

RELIGIOUS REVITALIZATION IN MALAWI: THE AFRICAN ANCESTORS' RELIGION

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One of the recent events in the city of Blantyre has been the formation of what is called 'Makolo Church'. This is not a Christian Church, but the leaders of this Church are those christian church ministers who have been suspended or sacked by their churchers because of breaking certain rules.¹

This is what an Anglican priest, the late Father Likoleche, wrote in 1975 referring to the **Chipembedzo cha makolo achikuda**, or The African Ancestors' Religion. Unlike other neo-primal religious movements, the literature about which has come from outside observers, the African Ancestors' Religion or A.A.R., as I shall hence forth refer to it - has from time to time produced its own small publications, mainly for propaganda purposes. It is on this literature that most of this discussion will be based.

In Malawi today, the word **makolo** (ancestors) refers also to Peter Nyambo's Ethiopian Universal Church (Kush) although in a rather pejorative sense.² Another name often heard is **zoipa chitani, mbiri siyigonera** (do whatever evil things, as they will not be remembered for long).³ In a wider usage, the term **makolo**, along with 'Abraham', denotes religious movements which stress the Old Testament, upon which they justify such practices as polygamy, beer-drinking, traditional initiation and ancestor veneration, which are also part of the general African heritage. It is therefore not easy sometimes to distinguish between the different sets of movements in this category. The Catholic Archbishop of Blantyre, the most Reverend James Chiona, in a circular to the Catholic Christians in his Archdiocese, writes;

As you all know, a sect called **Makolo** has been introduced over here. This sect follows pagan practices.⁴

The Archbishop's identification of the movement is accurate. It really started to come out openly in Blantyre, Thyolo, Chiradzulu and Mulanje, and its preachers attracted crowds at bus-stops and markets.

The leaders of Nyambo's Ethiopian Universal Church (Kush) deny any links with the A.A.R., despite some similarities. Both stress "a return to the ways of the ancestors", but while the A.A.R. are rabidly anti-Christian, the Ethiopian Universal Church accepts the fundamental Christian teachings. When I personally interviewed Bishop Absalom Makauli of the Ethiopian Universal Church in 1981, on whether his church could be identified with the A.A.A.R., he replied:

Many people see it that way, but in reality we are a different organization. The main difference is doctrinal: we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and the Bible as the revealed world of God, whereas they do not.⁵

However, the two movements started and gathered momentum when nationalist fervour was mounting and taking a definite turn. The Ethiopian Universal Church (Kush) started in 1943, a year before the foundation of the Nyasaland Congress Party, while A.A.R. was founded at Chilomoni near Blantyre, on 6th July, 1958, the day Dr. H.K. Banda arrived in Malawi to lead the country to independence.

The A.A.R. does not call itself a 'church' as this term is considered to be associated with Christianity, which they regard as alien. The name **Chipembedzo cha Makolo Achikuda** should actually be translated into English as 'The Religion of the Black Ancestors', or simply 'The Black Ancestors' Religion'. But the official documents of the movement refer to it as 'The African Ancestors' Religion'.⁶ 'Black' has been translated as 'African', since to many people 'black' is synonymous with 'African'.

The founder, Joseph Mphambala, once a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (or perhaps even, the Providence Industrial Mission) is alleged to have left that Church after declining to hold an office to which he had been appointed.⁷

The main doctrinal points of A.A.R. are set forth in five mimeographed documents issued in Chichewa, Malawi's national language, by the headquarters of the movement in Blantyre. I shall now summarize the contents of these documents in order to give a better understanding of the teaching and practices of this movement.

Fr. Likoleche, who heard leaders of the African Ancestors' Religion preach at Blantyre and Limbe Bus Stations, has written that its teaching can be summed up in three points:

- (i) It blames Malawians for rejecting the God of their ancestors and accepting the foreign God of the whites;
- (ii) It rejects the Bible as the word of God, and notoriously twists the whole truth about Jesus in the Gospels and treats him as the son of a nobleman in Palestine; and
- (iii) It denies the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God and that He still lives. If Jesus brought salvation, then it was to his fellow Jews and other Europeans, and not to Africans.⁸

These observations, although not necessarily biased, represent a hearer's view of the movement's teachings.

**Document 1 - The Truth about Jesus, the Saviour of the Israelites
- the whites.**

This document emphasizes that Christianity is an alien religion which has no relevance to Africa, except that it has been used as an instrument of subjection: "We were but fourth-class citizens, human filth in the country which was ours by birth", the document bemoans.⁹ The Bible is for the white people, containing stories and references which parallel the black condition.

**Document 2 - The end of Christian Churches in Africa OR
The demise of Christianity in Africa**

This is a general appeal to Africa to return to her old traditions.¹⁰ A set of corresponding Bible texts such as Micah 4:5 are cited. A passage reads:

The Christian Churches (Christianity) came to Africa to hoodwink the black people away from their traditional religion in order to follow a religion which is false to the blackman that of Jesus, a white man who was crucified on a tree and died a long time ago in his country. It is indeed useless to the blackman. As a result of abandoning their ways and customs, Africans are dying young, as their book - the Bible - says.¹¹

On the mission of Jesus Christ, another passage reads:

Jesus was a political revolutionary who wanted to overthrow Roman rule in Israel, or say Canaan, but he was killed by the Romans. He never rose from the dead; and to say that he ascended into heaven is a lie - as their book, the Bible, says.¹²

The concluding passage accuses the Christian Churches of "teaching through their book called 'Kaunjika' (Book of Refuse) - the Bible - such things as war, adultery and witchcraft.¹³

Document 3 - The Jesus (Political) Party

A collection of Bible texts have been interpreted as pointing to Jesus as the political liberator of the Jews.¹⁴ Jesus' public ministry, some of his sayings, his passion and death are all cast within a political - or better still, a nationalist - perspective. Here are a few examples:

1. Matthew 4:

12-18. When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he launched his political party. "The Kingdom of God is at hand". Here, Jesus meant 'independence', or 'self-rule', although he said it indirectly, for fear of being arrested by the Romans.¹⁵

2. Acts 9:

13-19. Saul joins Jesus' political party in order to overthrow Roman rule, when he had realised his mistake after being misled by the Jewish priests. (Note here that Jewish

priests are called 'chiefs', who were appointed by the Romans to take charge of Jewish affairs.)¹⁶

3. Acts 11:

26. The Jews who followed Jesus began to be called 'The people of Jesus in Antioch', and not 'Christians' after the name of their leader.¹⁷

4. Psalm 18:

9. There are many gods. Let there be no strange god on your land; do not worship an alien god. The God of the Christians is alien, and therefore must not be worshipped.¹⁸

The document closes with hard words against the Christian Churches:

The devil (Satan) is none else than a beast that wanders around deceiving people. The Christian Churches, finding this word foreign, interpreted it to mean a heavenly evil spirit, so as to deceive people. Now you can say that the Christian Churches are in fact the devils.¹⁹

5. Jer.8:

8-12. The shepherds of the Christian Churches are avaricious dogs, never satisfied, each one seeking gain in his area.²⁰

Declaration:

The name of Jesus was introduced here by whitemen, to deceive people into believing that Jesus is the Saviour of all people, including the black people. We, the black people, do not accept this lie. We have been enslaved by the white people for many years in the name of Jesus.²¹

Document 4 - The death of Jesus, called Christ, in Jerusalem, Judea

The passion and death of Jesus Christ are narrated from a political perspective with some local embellishments.²² One passage reads:

Christians chide the Jews for having unjustly put Christ to death, disregarding the Romans who actually executed him. Pilate said: 'Let him be killed... for sedition'.²³

Document 5 - Worship and Rites of the African Ancestors: an introductory text.

This is a nineteen-point outline of the code of conduct and rites of the A.A.R.²⁴ The following is a summary of the main points:

(i) Duties Towards Self:

Regulations concerning good personal conduct; compassion; meekness; good department, etc.

(ii) Duties Towards Others:

Good conduct towards others; respect for the elderly; obedience to parents and to the State; love; not to kill, steal, commit adultery.

(iii) Duties Towards God and Ancestors:

Observance of ancestral customs: funerals, rites of passage; offering sacrifices to ancestors; traditional dances; perpetuation of names of ancestors.

The direct allusion to leading personalities in nationalist movements characteristic of the early period as reflected in the first document, put the A.A.R. in disfavour with nationalist aspirations. It was thought that the movement had seeds of subversion which had to be nipped in the bud. Consequently, the movement was temporarily suspended and its preachers prevented from preaching. Popular sentiment stipulated that the movement change its mode of preaching, by refraining from the use of overtly political images and personalities in the current political set-up of

Malawi.²⁵ The A.A.R. has responded by avoiding mentioning names of persons and situations in Malawi. But this is compensated by a heavy emphasis on depicting Jesus Christ as political liberator of the white people (Jews are regarded as white people) and the black people as outside that liberation, since they have their own liberators.

In the economy of salvation, just as the white people have their own ancestors and saviours as revealed in the Bible, in like manner the Africans have theirs. To stress the identity and self-sufficiency of the African or black man in matters of salvation, Christianity and the Bible are considered alien intruders, with tendencies divisive and disruptive of the African ethos. The Bible is depicted as essentially catering for the white people's aspirations, which do not apply to the black except at the level of liberation in general.

Furthermore, the A.A.R. interprets the Bible in such a way as to show not only how the white people have distorted it, but also how they use it to oppress the black people and to hoodwink them into abandoning their own traditional religions. The A.A.R. preachers ask:

If the Bible, which is the source of Christian teaching, says that people must return to the ways of their ancestors, why do the Missions stop us from following the customs and ways of our ancestors?²⁶

This is not to say that the A.A.R. take or justify their stand from what the Bible says, since they reject it totally, but what they stand for is also expressed in the Bible. Hence they use the Bible itself as a weapon to castigate the Missions and all that they stand for.

Comparing the A.A.R.'s negative approach to the Bible with that of the Christian-based Independent Churches, the latter accept the Bible as the true word of God, and often use it to demonstrate that the whitemen have strayed from its true message through misuse or misinterpretation.

The A.A.R. maintains that there is a universal God, but that He nevertheless has ordained that each race abides by its own traditions of worship inherited from its ancestors. Taking over a new or foreign tradition will have adverse effects on the society that does so.

The documents I have just summarized constitute a major unifying symbol in so far as they attempt to systematize the A.A.R. movement's central tenets in a pan-African approach, although with particular reference to Malawi. The following hymn reflects this pan-Africanist orientation:²⁷

Hymn of All The Black People

Chorus: Come, let us offer sacrifice to the Spirit.
Let us do so, the Creator has come.

1. The going astray of the black people must stop
The Creator has come
Misunderstanding among the black must end
The Creator has come.
2. Let the black people rejoice today
The Creator has come
Now indeed is the time
The Creator has come.
3. He is the Spirit of our Ancestors
The creator has come
Let us all unite,
The creator has come.
4. All the black people on our land
The Creator has come
All you who have been misled, listen:
The Creator has come.

Despite this pan-Africanist appeal, when the A.A.R. is introduced in areas where the people are from diverse cultural backgrounds and religious traditions, it adopts a great deal from the existing local forms of worship and other traditions which generally lie within the scope of its manifesto on worship and rites reflected in Document 5. Prof. J.M. Schoffeleers has observed for Nsanje District where the movement was introduced in the 1970s that the local emphasis has come to be centred on M'bona, the guardian spirit of the Mang'anja.²⁸

Worries, worries, worries!
M'bona is there!
Let us put our worries before God.

In Zomba District, where I became familiar with this movement, **chinamwali** (puberty rites) and **nsembe** (sacrifice to ancestral spirits) were not performed regularly. Most of the meetings were open to the public and merely consisted of long sermons, hymn singing, spontaneous prayers, and a collection for charities was taken. Representatives of the movement occasionally bring gifts to patients at the Zomba General Hospital. The few young people in the movement usually act assistant to the leaders at a religious function. This may well be a traditional custom which reserves ritual functions to elders or those who have reached the age of seniority.

Conclusion

The A.A.R. stands out as being at the extreme end of religious polarization among Malawi's new religious movements. Notably, it is disliked both by the mainstream churches and by a great majority of the independent churches, as it is considered not only potentially disruptive, but also a menace to these churches in that its doctrines and practices confuse Christians and pseudo-Christians. Archbishop Chiona's circular, which I have cited, is a clear example of the antagonistic attitude of a high-ranking prelate towards the A.A.R. Fr. Likoleche has singled it out as non-Christian and led by ministers who have either been suspended or sacked from the mainstream churches because of indiscipline. It delights in the rejection of basic Christian tenets and indulges in denouncing Christian churches. A similar attitude was reflected at a conference of independent churches held in Zomba in September, 1980, when the steering committee declined to invite representatives of the A.A.R. because they were considered not merely non-Christians, but even anti-Christian.

The official Government attitude seems to be one of non-committed tolerance, so long as the A.A.R. does not pose a threat to peace and harmony. Hence, local chiefs may, at their discretion, permit the A.A.R. to establish branches of the movement in their areas with the approval of the District Commissioners.³⁰

By and large, the A.A.R. does not have a clear vision of what it is up to, and in many respects the values it tries to proclaim are out of step with the aspirations of changing Malawian societies. Nevertheless, nostalgia for the past,

and the fear of abandoning the ancestral heritage for modern ways, may have some appeal to the more conservative section of society, particularly if its lot has not improved by espousing new ways.

Thus membership is composed mainly of adults who have not been very much affected by recent changes in the rural areas, and of the less-privileged in the suburbs of Blantyre, Zomba and Lilongwe. There is a core of committed members, and a large number who are either sympathizers or people who drift in and out according to the situations in which they find themselves. Its rather frequent outbursts against Christian churches put off many potential A.A.R. followers, either because they fear being implicated in its political connotations, or simply out of disgust for such an unecumenical approach towards other churches. However, a number of ordinary members to whom I have spoken have said that the A.A.R. is simply a church (**mpingo**) which accepts them as they are, particularly when other churches have rejected them or cannot take them.

The leadership of the A.A.R. formulates the teaching of the movement and disseminates it at rallies and in print. The negative aspect of the teaching is highly persuasive in that it gives a totally different interpretation of the Bible, the authoritative source from which Christian doctrine, as known by many people, is derived. The use of apocryphal literature is a strategy aimed at convincing Christians and would-be Christians of the insincerity of the missionaries who have even kept certain parts of the Holy Scriptures from them.

Although the positive aspect of the teaching is very general, it nevertheless gives wide scope for implementation in the differing cultural backgrounds where the A.A.R. is introduced. My personal observation is that both the negative and positive aspects of the teaching reflect an ingenious and well-thought-out strategy for mobilizing the masses ideologically for a return to the way the African ancestors worshipped. The Christian churches are considered, not only as a threat to the spread of the movement, but also as undermining the African people's religious heritage through their foreign ideologies and ways of worship.

NOTES

1. J.F. Likoleche: "Why many divisions in the Church of Christ?" **Ecclesia** (Diocese of Lake Malawi and Southern Malawi) Kasupe. July, 1975, p.3.
2. R.L. Wishlade: **Sectarianism in Southern Nyasaland** London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1965, pp. 20, 47.
3. **Ibid.**, 49.
4. Archbishop J. Chiona: "Mwezi wa Korona", Blantyre, 1st October, 1975. "... monga mukudziwa, kwathu kuno kwafika mpingo woti: 'Wa makolo'. Mpingowu ukutsatira zachikunja zonse..." My translation.
5. O.T. Bishop Absalom Makauli to J.C. Chakanza; Zomba, 10th Sept., 1981.
6. See the documents from the A.A.R. cited in this section. Members of this religious organization are popularly referred to as "Achipembedzo" (Those who belong to "the Religiou") or as "A Makolo" (Those who belong to the 'Ancestors' Church).
7. Questionnaire on the "History of Independent Churches", filled by Solomon Mphulanga.
8. Likoleche; **op. cit.**,4.
9. The Chichewa title of Document I reads: "Zoonadi zache za Mpulumutsi wa Aisraeli", 3 pages, no date.
10. The Chichewa title of Document II reads: "Kutha kwa machalichi m'dziko la Africa", 2 pages, no date.
11. **Ibid.**,1.
12. **loc. cit.**
13. **loc. cit**
14. The Chichewa title of Document III reads: "Chipani cha Yesu"; 4 pages, no date.

15. **Ibid.**, 1.
16. **loc. cit.**
17. **Ibid.**, II.
18. **loc. cit.**
19. **Ibid.**, IV
20. **loc. cit.**
21. **loc. cit.**
22. The Chichewa title of Document IV reads: "Imfa ya Yesu ochedwa Kristu ku Yerusalemu ku Yudeya"; 10 pages, no date.
23. **Ibid.**, 1.
24. The Chichewa title of Document V reads: "Kalata yofotokoza Kasamalidwe Ka Chipembedzo ndi Miyambo ya Makolo Achikuda"; one page, no date.
25. O.T. Peter Bvalani, Department of Surveys, Blantyre, December, 1981.
26. **Ibid.**
27. J.M. Schoffeleers: File on Independent Churches, under 'Makolo'. I am very grateful to Professor Schoffeleers for letting me use this file.
28. J.M. Schoffeleers: "Economic change and religious polarization in an African rural district". Paper presented at the conference on "Malawi: an alternative pattern of development"; held at the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 24-25 May, 1984. 22-33.
29. J.M. Schoffeleers: Interview with members of the Chipembedzo cha Makolo Achikuda, Nsanje; 31 December, 1978; kindly made available to me by the author.
30. Group Village Headman Chapinga of Nsanje District told me in September, 1981 that he would not tolerate the A.A.R in his area because they were troublemakers.