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Prophetic Movements: Western Africa

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Prophetic movements have not dominated the landscape in western Africa to the same extent as they have in eastern and southern Africa. Nevertheless, a number of prophetic movements did emerge from around 1920 onward, marking the most dramatic growth of Christianity in twentieth-century West Africa. It has been noted that the growth was uneven – prophetic churches are abundant in Nigeria and Ghana. Côte d’Ivoire recognizes the prophetic Harrist church, together with Islam, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism, as one of four official religions. But in other West African countries such as Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Mali, prophetic churches have made little impact. This no doubt has to do with the dominance of Islam in these countries, but it is also likely that colonial policies and the presence of Roman Catholicism produced a buffering effect. All across Africa, and indeed within Christianity as a whole, prophetic movements have been more likely to spring from the Protestant churches.

Christian Prophetic Movements

The prophet-healing churches in Ghana are popularly referred to in Akan as “Sunsum Sore” or “Spirit churches.” Perhaps no other of Ghana’s Spirit churches has as long and colorful a pedigree as the Musama Disco Christo Church (Army of the Cross of Christ), founded by a former methodist catechist and school teacher, Joseph William Egyanka Appiah (1893-1948), who later became known to his followers as Prophet Jemisimiham Jehu-Appiah. Like many break-away groups, the Musama Disco Christo Church (MDCC) began in 1919 as a prayer fellowship within one of the mission churches, the Methodist Church of the Central Region of Ghana (formerly Gold Coast). When Appiah and his followers were asked to leave the Methodist Church in 1922 for their “occult practices” of prophesying, healing, and speaking in tongues, the group established the MDCC, receiving this name by divine revelation. Appiah was visited by three angels, who told him that he would be a king. Indeed, the movement constructed for

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themselves a holy city, which they named Mozano (my [God's] city). In it, Appiah reigned as the spiritual head of a dynasty, taking the title *Akaboha* (King) I. His bride and the cofounder of the movement, Abena Bawa, now became the Prophetess Natholomoa Jehu-Appiah and also the *Akatitibii* (Queen mother) of the church. The MDCC borrows its elaborate church structure from traditional Fanti royal courts, yet it notably bans the use of ancestor rituals. It emphasizes divine healing and has an elaborate system of angels, who are to be petitioned in prayer. It has its own special language for greetings between church members, each of who receives a unique heavenly name (no two are alike) from the head of the church upon his or her conversion. Borrowing heavily from practices contained in the Old Testament, members gather once a year at a holy shrine, where the *Akaboha* enters once a year to offer prayers before an "Ark of the Covenant" and make sacrifices on behalf of the people. The office of *Akaboha*, comprising both spiritual and political duties, is inherited through the Jehu-Appiah family line. Appiah's grandson currently holds the title of *Akaboha* III.

Whereas Appiah's prophetic visions led him to found a city and become a king, William Wadé Harris (1865-1929) was called to the life of a wandering evangelist. Perhaps one of the first and greatest of the prophets to emerge in all West Africa, Harris had a lasting impact in Ghana and is regarded as the father of Christianity in Côte d'Ivoire. He embarked upon his most successful preaching journey across the southern Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana between the years 1913 and 1914. In Ghana he challenged traditional priests, many of whom were converted after apparently recognizing the superiority of the power of the Christian God over traditional deities, ancestors and nature spirits. It is said that over one thousand new people came to hear Harris preach each day, until opposition from Catholic missionaries caused him to flee. In Côte d'Ivoire, he is thought to have converted and baptized well over 120,000 people in one year. Such was the enthusiasm surrounding Harris's ministry that the French colonial administration imprisoned him for a short time and thereafter kept him under close watch. Eventually, under pressure from Catholic missionaries, the French authorities deported him from Côte d'Ivoire in 1914. Harris returned to his native Liberia and neighboring Sierra Leone, where he preached with little success until his death in 1929.

Harris's career is characteristic of other prophetic movements in western Africa in that his prophetic calling began in Anglophone West Africa and later spread to neighboring Francophone countries. Harris, an indigenous Grebo, was a well-educated, middle-class Liberian

disillusioned with the country's black American rulers and the missionaries who had employed him as a teacher in the Episcopal church. While in prison in 1910 on charges of treason (he symbolically raised the Union Jack in place of the Liberian flag, signalling that native Liberians would fare better under British colonial rule), Harris experienced a vision that changed his life. The angel Gabriel appeared to him with the message that he was to be a prophet, commissioned by God to preach the gospel in a more African way. Upon his release, Harris became a peripatetic proclaimer in the biblical style of John the Baptist – he went about barefoot, adorning himself in a simple long white calico robe and turban. Armed only with cross, clabash, and Bible – the essential tools of his prophetic calling – Harris preached the absolute sovereignty of God, healing from disease, and the rejection of traditional religions. He encouraged people to burn their fetishes and idols and strongly condemned the consumption of alcohol. Contrary to the practice of the mission churches which required a long probationary period before initiation, Harris baptized converts on the spot, often baptizing entire villages at once, thereby minimizing potential social tensions. These villages ever after retained a Christian character.

With the exception of supporting polygamy, which he practiced himself, Harris's teaching was similar to that of the European missionaries. He urged his converts to await Christian missionaries with Bibles and had no intention of establishing his own church. When he arrived in Côte d'Ivoire in 1914, there were probably only a few hundred Catholics throughout the entire country. Many converts joined the Catholic Church as a result of his preaching. When the first Methodist missionaries arrived in 1924 they were pleasantly surprised to find thriving village churches started by Harris that came to form the backbone of the Methodist mission, thus the Methodist Church dates its founding in Côte d'Ivoire to Harris's 1914 preaching tour. Nevertheless, disputes over polygamy and compulsory church dues discouraged some Harris Christians from joining the mission churches and a number of Harrist churches emerged in parts of Côte d'Ivoire and western Ghana. A number of prominent Harrist churches were founded by women, who occupied a prominent role since the movement's inception. Marie Lalou (d. 1951) started the Deima Church, the second largest Harrist church in Côte d'Ivoire. Grace Tani (d. 1958), a former diviner who had been converted by Harris, established the Church of the Twelve Apostles in western Ghana.

At about the same time but further east in the Niger Delta, an adult Anglican convert by the name of Garrick Sokari Braide (c. 1882-1918) began his prophetic career. A poor fisherman

and trader with little formal education, he received a vision in 1912 as he knelt at the communion rail. After that, Braide embarked upon an extraordinarily successful public ministry of preaching and healing. The similarities between Braide's career and that of Harris are noteworthy. Both men were charismatic figures credited with the power to heal and make rain. Given the name Prophet Elijah II by his followers, Braide was also a fiery preacher who called people to renounce their traditional practices and believe in God. Enthusiastic public response to his preaching aroused resentment within the Anglican church mission (CMS) and anxieties within the colonial government. Crowds flocked to listen, and his disciples carried the message all over the Niger Delta and deep into the Igbo interior. Braide railed against the evils of alcohol consumption with the result that trade in spirits declined dramatically, drawing the attention of colonial authorities who felt the pinch from decreased tax revenues. Furthermore, zealous converts frequently smashed traditional shrines, angering their devotees who complained bitterly to the authorities. In 1916, however, Braide's prophetic career came to an abrupt end. He was arrested by colonial officials with written support from the Anglican Bishop, James Johnson. Although Braide himself never assumed leadership of his own church (Anglicans were the primary beneficiaries of Braide's converts), his preaching and healing ministry did result in the creation of new churches. While Braide was still in prison, some 40,000 of his followers formed the Christ Army Church. Shortly after his release in 1918, Braide died, perhaps a victim of the worldwide influenza epidemic.

In western Nigeria, 1918 also marks the emergence of the Aladura movement, the name given to an aggregation of churches that took root among the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria. In that year, Joseph Shadare (d. 1962) organized an Anglican prayer group ("aladura" is a Yoruba word meaning "praying people") at Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria to provide support and healing for victims of the influenza epidemic. The group was comprised largely of members of the younger Christian elite, who called themselves the Precious Stone Society. Dissatisfied with Western religious forms and lack of spiritual power, they were strongly influenced by the divine-healing literature of the fundamentalist Faith Tabernacle Church based in Philadelphia, USA. Although some of its first members had prophetic visions, the group's main activities centered on faith healing, prayer protection, and observing a strict moral code. In 1922 they broke with the CMS due to their disapproval of infant baptism and the use of medicines.

The Aladura movement experienced its greatest period of expansion, however, under a Yoruba prophet-healer named Joseph Ayodele Babalola (1906–59). Another prophet with a short but influential preaching career, Babalola left his job as a road construction driver to preside over a massive revival and healing movement in 1930. Like the other prophets before him, Babalola heard a voice ordering him to preach and to heal. The ensuing revival resulted in thousands of conversions and great bonfires in which people burned their charms and traditional religious objects. Rumors of witch-hunting and opposition to western medicine circulated, drawing opposition from all sides – traditional leaders, colonial administrators, and missionaries. The government responded by rounding up Babalola and the leaders of the movement, and placing them in jail. Shortly after their release, Babalola sought help from the pentecostal Apostolic Church of Great Britain. When the missionaries arrived in 1932, however, problems arose over the missionaries' use of Western medicines—clearly contrary to doctrines of divine healing—their exclusion of polygamists, and their assertion of full control over the movement. In 1941 the ablest leaders, including Babalola and Isaac B. Akinyele (1882-1964), formed their own Christ Apostolic Church, which by the 1970s had several hundred thousand adherents, its own schools and had spread as far west as Ghana.

Another well-known Aladura church is the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Society, or simply the Cherubim and Seraphim. It was founded in 1925 by Moses Orimolade Tunolashe (d. 1933), a Yoruba prophet, and Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon, an Anglican girl from the Lagos elite who had experienced visions and trances. Like the Precious Stone Society, the Cherubim and Seraphim started out as an Anglican prayer group. It emphasized revelation through dreams and visions, divine healing instead of traditional charms and medicine, and protection from witchcraft. Members believed that the Archangel Michael was their captain, and they were known for their distinctive white robes. They permitted western medicine, however they also permitted polygamy. Intense criticism by Anglican priests forced a separation in 1928, the same year in which the founders parted. Further dissension produced some fifty-two splinter groups, which spread widely in Nigeria and west to Benin (formerly Dahomey), Togo, and Ghana. The Cherubim and Seraphim continues to exert its influence in Nigeria today, where nearly all of the fifty-two groups have reunited under the Baba Aladura, Dr. G. I. M. Otubu.

Another important Aladura church is the Church of the Lord (Aladura), established by Josiah Olunowo Ositelu (d. 1966), an Anglican catechist and schoolteacher. In 1925, through fasting and devotions, he experienced many unusual visions in which he was called to be a prophet. Within a few years, Ositelu was preaching judgment on idolatry and traditional charms and medicines, uttering prophecies, and healing through prayer, fasting, and holy water. An associate of Babalola during the 1930 revival, he also claimed to have been given the power to detect witches. On the question of polygamy, however, Ositelu broke with the Christ Apostolic Church, eventually taking seven wives. After Ositelu's death in 1966, Apostle Adeleke Adejobi (1921-1991) assumed leadership of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) (CLA). An indefatigable leader and bridge-builder, Adejobi oversaw the establishment of CLA churches in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Accra, Ghana. He was instrumental in the creation of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), based in Nairobi, and served as its first Chairman. He improved cooperation among the Aladura churches, forming the Nigeria Association of Aladura Churches, which had over 1,200 member churches by 1996. In 1975, the CLA became one of the few AICs to join the World Council of Churches. Founded at Ogere, Nigeria in 1930, the CLA has since spread to north and east Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, the USA, UK, and Germany, claiming nearly 2.5 million members.

The Aladura movement continues to grow and encompasses many small secessions, ephemeral groups, and prophet-healers with one or two congregations. Following the end of colonialism in West Africa in the late 1950s, new movements began to appear with names like Spiritual Healing Church of the Lord and True Church of God. One such later movement that has now surpassed the earlier Aladura churches is the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), first started by a former Methodist named Samuel Oscoffa (1909-1985) in Benin. In 1947 he had a divine revelation while paddling his fishing canoe in the coastal lagoons. Having received angel instructions, Oscoffa began preaching and soon gained notariety as a great healer and wonder worker – he was even said to have raised the dead. In 1952, poor Gun fishermen carried the message of the CCC to Lagos, where it gained adherents among the Yoruba middle class. Like most of the previous Aladura churches, CCC members wear distinctive white gowns, remove their shoes in worship, and permit polygyny. However, miraculous healings, ecstatic speech, and traditional prayer rituals that combine Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim practices may account for the increased popularity of the CCC over the older Aladura churches. As of 2004 it claimed to

have had five to six million members with some 2,000 congregations in Nigeria and still others in western Africa, Europe and North America.

Millenarian Movements

Though Christianity proved the more fertile soil for prophetic ideas to take root, both it and Islam were incubators of millenarian expectation. In Christianity, such expectation was identified with the idea that upon Christ's return evil would be destroyed, the earth made new, and all would enjoy a thousand-year reign of peace, justice, and prosperity. Likewise, Islam pictured the return of the Mahdi, a savior figure who would vanquish Antichrist and establish the rule of Islam over all the earth. The millenarian ideas and expectations of these world religions articulated well with Africans' hopes for a community cleared of witches and the need to cope with the rapid social, economic, and spiritual changes triggered by colonization.

One example of a Christian millenarian movement in western Africa is the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (BCS) in eastern Nigeria, which was founded in Calabar in 1956 by Olumba Olumba Obu (b. 1918). Starting out as a prayer and Bible study group, the movement has been one of the fastest growing in Nigeria, with well over two million adherents in West Africa, the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Australia, India, and the Caribbean. Although the BCS began to take shape along similar lines with the Aladura churches, the group diverged when it developed messianic and syncretistic tendencies. Consequently, both the older mission churches and the Aladura churches look upon BCS with disdain. To members of the movement, Obu is not only a healer and miracle worker but also God in human form, the Messiah. He is referred to by his followers variously as the Universal Teacher, His Holiness, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, or simply OOO, the letters which adherents paint on their cars and houses for protection. Obu's coming marks the eighth and final incarnation of God in world history – the previous seven manifestations of God being in the form of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Although the group does not consider itself to be a church, it uses the Christian scriptures, supplemented by Obu's own revelations and pronouncements. Members say that their central doctrine is to love all people without discrimination, which they attempt to achieve through its centers (known as "bethels") for worship, teaching and healing, and a wide range of social programs. In recent years, tensions have mounted over who will succeed OOO, who is said to have gone blind and is now rarely seen outside his compound. Obu's eldest son,

also named Olumba Olumba Obu, was appointed in 2001 by his father as his successor, however that move has been challenged by Obu's daughter, Ibum, who is supported by some BCS bishops.

Long before any significant Christian presence made itself felt there, a storm surge of millenarian expectation churned up within Islam's heartland crashed upon the mixed communities of West Africa. The result was the nineteenth century *jihád* movements led by zealous reformers such as 'Uthman dan Fodio, Abi Bakr ibn Sa'id, and al-Hajj 'Umar. It is important to recognize that in orthodox Islamic belief, self-proclaimed prophets are subject to the charge of heresy. This is because of Islam's teaching about the prophet Muhammad – he is said to be “the seal of the prophets.” For this reason, we refer to these movements as reform movements or millennial movements, even though they functioned much the same way in Islam as the prophetic movements functioned within Christianity.

Initiated in 1804, Dan Fodio's reform movement swept through Hausaland, located in what is now northern Nigeria. A pious cleric, Shehu 'Uthman dan Fodio (1754-1817) fought to eradicate pre-Islamic, pagan elements from the practices of Islam in Hausaland. His education included many works by well-known Sufi luminaries, whose charismatic example left their mark on the Shehu's own religious exercises and mystical visions. A revival at al-Azhar, that great center of learning in Egypt, suffused the Shehu's message with a sense of urgency and helped him to see his mission within the context of world-wide Islam. Like the great teacher al-Maghíli three centuries earlier, dan Fodio came to believe that he was the *mujaddid* of the thirteenth Islamic century (which began in AD 1784), the precursor to the *Mahdi*, chosen by God to purify Islam. His belief was supported by his mystical visions, in which he was given guidance by the Prophet Muhammad and 'Abd al-Qádír al-Jilání, the twelfth century founder of the Qádiriyya Sufi order. On one occasion, after dan Fodio observed silence in prayer for an entire year, he received a vision of the Prophet Muhammad. In another vision, the Prophet brought the Shehu before God's throne, where he was presented to 'Abd al-Qádír who appointed him as his earthly representative, saying, “This man belongs to me.” Not only did these encounters provide instruction, but they confirmed the divine origin of his calling. His community, meanwhile, conducted themselves with the knowledge that their victory was assured by the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi saint, mediated through the Shehu's leadership. The most decisive vision came when dan Fodio was given the “Sword of Truth” by al-Qádír and told to draw it

against the enemies of God. After such a vision, the *jihád* seemed inevitable. By means of a wide network of alliances and through a series of well-calculated military campaigns, he succeeded in replacing most of the Hausa kings – branded as pagans by the reformers – with emirs loyal to the architects of the revolution. Having firmly secured the centers of power, the Shehu and his followers set out to revive Islamic orthodoxy through the establishment of the *Shari‘a* and the introduction of Islamic political structures and social institutions under the administration of a new caliphate based at Sokoto. Dan Fodio’s *jihád* had far-reaching consequences as its example inspired similar revolutions aimed at purifying the religion throughout the mixed-Islamic kingdoms of West Africa for at least the next century.

Another important reformer who patterned his own career of *jihád* on that of Dan Fodio’s was al-Hájj ‘Umar Tal al-Fúti (c. 1794-1864), who established the Tukolor empire in Futa Toro in Senegal in the mid-nineteenth century. Deeply steeped in the devotions of the Tijáníyáh Súfi brotherhood, he was also exposed to radical Wahhabi teachings when he undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1826. Wahhabism sought to eliminate what it considered to be syncretic practices in Islam – images, prayers to saints, the veneration of local holy sites, and the use of fetishes, amulets, or charms. The fires of reform were further stoked within al-Hájj ‘Umar following his return from Mecca in 1832, when he stopped in Sokoto for a period of six years as the guest of Muhammad Bello, the son and heir of ‘Uthmán dan Fodio. After Bello’s death in 1837, al-Hájj ‘Umar returned home to Futa Toro, where in 1852 he declared a formal *jihád* that was waged for the next ten years against his non-Muslim neighbors. Al-Hájj ‘Umar’s *jihád* was successful, however his empire never achieved the glory of dan Fodio’s Sokoto. Pressured by encroaching French colonial forces and dogged by anti-Tukolor rulers agitating from within, al-Hájj ‘Umar eventually died in battle in 1864.

More recently, a genuinely prophetic movement emerged in West African Islam. It culminated in the Maitatsine Riots, which rocked northern Nigeria between 1980 and 1985, leaving more than 8,500 people dead. The sect’s founder, Alhaji Muhammadu Marwa (c. 1922-1980), who hailed from Cameroon, proclaimed himself a prophet (contrary to the teachings of orthodox Islam). In 1962, Marwa was arrested and banished to Cameroon but he seems to have returned shortly thereafter. In 1975 he was again arrested on charges of political agitation after attracting a large following. By 1980 Marwa was besieged by controversy because he claimed to be a prophet, discarded Qur’an exegesis based in classical Arabic for his own bizarre brand of

interpretation, and rejected the *sunna* of the Prophet. Central to his preaching was a rigorous rejection of affluence and western material culture. Maitatsine appealed to a non-literate crowd and had a decidedly anti-Hausa bias. Non-sect members, especially affluent ones, were regarded as infidels. In fact, his title “maitatsine,” derives from the Hausa word *tsini* and means “The Anathematizer.” It is reported that the Maitatsine vigorously attacked his detractors declaring, “Allah ta tsini,” “May God damn you.” More than twenty years after the riots were put down and Alhaji Marwa was martyred in Kano by the military police, scholars still puzzle over the peculiarity of the movement. Reports of ritualized human butchery on the part of Maitatsine in order to make magic charms reveals as much about the resilience of animist culture and ideas as it does about the synthetic quality of Islamic (or Christian for that matter) beliefs and practice in the western Sudan. Whatever the case, the Maitatsine Riots that bubbled and seethed in Kano in the 1980s will be remembered as a highly exceptional and heterodox instance of prophetism in West African Islam.

Pentecostalism

More recently, since the 1970s, there has been a great proliferation of new churches, many of which are situated in the Evangelical or Protestant tradition. In particular, the rise of global pentecostalism has made its strongest impact on the continent in western Africa, especially in the cities of Nigeria and Ghana, where everything from informal and make-shift prayer houses to multi-million dollar mega-churches thrive. These new pentecostal and charismatic churches are strongly influenced by movements based in the United States and Great Britain, and many of them are led by women and youth. The founders and pastors of the mega-churches are typically educated, whereas the entrepreneurs of smaller storefront churches with names like “Glad Tidings Tabernacle,” “Signs and Wonders Church,” and “Hebron Divine Power Center” are usually not. In either case, personal charisma is the most necessary necessary qualification for leadership. While many preach a gospel of spiritual and material prosperity, not all do. An important continuity with the earlier prophetic movements is that the new pentecostal churches attempt to speak to people on the most basic, existential level. They offer an encounter with God, in which healing from sickness and deliverance from evil are achieved by means of God’s powerful Spirit. Unlike many of the prophetic movements, however, nearly all would consider the need for a conversion experience in which one makes a personal decision for Jesus

Christ, and affirmation of the Bible as the literal and inerrant Word of God as essential tenets of the Christian faith. The pentecostal churches also compete with some of the older “Spirit churches” and other independent churches for members, many of whom are drawn to promises of prosperity and a way to exercise control over the myriad challenges which confront people living in contemporary Africa.

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