

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MUSAMA DISCO CHRISTO CHURCH

1. Introduction

The Mussama Disco Christo Church (MDCC) is one of the oldest indigenous churches in West Africa. It is an indigenous church because in the words of Opoku: "It draws heavily on traditional Akan religion and culture in the search for more satisfactory answers to the problems of contemporary life."⁷⁹

The Church, like most other independent movements, began as a prayer group within the Methodist Church at Gomoa Oguan, in the Central Region of Ghana in 1919. Some three years later, the Prayer band called the "Faith Society" flowered into the MDCC when its founder and leader, Mr. Appiah, was dismissed from the Methodist Church.

2. Objectives

At the end of this chapter you should have an insight into the origin, development, beliefs and basic practices of the MDCC.

3. Content

(a) The Founder

The founder of MDCC, Joseph William Egyanka Appiah was born in 1893 at Abura Edumfa in the Central Region of Ghana.⁸⁰ Tradition says an unknown stranger predicted his prophethood five days after his birth and counseled his parents to send him to school. His parents, though poor, obliged and the prospective prophet completed his elementary education at the age of eighteen in Cape Coast.

Appiah was appointed a Methodist teacher and later he became a Headmaster/Catechist in charge of the Mission station at Abrakrampa-Dunkwa. He got married to Abena Nomaa and had three children in his station before he tendered in his resignation as a teacher. For the next few years he tried his hands and luck on many jobs but he did not prosper in any of them. In desperation he accepted a reappointment as Teacher/Catechist at Gomoa Dunkwa. While in this town he came in contact with a prophet, Samuel Nyakson, who left a deep impression on Appiah and influenced his devotion and desire to become a prophet.

(b) *His Call*

Joseph Appiah began to keep fasts and engage in solitary prayers. On one occasion he fell into a trance in which he saw three angels who placed a crown on his head.⁸¹ A confirmation that he will become a priest-king was, soon afterwards, given by Job Gartey, a disciple of Prophet Nyakson. Gartey also enjoined Appiah to acquire a large plot of land which would accommodate a multitude and serve as a prayer-camp. Appiah heeded the prophetic advice and procured a vast land. While praying on the site on the 18th August 1919, the Spirit of God descended upon him and he began to speak in tongues. Henceforth, he became a miracle worker. Appiah inaugurated a prayer band within the local congregation but shortly afterwards he was transferred to a bigger town, Gomoa Oguan. Here too he initiated the formation of a prayer group. Three weeks after his arrival in Gomoa Oguan he admitted a spiritually gifted lady, Abena Bawa into the Prayer group. Miss Bawa who was later christened Hannah Barnes excelled in spiritual disciplines, and soon became the deputy and wife of Appiah.

⁷⁹ K. A. Opoku, "Changes within Christianity: The Case of MDCC," in Fashole-Luke, p. 120.

⁸⁰ G. Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1976), p. 151.

⁸¹ P. B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 188.

As the group was becoming distinct and influential with its members stressing divine healing, speaking in tongues, and prophetic utterances, the members were called to order by Rev. Acquah, the Circuit Superintendent who asked Appiah to stop his "occult practices." Prophet Appiah refused to obey the order and he was summarily dismissed from the Methodist Church. Appiah and his wife Hannah who now considered themselves divinely appointed leaders and deliverers, adopted the titles *Akaboa* or *Akaboha*, meaning the highest, and *Akatabiti* or *Akatitibi*, that is, the queen. Prophet Appiah, Akaboa I, led his followers to Fomena Gomoa where he inaugurated his *Egyidifu Kuw* (Faith Society).

(c) *Institution of MDCC*

At one of the camp meetings of the *Egyidifu Kuw*, the official name of the Society was said to have been revealed from heaven as Musama Disco Christo Church (translated: Army of the Cross of Christ Church). The movement acquired a large site which they cleared by their own labour. The new site was by a revelation from an angel called Muzano (a 'heavenly word' meaning "My town" or "God's Own City"). On 17th October 1925, a memorable procession, which was likened to the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, started with jubilation from the Camp at Onyaawonsu and terminated at Muzano.

(d) *Practices*

One of the striking things about this Church is the observation that the Sect has succeeded in blending various religious traditions together. While the Old Testament religious practices are foundational and normative, the admixture of Methodist, Catholic and African traditional customs are pervasive. One can understand that of the Methodist's, as the leader and founder came out of that tradition.

(i) *Methodist Influence*: The MDCC could not abandon completely the practices of its 'parent' denomination, The Methodist Church. Like the Methodist Church, the governing body of the MDCC is the General Annual Assembly of the Church (which is termed L'Odomey Conference). Secondly, like the Methodist Church, the MDCC is organised under the umbrella of circuits. Thirdly, it makes much of camp meetings. Also, in apparent imitation of the Methodist Church, the MDCC appoints Deacons and Deaconesses. Finally, it makes use of the Methodist Hymn Book, written in Fante language for its worship.

(ii) *Peculiar Heritage*: In apparent deviation from the Methodist indoctrination, the MDCC engages in some practices which are evidently borrowed from other religious organisations. Such practices include: the use of rosary referred to by the heavenly name *Yinaabi*, the string of which is employed to keep count of prayers which are said while meditating. Secondly, unlike the Methodist denomination, the MDCC lays stress on divine healing. "Healing by prayer and water is a central feature of the Church and no form of pagan or 'western-scientific medicine' was to be taken by the members."⁸²

Thirdly, like some other indigenous churches, the MDCC regards itself as a divine creation and all its members as divinely elected. In consequence of this, the name of the Church, *Mussama Disco Christo* was dictated "in the language of the angels;"⁸³ and each member is given a unique heavenly name.⁸⁴ The founder's heavenly name was *Jemisimihan*, his wife was *Nathalomoa*, while the successor of the founder was *Metapoly Akaboa II*. Professor Opoku observed that within about half

⁸² H. W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville, 1967), p. 330. See also Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 189.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*, p. 391.

a century of its existence the MDCC had christened its members with about 90,000 heavenly names, and no two of them were identical.⁸⁵ Fourthly, apart from the celestial or holy names, the members have a secret pass word or identification expressions by which they recognise one another. This oral communication is frequently used in salutations on meeting a member, when one wants to enter the house of another adherent and in any greeting situation.

Like the word *Shalom* is to the Hebrews, their salutation is of profound religious importance. It is not merely to inquire after someone's health or wealth, it carries with it some blessings. Another distinct feature of the MDCC is that members wear copper rings and make much use of copper crosses with the inscription MDCC as religious emblems. Also, like the Catholics, the MDCC in ordinary services makes use of candles, burn incense and recites the Nicene Creed, except that instead of the section which reads "I ... believe ... in the Holy Catholic Church," members rather affirm belief in the Holy MDCC. Furthermore, like the Catholic priests, the MDCC healers, prophets, teachers and priests wear gowns. Members are however enjoined to emulate this practice too.

Finally, the MDCC's system of prayer is usually combined with fasting and consists in the performance of certain rituals prescribed *ad hoc* by the prophets to meet specific situations of impending danger and suffering. To avert imminent danger, for example, a member may be required to hold a palm branch in the right hand, dress completely in white apparel and recite some special prayer while standing before three lighted candles.

(iii) Old Testament Influence: The Church claims that only the Bible (as well as occasional revelations from heaven) serves as the manual or guide in matters of conduct, instruction, administration, devotion and service. It is evident, however, that the MDCC has a predilection for the Old Testament. It may be deduced from the Church's beliefs and practices that the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) especially has the most important appeal. The Church sees Jehu-Appiah as a prototype of Moses. He is the leader, prophet and liberator. Like Moses, he led the assemblage of faithful followers from Gomoa Oguan, where they were subjected to the Old Muzano and finally to the promised land — the New Muzano.

Secondly, just as Jacob built an altar and set up a pillar when he returned from Haran to Bethel (cf. Gen. 35:1-15), the MDCC has set up a pillar: the *Nokwarbo* (stone of truth or covenant) at the southern entrance of the Muzano. Thirdly, the MDCC possesses an Ark of Covenant which is kept in the Kronkronbea (The Holiest Place). Moreover like in the ancient Jewish practice, only the High Priest (Akaboa) is permitted to go into the Kronkronbea, and he enters there only once in a year to perform the required rituals.

Fourthly, as in Judaism, the MDCC engages in the practice of animal sacrifice. One of such sacrifices is the burnt offering which was never omitted on great occasions in Judaism (cf. 1 Kings 3:4; Jos. 8:31). Taking a cue from Leviticus chapter 1, the whole animal except for the skin is sacrificed to God during the MDCC's peace festival. The blood of the victim — the sacrificed animal — is used in marking the foreheads of the pastors and prophets with the symbol of the cross. The ashes of the victim are distributed to the religious leaders who are expected to mark the foreheads of their members also with the sign of the cross.

⁸⁵ Opoku, *op. cit.*

Fifthly, apparently in its bid to imitate the Jewish observance of the Passover, the MDCC celebrates an annual festival. *Asomdwe Afe* (Peace Festival or Year of Peace) which comes up on 24th August each year. This festival is preceded with the Mercy-Seat meditation during which three weeks of prayer and fasting was declared. Another significant event which takes place during this time is the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrificial animal at the points of entrance to all the houses at Muzano. Also in apparent obedience to the Mosaic legislation, the MDCC enjoins food taboos stipulated in Leviticus. Members are not expected to eat pork, monkey, bush rat, strangled animal and blood.

Finally, as in the Old Testament era, Akaboa I was destined to be the progenitor of a dynasty. According to the constitution of the Church of 1959, Akaboa's son, *Akasibeena* (Prince) is

*entitled to hold this line of succession as a divine right, as ordered by the Holy Spirit. The wife of the Akaboha, the Prophetess Natholomoa Jehu-Appiah, became the Akatitibi (Queen mother) of the church; and the King and Queen therefore became the supreme authorities in the Musama Disco Christo Church.*⁸⁶

It remains to be seen for how long this dynasty will last, given the rate at which such groups split at the death of the founder/leader, or at the emergence of another charismatic and manipulative leader.

(iv) African Heritage: In spite of the above influences, the MDCC may aptly be described as a thorough going indigenous African Church. Indeed, so pronounced is the African influence that Baeta described the Church as a "Christian society built on the foundation's of African culture." Baeta observed that the use made of the African heritage in building up the structure of the Church is not surprising because Akaboa I revealed in one of his booklets that he was a typical ardent Gold Coast nationalist. He was desperately concerned to re-assert the value of African institutions and customs in the face of what he considered to be an all-to-discriminate rejection of them in favour of European ways.

The set-up of the Church, in several respects, seems to tally with the traditional Akan State structure based on Nana Akaboa (King or the Highest or Supreme Head). Like other Akan kings, he has right and left wing chiefs, rear-guard scouts and advance guards under him. Consequently, as Debrunner observed, some appellations belonging to the pattern of Akan chieftaincy such as *Omanhene* (paramount chief), *Nifahene* (rightwing chief), *Benkumhene* (left-wing chief), etc. are taken over for the Church leaders as alternative titles.⁸⁷

Furthermore, as *Omanhene* Nana Akaboa I has his own regalia as well as sceptre, umbrellas, swords, palaquins and retinue-drummers, horn-blowers, linguists and elders. Also like the Akan queens, MDCC Queen has her own emblems of royalty and court officials.

Also, like other Akan kings, the personality of the Akaboa is of major importance to the sect. There are some taboos affixed to his office. He is regarded as sacred, thus he may not strike nor be struck by anyone. He must never walk barefooted and he is not expected to go anywhere unaccompanied by his elders, linguists and umbrella bearers. As a sign of reverence accorded him sandals and footwear are removed in his presence, and women kneel in greeting him. It is also worthy of note that Akaboa's position as a king is recognised by other traditional chiefs who frequently invite him

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⁸⁷ Debrunner, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

to their public ceremonies and important social gatherings. They are also in turn invited and attended MDCC's annual Peace Festival.

In addition to these, the formalities and rituals observed during the death and installation of an *Akaboa* follow closely the Akan traditional practices and course regarding the death and entoolment of chiefs. When a deceased *Akaboa* is laid in state, as in the Akan custom, his ministers would assemble before the corpse, at midnight, and solemnly take an oath to remain faithful to his successor.

The Church practices "controlled polygamy" but maintains a resolute stand against any form of divorce. The relevant Church rules says *inter alia*: "Everybody is to marry according to God's will. We believe that as an African Church, polygamy is not a moral sin." The founder who was himself a polygamist admonished that "open marriage is more divine in Christian life than secret concubinage" as reported by Opoku. Consequently, unlike in some of the Mission Churches, appointments into positions of stewardship and leadership are not determined by one's marital status.

Also, the Church provides forms of worship that satisfy the African spiritually and emotionally. Liturgy is made more African as MDCC makes use of African music. As is common among the Fantes, the Church encourages the singing of chants and it has developed a great wealth of Fante lyrics. In peculiar type of song, a chant which recounts the history of the Church and what God is doing in their midst, would be led by a cantor while the congregation responds by singing the chorus.

Another evidence of African cultural manifestation is demonstrated by the importance that the Church attaches to the medium of communication. In the instruments guiding its worship, the first statement instructs that vernacular (Ghanaian language) should be used in all Church services.

Furthermore, as in the African custom which stresses solidarity,⁸⁸ the congregation underscores the importance of group identity and unity resulting from common interests and feelings. Members attain emotional and other forms of support from the Church. They assist one another in the event of death and each member is given a fitting burial at the expense of the Church. This concept of stressing group oneness has its roots in indigenous religion and traditional practices which do not encourage individualism.⁸⁹

Moreover, in its bid to give assuring answers to the probing questions of the African, MDCC, unlike the Mission Churches which deny the existence of witches and wizards, takes cognizance of the traditional Akan world view. The MDCC acknowledges the existence and diabolical works of demons, evil spirits, witches, wizards and herbalists, but the Church believes and exhibits the almightiness of God over all Satanic agencies.

All these demonstrate the fact that Christianity as practised in the MDCC polity, is in the words of Opoku "a religion of being and doing. It represents a rejection of missionary Christianity which was largely a religion of mental culture."

⁸⁸ Cf. I. S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: SCM, 1971), p.106f.

⁸⁹ See Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM, 1976), pp. 178ff.; and J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* [2nd. Ed], (London: Frank Cass, 1968), pp. 176ff.

4. Summary

The MDCC was founded by a Methodist teacher and catechist, Mr. J. W. E. Appiah. He was dismissed by the Methodist authorities when they could not countenance his deviation from the Methodist practices.

The MDCC's practices and beliefs may be described as a hybrid of various heritages borrowed from the Methodist, Roman Catholics and African traditional religion. It also has its unique practices which include giving of new angelic names to members, wearing of crosses with the inscription MDCC round their necks and of speaking of special identification expressions.

5. Post-Test

(i) "The Musama Disco Christo Church meets the criteria for a Christian Church and may be regarded as a further extension of Christianity in Africa based on the conviction that a Christian society can be built on the foundations of African culture" (K. A. Opoku). Discuss.

(ii) "The MDCC is an indigenous Christian Church founded to serve as our humble present myrrh- from Africa to Christ our divine and precious gift, not caring whether others are offering Gold or Frankincense" (Constitution of the MDCC). Discuss.

(iii) "The Church remains in many respects thoroughly African and has succeeded in blending various heritages together." To what extent is this statement true of the MDCC?

(iv) How true is the statement that the MDCC is like an Akan State, *Oman*?

(v) "The self-awareness of the Church, as a divinely established institution matches that of the Ancient Israel, and the Church regards itself as the recipient of the faith once delivered to the "saints," a faith which leads to the practice of the Old time religion." Evaluate this statement in the light of your study of MDCC's beliefs and practices.

(vi) "The Church forbids all participation in customs performed in respect of ancestors including the keeping of the traditional annual festivals ... and yet... it has been described as a Christian society built on the foundation of African culture ..." (Baeta). To what extent is this assertion true of MDCC?

(vii) Give evidence in support of the belief that the MDCC "sees itself as the true original church which has been refounded for Africa."