

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PRECURSORS OF INDIGENOUS AFRICAN CHURCHES

#### II. IN GHANA

##### 1. Introduction

In the then Gold Coast there were not less than four groups that may be described as precursors of AICs. One was motivated by their so called desire to achieve a purer Christian way of life. Three others seemed to have been inspired by nationalistic feelings. At least they all aimed to achieve complete independence from European authority and standards of conduct. As would be seen, sometimes, this was due to irksome discipline by the parent church or some missionaries' authoritarian leadership.

##### 2. Objectives

In this chapter, like the previous one, attempts will be made to:

- (i) Demonstrate how these precursors of AICs are different from the Indigenous Churches.
- (ii) Trace the genesis of these Churches.

##### 3. Content

We will discuss only four sects in the following order:

- (i) The Methodist Society
- (ii) The National Baptist Church
- (iii) The Nigritian Church, and
- (iv) The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZION)

##### (a) *The Methodist Society or Akonomnsu (Water Drinkers)*

The first sect which broke away from an established Church, (The Methodist Congregation, Gold Coast) was the Methodist Society. This society had its base at Anomabu. The incident took place in 1862 thus making it, probably, the first secession from any mission establishment in Africa south of the Sahara.<sup>33</sup>

This sect desiring to have a purer form of Christianity "took exception to the laxity with which the Methodist missionaries were enforcing church rules on the drinking and selling of alcoholic beverages by members of the Church."<sup>34</sup> Consequently they broke away from the Methodist Church. The sect adopted the name Akonomnsu or "water-drinkers" to demonstrate that they are convinced teetotalers. Led by Brother G. R Ghartey who later adopted the title King Ghartey IV, the sect traveled to a number of nearby towns and villages, entreating Christians to leave the Mainline Churches and join them.

The sect, though claiming to strive for a purer form of Christianity, had a curious mixture of traditional religious ideas, pseudo-Christian ideas and anti-Christian ideas. Apart from their rigid stand against drinking and selling of liquor, they pulled their children out from Mission schools. They refused to pay church dues, and they also maintained that it is wrong for Christians to sweep the house or cultivate the ground on which the palm tree grows, because the wine and broom come from that tree. They also

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<sup>33</sup> K. A. Dickson, *Aspects of Religion and Life in Africa* [J. B. Danquah Memorial Lectures]; (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corp., 1977), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

insisted that it is wrong to prepare the dead for burial on the Sabbath. They further taught that it is not necessary for members to listen to the Bible, read or preached, that what they had heard in the past was sufficient.<sup>35</sup>

Akonomnsu Society had a rather short existence, for after a decade or so The Methodist Church endeavoured to deal with the cause of the accusation. In 1874, the Church Authorities took a firm stand against the buying and selling of liquor among its members. The Church further insisted that nobody engaging in liquor business would be opportuned to hold any position of leadership in the Church. With this event, *Akonomnsu's* justification for breaking away was dealt with and virtually nothing henceforth was heard about the society.

(b) *The National Baptist Church*

The first Church which was founded in Ghana with nationalistic undertone was the National Baptist Church. It was started by Rev. Christian Hayford, the son of a Methodist minister. Rev. Hayford became a Baptist while he was resident in Lagos. While there, he must have been influenced by Wilmot Blyden's proposition for a West African Church manned by the natives (see Chapter IV).

As William Cole did in 1891, Rev. Hayford established a Native Baptist Church in Cape Coast as part of the West African Church movement. The Church spread rapidly into the interior of Ghana and extended as far as Atebubu in Northern Region of Ghana. It was even known to have taken root in the Ivory Coast. The main significance of this Church is that it maintained a link with other separatist movements in West Africa.<sup>36</sup> It stood for native effort, self-reliance and independence, and this brought it in line with nationalistic aspirations.

After the death of Hayford in 1935, not much was heard about the National Baptist Church. It is likely that the Church lacked good national coordination and the members of its congregation must have joined other denominations soon after the death of its founder.

(c) *The Nigritian Church*

This Church started as a congregation of some 40 members of the Anomabo Methodist Church who dared to raise their voices against the Methodist authority's ruling regarding participation in singing bands.

The dissidents felt that there was nothing wrong in Christians taking part in the *Fante* (an Akan-speaking ethnic group) custom of dancing to the tune of singing bands. When the Methodist ministers maintained their position and went ahead to carry out their threat to excommunicate the dissidents, it led to agitation for dissension. The final stroke, which sparked off the schism, took its course when the Minister-in-charge of the Anomabu circuits declined to neither bury nor grant permission for the burial of one of the dissidents in the Methodist cemetery.

The group solicited the assistance of a dismissed Methodist minister, Rev. J. B. Anaman. Anaman coordinated the activities of the group that subsequently began as a separatist movement from the Methodist Congregation in 1907. They went by the designation: The Nigritian Church.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> K. A. Opoku, "A Brief History of Independent Church Movements in Ghana," in Virginia Torvestad, (ed.) *The Rise of Indigenous Churches in Ghana* (Accra: Asempa, 1990), p. 14.

The sect broke all links with the Methodist Church, worshipped independently and made its special appeal through the use of the local language. Fante is used as a medium of conducting every part of its worship service.

(d) *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ)*

This Church was another significant breakaway movement from the Methodist congregation. Unlike the previous sects, AMEZ broke away under American Negro influence. The influence came from New York where AMEZ started in 1796, and was introduced to Ghana in 1898 by one John Bryan Small, then serving in the West Indian Regiment.<sup>37</sup> He had served as a sergeant in the West African Regiment, stationed in the Gold Coast before he went to the United States to be ordained. This Church appealed to some Methodist ministers and some members of congregations who joined the AMEZ.

Bishop Small's Church seemed to have been primarily interested in awakening colour consciousness. The Nigritian Church was absolutely a black man's congregation. This was intentional, as it is revealed in the statement made by Rev. T. B. Freeman (JR.) at its inaugural meeting in Cape Coast in 1898. He said:

*The Church is composed of Africans and entirely governed and worked by Africans. It is indeed bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh which would naturally take a much greater interest in their missions in their motherland than can be possible [sic] with Missionary Boards and missionaries of an alien race who are not above the colour question.*<sup>38</sup>

At the inauguration of the Church in Keta, Volta Region, some of the reasons why the church was founded and its composition were unveiled:

*It is indeed an entirely negro Church, organised by negroes for negroes, manned, governed, controlled and supported by negro energy, intellect, liberality and contributions. . . . In fact, it is the sentiment of the Church, that however great may be the friendship, intellect or interest of any white man, in the well being, Christianisation and enlightenment of the Negro Race be he European, American or Asiatic, he cannot successfully reach the emotional feelings of the masses of our people.*<sup>39</sup>

#### **4. Summary**

Like the Churches discussed in chapter 4, these Churches which broke off from the Mission Churches did not achieve much in the way of indigenisation or even independency. The same can be said of AMEZ which intentionally awakened colour consciousness. The point was not that it was really independent as that it was wholly a black man's Church. In the Nigritian church, apart from the fact that it adopted the local vernacular, its mode of worship was not markedly different from its parent Church's liturgy.

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

- (i) Discuss the origin and development of one of the Nationalistic Churches in Ghana.
- (ii) "The sect had a curious mixture of traditional religious idea, pseudo-Christian and anti-Christian ideas." Discuss.
- (iii) Write a meaningful essay on either The Nigritian Church or AMEZ Church in Ghana.

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<sup>37</sup> L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity*, p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism, 1850-1928* (London: OUP, 1963), p. 160.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.