

CHAPTER EIGHT

A "PRAYING SOCIETY": THE PRECIOUS STONE

1. Introduction

The history of indigenous churches (Aladura) among the Yoruba is inevitably traced to the events, which started and culminated in the establishment of the Precious Stone Society at Ijebu-Ode. Soon after this, the Aladura Churches spread like wildfire all over Nigeria and across its frontiers. Today some of these indigenous churches have branches in Great Britain, United States and Europe, though mostly made up of Nigerians and a few other Africans from Ghana and Sierra Leone.

2. Objectives

This chapter is intended to trace the genesis of the African Indigenous Churches among the Yoruba. An insight will also be given about the development and growth of the first known society: "The Precious Stone."

3. Content

For easy comprehension, the history of the above named society will be discussed under four sub-headings:

(a) *The Epidemic*

During the closing months of the First World War (WWI) in 1918, a deadly form of epidemic struck in several parts of the world. This plague or disaster has been described as "bubonic and small pox epidemics." It is recorded that within a short time as many died from the plague as had died from the four years (1914-1918) of deadly conflict on the battlefield. It is estimated that over ten million people died from the plague. Nigeria had its share of the calamity. The plague claimed thousands of lives in the Southern part of Nigeria and there was apprehension everywhere as the plague was spreading swiftly.

This epidemic, coupled with the economic depression that followed, had adverse effects on the Church. Most public institutions such as the schools, hospitals, clinics, and offices, as well as some Churches were closed by the colonial administrators. A good number of Europeans returned home and not a few missionaries abandoned their congregation to heed the call to go back to their countries. Several churches were without ministers and spiritual matters seemed to be fading into oblivion.

It was at the height of this confusion and the attempt of some people to put the Christian religion behind them and probably go back to the traditional religion that a few committed Christians sought for a more practical approach to solving the prevailing problems. This they found by devoting themselves to domestic family worship, private prayers at home and small gatherings for prayers in churches.⁴⁵

(b) *Genesis of the Precious Stone*

At Ijebu-Ode (in the Southern part of Nigeria), the Saint Saviour's (CMS) Church was shut and barricaded on the advice of the colonial administration. The Resident Minister Rev. Gansallo vacated his post and made an exit out of the country. Just about this time, one Daddy Ali, the Sexton of the

⁴⁵ Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 190.

Church, had a religious experience which he interpreted to mean the call of God challenging him to consecrate himself to a life of prayer for spiritual development and growth. This preparation would enable him to be used as a vessel by God to heal the sick and fetch those who were getting lost.

As a result of this experience, Daddy Ali had to organise a prayer fellowship. With the strong and general feeling that there would be a breakthrough, a group comprising mainly of some members of St. Saviour's Church came together to pray. Their meeting place was in front of their closed church. They prayed for the intervention of God to bring an end to the epidemic and revive His Church.

As the group continued in persevering united prayers, it had unfailing results. As its fame began to spread with its insistence on faith healing, a confirmation of its teaching was revealed to a school mistress, Miss Sophia Odunlami, who later became associated with the group. She lived at Isonyin, which was just about 5 miles away from Ijebu-Ode. She saw in a vision that rainwater and prayer would be the most effectual remedy for influenza victims. She traveled about telling people to store the rainwater and have it consecrated for use.

Members of the prayer group directed the awakened people to follow Miss Odunlami's instructions and several people were reported to have received healing. This made the Fellowship to become an irresistible centre of attraction. As the group was growing and taking shape, one Mr. Sadare, the People's warden of St. Saviour's Church and a member of the Lagos Synod for Ijebu-Ode became its leader. The prayer group adopted the name *Egbe Okuta Iyebiye* which was interpreted as the Precious Stone or Diamond Society.

(c) *External Influence*

Meanwhile an ardent Christian, David Ogunleye Odubanjo who was a strong believer in divine healing overheard the activities and growing fame of the Diamond Society and decided to join them. While in the group, Brother Odubanjo introduced a magazine *The Sword of the Spirit*, published by the Faith Tabernacle in Philadelphia, U.S.A., to the group.⁴⁶ He was fascinated by an article "The Seven Principles of Prayer" which he read in the magazine and recommended it to the members. The suggestion was warmly received and its tenets carefully followed.

(d) *A Separate Organisation formed*

The Diamond Society made contact with the Faith Tabernacle in 1923, and applied to be affiliated with that Congregation. The application was approved but this soon necessitated a change of the Society's name to The Faith Tabernacle (Nigeria).⁴⁷

A rift with the Anglican Church was inevitable and it soon came when many young children in the Anglican Church in that locality died. Sadare and his group seized the opportunity to condemn the Anglican sacrament of infant baptism, which they claimed was responsible for the high rate of infantile mortality. This criticism annoyed the Anglican Bishop who condemned the group and asked it to be banished from the Anglican Church.

The prayer group pulled out and it was this separation which dictated the birth of a new denomination: "The Faith Tabernacle Church." The group held its first service as a Church in Ibadan in 1922. Small congregations of the Faith Tabernacle were soon established in Ijebu-Ode, Lagos, Ilesa and a few other towns.

⁴⁶ G. Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1976), p. 152.

⁴⁷ Oshun, "The Pentecostal Perspectives of the CAC," p. 105.

4. Summary

The Precious Stone started as a prayer group. It initiated contact and ultimate affiliation with the American Faith-healing group called the Faith Tabernacle Congregation in 1921. Because the Faith Tabernacle emphasised divine healing, consecration, fullness of the Holy Spirit and the Pre-millennial coming of Christ, the Precious Stone believed that the two of them shared the same doctrine.

The Society criticised the Anglican doctrine on infant baptism and the group was banned. This led to the inauguration of the new Church that eventually metamorphosed into the Apostolic Churches in Nigeria.

5. Post-Test

- (i) Trace systematically the events that led to the formation of the Precious Stone Society.
- (ii) State and discuss the emergence of the Faith Tabernacle Congregation in Nigeria.
- (iii) To what extent can it be said that the Diamond Society prepared the way for the emergence of Indigenous Churches among the Yoruba?