
Independent African Churches— Are They Genuinely Christian?

by J. J. Nortey

On Saturday, July 16, 1988, in the company of a Seventh-day Adventist minister, I attend a church service at Accra New Town, the headquarters of the Kristo Asafo Mission Church. The founder of this independent African denomination grew up knowing Seventh-day Adventists, and the 350 congregations of his denomination worship on the seventh day of the week.

By 3:00 p.m. when we arrive, the church is already full. We are shown a porch where we must leave our shoes. The usher permits us to enter the sanctuary with our socks on. The service is held in a school classroom. The benches are so arranged as to provide a corridor in the middle of the hall so, from the pulpit, the preacher can walk up and down and get within arms' reach of every member.

On the farthest west is a table covered with white cloth. On each side of the table is a wooden lectern. On the west wall, behind the table, is a large wall clock, stuck between the carved wings of a golden eagle. On the table is a tall glass vase

with artificial flowers in it. On each side of the flower vase is a table clock. Pictures of Bible characters and scenes are painted in lovely, bright colors all over the four walls.

This morning, approximately 300 people are in attendance. The women and children are seated toward the pulpit, and the men are seated at the farthest east of the hall. The elders and two choirs sit apart from the worshippers. All the women have their heads covered with long, white shawls, which cover their shoulders also. At first sight, one has the feeling of seeing a Muslim assembly.

At 3:00 p.m., one choir after the other sings lively songs in Twi. (One of the choir directors is a member of the Accra Seventh-day Adventist Church. He teaches songs to the Kristo Asafo Mission at Accra New Town.) After each lyric or song, the congregation applauds. There is applause, also, after each interesting or touching statement of the preacher. It appears that the applause replaces the "amens" heard in many churches.

The preacher, evangelist Akwasi Gyebi, arrives at 3:30 p.m. He removes his shoes and socks before entering, then kneels by the pulpit. The choir heralds his rising from his knees with a touching Ghanaian lyric welcoming the Sabbath. In the spirit of Psalm 136, it reminds the congregation that the Lord, the Creator, Sustainer, and Provider, is the Lord of the Sabbath. Polite, graceful, holy dancing accompanies this Sabbath song. The evangelist congratulates the members of the choir and gives each of them a 100 cedi note,

J. J. Nortey is a citizen of Ghana, where he received certification as a chartered public accountant before becoming an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister and the president of the African-Indian Ocean Division. He presented the paper from which this essay is taken to a symposium for missiologists, August 1-5, 1988, at the European Institute of World Missions, Newbold College, England. The paper, in its original form, will be appearing in the published proceedings of the conference, available through Newbold College, Bracknell, Berks., England.

placing these on their foreheads. (The notes stick for a few moments because of the sweat on their foreheads.)

Tithes and offerings are actively promoted and collected. The evangelist then greets the congregation and calls for a repeat of the Sabbath song. After that, a second joyful lyric is sung in loud praise of the leader and founder. The preacher next leads the congregation in repeating the following statements responsively: “Service to Mankind—Service to God,” “The Voice of the People—The Voice of God.” This is followed by the singing of two more songs.

The preaching, in eloquent Twi, starts at 3:40, with the evangelist citing from memory 10 to 12 Bible passages, which he assigns to two young men who are, by then, standing by the two lecterns. Leaving his Bible on the table, the evangelist walks to the middle of the hall and begins preaching and teaching. There is no specific subject matter. From time to time he calls on one of the two readers to read one of the texts assigned earlier. He then comments on the text and applies it to life today. His explanations are very basic and straightforward. On Matthew 21:7, for instance, he spends some time explaining how Jesus could ride an ass and its colt.

When he is through at 5:45 p.m., he quickly steps out of the building, puts on his socks and shoes, and leaves. The service continues for another hour with the resident pastor summarizing the sermon, calling for more songs, collecting more offerings, and giving more admonitions. Everyone kneels for the final benediction.

Why Are There African Independent Churches?

Are African independent churches, such as the one described above, making a valid contribution to Christianity? Or are they merely competitors on the religious street, “me too” traders, loudly touting their wares?

A way to evaluate whether the African independent churches are valid is to examine African

independent churches that observe the seventh-day Sabbath. First, however, a few facts should be noted about African independent churches in general.

Many Africans are searching for a closeness to God. In the four independent churches I visited in Accra, an enquiry indicated that more than 30 percent of the “registered members” were actually people who held their current membership in a “mission church,” but who attended the African independent churches for greater fulfillment and healing. The history and form of the African independent churches in Ghana, popularly known as “spiritual churches,” strongly indicate that the explosion of the independent churches may also be due to a desire to “grow” spiritually.

The African independent churches are teaching Christianity, but, unlike the mission churches, they are teaching it with a “holistic” approach. The principles of the doctrine of Christ are not alien to the African thought pattern.

Attainment of Ghana’s political independence in 1957 seems to have accelerated the growth and spread of the African traditional churches. Once the missionaries left, the indigenous people were able to do what their consciences and feelings dictated without showing “disrespect” to their European “brothers and masters.” What colonialism had suppressed now came alive.

Between 1900 and 1957, growth of the Adventist church in Ghana, as a whole, was slow; but phenomenal growth has taken place in the past 30 years. In 1957, there were 30 recorded churches; by 1980 there were 570.

In the Ghanaian context, and especially within the people forming the Ashanti or Akan nation,¹ Saturday has been a traditionally accepted “holy” day, a day for worship of God.² This no doubt accounts, to a large extent, for the tremendous growth seen in the Seventh-day Adventist church around Ashanti.

One would have thought, therefore, that when Ghanaian Christians decided to go cultural, traditional, or independent, the first thing they would do would be to adopt the Saturday Sabbath, and to reject Sunday worship, since Sunday is the “white man’s day.”³ And this appears to be what actually occurred.

Sabbathkeeping indigenous churches in Ghana come in two kinds: Those related to the Seventh-day Adventist church, and those not related to it. Practically all of the Adventist-related churches have been founded by former Seventh-day Adventists who have left or broken away from the church for one reason or another.

These churches, established by former Seventh-day Adventists, have not shown any signs of progress or prosperity. Unlike other African independent churches, none of these churches has ever exceeded 500 members, or spread beyond a given district. This lack of growth has persisted despite the idea of liberalizing on church doctrines, such as polygamy.

By contrast, the two seventh-day Sabbath-keeping churches in Ghana *not* started by former Seventh-day Adventists, have flourished. The Memeneda Gyidifo (The Savior church) has nearly 7,000 members; and Kristo Asafo has 350 congregations throughout Ghana. Before concentrating on the Kristo Asafo church—our primary focus—the Memeneda Gyidifo church deserves brief mention.

Memeneda Gyidifo

The founder of Memeneda Gyidifo (now referred to as Memeneda Kokoo), was Samuel Brako, a Methodist living in the Tafo-Akim district of the eastern region of Ghana. Never a Seventh-day Adventist church member, there is no indication that he was ever taught by any Seventh-day Adventist. He claimed to have been taught about the Sabbath by the Lord himself, in a series of dreams in 1924. The dreams also pointed out errors of the Christian church, in respect to adultery and drunkenness. Brako died in 1946, and his nephew and heir succeeded him. The group had grown to nearly 7,000 members by 1960.

The main weekly service occurs on Saturday morning from 10:00 to 12:00, with daily prayers held at 4:30 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. During the Sabbath worship service, no foreign melodies are sung; only hearty singing of African lyrics, begun

by one person and joined in by the whole congregation, occurs. Prayers are usually punctuated by singing and “amens.” The sermon can be given by the preacher while he is seated. No footwear of any kind may be worn by anyone going into the church.

While women are allowed to be members and

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attend worship services, they cannot preach, teach, or give instructions during worship services, nor can they participate in church board or similar meetings.

No offerings are requested during church services. When funds are needed for a specific purpose, members provide for it.

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Other unique features of Memeneda Gyidifo include the fact that polygamy is regarded as normal; there is no restriction as to the number of wives a man may have. Members refuse the intake of any alcoholic substance. There is some healing done.

Men appointed to be pastors of Memeneda Gyidifo have their own means of stable livelihood. Most of these, including the Opanin or elder, have been cocoa farmers. Other pastors have been carpenters, masons, smiths, tailors, et cetera.

The growth rate of the Savior Church, between 1954 and 1960, of nearly 100 percent net increase, has not continued since the 1960s. The church has remained mainly rural, and the few congregations in the city of Accra and Kumasi have not shown any real increase in membership. Many of the children of members, after receiving formal education, have not remained in the Savior church.

Numerous members have converted to Sev-

enth-day Adventism. This is especially the case at and around Osiem, where Opanin Samuel Brako, founder of the Savior church, lived. Some of these converts have become Seventh-day Adventist ministers and have “worked” among their brothers and sisters in the Savior church.

The Sabbathkeeping Kristo Asafo Mission

The following information about the Kristo Asafo Mission comes from the personal contacts I have made, from experiences of friends who know members of the mission, and from direct interviews conducted at my request. I have had the opportunity of meeting the “apostle,” the founder and leader of the Mission, Opanin Samuel Kwadjo Safo, on two occasions; I have also met his second-in-command, and some of the pastors. I attended a church service at the headquarters of the mission at Accra New Town and talked with several members. The dedicated leaders of Kristo Asafo Mission of Ghana (or Kristo Asafo, as it is commonly called),

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informed me that they wanted the name of their denomination to emphasize that Christ is, and should be, the head, visible and invisible, of each church.

Accra New Town, where the church was founded, is the headquarters of Kristo Asafo. But the church has not remained confined to one area; it has spread throughout other parts of Accra, and also to other parts of the country.

Kristo Asafo’s founder, Opanin Samuel Kwadjo Safo, came to Accra New Town from the Ashanti region. After his primary and middle-school education, he learned the welding trade. He was then a member of the Methodist church of

Ghana, in which he had been christened. Opanin Safo’s colleagues affirm that he was never a Seventh-day Adventist. However, he did know about Seventh-day Adventists.

Sometime in early 1969, Safo felt the need for a closer walk with his Lord. He studied the Scriptures and prayed fervently, finally receiving a revelation that urged him to establish a church that would bring together young, energetic people who, while practicing their trades, could do so with a touch of pure religion. This resulted in the establishment of a 10-member bible study and prayer group. The group started as Sunday worshippers. Everyone expected the group to grow; instead, the membership dwindled. Opanin Safo decided to pray and fast for understanding. In early 1971, while he was praying, the Seventh-day Sabbath was revealed to him, and he told his congregation about it. With this new truth, they set out as never before to proclaim their teaching everywhere. A new denomination was born.

With zeal and enthusiasm the members preached and taught. And they saw growth! By 1975, they had members in areas outside Accra New Town. The church embarked on a strong expansion program, coupled with various economic enterprises, to finance the growing church.

As of 1985, 350 churches of the Kristo Asafo Mission had sprung up in seven of the 10 regions in Ghana. The three unentered regions, all in northern Ghana, are targeted for outreach in the next few years.

The Kristo Asafo Mission teaches that the Sabbath begins at 6:00 p.m. on Friday, the day of preparation, and ends at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday. The Sabbath church service begins at 3:00 p.m., because the mission teaches that worship should be done from the ninth hour, according to Acts 3:1. The morning hours are devoted to personal Bible study, meditation, and prayer; all members are to remain indoors during this time. Ministers use this time for personal preparation for the afternoon services, which consist of a lot of singing, dancing, and prayer, in addition to preaching and instructions by the pastor.

According to Kristo Asafo, no secular work should be done by members on the Sabbath. They should do good and be of service to God and

humanity, but no unnecessary and long travel is allowed on the Sabbath.

Theologically, Kristo Asafo accepts the Bible in its entirety. No other book is considered to have any real value when it comes to faith and belief. Both Old and New Testaments are seen as the inspired and authoritative voice of God, but in areas of doctrine, the New Testament is seen as an improvement on the Old. Where a doctrinal point appears in both the Old and New Testaments, the mission takes the teaching of the New Testament as the current teaching.

The Bible is read very literally by both leaders and members. Sermons and biblical instructions reveal the very nature of the mission. No attempts are made to involve the congregation in any theological and scholarly discussions. "The Bible is plain enough and no attempt should be made to explain it by human knowledge and ideas," a Kristo Asafo pastor told me. He added, "Preaching is the work of the Holy spirit; it does not necessarily come by learning." Often, the founder and leader receives inspiration and prophecies as God sees fit. The mission firmly teaches the existence of God, and his participating in the affairs of humans. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are close companions of God, all of them being, at the same time, separate and one.

Though no extensive discussion is put into this topic, the mission acknowledges the unity of the Godhead, no doubt based on the leader's Methodist background. Still, the mission teaches that God is actually black. In fact, for thousands of years, Africa was his home—he lived in Ethiopia. Satan, seen as constantly antagonizing God, is indeed the opposite of black—white. While Jacob was black, his brother Esau was white, and not quite loved by God.

Baptism is done by immersion only. To be baptized, one has to be 16 years of age or older. The baptism takes place in a river. Baptismal candidates are immersed three times, in the names, successively, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The literal return of Jesus Christ is supported by quoting Matthew 25:31 and John 14:1-3. At the second coming of Christ, there will be two distinct groups—the righteous and the wicked.

The righteous will be taken by Christ to the place he is preparing for them, while the wicked and the earth will be totally destroyed by the fire of God. A new era will begin at the second advent of Christ. There will be peace, plenty, and a place for all the righteous.

The mission has no creed regarding the state of the dead. No one really knows what happens in

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death. The righteous go into paradise "inside" the earth, but the wicked go into hell "under" the earth.

Kristo Asafo's leaders and members insist that they are not Pentecostals. They do not speak in tongues, nor do they go into trances. Women cover their heads when they come into the church and when in prayer, based on 1 Corinthians 11. Both men and women enter the church barefooted, in accordance with the Scriptures regarding entering the holy place.

So far, the local language is used exclusively in preaching and singing. The music is mainly the beautiful Ghanaian traditional lyrics. Local compositions, and on-the-spot compositions, are common. There is strictly no drumming in the sanctuary during services; however, during outdoor services, public preaching, and evangelistic efforts, which mostly take place at street corners and market places, lively drumming and dancing take place.

Every fourth month the Lord's Supper is celebrated. All baptized members partake of the wine and the bread, which are symbolic emblems. For wine, only the juice of the fruit is used.

Regarding marriage, the mission teaches that monogamy is the ideal marital situation that pleases God. However, people who are polygamists are accepted into full membership, as the Bible does not prohibit polygamy. Polygamists in good standing can receive baptism and participate

in the Lord's Supper. Polygamists must, however, vow to love their wives "equally." Single members are encouraged to marry only one wife, but if a member marries a second, he is not dropped from membership. He is "left to God," and may continue to participate in the Lord's Supper. He, too, must vow to love his multiple wives equally.

Health regulations for members of Kristo Asafo are straightforward. No foods or meats are prohibited, except animals slaughtered and offered to idols, a concept based on Acts 15:28, 29. Members are taught not to use tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.

There is strong emphasis on the belief that Jesus Christ is the head of the Kristo Asafo Mission, both spiritually and organizationally. It is he who has directed how the mission should be run

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on earth, by directing the apostle and the founding leader of the denomination. The apostle, therefore, oversees all activities, including planning and decision-making. The apostle is assisted by his lieutenant evangelist Akwasi Gyebi, the "second in command," and a church secretary, Pastor Eric Akon, whose office is at the Accra New Town headquarters. There is one "senior pastor," Pastor Samuel Safo. These four serve as the highest executive committee or synod for the committee.

Closely working with these four in Accra are a corps of district pastors, each administering the activities of the mission in a given territory. Then there are local church pastors, and finally hundreds of local church elders heading the various churches and groups.

Only the four top administrators at headquarters in Accra receive salaries. The part-time district pastors are given allowances to meet travel expenses. Both district pastors and local church

leaders are engaged in some other form of business activity, working as technicians, farmers, et cetera.

The pastors and leaders have no formal theological or pastoral training. Once a month, all the pastors come together to Accra and spend two or three days receiving instruction from the founder and leader. This instruction and teaching forms the basis of the weekly sermons. The pastors, in turn, teach the local elders.

The ministers dress no differently from the lay membership, because Jesus dressed in just the same way as did his disciples and the people to whom they ministered. It was necessary for Judas Iscariot to kiss Jesus in order to identify him—obviously, Christ was not identifiable by his dress. Ministers and members alike freely use jewelry.

Tithes and offerings form the basic, but not the major, source of financing for the activities of the mission. Both tithes and offerings are promoted strongly during Sabbath services. General offerings are taken for the general operation; specific offerings, for housing a minister, et cetera, are also collected cheerfully. It is not uncommon during one Sabbath service to collect four or five offerings, and for the minister to ask for a sixth if the amount targeted is not reached.

It appears that the major source of financing comes from the many commercial and industrial ventures of the mission, notably the farm projects in all seven regions where the mission is active. There is also a large dam in Gomoa owned by the mission for farming purposes.

In addition to the farming projects, the mission has several small-scale electronics shops in the cities, which assemble, repair, and sell electric appliances like radios, televisions, sound systems, and the like. This provides apprenticeships and wage-earning possibilities for the youth in the mission. Carpenter shops and ceramics workshops are also being added to the list of mission ventures. This has considerably reduced unemployment and increased self-respect in their churches.

Every branch of Kristo Asafo must be self-supporting. Tithes, offerings, and incomes from branch projects, are all channeled to headquarters

and into a central fund administered by the apostle, founder, and leader.

Are African Independent Churches Really Christian?

Not everything about the independent churches is good. Perhaps the most serious weakness of the African independent churches is their apparent neglect of theological study. Most African independent churches content themselves with a very casual reading of Scripture and refuse any detailed and systematic study. Hence, meanings are read into texts and passages, sometimes to the point of making them appear fanatical. The second problem is the lack of adequately trained ministry.

Probably both of these problem areas came about because the African independent church idea reached and attracted only a certain class of people in the community. But this is fast changing. Now, people of all walks of life are joining these churches. In universities all over Africa there are young people, either direct converts or children of old converts, studying and taking their religion seriously. In time, this class of university-trained members will take theology seriously and enter the ministry.

African independent churches have been important in Africa and are beginning to have an impact globally. But are they truly an effective agent for the spread of Christianity? Are they making a worthwhile contribution? In my estimation, the African independent churches are, and continue to be, a valid part of Christianity within Africa, for the following reasons:

The appearance of the African independent churches has been timely—to meet political needs. The question, “Is everything in Christianity divine or Western?” has agitated the minds of many believers. In many cases the question was not asked, for fear that the questioner would incur the displeasure of the only people who could answer it. Thousands went to church in order to please the officials, or to get or keep a job.

To most Africans, Christianity came with, or

under, the protection of one colonizing power or another. In time, therefore, the two were perceived to be the same. Christian missionaries brought Christianity, along with their culture. But it took centuries for African Christians to grasp the fact that the missionaries were showing them how they, the missionaries, lived—as Danish Christians, British Christians, or American Christians—while Africans must live as African Christians.

In a way, the African independent churches have not only saved Christianity, they have expanded it in the face of political turmoil and social change in Africa.

With the advent of independence, mass education, and widespread travel, came a reaction. “Let colonialism go—bag and baggage.” Christianity, which had been seen as part of the neocolonialist package, also fell into disfavor. In some places, by national decrees, Christian names and Western style neckties and suits were abolished overnight. There were attempts to dismantle the whole Christian paraphernalia.

The African independent churches provided part of the solution. An old man I talked with told me that during that critical period, the African independent churches were, in effect, saying to Africa, “You can be Christian and remain African.” That was what thousands of people wanted to do: maintain their Africanness in dress, music, and thought, and at the same time appropriate the grace of Jesus Christ, and receive the assurance of eternal life. A possible mass exodus out of Christianity to something yet unknown to the African was averted into a mere “crossing the carpet,” as it was described in some countries in Africa, from missionary churches into independent churches.

In a way, the African independent churches have not only saved Christianity, but have expanded it in the face of political turmoil and social change in Africa. The African independent churches have held the banner of Christ high through Africa’s most critical periods. Christ has been made real by the one million Kibanguists in

Zaire, the hundreds of thousands in Aladura churches in Nigeria, and great numbers in the Zionist churches in South Africa.

The African independent churches have met needs that the missionary churches ignored. The converts into the missionary-church Christianity soon realized that their newly adopted religion dealt with only part of their life's needs—only a few hours a week of their time. The missionary churches dismissed issues like ghosts, witchcraft, and taboos. But to the African, these things were very real. The bonds with the spirit world could not easily be broken. They heard the spirits speak to them, they suffered the effects of spells of witchcraft, and mysterious things happened to them as a result of neglect or disobedience of the old-time rules of the tribe. So when a convert became sick and could not find healing from the hospital run by the missionary's cousin, he would secretly go anywhere for help.

By and large, the African independent churches have squarely addressed these neglected issues, through the presence of divine healing and the casting out of devils. In my estimation, these constitute real contributions to Christianity. In this way, Christians can confront such issues right in their own church, without resorting to diviners.

The African independent churches have fairly successfully indigenized Christianity. To make Christianity belong here in Africa is an achievement. For people to worship in their own language, and in the way that appeals to them, is definitely a plus. The efforts to indigenize Christian music, dress, and thought have paid great dividends, and could be part of that which will preserve Christianity on the continent of Africa.

Many missionary churches, especially the Roman Catholic church, have taken the hint and are fast indigenizing. African traditional lyrics, using Bible passages, are now common in the music of many churches. The use of traditional musical instruments—for example, drums, xylophone, bamboo, maracas, —is gradually becoming commonplace in many missionary churches. The graceful, polite swaying of the body, or holy

dancing of the African independent churches, is also creeping into the missionary churches.

Extemporaneous preaching, “amens,” and the freedom to be yourself in the house of the Lord is what the African independent churches are

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bringing into Christianity. Large numbers of Christians from the missionary churches frequently visit the African independent churches, from which they return home refreshed and challenged. The church in Africa must indigenize. It will be the only effective challenge to attempts being made by revolutionary elements in Africa to polish and market, in a new package, Africa's traditional heathen practices.

With zeal and energy, the African independent churches, by and large, are proclaiming the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes the conviction and urgency with which they preach the Lord's imminent return, and the clarity of the message, tend to surpass what we as Seventh-day Adventists preach. They might not have all the prophecies in proper order, and they might not line up exactly what events will take place at the Second Coming, but they surely and clearly announce the Second Coming. It is evident that the Lord is using them to do his work.

There is much the Seventh-day Adventist church can learn from the African independent churches. The Adventist church in Africa is proclaiming the truth, and has great potential for proclaiming it more effectively. But African independent Sabbathkeeping churches are also a part of the plan of God. We can work together, helping one another, until we all come into the full knowledge of the truth.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Akans represent nearly 50 percent of the population of Ghana and are made up of the Ashanti, Fante, Brong, Akyem, Nzima, Akwapim, Kwahu, and the Anyi-Baule ethnolinguistic groups.

2. For a comprehensive study of the subject, see K. Owusu-Mensa: "Onyamee Kwamee (The Akan God of Saturday)", an unpublished manuscript.

3. Ibid.