

## The Emergence of First Generation African and Independent Churches in Nigeria: Historical Survey

Dr. Thomson Temitope Bello

Department Religious Studie, Ekiti State University, P.M.B 5363, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.  
E-mail: venttbello@yahoo.com

### Abstract

The paper considers the independent movement campaigns and what motivated the establishment of the African and independent churches in Nigeria. It will also examine the condition that led to the emergence of the Africa independent churches. Also it will differentiate be between the so called "politico-racial" factors.

How the recommendation to release African indigenous churches to start on their own was unduly delay was equally discussed in this paper. The factor responsible for emergence of first generation African church and independent churches in Nigeria were also discussed.

The abuses and proliferation of church was also mentioned in this paper. The identities that distinguish them from the mainland church was also discussed. This common identities include their passion for prayer, emphasis on the spiritual interest in divine healing, the exalted position accorded women, their inclination towards having freer forms of worship, their aspiration to contextualize Christianity in African culture, their stress on evangelism and revival and their fancy for skeletal administration.

In this paper it has been tried to assess some of the nominatives which have been used to describe the churches which emerged from Hizeric churches. It concluded that the adjective 'independent' may be used since it indicates their independence from mission control. They are African churches because they were founded by Africans and primarily for Africans.

### I. Introduction

The history of independent churches in Nigeria could be precisely dated back to 1888 when the Native Baptist Church of pastor Stone emerged in Lagos<sup>1</sup>. From 1842 to 1888 all the churches in Nigeria were mission churches. They were under the control and supervision of the white missionaries. Due to the inadequacy of measures against many health hazards on the coast white missionaries died in quick succession and J.F Schon recommended a native agency, after the Niger Expedition of 1841<sup>2</sup>. In his paper of 1851 entitled 'Minutes' upon the employment and ordination of a native teachers' Henry Venn also recommended a Native Church under Pastors in a self supporting system. Venn believed that the progress of a mission mainly depended upon the training and development of native Pastors. In addition, he hold the belief that the stability of a mission would take place when the missionary surrounded by well trained native congregation under native Pastor, was able to resign all pastoral work into the hands of native pastors<sup>3</sup>.

The most part of the problem of the recommendations of both Schon and Venn was to give freedom and independence to the churches in Nigeria. However the recommendation were unduly delayed and not implemented in the line suggested by both Schon and Venn. African members of the church were denied opportunity to exercise their understanding in the administration of the church. No African was admitted unto the church's ruling class. For instance, the first two African to be ordained in Yoruba-land since 1842 were admitted to deacon's order only in 1854, and in 1855, three Africans were admitted, to Holy order in Abeokuta while in 1856 the first African ordinands (six in number) who had been wholly trained within the colony, were ordained by Bishop Weeks of Sierra Leone. Reverend Crowther was consecrated Bishop in 1864. it must be noted that these Africans were given subordinate duties to perform in the church.

In the course of writing this paper, it is not that I am supporting the independent Churches in Nigeria rather I'm writing to correctly re-construct the history of the churches and hereby address the issue of brake-away church from the mission churches and their relevance to the Nigerian society today.

The founding fathers of the Independent Churches in Africa Should not be seen as rebellious attitude against the establishment or orthodox churches nor should not be regarded as products of schismatic uprising. There was no physical attach against the religious programmes and religious activities of the missionaries. There was no aberration from the doctrines and practice of the orthodox churches.

Two major fundamental factors were identifiable in the founding of the Independent Churches in Nigeria. They are religious-cultural and political E.B Idowu wrote in his book *Olodumare God in Yoruba Belief* "in all things, they are religious, religion forms the basis of life for them". Traditional Africans are very religious. Their occupations dresses, food, songs, buildings, history, languages and politics are a part of their religion. Religion permeates all their activities. They are very loyal and faithful to their objects of worship and the depth of their love for religion is unfathomable and this was demonstrated in the rousing welcome accorded the missionaries when they came to Abeokuta in 1842<sup>5</sup>. The missionaries were given warm reception and support everywhere they went in Egbaland. This was an attestation of their love to religion. The local people wanted to

adapt and practice the new religion within the context and framework of their old faith and blend the two together where necessary in a healthy way as the case is in most churches today. The aim of the local people was not to encourage the old faith but to marry the two. In Christianity, they wanted to read and interpret every event from a religious perspective and against religious background and to be divinely guided in all matters of life. The mainline churches became skeptical of these noble objectives of the African members of the church and condemned it. The traditional Africans saw no difference between religion and culture, and condemned it. The traditional Africans saw no difference between religion and culture, and this is the case in all independent churches. It was this awareness by the converts to Christianity that culminated in their attempts to found their own independent churches. It was not destruction of edifices, symbols and sacred emblems that caused secession. After all when the converts had accepted the new faith, they voluntarily submitted the emblems for burning.

In an attempt to incorporate as many traditional cultural elements as possible into Christianity and adapt them to the taste of the local people, the converts began to plan to free the church from the cultural bondage of the missionaries.

The political organization and administration of both America and Europe are different from those of traditional Africa. In traditional African setting, only the elderly person with tested experience of life and high integrity ruled, while the young and middle-aged ones watched and learned. Anything contrary to this amounted to an aberration and it was disastrous. When the missionaries settled the arrangement was such that the young missionaries rule and controlled the more elderly African members of the church. The case of David and Stone of southern American Baptist in 1888 readily comes to mind. David a young Pastor, sacked and dismissed the more elderly man Stone. While this may be accepted in America it does not conform with natural order in the African setting. No African would tolerate it. Events of this led to the founding of the Native Baptist Church. The first in the series of Independent Churches<sup>6</sup>. The action of David, a white man amounted to a violation of the natural order among the Yoruba who say “Agba ni pase, bomode pase a dogun” which literally translated means it is the elders who rule, if the youth rules catastrophe arises’.

The emergency of the United Native African Church in 1891<sup>7</sup> had political motives. It was not an opposition to the doctrine of the church against the high handedness of the white missionaries in the administration of the church. In all church administration, the missionaries who were in the minority ruled the church bringing the power and dominion of their nation into play. European political bureaucracy was introduced. They ruled the church as an arm of the government. The church was administrated by missionaries without any reference to or regard for the views of African members of the church. A single or American Pastor could take decision and implement them.

This was against African political administration in which every member of a ruling class including the youth would be consulted for advice before the elders give the final ruling. There is a Yoruba saying “Omode gbon, agba gbon la fi da le ife”, which when literally translated means the youth are wise, the elders are wise was the policy adopted to found ife’ implying that nobody, on account of age, should be despised. But the white men did not know this. The missionaries collaborate with the political overlords and controlled the local congregation throughout the West Coast of Africa. This created a state of political upheaval in the church. In actual fact, the local congregations had been grumbling for long for they were dissatisfied with the situation. Ayandele said, “The political temper in the Lagos of 1900 was very high. A number of grievances against the British administration had been building up<sup>8</sup>. The situation was not peculiar to one arm of the government but was extended even to where the church demand for greater presentation in the church council was becoming louder and the missionaries to force European rule upon the members were registering serious opposition against the attempt.

The result of this was the idea to found a West African Church championed by W. Blyden, an African Negro from Liberia who came down to Lagos in 1891 to address an interdenominational committee. The idea was well received by both the clergy and the laity of the churches of major denominations. Unfortunately, however, owing to financial constraints and fear of ex-communication of the clergy, the proposal collapsed but the members of the Anglican and Methodist Churches who were struggling for political freedom and emancipation of the church in Lagos withdrew from their churches and came together to found the United Native African Church<sup>9</sup>, a church where the members would worship God in their own way. J.B. Webster said “A spell had been broken, a door had been opened for Christians of every mission affiliation to find a dignified means of escaped from the tyranny of the rule of the societies.

#### **The African Church Incorporated:**

The political situation during the founding of the African Church (incorporated), the third in the series of the Independent Churches was nowhere different. The autocracy and high handedness of the missionaries continued in spite of the grievances of the local congregations. The sadness and dissatisfaction of the people meant nothing to the missionaries. The Anglican Bishop, Rt. Rev. Herbert Tugwell in October 1901 when about six hundred people left his church, demonstrated this in the indiscreet handling of the case at Breadfruit Anglican Church. The secedes were all members of St. Paul’s Breadfruit Anglican Church. Instead of pacifying the aggrieved

parishioners and calmly appealing to them, he despised their integrity, age and experience and began to deride their nationalism saying. ‘This is an Anglican Church and not an African Church. Is it an African Church? Let them go, they Africans are not, they cannot do anything, they will come back.’<sup>11</sup> The administration of the church in all lands requires care and regard for the local people among whom the church is planted. This gives freedom and joy to the people.

The African church was ridiculed and called names. In spite of the obnoxious words said against it, the secessionists continued to enjoy the support of the local people from far and near. The name ‘African’ was given to the church to reflect African nationalism and in answer to Tugwell’s claim that St. Paul was Anglican church and not African. To demonstrate their support for the African Church, some wealthy personalities in Lagos and environs sent presents, gifts and messages of congratulations. A wealthy Lagos merchant, J.R. Shanu, was so glad that he gave them five pounds (£5) and made the remark that no other Anglican church was able to establish an independent church organization of the kind that came out of the Breadfruit Church. A Bible and the small cloth on the Reading Desk and by pulpit were given to them by Dr. (Mrs) Olufunke Obasa<sup>12</sup>.

The African Church organization made many converts and quickly spread in Lagos first to other parts of Yoruba land, then to other parts of the country.

### **Other independent Churches:**

The founding of the other Independent Churches the United African Methodist Church and those commonly called Aladura among the Yoruba, had similar religion-cultural and political motivations to those before them. The founders wanted to enjoy freedom of worship politically and incorporate as many of the traditional cultural elements as possible into their worship and belief practices. They wanted African leadership. They wanted to be self-propagating, self-financing and self-governing. Foreign interference was completely to be rejected. They wanted to be politically, culturally and religiously free. Today the Aladura enjoy greater freedom in all aspects of their worship, practices and beliefs than those Independent Churches, which still recognize the mission churches as their mother church and to which they are related in doctrines and practices.

### **Abuses**

The detractors of proliferation of churches talk of abuses among the proliferated churches. Proliferation is common among the Independent Churches and even it is peculiar to a group of them. What the detractors refer to as abuse is a common feature of all organizations of living men and women. Abuse is not peculiar to only the Independent Church; it is common to Mission Churches too. The degree or intensity of the issue only varies. There is arrogation of power to leadership in all churches, mis-use of position is everywhere, and embezzlement is not only peculiar to only Independent Church. Adultery, wrong Bible interpretation, drunkenness, seduction of other peoples’ wives, litigation and commercialization of churches are also not peculiar to only Independent Church in today’s mainland context. It is the old prejudice, which is still in vogue when Independent Churches are being accused of abuses. Truly and objectively speaking, some leaders and founders of the Independent Churches are corrupt but it is an over generalization to accuse all the churches of corruption. That they are doing fantastic work cannot be disputed. Their health-care programmes are great and are good for a country like Nigeria with millions of invalids who are indigent. Abuses can be checked through association and fellowship of all Christian bodies. Any attempt either on the part of the government or on the part of the churches of major denominations to stop or interfere with the rapid growth of the Independent Churches in Nigeria should be opposed with all vehemence at the disposal of Christians throughout the country. Growth is natural to church because of the tendency to develop in them.

### **Factors responsible for emergence of first generation African and Independent Churches in Nigeria**

#### **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 emphasized 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>14</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 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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)<sup>18</sup> in Ghana, they include: The National Baptist Church (1898); The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Nigritian Fellowship (1907). These churches to some varying degrees were characterized 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 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 fellowship were established 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 this “fatherless” acts of missionaries who were forced to put their churches under lock and keys. This compelled some African leaders to hold prayer meetings in front of the locked churches. This kind of experience led to the inauguration of 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>16</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 criticized the leadership of the Mission Churches who they claimed, put so many obstacles in the way of African converts by imposing on them European customs and traditions.

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 recognized 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 Mainline 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- *Akonmnsu* (water-drinkers) which broke away from the Methodist Church at Anomabu in 1862, were “convinced teetotalers”. 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 criticized 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 the 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 criticized or frustrated in the Older Churches, found a refuge in the Indigenous Institutions.

### **Conclusion**

People say we have proliferation of churches in Nigeria today. There was also growing number of African Independent Churches. Why do we say these? And what is the value of all these in Nigeria today?

S.A Adewale in his article entitled “proliferation of churches in Nigeria: a critical evaluation of the issue published in proliferation of churches in Nigeria”, he outlined some causes of the proliferation of churches in Nigeria including political, doctrinal, cultural, personal, educational and influence of other religions.<sup>18</sup> I have demonstrated in this article that political, cultural and religious issues all tied up with educational and personal motives.

In this conclusion, I shall essentially address myself to the issue of necessity for the growth of the church in Nigeria. For a religion to attract people and survive in a foreign land, it must adapt itself to the taste of the local people and absorb as many cultural elements as possible of local people. This adoption will make the religion meaningful to the grassroots. The practice of the religion will also be down-to-earth. The Independent Churches realized this vital and essential factor and acted quickly. In the absorption of the cultural elements, the Independent Churches were ridiculed by the mission churches and discriminated against. Fortunately, the detractors of the traditional elements, today, are not found wanting in the use of the elements. They now freely use the elements. For instance, the mission churches these days clap, beat drums and dance in churches. They seem to be no longer emphatic about polygamy among the laity. They apparently connive at ambivalence in religions practices. Some of them are members of secret societies, some patronise traditional herbalists and diviners either directly or by proxy, while others patronise Christian ‘prophets’ for solutions to the problems and divine guidance in their careers. They now practice what they originally condemned in Independent Churches. Thus today, Christianity has more converts than in the days of the missionaries.

The leaders and founder of the splinter groups want to be self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagation as recommended by Henry Venn<sup>19</sup>. They also want to worship God freely in their own ways, to interpret the scripture to suit their listeners and to be leaders of their own churches. In actual fact, freedom must be the watchword of everybody because freedom is natural. The Independent Churches had won freedom for the church in Nigeria. What the Mission Churches were unable to do and what they now enjoy, the Independent Churches had achieved through problems and hardships. They have, today, many churches and converts everywhere throughout the country. Independent Church buildings, room and parlour churches and converts are increasing day by day. Their religious activities including revival services, prayer and faith healing, prophecy and vision, drumming and dancing, are all impressive and attractive. The Nigeria peoples want them and love them. But for the Independent Churches which gives allowance for these practice to attract more converts, the influence of Islam and of other factors would have been great on Christianity. In the Muslims’ stronghold of far North, the Independent Churches dreaded to preach for fear of victimisation. The Independent Churches are good enough for the Nigerian situation a pluralistic situation.

### **Notes and References**

1. Adewale, S.A. *The African Church (Inc.) 1991-1986: A Synthesis of Religion and Culture* (Oluseyi Press Ltd.) Ibadan, 1988, p.9
2. Groves, C.P. *The Planting of Christianity in Africa, Vol. II 1840-1878* (Lutherworth Press. 1964), pp. 13-16.
3. *Ibid.* pp.13-16

4. Idowu, E.B. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Longman, 1962), P.5.
5. Adewale, S.A. *The Interpretation of Religions in Egbaland*, unpublished Ph.D Thesis, 1976, P. 23.
6. Webster, J.B. *The African Church among the Yoruba 1888-1922* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1964), P.49.
7. Ibid. P. 62.
8. Ayandele, E.A., *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis* (Longmans, 1966), P.234.
9. Webster, J.B. Op. Cit., P.62.
10. Webster, J.B. Op. Cit., P.61
11. Adewale, S.A Op. Cit., P.19.
12. Adewale, S.A. Ibid, P.21.
13. Peter M., *African Independence Churches and TEE International Review of Mission*. Vol. (xxI.282 April 1982) pp. 204-212.
14. Welbert Shank, *Henry Venn-Missionary State-man* (Ibadan, Ray Star Press 1983) p.31
15. Harold Turner, *History of an African Independent Church Volume 1 and 2* (London: Clarendon 1967). P.77
16. Ibid p.90
17. Ibid p.92
18. Adewale, S.A. *The Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria*, (NACS 9), P.64.
19. Groves, C.P. Op. Cit., pp.13-16.