Unity in Contextual Cravings of African Indigenous Churches and their Contributions to Christian Missions.

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, the African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have been growing by leaps and bounds. At this point, their presence has become a major force in reshaping Christianity across the African continent. The researchers have a much better appreciation for the African Indigenous Churches because of recent people do not view them as a problem to be solved any longer but as a sacred part of the solution; that is, they are now a vibrant segment of the body of Christ with which other churches or denominations can partner with in God's great commission of making disciples among the nations. In this partnership, there are several questions the stakeholders are still struggling to answer. For example: What exactly are the AICs? What are their belief and practices? How do they "contextualise" in ways that balance the demands of Indigenous identity with the broader call of the Christian mission? Why, for example, do the AICs, like Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ, and Aladura Churches, all look alike? Why do the AICs across Africa, in the same way, preserve Christian traditions?

Keywords: *African Indigenous Churches, Contextual Cravings, Christian Missions.*

Introduction

Overview of African Indigenous Churches

The African Indigenous Churches (AICs), also called African Initiated Churches, are Christian denominations that originated in many African communities. These have often blended traditional beliefs and cultural practices with the teachings of Christianity. AICs have played a vital role in shaping the religious landscape in Nigeria. While maintaining a Christian theological framework, they have emphasised an African identity, local spirituality, and social values that resonate with the communities in which they are found.

Critical Characteristics of African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria

Indigenous Leadership and Autonomy: AICs are established and run by Africans, different from the European missionaries-led churches in their beginnings. These churches were spiritually impoverished in responding to Western missionary activities of the church, and it was often purgatory to have their cultural authenticity connected in any other way. AICs stress local leadership, fusing Christianity with indigenous culture, making it approachable and relevant to the community from which an AIC may have emerged (Chishanu 2023:29).

Incorporation of African Culture: AICs are characterised by synchronising a few aspects related to traditional music, dance and dress, which is then demonstrated through this mixing with Christian worship. This type of Christianity is even more local and blends with existing practices, which accolades much of the blending that has already gone on. For example, traditional African drumming and singing take place during services(ibid).

Spiritual Emphasis: AICs typically stress religious' spiritual and supernatural elements (e.g., healing, prophecy, dreams and visions). Most of these churches believe that the Holy Spirit is a present and active part of daily life for the believer. The most prominent are Healing Ministries, where spiritual leaders perform miracles by casting out demons and delivering the oppressed from demonic forces (Afriyie 2023:221).

Nationalist and Anti-Colonial Origins: A key reason why it was established has to do with religious nationalism — African Indigenous Churches were expressions of resistance to colonialism. Part of the roots of the AIC movement lay in various missions and disillusionment with Western liturgical forms (missionaries could be racially discriminatory). This elevated AICs to become symbols of African self-assertion and identity (ibid).

African World View Adaptation: AICs are Springing up to meet the needs of individual African communities with concerns and worldviews such as gatherings involving ancestor spirits, traditional medicine, and the communal nature of African society. Although those practices are interpreted through a Christian lens, AICs tend to accommodate traditional African cosmologies more than missionary churches and offer syncretic forms of belief that combine elements from Christianity and indigenous culture (Kealotswe 2014:3).

Contextual Cravings of African Indigenous Churches

African Indigenous Churches (AICs) have crystallised as a dynamic and essentially African interpretation of Christianity resulting from the confluence of Africa's cultural, traditional and spiritual currents. From the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these churches were founded as Indigenous movements by some African Christians looking to find ways of practising Christianity without European missionary domination. In time, they have created their religious traditions (forms of worship and theology) and political organisations that incorporate African communities' spiritual, social, and cultural needs. The phrase "contextual cravings" captures how these churches cater to African communities' cultural, spiritual and socio-political contexts.

Spiritual Autonomy and Cultural Identity

The desire for spiritual independence is one of the primary needs that gave birth to AICs. The African converts to Christianity were often placed under the leadership and doctrines that were not only foreign to them but also culturally embedded values and worldviews. AICs, therefore, arose to fill this gap and provided a mechanism through which the African population could practice their faith following their traditional perspectives. For example, spiritual healing, prophecy, and revelation are AICs' practices that are fundamental among Africans. Among the many tasks applicable to society were the roles performed by spiritual leaders, diviners or healers in ameliorating daily living tests. Such components were incorporated in their praises and worship in the AICs, creating a conducive environment for worship and distancing themselves from Westernised Christianity that, for example, dismissed practices as 'pagan' (Molobi 2020:323).

Sociopolitical Empowerment

The desire for sociopolitical empowerment is another contextual craving of African Indigenous Churches. Many AICs came into existence during the period of colonial domination, and thus, their birth was often in defiance of political and religious oppression. They offered Africans the opportunity to identify themselves and oppose the cultural annihilation that was to be caused by European colonial powers. These churches did not only offer religious services but became centres of political activism where Africans could strategise and fight against unfairness. From the slave trade in the Congolese, AIC leaders Simon Kimbangu and Isaiah Shembe in South Africa became iconic faces in the struggles for political and spiritual liberation. Their churches preached about emancipation and the need to fight for justice and equality under colonial rule. Moreover, even after independence, AICs remained relevant in the struggle for the voiceless and social justice (Adedibu 2018:8).

The Quest for Relevance in Daily Life

The need to bring religion into the quest to make it meaningful and relevant to everyday life is another need that informs the practices of AICs. In the context of this paper, Africa is a continent with many uncertainties: poverty, epidemics, political strife, and incessant fighting among the communities. These challenges have always characterised the traditional African religions whose main objectives are mortality, protection, fertility and the welfare of the society. It is pretty evident, and AICs seem to endorse it as well, that such a strategy integrates various religious beliefs into one. This approach also includes the curing of body and spirit. Killing diseases and attacks from the evil spirit's charges are part of this kind of church. Only in the context of these practices can the African philosophy of a man's life as a dual entity be adequately grasped. In this setting, religion does not exist in a vacuum, as in the case of one sphere of society, but is part of every sphere of society. AICs ensure that the spiritual lives of their members are active and responsive to the tasks that are pertinent in the present (Banda et al 2015:141).

Adaptation of Worship

The contextual cravings of AICs are also seen in how their worship styles and liturgical practices reflect those of African cultures. African rhythms, languages and rituals were too different from the old Western forms of Christian worship. In turn, AICs create lively and highly participatory worship services filled with music, dancing to African rhythms in a high-spirited style until the early morning hours. Drumming, clapping, dancing and call-respond singing are standard practices in many AICs worship services. They strengthened the communal and expressive components of worship because they are relevant to African converts who regard these aspects as essential to their spirituality. Moreover, AICs

generally worship in African languages, which adds accessibility (Wanderi 2019:109-110).

Engagement with Traditional African Religions

AICs can be interpreted as representing a theological yearning for a compatible plane between Christianity and African Traditional Religions (ATRs). Rather than a repudiation of traditional religions, many AICs attempt to absorb them within Christianity. Testing ground AIC theology offers a fertile outlet for African belief in ancestors and the role of spirits held by many traditional worldviews from which it is derived; both involved here are expressed as part thereof, if not re-interpreted through Christian eyes. AICs offer a comprehensive religious experience that resonates with the black African consciousness through syncretism. Unlike traditional religious beliefs, Westernised Christianity is viewed as alien to the African context of Christian worship. AICs tend not to see a problem with assimilating what appears plausible (English) and compatible responses, expressing that Africans identify themselves with strength (ibid).

Response to Pentecostalism and Globalization

Nevertheless, the new challenges created by Pentecostalism and the forces of globalisation over the last few decades have been one in which Pentecostal churches have prospered with a message of prosperity, miracles, and modernity, even attracting many urban youth, especially away from the more traditional AICs. In light of this, many AICs later adapted their teaching and practices to survive within a highly changing religious landscape. It has resulted in the combination of AIC and Pentecostal elements within some churches' efforts to adapt to the spiritual demands of newer generations while retaining their indigenous identity.

These indigenous churches of Africa epitomise contextual desires for an authentic faith relevant and empowering within African cultural, spiritual, and socio-political contexts. The churches provide valuable space for expressing their spirituality so that AICs remain dynamic, growing institutions in the African religious landscapes while purposing to respond to practical, spiritual, and cultural needs within their settings. The growth and resilience testify to the enduring relevance today in Africa by contextualised religion (Meyer 2010:5).

Cultural Expressions and Theological Unity in African Indigenous Churches

The AICs dynamically fuse elements from local cultural traditions with theological elements into a unique expression of Christianity within the African context. These churches have emerged as a response to Christian expressions influenced by missionary activities. Their peculiar theological frameworks have captivated African communities' diverse cultures, languages, and worldviews. The result is a powerful example of contextual theology: an adaptation of Christian theology within the cultural context in which, at last, expressions of culture and theological unity combine in an integral, community-centred way to present faith.

Historical Roots and Cultural Resilience

The AICs first emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in part as a response to the missionary efforts of the colonial era, which often imposed Western cultural norms and theological doctrines. For their part, African leaders and communities who felt alienated from those structures sought ways to incorporate Christian teachings within their traditions. Such churches became the site for cultural resilience wherein African languages, music, dress, and rituals were articulated meaningfully within the Christian frame.

Indeed, in that manner, the mixing allowed the African communities to relate to Christianity in a manner that attributed legitimacy to their heritage while at the same time adaptively meeting new spiritual insight (Duncan 2014:3).

Cultural Expressions in Worship and Rituals

One distinctive feature of AICs is that African languages, symbols, and rituals are used in worship. Unlike Western-influenced liturgies, AICs commonly include practices such as drumming, dance, storytelling, and traditional dress as a part of their services. For example, many AIC forms of worship involve the spontaneity of prayer and singing, while drumming and bright dancing depict communal participation and emotional engagement with God. Such physicality reflects African perceptions of the sacred as interconnected with the body and communal self (ibid).

Theological Unity Through Contextualised Doctrine

Theologically, the AICs often lead discourses of liberation, community, and spiritual empowerment, appealing to African values of communal well-being and kinship. The stress these churches lay on God's power over challenges posed by life often implies reading scripture through prisms related to particular African social realities, such as economic hardship, community conflicts, and social justice issues. The AIC sermons frequently use the Old Testament deliverance narratives and represent God as an emancipating force who 'acts' in the lives of the oppressed.

AICs have shown the world that theological unity does not necessarily call for cultural uniformity, but Christianity can be flexible enough and adaptive to diverse cultural expressions. Consequently, AICs manifest dynamic faith that is robust in the theology of being contextual, both for African Cultural Identity and World Christianity (Manganyi et al 2013:4).

Challenges to Unity in African Independent Churches

The pathway towards unity within AICs is never smooth. Their diversity in doctrines, cultural practices, organisational structures, and interpretation of theological tenets often poses grave obstacles to forming cohesive alliances. This paper discusses the main obstacles to unity within the African Independent Churches and pursues possibilities of further cooperation.

Diversity in Theological Beliefs

One of the biggest obstacles to unity in AICs is their theological diversity. In contrast to mainstream churches, which sometimes cling to articulated doctrines, the AICs differ significantly in their concepts about God's nature, salvation, prophets' role, and healing practices. Some AICs insist upon the traditional doctrines of Christianity, while others incorporate indigenous African beliefs and often include ideas about ancestors, spirits, and divine intermediaries. This theological diversity sometimes causes tensions when different churches try to unite and find some practices unorthodox or incompatible (Doyah 2024:97).

Cultural Differences and Ethnic Loyalties

AICs are often identified with specific ethnic groups, language bases, or local cultures. Though this allows for a greater depth of cultural representation in each particular congregation, it acts as a detriment to unified cohesion as these churches interact with other churches from other ethnic backgrounds. Loyalties to one's ethnic group and cultural heritage often replace inter-church cooperation and collaboration as there may be a far greater bond among

congregants to ethnicity than there is to a pan-African Christian appeal (ibid).

Leadership Structure and Authority Conflicts
The leadership structures among AICs are different and sometimes present a challenge when other churches try to work with them. Many AICs are organised around charismatic leaders, either the prophets or senior apostles, with significant spiritual and administrative influence. Often, these individuals are believed to be divinely chosen and carry significant weight within their constituencies. Consequently, unity efforts can be complicated by disagreements over the leadership role since each leader can hold distinct views on who should lead or how authority should be distributed in whatever inter-church collaboration (Chikwanha 2022:5).

Doctrinal Discrepancies and Syncretism
Other challenges to unity include variations in doctrine and the extent to which syncretic practices—those that blend traditional African belief systems with Christianity—prevail. While some churches have retained minimal syncretism, others have retained more customary traits that include ancestor reverence or spiritual practices that are less prevalent in Western Christianity; this has perhaps caused some disunity within AICs themselves, as some would see this as an essential expression of faith from an African perspective, while others cannot accept these syncretistic practices as compatible with Christian doctrine.

While there are many setbacks to unity within the African Independent Churches, they are certainly not impossible. AICs can work toward more collaboration and mutual understanding regarding the diversity defining them. Unity in diversity allows AICs to model an inclusive, culturally resonant faith that is both true to the African experience and, at the same time, honour the wider Christian community. This unity may be firmly cemented through shared social initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and the building of supportive structures so that AICs can meaningfully contribute to the more excellent Christian families in Africa and globally (Ezenweke et al 2012:73).

African Independent Churches and Their Contributions to Christian Missions
AICs have contributed toward the universal Christian mission through reshaping Christianity with African expressions, community-based theology, and contextualisation of practices. In contrast to earlier expressions of Christianity as a world religion, it is often marked by the imposition of Western doctrines and practices on others. AICs represent another kind of reinterpretation of Christianity, which carries African identity to make the gospel relevant and meaningful in African communities. Through the AICs' approach to evangelism, social outreach, and spiritual formation, it emerges as a model for Christian missions that underlines cultural resonance and self-sufficiency. The following are some of the ways AICs contributed to Christian missions:

Contextualisation of Christianity
Probably, the most essential contribution AICs have made to Christian missions is their emphasis on contextualisation. As much as Christianity needs to resonate with local cultures, the AICs have contextualised those teachings, symbols, and practices of Christianity along African values, beliefs, and ways; this came out quite strongly against early Western missionary models, which always tended to impose on their African converts the necessity of abandoning their traditional culture heritage. By using African languages, art, music, and dance in worship, AICs make Christianity accessible and profoundly meaningful at the level of the local community.

Accommodation of African tradition is seen in traditional drumming, call-and-response singing, storytelling, and the use of culturally relevant symbolism. These add not only to the enjoyment of Christianity but also afford African Christians a means of expressing themselves during worshipping. This contextualisation model's success underlines the gospel's relevance to the local culture and is an essential lesson for contemporary Christian missions worldwide (Mokhoathi 2017: 7).

Self-Reliant and Indigenous-Led Missions
AICs pioneered the concept of self-reliant Indigenous leadership instead of the dependency model, which is the one most Western missions were practising. Most AIC churches emerged in reaction to the colonially rooted Christian missions that relegated minimal roles to Africans in church leadership and decision-making. Such AICs created an independent and self-sustaining church model wherein African clergy and administrators take the lead in church affairs for their members, fitting within the nuanced cultural, social, and economic context. This autonomy thus empowers the AICs to marshal resources, develop relevant ministry programs, and shape missions in conformity with local needs and priorities (Molobi 2020:324).

Focus on Holistic Missions
AICs, therefore, contribute to Christian missions by exercising holistic ministry that addresses the community's physical, social, and spiritual needs. While the older mission approaches were limited in their main endeavour to the spiritual conversion of people, for AICs, faith is related to every aspect of life. Their mission covers health, education, and economic development and, thus, represents the integral broad-based understanding of the gospel that speaks to the immediate struggles of ordinary day-to-day living. One of the defining characteristics of AICs is healing ministries, where health and wellness are considered part of spiritual life (Sukarna 2023:460).

Influence on Global Missions
As African Christianity develops, the contribution of AICs to world missions keeps growing. As examples of cultural accommodation, holistic ministry, and Indigenous leadership, AICs give a pattern for missions across other regions where the same challenge of cultural diversity and spiritual independence exists. The AICs' successes prove that Christianity is tied to no culture or geographical region and that its expressions are as varied as the communities that receive it. The growth of AICs has encouraged churches worldwide to develop similar approaches sensitive to culture, social justice, and ministry models that can be sustained (Duncan 2014:3).

Conclusion
The African Independent Churches have given a transformative impulse to the Christian mission, becoming an Africanised expression of self-reliant, communitarian, and culturally relevant Christianity. Therefore, The AICs have focused on contextualised theology, indigenous leadership, holistic ministry, and coherence within the community to develop a model of mission that is both

effective and sustainable. In doing so, the shape of the global Christian mission has been revised to illustrate how culturally sensitive ministry and indigenous peoples-led Christian missions may be effective. In this growth, the AICs would continue to influence world Christianity in diverse ways of mission practice, respectful of particular identities and spiritual needs in all communities they serve.

Suggestions for Potential Unity among African Indigenous Churches

Despite all these challenges, the following are suggestions through which African Indigenous Churches may have peace within themselves:

1. Interfaith Dialogue and Ecumenical Partnerships: It will, therefore, be essential to create forums for discussion whereby leaders and members of AICs can express their beliefs, lessons, and opinions about areas of common interest.

2. Shared Social Initiatives: Discussions on social issues, like poverty alleviation, education, or health, will provide AICs with an opportunity to unite on practical projects in a unified manner while working toward community needs.

3. Leadership Training and Capacity Building: Common training programmes for clergy will provide an avenue for giving them a more coherent theological understanding and standard leadership models.

4. Establishment of Regional and National Councils: Establishing councils or associations of AICs would give an organisational framework for consultation, conflict resolution, resource sharing, and adequate group management.

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