

A PERSONAL LOOK AT AFRICAN SPIRITUAL CHURCHES – REFLECTIONS, CHALLENGES, HOPES

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Trying to define the essence of African Independent Churches or as they prefer to call themselves, African Spiritual Churches, is a challenge best suited to story and song, not an academic treatise. With that in mind, I will begin by describing an event that took place during the Mennonite World Conference in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in August of 2003. Since the conference was being held in Africa, it made sense that the Mennonite relationship with African Spiritual Churches should also receive some attention. Two afternoon workshops featuring ASC leaders from Botswana and Swaziland were arranged. It was during the second of these workshops that a wonderful event took place right in the face of imminent disaster.

The history of conflict and mistrust between mission-founded churches and African Spiritual Churches (hereafter ASC) is long and often not very pleasant. At one point during the workshop it appeared that we might write another chapter in that unfortunate history. Some of the workshop participants had begun to challenge the doctrines and practices of the ASCs, and the ASC leaders in turn were becoming defensive and upset. I looked over with concern at my missionary colleague, Tim Bertsche, both of us wondering what we should do. Just at that moment, one of the ASC women from Botswana asked if she could address the group.

Mma Lesego Mannathoko stood hesitantly and then shared with the group her experience of physical illness, how she had searched for help, and found none until one day she heard singing as she walked by the St. Faith Holy Church in Francistown, Botswana. She felt compelled to enter that church, and when she did, she was surrounded by the congregation as they prayed over her. As she shared this story with the group in Bulawayo, she compared her situation to that of the needy woman in Luke who had suffered for twelve years and found no one to help her (cf. Luke 8:43-48). Then she slowly began to sing quietly and dance: “I was sick and all alone, no one could help me until I found Jesus. I touched Jesus and he made me well. Jesus touched me and he made me well.” When she finished singing, it was quiet - the argument had ended, brothers and sisters from different church traditions embraced.

I believe Mma Mannathoko’s brief testimony illustrates the very best of African Spiritual Churches. In her own words and in her own way (in song and dance), she

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expressed the wonderful sense of community that she experiences in her congregation, the healing power of Jesus and the desire for peace and reconciliation so evident in ASC life. When my wife Teresa and I, along with our three children, arrived in Gaborone, Botswana in July 1992 as Africa Inter Mennonite Mission missionaries, we thought we knew a good deal about ASCs. Twelve years of life and ministry in Botswana and Lesotho has taught us that we did not know very much. In what follows I will provide a brief look at the ASC context, reflect upon our experience of ASC life, outline some of the developments taking place both internally and externally that affect ASCs, and finally I will conclude with some thoughts about the future of ASCs.

African Spiritual Churches in Context

At the outset I should provide a brief rationale for my use of the term African Spiritual Churches instead of the more familiar African Independent Churches (AIC).¹ I am using the designation that members of these churches themselves use when referring to one another in Botswana, Lesotho and parts of South Africa. Even though these church bodies demonstrate wide divergence in theological belief and practice (ranging from broadly evangelical to a highly syncretistic blend of Christianity and African Traditional Religion), they choose to emphasize their reliance on spiritual power and describe themselves as “spiritual churches” (*dikereke tsa semoya* in Setswana/Sesotho). It was mainly because some ASCs split off of existing mission-founded churches in the past that outside observers of the movement coined the term African Independent Churches. This was an unfortunate development because it tended to encourage the idea that ASCs are more of a reactive rather than a proactive movement.

For many outside observers ASC members are most readily identified by their distinct church uniforms. In most churches the women wear ankle-length white gowns, a head covering (either a hat or scarf wrapped tightly around their head), a woven belt around their waist and a colorful sash with the name of their church embroidered on it draped over their right shoulder. Depending on the church, men wear a variety of uniforms ranging from knee length dustcoats (like a lab coat) to garments best described as a flowing robe. In almost all churches they wear a woven belt around their waist. Men’s uniforms may be white or the specific color of their church (green, blue, yellow or red). Uniform styles and colors are important to their members as the founders of each ASC testify to having received specific instructions in dreams and visions concerning their design.

¹ The acronym AIC originally stood for Independent Churches but has also been used to refer to African Indigenous Churches, African Initiated Churches and more recently African Instituted Churches. Scholars have often tried to distinguish among the many groups by using a variety of designations such as Spirit-type, Prophet-healing, Ethiopian, Zionist and Apostolic (for further discussion, see Oosthuizen 1997:8 and Anderson 2001:108-110). Although these groupings are of academic interest, in reality there is considerable overlap (e.g., The Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion – is it Apostolic, Zionist, Spirit-type, Prophet-healing or all of the above?)

It is this willingness, and in fact, their desire to receive and obey direction from the spiritual world (including the Holy Spirit as well as ancestral spirits and angels) that gives ASCs their name, and is one of their key features. By embracing African spirituality ASCs connected with Africans in ways that the mission-founded churches often missed. “The AICs reflect the traditional African outlook-the metaphysical world with its spiritual beings and forces, its view of the nature of truth and of cause and effect, its emphasis on mutuality and community life, and its understanding of quality-of-life issues” (Oosthuizen 1997:9). But as suggested above, earlier commentators on the ASC movement did not see it that way. These churches were branded as a negative reaction against western Christianity and “*the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism*” (Sundkler 1961:297, his italics).² Not long after, David Barrett (1968:156) put forth his view that the root cause of the ASC movement was a missionary failure to demonstrate the “biblical concept of love”. But ASCs were much more than a reaction against western Christianity and missionary failures. In the past 30 years observers have begun to focus on the more positive features in the ASC genesis. Primary among these has been the recognition of both sociological and religious causative factors.

Those who have tended to focus on sociological factors have noted the huge influence on African life of the western forces of colonialism, urbanization and industrialization. Throughout the 20th century many Africans (especially those in the growing urban centers) found themselves adrift in uncharted cultural territory, cut off from their African roots while struggling to understand the modernizing forces at work around them. They needed a community, a place that was both familiar to them, and that would empower them to face the challenges of the new world in which they lived and worked. Inus Daneel (1987) referred to this longing as a “quest for belonging”. ASCs sprung up to meet this need for communities that offer self-respect, physical and material support, social security and friendship in times of change and difficulty.

Clearly sociological dynamics have played a major role in the formation of ASCs. But it would be a huge error if one simply imposed a western dichotomy on African life by isolating secular and religious factors. This is especially true when one takes into account the fact that ASCs have flourished in rural areas as well as urban centers. Most Africans have experienced a tremendous sense of disruption in the past century which has created a widespread sense of dis-ease. This dis-ease manifests itself in physical illness, of course, but also in widespread social ills such as the breakdown of families, high crime rates, economic poverty, jealousy and witchcraft. Viewing life holistically many have sought answers that will meet their physical, spiritual and social dis-ease head on. As my

² Sundkler modified his view of ASCs considerably in later years (see Sundkler 1976).

introductory story illustrates, ASCs offer that hope – hope that is spiritual in nature but one that encompasses all of life (see Oosthuizen 1997:9; Pauw 1995:13-15).³

As a movement ASCs seek to fulfill African aspirations for spiritual power to overcome all manner of evil, and thus provide the needed physical, spiritual, emotional and social healing. ASC healing, exorcism and fortification rituals (such as the use of water, salt, traditional herbs, staffs, ropes, etc.) along with prayer, visions, dreams and the Bible demonstrate the tremendous importance of spiritual power understood in an African manner. Allan Anderson has argued that it is the ASC emphasis on Spirit (*Moya* in Setswana/Sesotho) that appeals to so many Africans. “In the African Independent Churches the Holy Spirit is unanimously associated with power- whether physical, moral, or spiritual – the Holy Spirit is viewed as the all-embracing, pervading power of God” (1990:73). Focused on the power of the spiritual world, offering a haven of security, ASCs have sought to integrate the lives of Africans who often find themselves caught between two worlds.

Some Personal Reflections on African Spiritual Church Life

With the previous discussion in mind, I now want to offer a few reflections on our experience with ASCs. When we went to live and minister with ASCs my focus was primarily focused on theological issues – are these churches faithfully believing in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Bible? What I discovered was the phenomenal diversity within the ASC movement. Anyone who attempts to generalize when speaking about ASC beliefs and practices is bound to create distortions and misunderstanding. Many have disparaged ASCs on account of gross examples of theological heresy and ethical misconduct. It is true that a few prophets charge exorbitant amounts for healing consultations, some pastors engage in adulterous affairs and great confusion exists in the minds of many when it comes to the role of ancestral beliefs, angels and Jesus. But the negative examples should not be allowed to define this movement.

I will try to offer a more balanced view of ASCs by means of a few vignettes from our years in Botswana. First, I want to echo the sentiments of G.C. Oosthuizen: “Almost uniformly, a Christian sense of sharing and caring is their distinguishing mark” (1997:8). As mentioned, generalization is dangerous but I must say that the vast majority of ASC members we met were extremely accepting and overwhelmingly generous. From providing the best bed in the house when staying the night to giving our family the Sunday collection so that we could buy cold drinks on our way home from church, we were amazed at their willingness to care for others. In a similar manner, their love and care for the sick, poor and oppressed stands out. It was common to enter ASC homes and churches and find the dis-

³ Allan Anderson has said it well: “In the holistic African worldview we may not adopt a Western dualistic idea that the power of the Spirit only has to do with some sort of mystical, inner power and nothing with our concrete physical, social, political and economic needs” (1990:68).

eased living on site. The physically sick slept on mattresses in the churches, while the mentally ill were given meals to eat and tasks to perform. These are churches where those without home or hope have found a place to stay and Christians who love them and seek to meet their needs. No one is sent away.

It bothered me when we first started worshipping with ASCs that those who were mentally and/or spiritually distressed, along with the inebriated were allowed to walk around, shout and generally disrupt services. So I asked one of my friends why they permitted this disorderly behaviour. He answered simply, "Aren't we supposed to bring the sick and needy to Jesus? Didn't Jesus say that it was not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick?" Obviously I had a great deal to learn. This willingness to accept and embrace those on the outside is what makes ASCs highly attractive to so many. I thought it was their ability to cure physical ailments but I was wrong. Through the years we made friends with many church members who had not received the physical healing they sought, did not find good jobs, were not able to conceive or find a faithful spouse. From the outside it looked as though these churches lacked the spiritual power that they preached.

But once again it is critical to note that what ASCs offer is community and the promise of power to persevere even in the midst of distress. This was made most evident to me at a one-day conference for mission hospital staff. I had been asked to present a paper on the healing practices of ASCs. In order to ensure accuracy and integrity I asked five of my ASC friends, who were also leaders in their respective churches, to accompany me. Following my presentation, the audience was invited to participate by asking questions. Immediately some of the hospital staff began to question the ASC leaders who were present about their ability to cure AIDS.⁴ One of the older women, Rev. Oteng Rauwane, stood to her feet and bravely proclaimed her belief that God could heal this dreaded disease. She was asked if she had ever seen someone healed of AIDS. She had seen her church members and relatives struck down by this cruel disease and yet her response was still one of simple faith, "No, but I believe He can heal." Some in the audience mocked her belief but what struck me was her hope in the midst of disaster.

When Africans seek help from ASCs, they are not so naïve as to believe that they are guaranteed to receive what they ask for in prayer. Rather they go to find spiritual power that will enable them to endure and overcome the problems they are experiencing. Perhaps the idea is best expressed in one of their favorite hymns:

Lona ba ratang go phela (You who want to live)
Mohlapeng oa Jesu (Within Jesus' flock)
Hopolang tsietsi tsa tsela (Remember the trials of the road)

⁴ Botswana, along with the entire southern African region, is suffering with distressingly high HIV/AIDS rates of infection. In the year 2000, it was estimated that 17% of the total population of Botswana was infected with HIV, while 36% of the sexually active population was infected with HIV. By 2010 it is estimated that close to 20% of all children will have lost their mothers to AIDS (UNDP 2000:58-59).

E isang ha eso! (That leads home!)⁵

As most ASC members know from daily experience, life is not easy; it is filled with challenges and struggles but if one perseveres by means of the strength provided by the Spirit and the church community, one will find a place of rest.

African Spiritual Churches Today and Tomorrow

In the previous paragraphs I attempted to provide a brief glimpse of ASC life as we both witnessed and experienced it. But one might also ask about the future of this movement. The African cultural landscape continues to shift and change. Have ASCs kept pace with what is taking place around them? Are they able to respond to the questions 21st century Africans are asking? The answers to those questions are more of a mixed bag.

Looking at Botswana in particular in the past 25 years reveals a society undergoing major flux. The country has experienced dynamic economic growth due to the discovery of diamonds, rapid urbanization, higher levels of education and a growing population. Alongside these developments has been a growing disparity between the rich and poor, increasing family breakdown as evidenced by the rapid increase in female-headed households (well over 50%) a loss of respect for the elderly and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Many of the younger generation seem confused and have turned their eyes to the West to find answers.⁶

The effect of these cultural shifts on ASCs has been dramatic but less so than one might imagine if visiting one of their services. ASC beliefs and rituals show little change – changes in liturgy are almost non-existent in most churches. Even though some of the present leaders and many of the younger generation have greater levels of education, innovations come very slowly. However some of the younger members of ASCs are no longer willing to wait for change and have begun to move to the newer Pentecostal type churches or to leave the church completely. In their desire to remain open and accepting of all, it seems that many ASCs have been unable to speak prophetically to the issues of family breakdown and HIV/AIDS. Seemingly oblivious to the slow exodus of young people from their churches, many of the older leaders are content to retain their power as they merely replicate the rites of the past.

The new Pentecostal churches that have sprung up throughout Africa clearly constitute a major challenge to the continued vitality of contemporary ASCs. According to Paul Gifford, “Pentecostalism is undoubtedly the salient sector of African Christianity today” (1998:33). These new churches are aggressively transforming the African

⁵ This is hymn #200 in the Sesotho hymnal, *Lifela tsa Sione* (Songs of Zion).

⁶ Documentation and further discussion of the Botswana context is provided in my M.Th. thesis (see Born 2002:34-42).

ecclesiastical landscape. They have adopted the traditional African worldview but then reinterpreted it for a new context using biblical images and resources as well as western symbols of success (e.g., language, technology, money and dress). As they attempt to bridge western and African culture, they have in effect created an alternative way to view the world, a new *imaginaire* of power (Corten & Marshall-Fratini 2001:1).⁷ They seek to provide a sense of control to individuals who are struggling to deal with “spiritual” concerns such as witchcraft and troublesome ancestral spirits as well as with the “secular” concerns created by technological change, urbanization and globalization. Like the older ASCs, these new Pentecostals are also offering a holistic message to a new generation of Africans, but one with a more western flavour.

Although both ASCs and new Pentecostals claim the Spirit as their inspiration and support their views of the world with biblical texts, a growing rift has opened up between them. Interestingly Andrew Walls (1996:8-9) has suggested that it is their very commonality that lies at the heart of the dispute:

Perhaps the core of the conflict, the element which makes relationships so tense, is the issue whether subordinate spiritual beings, who represent the continuity of the religious consciousness demonstrated in the divinity element in the older cosmologies, may be recognized as the obedient agents of God, or must be anathematized as evil entities opposed to Him. *What both groups take for granted is the existence of this element.* In this the radical evangelicals are as much children of Africa as the Older Independents, the prophet-healing churches. *They use the same maps of the universe – even if they color them differently* (italics mine).

The issue, then, is not a question concerning the actual existence of subordinate spiritual beings (especially ancestral spirits) but rather how Christians should understand and relate to them. While the new Pentecostals take a hard line negative stance and demonize the ancestral spirits, the ASC approach is much more ambiguous. In this area in particular one must be careful not to generalize. I have heard some ASC members claim that ancestral spirits were demons in disguise (based on 2 Cor. 11:13-14), while others argued that it is important to listen to, honor and obey the ancestors (as parents, see Ex. 20:12) and still others offered sacrifices and prayed to their ancestors as they always have in the past. Clearly this is a contentious issue within ASC circles as well as between ASCs and new Pentecostal groups.

The growing challenge of new Pentecostal groups is not lost on ASCs. Their rivalry is perhaps most pronounced at the prayer vigils for the deceased. In the past, these

⁷ Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001:4) explain this idea further: “Pentecostalism constitutes not only a discourse within modernity, but also a discourse *about* modernity, insofar as it elaborates a series of reflections on the present, adopting and adapting modernity’s techniques, discourses, and practices into a new *imaginaire*”. For further discussion of new Pentecostal type churches, see Marshall-Fratani (1998) and Kalu (1998, 2000).

events were solemn affairs where churches were expected to put aside their differences and unite to offer solace to those who have been bereaved. These community events, held in the home of the deceased, have now become battlegrounds as churches vie to lay claim to their deceased members, and actively recruit new ones. Previously it was assumed that all church leaders would take part in the proceedings, now individual churches attempt to monopolize the events. Preachers are no longer afraid to contradict one another and aggressively attempt to win converts to their cause. The main culprits appear to be the young Pentecostal preachers but it must be said that many are drawn to their bold messages and willingness to condemn what some see as the syncretistic beliefs of the older ASCs. However, considering the great respect that Africans have traditionally had for the dead, this new Pentecostal willingness to transgress cultural taboos is a daring move that may come back to haunt them.

Although there are clear theological issues at stake, this debate is also closely related to generational and cultural issues. It is interesting to note that ASCs appear to be growing closer to the older mission-founded churches. Greater cooperation is in evidence in bodies such as Christian councils and theological training institutions. When the issue of conflict at prayer vigils arises, often it is the older mission-founded churches along with ASC leaders who seem most offended. The new Pentecostals, the majority of whom are young and better educated than their elders, are no longer willing to sit quietly but rather challenge the traditional sources of power. Speaking in English they appeal to young people wanting a more “modern” faith but they also hold out spiritual power as they prophesy in “tongues”, (cf. van Dijk 1992:164-69). In order to combat what they believe is the dangerous anti-African bent of the new Pentecostals, older church leaders, both ASC and mission-founded, have joined hands to condemn the perceived lack of respect shown by the younger Pentecostal preachers. This development is not a complete surprise when one notes the degree to which traditional beliefs and customs have remained a permanent fixture in the lives of both ASC and mission founded church members.⁸

But while ASC leaders do battle in public, it seems that their young people are being heavily influenced by both their Pentecostal friends and the general society around them. Many ASC young people attend Pentecostal tent crusades, listen to Pentecostal cassette tapes and watch videos of charismatic American, European and African evangelists (such as Benny Hinn, Reinhard Bonnke and Mensa Otabil). As ASC youth choirs meet, one is beginning to hear new songs sung in new ways as western choruses and instruments are being introduced. Youth leaders are also being challenged with previously unheard of questions concerning sexuality, traditional beliefs, deliverance ministry and church healing practices. Younger leaders have recently begun to form married couples fellowships as they

⁸ Gabriel Setiloane (1976:224-225) described the continued vitality of Setswana culture in the face of Christian attempts to denigrate it: “Among Church members themselves, unknown to their senior officers, there is a high degree of syncretism. It might almost be said that, rather than ‘mekgwa’ (Setswana customs) being fulfilled in Christ, Christianity is being enrolled in the service of the ‘mekgwa’” (225).

are no longer satisfied with traditional marriage models or with the virtual abandonment of marriage by many. Higher levels of theological education are being requested and attained. As these new leaders gain greater confidence it will be interesting to see what developments occur within many older ASCs.

In some of the larger congregations there seems to be a greater openness to these outside influences and an ability to retain younger leadership. In these primarily urban churches, younger leaders are staying put and helping to build up and maintain the present church structures. Stan Nussbaum, a missiologist with considerable knowledge of ASCs has suggested that these leaders are trying “to straddle Western and African culture, picking up biblical themes that help achieve the straddle”.⁹ However in other ASCs the desire to hold onto the past has created a situation where any proposed innovation is greeted with suspicion and quickly rejected. These congregations seem to drive their youth away with the result that they are aging quickly and shrinking year by year. However, it should be noted that these young people are not automatically joining new Pentecostal churches. Trying to make sense of their world some have opted to start their own small congregations or join other fledging churches. Their young leaders, some devout and some with less than honorable motives, have injected new vitality and introduced even greater diversity into this already multi-form movement.

Conclusion – Where Would Jesus Go to Church?

What is the future of the ASC movement? Better an ASC prophet to answer that question than myself but my hope is that these churches will continue to function as places of refuge for those searching for hope. As I reflect on my experiences of worship with my brothers and sisters of the African Holy Church, Bodiba Christian Church, Holy Heart and so many others, I am continually reminded of their love and care. Clearly some would struggle to pass a test of biblical orthodoxy but they do fulfill Jesus’ command – love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt.22:37-40). Lacking in financial and educational resources some ASCs may well suffer from weak biblical teaching and ethical setbacks in the days to come but as long as spiritual need and social disruption exist in Africa, these churches will exist and multiply. Filled with under-educated and under-employed youth, unwed mothers and those desiring healing from various dis-eases, God meets them at their points of need. Their shelters, often not much more than wooden poles holding up torn tarpaulin, plastic or shade-netting, become holy places where the needy come to dance, to sing, to pray and to weep. I have sometimes wondered where Jesus would go to church in Africa. I think it is quite likely that we would find him in an African Spiritual Church.

⁹ Stan Nussbaum, email correspondence. 24 October 2002.

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