

# African Body Adorned in Christian Garb: A Study of the Prayers of Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria

by

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## Abstract

The Cherubim and Seraphim church is an African independent church that was founded in Yorubaland (Nigeria) in 1928. This paper examines the prayers of Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria, with the aim of determining the degree of influence of Yoruba culture and religious tradition on them. It was discovered that the world affirming world-view of Yoruba people conditioned and moved the imports of these prayers. The cognitive and normative content of Yoruba culture remains intact and active in the adherents of this sect as they elaborately display them in their prayer life. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church is one of the fora sought by Christianity to make a home for herself in Africa. The Church is well attuned to Yoruba Culture, hence her popularity and growth.

**Keywords:** African body, Christian garb, cherubim and seraphim, prayers.

*The Gospel message must remain the focal point of every missionary activity and must be presented in its full splendour and not weakened in any way but rather adorned, enriched and made more intelligible and attractive by the use of whatever is good, just and beautiful that is found in the cultural heritage of a people. - Ezeanya, S.K: 1969*

## Introduction

Professor Wall (1982) has excellently demonstrated the astonishing powers of cultural environments on the gospel, in its itinerant journeys around the globe, so much so that the same Christianity practiced in the different cultural climates are distinctly marked in time and space. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church movement in Nigeria was founded by Moses Orimolade Tunolase in 1925. The principal object of this paper is to unravel the Yoruba cultural elements in the prayers of Cherubim and Seraphim and to state emphatically that in seeking a home for Christianity in Africa, only those elements in African culture with biblical support should find endorsement. Any practice or belief in C&S that is hostile to scriptures should be outrightly rejected, and must never be sanctioned in the guise of adaptation or inculturation theology. Cherubim and Seraphim prayers are x-rayed in this paper, both the ones acceptable and the ones too culturally accented to be called Christian prayers.

The writer has employed anthropological method to gather data through interviews and participatory method in the service of C and S Church across Bauchi, Plateau, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos and Ondo States of Nigeria for more than ten years. Phenomenological method is then employed to systematize and give interpretative depth to our findings.

## Cultural and Conceptual Background

Religion has been defined as the "recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship (Little, 1970). "Submission to God" is a generic form of religion because there is no connection to a geographical location, tribe [i.e., ethnic group] or a person" (Ibn-Stanford, 2017). Religion is therefore a relationship between the transcendent and humanity and is perceived as an awesome but fascinating mystery, to which man is "owes total submission and an absolute obedience" (Otto, 1959). Religion therefore asserts "Your will be done" to the ultimate.

Magic on the other hand is:

*a supernaturalistic behaviour involving the control of supernatural forces by human beings through acts and formulas that reach natural goals if properly followed. (Metuh, 1987)*

Magic is a technique by which humanity recognizing the supernatural powers that pervade the universe, utilizes and controls these powers for their ends, whether for good or for bad (Dopamu, 1977). Magic asserts "my will be done". According to Frazer (1913), magic acts by the principles of "like produces like", or "an effect resembles its cause".

It is difficult to clearly delineate magic and religion. Humanity may seek not to submit and obey the transcendent but to dominate and control it. This is magic in its various forms. Religion in life situations may be found to fall anywhere in a continuum which runs from pure religion to pure magic with the frontiers of both shading into each other (Metuh, 1992).

While religion appeals to the ultimate to satisfy humanity's needs, magic exploits the hidden elemental forces in nature to achieve the goals. Awolalu says Religion is exoteric, that is, it is open to all: but magic is esoteric, that is, closed to the novice. So much for all these differences. But religion and magic, at least, in African understanding are so interlocked that one fails to know when one passes from one realm to another. Mbiti (1969) enthuses:

*Magic is part of the religious background and it is not easy to separate the two. Magic belongs to the religious mentality of African peoples.*

Idowu is also of the same opinion when he says magic and religion have a common origin (Idowu, 1973). To the African man or woman, religion and magic bear similar relics. To a large extent, their magical outlook which is in turn responsible for traditional religious affirmation shapens and reshapens their entire world outlook. Magic and religion are the necessary devices to confront and to master the complications of life. The Yoruba is a practical person who detests an indolent God. Their God and religion exist for their welfare. No honoured place is allotted to alien concepts like salvation, eschatology or eternal bliss. The paradise is here and now. Therefore, the Yoruba largely subject magic and religion to pragmatic and utilitarian" uses (Awolalu, 1979). This traditional philosophy of Yoruba religion, knowing, explaining, and controlling the future has merely been transplanted to Christianity. It is no wonder, therefore, that this traditional, sympathetic magical complexion is so profusely employed in contemporary Christian prayers, generally in Africa, and particularly in Yorubaland. This element is prominently featured in all Christian denominations, but much more so in independent movements.

Incantation or spell is the vocalized dimension, verbal art, and the voice of magic. On the other hand, prayer is the voice of religion. In this paper we shall expose African Christian prayers and how they have been influenced by the sympathetic complexion of African Traditional religion. But first what is prayer?

Heiler (1958) the author of the great classic on prayer, defines prayer "as a living communion" of the religious with God, a communion which reflects the forms of the social relations of humanity". Thus, prayer is the outpouring of one's mind and soul to God, 'a going out of one's self a pilgrimage of 'the spirit in the presence of God".

This distinguishes prayers from magic formula or incantation which has been called "oral talisman" - an attempt to conjure or compel the divine by threats to yield to humanity's wishes (Encyclopedia, 2010). Prayer is a universal religious phenomenon because it stems from natural human disposition to give verbal expression on thought and emotion (Bandon, 1970).

No doubt Bandon is right in observing that prayer is a universal religious phenomenon. However, the world-affirming character of African primal religion has enveloped African Christian prayers in sympathetic colouration. The Yoruba is practical. They expect their god/gods to answer their prayers. A god that fails to heed the prayers of his/her devotees is discarded for another. Thus, Omoyajowo (1982) observes the same thing among the African Christians of independent movements;

*They hardly ever give up any case as hopeless or impossible, not even if it is obviously glaring, the petitioners seems to be forcing God to grant their request.*

This is a fallout of traditional religion. Mbiti (1969) says:

*To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life. No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. There is neither paradise to be hoped for, nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man does not long for spiritual redemption or for closer contact with God. This is an important element in traditional religions, and one which helps us to understand the concentration of African religiosity on earthly matters with man at the centre of this religiosity.*

According to Awolalu (1970),

*the world, according to the Yoruba, is the best place in which to live. Hence, it has been said that the Yoruba attitude is world affirming, not renouncing.*

Elsewhere he elaborated more:

*What is uppermost in the mind of a Yoruba man is to have life-that is, to have peace, happiness, good health, prosperity and longevity and he is ready to utilize whatever means by which such good things are available (Awolalu, 1979).*

This traditional philosophy, denied or not, continued to persist in Christianity and Islam. In addition to the stress on material things, the traditional imageries and symbols are equally creatively employed by Yoruba Christians to make their prayers more meaningful, more focused and more realistic. What again should be added is that Frazer's law of homoeopathy is luxuriantly demonstrated in all of these sympathetic Christian prayers.

## **Yoruba Traditional Prayer**

Generally, Yoruba and other African people are notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1969). This notoriety is often expressed profusely in traditional life, for instance, in the rite of passage, naming, initiation, marriage, funeral ceremonies, etc.

Masquerade (egungun) is generally considered the reincarnated spirit of the ancestors among the Yoruba. During the *egungun* festival, it is therefore traditionally expected that the ancestral spirit should pray and bless the people (Barto, 1994). An example of such a traditional Yoruba prayer is cited by Abraham (1962) in his *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*:

*Ile ko ni le o  
Onon ko ni no o  
Eyii to nro o a fun  
Ajayi, iku ko ni file re se onon  
Arun ko ni gbe o de,  
eni tori re se majele, yi ofije  
adamonlapa ko ni da o lapa:  
Eleegbe-orun ko ni gbe o lomo lo  
O ko ni ri ibi 'wa gbaje:  
Bii eron!  
Oju ko nifomon a lori:  
alogbo, aloto ni Ologboo n laso!  
alogbo, aloto ni iwoyi o lo oriire!*

Translation:

You will not be ejected from your home  
nothing will hinder your freedom of movement!  
Whatever your plans, they will succeed  
Ajayi, death will not pass through your house!  
disease will not lay you low!  
the one who tries to poison you,  
will poison himself!  
the bogeyman will not break your arm:  
the Angel of Death will not wrest  
away your child from you!  
you will never suffer the humiliation  
of being told "come and eat food!"  
like a domestic animal;  
Your eye will not suffer blindness  
no child of yours will die and vanish  
from your sight! Just as cat's fur lasts  
till old age and life reaches its span, so  
shall you enjoy luck till you age and pass away.

## **Cherubim and Seraphim Prayer**

Against the cultural background which sprang up in C & S Church, it is naturally not a wonder that adherents of the church are prayer warriors, fiercely praying every need to reality. An appraisal of their sympathetic prayers manifests a number of features. The Yoruba love praises and eulogies, from Olodumare, the Supreme God, to different divinities, to kings and Chiefs, different families, ordinary people, children and even animals (Beier, 1959) People praise copiously. They are prodigious in the use of nicknames and praise names.

Eulogies and cultural accolades serve the purpose of affirming esteem, honour and exaltation, particularly from the inferior to the superior. Thus, this love for paying homages through praise is well demonstrated in prayers in praise, to God and Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, from these names and attributes bestowed on God, it is observed that certain divinities' attributes in Yoruba religion are merely transferred to God and Jesus Christ. For example (Odeyemi, 1998), it is known that part of attributes of ifa is *Okitibiri a pa ojo iku da*, an attribute the Christians now ascribe to Olodumare.

## A Typical Prayer

*Ni oruko Jesu, Ni oruko Jesu, Ni agbara eje Jesu, Olorun baba, Olorun omo, Olorun emi mimo, **Olorun** Olodumare, atererekari-aye, eleni ateka, Oba **alewilese**, olofin **Oyigiyigi**, ota aiku, Okitibiri a pa ojo iku da. A dupe lowo yin fun ola at ola ti e fun wa, fun ife yin, fun abo yin gidigidi, e gba ope wa.*

## Translation

*In Jesus name In Jesus name In the power in the blood of Jesus. God the Father, the Son, and the Holyghost, the Almighty God, the ominipresent, He who spreads His mat universally. He who does what He says, the immovable, the undying rock, the massively built, who changes the day of death. We give you all praises, for all the honour and wealth bestowed on us, for your love, for your protection, father, open opportunities for us.*

## Magical Complexion

Nos	Original Version	English Meaning	C&S Version
1	Bi pepeye bajokuta omi lofi nsu	If a duck swallows stone it excretes water.	Every evil plan of the enemy over my life will be futile.
2	Sa woro ilu kii ni isimi	The chains around a drum do not have rest.	My enemies will not experience peace.
3	Iji kii ja ko do omi inu agbon nu	A wind does not blow off the water inside the coconut fruit.	My life will be a mystery to my enemy.
4	A ki ri ipa ida lori omi	There is no sign of the strike of a sword on water.	Lord Jesus whatsoever weapons fashioned against me must not have a destructive effect upon my life.
5	Agbara ki fo koto	The flood does not leap over a gutter.	My helper must not pass me by in Jesus name.

Beside all these, and much more pertinent to this paper is the homoeopathic principle which runs all through the prayers such as, for instance "*omi okun ki simi ota mi ki yo simi*". "The ocean is never still, my enemies shall never be at peace". This and more reveals the extent of the hold of Yoruba religious philosophy on Christianity and Christian prayers.

## Colourful Imageries

Another remarkable feature, worth nothing, is the graphic imageries and picturesque symbols employed which make these prayers very vivid, colourful and sufficiently expressive to the supplicants--for example *"Ti arigisegi be segi tan, ori ara e, ni o fi gbe"*. When arigisegi (twigs gathering insect) gathers its twigs, it carries it by its self". The ultimate object of this prayer is that the enemy will destroy himself/herself by his own evil machinations.

Finally the love of Yoruba for oratory excellence is elaborately demonstrated in the Christian prayers. Oratory prowess is cultivated as an art, even in prayer, and cherished as an index of acquaintance with traditional knowledge and ancestral wisdom. Without such, "the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without a soul". The Yoruba dexterously exhibit this love of words in their prayers such as, for example, *"ise wa ko ni dise"* "our work will not be a rigour"; here there is a pun on *ise* "Eyin omo Olorun, aran ni e e ma da e ko ni daran. You will buy velvet cloth (aran) and not commit crime (daran). There is a play on the word *aran*.

*"Dedede ni ara nro rorowo"*. Rorowo is always at ease. The alliteration in the word de-de-de is very obvious here. We can only conclude that the Christian Yoruba merely dip his hand into his cultural quivers, bringing out creative arrows, perfectly shot, bringing forth inestimable spiritual dividends, in his attempt to speak to God as an African, in an African way.

## The Employment of Psalms Magically

Right from the dawn of civilization, humanity was keenly aware of their incompetence to cope with the challenges of life. In Africa, a person therefore seeks other forces more powerful than he/she is to subdue these challenges. He/she appropriates forces in herbs, exploits certain rites and teases the "occult" power in spoken words in form of incantations.

The Christian adherents in C & S simply embrace Christian prayers in the light of prayers as understood in African religion, employing materials, rites and spells. Praying is made more effective and materials are practically employed. Thus in C & S, there is extensive use of materials like candle, palm fronds, water, incense white garment, sword, etc. But the C & S Christians besides all these are obsessed with the use of psalms for prayers (Adegbola, 1969).

*Western thought revels in abstract ideas: the African, on the other hand, prefers to grapple with reality, through word-pictures, verbal imageries and concrete ideas.*



These are instances;

1. Looking For Good Work (Psalm 13, 25)

Uses:-Get well water which can be enough to bath and drink for three (3) days. Read these Psalm into the Water three (3) times, with fasting and Prayer 6am-6pm daily. Use it to bath and drink.

Prayer:-O Lord, order my foot step to the Journey of my success this year, in the name of Jesus.

2. For Pregnant Woman (Psalm 16, 91, 121)

Uses:-Get one bucket of well water which can be enough to bath, one original goya oil (bottle), read these Psalms into the water once, take your bath with the water, and rub your narvel with the goya oil every morning and drink a little out of the oil; do this all the time before you deliver your baby.

Prayer:-O Lord, protect me, and let me deliver safely in the name of Jesus.

3. To Attack the Attacker (Psalm 35, 109)

Uses:-Any time that you want to use these Psalms always get a bucket of water inside your room before you sleep. Read these Psalms into the water while naked, with powerful prayer by 12am dot in the night. Use the water for your bath in the morning.

Prayer: Every attack of the enemies that want to come my way, I cancel your power in the name of Jesus (Adesanya, 2016)

## Conclusion

In trying to make a home for Christianity in Africa, in an effort to make Christianity "wear an African face" some scholars have labeled C & S prayer as syncretism, schisms, separatist sects, prophet movements or independent churches. Some went beyond nomenclatures to pass value judgements on authenticity of C & S beliefs. The cognitive and normative world view of African Religion and culture which gear the total outlook of the people towards predicting, explaining and even bringing the future under control is primarily responsible for the wholesale magical complexion in the practices and prayers of C & S. Many scholars had pungently criticized this in all African independent churches.

Sundkler (1967) describes some features of Yoruba religion in Christianity as "the backdoor which the African past enters the Church to paganise it". December (1973) sees the same features as

*sympathising the issue, protecting a magical attitude, and only patching up individual for a time without getting to the roots of the problem.*

Mbiti (1969) on his own avers that this process of acculturation, of partial giving and partial receiving, partial withholding and partial rejection, has led to what he calls "unofficial baptizing" of African cultural traditions into the Christian way of life. Cross(1978), on his own sees these features as "pagan survivals" in grassroots Christianity.

Pannikar (1979) once made a classic statement when he said "when a religion is imported to a culture, for that religion to survive, it must adapt". Christianity is not only adapting to Yoruba culture, the presence of traditional religion within Christianity is widely felt throughout Black Africa (Walingo, 1948). This is inevitable as Kibicho (1970) asserts, "Christianity needs to be well rooted in the African soil of African Traditional religion.

For Yoruba to be wholly involved, emotionally and spiritually in Christian fellowship, he/she has to fall back on the spiritual ingredients in his/her cultural religion. Christian prayers to him/her can only be meaningful in the light of his/her understanding of traditional prayers, and by innovative employment of them. Horton (1974) posits that;

*Where people confront new and puzzling situations, they tend to adapt to them as far as possible in terms of their existing ideas and attitudes, even though they may have to twist and stretch these considerably in the process. Another is that when people assimilate new ideas, they do so because they make sense to them in terms of the ideas they already hold.*

In praying to God using all cultural ethos and pathos known to them, the Yoruba Christians have succeeded in making Christianity their own religion, "not a mere veneer over traditionalism" as Bitek (1970) will say. God has been answering the prayers. The astronomical growth in the rate of conversion to C & S church in Yorubaland and beyond corroborates this affirmation.

The Yoruba Christians have simply utilized, creatively and effectively, the lively symbols and imageries in cultural expression, yorubanising Christianity and removing its alien, hellenic, foreign apparels: at the same time bringing out the splendour of Christian prayers.

However, to protect the purity of the gospel from being defiled, only the scripturally supported values in African culture and Religion should be allowed to subsist in C & S. Any practice or belief not in consonance with the bible in the church should be severed off to maintain eternal relevance of the church (Matthew 22:12-13), Christian gospel should liberate the paganistic aspects of African culture. African culture and Religion should in turn never turn the gospel to a prisoner.

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