
Prophetism and Prosperity Teaching

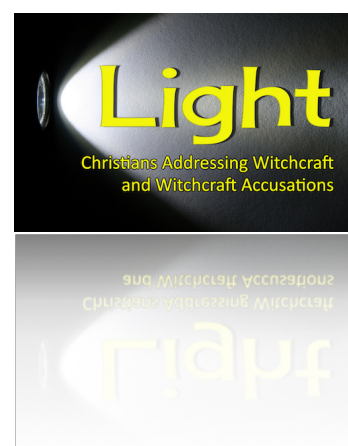
— and their role in African Christianity

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Introduction

Before Christianity was established in West Africa, African Traditional Religion was well instituted. A prominent feature of African Traditional Religion has been 'prophetism'. Prophetism can be described as special powers accredited to persons of strong personalities, who are thought to be able to heal, expel evil spirits, reveal hidden things, predict the future, curse and bless.¹ Persons who were accredited with such powers were often called names such as traditional priests, diviners or sorcerers. Prophetism is different from the gift of prophecy, which is mainly speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to encourage, comfort and exhort people (1 Corinthians 14:3). In African Traditional Religion, people who had various problems often consulted these spiritually thought personalities for assistance.

In the attempt to evangelise and disciple Africa, the missionaries tried to exterminate what was considered 'pagan practices'. However, various aspect of traditional religion, including spirit possession, days of consultation, and ways of exorcisms continue to resurface into Christianity. One aspect which happens to be predominant, prophetism, has been recurrent in the various types of Christian traditions in Africa.

This paper attempts to show how prophetism within the African Traditional Religions has metamorphosed into contemporary prophetic movement and prosperity preaching in Africa. I begin by throwing light on how prophetism was prominent in African Traditional Religion, and continue with how it has been treated within the various Christian traditions, before drawing conclusion.

Prophetism within African Traditional Religions

Adherents of African Traditional Religions claim to worship God, the Supreme Being, through gods or deities. These deities are often associated with objects which they see within their environs. The Nigerian Church historian Ugbo Kalu rightly observes of the Igbo of Nigeria that "since a living religion is likely to relate intimately to the basis of livelihood within a community,

¹ Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, London: SCM Publishers, 1962, p.6-7.

the relationship between religious expression and ecology is crucial".² In other words, this is to convey the idea that the objects people witness within their surroundings, such as the mountains and stones often become the symbols of the gods which they claim to worship. The gods are not considered to be in these objects or places, such as the stones, the rivers or the sea, but that as deities, they may be consulted or worshipped at such places. It often becomes difficult, however, to determine whether the spirits of the objects are being worshipped or whether some external deities that have been associated with the objects are being worshipped.

The central activity of the worship of the gods is a day for consultation. This is the day when the 'priest', who is the hub of the worship of the gods, performs his activities. In some places in Southern Africa, a diviner becomes the centre of affairs, and not a priest.

In the case of the priest, on the day of consultation, the deity takes possession of his or her personality and mind, thus making him or her its medium and spokesperson. The priest then receives messages from the deity. These messages are often constructed in allusive expressions and sounds, which are unintelligible to clients. The priest, therefore, relays them to the interpreter who deciphers them to the clients. By this act, the deity is mystified and clients are inclined to believe in its supernatural ability.

The priest gives information with respect to the cause, the type, and the treatment of a disease or causes of mishaps, such as barrenness, accident, sudden deaths, or origin of conflicts in a marriage. The priest may also give signals or warning of approaching misfortune, and how to avoid it.³ This process of consulting and receiving answers from the priest or a diviner is what I termed as divinatory-consultation. It can be postulated that divinatory-consultation underpins most of the religious activities that take place in Africa.

the Resurfacing of Prophetism within Christian Church Traditions

The early missionaries tried to downplay the ministries of healing, exorcism and prophecies in Christianity, yet some indigenous prophetic figures continued to emerge within the existing churches from time to time. Those 'prophets' sought to co-operate with the churches, though they might either originate from or independently of the churches. Often they came from the lower strata of society with little or no formal education, whose experiences of the Christian faith might be different from the mainline churches.⁴ Although these 'prophets' sought to cooperate with the existing churches, their exhibition of some of the features of the African Traditional Religion, especially prophetism, made it difficult for the churches to accept them.

² Kalu, *The Embattled God: Christianisation of Igboland, 1841-1991*, Lagos: Minaj Publications, 1996, p.30.

³ Akesson, "The Secret of Akom I", in *African Affairs* 49 (196), 1950, p.237-246; Field, *Search for security: An ethno-psychiatric study of rural Ghana*, London: Faber & Faber, 1969, p.3-13; Abbink, "Reading the Entrails: An analysis of an African Divination Discourse", in *Man* 28 (4), 1993, p.705-726.

⁴ Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A study on the belief in the destructive witches and its effects on the Akan tribes*, Accra: Presbyterian Book Depot Ltd, 1961, p.144.

It is against this backdrop that the African Initiated Churches (AICs) emerged. These churches are called differently in different countries and circles. These include African Indigenous Churches, African Independent Churches, or African Initiated Churches. I prefer using African Initiated Churches since, for me, it connotes a broader understanding.

Prophetism was central to the ministries of these churches. Almost all of them had healing camps (also called gardens or centres). A missiologist who grew up in Zimbabwe, Professor M. L. Daneel's reports about these churches, also called Zionist and Apostolic churches among the Southern Shona people of Zimbabwe, shows that special days, usually Fridays were set aside for this ritual.⁵

For Professor C. G. Baëta, a Ghanaian theologian, "the 'spiritual churches' represent a turning away from these traditional resources of supernatural succour in order that help may be sought, for the same purposes, from the God proclaimed in the Christian evangel".⁶ However, the notion of 'turning away' is questionable. Questionable in the sense that just as some of the priests of the traditional shrines were taken to court and dealt with, on the grounds of accusing people indecently for their dealing with witchcraft issues, so were some of pastors of these churches taken to court on similar abuses.⁷

When prophetism seemed to dwindle within the AICs, Classical Pentecostalism appeared. It emphasised the baptism of the Holy Spirit that empowers the individual to serve God. For the Classical Pentecostals, power was associated with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. One could hear from God and no evil could befall the individual. Professor K. Emmanuel Larbi, a Ghanaian Pentecostal theologian, hits the crux of the matter when he states that "the key to the tapping of these unlimited abilities is the glossolalic experience, hence the stress on the need for everyone to experience this phenomenon".⁸ Once people experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit as initially evidenced by speaking in tongues, they were expected to witness Christ, with the ability to perform signs and wonders in Jesus' name, to authenticate the gospel message. This belief was strongly based on Mark 16:17-18, which reads, "And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (NIV) Thus, for the Classical Pentecostal, it was believed that witches, demons, and sorcerers could not hinder their progress in life. Rather they had the ability to cast evil spirits out.

⁵ Daneel, *Old and new Southern Shona Independent Churches volume 2: Church growth causative factors and recruitment techniques*, the Hague: Mouton & Co., 1974, p.201-14.

⁶ Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana*, p.135.

⁷ Breidenbach, "Maame Harris Grace Tani and Papa Kwesi Nackabah: Independent Church leaders in the Gold Coast, 1914-1958", in *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 12 (4), 1979 p.600-601; Beckman, *Eden Revival: Spiritual Churches in Ghana*, London: Concordia Publishing House, 1975, p.55.

⁸ Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, Accra: Centre for Pentecostal & Charismatic Studies, 2001, p.277.

Indigenous Christianity

Enhanced by Americanism

Three trends developed within West African Christianity during this period. The first of these are the books and cassettes from Western preachers, especially such American preachers as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Reinhard Bonke and later on Benny Hinn, which were sought to enhance the preaching of many ministers. Many sermons followed materials drawn from these ministers, especially that of the “seed faith principle”, which is centred on prosperity, set by Oral Roberts, and faith healing by Hagin.⁹ This practice was very common in the 1970s and the early 1980s.

Since the teaching of prosperity assents with African traditional concept of prosperity and well-being, a ministry, often called “Prosperity Gospel,” developed out of this. The Prosperity Gospel assumption is “God’s guarantee of material wealth to all Christians, and all Christians have the right to good health”.¹⁰ It is claimed that all Christian can take possession of these through the exercise of faith and positive confession. Many ministers followed this teaching.

The Second trend is the special role of Bishop Benson Andrew Idahosa (1938–1998) of Nigeria. Possibly, he is the most significant person who made a turning point in the history of Nigerian and Ghanaian Pentecostalism; he also influenced other African countries. Idahosa studied at the Christ for All Nations, established the Church of God mission international, in Benin City, Nigeria. He also established the Church of God Mission International Bible School, where he offered scholarship to many people who wanted to study. Idahosa was invited by many Pentecostals and Charismatics across the globe to speak and conduct healing services for them. The Oral Roberts University offered him and his wife honorary doctorate degrees. Idahosa had a television and radio regular programme, “Redemption Hour”, which featured in Nigeria and Ghana. Many young ministers in Nigeria and Ghana came out of his ministry. When he became an archbishop, he consecrated many Charismatic ministers as bishops. Idahola’s message was centred on faith and healing and was not termed as a prosperity gospel preacher as such. However, his ‘flashy’ life style, stirred the need for ministers of the gospel to be prosperous. He better serves as a precursor to the prosperity gospel preaching.

The third trend, which took place at the latter part of the 1980s, was the interest in books and cassettes (both video and audio) which were sought to increase people’s awareness of demons and how to exorcise them.¹¹

⁹ Hunt, “Winning ways: Globalisation and the impact of the Health and Wealth Gospels”, in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 (1), 2000 p.331–347; Jackson, “Prosperity Theology and Faith Movement”, in *Themelios* 15 (1), 1987, p.19–24; Anim, “Who wants to be a millionaire? An analysis of prosperity teaching in the Charismatic ministries (churches) in Ghana and its wider impact”, 2003.

¹⁰ Anim, “Who wants to be a millionaire?” p.66.

¹¹ Hagin, *Demons and how to deal with them*, Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Evangelistic Association, 1976; Cerullo, *The Miracle Book*, San Diego: Moris Cerullo World Evangelism, 1984; Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ: My true life story*, London: Concordia Press, 1973; Brown, *He came to set the Captives Free*, Springdale: Whitaker House, 1992; Brown, *Prepare for War*, Springdale: Whitaker House, 1987.

This trend led to a practice in West African Christianity, which I call “witchdemonology”. Witchdemonology is the synthesis of the practices and beliefs of African witchcraft and Western Christian concepts of demonology and exorcism. These beliefs include the credence of the reality of witchcraft, demons and gods, the belief in territorial spirit and mapping them out; it includes the belief in ancestral curses, identification of demonic presence and curses in both Christians and non-Christians. In order for people to be set free and prosper in life, special session of prayer called deliverance, either through mass or personal session, needs to be conducted for them.¹² This has given prominence to the new set of prophetism.

the Rise of New Prophets

There has been a shift from too much emphasis on deliverance to prophetism or what Anim, identifies as “Super-Charismatic[ism]”.¹³ The concentration here is for the minister to diagnose the problem of a client and inform same through the manifestation of spiritual gifts such as the word of knowledge or prophecy. The desires of many people are to prosper, have good health and be protected from evil forces. These Charismatic ministers attempt to speak to clients about their future, reveal the causes of their problems, interpret dreams, show ways of dealing with difficult issues and then pronounce blessing of prosperity and brighter future on them.

The ministry is not limited to church services only but also mediated through revivals, crusades, vigils, which is often called ‘all night prayer services’, and the use of media.¹⁴ In some cases, the ministers offer prophetic insight to people’s problems on the electronic media.

However, the *modus operandi* of the prophetic ministers has attracted criticisms from many Christians (Pentecostals / Charismatics / Protestants) and the public. Anim records that there have been allegations of immorality among these ministers and that the means by which they extract money from people for special blessing and anointing have been condemned. He shows how in some cases ladies who cooked for some of these prophets claimed they had been sleeping with them during the programmes, and again how some of the pastors had refused to take honorariums given to them on the ground that they were not enough. In some cases, pieces of cut clothes, referred to as the mantle, are sold to people with the hope that wearing them will ensure prosperity.¹⁵ Sometimes people are asked to buy anointed oil and pour it upon bags of rice for that rice to keep on increasing.

This feature of spirituality, with a gimmick of ‘Pentecostal rituals’ has been on the ascendancy in African Pentecostalism; thus African Christianity is back to prophetism; a phenomenon which is prominent in African Traditional Religion.

¹² Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana*, Blandford: Deo Publishing, 2012, p.171–230.

¹³ Anim, “Who wants to be a millionaire?” p.122.

¹⁴ Hackett, “Charismatic / Pentecostal appropriation of media technologies in Nigeria and Ghana”, in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28 (3), 1998, p.259–227.

¹⁵ Anim, “Who wants to be a millionaire?” p.124.

Conclusion

The question that arises is, “Was prophetism out of Christianity in Africa?” The presentation thus far shows that it has never been out of African Christianity. Although the early missionaries tried to stamp it out, it bounced back through the ministries of the ‘African prophets’. It was the centre of attraction in the ministries of the African Initiated Churches and still the major attraction in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Yet, this experience has always been shifted to the periphery, to the advantage of charlatans who use it for their personal gains. It is on this strength that I suggest that biblical concept of ‘prophetism’ be reconsidered in mainstream Christianity. This may ensure proper guidelines and virtues to control it.

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