

CHAPTER TEN

CHERUBIM AND SERAPHIM MOVEMENT

1. Introduction

One of the most prominent indigenous churches in Nigeria is the C & S Movement. This society emerged just about the time when the Faith Tabernacle was taking shape.

2. Objectives

This chapter discusses the origin and development of the C & S. It also highlights some of the characteristics of the movement.

3. Content

There is a strong belief by the members of the C & S Movement that their Church was not founded by a human being. It is, however, a historical fact that the C & S made a beginning as a prayer group in Lagos in 1925 under the leadership of a prophet, Moses Orimolade Tunolase.

(a) *Emergence of Orimolade*

Prophet Orimolade, who is acknowledged to have taken the first step that led to the establishment of the C & S, was a prince from Ikare in Akoko Division of Ondo State. He was born in the 1870's with an invalid-crippled in one leg. Just before he started his ministry, he was said to have received a vision in which he was asked to take and use some water from a nearby flowing stream. He obeyed and partially recovered from his infirmity though he still limped for the rest of his life.

Soon after this miracle, Orimolade became a travelling preacher. Between 1916 and 1924 he journeyed to many parts of Yoruba land, Bendel State and Northern Nigeria. Wherever he went God confirmed his words with tremendous signs and wonders. Though he was unlearned, his adherents were fascinated by the way he made copious Biblical quotations from memory.

He was said to have been particularly successful in Ilorin where he was nicknamed *Alhaji Yisa--Yisa* is a Muslim's rendition of Jesus, and *Alhaji* is a title for someone who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca (thus likening him to the Lord Jesus). However, he was not permitted to establish a Church in that predominantly Muslim town. From Ilorin he moved to Ibadan where his fame increased as he led prayer meetings in the Church of his host: The African Church, Ibadan. Eventually he arrived and lodged with the sexton of the Holy Trinity Church, Ebute-Ero, Lagos in 1924. Here as in other places, Orimolade's popularity increased as a miracle-worker and he was addressed as *Baba Aladura* (The Praying Father) because he visited people in their homes and prayed for them.⁵⁸ He moved out of the Holy Trinity Church when the style and content of his message came under severe criticism by the Vicar of the Church, Rev. T.A.J. Ogunbiyi. This is the vicar who started the secret cult, Christian Ogboni Society.⁵⁹

Orimolade continued his series of evangelistic campaigns apparently with no objective of establishing a Church. This was the situation until the unfolding of remarkable event which brought him in contact with a teen-age girl, Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon. The duo, Orimolade and Sister Abiodun, became the principal actors in shaping the destiny of the movement later known as the C & S. Church.

⁵⁸ Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of an African Independent Church*, op. cit. p. 42.

⁵⁹ Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*, p. 276.

(b) *Commencement of a 'Praying Society'*

On the 18th June 1925, Miss Christianah Akinsowon, a young girl aged fifteen had gone to the Campus Square in Lagos in company of some friends to witness that year's Catholic *Corpus Christi* procession. She recalls that she saw a strange spectacle: an angel of the Lord under the *Corpus Christi* canopy. As a result of this she became feverish and was rushed home. Almost immediately she fell into a trance which continued for many days.

The vicar, Rev. T. A. Ogunbiyi who was preparing Abiodun for confirmation was called upon to pray for her recovery, but he failed in his bid to revive her. Following a recommendation, Abiodun's guardian invited Prophet Orimolade who prayed for her to come around. When she became herself again she recounted to the amazement of all those around, the mysteries revealed to her while in the Celestial city.

As expected, this event made many people to converge in the house of Mr. & Mrs. Hunny Moiett (from Benin Republic) where Abiodun served as a ward. The Moiett, ostensibly to stem the influx of inquisitive visitors and the attendant embarrassment, advised Abiodun to follow the *Baba Aladura* to his residence in order to recover fully from her experience. As more and more people converged in Orimolade's house to listen to Abiodun's story, the *Baba Aladura* capitalised on this timely event to lay the foundation of a regular praying society which developed very fast.

(c) *Giving the Society a name*

As the society was progressing Orimolade declared three days of fasting so that God may reveal the name which would be given to the society. On the third day, September 9th, 1925 as they converged to pray and suggest names, a female member of the society declared that she saw, written in fire, up in the sky the letters SE. An associate member of the group, Rev. Barber of the UNA Church Lagos, explained that the two letters were the beginnings of the word. SERAFU (Seraph). The group unanimously agreed with the interpretation and adopted the name: Egbe Serafu (the Seraphim Society). Later the twin name. KERUBU (Cherub) was incorporated in response to the charge by another woman that it had been revealed to her that it is wrong to separate the twins: Cherub and Seraph. Consequently, members embraced the name: The Cherubim and Seraphim Society. .

(d) *Election of Patrons*

Barely three weeks after revelation of a Celestial name for the Society, the movement, apparently, in line with a Jewish custom, decided to cement a relationship between their society and the heavenly hosts by electing Archangel Michael its Patron or Captain, and Angel Gabriel its Deputy-Patron. The 'election' which was believed to have been settled and revealed in heaven convinced members that their society already existed in heaven before it was inaugurated in Lagos.

Henceforth, Orimolade laid it down for all members to wear white gowns in imitation of the Cherubim and Seraphim who are believed to be arrayed in white robes. With this belief that the movement is a unique gift from God and that the whole world must know about it, the Society took evangelism very seriously and by 1928, only three years after its inauguration, vibrant branches were established in Agege, Abeokuta, Ondo, Ijebu-Ode and Ibadan. It was still obvious then that the movement had the prospect of spreading rapidly.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ J. D. Y. Peel observed that the C&S engaged in evangelistic outreaches to major Yoruba towns-See his article "The Aladura Movement in Western Nigeria," in *Tariqh*. Vol. 3: 1 (1969): pp. 47ff. See also his definitive work on the same group, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: OUP, 1968).

(e) *Splits within the Movement*

Today, there are hundreds of splinter groups scattered all over the country each claiming to be the headquarters of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society of Nigeria. There is probably no sect in Christendom that has suffered so much splintering as this movement.⁶¹

In less than four years after its inception, there were symptoms of smouldering conflict between Orimolade and Captain Abiodun. Whatever the reasons for the dispute may be, it deepened so much that all attempts to patch up the relationship failed. The two factions, which resulted from the disagreement did not help the situation. To make matters worse, a clique of youths (the Valiant 12, they called themselves) who sided with Abiodun, flattered her by impressing upon her that she was more popular than Orimolade. They further encouraged her to break away.

(i) The First Secession:

In 1929 Orimolade and Abiodun parted ways. This was occasioned by a serious clash which occurred between the two splinter parties. Orimolade promptly asked for the intervention of the police. Consequently, Orimolade wrote to Abiodun:

*... I am therefore asking you through this letter to inform you to form your own society taking with you all the members as are willing to follow and cooperate with you*⁶²

This event culminated in the adoption of the name: The Cherubim and Seraphim Society by the Abiodun faction. Orimolade's group picked the designation: The Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Society.

(ii) The Second Secession:

As the Movement was recovering from the shock of this schism, another disagreement arose between Orimolade and the Praying Band within his own Church. In 1930 the enlightened members in the Praying Band made a bid to rob Orimolade of the leadership of the Society by turning the Praying Band into an autonomous body in a draft constitution submitted for the registration of the Church. When Orimolade protested, a number of members in the Praying Band under the leadership of Ezekiel Davies and others seceded, sticking to the name: The Praying Band of the C & S. A court injunction filed by Orimolade to force them to drop the name yielded no fruit.

(iii) Third Secession:

As these worrisome developments raged on in Lagos, the leaders of the branches in the Western part of the country appealed for a truce and an end to the secessions. When their appeals fell on deaf ears they registered their displeasure by inaugurating a separate organisation: The Western Conference of the C & S (Nigeria) under the leadership of Madam Christianah Olatunrinle who was appointed its first General Superintendent

(iv) The Fourth Secession:

As if these were not enough, in 1932, Major A.B. Lawrence, one of the leaders of the Praying Band announced that he had a vision to establish his own organisation. Consequently, he launched his Holy Flock of Christ Church.

⁶¹ S. Onovughakpo, History and Doctrine of the C & S (Nigeria) [Warri, Nigeria: Midland, 1971], p. 6.

⁶² Omoyajowo, Diversity in Unity: The Development and Expansion of the C & S Church in Nigeria (Lanhan' U.P. of America, 1982), p. 65.

(v) Fifth Secession:

Immediately after the death of Orimolade in October 1933 there was a hard struggle over who was to be next in succession to the Alakoso (Head or General Overseer). Apparently, Orimolade has appointed Abraham Onanuga, though a late comer but a gifted prophet, as his successor over another prospective leader, Peter Omojola, who was Orimolade's own senior brother. A faction which felt that Onanuga was not qualified to succeed Orimolade encouraged Omojola to start his own church. He seceded and launched his Eternal Sacred Order of the C & S (Mount Zion).

(vi) Further Secesions:

The schisms that rent the Church in its formative years have continued. Each succeeding year gives birth to multiple splinter groups within the movement. Onovughakpo describes this vividly:

*To found one's own branch and headquarters is as simple as winking the eye. The procedure is first to procure for yourself the power of vision and prophecy. . . . The next step is to approach an Apostle or Bishop to receive the Order of Apostleship. As you settle down in a neighbouring or far away town, your parlour becomes the Cathedral Church and your room the headquarters. . . Your house becomes consulting chamber for all sorts of people: boys and girls anxious about love, students wishing to pass their exminations, clerks/and executive officers seeking promotion . . . and the poor and destitute seeking wealth. . .*⁶³

It is worthy of note, however, that in spite of its splintering tendencies all the C & S groups have adhered to virtually the same beliefs and practices.

(f) *The Africanness of C & S Practices*

The Church has syncretistic elements, combining traditional and Christian beliefs in order to make the members feel very much at home. This is evident in a number of their practices:

(i) Prayer:

Their procedure of saying prayers resembles the traditional routine in that they believe that the courses of getting what one wants is like following a systematic order. For example, they have the Psalms to overcome an enemy. One may be asked to read Psalm 35, three or seven times around mid-night; appear naked as you read the Psalm and pronounce the following Holy Names: Yah, Elohim. . . as you read it.

(ii) Marriage:

One of the glaring ways the sect demonstrates its willingness to accommodate African culture and its beliefs is by its acceptance of the practice of polygamy. This has drawn into its fold a number of men who are engaged in multiple marriages and yet have no intention of abandoning it. Unlike the African or Ethiopian Churches who disallow their clergy from engaging in polygamy, the C & S acquiesce in such marriages for their spiritual leaders

(iii) Spiritual Agencies:

Members and leaders of the sect believe as in the traditional African practice that human destiny is regulated or modified by spiritual agencies. Unlike the Mission Churches, the C & S claims to have conscious knowledge of the evil spirits which sow the seeds of discomfort, set afloat ill-luck, diseases,

⁶³ Onovughakpo, *History and Doctrines*, p. 8.

induce barrenness, sterility and the like. Exorcism is therefore a common practice in this Church as in the traditional religion. Church leaders cast out demons and evil spirits especially when people believe that they are bewitched or they are bewitching others in spite of themselves.

(iv) Church Service:

The C & S Churches use indigenous instruments like drums, *sèkèrè* (drum made from calabash netted with strings of beads or cowries), flutes and so on. The content of their songs and rhythm portray their Africanness. In their sermons which are usually less formal (a member can raise a song at any time in course of the exhortation); they use Yoruba ideas to explain the Christian faith: The Christian God is even merged into the traditional figure of the Supreme Being: *Olodumare*.

(v) Language:

They are aware of the crucial importance of language since it is the medium of assuming the weight of a culture or understanding. They seem therefore to insist on a cultural revival through the use of the vernacular, which may then be interpreted into English.

(vi) Status of Prophets and Elders:

Irrespective of their age, they occupy a place of honour at service. They are greeted by kneeling and referred to as *Alàgbà* (an elder, or one who is held in honour) in accordance with Yoruba tradition.

(vii) Interpretation of Revelations:

Interpretations of dreams, visions, trances and so on play important part in the C & S worship as in African traditional practices. The Prophets like the fetish priest is the main interpreter of these mysteries. Prophets and Prophetesses occasionally go into trance for periods of days varying from 3, 7, 21 to 40 days.

4. Summary

The C & S Movement was co-founded by Orimolade and Abiodun in 1925. The movement spread rapidly as people heard of the miracles of healing wrought by its leaders. Three years after its inauguration, the founders broke apart and set the pace for one succession that followed soon afterwards. Among the practices that portray the African-ness of the C & S are its procedure of saying prayers, practice of polygamy, practice of exorcism and so on.

5. Post-Test

- (i) "The C & S was not founded by a mortal". Do you agree?
- (ii) Describe the observable beliefs and practices of the C&S.
- (iii) Trace the genesis and development of the C & S up till October 1933.
- (iv) Discuss the role of either Orimolade or Abiodun to the emergence of C & S.
- (v) What are the causes and consequences of secessions within the C & S?
- (vi) In what sense may the C & S be described as an Indigenous African Church?