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AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCHES IN GHANA – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Introduction

The emergence of AICs on the continent of Africa has been a phenomenon so rapid and widespread that it has forced its way onto the academic agenda of the study of religious movements in Africa. Since the first academic research on this religious phenomenon, writers have pondered the cause (or causes) of the growth of this new religious movement. Each AIC has its peculiar and unique sets of reasons that have contributed to its emergence and development within its own national and local setting, and in spite of similarities, causes must not be universalised. As a whole, however, this movement can be located in the wider context of the rapid spread of Christianity in Africa during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Causes for Development

Issues surrounding causation are rather complex. Allan Anderson rightly points out that, in discussing the question of causation, we must distinguish between factors that account for the origins of AICs from those that should rightly be considered as contributing to its subsequent growth and development. In addition to this, one has to carefully evaluate what should be considered as ‘background causes’ or secondary causes from those which are to be considered as ‘primary causes’. Nevertheless, there are some significant events and personalities that appear to figure quite prominently in the causal and developmental factors of indigenous churches in Ghana.

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Religious Factors

Among the various theories that have been posited to account for the emergence of AICs. The ‘religious factors’ feature prominently. Although it is difficult - if possible - to make arbitrary distinction between religious factors and socia-political and economical ones, the general position of those, who advocate religious causative factors, consider AICs, primarily, as a new religious movement responding to religious needs. Harold Turner, who conducted extensive research on Aleatory churches, stresses the religious nature of these churches, arguing that, they provided security, fellowship and spiritual guidance in the midst of crumbling traditional structures and the influx of foreign religious groups. Religious factors are usually based upon the traditional critique of western mission in Africa as one failing to meet the cultural and religious needs of Africans.

The inability (or unwillingness) of western missions to appropriate Christ particularly and Christianity generally into a Ghanaian context in a way that was meaningful and affirmative of Ghanaians, constituted a major reason why western Christianity was resisted. David Barren, who believes that reaction to European missions was the common cause for the emergence of AICs across the continent, maintains that, western missions had exhibited a ‘failure in love’ in their attitude toward African people. It wasn’t just their insensitivity to Ghanaian culture that caused this apparent reaction to their message, however, but it was also the inadequacy of the message and its efficacy for an African cosmological outlook. An example of this was the church’s altitude towards witchcraft and evil spirits, which was usually dismissive as opposed to recognising that, for the African, they constituted a real and immanent threat against which one needed to be protected. Roben Wyllie, in his study of prophet-healing churches in southern Ghana, maintains that, the emergence of the MDCC in Winneba reflected a sense of disenchantment with orthodox mission Christianity, which seemed incapable of offering practical solutions to the kinds of problems that ordinary people could expect to face at anytime. David Bosch - speaking out of a South African context, but which also reflects the Ghanaian situation - further argued that, the white missionaries often proclaimed a superficial and impoverished
gospel. The preaching of the word and the Catechist, he maintained, did not touch on many facets of life or struggle of the African.\textsuperscript{13}

The inability of western mission churches to grasp the salvatory needs of the Ghanaian was most clearly expressed in the area of illness. The missionaries, by and large, condemned traditional healing practices, and the provision of western medicine through hospitals and clinics was in short supply to meet the needs of the expanding Christian community throughout the country.\textsuperscript{14} Here, the church simply had no message and provided inadequate alternatives, which, therefore, left a vacuum aptly filled by a proliferation of faith-healing Prophets.

In addition to the frustration and disenchantment with missionary Christianity experienced by African, there was also a reluctance to continue to accept the patronising attitudes and racialist inequalities meted out by white colonial church officials. Adrian Hastings, in discussing the causes and motivations of independency and Prophetism writes:

\ldots it was, still more, the racialism with in the church, the impression - in most cases, very well grounded - that even able and experienced African ministers remained second-class members of the church, always inferior to even the most junior missionary recently arrived from Britain. This was a matter of authority exercised, of salary, of details of human behavior, such as the sharing of meals. The missionary churches were so integrated into racialist society that their membership was profoundly alienating for black people.\textsuperscript{15}

In West African context, the collapse of Bishop Crowther’s Niger Episcopate at the hands of CMS missionaries, determined to assert their position of power, was a case in point and, which some would argue, set the stage for the proliferation of indigenous Christianity across West Africa.\textsuperscript{16}

The Quest for Self-expression and Freedom from Western Missionary Tutelage

The unfavourable reaction to missionary Christianity and their racial attitudes towards Africans in part precipitated a number of se-
cessions from western mission churches in Ghana. These churches, to varying degrees, were characterised by a desire for African self-expression and freedom from missionary control. In Ghana, they included the National Baptist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Nigritian Church.

Dr. Mark Hayford founded the National Baptist Church in 1898 and it is purported to be the first established African Church in Ghana. The significance of this church movement was that Mark Hayford forged effective links with other separatist movements across West Africa in an effort to consolidate churches seceding from western missions. In the same year, he officially organised a fellowship of independent Baptist Churches from Sierra Leone to Cameroon: This was a new era of independence. Another church that emerged in this climate of secession was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion). This church originated in America within the Methodist Church as a black protest movement for self-expression and determination in 1796. It was established in Ghana under the direction of Bishop Small and placed under the leadership of Reverend Egyir Asaam and Reverend T.B. Freeman, who started a branch in Keta, in 1898. At a time when the hegemony of western missionary Christianity stifled the African personality and undermined their cultural expressions and selfhood, their message of native effort, self-reliance, independence and self-respect rung loud in the ears of Ghanaians. The formation of the Nigritian Church is an example of secession triggered by a desire for self-expression against restrictive church policies. Reverend J.B. Anaman, a former Methodist Minister, founded the Nigritian Church in 1907. He led a group of forty dissident members of Anomabu Methodist Church, who had been expelled for flouting the church’s ruling concerning singing bands. The rigorous vernacular singing and music, which drew upon traditional African rhythms, were seen by the church authorities to desecrate the church, as well as belonging to the annals of their traditional fetish past. The Nigritian Church’s usage of the vernacular and singing bands was in accordance with the growing national aspiration for African self-expression and a longing to worship freely and independently of foreign interference. Such secessions and the formation of indigenous church organisations were confidence-
boosters for Ghanaians, who were previously considered too inept to be at the helm of church leadership.

**Translation of the Bible into Ghanaian Languages**

The translation of the Bible into Ghanaian vernaculars was also a key religious factor in the emergence of indigenous churches in Ghana. In 1871, the first Twi Bible was translated and published by the Basel Mission. By 1874, the Bible was further translated into Ga and Ewe. J.G. Christaller’s widely acclaimed Twi Grammar Dictionary and collection of proverbs were also completed and published by 1881. David Barreu contends that, scriptural translation is a significant contributing factor toward the development of African indigenous churches. He states: “... an event of fundamental importance in the life of the tribe took place: the Holy Scriptures were translated and published in the tribe’s own language.” Kwame Bediako is of the view that:

There is probably no more important single explanation for the massive presence of Christianity on the African continent than the availability of the Scriptures in many African languages.

The most important function that vernacular Scripture played was in enabling the African Christians to distinguish between what was taught by the missionaries and what was taught in Scripture. The Scripture translated into the vernacular became an independent standard of reference and it soon became apparent that much of what was taught by missionaries was more of a reflection of their own cultural baggage than from the Bible. The Old Testament was of particular interest because it resonated with much of what was important within an African outlook on life: the importance of fertility and sexuality, the place of ancestors, polygamous practice, the importance of land and a host of other cultural and religious similarities. It was, above all surprising to see the practice of polygamy in the Bible, which the missionaries fought hard to eradicate by imposing strict prohibitions on members. Particularly striking was the agreement between the African worldview and that of the Old Testament. Although the missionaries - as good
Protestants - believed in the centrality of the Bible, they were not accustomed to making the connections or seeing the continuity between the Biblical context and the contemporary one that the Africans were discovering.  

The translation of the Bible into the vernacular was also a factor in a new process of growing self-awareness. A people, whose culture had been, hitherto, undermined, was, nevertheless, important enough to have the Bible – the Word of God – in their own mother tongue. The impact of the Bible was so significant that, many of the indigenous church leaders modelled their leadership style and imagery on Old Testament Prophet figures, which were, probably, familiar figures in Africa before Christianity arrived.

Although the above, primarily religious factors, contributed significantly towards the origins and developments of AICs in Ghana, the strength of the general movement toward independence was in the combination of socio-political factors that overlapped with the religious factors.

**Social and Political Factors**

During the latter part of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, certain changes in the Ghanaian society had a significant bearing on the growth and development of African indigenous churches. To a large extent, economic development was the main mediating force whereby the individualistic, competitive, acquisitive attitude and values of the West were introduced into the Ghanaian society. Although before the nineteenth century new means of acquiring wealth and power was introduced through the sale of guns and gunpowder, this brought little disturbance to social order and scarcely affected the more loosely knit societies of the hinterlands. The social and political changes during this period, however, were more widespread and deeply felt by even those at the margins of society.

**Indigenous Churches and African Nationalism**

The researchers on AICs, that base their emergence upon socio-political factors, understand indigenous churches to be political protest
movements against a background of colonial paternalism and the rise of black nationalism. Beckmann, for example, believes the independent church movement in Ghana to be the religious counterpart of political nationalism. The training for leadership given to African ministers, and their growing self-confidence in working alongside Europeans, may be regarded as positive stimuli to the development of the nationalist movement. Though church organisations did not take a definite part in nationalist agitation, prominent members were often outspoken on political issues. The nationalist voices of men like Dr. Edward Wilmot Blyden, who was highly critical of missionary Christianity and advocated the establishment of an independent West African Church, and J.E. Casely Hayford, a Methodist, became more and more prominent. In the growth of self-governing institutions, the churches were usually ahead of the government, and they provided some African leaders with a forum, and an unaccustomed freedom of expression, both in the pulpit and the press. In his book, Ethiopia Unbound, Casely Hayford, who was also a distinguished politician and layman, accused the missionaries of haughtiness in their relationship with Africans and caricatured the type of Christians bred by mission churches:

At the head of the choir was the school-master, whose attire certainly invited attention. In his elegantly cut-away black morning coat and beautifully glazed cuffs and collar, not to speak of patent leather shoes, which he kept spotlessly bright by occasionally dusting them with his pocket-handkerchief, tucked away in his shirt sleeves, he certainly looked a veritable swell, but he also did look a veritable fool—and this is the sum total of half a century of missionary zeal.

Such voices of dissent contributed greatly to this new African cultural assertiveness which decried the imposition of western religiosity upon Ghanaians. The Gold Coast Aborigines Right Protection Society (A.R.P.S.), particularly, through their newspaper, the Gold Coast Aborigines, and the National Congress of West Africa, also played a pivotal role in advancing the cause of African nationalism. The interesting and complicated story of the rise of nationalism in the Gold Coast has already been told in great detail and does not need be
What needs to be recognised, however, is that, this movement added significantly to the momentum that would, eventually, lead to the emergence of African indigenous churches in Ghana.

The language and sentiments of African nationalism, much of which came via the African American movement in the USA, coincided with a growing feeling of frustration that emanated from Africans in western mission churches and those that had seceded and formed indigenous churches. This nationalist influence was seen, most notably, in the establishment of A.M.E. Zion Church mentioned above, which appealed to awakening colour consciousness. At the inaugural meeting held in Cape Coast in 1898, T.E. Freeman, Jnr. – one of its leaders – is reported as stating the ethos of the church as follows:

This church, composed of Africans and entirely governed and worked by Africans, was, indeed, ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,’ which would, naturally, take a much greater interest in their missions in the motherland than can be possible with missionary boards and missionaries of an alien race who are not above the colour question.

Although the church did not rally the mass of support that they expected – which was possibly to do with the foreign origin and rhetoric – nonetheless, it laid another brick on the road toward the Africanisation of Ghanaian Christianity.

The forty dissident members of the Nigritian Church, who were expelled from the Methodist Church for singing in the vernacular and playing their traditional drumbeats – also mentioned above – were, no doubt, also greatly encouraged by the wave of nationalist consciousness that was indicative of the time.

Social Change

The development of African indigenous churches in Ghana has been also closely identified with rapid social change that created a climate of anomy and uncertainty during the indirect rule of the colonial rulers between 1880 and 1920. To start with, the super-imposition of external authority of colonial rulers seriously weakened the powers
of the Chiefs, and the sanctions at their disposal. The prevention of intertribal warfare, for example, deprived them of their main means of gaining new prestige, territory and wealth. Traditional gods also proved no match against the might of Europeans, who encroached upon traditional land, desecrated shrines and declared worshipping traditional gods was tantamount to worshipping Satan and his angels. This, sometimes, led to harsh conflicts between Christianity and the traditional religion. Such conflicts more often led to the defeat and humiliation of Chiefs and other such guardians of the traditional religion. The religious authority of the Chiefs and their ability to invoke supernatural sanctions was, therefore, undermined by the introduction of Christianity which offered, not only the prestige of association with the ruling colonial government, but also the utilitarian advantage of education, which, in turn, led to wider economic opportunities. These events, as we shall see in our consideration of the contribution of African Prophets, paved the way for the message of indigenous prophets such as Harris and Oppong for whom the disenfranchised traditional observers constituted an evangelica preparatio.

The period was also marked by social and economic uncertainties. The cocoa boom instigated an economic and social revolution in Ghana. Thousands of people, uprooted from their villages, leaving behind many of the local traditional and ancestral gods, found new villages in the cocoa-growing areas. Economic boom and newfound wealth created a feeling of hedonism that found expression in the so-called ‘dances’ of Asiko and Sibisaba. These were new forms of socialising which involved young people, particularly young women, dancing provocatively and singing to brass band music. When the value of cocoa, which brought great wealth to farmers, began to fall, this brought about much insecurity and resulted in an increase anti-witchcraft beliefs, which, in turn, led to an increase in anti-witchcraft cults. Although the explanations of the rise of the witchcraft cults vary, the prevailing social disorientation and uncertainties played a key role in their proliferation. The influenza epidemic, which had a previous outbreak in 1891, and had caused a number of deaths, resurfaced killing thousands, and added to this climate of uncertainty and anomy.
Traditional religion in its old form, which had been discredited by Christianity and to which many, who had migrated to unfamiliar areas, were not sufficiently engaged, no longer brought protection and meaning. It was within the new indigenous churches that many sought protection from witches and a ‘place to feel at home.’

KwaOle Nkrumah as Osagyefo (Redeemer)

The 1950’s saw acceleration in the movement advancing the national self-consciousness of Ghanaian people. The prevailing political climate at the time in Ghana was summarised by the popular maxim: ‘man, be thy self.’ This was, indeed, the rallying cry for many nationalist politicians and for those who were struggling for the national independence of Ghana from Britain. Although the period had witnessed a rise in the number of indigenous churches, and an increase of Africans in positions of leadership in mission churches, the vast majority of the mission churches still had expatriate leadership. This state of affairs made the church a scapegoat for politicians, many of whom argued that the continued presence of expatriates as heads of churches served to confirm the impression of the church as another front of the European onslaught on Africa. This foreign aspect of the church stood in opposition to what Nkrumah stood for, namely, national and cultural self-consciousness. This brought up a conflict between Nkrumah and the mission churches. Nkrumah believed western mission Christianity to be the instrument of social oppression; in his words. He maintained that ‘religion is the instrumental of bourgeois social reaction.”

Nkrumah’s message resonated with the African indigenous churches, who were themselves, in effect, a protest movement against the historic churches and their western leadership. The attitude of the indigenous churches to Nkrumah, at least in the earlier years of his rule, was very positive. The former Head Prophet of the MDCC, JehuAppiah (Akaboha II), is widely reported as even being a great friend of Kwame Nkrumah. The sympathetic ear given to Nkrumah’s message on the part of the indigenous churches was further increased when Nkrumah narrowed the gap between his political nationalism and indigenous church prophetism by adapting the traditional role of the paramount chief (Omanhene) to the contemporary situation.
In the first place, Nkrumah took to himself certain titles, which outraged the historic churches. The two most provocative ones were Osagyefo\(^5\) (Redeemer), which literally means, ‘one who saves the battle’ or deliverer. The second was the title Asomdwehene that literally means, ‘Prince of Peace.’ ‘Christians, specifically, used this title of Jesus Christ. Nkrumah promised an early ‘paradise’ on earth (Ghana) in 10 years; in 1950, the creed of the CPP was based upon the Apostolic Creed and Christian hymns were adapted and regularly used at CPP rallies. The Evening News newspaper compared Nkrumah to Jesus, and read:

Angels were singing ‘the Messiah is coming’ when, in 1909, at Nkroful, a woman was labouring to bring forth the Apostle of Freedom.

Also,

Nkrumah is all right;
Nkrumah is our Messiah;
Nkrumah never dies;
if you follow him, he will make you fishers of men.\(^5\)

David Burnett, in his assessment of Nkrumah’s usage of religious symbolism, remarks:

The use of clear Christian symbolism illustrated the widespread influence of Christian ideas among the people of the Gold Coast, and Nkrumah, as an astute politician, realised the value of biblical imitation for slogans in his political campaigns. The biblical imagery provided ready-made metaphors to communicate his message to people, who had, at least, heard the preaching of a Christian evangelist, even if only a minority were Christians.\(^5\)

Nkrumah was, perhaps, the first Ghanaian prophet of liberation, political as well as cultural.

It was not so much that Nkrumah was deified as Christ, but was being seen as a prophet of liberation and change, and admirers were
perfectly at ease in communicating this through symbols and means that were Christian and overtly African. I want to propose here that, Nkrumah’s usage of symbolism, both African and Christian, added to the legitimisation and popularisation of an African expression of Christianity in Ghana. Also, his boldness in accepting a comparison with Christ, ostensibly linking Christ to the struggles of an African people, was further adding to a liberative interpretation of how Jesus could be understood and how one could be both Christian and African.

Before national independence in 1957, indigenous churches had already begun to spring up in large numbers. However, according to David Barrett, by 1967, this movement had mushroomed enormously to, at least, two hundred distinct bodies with two hundred thousand adherents. Although Nkrumah could not be credited with this massive increase, which, for the most part was the culmination of a combination of factors, he clearly played a significant role.

African Prophets

Although the religious and socio-political factors outlined above contributed greatly to the conception and emergence of indigenous churches, which mirrored the African (Ghanaian) cultural outlook, the character of African indigenous churches in Ghana owed a great debt to two African prophets: William Wade Harris and Samson Oppong. These two preachers have been singled out because of the mass conversions that ensued as a result of their preaching. They also provided a model in which the best of African traditional culture and Christianity could be exemplified. Their ministries were both timely and pertinent, because criticism of Christianity as a European brand - which begun in a modest form in the publications of Edward Blyden in the 1880s – became much stronger at the beginning of the twentieth century. Members of the African intelligentsia were particularly vociferous criticising Christianity itself and not only the missionaries. It was during this period, according to Haliburton, that Prophet Harris ‘like a meteor, flashed across parts of the West African landscape, rushing through the waste places of the sky.’ The ministry of the Prophet came as a breath of fresh air to many, who were torn between their Christian faith – which came clothed in European garb – and their African identity.
This feeling was captured by J.E. Casely-Hayford, a brother of Dr. E. Hayford, and the Reverend Dr. Mark Hayford. In a daily journal published in 1915, he wrote as he observed Harris at work:

He says of the Christ that he took the form of a babe in order that by his helplessness he might indicate the true nature of humility. He reminds you that the Kroo man is the scavenger of the world .... Mammon has used the Kroo man all these years. And now God has need of him .... God is using him now in person of William Waddy Harris.

The impact of Prophet Harris’ ministry was far reaching, particularly for its significance in the development of African Christian expression. In Prophet Harris, we see the embryo for the development of an African indigenous spirituality and an Akan Christology in Ghana. The power of the Prophet’s ministry was best demonstrated in his ability to appropriate the Christian evangel into what was in Ghana an Akan traditional context. His use of water, a calabash, a tall rod or cane, would have been symbols that Akan traditional observers would have been familiar with. Even the use of a cross and a Bible as symbols of power would have reverberated with the Akan worldview that maintained that natural objects have a life force in and of themselves. The efficacy of the Prophet’s message and ministry, however, was demonstrated poignantly in his ability to strike at the heart of the African deepest ‘soul-need,’ which was for protection and deliverance from the fear of oppressive and evil spirits. Through the Prophet’s public triumph over witches and workers of juju and magic, he demonstrated the supremacy of the power of Christ over all these powers, thus bringing peace to the African heart. It is here, therefore, that we can begin to see an inkling of an African Christ, who enters the Akan worldview, and is victorious over its malevolent powers, which are ubiquitous within it.

In a very similar fashion to the Prophet Harris, Samson Oppong preached against the use of fetishes and charms, threatening to call down fire if the villages did not burn them. With his background and experience in the practice of witchcraft, Oppong was able to make his message appropriate in such a way that spoke meaningfully the needs
of the people that formerly came to him for protection and revenge. The Methodist Church in Kumasi collaborated with Oppong – as they had also collaborated with Harris – and several thousand were won for their church through his ministry.

As a result of these and other such ministries, hundreds of thousands of people came to faith in Christ in Ghana and across West Africa. One of the key features of this new appropriation of the Christian message was its emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit, particularly in confronting issues of illness and witchcraft. This had struck a strong chord within the ‘souls’ of African people for whom traditional religion remained the strongest element of their culture. It was the ability to appropriate the Christian message into this worldview that led to the rapid expansion of African indigenous churches during the period 1922 to the 1970s.

Among the first African indigenous churches to be established in Ghana were the ‘Musama Disco Christo Church,’ the ‘Saviour’s Church’ (also known as Memeneda Gyidifo), the ‘Church of the Twelve Apostles’ and the ‘African Faith Tabernacle Church.’ The evangelistic type ministries of Harris and Oppong had entered a new era of African independence through the birth of African indigenous churches, churches that were led, financed and organised by Africans for Africans.

These movements were not purely secessions and reactions to western mission Christianity, but a part of a wider receptiveness and responsiveness to the Christian message in Ghana and across Africa. Independence was also a part of the primary movement of mass conversion of which mission Christianity enjoyed enormous numerical success, so much so that, after 1910, many of them were grossly understaffed and simply overwhelmed by the enormity of the African harvest. Hastily trained evangelists and catechists had to be trusted to teach the masses of converts, who wanted to be baptised. Many of the indigenous church prophets and founders did not set out to establish churches or to head mass movements, but were, essentially, taking on the missionary task, because it seemed so important. Harris, for example, encouraged his converts to wait for missionaries and to attend their churches; Oppong, on the other hand, was a great asset to the
Methodist Church, which he encouraged thousands of his converts to join. The main motivation was rather a deep conviction that God had called them as prophets to turn people to Jesus Christ.

**African Indigenous Church and the Mainline Denominations**

The rise of indigenous churches in Ghana, by and large, has been a spontaneous movement. For the most part, it has been a movement that has continued within the western Protestant theological tradition of the churches from which they seceded. Many have argued that, in their effort to inculturate Christianity within an African setting, some have – by virtue of certain practices and unorthodox theological viewpoints – positioned themselves outside of the mainstream Protestant theological position. Some even questioned the validity of them being described as ‘Christian Churches,’ but described them as an aberration of Christianity. The initial impression of these churches was that, they were syncretistic sects quite apart from orthodox Christianity. Many Methodists, for example, described Prophet Appiah (Akaboha I) and his followers as ‘false prophets’, as foretold in the Bible, and denounced them as heretics. Turner summarises the hostile reports of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches towards indigenous churches in Ghana in the 1950s: These reports are usually hostile, and refer to the ‘cheap Christian sects’ which ‘infest the district’ with their ‘dark influence’ ‘like a spiritual cancer eating steadily into the Church.

The basis of these criticisms was, primarily, due to the perceived unorthodox practices that were observed being carried out by indigenous church adherents. The practice of polygamy is an example of this, which has brought heavy criticism from both black and white leaders within mainline mission churches.

**Indigenous Church’s Response to Mainline Church Criticism**

From the outset, African indigenous churches have considered themselves to be ‘Christian churches’ that were in a continuous line of succession with those biblical characters who too had experienced
the power of the Holy Spirit. Attempts, therefore, to isolate them from the wider Christian community were taken very seriously. The Bible played a key role in the legitimising of their practices and teachings, which for the most part was interpreted literally, Church teachings and declarations of faith were, therefore, often accompanied with an array of scriptural support. The theological inadequacy of AICs’ leaders in comparison to their African mission church counterparts, who often comprised the educational elite – many of whom had studied overseas – nonetheless, was clearly evident. Added to this was the prestige and financial backing that the mission churches enjoyed due to the ability to access western support and partnership.

Theological Training

Indigenous churches were rather ambivalent towards formal education, which usually meant westernisation at the same time. Their religiosity was more African in orientation and, therefore, less congruent to education. It was also dependent on the charisma of the leader rather than the trained professional and on divine power rather than human wisdom and skill. The perceived benefits black mission church leaders received through their association and partnership with historic churches overseas, however, prompted a number of different indigenous churches to seek support from overseas missions to set up Bible colleges and theological institutions to train their leaders. The prestige and economic benefit gained from such contacts was evident within the mission churches that they sought to emulate, The Mennonite Mission Board, for example, was approached in 1957, by a Ghanaian pastor of several dissident indigenous church congregations for whom they worked, but with few resources. In 1969, Reverend Weaver set up Bible classes for indigenous church leaders, and in the same year, the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) also began work in Ghana with indigenous churches in the area of theological training. The works of both the Mennonites and the Lutherans helped to form the Good News Training Institute (now Good News Theological College and Seminary), which trains leaders from within indigenous churches.

The continuous exposure to what was, by and large, western evangelical theology – that was and still is the most popular theological position in Ghana today – curbed some of the more excessive practices
and unbiblical theologies of these churches. The majority of their leaders, especially the younger ones, adopted the evangelical theological position. Bible study, such as the ones conducted by Edwin Weaver, that included both indigenous churches as well as mission-related churches, also helped to conform indigenous churches to an evangelical position, though in many areas, certain idiosyncratic practices and beliefs were maintained.  

**Ecumenical Co-operation**

Another means by which indigenous churches have sought to respond to the criticism and ‘snubbing’ of mission churches has been through the formation of various ecumenical organisations and cooperation.  

As early as 1898, Dr. Mark Hayford, who founded the National Baptist Church, attempted to forge links with indigenous churches across West Africa. In 1962, several of the more prominent indigenous church leaders formed the Pentecostal Association of Ghana. This was modelled after the Christian Council of Ghana, to which they were not welcomed. It was intended to encourage indigenous churches to learn from each other and to thrash out issues of mutual concern. In 1968, another group of smaller indigenous church leaders organised the Ghana Council for Liberal Churches and managed to get government recognition. Through such organisations and cooperation, a deeper engagement with Scripture and tradition was gained, as well as a shared solidarity.

As indigenous churches began to grow, so did the curiosity of the mainline denominations. There was a growing realisation that the indigenous churches were creatively producing new, indigenised usages, which were, in many respects, more acceptable theologically than was at first thought. The study committee of the Bawku presbytery of the Presbyterian Church, which initiated contact with indigenous churches in 1966, both to learn and to teach, was a good example of this growing curiosity. A year later, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana synod assigned persons to study indigenous churches’ methods of prayer. Bible studies and worship styles in more depth.
These types of formal and informal co-operations with older mission churches reinforced the existing tendency to model themselves all the older churches and to gain wider acceptance. To this end, areas that were perceived to be offensive or erroneous theologically were discontinued or conducted away from the gaze of non-members.

Re-thinking Christology

The effects of these ecumenical and other contacts, as well as formal theological training on indigenous churches are mixed. The benefits of recognition by the world Christian community, with a wider experience and broader outlook, nonetheless, were obvious. There are, however, areas in which indigenous churches have sought to replicate mission church theology and practice without allowing the meaning to penetrate to the grassroots level. These areas include the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion whose Christological symbolism is often wrongly associated and meaning misunderstood. There have also been practices that have undergone modification on the basis of modernisation and progress. One such practice that has been modified, with regards to the Christology of AICs, is the prohibition of the use of western medicine or African medicine men or women during illness. The Prophet Jehu-Appiah (Akaboha I) of the MDCC was always interested in divine healing, but in 1925, during a seven-day fast, he was told by God to take divine healing seriously. Soon after, he prohibited the use of edur, which means charm, herbal medicine or western medicine. The reason given for this was that, Jesus and his disciples did not use any of these methods in their healing practice. Over the years, this is one of the areas in which their Christology has been modified. During one of my visits to Muzano, I was taken to see a number of long-term sick people kept in small huts. When I asked if they were allowed to use western medicine, I was told:

They are allowed to use western medicine and we do, sometimes, give them when we have it. Formerly, this was not so and even today, some of the old people don’t take it. But because of education, we have changed that, because we now know that Christ can choose to heal anyway he likes, by
medicine or divinely; after all, in everything, it is his power working, even in the medicine.  

There has, therefore, been a genuine effort to respond to the criticisms and challenges that have confronted indigenous churches, and in various ways, they have been able to adjust while maintaining their distinctiveness. The coming of a new Pentecostal wave, that would take the country by storm, would prove to be the greatest challenge that would confront them all.

The Challenge of Pentecostalism to the Development of AICS in Ghana

The rise of Pentecostalism in Ghana is another stage in the development of African indigenous churches and has contributed towards the formation and shape of their Christology. Pentecostalism in Ghana has been the subject matter of some interesting research in recent years that has recognised it as a continual development of African indigenous Christianity.

Various missions from the United States and Great Britain, most of which have been derived from revivalist Protestantism, most notably, Pentecostal in spirituality, have proved to be popular in Ghana. Many maintained much of the zeal and theological fervour of the missionaries, who came to Ghana in the early nineteenth century, but some also reflected the influence of the African-American Pentecostalism, which has its roots in the 1906 Azusa Street revival. According to the Ghana Evangelism Committee’s national survey updated in 1993, the growth of Ghanaian Christianity occurred in two main areas. The first was in those churches belonging to the Pentecostal Council, which had among their members, denominations such as the Assemblies of God, the Church of Pentecost, The Apostolic Church and the Christ Apostolic Church. The second group was of churches categorised as ‘mission-related’, where the most successful were the Churches of Christ, and the New Apostolic Church. These Pentecostal and Revivalist Churches, which began to take hold in the mid-twentieth century, did not insist on the African ceasing to operate in the spiritual worldview of the tra-
ditional religion, but maintained that, Christ was even greater than the powers of the spirits or ancestors.

These churches were places where spiritual healing and exorcism were a part of the ‘spiritual landscape.’ They were places, where the African could come for miracle healing and deliverance from curses. This Pentecostal wave brought an appropriation of the gospel message where it was now possible to experience the power of Christ within the realm of the African worldview, generally, and the Akan one, specifically.

The character of this Pentecostal spirituality played a crucial role in accelerating the pace of indigenous expressions of Christianity in Ghana. Pentecostalism championed certain key areas of Christian expression, which struck a chord with the frustrated masses of Ghanaians, who had grown wary of the cerebral spirituality of western missionary Christianity. These were traditional ways of worship, divine healing and deliverance, speaking in tongues, special emphasis on the baptism of the Holy Ghost, charismatic preaching, dreams and visions and all that characterises Pentecostal experience.

Pentecostal spirituality also helped to redefine a very important aspect of Christianity; this was the area of Christology. The Christ of Pentecost was in stark contrast to the Christ preached by the early missionaries. This Christ of ‘Pentecost’ healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, and gave food to the poor and needy. The Christ of ‘Pentecost’ was ‘at home’ within the African primal worldview and triumphed over all its spiritual entities. The crucis gloriae of western mission Christianity was exchanged for the Christus Victor of Pentecostal triumphalism.

The explosion of Pentecostalism upon the Ghanaian church scene, which gave rise to new Charismatic churches, also had an adverse impact on indigenous churches that were, by the 1980s, experiencing rapid decline.\(^8\) The harsh criticisms of the new Pentecostal churches, who castigated indigenous churches as syncretistic traditional worshippers and even devil worshippers, also forced leaders to change their approach, particularly on seeing the members exodus the churches for the new pasture of the young and upwardly mobile charismatic ministries. The ‘African culture’ that these churches championed in the 1950’s and 60’s was no longer so much an issue.\(^8\) Many indigenous
churches, therefore, metamorphosized into charismatic churches in order to survive. The notion of healing, already present within indigenous churches, was extended to health and prosperity in many cases, particularly among the younger AICs leaders, who sought to model themselves on charismatic leaders, such as Duncan-Williams and Mensah Otabil. The prosperity Christology, espoused by the plethora of Charismatic ministries, also found its way into indigenous churches. This Christology extended beyond the cosmic powers of Christ to bring healing and wholeness and added a social and financial element of health and wealth that could also be accessed through the domain of spiritual breakthroughs. Indigenous church leaders have sought to adjust their approach to the changing religious climate. However, their inability to allow changes to permeate their structures and pastoral approach in line with the educated and enterprising youth, who have not been accommodated by their power structures could mean, in Glifford’s view, that as a movement, AICs will continue to decline.

**Whither AICs in Ghana?**

African indigenous churches in Ghana today are undergoing a serious identity challenge or even crisis. The questions that confront them are, will they maintain their brand of Christianity, which, unashamedly, draws upon African traditional religiosity or are they to tone down the overt ‘Africanness’ of their religious practice and seek to blend into the current wave of African Charismatics? What is for sure is, if they continue to rest upon past laurel, they will continue to decline. One of the ways in which AICs have sought to face the challenge to stay strong is through ecumenical relations as they have done in the past. In Ghana, there are a number of ecumenical councils that, though have existed for a number of years, are finding a new sense of unity and purpose. The councils in Ghana include: Council for African Indigenous Churches (CAIC), Council of Independent Churches (CIC), Organisation of African Initiated Churches (OAIC) and Pentecostal Ministers’ Association (PMA). These councils are seeking, once again, to rally together African indigenous churches and pastors in order to represent their interest. They also exist in order to provide a voice against the pessimistic opinions and attitudes of older western
mission type churches, as well as the new charismatic churches, many of which are nothing more than a syncretistic aberration of Christianity. The last convocation of African indigenous churches in Ghana, which brought together all of the above councils and other AIC organisations, that took place between 14th and 16th October 2004, sponsored by the Church Mission Society in the UK, is a good example of this renewed co-operation.

So what of the future for AICs in Ghana? Well, I believe the future stands or falls on leadership – the kind of leadership that can bridge the gap between the traditional and the contemporary, between the ancient and the modern and between the global and the local. Leadership that can clarify the place and the theology of indigenous churches to an illiterate senior as well as the educated university student. Leadership that will assimilate vibrant educated young men and women into the upper echelons of its ranks, as well as attract people from the higher income brackets.

African indigenous churches must seek, once again, to bridge the gap that exists for many Africans, who find themselves living between two spheres. Firstly, there is the western influence, and secondly, there is the influence of his or her own traditional culture and upbringing that give many African the sense that, they have a unique culture of their own which gives them an identity as Africans. This dichotomy is further widening, because of the pace of the technological advancement in the western world. The challenge, therefore, for AICs is to provide a distinctly African Christianity for modern Africa that is not retrospective, but represents the future of Christianity in Africa. That is, a future that goes beyond the old dichotomies of the colonial and the post colonial, the traditional and the contemporary, embracing the best of the old and the new. A future that also can see beyond the current popularity of western-style charismatism and prosperity Christianity beamed in through satellite television and global radio stations, to the day when young Africans will ask once again, what is an ‘African Christian’ in the midst of global Christianity.

What J.C. Thomas said, however, during the post-colonial discussions on Africanising Christianity is still true for AICs:
This process of Africanising Christianity can only be done, however, if both traditional religion and the doctrine of the Christian churches are examined carefully and systematically and the areas of agreement and conflict are carefully defined and demarcated.95

In short, African indigenous churches will have to rediscover their prophetic calling which, in the past, was not intimidated to espouse an African religiosity in the face of powerful religious institutions, which frowned upon their audacity to be overtly African and Christian at the same time. A prophetic calling that dares to anticipate the future and step out towards it by faith. This time, however, it will not be a post-independence Africanisation of the faith, but a further refinement of what it means to be an African indigenous Christian in a context of a global world of change in which no one escapes.

References

4 Sec Daneel’s assessment of the literature in *Quest for Belonging* pp. 68-101.
6 Daneel. Quest, p. 68.
9 There were some attempts on the part of the missionaries to grapple with Ghanaian culture in order to appropriate missions more effectively. One such publication was John Beecham, *Ashantee and the Gold Coast: A Sketch of the History, Social State and Superstition of those Countries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1841).


Ibid. p. 493.

The issue of the first established African church in Ghana is a matter of dispute. The Twelve Apostles’ Church, which was started by William Wade Harris, lays claim to this status. See Opoku, ‘A Brief History of the Independent Church Movement in Ghana,’ in *The Rise of the Independent Churches in Ghana*, p. 17.


Ibid.


Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 62.

See Daneel, *Quest*, pp. 84-85.

Barrett, *Schism*, p. 117.


The Wesleyans, for example, besides introducing a printing workshop as part of their educational programme, were responsible for some of the earliest Gold Coast newspapers. *The Christian Messenger*
and Examiner was produced in Cape Coast by the Rev. T. Freeman and the Rev. H. Wharton as early as 1859; this was succeeded by The Christian Reporter. See Kimble, A Political History, p. 162.


36 Gold Coast Aborigine, 26 Nov. 1898.


39 These sanctions included chaining, mutilation and enslavement of prisoners.

40 Debrunner, A History, p. 141.

41 The most famous of these conflicts was the one over Nananom or Brafo, the tutelary spirit of the Fanti, established at Mankessim, spiritual capital of that nation. Methodist Christians made farms in the sacred grove of Nananom and approached it with a levity and irreverence. This was highly disrespectful and displeasing to those who considered him a distinguished ancestor. The conflict that ensued led to the elders of the village being publicly whipped in the market place at Cape Coast amidst the universal applause of the people. See B. Cruikshank. 18 Year of the Gold Coast of Africa, (vol. 2) cited in Debrunner, History of Christianity, p. 141.

42 For a detailed discussion on the impact of Christianity upon traditional religion see, Kimble, A Political History, pp. 151-161.


The most popular view in regard to the rise of the anti-witchcraft cults was that, they were a new creation that arose out of social uncertainties and disorientation. Some maintain that they were a resurgence of a precolonial cult. See McCaskie, ‘Anti-Witchcraft Cults in Asante: An Essay in Social History of an African People,’ History in Africa 8 (1981), pp. 125-154.


Ibid. p. 55.


See David Burnett. ‘Charisma and Community,’ pp. 190-195, for more information on the altitude of the MOCC to Kwarne Nkrumah.

This title was first used of Osci Tutu I (1697-1731) of Asante when be delivered the Ashantis from the domination of Denkyira.


For more on Nkrumah and religion, see S. Pobee, Kwame Nkrumah, pp. 39- 46.

Barrett, Schism, p. 19.

See Blyden, Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race, p. 15.


Ibid.

Haliburton, Prophet Harris, p. 1.

Brother of Dr. Mark Christian Hayford, the founder of the National Baptist Society mentioned above.

Haliburton, The Prophet Harris, p. 78.

I am using this phrase to mean the deepest and most fundamental fears of the African personality to which salvation in Jesus Christ can be most meaningful. Jean-Marc Éla in his book, My Faith as an African, pp. 33-54, explores this whole issue of translating the Christian message into the language and symbols of African culture.

Juju is a West African term for witchcraft.


Ibid. p. xiv.

David Burnett, “Charisma and Community” p. 130.


The MDCC – who state in clause 18 of their declaration of faith: – ‘We believe that (as an African Church), polygamy is not a moral sin’ particularly came under ‘fire’ for this practice. See Tumer, *African Independent Churches*, pp. 58-60, for a discussion of their position on polygamy.

The possible motives behind the indigenous churches’ desire to establish their own schools is discussed by Turner, ibid., pp. 324-326.


Ibid.


For some historical details of the ecumenical progress of the indigenous church movement across the continent, see Daneel, *Quest*, pp. 109-113.


Weaver, *Kuku*, p. 52.

Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, p. 54.


J. Asamoah-Gyadu argues that, the drift of members into charismatic ministries was not the only reason for the decline of the indigenous churches, which he maintained attracted different clientele. See ‘Renewal Within ‘African Christianity,’ pp. 90-124.


Ibid.


This is by far the largest association on the continent with about 16,000 churches affiliated.