

The Relevance of African Independent Churches to the Yoruba of South Western Part of Nigeria

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Abstract

African Independent churches (AICs) have contributed immensely to the spirituality and preservation of values and traditional institutions of the Yoruba people in the southwestern Nigeria. Emerging from the missionary's and colonialist's imposition of western ideals, liturgy and life styles, African Independent Churches penetrated into the minds of the Yoruba people through contextualization of the bible's truth and de-westernization of the gospel. Hence, they prevailed in interpreting the bible from African's perspective. The relevance of AICs is therefore obvious in the entire life of the Yoruba people ranging from their culture, spirituality, politics, social life, economy, education and others. It is therefore evident that, the relevance of AICs has led to its proliferation and attracted a numerous membership from all walks of life in the South western Nigeria. Interestingly, a good number of the missionary churches have today taken a cue from the AICs to incorporate some of the ideals of AICs into their churches especially in the area of respect for some of the African culture they found compatible with the Christian Bible

Key words: African Independent Churches, Relevance, Culture, Colonialism, Liturgy

Introduction

The African independent churches (AICs) have played some key roles in the life of the Yoruba people in the south western area of Nigeria: especially, in bringing Christianity to the appreciation of their worldview, and their world view in appreciation of Christianity. The Yoruba converts who found Christianity in the garb of westernization appalling and exploiting resorted to the understanding of the Bible in the Yoruba context. It was in this manner that AICs brought the Gospel of salvation to the Yoruba people with a vivid attempt to de-westernize the gospel: a counter to what the White missionaries deem necessary as the acceptable Christian practice. Gaiya, (2002:3) therefore observes that AICs, "although a different sort of Christianity than the one planted by Western missionaries; it was by all standards an outgrowth from mission Christianity. The African independent churches were Africans' way of domesticating the Christian teachings."

The inevitability of African Independent Churches is evident today in the obvious relevance it plays in the preservation of Yoruba cultural traditions and institutions such as communality which incidentally, a way of life common with the biblical Israelite as against individualism entrenched in the western way of life. Communality as a way of life has helped the Yoruba people to protect their definition of family which transcends the nuclear family concept to the extended family relationship.

Spirituality as understood in the AICs is given a far deeper understanding because of their appreciation of the reality of the spirit world. The Yoruba believed in the world of the spirits, ancestors, and other metaphysical forces which often are ignored by the Orthodox missionary churches because of their scientific and secular orientation of the world. The Yoruba have always believed in the dualistic nature of the world where the forces of good and evil are warring. It was from this backdrop that the Yoruba belief in the reality of the existence of evil. Their experience of evil is real and no theology can explain it away. They therefore believe in the necessity of salvation as a deliverance from evil. Hence, the AICs appreciating the practical experiences of the Yoruba people makes it relevant to them as an alternative to Traditional Religion which was entrenched in idolatry.

AICs emergence in the history of Christian churches in 19th century can therefore be said to be largely linked with the idea of making the bible relevant to the entire life of Africans, spiritually, culturally, politically, economically, and socially even in their very challenging situations(slave trade, imperialism and colonization) (Kalu, 2000:11).The AICs championed the course of preaching the total gospel to the total African man unlike the missionaries that only consider some biblical truths relevant and decline on others such as faith healing, loud prayer and others.

The African Independent Churches have been variously categorized as observed by Ayegboyin (1997) and Gaiya, (2002). However, this paper is considering AICs as Churches that are independent of the missionary churches, founded by Africans, and initially established for Africans before taking mission to overseas countries. Nevertheless, the main argument of this paper is that, the relevance of AICs to the multifaceted life of the

Yoruba people of the south western of Nigeria has encouraged its dominance in the area; despite the existence of the missionary churches which were first founded among the Yoruba people.

Area of Relevance of AICs to Yoruba People

AICs relevance in provision of a homely setting for Yoruba converts.

The African Independent churches provide for the Yoruba people of the South western Nigeria a homely setting in which they can worship God. Homeliness in the sense can be describe as a native territory where they can get a home care without feeling of racial prejudice in any form which was apparent in the mission churches. Ayegboyin, (1997: 23) observes that, "These churches to some varying degrees are characterized by a desire for African self-expression and freedom from missionary control." The missionary churches were heavily westernized in expression and worldview, and having to conform to another worldview in the apparent denial of Yoruba worldviews makes it difficult for converts to express themselves in the world view they are brought up. Therefore, they do not really feel at home but rather like a visitor in the missionary Churches.

The compulsion of certain educational attainment in order to be relevant in the Establish Churches was one factor that was less considered in the AICs churches such as The Cherubim and Seraph, Precious Stone, Aladura Churches, C.A.C, Celestial Churches and others. While education is not discountenanced, it was not however a requirement to function as a church member. Yoruba Christians are allowed to speak vernacular in preaching and in prayer without any restriction, rather than reading prayers from the prayer books only. Putting Bishop Ajayi Crowther in perspective Ayandele (1966:206) observes that, "he refused to allow the vernacular to be taught in the Niger Mission. As late as 1890 he emphasized that the medium of teaching throughout the Mission would be English" it was also in this period that even the educated Africans who refused to change their names or cast away European dress was stigmatized nondescript, a libel on his country and a blot on civilization" (Ayandele, 1996 :259).

Therefore, the AICs provide that medium which the mission churches denied the Yoruba people in expressing themselves. They accommodate both the literate and the non-literate especially. The unschooled converts could fellowship without prejudice and a feeling of strangeness in the church. They could freely associate with themselves since there were less social or status discrimination among them as the communality way of life which was original to the Yoruba people was revitalized in the AICs churches. In the words of Ayegboyin, (1997: 24)

They held that by this they were breeding their own kind of African Church where African institutions would be recognized and respected. They felt that any religious institution, which did not meet Africans daily life's experience, would create a spiritual hunger. In the AICs, therefore liturgy was made more African, as they made use of dreams, singing, drumming and dancing, some which were ingredients of African cultural manifestation.

The African Independent Churches therefore brought the gospel into the African-Yoruba context, enliven African traditions and institutions with the gospel of the bible, and create a setting where the Yoruba people could worship. Most importantly they move the Yoruba from the known to the unknown rather than imposing the unknown to the people. It is from this background that, the African independent churches gained the heart, support and encouragement of the Yoruba people and become undeniably relevant I their society to date.

Cultural relevance of AICs

It is very difficult to alienate culture from religion but they must not be confused. Idowu, (1973: 5) observes that,

religion and culture are involved in each other and that it is often difficult to draw a precise line of demarcation between the two, if that is ever possible, especially in places where people still consider life as one indivisible whole and have not reached the stage of artificially dividing the reality in to the sacred and the secular.

"Therefore there seems to be that tendency of uniqueness of each culture's understanding of human person base on their religion, morality, arts and scientific understanding" (Asojo & Ijaola, 2008: 64) Hence, the Yoruba people in their cultural uniqueness perceived the world undivided but as a twin of the spirit and physical realms ; as for them, "every aspect of ancient and traditional African life reinforced a philosophy and cosmology that

created an inseparable union between the visible world of society and the invisible world of heaven".(Ijaola & Asojo, 2010: 40-41, citing T'shaka, 1995:90).

Onakpa & Akase (2008: 202) has defined culture as that which

... provides the society with the inherited transmissible code of conduct as both part and function of the total system of ideas, values, knowledge, philosophy, law, moral, believes system which constitute the content of life of a society. Culture provides order, guidance for social behaviour and stability amidst rapid change

Culture is therefore, "the totality of the way of life evolved by a people as they try to meet the challenges of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms of an organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours." (Obasola, 2006:104, citing Nigerian Cultural Policy, 1989) It is obvious therefore, that the gospel brought by the western missionaries in to the Yoruba land was first of all western in all sense; second, was anti Yoruba view because during this period, Europe and America had separated the secular view of the world from the spirit with the later appreciably de-emphasized.

African Independent churches expanded their horizon of the gospel by reading if from the cultural glasses. The people are therefore free to dress in their native wears without and discrimination or being considered to be less Christian. The respect for traditions such as appropriate regards to elders, were carried on by the AICs. The vernacular language is being used by most of the AICs churches especially in the C.A.C, Cherubim and Seraph and others and use interpreters for their English audience. Yoruba from the southwestern Nigeria appreciate praying in their mother tongue either in their private or public prayers. They found themselves more expressive and therefore been able to channel their petitions. Songs were sung in the mother tongues and they are easily learnt and appreciated. Often these songs arouse them to a spiritual ecstasy as obvious in most Aladura churches.

Therefore, worship in the Yoruba language either during Sunday services, naming and marriage ceremony therefore makes more meaning from the beginning to the end for them; as they do not have to bother what a particular word means in English, or have to wonder what the English preacher tried to say either in English or Yoruba. The AICs allowed the people's culture to be relevant in the worship system as they coordinate most of their worship in their language.

Liturgical Relevance

The AICs churches allowed the use of many traditional musical instruments in their liturgy. Unlike the missionary churches where drums and clapping of hands in the praise of God is a taboo; the AIC incorporate the use of local drums such as *Gan gan*, *Iya-Ilu*, *Omele* and others such as *as agogo*, and *sekere*. Oshitelu, (2007 : 107)opines that, In Aladura Churches, liturgies such as music and prayer are lively unlike often abstract, inconceivable liturgies of western theology of the 'mission' churches. They make use of anointing oil, holy water, symbols. Oshitelu, (2007:106) observes that:

Omi tutu (cold /ordinary water) and Oloro Adura (blessed oil) are used for faith healing. Like Yoruba traditional believers, for the Aladura faith is not abstract. Like in Yoruba traditional religion, the Aladura believe that faith must be assisted with concrete objects like *omi Iye*, *ororo Adura* and *Abela* (candles).

The africaness of the AICs liturgy endears it to many Yoruba people. Ayegboyin & Ishola (1997: 88) observes:

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

Hence the AICs were able to provide a liturgical context that brings the people into a participatory worship without prejudice.

Virtually all of the AICs believe in the efficacy of prayers. The emphasis on prayers is both theological and practical in these churches. However, they differ in some of their practices in prayer. While most of the of the Aladura believe in some sort of holy ground where they believe that prayer answers there more speedily,

others like C.A.C and some of the neo Pentecostals like mountain of fire believe in going to some specific mountain of prayer popularly called *Ori Oke*. Oshitelu (2007: 107) observes opines that, “these are features of African traditional religion: the belief that the abode of *Olodumare* is in the high places.” Their prayers include the use of psalms, fasting which they believe hastens answers to prayers. They also believe in special prayers: for breaking ancestral curse, for the unemployed to get job, for overseas travelers to gain visa from the embassies, for the waiting mothers and others with some common spiritually induced social problems.

Some of the AICs churches also like invoking God through the names of their late Christian spiritual leaders believing in a spiritual covenant link with the names during worship and prayers. Such as mention include: God of Moses Orimolade, God of Joseph Ayo Babalola, God of Adeboye and others. Oshitelu (2007: 108) observes that:

in the Aladura Churches, one often hears references made to “*Olorun awon Baba- nla wa*”,(that is God of our forefathers)-Ahraham, Isaac, Jacob; “*Olorun awon woli igbani*,” (God of the Prophets of old)- Moses, Caleb, Elijah. *Olorun Mose Orimolade*. (God of Moses Orimolade); and *Olorun Oshitelu* (God of Oshitelu)

In this way the AICs appropriated the doctrine of ancestral reference in to their liturgical practice of the Yoruba people. “No one can hope to appreciate the thoughts and feelings of the black man who does not realize that to him the dead are not dead but living...” (Awolalu, 1979:53 citing Talbot 1926:298) Yoruba people believe in paying homage to their dead, who they believe live in the other worldly and they could be of help to them spiritually. Awolalu, (1979:64) asserts that, “we are convinced that the ancestors are included in the religious system of the Yoruba and that they play the role of being the immediate intermediaries between men and the ‘totally’ supersensible world.”

The Yoruba people therefore found the idea of venerating their ancestors and heroes in AICs’ mention of names of late spiritual covenant fathers a close ideology and found it very easy to switch. They believe that associating with such spiritual persons help them to believe God of the Bible more strongly. Ayegboyin, (2010:5) also asserts that, “The strong belief of the Aladura in God and the uniqueness of their fellowship with Him are evident in the claims of the divine calls of the leaders.” Observing, the Aladura Church in particular, he further comments that, “Members of the of the Church of the Lord refer to God as *Olorun Oshitelu*, *Olorun Adejobi*, *Olorun Oduwole*. (The God of the Primates Oshitelu, Adejobi and Apostle Oduwole)

The CAC usually refer to Him as the *Olorun Babalola*, while in the C & S, God is referred to as *Olorun Orimolade*”. These liturgical practices that closely associate with African Religion helped most Yoruba converts into Christianity to find the AICs an easy place to worship and appreciate spirituality and Christianity at the same time. They were able to understand the context more easily and flow along with them.

Political relevance of AICs

The African Independent Churches have played a key role in the political affairs of the Yoruba people. The Yoruba in south western of Nigeria were able to respond more effectively with the western traders, imperialists and subsequent colonialism through the missionary leadership. Ayandele, (1966: 178) observes that, “It was natural that before 1914 the Church was the centre of the social, spiritual and political aspirations of educated Africans and illiterate converts.” He further comments that,

Educated Africans, in our period, accepted Christianity whole heartedly and emphasized it apparently to the exclusion of purely political matters, not because they were not patriots, nor because they were not patriots, nor because they had no political vision of an independent nation. On the contrary they were intensely patriotic and they were intensely patriotic and believed that they were paving the way for the creation of the Nigerian nation by patronizing Christianity. But political independence, the vision of which they had, must be shelve because it could not come until Christianity was fully established and they, educated Africans, were in complete control of it; one independence in the management of Church affairs was secured, political independence would logically and automatically follow like cause and effect (Ayandele, 1966: 179).

However, the nationalism feeling and Ethiopianism were not achieved in the mission churches but in the AICs. One typical example of these churches is the United Native African Church in Nigeria. It was interesting that the Aladura movement like the C&S and Faith Tabernacle leaders were victimized by Colonial government because of their prophetic calls and publications that condemn heavy taxation which was dominant

then. It was on this ground that the Faith Tabernacle Church sort for an association with the Apostolic Church in Bradford .It was as a result of this association that the government reduced their persecutions of these AICs prophets and leaders for the fear of being exposed for highhandedness in their home country (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1997: 75-6).

The African Independent Churches have continued to play vital roles in the contemporary politics. Several political aspirants and leaders have sought the spiritual assistance of these AICs prophets and leaders in gaining political position in Nigeria. Some engage in the prediction for the political class and the citizen in general what lies ahead of the nation politically. They are also involved in educating their members on the qualities of the people they are to vote into position, encourage them to register for election and vote according to their conscience.

Politicians also in response to their victory associate with some of these AICs leaders. For instance, the swearing in thanks giving service of the incumbent Nigerian President- Dr. Good luck Ebele Jonathan on 28th May, 2011 witness the participation of a number of prominent AICs leaders of neo-Pentecostal movement such as pastor Ayo Oristejafor, Pastor E.A Adeboye, Bishop David Oyedepo, Prophet Uma Ukpai, Bishop Margret Idahosa and a host of others. Several Governors in the south western Nigeria has claimed that they sought for the spiritual assistance of some of these AICs leaders and prophets for sustenance of their political career. Hence, the AICs churches have contributed to the development of the AICs of politics and democracy in Nigeria.

AICs relevance in faith healing and alternative medicine

Healing is very prominent with the African Independent Churches. The first AICs of the Aladura extract in the south western Nigeria can be traced to the Precious stone group which began at Ijebu-Ode around 1918. The small group started consequent the “bubonic and small pox” epidemic-an aftermath of the World War I which was ravaging the world then. As a result many white missionaries left the churches and flee to their home country as the situation was very bad in the South western Nigeria. It was on account of the exit of Rev. Gansallo of Saint Saviour (CMS) due to the outbreak, that the small group that later became the Precious Stone started (Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997, and Beyer 1997) the group believed strongly theta through prayer the epidemic would be averted but the spiritual vision of miss Odunlami of praying on rain water was confirmed to have healed so many who had contacted the epidemic. (Ayegboyin, 1997 & Ishola: 67)

The belief in divine healing, use of ‘prayer water’ prayed upon by prophets or leaders became prominent with this group as they metamorphosised into Faith Tabernacle, Nigerian Apostolic Church, United Apostolic Church and to the present nomenclature, Christ Apostolic Church (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1997) Other AICs movement. Other movement like the Cherubim and Seraph cofounded by Moses Orimolade and Mrs Abiodun also held the belief of using water as a means of healing the sick. Oschoffa the founder of Celestial Churches do not only use ordinary but also introduce Green water as a means of healing diverse sicknesses. Oshitelu, (2007: 106) observes that:

just as in traditional religion, the Aladura offer the essential spiritual resources to help them achieve a satisfactory life’s destiny, which is very crucial to the Yoruba regardless of educational status. This includes wealth, children, long life and freedom from fear of evil powers and witchcraft. Like in the traditional belief, whatever is a man’s problem or predicament is seen as illness, which needs been healed.

The AICs of are often on the television today claiming the divine power of God to heal people of all manners of infirmities as they come to believe in Jesus Christ the Saviour. Healing of the medical incurable illness such as HIV&AIDS, cancer, diabetics and others have been claimed to have been healed by these AICs. While some especially the Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal and some Aladura churches like Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Ministry, Living Faith International, church of God Mission, claims the miraculous power of God to heal in their ministry; some also organize healing schools for example Christ Embassy A.K.A Believer’s Love World to ensure that people receiving through faith in God’s world.

However, some of the Aladural/spiritual churches allow the use of certain rituals such as bathing in a flowing river, use of palm front, use of oil and others in the healing of sick people. Some of them also make use of the local herbs to cure sickness such as prostate cancer, stroke and paralysis successfully. There is very vital to the Yoruba converts because they consider their health and good living of great priority especially when such sicknesses can be attributed to a metaphysical cause. Cases have been heard of sick people discharged from hospital to seek spiritual assistance. While some have been successfully healed by these AICs; there are also cases where the sickness worsened or the sick later died in the process.

Interestingly, good patronages of timber and caliber have been noticed with the AICs for the purpose of their health in Nigeria either by seeking for divine healing or through alternative medicine especially when their

sickness is attributed to witchcraft or other metaphysical cause. Like in the traditional belief, the Yoruba believe that the witches or sorcerers can afflict people with deadly sicknesses, and such illnesses can be medically cured. More so, the cost of medical treatment becomes a burden on the long run for some people and they found these AICs as a way out of their predicament. Therefore, despite the little improvement in medical facilities in Nigeria, the African Independent Churches remain relevant in the domain of divine healing and alternative medicine.

Economic relevance of AICs

The African Independence Churches have been very relevant in the economical life of the Yoruba people in the South western Nigeria. The emergence of Native African Church in Nigeria in 1981 was not unconnected with the devolution of trade and commerce in the monopoly of the missionary. (Beyer, 1997) The contemporary AICs have kept the pace of the economic relevance of the movement in far broader way.

Several Pentecostal and neo Pentecostal churches today have become a very big enterprise with their leaders purchasing large expanse of land to build campground. For Instance, The 50,000 sitter church auditorium in Otta Ogun state called Cannan land, the Redemption Camp, Lagos express way, Ogun State, own by Redeemed Christian Church of God and many others own by other churches such as Deeper Life, Mountain of Fire, Ori Oke Taborah etc.

The churches have expanded their horizons into business such as micro finance banks, schools - providing education from primary level to the University, Insurance companies, studios and many others. Therefore, the AICs have extended itself in the employment of labour aside the numerous clergy services acquired by these churches. The Church also employ services of the other servicing industries in oil and gas, airline, transport, building, musical instrument, decoration, horticulture, and many others. These become imperative because of the growing enlargement of church buildings, use of a chain number of cars and aircraft for the ministry, generator servicing and many others.

In Nigeria today, churches are playing a key role in the educational sector. The Living Faith Church A.K.A Winners chapel today leads with two state of the heart Universities: Covenant and Land Mark Universities in Otta, Ogun State and Omu Aran, Kwara State respectively. Others include Redeemer's University, Benson Idahosa University, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Mountain University and others. Therefore the AICs have remained a very big employer of labour in Nigeria today and by so helping to develop the nation's economy.

Aside, the direct participation in business and educational areas; the AICs have been noted for their faith based business seminars and prayer over member's trade and businesses. Several Yoruba converts believe that such prayer helps in enhancing their breakthrough in the business arena. It is common today to see fliers advertising as 'Anointing for prosperity', 'Deliverance from Business Hardship', 'Power for Business Breakthrough' and other captions around the street and television in Nigeria. People goes as far as getting anointing oil to sprinkle on their shops, offices and products in order to have a breakthrough.

The African Independent Churches organizes prayers for divine security of life, home and businesses. The fear of insecurity is a problem in Nigeria. People often resort in prayers of the prophets and other Christian Charismatic figures for protection. While some believe in prayers, some go further to pray on mantle or candle to hang on the door of their houses. Some others believe in their church stickers as a protection symbols from arm robbers and other devilish attacks. So the stickers pasted on their cars, houses, bags, door post home and offices.

Social relevance of the AICs

The AICs have largely become both a spiritual and a social group. They are social because they form a block of people with some similar identities and quest. Resulting from Church relationship and the fact of the communal nature of the Yoruba people, interactions extend to other areas of life. AICs organizes youth forum, single forum where youth seeking for marriage partners attend both for spiritual help and social interactions. Often time some of these churches encourage members to marry from each other. However, while some of the spiritual/Aladura churches encourage polygamy, most others refute polygamy as Christian form of marriage.

Churches encourage their members to participate as a family when any of their members have occasions such as wedding, naming and funeral ceremonies. Some even call for the church to assist them in what they way they can. While they encourage members to moderate in spending, they do however identify with them.

African Independent Churches also contribute in social services such as catering for the orphanage and the motherless babies' home. They are involved in giving scholarships for the less privilege around them. The Synagogue Church of Nations headed by T.B Joshua has been noted for generous donations of money and other materials to the less privilege at the Ikotun area of Lagos State where the church headquarter is situated in Nigeria. Some of these AICs churches have also planted mission hospitals and clinics to help the poor rural people, extend gifts and education to imamatees and give scholarships to indigent students to further their education either in the secondary schools or tertiary institutions in the south western Nigeria.

Conclusion

History has placed the African Independent Churches to be very relevant to the Yoruba people in the South western part of Nigeria. The Yoruba people came from the spiritual, cultural and social background which was very different from those freed Africans during the abolishment of slave trade and the missionaries. Therefore, there was a difficulty in grasping the western laden Christianity introduced to the Yoruba people. It was in this light that the emergence of AICs became very relevant to them, as the churches put their cultural, spiritual and social world views in perspective.

The relevance of the African Independent Churches are however not limited to the period of the colonial masters or when the missionaries were still readily with us. The AICs have continued to play significant roles among the Yoruba people even in the contemporary society. Their relevance keep blossoming so much that, the history of Nigeria as a nation today cannot be complete without mention a good number of the African Independent Churches. It is to this end that the AICs can be said to have paved way to development of the Yoruba people as a total man.

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