

## ***CHAPTER TWELVE***

### **CELESTIAL CHURCH OF CHRIST**

#### **1. Introduction**

One of the most attractive and flourishing indigenous churches is the relatively young organisation which goes by the name: Celestial Church of Christ (CCC). It was founded in 1947.

The claims of the CCC that "it did not emerge within the context of any church" is only true if by this statement the organisation means within the context of any AICs. Indeed its distinctive traits and some unique circumstances surrounding its emergence marks it as an off-shoot of the earlier AICs in Yoruba land. It is obvious, however, that the founder must have been influenced somehow by Methodist's indoctrination, since he was born a Methodist, served as a ward to a Methodist catechist and finally became a choirmaster in a Methodist Church.

Today, the CCC has become an international organisation and one of the most influential indigenous churches in recent times as Omoyajowo testifies.<sup>66</sup> Even the late Dr. Tai Solarin, an agnostic, was quoted to have said in the *Nigerian Tribune* of 1974, that "the church is fascinating to the incredulous, inviting to those with problems and a haven from the billows of life."

#### **2. Objectives**

At the end of this chapter students are expected to have a full grasp of the events which led to the genesis and the rapid expansion of the CCC. The lecture also gives an insight into the uniqueness of the CCC's mode of worship.

#### **3. Content**

The CCC was inaugurated on 29th September, 1947 in Porto-Novo, Dahomey. How did it become associated with Nigeria, and by whom was the organisation instituted? These are some of the questions we will endeavour to answer in this section.

(a) *The Founder*: Pastor S.R.J. Oshoffa

The founder, the first Pastor and leader of the CCC worldwide, was Samuel Bilewu (Biléou) Joseph Oshoffa. He was born in a small village, near Port-Novo, Dahomey (Benin) on May 18, 1909. At his infancy, his father arranged for him to live with Rev. Bishop David Hodonu Loco, who was the Methodist Bishop of Porto Novo. He attended a Methodist Primary School but missed narrowly an opportunity to continue his formal education in a Seminary as a result of his disagreement and consequent refusal to partake in the tedious task imposed on the pioneering students to make blocks for their hostels. Consequently, Oshoffa was compelled to learn carpentry and thus follow after his father's profession.

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<sup>66</sup> J. A Omoyajowo "The Aladura Churches in Nigeria since Independence," in Fashole-Luke, *et al* (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa*, p. 96.

(b) *His Call*

His divine call is said to date back to May 1947 when he was lost in the forest for three months.<sup>67</sup> While he was in the woods he was said to have lived like a hermit, depending only on honey and water and praying more fervently. He emerged out of these experiences with the revelation that God has appointed him a worldwide evangelist. To assure him of the genuineness of this revelation, on the day he came out of the forest, at Agange, a village near Port-Novo, he healed a young man, by name Kudiho, who was at the point of death, merely by laying his hand on the man who was sick.

As the news spread around people trooped into the house of Kudiho where Oshoffa was residing and many miracles were wrought. Before Oshoffa arrived at Porto-Novo, news of what he had become had gone before him. Soon after his arrival he brought back to life a nephew who had died and healed as many patients as were referred to him.

Akinlolu Aje notes that 'the singular event which eventually served as a signal for him to begin his ministry happened on September 29, 1947. On that day, Oshoffa saw a vision of a strong ray of light, heard a message of assurance from an angel of God and had a confirmation of his call from one of the members of his praying bands, Mrs. Zuvenu who fell into a trance.

(c) *A Name for the Church*

For the next thirteen days or so after these events, Oshoffa could hardly sleep. He was hearing voices and seeing visions, part of which included the form his Church would take. A member of the group, Mr. Alexander Yanga, who was in a trance for seven days came round and wrote the words: *Église Du Christianisme Celeste* on the wall. The Yoruba version, *Ijo Mimo ti Kristi lati Orun wa*, meaning *Holy Assembly of Christ from Heaven* probably helped the group to spread quickly in southwestern Nigeria. This marked the beginning of identification of the praying group with this name, which it has borne since then.<sup>68</sup> Henceforth, the Church spread rapidly as there was mass exodus of people from the orthodox churches into the CCC in Porto Novo.

(d) *The Spread to Nigeria and Beyond*

As the CCC began far and wide in the capital city, the founder was said to have come under heavy criticism and persecution which made him to leave Benin Republic. Views have been expressed to explain why Pastor Oshoffa was compelled to "shift" his base. One source holds that there was a clash between Oshoffa and the new military government of President Kerekou, who had advocated a socialist system of government. Such a clash may not be unexpected since the socialist leader would have seen a popular religious leader as a threat to the realisation of his socialist goals. Another source which is closely related to the first one holds that there was friction between Prophet Oshoffa and Kerekou occasioned by the government's order to all institutions to make a declaration of their property. Of course, Oshoffa would show his disgust for such proclamation that does not exempt the Church of God. A third account submits that as members of the older Christian organisations were defecting to the CCC,

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<sup>67</sup> For some details, see Sunday Olagunju, "The Life and Times of Pastor Oshoffa: A Special Report on the Life and Death of the late Founder of the Celestial Church," *Spear Magazine* (October 1985), pp. 33-36. See also Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Thirty Years of Growth and Change in a West African Independent Church — A Sociological Perspective" in *Journal of Religion in Africa* XI:3 (1980): pp. 212-24.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Celestial Constitution* (First Edition, 1980). See also their 1972 document entitled: *Lumiere sur le Christianisme Céleste* in which their identity and objectives are stated.

the ministers in these established churches worked together as a group against Oshoffa and ensured that he left the vicinity.

Before Oshoffa found refuge in Nigeria, some *Ègùn*<sup>69</sup> fishermen from Republic of Benin had introduced the Celestial brand of Christianity in Lagos. Convinced about the prospects of the Church in Nigeria, Oshoffa arrived in Nigeria in 1951. He settled formally in 1952 in Makoko, a marshy area in Lagos. With his charisma and the powerful gift of performing extraordinary miracles, the CCC grew far more rapidly in Nigeria than it had been the case in Port Novo.

The church was duly registered under the land (Perpetual Succession) Ordinance, Cap. on 24th November, 1958. Some two decades later (1977) the CCC established its International Headquarters at Ketu near Lagos. Before Pastor Oshoffa died on September 10, 1985 he had worked relentlessly to make the CCC one of the fastest growing churches in the world. Members of the Church claim that they have close to 1600 branches worldwide.

(e) *Beliefs and Practices*

The beliefs and practices of the CCC, members claim, came through spiritual instructions; they are therefore followed meticulously.

(i) **Worship:** Church service in the CCC is apparently a hybrid (mixture) of the practices picked from various religious organisations. Members worship three times a week — Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. There is the monthly night vigil on the last Thursday. There is what is known as *AMISSA*, that is, "Invocation of the soul of the dead" performed once a year where capable "spiritual" leaders are available to conduct the services.

As members approach for normal worship programmes, they dip "a finger" into a basin containing consecrated water deposited at the entrance to the Church and make a sign of the cross (as Catholics do). The Church uses chants for its Gloria (as Anglican). After that members prostrate and touch the bare floor with their fore heads (as Muslims do). After the peculiar light of seven candles on the altar, the Service starts with a song of worship. As the song is sung, members are expected to lift up their hands to bless the Lord. Next, they put their hands on the thighs and touch the ground with the forehead (again, as Muslims do).

Music plays a very significant role in the worship. At intervals during service, drumming, singing of lyrics and dancing take place. In course of worship, prophets and prophetesses usually go into a trance whereupon they suddenly break into "angelic language" which is either scribbled down or interpreted.

(ii) **Fasting:** Members of the Church hardly engage in corporate or individual fasting. Scarcely is fasting prescribed by a prophet as it is done in other indigenous churches. The only time members may choose to fast is during the last one week of the Lent

(iii) **Foot wear:** CCC members are called the "bare-footed Celestials" because members are not allowed to put on foot wear of any kind when they are within the Church premises and also when they are wearing their praying gown or *Soutane*.

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<sup>69</sup> Hackett, "Thirty Years of Growth. . ." *Ibid*.

(iv) Seclusion of Women: Menstruating women are not allowed to come within the Church premises until they are cleansed. Procedure for purification is meticulously followed. On the day of purification — usually, the eighth day, the woman is expected to go to the Church with a bucket of water, candle, sponge and soap. Prayers of purification are then pronounced over these before the woman takes her ceremonial bath. It is only after this that she is permitted to reenter the Church.

(v) Purification after Childbirth: A woman who gives birth to a child is ceremonially unclean just as she is during her monthly period. Such women are not allowed into the Church premises until forty-one days after delivery when they are allowed to re-enter the Church after thanksgiving. This practice, though has a parallel in Leviticus 12, has, in all probability, its roots in African tradition which confines a newly delivered mother in the house for forty-days before she makes her first ceremonial outing.

(vi) Naming Ceremonies: For a child to receive a name, there are procedures to be followed. Naming ceremonies are usually elaborate and ritual-like. The celebrations are performed in the Church and never at home, and always in the evenings, except those that fell on Sunday. As part of the naming ceremony, parents buy seven types of fruits and seven candles which are lit and put in a white bowl into which water is poured. The mother is not allowed to enter the sanctuary as she is considered ceremonially unclean. While the service is in progress, a recorder sits close to the prophet-in-trance to record prophecies about the names given by the heavenly hosts.

The names of a child are dictated not by parents but rather given under inspiration by a prophet or prophetess. What the future holds for the baby may also be recounted by divine guidance. After the naming, the six blessings and Deuteronomic homily in Deuteronomy 28:1-14 are read to invoke the blessings of God on the child.

(vii) Confinement: A prophet may occasionally pronounce the need for a member to be in confinement (*abe àbò* – place of safety or refuge) in the church premises. The usual reason given for this spiritual protection is either to avert a disaster or achieve a prescribed level of spiritual fortification against evil occurrences against one's life or progress. One would be expected to stay away from one's family and home for as long as the protection lasts.

(viii) Seeking Guidance: When a new inquirer comes to the church seeking to discover the unknown and the future, the investigator is asked to buy a candlestick (usually sold within the Church vicinity), prays on it and recounts his/her problems. Thereupon an invocation song is sung inviting the Holy Spirit. After a while, the predictor shivers, then follows the outburst of the message, or oracle, recounting the past, present and the problems confronting the investigator. The message may also suggest a theoretical solution to the problems.

(ix) Taboo: There are some things that the CCC regard as forbidden. Women, no matter their ranks, are forbidden from entering and sitting at the altar. Members are also admonished not to wear any red or black dress or clothing underneath or on top of the *Soutena*. Consequently, members disdain red and black objects.

(x) Green Water: The CCC is well known for its characteristic so-called 'green water' on which special prayers are said. Members claim that when taken by a sick person any poisonous or deadly

meal taken in a dream or in reality would be vomited. The 'green water' is a solution from *potassium bicarbonate*.

(xi) Mercy-land: Like Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) every CCC has a mercy-land which is usually shut in ill sides and located either within the Church vicinity or nearby. The land is usually filled with sea-sand. Prayers, corporately or individually may be said on this sacred ground. Virtually every mercy-land has a well. The water is consecrated and taken for special purposes.

#### 4. Summary

The CCC which was described by its founder "as the last born of creation" has undoubtedly become one of the most attractive and very influential indigenous churches. Founded by a former Methodist choirmaster in Dahomey (Benin Republic) the CCC found its way into Nigeria from where it spread out into other countries in Africa and abroad. The Church has some unique practices which include: (a) the injunction for members to walk bare-footed when they are in their *Soutanes*; (b) engaging in worship service which is a mixture of the practices borrowed from various religious organisations, (c) and where parents are not given the option of giving a name to their children. The names are dictated under divine guidance. It is a place where spiritual trances "are matters of seconds."<sup>70</sup> The point of attraction to many people is the strong African traditional way of life that the church upholds.<sup>71</sup> Virtually all aspects of the Church have some African touch.

#### 5. Post-Test

- (i) Discuss the events that led to the birth of the Celestial Church of Christ.
- (ii) Discuss the early life of Pastor Oshoffa up till the time when he found refuge in Nigeria.
- (iii) "The point of attraction to both male and female alike is the strong African traditional way of life that the Church uphold." How true is this statement in reference to the Celestial Church of Christ?
- (iv) Outline the distinctive features of the CCC. Assess the motives which led to the introduction of these characteristic traits.
- (v) "The distinctive traits and the unique circumstances surrounding its emergence mark it out from being an off-shoot of the earlier indigenous churches in Yorubaland". Discuss.
- (vi) "The most attractive and the most influential Aladura Church today is the CCC." (Omoyajowo). Is this an apt description of the CCC?

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<sup>70</sup> Akinlolu Aje, The Celestials in *The Headlines*, No. 102 (August 1981), p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> There are indications that CCC is a cult, and that many practices are indeed fetish and unscriptural. Ebenezer Oshoffa, the son of the founder testified of the truthfulness of this statement He claimed it was due to "an influx of strange bodies and strange ideas." He has since left the church when he claimed a new life in Christ—that he was born again. For details, see *Punch* of Wednesday, June 5, 1996, page 14. There are new publications written by erstwhile members that provide other details on the cultic nature the CCC, and the unscriptural practices of this church. Some splinter groups from the original CCC are veering away from the above assertions. One Rev. Yemi Soetan, a former prophet in the CCC has written his own account titled: *The Hidden Secrets About Celestial Church of Christ* (Abeokuta, Nigeria: Lifeline World Outreach, 1995). The book is however very simplistic and contains few details for serious academic purposes.