

CHAPTER ONE

INDIGENOUS CHURCHES Some Problems of Terminology

1. Introduction

The period from the nineteenth century to the present has been characterised by establishment and growth of the African strand of development of Christianity.¹ This phenomenon has given birth to indigenous Churches and prayer groups in Africa. These groups have not only taken root but they have proliferated and shown phenomenal growth particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The West, Central and the South of Africa, as statistics have shown, remain the most fertile soil for the growth of these Indigenous Churches.² The number of distinct denominations which registered with the government, according to David Barrett was over 760 in 1970 but the number increases with each succeeding year.³ Of course, the number of the unregistered bodies would be greater than the registered denominations. In South Africa alone, an estimated 5,000 Indigenous Churches represent between 30%-40% of the total black population.⁴

These new religious movements differ widely in style, organisation and attitude. As a result of these, they are often variously characterised and defined. In this chapter, we intend to assist you in understanding how and why the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have been given a variety of names. These definitions will help to distinguish Indigenous Churches from the Historic or Mainline Churches. You should also understand after this chapter the classifications of these Indigenous Churches.

2. Problem of Nomenclature

Very many loose terminologies have been used to describe the religious movements in Africa. These terms have been employed with great abandon as if they were interchangeable. We shall examine some of the terms.

(a) Separatist

Indigenous Churches are often characterised negatively as separatist because some of them originated through a variety of schismatic processes within Western oriented Mission Churches. Parrinder describes separatist churches as “the sects which have split away from or sprung up in relative

¹ Comprehensive texts on the subject include David A. Shank, ed *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches* (Elkhart: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1987); Harold W. Turner, *History of an African Independent Church* Volumes 1&2 (London: Clarendon, 1967); Victor Hayward, ed. *African Independent Church Movements: Essays in Honour of Harold W. Turner* (Elkhart: Mission Focus Publications, 1990); Benneta Jules-Rosette, ed. *The New Religions of Africa* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979); Ntedika Konde, ed. *Interpretations et Croissance de la Foi* (Kinshasa: Facultes Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1992); C. G. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana* (London: SCM, 1961); among others.

² For details, see, J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: OUP, 1964); J. A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of an African Independent Church* (New York: NOK, 1982); C. O. Oshun, "Christ Apostolic Church of Nigeria: A Pentecostal Consideration of its Historical, Theological and Organisational Developments 1918-1978," Ph.D. Dissertation, Exeter, 1981; Ogbu Kalu, (ed.) *Christianity in West Africa: The Nigerian Story* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1978), among others.

³ David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (London: OUP., 1968), p. 78.

⁴ Ibid. See also Paul Makhubu, "Attempts to Unite AICs into Associations in South Africa," in Sam Babs Mala, ed. *African Independent Churches in the 80's* (Nairobi: OAIC., 1983), pp. 38-45.

independence of the Older Mission Churches.”⁵ Most of the leaders of these denominations seem to dislike this nomenclature. They hold that the term “Separatist” has disparaging flavour. In any case, not every Indigenous Church seceded from a Mission Church. Several leaders of the indigenous churches were pushed out or were excommunicated by the foreign missionaries and national leaders of the Historic Churches who could not stand the alleged “aberrations” or “strange” theological or doctrinal expressions.

(b) *Ethiopian*

Some authors have erroneously described the Indigenous Churches as Ethiopian sects. This is because the Churches are believed to have been founded only for political reasons: That is, they established their churches in order to demonstrate their rejection of European leadership while keeping still to the shape and pattern of the established Church from which they seceded.⁶ Ethiopianism stands for indigenous initiatives with no support from foreign country whatsoever — monetary or otherwise. This quasi-nationalist initiative is probably based on an inference to Psalm 68:31 which reads in part: “Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch her hands to God.”⁷ Most of the leaders of this movement were blacks of the Diaspora and freed-slaves. Ethiopia is the only African country that was not colonised by any of the Western countries, and whose political kingdom dates back to Old and New Testament times (cf. Isaiah 18:1; Jeremiah 13:23; 38:7ff.; Acts 8:26-39). Ethiopia is usually referred to as Cush in the Old Testament — then a part of southern Egypt and Sudan.

Indeed, some churches in South Africa as well as in West Africa seceded primarily in opposition to European control. For example, the African Church in Nigeria, founded by J. K. Coker, was formed as a result of “inhuman treatment meted out to Bishop Johnson” by the Anglican missionaries.⁸ The same applies to Tembu Church founded by a Wesleyan minister, Nehemiah Tile in South Africa as a mark of protest to emancipate from the Mission authority. The Church did not only adapt the message of the Church to the heritage of the Tembu tribe, but it also, in opposition to European leadership and control, made Chief Ngagelizwe, (the chief of Tembu), the spiritual and political head of the Church. After all, the head of the Anglican Church of England is the King or the Queen, and to these Africans, there is no difference between them and their chief or king.⁹

There is also the Yoruba version of Ethiopianism. The secessionist group led by some Yoruba laity out of the Baptist Mission in sympathy with Rev. Ladejo Stone, in the late nineteenth century (March 1888 to be precise) was politically motivated. It was in opposition to the American missionary leadership.¹⁰ The Ebenezer Baptist Church that was started between March 11-18, 1888, is still located at 50A Campbell Street in Lagos. The groups which made their exit out of St. Paul's (Breadfruit Street) and St. Jude's (Ebute-Metta) churches were purposely organised against the Anglican Mission leadership.¹¹

Incidentally, these groups, strictly speaking, are not classed among the Independent African Churches. The reason is that they were not really “independent” - for they continued in the practices and taught, almost absolutely, the doctrines of their Parent Mission. For example, the African Church, at its

⁵ Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, p.1.

⁶ M. L. Daneel, *Zionism and Faith-Healing in Rhodesia: Aspects of African Independent Churches* (Leiden: Africa-Studiecentrum, 1970), p. 10.

⁷ E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914. A Political and Social Analysis* (London: Longmans, 1966), p. 177.

⁸ S. A Dada, *J. K. Coker: Father of African Independent Church* (Ibadan: AOWA Printers & Publishers, 1986), p. 3.

⁹ Bengt G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: OUP, 1961), p. 38.

¹⁰ Travis Collins, *Baptist Missions of Nigeria* (Ibadan: Baptist Press, 1995), p. 56.

¹¹ Dada, *J. K. Coker*, Ibid.

inception and even later, did not depart from the teachings and tenets of the Anglican Church. The only exception was in their choice of Africans in place of European leadership.

(c) *Zionist*

This term has been used primarily to describe the African Churches, which are charismatic. Properly speaking, only some churches in Zimbabwe and South Africa, such as the Zion Christian Church of Bishop Mutendi would deserve this appellation.¹² The Zionist movements are Pentecostal in nature, as they draw more freely from elements found in traditional religions and seek the fulfilling of “Zion” of their own. Because of the political climate of South Africa and the strict control on residence, movement, labour and so on, the Zionist movements have millions of adherents who nurse the ambition to build “Zion” which is interpreted to mean “our home.”

A consultation arranged by the World Council of Churches at Kitwe in 1962 classified what the Yoruba call *Aladura* Churches in this group. This is because they satisfied three criteria: a) they emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit; b) they make reference to various forms of revelation and healing and c) they stress re-interpretation of Christianity in terms of felt needs of the local culture.

(d) *Spiritual*

Quite a number of the leaders of Indigenous Churches prefer to identify themselves with this designation. The Yoruba (indigenous) charismatic leaders call their churches *Ijo Emi* while Akans of Ghana call theirs *Sunsom Sore*. They intend by this to signify that they engage in various activities which, by their own assertion “are meant to invoke the Holy Spirit of God or are to be interpreted as signs of His descent upon the worshippers.”¹³ The problem with this definition is that it would be inappropriate for any Christian movement to claim the monopoly of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

(e) *Prophetic Movements*

Some African scholars prefer to describe these churches as “Prophetic-Healing Movements.” This is apparent because virtually all these Churches are focused upon the charismatic personality of a prophet. Also, they emphasise and depend very much on visions and prophecies.

(f) *Praying Churches*

This is one of the designations that the Yoruba Indigenous Church leaders cherish most. They call their movements *Ijo Aladura* (Praying Church), because, according to them, they devote quite a substantial time to saying prayers; and their constant theme is the power of prayer. In Ghana, especially among the Akans, these churches are described as *Mpaebo Kuo* (Praying groups).

The question arises again: can these movements claim monopoly of this religious act? Of course not! Prayer is a *sine qua non* of every true Christian organisation.

(g) *Pentecostal Churches*

Some Indigenous movements like the Christ Apostolic Church prefer this designation. They claim that the experiences of the Apostles on the day of Pentecost are reenacted in the day-to-day activities of their church. They maintain that, as in the Early Church, their meetings are characterised by outbursts of ecstatic enthusiasm featuring healing, speaking in tongues, interpretation of prophecies, and all kinds of miracles.

¹² Daneel, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹³ Baeta, *op. cit.*

As the other terms discussed, the indigenous churches cannot be described as the only Pentecostal Churches, if they can be so described at all. This is for the simple reason that as in any extended family, Pentecostalism includes a wide variety of denominations. Notable among these are the Wesleyan Pentecostals, Holiness Pentecostals, Pentecostal Apostolic (who affirm the continuing validity of Apostolic offices, such as apostles, prophets, deacons, etc.), and a few others.

Pentecostalism therefore is thus a general term used to describe the groups and sects which have traditionally placed emphasis on the speaking and receiving of certain gifts of the spirit such as speaking in tongues, prophesying and healing as a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Pentecostalism has been considered a movement to Christian renewal. It is also classified as a Holiness Movement, and the Born Again Movement. Pentecostals have invariably rejected paedobaptism and adhered to the practice of adult water baptism by immersion as a public profession of faith after conversion.

Some hold that the origins of both the AICs and the Pentecostals differ. In an interview, Rev. Jinadu claims, and with some justification, that Pentecostalism as an institution is a recent phenomenon in Nigeria. It was not until the 1960s that the door was flung open for the Pentecostal movements to adopt a militant approach in Evangelism in Nigeria.¹⁵

It is interesting to note that some neo-Pentecostal groups like Christ Chapel, the Rhema, New Covenant, Deeper Life Bible Church, etc. do not appreciate being classified in the same group with the AICs.¹⁶ There are some people who do not consider quite a number of the Indigenous Churches as Christian denominations, particularly the charismatic leaders.

(h) *Other Nomenclatures*

The AICs are also described as Messianic. Indeed, quite a few of them are messianic in the sense that their group is centred on a dominant personality; usually the founder, who claims special powers involving some forms of identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. These leaders are seen as redeemers with extra-ordinary powers. In most cases a myth about what they did while in the womb, at birth, in the course of their ministry and at the point of death is circulated to show that they were extraordinary prophets. While this may not be true of all the AICs, it is patent that the emphasis upon the importance of the leaders in these churches certainly differs from the Mission Church patterns. They are also referred to as *Schismatic Churches*.¹⁷ Adewale has debunked this type of designation, especially in defence of the African Church.¹⁸ He said only a church that came into existence through doctrinal controversies is a schismatic Church. Most of these leaders claim that their churches were not founded as a result of controversy but only in response to the dictates of the Holy Spirit.

They are also called *White-garment-churches*. It is true that the majority in this group wear white *Soutenas* during worship but certainly there are exceptions, and that is why it is not appropriate to use the term for all of them.

¹⁴ W. J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM, 1972), p. xvii.

¹⁵ For an overview see Ruth Marshall, "Pentecostalism in Southern Nigeria: An Overview," in Paul Gifford, ed. *New Dimensions in African Christianity* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1993); pp. 8-39.

¹⁶ Cf. Ibid.; Matthews A. Qjo, "Deeper Life Christian Ministry: A Case Study of the Charismatic Movement in Western Nigeria," *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 18 (1988): pp. 141-162.

¹⁷ This is the main thesis of David Barrett's book: *Schisms and Renewal in Africa*.

¹⁸ See S. A. Adewale, *The African Church (Inc.) 1901-1986* (Ibadan: n.p., 1988).

3. Which Term to Use?

The World Council of Churches' Department of Missionary Studies on this subject convened a consultation that was held at the Mindolo Ecumenical Centre, Kitwe, and Northern Rhodesia (6th-13th September, 1962). As a result of this consultation and the International Missionary Council Study in 1963, it was agreed that the Churches in Africa may be divided into two main classes:

(a) *The Older Churches* — denoting those in continuity with the Historic Churches of the West. These include the Catholic, Anglican, Qua Iboe, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist Churches and others. They are referred to as: Main line, Mission, Traditional, “Orthodox,” Historic and Established Churches.

(b) *African Independent Churches* (AICs) — denoting the Churches which emerged from within the Mission-Churches, beginning from the 1920's. They are also called: Indigenous Christian Movement, *Aladura*, and African Instituted Churches. These Churches are believed to be somewhat self-supporting, self-financing, and self-governing. They do not depend on any Missionary Board or individuals or groups abroad for financial and spiritual assistance. The Consultation further distinguished two broad classes of AICs:

(i) *Ethiopian* - denoting those churches in which the emphasis is on independence while they still retain an essential part of their Parent Church doctrines and practices.

(ii) *Zionist* - Those in which the emphasis is on the work of the Holy Spirit with particular references to various forms of revelation and healing, re-interpreted in terms of felt needs of the local church. They are also messianic in nature.¹⁹

4. Summary

In this first chapter we have tried to assess some of the nomenclatures which have been used to describe the churches which emerged from the Historic Churches. We concluded that the adjective 'Independent' may be used since it indicates their independence from Mission control. They are African Churches because they were founded in Africa by Africans and primarily for Africans.

5. Post-Test

Show why the use of any of the under-listed nomenclature may be misleading or inadequate to describe indigenous churches:

(i) Ethiopian (ii) Separatist (iii) Spiritual (iv) Schismatic (v) Pentecostal.

¹⁹ See H. W. Turner, “Chart of Modern African Religious Groups,” in Victor Hayward, ed. *African Independent Church Movement* (London: WCC, 1963), p. 13. See also Dean S. Gilliland, “How 'Christian' Are African Independent Churches?” *Missiology* Vol. XIV:3 (July 1986): pp. 259-272 who classified them into four main, groups, namely: (1) Primary evangelical-pentecostal; (2) Secondary evangelical-pentecostal; (3) Revelational indigenous; and (4) Indigenous eclectic.