

## CHAPTER TWO

### FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EMERGENCE OF INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

#### 1. Introduction

We have studied in the last chapter that the indigenous movement is relatively recent development compared to the Main-line Churches. In this chapter and the subsequent ones, we want to move up close to see when these Independent movement campaigns really started and what motivated the establishment of these movements.

#### 2. Objectives

At the end of this chapter you should be able to: first, examine the conditions that led to the emergence of the AICs. Second, differentiate between the so-called “Politico-racial” factors as compared to the genuine religious and circumstantial factors.

#### 3. Content

R.C. Mitchell contends that “What motivated the Aladura leaders and their followers was a desire to reform existing Mission Protestant Christianity and make it more relevant to the needs of the daily African life.” The fact is that these religious movements did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. They were conditioned by a number of factors ranging from spiritual, cultural, political, social and circumstantial factors.

##### (a) *The Role of Henry Venn*

In discussing the role of Ethiopianism and the subsequent appearance of the AICs, the contributions of Henry Venn cannot be overestimated. Long before his contemporary white missionaries could give any thought to native or indigenous leadership, he had emphasised in his 7th. Mission Principle that “native agency is basic to the development of the Mission in Africa.” He deepened and broadened the concept of training indigenous leadership. He said “as early as possible local leadership should replace the missionary.” In 1846, Venn wrote the leaders of Sierra Leone in straightforward language:

*It has been our constant aim and prayer that we might be enabled to train up a body of Native teachers to whom we may turn over the pastoral charge of those of your countrymen who have embraced the Gospel of Christ . . . . He further told the teachers that they were those upon whom the hopes of an African church are fixed.<sup>20</sup>*

His contribution here is that he did not only succeed in describing the problem but he also accomplished the task of awakening others to it. No wonder, soon after the Native Baptist Church broke away from the American Baptist Mission in 1888, many secessions followed.

##### (b) *Nationalist Feelings*

From the tail end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, quite a number of African Churches emerged in Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa. The Churches include the following from Nigeria: The Native Baptist Church (1888); The United Native African Church (1891); The African Church (1901); The Christ Army Church (1915) and the United African Methodist Church (*Eleja* - 1917). In Ghana, they include: The National Baptist Church (1898); The African Methodist Episcopal

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<sup>20</sup> Wilbert Shank, *Henry Venn — Missionary Statesman* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983), p. 31.

Zion Church and the Nigritian Fellowship (1907). These churches to some varying degrees were characterised by a desire for African self-expression and freedom from missionary-control.

(c) *Mass Movements*

Another agency, which stimulated the rise and growth of AICs, was the emergence of charismatic figures that led mass movements towards Christianity. These prophetic figures organized evangelistic crusades in several localities. They did not intend to establish churches of their own, rather they perceived themselves as prophets raised by God to make people “turn unto Jesus.”

These prophets include Garrick Braid (from Niger Delta in Nigeria); William Wade Harris (A Kru from Liberia) Walter Matiffa (Lesotho), Simon Kimbangu (Belgian Congo) and Samson Oppong (Ghana, formerly Gold Coast). They were all evangelists with special charisma. A number of indigenous churches, which claimed to have inspiration from them were established soon after their demise.

(d) *Circumstantial Factors*

Some prevailing conditions soon after the First World War served as immediate factors that occasioned the rise of some AICs especially in the Yoruba land. These factors may be divided into two: the worldwide influenza epidemic and the economic depression which followed.

A few important indigenous Churches owe their origin indirectly to the deadly influenza epidemic, which spread through West Africa in 1918. Many Yoruba Christians expressed disappointment in the leadership of the Mission Churches, which seemed to be helpless in the face of the disaster. Consequently, Yoruba Christians started prayer and healing fellowships were established to check the outbreak. This prayer bands culminated in the establishment of congregations like the Diamond Society; the Faith Tabernacle, the Cherubim and Seraphim society and a number of other bodies which subsequently seceded from them.

Closely following the above was the economic depression which forced many missionaries to leave Africa. A number of missionaries could not receive their financial support and funds for their projects because of economic crunch abroad. As the economic crunch was biting harder, and out of desperation, the colonial administration summarily closed some public institutions manned by the whites. Incidentally, a number of ministers heeded the advice to close down their churches and preaching stations. Some African Christians were disappointed at these “faithless” acts of missionaries who were forced to put their churches under lock and key. This compelled some African leaders to hold prayer meetings in front of the locked churches. This kind of experience led to the inauguration of the Diamond Society, which eventually flowered, into the Faith Tabernacle.

(e) *Desire to indigenize Christianity*

David Barrett argues that “independency reflects a rebellion against a Christianity that had become “over-Europeanised.”<sup>21</sup> There was a longing in the hearts of several Africans to find a mode of religious expression, which is psychologically and sociologically satisfying. Quite a number of independent clergymen criticised the leadership of the Mission Churches who, they claimed, put so many obstacles in the way of the African converts by imposing on them European customs and traditions.

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<sup>21</sup> Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, pp. 161-62.

Consequently, the new African movements, in a bid to correct the foreignness of the Church, took into consideration the African culture and religious consciousness. They held that by these they were breeding their own kind of African Church where African institutions would be recognised and respected. They felt that any religious institution, which did not meet the African daily life's experience, would create spiritual hunger. In the AICs, therefore, liturgy was made more African, as they made use of dreams, singing, drumming and dancing, some of which were ingredients of African cultural manifestation.

*(f) Passion for a purer form of Christianity*

Some African prophetic leaders seceded from the Main-line churches because of what they perceived to be the failures of ministers in the established churches to live up to the call of the Bible and the alienation of the Church hierarchy from the spiritual needs of the common people.

In Ghana, for example, the members of the Methodist Society - *Akonomnsu* (water-drinkers) which broke away from the Methodist Church at Anomabu in 1862, were "convinced teetotallers". The principal reason why they seceded was that they felt that the Methodist Church had failed to enforce its rules against the buying, selling and drinking of alcoholic beverages.

In Nigeria, some of the breakaway Churches criticised the clergymen in the Established Churches for appointing well known Secret Society men and some men with questionable traits, apparently because of their status in the society, into the Church hierarchy. Some of the Pastors were even known to have been regularly consulting native doctors while some wore charms and amulets under their cassocks. Like Amos, they opposed the corruption and desecration of the House of God.

Some members of the Faith Tabernacle and the Cherubim and Seraphim society contended that the sins of the Yoruba Christians and the clergy were responsible for the visitation of the influenza epidemic and the depression that hit Yoruba land in 1918.

*(g) Freedom to exercise gifts of leadership*

In the Main-line churches the way into positions of stewardship, leadership and authority were carefully regulated and people who were not well educated could not expect to go far. To several of these charismatic figures, therefore, the Mission Churches were seen as Institutions which did not allow them to exhibit their charisma. The Indigenous Churches have shown expressly that the less-educated and even illiterates could have or at least acquire veritable and genuine gifts of leadership. Consequently, a number of illiterates and semi-literate prophetic figures, who found themselves criticised or frustrated in the Older Churches, found a refuge in the Indigenous Institutions. .

#### **4. Summary**

In this chapter, we have tried to discuss the possible factors that were responsible for the emergence of the AICs. We itemised seven of such factors. Scholars of Church History are near unanimous that a combination of the factors, in most cases, was responsible for the establishment of AICs.

#### **5. Post-Test**

(i) Assess the factors that were responsible for the founding of Indigenous African Churches.

(ii) "What motivated the Aladura leaders and their followers was a desire to reform existing Mission Protestant Christianity and make it more relevant to the needs of the daily African life" (R.C. Mitchell). Discuss.

- (iii) Discuss the role of Henry Venn in the eventual emergence of the Independence African Churches.
- (iv) “Independency reflects a rebellion against a Christianity that had become over-Europeanised.” Discuss.