
Timothy H.B. Stoneman*

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Abstract

During the second half of the twentieth century, Christianity underwent an epochal transformation from a predominantly Western religion to a world religion largely defined by non-Western adherents in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Broadcast media, spearheaded by American evangelical missionaries, played an important role in the globalization of Christianity. After WWII, conservative Protestant missionaries from the United States established a “far-flung global network” of radio stations around the world with the avowed purpose of proselytizing the entire globe. In Liberia, American missionaries organized Station ELWA, the first evangelical station in Africa. The medium of radio proved well suited to the “universal” mission of American evangelicals, particularly after the expansion of worldwide ownership in transistor radios during the 1960s. Yet the success of missionary radio stations such as ELWA rested on an extensive process of translation into local customs and practices. Between 1954 and 1970, ELWA officials and workers constructed transmission platforms, political relations, language services, receiver distribution campaigns, and community networks. These constructs functioned as the crucial grids through which the “universal” meaning of evangelicalism was produced at the grass-roots level. As the history of ELWA in Liberia makes clear, American evangelical broadcasters acquired converts only by adapting their gospel message to fit particular churches, cultures, and contexts across the globe. Localizing missionary radio required the appropriation of indigenous cultural capital, the transposition of national partners, and the active agency of audiences on the ground.

KEYWORDS: global and local, international broadcasting, radio and missions, American evangelicals, ELWA, Liberia

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During the second half of the twentieth century, the character of the Christian religion underwent an historic shift. For the first time in a millennium, the majority of Christian adherents in the world came from the global South in Asia, Africa and Latin America.\(^1\) Independent evangelical and Pentecostal groups fueled the growth of the Southern Church, increasing at nearly twice the rate of other Christian affiliations.\(^2\) The emergence of Christianity as a world religion was accompanied by the globalization of communication and the rise of global religious media, dominated by organizations in the United States.\(^3\) During the last quarter of the century, the number of Christian radio and television stations in the world quadrupled to more than 4,000 outlets, a majority of which were located in

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the United States. Abroad, American religious media organizations dominated the field of international radio broadcasting. By 1980, American religious broadcasters transmitted more hours and in more languages and received more letters annually than other broadcasters overseas, including official government services.

Missionary broadcasting combined two dimensions of American global power that international historians have rarely considered together: technology and religion. Missionary radio capitalized on two postwar technological developments: an overseas network of broadcast transmitters and worldwide ownership of transistor radios. The technological platform of international radio promised missionary broadcasters seemingly limitless possibilities for the mass dissemination of evangelicalism. Radio appeared to free missionary endeavors from the constraints of time and space that had limited Protestant missionary activities in the past. To meet the opportunity afforded by postwar radio, evangelical broadcasters carefully crafted a “universal” presentation of Protestant religion for transmission abroad. The confluence of a global broadcasting technology and a “universal” evangelical message specially adapted for radio

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allowed American religious broadcasters to make ambitious plans to proselytize the entire planet for the first time in Christian history.

Contrary to broadcasters’ “universalist” rhetoric, however, American missionary radio did not offer a straightforward, panoptic solution to global evangelization. As a case study of Station ELWA in West Africa demonstrates, translating global American religion into local settings was no easy matter. Capturing audiences demanded both sociological and technological creativity. It involved far more than simply employing the vernacular in broadcasts (though American religious broadcasters made extraordinary efforts to do that). Transposing a global American discourse into a tropical environment required devising social arrangements that could be grafted onto existing power relations among local elites and indigenous peoples, and designing technologies that were sensitive to both the cultural and geographical constraints imposed by the milieux in which they were used. The emergence of evangelical Christianity as a world religion in the late twentieth century was preceded by a lengthy process of innovation and adaptation by broadcasters from the United States who spent over a decade searching for ways to transpose their global mission onto a grammar that could be read and grasped by local populations. It was only by assuming a variety of indigenous forms around the world that the “universal” message of American evangelical faith could take on meaning for foreign listeners and attract widespread religious followers.

THE GENESIS OF AMERICAN MISSIONARY BROADCASTING

The first part of this article examines American evangelical radio as a recent global phenomenon on two levels. First, during the second half of the twentieth century, as a result of expansion in both transmission and reception facilities,
Radio became the dominant mass communication medium in developing societies with large numbers of illiterate, poor and geographically scattered populations. Second, in order to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by global radio, evangelicals in the United States emphasized the “universal” aspects of their nondenominational religious message, while playing down its sectarian or political overtones. By pairing radio technology and evangelical religion, missionary broadcasters believed that they could complete the Church’s work of global evangelization by the close of the millennium.

**Radio broadcasting as a global medium**

American missionary radio expanded rapidly around the world during the decade following World War II. Missionary radio traced its origins to interdenominational faith missions that conservative Protestants formed in the United States during the late nineteenth century in order to conduct large-scale evangelistic work. Pioneer American broadcasters married the voluntarism, parachurch organization and revivalist outlook of faith missions to a technological enthusiasm for radio. In 1931, the year that Radio Vatican began broadcasts, evangelicals in the United States launched the first full-time Protestant religious radio station overseas – Station HCJB in Quito, Ecuador. By the mid-1950s, sixteen religious broadcasters covered the globe on medium and shortwave, with stations in Central and South America, the Caribbean, much of Asia, sub-Saharan and North Africa and Europe. In addition to setting up missionary stations, conservative evangelicals from North America organized recording studios in remote locations overseas and purchased extensive airtime on government or

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11 Faith-based missions overseas were modeled on J. Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission (1865). Examples of faith missions working in Africa include the Sudan Interior Mission (the parent organization of Station ELWA), the Sudan United Mission, Africa Inland Mission, Heart of Africa Mission (later the World-Wide Evangelism Crusade), the Gospel Missionary Union, and the Christian & Missionary Alliance.

http://www.bepress.com/ngs/vol1/iss1/art3
commercial stations in countries where privately owned religious outlets were not available. By 1970, between studio facilities, paid airtime and proprietary stations, evangelical Protestant organizations had indeed assembled “a far-flung gospel radio network around the world.”

Numerous factors contributed to the worldwide growth of evangelical missionary radio during the postwar period. Wartime advances in high-frequency transmission and the supply of surplus military equipment provided evangelicals with an affordable and readily available means to reach the world that was ready at hand. The revival of evangelicalism in the United States after World War II, following two decades of successful radio broadcasting on the domestic dial, gave evangelicals the confidence to export their religion aggressively abroad over the airwaves. The onset of the global Cold War, along with rising nationalism in the “Third World,” created a polarized international climate upon which evangelical broadcasters capitalized to promote their “apolitical” version of evangelical Christianity. Finally, confronted with the reality of Third World anti-colonialism and hostility towards the West, mainline churches after WWII curtailed their overseas commitments, opening a space for the aggressive advance of Protestant missions.

Missionary transmitters, receivers and letters to stations proliferated during the postwar period. By 1970, according to the trade organization International Christian Broadcasters (“ICB”), forty-five mission stations operating more than 80 transmitters poured out over 600 hours of programs per day overseas. Expansion of transmission facilities was met a decade later by equivalent growth in the means of reception. Beginning in the late 1950s, affordable radios manufactured in Japan and Europe using transistorized circuits began to enter non-industrialized markets in rapidly increasing quantities. Semiconductor components revolutionized radio consumption patterns in poorer countries by dramatically reducing battery maintenance costs. By 1960, transistor radios were entering African countries in the tens of thousands annually, connecting growing numbers of rural villages to global civil society via

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13 Clarence W. Jones, World Survey of Missionary Radio, Folder 16, Box 34, Collection 86 (International Christian Broadcasters), Billy Graham Center Archives (“BGCA”), Wheaton, IL.
broadcasting networks.15 Overall, the number of radios in Africa increased nearly fifteen times from 1950 to 20 million in 1975 and would nearly quintuple in the ensuing decade to 94 million by 1986 – roughly 5 percent of the nearly 2 billion radio receivers world-wide.16 ICB argued that in 1970 missionary stations reached some 320 million potential receivers in target areas and received an average total of 42,000 letters a month from listeners.17

American evangelicals dominated worldwide Protestant missions after World War II. Evangelically minded members of Protestant churches in Europe and the United States had fueled the initial expansion of missions during the nineteenth century. During the 1930s, American missionaries with mainline denominations outnumbered their evangelical counterparts by as much as ten to one. However, the modernist controversy, capped by the Scopes trial in 1929, sparked an exodus of disaffected religious workers overseas, where they swelled the ranks of interdenominational fundamentalist faith missions. By 1945, evangelicals made up the largest single grouping of American religious workers abroad. The configuration of American foreign missions had changed dramatically by mid-century. In 1970, roughly three out of four full-time missionaries in the world came from the United States.18 Of these, a decade later, nine out of ten belonged to evangelical agencies.19

Evangelicals’ embrace of radio broadcasting reflected their deep-seated, American faith in the power of technology. Evangelicals’ turn to radio as early as the 1920s echoed a familiar theme in America’s history, common among utopians, writers, inventors and engineers, of redemption through the “religion of technology.” According to the “technological sublime,” advances in the useful arts would usher in a new millennial age, restoring America to a prelapsarian, Edenic state. The telegraph and later radio held special potential in this regard for the American people. Because of their ability to annihilate time and space, communication via electrical wires and later electromagnetic waves promised to end isolation, strengthen moral community and create transcendence. Missionary

16 United States Information Agency, Office of Research and Intelligence, “World Wide Distribution of Radio Receiver Sets,” December 31, 1957, Folder 5, Box 33, Collection 86, BGCA.
broadcasters imbibed popular American hopes about the capabilities of technology, which they exported abroad in their religious enthusiasm for radio.20

Missionary broadcasting also grew out of the experience with large-scale technological systems. To form a nation, Americans constructed electric power grids and built networks of transportation and communication that connected regions and spanned a continent. Missionary radio extended American communication to a global scale, forging arguably the first private mass communication system in history to encircle the planet.21 As a decentralized global network, missionary broadcasters broadly resembled American business franchises. Like the McDonalds restaurant chain, missionary broadcasting functioned abroad as a “multilocal” enterprise.22 As discussed in detail below, individual station franchises adapted the rationalized products and practices of American evangelical religion to fit local cultures and consumption climates around the world.23 Station managers supplemented a staple diet of English-language programs, centrally distributed by radio evangelists from the United States, with extensive materials produced by station officials, national workers and foreign missionaries overseas. Such a loosely coordinated grouping facilitated the global circulation of American religious ideas, radio programs and personalities after WWII, while permitting stations a considerable degree of managerial autonomy.24

Missionary broadcasters relied on American funding rather than foreign revenue to finance operations. Governments in Liberia, Ecuador and the Philippines supplied missionary stations with critical resources, including broadcast licenses, frequencies, land and waivers on import duties; in exchange, broadcasters provided extensive airtime for state programming. But host


governments made no payments to missionary stations, which it expected to be strictly non-commercial and self-supporting in order to not compete with domestic radio stations. Requirements of financial autonomy fit with stations' own mandate as faith missions in order to raise support voluntarily through independent means. Missionary broadcasters therefore did not raise funds abroad, but drew instead on two sources in the United States. First, stations used large numbers of programs produced by popular American radio preachers for domestic audiences, which were shipped on acetate discs for retransmission on missionary equipment overseas. In addition to filling airtime, prominent sponsors like Charles Fuller (Old Fashioned Revival Hour), Walter Maier (The Lutheran Hour), and Billy Graham (Hour of Decision) provided as much as half of missionary station revenue. Stations raised their remaining funds directly from American churchgoers. Station HCJB in Ecuador illustrated the common pattern for missionary broadcasters. As a parachurch organization, HCJB functioned without the regular support of a church body, denomination or mission agency. To operate, it counted on small, unsolicited contributions from “friends” in the United States – Baptist and independent Bible churches and their individual members.25

Evangelical broadcasters embraced radio enthusiastically because they claimed it would help the Church fulfill its obligation to evangelize the globe. Before ascending to heaven, Christ instructed his followers to preach the gospel to the entire world, a mandate the Church identified as the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20). A widely shared eschatological outlook among evangelicals, known as premillennialism, held that the fulfillment of Christ’s commandment would precede his imminent return to earth. Broadcasting made fulfillment of the Great Commission imaginable by rationalizing the process of world evangelization. In the words of one typical enthusiast, radio provided “the most economical way of getting out the Gospel of Christ that has ever been utilized by man.”26

Broadcasters singled out three distinct technological features of radio as a global missionary medium: its mass exposure, simultaneous coverage and penetrative power. According to Clarence Jones, the founder of Station HCJB and principal architect of the postwar expansion of missionary radio, broadcasting provided “vast coverage for the masses,” allowing missionaries to reach the “ends of the earth” with the gospel “more completely and consistently” than in any

26 Miss Rensch, “Radio on the Mission Field,” undated (1949), File 6, Box 79, Collection 86, BGCA.
Moreover, the modern technology of radio circulated the gospel “quickly and continuously” to its listeners around the globe via electromagnetic communication, allowing hundreds of thousands to hear the message simultaneously and thereby dramatically expediting the urgent task of world evangelism. Finally, radio “penetrated” innumerable political, cultural, economic and linguistic barriers to the propagation of the Gospel, allowing the missionary to reach previously inaccessible domains and meet listeners in the privacy of their own homes.

According to Station ELWA’s publicity literature, nothing could stop the power of electromagnetic transmission: “By means of short wave, we can take the Gospel into European and Iron Curtain homes, for ELWA will know no barriers of climate, distance. It will surmount the human obstacles – closed borders, closed doors and closed ears.”

Missionary broadcasters exhibited a utopian, quasi-deterministic faith in the power of technology to produce mass spiritual results. The properties of radio singled out by missionary broadcasters – its speed, coverage and penetration – derived from the time-space distantiation inherent in mediated electronic communication. Advocates of missionary broadcasting believed that the despatializing, or disembedding, of personal relations from their immediate surroundings by radio facilitated the activities of Christian evangelism and discipleship on a far wider, even global, geographic scale. The scalability of radio broadcasting coincided with an explosion of population in the developing world after WWII. As a global mass medium, radio created an unprecedented opportunity for Protestant missions: “… we can distribute universally the message of true Christianity, and in the greatest and finest sense, effectively meet for this hour the World Challenge of Radio Broadcasting.” (emphasis in original)

29 Untitled brochure, “Give the Winds a Mighty Voice: JESUS SAVES,” West Africa Broadcasting Permit (1950-54) folder, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, Sudan Interior Mission (‘SIM’), Fort Mill, SC.
The “universal” message of evangelicalism

To take advantage of the despatialization afforded by post-World War II global communication, missionary broadcasters honed a “universal” presentation from their fundamentalist heritage. Postwar broadcasters emphasized evangelical aspects of their biblical worldview, highlighted the movement’s nondenominational character, and played up the apolitical nature of sectarian Protestantism. In stressing “positive” aspects of their fundamentalist faith, broadcasters sought to both differentiate and distance themselves from the mainline Protestant churches that had preceded them in the mission field.

The gospel heard on missionary radio stations included three core evangelical components. Firstly, it emphasized a high view of Scripture as the Word of God and the clear and final source of religious authority. Christian broadcasters on missionary stations prided themselves on preaching a “positive Gospel” based on “the tenets of the Christian faith as found in the Holy Bible.”

Secondly, missionary broadcasters called for the experience of conversion as a decisive and life-changing event. Conversion on missionary radio was a highly individualized transaction ideally suited to communication over the airwaves; listeners uttered a private prayer of repentance, placing personal faith in Christ’s death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. Since the transaction did not require priest, church or sacrament, salvation for evangelicals could (and did) occur in a wide array of locales - in homes, at work or on the road. Finally, missionary broadcasters called converted believers to a lifestyle of “holy living,” including evangelism and further missions.

Missionary broadcasters also stressed the nondenominational character of biblical Protestantism. Missionary stations’ origins as interdenominational fundamentalist faith missions allowed them to claim exemption from the territorial disputes and doctrinal controversies that been common between Western missionary churches under colonialism. Foreign nationals in the mission field had a strong distaste for such denominational divisions. Edwin Kayea, a vernacular language broadcaster with ELWA, succinctly summarized the common attitude among African believers towards religious divisions:

“We Africans feel that denominations are the carry-over of foreigners’ troubles into our country. We don’t care to be called by any denominational name, but we want to be known simply as Christians. If a missionary radio station should promote denominations, it can only stir up a fighting spirit among believers.”

in Christ. Our job is to evangelize in the Name of Christ and to lead people to become Christians, not denomination members.”

Missionary broadcasters took several steps to avoid denominational entanglement. First, station officials forbade promotion of particular church doctrine on the air - that is, distinctive teachings linked with specific Protestant groupings (such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit favored in Pentecostal circles). Second, missionary stations like HCJB and ELWA viewed themselves as service agencies modeled after faith missions; they therefore refused to organize congregations for their radio converts. Finally, beginning with Clarence Jones and Station HCJB in 1931, missionary broadcasters established policy guidelines that forbade attacking other religious groups on the air, particularly Roman Catholics. Station ELWA’s earliest program standards, for example, required that “[n]othing may be said that is derogatory of any religious body nor used to advance the interests of any one denomination.” Missionary broadcasters thus played up inclusive dimensions of their fundamentalist heritage rather than its exclusivist, sectarian core. According to broadcasters, “Biblical Christianity” possessed universal qualities that transcended the particular claims of denominational Protestantism.

In addition to preaching a nondenominational evangelical message, missionary broadcasters eschewed politics. Mainline Protestant missions under colonialism had been closely linked with Western imperial power and colonial administration, particularly in areas such as Africa that came under direct rule. In a postcolonial environment, missionary broadcasters avoided such public involvement. Missionaries agreed in their broadcast contracts with governments to ban political programming and to refrain from criticizing government officials. ELWA made this clear in its station policies: “No derogatory reference may be made regarding any politicians or political organizations.” Instead, broadcasters promoted a strictly spiritual version of Christianity that aligned with their pietist heritage and conservative political leanings and reinforced the governing status quo abroad.

During the post-WWII period, evangelical broadcasters based in the United States married a global vision of radio with a biblically minded presentation of the gospel. Evangelicals during the period expressed faith in the power of broadcast technology to propagate religion efficiently on a worldwide scale.

33 Edwin Kayea, “Programming – The Station’s View,” undated, Testimonies folder, Box 24, Audience Survey, Liberia Collection, SIM.
basis. Yet, missionary broadcasters’ postwar achievement did not derive from the facile imposition of a “universal” evangelical religion through the “limitless” medium of global radio. Rather, as the following section will show, success lay in translating evangelical norms into contingent local expressions at the grass roots level through a sophisticated and sensitized handling of reception.

**TRANSLATING THE GLOBAL INTO THE LOCAL: RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING IN WEST AFRICA**

The globalization of evangelical broadcasting during the decades following WWII required roots in local knowledge and practices.\(^\text{36}\) The following case study of the receiver distribution program at Station ELWA – founded in Liberia in 1954 and the major religious radio station during the first decade of Africa’s postcolonial era – typifies missionary innovation in the area of reception. While transmitting evangelical programs posed comparatively little technical difficulty for missionary broadcasters after WWII, reception was a different matter. Broadcasters had to build receptivity of the missionary radio message. Building receptivity required a laborious and time-consuming process of translation. The transmission platforms, political relations, language services, receiver distributions and community networks which ELWA constructed between 1954 and 1970 functioned as the crucial local grids through which the meaning of postwar American evangelicalism as a “universal” religion was produced at the grass roots level. Because ELWA relied on numerous partners and faced an array of contingencies in its efforts to build reception for its programs, the success of its pioneering translation work could not be guaranteed in advance. Rather, translation had to be worked out through painstaking labors in uncharted territory, often with uncertain outcomes.

**Protestant missions in West Africa**

Protestant missions had a long history in West Africa, dating back to the founding of Christian colonies in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the early nineteenth century.\(^\text{37}\) Modern Protestant missions started in the region with the Basel Mission in Ghana (the Gold Coast) in 1828 and Methodist work in Nigeria in 1842. Mainline Protestant churches showed few results in West Africa during the

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nineteenth century, however, due to high mortality rates and the cultural isolation of missionaries. The onset of direct Western colonial rule after 1880 brought a gradual reversal of fortunes. Improved transportation facilities and commerce, coupled with the new value placed on the missionary monopoly of education, opened doors of opportunities for European missionaries, which would bear fruit in the next century.

Two trends distinguished Western missions in West Africa during the twentieth century: the growth of charismatic, or spirit-led, revival and a trend towards indigenization. Missionary education provided religious groundwork for a series of spontaneous, African-led revivals in the region around 1900, which resulted in the birth of independent African churches. Independency provided the template for the translation of Christianity as an African religion, a prerequisite for its subsequent spread across the continent. Beginning in the 1920s and with increasing rapidity after WWII, Western mission organizations trained African converts to perform itinerant evangelism, conduct catechism, pastor congregations and eventually oversee church finances and administration. Indigenization of missions produced significant results in West Africa, as across the continent. Whereas Christians formed less than 2 percent of West Africa’s population in 1910, the number had risen to more than 30 percent of the region a century later.38

Missionary activity in Liberia formed illustrates the larger pattern of Christian missions in West Africa, while also providing a special case. The American Colonization Society founded Liberia in 1821 in part as a missionary settlement. According to its charter, the colony’s original purpose was partly to spread “civilization and Christianization” to the surrounding region. Liberia’s first settlers organized Baptist and Methodist churches on board ship before disembarking in 1820; roughly one-fifth of the repatriate slaves who founded the colony were church adherents.39 During the nineteenth century, however, Baptist, Methodist and Episcopalian churches in Liberia remained confined to the Americo-Liberian community in Monrovia. Missionary outreach by settler churches to tribal groups was restricted to the nearby coastal area. The Lutheran church in the United States sent missionaries to evangelize Afro-Liberians in Liberia’s interior in 1860 – the first group to work exclusively among Liberia’s tribal peoples. Almost immediately after the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 in Los Angeles, Africa’s first Pentecostal missionaries arrived on Liberia’s shores – a harbinger of the continent’s impending turn towards independent, spirit-led forms

39 Paul Gifford, Christianity and Politics in Doe’s Liberia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 49.
of Christianity. By the post-WWII period, due to the history of its special relationship with the United States, Liberia had one of the highest populations of American missionaries per capita in the world. Unlike other West African countries dominated by European missionaries, Protestant missions in Liberia from the country’s founding were almost entirely American.

Local infrastructure: establishing transmission power

Radio considerably magnified the influence of evangelical missionaries in Africa during the twentieth century. Three missionaries from the United States founded Station ELWA in Liberia in 1954, drawing the initial decade of postwar expansion in missionary radio to a close. William Watkins, Abe Thiessen and Merle Steely, students at Wheaton College outside Chicago, shared a common vision to evangelize Africa by radio. After forming the West African Broadcasting Association in April 1950, the three young men applied for a station license with the government of Liberia. Lacking radio facilities and following their government’s own failed attempt to start a station, Liberian officials in February 1951 granted the Americans an unrestricted broadcast franchise, along with a generous grant of coastal property and a waiver of import duties on imported station equipment. Assigned the call letters ELWA, Watkins and Thiessen adopted the eponym “Eternal Love Wins Africa” (ELWA) to describe the religious mission of their new outlet, the first full-time religious station on the continent.

ELWA steadily increased its transmitter power, language programs, and audiences during its first two years of service. ELWA began broadcasting in English on January 18, 1954 on medium wave, using a 1 Kw transmitter. In March 1955, technicians added a 10 Kw shortwave transmitter. The station soon reached deep into Liberia, a thousand miles along the West African coast, and across the African continent. Programs heard on the air included cultural and educational offerings; the station provided regular news services, light classical music and public service campaigns on behalf of the Liberian government. ELWA recorded numerous religious programs in its own studios using local musicians and announcers, while prominent radio preachers in the United States, such as evangelists Charles Fuller and Billy Graham and Bible teacher Theodore Epp, sponsored nearly thirty different gospel programs a week from the United

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States. By the close of 1955, the station received nearly 2,000 letters a month from over forty different countries in Africa, Europe and the United States.42

Local politics: co-opting elites

American evangelical broadcasters enjoyed favored standing with the Americo-Liberia elite who descended from the colony’s original settlers and dominated Liberia’s business and political affairs. In addition to American roots, a Westernized culture (including dress, names and language), and a politically conservative outlook, ELWA officials shared a common evangelical disposition with many members of Liberia’s ruling class, who utilized Protestant religion to sanction social status and buttress state power.43 High ranking government officials, including President William Tubman, Vice President Daniel Tolbert, cabinet members and senior ministers, attended ELWA’s inaugural ceremony and participated in the station’s anniversary celebrations and prayer services on a frequent basis. Tubman deemed the station “a vital part of the nation’s religious, educational, social, and cultural progress” and commonly sang its praises in public declarations and speeches.44 A lay Methodist preacher, Tubman considered ELWA his favorite radio station because it provided him with “spiritual help.”45

In order to broadcast, ELWA officials such as founder William Watkins and station managers Gordon Beacham and Ray de la Haye came to an implicit understanding with the ruling political forces in Liberia. Liberian officials provided ELWA with “an open door for Gospel radio.” 46 In return, ELWA agreed in its licensing contract to pursue several objectives on behalf of the Liberian government. First, ELWA agreed to provide a positive “advertisement” of Liberia’s growing prosperity to other countries. Second, ELWA would foster “national unity” and “raise the cultural level of the Republic” by distributing radios to indigenous peoples in the country’s interior. Third, ELWA promised to help “make Liberia a Christian nation,” since tribal groups that practiced

42 “Statistics - November 1, 1955,” Statistical Reports and Correspondence (1955-72), Box 24, Audience Survey, Liberia Collection, SIM.
44 Letter from William S. Tubman to Rev. Ray de la Haye, January 18, 1964, Public Information Office – Publication Reviews (1964-69) folder, Box 13, Administration, Liberia Collection, SIM.
45 Speech by President William S. Tubman, May 6, 1963, quoted in “President Tubman Says,” Public Information Office – Publication Reviews (1964-69) folder, Box 13, Administration, Liberia Collection, SIM.
46 “Radio Station ELWA Annual Report (1954),” Director’s Annual Reports (1960-80) folder, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM.
traditional, animistic religion made up 90 percent of the country’s population. To reach its broad official goals, the station transmitted a regular variety of “Public Service” broadcasts: reliable time signals; educational programs on literacy, agriculture, and hygiene; governmental broadcasts, such as presidential proclamations; and national and world news. Station managers also publicized the Tubman administration’s economic development plans – the Open Door policy and National Development Campaigns – in the rural regions of the country. By 1958, the station had provided services to an exhaustive list of government departments and agencies in Liberia. Contrary to rhetoric of non-involvement in politics, ELWA broadcasters built an extensive, highly political, and mutually beneficial relationship with elite forces in Liberia. Only an open accommodation with Liberia’s leaders permitted ELWA to initially obtain a station license in 1954 and then allowed it to continue broadcasting for nearly four decades until it was taken over by government rebels in 1990 and destroyed.

**Local language: use of vernacular**

Like the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, postwar missionary broadcasters used media extensively to transmit vernacular programs. Shortly after adding its first shortwave transmitter in March 1955, ELWA launched its first programs in French, Arabic and the Nigerian tongues of Hausa and Yoruba. Soon listeners could hear over 100 programs per week on each of ELWA’s long-wave and shortwave services in twenty different languages, mostly tribal dialects from Liberia and Nigeria. By the mid-1960s, ELWA was broadcasting in an

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47 Letter from John L. Cooper, Commissioner of Communications and Aeronautics, to William Watkins, February 14, 1951, Documents – Correspondence (1951-1994) folder, Box 4, Important Documents, Liberia Collection, SIM; Dick Reed, “Report for Mr. Darroch,” May 30, 1955, Newspaper Clippings (1951-60) folder, Box 1, Liberia Information, Liberia Collection, SIM.


49 The complete list includes the Department of State, Bureau of Information, Department of Defense, Post Office, Department of Public Instruction, Bureau of Fundamental Education, University of Liberia, Booker Washington Institute, National Public Health Service, Department of Public Works and Utilities, Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, National Police Force, House of Representatives, Liberian Senate, Supreme Court, Department of National Defense, and customs office of the Treasury Department. Source: Untitled document, “Here is some interesting information for your files, Ray,” February 25, 1958, Newspaper Clippings (1951-60) folder, Box 1, Liberia Information, Liberia Collection, SIM.


51 R. G. de la Haye, letter to Abe Thiessen, August 27, 1957, Folder 26, Box 33, Collection 86, BGCA.
astonishing forty-nine different languages, including the principal languages of Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Congo, East Africa, North Africa and the Middle East.52

In order to produce vernacular material, American missionaries at ELWA relied on an extensive network of national workers and mission groups that was concentrated in Liberia but that fanned out across West Africa and the African continent. ELWA initiated an on-the-job training program early in its history to train local announcers, recruiting candidates from Bible schools in Liberia’s interior. By 1964, the station had ten full-time “dialect broadcasters” working on Liberian vernaculars. Dialect broadcasters not only translated the news on a daily basis into their mother tongues, but regularly produced language programming as well. They also interpreted biblical texts from English, since their people rarely had complete New Testaments or Bibles in their native languages.53 Dialect broadcasters conducted frequent visits in their language areas, meeting new converts and radio listeners, attending church conferences, conducting evangelistic campaigns among their people and recording popular materials for re-transmission on the air.54 By mid-1971, the station employed more than three times as many local workers as missionaries – 200 Africans (mostly Liberian) and 60 expatriates from North America.55

In addition to employing Liberian staff, ELWA utilized an extensive network of recording studios elsewhere. By mid-1971, ELWA operated several language production sites in addition to its own studios in Monrovia, including Abidjan, Ivory Coast (French), Jos and Igbaja, Nigeria (English, Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo) and Beirut, Lebanon (Arabic). ELWA also obtained program material from a chain of recording studios across Africa operated by members of the Sudan Interior Mission, other evangelical missions, and staffs of national

Languages included English, French, Arabic, Bassa, Kpelle, Gola, Kru, Gio, Putu, Konobo, Tchien, Sabo, Twarbo, Vai, Belle, Mende, Maninka, Twi, Fanti, and Fula. Source: “List of Languages Heard Over ELWA During 1955,” Beginnings (1956-69) folder, Box 14, Broadcast Division, Liberia Collection, SIM.


preachers and teachers. These mission groups used portable recording equipment in make-shift studios to produce taped recordings of “simple Gospel programs,” including preaching, teaching, testimonies and Christian music, which were then retransmitted over ELWA.

Vernacular broadcasting involved far more than simply translating American broadcasts and producing on-site material. It required reformulating the American evangelical message into the complex idioms and myriad thought forms of local audiences. Translation entailed designing programs according to the principle of localness:

“Programming should reflect the local community’s lifestyle, acceptable values and behavioral patterns. The Christian station… should acquire, in time, as fully as possible a local image reflected in the loyalty of its listeners.”

For ELWA, localization meant “Africanization,” or using African voices to frame missionary discourse in African cultural terms. Africanization served to mask, or even to erase, the foreign origins of ELWA, and transformed missionary radio into a truly hybrid, transnational endeavor. In 1958, ELWA’s co-founder Abe Thiessen could describe the station’s pretuned radios as “proficient linguists” who did not distract as would a “white man” with his queer hair, skin and dress, but

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A list of these groups from the mid-1960s includes the following: The Lutheran Hour, Canadian Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Mission Evangelique de l’Ubangi (Quebec, Canada), Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA), American Mennonite Brethren Mission, North African Mission, Christian Reformed Board of Missions, Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Christian Missions in Many Lands, Dutch Reformed Church (Sudan United Mission), Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, American Wesleyan Mission, Christ for Greece, Inc., Mission Phil-Africaine (Angola), Missionary Tapes, Inc., ABWE (Brazil), Centro Audio-Evangelico (Brazil), and Gospel Missionary Union. Within Liberia, the following groups supplied material to ELWA: Mid-Liberian Baptist Mission, Liberia Inland Mission, Assemblies of God, National Baptist Mission, United Lutheran Mission, C&MA, Open Bible Standard Mission and La Mission Biblique. Source: Untitled, list of missionary boards (“Boards, Missionary in Charge & Address”), undated, Newspaper Clippings – Press Releases (1969-82) folder, Box 1, Liberia Information, Liberia Collection, SIM.

According to Dick Reed, ELWA also received material from several further recording centers in 1961: SIM’s Amharic studio in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Africa Inland Mission’s recording center in Swahili in Kenya; C&MA’s Kikongo studio in the Congo; the American Wesleyans’ Thimne studio in Sierra Leone; and the Olga Weiss Memorial Studio for North African Arabic in Morocco. Source: Dick Reed, “Eternal Love Winning Africa,” Good News Broadcaster, May 1961, 28-29, in Newspaper Clippings – Press Releases (1961-65) folder, Box 1, Liberia Information, Liberia Collection, SIM.


who was experienced by the African listener as a national, as “one of his own people giving the message without accent.” By 1968, senior station personnel looked to “Africanize” ELWA’s remaining English-language programming by using national voices for all sign-ons and sign-offs, station breaks and announcements. The policy of Africanization made ELWA’s North American origins appear almost completely invisible.

Local receivers: the rigors of the tropics

Technological bottlenecks on the receiving end of broadcasting posed a major obstacle to the “tropicalization” of American missionary radio after WWII. Prior to the advent of the transistor radio, the lack of receivers severely hampered the ability of missionary stations such as ELWA to translate their “universal” religious message into indigenous settings. The greatest single challenge confronting postwar broadcasters in the developing world was the shortage of radios. In 1950, roughly 1.5 million receivers existed in Africa – less than 1 percent of world total – to be compared with nearly 98 million in the United States, 64 million in Europe, and 11.5 million in Asia. According to VOA estimates, a mere 4,000 sets existed in Liberia in mid-1953, less than 0.5 percent of the country’s population.

To address the shortage of receivers in the developing world, missionaries in West Africa took proactive steps at the community level. ELWA officials initiated a receiver distribution program almost immediately after the station began transmitting in January 1954, handing out tunable radios in Monrovia in order to promote the station’s image and build local audiences for its programs. Officials used funds donated by a wealthy American businessman to purchase 100 four-tube superheterodyne receivers from Philips through a Liberian agent, and

59 Abe Thiessen, “The Job Receivers Have to Do,” Report of the Second Conference on World Missionary Radio, June 12-14, 1958, Folder 16, Box 34, Collection 86, BGCA.
61 The notion of “tropicalization” is found in Gyan Prakash, Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
placed the sets within the roughly 50-mile radius of the station’s 1 Kw long-wave transmitter. By April 1957, ELWA had distributed nearly 225 receivers in Liberia. The high cost of maintaining receivers in the tropics, however, combined with shortage of donations from the United States, stalled further expansion of the program.

Adapting Western-manufactured radios for use in a rural barter economy that lacked electricity posed a technical challenge for ELWA. The central problem concerned power supply. Commercial vacuum tube radios consumed large amounts of battery power and required regular replacement. Yet, because less than one-quarter of the population participated fully in Liberia’s money economy, acquiring new batteries in rural locations was difficult for villagers and station alike. Radio receivers were not only scarce in West Africa during the 1950s, but expensive as well. Batteries were the single largest cost in keeping up vacuum tube sets in tropical environments. ELWA officials could purchase commercial receivers in Liberia for $14 in early 1956. Yet tube receivers in 1956 consumed roughly $18-20 a year in batteries in Liberia, a vast amount for Liberian peasants. To the dismay of officials, sets needing new batteries would often sit idle in villages for months because their users could not afford to recharge them.

In addition to replacement issues, batteries also caused a series of common maintenance problems in missionary settings. Africans inserted batteries improperly and short-circuited sets. Batteries manufactured outside the United States did not come in standard sizes but varied in length by fractions of an inch, causing difficulties with electrical contact in sets. Finally, batteries frequently went bad and leaked in tropical environments, pointing to the need for a specially designed non-corrosive battery holder, which did not come on standard American sets. Faced with the cost and difficulty of replacing batteries and maintaining

65 M.A. Darroch, letter to Rev. C.G. Beacham, February 5, 1954, MPR Minutes, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM; “Radio Station ELWA Annual Report (1954),” Director’s Annual Reports (1960-80) folder, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM.
67 Abe Thiessen, “The Mighty Mite in Missions,” Collection 86, BGCA.
68 “Discussion of Production Possibilities” and Bill Watkins, “Distribution,” Missionary Transistor Research Meeting (‘MTRM’), May 1, 1956, Folder 12, Box 27, Collection 86, BGCA; letter from Ray de la Haye to Abe Thiessen, May 14, 1958, MPR Minutes, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM. Bill Watkins states that commercial receivers could be purchased in Liberia for $14 in early 1956.
69 Letter from Herschel Ries to Abe Thiessen, August 14, 1955, Folder 35, Box 19, Collection 86, BGCA.
70 Letter from Abe Thiessen to Walter Ohman, April 10, 1959, Folder 35, Box 18, Collection 86, BGCA.
71 Letter from Herschel Ries to Abe Thiessen, August 14, 1955, Folder 35, Box 19, Collection 86, BGCA.
receivers in remote rural settings, workers in ELWA’s receiver department attempted to limit battery consumption and salvage sets by regulating how listeners used receivers. Difficulties involved in “capturing” listeners, as this process was known, are discussed below.

Conventional vacuum-tube receivers built in the United States and Europe simply did not make practical sense for missionary use on a large scale. Field experience demonstrated the difficulty of uniformly adopting technological solutions engineered in the West to fit tropical missionary environments. Influential missionaries such as Thiessen considered the battery consumption of tube sets so severe as to render them impractical for the mission field. In 1954, Thiessen and a pair of radio engineers affiliated with the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago organized a five-year long project to custom design a transistor receiver. The group’s goal was to construct a low-cost, highly efficient, pretunable “tropicalized” (or weatherproof) receiver with capability for short-wave reception and group listening – a highly specialized niche product not available from commercial radio manufacturers. Thiessen’s group succeeded, but only just before a global market in transistor radios emerged in 1959 to undercut their competitiveness.

Local audiences: the complicated problem of capture

Tube radios and batteries were scarce resources in West Africa during the 1950s. To maximize their efficacy, the managers of ELWA’s receiver department attempted to regulate how rural radio listeners in Liberia used their sets. Controlling the process of reception (or “capturing” listeners) involved officials in the day-to-day village operation of radios. Control at the village level not only ensured proper usage, but helped expand missionary audiences as well, since ELWA insisted that listeners use sets communally.

ELWA attempted to capture audiences through social mechanisms that required close interaction with listeners. When ELWA initiated its receiver program in 1954, officials decided to lend radios to Africans rather than sell them to customers. By lending radios, officials felt they could more easily maintain control over how sets were used, since the station maintained its ownership rights. Determining whom to lend receivers became a critical choice for managers of ELWA’s receiver department. Officials established two basic criteria by which to select users. First, officials distributed radios only to Christian believers. In order to identify believers, officials developed an extensive written questionnaire. The “Radio Receiver Application Blank” required applicants to answer a series of questions concerning their spiritual beliefs and social practices, and to provide three references from non-relatives. Second, in addition to selecting Christians,

72 “Villager” promotional brochure, “Announcing ‘the other ½’ of missionary radio,” undated (prior to May 1958), Folder 32, Box 32, Collection 86, BGCA.
managers attempted to verify on the application form that applicants would use receivers solely for group purposes. Such a requirement expanded the usefulness of individual radios by taking advantage of existing social customs in Liberia, since West Africans generally used radios overwhelmingly in communal or group settings.\(^{73}\)

To ensure that selected borrowers utilized sets properly, ELWA officials crafted a “psychological” approach to set placement. ELWA’s indoctrination program played off cultural attitudes towards radio in rural Liberia. Before transistor radios became commonplace objects in the West African countryside, vacuum-tube sets often received ritual-like attention from Liberian peasants because of their rarity. Villagers ascribed magical properties to the ether, since it could invisibly bring persons and objects across great distances to close locations. In the view of one Liberian religious leader, “the listening African readily believes with a degree of conviction anything he hears on the air. The voice coming over the air through the radio is unconsciously regarded by them to be somewhat supernatural.”\(^{74}\) When lending sets, ELWA workers taught borrowers to view radio ownership as a distinct privilege that entailed great care and brought considerable responsibility. ELWA officials trained set borrowers exactly when to turn sets on/off, limiting broadcasts to vernacular programs. Restricting use preserved battery power and further enhanced the status of the receiver in the village as a distinct object worthy of special attention. ELWA officials intended not only to control sets by indoctrinating users, but to ensure large audiences for the station as well. By turning the station’s set borrower into an “ideal receiver operator,” ELWA hoped to capture not only the individual borrower, but the entire village audience who listened to the radio as well.\(^{75}\)

ELWA undertook elaborate efforts to ensure that borrowers used radios for missionary purposes. Staffers in the receiver department recognized, however, that their approach to social control was extremely inefficient, since it hampered expansion efforts and drained the station’s limited personnel resources. Nor could officials be sure their solutions actually would work because numerous avenues for resistance existed, including simply turning sets off when station representatives were not present. Prompted by experience with Thiessen’s missionary receiver project, ELWA officials turned within five years to the “technological fix” of pretuned transistor radios as a means for social control. In

\(^{73}\) United States Information Service, “Facts on Liberia Communications Media,” September 1, 1960, 976.00/6-2460, Box 3088, General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, Record Group 59, National Archives Records Administration (‘NARA’), College Park, MD; T.W. Chalmers, “This is the Nigerian Broadcasting Service,” from Nigeria, No. 40, 1953, Folder 6, Box 29, Collection 86, BGCA, 280-296.

\(^{74}\) Letter from Augustus B. Marwiewh to Dick Reed, November 1, 1967, “Admin.-Public Info. Office – Publication Reviews, 1964-69,” Box 3, Liberia Collection, SIM.

\(^{75}\) Bill Watkins, “Distribution,” MTRM, May 1, 1956, Folder 12, Box 27, Collection 86, BGCA.
late 1959, ELWA officials began purchasing large quantities of a special pretuned commercial transistor set manufactured by Philips, N.V. of Holland. Pretuning ensured technologically that borrowers used sets solely for religious purposes. The director of ELWA’s receiver project, Dale Graber, estimated that use of transistors in pretuned sets cut power consumption by more than three-fourths to less than $4 per year, allowing almost all Liberians to afford batteries. By dramatically reducing power costs, transistors facilitated the rapid expansion of ELWA’s receiver program during the 1960s. When the station closed its receiver program in 1970, ELWA had succeeded in placing a total of 2,400 sets, nine-tenths of which were pretuned and contained transistors.

Missionary stations around the world unanimously adopted the hardware standard of pretuned radios in their receiver departments after WWII. Pretuning appealed to key stakeholders in American missionary broadcasting enterprise: religious program producers and churchgoers in the United States; and missionary agency officials, station managers and missionary radio engineers abroad. Pretuning amply reassured these constituents that listeners would not “misuse” radios and reduced unspoken anxiety that audiences were not tuning in to missionary stations at all. Despite its appeal, however, pretuning posed major practical field difficulties for missionary broadcasters like ELWA. The practice of fixed tuning did not readily suit the unpredictable environment of shortwave broadcasting. Lower frequencies presented more stable signals than higher frequencies; missionary technicians therefore found it far easier to pretune broadcast band receivers than shortwave ones. Pretuning of shortwave receivers eluded simple standardization, since individual missionary broadcasters around the world defined pretuning differently to include varying degrees of frequency, bandwidth and spectrum. Missionary stations’ demands for customized pretuning worldwide during the 1960s made mass production of a single transistor receiver model for the evangelical mission field impossible, limiting the use of pretuned radios to audiences at the village community level.

The missionaries’ insistence on “capturing” listeners, coupled with the difficulties of pretuning shortwave receivers, meant that missionary radio did not develop as a mass market in the two decades after WWII. Given their prerequisite of audience control, missionary broadcasters had to adjust the global potential of their technology to fit limited local circumstances. Instead of a single global market, missionary broadcasters around the world targeted a series of narrowly defined and geographically circumscribed audiences, identified with individual

76 Dale Graber, “Portable Missionary Radio Project,” 1958, MPR Minutes, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM.
77 Of roughly 2,400 total sets distributed, approximately 2,187 were transistorized. Source: “PMR Proposal,” September 26, 1970, MPR Minutes, Box 15, Broadcasting Division, Liberia Collection, SIM.
American missionaries, national church workers, rural villages and ethnic language areas.

Local resources: building local community

ELWA’s used pretuned radios most effectively to build religious communities in Liberia at the village level. Building religious village communities in rural Liberia required collaborating with fellow mission organizations and Liberian church workers in order to distribute and operate sets. When properly employed by ethnic Liberians in tribal language areas, pretuned radios produced conversions and helped maintain churches.

ELWA officials conceived of pretuned radios primarily as community-building devices. ELWA’s most fruitful area for community building by radio lay in Liberia’s eastern hinterland, where nine-tenths of the country’s population lived and where the station could reach a large number of tribal groups with little exposure to radio through its extensive vernacular programming. Expansion into Liberia’s frontier areas meant reliance on Protestant mission groups to distribute ELWA’s radio sets. ELWA’s receiver department worked with nearly twenty of the forty American mission organizations operating in Liberia, including the Mid-Liberia Baptist Union, the Methodist Mission, the Lutheran Mission, World-Wide Evangelization Crusade and several Pentecostal groups. Officials provided pretuned, battery-operated radios to mission stations, which then placed the radios with indigenous pastors and evangelists for use among their native peoples.78

A remarkable letter from a Liberian Christian leader, Augustus Marwieh, demonstrates how Liberian workers used ELWA’s sets to convert nonbelievers and to grow village churches. Marwieh ran the Elizabeth Native Interior (E.N.I.) Mission, an agricultural, industrial and religious training institute in Sinoe County, founded by a black Baptist schoolteacher from Texas. Marwieh placed twenty-five pretuned receivers in the hands of indigenous pastors and evangelists affiliated with the mission for use in townships in Liberia’s southeastern Grand Cedeh County. Itinerant evangelists used the battery-powered sets, or “Portable Missionaries” (PM’s), to tour rural districts that lacked electricity. Attracting village crowds with the PM’s, workers then conducted regular church or preaching services to the captive assemblies. By combining live and mediated

78 Information on Protestant mission groups working in Liberia can be found in United States Information Service, “Facts on Liberia Communications Media,” September 1, 1960, 976.00/6-2460, Box 3088, General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, 1960-63, RG 59, NARA. See also Department of the Army, U.S. Army Handbook for Liberia, Pamphlet No. 550-38, July 1964, ch. 10.

Pentecostal missions which collaborated with ELWA in Liberia included the Swedish Pentecostals, Assemblies of God Mission, and Pentecostal Assemblies of the World.
forms of religious experience, pastors drew in unevangelized audiences that they could not previously reach, while continuing to administer existing churches.

The accounts in Marwieh’s letter make it clear that American missionary broadcasters did not evangelize rural areas in Liberia by simply propagating the “universal” gospel. Instead, national pastors, church members and participating villagers had to receive the gospel message and translate evangelical religion into community life at the village level. In Kudi Town, for example, the entire township met on a daily basis for two-and-a-half hours for the “PM” radio service in the Krahn language. After the radio service concluded, the pastor conducted an evening meeting, preaching to the whole town which had assembled. Women in the town rearranged their traditional cooking hours so they could attend radio services, preparing food in the afternoon rather than at night. After hearing “PM” services, church members in Gbahu would occasionally spend the entire night “singing, praying, and testifying.” Radio listening and church attendance occasionally led to changes in lifestyle. Marwieh reported that village women spurned “immoral” living, stopped eating lice, and abolished the traditional practice of the medicine bush as a result of religious revivals induced by radio.

Marwieh’s letter demonstrates how Liberian Christians indiginized ELWA’s radio message. Church workers effectively transposed ELWA’s language programs into vernacular idioms by linking them directly with popular religious and social life in rural villages. American missionary broadcasters evangelized the Liberian hinterland only by partnering with ethnic Liberians who recast and reinterpreted the gospel for tribal members in highly personalized, and therefore meaningful, ways. Through an elaborate process of filtering and re-presentation, Liberian language broadcasters, pastors and evangelists fleshed out the substance of global evangelical American religion in concrete African form.

CONCLUSION

American global hegemony after WWII allowed evangelicals in the United States to complete a major overseas expansion of mission activity begun in the 1930s. The contemporaneous invention of the transistor in 1949 heralded a revolution in world communication that cheapened as it widened access to global mass media, particularly in developing countries. The two trends – the predominance of evangelicals in American missions and the globalization of communication – converged in the postwar field of missionary radio broadcasting. Missionary broadcasters spread the influence of American culture to remote rural regions of the world, and lay the groundwork for an historic resurgence of evangelicalism in Africa, Asia and Latin America after 1970.

79 Letter from Augustus B. Marwieh to Dick Reed, November 1, 1967, Public Information Office –Publication Reviews (1964-69) folder, Box 13, Administration, Liberia Collection, SIM.
American evangelicals understood, however, that spreading their religious views abroad through the global medium of radio was not as simple as the technology suggested. Communication of the gospel required the appropriation of indigenous cultural capital, the transposition of national partners and the active participation of audiences on the ground in order to take root. For evangelical Christianity to approach “universal” status, broadcasters, scriptwriters, announcers, mission studios and national church workers had to reinvent and re-embody – translate – evangelicalism into diverse tribal languages and recognizable popular idioms on an ongoing basis. Electronic translation familiarized a wide range of audiences in developing countries with American religion. By adapting the American evangelical gospel to fit particular churches, cultures and communities around the world, missionary broadcasters narrowed the gap that separated “near” and “far” and “us” and “them,” and brought distant religion into listeners’ everyday lives at the most quotidian level.

Translation by radio entailed vernacularization of both the form and substance of American evangelical religion. Like the work of earlier Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, translation of the Bible into other tribal tongues via electronic media vastly expanded the geographic scope of evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity, while dissimulating the hand of its American progenitors. Missionary radio extended, as it muted, the sectarian impulse of Protestant fundamentalism as a reactionary movement within American evangelicalism. The need to vernacularize, along with the requirement of conversion, limited the “Americanization” implicit in missionary broadcasting as the religious product of American global power. To take on meaning at the individual level, evangelical broadcasters recast their gospel presentation in particular cultural terms that were relevant, even personal, to audiences. In translating their discourse into tropical settings, American missionary stations such as Station ELWA validated rather than overruled the cultures they sought to convert.