

The History of African Indigenous Churches in Scholarship

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Abstract

In this article I take the opportunity to reflect on historical developments in the study of African Indigenous Churches (AICs) up until the present and show that there have been a number of distinct phases in the study of AICs. In conclusion, I argue that up until recently, the AICs have been studied as a synthesis of African traditional religions and Christianity but that a more meaningful approach begins with an acknowledgement that they are both African and Christian.

Introduction

Studies on the AICs in South Africa have taken a very interesting methodological journey. They were initially studied by missionaries who wanted to prove that AICs were not Christian but misled, pagan corruptions of the Christian faith: a rouge phenomenon. Missionaries and theologians did all they could to disown these churches of their Christian heritage. The term "Christian" as used by missionaries and theologians is loaded with a European religio-cultural content. Their definition of a Christian, therefore, excluded any practice that did not conform to their formula. The second phase was dominated by anthropologists who implemented ethnographic tools of investigation. Researchers actively collected data on these churches and their belief systems were recorded. The AICs were said to be syncretic: an illegitimate mixing of Christianity and African beliefs and customs. Both James Kiernan and Martin West argued that these churches offered a coping mechanism for rural Africans within an urban context. The AICs have always been treated ethnographically while the mission churches were treated historically - with the consequence being that AICs ended up being

perceived as exotic. The focus was on the peculiarity of these churches and Black mainline churches were ignored. Ranger (1987: 31) has suggested that:

...it is time that social historians, anthropologists, and even theologians to become more interested in the inner history of the churches of mission provenance. ... we should see mission churches as much less alien and independent churches as much less 'African' than has hitherto been the case.

In South Africa, the AICs are largely made up of poor people who have had a long history of being disenfranchised and have experienced different forms of suffering under successive white governments. According to Glenda Kruss (1986: 21), "[t]he first dominant explanation of independent churches is that they are a reaction to conquest". In other words, AICs were a response to the socio-economic and political situation in South Africa. Their symbolism and practice was a subversion of the norm as they appropriated and subverted important Christian symbols. Their ritual practice, especially healing, was seen as a major indication of resistance to white or Western institutions, and the system of apartheid in particular (Thomas 1994, 1997, 1999). It is no longer enough to say that these churches emerged as a response to their situation of being subjugated and that they were merely ways of coping in a difficult time. Such methods pay more attention to the impact of social structures than human agency. That context is very important, but one has to go beyond that and acknowledge the creativity and innovativeness of the AICs. A more helpful explanatory approach is found in resource mobilisation theory. Since Africans were subjugated and dehumanised, their reaction was to find alternative ways of affirming their humanity. It was not a question of coping but that of affirming their humanity. They mobilised religious and cultural resources from various sources and devised strategies for affirming their humanity. These resources and strategies are very important in individual identity and group formation. Some of the resources mobilised are often symbols held in common with other groups but they will be appropriated and claimed by the group. This is what Jean Comaroff (1985) called "symbolic negotiation".

Symbolic negotiations are claims, by individuals and groups, over legitimate ownership and control of "symbolic discourse, practice, and forms of association that comprise a worldview" (Chidester 1989: 21). Symbols are part of society's cultural landscape and no individual or group has exclusive ownership over them. Like culture, symbols are resources from which people draw in their processes of self-definition (Thornton 1988). The reason for having claims and counter claims on symbols is due to "deep ambiguity and negotiability of symbols" (Beidelman 1987: 546). As Beidelman (1986: 8) observed:

....much of Kaguru social life is a constant negotiation between self-serving, protective ambiguity and co-operative or exploitative explication of social rights and obligations.

The negotiability of symbols has to do with their ambivalence and the plurality of meanings that can be attached to them. The inherent ambiguity of symbols allows social groups to appropriate and interpret them in accordance with the interests of that particular social group. It serves the cause of the group's self-definition. Historian of religion David Chidester (1989: 6) has suggested that a worldview is a "multidimensional network of strategies for negotiating person and place in a world of discourse, practice, and association". "Person" and "place" refer to human identity and the place a human occupies in the constructed reality. The "world of discourse" is the broad interpretative framework within which reality is understood and experienced. It establishes, constitutes, and sustains the social world in which the individual participates. It includes socially established cognitive knowledge, roles, values, attitudes, emotions, motives, and decisions to engage in one line of action rather than the other (Wanamaker 1999).

African Indigenous Churches in Scholarship

Mission History

Chidester (1996) has observed that missionaries were involved in the practice of comparative religion from the beginning. Africans were said to not have a religion based on the theory that they did not have an idea of a Supreme Being or God. The missionary Shaw, for example, said that the Xhosa had "no knowledge of God whether true or false" (Chidester 1996: 91). The earlier missionaries said that Africans had degenerated from a superior civilisation to an inferior one. The inferiority of African civilisation was reflected in their superstition "including their belief in witchcraft, their practice of circumcision and their funerals". In fact, "African superstition was the trace of a lost religion" (Chidester 1996: 91). According to this Eurocentric worldview, the degeneration was so bad that Africans had reached the same level as animals and were thus referred to as beasts or brutes. The absence or lack of religion went along with the lack of "other defining human features, such as institution of marriage, system of law, or any formal political organisation" (1996: 14). The assertion that Africans lacked religion and they were on the same level with animals meant that they had no human rights:

As animals by comparison to Europeans, therefore, indigenous people who lacked a religion also lacked any recognizable human right or entitlement to the land in which

they lived. ... Animals, therefore, had no human rights to life or land, neither did the indigenous people in the Americas, Australia, Africa, or the Pacific Islands, who were classified as beastly or brutal because they lacked religion. (Chidester 1996:14)

Furthermore, lack of religion also meant lack of industry, and Africans were said to be living a "life of laziness and indolence" (Villa-Vicencio 1988: 43). Missionaries saw their task as that of taming the African beast. One of the ways of doing that was to teach him or her (the African) the value and dignity of work. The Gospel was believed to be the most important "weapon" for taming the beast. James Stewart of the Lovedale mission pointed out that the "gospel was the basis of what he called Christian civilisation" (Villa-Vicencio 1988: 43). Work and commerce were part of that Christian civilisation, in fact, as Villa-Vicencio has noted, "[t]he missionaries were fervently convinced that *the* most important gift they could impart was the gospel" (Villa-Vicencio 1988: 44). The earlier missionaries were on a civilising mission with the gospel being the forerunner of the mission. Missionaries thought that they were going to simply impose their faith and their culture on Africans for "[t]heirs was also, however, a religion influenced with a sense of cultural superiority and arrogance" (Du Bruyn and Southey 1995: 28). They worked hard "to smash African religions, social and thereby, political systems in order to replace these with those imported from Europe" (Bredenkamp and Ross 1995: 3). European missionaries found it very difficult to make a break-through, but eventually after conquest of African polities they were able to get a number of converts. Etherington (1997: 97), referring to the effectiveness of missionary messages among the AmaZulu, pointed out the difficulties which all of them had. For the most part, they were only able to get few converts and they also came in small numbers:

Neither the friendly blandishment of Colenso nor the hell-fire preaching of the Americans and Wesleyans nor the medieval communalism of the Hermannsburg Lutherans proved especially effective. In the first five decades of evangelization material factors were far more important than spiritual ones in drawing adherents. Converts, or *khohwa* as they were called in Zulu, came in dribs and drabs rather than waves. (Etherington 1997: 97)

Bredenkamp and Ross pointed out that for Christianity to survive and grow it had to be seen and experienced as an indigenous religion. As a result, "the history of Christianity in South Africa is a history of this process of naturalization" (Bredenkamp and Ross 1995: 3). The process of naturalization was neither simple

nor uncontested. There were exchanges between missionaries and their congregations, which resulted in Christianity being regarded as an indigenous religion. As a result, early in the twentieth century African Christians did not associate their faith with whites. Developments in the twentieth century saw Christianity becoming a firmly entrenched part of the cultural and religious landscape in South Africa. Historian of missions and world Christianity, Lamin Sanneh observed that missionaries realised that the only way for Christianity to make sense to Africans was for their message to be translated. However, translation is not a simple process of replacing English with the vernacular. The gospel message had to be translated into the vernacular *idiom*. Numerous complex discussions about what vernacular terms to use in describing God were held, and this suggests that there were competing forces and interests at work. Missionaries, according to Bredekamp and Ross (1995), had the upper hand in most negotiations but could not simply impose their will because they could find themselves preaching to an empty church. As the process of negotiation and translation unfolded it was clear that there were different interests at play. In Sanneh's (1995: 173) words:

We may observe in this connection that missionaries and Africans played complementary roles in the establishment of the religion. ... Indigenous aspirations were promoted by the vernacular prospects of scriptural translation while missionaries were committed to translation from motives of numerical success. ... Missionaries continued to be committed to the development of the vernacular as a foil to the establishment of the Christianity they knew and trusted. ... Africans acquired from vernacular resources a strengthened determination to reject foreign interpretations of the religion. It is the common nature of this tension that the concept of reciprocity tries to elucidate.

In Sanneh's work it is clear that Africans were not victims in the process of translation and that they benefited from it immensely, especially the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. This is clearly evident in the development of the African indigenous churches and the different interpretations they have formulated. The process of translation proved to be vital to the conversion process. Furthermore, Sanneh suggests that due to the availability of scriptures in the vernacular, converts were able to come up with their own interpretations independent of Western models and "local converts appropriated the gospel without running it through Western filters first" (1995: 177). The Bible was appropriated as a local symbol, which could be interpreted by indigenous people in ways they found appropriate.

The Study of African Indigenous Churches

The twentieth century saw a gradual development in the study of African indigenous churches. In this process, the AICs went from being regarded as separatist churches driven by political motives, to sophisticated socio-historical and anthropological objects of study which understood them as African initiatives drawing upon Christian and African resources in their attempt to define what it means to be human. The earlier studies were dominated by authors who either were part of the missionary enterprise or who sympathised with its aims. As a result, such studies tended to denigrate and discredit AICs. The historical development of the AICs in scholarship can be traced as follows. Firstly, in the earliest studies they were seen as not only an ecclesiastical but also a political threat and, as such, they were called separatist. The next development was the recognition that the phenomenon was religious but that it mixed Christian and African practices. The process of mixing was called syncretism. The third stage was the determination that the AICs were African movements. The last stage is located within socio-historical and anthropological studies in which AICs have come to be understood as being both African and Christian.

The first attempt at understanding the movement was a study by Allan Lea (1926) which reflected the attitude of a generation of missionaries who were threatened by secession. In the earlier part of the twentieth century the AICs, especially the Ethiopian churches, were linked to the emerging sense of Black Nationalism. Theologian Bengt Sundkler explains this further by saying that the "Ethiopian problem" was discussed with interest and almost with anxiety not only by missionaries, but also by politicians, scholars and others interested in the welfare of the country" (1961: 13). According to Chidester (1992: 112), earlier independent churches "tended to retain the doctrines and practices of missions, while creating separate organisational structures". The white religious leadership became uncomfortable with an African initiative independent of white control, thus they sought to discredit and delegitimize it. Chidester (1997: 323) argued that,

the very notion that African independent, African indigenous, or African initiated churches formed a unified category emerged out of the concerns of white church leaders that African initiatives represented a Christian heresy, a political threat, and, ... a foolish desire to get rid of the white man's control.

Since these churches were out of the control of mission influence, they were called separatist churches - a term which suggested that these churches were not Christian. They did not fit into the definition of Christian as generated by the white missionary establishment and therefore were not authentic. For the most

part, African Indigenous Churches appear in earlier studies as the "other", which is assumed to be mysterious, and not authentically Christian. This was reinforced by the notion that AICs were "separatist" or "syncretist". Pauw (1995: 8) says that missionaries referred to members of the AIC as a "misled and sectarian people who jeopardise the work of God through syncretism and neo-paganism". He further observed that there were even suggestions that AIC members were possessed by demonic forces. These are some of the attempts by those who belonged to the mainline churches to create distance between themselves and the AICs. The aim was to discredit and even disown the AIC of belonging to the Christian fellowship. Some Black church leaders were threatened by mainline churches who, in some cases, wanted their activities forbidden:

[T]hey felt outraged when their members were drawn towards the independent churches, particularly whenever they have been placed under discipline, and regarded this as a sheep-stealing. (Pauw 1995: 8)

Missionaries projected an image of "mainline" Christianity as orthodox or normative Christianity and theologians who studied these churches were motivated by the desire to prove that they were not truly Christian. The study by Mqotsi and Mkele (1946) *A Separatist Church: Ibandla Lika-Krestu* (The Church of Christ) was the first social scientific study of the AICs. According to Vilakazi (1986: 3) the two men had no vested interests as they sought to understand the sociological process of separatism objectively. The study looked at the history, practice, beliefs, and organisational structure of this particular church. They showed how Christian symbols were appropriated and how important African symbols like clan names were discouraged because potentially they might have destabilized the church by recalling traditional enmities between the Xhosa and the Fingo.

The theologian Bengt Sundkler, in his 1948 book *Bantu Prophets*, which was heralded as a classic, developed the idea that AICs are syncretic. Sundkler's work focussed almost exclusively on the Zulu rural independent churches. This was very important in the later development of studies of the AICs as Sundkler drew a distinction between two types of churches within the independent fold. Firstly, he identified the Ethiopian type, which was regarded as a "book" (*incwadi*) religion and whose leadership was that of a chiefly nature. Secondly, he identified the Zionist type, which were regarded as "spirit" (*umoya*) churches and whose leadership structure is that of a prophetic nature. He further said that the AICs bring non-Christian elements to the Christian faith. Another theologian, G.C. Oosthuizen gave his own definition of syncretism and how it manifests itself:

The mixture of the old and the new, by people who stand in the old and select from the new, leads to syncretism pure

and simple. Syncretism is basic to all naturalistic religions and becomes a problem when a prophetic religion like Christianity which is "based on the assumption of God's initiative in the act of self-disclosure, and naturalistic-cosmic (or naturalistic-monistic) religions meet each other". ... In movements we have discussed, it was relatively easy to work out a *syncretistic third or post-Christian religion* (a religion of neither Christian nor traditional), because of the leaders being influenced by Christianity but also steeped in traditional religion. Here the chiliastic-messianic elements becomes the major emphasis covered in magic nativism, and it comes with great vitality and expectation. (1968: 91)

The term syncretism is derogatory as it means an illegitimate mixing of Christian and African elements or the bringing of non-Christian elements into the faith which, in turn, leads to the perversion of the faith. "Syncretism" is not a neutral category - it is, as theologian Luke Pato argued, ideologically loaded:

...in so far as the AICs are understood as Christian churches, the idea that they are syncretistic is based on an ideological assumption that Christianity is a unified consistent phenomenon against which deviations may be checked and balanced. (1990: 2)

For Oosthuizen and Sundkler, syncretism is regressive - than progressive - and, in the context of AICs, represents a return to paganism. The idea of progress is structured in a way that African practices are part of the old, and because they belong in the past, are supposed to be forgotten. Christianity, on the other hand, is seen as the future revelation and therefore a mixture of the two provides a bridge to heathenism. Oosthuizen was adamant that the ethnocentricity of the AICs disqualified them from being Christian because ethnic rituals and other practices have become central to these churches. He then suggested that,

...the only way to counteract syncretism here is to build a community of reborn in Christ, where man's works do not take precedence, but rather God's grace with which quality of life is lived of which the New Testament gives sufficient evidence. (1968: 210)

What is very clear in Oosthuizen's early work is that, according to him, there is only one correct analysis of the Bible, and that the role of interpretation lies with the dominant church. As a theologian, he obviously had a vested interest in

denying AICs a Christian identity and used theological standards and categories to evaluate and judge the AICs. In contrast, Chidester (1989) rejected the notion that AICs represented a mixture of the African and Western Christian worldviews, for it assumed that these were two bounded and static entities. His starting point was that worldviews are "open-ended processes of negotiation and renegotiation- changing, in flux, in transition- with no closed, permanent, substantial essences (1989: 20). Hence, there is no "pure" Christianity or African tradition.

The third stage of development arrived when the AICs were recognised as authentically African. That type of identification was due to the fact that they drew heavily from traditional African practices and customs. This development was important because these churches were now recognised as a significant component of the African religious landscape. The initial phase in this development was the adaptation to urban living thesis. The most notable studies of urban independent churches were those by anthropologists Martin West in Soweto, Johannesburg and James Kiernan in KwaMashu, Durban. These studies were carried over a period of two years each, and provided very rich ethnographic data on the structure, beliefs, rituals and practice of scores of AICs. Both Martin West (1975) and James Kiernan (1990) pointed out that African Indigenous Churches served to smooth the transition from the rural areas into the urban setting. Kiernan argued that:

The alternative causal nexus resides in the fact that we are dealing with the most industrialised and urbanised region in Africa in which there is a very high turn over of migrant labour. Large numbers of people find themselves poor and estranged in unfamiliar surroundings, culturally and socially disoriented and without adequate social institutions to provide for their needs. The hypothesis is that religious institutions spring up to smooth the transition for them, an hypothesis which derives from the American Sociology of Religion. (1990: 6)

West went so far as to suggest that AICs replaced rural kinship networks and other traditional structures in an urban environment - serving the same purpose in the urban areas as kinship networks in the rural areas did:

The system of social organisation in the rural areas, based largely on co-operation between kith and kin, is no longer viable in Soweto, as kin are usually far apart, and administrative decrees determine where you shall live. What is required in order to adapt to this new and changing situation

are new bases for social organisation, and should examine the churches in this light. ... We suggest that this blend of old and new in the churches is an important factor in attracting members into their congregations because it facilitates adaptations to the urban environment by providing an important link between it and the environment from which they came. (1975: 195-196)

Kiernan (2004: 53) pointed out that prophet churches, "consciously turned their backs on modernity in an attempt to reinvigorate traditional order". Viewed from a distance, this might seem true, but one needs to realise that these leaders wanted to restore a traditional order that was rapidly fading away while embracing modernity at the same time. However, they wanted to embrace modernity on their own terms. Isaiah Shembe, for example, encouraged his followers to embrace Zulu traditions and customs while he sent his children to elite schools in Natal. J.G. Shembe was a graduate of the University of Fort Hare and he taught at Adams College before becoming leader of the Nazareth Baptist Church. The leadership style of J.G. Shembe demonstrated both modern sophistication and charisma. He took leadership of the church in 1935 and transformed it from a small band of members, into a well-oiled machine with thousands of followers by the time he died in 1975.

The black working-class thesis emerged as a critique of the adaptation to urban living thesis. Old Testament scholar and Black theologian Itumeleng Mosala (1985:110) identified theoretical problems with most of the earlier studies as, "reflecting ruling class interests and models of explanation". He proposed that cultural notions of "Africanness" mystified the social and historical analysis of AICs:

Studies in African Independent churches have missed the point mainly because they have tended to view these churches in terms of liberal anthropology, emphasising their "Africanness" in some static ahistorical form. A more helpful and liberating exercise would be to analyse these churches socio-historically, so that their social class character can be seen for what it is. When West, Sundkler and other liberal anthropologists raise the question of culture, they do so in relation to a mythical, monolithic, timeless African culture. The major theoretical weakness of this position is that it does not explain why, if "Africanness" is the key feature of these churches, it is not the case that all Africans are members of the African Independent churches or even shares the faith of African Independent churches. (Mosala 1985: 110)

Mosala maintained that the AICs are black working-class churches, especially the Zionist churches and only a socio-historical analysis would help to give a better understanding of these churches. As a result, the fact that they are working-class churches "can not be explained in terms of the fact that their members are African who still cling to some African traditions" but through a "thorough going social-cultural analysis of the prehistory of the black working class, and the rural areas" (Mosala 1985: 110-111). Furthermore, these churches are a socio-cultural protest using pre-colonial African resources and reject definitions of Christianity based on Western capitalist models. Mosala asserts a different kind of African identity - a dynamic one, which is firmly entrenched in historical and sociological developments.

Glenda Kruss was critical of the functionalist framework within which earlier scholars had operated, as their studies never provided any useful historical context, treating all Africans as a monolithic bloc with no differentiation. She further argued that even poverty was turned into a state of mind rather than an experienced reality. The tendency to reify culture is also pointed out from these studies:

The assumption that the two opposing cultures, traditional African and Western Christian, exist as separate neatly defined entities which can be dipped into at random to select beliefs, values, and meaning to meet the present needs of Africans in a new alien world. However, no culture is timeless and static. (Kruss 1986:27-28)

As Kruss observed, Africans in these studies are presented as "cultural beings, attempting to find values and meaning in a new Western cultural situation" (1986: 28). Such a depiction when taken to its logical conclusion would say that Africans shift from one identity to the other. It does not credit African innovation and creativity in mobilizing resources from various sources for the process of identity formation. Further developments in research on AICs found gaps in the earlier explanatory models, which led to the emergence of a positive-response-to-the-gospel thesis. Theologian C.M. Pau (1995) suggested that AICs could be understood as a response to the Christian message. Moreover, it was a positive response in that Africans appropriated Christian symbols and interpreted the gospel on their own terms. Africans used their creativity and innovation to make something that is truly their own:

AIC leaders have attempted, to make creative symbols of traditional and Christian beliefs, creatively formulating truly African Christianity which gives Africans an African identity: they represent radical indigenisation and Africanisation of Christianity. (Pau 1995: 16)

Missiologist Martinus Daneel did a lot of work on AICs in Zimbabwe. He understood AICs as a Christian entity and his aim was to explore their theology. In his endeavour to study these churches, he referred to himself as an alien participant whose aim is to "discern and describe relevant trends rather than a conclusive definition" (1983: 59). Furthermore, he points out that "communication of the Good News in African Independent Churches increasingly had an overwhelming appeal to Africans because of its dynamic quality and obvious relatedness to the African worldview and specifically to African needs in all spheres of life" (1983: 58). For him, these churches appeal to African because they take the African belief systems seriously, a point that Allan Anderson (1993) observed about ancestor veneration. Daneel also observed that AICs are reserved in their involvement in politics, he gave examples that demonstrated that at times they displayed reactionary tendencies.

Chidester takes the debate further by suggesting fresh ways of looking at these churches. His concern was that some academic studies had tended to depart from social-scientific analysis to theologise about these churches, a tendency that disadvantaged the AICs. Scholars with vested interests used the platform of the academic study of religion to exclude these churches from the Christian fold. He further suggested that:

Academic analysis of the AICs can only proceed by departing from the theopolitical baseline of "Christian" or "Christianity", as a *genus* for classifying these movements. AICs are Christian by definition, but focus on the term "Christian", in the study of the AICs tended to encourage the substitution of theological evaluation for academic analysis. (Chidester 1988: 85)

The most recent stage in the development of the study of the AICs has emerged in research that recognises them as being both African and Christian. There has been a realisation that these churches are important African initiatives aimed at defining what it means to be human in a dehumanising environment. Furthermore,

African interpretations of Christian symbols are not simply transpositions into a different idiom; they are strategic appropriations of power. (Chidester 1989: 26)

The first independent churches emerged in an era where Africans were increasingly being pushed off their land, as well as being sidelined within the churches. For example, Nehemiah Tile left the Methodist Church to found the Thembu National Church in 1884 for political, cultural and ecclesiastical reasons:

[He] was dissatisfied with his long period of probation before being ordained, and he resented the fact that church funds were only allowed to be handled by white ministers, but the main source of conflict seemed to have been Tile's increasing involvement in Thembu politics. (Chidester 1992: 114)

In their quest to become human, Africans in their churches draw on both African and Christian resources. Chidester (1997: 11) has observed that these churches are not "simply a product of mixing and merging of African and Christian worldviews". The terms "mixing" and "merging" tend to downplay the creative process involved in the shaping of the worldviews of these churches. He suggests the use of the term "negotiation" to describe the process of worldview formation by the AICs. Negotiation presupposes engaging, intellectually, both the traditional religions and Christianity. The AICs are thus not a synthesis of traditional religions and Christianity but they are, as Chidester argues, "engaged in detailed appropriations of religious resources that can be mobilized in working out the meaningful contours of the world" (1997: 11). The mobilized resources are used in the process of individual and group formation. Based on such an understanding, one reaches the conclusion that AICs are both African and Christian.

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