



Prayer and Rituals in African Spirituality: The Perspective of African Independent Churches

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ABSTRACT

The growth of African Independent Churches (AICs) has baffled many people, particularly those who know the extent of their persecution and the tenacity of their leaders and members. While many people wonder about the appeal of some churches that they claim do not have a firm grounding in the Scriptures, leaders of the AICs combine the spirituality of African Traditional Religion, Judaism and Christianity to constitute a strong foundation of their churches. Prayer and Rituals are the aspects of spirituality discussed in this article. The purpose of this article is to show the indispensable roles of prayer and rituals and the delineation of the dynamics of these rituals to a maximum extent that have become very meaningful and relevant to all leaders and members of African Independent Churches. These could be the source of their qualitative and quantitative growth and influence. The participant-inclusive method will be used since the writer is a member of an AIC. The data was collected through interviews with some key members of AICs and what has been written about the spirituality of AICs. The data was analysed to show how leaders attach importance to them.

Keywords: Prayer, Ritual, Spirituality, Integration, Contextual.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to study Africans and classify them as one people because of their varied worldviews, cultures, environment and practices. Despite the difficulty, there are certain aspects of Africans that one can confidently perceive as common to all, irrespective of geographical, cultural, religious and societal differences. That aspect is their concept and practice of spirituality.

African Independent Churches are said to be the fourth wing of Christianity introduced to Africa after the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches and the early Protestant Churches. The emergence of the AICs was to inculcate African culture and personality into Christianity. Therefore, African Independent Churches have been defined as “congregations and or denominations planted, led, administered, supported, propagated, motivated and founded by Africans for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and worshipping the Triune God in the context and worldview of Africa and Africans.”¹ The African

¹ Thomas A. Oduro, *Christ Holy Church International: The Story of an African Independent Church* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publishers, 2009), 17.

Independent Churches emerged in the twentieth century and have grown stupendously, to the amazement of all Africans, particularly given that most of the early founders could not read or write English. The forebears of African Christianity, the Roman Catholics and the early Protestant churches, have learnt a lot from the AICs.

This article is about the spirituality of the AICs, something that meets the needs of Africans. The article begins with the importance of spirituality in Africa, particularly for AICs. The discussion begins with prayer and its components in the AICs, which are prayer and fasting; prayer and healing; prayer, spirituality, singing of hymns, and the scriptures; and prayer and the environment. The article continues on Rituals and its ambience in the AICs. It includes rituals during worship, Healing and Ritualistic Elements, and water rituals. Prayer and rituals will be discussed and linked with the growth of AICs.

African Spirituality

Spirituality, to the African, is everything about life and the hereafter; it is not about an esoteric experience peculiar to certain people because of their religious status or inclinations. Spirituality is pragmatic – something that is perceivable and encountered in the everyday life of everyone, regardless of age, gender, experience in life, education, and status.

The unanimous importance of spirituality among Africans can be seen in how they perceive the world and the position of human beings in the world. Kofi Asare Opoku enumerates six prominent beliefs in African Traditional Religions, five of them are – (1) A widespread belief in God as the Supreme Being who is above all physical and spiritual beings and powers, and can be likened to the Overlord of society – the Final Authority in all matters, (2) belief in the ancestral spirits, who are considered as next to God and are thus, treated with reverence and awe, (3) belief in supernatural entities, also known as, lesser deities, who are perceived as powerful – able to reward the living or punish them with misfortunes, diseases or even death, (4) belief in other spirits or mystical powers who, like the lesser deities, have the ability to either aid or harm the living, and finally, (5) belief in the potency of charms, amulets, and talismans.² In the midst of this spiritual cosmology, we have *homo sapiens*.

These beliefs shape the attitudes and practices of Africans; these beliefs groom Africans from infancy till they reach adulthood. They laid solid foundations for African spirituality. The Africans see themselves as being surrounded by spiritual forces that are more powerful and influential, hence the need to depend on the most powerful one – The Supreme Being – for protection and sustaining relationship and also the need to perceive everything spiritually.

The Spirituality of AICs

One cannot comprehend the emergence, beliefs, ministries, persecutions and the overwhelming growth of AICs³ when one overlooks the importance they attach to the inherent African traditional beliefs stated above.

Leaders and members of the AICs attribute almost every belief and practice to the Holy Spirit. This, they claim, is revealed through dreams, visions, auditions and prophetic oracles. It is, therefore, no wonder that they are referred to as *Spiritual Churches* in most parts of Africa– *Ijo Emi* among the Yorubas in Nigeria, *Sunsum Sore* among the Akan in Ghana,⁴ and *Roho Churches* in Kenya.

The reintroduction of Christianity into Africa by Western missionaries and the condemnation of traditional spirituality among Africans, without a replacement of related spirituality that is meaningful and relevant to Africans, left a wide vacuum in the lives of African Christians. To fill the vacuum, Desmond Tutu suggested in 1990 that “Christianity, to be truly African, must be incarnated in Africa. It must speak in tones

² Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 9, 10.

³ African Independent Churches are also known as “African Instituted Churches”, “African Initiated Churches”, “African Indigenous Churches”, etc. Thomas Oduro classifies the AICs into three categories: (1) Conservative, (2) Reformed (3) Charismatic. Read, Thomas Oduro, *Christ Holy Church International: The Story of an African Independent Church*. (Lagos: Greater Heights Publishers, 2009), 18-20. The AICs referred to in this article are those in the first and second categories.

⁴ Deji Ayegboyan and S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Lagos: Greater Heights Publications, 1997), 15.

that strike a responsive chord in the African breast and must convict the African of his peculiar African sinfulness. It must not provide him with answers to questions that he has never asked. It must speak out of and to his own context.”⁵ Perhaps unknown to Desmond Tutu, the AICs had already put into place his suggestion as early as the twentieth century.

AICs have meticulously filled the vacuum by integrating the spirituality of African Traditional Religion and Judaism into Christianity. Spirituality is, therefore, the *raison d'être* of the AICs. However, their emphasis and practice of integrated spirituality have earned them a bad reputation among some Christians and scholars. As a result, the AICs are the most persecuted group of Christians in the world, after the persecution of the Anabaptists in Europe in the 16th century. Paul Makhubu, a South African AIC leader, refers to such an unhealthy attitude when he wrote: “Most of the time we are not even considered churches or denominations...The most insulting argument is that some of us are not Christian churches, just because our beliefs and actions do not match what they believe and do.”⁶ Like the Anabaptists, the desire to practice communal spirituality devoid of interference by non-Christians and Christians who did not understand their spiritual emphasis led some AIC leaders to establish their own villages and townships where only members of the church are permitted to dwell.⁷ Inhabitants of such settlements are supervised to adhere to some strict spiritual practices outlined by the churches.

Some of the beliefs and practices of the AICs that non-AICs found repulsive bother them in their integrative spirituality. Two of such things, prayer and ritual, are the focus of this presentation.

Prayer

Prayer is a spiritual activity in almost every religion. Christianity is not an exception. It is considered a communication/conversation between the worshipper and God. It is also perceived as a means of empowerment. E. M. Bounds expresses the importance of prayer in Christianity:

What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men [and women] whom the Holy Ghost can use – men [and women] of prayer, men [and women] mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men [and women]. He does not come on machinery, but on men [and women]. He does not anoint plans, but men – men [and women] of prayer.⁸

One of the main reasons for the schisms of some African Christians from some Western mission-founded churches was the need to emphasise prayer spirituality. Most leaders and members of AICs were members of churches planted by Western missionaries in Africa. Therefore, they left the western mission-founded churches because they felt that prayers in those churches were mechanical, written prayers, not dynamic enough and not directed to address peculiar African problems.⁹ In Nigeria, the most popular name for AICs, particularly among the Yoruba, is *Aladura* churches. *Aladura* is a Yoruba word that means “Praying People.”¹⁰ Ayegboyin and Ishola further observe:

Among the Yoruba, the spiritual leaders are affectionately called *Baba Aladura* and *Iya Aladura* (for women). It is their habit to pray several times a day. Some enjoin and observe “hours of prayers” (like in Judaism) and night vigils...It is their sole

⁵ Desmond Tutu, “Black Theology and African Theology,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1990), 52.

⁶ Paul Makhubu, *Who Are the Independent Churches?* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers, 1988), 1.

⁷ Such settlements are found in countries where AICs are found. Some AIC settlements in Ghana are: Musama Disco Church (Mozano), The OSSA Madih Church (Chapess Conngah), and The Apostolic Revelation Society (Tadzewu). Ref. C. G. Baëta, *Prophetism In Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches* (Achimota: African Christian Press, 2004), 1-145.

⁸ E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Company Inc. , 1992), 8.

⁹ Those who wanted to reform the prayer life of the Western-mission founded churches were excommunicated. See, Baëta, *Prophetism In Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches*, 72-76; Frank Botchway, “The OSSA-Madih Church (Church of Light),” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 3, no. 2 (2000): 2–15.

¹⁰ Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, 26, 27.

responsibility to pray and fast for those who have problems and commit special programmes of the churches into God's hands.¹¹

The fact that leaders of the Cherubim and Seraphim group of AICs, founded by Yorubas, call their leaders *Baba Aladura* and or *Iya Aladura*, is a clear example of the integration of the spirituality of traditional religion, Judaism and Christianity.

Prayer encompasses every activity of the AICs. Until the emergence and popularity of charismatic churches, which also emphasise prayers, one of the popular names for AICs in Ghana, which began as pejorative, was "Pray-for-Me Churches." People who were not members of AICs realised the importance of prayer in the AICs and patronised their prayer sessions, hence the name. Some patronised openly while others did so surreptitiously.

To understand the importance of prayer among the AICs, one must not ignore the spiritual worldview of the African that has already been cited – i.e. a human being, composed of spirit and matter, surrounded by spiritual entities that are more powerful and could be malevolent. This worldview, coupled with the endemic wickedness of fellow human beings, calls for drastic means to ensure some safety valves. To the African, living peacefully in such a world requires a closer relation to and dependence on the head of the spiritual beings – the Supreme Being. This, more often than not, could be done through prayer.

Consequently, AIC members never do anything without first praying to seek God's directives. They pray about almost everything and everyone. Part of the liturgy of Christ Holy Church International, an AIC, is to remind every Sunday morning of the need to pray before undertaking any project, travelling, or even getting out of bed.

AICs believe that prayer has power. Prayer is revelatory; prayer rejuvenates Christians who feel a sense of spiritual dryness. Above all, prayer is the key to unlocking solutions to all problems. A popular song among Nigerian AICs is:

"Prayer is the key (2x),
Prayer is the Master key.
Jesus started with prayer and ended with prayer.
Prayer is the Master key."

A member of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church, an AIC in South Africa, stresses this notion when South Africa was under apartheid rule:

We need a future for our children, but we want to know how we can go through these problems and get a future for our children?... That is why we pray every time, because we also think that the only thing that can help us is to pray to God. We haven't got the power. We haven't got the tools to fight against the white people. We haven't got the things to fight against them. If we can't fight against them, then we can pray for ourselves. So instead of fighting, we'd rather pray.¹²

AICs use many prayer postures, including standing, prostration, kneeling, sitting, and raising of hands, but one posture that is repugnant to many Christians is that of *rolling on the ground*. This is practised mainly in some Aladura churches. Rolling on the ground "...consists of lying at full length and rolling backwards and forward; it may take place across the open space towards the front of the church, at home, on the mercy ground [a prayer ground] or the beach and may be a voluntary discipline, or imposed as a penance or punishment."¹³ This posture, some people believe, is an ample demonstration of the petitioner's

¹¹ Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, 28.

¹² Linda Elaine Thomas, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 61.

¹³ Harold Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 110.

seriousness in the act of praying. It is also widely believed among some Aladura members that rolling on the ground nakedly, particularly at midnight, fast-tracks an answer to a petition. There are many ramifications of prayer among AICs – fasting, healing, hymnody, use of Scriptures, and the environment.

Prayer and Fasting

Basing their belief on Matt. 17:21,¹⁴ leaders and members of African Independent Churches consider fasting as a necessary concomitant to prayer. To ensure that none of their members fails to fast, some West African AICs have categorised fasting so that anyone could choose a type of fast that suits his/her maturity in Christ, position in the church, age, or physical condition. Some of the types are: (1) Dry fasting – fasting without food and water for a period, (2) Ordinary fasting – fasting for a period but eating any food to break the fast daily, (3) White fasting – fasting for a period but not eating any food with salt, pepper and sugar when breaking the fast every day, (4) Water fasting – fasting for a period but drinking water intermittently during the fast, (5) Fruit fasting – fasting for a period but breaking the fast with only fruits at the end of each day.

Undertaking a dry fast for forty days, twenty-one days, fourteen days, or seven days is a common phenomenon among AIC pastors. Proxy fasting is another common spiritual activity in AICs.

When he asked to pinpoint the most important contribution of AICs to African Christianity, Apostle Henry A. Boateng, without hesitation said it was fasting., a leader of the Church of the Lord (Brotherhood) who has retired after serving the church for 50 years, Apostle Boateng claims that it is the AICs who emphasised the importance of fasting in African Christianity and taught African Christians how to fast.¹⁵ He strongly believes that a Christian who does not fast is powerless.

It is strongly believed among AICs that praying and fasting are evidence of one's willingness to go the extra mile with God. Fasting draws one closer to God than any spiritual activity. Prayer and fasting also unlock the doors to God's treasury of seeing visions, giving accurate prophecies, and getting quick answers to prayers.

Prayer and Healing

Most scholars who have studied AICs attribute their immense growth to their prowess in healing diseases: From West Africa, Ayegboyin and Ishola have noted, "Indeed, sickness is by far the most common reason which people give for attending AICs."¹⁶ Regarding AICs in Southern Africa, Allan Anderson makes a similar observation that "As far as reasons for people joining Zionist churches are concerned, healing is a major factor. So too, Daneel wrote that in the 'Spirit-type' churches of Zimbabwe in the 1960s and 1970s, the healing treatment by the prophets was the reason mentioned most frequently for people joining them."¹⁷ Although these assertions are true, it should not be forgotten that healing in AICs comes from prayer. AICs never heal without praying.

AICs believe that human beings are surrounded by spirits – some good, others malevolent. Therefore, following Jesus' example, they attribute the causes of diseases to the malevolent spirits (Luke 9:37-42; 11:14; Mark 5:1-18). To be healed, the powers of malevolent spirits must be broken. This could only be done by appealing to the Supreme Being through prayer. The emphasis on prayer, and at times fasting, before healing is indicative of the prominence of spirituality for both the healer and the one seeking healing. The healer and the seeker of healing both forgo certain earthly pleasures and privileges; a practice believed to enhance spirituality. In most cases, the causes and prescriptive rituals for the healing are revealed after much prayer has been offered.

¹⁴ Matt. 17:21 "But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." Many translations footnote this verse and describe it as extra-biblical, but the KJV and other vernacular translations think otherwise.

¹⁵ Interview with Apostle Boateng, a retired leader of the Church of the Lord (Brotherhood) by the author on May 15, 2010, at Kasoa.

¹⁶ Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, 29.

¹⁷ Allan Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2000), 120.

Prayer, Spirituality, Hymn-Singing and The Scriptures

The African Independent Churches saturate their prayers with hymns and choruses. They sing many hymns and songs before, during and after prayer meetings. Most of the songs are composed in local languages, so the members sing with meaning and attitude. By using hymnody alongside prayer, members of the AICs enrich their spirituality by meditating on the lyrics. Alongside the singing, there is the use of indigenous local musical instruments. The indigenous musical instruments and ancient rhythms used in pre-AIC eras are used presently by most AICs. The indigenous instruments and ancient rhythms inspire the spirit, even to the point of exhibiting spirit possession when AICs meet to pray or worship. Thus, their souls are easily connected to their Creator. These are all further amplifications of their integrative spirituality, which aims to get closer to God in a manner that is meaningful and relevant to their distinctive contexts.

AICs do not just pray without using the Scriptures. Hardly will an *Aladura* leader begin to say a prayer without first reading or reciting a psalm. All prayer meetings are preceded by some form of exhortation from the Bible. All their types of prayer – petition, thanksgiving, intercessory, adoration – their motives, postures, and paraphernalia are based on some Scripture. The use of psalms to augment prayer facilitates personal spiritual growth and nurtures faith based on the Bible.¹⁸

Prayer and the Environment

The spirituality of AIC prayer is encapsulated in the environment. The environment plays a vital role in their integrative spirituality. AIC members, when praying, make use of the environment that is accessible to them. Those closer to the forest go to the forest to pray, whilst those closer to the ocean go to the beaches to pray. “The seashore is valued as a place for quiet prayer, for rolling on the sand, for separation from the comforts of life and so akin to fasting, and purification through sea bathing...The particular part of Victoria Beach, Lagos, which is frequented by various *aladura* and similar groups, is well known. Some spend the whole Lent there, and others go every day in Lent after work, and spend the night.”¹⁹ In Ghana, the establishment of prayer camps and the practice of praying in forests, riversides, and oceans are age-old phenomena among the AICs.

In East Africa, among the Holy Spirit Churches in Kenya, praying on a mountain is considered the most important kind of prayer. Though they pray on any mountain, “...they never go to a mountain for just ordinary prayers, but only when the Holy Spirit has shown them, they must go there to pray very seriously, and it usually happens only once or twice a year. Not all members pray in the mountains, only the top leaders of each church.”²⁰ The Holy Spirit churches in Kenya pray at the mountains for three reasons: for serenity, the belief that God himself lives in the mountains and the expectation to receive many revelations from God.²¹ These reasons and expectations are akin to those of mountain prayers in Judaism and African Traditional Religion. The annual visit to Mount Taborar by leaders and members of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) is an important event in the life of the Church. Members of the church believe that “...God has appointed this special place and occasion to meet with His people and grant them forgiveness, cleansing, and blessing”²² This belief reinforces the widespread practice among AICs of praying at places they deem sacred beside their worship centres.

In an era of environmental degradation, AICs can be seen as environmental preservers since they do everything possible to preserve the environment to enjoy a sustainable benefit from the natural spirituality most of them derive. Like ancient Israelites and members of the early church, AICs perceive a closer interaction and relatedness to God when they pray and meditate on mountains, hills, and beaches.

¹⁸ Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, 72-76.

¹⁹ Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, 104.

²⁰ Ane Marie Bak Rasmussen, *Modern African Spirituality: The Independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902-1976* (London: British Academy Press, 1996), 104.

²¹ Rasmussen, *Modern African Spirituality: The Independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902-1976*, 104, 105..

²² Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, 221 - 230.

Rituals

A ritual is a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value. It may be prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community...A ritual may be performed on specific occasions or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by a group, or by the entire community; in arbitrary places, or in places specially reserved for it; either in public, in private, or before specific people. The purposes of rituals are varied; with religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bonds, social and moral education, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one's affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event, or, sometimes, just for the pleasure of the ritual itself.

Christianity has many rituals, including baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination, funerals, and many more. Each denomination has its own set of rituals and symbolic elements, and values. The AICs, too, have their own rituals and ritualistic symbols. The rituals and symbols differ from one place to another due to differences in traditions and environment where particular AICs began or are located. There are, however, certain rituals common in the AIC family. The ritualistic symbols and performance may be different, but the concept may be the same. Ironically, certain AICs frown on the rituals of other AICs, but one can appreciate all AIC rituals when one takes time to study their blending of spirituality in Judaism, African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Only the major rituals and ritualistic elements in AICs would be discussed.

AIC Rituals During Worship

The ritual of chasing the devil and his demons out of a worship centre before worship begins is commonplace among many AICs. In West Africa, many AICs begin their worship services by ringing a handbell – either seven times, thrice or once. The bell is rung not to call the attention of the worshippers but to call the angels of God to descend at the place of worship. An aspect of AIC rituals that attracts the attention of people who worship with Roho churches in Kenya is the practice of exorcism before starting their service. This is done both individually and collectively as a way of cleansing from evil. Individually, a member comes to one corner by the entrance door or near the grounds where the service will take place, because it can be under a tree or in a building. The member utters things like; forgive and cleanse me, God, from (mentions several bad things that might have happened to him/her over the days leading to the day of worship, e.g. quarrelling with a neighbour, etc.) and then gestures through the window or the door as to wade them away, sometimes foot thumping on the ground as a way of shedding away evil spirits. The leader casts out the demons and the congregation responds by shouting, ‘Tiriswa or riswa’ (in Luyha) meaning ‘be gone’, Swahili ‘ondoka’.²³ In Ghana, some AICs cast out demons from their places of worship by binding them, others use all their might to stamp on them, while some others either shoot or bomb them. These rituals may seem strange to many people, but that is how AICs exercise pragmatic authority over the devil and his demons.

Rituals, Healing and Ritualistic Elements

People are drawn to AICs for many reasons. Prominent among the reasons is that of healing. Many people see the AICs as a last resort to their healing after they have tried other healing centres and healers, both western and traditional. The following prelude to an AIC service in Ghana, captured by C. G. Baëta, affirms the belief that AICs are healing centres for many:

At an evening prayer meeting of [Musama Disco Christo Church] in a small provincial town, the catechist began his address as follows: ‘We are all in this Church because we have found healing here. But for this Church, the great majority of us here assembled would not be alive today. That is the reason why we are here: is that not

²³ Interview with Rev. John Gichimu, Interim Director of Theology and Ministerial Formation of the Organisation of African Independent Churches, at Nairobi, on 17th May 2010. This also happens when praying for the sick. The one praying says, for example, “we cast the sickness attacking our mother, father, son, daughter or child. The congregation in unison says, “Tiriswa” or “riswa”.

so?’ To that question came from the congregation as answer, a unanimous and most decided ‘Yes!’²⁴

It is during healing that the ritualistic prowess of AICs is best seen. Ritualistic elements used in healing differ from one region to another in Africa. The Bible is even a ritualistic element of healing in some AICs. It is, for instance, a common practice in the Church of the Twelve Apostles in Ghana to use the Bible as a ritualistic element. It is used to rub the stomachs of women seeking the fruit of the womb.”²⁵

Allan Anderson notes that some of the elements used by South African AICs in healing are: blessed water, special tea, walking sticks, ropes and strings, salt, strips of cloth worn around the body, copper wires, small pieces of wood, sheets of paper, sand, etc.²⁶ To these, Makhubu adds white vinegar, bluestones, red-hot brick or stone for steaming Sauna bath, olive oil, girdles and sashes.²⁷ Except for water, olive oil, sand and salt, all the other elements may seem strange to West African AICs who use Florida Water, ‘devil’ incense, candles, charcoal, porridge, lime, crosses, in addition to water, olive oil, sand and salt to heal. Perhaps the South African AICs would also perceive some of these elements as strange.

No matter the individual perceptions, it is generally believed that the elements have some curative and protective potencies; they are believed to cure and protect users from demons, accidents, and other mishaps. The elements also perform some cleansing roles. Users use them to cleanse themselves of any ‘filth’ they might have encountered in the secular world.

Despite the strangeness of some healing ritualistic elements, even to some AIC members, AIC leaders would not be overly surprised because of some common beliefs they hold about healing and aids to healing. AIC leaders believe that sickness is caused by either demons or personal sins. They also believe that God desires to heal. It is, therefore, a common belief that God reveals the elements to be used by the healers, so whatever element a healer prescribes is perceived as being revealed from God. Another common ritualistic belief among AICs is that the elements, when prayed for, take on a sacred nature. With these beliefs and perceptions, those who question the suitability of the elements are ironically not surprised at their potency. Bishop Isaac Wontumi, head of the Church of Melchizedek, an AIC in Ghana, claims that, unlike the Greeks in Biblical times who were mostly philosophically inclined, Africans are empiricists, so the ritualistic elements enable AICs to strengthen their faith in the Triune God. Despite this claim, he stresses faith in God rather than faith in the ritualistic elements.²⁸

Water Rituals

The use of water in AICs is widespread. It is not uncommon to see members of the AIC carrying bottles, plastic cans, buckets and other containers of water to church.²⁹ Although many AICs take water in containers to their places of worship to be blessed by their leaders, others bless streams and rivers.³⁰ While worshippers in some *Aladura* churches are required to remove their footwear and wash their feet before entering the place of worship, some AICs place barrels of water at the entrance of their worship centre. Water is sprinkled on worshippers – front and back – before they are allowed to enter the place of worship. Water has been so synonymous with some AICs that in the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*), for instance, Turner observes, “It is a regular feature of special services for naming children, enrolling new members, anointing ministers, or

²⁴ C. G. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 50.

²⁵ Baëta, *Prophetism In Ghana: A Study of Some ‘Spiritual’ Churches*, 20.

²⁶ Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Asmara: Africa World Press Inc, 2001), 101, 102.

²⁷ Makhubu, *Who Are the Independent Churches?*, 78-84

²⁸ Interview with Bishop Isaac Wontumi, head of The Church of Melchizedek, at Accra, on 7th May 2010.

²⁹ Harold W Turner, “African Independent Churches and Economic Development,” *World Development* 8, no. 7–8 (1980): 523–33; Thomas, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa*, 74-76; Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa*, 153, 154; Afeosemime U. Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 194-199; Oduro, *Christ Holy Church International: The Story of an African Independent Church*, 176.

³⁰ For more information on this concept of water, read Oduro, *Christ Holy Church*, 89, 90.

receiving the Lord's supper, and it may be used whenever there is a special spiritual concern.³¹ It is no wonder; they are sometimes referred to as "those water people."³²

AICs use water to perform many rituals. "Water is mainly used for ceremonial cleansing, by sprinkling it around the home, and by bathing the defiled after a death or misfortune, such as not being able to find work, marriage, etc."³³ Allan Anderson adds, "The most common symbol used by prophets is water 'blessed' for use by congregants, either as a healing potion itself or else in large quantities to induce vomiting, and sometimes mixed with ash, a cleansing substance traditionally regarded as purified by fire...the water represents cleansing and purification from evil, sin, sickness, and ritual pollution, concepts familiar to African thought."³⁴ AICs do not only use water for healing and purification purposes, "It may be used...to restore spiritual powers and chase away unwanted malevolent spiritual forces."³⁵

AIC members believe that water, when prayed over, becomes sacred; it is filled with spiritual power to heal, purify and empower the user. Though it is commonly believed that the use of water among AICs is part of their integrative approach to theology and spirituality, it is also commonly believed that water is used after God has revealed to a leader how and when to use it, albeit some AICs have institutionalised the practice. The revelatory aspect of the use of water to heal diseases finds its confirmation in Sophia Odunlami's claim in 1918 that God had revealed to her to use rainwater, after praying over it, to heal influenza victims in Nigeria.³⁶ The efficacy of Sophia's claim gave credence to the widespread use of water among the AICs in Nigeria.

Baptism

Baptism as a sacrament and a ritual is important among AICs. While some perceive re-baptism as unbiblical and, thus, reject it,³⁷ others see nothing wrong with it. Most AICs, like Anabaptists, require re-baptism of new members irrespective of previous baptisms, in some rare cases, even baptism at another AIC. In the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), for instance, "Entrants who have undergone baptism (immersion or infusion) in their former churches need to undergo rebaptism in the CCC. They believe that through rebaptism, this person can obtain the spiritual force that manifests itself in the church."³⁸ Adult baptism by immersion is common among AICs.

For most AICs, baptism is not just a sacrament; it is the act of joining a new group of people or a new community. That aspect of baptism is, at times, more stressed than the biblical significance of baptism. As such, baptism becomes a rite of initiation. In the Celestial Church of Christ, baptismal rituals can be conveniently grouped into five stages. The first stage is teaching the candidates the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the proper recital of some Psalms, especially Psalms 51 and 24.³⁹ The next stage is that of renunciation. The candidates renounce their membership of all secret cults, societies, fraternities and the like. They also renounce the worship of all idols and fetishes, all titles, positions or associations that are contrary to Christian teachings. The candidates vow to desist from worshipping Satan and all his works. A declaration of full membership and a vow (or will) that candidates should be buried according to the tenets and rites of the church are the last but one part of the stage.

The final part of the renunciation stage is the signing of a declaration of adherence to the renunciations made.⁴⁰ Adogame adds three more stages to the baptismal ritual, "...exorcizing of evil spirits, sanctification of the participants and invocation of the Holy Spirit to descend into their midst; the baptismal rite proper;

³¹ Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, 108.

³² Turner, *African Independent Church II: The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, 107.

³³ Makhubu, *Who Are the Independent Churches?* 78.

³⁴ Allan Anderson, *African Reformation*, 199.

³⁵ Afeosemimo U. Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 75, 76.

³⁶ Ayegboyan and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, 65-67.

³⁷ Kenneth J. Brown, "Joyous Baptism Among African Independent Churches," *RISK* 7, no. 3 (1971): 50-55.

³⁸ Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ*, 195.

³⁹ Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ*, 196.

⁴⁰ <http://www.celestialchurch.com/aboutus/reference/constitu.hm>. Accessed on 8th May 2010.

and the concluding prayers.”⁴¹ What happens when the candidates are removed from the baptismal waters is noteworthy. “Taking him/her out of water, he [the shepherd] makes a cruciform sign on the forehead, chest and back of the male participants, but for the females, he uses a candle to make the sign of the cross on the back instead of the chest...Before leaving the water, the shepherd leads a thanksgiving prayer with shouting of seven Alleluias to the four corners of the earth. This is to indicate an end to the baptismal exercise.”⁴²

The baptismal rite of the Celestial Church of Christ is an epitome of AICs’ creative ways of inculturating a contextual worldview and spirituality into Christian spirituality. Baptism has an additional meaning to the biblical one of dying and resurrecting with Jesus Christ. The new Christian has joined a new community. The act of joining a new communion of saints and that of becoming a new person are entrenched in the various rituals that accompany baptism – rituals that are similar to those that are performed when one joins a secular group in an African society. The rituals act as constant reminders to the new Christian about his/her new identity and its resultant lifestyle.

The discussion has established that Spirituality is the central activity in African Independent Churches. Any attempt to understand the AICs must be related to their sensitivity to spirituality. In fact, one cannot appreciate their growth, contributions to African Christianity and their attendant challenges if one ignores their high sense of spirituality and their approach toward integrative spirituality.

CONCLUSION

Prayer and rituals are the major components of AIC spirituality. Knowing that the world is made up of many spiritual elements, some of which are more powerful than human beings, AICs depend solely on the Triune God for protection, provision, and promotion through prayer and rituals. When praying to God, they do not doubt the fact that God still reveals Himself to humanity. Therefore, they do not hesitate to accept whatever ritualistic elements they claim to have been revealed to them by God, not even caring that using the elements would cause the displeasure of other Christians and ultimately result in being persecuted.

The objective of AIC spirituality is to keep its members closer to God, to realize God’s ideal for human life on earth, and to allow them to live harmoniously with their creator in a manner consistent with biblical spirituality, but not utterly different from the pre-Christian spirituality in their respective contexts. That way, Christian spirituality becomes more vibrant, meaningful and relevant to them.

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⁴¹ Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ*, 196.

⁴² Adogame, *Celestial Church of Christ*, 197.

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