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AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCHES AND THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Introduction

Over the past fifty years, the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have been at the forefront of indigenising Christianity in an African context. Previously, it was assumed that, the ‘West’ had a monopoly on Christianity and that they were the sole custodians of the Christian Faith. Consequently, Western theology was presented as biblical and universal. The advent of Western mission in Ghana in the 1830’s and 1840’s brought with it practices and liturgy that were mostly western; African forms of religious expression were considered heathenistic or pagan. Missionaries suppressed the real spirit of the Africans and they even taught that for a person to be a true Christian, he/she must speak and act like a European. African names were considered pagan, unworthy of Christian identity. Consequently, European or Western names were given to Africans as “Christian names”. The Missionaries went as far as separating Christian converts from their families, friends and relatives, thus, militating against the African sense of ‘we-feeling’, amply captured by the maxim, “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”

There was a common perception among missionaries that, African culture had nothing to contribute to the Christian faith. They, therefore, declared that every aspect of the traditional African culture had to be expunged before Christianity could be established. The wearing of native clothes to church services was forbidden and, in its place, Africans were told to wear European attire. Similarly, there were to be no wearing of native sandals; women were barred from any leadership position, and rites of passages, such as the Otofo² of the Ga tribe, were prohibited. New communities, one of the most famous being Salem,

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were established as places where converted Christians were segregated from their families. *Libation* was rejected as a pagan practice, and drumming and dancing in worship were also outlawed, because of their perceived pagan association. Some even declared that an African could not be saved. The missionaries assumed that. Christianity was seen as the very antithesis of African traditional life and culture, when, in fact, as Kwesi Dickson has ironically pointed out, there is a cultural continuity between African culture and the culture in which the biblical narrative was played out. These forms of foreign religious domination awoke in Africans the need to struggle for an African Christian identity and African ways of worship. African indigenous church started in part as a protest against this western religious hegemony. M.L. Daneel states:

African Independent Churches have been described as protest movements in relation to oppressive colonial government, as reactionary groups that resent the paternalistic approach of missionaries or as deliberate attempts to adapt Christian belief and worship to their specific ethno-religious background.

As a result of this affront to African identity, the African Indigenous Churches took the initiative to repudiate western administrative control of Christianity. Some local individuals established churches and became self-controlled, self-governing, and self-supporting. These churches worship God as Africans using African expression and modes of understanding. AICs also wanted a belief structure that would answer their present needs that were often spiritual. In Ghana, people were afraid of the powers of spirits, ancestors, witches and wizards. Western missionary spirituality, which was often cerebral and rationally based, did not have answers for such fears and concerns. This left a vacuum in the African soul, because they wanted immediate answers to these spiritual problems and a religious system that could contend with such spiritual powers. Maimela remarks that:

A large number of African Christians believed that the church was not interested in their daily misfortunes. illness,
encounter with evil and witchcraft, bad luck, poverty, barrenness — in short, all their concrete social problems ... most Africans often did not know what to do with their new, attractive Christian religion and yet one which dismally failed to meet their emotional and spiritual needs.¹

Many found this need fulfilled by AICs, who geared their religiosity to meet African needs and expression. In Ghana, the AICs’ leaders are proud that their services are shaped by African religiosity, graced by African music and dancing⁹ and are in touch with African problems.

As Andrew Walls has attested, the AICs have shown us that, Christianity is ‘culturally infinitely translatable’."¹⁰ They made it plain that Africans want to be Christians based upon their own salvation needs, and not on the conditions often lay down by the missionaries or the mission-related churches. The AICs are proof that there are other ways of expressing the Christian faith that are equally as valid as western forms of appropriation. In fact, it might well be argued that, it was through the AICs, in part, that Christendom has realized that Christianity cannot afford to be a monolithic inflexible unchanging form of life, which is out of touch with the local environment and felt needs.”¹¹ Today, AICs, through their style of worship, theology, dress, and practices continue to represent an indigenous expression of the Christian faith in an African context and set the pace for African Christianity for other churches and denominations to follow.

There are a number of specific areas in which AICs have contributed to the changing face of Christianity in Africa in a post-missionary era, however, I will be highlighting in this article their specific contribution to African Christian pneumatology.

The Holy Spirit in African Indigenous Christianity

"Sunsuni Kronkron (the Holy Spirit) has a prominent place within the religiosity of AICs. Their pneumatological focus has earned them the name “Sumsum Asore” meaning “Spiritual Churches”. Allan Anderson suggests that, due to the central place given to the Holy Spirit in these churches, Christian theologians are beginning to take pneumatology
Victor E.W. Hayward said, “we are sure that the Holy Spirit has much to say to the Older Churches through the existence and practices of the Independent Church movements in Africa.”

AICs can be described as ‘pneumatiko’. This Greek expression is derivative of ‘pneuma’ meaning ‘Spirit’, and refers to someone, who has received God’s Spirit and presumably lives in accordance with this relationship. In a number of languages, it is not possible to speak of ‘possessing the Spirit’, but one can often be said ‘to be possessed by the Spirit’ or ‘those whom the Spirit possesses’ or ‘... owns’ or ‘... controls.’ In the African indigenous churches, great emphasis is laid on the presence and the activities of the Holy Spirit. These churches experience the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives, but particularly during worship services. Through the power and the influence of the Holy Spirit, their spiritual leaders give prophetic messages, see visions and provide healing for the sick among them. For them, every activity and almost every word that is uttered is determined and directed by the Holy Spirit. Among them, every event has a spiritual connotation, because by nature, Africans are sensitive to the activities of evil spirits, wizards, and witches. John S. Mbiti, commenting on Africans’ sensitivity to spirits says:

African Christians do take into serious consideration the spiritual realities, which, basically, come out of the very background in which their ardent praying tradition is born. There is widespread belief that there are divinities and spirits associated with natural phenomena and objects, as well as spirits of (he departed; there is a strong belief in the power of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, the evil word or evil look and the power of the curse.

In Africa, therefore, and specifically within African indigenous churches, death, sickness, physical disability, travel, infertility, difficulties in childbirth and other occurrences in human life are given a spiritual interpretation. Spiritual exercises such as fasting, praying, meditation and casting out demons, are important aspects of the spirituality of African indigenous churches in confronting these maladies. Prophet Jehu-Appiah, a Ghanaian African Indigenous Church leader,
said in 1967 that, “Politically, we are harmless; economically, we are feeble; socially, we are downtrodden; but spiritually, we are more than giants.” The Pentecostal explosion that we are witnessing across the African continent began with African Indigenous Churches insisting on the foregrounding of the Holy Spirit in Christian apprehension for the African context.

Worship is a very central activity for AICs in Ghana and, indeed, throughout Africa. AICs see worship as a time of joy and celebration in the power of the Holy Spirit. Clifton Clarke, in his research on African indigenous churches in Ghana, maintained that:

Music expressed through singing and dancing is the language of the transcendent; the conduit line through which the presence of the supernatural may be invoked. The essence of music as ‘orality’ is seen its ability to project the worshipper into the spirit-world. In the ‘trance’ of song ‘all is spirit.’ The song and the dance, therefore, are not just a means by which Christ becomes imminent within the context of the worship, but also the means by which the worshipper becomes transcendent into the realm of the spirit-world.

The worship service is made up of singing, dancing, jumping, clapping of hands, speaking in tongues, and making a joyful noise unto the Lord. Some of the African musical instruments used are the arm pit drum, maracas, tambourines, drums, and double bells. Most of the songs are sung in the vernacular and are, therefore, sung with greater understanding than the hymns of the mission-related churches that are foreign to them. Closing time is not important to them since they believe it is the Holy Spirit who will decide when a worship service should come to a close. Visions, dreams, prophecies, and healing are highly valued and sought after in these churches. Prophets, pastors, and prophetesses seem to be looking for a new, special message and “a word of prophecy” for almost everyone who comes for consultation. More often than not, these prophetic messages will be addressing issues of health and well-being.

The use of the spiritual gifts is also encouraged. As a result, the church members are given different roles to play in order for them to
demonstrate their spiritual gifts. In the AICs, there are servers, cross bearers, prayer warriors, etc., and members of these groups are also allowed to lead worship, preach, teach, and perform other functions like the head pastor. In fact, if the head pastor is not present, it is expected that the servers or the cross bearers can lead the service. So the AICs recognize that each member of the church has been given a special gift by the Holy Spirit and that person should be allowed to use his/her gift for the common good of the church. In this respect, there is an egalitarian understanding of the distribution of the spiritual gifts that transcend gender, age, and ethnic background.

The Holy Spirit and the Bible

The pneumatic emphasis of AICs is not only due to African living in a world of spirits, but also due to their reading and understanding of the Bible which they believe has a strong pneumatic underpinning. It could be argued that AICs were following the footsteps of Jesus, who also had a pneumatic focus in His ministry. Throughout His ministry, from His bodily conception to His Ascension, Jesus Christ was led by the Holy Spirit. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, anointed by the Holy Spirit before He started His ministry, led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil; He was full of the Holy Spirit before He was tempted by the devil; He taught in the power of the Holy Spirit and was praised; He offered Himself as atonement through the Holy Spirit, and it was the Holy Spirit who raised Him from the dead. This pneumatic emphasis evident in the New Testament — often downplayed by the earlier mission churches — has great resonance for AICs.

AIC leaders take very seriously the fact that Jesus, knowing very well the significance of the Holy Spirit in His ministry, commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem till the Spirit comes upon them to give them power for the ministry He assigned to them. So in the book of Acts, where the story of the early church is recorded, we see that the disciples ministered in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. This requirement for the disciples to wait on the Holy Spirit is symbolized through the many seeking and waiting prayers services in which the faithful pray and tarry for the power of the Holy Spirit to fill their
lives. When leaders and servers are needed to participate in church services, there is an expectation that such a one would be filled with the Spirit and exhibit qualities of a person who is very spiritually mature. The early Christian need for leaders, who were ‘filled with the Spirit’, to help with the widows and the daily distributions of food, is further evidence of the importance of the Spirit in the life of the believer.\(^{22}\)

Further Biblical examples, which demonstrate the centrality of the Holy Spirit in Scripture to which the AICs attest, is seen in the fact that, Jesus knew that, without the Holy Spirit, the disciples could not do the work, therefore, He promised them the Holy Spirit before His ascension.\(^{23}\) When the Spirit came upon them in Jerusalem, He made the difference in their lives. Peter, who denied Jesus three times, now became bold and testified about Jesus. He healed the crippled and, though they were ordinary men, they became extraordinary men in the eyes of the people of their day. They became bold and preached Christ no matter the consequences or the threats they faced. The Holy Spirit also controlled their movements and directed them in the selection of Christian leaders.\(^{24}\)

These few examples, often cited by AIC leaders, show that the disciples relied on the Holy Spirit in their ministry and, though they faced a lot of opposition and difficulties, they were successful in their ministries. Based upon the above texts, one can conveniently say that, the early church was ‘pneumatiko’. The AICs, therefore, believe that, in asserting the centrality of the Holy Spirit, they are in what Howard Ervin, in another context, calls ‘pneumatic continuality with the early Apostolic witness.’ Ervin states:

> When one encounters the Holy Spirit in the same apostolic experience, with the same charismatic phenomenology accompanying it, one is in a better position to come to terms with the apostolic witness in a truly existential manner. One then stands in “pneumatic” continuity with the faith community that birthed the Scriptures.\(^{25}\)

This pneumatic continuity creates a deepening respect for the witness of Scripture to themselves, thus making the Bible “alive” in a new and fresh way.
In spite of the evidence in Scripture, the ministry of the Third Article of the Apostles’s Creed was often ignored and misunderstood by the mission-related churches. Members in some of these churches, who demonstrated the gift(s) of the Spirit, were, at times, excommunicated. Peter Baker, speaking about the multiplication of New Churches in Ghana and the spiritual gifts said:

Though not all newer churches are Pentecostal in their practice, most of them are, and even those which are not, are glad to be called “spiritual churches,” indicating their emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Not all stress speaking in tongues, but nearly all stress the gift of healing. The older churches have regarded these gifts with suspicion and members, who received them, have been discouraged, sometimes driven out.²⁶

During this period, the AICs were already ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit and were allowing their members to exercise their spiritual gifts. This earned them the name “Spiritual Churches” or “Sumsum Asore”. Harold W. Turner was right in saying that, “Many of them (AICs) also feel that they are reforming Western mission Christianity, which has lost its power and does not rely upon the Holy Spirit.”²⁷

It was not long before those in the mission-related churches began to realized that, the ministry of the AICs was actually ‘scratching where they were itching’ and began to attend their services. Many, who wanted to maintain their place in the mission-related churches, due to the benefits, such as free education and other fringe benefits, would attend the midweek services of AICs. Kofi Asare Opoku observes:

To a large extent, the occurrence of the independent Churches is an attempt by African Christians to find ‘a place to feel at home’, not only in terms of worship, but also in the whole expression of religion. In the Independent Churches, one sees an attempt to Africanize Christianity, and in this exercise, there is evidence of fusion of elements of both traditional culture and Christianity, which removes the feeling
Today, through the pneumatic emphasis of the AICs, many churches have now opened up to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. A number of the mission-related churches in Ghana have started prayer and deliverance sessions where people with spiritual gifts are allowed to exercise their God-given gifts without the fear of excommunication. For instance, “The Presbyterian Church of Ghana now has a union of Bible Study and Prayer Groups in which these gifts (Spiritual gifts) are emphasized, and other older churches too are coming to recognize these gifts as manifestations of the Spirit.” These developments indicate that, those churches that initially have nothing to do with most of the gifts of the Spirit are now practicing it and encouraging their members to exercise their spiritual gifts. Most churches in Ghana today are now pneumatiko.

**Pneumatic Style of Worship**

The AICs believe that the Holy Spirit controls their worship. It is the Spirit that determines when the worship should be brought to an end since He directs each and every aspect of the worship service. Drumming, dancing, and clapping are important parts of the worship service. Initially, drumming and dancing were not allowed in the mission-related churches.

In Ghana, as it is in other African countries, music and dance provide the means for people to express their culture and worldview. For the missionaries to deny this to African converts was, therefore, a deliberate attempt to suppress African cultural heritage. During those years, when most Christians were shying away from drumming, dancing, and clapping, the AICs were drumming, dancing, and clapping their hands during church services.

The oral liturgy of an African Indigenous Church on Sundays is as follows: The service begins with a time of adoration during which, God is exalted, appreciated, and sins are confessed for forgiveness. After this, there would be a song by a singing group or a choir. Then Scriptural reading would follow. Another song would be given fol-
owed by the Second Scriptural reading. The congregation would enter into Prayer time — to thank God for all His kindness and to intercede for others. During this time, those who have seen visions or have prophecies would be encouraged to share with the congregation. This is followed by shouts — songs would be sung, drums would be beaten and the entire congregation would clap their hands and dance exuberantly around several times. In fact, each member would have the opportunity to dance around to express his/her gratitude to God for the good things He has done and continues to do in his/her life. The Sermon will come after this and the offertory would then follow. During the offertory, people would dance around to put their offerings in an offertory bowl in front of the altar. There would be announcements, closing prayer and benediction to end the service. There is a Prayer and Healing session, usually on Fridays, from 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon. During this session, people are delivered from the bondage of the devil, witchcraft and evil spirits. Throughout this oral liturgical format, there is sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, who works through whomever He each chooses.

Many of the denominations that were hostile to the style of worship of the AICs have now adopted AIC spiritual exuberance and followed suit with AICs’ style of worship. A good example of this is the way most of the mission-related churches in Ghana no longer only sit or stand for a hymn during the offertory, but wave handkerchiefs and dance while they pass the collection bowl around, or march dance to the front of the church to deposit their offering. This, though common in most of the churches in Ghana today, started with the AICs.

Today, it is important to recognise that AICs have contributed immensely towards the spirituality and cultural expressions of orthodox churches. It is now not unusual to see prayer groups, prayer sessions, healing crusades and revivalist activities among orthodox churches. In the past, many left their orthodox churches services to attend AICs services, because the religiosity of their churches were not meeting their felt needs. AICs have been very successful in appropriating the power of the Spirit into the African psyche. Primarily, it is the confrontation between the traditional African spirit world and the Holy Spirit in the AICs that penetrate the African worldview and makes Christianity relevant in the African idiom. The power of the Holy Spirit liberates
from the oppression of both the traditional spirit world and the Western ‘colonial’ forms of Christianity. It is this dynamic African pneumatology, which meets human needs far more substantially than does either Western Christianity or African traditional religions. The foregrounding of the Holy Spirit that we are witnessing within the global Pentecostal and Charismatic movement as well as the orthodox churches as a means of effectively confronting African reality and appropriating the gospel of Christ, must, therefore, be recognised as something for which AICs were the trailblazers.

References

2 Otofo is the name for the puberty rites of the Ga tribe in Ghana. This rite of initiation is performed to publicly recognize that an individual is now passing from childhood to adulthood.
3 Libation is an act of pouring a drink to spiritual beings in religious ceremonies. The act consists of an invocation, the calling of the Supreme Being, gods, and the ancestors by name, the offering of prayer and the pouring of a drink. In this way the worshipper establishes contact with the deity and powers whose protection and blessings the person seeks.
9 David, M. Beckmann, Eden Revival (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing Flouse), 1975, p. 15.

15 Quoted by Thomas Oduro, in “Introduction of AICs,” a brochure prepared by GNTCS.
18 1 Cor. 12:7.
19 Lk. 1:35; Matt. 3:16; Lk. 4:18; Matt. 4:1; Lk. 4:1-2; Lk. 4:14, 15, 31, 32; Heb. 9:14; Rom. 1:4.
22 Acts 6:3.