

A Review of African Initiated Churches and Their Contributions to the Development of Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper reflects the opinion of scholars on African initiated churches. The contributions of African independent churches to the development of education in Nigeria were also highlighted. The factors that influenced the rise of these Churches, distinguishing features and characteristic of these churches were also dealt with in the paper. Finally, the initial problems of the AIC'S which includes low level of education was addressed in the paper. The church rose up to the challenges by establishing schools, theological colleges and training centre to solve the problem of low level of education. In this way the churches contributed a lot into the development of Education in Nigeria.

Introduction

The contributions of the African Independent Churches to the development of Education in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. Some of these AICS are, Church of the Lord Aladura (COLA), The Cherubim and Seraphim, The Christ Apostolic Church, the Celestial Church of Christ and the Zionist Church. These Churches have established Schools and employed teachers ranging from. Primary Schools, to Secondary Schools, teacher training colleges and colleges of education. To crown it all many of these Churches have founded Universities spending huge amounts ranging to millions of naira to keep these institutions going. Needless to say that millions of individuals have benefitted from these Churches in the area of education, Church members and none members alike.

The existing works have been reviewed: (J.D.Y. Peel 1968), (Harold Turner 1967), (C. O. Oshun 1983), (D. O. Olayiwola 1994), (J. A. Omoyajowo 1982), (J. B. Webster 1964), (S. A. Adewale 1988), (A. Alokun 1991), (Olabisi Adenaike 1998), (S. G. Adegboyega 1978), (E.H.L. Olushey), (E. O. Babalola 1988), (R. C. Mitchell 1970), (S.B. Mala 1983), (Deji Ayegboyin and Ishola S. A 1997). Alokun has it on record that it was during the second half of the 19th century the African churches emerged (Alokun, 1991 p. 18). The view of Alokun is confirmed by Deji Ayegboyin and Ishola, who write thus "The period from the nineteenth century to the present has been characterised by establishment and growth of the African strand of development of Christianity (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 11). It can therefore be stated without fear of serious contradiction that the African initiated churches started around the 19th century. African initiated churches are the churches founded, funded and led by Africans and in most cases for Africans.

It is the opinion of Babalola that: "The independent churches have been classified as either "Ethiopian or African - a symbol of independence from foreign control of Africa" (Babalola 1988 p. 25). H. W. Turner has aptly defined an independent African church as a church which has been founded in Africa by Africans and primarily for Africans (Turner 1967). In other words such a church is indigenous. Some erudite scholars have stood their grounds in support of and in recognition of African Independent Churches. Such scholars are: E. B. Idowu 1979, (H. W. Turner 1967), (J. D. Y. Peel 1968) and (J. Akin Omoyajowo 1982).

According to Alokun "Today, the examples of indigenous churches are numerous in Africa. They include the praying churches such as the church of the Lord, Aladura (COLA), the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, the Celestial Church of Christ and the Zionist Church" (Alokun 1991 p. 26).

According to Babalola "several Independent African churches arose in parts of West Africa in the course of the 19th century" (Babalola 1988). "The first independent African church appeared in Sierra Leone in 1821 with the name of African Methodist church, a break away from the Wesleyari Mission" (Alokun 1991). "By 1835, six others had appeared in the same territory and they were all churches that seceded from the Wesleyan Mission" (Alokun 1991). The Native Baptists seceded from the American Baptist in 1888 (Alokun 1991 p. 221). The United Native African Church was established in 1891, African church incorporated was established in 1901 (Babalola 1988 p. 217) while the United African Methodist church (Eleja) UAMC was established in 1908.

Causes for the Rise of African Independent Churches

The African initiated churches were founded because of the following reasons: the issue of leadership, of which the Africans have been denied in European and American established churches, the love for self

government by the Africans, colour prejudice or racial discrimination by the Europeans, and imposition of foreign culture and customs by the European missionaries (Babalola 1988 p. 217).

According to Adewale, the founding of the African church was not essentially an attempt to encourage polygamy as the detractors of the church who knew not the causes of the secession alleged, nor was it an effort to propagate the doctrine of the traditional religion. It was purely a struggle for the rediscovery of African nationalism. It was for the emancipation and liberation of the church in Nigeria from foreign political domination and ecclesiastical bondage. It was a struggle for an independent African church where the members could worship God in their own way to satisfy their spiritual needs and aspirations knowing fully well that foreign agencies in the country could not effectively and adequately cope with the situation. (Adewale 1988 p. 9)

Alokan corroborates Adewale in his writing thus:

The root causes of their (i.e. African churches') alienation were the European monopoly of the leadership of the church and European belief that the white missionaries were superior to the African. (Alokan 1991 p. 18)

This view was underscored by J. S. Coleman, when he writes:

Not only was European religion presumed to be higher than African religion, but European values and institutions were considered superior to those of the Africans (J.B. Coleman).

Babalola underscores the earlier stated opinion when he writes thus: "the leadership issue was another major cause of the earlier schisms from the missions" (Babalola 1988 p. 215). "Their (i.e. Africans') main complaint was the monopolisation of leadership by Europeans" (Babalola 1988). Ayegboyin and Ishola, while stating some of the factors for the rise of AICs, quote R. C. Mitchell thus: "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" (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 20).

The role of Henry Venn, nationalism feelings, emergence of prophetic figures among Africans, circumstantial factors, desire to indigenize Christianity and passion for a purer form of Christianity are some of the factors stated by Ayegboyin and Ishola as causes for the rise of African independent churches.

Some prophetic figures such as: Gerick Braide from Niger Delta; William Wade Harris (A km from Liberia) Walter Maliffa (Lesotho) Simon Kimbangu (Belgium Kongo) and Samson Oppong (Ghana) led mass movements which served as precursors of indigenous churches. All these prophets and evangelists with special charisma left indelible marks on the emergent indigenous churches. James Johnson, however, explains the reasons for the rise of AICs thus:

There are times when it is more helpful that a people should be called upon to take their responsibilities struggle with and conquer their difficulty than that they should be in the position of vessels taken in to and that for West African Christians, this is the time. (James Johnson 1964 P. 1).

On the causes for the rise of AICs, it is Oshitelu's opinion that:

Many of the African Initiated churches grew out of a response of the failure of missionaries (European) to relate Christianity to the traditional African view of the world. Often, the missionaries (European) condemned the traditional African way of life. They wanted to transform Africans into "Black Europeans" that is; they laid more emphasis on the European culture than the Gospel truth of the Bible. For example, Africans had to be baptised with the so-called "Christian names" which are actually European names. To them anything African was barbaric, fetish, and evil. (R.O. Oshitelu).

"The African church which was founded on 13th October 1901 began as a protest against the denial of self-government, colour prejudice, imposition of foreign culture and customs, dictatorship and an attempt to translate and enforce the principles of the church of England in the native pastoral church" (Babalola 1988 p. 217).

These among others are the views of authors on causes for the rise of African independent churches.

Characteristic Features of African Independent Churches

The following are the distinguishing features and characteristics of African Indigenous churches:

Africans are founders as well as leaders. Africans finance most of these churches while Africans also constitute majority of the congregation. Worship or services are conducted in the African ways, while habits like singing of choruses, clapping of hands, dancing and beating of drums are allowed.

Polygamy, chieftaincy titles, traditional religious habits, and belief in traditional African cosmology are not frowned at. Prophecy, visions and dreams are allowed in these churches. Furthermore, speaking in tongues,

use of holy water and oil, as well as the use of holy names are frequent. In many of these African churches, women who are in their monthly period are not allowed into the main auditorium of the church. However, they may remain outside the auditorium. Many of these churches do not allow the use of trinkets, expensive and worldly clothings. Other habits common in these churches include, spiritual bath at riversides, burning of candles and incense, and going up to the mountains to pray (T. A. Falaye).

Several authors and scholars of African church history do agree that these characteristics and distinguishing features of African independent churches make them more attractive, exciting, fulfilling, and satisfying to Africans; hence these churches attract large patronage among Africans. Quite often, there are criticisms from historic and mainline churches that African independent churches attract and lose off many of their members through these peculiar habits, distinguishing features and characteristics. (T. A. Falaye).

On the characteristics of AICs, Ayegboyin and Ishola comment thus: "while the AICs have distinct characteristics, which mark them out from the main-line churches, yet it is necessary to point out that the former are immensely diverse. Some wear garments while a few do not. Also, not all of them carry spiritual rods or staff, not all of them burn candles or incense. However, they have some basic characteristics which they all share" (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 27).

The two scholars, Ayegboyin and Ishola, however commend the AICs for their fascinating features and characteristics thus: "One of the fascinating features of the AICs is their so called free and lovelier mode of worship. The African naturally enjoys a more demonstrative form of worship. Consequently in contrast to the supposedly dull liturgy of the mission churches, the AICs have given a home to a more fascinating and exciting form of worship with singing, clapping, dancing and stamping of the feet" (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 31).

Most of the songs are customarily indigenous songs in traditional lyrics. Usually they are invocations and sometimes spontaneous composition accompanied with ringing of bells, drumming, and the use of other native musical instruments (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 31).

Ayandele also commends the AICs' participatory worship. He says: "The individual is a heart and soul participant in the service and not the passive members who allow only the clergy and the key officials to be dramatispersonae" (E. A. Ayandele).

In admiration of the AICs, Ayegboyin and Ishola comment thus:

Another remarkable trait of the AICs is its insistence on giving Christianity an African colouration. The AICs are pragmatic in contextualising Christianity in African culture. They are practical and down to earth in their belief, doctrine and response to the problems of their congregations (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997 p. 31).

On worship among AICs, Adewale comments, thus: "Basically worship is ceremony and service showing reverence and respect to God. The traditional Africans are very religious and they love to show reverence and respect to God in whatever they do, in all places and at all times. Their view of the world is essentially religious and theo-centric" (S. A. Adewale 1988 p. 60).

Idowu was apparently thinking more about the Yoruba when he declared that "in everything they are religious. Religion forms the basis of life for them" (E. B. Idowu).

Another popular characteristic feature of AICs, which Babalola singles out is prayer. He observes that: "The Aladura churches differ from other churches of West Africa in their emphasis on the power of prayer. Their claim is that God answers all prayers, and that their doctrines, services preaching and revelations help them to pray effectively. On their mode of worship, Babalola observed that because of their prophetic and revivalist type of worship and belief, they are popular. Their worship is made up of phrases such as "Alleluia" praise to the Lord" set to musical tune. This is sung and danced to, which encourage a type of mass self-hypnotism" (E. O. Babalola 1988 p. 238).

Furthermore, Rufus Oshitelu while praising the African Instituted churches' mode of worship which he described as both Pentecostal and Apostolic writes thus:

The charismatic movement, which is primarily and predominantly from the African initiated or instituted churches (AICs), has tremendously influenced many Christians of all denominations all over the world. Most of their practices have been adopted by the so-called main line churches and the American style new generation churches (R. O. Oshitelu p. 38).

In the 1920s a wave of charismatic African churches arrived on the scene of Christian independency in West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa and South Africa. These charismatic churches combined the two fundamental elements of Christianity and African culture in a way that advertise their Christian intentions without denouncing their African values (R. O. Oshitelu, p. 39).

Finally, Oshitelu describes the positive impact of the AICs features thus:

In the various African independent, initiated or instituted Christian churches, there are groups and congregations who exhibit an unlimited joy about their faith. Worshipers

often clap their hands, raise their hands or lead the prayers. This movement is known as Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement (R. O. Oshitelu, p. 39).

So far, we have reviewed literature on causes for the rise, and characteristics of African instituted churches. It is necessary to discuss the initial problems and write a critique of African instituted churches.

Initial Problems and A Critique of African Instituted Churches

The African Independent Churches and the African church are not without problems even though they are attractive to Africans in the first instance. The initial problems of AICs and the African church vary from lack of funds, lack of acceptability by the historic churches, to lack of manpower, and schismatic tendencies within the organisation (T. A. Falaye).

Ayegboyin and Ishola corroborate the above stated points when they outline the weaknesses of AICs as: Increasing secessions, lack of church discipline, overdependence on leaders, lack of fund or financial support, lack of provision of Bible training centres, extra-Biblical practices, absence of elaborate, administrative structure and marital problems arising from polygamy and extra marital affairs. (Ayieboyin and Ishola 1997)

Adewale shares the same opinion when he describes marriage particularly in the African Church or Ethiopia thus:

The church recognises marriage under Native Law and Custom. This is practised without church's knowledge and there is no sanction. Pregnant women are wedded. This is regarded as immorality by some churches. Divorce is allowed. Initially polygamous members who broke away from other churches were admitted. (S. A. Adewale 1988 p. 85)

On discipline in the African church Adewale confesses that: The African Church does not influence attitude towards alcohol, tobacco, certain types of food and cosmetics. There is no teaching about these items. Both the clergy and the laity drink alcohol. Members serve alcohol to guests '(S. A. Adewale 1988 p. 92)

On the use of medicine and magic in African church Adewale writes thus:

The church supports and encourages the use of medicines both traditional and orthodox, some members of the church are practising herbalists and ifa priests while some are medical doctors (S. A. Adewale 1988 p. 88)

Dr. Lydia August states the problems of AICs in South Africa thus:

We lack education, we have no church buildings, we have no pulpits except for a very limited number of those who could build churches. On the other hand, we do not build because we have no church site and no money as there is no England America or Italy that support us financially. We still find ourselves in the dark of discord and enmity (Mala 1983 p. 30).

AICs have been accused of being separatists and syncretic, On this for example, Olayiwola recalls:

"We wish to state that the healing activities done in some of the Aladura or Nigerian independent churches were syncretic in form and therefore, without glossing over issue, cannot stand the test of biblical scrutiny. On this same allegation of syncretism, the other Aladura churches, the Celestial Church of Christ (C.C.C.) in particular could easily be faulted.

However on the whole, we are beginning to see on a wide scale a resurgence of Gods gift of healing in a manner not seen in the church since the Apostolic times. Healing is not the periphery of Christianity, it is central, A theory of healing without healing taking place in empty rhetoric" (D. O. Olayiwola 1994 p. 43).

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