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An introduction to independent african churches

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AN INTRODUCTION TO INDEPENDENT AFRICAN CHURCHES

Cornelius Abiodun Olowola

The African Independent Churches are the fastest growing churches in Africa today. They are having so much impact on the missionary-founded churches that in December 7, 1981 an issue of **West African Magazine** had an article titled "Desertions of the Orthodox Churches - Changes in Worship."

Because these churches are growing fast and have great influence upon the people of Africa, it is necessary to investigate their beliefs. It will then be necessary to briefly discuss what these churches are, why they grow, and what part of their theological beliefs make them acceptable to the people.

Definition

Various definitions have been given by various authors and observers of African Independent Churches. This is Barrett's definition:

the formation and existence within a tribe or tribal unit, temporarily or permanently, of any organized religious movement with a distinct name and membership even as small as a single organized congregation, which claims the title Christian in that it acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has either separated by secession from a mission church or an existing African

Independent Church, or has been founded outside the mission churches as a new kind of religious entity under African initiative and Leadership.[1]

A close and realistic definition is given by Kofi Appian-Kubi of Ghana. He defines African Independent Churches as:

. . . churches founded by Africans for Africans in our special African situations. They have all African membership as well as all African leadership. Some were founded by Africans in reaction to some feature of the Christianity of missionary societies; most were founded among those people who had known Christianity the longest.[2]

This latter definition prefers to identify the African Independent Churches as Indigenous African Christian Churches.

How independent? The question one needs to ask is are these churches truly independent or indigenous? Yes, to a certain extent they are independent, but they still have some relationship with the older churches and also among themselves.

Harold W. Turner gave four ways in which the African Independent Churches still have relationships with the older churches. Turner writes: There has often been an informal and unstructured relationship of inter-dependence between the older and the independent churches, whereby they performed different services for each other's members.[3]

First, they are related to each other in the services that are performed for each other.

Those from the older churches often sought the services of a prophet or healer among the independents, and usually somewhat secretly, while the independents used church or mission schools for the education of their

children, church bookshops and journals for their literature, and even retained a second membership in order to secure a proper church burial or for other specific services.[4]

Second, some of the independent churches still have affiliation with the older Christian bodies from overseas and in Africa for training their ministers. Third, many leaders of African Independent Churches attend some international gatherings. "Thus Yeboa-Kurie of Ghana's Eden Revival Church and others visited the World Pentecostal Assembly in Texas in 1970 and independent leaders are now likely to be present at some World Council of Churches meetings." [5] Fourth, they still look for financial assistance from overseas.

Since many countries in Africa are becoming independent there has been more understanding among the African Independent Churches than before. They now come to the awareness of a common goal and that is to bring Africans to Christ. However, because of personality clashes and theological differences they have not been able to form a united church. One can conclude that these churches are somewhat independent but still look for help from older churches and have seen the need of various groups coming together for only one purpose and that is Christ for Africa but there are still barriers.

The Rise and Growth of Independent Churches

Africa has her world view and it is necessary that any missionary who will work in Africa must understand this world view. Barrett writes:

For centuries, the foundations of culture in African tribes have rested on a number of dynamic institutions and beliefs found in varying form in all parts of the continent, and which, within a given tribe centre on the family and on the home.[6]

It is this world view of the people which are well

observed by these churches that brought about their rise and growth. There are various reasons why churches are begun and why some separate from the older churches. Barrett also gave eight reasons.[7] Barrett's reasons should be well noted. They are, first, historical factors. Barrett gave examples of the Church Missionary Society in Nyanza which refused to give authority to African clergy and so a group broke away and began what is known as the Church of Christ in Africa.

Second, are political factors. The movements arose because of political oppression in one form or another. They were political protest movements arising out of political frustration. William Wade Harris' removal of the Liberian flag was an example of his political frustration. His repatriation charges from Ivory Coast in 1914 will reveal what the government thought of the reason for these movements.

From information coming to me from different sources, it appears that the moral-improving activity of the Prophet William Wade Harris is interpreted in a different fashion by the natives and is hampered in a rather unfortunate way mainly by his imitators, improvised pastors recruited from among the clerks severed, often for delicate reasons, from their counters.

So it is that one administrator has told me about the rumour circulating in his circle that Harris was going to succeed in obtaining before long a reduction in the rate of tax and even the suppression of capitation.

In the impossible situation in which the much reduced personnel from the circles now find themselves, the doings of these more or less religious personages cannot be watched closely enough; therefore you will invite the pretended "Sons of God" who have been roaming to the villages recently to return to their own country where they will be able to spread the good word easily. The Prophet Harris in particular will find in Liberia,

his own country, a sufficiently vast field for activity (quoted in Haliburton 1971:139).[8]

Third, economic factors. Aristotle's theory said "the causes of revolution are to be found in inequality, particularly in the separation of economic and political power.[9] The basic background out of which movements emerge is economic deprivation; "they are economic protest movements directed against exploitation of tribal lands or other riches by Colonial powers." [10] There are also those who believe in starting a Church for economic reasons.

Fourth, sociological factors. These can be viewed in three areas: in South Africa, it is a reaction against apartheid; in East and Central Africa it is a reaction against land occupation of the white settlers and in other areas it is a reaction against social injustice of different types.

Fifth, ethnic factors. Kuper made this observation in 1946 noting that among the Swazi separatism led to further separatisms. She commented:

The fissiparous tendency is . . . a characteristic of the traditional tribal structure. It was part of the clan structure until clan divisions were checked with growth of a strong centralized and hereditary kingship; thereafter it continued in the structure of the homestead and is evident in disputes over succession and the splitting of the kinship unit on the death of the patriarch.[11]

Barrett affirmed that:

Ethnic factors by themselves are obviously not responsible for the rise of independency, but taken together with the other types of factors they occupy an important place in the long chain of causation. The phenomenon has not been foisted upon African societies from outside; it has roots in traditional society.[12]

Sixth, non-religious factors. All the above mentioned reasons are non-religious factors.' In a study of the types and dynamics of African religious movements, Fernandez asserted that most of the examples of churches within the separatist category had in fact "separated from European-dominated parent organizations for non-religious reasons".[13]

Seventh, religious factors. Harold Turner sees the phenomena as primarily spiritual and religious "striving for cultural integrity and spiritual autonomy." [14]

Eighth, theological factors. The theological factors are not so much on doctrine as practice. For example, the Sudan Interior Mission in the early 40's had this experience when some people broke away from some of their churches because of church practices like polygamy, drumming and dancing.

It has been said in the introduction to this paper that African Independent Churches are the fastest growing Christian body in Africa today. The reasons given for the growth are that these churches' goal was to bring Africans to Christ via media that is understandable to Africans and more relevant messages that meet the needs of the Africans. Unlike the older churches the independent churches are not growing biologically. Hence they have extensive outreach through healing ministries. Kubi writes:

But the most important single reason why people join the Indigenous African Christian Churches is healing. This came out quite clearly in the research in the question "why did you join this particular church?" People invariably and quickly replied that they had been ill for a long time, they had tried all forms of treatment to no avail, they were directed to, for example Prophet Prah, and behold, they are fit as a fiddle: Praise the Lord, Hallelujah.[15]

Other reasons for expansion were the indigenization of

worship. Kubi writes: "The Indigenous African churches, through careful and concrete adaption of certain cultural elements into their worship, have made Christianity real and meaningful to their African adherents." [16] I will deal with this aspect of worship under the theology of African Independent Churches.

The Theological Beliefs of Independent Churches

As one approaches this topic, one is aware of the limitation of literature that is available on the subject. Few independent churches have articles of faith.

I prefer to write on the theological beliefs and practices which are tools for the growth of these Churches.

Visions and Revelations

The belief in visions and revelations is the centre of the doctrinal practices of Independent African Churches. Many of their leaders claimed to have visions or revelations.

One such founder was William Wade Harris, born in 1865 in Liberia. Harris claimed he saw the angel Gabriel in his vision while in a prison cell and that the angel gave him a message:

Gabriel's message to Harris was that he had been designated as God's last prophet whose mission was to carry His Word to those people who had not yet heard it. Those people who did not heed the message would soon be destroyed by fire. This event was at the origin of a mass movement that revolutionized the religious life of most of the southern Ivory Coast. [17]

Another example was the founder of the Celestial Church of Christ. The Celestial Church of Christ was founded in 1947 in the Republic of Benin by Samuel Bileou Oschoffa, a carpenter of Gun and Yoruba origin. Like Harris in Liberia, Oschoffa was educated in the Metho-

dist tradition. In an interview by Nigerian Television Authority, published by Drum Magazine, Pastor Oschoffa said:

My actual name is not Oschoffa. It is Oju Kise Ofa, which means that you cannot kill someone by merely looking at him since the eye is not an arrow. It was however shortened to Oschoffa. My grandfather, a farmer named Ojo was a native of Abeokuta in Ogun State of Nigeria. He, as a farmer travelled to Idasa Village, and during the war my father then a carpenter was taken prisoner of war to Cotonou where I was born. I did not commit any crime in Benin, I have only come back to my country, Nigeria.[18]

After a three-month sojourn in the bush, Pastor Oschoffa claimed to have received a vision in which he was commissioned to found a church and the name of the church was also given to him in a vision.

The Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu was founded by a young man named Simon Kimbangu who was educated at a Baptist mission near Nkamba in Zaire. His vision for founding the church is as follows:

In 1918 a serious flu epidemic took thousands of lives, and many other Kongo died as a result of forced labor on a government railroad project. At this time Kimbangu heard a voice telling him: "I am Christ, my servants are unfaithful. I have chosen you to witness to your brethren and to convert them." [19]

Kimbangu's reactions to his call was like that of Moses. Kimbangu resisted the call with the idea that others can do better. Also like Jonah, he fled to Kinshasa to escape the call. Things did not go well for him at Kinshasa and so he returned to his home. "In 1921 the Holy Spirit took him against his will to a sick woman's house in a nearby village and told him to heal her. He laid his hands on her in the name of

Jesus Christ and she became well."[20]

Another example from South Africa will illustrate the point. The Nazareth Church was founded by the Zulu Prophet/Messiah, Isaiah Shembe, who claimed that he received a *series of revelations* from Jehovah. In the revelations he was to abstain from sex, abandon his wives and leave his village. According to Ray,

These revelations occurred during thunderstorms, a traditional Zulu mode of revelation. Shembe's last and decisive call occurred during a storm when lightning struck and killed his best ox and burned Shembe on the thigh. Refusing treatment from a traditional healer,[21] Shembe declared, "Jehovah has revealed to me that I must not be healed by medicine - only through His Word." [22]

Finally, one illustration from Nigeria will conclude the doctrine of visions and revelations in Independent African Churches. Prophetess Mary Omotara Audifferen of Nigeria went on a spiritual pilgrimage during which, in her own account, she said, "I met Jesus Christ, heard the voice of God, saw the Garden of Eden and heard the music of angels." [23]

According to Innocent Ezech of **Spear Magazine** "The spirit of this 42 year old woman ascended to the unknown after a covenant between church elders at Cherubim and Seraphim movement at Irete-Ogo, Orile-Oshodi, near Lagos. The covenant was that Mary who had been ill will fall on into a 91 day trance." [24] Ezech continued his report, "According to a competent church spokesman, falling into a trance simply means going to know, through His own call, the secrets of God's power for mankind. The person in trance is an intermediary between God and human beings. He or she passes God's message to man." [25] Ezech of **Spear Magazine** said Mary gave her account thus:

When a blessing borne out of spiritual grace of God

befalls an individual, the receiver spiritually abandons the physical body and sleeps into the land of God's spirits for the purposes of gathering information.

It is a blessing, it is wonderful, it is challenging and it is stunning to the world of metaphysics. You are compelled by the will of God to serve in the invisible world.

I made 30 days journey under water, 30 days in the sky, and 30 days in the Garden of Eden (Paradise) where I came face to face with Jesus Christ in His human appearance. I did not see God, but I heard a voice telling me that I should not bother about seeing God. He is only the person one can never see.

In Paradise, I saw myself with a wing just like the angels. There was something like a film that the angels showed to me.[26]

Concluding her story, Mary said, "There and then, He sent his message to the world through us, myself and angels, who held me in high esteem. Such messages included how to make barren women fertile through the power of prayer as well as how to redeem suffering humanity." [27]

Here we are stressing visions as claimed by prophets and prophetesses. It is also through these visions that they claimed to have powers to heal (discussed later in this article). The above vision or trance is an interesting one because solid theology of their church is based on this and little flavour of African beliefs.

Mary claimed in her vision or trance that she was not only given power to heal but also was privileged to see or witness a series of judgements upon people. She saw girls receiving punishment for their immorality and parents for failing to show their children how to live

a good life. Other messages are that the living children are also to pray for their dead parents and, finally, Moslems are warned to resist from violence, and bitterness, have a hate-free religion and fear God. According to Ezech of **Spear Magazine**, "Members say she did not eat for 91 days." [28]

Dreams

Dreams also have an important place in Independent African Churches. Falk writes:

Dreams are considered important by Africans and also by the Zionist and Messianic Movements. Dreams are believed to be sent by ancestors. The people act according to their interpretation of the message they feel they have received. They share dreams with each other as significant messages. The community regards the dreams as such. [29]

Prophecies

There seems to be no difference between revelations and prophecies but I have decided to write on prophecy separately. Oshitelu, the founder of the Aladura Churches in Nigeria, wrote down his prophecies. These prophecies are also called revelations and they are many. The prophecies are similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. An example of this is an outbreak of a severe plague in the Yoruba land in the 1920's of which Ray writes, "The present trials are God's Judgment; only faith in God, the power of prayer and the abandonment of paganism can overcome them." [30] This was the message of the Aladuras. Turner provides a summary of a ten-point outline of Oshitelu's message during this sudden upheaval. Turner writes:

The first three points address Christians, Muslims and pagans; The Christians have strayed and disobeyed God, the Muslims have shunned his precepts, and the pagans have been idolaters. The next three predict the immi-

nence of judgement through locusts, famine and war - all as part of the Gospel of Joy - for all the world is old and broken, but it will be changed immediately, for the kingdom of God is at hand. The last four points of this gospel condemn native doctors and promise divine healing, the curing of all woes and ailments, through the water of life which is given to all who believe in God. The message may be summed up as an offer of blessings in all one's troubles through faith in God alone, with judgment for those who fail to respond.[31]

Another example of prophecy by Captain Abiodun for the year 1970 is quoted from *Drum Magazine* of June 1970. Abiodun prophesied:

More children will be born this year than in any year in the past. . . . There will be an acute shortage of drinking water this year. Violence will be on the increase. There will be more cases of armed burglary and highway robbery. There will be an alarming rate of unemployment. Two top leaders will die this year and there will be many fatal motor accidents on Nigerian roads. There will be a famine in 1970 as well as an epidemic of plague, though smaller than in 1918. Plenty of money but scarcity of goods.[32]

From these examples, one sees that the independent church followed what to them are revelations and prophecies. Some of them claimed to be Elijah or Moses while others claimed to be the Messiah.

The second area of prophecy could be described as divination. Ray writes that "people ask their minister for special revelations concerning personal problems. Prophecies may also be obtained regarding significant events within the church." [33]

Worship

Worship is the avenue through which African Independent Churches express their beliefs and practices. It was

here that there is an obvious mixture of Christianity and tradition. Some observers appreciate it and call it "the indigenization of worship." [34] Kubi who made these remarks continued, "If the churches in Africa are to grow and develop, they must be allowed to take root in the soil of Africa where they have been planted. In the Africanization process, the indigenous African churches have made a breakthrough and have a great deal to teach the missionary churches." [35] Ray confirmed that there are importations of African tradition in the worship. Ray declares:

Another direct importation from the traditional sphere is spirit possession. This is a common occurrence in the church of the Lord, especially during public worship when, at the climax of the service, members of the congregation come forward to dance, sing and testify to God's saving power. These acts are used to induce possession. [36]

Adejoji who succeeded Oshitelu said, "Why do you need to sing, dance, clap and engage in all sorts of lively entertainments before the Holy Spirit could descend? Because sweet songs, drums and the like are relished goods of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would therefore descend on hearing them." [37]

Prayer

Belief in the power of prayer is a prominent feature of the Church of the Lord. Africans in general believe in the efficacy of prayer. Hence, the Church of the Lord uses this means to help the growth of their church. The Yoruba name for this group is "Aladura," i.e., the praying ones. This group prepares prayer booklets and techniques and each member is instructed to pray every three hours, day and night. Midnight prayers are believed to be more effective. Often they pray all night and some pray on the top of mountains, hills and by seashores. These prayer times are seen as a time of struggling and wrestling. In Turner's view, it is a

"special form of the wider concept of strenuous endeavor, and emphasizes the earnestness, frequency, and importunity of prayer."[38]

Adejobi explained the reasons behind this in the following words: "If we are tired of praying then we shall resort to human means of protection", namely paganism. But "God will never be tired to hear and to render your request to you."[39] The pattern of their prayer is adoration, confession, intercessions, petitions and thanksgiving. Turner observed, "as in the Orisa cults [they pray for] healing or the gift of children, promotion, business prosperity or examination success."[40] Turner gives an illustration of a prayer prepared by a Prophet for a student thus:

Make me holy for my blessing. Send me this moment
Divine helpers, Divine Intelligence, Divine Intermediaries and gracious look of Jesus Christ my Savior. . .
My examinations will come up (mention time and place)
. . . I call unto Thee for success. . . . Grant that I
may study the right text and passage and subject; Jesus
Christ let me feel Thy influence . . . Thy breath, and
Thy assistance. Send to me most powerful angels, that
these may fight out for me all dangers and evil beset-
tings, that I may not be frightened, careless, nervous,
and obsessed. . . .[41]

Petitions are also made in form of special psalms and the recitation of holy names. According to Ray, "This accords with the traditional idea that ritual language and sacred praise names have an intrinsic power of their own."[42]

An example of intercessory prayer of Kimbangu is quoted from Ndofunsu's article: He prayed for the sick and the dead, for those who were falsely accused and for enemies. He also asked God for help, given the spiritual and material poverty of mankind. He prayed for perfect unity among men, that there should be no more barriers or frontiers. He prayed for those who plotted

against him as Saint Stephen had done (Acts 7:60). He prayed that those who had understood the aim of his mission should be steadfast in the faith particularly the sacrificers (priests) in exile and other Christians, whose persecution had begun in 1921 and were to last until 1959. He asked God to open the hearts of the unbelievers, so that they might accept the message of Christ.[43]

It is necessary here to quote an extract from one of the prayers of the prophet Kimbangu:

I thank Thee, Almighty God, Maker of Heaven and earth. The heaven is Thy throne and the earth Thy footstool. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Bless all peoples of the earth, great and small, men and women, whites and blacks. May the blessing of heaven fall on the whole world so that we all may enter heaven. We pray to Thee trusting that Thou dost receive us, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.[44]

Baptism

The Kimbanguist Church does not believe in water baptism. Ndofunsu writes:

For us the baptism of water is a baptism of repentance to prepare for Christ's coming (Mark 1:4). But since Christ came and died on the cross and rose again from the dead for remission of the sins of the world, it is now the Holy Spirit who comes into the heart of mankind to reveal the possibility of repentance. If a person accepts this possibility, the Church receives him through the laying on of hands so that the Holy Spirit may dwell in him, without using water.[45]

The other independent churches either sprinkle or immerse. The Christ Apostolic Church of Nigeria will not accept baptism from other denomination unless it is in the form of immersion.

The Lord's Supper

The Kimbanguist ask the Lord Jesus Christ to come and partake of the elements which are cake made of maize flour, potato flour, flour from raw and dried bananas. Honey diluted with water represents the blood.

This is celebrated three times a year. April 6, October 12, and December 25. The elements are taken by the participants on their knees. Some other independent churches celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly. It forms part of their worship. What the elements really represent do not pose serious problem to the leaders and members. Here again, the African religious world view manifests itself.

Naming Ceremony

Kubi writes: "The birth of a baby is the greatest blessing for the family and to a large extent for the community as a whole." [46] Among the Akans of Ghana and the Yorubas of Nigeria and probably other ethnic groups in Africa, a child does not belong to the family until it is eight days old. It is on the eighth day that the child is named. According to Kubi's observation, "The general assumption is that if by the seventh or eighth day the child still lives, then the ancestors, the gods and the Supreme God have blessed the child for the family. At times it is simply said that the Ghost-mother has relinquished the child into the world of the living." [47] Here, it will suffice us to use the Church of Messiah in Ghana as an example.

In the Church of Messiah in Ghana, when a baby is born, the baby is taken to the church on the eighth day and the father will choose three names which will be presented to the spiritual father, who through meditation, selects the right name for the child.

In the ceremony, the spiritual father first drops water three times into the child's mouth saying, "The whole

congregation will be a witness to your life, and when you say 'yes' it is 'yes' and 'no' must be 'no.' Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no', 'no.'" Then the spiritual father takes salt and says,

This day I give you salt, and according to the Bible you are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot. Therefore from this day may your life be like salt and may all trials and temptations which may be in your way be wiped away now and forever.[48]

Then the congregation will say "Amen." Finally, the spiritual father takes honey and says, "This day I give you honey which is the witness of all mankind. May this honey wipe away all trials and temptations. Amen." The spiritual father then pronounces the name of the child and says "We do not give you this name for you to be lazy, but rather that you should take up the cross of Christ and follow him in the wilderness, in the bush, and in the villages. In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Marriage

Marriage is an interesting occasion in African Independent Churches. We will use the Aladura Church as an example. The marriage is based on the traditional system of African marriage. Kubi writes, "Instead of employing gold rings, wedding cakes, and other expensive articles used by the missionary churches, the Aladuras for example, use eight different symbols." [49] The symbols are the Bible as a sign of fidelity between the couple. The banana plant is used to represent many children. (In the African world view many children are the hope of all marriages.) The coconut signifies maturity and the secret blessing of God. Kubi explaining this says: "Just as no one knows how the milk gets into the nut so no one knows how the two are chosen by

God for marriage."[50] An orange is present to symbolize a sound body and mind. Bitter kola nuts symbolize long life and the wisdom and knowledge of God. Salt is given with the words, "You are the salt of the earth; may you never lose your savor, but be a benefit to society." Honey is a sign of sweet marriage relationships with no bitterness. Finally, a seven-branched candelabrum represents the prayer that the eyes of Almighty God and the living Lord may ever be upon the couple.

Music and Musical Instruments

The theology of African Independent Churches is found in their songs. Africans love singing. Messages are transmitted in songs, and song is part of their lives. However, the songs or hymns are very short. Kubi writes, "The hymns and songs of most African Independent Churches are often remarkably short and simple. They tend to be one-, two-, or three-line refrains. The contents embrace confessions, prayers and praises, with constant refrains of 'Amen,' 'Halleluja,' and 'Praise God.'"[51]

Most of these songs are sung with drums, hand clapping and dancing. The missionary churches do not accept African drums. Kubi writes:

The African Independent Churches have wholeheartedly accepted the use of locally-made drums. The use of drums has been frowned upon by the missionary churches as pagan and therefore devilish. In fact, until recently no Christian could with impunity use any musical instrument in church except the piano and the organ, neither of which is built in Africa.[52]

Those who played the guitar were considered hooligans and unbelievers by members of the mission churches. However, in my church these instruments are now allowed to be used as well as organ and piano. To conclude it is well to quote what Sister Mary Aguina, in an article

on the Rhodesian Zionists, wrote:

We Zionists please God with our drumming. In Psalm 149 verse 3 and 4, we read: Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with timbrel (translated as drums) and lyre (translated as the African piano). For the Lord takes pleasure in His people. . . . Here we are told to use the drum and the African piano, because we are told both drum and African piano please God. The Bible is our witness that we please God, with our drumming. But many do not understand what we are doing and they think we are playing. Look also at Psalm 150. There we read: Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with timbrel and dance. This proves that we teach only what is written in the Book. The Bible is our Teacher.[53]

Here it must be said that these churches have arguments to support their mode of worship as far as singing, drumming, and dancing are concerned. It is not necessary to impose music and musical instruments upon a people as part of the gospel.

Healing

Healing is part of the doctrinal practice of the independent churches and it forms an important aspect of their worship service. This is the primary concern of their ministry. Ray declared:

The whole purpose of prophecy-divination in the Church of the Lord is to save men from the evils of this world. And illness is the primary concern. Despite the widespread introduction of Western medicine into West Africa, medical services are still in very short supply and the treatment given is often far from adequate. Consequently, many Africans are not entirely convinced of the effectiveness of Western medicine. There is also a tendency in the Aladura Churches to reject all Western medicine, because the African word for medicine is a generic term that does not distin-

guish between pagan medicines, which the churches condemn, and Western medicine. There is also a tendency to reject all medicine as the work of man.[54]

Ray has given us three important reasons why people sought divine healing: first, the non-availability of adequate medical care; second, the word used in describing medicine in Yoruba does not distinguish between traditional and Western medicine; and third, the Church's attitude towards medicine as the work of man.

However, the Celestial Church of Christ has a dualistic attitude towards medicine and sickness. According to Rosalind Hackett in her research on the attitude of this church writes: "Some illnesses have natural, physical causes, such as malaria, injuries, colds, appendicitis; others are unnaturally caused by the spiritual agents of evil." [55] This church encourages those who are suffering from natural causes to visit the doctors and benefit from modern medicine. Hackett continues:

There is nothing unholy about patent medicines or Western type medical services and the use of them is not believed to detract from the power of God. The position adopted by some Aladura Churches, notably the Christ Apostolic Church, regarding the absolute power of God in the treatment of all ailments and consequent refusal of any type of medicine is strongly criticized by the Celestial Church as tantamount to testing God.[56]

However, the Celestial Church will excommunicate any of her members who take traditional medicine and who consult native doctors or herbalists. The ideal of the Church is that the one who does so shows lack of confidence in God. Such a person is seen as looking for help from other gods.

For spiritual or unnatural illness, the person is advised to come to the church for prayer before seeking medical attention, for the evil spirit needed to be

driven away before modern medicine can do its work.

Prescription is usually done after fasting, prayer and possibly trance. Hackett observes that when any newcomer or member comes to the church for healing he is immediately directed to a prophet or prophetess. He will then go into a trance and diagnose the cause of the sickness or problem and announce certain ritual prescriptions or prayers which are to be carried out by the sufferer.[57] In case of unnatural illness, the prayer will be offered by elders and prophets with the use of candles; then holy water or oil will be applied to the ailment, or the patient will be asked to go and wash in a nearby stream. Complicated instructions are often given such as how and when the washing should be done, e.g., twice everyday for a week, then daily for a fortnight. This involvement by the patient means that he is engaged in his own cure.[58]

Two things must be said in regard to divine healing. One is that these churches are still involved in the African traditional way of healing, and second, that witches are often the cause of unnatural illnesses. Hackett says of the Celestial Church: "Many of the healing techniques and symbolic objects used by the church resemble traditional and magical curative practices." [59] In an interview by Nigerian Television Authority with the founder of Celestial Church about the use of green water, the Pastor declared, "Some people have asked me about that. It is useless, and has no bearing on the real powers of the church. It is only a mixture of green alum, water and lime. It cleanses the chest. It has nothing to do with the power of God." [60]

Dr. E.O.A. Adejohi, the Primate of the Lord "Aladura," gave some practical ways in which divine healing is done in a paper he presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the West African Association of Theological Institutions in 1977 entitled "Facts about Faith, Psychic or Spiritual Healing." Part of it is reproduced

here:

A. Causes and Nature of Sickness

1. Spiritual sickness is caused by sin (Matt. 9:2)
2. Physical sickness is caused by unsanitary conditions.
3. Sickness of bad habit (John 8:3-11)
4. Psychic sickness is caused by incantation, evil spells, bad spirits and God's anger (1 Samuel 10:11), (Acts 13:8-11).
5. Miracle sickness - can be act of God or the devil

B. Divine Names and Spiritual Power for Healing

Dr. Adejobi writes:

We are blessed with Divine names for the healing of each part and according to the Old Testament, these names are ascribed to God. The variety and variation of these names are attributed to different divine functions.[61]

In summary, one of the greatest reasons why the Independent Churches are growing so fast was the art of divine healing. Western medical facilities are inadequate to help the people and so they either resort to these problems and prophetesses or to traditionalists.

Theology Proper

Theology proper or the idea of God does not pose any problem to either the independent churches or African world views. However, some of the churches emphasize their idea of God from an Old Testament perspective while others see Jesus as the Great Physician. Ray writes:

Shembe's conception of God was derived more from the Old Testament than from Zulu religion. Zulu names for God are less frequently used in the hymnbook than the Old Testament name Jehovah, associated with the Sinai revelation in thunder and lightning and the giving of

the law. This name was most prominent in Shembe's vocabulary because it was Jehovah that gave the Sabbath law, which distinguishes the Nazarites from the other Christian Churches.[62]

The name of Jesus rarely occurred in the Nazareth Church's hymns and prayers.

Christology

There is no doubt that the Independent Churches have the idea of Christ as the Son of God, the Saviour of the world and the coming one. Falk writes, "They accept the historical Jesus as Lord and give Him a central position in their faith, even though this may be expressed in new African forms; they manifest a resurgence of the traditional African world view and customs; and they strongly affirm the right to be fully African and fully Christian, yet independent." [63]

Bibliology

The African Independent Churches have a high view of the Bible.

The Scriptures are held in high esteem. The centrality of the Bible is striking. Earnest Bible study is one of the characteristics of the group. They purchase Bibles and distribute them. Thus the proclamation of the Word has a central place in the worship service.[64]

However, the problem is that the use of the Bible is not different from the traditional use of symbols. Members are advised to put their Bibles under their pillow so as to drive away evil forces. Interpretation of the Scripture rather than its authority is their problem. However, the Psalms and the Gospels are mostly used. This writer was unable to find copies of what people claimed to be the six and seven books of Moses. There are evidences from investigations that some lead-

ers of these churches do possess those books.

Ecclesiology

There is no evidence from the available literature of their idea of when the church began. However, these churches have little church organization. They often face serious problems when the founder dies. Hackett declares, "The organization of the Celestial Church of Christ is ostensibly structured around the centralized authority of the Pastor Founder. All major decisions, especially those of disciplinary or innovatory nature, must meet with his approval." [65] The problem of leadership succession is further revealed in the writings of Harold W. Turner. He writes:

The problem of succession to leadership upon the death of the founder presents a particular instance of the relationship between old and new forms. Succession from father to eldest son (sometimes disputed by another son) has been not uncommon, as with Isaih Shembe to his son J.G. Shembe in 1935, and Jehu-Appiah to Matapoly Moses Jehu-Appiah in 1948 in the Musama Disco Christ's church. [66]

However, it is probable that family succession is becoming less common as churches become larger and therefore have more senior leaders and have access to better education which provides other jobs for the children of the founders.

Baeta writes:

. . . The prophetic leaders and their helpers . . . have on the whole followed the basic pattern of organization of African communities. . . . It centers around the strong personality of its leader who is its real pivot, though use is made of all sorts of councils as well; above all it gives more scope to individuals to express themselves freely. [67]

It can be observed from the above that the African Independent Churches do not seriously consider any form of church government.

Conclusion and Evaluation

It is clear from what has been said earlier in this paper that African Independent Churches have come to stay and that they are growing rapidly.

Now, what could the evangelical churches do to help them. Here are some suggestions:

First, encourage the leaders to attend seminars and short courses, seminaries and Bible colleges, because most of these leaders have little or no formal education in the Word of God. Second, hold seminars for the lay members from time to time if opportunity is available. Third, assist the youth of these churches with scholarships to train in Bible colleges and seminaries. Finally, teach the Bible to these churches so they know that traditional religion must not be mixed with Christianity.

One can safely conclude that while some are trying to be biblical Christians, others are clearly cultic. Some are actually traditional worshippers in Christian colour. Hence, their doctrines and practices are not biblical.

Notes

- 1 David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* 50.
- 2 Kofi Appiah Kubi, *African Theology En Route* 117.
- 3 Harold W. Turner, *Christianity in Independent Africa* 45.
- 4 Turner, p. 45.
- 5 Turner, p. 46.
- 6 Barrett, p. 83.
- 7 Barrett, pp. 93-96.
- 8 George Bond, *African Christianity, Patterns of Religious Continuity* 17.
- 9 G. Balandier, "Messianismes et nationalismes en Afrique noire," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 14 (1953) 41.
- 10 Barrett, p. 94.
- 11 H. Kuper "The Swazi Reaction to Missions, *African Studies* 5/3 (1946) 178.
- 12 Barrett, p. 95.
- 13 James W. Fernandez, "African Religious Movements - Types and Dynamics" *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2/4 (1964) 535.
- 14 H. W. Turner, "African Prophet Movements", *Hibbert Journal* 61/242 (April 1963) 114.
- 15 Kubi, p. 121.
- 16 Kubi, p. 122.
- 17 Bond, p. 9.

- 18 F. Olorunnisola, "Meet the Founder of Celestial Church of Christ" *Drum Magazine* (Jan 1981) 5.
- 19 Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbols Ritual and Community* 195.
- 20 Ray, p. 195.
- 21 Ray, p. 200.
- 22 B. G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* 110.
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- 26 Ezech, pp. 30-31.
- 27 Ezech, p. 31.
- 28 Ezech, p. 32.
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- 30 Ray, p. 200.
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- 32 *Drum Magazine* (June 1970)
- 33 Ray, p. 212.
- 34 Kubi, p. 122.

- 35 Kubi, p. 122.
- 36 Ray, p. 212.
- 37 Turner, Vol 2, p. 127.
- 38 Turner, Vol 1, p. 70.
- 39 Turner, p. 70.
- 40 Turner, p. 71.
- 41 Turner, p. 71.
- 42 Turner, p. 71.
- 43 Ray, p. 211.
- 44 Diakanua Ndofunso, "The Role of Prayer in the
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- 45 Ndofunso, p. 577,
- 46 Kubi, p. 122.
- 47 Kubi, p. 123.
- 48 Kubi, p. 124.
- 49 Kubi, p. 124.
- 50 Kubi, p. 124.
- 51 Kubi, p. 124.
- 52 Kubi, p. 124.
- 53 Kubi, p. 124.
- 54 Ray, pp. 212-23.

- 55 Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Prophetism and Healing"
p. 2.
- 56 Hackett, p. 2.
- 57 Hackett, pp 2-3.
- 58 Hackett, p. 3.
- 59 Hackett, p. 3.
- 60 Drum Magazine (January 1981) p. 5.
- 61 E. O. A. Adejobi, "Facts About Faith, Psychic or
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- 62 Ray, p. 202.
- 63 Falk, p. 455.
- 64 Falk, p. 458.
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- 66 H. W. Turner, Christianity in Independent Africa
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