

Towards a Black Church: A Historical Investigation of the African Independent Churches as a Model

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INTRODUCTION:

A desire to have an African Church independent of the white man and expressing African cultural genius, dignity and self-reliance is as old as the period of the conversion of first Africans to christianity. We live in a period when this desire has been realised in the form of a mass movement of African Independent Churches (AIC's) which is sweeping the entire African continent, and is most expressive and visible in South Africa.

The emergence and existence of AIC's represent an attempt, and the only one thus far in South African Church history, at the establishment of a Black Church. The AIC movement is a symbol of African religious boldness and novel theological creativity, a step towards the construction of an authentic Black religion for Africa of the twentieth century.

Challenges Facing AIC's

The academic misrepresentation of the AIC's by Western Missionary researchers and some theologians from the Black community has distracted Black Theology from taking these Churches seriously as a possible model of a Black People's Church. On

the other hand the latent AIC's themselves are undergoing a crucial identity crisis. Many of them are operating in direct contradiction to the very reasons and conceptual modalities their pioneers had founded them on. This paper will introduce some of this conceptual modalities, and further demonstrate how the AIC's are a victim of the developments in Black history.

The African Independent Church movement is faced with the daunting challenge of reaffirming itself in the face of the hostile and negative characterization by the unsympathetic bourgeois white theology, on the one hand, and on the other, it is faced with the challenge of rediscovering its role as the sole Church which is being built among, and by the oppressed themselves.

Analysis of the AIC's Socio-theological image

AIC's are, as a historical movement, Churches that have emerged as a protest phenomenon. In the process of their emergence they have swum on the current of a renaissance or a radical affirmation of African humanity and Black self-hood. Even up to this

juncture, whenever an African Independent Congregation is established, a symbolical enactment of liberation happens. A leap, a bold one indeed, is being taken away from the experience of religious manipulation, deculturalization and racial subjugation, to the promised land of freedom. An assertion is here registered that the founding of AIC's is a step of liberation, and a part of the broad and long term process of national politico-economic emancipation.

However, our submission is that our AIC's have not yet completed the leap they have set out to take. A vast majority of the African Independent Churches are still somewhere in the air. They have taken a leap of liberation but they have not (and some are consciously afraid to) put a foot across into the promised land.

AIC's have revolted against traditional European theology, but they have not yet arrived at constructing their own contextual theology. (or are we imposing our western-education inspired expectations on them?) Many have broken away from mainline mission churches in protest against discrimination and oppressive ecclesiastical structures but up to now have not developed liberatory leadership and administrative structures. In their rejection of racism some of them were being deliberately built on tribalism. In church practice much confusion and indecision on the fusion of African cultural rituals and beliefs with the Gospel teachings is observable. Also, AIC's in South Africa are summarily accused of failing to take an explicit missiological position on the national liberation struggle. AIC's are wandering in the desert between the Red Sea and the river Jordan. They have left the house of slavery but they have not yet arrived in the land of the

Lord's rest. Or is it because as a church which is an institution which is embedded in society, it cannot reach this freedom independent of the general transformation of societal structures?

A Contribution towards AIC's History

A history of the AIC's, which this paper hopes to introduce, is a demonstration of the very first attempts to establish a Black national Church. This history is a religious heritage of Black people. The activities of the pioneers of the AIC's at the turn of the nineteenth century represent the very first articulations of what we later came to systematise and label as Black Theology. The AIC's are obligated with the mission of guiding the Black nation through to this liberating heritage of Black Christian religion in colonial South Africa.

When reflecting on the history of Black Theology in the USA, in one of his latest writings, James Cone observes that "When Black Theology first came into being it was the radical, prophetic voice in Black Churches, calling them back to their liberating nineteenth-century heritage, by attacking racism and affirming black identity extending back to Africa" (1986: 111). This statement poses for Black theologians in South Africa a question as to whether we have ever taken seriously the task of reflecting on the liberating heritage of our religious history as a people.

The purpose of this paper is to distil those aspects of the history of Black Christianity which are self-evidently bountiful with liberatory and revolutionary undercurrents. Through this paper we shall attempt to investigate the AIC's from a historical perspective. As we do this it will be interesting to note the fundamental historical role a

Black Church in South Africa can play in the people's struggle.

THE BLACK CHURCH IN BLACK HISTORY

The Black Church Shapes Black History

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the mode of Black protest against racist and capitalist colonialism, which had begun in the 1650's, took a dramatic new character. The age of tribally organised armed resistance against the settler advancement was to close with the Bhambatha Uprising of 1906. A new strategy of non-military intellectual confrontation of the oppressor began to emerge. Instead of the hitherto tribally organised resistance, now supra-tribal and nationally based structures of protest were being founded. This strategy was a result of a new wave of self-consciousness which was beginning to gain ground within the African community.

The motor of this new development was one of the results of the missionary endeavours. Through the missionary church institutions, Africans were being educationally equipped and exposed to what they later came to discover in full for themselves as the liberating potential of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Much against the missionaries expectations and intentions, this educated class of Africans gradually became conscientised with the obligation presented by the Gospel, that dehumanising structures in the Black community had to be attacked and dismantled. This period (1890 – 1912) saw the first founding of African political organizations. The most notable being *Imbuba ya maAfrica*, the *Funamelungelo* Society (seek your rights), Natal Natives Congress and the culmination of this movement in the

founding of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), two years after "Azania" had been named a South Africa in which the African majority was excluded from political power. It was not accidental that the SANNC was to have a Rev. John Dube, a product of missionary tutelage who had even had the rare privilege of studying overseas, as its first president.

The church in the Black community played a crucial role and is still up to this day dispensing this role. What is questionable is the kind of historical results that the church deposits into a people's history. In a passing brief, we note from the foregoing development that the conduct of the struggle for emancipation changed hands away from the grassroots to the African petit bourgeois class during the 1900's through the influence of the Church.

The Black Church, Mid-wife of Black Nationalism

When they began to learn to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, late nineteenth-century African Christians became aware of a contradiction between what the missionary church was teaching them and what the Spirit was revealing from the scriptures. God was discovered as dynamic being who was concerned about the upliftment of all nations. A contradiction was found between the ecclesiastic model which was emerging in the Biblical writings, where the church emerges as an institution of the mission of human liberation, and the missionary presentation of the church as a transplantation from Europe to Africa. A tense contradiction was also discovered between their attraction to the Christian message of human fellowship and their experience of racial discrimination both in society and the church.

With admirable boldness in defiance of the Western Church's sacred theological tradition that outside of itself "*Salus Nullus*" (No Salvation), that those who are not part of it or break away from it are Kaffirs (Heathens) and anathema, one African church leader after the other began to express rejection of missionary Christianity, and instituted their own African Churches, independent of all foreign influence.

From Nehemia Tile to Mangena Mokone

In 1882 Rev. Nehemia Tile of the Wesleyan Church, a gifted and well-known preacher in Thembuland (Sundkler: 1961: 38) colluded with the local paramount chief, Ngangelizwe, and led a breakaway of the Thembuland area Methodist Church, to establish the Thembu National Church.

The founding of the Thembu National Church is significant in at least two respects besides the fact that it was the first AIC in South Africa. Firstly, by calling his church a Thembu *National* Church, Tile had caught up to the theological fact that the Church is not a supra-social institution. The founding, structuring and mission of the Church is much affected by the ideological and class interests of those involved. For Tile the Church could be *national*, that is, it could be organised by the interest and aspiration of the nation. As if to ridicule the English history of the Wesleyan Church, Tile ordained Chief Ngangelizwe as the head of the Thembu National Church, just as the Queen in England was the head of the Church of England.

Secondly, this Church became famous for its pioneering work of assimilating African cultural practices which were then vehemently castigated by missionaries as being

heathen, barbaric and uncivilized with Christian doctrine, and ethics. Cultural self-affirmation, a rejection of religious sub-servience to non-liberating foreigners, and a commitment to the nationalistic ideal blended together into a theology of the Thembu National Church.

The fact that Tile's church was tribally based is usually used to diminish the nationalist significance of his contribution to the Black history of emancipation. We however, have to note that Tile was the product of his times (and the best product indeed). To the African of the 1880's (the pre-industrial period) the tribe represented the nation, Africa ended where his tribe end, and the battles of his tribe were the battles of Africa.

Nehemiah Tile's expression of nationalist sentiment through the Church was to be further developed and extended in the following epoch of Black history, the post-discovery-of-gold era.

During the years 1892-96 Rev. Mangena Mokone in Pretoria together with his colleagues, Rev. James Dwane and Simon Brander, formed a new church after a dramatic resignation from the Methodist Church. What was significant about this new church, besides the background of the historical dynamics which resulted into its founding, was the name adopted. It was called the Ethiopian Church. Its mission was to enlist all Africans into Ethiopian consciousness, believing that the Psalm 68: 31 "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God", was finally being fulfilled.

The historical significance of the Ethiopian Church was that whereas the hitherto pattern of the founding of AIC's was tribally conditioned, this Church was to become consciously non-tribalistic. The concept of

Ethiopianism, representing a philosophy of African self-consciousness and unity, and which at the time was mobilising all Africans even across the Atlantic ocean into a liberatory front, was for the first time introduced into colonial South Africa's protest. The advent of Ethiopianism was to change the shape of Black political protest. "Unlike those who believed in evolutionary change through constitutional means, the separatist [Ethiopian] Churches were impatient with white control and pessimistic about the protest for evolutionary change" (Ondendaal: 1984: 23).

Ethiopianism

Ethiopianism was an assertion of the absolute right of Africans to rule Africa. It was a rejection of the accommodative ideology of John Tengo Jabavu's newspaper, "Invo Zabantsundu" (founded 1884). It called for Africans to struggle for goals beyond mere representation in the Cape Colony or any other legislative assembly. Its formulative battle cry became "Africa for Africans, Africans for humanity!" It emphasised African self-pride, self-reliance and service to humanity.

The Ethiopians questioned the one-way missionary traffic from the West to Africa. They maintained that the church in Africa should also be allowed to develop to a point where it will also be able to send missionaries to Europe and other lands. Also, Africans should be armed with education and economic power so that they could rise from a position of social subjugation by the settlers and be prepared to serve other nations. (This message of the Ethiopian movement was to encourage the emergence of an African petit-bourgeoisie which was referred to earlier). A reading of the

history of Ethiopianism is a record of attempts, both unsuccessful and successful, at establishing Black-sponsored educational institutions. In 1903, Rev. Brander's application to the colonial Transvaal republic government for the establishment of the Ethiopian School was rejected (Karis and Carter : 1973: 37 Vol. 1).

"By the end of the nineteenth century the Ethiopian movement had gained thousands of adherents and spread throughout South Africa" (Ondendaal: 1984:29). This emergence and phenomenal spread of the challenges of Ethiopianism was not without crisis. It created a crisis for both the colonial regime and the missionary agencies, as well as for sections of the liberal-bourgeois Black community.

In his African Yearly Register of 1929, T.D. Mveli Skota reports that the missionary agencies and the colonial Transvaal (Z.A.R.) Legislative Assembly instigated President Paul Kruger to suppress the Ethiopian Church. Paul Kruger is said to have given in a carefree manner the monumental reply to this, saying: "Let the Kaffirs preach to the Kaffirs, why interfere with them". For Kruger the institution of separate Black Churches was wrongly confused with a manifestation of racist social regimentation.

Summarising up deliberations on Ethiopianism among the missionaries at the first General Missionary Conference held in Johannesburg in July 1904, Alexander Roberts of the Lovedale Mission characterised the missionary view of Ethiopianism: "First, it is a race movement; second, it is political; third, it is Church" (quoted in: Kuzwayo: 17).

Reception of Ethiopianism within the Black Community

Within the Black community, particu-

larly in the 1920's, the Ethiopian creed of "Africa for the Africans" was to create conflict with the programme of those Africans who were sympathetic to Cecil John Rhodes' League, which was established to mobilise British intervention against the Boers in the politics of South Africa. Many middle-class Africans supported it as they wished Britain, thought to be more liberal than the Boers, to assume responsibility over "native affairs" throughout Southern Africa (Ibid: 1984: 11). The Black disciples of Cecil John Rhodes preached their slogan of "equal rights for every civilised man South of the Zambesi" against the Ethiopian demand of absolute African rule of Africa. Karis and Carter also observe that "the Ethiopians, through the medium of the Church, rejected the liberal assumptions of a common non-racial society. Instead they supported separate but African-controlled organisations" (Ibid: xi).

The Ethiopian assertions were most unacceptable to the Black intellectuals in Natal and Cape Colony where Blacks had a vote in the colonies parliaments, and were at the time struggling to get more constitutional rights. In Natal there was a campaign for an expansion of African representation in that colony's Parliament. A few Blacks who could fulfill the stipulated property-ownership requirements had the vote (the "exempted"). These few educated and "rich" Africans, together with *amakholwa* (Black Christians outside of the Ethiopian movement) formed an organisation called *Funamalungelo* – "seek your rights" – (Exempted Native Society), through which they could press for more rights within the colonial structures. In 1900 the *Funamalungelo* was widened to include non-exempted Africans and became the Natal Native Congress,

(*New Nation*: June 11, 1987:9). The most famous and eloquent opponent of Ethiopianism in Natal became Rev. John L. Dube, the editor of the second African-owned newspaper in Natal, the *Ilanga lase Natal* which he founded in 1903. The *Ilanga* started circulating as a sister newspaper to the *Indian Opinion*. The first African-owned newspaper in Natal was *Ipepa Lo Hlanga*, which was started in 1900 by Chief Mkhize Majozi. It "met with white hostility from the start. It was regarded generally as a seditious propaganda organ for the Ethiopian movement" (Ibid: 1984: 61). *Ipepa* was suppressed by the Natal colonial authorities within twelve months, and the *Ilanga* emerged as its substitute.

The leading opponent of Ethiopianism in the Cape colony was politician and journalist John Tengo Jabavu. Jabavu entered politics with a serious faith in the colonial structures and a hope of reform that would enable the Cape Africans to have full participation in the political running of the colony (Odendaal: 1984: 11 -16). He distinguished himself as being the pioneer of the Black independent press. However, his newspaper which he used to present his views and attacks against the African exclusivism of Ethiopianism, the *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Native Opinion) was set up with the finance and guidance of the family of a white friend, Rose-Innes, whom Jabavu had helped to win a seat in Parliament (Ibid: 1984:12).

The aim of the *Imvo*, according to Jabavu was "to help bring about closer bonds between blacks and between blacks and whites" (Ibid). Jabavu devoted his life in the mid-1880's to getting Africans to participate in the Cape Parliament. He developed open friendship with liberal Cape Parliamentarians such as W. Sauer and

J.X. Merriman. This set him in sharp conflict with the adherents of the Ethiopian philosophy. The *Casus belli* for Jabavu came in 1898 when in the Cape elections he declared his support for the leader of the Afrikaner Bond, J.H. Hofmeyer. "This action alienated him from large sections of evolving african opinion" (Ibid: 13). Jabavu and his supporters were called by the Cape Ethiopians, "*amagqoboka*" ("People having a hole"). *Amagqoboka* were said to have opened a hole in the Xhosa nation which had allowed the white man to gain a foothold.

"One Nation, one Church"

During the 1920's a campaign was launched for the establishment of a one united church to which all African people would belong. By this point the Ethiopian movement had been the only national political ("religio-political") programme. The practice of the Ethiopian movement and its introduction of a supra-tribalistic nationalism influenced the alliance of a number of regional political organisations and led to their coming together to form the South African Native National Congress in 1912 (which in 1930 was renamed the African National Congress – ANC). By the 1910's however, the vigilance of the Ethiopian movement was dissipated by the rivalries and divisions which had developed within the Ethiopian Church, the prime vehicle of Ethiopianism. Two of the original founders of the Ethiopian Church, S. Brander and James Dwane, had led major splits from it. Dwane ended up leading his group into the white Anglican Church.

By the 1920's Ethiopian splinter groups from mainline missionary churches had mushroomed throughout the country. Some people argued that the black church had to carry out

the mission of uniting people and that the existence of so many black churches only worked against this nationalistic ideal and theological imperative. Such a church was to be called the United National Church of Africa (Ibid 1961: 50).

The years 1911 – 1930 saw a new convergence of Black political opinion. Africans had been shocked by the callous settlement of the 1910 Union of South Africa Act which sealed their inferior political position. Those who had fraternised with the British liberals in the hope of being accommodated in the settlement felt betrayed and disappointed, and those who all along preached black exclusivism did not only feel vindicated, they found themselves faced with the challenge of having to strengthen African unity in the face of a now seemingly more determined aggressor.

Within its national executive, the SANNC had an office of the chaplain-general (which of course, was for a minister of religion). It became the task of the SANNC's chaplain-generals to mobilise within the churches and draw black Christians towards the need for a united black witness against the colonists. At the historic 1930 SANNC national conference held at Bloemfontein, where the name of the organisation was changed to African National Congress (ANC), one of the most important resolutions, which was released on Dingaan's day, (16 December), was a call for the establishment of the United National Church of Africa. Bengt Sundkler observes that "This linking of the independent Church movement to the Congress was a new development, but the urge for a nation-wide union of all separatist organisations was at least ten years older" (Ibid:50).

The development towards a united

national black church was to be thwarted by two factors. Firstly, the remnants of the early Ethiopian radicals among the African Independent Churches viewed the manner in which the process was being carried through with some suspicion. They noted that the ANC's chaplain-general of the time, Rev Z.K. Makgatho was thus charged with the supervision of the formation of such a Church who seemed still much unwilling to break away from his Methodist connection. The second factor which created the stumbling block to the mission was that of ideological differences which once more erupted within the Black protest movement immediately after 1935.

In 1936, the All Africa Convention (AAC) was formed as a broad alliance of anti-government organisations which were coming together to oppose the Hertzog Native Bills. The ANC, trade unions (ICU), cultural bodies, student groups, sport groups and Churches formed the AAC under the Presidency of Professor D.D.T. Jabavu, J.T. Jabavu's son.

The AAC developed and adopted a policy of African Nationalism as their mobilising creed, and absolute non-collaboration in all government structures as its political principle. Later on the ANC withdrew from the AAC, and the AAC's adoption of a formal constitution in 1937 meant the existence of two rival political ideologies in the country. The campaign for the formation of the United National Church of Africa as an African nationalist expression, became embroiled and finally aborted in the ideological debates that ensued.

The United National Church of Africa failure, as well as the emergence in the early 1950's of the ANC as the sole African nationally-based political

organisation with non emphasis on African personhood and self-rule, marked the fizzling out of the original spirit and vision of the Ethiopian movement. The remnant of the spirit and ideas of the Ethiopian philosophy continued to surface in the beliefs of the Pan African Congress of Azania which was founded in 1959 in frustration at the direction the ANC was thought to be taking. It has also found residence in the current Black Consciousness philosophy.

The work of the Ethiopians produced not only the first challenge in the motivation for the creation of the Black Church. They were also pioneers of African nationalism in colonial South Africa. In conceiving the reason for the founding of the Black Church as being primarily missiological even to the extent of visualizing the principle of the ecumenical dimension of Christian mission, they were the formulators of the concept of Pan-Africanism. They preached that the Church in colonial South Africa and the entire African population should be so developed, freed and equipped that it can go out and serve other people – "Africa for Humanity!".

The Zionists

The period of the demise of Ethiopian fervour was also a period that saw the emergence of another major theological tradition of the African Independent Churches, namely the Zionist Churches. Besides the differences noted in the colourful uniforms and expressive spirituality of the Zionists as opposed to the Ethiopians, a fundamental difference between them is historical. Whereas the Ethiopian churches are South African indigenous Churches (pioneered by ideas fed from local challenges) with an overt nationalist undercurrent, the Zionist movement

was introduced into South Africa through the work of Pentecostal white missionaries from North America.

The history of the Zionist movement in South Africa dates from 8th May 1904 when Daniel Bryant from the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion in the U.S.A. baptised his first twenty-seven converts near the Johannesburg railway station.

The pentecostal, spiritual and apocalyptic theology of this church found ready converts and fertile ground among the degraded, exploited and culturally disoriented Black population which was streaming into the Transvaal gold fields. In accepting the Zionist faith, African converts developed into congregations which could in no way have any relations with white people.

Being away from European interference, the Zionists were free to incorporate into their religiosity elements that were part of the African religious culture. Also, a new indigenous meaning was subconsciously attached to the concepts *Zion* and *Jerusalem*. Many of the churches which were mushrooming all over the country, adopted the two concepts as part of their names.

The Concept "Zion"

Upon closer examination it is discovered that the use of *Zion* and *Jerusalem* were typologically appropriated into some form of an unarticulated social revolution. The eschatological meaning of *Zion* is meditatively transposed into a wish and an affirmation of the eschatological judgement of the status quo. *Zion* alludes to a glorious land and experience which lies beyond the present. It is an echo of the nostalgia of the Israelite captives as they mourned by the rivers of Babylon, remembering the

lost glory, both religious and political, of their nation.

(For today's Black South Africans, the concept *Zion* carries an equal psychological and historical import as the concept *Azania*, a vision of a glorious land untainted with imperialist exploitation.)

After splitting from the main Ethiopian Church in 1903, Rev. Brander called his new Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church In Zion. Brander used the term "Zion" before Daniel Bryant came to South Africa. The concept "Zion" to Brander was and could be related to his radical nationalistic conceptualisation of Ethiopia.

The use of "Zion", together with "Jerusalem" reveals the devotees' obsession with the vision in the book of Revelation Chapter 21. It is a Johannine cry, "Lord Jesus, do come", the desperate hunger of a persecuted people for the Lord's intervention.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we need to reiterate a point made at the beginning that the challenge and option facing both the AIC's and all Black Christians, is a task of revisiting our history, the suppressed history of Black religion which is where the spirit of our forebears, our liberatory *heritage*, lies.

The liberatory undercurrent of our ancestors' experience of God awaits not only to be discovered but also to be reinterpreted, restated and developed into a revolutionary idiom of our time and into projects for the transformation of Black life in oppressive South Africa.

With James Cone we conclude that, "our task as Black Theologians is not to tell others what the Gospel is, as if we know and they do not. Our task is rather to take as the content for Black

Theology the prereflective understanding of the Gospel held by Black Christians, in order to make their voice heard throughout the Church and society.”

Furthermore, “We do not create the Gospel, we interpret it as it is celebrated in worship and as it is preached in society. Deeply embedded in Black Church history are sermons, songs and

the prayers of our grandparents waiting to be put into theological language ... and we must uncover their words about God and make them the foundation of Black Theology. [The sources of Black Theology] are not to be found in Barth, Tillich or Pannenberg; they are found in the sayings of our people”. (Ibid: 1986: 117).

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