic North and the majority Christian South of the continent.¹⁰ A look into the arrival of the religions to the region provides an explanation for some of the tensions that still exist today between the two faiths. Historically, Islam and Christianity experienced difficulties in avoiding external religious ideas and traditions influencing and mixing into their doctrines and practices because they were being brought into an area with a wide range of indigenous belief systems already in place.

The clash between Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religions in West Africa has resulted in the rise of the phenomenon called Insider Movements and the establishment of African Initiated Churches across the region. Insider Movements and African Initiated Churches often stem from cultural differences between the East and the West, and are viewed as syncretic practices by many Christians and Muslims alike,¹¹ which can be understood as the combination of different forms of one belief or practice or the fusion of two or more originally different inflectional forms.¹²

¹⁰ Gordon Conwell, *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020*, (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2013), 32.

¹¹ Gene Daniels and Stan Nussbaum, "Letting Africa Speak: Exploring the Analogy of African-Initiated Churches and Insider Movements," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32:4 (October-December 2015): 166.

¹² "Syncretism," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, Online: [merriamwebster.com/dictionary/syncretism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism)

Over the past century, African Initiated Churches, churches that are established and led by local believers, rather than foreign missionaries, have emerged in many forms and locations across the continent, from small house churches to multi-million member mega churches. These establishments have caused missionaries to ask questions about the soundness of doctrine and theology, and if the churches are syncretic or simply contextualized properly to their cultural context. These churches are typically seen in coastal rural areas of Africa, because they are dealing with the conflicting views of Christianity and the long-standing religious traditions in the area.¹³

As I was reading about this phenomenon, I began to ponder the role of foreign missionaries in the local church. Traditional culture, beliefs, and practices are now being put under the microscope of Scripture to address whether they are culturally as well as biblically acceptable. For example, style of dress and music vary all across the spectrum in different cultures but do not cause a theological question mark. However, holding on to cultural norms, such as offerings to spirits are clearly unbiblical. These are very black and white examples, but the gray areas, such as the extent of ancestral respect and veneration, are where these untrained churches can fall into syncretism and ultimately false Christianity. This is a difficult task, in that it is not the job or concern of foreign missionaries to westernize churches or implement their cultural opinions upon the local church, but rather, to equip the leaders to shepherd and teach their congregations biblically and effectively.

A distinct element of West Africa is its power culture, stemming from a strong awareness of the spiritual realm. Most African societies hold the belief that there is the presence of a

¹³ Gene Daniels and Stan Nussbaum, 166.

mysterious and hidden power in the universe that comes from God. Likewise, they hold that this power is available to the spirits as well as certain human beings and desire to have control over it.¹⁴ When West Africans read the Bible, they tend to focus on the physical healings, examples of power, and visionary experiences that are depicted in the narrative, which resonates with their worldview. However, these concepts can often seem to be void from missionary-initiated churches to natives, making them seem counter to the Scripture they are reading and being taught about. The Christianity being brought to them is foreign and seen as a religion of words that is absent of true or real power. Likewise, their leadership and authority structures are often based upon super-natural awareness/encounters and charisma of a person, rather than their textual knowledge and understanding, a typical prerequisite for leadership in Western churches.¹⁵ This often results in African-Initiated Churches being established, which resonates with the culture and what they have encountered in their reading of the Bible. Now there is a form of “Christianity” that fits into the culture that it is being planted in, however, there are issues that arise.¹⁶

Syncretic beliefs creep into these churches due to lack of training and teaching. Herein lies the problem of widespread distrust of the institution of Christianity. The term “Christian” is often associated with nations, such as America, that are seen by many West Africans as unbiblical, morally devoid cultures. Thus, the doctrinal foundation of the church is built upon the African pastor’s or leadership team’s understanding of Scripture combined with (even unintentionally) their pre-understanding and past beliefs. Thus, tendencies such as attempting to

¹⁴ Kelvin Onongha, “Acts 1:8- A Paradigm for Missions in West-Central Africa,” digitalcommons.andrews.edu (February, 2009), 67. Online: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=jams>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Daniels and Nussbaum, 166.

manipulate the God of Christianity is present due to how power is understood in their worldview, and the fear of bad powers causes them to continue to seek spiritual help and guidance from the services of “local diviners,” people who possess the ability to manipulate spiritual power.¹⁷

The second result of this clash of beliefs is Insider Movements, which occur mainly in the more inland northern regions of West Africa, where conversion to Christianity could be life-threatening. Insider Movements serve to offer an element of safety for converts to Christianity by allowing people to remain culturally and socially Muslim, while adhering to Christianity’s religious beliefs and practices. Islam as a whole is very aware of the supernatural and the spirit realm. Muslims believe that there is an angel on either shoulder of every person recording their good deeds and bad deeds, they are very apt to pray to receive dreams or visions from God, and they believe that the *jinn* (similar to the Christian understanding of demons) live in their homes. Islam in West Africa is already steeped in the supernatural due to the basic doctrines of the religion, but also because of the indigenous religions that were present and established when Islam was introduced to the area. Thus, Insider Movements in theory could be a more effective evangelistic strategy, because it would resonate with the cultural identities of the people. Insider movements can be defined as missionary strategy that grows believers that fall into all of the following categories and contain these characteristics:

1. Following Jesus and the Bible as the risen Lord and Savior and Son of God
2. Fellowship in culturally appropriate ways of prayer, Bible study, gathering within the body of believers, led by fellow insiders who were called by God to leadership
3. Spiritual transformation occurring through Scriptural study that results in certain cultural and religious beliefs and practices being retained, reinterpreted, or rejected

¹⁷ Onongha, 68.

4. Remaining a witness for Christ as internal members of the community of God
5. Multiplication and reproduction through ongoing witness and prayer, while reproducing insider fellowship¹⁸

In an Islamic context this would look like a Muslim learning about Jesus and deciding to become a Christian. However, he/she continues to identify himself/herself as a Muslim culturally but not religiously. The disagreement between evangelicals lies in the definition of syncretism. While many would say that following Jesus as a Muslim is syncretism and condemned by Scripture, others would say that these Muslim believers are living under the authority of the Bible, while reinterpreting and rejecting their previous beliefs and practices against Scripture. Thus, they are not participating in the mixing of two belief systems that Scripture condemns. However, being a Muslim is not simply a cultural identity, but also a religious proclamation that is intertwined into the all aspects of life. As we see when we look at the history of West Africa, Islamic states were established through governmental entities, which formulate their laws and political views from the Qur'an. To be a Muslim is to be aligned with the religion, but that religion is also interwoven into government, lifestyle, and culture, thus difficult to separate.¹⁹

Likewise, West African Islamic culture is similar to that of the Old Testament Jews. Similar to the issues that the African-Initiated Churches are addressing and growing out of, Muslims culturally do not and will not look like Western Christians. Often, the gospel is brought to them in a way that is too dominated by foreignness.²⁰ Thus, in a way, Insider Movements are a strategic reaction to the lack of Semitic cultural values in the Western Church, despite their

¹⁸ John Jay Travis, "Coming to Terms with Terms," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Thomas and John Jay Jackson (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2015), 8-9.

¹⁹ Joseph Cumming, "Muslim Followers of Jesus?," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Thomas and John Jay Jackson (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2015), 26-27.

²⁰ Charles H. Craft "Fear of Syncretism," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Thomas and John Jay Jackson (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2015), 381.

prominent presence in Scripture.²¹ Although, this can become an issue when we consider, as discussed previously, that Islam is just as much a cultural identity as a religious identity. An example of this is the recitation of the *shahadah*. The *shahadah* is the Islamic confession of faith that one says to become a Muslim and to confirm his or her allegiance to Islam. The *shahadah* affirms Allah as God and Muhammad as his prophet. Muslims understand God to be purely one, proclaiming an anti-Trinitarian view of God, which completely rejects Christianity and salvation.²² But, the *shahadah* can also be understood as “civilization identification,” a phrase said to identify oneself politically and culturally as a Muslim but not religiously. However, this becomes an issue when holding onto a cultural understanding and identity, and continuing to practice it is ultimately communicating a rejection of Jesus as God and savior.

I concluded my research with many thoughts and questions as I mulled over what I had learned and read about West Africa that semester: my studies led me to believe that syncretism in West Africa looks different than and is caused by different factors, depending on where you look in the region. Thus, I assumed my experiences would be very different depending on what region of West Africa I would be spending my Hands-On semester in. My research revealed that generally the rural coastal areas of West Africa clash with Christianity mainly on cultural/worldview issues, and that their power cultures do not often align with what many Western missionaries are preaching to them. Thus, nationals would often start their own churches on the foundation of doctrine they have interpreted out of Scripture. And because of this, it seemed to me that syncretism would have the potential to erupt in these churches due to

²¹ Daniels and Nussbaum, 169.

²² Harley Talman, “Muslim Followers of Jesus and the Muslim Confession of Faith,” in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Thomas and John Jay Jackson (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2015), 506.

lack of training and teaching (that is common, if not often required of church leaders in the West) about who God is and what it means and looks like to follow him.

Looking to the inland countries, I saw through my reading that there seemed to be much stronger Islamic roots. This is where Insider Movements would likely be more in action. I had read a lot about how culture/worldview clashes are a major factor in syncretic behavior and beliefs, but that it also boils down to an identity issue.; to be a Muslim is to pledge allegiance to Allah and his prophet, Muhammad, but it is also to pledge allegiance to your government and your people. The introduction of the gospel calls for an allegiance to Christ and an abandonment of Islam. Thus, I concluded that syncretism had the potential to occur when there are aspects of life and culture that are extremely difficult or even dangerous to abandon, tempting believers to compromise on what it means and looks like to follow Christ in some or many areas of their life. This caused me to think about what would just be unconventional by Western standards, and what would counter to following Jesus by biblical standards.

I walked into my Hands-On semester pondering these things and all of the information I had taken in from my research: the facts, the history, the articles. I wondered if what I had read was going to be accurate to my setting and to the people I would be working with. A lot of what I had researched was interesting and informative but also felt very abstract and impersonal. I was eager to encounter life in a West African setting after spending a semester studying and trying to gather as much information about the region as possible in order to arrive with a foundational understanding of what the next five months of my life were going to look like.

III. Background

In March I was assigned to work on an urban missions team in a major West African city. I was absolutely thrilled with my assignment, and so much of what I learned about the city was

simply from living and experiencing life there.²³ It is one of the fastest growing cities in the world with a wide gap between the wealthy and the impoverished. One of the biggest issues in the city and the country as a whole is poverty. People are often consumed with wanting more money and escaping the cycle of poverty and lack of education and opportunity. This affects the way they understand and relate to God, sometimes causing people in lower social classes to not engage in their religion because they believe God does not love or care for them because they are poor.

There is a common misconception in the country that all Westerners are Christians. Because of this, many of the locals see Christianity as a hypocritical and immoral religion that has been tainted and abused. Christianity is the “religion of the white people,” as many natives would say, and to be associated with it can often be shameful in the eyes of devout Muslims. Local Christians who accept this misconception as truth believe that faithfulness to God equals prosperity, health, and wealth. They look at American culture and lifestyle, still thinking that everyone is Christian, and often can be tricked into believing that being faithful enough or spiritual enough will lead to God blessing them.

In recent decades people from surrounding areas have migrated to the city because of its growth and industrialization. Job opportunities and the hope of a better life are strong motivations behind the influx of the population in the city. The urban sprawl from the hundreds of surrounding villages has created a melting pot of every people group known throughout West Africa, but despite urbanization and industrialization, the city still operates very much like a village. The culture is more modernized and westernized compared to that of the villages, but it

²³ All information in this section is based upon my experiences and conversations with cultural informants, such as my supervisors, my English students, and other national friends.

is still very traditional and conservative. Locals still hold strong ties and loyalties to their family villages, which seeps into the lifestyle of the city where hospitality, honor and power structures, and community are of the utmost importance. One of the career missionaries who has lived and worked in the city for a number of years explained the mindset of the people by describing it as being similar to America in the 1950s when it comes to politics, technology, individualism, and other beliefs.

City inhabitants were typically very open about religion and enjoyed faith-based conversations, but the vast majority of the people were Muslim, upward of ninety percent of the population. Despite the lack of religious tolerance and political instability that resides in the war torn northern areas of the country, the city tends to be generally accepting of other faith practices. During my time living in the city, it was essentially absent of religious violence. Their government, however, is influenced by Islamic doctrine and tradition, and religious tolerance is increasingly under threat from outside Islamic forces and pressures.

The city is not exempt from the norm of large industrial areas being more open and loose with morals and beliefs. Many of my students were consumed with their studies (those that were studying at universities) or the busyness of their careers and lifestyles. Granted, Islam structured the framework of their daily lives when it came to government, holidays, and rules, but few of my students were devout in their faith, whether they were Muslim or Christian. The majority of my Islamic students were apathetic in their practice of their faith. They did some daily prayers, participated in religious holidays, and knew the basics of their faith, but that was typically the extent of it. It was more practice and routine, rather than worshipful belief and following. The positive aspect of this was their willingness to hear and ask questions about Christianity, but at

the same time they were not too concerned with what we shared with them because of their apathetic view of religion as a whole.

The people tend to be very spiritually aware. Despite the average person's concern with wealth and success throughout the day, they are often still considering God in the back of their mind. However, when considering God, they are often thinking about how he can bless them or help them in their endeavors. Something interesting that I noticed in my classes was how God is a part of everything my students did. Even though many of them were not concerned with acting in a way that was consistently pleasing God, they were very quick to recognize his authority. For example, a lot of the locals responses to future statements, such as "see you tomorrow," was, "*Inshalla*," if God wills. There was recognition of God's ultimate power in their lives, but it was also a very cultural response not a heart response. A lot of this lack of interest in pleasing God is tied to the belief that Ramadan cleanses all sins and the fact that people are so preoccupied with their own needs being met by God.

When wrestling with how to deal with sin, even in Christian circles there is a lot of syncretism such as prosperity gospel, the idea that God will bless you with health, wealth, and family if you are faithful to him, and spirit worship. People are often less interested in their sin being washed away by Jesus and more concerned with how God can bless them financially. This can be a huge stumbling block for national believers. For Muslims, participation in Ramadan is understood to cover all of a Muslim's sin for the year. By following all of the regulations of the fast God will forgive all of your sins, and that is why it is taken so seriously. However, nationals are not overly concerned with atonement or forgiveness because of the legalistic nature of Islam. As long as they do more good than bad, God will bless and accept them.

When it comes to the interaction between Christianity and Islam, many Muslims in the

city believe in the Jesus of the Qur'an. There are many misconceptions that are centered on the true identity and purpose of Jesus. Muslims in the city do not deny Jesus' existence of Earth, rather, they have a great respect for him in their understanding of him, but they say his time is finished and now it is the time of Muhammad. In the Bible when Jesus said that he was leaving Earth and sending someone, a helper, to them, Muslims believe that this is Jesus prophesying about Muhammad. I had conversations with some of my local Christian friends about how they have had conversations with Muslim friends about this passage, explaining the truth of the Holy Spirit being promised to come, not Muhammad. But there is very much an "agree to disagree" mentality that often results from this conversation.

IV. Experience

Before going to West Africa, I spent ten days in the eastern part of the continent for training with all of the other students participating in the Hands-On program across Africa. We focused on things like security, culture shock, evangelism strategy, and healthy team relations. I was antsy during my time there to get to West Africa and begin working, and I did not take advantage of the training time the way that I should have. However, being trained in "story telling" opened my eyes to the semester I was about to have.

The whole of the African continent is predominantly an oral culture. Literacy rates in many areas are very low, especially in village settings, and historically Africans have passed down traditions, religious beliefs, and other stories by word of mouth. As an American who grew up reading and writing, this whole concept was incredibly foreign to me. I knew that different places around the world learned and communicated in different ways and that story telling was a big aspect of many cultures, especially in tribes and villages, but I did not realize the extent to which it reached even into the more urban and educated parts of Africa.

We were trained in “story telling” as a means to communicate Scripture. To us Hands-On students it was very difficult to capture all of the details and points of a story by just listening to it, and much more difficult to relay the story back after hearing it only once or twice. However, once I got to West Africa, I was shocked by the ability of my African students’ ability to hear a story once or twice and communicate it back to me with almost perfect detail. The training that we received in this area before arriving on the field was incredibly beneficial. It was a mental challenge, exercising and using my mind in ways I never had before to memorize long narratives and relay them in a way that was biblically accurate but also engaging and convincing. Trying to remember all of the details chronologically and accurately, while attempting to convey a story with enthusiasm and in a way that would capture an audience was something that I never would have imagined myself having to learn to be effective as a gospel presenter in a different culture.

It was incredibly intriguing to learn that the way people learn and take in information can be so different depending on how they grew up and were educated. Very briefly discussing the neurological differences between western styles of communicating and learning information about African styles was shocking to me and something I had never thought about before. This was only the beginning of a long semester of realizations that were about to hit me head on. I had never experienced anything other than American culture and way of thinking (outside of a few family vacations to Central America), and I was about to spend the next four months having my world turned upside down.

One of the toughest aspects of this for me was learning the language. I spent six weeks taking private French lessons for multiple hours per day. I had absolutely no background in French, but it was amazing how quickly I picked it up when it became necessary for functioning in daily life. I was able to immerse myself more into the culture that was going on all around me,

once I began to have an amateur grasp on the language. Being able to get around the city in a taxi or buy produce from the fruit stands on the side of the road or communicate things to my students when they did not understand my explanations in English encouraged my confidence and independence in my new setting.

I learned so much about the culture and the people simply through conversations with my taxi drivers; I got to learn about the life of the average West African directly from the source. I was not a fluent French speaker by any means, but I had a strong enough understanding of the grammar and structure of the language as well as a wide enough vocabulary to have an array of conversations with locals of all social statuses. This was incredibly beneficial in learning about the life and culture of the people in the city from the people in the city, and being able to communicate with locals was the beginning of me realizing what aspect of my research were true to the area and what was inaccurate to my setting.

During my time in West Africa, I was assigned to work as an English teacher for adults at the community center that was owned and operated by the local missionaries. Going into my semester, I had always thought that teaching English was something that missionaries did if they could not find anything better to do or needed entrance into a country. It seemed boring and at times pointless to me, but I was quickly humbled in my thinking. I realized how important language was to the people. I was shocked to learn that the majority of the population was fluent in at least two languages and often many more. Being able to speak and understand English was an avenue for advancement in business and political spheres in West Africa and made it easier to leave the area to go to Europe or America in hopes of further education or work. The ability to learn the language from and practice with a native English speaker is exciting and intriguing to

the locals, and on top of learning the language, they were very curious to learn more about American life and culture. Through teaching English, I was able to provide a practical and desired need while also having a platform to share my faith.

When I was thinking about all of the experience I would get during my Hands-On semester and the things that I would learn, I was always assuming I would grow immensely in my understanding of missions and ministry, and that I would learn about what it looks like to live in a different culture. These were huge points of growth and learning during my time in West Africa, but I could have never imagined the array of lessons, skills, and fields I would learn about while overseas on the mission field. A missionary couple was assigned to be my supervisors while I was there. Before going onto the mission field, Matthew helped run a homeless shelter, and Alyssa worked at a bank. Their business and financial backgrounds were foundational in their ministry in West Africa and influenced the way they ran their ministry at the community center.

Their main focus was the English classes offered at the community center, which I was predominantly involved in. Working alongside them was an incredible experience. I quickly learned that teaching English was not easy and not just something they did because there was nothing else to do. Everything was prayed over, thought through, and strategic. In the past under different leadership the English classes had been in many ways unstructured and disorganized, but Matthew and Alyssa were completely revamping the program. Before I had arrived they had put in a lot of time and effort into renovating the center. The building was an old manufacturing warehouse that was dirty, rundown, and littered with heavy and dangerous machinery. By the end of the renovation process the building looked like a completely different structure internally: walls and floors were cleaned and patched, classroom supplies such as whiteboards, desks, and

chairs were added, new lights, fans, and air conditioning units were installed, and bathrooms and showers were added in hope of hosting pastoral retreats at the center in the future.

All of this was purposeful. One of the biggest lessons that I learned from working under Matthew in the urban West African setting was the importance of “building value into your programs.” He explained to me the culture of the city from an evangelical standpoint. Having spiritual conversation with the people is not difficult; individuals are very open and also intrigued to talk to Americans about religion and faith. A lot of the previous ministry done by different missionaries in the English classes had been focused on reaching the poor; the classes were free and had few requirements for participation. Relationships were established through this program, and the gospel was proclaimed, but there was an element of stagnation in the spread of the gospel and the sphere of influence that the program was having on the city.

The hope and goal of the new program was, and still is, to provide quality English classes to adults who are successful or higher up in society, in order to establish long-term relationships with them that would lead to the gospel and further influence the city and eventually country as a whole. The classes were structured and taught with genuine hope and interest in providing a place to grow and advance skills and communication in the English language for those who participated. The program needed to be truly what it advertised itself to be, and it was. I saw my students’ grasp on the English language and ability to read, write, and communicate increase tremendously over the course of the semester. But the ultimate goal was to reach people with the gospel. This was done through offering optional Bible studies in English to our students, building relationships with students outside of the community center, and initiating spiritual conversation and topics in the classroom.

The country, historically and because of Islamic influence, operates as an honor/shame culture. This being the case, in order to reach the country as a whole with the gospel more effectively, you have to reach the influential people of society. I had learned this about Islam in the past: working as a coffee shop owner or in a “lesser profession” in an Islamic setting generally does not give you credibility, due to the belief that if you are being faithful to God he will bless you. Thus, your place in society often determines your influence and impact. So, yes, the missionaries in the city had different strategies and ministries to reach all different types of people in all levels of society, but the English program specifically, where I was focused, was strategically formulated to reach the societal influencers and a wider audience of people in the country.

Seeing this in action was incredible. By improving the facilities and classroom setting, charging fees for classes, introducing an attendance policy, and providing curriculum, the program targeted a completely different audience. We had doctors, university students, businessmen and women, and other influential members of the community in our classes, and this was just the first semester of the new and improved program. The students were predominantly Islamic: specifically, of my nineteen students, seventeen professed to be Muslim. So, the reach the program had in its first semester was great. Overtime as students continue to advance through the program and establish relationships with the career missionaries there, the hope and prayer is for the gospel to be received and then taken out to the students’ sphere of influence. Bringing the gospel to the people at the top of society overtime will have a domino effect on the city and country as a whole, if the message is accepted and spread.

A lot of the participants in the classes were also people who did not need relationships with Americans from a financial standpoint. I quickly learned from experiences and

conversations with Matthew and Alyssa that the mindset of many people in the city was one of reliance on Americans financially. Because I was American, I was automatically treated with respect and people wanted to please me. Every day I would be asked for things or complimented, often in order to attempt to establish a friendship for personal gain. This made it difficult to differentiate between who actually wanted to have a conversation with me and who just wanted something from me. People genuinely had interest in knowing me and talking, but a lot of the time there was also a monetary motivation. Many locals have become so accustomed to handouts from different American organizations in the city, that financial assistance without any expectation of return from that giver can often be assumed in relationships with Americans. Some locals even go as far as cutting their friends or family out of financial support arrangements they have made, because having American friends communicates that you have more financial security and less need.

Having students that were interested in us as their teachers created room for genuine relationships that were unmotivated by finances. There were still some students who struggled to pay the fee for our program, but as a whole the participants were there to learn and engage with the English language and were financially secure. Their desire stemmed from wanting to have a better education and get further ahead. Few people that I encountered wanted to remain in the country, and if they did want to stay, they often desired to invoke change and justice in the country. There was the reoccurring dream that many of my students had of leaving Africa and going to America to work and study. From a teaching standpoint, this fostered an incredible classroom setting. Students were engaged, motivated, and participated well in classroom activities and discussions. They wanted to learn English because of where it could take them and what it could do for them. From a missional standpoint, this created an open door for

relationships and all types of conversations. People wanted to practice their speaking skills with native English speakers, and this gave us an avenue to share our hearts and who we were as followers of Christ, while still fulfilling the promise of assisting in their English proficiency. We were able to give them something that they desperately wanted and needed in the classroom, while also having a platform to reveal to them their desperate need for Jesus.

Reflecting on the impact that my pre-trip research had on my semester, I realized that a lot of it was not what I experienced, like issues with African-Initiated Churches and Insider Movements, but it did give me a good foundational understanding of the background and culture of the country. A lot of what I had studied and read about missionary involvement in West Africa and syncretic issues was not the case with the missionary team that I worked on. My research focused a lot on initial contact with people in different areas of West Africa and issues that resulted from that, whereas the team I was working with had been established in the area for years. However, my studies informed me of the varying factors that can lead people to practice syncretism whether purposely or unintentionally.

Reading and learning about how West Africa was a culture focused on power and getting tangible insight to what that meant and looked like was very beneficial for me in my experiences. The Islam that I witnessed around me was highly influenced by the ideas and practices that stem out of being a power culture. The historical spirituality of the traditional beliefs in the country was tied to spiritual leaders in the community who served as an interim between man and the spiritual realm. Presently, this is still a reality in the form of *marabouts*, or witch doctors. Individuals will still go to the *marabout* for spiritual solutions to their problems. In the city every aspect of life, prosperity, hardships, health, and so on, is all related to and affected by the

interaction between the physical and spiritual realms. If there is a problem, the explanation for it is always a spiritual one, thus, the need for *marabouts*. Whenever an individual needs guidance or a solution to a problem, they go to the *marabout* for a sort of “recipe” to appease God and the spirits. These solutions can look like animal sacrifice, totems, rituals, and other practices. The Muslims believe that the *marabouts* are similar to prophets, in that God has ordained and sent them for the purpose of guiding people through spiritual encounters and appeasement. This becomes a very cyclical practice for many people who find only temporary solutions in what the *marabout* had previously instructed them to do, thus they must return when a new issue arises. Despite how common going to the *marabout* can be for many people, it can often still be a cause of shame because of its lack of doctrinal support in the Qur’an. African Islam is very different from Islam in the Middle East in this way. Islamic doctrine does not include sacrifices, but the history of performing ritual sacrifices as an element of orthopraxy in African Traditional Religions has initiated syncretic beliefs and practices.

I encountered this first hand in a village that the missionaries were connected to and working in. Two other Hands-On students were living with the people there, and I went to spend a week with them during our mid-semester break in the English classes. A *marabout* had been staying in the village with the people for over a week when I arrived. They informed me that even the villagers who had been receptive to hearing their bible stories and seemed as if they were growing to understand the gospel had been visiting the *marabout* to receive guidance. They so desperately desired spiritual intervention in their poverty that his arrival was received with gratefulness and excitement. Animals were being sacrificed, different instructions were given, and prayers recited as a form of intervention and communication with the spiritual realm.

I experienced syncretism in Christianity mainly through Neo-Pentecostalism. “Neo-Pentecostal churches are unlike the missionary churches planted by the modern mission movement in that they are founded by African leaders, and their theology is thoroughly contextualized, taking up central elements of African Traditional Religions and worldview. They share their emphasis on the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit with the classical Pentecostal churches but can be distinguished from these churches not just by their African origins, but also by the different emphases in their spirituality and praxis.”²⁴ Neo-Pentecostalism continues to differ from the classical Pentecostalism in its view on material possessions and affluence. The older missionary-derived Pentecostal denominations emphasized holiness and social humility, and it was wary of material gain or surplus. Present Neo-Pentecostalism has been influenced by the “prosperity gospel” and argues that material success signifies that a person is faithful and that God has placed his blessing upon them.²⁵

I attended the largest church in the country with one of my students, and after processing the service with my supervisor, I realized it was founded on Neo-Pentecostal beliefs. The service was incredibly emotional and charismatic and had a seemingly idolatrous love for its pastor. I had someone translating the sermon for me, and the basic message was steeped in prosperity gospel mixed with their traditional power culture that neo-Pentecostalism preaches: if you battle against the forces of Satan as God’s army, he will bless you with health, wealth, and family. If you are not paying close enough attention, the messages and beliefs of this movement seem biblical, but they are missing huge aspects of the gospel. This theology fits well into their

²⁴ Benno Van den Toren, “African Neo-Pentecostalism in the Face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities,” *journal.etsc.org* (2015), 111-112. Online: <http://journal.etsc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Cairo-Journal-of-Theology-2-2015-Van-den-Toren.pdf>

²⁵ David Maxwell, “Religion, Postcolonial Africa: Neo Pentecostalism,” *worldhistory.biz* (2015) Online: <http://www.worldhistory.biz/sundries/27763-religion-postcolonial-africa-neo-pentecostalism.html>

worldview and is slowly creeping its way across West Africa.²⁶ However, it is absent of submission to Jesus. The doctrine is ultimately manipulation of God, by working against the forces of evil for the result of God's blessing. It was heart-breaking to see such a massive crowd of people that are ultimately being led astray from the true hope and message of the gospel.

Another issue found in the churches was the struggle for power. This is not a problem due to syncretism, but one that has often resulted in lack of growth in churches. This was not the same as the African Initiated Churches that I had learned about through my research, but understanding how culture and worldview affects the way churches are operated and led helped put my experiences with the local churches into perspective. In this culture, knowledge is power, and this is true in the church as well. Matthew explained to me the struggle of working with and training pastors; they are so eager to learn more about Scripture and how to better pastor their churches, but at the same time there is internal conflict. Often times they do not want someone new knowing enough to pastor and thus could take away their congregation. This results in neglecting to train and equip new leaders in the church, as well as failing to properly shepherd the congregation. The honor of the "ownership" that a pastor has over his church can at times outweigh genuine growth within the congregation and spread of the gospel outside of the church. Matthew and other career missionaries were working a lot in this area with pastoral training sessions and other modes of equipping and facilitating church growth in the congregations and in leadership.

Through discussions with Matthew on this topic and witnessing it first hand I learned one of the biggest lessons about missionary work: the goal is to establish the gospel in a lost area and equip national believers to take over the work. It is not to stay forever. Matthew reiterated to me

²⁶ Van den Toren, 103.

again and again that he did his work in the hope of one day being able to hand it off to nationals. He taught me that we would never be able to infiltrate the country for the gospel as effectively as the locals, because we will never be able to understand all of the interworking of the culture, lifestyle, or beliefs like they would. We are to be trainers and equippers. I saw this modeled in the way Matthew and the other missionaries trained local pastors, assisted them in ways that did not cause reliance on themselves as America Christians, and encouraged pastors to bring along members of their congregation to training times in order to establish stronger and lasting leadership.

It was interesting to see the influence that the missionaries had on the churches in the city. A lot of my research led me to believe that missionaries are often transplanting a western form of Christianity into the cultures they are working in, but that was not true of what I saw and experienced. The missionaries that I was working with were very cautious about how they trained pastors and churches: they taught sound doctrine and encouraged genuine worship but insisted that it fit into the culture of the country. But, at the same time, the city is quickly urbanizing and looking to the West. Some of the churches looked more western, but it was because they wanted to be that way: full bands, choir robes, pulpits, etc. I very much saw a balance between a desire from the locals to look more western and implementing that into their churches, but at the same time this was not encouraged or discouraged by the missionaries. The churches had the freedom to structure themselves in the way that they saw best to worship, whereas the focus of the missionary influence was shepherding and equipping with sound practice and doctrine.

During my time in West Africa, I consistently went to a church in a small village right outside the city limits, but I also visited many different churches in the city, as well as in different villages. As I mentioned previously, I spent one Sunday at the largest church in the country with one of my students. This was one of the most overwhelming experiences of my entire semester. The service was five hours long, including a two-hour period of song and dance, a two-and-a-half-hour sermon, and a 30-minute time of what could best be described as a period of intercession by the pastor on behalf of the congregation for healing and exorcism of demons. This was the first time I ever witnessed a person who was under the control of demonic forces: the crying out, the strength of their thrashing about, foaming at the mouth. It was incredibly overwhelming and like nothing I had ever previously seen or experienced. I had always known intellectually and believed by faith in demonic activity in the world, but to witness the reality of it first-hand has changed the way I read Scripture and understand spiritual warfare. Even more shocking was the normalcy of it to the native people. To them this was just an aspect of what they saw and experienced on a day-to-day basis. It was gut-wrenching and incredibly emotional to me but in contrast such a casual and normal sight to them.

I spent the majority of my Sundays attending a small village church outside of the city that the missionaries had been connected to and working with for a number of years. The congregation of about twenty local believers met outside underneath a roof of tree branches, and cheerfully welcomed us every week. The flies constantly buzzed in and out of the rows of the congregation and the occasional dog or goat would trespass into the shaded area of the service, but I absolutely loved it. Like all of the other churches I visited, singing and dancing was a huge part of the service and the children always led a few songs each week. Young boys and the church elders sat in the front facing the congregation and played the drums and other makeshift

percussive instruments. It was always the most upbeat and joyous time. The head pastor conducted a very interactive service. For his message he would tell a Bible story twice and have one or two people repeat it after him. He would ask questions and encourage audience participation and discussion. Each week ended with a challenge to the congregation to tell the story to someone outside of the church.

Training pastors on how to teach and shepherd their congregations through story-telling was a big part of the missionary strategy in and around the city. Because of the lack of literacy, especially in villages, the use of Bible story-telling was an effective and practical way for any member of a congregation to grow in their knowledge of their faith and also equip them to share with others. Preaching a message in this way encouraged growth in the personal faith of each member of a congregation and also assisted in training some members to serve in different leadership roles within the church. This combatted the issue of knowledge hoarding by an individual pastor or a few men in leadership and provided avenues for personal, spiritual growth and maturity for believers in the churches.

On a few Sundays I attended a church in the city with my supervisors. It was interesting to witness the western influence on the style and structure of their worship but also recognize and embrace aspects of the service that were very different from anything that I had previously experienced. For example, the children would have a time every Sunday to come forward to lead the congregation in song and dance. Dancing was a huge part of Sunday worship at this church but also in all of the churches I visited, and despite my lack of rhythm and skill, it was incredible to worship through dancing alongside fellow believers. Because of the language barriers, going to church was something that was at times difficult and draining for me, but I found myself

missing the musical aspects that I had become so fond of during my time in West Africa when I returned home.

V. Conclusion

The ultimate lesson I learned through my studies and my time in West Africa was the importance of research being supplemented by experience. All of the efforts and time I put into understanding the cultural and religious setting of West Africa and specifically the country I would be living and working in only scratched the surface of what was the reality. Some of the things I learned through my research were not relevant or accurate to what I actually lived and saw, whereas others gave me a solid foundational understanding of what I was going to experience. The things that I took away from living the day to day life of the place that I fell in love with through books and internet sources were far beyond what I could have ever dreamed.

I got to see the interworking of a healthy missionary team. I understood all of the thought and prayer and strategy that goes into ministry efforts. I had conversations with missionaries who were dealing with issues of local church conflict. I worshipped with local believers in a language I did not understand. I was trained in and practiced different forms of culturally appropriate evangelism and discipleship. I established the most-unlikely but sweetest relationships with my English students and learned about the differences in hospitality and friendship from my cultural understanding. I learned about how Islam, Christianity, and African religions in West Africa function together and shape each other, and so many more countless lessons that I could have never learned without experiencing it myself. My college education as a whole has been immensely impacted and influenced by five months in a foreign country, and it gave me a new lens and perspective from which to view everything I have learned in the classroom.

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