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# AFRICAN COSMOLOGY: A CATALYST TO THE GROWTH OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

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## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is of great significance in the religious history of Africa. This is because it was characterized by the establishment and growth of African strand of development of Christianity. They go by various names depending on the circumstances of their birth, public perception of the group or how members perceive themselves. Some common names associated with these churches include: Separatist, Ethiopian, Zionist Spiritual, Prophetic Movement, Prayer churches, Pentecostal churches, Messianic movement, Aladura and several others.<sup>1</sup> Though these new religious movements differ widely in style, organization and attitudes, they are called indigenous churches because they, as Omoyajowo observed “began as indigenous

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<sup>1</sup>D. Ayegboyin, and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, Lagos: Greater Height Publications, 1997, 12-17.

churches founded by indigenous persons and run under indigenous leadership."<sup>2</sup>

The number of African indigenous churches (hereinafter referred to as AIC) cannot be ascertained. However, the greater concentration of the group is in sub-Sahara Africa. Some of the churches belonging to this genre in Nigeria include: the cherubim and Seraphim movement, Church of the Lord Aladura, Celestial Church of Christ, Christ Apostolic Church, and Christ Army Church. In Ghana one finds Nackabah, The church of the twelve Apostles and the Musama Disco Christ Church. There is the Kimbanguist Church in Congo. Southern Africa boasts of five major AIC – Native Independent Congregation Church in Botswana, Tembu Church, Bapedi Church, and African Church in Pretoria.<sup>3</sup>

Barrett puts the total population of AIC at 7.7 million out of which 2.2 are in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> Over 760 distinct denominations were registered with government in west and central Africa. In South Africa, indigenous churches represent 30-40% of the total black Christian population. In Nigeria, the greatest concentration of the group is found in southern Nigeria where they draw their membership mainly from mission churches. For instance, a survey carried out in Ibadan city revealed that 63% of converts into the Christ Apostolic church were drawn from the Anglican Church alone.<sup>5</sup> The Cherubim and Seraphim movement itself has spawned some hundred distinct denominations including several of Nigeria's largest churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God which by 2002 had 6,265 perishes worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Though, relatively late comers to African mission field, African Indigenous Churches have made significant inroad into extant or historic churches. How were they able to achieve this feat? Ukah attributes the phenomenon of growth in African Indigenous Churches to what he called perennial spiritualities and traditional

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<sup>2</sup>A. Omoyajowo, "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria Since Independence," in Fashola – Luke, E. et al, ed., *Christianity in Independent Africa*, London: Rex Collins, 1978, 96.

<sup>3</sup>D. Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> D. Barrett *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 527.

<sup>5</sup>Omoyajowo, A., "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria Since Independence," 96.

<sup>6</sup>Ukah A.F.K., "Pentecostalism, Religious Expansion and The City: Lessons from the Nigerian Bible Belt," in Probst, Spittle, ed., *Between Resistance and Expansion: Exploration of Local Vitality in Africa*, Munchen: Lit. Verlag, 2004, 415.

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cosmologies of the African people.<sup>7</sup> The primal religious worldviews of Africa, he said, are dynamic, pro-active, and resonate with forces and powers. This, heavens has guaranteed local resilience in the face of other contesting worldviews like Islam and Christianity.

The study dwells on specific aspects of African cosmology which have provided African Indigenous Churches with springboard and competitive edge over other actors on the African mission field. To understand better, we need a word on African cosmology.

### **African Cosmology**

The term cosmology refers to a branch of philosophy dealing with the origin, processes and structure of the universe. It is the astrophysical study of the structure and constituent dynamics of the universe. African cosmology simply put is the way Africans understand and interpret time, space and events.<sup>8</sup> Africans believe that the world has two component parts — the visible and the invisible. Concerning their relationship, Parrinder writes, “to African, the spiritual world is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to the mortal sight.”<sup>9</sup> Neither education nor change in religion has been able to erase this consciousness. Parrinder elucidates: “Africans still hold to traditional religion of their fathers, but also behind the veneer of the new beliefs of most educated people lie older ideas that will not disappear for a long time yet.”<sup>10</sup> Dime shares this view. To him, African view of reality emphasizes the structural kinship between man and nature, man and man and man and the spirit world.<sup>11</sup> The whole multiplicities of things of which comprise the universe are mystically one and therefore constitute one thing, one reality; everything is part of the other that makes up reality, the total cosmos or universe. Major life decisions as migration, career, marriage, and even creed are influenced by the primal world view which has been through untold vicissitude. The cultural revival

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<sup>7</sup>Ukah A.F.K. (2004) “Pentecostalism, Religious Expansion and The City,” 435.

<sup>8</sup>M.S. Berube, *The American College Dictionary*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1982, 328.

<sup>9</sup>E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, London: Sheldon Press, 1974, 10.

<sup>10</sup>E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 10.

<sup>11</sup>C.A. Dime, *African Traditional Medicine: Its Peculiarities*, Ekpoma: University Publishing House, 1994, 28.

which followed at the heel of independence of most African countries was of momentous import for Christianity.

### **Cultural Renaissance**

Colonial rule in Africa was characterized by effort on the part of the imperial powers and their missionary collaborators to exterminate indigenous culture which they felt was antithetical to Christianity and western civilization. Indigenous churches which were adjudged to symbolize native cultures were not spared. For instance, Omoyajowu cites Captain W.A. Ross, the Resident at Oyo who wrote in August 1930 that "they (AIC) are not recognized Christian missions and they should be regarded as enemies."<sup>12</sup> Senior civil servants who identified with AIC were sanctioned by the colonial government. Consequently, many stayed away, while those who could not played the Nichodemus by associating secretly with these groups. The result was that AIC experienced slow growth.

With the attainment of independence by most African countries beginning from the 1950's, the situation changed. The psychological challenge of belonging to a church that was "not recognized" by the government because it was not under proper control disappeared.<sup>13</sup> Following independence, most African states in a bid to assert their new found sovereignty and nationhood embarked on various programmes aimed at awakening national consciousness and cultural rebirth. In Nigeria, for example, many multinational companies were nationalized. The 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) was a bold attempt at cultural revival. In addition, electronic media such as television and radio were mandated to expand the local content of their programme. It then became fashionable to identify with institutions that represent African worldview and in fact unpatriotic to flaunt western values. AIC benefited immensely from this volte-face. Indeed, the period following the independence of each African country may be regarded as the golden age of AIC therein because of the high growth rate that was recorded.

### **Attributions of Fortunes and Misfortunes to Extraneous Forces**

In Africa, there is the widespread belief in psychic powers and predestination. While psychic powers may be manipulated in favour or against a person, the manner of life an individual led in previous

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<sup>12</sup>A. Omoyajowo, "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria Since Independence," 97.

<sup>13</sup>A. Omoyajowo, "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria Since Independence," 97.

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incarnations is said to influence the present. Misfortunes such as untimely death, accident, barrenness, failure in business, ailments, poor harvest are attributed to witches/wizards, malevolent spirits, provoked deities, ancestors, broken taboos or atrocities committed in past lives. Success in life stems from good past lives and right relationship with the various powers that be. AICs hold strongly to these beliefs and employ solutions which their converts were familiar with. Such solutions include: prayers, rituals, sacrifices, offerings, stream bathe, prophecy, tongues and so on. Thus, the African indigenous Christian practises the Christian faith without needing to divest himself of cherished cultural foundations, of which communal solidarity is an integral element.

### **Communal Solidarity**

Pope John Paul II will be remembered for acknowledging that there exists elements of African religion and cosmology that could be harnessed to enrich the gospel content and eliminate certain barriers encountered in the arduous task of evangelization in Africa. In his speech of May 8, 1980, the pope remarked that, Africa constitutes a real treasure house of so many authentic human values. It is called upon to share these values with other people and nations and so to enrich the whole human family and other cultures.<sup>14</sup>

One aspect of African culture which elicits the envy of both friends and foes alike is the sense of communality which is encapsulated in the philosophical axiom – I am because we are. There was a high need and regard for community solidarity and identity. Enang observed that “the clans provided originality and identity which people enjoyed before the confrontation with a new form of culture which inevitably and gradually dissolves this identity giving quality.”<sup>15</sup> By a new form of culture, Enang refers to the twin of orthodox Christianity and western civilization. As the mainline churches soared in their numerical strength, they inevitably began to slide into personal organizations. Individuals who feel that their identity and security are threatened because of the development turn to AIC where significance, identity, security and root in a community can be given

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<sup>14</sup>Pope John Paul II as quoted in W.E. Ehianu, “Ecumenism in Benin and Environs in the Light of Vatican II’s *Unitatis Reintegration* 1962-1965”, Unpublished PhD thesis, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, 2008.

<sup>15</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation Based on the Annang Independent Churches of Nigeria*, London: M and C Publishing, 1982, 336.

to them. This identity is mediated in terms of personal communication, openness, confidence and dress code. AIC therefore provide not only social support but a supporting psychology, a form of psychotherapy and God is conceived of as a humane and considerate God.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the man who leaves the mission church finds in the AIC a place he can feel at home.<sup>17</sup>

### **Prophecy, Dreams and Visions**

Africans see the world as a battle field where a laiz-faire attitude is not an option. As in a war situation, no effort is spared at identifying the enemy's intention, strategies and weaknesses. Equally of immense importance in Africa is the imperative to be in good stead with the various powers that be and the demands of destiny. This quest crystallizes not only in the importance attached to dreams but also in such practices as divination, necromancy, palmistry and sundry acts with the sole aim of obtaining information about what the future holds.

AICs have been known to provide the same platform. Prophecies and visions are adjudged as the climax in the whole process of spiritual revelations. Enang reflecting on the significance of prophecy in AIC in Enang's independent churches surmised that "the independent churches rise and fall with prophecy, take it away and you cut off the central nerve of their whole spiritual life and foundation."<sup>18</sup> Boniface Osuji, a clergy in Christ Chosen Church of God with branches across the world says without equivocation that "his ministry with the church ends the day prophecy is killed."<sup>19</sup>

The messages of the prophetic revelations cover a wide range of subjects which mostly express mundane concerns. They principally give hints to and reveal approaching dangers and measures to avert such. Enquirers also visit in search of spiritual guidance on social, economic and political intentions and undertakings.

Alongside prophecy are visions and dreams which are among the central means for communicating a spiritual message. With a

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<sup>16</sup>M. Atere *CTH 001: Religion and Society*, Lagos: National Open Universities of Nigeria, 2006, 22.

<sup>17</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 337.

<sup>18</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 215.

<sup>19</sup>B. Osuji, Personal Interview, Clergy in Christ Chosen Church of God, C.55yrs, 5/2/2012.

discovery of spiritual experiences: forecasting the future, revealing the causes of their troubles and misfortunes, tracking down of enemies and witches, seeing of visions, the interpretation of dreams, hitherto unknown to them, orthodox members quit to attach themselves to AICs where they feel their spiritual needs are met. In addition, African Indigenous Churches present their faithful with a more encompassing understanding of salvation.

### **Concept of Salvation**

Salvation in African cosmology presupposes an atmosphere of total wholeness. It implies freedom from all that make life unpleasant — ill health, lack, absence of rest of mind, fear, insecurity, barrenness to mention but a few. A man is saved if he enjoys full membership of his community and is sure of admission into the bosom of his ancestors at death. Enang adds that salvation in Africa include peace, justice, blessing, giving individuals extensive space, saving from outward oppression or in a religious sense, liberation from an inward distress and misery.<sup>20</sup> In order words, salvation in African world view is two dimensional, namely, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Africans are never in a hurry to leave the world. On the contrary, there is an earnest desire to enjoy the best of two worlds: the present and the hereafter. There is strong attachment to the world as enunciated in a famous prayer “we shall continue to enjoy the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” Little or no thought is devoted to the song writers famous line – “this world is not my home, I am just passing through.”

Salvation in Africa aligns with the psalmist view. To the psalmist, salvation encompass deliverance from physical and mortal danger, healing from sickness, liberation from captivity, ransom from slavery, help in law suit, victory and peace after political negotiations.<sup>21</sup> This perhaps explains the pre-eminence of psalms in the liturgy of AICs.

For every problem, a corresponding psalm is invoked to provide solution. For instance, the one desirous of safety is encouraged to pray or read Psalm 91- *He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*

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<sup>20</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 39.

<sup>21</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 39.

In apparent contrast with AIC, mainline churches hold another worldly interpretation of salvation. Orthodox faithful are encouraged not to be attached to the world and the things therein. Enang observed that the God of the mission churches is remote one, too far removed from man.<sup>22</sup> Man is confronted with evils, yet he is not interested in their destiny, he does not help. He is only interested in their souls and not in their general and total welfare, bodily and spiritual.

This perhaps explains in part why many mainline Christians in order to balance the spiritual against the physical turn in the night to share the liturgical celebration of AICs and when necessary, finish up in the nearest parish at day break. Many realizing the clumsiness and hypocrisy of their action take the bull by the horn and join AIC groups where they are assured of healing for their body and soul.

## Healing

African medical practice is one aspect of African life that continues to suffer in the hands of missionaries and evangelist. In fact, according to Dime the early missionaries considered the suppression of African traditional medicine as a part of their Christian mission.<sup>23</sup> To achieve this objective, western medical system was introduced with the building of hospitals and health centres. No doubts, Africans happily embraced the new found method of health care delivery; but something was lacking. Certain questions demand answers. Why me? Why now? What caused it? How was it caused? Who caused it? How can I prevent its re-occurrence? Until these questions are answered, the African is not satisfied. In fact, these concerns in themselves constitute ill-health. This is because being healthy among others presupposes peace of mind and assurance of physical and spiritual security. Thus, even when the African has been certified healthy and discharged at the hospital, he continues to visit medicine men and diviners in search of answers to questions he considers fundamental to his existence. All of these are not without cost.

The emergence of AIC was therefore a welcome relief. This is because AIC not only promises healing to their members but equally provide information and solution to the spiritual or mystical cause of

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<sup>22</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 333.

<sup>23</sup>Dime C.A. *African Traditional Medicine: Its Peculiarities*, Ekpoma: University Publishing House, 1994, 16.



misfortune. Health in Africa is holistic; therefore a holistic approach to healing as is the case in AIC is preferred. Besides, in an area where there are few hospitals and where medicine is beyond the reach of majority, one would expect that the promise of divine healing would attract a number of people. For example, a field work carried out by Kenneth Enang in an AIC congregation in Anang, southern Nigeria reveals that over 60% of the members interviewed joined the church because they were sick.<sup>24</sup>

Enang cites Sundkler as saying that healing is the strongest influence in drawing people from the mission churches into the Zionist fold in southern Africa.<sup>25</sup> This is corroborated by Aigbokhan who when asked the secret of their growing congregation said "when we pray, God answers our prayers, many who were barren became proud mothers, the sick recovered, all who were marked for misfortune by evil forces were liberated, those who hitherto spent their income consulting native doctors became free from such shackles.<sup>26</sup> More so, healing practices in AICs involve elements and usages in traditional religion such as prophecy, prayers, oil, soap, perfume, stream bathe, water, fasting and confinement. All of these need no explanation in the people's religious understanding. In sum, African Indigenous Churches recruit large numbers as a result of their prophetic and faith-healing activities which are relatively unknown in orthodox churches.

### **The Place of Women**

In traditional Africa, women played significant roles in the religious life of their people. There were women priestesses in the services of Ogun, Orisa Nla, Osun, Orunmila, Buruku, and Egungun cults among the Yoruba of western Nigeria.<sup>27</sup> Priesthood of Olokun among the Bini is open to both male and female. Among the Zulu of South Africa, women participated in many aspects of the priesthood,

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<sup>24</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 339.

<sup>25</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 339.

<sup>26</sup>K. Enang, *The African Experience of Salvation...*, 51.

<sup>27</sup>C.A. Obi, "A Feminist Re-Reading of Women's Leadership in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Churches with African Perspective," in G.U. Ukagba et al., ed., *Kpim of Feminism: Issues and Women in a Changing World*, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2010, 430.

particularly an old woman beyond menopause. The same obtains among the Lovedu and the Akan of Ghana.<sup>28</sup>

The place of women in African religious worldview is enunciated in Nigerian movies, the home-videos where women play the role of diviners and leaders in religious rites. A typical example is the film *Passage of Kings*, directed by Sunday Nnajiude, a woman diviner was in charge of the Agbala oracle one of the four main oracles in Igbo land.<sup>29</sup> All these show women played prominent roles in traditional religion and society.

Evidence abound to conclude that early Christianity was organized around house churches and that women held significant leadership roles, sometimes working with their husbands. However, as the church expanded into areas of varying socio-cultural orientation, it became patriarchalized. The result was that women, as in other fields, were marginalized. In the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, in spite of the much publicized reforms at Vatican II, the door of ordination remains shut to women. The same is true of other mainline churches except for the Anglican Church in America and the Baptist Church.

One major difference between mainline churches and AIC is the attention that is accorded women. AIC according to Ayegboyin have been exceptional in encouraging women to participate in the ministry of the church.<sup>30</sup> They provide opportunities for leadership and the exercise of authority by women who usually outnumber the men who attend these churches. Captain Abiodun Emmanuel co-founded the Cherubim and Seraphim Church movement in Nigeria. Alice Lakwena of Uganda founded the Holy Spirit Movement. Such positions as Revered Mothers, Lady Leaders, Mother in Israel, Superior Mothers, Praying Mothers, Lady Evangelists, Prophetess to mention but a few, all testify to the gender friendliness of AICs.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, women who have the call to church leadership on realizing that such gift or charisma cannot be nurtured, utilized and appreciated in their local congregation join AIC which offers them a platform.

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<sup>28</sup>C.A. Obi, C.A. (2010), "A Feminist Re-Reading...", 432.

<sup>29</sup>C.A. Obi, C.A. (2010), "A Feminist Re-Reading...", 432.

<sup>30</sup>Ayegboyin, D. and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, 30.

<sup>31</sup>Ayegboyin, D. and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, 30.

## Conclusion

This study has established the reasons for change of membership, either complete severing or partial deviation from the orthodox churches to the independent ones. Cultural renaissance following the independence of most African countries and the fact that AIC promise their faithful antidote to mysterious powers which are believed to influence an individual's lot in life form major attraction to AICs. Added to these are communal solidarity, broad understanding of salvation, attention accorded women, healing practices and prophecy.

An AIC Christian finds himself on a familiar terrain as none of the practices mentioned above are strange to him. The lyric may have changed but the rhythm remains the same. The future of historic churches according to Enang rests on their ability to recognize the achievement of AICs, ask why they are so successful and where their (mainline churches) weakness lies.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, they may be able to halt, to some extent, the great exodus from their congregation.

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<sup>32</sup>Enang, K. *The African Experience of Salvation Based on the Annang Independent Churches of Nigeria*, London: M and C Publishing 1982 pg 341.