

The African Independent Church Movement

A. Scott Moreau

1. The rise of independent churches in the African context: why has it happened?
 - a. A number of factors have been proposed as the "core" reason. These include (from Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, pp. 92-7):
 - i. Political factors: the independent churches were a religious form of a political outlet under colonialism.
 - ii. Economic factors: the independent churches arose because of economic crises (inequalities, depressions, etc.).
 - iii. Ethnic factors: the independent churches arose as result of race, tribal, or community tensions.
 - iv. Sociological factors: the independent churches reflect already present tribal groupings and subgroupings, which were subconsciously introduced into the church, or they resulted from missionary pressure on traditional family bonds (polygamy).
 - v. Religious factors: the independent churches arose as a result of local desire to develop a meaningful (i.e., relevant) religious experience.
 - vi. Theological factors: the independent churches arose as a result of a discrepancy between what the missionaries taught about the Bible and what the Bible actually says.
 - vii. Contextualization factors of which Barrett relates:

The common root cause to the entire movement of independency, therefore, may be seen in this one aspect of culture clash: a failure in sensitivity, the failure of missions at one small point to demonstrate consistently the fulness of the biblical concept of love as sensitive understanding towards other as equals, the failure to study or understand African society, religion and psychology in any depth, together with a dawning African perception from the vernacular scriptures of the catastrophic nature of this failure and of the urgent necessity to remedy it in order that Christianity might survive on African soil. (Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, p.156)
 - b. What factors are involved? The total socio-religious climate towards independency (called the *zeitgeist*) includes 18 significant factors (Barrett, *Schism and Renewal*, p.109) in 5 major categories:
 - i. Traditional culture:
 - (1) Is this a Bantu tribe?
 - (2) Is it over 115,000 in population?
 - (3) Is polygyny general or common, and not limited?
 - ii. Traditional religion
 - (1) Is the ancestor-cult important?
 - (2) Is there an earth goddess?
 - iii. In the colonial period

-
- (1) Did colonial rule arrive more than 100 years ago?
 - (2) Have white settlers occupied tribal land?
 - (3) Is the national per capita income over U.S. \$70 per year (1967 levels)?
- iv. In the missionary period
 - (1) Did the missions arrive more than 60 years ago?
 - (2) Have scripture portions in the vernacular been translated?
 - (3) Has the New Testament been published in the vernacular?
 - (4) Has the Bible been published in the vernacular?
 - (5) Was the New Testament published more than 60 years ago?
 - (6) Is Protestant missionary density in the nation more than 22 ordained missionaries per million population?
 - v. In the current period
 - (1) Are Muslims in the nation less than 50 per cent?
 - (2) Are protestants in the tribe 20 per cent or over?
 - (3) Are Catholics in the tribe 20 per cent or over?
 - (4) Is there independency in any physically adjoining tribe?
- c. Measuring the *zeitgeist* scale: each "yes" answers adds 1 mark. The total tribal *zeitgeist* is the total number of questions answered "yes" Barrett identifies four ranges in the scale in relation to independency:
- i. 0-5: **Dormancy**; No independent churches are found.
 - ii. 6-7: **Marginal separation**; 25% of the tribes in this category exhibit a relatively weak independent church movement.
 - iii. 8-12: **Pressure**; 50% of the tribes in this category have independent churches of some form.
 - iv. 13-18: **Inevitable independency**; virtually every tribe in this category has an independent church.
- d. Things to note:
- i. No one factor is necessarily more crucial than the others; only the sum total of all the factors had significance. (Barrett has been criticized for not weighing each of the 18 factors, but he feels that there is the need to do so.)
 - ii. Some answers to the questions never change (Is this tribe Bantu?), while others change with time (Has the Bible been published?). Overall, the average *zeitgeist* is increasing as time goes on, thus, independency should be expected to increase.
 - iii. The scale may be used as a predictor for independency in a particular tribe (as the *zeitgeist* gets higher, so will the probability of an independent church being formed).
2. Why do independent churches grow?
- a. The statistics (1985):

-
- i. 7,170 separate and distinct denominations
 - ii. 43 countries
 - iii. 74,000 centers of worship
 - iv. 29.1 million church members
 - v. 850,000 new members per year
- b. David Hesselgrave lists nine factors common to rapidly growing religious movements around the world (Dynamic Religious Movements, pp. 297-326):
- i. **Timing:** growth comes most rapidly in non-ideal (usually stressed) times.
 - ii. **Culture:** usually both for and against their local culture.
 - iii. **Beliefs:** Four elements are usually present:
 - (1) A unique message
 - (2) Practical beliefs
 - (3) All-encompassing teachings
 - (4) Apocalyptic faith
 - iv. **Group Organization:** typically one basic structure is present. Elements included:
 - (1) Strong hierarchy
 - (2) Charismatic leadership at the top
 - (3) Ample chance to participate and lead by those at lower levels
 - v. **Worship:** common aspects are
 - (1) Some form of conversion/initiation rite
 - (2) Active participation in worship by the congregation
 - (3) Worship is geared to meet felt needs
 - vi. **Meeting places and material objects** which help to provide security and identity.
 - vii. **Revelation and linguistic behaviour** that demonstrates clear authority.
 - viii. **Affective and emotional elements** which help to provide identity, belongingness, security, ecstasy, awe, and zeal.
 - ix. **Propagation techniques** that include:
 - (1) A vision for the world
 - (2) Aggressive programs of outreach
 - (3) Face-to-face communication

- (4) Use of mass media
- (5) Establishment of schools

3. Case study of the EJCSK

a. History of the EJCSK

i. Simon Kimbangu (1889-1951)

- (1) His name
- (2) His conversion
- (3) His ministry
- (4) His incarceration

ii. The EJCSK

- (1) Origin
- (2) Outlawed (1921-1959)
- (3) Legal recognition (1959-present)

b. Elements of EJCSK

i. Organisation

ii. Methods of worship

- (1) Worship services
- (2) Music (note the fascinating study of their hymnology in Molyneux, "African Christian Theology").
- (3) Symbolism and sacraments
- (4) Retreats

iii. Social work

iv. Methods of outreach

- (1) Good literature
- (2) Strong lay involvement
- (3) Clustering of believers in a community

v. Traditional values upheld (indigeneous elements)

-
- (1) Old Testament emphasis
 - (2) Permeation of whole life with religious values
 - (3) Taboos include a ban on dancing, swimming or sleeping naked, eating monkey meat, pork, and fetishism.
 - (4) Indigeneous hymns, drama, etc.
 - (5) Clustering of believers, communal self-perception
 - (6) Use of symbols that tie spiritual to physical (the "New Jerusalem" and holy water)
 - (7) Strongly hierarchical lines of authority
 - (8) Kimbangu held as an African Moses (some pray to him. a mixture of saint and ancestor veneration).
 - (9) Church service a true event-oriented community gathering.
 - (10) Explicit recognition of the spirit realm and victory in power encounters.
 - (11) Local communion elements.
 - (12) Confession to specified church members.
- vi. Both "in" and "out" of the culture (the strong eschatological flavor is "out", OT emphasis is "in").