

# MIGRATION AND AFRICAN DIASPORA MISSION AND THE CHANGING CHRISTIAN LANDSCAPE OF THE WEST

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## **Introduction**

This Essay reflects on the significance of African and African-led Pentecostal/charismatic churches in the modern West. The basic thesis is that through the establishment of African churches (that is churches made of Africans) and by African Christians forming churches in Europe (that is churches formed by Africans but that have a predominantly white or mixed race membership), a case has been made for the reference to Christianity as a non-Western religion with Africa as one of its major hubs. Kwame Bediako argued that Christianity has now become a non-Western religion with its centers of dominance in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Bediako 1995).

Until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity in Africa for example was associated mainly with evangelization by Western missionaries and the consequent establishment of the historic mission denominations. African responses to what was then tagged as "Western Christianity" have been varied. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some African elites formed nationalist churches in a bid to break Western hegemonic tendencies in church administration. The 'Nationalist' churches as they were known in West Africa or 'Ethiopianist' churches as they were called in southern Africa constituted the first indigenous response to Western Christian influence on the continent. The second response was to occur at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of independent churches and prophet-healing movements that became known collectively as African Independent Churches (AICs). The third response led to the emergence of independent contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic varieties of churches, a development that has led to further seismic changes in the African Christian landscape from the dominant era of historic mission Christianity.

### **African Instituted/International Churches**

The developments described above means that the acronym AICs could well stand for African International Churches because with increasing global trends in migration, Christianity in Africa has now gone international. Today, some of the largest congregations in Europe—Western and Eastern—are either founded by Africans or are led by people of African descent. There are also international churches made up of migrants from different countries that are led by Africans. These developments are important because discussions on African immigrant Christianity usually focus on churches whose memberships tend to be constituted by Africans or people of that descent. A good example of the new development is the Calvary Worship Center (CWC) in British Columbia, Canada led by Rev. Dr. Samuel Owusu from Ghana. On its website the CWC states its vision as follows:

Calvary Worship Center exists to proclaim the gospel to all nations and to equip them for their ministry in the church and in the world.

In keeping with this statement the CWC, which is every sense a multicultural African-led Christian community, attracts citizens from seventy-five nations including Canadians. Another example of an African international church is the more popular Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC) in London led by the charismatic Nigerian pastor, Matthew Ashimolowo. In the early 1990s an African-led Pentecostal church emerged in Eastern Europe. KICC, which was founded in 1992 now has a total membership of about twelve thousand worshipper from forty-eight nations, a majority of them West Africans. This means the designation of these churches in the Diaspora as 'African churches' is no longer tenable. The other useful example is Sunday Adelaja's 'Church of the Blessed Embassy of the Kingdom of God for all Nations' is based in Kiev, Ukraine. Pastor Adelaja is also Nigerian and he founded Embassy of God some twenty-two years ago. Until about five or so years ago it was the single largest church in all of Europe and had a total membership of approximately twenty-five thousand adults.

Embassy of God as I refer to it in this essay has fallen on hard times due to charges bordering on the operations of a financial scheme and moral failure on the part of its leader. These alleged failures notwithstanding we cannot take away from the fact that at the height of its popularity, Pastor Adelaja an African pastor once led the largest church in the whole of Europe, the land from where missionaries evangelized his home continent.

### **Mission, Migration and Diaspora**

Africans in Diaspora churches are now at the forefront of the new Christian initiatives that may yet restore some semblance of life into the religious life of Europe as far as Christianity is concerned. The term 'Diaspora' is associated with migration in the Jewish tradition but it now enjoys growing importance in the study of religion precisely because of some of the developments relating to the dispersal of African Christians in the modern West (Walls 2002). The reasons for migration are many but for whatever reason that took them abroad, many African migrants do not consider the word 'return' in their vocabulary. Statistical data are difficult to come by, but it is widely known that a majority of Africans in Europe and North America are economic migrants who traveled in search of better life.

There are numbers of people who also left the shores of Africa, especially in the 1980s when economies collapsed largely due to mismanagement under military dictatorships, political persecution, and the perennial search for better educational facilities for one's self and offspring. Whatever the reason for migration, as Gerrie ter Haar has noted, human migration is something of all times and ages and that 'religion has always been a significant aspect' of it (Ter Haar 2001:2). Here in this essay we look at the Christian factor and church formation in African Diasporas as an enterprise in mission.

Into whichever category they fall, African migrants have always carried their faith with them to the Diasporas contributing significantly to the revival of Christianity in the West (Hanciles 2003:146). Unlike the cries of Diaspora Jews who out of exilic despair could not fathom singing the Lord's song in a foreign land, modern migrants are doing just that with the formation of churches with many hoping that their efforts may help dealing with the declining presence of Christianity in the modern West.

### **'Witness of Presence'**

Popular discourses in the African Diasporas speak of many Christians feeling traumatized at the sight of beautiful cathedrals in Europe in particular that have now been converted for secular and non-Christian uses. Although African churches in Western Europe do not attract too many Europeans, there is such a thing as the 'witness of presence' in mission studies. The very presence of African dominated and African-led churches in Europe and North America is testimony to the dynamic quality and significance of the African evangelical witness. This is because quite a significant number of the African churches in the Diaspora tend to belong to the Pentecostal/charismatic streams of the faith. Indeed the impressive dominance of Pentecostalism in African Christianity has led to some sort of "pentecostalization" of Christianity including the historic mission denominations. Thus it is not surprising that African Methodists, Presbyterians and Catholics have now formed their own churches in the lands of their former missionaries and rather than follow inherited liturgical forms of worship, have rather opted for the more informal, expressive and dynamic forms associated with Holy Spirit movements.

Christianity has become Africa's religion too with even Catholic Parishes in several Western locations relying on African priests on sabbatical to provide them pastoral services. This, to use Pauline language, testifies to how God chooses 'the foolish things of this world' to serve his purposes:

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence (I Corinthians 1:27-29).

It is therefore not insignificant that Africa, a continent despised, deprived, trampled upon, marginalized and shamed in many ways has emerged as the beacon of Christian mission and evangelization in the global spread of the faith. This does not render European Christianity irrelevant but rather it shows that at a time when the faith is under siege

in its former heartlands, God may have placed its destiny in the hands of the people of the South. For what we say of African Christianity in the Diasporas of Europe and North America is also true of Latin American and Asian migrants in those contexts. Thus for many of these non-Westerners in the Diaspora, the recession of Christianity among Westerners is a call to evangelism and the re-establishment of kingdom values in the lands of nineteenth century missionaries.

### **Mission is in reverse**

African-led churches in the West, as I have sought to illustrate, come in different varieties and categories. The earliest ones began as fellowships among migrants who felt unwelcome in the established churches of Europe on racial grounds. These interdenominational fellowships served a second purpose of making up for the spiritual and liturgical poverty of worship life in the European church. As the churches of the missionaries continued to lose their spiritual fervor and sense of supernatural, the Africans took their spiritual destinies into their own hands and reconstituted fellowships into churches where faith could be expressed in ways that resonated with African and biblical pieties. To quote Hanciles:

In Western Europe the rise of African immigrant churches and other non-Western Christian congregations has been dramatically visible because of the stark contrast between the dynamism of new immigrant Christian groups and the often moribund tone of the traditional churches (Hanciles 2003:150).

The first immigrant churches to form in Europe were the African independent churches known in Ghana as Spiritual churches and in Nigeria and South Africa as Aladura ('praying people') and Zionist churches respectively. A number of them first started in London where one of the earliest Ghanaian independent churches, the Musama Disco Christo Church still maintains a vibrant presence. African members of mainline denominations in their home countries initially joined similar denominations in Europe, particularly in the UK and Germany. With time, many have pulled out of those communions and throughout Europe today, one encounters Ghana Methodist, Nigeria Anglican or Ghana Roman Catholic churches operating under the pastoral leadership of their own kind often posted from the home countries.

The meaning of this development is that Methodism, Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, and Presbyterianism have all in African hands, acquired new ecclesial identities, liturgical structures and styles of worship that differ markedly from those inherited from nineteenth century missionary endeavors.

From the last quarter of the twentieth century, the numbers of churches established by African migrants increased significantly. Africa-based classical Pentecostal churches such as Ghana's Church of Pentecost and Nigerian William F. Kumuyi's Deeper Christian Life Bible Church have brought together their own and established congregations throughout Europe. Another Ghanaian Church, the Lighthouse Chapel International led by Bishop Dag Heward-Mills and the Redeemed Christian Church of God led by a Nigerian Pastor Enoch A. Adeboye now have churches in many parts of Europe and North America. This means that African Pentecostal/charismatic churches have virtually taken Europe by storm. Matthew Ashimolowo's KICC and Adelaja's Embassy of God belong to this category but as stated earlier, the former attracts mostly Africans and the latter is filled with Europeans. The primary intention of these churches is not to establish congregations for only Africans so those belonging to the independent category usually cast themselves as 'international churches', although as stated earlier it has been difficult to attract Westerners. The reasons for this are usually not too hard to find, as a number of African churches often like to use the vernacular in worship.

### **Social versus Religious Roles of Immigrant Churches**

The questions of ethnic and cultural identities are important for people in the Diaspora but African immigrant Christians still consciously label themselves not in exclusive but in inclusive terms although such inclusivity may only be apparent (Ter Haar 2001:6). Quoting Ter Haar:

African Christians in the Netherlands generally identify themselves first and foremost as Christians and only secondly as Africans or African Christians. In their own view, their public adherence to Christianity constitutes the most important element of their identity (Ter Haar 2001:47).

In addition to whatever religious services they provide for African immigrants seeking to quench their thirst for dynamic Christian services that meet their need, there is no gainsaying the fact that the immigrant churches in the West also provide for members a social safety net from the harsh immigration conditions that are worsening by the day due to the reconstitution of the European Union. For many of them however, 'their religion helps them to achieve a degree of security and inner strength' within a hostile European environment (Ter Haar 2001:49). Some even see parallels between the pains of being 'aliens' in a foreign land and the experiences of Jesus Christ. Christ's own life and ministry, as Hanciles shows, included the travails of a refugee, the pain of uprootedness, and the alienation that comes with being a stranger. Even the emptying of status in the incarnation to take on the form of a servant has its parallels in the migrant experience (Hanciles 2003:150).

### **Mission and Evangelism in the Diaspora**

The painful experiences notwithstanding therefore, African Christians and African-led churches in Europe interpret their presence in terms of a call to mission and evangelism. In his book, *The Go Between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission*, John V. Taylor defines mission as 'recognizing what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in his world and doing it with him' (Taylor 1972:37). I have often revised this definition to read, 'knowing what the Creator-Redeemer is doing in the world and allowing him to engage you in the enterprise'. For the purposes of this work, I use mission and evangelism as synonymous expressions encapsulating the active prosecution of an agenda to restore and reconcile a broken world to God in Christ. That has been God's business and the African-led immigrant churches in the West seems to be serving a deep seated religious need that lies neglected in the evangelism efforts of the churches belonging to the former heartlands of Christian mission. The Spirit of God seems to have chosen the church in Africa for a new and spectacular advance. I believe that the ministries of immigrant churches are serving the purposes of the Spirit in his work of renewal and mission.

There are reasons for this. First, Christianity in African hands serves to challenge the moral relativisms in European culture by getting people to offer their lives to Christ in ways reminiscent of occurrences in the Acts of Apostles. The people that have been reached by Sunday Adelaja's God's Embassy, for example, are predominantly former drug addicts, prostitutes and leaders and members of mafia gangs who have now, under the powerful influence of the Spirit, turned to Christ. The state of Ukraine has been forced to take notice and the authorities are now too happy to turn over drug addicts to the Church because clinical psychology and expensive rehabilitation programs have proven inadequate in dealing with them. Under the powerful influence of the Spirit however, lives that were being destroyed by evil have now been turned around for Christ.

Second, through these churches, the Bible has returned to the life of the church as the authoritative word of Word. It is the main book from which preaching is done and is considered sufficient as for teaching, rebuking and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Third, African immigrant churches do take the worldviews of Africans seriously as far as pastoral care is concerned. Thus as Gerrie ter Haar would have it in another publication, *Halfway to Paradise*, African Christians find ample evidence for their beliefs in the Bible, which represents forces of good and evil as having power over life and death. African churches in the Diaspora, irrespective of their particular persuasion, address the issue of spiritual forces explicitly' (Ter Haar 1998:51). Right from missionary times in Africa, worldviews of spiritual causality had been dismissed by white missionaries as psychological delusions and figments of people's imagination. Not so with African churches in Europe, who irrespective of whatever abuses that may be associated with those worldviews, do take them seriously and articulate Christian responses to them in ways that may look alien to Western rational and cerebral Christianity.

The sense of fear, uncertainty and insecurity associated with being an immigrant makes the ministry of spiritual warfare an important aspect of the mission of Diaspora churches.



The fourth missionary implication of the Diaspora churches lies in the area of liturgical renewal. African churches generally prefer worship life that is experiential, expressive, exuberant and dynamic in nature. Whether they belong to the Pentecostal/charismatic stream of Christianity or not, renewal seems to be an important element in the lives of these churches, the point being that, the active presence of the Spirit is what gives the church of Jesus Christ its identity.

Fifth, the churches in the Diaspora provide much needed moral and physical support for their fellow 'aliens in the foreign lands of Europe'. The African immigrant, at the present time lives within a very precarious and difficult European world and spiritual and material support from the churches cannot but be considered high priority on the agenda of the church. In that respect these churches have chosen a path of evangelization that is not discontinuous with what we encounter in the Acts of the Apostles where the believers bonded together to provide for each other's needs in the spirit of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

There are many rough edges as far as churches in the Diaspora are concerned. Several of its leaders have been accused of using the enterprise for personal and material gain. Others blatantly abuse their position by playing on and exploiting the fears and insecurities of people whose lives are full of uncertainties. But perhaps one of the greatest lessons we learn from the 'ministry of presence', associated with the African Diaspora initiatives is that through these immigrants God may be preserving the life of his church. It recalls the days of his birth when the life of the baby Jesus came under threat from Herod and his henchmen. Under the direction of the divine messenger, the child and his parents took refuge in Egypt until the time when it was considered conducive for mission to resume.

In African hands, Christianity has virtually returned 'home' to the continent that granted refugee status to the Lord of mission when his life was in danger. With the recession of Christianity in the modern West and the siege under which the faith has sometimes come, immigrant churches may well be the institutions through whose efforts God would like to keep his Presence active in the West.

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