CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN CULTURE: AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCH AS SAVING GRACE FOR WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIANITY AND AFRICAN CULTURE

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Abstract
Despite the highly intimidating numerical strength of women in the mainline churches, coupled with their active participation in various church activities, they have been systematically excluded from the ordained ministry and the hierarchical structure. The discrimination against women in respect of church leadership has been aggravated by African cultural dictates, buoyed up by taboos and superstitions. But given the experience of African indigenous churches and that of the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, there has been a radical departure from the status quo. However, the mainline churches still maintain their opposition to the practice. Many view such opposition as a product of patriarchal tendencies in African culture, which has enthroned men in virtually all aspects of the people's life. This paper therefore examines African indigenous churches' saving grace for women's involvement and full participation in church activities. It discusses the areas of denial of women's rights in African culture, which seems to hinder the total acceptance of women as priests in the church. Based on these premises, this paper conceptualizes women and patriarchy, and culture and patriarchy, and also reviews women as founders of African Indigenous Churches. Empirical research methods were used to analyze some of the areas in which African indigenous churches have been a saving grace for women. This paper concludes that, under the platform of African indigenous churches, women have experienced Christianity as empowering, giving them a place to stand, and from which they could challenge the male-denominated sacred world and its traditions. Finally, since there are hidden potentials in women that churches totally need to harness in order to move forward, the article therefore recommends that sex should not be a barrier to the propagation of the gospel because the grace and gift of God are not limited by gender considerations.

Keywords: Christianity, African Culture, African Indigenous Churches, Grace, Women.

Introduction

Since women in many societies are very active participants in religious activities, the clamour for recognizable leadership positions in the various religions has recently becomes a very touchy issue in public discourse. In our contemporary secular society, many women occupy notable positions of authority in politics, social, educational and economic sectors. The Church is considered as just a part of the social activities of man. Naturally, women probably believe that since they have been able to compete keenly with their male counterparts in other spheres of human existence, leadership positions in religious organizations should not be

exceptions. This seems to have re-opened discussions on the status of women in the Church vis-à-vis their acceptance by men in respect of spiritual leadership positions.

However, cultural values, traditional beliefs, norms and superstitions have been the major obstacles in the realization of women's aspiration to spiritual leadership positions in the church and in many religions of the world. Despite the highly intimidating numerical strength of women in the mainline churches coupled with their active participation in various church activities, they have been systematically excluded from the ordained ministry and the hierarchical structure. But given the African Indigenous Churches there has been a radical departure from the status quo. Owanikin (1992, p. 206) lends credence to this position: "There has been a remarkable revolution against the conservative order of male Chauvinism domination practiced by early mission churches on the part of women evangelists, visionaries and church founders, mostly within the African Indigenous Churches, Charismatic and Pentecostal folds"

The discrimination against women in respect of church leadership has been aggravated due to African cultural dictates buoyed-up taboos and superstitions. The acceptance of this cultural norm in the church can be seen as a product of gender arrogance on the part of men to maintain the traditional status quo and the seeming total submissiveness on the part of women. This postulation agrees with Baur's position:

> Men strive to dominate and are reluctant to listen and accept while women are ready to submit, thus neglecting initiative and leadership. In the pastoral work of the church, these attitudes… would be enhanced by the priestly-hierarchical mentality that sees women as only to receive and obey, (Baur 1998, p.480).

The attraction of African women to Christianity was not confined to pioneer period. Today, women still dominate the pews in mainline churches, African instituted churches, charismatic movement and Pentecostal churches. They are, however, absent from the power structures of the churches, which are male dominated. Their contribution to the growth of the church in African cannot be gainsaid. Isichei (1989) emphasizes that women were often the first converts and the most enthusiastic local evangelists. They even sacrificed their resources in propagating the gospel. Sundkler and Steed (2000), note that though women appear invisible, they have been the pillars of the parish and take care of the local church and its worship. The church has provided them with support systems and solidarity. Women are animators of the church and society not only during times of crisis, even in times of stability. Whether women are educated or not, they continue to be devoted to the church.

A dominant male ideology has ensured that women continue been clients in the churches just as they were in shrines of traditional society. Patriarchal ideology that props up the structure of African societies, whether matrilineal or patrilineal, has defined women as inferior, thus perpetuating marginalization and oppression of women. The resultant unequal gender relations have been translated into male dominance and female subservice in church and society.

This background is necessary because Christianity, Islam and Judaism have influenced Africans more than the other world religions. It is important to note that while God in these three religions is conceived as male, in African traditional religion, God has both male and female element. In other words, God is considered both as a father and as mother. Most probably, it is this idea of God that has made it possible for male and female to hold leadership

positions in the indigenous religions in Africa. It is on this note that this paper attempts to explore the ambivalence role the African Indigenous Churches have played in being a catalyst for women's liberation and her complicity in their subordination.

Conceptual Clarifications

Culture and Patriarchy: As the reality of human existence, culture may be viewed as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their sustained efforts to confront the challenges of reproducing their material existence (Okpey, 2007). As a concept however, it involves a people's ways of doing the things they do, their conception of themselves, their values and beliefs systems which also gives them meaning, relevance and identity (Akintunde, 2001). Accordingly, Linton was right in his assertion that, "The culture of a society is the way of life of its members the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation". Reinforcing the perspective of culture, (Wosley, 1984) identifies at least three aspect of culture, namely: cognitive, normative and conative. While the cognitive aspect of culture tells us who we are and why we differ from others in addition to allocating to us social categories premised on age, sex, gender and descent; the normative inculcates in us the value attached to the various parts of the social world we are living in. The conative however, provides us the beacon or anchorage for channelling our actions according to prescribed standards inherent in our cultural milieu.

Seen from this perspective, it is possible to contend that culture embodies all the activities that give a people their identity in relations with other with whom they necessarily have to relate in order to survive. In this regard, culture may be considered as partly setting the basis for social differentiation and stratification within and between interacting groups. With specific reference to gender, the consciousness culture and cultural processes have generated across societies the world over is crucial for the understanding of the status of the man and the woman and what they should and should not do. It is also responsible for the value we place on issues relating with these two typologies of the human species. As a result, and as Andersen (1983, p. 310) aptly asserts, "The differences observed between men and women can be attributed largely to these cultural basis of gender roles'. It is however, suffices here to underline culture as a strong determinant of the nature and character of cross-gender relations.

Related to culture is patriarchy, which should actually be seen and understood as integral to the former. By patriarchy here, it implies a broad network or system of hierarchical organisation (political, economic, social, religio-cultural, industrial, and financial, etc) under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men, (Norris, 1987). A system is therefore, adjudged patriarchal if it operationalizes an order that gives men undue advantage over women. As an essentially sexist concept, patriarchy justifies the subordination and super-ordination of women by men in all spheres of human endeavour. It is important to point out the fact that given its multi-dimensional applicability and the essence it serves sin the gender dynamics, patriarchy is also an ideology. It is an ideology that justifies the preponderance of the male gender society and elevates his status over that of his female counterparts. Okpeh (2002) opines that patriarchy is by and large, the male ideology of dominance, according to him; it is the bases of the machismo consciousness in men and a core component of their chauvinistic tendencies in their dealings with women.

Finally, on this, Goldberge (1997) asserts that patriarchy is a universal scientific law that is common to all known societies in the world, be they developing or industrialized, past or present, traditional or modern/ revolutionary. For Goldberg therefore, every society gives higher status to male roles than to non-maternal roles of females. This is regardless of what the tasks involve and their significance in the development process. In Goldberge' understanding nothing can be done about this state of affairs because it is natural.

Women and Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a strong determinant of the nature character of cross-gender relations in Africa, as it is virtually in all societies of the world. As a matter of fact, every community in Nigeria has fixed ideas about the female gender, who she is and what she hopes to become in the future. Okpeh, (2007), is of the notion that this gender- based discrimination encapsulate two basic concept that can be explained, even if briefly. Firstly, it emphasizes the superiority and importance of men compared to women. The extension of this is the notion that men are more 'intelligent' than women, more 'significant and of course more 'worthwhile'. An African proverb (from Ghana) says it all, when it unequivocally asserts that, 'The dumbest man is better than a woman. Secondly, it underscores the complementary nature of women in relation to men. Therefore, rather than compete with men, women should take pride in fulfilling their natural feminine functions like making the home as wife and taking care of the man and his children as mother and mistress, for which they are socially rewarded.

Another dimension of this overall marginal status of women in Nigeria and in Africa at large is that the marginalization of women in the society knows no bounds because it is justified by the logic of our socio-cultural stereotype of the female gender. Arising from the fact that she is conceptualized as the appendage of the male gender, the woman, by implication, is subject to the whims and caprices of the man. For example, he decides what she should want, what she should and should not do and even how and when she does what is accepted. An African proverb (from Nigeria) underlines the marginality of women by declaring that, 'The good and obedience wife is the one that does not question her husband's authority over her'. It should be noted however, that this marginalization emerges from structural nature of the unequal relationship between men and women, and its pervasive manifestation straddles every segment of the society. At the family level for instance, both the male and female gender are socialized to internalized socially acceptable roles, which ultimately reinforce their status differentiation. For example, while the Boy-child is taught to be assertive and independent, the Girl-child is taught be weak, submissive, dependent and protected.

Furthermore, the Girl-child is less preferred compared to the Boy-child in most Nigerian families. This 'gender apartheid' starts right from the labour ward where most people feel apologetic that a Girl-chid has been delivered. Similarly, where she is grudgingly accepted, the Girl-child is trained to feel inferior to the boy child. She is taught to be subservient to male authority, tutored to become a good wife and mother in the future and made to feel that she is a 'tool' an 'object' or a 'thing' to be owned and possessed by the man Omannor and Osinulu, (1997). At the larger society, women are subordinate to male authority; they are excluded from high status occupation and position of power.

The most basic division of labour in Africa is based on sex or gender and in terms of the rewards of prestige, wealth and power attached to gender roles, women come off worst. In

addition, women suffer degradation in the sense that they are usually at the receiving end of the worst forms of malignant sexism: they work long hours than men, they are generally rewarded with less food, less health care, less education, less training, less leisure, less income, less rights and less protection, (Okpeh, 2007). The point therefore is that patriarchy as part of culture by and large determines the status of women in Africa. It ideologically underscores the discrimination, subordination, marginalization and oppression of women in relation to men.

Literature Review

Women as Founders of African Independent Churches

The role of women in the growth and spread of Christianity in the world today cannot be overemphasized. Though, a number of writers have noted that historically, women have always been subordinate within most religions, especially, in the mainline Churches. This notwithstanding, in recent times women are making progress in the Church as they now use their God-given talents and initiatives in planting Churches and becoming leaders in Churches today. The founding and planting of Churches by women in Africa in general is the ultimate act of religious independency and self-determination.

Since the establishment of Christianity in Africa, according to Barrette, there has always been an upsurge of female religious leadership, particularly, in the prophetic, revival movement, African independent Churches and Neo – Pentecostal Christianity. In these churches, Barrett argues that women have been experiencing a measure of Christian ministerial freedom and equality hitherto denied them in the mainline Churches. To him, not only are the women visible in ecclesiastical leadership as founders of Churches, Bishops, Pastors and Evangelists, but they also function as prophetesses, prayer leaders, healers and head of Church organizations and departments. They also promote the enculturation of Christianity by interpreting the Gospel message in a new perception that is both liberating and empowering, especially, to their female colleagues and followers.

To this effect, Fatokun (2006), in his own work, cites some notable women who are Church founders and co-founders who have exhibited leadership traits in the African indigenous Pentecostal Churches, like Sophia Odunlami of the precious Stone or Diamond Society (translated from the Yoruba Egbe Okuta Olowo Iyebiye) – a prophetic healing movement which originated from St. Saviour Anglican Church at Ijebu-Ode in 1918 and Captain Abiodun Akinsowan who confounded the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in 1925 together with prophet Moses Orimolade.

In the same vein, the Neo–Pentecostal churches took their cue from the African indigenous Pentecostals who had liberal views on the participation of women in active ministry. A close examination of the Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria reveals that not only are women playing prominent leadership role in Church administration on an equal footing with men, but Nigeria Pentecostalism has in fact, produced great women Church Founders, Planters, General Overseers, Prophetess, Lady Evangelists, Pastors, Teachers and so on. Besides, some of these women whose husbands are Church founders have proved themselves suitable help-mates to their husbands in co-running Church ministries.

Fatokun continues by giving examples of such women in Nigeria Neo-Pentecostal Churches. To mention but few, the Rev. Dr. (Mrs.) Sam Amaga of Foundation Faith Church (a.k.a Salem International Churches), Pastors (Mrs.) Faith Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, the

Late Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya of Fountain of Life Bible Church, Lagos, the Revd (Dr.) Mrs. Funke Nelson Adetuberu of by Faith Ministry International Churches, and Pastor (Mrs.) Deola Ojo of Grace Family Church, Ibadan. One of the most noteworthy achievements is the full leadership status assumed by Bishop (Mrs.) Margaret Benson – Idahosa subsequent to the death of her husband in 1998. In fact, these women and others in Neo-Pentecostal circles have indeed proved through their leadership roles that women are not weaker vessels as most Churches today were founded by women.

A critical look at the teaching and counselling ministry of Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya makes it clear that both men and women are gifted by God to do his work. Bimbo Odukoya's teaching ministry has received so much public recognition and ecclesiastical approval that many different Church denominations and Campus Fellowships have invited her to conduct youth ministry. The leadership role played by this woman in the transformation of the lives of youths (males and females) alike in the area of marriage has been found to be so unique that it could be said in all fairness that no man has been able to beat her record.

The Rev. Dr. (Mrs.) Funke–Nelson Adetuberu is another woman of great importance in Pentecostal leadership. Through her woman's college of ministries, this woman like Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya, has transformed many lives, rebuilt many damaged homes, and restored hope to many hopeless women. Besides this, she has succeeded in preparing many women for active ministry in the Church. She has also remoulded the lives of many women, which have become good housewives and loving and caring mothers.

Bishop (Mrs.) Bola Odeleke of the popular Christ Apostolic Church, Agbala Agbara Olorun Kiibati), now known as the Power Pentecostal Church, is another woman of great leadership charisma in Nigeria Pentecostal circles, this woman is not merely a female Pastor but a Church founder with male Pastors working under her. Her leadership qualities have been tested and proven in the way she was able to successfully pilot her Church through these years in the midst of the crises that followed the death of her husband (an officer in the Nigeria Army). The leadership charisma of Bishop (Mrs.) Bola Odeleke as a Church founder and Pentecostal leader has been demonstrated by many diverse signs and wonders that accompanied her ministry and are in no way inferior to those associated with the men in Nigeria Pentecostalism.

Another great woman of repute who demonstrates a great leadership trait in Africa today is Pastor Evelyn T.B. Joshua, the wife of the late Pastor T.B. Joshua of The Synagogue, Church of All Nations, whose since the demise of her husband in June 2021 has assumed leadership after a unanimous decision by the church elders to prevent the ministry from collapsing. Under her guidance, SCOAN has inaugurated new branches in places like Akure, Lokoja etc and continue global crusades and weekly charity works. She has also personally led humanitarian missions, including donating food, educational materials, and boreholes to communities in Nigeria and Africa at large. Isaiah (2016)

Women founders of religious movements are not a recent phenomenon in Africa. One of the most famous among African founders and prophetess was Kimpa Vita, later baptized Dona Beatrice, who in 1704 founded the Antonian movement in the Kongo. She was reportedly a woman of noble birth and a leader of a traditional ritual society known as Marinda before she emerged as a Christian prophetess. Like many African prophetesses after her, she had ecstatic experiences. She claimed to have died and resurrected and also alleged that she was the reincarnation of St. Antony. Barett (1968)

Grace Tani and Marie Laolu are well known founders of churches in West Africa. They were both prominent prophetesses, healers and leaders in the Harrist movement. Tani founded the church of the Twelve Apostles in 1918, together with Kwesi John Nackabah, who became the administrative and public leader. This dual arrangement was a convenient method used by several African Independent Churches to overcome traditional male resistance to women's leadership. Tani was a traditional priestess before she had an extraordinary encounter with Harris in Ghana. Her church emphasized healing through faith in God and through the use of sanctified water, (Daneel, 1987).

Alice Lenshina Mulenga Lubusha popularly known as "Prophetess Lenshina" founded the Lumpa Church in 1954 during politically turbulent times and it grew to be one of the most successful churches in Zambia. Like Dona Beatrice and other prophetesses before her, she underwent a death and resurrection experience after a period of illness, and came back with a message of repentance, destruction of witchcraft and healing. She is renowned for her witchcraft eradication activities and evolving an indigenous theology especially in worship and liturgy. Her church was attractive to women due to its enforcement of monogamy, denouncement of widow inheritance and other practices that were inimical to women's well being, (Hackett, 1987).

Mai Chaza, a Shona Prophetess who founded the Guta La Jehova Movement (City of Jehova), had similar death and resurrection experiences like Dona Beatrice and Alice Lenshina. Like Marie Laolu she left her husband, claiming to have had revelations to lead a celibate life, and preached healing, especially for barren women, the blind and the infirm. Her fame as a healer spread and people from Zimbabwe and all over Southern Africa came to her for healing. (Mulenga, 1988). Therefore, it could be said that the list are inexhaustible. This is because there are many more women leaders or founders in Nigeria and in Africa at large whose work are worthy of mentioning.

Culture and Christianity in Africa

Culture has been defined in various ways, but for the purpose of this discussion it is described as a social phenomenon with separable parts. It is a way of thinking and an approach to life. Neither theology nor anthropology can say decisively when culture begins. But it can be assumed that God is responsible for culture because God created human beings in such a way that they can formulate culture.

Throughout history, Scholars have expressed different opinions regarding a Christian's attitude towards culture. To some, God is opposed to culture because culture is identifiable with the world hence the essence of culture is evil, (Kraft, 1984). Early missionaries to Africa subscribed to this stand as deduced from their utterances and actions about the African Culture. Kraft (1984, p.104) posits, "Culture, especially African culture, is within and around the individual. In Africa, the culture cannot be separated from the people's orientation, mission and vision of life. The African is inalienably bound to and by his or her culture".

Kraft (1984, p. 105) is of the view that Cultural structures are best regarded as a vehicle or milieu, neutral in essence, though warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness". Therefore, culture is not to be seen as an enemy or friend, but rather as a reality that can be employed by human beings. Bearing in mind the enormous potential of culture for the African, it is obvious that for Christianity to be meaningful in African setting, the importance of culture

cannot be overemphasized. The authenticity of the above claim has already been established by the African Independent Churches in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole.

Factors Challenging Christianity in Africa Culture

Operating within the African culture, Christianity in Africa is thus challenged by the following:

1. An urgent need for the Christian authorities and policy makers to yield to calls for a re-appraiser of the subordination of women in the church by allowing women to occupy leadership cadres if they are qualified. The Bible prescribes equality in the Body of Christ and it is therefore, the Church's duty to enforce this. As Totte and Coote (1980, p. 13) notes:

> A special responsibility rests on Christian to be sensitive to the movement of history, to discern the signs of the times, to distinguish between that which is of real advantage and that which is merely deceptive attractiveness, to ensure that the will of God becomes the criterion of change and that the whole life of man is conformed to the likeness of Christ and renewed according to the pattern which God himself has revealed to us in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is also closely related to the status of women in the African culture. Women are not denied participation in leadership positions, especially in the religious realm. This is based on the African belief of the need to maintain a balance in the cosmology and their relationship with the super sensible world.

2. A need for Christians in Africa to appreciate their culture and not discard it in its entirety as being evil. While there are some customs and practices within every given culture that Christianity cannot condone due to Biblical injunctions, there are others that can be utilized to further the course of the Gospel. For instance, Christianity cannot accommodate witchcraft of any kind, twin-murder, cannibalism, physical mutilation and ritual prostitution. But, the African concept of hospitality and "being your brother's keeper" is worthy of emulation. The Bible enjoins Christians to care not only for friends, but for enemies as well. Marrying this Biblical injunction with African hospitality will deepen the African's appreciation for Christianity.

Christian women in Africa have also to learn to appreciate and develop African styles of dressing and behavioural patterns. Self-respect and decency are the two qualities that would enhance woman's dignity in this regard. Both virtues are recommended by the Bible and African culture. Emphasis should, therefore, be placed on the African mode of dressing which is more complimentary to the physical features of the African woman. In view of this, there is need for the African Christian women to cultivate a cultural identity which is crucial to her total appreciation of the Christian message in African setting.

Some Areas of Denial of Women's Rights

1. **Leadership Discrimination:** There is an unimaginable discrimination against women seeking leadership post all over the world. A cursory observation of Nigeria's political history suggests that women are insignificant in the political process. Even, when the best candidate

apparently is woman, she is often side tracked on the basis of gender. According to UN Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM); "there is still a long way to go in sharing political and economic opportunities". In the contemporary political development of Nigeria, the role of women has been minimal. Lasebikan (2001), posits that "women have suffered discrimination in the power-sharing, social situations, and that women have not enjoyed their God-given right to exercise power and authority, women have also suffered prejudices which have denied them power control almost in all spheres of human endeavour plus including religious settings where women are considered inferior and subordinate to men. Therefore, women are usually excluded from political and religio-cultural leadership".

2. **Right of inheritance and widowhood:** The status of women in most traditional Nigerian communities is one of subservience to the men. Traditionally, the girl is not recognized as an important member of the family and a family with only female children is regarded as barren. With this belief the girl loses her right to inherit part of her father's property. Okpeh (2002) observed among the Idoma (found in Benue State) that the woman is excluded from the highest organ of socio-economic and political decision-making in the society. She could not inherit her husband's properties and whatever wealth acquired would be passed on to the male heir which may not necessarily be her biological offspring. Widowhood cuts across religion and race. The psychological impact on the surviving spouse who is deprived of the companionship of the dead may be the same all over the world, but the rights and privileges accorded to widows are diverse among cultures and as far apart as heaven is to the earth. In Africa, the widow is oppressed, suppressed, afflicted, neglected, suspected and insulted. Lasebikan (1996)

3. **Genital Mutilation:** Lasebikan (1996) explains that, in some cultures in Nigeria years back, the bride-to-be would be circumcised a couple of weeks before her marriage. Those who went through the experience found the operation painful and humiliating. Female genital mutilation is a very harmful traditional practice culturally handed down through succeeding generations. It is detrimental to the health of women and girls.

4. **Rape and Sexual abuse:** Sexual harassment or rape is one of the major domestic violence against women and this happens worldwide. The assault on such defenceless women who are ravaged by unscrupulous men almost forces one to think of training women in martial arts. This is because their right as women is abused. They are made to be involved in something they do not consent to. Their right to decide to be involved was not sought and they are treated in a dehumanizing manner. Part of the organized onslaught against women-trafficking across borders fossilizes into international prostitution. Scores of women, young girls especially are only to get there and find themselves bound to join a trade to which they rarely gave their consent. There is no doubt that this is a big misfortune which needs to be redressed through continuous education.

African Independent Churches as Saving Grace for Women

It has been noted that women are proportionately more highly represented in all types of churches compared to men. This has been attributed to various reasons, including opportunities for leadership, entrance into carrier support network outside formal structures of society and the possibility for personal advancement. African Indigenous Churches are said

particularly to provide women with the chance to recover their traditional status and positions that had been undermined by the teachings of mission churches.

Firstly, Western Christianity, whose tradition, mainline Christianity in Africa adopted, provided women with no leadership roles in their structures. African Christians were able to find legitimacy for their inclusion in leadership in the mission churches from the Bible, which depicts women like Deborah, Miriam, Prisca and Lydia playing prominent roles. Missionaries often overlooked these sections of the Bible, and possibly considered them irrelevant to their missionary situations. These passages were, however, meaningful to the African converts for missionaries had often criticized and condemned the African forms of religious expression in which women had a part to play. Scholars suggest that many women started and others were attracted to the African Indigenous Churches, because here they were able to reclaim the functions of customary institutions that were weakened by cultural change.

Secondly, women within Christian churches also found out that they were not permitted to hold positions in the ministry, nor in the executive structures of the churches. Women in polygamous unions experienced rejection when their husbands accepted mission baptism. Women thus joined African Independent Churches to seek religious legitimization for their rejection.

Thirdly, African Independent Churches are also regarded as sites for women's liberation. They have provided women with a forum where they find liberation from the ever present fears of witchcraft and other forces that undermine their well being. Perin-Jassey (1971, p. 47) asserts that women find liberation from:

> The duties and tensions of the home, from the domination of men over women, from the burdens of traditional customs and innumerable taboos, from the threat of death and diseases of their children. Liberation in faith from everything that oppressed them, until a source of power stronger than the traditional sources, ancestors, spirits and magicians, was offered them: Christianity, in which all human beings regardless of age or sex could reach God.

Women in these churches find relief for their psychological and physiological symptom which often linked with dissatisfaction at home. In most places in Africa, African Indigenous Churches have healing homes and even hospitals that deal with women's specific problems like infertility, maternity care and roles as wives and mothers. Women thus give each other material and spiritual support, which could be interpreted as liberation.

In the same vein, these churches provide a caring support network to women and opportunities for personal development. Women, who because of their poverty and personal circumstances find themselves excluded from other self-group, find a place in these churches. Sealey (1984). Not only do women receive social, spiritual, psychological and material benefits in these churches, but they also feel affirmed and their dignity upheld. Commenting on this, Hackett (1991) avers that within the intimacy of the compound church, women may become known and accepted as persons and become full citizens of the kingdom of God, in which they can take initiative and responsibilities.

In another sense, this source of personal validation is especially important for women who are sick, childless, divorced or accused of witchcraft. Whereas single mothers, divorced and separated women are rarely given positions of responsibility in mainline churches, the African Indigenous Churches ordain such women and give them other church responsibilities.

It is acknowledged here, that spiritual power is charismatic and both men and women are equally channels of God's power

Lastly, Sundkler and Steed (2000) observe the ambivalent role the church has played in being a catalyst for women's liberation and her complexity in their subordination. The church, they note, had opened up new opportunities for women and through education for girls and through roles of leadership. On the other hand there operated in and through the churches, discriminating practices upheld by divine authority. They attribute this to the fact that the missions whether Catholic or Protestant originating in the nineteenth century, were largely expressions of a patriarchal society and these attitudes seemed to fit with an African society in its patriarchal and matriarchal form.

Conclusion

This work has been able to analyze the African indigenous churches a saving grace for women. It equally discusses the status of women in the mainline churches despite their highly intimidating numerical strength coupled with their active participation in various church activities; they have been excluded from the ordained ministry and hierarchical structure. The paper reveals that, the discrimination against women in all aspect of life including church leadership and involvement, has been aggravated due to African cultural dictates buoyed up by taboos and superstitions. Apparently, given the experience of the African indigenous churches, there has been a radical departure from the status quo. This work concludes that, under the African indigenous churches platform, women have experienced Christianity as empowering given them a place on which to stand and from which they could challenge the male dominated sacred world and traditions.

Recommendations

Having critically analyzed the idea of African Indigenous churches a saving grace for women in the context of Christianity and African culture, the following recommendations are made:

1) Culture as concept needs to be appreciated not as a friend or an enemy, but as a vehicle that can be employed by entities for a desired goal. For instance, the New Testament and consequently Christianity is not against culture. The New Testament attitude to cultural values can actually be described as being positive.
2) African Indigenous Churches can also become a saving grace beyond the spiritual aspect by addressing women's material issues and realities like land rights, inheritance, child marriage, rape and sexual abuse, wife battering and widowhood etc.
3) Africans should learn to identify more with African culture to enhance a deeper appreciation of the Christian message in cultural setting
4) There should also be a balanced assessment of this saving grace by no longer restricting women from leadership roles like Bishops, Archbishops, and mores so, there should be a review of some of their teachings on submission and ritual purity where women are disallowed to minister during their monthly flow.
5) Christian policy makers today are to emulate Jesus' attitude towards women as persons first, and then as women. This will enables women make use of their God given talents as everyone is bestowed with one gift or the other.

6) Finally, sex should not be seen as a barrier in every sphere of human endeavour be it religious, political, economic, social and otherwise, this is due to the fact that the grace and gift of God is not limited by gender consideration.

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