

ALADURA: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY
AN IMPETUS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction

In recent years, numerous studies have emerged about indigenously founded, faith healing, and tongue-speaking phenomenon, which began in southern Nigeria in the early 1920s (Peel: 1968). The studies of the movement known as Aladura have now become a topic of considerable interest. For examples: Peel focuses on the historical perspective of the Aladura churches; Appiah-Kubi (1979) offers reasons for the emergence of Indigenous African Christian churches: while Babalola (1992) explores the alarming rate of growth with emphasizes on their *modus operandi* in light of traditional cultures. Babalola argues for the contextualization of Christianity through the Aladura churches. In a fascinating study, Akinade (1996) poses these questions: 1) What are the reasons for the emergence of these churches? 2) What are their strengths and weaknesses? 3) What challenges do they offer to orthodox churches? Omoyajowo (1982) explains the history of African Independent Churches with the foci on the Cherubim and Seraphim (Ischei, 1970). On the other hand, Crumbley, (1992:505-522) tasks the Aladura movement, by pointing out the condescending roles of women in the Aladura churches. Anderson (2004) points out the difference between the Christ Apostolic Church and Aladura. Turner (1967) in his study focused on the issues of culture and Christianity. The movements, which began in Nigeria, were once widely regarded by many scholars as incipient nationalism or religious independents. Today's scholars have dismissed the validity of this rationale and have concluded that the phenomenon is more complex than once thought (Turner, 1967). The majority of African theologians argued that the movement gained popularity because of its

attacked issues such as witches, sorcery and fetishism which other traditional churches failed to address.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are twofold: 1. To trace the theological development of the Aladura and, 2. To explain reasons for the search for “authenticity” for the Aladura.

The movement-Aladura, meaning in Yoruba, “the prayer people” because they pray more than other churches, originated among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria as a religious acculturation or social protest. It was an attempt to make the religious experience of the natives relevant to their society with special references to vision experiencing, tongue speaking, and magical drugless healing.

Who are the Aladuras? What do they believe? What is the genesis of the movements? These and other questions will be addressed in this paper. The schisms within the movements will be described.

The Genesis of Aladura Churches

The Aladura churches have attracted many followers. It began as prayer groups within older Nigerian churches, particularly the Christian Missionary Society (CMS). The movement came into existence in the 1920s as a response to a society gripped in crisis, afflicted by epidemics (influenza, small pox and plague) famine, and world depression. Isichei (1995) pointed out, in Nigeria, the epidemic resulted in many people dying on the roads. Consequently, many Nigerians turned to the new prophets who emerged to fulfill their spiritual yearning. Many thought that the mainstream churches had failed them.

What differentiates the Aladura churches from the main churches is their rejection of infant baptism, and rejection of western and traditional medicine. They were the catalyst that led to a breach with the CMS in 1922. The schism began in Lagos. It was spearheaded by David Odubanjo, a clerk by profession, who founded a branch of the Aladura. For a time, the movement was attached to an American sect known as Faith Tabernacle. The alliance dissolved because of the spiritual emptiness associated with the mainstream churches. This breach resulted in the group forming a link with the British Apostolic Church (BAC) from 1931-1941 as it attempted to liberate the natives

from “the prefabricated liturgies which had been imported from Europe and imposed upon” (Akinade 1996: 319) the natives. The alliance did not last. The major breach that resulted in separation from the BAC was over the use of quinine. The natives discovered that the BAC missionaries were secretly using quinine, contrary to their preaching of drug free practices. The final result was the formation of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). The CAC in its practices resembles the older Pentecostal denomination. Consequently, its members prefer to be called Pentecostals instead of Aladuras.

The Aladura churches have a strong faith in divine healing and are consistent in their rejection of all medicines both native and western. They believe in the power of spirit, dreams, vision and the power of prophecy and revelations. The Aladura churches believe in the power of prayers to cure all sickness. The churches have a Yoruba flavor and style that has been incorporated into their worship, such as joyous spontaneity and the use of indigenous musical instruments. The churches pay more attention to healing deliverance from evil powers and prayers (Turner, 1967:33). Aladura Christianity rests on the spiritual graces of salvation, repentance, forgiveness, holiness, healing, deliverance, exorcism, spiritual baptism, spiritual gifts, and spiritual authority (Osun:1999).

The Aladura churches consist of four prominent kindred: 1) The Christ Apostolic Church; 2) The Cherubim and Seraphim; 3) The Church of the Lord; and 4) The Celestial Church of Christ.

The Christ Apostolic Church

The Christ Apostolic Church grew out of an Anglican Bible study group founded in 1920. The most important belief is the rejection of both traditional and western medicines. The Christ Apostolic Church lays great emphasis on the power of prayer to cure all sicknesses. This has been their treasured belief. It should be recalled that the Christ Apostolic Church emerged out of schism with Faith Tabernacle. The Faith Tabernacle emphasizes the imminence of the Millennium, and distaste for acquiring property. These precepts did not augur well with the nascent African churches. Moreover, the Faith Tabernacle did not see any sense in relying on vision for guidance, which is the hallmark of African churches. The Apostolic Church has its roots in Pentecostalism. Their organizations and worship reflect many of the values of the mission churches.

The Cherubim and Seraphim

The Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S) was founded by two visionaries: Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Christiana Abiodun. Abiodun, a young Anglican woman who at on Corpus Christi in 1925 in Lagos, Nigeria, fell into a trance in which she said that God called upon her to establish a new church. The two visionaries were brought together when Orimolade was sent to pray for Abiodun who was in the state of possession. Thereafter, Abiodun came out of the trance. The two teamed up to form the Society. According to Omopyajowo (1982) the real acknowledged founder of C & S was Moses Orimolade Tunolase. He was a completely illiterate itinerant preacher whose main aim was to convert people to the way of Christ. Upon settling in Lagos in the 1930s, he organized a prayer group into a Society, which met every Thursday. This was what eventually metamorphosed into a new church, which became known as Cherubim and Seraphim (Omoyajowo, 1982). The Society began to spread because of its focus on the importance of prayer and healing.

The Church of the Lord

The largest of the Aladura Christian Church is the Church of the Lord, which was founded by Josiah Oshitelu in 1934. Oshitelu was an Anglican catechist before he founded the Church of the Lord. He was famous for his “witch-busting evangelism.” Prior to his expulsion from the Anglican Church, he had prophesized the events of the 1920s, which included western Nigeria, would be ravaged with smallpox. He attributed this to God’s anger on the people for practicing paganism and accused the colonial government of deception (Probst, 1989: 483). He warned that only faith in God, the power of prayer and abandonment of paganism could prevent the catastrophe. Six months after Oshitelu’s prediction, there was an outbreak of plague in western Nigeria, and Oshitelu was expelled from the Anglican Church.

The Celestial Church of Christ:

The founder of the Celestial Church of Christ was Samuel Oshoffa. By profession he was a carpenter in Porto Novo, the Republic of Benin. He began a career as a prophet in 1947. The new church he founded

was originally christened *Le Christianisme Celestre*, translated from the French as the “Holy Assembly of Heaven in God.” Among the Yoruba speaking people, it was known as the “Holy Assembly of Christ from Heaven” (Isichei 1995, p.284). At first the adherents of the church were small. It began to attract increasing numbers when a branch was opened in Lagos under the leadership of Alexander Bada. Bada later became the successor of Oshoffa. The success of the church was due to its charismatic leader Samuel Oshoffa who came to Nigeria to spread the word of God.

Of the Aladura churches thus described, the practice of the Christ Apostolic may be described as laying somewhat between Aladura and the classical Pentecostal churches (Anderson, 2004). Unlike the other Aladuras, members of the Christ Apostolic Church wear ordinary clothes to church. The other Aladuras wear white robes during their service. The Christ Apostolic Church also differs in their service. When the congregation is invited to pray, there is no clapping, beating of African drums or burning of incenses as in the mainstream Aladura churches. In short, they are quieter than their white-robed compatriots. Importantly, the Christ Apostolic Church service is well structured. Their services and rituals resemble the mainstream churches. Services in Aladura churches are spontaneous. Sermons in Aladura churches are based on inspiration of the Holy Ghost. They are lively; punctuated by exclamations “hallelujah,” “amen” and other cries of joy (Zvanaka, 1997, p.70).

Most of the founders of the Aladura churches were semi-illiterates who fiercely believed in the powers of winning adherents to the way of Christ. They all affirmed that they were visionaries and believed that their visions were directly from God. By adopting biblical faith, the founders rejected the traditional gods, diviners, healers, and initiation, ritual sacrifices. In order to achieve these goals, members were directed to seek religious solutions to the problems of sorcery, witches, and other problems. They were to look to God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit for guidance. They then incorporated holy water, candles and spiritual words in their worships (Ray, 2000, p.172). These were the spiritual weapons that led to the spread of the movement.

The Growth of Aladura Churches:

There are many factors that have led to the growth of Aladura churches. Akinade (1996) aptly puts the reason as follows: “The most

reason for the rise of Aladura is the need to shift the church from foreign domination: ecclesiastical, colonial, social, cultural and administrative” (Akinade, 1996, p.10). In support of this viewpoint, J.D.Y. Peel (1968) says:

The real motive of the founders was the conviction that the mission churches were still exotic institutions, and would remain so until led by Africans, they purged themselves of their adventitious and unessential European cultural trappings (Peel, 1968)

In the same breath, Nathaniel Ndiokwere (1981) emphasizes the sense of insecurity. He states:

The sense of insecurity is perpetuated in the African milieu by fears of evil spirits, the phenomenon of “poisoning”....It is the urge to have these problems solved which drives people to the doors of the Aladura prophets...If there were no healing mission there would be no meaningful Independent Churches; if there were no sick people or individuals craving for insecurity, there would be no followers. (Ndiokwere 1981:256, and (quoted by Akinade, 1996)

Professor Omoyajowo who has written extensively on the Aladura becomes explicit on the issue by saying:

Africans generally fear the power of witches and the evil spirits, who beset them in their dreams; they worry about the future and want to know what it has in store for them. Missionary Christianity repudiated this practice and substituted abstract faith for it. The Aladuras take the problem as genuine and offer solutions in the messages of the Holy Spirit through the prophet and visionaries. They give candles for prayers, incense to chase away evil powers and blessed-water for healing purposes, consequently, the Christian suddenly finds himself at home in the new faith, and Christianity now has more meaning for him than before, for it takes special concern for his personal life, his existential problems and assures his security in an incomprehensively hostile universe. That is what has endeared the Cherubim and Seraphim to the hearts of the cross-section of our society,

irrespective of creed, status and class. (Quoted by Akinade, 1996, p.323) (See also Omoyajowo: 1970).

Many people join the Aladura churches because they see some flavors of African tradition. The churches offer a sense of security that helps address the problems of witches, sorceries and visions. Adherents of Aladura churches believe that the churches protect them from invisible powers that exist in the world (Akinade, 1996). Most Africans envisage that the world is full of evil spirits, which can only be prevented by prayers and healings. Consequently, adherents of Aladura churches rationalize that the church offers them protections and consolations from the hostile world. This has helped to expand membership in the Aladura churches.

Thomas (1987) took a different point of view as a central factor to the growth of the Aladura churches. He attributed their growth to their "Holistic mission" (Thomas, 1987:167). He states: "the recognition that witness and obedience to Christ involve not only personal relation to God through Christ but our total life in community (ibid.)". John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* captures this theme in these words: "There is no formal distinction between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion." (See Thomas, 1987, p.16). This means that religion to an African involves the entire community because they believe that it takes the entire community in any religious undertaking. To an African, the community serves as insurance. According to African tradition, one exists because of community. Emphasis is always placed in "we" rather than "I". The collective service practiced by the Aladura Churches and the emphasis on community make the Indigenous Christian Churches attractive to the natives. In other words, western churches place a premium on individualism, which is against African tradition. In light of this, the Aladura churches become a refuge. Worshippers feel at home in their religious experience in Aladura churches, because African theology emphasizes family, work, worship and play as human development. A person's religious experience is seen as proper concerns for the community as a whole. The mainstream churches failed to realize that in the African minds, society is viewed as an organism with the individual subordinate to the community

According to Ray, the expansion of Aladura churches is attributed to what he calls: "spiritual diagnosis" (Ray, 2000, p186). It means that Aladura ritual is devoted to solving personal problems, diagnosing

them and offering solutions to problems that include “conceiving of children, economic affairs, personal security, and health matters” (ibid.). In support of this, Bolaji Idowu (1965) explicitly puts it in this way:

They (the Aladura Churches) claim that their prayers are efficacious for every eventuality...A person who goes to them receives diagnosis of his trouble as well as the necessary prescription of what to do in a concrete, dramatic way, to be saved (Idowu, 1965, p.46).

This suggests that Aladura churches have come to replace “babalawo”—the traditional medicine man in the Yoruba traditional religion, who is consulted for prognostic consultation. The exception here is that Aladuras believe in the power of prayer and drugless healing. No wonder so many people are attracted to the Aladura churches, not only in Nigeria but in England, Germany and the Americas where the churches are expanding. The founding of Aladura churches was a shift in paradigm that aimed to address the type of Christianity that would cater explicitly for the well being of Africans, their ways of worships and to free themselves from the yoke of western theology. In addition, Aladura churches offer a tremendous intellectual vitality and flexibility to serve God, to develop African theology to fit the African experience. In Aladura, the people have found a systematic and encyclopedic body of thought that addresses the issues of witchcrafts, sorcery and the evils of the worlds. This makes them feel whole in their search for beatitude with God.

The Shortcomings of Mission Churches:

There were many mistakes that were made by earlier missionaries. The major problems with those who embraced mission churches was that, once conversions were consummated, converts were uprooted from their communities, and not allowed to live with their kindred. The result of this was the erosion of the African nuclear family and the breakdown of communications between the converts and non-converts. This naiveté is the theme of Professor Idowu’s (1968) observations:

It was a serious mistake that the church took no account of the indigenous beliefs and customs of Africa when she began her

work of evangelization. It is obvious that misguided purpose, a completely new god who had nothing to do with the past of Africa was introduced to her people. Thus there was no proper foundation laid for the gospel message in the hearts of the people and no bridge built between the old and the new, the church has in consequence been speaking to Africans in strange tongues because there was no adequate communications. (Idowu, 1968, p. 423).

In strong words, Professor Emmanuel Ayandele (1966) has this to say to early missionaries:

...missionaries activity was a disruptive force, rocking traditional society to its very foundation, producing disrespectful presumptions and detribalized children through mission schools, destroying the high principles and orderliness of indigenous society through denunciation of traditional religion without adequate substitute and transforming the mental outlook of Nigerians in a way that made them imitate European values slavishly whilst holding irrational features of traditional religion. (Ayandale, 1966, p.326)

Professor Idowu (1968) and Professor Ayandele (1966) agreed that the newfound religion or God that was introduced to the people was disruptive. Added to this, early missionaries made no concerted efforts to substitute the disruptive elements with what Africans could identify with in their religious encounters with the west. The mainstream western missionaries were arrogant and selfish by parroting their culture with absolute disregard to the people's way of life. The God they introduced was alien to the natives. As a result, the Aladura churches stripped the mission churches of the foreign elements that beset their Christian experience and replaced them with Christianity that expressed African identities. By providing such leadership, it was a way of saying that African churches must be led by Africans and for Africans. This assertion and confidence of African prophets called for self-determination in African religious experiences.

The idea of self-determination was precipitated by the condescending manner in which early missionaries treated African churches. As Ray points out, Western scholars and mainstream churches began to stigmatize these churches as "separatist" or "breakaway" churches and dismissed them as syncretistic and

unorthodox. Furthermore, this term stigmatized the Africanized churches as inferior versions of European Christianity instead of recognizing their claim to their own sources (Ray, 2000, p.171).

This condescending attitude triggered Desmond Tutu (1994) to observe:

We in the so-called “mainline” churches looked down disdainfully at the odd phenomenon called independent or indigenous churches. After all were their ministers not nearly all of them illiterate’s persons...and what was this odd mix of the odd clearly pagan beliefs and practices which so obviously condemned them all as syncretistic-the ultimate heresy we had been led to believe? (Tutu 1994) (Quoted Ray 2000:171).

In order to be a genuine Christian, an African must give up his Africanness. This makes him a stranger among his people. More importantly, he is uprooted from the tradition that nurtured him. African indigenous churches are under the microscopic of western theology. They are constantly stigmatized as unorthodox.

Finally the intolerance of the mainstream churches was the big inertia that pushed the Aladuras to embark on a separatist movement, notwithstanding that they were reluctant to break away. Omoyajowo put the crux of the matter in this word in his study of Cherubim and Seraphim:

That the C&S finally became a formal Church was more as a result of the intolerance of the ‘orthodox’ Churches than the logical product of a deliberation and a systematic planning. Members of the Society have alleged that they were sporadically forced out of the mission Churches in the various places where they had organized branches (Omoyajowo, 1982, p.9).

In support of this theme, Levtzion and Fisher (1987) say:

This seems to have been the case with a number of religious movements, which at first hesitated to break away, but were then more or less expelled by the parent body and thus launched into liminality between forcible separation from the previous structure and being incorporated as founding into some new structure (Levtzion et al., 1986, p.168).

In discussing the shortcomings of the mission churches we find that there were many factors that contributed to the liminality of the Aladura churches. They include: lack of the understanding of the African cultures, the negative perceptions of the leaders of the movements as illiterates and intolerance of the mission churches. For example, adherents of early African Christians were disappointed when they found that early missionaries were only preachers and not preachers of love. In their contacts with the natives, early missionaries always gravitated to their fellow Europeans for social activities instead of interacting with African converts. This segregation was spurned on when new mission houses were built in the preserved sections away from the African community. It reached its crescendo when missionaries could not sit with their African brethren during church services (Onibere, 1981, p.11).

Discussion and Conclusion

Are the formations of Aladura churches a form of rebellion? Are Aladura churches another form of paganism masquerading as a Christian movement? Those who pose these questions are alluding to its beliefs and worships. What were the reasons for the establishment of healing churches?

The prophet movement that emerged in the 1920s in Nigeria according to Turner (1967) is a creative response to the breakdown of the old forms of African society that was triggered by mission churches and the colonial era. The formation of the new groups that emerged provided fellowships, security and some sanctioned guidance for living. The culture crisis of the 1930s also created a vacuum. The traditional religion was weakened because of the outbreak of bubonic plague. Consequently, African prophets became substitutes for the chiefs and their churches took the place of the extended family and clan. It would be safe to label the prophet movements as a cultural reaction of the African people rather than a rebellion. Africans were seeking to rediscover themselves, and to promote their own way of life. The religious movement was geared towards an expression of a religious experience that would depict the African way of life. It should be emphasized that many of the founders were products of mainstream churches. Their aims were not to reject Christianity. The protest itself does not have an atom of bitterness against mission churches (Turner, 1967). As previously stated, emphasis was on the African practice of

Christianity that infuses the African culture in Christian practice. The movement demonstrated a very optimistic view of African tradition and charted its own theological course. The reason: The western churches were seen as the church of whites. Africans rationalized that Western churches have not assumed an African face. The tenet of African Christianity is that there are many roads leading to salvation; it is not the task of the West to point only one way. The lesson here is that Western Christianity must begin with the social world as it is, in all its complexity and ambiguity. On that basis, it will evolve a pluralism of religion that will aid different cultures in actualizing their communion with the Christian God. The complexity of our world requires plurality in religion and plurality in no way contradicts western Christianity. Those who grasp the complexity of our world will appreciate the plurality of religion of which the Aladura is a glaring example. It is in this point of view, that one can understand the genesis of African Christianity.

It is difficult to pinpoint one factor as the contributing factor that led the African prophet movements to break away from orthodox Christianity. The popular explanation is always levied at the doorstep of polygamy as the main cause. While many of the Aladura churches condone plurality marriages, this is not uppermost in their agenda. Other scholars express the schism in terms of economics. While there is some validity in this explanation, we can conclude that it is a contributory factor but not the major cause. In attempt to give a valid explanation to the cause, we must probe deeper by perceiving the African prophet movements as a response to provide fellowship in African fashion without resorting to paganism.

It would be erroneous to label the prophet movement as a reversion to paganism. Founders of this movement prevent their members from embracing African traditional medicine of magic. Omoyajawo clarifies this by saying that “borrowing from indigenous tradition must not be seen as an attempt to mask a religion that is “essentially pagan with a barrowed Christian veneer” (Omoyajawo: 1982, p.220). In support, Professor Ayandele has this to say: ‘the much-vilified ‘African’ Churches in West Africa... have no intention to repudiate Christianity. Rather they have been seeking to implant Christianity of the Bible in the African milieu.’ (Quoted by Omoyajawo, 1982; see also Ayandele, 1970)

The main purpose of the movement known as the Aladura churches or prayer people was to bring Christianity to the grassroots. Moreover, to make the native’s experience reflect their beliefs and

cultures. Finally, the movement was an affirmation of African identity, which was being challenged by a foreign culture. As a result, Aladura churches were founded to heal the wounds that were caused by the mission churches and to free Africans from the captivity of the west. It is a movement in which adherents can attain self-determination rather than being tied to the apron string of western theology.

Many converts are attracted by the use of mediumistic trances, because they address issues of witches and sorcery, which are the major problems that beset Africans. Since the mainstream churches fail to address the issues adequately in their theology, Aladura churches become a refuge for the troubled. Moreover, the mainstream churches are interested in Christianizing Africa rather than evangelizing. Chipenda, Karanga, Mugabi and Omari (1991) makes the decision between the terms as follows:

Christianization is a detached, cold transmission of values, dogmas, rites and symbols of Christianity. Such transmission may derive from sympathy, zeal, or affection which we portray toward people. Evangelization is the transmission of the Good News of salvation. It is proclaiming God's intervention in world history, done once for all touching all mankind in every situation...People who receive the power to share what is dear to their hearts, creating new life and identifying new tasks when old challenges have been overcome. (Chipenda, Karanga, Mugabi, & Omari. (1991, p.13).

The Christianization of Africa has been very condescending to the populace. It strips Africans of their personality and culture. On the other hand, evangelization puts both the converted and converter on equal footing before the gospel. It emphasizes the power of sharing Christ by all, thus affording both persons a religious experience and imparting an equal playing field.

Benjamin B. Ray (2000) in African Religion best expressed the Aladura movement:

The Africanized churches, while rejecting the traditional gods and rituals as "pagans," have retained three basic elements of traditional thought: the concept of supreme creator God, the belief in malevolent spiritual forces, and the belief in the power of ritual words and acts. Only by seeing African Christianity as a new synthesis of biblical beliefs with these basic elements of the indigenous religions can we understand how African Christians have creatively incorporated and transformed Christianity into African forms. In this way,

Christianity has become a force for resolving life's problems: offering cures for illness, solutions to personal problems, moral guidance, and a means to personal salvation (Ray, p. 172).

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