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## **GODIANISM:\* FROM A LOCAL BLACK PROTEST TO A QUEST FOR WORLD PEACE**

### **Introduction**

The study of the New Religious Movements in Africa is fraught with a lot of problems. It is involving and exerting in its demands of intellectual resources, time, patience and objectivity. More often than not, there is such a careful reconstruction of the history and development of a group that its factual history is lost. Some researchers therefore fall back to the only available data which had been properly reconstructed and distorted by some enlightened members of the group. Such careful reconstructions are out to project a particular point of view. A case in point is *Godianism* in Africa. This is a movement that is currently gaining grounds in many parts of Africa and among many Afro-Americans but its history has not been accurately presented in its right context. From the current write-ups and oral presentation of facts, one is made to believe and accept that Godianism which claims to be the "traditional religion for modern man" was originally begun as an indigenous religious revivalist movement. Consequently the hard time the Blacks passed through, their ingenuity and perseverance in the face of obstacles are glossed over.

The task of this paper is two fold. In the first place, it will present a critical and objective history and development of the movement that has crystallized in Godianism. Secondly it will assess how much this movement has borrowed from other religious systems particularly Christianity to assume its present "religious image." Was it originally a religious revivalist movement or a secular nationalist group whose primary aim was political independence? Is her present quest for World Peace her original aim? Our approach in attempting answers to the

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above and other pertinent questions would be both critical and analytical. We shall finally come to observe that inspite of its rough beginning, Godianism has shown the World, the ability of the *Black Man* to achieve lofty goals and success out of suffering, oppression and discrimination. His handicaps and stumbling blocks can be converted to useful purposes.

## I

### Early History and Development

Godianism is over thirty years old in Africa. It is relatively new when compared with many other independent religious groups in Africa but has rapidly grown both in number of adherents and sphere of influence. The movement that gave birth to Godianism can be remotely traced to 1948 Labour Crisis in Burutu, in Southern Nigeria. We have not been able to identify any prominent leader of the group because it was an acepholous radical labour movement which began as a pressure group that sought to generate national consciousness among the African employees of the United Africa Company (U.A.C.). In the hey days of nationalist agitation for political independence, indigenus active trade unionists mobilized forces against the colonial government and their agents in the colonies. They were also against the Christian Church which they considered as an agent of colonial administration.

Some African employees of the United Africa Company (U.A.C.) were shot in Burutu, in the Delta Province of Southern Nigeria, now located in the Bendel State of Nigeria when carrying out peaceful demonstrations for pay rise and improvement of their general condition of service. The shooting did not really start the movement but intensified an already tense political situation in the colony. The local press in the various parts of the British Colonies in the West African subregion had earlier on started to run a campaign of bitterness, hatred and mistrust against the colonial administration and everything connected with Great Britain, including the Church (Historical Record 1947-48).

In 1949, in another development some Coal Miners at Enugu in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria were fired by the police and nine of them died. The miners were carrying out another peaceful demonstration to back up their demands for pay rise. The trade unionists saw this killing of their colleagues as an open demonstration of the British determination to exterminate the "black race." They therefore got prepared for a show-down.

A funeral service was immediately arranged by the members of the union in Enugu for their dead colleagues. None of the Churches in the town allowed them to use her place of worship for the service for fear that the unionists might drag the Church into what was purely political. The Unionists saw the refusal as the Church's indirect support to the Colonial government. Any one found loyal and obedient to the Colonial government was regarded as a traitor.

Eventually the Unionists moved down to Aba, a town in the same Eastern Region known then as a commercial centre and full of rough and rascally young nationalists. On failing again to secure the permission of any Christian Church in Aba for the funeral service, the Unionists rallied a lot of sympathizers and went to an open field. Aba was the seat of the 1929 Women's Riot. The Riot (organized by the Igbo women of Nigeria) was a turn of reaction against colonial administration especially the post-First World War economic policy (Onwuteaka, 1965:278; Leith-Ross, 1939). The funeral service featured traditional war songs, anti-government speeches etc. The prayers were directed to the "God of Africa" to grant victory over the "white oppressors." Thereafter, a new form of "Church" emerged. It was called the "National Church of Nigeria and Cameroons" and became part of the Nigeria's Nationalist Freedom Movement (Adiele: 1982:2). The name National Church of Nigeria and Cameroons was a reflection of the movement's identity and connection with one of the leading political parties then in Nigeria known as the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons - (N.C.N.C.) with its strongest base in Eastern Nigeria.

Members of the 'Pseudo-religious' movement - the National Church - set themselves against Christianity and the "White man's God" whom they described as an "oppressor." They on the other hand held African nationalists in high esteem particularly Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, Mbonu Ojike, Tafawa Balewa (Nigeria); Aggrey, Kwameh Nkrumah (Ghana); Leopold Senghor (Senegal); Milton Margai (Sierra Leone); Taubman (Liberia); Julius Nyerere (Tanganyika, now Tanzania after merging with Zanzibar); and Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) among others. The National Church did not project the traditional religion per se. The members rather saw themselves as nationalists who were set to oppose the "white man" and secure the liberty of the blackman. They therefore built a strong cult around African nationalists whom they greatly admired and revered. In one of their stimulating songs, they

projected Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as a type of "African Messiah or Saviour." A stanza of the song, for instance, runs thus:

The muslims have their Allah,  
The Christians have their Jesus  
But we have our Zik.

(Historical Record 1947-48;  
National Church Song Book 1950)

In their liturgy, no serious mention was made of the traditional deities, symbols or ancestors but of the nationalists. As their influence increased, the membership began to attract a large number of politicians and their supporters. Emphasis on African gods became prominent.

## II

### The 1962 Convention and After

In February 1962, during a symposium organized by the members of the National Church at the Enugu Campus of the University of Nigeria, the organization unanimously elected Chief K.O.K. Onyioha, the "High Chief Priest" of the Church. An articulate and veteran trade unionist and politician, Chief Onyioha, there and then propounded the philosophy and proceeded to rename the movement - Godianism. This convention thus transformed the movement which began in 1948/49 as a secular nationalist group into a religious organization. The religion is now incorporated under the Federal Republic of Nigeria Land (Perpetual Succession) Acts Cap. 98 by certificate of Incorporation No. 1247.

Chief Onyioha's new philosophy of Godianism is a rational and well-thought out scheme aimed at giving the movement both national and international outlook as a world-wide *Religion of Traditionalism*. Since every people has got a traditional religion ere the emergence of some religious systems like Christianity and Islam which did not begin at the axial period (5th and 7th centuries B.C. when most Eastern religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism etc were begun) they should revert to Godianism as their oldest and natural search for the 'creative force' called God.

Second, Chief Onyioha realized that by 1962, many African countries were already independent or were on the verge of obtaining it, the colonial spirit of 'Pan-Africanism' could be maintained in Independent

Africa and Black World through a religion that could preach the traditional unity of the Black Race. Third, if the movement would get world-wide followership and sympathy, it must drop its "local nationalist stance" and preach a philosophy of the "Universal brotherhood of man." Fourth, it would be thought necessary that in any assembly of World Religions, an organization headed by a black man should be there to represent the Black World. For instance, if the Pope (a whiteman) heads Christianity, an Arab Sheik heads Islam, Eastern Religions are headed by non-blacks, a black man should be there with them to head *Godianism* of Black Race.

With this new slant, Chief Onyioha has travelled extensively to different parts of Africa, America and Europe to give lectures on the philosophy of Godianism and to canvass for adherents. In each place he would stress that Godianism is a "philosophical evaluation and appropriate identification of Africa's traditional religious habits and practices capable of universal application." (Onyioha: 1975). In one of such tours of American Universities in 1973, Chief Onyioha declared the intention of Godianism to canonize Martin Luther King, the assassinated Black American Civil Right advocate and to build St. Martin Luther King School of African Languages and Culture. They had earlier in 1965 canonized J.F. Kennedy, the assassinated American president (who was said to be kindly disposed to the Black) as St. John F. Kennedy. That same year, Godianism proposed to build in the United States, St. John F. Kennedy School of African Languages and Culture and same type of schools in honour of St. Marcus Garvey and St. Mbonu Ojike who were among the first pan-Africanists to be canonized by the Godians in mid 1960's.

Godianism which started as a Nationalists Movement for freedom has turned a new champion and advocate for World Peace. In 1981, for instance, Chief Onyioha attended the Tokyo Conference of World major Religions in which a far-reaching resolution on World Peace was taken in support of Disarmament and reduction of nuclear weapons. In spite of the claims of Godianism that she is the "Traditional Religion of Africa for modern man," a prominent and pioneer scholar of African Religions, Professor E.B. Idowu, who had followed up the history of the movement reported in 1963 that:

in the early days of vigorous  
nationalism, especially in Nigeria,  
a political 'God of Africa' was born

by the National Church of Nigeria as an opponent of the "God of the Europeans" who was described as an Oppressor (Idowu, 1963:36).

This observation rightly confirmed that the movement began as a part of the nationalist struggle going on in the 1940's and not purely as an independent religious revivalist group. Some scholars of religion from outside Africa had not been aware of Professor Idowu's observation. For instance, Professor W. Amanda, a Buddhist scholar at the College of Oriental Studies, Los Angeles, California confessed in Lagos Nigeria in 1975 that Chief Onyioha in 1974 at the Second World Conference on Religion and Peace in Leuven, Belgium, made such a dynamic and strong case for Godianism that it created a stimulating interest among the delegates. He therefore promised to introduce the study of the Traditional Religion of Africa as an academic discipline in his college (Amanda, 1975:39-40). In the same vein, Professor Peter Evarts of Oakland University Michigan, U.S.A. stated that much interest has been drawn from Cultural and Academic Communities alike in the United States towards Nigerian Traditional Religion, generated in part by the avid pursuit by Afro-Americans of the roots of their non-cultural heritage on the continent (Evarts, 1975: 42). Both scholars expressed the view of many who thought that Godianism was in all its ramification the Traditional Religion of Africa. Professor Evarts did not therefore mince words in stating further that Godianism emerged as

... the need for the unification of Traditional Religions in Africa, of the need to extract an essential cosmology and an essential ontology central to a variety of names for the creative and harmonizing force called God ... is aptly defined in the term Godianism, a movement ... to unify under a theology acceptable to all the Traditional Religions of Africa but which cannot fail in the long run to have a significant impact on World religion itself. (Evarts, 1975: 42-43).

Incidentally, this view of Professor Evart is presented to the world as if the blackman had had everything in a platter of gold. The characteristics and nature of the original movement of the 1940's that gave rise to the movement are ignored. The sufferings and deaths that the blacks went through before the glorious dawn must be presented as a stark reality in history.

### III

#### **Godianism As Presented By Its Adherents Today**

The above impressions of the two learned scholars are deductions from the modern presentations of Godianism made by its elite members. The adherents see it as a synthesis and modernization of the traditional religions of mankind. It is therefore a world-wide religion which is as old as man in the universe. In every nation, it is the religion and the foundation of the local culture. (Godianism, 1984:1). The name Godianism is entirely new and it is applied to the ancient, natural, traditional, universally indigenous religion. (Godianism: 1984). The Godians insist that because God is a common denominator for all religions and because it is a religious philosophy wound around God Himself, it should be a religion for all mankind which all should embrace without any regard for race, or tribe or media – (Godianism: 1975) (ways of approach to God through intermediaries).

Because Godianism claims to be a pragmatic religion, its adherents have insisted that they take practical steps to encourage man to change his attitude towards his fellowman. In their own expression, "Love is the highest religion." Any religion which is incapable of making its members love and tolerate other religions and fellow men, despite creed, or colour is no religion at all (Godianism: 1975). This notion has made Godians see their main assignment as that of bringing all the conflicting religions of the world to harmonize and to learn mutual toleration and acquire spiritual balance by getting them to worship together on important national occasions even if it is once in a year. This therefore brings us to a point at which we can closely outline the Creed of Godianism as contained in their handout.

### IV

#### **The Creed of Godianism**

Sequel to the 1962 Convention was the formulation of a Creed in which the spirit, philosophy and purposes of the movement are compressed.

- I. I believe in the Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, as my source of inspiration, strength and is my protector.

- II. I believe in the universal brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of one God; love your neighbour as you love yourself, do to others as you would want others to do unto you; thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not lie, and in respect and obedience to elders; in observance of just laws and in retributive justice.
- III. I believe that every human being consciously or unconsciously looks up to something above him as his source of inspiration and that "something" is the Almighty God.
- IV. I believe that the Almighty God made the world, a paradise of happiness for humanity but man has made the world a hell for himself by too much quarrels with his fellow man over methods of God-worship.
- V. I believe that the Kingdom of Heaven on earth shall come when man learns to quarrel no more with his fellow man on the excuse of differences in methods of God-worship.
- VI. I believe that religions are inspired by man's desire to offer thanks to God for His goodness to humanity.
- VII. I believe that every human being has his own way, organized or unorganized, systematized or unsystematized, of expressing the necessary gratitude to God and that in this fact every human being satisfied the purpose of religion or God-worship.
- VIII. I believe that there is no sense in quarrelling with any fellow man over his religious doctrine, belief or methods of God-worship that differ from my own manner of satisfying the common purpose of thanking to the Almighty.
- IX. I believe that the base association of man with man, nation with nation, on the ground of common religion and faith is sheer folly.
- X. I believe that every man should have the right to worship God in the way he understands best, without bitterness.
- XI. I believe that any attempt to force man directly or indirectly to accept any particular faith, religious doctrine or method of God-worship rumples social harmony.



- XII. I believe that organized religious bodies as they are known in the world today, though the fundamental principles underlying their purposes are good, have by each in its way of canvassing to have all men embrace its doctrines, aroused unhealthy competition and mutual jealousy among themselves and blown the world into tumultuous asylum of warring religious factions.
- XIII. I believe that if the universal brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God shall be a reality, if the kingdom of God shall come, the traditional attitude of live and let live in all matters of religion is the indispensable catalyst.
- XIV. I believe that deification of man has given source to the formation of many religious organizations now competing and quarrelling with one another, each in frantic attempts to get everybody to accept and hallow the man it has deified as the only son, holy prophet and only medium through whom God's mercy and blessing should be invoked.
- XV. I believe that the practice of deification of man shall continue to be the source of disharmony in matters of God-worship unless it is stopped.
- XVI. I believe that to deify any person born of woman or to accept and hallow anyone so deified is conspiracy against social harmony, and sinful contempt for the very sanctity of God.
- XVII. I believe that to end deification of man and hang religion directly on God Himself is to end proliferation of religions and religious quarrels and return peace among men.
- XVIII. I believe that the Creed of the Godian Religion represents a new religious civilization which needs to be propagated to save human society from total destruction. (Godianism, 1975: 25-28).

## V

### **A Critique of Godianism**

A deep critical analysis of the eighteen-point credal affirmation of Godianism is beyond the scope of this paper. But suffice it to say that from both the Creed and the liturgical pattern of worship, (Godianism,

1984:2; Onunwa, 1987:6-7) it looks as if Godianism is not the true representation of the traditional religion of any people in Nigeria, let alone Africa. In Nigeria, for instance, the organization has accepted Sunday as its day of worship. We do not understand any historical or theological reasons for this practice. The Jews worship Yahweh on the Sabbath, the Muslims on Friday while the Christians on Sunday. To each group, her day of worship has a historical and theological significance. For instance, the First Day of the Week (Sunday) marks the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Pentecost when he sent the Holy Spirit on the first disciples after his ascension. So when Christians assemble for worship each Sunday, they commemorate the resurrection of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The early apostles of Jesus continued to worship on the Sabbath (as Jews) until the unique nature of Christianity was realized and they broke completely with Judaism. Since Godianism does not recognize any founder, messiah, prophet or "human" intermediary between man and God their day of worship should be made to fall on the day each community where it finds itself worships her patron deity or the Supreme Being (where it obtains). For instance, among the Akans of Ghana in West Africa, it should be on a Saturday when they traditionally worship their *Nyameduah* (the Akan Supreme Deity). Among the Igbo of Nigeria, it should be on an *Eke Market Day*. In this case it may fall on any day of the week (not necessarily on a Sunday) if we calculate it with the present Roman Calendar we use.

The choice of Sunday may be perhaps that the educated African nationalists and Pan-Africanists, want to create a centre of orthodoxy for all Black people, a feature that did not exist in the Traditional Religious systems of Africa. Sunday as a special day of worship is not traditional to any African peoples. Usually each clan or community has its own day of worship of its own patron deity.

Besides, African traditional religion is an ethnic and folk religion with local deities (and in some cases ancestors) as the chief objects of worship and not the *Supreme Being*. Godianism, however, is trying to make it a universal and world-wide faith for all men - perhaps another model of 'Catholic Faith.' This idea of a Universal Traditional Religion is unknown to the traditional votary of any clan deity in Africa who has never worshipped another clan's patron deity before.

This brings us to the problem of placing the Supreme Deity as the direct and central object of worship in African traditional religions. We

know that hitherto, a direct cult of the Supreme Deity is either absent or not well-developed in many communities. Where it does exist, it is not a common feature. Many early writers who encountered this difficulty in their study of African peoples had even denied a direct cult of the Supreme Being or belief in him by many Africans until contact with Christianity and Islam. The *Deus Otiosus* polemic is now an over-flogged and unresolved issue (O'Connell, 1962:67-69; Horton, 1971: 91-112; Shelton, 1965: 15-19).

Article XVIII of the Godian Creed tries to make the faith a universal and necessary one for salvation of humanity. Yet articles XI and XII of the same Creed have castigated forceful methods of evangelization or the attempts by any religion to make all men embrace its doctrines. Chief K. O. K. Onyioha and other enlightened members of Godian religion, have through their constant travels to different parts of the world, publication of literature, public lectures, seminars and international conferences won many members to their religion. Although they insist that Godianism is necessary for human salvation, they also advocate for religious ecumenism for world peace and co-existence of religious culture (Article VII, VIII, X, XIII).

Furthermore, the appointment of K. O. K. Onyioha, an Igbo of Nigeria and one of the pioneer members of the National Church of the Political days as the *World's High Chief Priests* of Godianism boils down to making him a counterpart of the Catholic Pontif – an idea strange to votaries of the traditional religion. The World Headquarters (another Rome or Saudi Arabia) of Godianism is Aba, a commercial city in Imo State Nigeria. This town has no traditional or cultural significance in traditional African history to be a religious headquarters of a religion that claims to revive African religion and culture. Aba is only known in colonial history in respect of the 1929 Women's Riot. However the choice of Aba as the World Headquarters may be connected with the 1949 Open Air funeral service which the nationalists held for their fallen colleagues which could be said to be the beginning of the National Church.

Most hymns sung by Godians today are composed by educated members of the group and set in English tones usually not understood by illiterate members. They should have tried to recover and revive the local folk songs of the people. The idea of the "universal brotherhood of man under the 'fatherhood of one god' (articles II and XII of the Godian Creed) is alien to the traditional concept of African geneology. Obviously the

Supreme Being is not understood as 'Father' in traditional religion. Even Judaism did not see Yahweh as 'father'. It is Jesus who brought in the idea of Father, 'Abba' and taught his disciples to see God as such. These and many other aspects of the Godian doctrine seem to have been borrowed from Christianity. They are strange to the tenets of African Traditional Belief.

## Conclusion

Thus far, we have in this brief analysis of the history and development of Godianism seen how a "pseudo-religious" wing of a nationalist movement which started about forty years ago in Eastern Nigeria has assumed a world-wide feature and mission to all peoples of the world. When Chief Onyioha attended the 1981 World Conference of Leaders of World Major Religions in Tokyo Japan, whose theme was *Principles for Peace and Disarmament*, he presented a stimulating paper which stunned his audience. In the paper, he urged the United Nations to

redefine civilization to mean not just exploitative or repressive territorial expansionist economic opulence or fantastic technological know-how of going to the moon and mass production of nuclear weapons of war for mass destruction of God's own creations, but to mean a cultivation of the human mind to live in harmony with fellow man despite creed or colour . . . (Statesman, 1981 :9).

Although syncretism is a feature of every religion, it seems to be overtly manifested in Godianism to the extent that one starts to doubt if it has anything unique and original to offer the world. However, what started as a local civil agitation for freedom and political independence has grown within so short a period of time to a world-wide movement. Although it now preaches peace and universal brotherhood of man, "anti-white philosophy" of the then National Church movement which crystalized in Godianism, is still inherent in the new Godian faith. The political desire of the black man to reassert his freedom and "recolonize" the world through religion or to revenge the exploitation by colonial foreign imperialists, may be among the latent and subtle motives of some of the propagators of Godianism. For instance, many Afro-Americans who have been zealous to look for the "roots of their non-cultural heritage" in the Americas have found the philosophy and practice of Godianism both challenging and encouraging.

Although Godianism does not fully and truly represent African indigenous religions, its new philosophy and tenets are a pointer to the ability of the traditional religion and the ingenuity of the Black Race to adopt any strategy for self preservation. That it appeals to many educated Africans today is another evidence that old habits, traditions and spirit of nationalism hardly die fast. The influence of the Black Race in World Affairs in our contemporary period can no longer be ignored. Their ingenuity in mobilizing and organizing themselves for development projects, self-government, philosophical developments are manifested in Godianism.

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