

CHAPTER FOUR

PRECURSORS OF INDIGENOUS AFRICAN CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

1. Introduction

The importance of the Churches that broke away from the established denominations between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the emergence of AICs cannot be overlooked. To a very large extent, these "Ethiopian" churches could be said to have set the pace for the AICs (See Chapter I). We will discuss the subject of precursors of two countries in West Africa, namely, Nigeria and Ghana.

In Nigeria, the churches in this group include: (i) The Native Baptist Church; (ii) The United Native African Church; (iii) The African Church, Bethel, and (iv) The United African Methodist Church (*Eleja*).

2. Objectives

In this chapter an attempt will be made:

(i) To give some guidelines which assist in differentiating between the Churches which were motivated by political consciousness and cultural awareness (Ethiopian/African Nationalistic Churches) from those which surfaced after the second decade of the twentieth century (Zionist/Aladura Churches).

(ii) To state some reasons for the establishment of these Ethiopian Churches.

(iii) To trace a brief history of these churches.

3. Content

Space would allow us to discuss only four of the religious organizations which served as precursors of the Indigenous Churches in Nigeria.

(a) *The Native Baptist Church (NBC)*

The first of a long list of 'nationalist' assemblage in Nigeria was the NBC which broke away from the Southern (American) Baptist Church in March 1888. The Africans must have been nursing some anti-white feelings which had been gathering strength since the 1870s but the conflict between Rev. David – an American missionary and a native pastor, Rev. Ladejo Stone sparked off the revolt.

There are two versions of the cause of the conflict.²⁶ The two however boil down to the fact that Rev. Stone was refused an increase in salary and he resigned his appointment which was accepted by the American missionary without consulting with the membership of the Church. When Rev. David was challenged he responded that he had dispensed with the services of Pastor Stone as he would do to any of his servants who acted in the way Stone had done.

In consequence of this, the African leaders and the majority of the congregation seceded from the American Baptist (First Baptist) Church to found the Native Baptist Church in March 1888. It was February 22, 1893 when the foundation stone was laid for the new sanctuary, and the name "Ebenezer" replaced the "Native." During the laying of the foundation stone of the Church one of the leaders of the

²⁶ Deji Ayegboyin, "The Baptist Mission Enterprise in Ogbomoso: An Analysis of the Social Significance of Mission." (M.A. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1983), p. 75.

Church, S. M. Harden recounted that the Ebenezer Baptist Church was the first church established in Lagos without foreign monetary support. Of course it was difficult, though others who shared their aspiration contributed some money to help with the project.²⁷ Harden said further:

*We cherish no ill feeling toward the missionary members of our sister Church (that is First Baptist Church). Like them we hold the same faith, same doctrine, believe in the same Baptist principles and have the same end in view, that is, the spread of the Gospel of Christ and the salvation of sinners.*²⁸

In 1894, however, a lasting reconciliation was effected between the First Baptist Church and Ebenezer Baptist Church. That was after Rev. David had been recalled to America and never returned to Lagos.

(b) *The United Native African Church (UNA)*

Unlike the Ebenezer Baptist Church which broke away from its parent Church, the UNA is not a fracture from one Mission congregation. Rather, the founders and original members came from different backgrounds, such as Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and so on.

The immediate genesis of the UNA may be traced to the lecture given by Wilmot Blyden in December 1890. In the lecture titled "The Return of the Exiles and the West African Church," Blyden, a well-known Negro scholar and politician had proclaimed that as long as the evangelisation of Africa was left in foreign hands, firm Christianity cannot be established in Africa. He therefore called on Africans to come together and shun denominationalism.²⁹ In consequence of this, a suggestion was made to establish a non-denominational West African Church but the plan failed mainly because of financial constraints and the fear of the organisers that they could be excommunicated by the missionaries.

Dissatisfied with the abortive scheme of a West African Church, one of its advocates, William Cole, a retired postmaster, tried to implement it at a local level starting in Lagos. He convened a meeting, on 14th August 1891, which embraced men of several denominations to discuss the possibility of establishing a Native African Church. As a result of this meeting the UNA was born with these set objectives: (1) to evangelise the African continent; (2) the wiping off of foreign forms in Christianity; (3) to improve markedly the lives of the African clergy and laity; (4) to ensure that the personnel of its Pastorate was entirely made up of Africans.³⁰

The UNA established its first church: *Jehovah Shalom* in Lagos in 1891. It spread quickly to the interior and hundreds of UNA churches were organised in several parts of the country.

(c) *The African Church, Bethel*

Ten years after the inauguration of the UNA, there was a major secession in the Anglican Church in Lagos which led to the genesis of the African Church. The secession occurred in St. Paul's Breadfruit Anglican Church, which was pastored by an African nationalist Rev. James Johnson.

²⁷ Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*, p. 200

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁹ J. B. Webster, *The African Churches Among the Yoruba, 1888-1922* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 65-68. Of course, Edward Blyden cannot be considered to be mission-minded in terms of Christian evangelistic outreach, as he was more politically-motivated. He even encouraged Islamic studies in place of Christian education that he considered having negative effects on African heritage. For further details, see Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), pp. 214-16.

³⁰ See "The United Native African Church in Nigeria," in *The Nigerian Story*, pp. 333-36.

The separation did not come as a surprise to many keen observers of the religio-political situation of the times. There were many Africans who protested against what they termed as deliberate attempts of the CMS to impose European culture on them while at the same time the missionaries maneuvered to destroy the African customs. Some of these African leaders felt that the UNA had not been radical enough to redeem the African congregation from the ecclesiastical and political bondage of the missionaries. Incidentally, the Breadfruit parsonage (Rev. Johnson's) became the usual venue for these nationalist meetings. It is not surprising that the Breadfruit bred many nationalist rebels who questioned the monopoly of the higher offices by CMS missionaries.

The immediate cause of the secession was what the nationalists regarded as the ill-treatment of Rev. James Johnson by Bishop Tugwell, who was an unbending European to the core. To make matters worse, when Bishop Tugwell got wind that the aggrieved parishioners were planning to withdraw from St. Paul's Church, he ridiculed and underrated their intelligence to organise and run a Church.

On 13th October 1901 (over 600 parishioners) about two-thirds of the members mainly from St. Paul's Church (Breadfruit Street) and St Jude (Erute-Metta) converged at the residence of J.K. Coker (the people's Warden to St Paul's Breadfruit) for the inaugural meeting and establishment of a new African Church.

In spite of the initial problems the African Church made remarkable progress and was able to celebrate its first anniversary on December 1902 with the dedication of its first chapel: The African Church, Bethel.

It is important to note, however, that doctrinal expressions were the same as those of the Anglican Church. The African Church however provided Nigerians with opportunity to assume the leadership of the Church, and allowing polygamous male members to participate fully in the church. They were also allowed to partake in the Holy Communion.

(d) *United African Methodist Church (Eleja)*

In 1917, Rev. D. H. Loko, who was opposed to polygamy, raised the issue of marriage custom over which his predecessors had held their tongues in the Methodist Church. At a leaders meeting in his circuit on 25th November, 1917, Rev. Loko called out the names of ten well-known polygamists from Ereko Church for possible indictment which he promised "to make known shortly".

With the support of his Superior Minister, Rev. G. O. Griffin, Chairman of the Lagos District, Rev. Loko announced to the House that the names of the ten men had been expunged from the Church membership. Almost instantly, fifty-five other self-confessed polygamists stood up and asked for their own judgment. Without hesitation, they were also pronounced dismissed from the Church.

The sixty-five polygamists made up their minds to establish a separate organisation: "ungoverned and uncontrolled by any foreign missionary body in which we may serve God as Africans in spirit and in truth and without hypocrisy".³¹

Barely a month after their expulsion a new church, United African Methodist Church was born. Members held their first regular service on the 28th December 1917 in -a building adjoining the fish market. The site earned them the appellation, *Eleja* (fish mongers) a nickname which almost displaced

³¹ Webster, *The African Churches*, p. 89.

their official name. The recipients eventually adopted the nickname because to them it had some appropriateness. First, the "fish" is a Christian symbol and one of the commonest secret passwords among early Christians was the word "fish" (Greek: Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ υἱὸς Σωτὴρ, was an acrostic well-known to Christians: Iesus, CHrist, THeou [of God] Uios [Son], Soter [Saviour] i.e. Jesus, Christ, The Son of God and Saviour of mankind).³² Second, members saw in the nickname a challenge that they have been called to be "fishers of men." Ironically one can consider them "fishers of women" as most of their members were women.

By 1920, when the Church created its own clergy, membership had risen to five hundred. It was one of the wealthiest Churches and it had risen to prominence in music. Although UAMC seceded as a revolt against the Mission's insistence upon monogamy, the Methodist schismatics took over the structure and pattern of worship which they inherited virtually without modification. In fact they found it unnecessary to draft a new constitution until some thirty-five years after the establishment of their new organisation. Also noteworthy is the fact that initially drumming and dancing were taboo in the UAMC.

4. Summary

It is evident from this chapter that there were institutional organisations which broke away from the Mission Churches. These Churches did not achieve much in the way of indigenisation or even independency. They stressed native efforts, self-reliance and self-respect but in almost all of them, their services and doctrines remained similar to those of their parent Mission Churches. That is why they are better described as precursors or institutions which set the pace for the AICs. Some scholars prefer to call them simply Ethiopian or 'African' churches.

5. Post-Test

- (i) "The African Church, Bethel broke away from the Anglican Church over the question of polygamy". Discuss.
- (ii) Trace the origin and development of one of the precursors of Indigenous Churches in Nigeria.
- (iii) Why may some Independent African churches in Nigeria be aptly described as Ethiopian rather than Indigenous African Churches?
- (iv) "The history of the UNA is a story of compromise". (Webster) Is this absolutely true?

³² S. M. Houghton, Sketches from Church History (London: M & G Ltd., 1980), p. 12.