

# The Influence Of African Traditional Culture On Symbolism In Some Selected African Independent Churches In Nigeria

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**Abstract**—African Independent Churches are the churches founded or pioneered in Africa by Africans and for Africans. They are completely independent of foreign control. These churches have distinctive African characteristics because they grew up from African Cultural milieu. The doctrines and practices of these churches are no doubt influenced by African culture. One of the objectives of this study, therefore, is to explore how African Traditional culture had influenced symbolism in some selected African churches in Nigeria. Being an historical study, historical method is employed in its analysis. The findings of the work show that African culture has pervasive influence on symbolism in African independent churches. The work concludes that the influence of African culture on some practices of independent churches is not syncretism but an attempt to contextualize Christianity.

**Keywords**—Independent, Churches, Influence, Symbolism, African, Culture.

## Introduction

The experience of Africans in churches established by the missionaries had remained unpalatable for years. The founders of independent churches wanted to free the church from the political domination of the European missionaries who deliberately excluded Africans from the local participation in the administration of the church.

There has been strong desire by the Africans to give Christianity African colouration. They wanted to incorporate into the church African ideas that will make the church interesting, attractive and meaningful to the great majority of Africans. To separate African culture and tradition from Christianity might remain a difficult task since Christianity in Africa evolved from African socio-cultural environment. The focus of this work is to examine how African culture had influenced the use of symbols in African independent churches. For easy coverage and better understanding, the work shall examine characteristics of African Independent churches and the influence of African Traditional culture on symbolism in African Independent churches.

## Characteristics of African Independent Churches

African Independent Churches are characterized by the following:

- **Prayer:** African Independent Churches handle prayer with all seriousness. Some of these churches are even described by many people as “Aladura”. Their prayers in most cases are said extempore as led by the Holy Spirit. Unlike the historical churches, they do not have Prayer Book. These churches believe strongly in efficacy of prayer. According to them, there is no problem that prayer cannot solve. They regularly indulge in fasting.

- **Worship:** Worship in African Independent Churches are not stereotyped. They worship as directed by God. Some of them make use of objects such as incense, candles and Holy words during their worship services.

- **Use of Candles:** Lighting of candles apart from being symbolic according to members, they dispel darkness and remove anything that may want to hinder prayers from being answered.

- **Incense:** African Independent Churches most especially, Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial Church of Christ and Church of the Lord Aladura believe that evil spirits inhabit every environment hence, there is need to always drive them away during prayer because failure to do so may hinder prayer from being answered.

- **Contextualization of Christian Doctrines:** As earlier mentioned in this work, Africans believe that Christianity can only be interesting, relevant and meaningful when it is given African colouration. African Independent churches therefore contextualize some of the doctrines of their churches.

- **Healing:** African Independent churches believe that the solution to man’s problem is a collective responsibility. As God has his own role to play, man must not neglect his, too. Since Africans believe that every problem has its source, forces of evil are believed to be the major and real sponsor of every calamity that befalls man. African Independent churches most especially, Celestial Church of Christ, Cherubim and Seraphim church like the African traditional religion, believe that what is evil must be exorcised. Those that are confronted with different degree of problems persistently visit Aladura Churches for permanent solution.

- **Belief in Mountain (Ori oke):** It is believed that mountains are scared places since spirits inhabit them. Others also believe that the higher one goes, the nearer he is to God. Some African Independent churches have mountains that are dedicated to prayers.

- **Participatory Worship:** Worship services in African Independent churches are designed in such a way that every worshipper is allowed to participate. Most of the songs according to Oshitelu are two or three-line refrains thereby, making it easy for their members to follow.<sup>1</sup> He explains further that in this way, their social, psychological and religious needs are met.

- **Keeping Faith Home:** It is very common in African Independent churches to have places within the church premises dedicated for special assignments. In some churches, they are described as "Abe Abo"- "Protection Home". The sick and mental patients, as observed by Oshitelu<sup>2</sup>, may be kept there for a special and prayerful attention.

### African Traditional Culture and Independent Churches

#### Culture

Culture has been defined by many people from different perspectives. Culture reveals the peculiarities of a particular race or group of people. From whatever perspectives anyone may consider culture, the fact still remains that it showcases the way of life of any community.

Paddington, cited in Oshitelu defines culture of a community or society as the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment by which they satisfy their biological and social needs. It is by these, he explained further, that they adapt to their neither particular community nor society. Taylor also presents culture as the knowledge, customs, beliefs, values, morals, arts as well as abilities acquired by man as a member of his community.<sup>3</sup> Linton and Router cited in Oshitelu appear to have shared the same view with Taylor as they defined culture as the sum total of knowledge, habit, attitudes and other variables shared and transmitted by members of a particular society. The sum total of human creation: the organized results of group experiences.

Culture has also been defined as a concept that encompasses the social behaviour, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups. It is often originated from or attributed to a specific region or location.<sup>4</sup> Culture can be acquired through the learning processes of enculturation and socialization which is shown by its diversity across societies.

<sup>1</sup>G.A. Oshitelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>G.A. Oshitelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup>E.B. Taylor, 1891. Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom. (2 Vols third edition Revised) London; John Murray.

<sup>4</sup>en.m. wikipedia.org/wiki

In all reality, African traditional society is not homogenous in nature but diverse and heterogeneous so that every person who grows up in a particular society is suffused and influenced by the culture of that society either consciously or unconsciously. Christianity, as a faith experience can be expressed by cultural means and ritual.

To separate or dissociate Christian practices from their cultural background will be extremely difficult if not impossible. The major ideological flaw of the missionaries who came to evangelize Africa was their attempt to separate Christianity from the African cultural practices.

It must be emphasized that African cultural expression of faith is based on community harmony, so that there is always a kind of harmony between individuals and the community they belong to. Whatever affects the community invariably affects every individual living in the community.

Cultures are externally affected through contact between societies. Definitely, when Christianity came in contact with African culture, there was cultural influence. Since Christianity emerged from the cultural milieu of Africa, the influence of African traditional culture on symbolic practices of African Independent churches is inevitable.

It is an observable phenomenon that every religion comes into being within a particular cultural setting and practices.<sup>5</sup> For instance, when Christianity got to the Roman Empire, it was influenced by the existing Greco Roman culture. This, according to Oshitelu,<sup>6</sup> is particularly noticeable in its theology and philosophy. Likewise, when it spread to England, it necessarily acquired series of English cultures. Unfortunately when it got to Africa, the missionaries decided to jettison African cultural factors. That was the reason why the "mission churches" type of Christianity did not make impact on their African followers. The desire to indigenize Christianity, however, made the Africans to break away from the "mission churches". It is not an overstatement, therefore, to submit that African Independent churches evolved from a cultural setting of the Africans. Since African Independent churches evolved from African traditional culture, it is, however, necessary in a study of this nature to examine the influence of this traditional culture on these churches.

One of the remarkable traits of African Independent churches is their insistence on given Christianity, an African "colouration"<sup>7</sup>. African Independent churches in Nigeria are pragmatic in contextualizing Christianity in the African culture.

<sup>5</sup>G.A. Oshitelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup>G.A. Oshitelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup>D. Ayegboyin and S. A. Ishola (Eds), 1997. African indigenous churches. Lagos: Greater Height publications. P. 31.

These churches believe that missionary Christianity with European cultural manifestations had failed to meet some of the pressing demands of the Africans. This failure, therefore, makes these churches to preach a branch of Christianity that is deeply rooted in the African traditional culture. The churches, through their doctrines and practices, teach a kind of Christianity that has the trademark of the African culture<sup>8</sup>. The churches like the traditional religion, emphasize the good things of life that the Africans appreciate.

Both the African Independent churches and the African traditional religion share in the cultural background of their society. The interaction of African Independent churches with African traditional culture makes the churches to incorporate a great deal of African culture. In Cherubim and Seraphim Church, for instance, as in other African Independent churches, there is the same fraternity whereby individuals are encouraged to regard one another as members of the same family. They are encouraged to support and sympathize with one another.<sup>9</sup>

The prayer gown being worn by Cherubim and Seraphim and Celestial church members has affinity with the Yoruba "Aso-Ebi" which can be described as the "cloth of understanding". The significance of Aso-Ebi in Oshitelu's<sup>10</sup> view will enable one to know how valuable the use of prayer gown is in some of these churches. The Yoruba, most especially, the people of Ekiti, Ondo and Osun attach more importance to "Aso-Ebi" to the extent that whenever they are inviting others to the community to participate in any important celebration, a clothe of certain worth, colour and design will be chosen which well-wishers and participants are expected to wear for that special ceremony. "Aso-Ebi" symbolizes solidarity during celebrations.

In the same vein, members of the Cherubim and Seraphim and Celestial church and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) believe that prayer gown levels the gap between the persons of higher status and those of lower one, and thereby eliminates, at least, temporarily, the built-in antagonism between the rich and the poor, the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The poor man in the church feels that he is, at least, equal to the rich man because he wears an identical dress with him. Such a feeling, although for a brief moment, purges him of his previous feeling of inferiority complex or financial inadequacy. He may also feel honoured by this temporary leveling of status.

In view of the parallel between wearing of "Aso-Ebi" in Yoruba traditional culture and the prayer gown of Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial church of

Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura), one can infer from this that the approach is a clear adaptation of the churches to Yoruba traditional culture. The symbolic wearing of white garment or prayer gown by African Independent church members are to be understood in the light of African traditional practices which emphasize the value of co-operation, collective responsibility, commonality, synthesis and oneness.

The Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ officially reject most ideas and practices that are traditional to the African environment. For example, the church theoretically prohibits traditional healing methods, the consultation of herbalists, ifa priests, the use of charms, witchcraft, sorcery and all "pagan"<sup>11</sup> practices. In fact, Cherubim and Seraphim church, most especially, requires all its converts to renounce membership of all cults; to desist from the worship of Satan and idols; and from following any "pagan" priests and from engaging in magic or any power of darkness.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the church's stances against African religion, cognizance must be given to the fact that it, no doubt, shares with African religion some features, one of which is the cultic use of water. The use of water in healing is traced by Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial church of Christ and Church of the Lord (Aladura) to Jesus and Elijah in John 5:1 ff and 2 Kings 5:1 ff, respectively. These churches, therefore, considers their practices as a reenactment of miracles performed by these prominent Bible characters. The Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ are correct by tracing the cultic use of water to effect healing to Elijah and Jesus but it is also obvious that not all the healing practices of Elijah and Jesus are being used by these churches. The use of saliva, for instance, to effect healing was used by Jesus but cannot be found in the practice of the church.<sup>13</sup> The use of ritualistic ceremonies for healing such as bathing at the crossroads, graveyards, market places at mild nights and wilderness have no parallel in the healing miracles recorded in the Bible but may be explained in the Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial church of Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura), taking over some of the age-long Yoruba healing practices.

The Celestial Church of Christ's use of anointing oil as symbolic elements, most especially, for healing is also paralleled in African traditional culture where the therapeutic use of palm oil is quite evident<sup>14</sup>. Palm oil is used as a balm for soothing painful or infected parts

<sup>8</sup>D. Ayegboyin and S. A. Ishola (Eds), 1997. African indigenous churches. Lagos: Greater Height publications. P. 120

<sup>9</sup>D. Ayegboyin and S. A. Ishola (Eds), 1997. African indigenous churches. Lagos: Greater Height publications. P. 120

<sup>10</sup>D. Ayegboyin and S. A. Ishola (Eds), 1997. African indigenous churches. Lagos: Greater Height publications.

<sup>11</sup>O.E. Alana, 1994. "The Impact of the Healing miracles of Jesus on the Aladura Healing methods in Yoruba land" in journal of Arabic and religious studies. Vol 2. P. 22

<sup>12</sup>O.E. Alana, 1994. "The Impact of the Healing miracles of Jesus on the Aladura Healing methods in Yoruba land" in journal of Arabic and religious studies. Vol 2. P. 22

<sup>13</sup>O.P. Omisore, personal communication, June 7, 2023. I'm

<sup>14</sup>O.E. Alana, 1994. "The Impact of the Healing miracles of Jesus on the Aladura Healing methods in Yoruba land" in journal of Arabic and religious studies. Vol 2. P. 22

of the body, such as boil. It may also be taken orally to neutralize poison. It is clear that Cherubim and Seraphim church's use of "anointing oil" as symbolic element can be traced to the use of palm oil in African traditional culture.

The use of candle in some African Independent churches has its foundation derived from Exodus 25: 31-37 and Revelation 1:12-13, where the erection of a golden candlestick with seven branches is mentioned. The Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ's reference to the Bible in respect of the use of candles is correct but these churches do not completely make use of candles as used in the bible. For instance, apart from using it for illumination, the Bible describes the spirit of man as the candle of God that searches the inward part of the belly (Prov 20: 27). Celestial Church of Christ emphasizes the physical benefits derived from the use of candles at the expense of the spiritual. It is also an observable trend that Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ employ unbiblical method in their use of candles. The cultic use of candles to fight enemies or evil spirits, such as witches, wizard and demons has no scriptural basis. The cultic use of candle to join a man to a woman in marriage or to separate lovers forcefully lacks biblical support. There is nowhere in the bibles that says candles are used to spiritually manipulate the consciousness of a person to do one's bidding as practiced in the Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ. The above cultic use of candles can only be given African traditional and cultural explanation. It is indeed a reflection of the Church members' African traditional and cultural background.

In a real African setting, objects are used to symbolically represent individuals. An effigy that is being destroyed symbolizes the destruction of the individual that it is representing. Using an individual's shadow as a point of contact is very common in some parts of Yoruba land<sup>15</sup>. Whatever happens to the shadow invariably affects the victim. A patient may be asked to set ablaze an old belonging like a cap or head-tie, as a way of recovering from a state of illness. The burning of the belonging is a confirmation of the success of the ritual.<sup>16</sup> The cultic use of candle by Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ, most especially, when it is carved to represent individuals, are identical with African traditional methods of healing. The use of candle as one of the symbolic elements in Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ is an attempt to contextualize Christianity. It must, therefore, be borne in mind that African traditional culture has a more profound impact on symbolism in African Independent churches.

<sup>15</sup>M. Y. Nabofa, 1994. *Symbolism in African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Paperback publishers Limited. P. 54.

<sup>16</sup>M. Y. Nabofa, 1994. *Symbolism in African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Paperback publishers Limited. P. 54.

African Independent churches are correct by tracing the use of palm fronds, to the events in Lev. 23:40, Neh. 8:15 and John 12:12-13 where palm branches were used to commemorate the victory of the Israelites from captivity and the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ to Jerusalem respectively. The belief of the church that palm frond symbolizes victory is, therefore, in conformity with the Bible as seen in the above passages. But then, it is necessary to take cognizance of the fact that most of the practices of Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ as regards the use of palm fronds have no parallel in the Bible. It cannot be established anywhere in the Bible that palm fronds are used to cast out demons nor used as sponge for spiritual bathing.

The cultic use of palm fronds to fight the enemies or to protect ones properties as practiced by the members of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, most especially, has no biblical justification. The practice appears to have been derived from the African background where palm fronds are placed on objects or properties to indicate that such objects or properties should not be touched by anybody except the owner. Palm fronds are also placed at the shrine to traditionally symbolize sacredness. In order to hallow places that are considered to be sacred, young palm fronds are spread at their entrances. They serve as warnings to people, especially the non-initiates and those that are not ritually pure, to keep off. They also act as reminders to all those who are worthy to go into such a place to keep it holy and comport themselves in a sacred decorum<sup>17</sup>. When they are spread in the front, at rear and sides of a vehicle, they signify the presence of a corpse in such a vehicle<sup>18</sup>. The Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ's ritualistic use of palm fronds, therefore, may be explained as the taking over of some of the age long African traditional culture.

The actual impetus for the practice of burning incense in Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) is derived from the salvation and the Israelites' redemptive stories in Numbers 16:35, 46; Exodus 30:1,7; Lev 10:1. Tracing the use of incense by the church to the Israelites' stories is correct but it is obvious that the reasons for the burning of incense by the Israelites are not completely the same with that of the selected African Independent churches. For instance, it was meant for atonement in Number 16:46 whereas it is only used to chase away evil forces in the church. Some of the ritualistic methods of burning incense in the selected churches have no basis in the bible. The practice of mixing incense with perfume and oil to rub the body for protection or to attract favour is at variance with the biblical practice. This ritualistic way of using incense has parallel in African traditional culture where cream derived from some

<sup>17</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>18</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

dreaded trees are used to rub the body for the purpose of getting favour from people<sup>19</sup>. We can, therefore, infer from this that the approach of the selected African Independent church members, as regard the use of incense, is a clear adaptation of their African backgrounds where rituals are usually performed.

The only reference to the use of girdle by Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ is Isaiah 5:27. Referring to the assurance given to the Israelites in this passage as the basis of the church's use of girdle is acceptable. It seems to be in consonance with the church's literary interpretation which is "readiness for action". However, it is an observable phenomenon in Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ that girdles are used for rituals.<sup>20</sup> For instance, they are, sometimes, tied around a person for deliverance; the members, in some cases, can hang them inside their vehicles or houses for protection.<sup>21</sup> After consecration, they are dipped inside water for bathing or drinking depending on the nature of the user's problem. Whenever the worshippers want to harm their enemies, black girdles are used. These ritualistic ways of using girdles in the selected African Independent churches as highlighted above, lack biblical support but can be explained as the influence of African traditional cultures where charms are hung inside vehicles and houses for protection. Without any iota of doubt, the impact of the African traditional culture is more profound on the use of symbols in the selected African Independent churches.

The use of salt in the Cherubim and Seraphim is in connection with the charge given to the Israelites in Leviticus 2:13; that every obligation of their meat offering should be seasoned with salt. The use of salt for healing in the church is also in conformity with Elisha's method of healing in 2 Kings 2:20 ff. For the Cherubim and Seraphim church to have patterned its use of salt for healing after biblical practices, as seen above, is good but it is also obvious that the church makes use of salt in ritualistic ways that are antithetical to the practice of the Bible. The cultic spreading of salt on the ground for protection<sup>22</sup> as practiced in Cherubim and Seraphim church has no justification in the Bible but has parallel equivalence in Yoruba traditional culture called "Awure".<sup>23</sup>

Some members of Celestial Church of Christ use some symbolic elements apart from those explained above that appear ritualistic in nature. Using sugar cane mixed with other emblem such as maize flower, palm oil and beans to prepare "spiritual load" which are usually put inside broken native pot to be placed at the crossroad for the deliverance of a possessed

person, for instance, is purely ritualistic<sup>24</sup>. It is indeed a practice transferred from African traditional culture to Christianity which further establishes the influence of African culture on symbolism in the Celestial Church of Christ.

As earlier explained in this study, ashes are used ritually to bring the spirit of confusion on individual.<sup>25</sup> They are also used to quench enemies' glory. They are used to prepare spiritual mixtures meant to cure blindness.

In the light of the above, we can, therefore, conclude that the influence of traditional culture on symbolism in Cherubim and Seraphim church and Celestial church of Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) is as a result of the members' adaptation to African traditional culture. This is necessary since the church evolved from the socio-cultural environments of the Yoruba<sup>26</sup>. The church cannot naturally estrange or alienate itself from the Yoruba cultural background. It cannot but make use of the symbolic techniques of its days, though in a different context. It is true that some modification of biblical ideas by the selected African Independent churches is due to the desire to contextualize Christianity in African culture. Such a trend is already observable, for example, in the church's elaborate use of symbols. However, the church needs to be conscious of the fact that contextualization based on compromise of standard biblical norms and doctrines, could lead to syncretism.

The belief of the church in sacred places is traceable to African traditional culture and the practice of praying at cross roads or where two or more rivers meet has parallel equivalence in African traditional religion where it is believed that a road junction is the meeting point of both visible and invisible beings.<sup>27</sup> It is where both negative and positive forces also meet. Hence, the undomesticated spirits and those that are considered to be intractable are invoked and sacrificed to at such places.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Criticism of the Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial church of Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in respect of the use of symbols, particularly those that involve ritualistic ceremonies and cultic use of symbolic elements such as candle, water, oil and incense, are very sharp. They are viewed with disdain as they are associated with African traditional culture and practices which are generally considered to be

<sup>19</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>20</sup>Elder Olorungebeja, a personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>21</sup>Elder Olorungebeja, a personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>22</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>23</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>24</sup>M. Y. Nabofa, 1994. Symbolism in African Traditional Religion. Ibadan: Paperback publishers Limited. P. 54.

<sup>25</sup>M. Y. Nabofa, 1994. Symbolism in African Traditional Religion. Ibadan: Paperback publishers Limited. P. 54.

<sup>26</sup>E. A. Babalola, 2003. Interaction of Religion in Yoruba land; A Theological and Social Analysis. Ibadan, Awofisayo Lithographic Printer.

<sup>27</sup>I. O. Ayegunle, personal communication, June 7, 2023.

<sup>28</sup>P. S. Berge, 2006. Religion and Symbols. California, Regal Books

“idolatrous”<sup>29</sup>. In all honesty, such criticisms appear to be erroneous. The Cherubim and Seraphim church, Celestial church of Christ and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) symbolic elements are not to be faulted on the basis that they are derived from African traditional culture since we believed that such practices are being given a new content in the power of God. The church should only be criticized for compromising standards of biblical norms, the practice which may, no doubt, lead to syncretism if not corrected.

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<sup>1</sup>G.A. Ositelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>1</sup>G.A. Ositelu, 2007. History of the Aladura (Independent) Churches 1918-1940: An Interpretation. Ibadan, Hope publications, p. 116.

<sup>29</sup>J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu, 1979. West African Traditional Religion. Ibadan, Onibonjo Press.