

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

## **The Role of the African Church Movement in Nigeria's Independence**

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**Abstract:** There are some churches in Nigeria that have an African outlook and characteristics. These churches are fully under African leadership, most of them were founded in the 1960s and 1950s. Most of them broke off from the orthodox and white dominated churches as a result of oppression by the whites and a desire for freedom and independence. These churches make up the African church movement. They played an important role in the attainment of Nigeria's independence. This paper looks at the meaning, the role of the movement in Nigeria's independence and the place of other factors in Nigeria's independence.

**Keywords:** African Independent Churches, Indigenous Churches, Nigeria's independence.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

African Independent Churches, also known as African Initiated Churches, African Indigenous Churches, African Instituted Churches, or just AICs, symbolizes well over 10,000 independent Christian churches in Africa. African Indigenous Churches are found in every country and region in Africa, but they are more adequately documented in southern Africa well as west Africa. Even though the denominational, linguistic and ritual diversity of these churches makes it complex to classify and analyze, the common thread uniting all of the Christian churches is that they were all established by African initiative rather than by foreign missionary agendas. Even though many of these churches have traditional denominational names and relationships, they are not defined by these traditions. These churches emphasize that they are established and led by Africans. In addition, all AICs place emphasis on the biblical warrant to include African cultural norms into their modes of worship, theology, and practice, though to varying degrees. Some scholars claim that African Independent Churches are syncretistic in that they combine indigenous African religion with Christian beliefs, but the degree to which this occurs is varying. Regardless, a process of acculturation between Christianity and African culture does occur. This paper looks at the meaning of African Church Movement the role of the movement in Nigeria's independence and the place of other factors in Nigeria's independence.

## **THE MEANING OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH MOVEMENT**

During the period of colonial rule in Nigeria, many educated Africans began to agitate against foreign rule and domination in all spheres of their lives. This desire for freedom and agitation for independence was known as nationalism. It was exhibited in various ways including the church. The church nationalism was known as ‘Ethiopianism’. It was marked by a strong opposition to foreign rule in the church, a struggle for power and position in the church by the Nigerians and it eventually led to the foundation of African churches (Onwubiko 321). The totality of all these groups and the sentiments behind them, constitute ‘The African Church Movement’.

## **THE AFRICAN CHURCH MOVEMENT AND NIGERIA’S INDEPENDENCE**

The African church movement played an important role in the attainment of Nigeria’s political independence in 1960. Hitherto, the colonialists had the impression that the Africans were inferior and so were not capable of self rule. Thus they subjugated and dominated the Africans both in the secular and religious spheres.

However, Africans began to react in the religious sphere and to oppose this foreign domination; they asserted the African’s ability to organize a religious body to work out his own spiritual salvation without western or foreign leadership (Onwubiko 321). Their success in this area, according to Crowder was a catalyst and precursor of the nationalist movement (255).

An examination of the development and nature of this movement, will throw more light on this assertion. This movement revolved around the activities of some key figures like Henry Venn, James Johnson and Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

Henry Venn is regarded as the originator of Nigerian nationalism as he brought up the idea that Africans should be prepared to assume responsibility for, the leadership of their countries (ESCC lectures 46). According to him, the Africans must be encouraged to financially support their pastors; and churches in every district should combine to farm “native pastorates”, and that African pastors should be trained to take charge of these churches (ESCC Lectures 46).

The original aim of Venn was to indigenize Christianity and put the Africans in control of the church (CMS), but the educated Africans saw the scheme as a way of achieving political freedom. They believed that if they could manage their affairs religiously, then they could do same politically (ESCC Lectures 47).

On his part, James Johnson asserted that Africans were as capable as other human beings, and thus concluded that Africa could best be evangelized by Africans. He held that Christianity should provide the foundation for political development, and added that native pastorates should combine and develop into an independent African church. This church, according to him, will be headed by Africans, because the Europeans could not understand African aspirations and ambitions (ESCC Lectures 48).

The African church he conceived of would create African Christianity which would adopt the vernacular languages, and own its own hymns and prayer book. After the establishment of the African church, the African Christian nation would emerge. He further advocated that the colonial government should support Christianity and appoint Christians to important positions in the civil service. His activities were opposed by the

whites, this conflict eventually resulted in the emergence of the native Baptist church in 1888 (ESCC Lectures 50).

A similar conflict also occurred in the African church involving Bishop Ajayi Crowther. The Anglican church initially wished to create an ‘African controlled’ church in Nigeria, thus they appointed Crowther as Bishop in 1864. However, they changed this policy in 1890 and returned the leadership to the Europeans, with the Africans acting as assistants. Due to this, they removed and discredited Crowther, then they brought in more whites into the pastorate.

This made many Africans to break off and form an “African church” under their own bishops. Their opposition to the Europeans covered the political, doctrinal and cultural areas, hence they advocated group baptisms, tolerance of polygamy, use of traditional African music and dance steps in church meetings. These oppositions to foreign rule in the religious sphere, extended to the political sphere (Crowder 255). Their success in the religious sphere encouraged them to strive for political freedom; it catalyzed and spurred them up.

The African church also contributed in other ways to the attainment of Nigeria’s independence. The church became a meeting place for the development of and expression of nationalist feelings and ideas. The educated Africans were equipped for the nationalist task by their learning. They also got the ideas of equality, justice and non-racialism from the bible. Their study of classics and history, gave them knowledge of the colonial people’s struggle against imperialists. These, coupled with their knowledge of European customs in comparison with their own, combined to develop nationalism in the Africans (ESCC lectures 44).

Several other indigenous church leaders also arose during this period and contributed effectively to the growth of their churches. Their successes in this religious sphere further confirmed and demonstrated that Africans could equally succeed in the political sphere.

According to Agwu, the first indigenous Ibo church agent employed by the missionaries in the fight against the evil aspects of Ibo traditional religion was Mr. Chima Nwana, who later became the first Ibo Methodist minister. He was a scholar and a theologian who strived hard to encourage more Ibos to enter the religious ministry (22).

Agwu also cites the case of Mr. Ucheya A. Ucheya who was also called Emmanuel Hart, and who is said to have introduced Methodism into Item, a town in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria. He started by teaching the children reading, writing and arithmetic. He also taught them the Lord’s prayer, hymns and told them stories about Jesus. The house of his brother Awa, was the meeting place, it developed into a little church. He tactfully used music and dances to attract the people and then preached to them until they were converted. Thus the church grew (37-38).

Similarly, the first group of missionaries to bring Christianity to Ngwa land in Abia state of Nigeria, included several African pastors of the Niger Delta pastorate mission. They included pastors Ockiya Bright, Allison Epelle, Godwin Epelle, Isaac Epelle. They were natives of Opobo town and they started the first nucleus of the Niger Delta mission in Ngwa land (Mejeh 43).

These are a few of the many Africans who demonstrated the African’s capability to administer their affairs religiously. This acted as a catalyst and precursor to political administration.

This religious factor and influence permeated and diffused into other factors which also contributed to Nigeria's independence. These other factors are examined in the next section.

### **THE PLACE OF OTHER FACTORS IN NIGERIA'S INDEPENDENCE**

Some other factors also contributed to Nigeria's independence and most of them were somehow connected with the religious factor.

Economically for instance, the foreign firms controlled the trade businesses and the overall economy. Thus, they exploited the native traders and businessmen, while at the same time, careers in the administration were not open to the Nigerians. This worsened their economic condition; the awareness of this economic exploitation of Nigeria by foreign powers, contributed to nationalist agitation (Olatunbosun 264).

This opposition to economic exploitation was stimulated by the religious teachings of equality, justice and fairness which were being applied in the religious sphere. Moreover, most of the Nigerian business men were members of these African churches from where they got ideas of equality, justice and fairness. In this way, the economic factor was linked to the religious factor.

Several other political and protest movements came into being around this time; they were also influenced by the Ethiopian religious ideas of equality, justice and fairness. Amongst them were the anti-slavery and aborigines protection society (1912, A.A.P.S), The National Congress of British West Africa (NCBW, 1920) and the Nigerian National Democratic Party in 1923. These groups pressed for social, economic, political and constitutional reforms which contributed to the attainment of independence (Onwubiko 315-316).

The education and enlightenment which were obtained from the mission schools and which initially gave rise to the African church movement, also encouraged the emergence of newspapers. These newspapers enhanced Nigeria's independence. For instance, 'the Lagos Weekly Record' which existed between 1890 and 1930, was a defender of the negro race and an opponent of white rule. It propagated racial and national consciousness in Nigeria at this time. The papers were the media through which the nationalistic ideas of the educated Africans found an outlet (Onwubiko 322). These nationalistic ideas were stimulated and enhanced by the religious movement and teachings.

The sense of justice and fair play which was one of the tenets of the African church movement arose from the religious teachings which also stimulated it and in turn, it enhanced the growth of the African church movement. Here, we see how it extended beyond the religious sphere into the political arena to stimulate a fight for political independence. These few examples illustrate the place of these other factors in the attainment of Nigeria's independence and their link with Ethiopianism and the African church movement. Here, we see how it extended beyond the religious sphere into the political arena to stimulate a fight for political independence. These few examples illustrate the place of these other factors in the attainment of Nigeria's independence and their link with Ethiopianism and the African church movement.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has illustrated the meaning of the African church movement and the concept of Ethiopianism behind it. These nationalist feelings and agitations were transferred to the secular and political sphere because many of the Africans were members of this church movement. Their religious experience and ability to manage their affairs religiously, gave impetus to this political movement.

Religion had enlightened them, provided them with education and sensitized them to the concepts of justice, equality, fairness and freedom which in turn spurred them up to agitate for political independence.

Some non-religious factors which contributed to Nigeria's independence also had some links with the religious concepts behind Ethiopianism. These were freedom, fairness, equality and justice.

Such non-religious factors which were based on these Ethiopian concepts included their opposition to economic exploitation, the birth of political and protest movements, the use of newspapers and some effects of the First World War. These factors provided avenues for the expression of the desire for justice, fairplay and equality. This same desire also led to the birth and growth of African church movement. This shows an intersection of factors and confirms that the African church movement contributed greatly to the attainment of Nigeria's independence.

In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are hereby given. The concepts of justice, equality and fairness which motivated the African church movement, should be encouraged and applied in all aspects of life, such as public, private, economic, political, social and religious. This will prevent or minimize conflicts and unrests.

Education should be provided for all, and people should be encouraged to seek education. This will enable them to fight for their rights and to resist oppression.

The church as a whole, should continue to serve as a watchdog and guide that ensures and maintains justice, equality and fairness in the society. This will improve the standard of living in Nigeria.

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