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## The Cherubim and Seraphim Church

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church founded in 1925, is the first indigenous Church formally established in Nigeria. It started as a "prayer group" protesting against the spiritual bankruptcy and foreign outlook of Christianity in the European-oriented Mission Churches. It was finally organized into a separate church.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church as an Independent African Church has tried to make Christianity more meaningful and more relevant to the African by conveying its teaching through essentially traditional means while preserving and practicing all the essential tenets of the Christian faith.

We place emphasis here on its weak administrative structure, a situation that arose from the fact that it did not set out *ab initio* as a separate organization, but as a movement within the Church to help the spiritual life of its members, to reinterpret Christianity to the Africans, and thus destroy the whole idea of Christianity as the white man's religion which Africans could ill-afford to embrace. It was concerned to make Christianity "catholic" and meaningful to the people of Africa. As a representation of the church of God in Africa, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church is clearly within the Church Universal despite the emphasis it places on pneumatology and the charismata of the Spirit.

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### A Brief History of the Origin

By the middle of the second decade of the 20th century an illiterate middle-aged lame man was going from village to village preaching the Gospel of Christ. He was Moses Orimolade Tunolase, from a ruling house in Ikare in the present Ondo State. With a beginning that was generally believed to be mysterious,<sup>1</sup> Orimolade had suffered from an unnamed illness which confined him, expecting him to die. It was probably during this period, when contemplations were possible, that he made far-reaching decisions about his evangelistic life.

By about 1919 Orimolade had visited several towns and villages in Yorubaland, in the then mid-western State and in the provinces of Northern Nigeria as far north as Kano. He preached the Christian Gospel in these places and helped to establish churches in a number of them. In every place he stunned his audience with his very accurate quotations from the Bible, even though he could neither read nor write. Whatever converts he won through his preaching, he directed to the existing churches, and where there was no church, he organized his converts into a small congregation and named it after the predominant Christian denomination in the area.

He finally arrived in Lagos in July 1924, and lived with the sexton of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Ebute-Ero, where Archdeacon T.A.J. Ogunbiyi was Vicar. He lived in the parsonage for only two months before he was sent out. Cherubim and Seraphim members have held that he was expelled because he was becoming more popular than the Vicar of the Church in consequence of his efficacious prayers and his healing powers. Whatever the immediate causes of his expulsion from the parsonage, we know that Archdeacon Ogunbiyi became very critical of the Cherubim and Seraphim society when it was formerly established and published a pamphlet, *Awon Serafu* (1926), in which he criticized the Society's "explicit comparison of its members with the Seraphim in heaven."

If the Anglican Church leaders in Lagos proved hostile to Orimolade, leaders of the newly constituted African Church were friendly. He had stayed with their head, Chief Jacob Kehinde Coker on his Ifako farm. The Chief later gave him a room in his Ita-Balogun house and took him round the district in his car to preach in African churches. For about one year Orimolade wandered about Lagos preaching at various centers and praying for the sick, several of whom received healing. He became popularly known as "Baba Aladura" (the Praying Father). He preached like a general evangelist, without discrimination, in any church that was willing to listen to him. He was neither a disgruntled nor a rebellious member of any denomination, but was mainly concerned to win converts for Christ, and it was none of his business which denominations eventually received the converts as members.

In June 1925, a dramatic event took place. A young lady, Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon, a member of St. Paul's Anglican Church, Breadfruit, Lagos, had been "visited regularly in her sleep by an angel who had taken her to distant places, to many places of interest, usually in the firmament."<sup>2</sup>

The climax came on 1 June, 1925 when she went to Campos Square with a friend to watch the Roman Catholic celebration of "Corpus Christi." Here the same angel appeared to her and followed her home. A week after this, she went into a prolonged trance during which time she claimed that she went with her angel friend to the "Celestial City" where she had several spiritual experiences. When she woke from her trance which, Archdeacon T.A.J. Ogunbiyi reportedly described as hallucination, Abiodun found that her guardians, the Moietts (her aunt Comfort and her husband Hunnu), had twice sent for Moses Orimolade, who, she had been informed in her trance, would come to help her. It was raining and Orimolade was loath to come. He finally came while the rain was still drizzling, but everybody there was amazed to notice that although "he walked through the rain without cover" Orimolade was apparently untouched by it. He prayed and

Abiodun recovered full consciousness and related her experience of the Celestial City to those who had gathered there.

These incredible stories caused much sensation and more and more people poured into her Saba Court residence to see her and hear her stories first hand. Because this "stampede" inconvenienced Mr. and Mrs. Moiett, they advised Orimolade to take Abiodun to his own residence at Ago-Isofin where she could continue to receive her inquisitive visitors. There, Orimolade himself suggested to those who regularly called to see the young lady, that the group should be constituted into a formal society. He was concerned to find something that would keep the group together after the excitement cooled off. Thus, the nucleus of what became known as the Cherubim and Seraphim was formed. Even then it was not given a name until three months later. During this time, it engaged its members in praying and in the blessing of water for healing.

### The Formation of the Society

On September 9, 1925, the young society was named Seraph by the Rev. James C. Barber of the United Native African Church. The twin name Cherub was added later in consequence of a vision in which the leaders were instructed that the two names should go together. For a number of years, the organization was nothing more than a fortuitous interdenominational society preaching faith in prayers, a renunciation of the devil and all his works (like the worshiping of idols, the use of Juju charms, and the fear of witches). For many years it was also a recruiting ground for some Christian denominations. While it encouraged its members who were already members of certain churches to be more ardent and more zealous Christians, its leading members belonged to the large congregations in Lagos: Ezekiel Akindele Davies (father of H.O. Davies and the right hand man of Orimolade) who was a local preacher in Olowogbowo Methodist Church; J.O. Coker, J. Ayo Coker, Gabriel Ogunyadi, who were leading

members of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Ebute-Ero, Lagos; H.S. Phillips, until his death, a leader of the Praying Band Section), his mother Sarah and his brother J.S. Phillips (who later became General Superintendent of the Western Conference of the C.&S.), and Mr. Hunnu Moiety and Captain Abiodun who were all members of St. Paul's Church, Breadfruit, Lagos. Apart from this fact, there were some ministers of other denominations who had very close connections with the society during its early days: Archdeacon F.D. Shodeinde of the African Church; Rev. Ajayi-Ajagbe of the Methodist Church; Rev. W.R.B. Kuye of the Anglican Church (also Principal of Abdokuta Grammar School); Rev. D. J. Oguntolu of the African Church, on whose Ojokoro farm Orimolade died October 19, 1933; and Rev. J. C. Barber who gave the Society its name.

That the C. & S. finally became a separate Church was rather the result of the intolerance of the Orthodox Churches than the logical product of deliberate and formal planning. The members were forced out of the Orthodox Churches in various places.

The young society, however, opened itself to criticisms when, on September 29, 1925, through the vision of a small child, it chose the Archangel Michael as its Captain, and Jah Jehovah as its Founder. The Archangel Michael, according to inferences from the Bible<sup>3</sup> is regarded as the defender of all godly people. In 1931, Archangel Gabriel was named the Deputy Captain. There were very sharp press criticisms of these "appointments."<sup>4</sup>

But despite these attacks, the society took further steps to establish its special relationship with the hosts of heaven. The claim of its members is that they represent here on earth the Cherubim and Seraphim of heaven who serve in the absence of the Almighty. In every branch, various bands, named after important Biblical figures (Solomon, Sheba, David, Esther, Martha, Mary, etc.), have been constituted and each section has a committee of twelve elders called Patriarchs. These represent the twelve tribes of Israel whose "names are written on the twelve gates of the Holy City

(the New Jerusalem) through which the nations of righteousness shall enter.”<sup>5</sup>

### Expansion to the Present

The Society then began to spread into the hinterland of Yoruba by sending out evangelistic parties usually under the dynamic leadership of Captain Christianah Abiodun, whose feminine charms, backed by a disciplined life of prayer, contributed in no small measure to the success of the campaigns. By 1926, the Cherubim and Seraphim, had been established in Agege and Sagamu and in parts of Ikoprodu area. In 1927 branches had been established in most of the major towns of Yoruba West — Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Ondo, Ilesa — and in villages around them. By the end of 1930, it has been known in parts of the Mid-West and in the East, through the activities of Madam Christianah Olatunrinle, the society's leader in Ondo who became later the first General Superintendent of the Western Conference.

Today, it is almost impossible to estimate the strength of the Cherubim and Seraphim. There are various reasons for this. In the first place, it has split into so many sections, factions, and independent groups<sup>6</sup> that a statistical survey of the actual number of branches and adherents is futile to attempt. In Lagos alone, not fewer than twenty-five sections had been registered by the Registrar of Companies some years ago. One of these Lagos sections (The Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim, Mt. Zion Ebute-Metta) has over 600 branches. In the second place, only a few sections of the society keep records of any kind. They all consider it a grievous sin to keep statistics of their society. They assert that it is against the will of God because King David quickly realized his sin when he took a census of his subjects.<sup>7</sup>

One other reason why accurate statistics of the Organization cannot be compiled is its generally weak administrative structure. The Cherubim and

Seraphim is the one Aladura Church that does not still have a common system of administration. Consequently, there are no avenues for determining the strength of the Society. Branches spring up according to the wish or whim of individual members, and such branches are administered according to the directions of their respective founders.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of these difficulties, the Cherubim and Seraphim must have not fewer than hundreds of thousands of congregations in Nigeria today, and millions of members—both active and nominal. In the Northern States more than half of the branches are among the indigenous population. The Organization also has over 100 branches in the Benin Republic and many branches in both Togo and Ghana. Some sections now have strong branches in England, the United States, and some Asian countries. The leaders of such branches are, of course, Nigerians. The significant thing about all the sections is their unanimous acknowledgement of Moses Orimolade Tunolase, as the founder of the society. Apart from the Holy Flock of Christ which broke away in 1932 under the society's first great visioner, Major A. B. Lawrence, no breakaway group has adopted a name that is not some modification of the main title "Cherubim and Seraphim."

### Distinguishing Features

Since we shall not be able to deal exhaustively with the features of the Organization here, we shall try as briefly but as accurately as possible to touch on the main emphases having to do with theological and liturgical matters.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Organization has been frustratingly defective in literary productivity. Because of this great handicap, and because of the apparent absence of any systematic theology within the Aladura Churches, it has not been easy to compose the theology of the Organization. Nonetheless, from personal observations and from the testimony of individuals, we have come to the conclusion that not only does the

Organization have a theology, but it is possible to know what are the tenets of its faith.

The Cherubim and Seraphim Society believes in the Godhead. The three persons of the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one, but there is a tripartite allocation of spheres and ages to the three. God the Father was active from Genesis to Malachi; God the Son from Matthew to Jude; and God the Holy Spirit (which Apostle Abana of the Eastern Conference, curiously identified with the Seraphim) from Revelation to the Early Church and our present age. This is the reason why much emphasis is placed on the Holy Spirit in whose age, they say, we are presently and who is ever ready to do exceedingly great things for us, if only we believe.

There is a belief in angels — especially the Archangels and the bands of the Cherubim and Seraphim in heaven. The Cherubim and Seraphim members, in identifying themselves with these angels, are not trying to worship them, but seek to imitate their manner of divine worship. The belief is that these angels represent them in heaven, so that all their wishes are fulfilled through their instrumentality.

The Cherubim and Seraphim also takes the Holy Bible as its sole authority, except for the Aiyetoro Community which regards the Bible as somewhat outmoded. Most members hold a literal and fundamentalistic interpretation. To them all sections of the Bible are divinely inspired and are equally true. The tendency is to bring in extra-scriptural information in order to explain difficult biblical narratives.

The two sacraments — Baptism and the Holy Communion — are recognized. Baptism by immersion is taken in the strict New Testament sense implying the forgiveness of sin, as in the Baptism of John. The Holy Communion is regarded as a memorial. But it must not be given to infants and must not be taken unworthily (1 Cor. 11:23-24).

A section of the Society also holds the strange view that Jesus was the minister of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in heaven. Gen. 3:23;



2 Sam. 6:3; Ps. 99:1; 80:1; Isa. 6:2-6; Ezek. 10; Hebrew 9:5 and Isa. 37:16 are all cited to support this view.

The commandments of God are believed to be necessary for the guidance of the believer in a way approved by Christ. They maintain an unparalleled belief in the efficacy of prayers and the necessity of fasting. It is their special emphasis on prayer that has earned them their name ALADURA. Before a member can be eligible for election into any office, he must first be elected into the Praying Band. Election does not take place until a probation of at least three years has been served following enrollment. The result is that all officers of the Cherubim and Seraphim are members of the Praying Band who can be called upon anywhere to pray, especially for the sick. All Cherubim and Seraphim members believe in the efficacy of prayer, provided it is offered in faith.

Saturday vigils are observed from midnight, during which time prayers are offered vigorously with all the members prostrating in the seatbare praying-house. The forty days of Lent are observed by all in the fast, and seats are not used in their churches during the period as a sign of sincere penitence and humility. Fasts, they believe, help to lift the spirit up to the throne of God "where it is en clothed with spiritual powers."

### Other Characteristics

The Cherubim and Seraphim also hold a very strong belief in prophecies, visions and dreams, while many members practice speaking in tongues. There are gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church "to ascertain the wish of God and to know the future for the preparation of the people of God for their heavenly home. They are also channels through which the Lord speaks to His people, directing their affairs and protecting them against all evils."<sup>9</sup> Much emphasis is laid on this aspect of their belief. It is for this reason the Organization has found much support in the traditional society and received much cooperation from the traditional rulers.

Africans generally fear the power of witches and the evil spirits, believed to beset them in their dreams; they worry about their future and want to know what is in stock for them. In the traditional society, many consult the diviner. Orthodox Christianity repudiated this practice and substituted for it an abstract faith. The Aladuras take personal problems as genuine and offer solutions in the messages of the Holy Spirit given through prophets and visioners. They give candles for prayers, incense to chase away evil powers, and blessed-water for healing purposes. Consequently, the Christian suddenly finds himself or herself at home, and the Christian faith now has more meaning than ever before because it takes on a special concern for his or her personal life and existential problems, ensuring security in an incomprehensibly hostile universe. This is what has endeared the Cherubim and Seraphim to the hearts of the cross-section of our society, irrespective of creed, status and class. Liturgically, the Cherubim and Seraphim has evolved a way of worshiping that is quite different from the dull, uninspired formalism of most of the orthodox Churches.

Edwin W. Smith in *African Ideas of God*<sup>10</sup> observes that Protestants will have to work out a new technique of beautiful worship and fine churches to replace the ugly barns and the ill-translated hymns and sermons of the past. Our faith will not impact African minds until we have brought more beauty, reverence and joy into the worship of God; something that is closer to Africa's own colorful and emotional religion. We must present real religion in a way that Africans can understand and interpret in their own forms of thought and worship. That is the testimony of Edwin W. Smith, a white man. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church has virtually fulfilled all these things. We only need to add here that one should find time to attend a service of worship in a C. & S. Church, and one will realize that real worship involves more than passively listening to a badly rehearsed "set-worship" and hearing hymns and anthems, which according to I. O. Delano in his book *The Souls of Nigeria*, "are too technical and too ad-

vanced for the congregation and therefore miss their purpose." Then one will appreciate why men have found it difficult to detach their wives and children from "the clapping sect," and also the fact that the antipathy of many to the Organization has its base in self-guilt, or in an inferiority complex. Their meaningful hymns, the drums, the joy with which they worship, the confidence with which they pray — all of which are naturally harmonious with the African way of life — will convince you that more than anything else, this form of Christianity is "the religion of the Africans."

### Conclusion

The Cherubim and Seraphim is a catholic faith. Although there is the tendency, because of its obvious peculiar features, to regard the Cherubim and Seraphim as a narrow, exclusive, and perhaps heretical sect (it lacks strong organization, has no trained ministry and no theologians, its leadership is basically local and largely unsophisticated, and there are no ecclesiastical affiliations), the truth is that it was founded not as a separate Church, but originally as a movement within the Christian Church. Its purpose was to reinterpret Christianity to the African — to destroy the whole idea of Christianity being the white man's religion which we as Africans could ill-afford to embrace to an appreciable standard. It was meant to bring Christianity to all sections of society and to show to the downtrodden that God is as much willing to listen to them and to help them as He is to bless the affluent. In other words, it was concerned to make Christianity "catholic" and meaningful, and in consequence, to produce better and more devout Christians. A life of discipline was necessary and a radical break with evil was inevitable. At first the leaders of other churches supported these views. But such views soon began to constitute an embarrassment to the so-called organized Church whose members had been brainwashed in their colonial churches and had learned to regard the

largely Westernized institutions bequeathed to them as the ideal Christian Church. Is it not ironical that it is the Christian Church which was used as a tool to persecute the Cherubim and Seraphim and to force its members out of the Church! At a 1928 synod the Bishop of Lagos described them as meeting superstition with superstition. And in that same year the Methodist district conference issued an encyclical to its clergy forbidding its members to join the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, which the letter described as a menace to true religion, although in what ways it did not specify.

While it was in fact government officials (the Residents and the District Officers) who instigated the local authorities and the missionaries against the society, the leaders of the Cherubim and Seraphim have usually paid glowing tributes to the security guaranteed them under the Colonial Government from the persecution of the churches. The local rulers, except in isolated cases, were very diplomatic. They did not refuse the order of the government, but offered protection to the Cherubim and Seraphim leaders and their followers. But the persecutors were the churches themselves. Special services, baptisms, weddings, etc. were denied the members and sporadically the Society responded by organizing itself into a separate Church.

### An Assessment

The most glaring weakness of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church is its generally weak system of organization. This is related directly to its origin. The Cherubim and Seraphim was not intended to be a Church, or an institution independent of the Church. It was to be a supplement to the Church, i.e., a society to revitalize the faith of Christians and bring them to an awareness of the reality of the Holy Spirit and his activity in our lives. Constitutions and administration were not considered of primary significance. For more than five years after its inception, members

attended services in their respective Churches and assembled for prayer or open-air preaching only after the Sunday evening services. This is why it did not evolve any administrative pattern or systematically organize its evangelistic campaigns. It was a spontaneous affair. Those so inspired went to preach and raised local branches. There was, therefore, no centralizing influence and branches emerged spontaneously. One effect of this development on the Organization is its characteristic tendency towards dissension. But as pointed out already, the unification movement has brought together more than 80% of the members under one umbrella.

The so-called mainstream Christian Church has also suddenly discovered that the Aladura Church is not anti-Christian, but that the Christianity which stigmatized everything African as bad, is false Christianity. The tendency today is for the orthodox churches to learn from this Society such practices taken from the traditional system which are not contrary to the will of Christ. The naming ceremony, for example, is a traditional practice which the African Church and the Aladuras have introduced into Christianity. Many churches today follow the example of the Aladuras in the use of drums and other musical instruments at worship. A further practical demonstration of this appropriation is the inauguration in many centers, of local councils of all Christian Churches, and the exchange of pulpits. The Cherubim and Seraphim worship in their praying garments. The effect of this is that it has helped to check the practice, especially among women, of coming to worship to parade dresses and accoutrements of fashion in the Church. Where there are no distractions, sincere worship has been made possible.

No attempt is being made here to underestimate the weakness of the Cherubim and Seraphim, particularly its fissiparous tendency, (which also has the functional effect of making possible a rapid spread of the Gospel), its untrained ministry, the excesses of some of its prophets, and their abuse of charismatic gifts. These cannot be elaborated upon now, but our approach should be objective, so that we can see what is good in this Church

and help it as best we can, to sublimate its excesses and fanatical traits which are obvious characteristics of an institution that does not feel that it is ever appropriate to restrict the activities of the Spirit.

The small incidental group which gathered in Saba Court house of Miss Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon (now Mrs. Emmanuel) on June 29, 1925 to witness her return from the "Celestial region," has grown into a dynamic and puritanical Church. Dynamic because it continues to grow; puritanical because its members are known everywhere to be loyal, faithful and devout Christians, and Church because it has all the qualities that make a Church. More importantly, all Churches in this land have recognized it as part of the Church Universal and as a prototype of the Church of God in Africa. Van Dusen must be right when he observed that "Peter and Barnabas and Paul would find themselves more at home in a good Pentecostal service than in any ritualized worship of most of our modern Churches."<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this is true in the case of adherents of the "orthodox" Churches who daily flock the C. & S. Churches either as supplicants or as sincere members, this fact conveys to us an urgent message — that there is something significantly lacking in our European-related Churches, and that members have found their spiritual consolation in the Aladura Church. This poses a challenge to which we need positively to address ourselves.

## Notes

1. Cherubim and Seraphim members believe that he spoke to his mother while he was still in the womb and that he actually stood up and tried to walk on the day he was born, as a result of which he became lame.
2. Captain C. A. Abiodun, *Celestial Vision*, 4th ed. 1962, translated by F. Ola Amure, p. 9.
3. June 9; Rev. 12:7ff; Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1ff.
4. Archdeacon Ogunbiyi's view has already been noted.
5. Rev. 21: 9-12.

6. We, however, note the efforts of the unification movement which has brought together many of the sections into a kind of loose corporation. They have one common hymn book and hold joint worship occasionally. Its acclaimed leader now is old Captain Abiodun Emmanuel, the co-founder who at 81 is generally addressed as "mother."

7. II Samuel 24:10ff.

8. There are some of its sections that are well organized and effectively administered — for example, the Mt. Zion Section and the Northern C. & S. movement which has moved down south with great impact. It is the brain behind the unification.

9. *The Constitution of The United Church of Cherubim and Seraphim Organization*, p. 7.

10 London, 1950, p. 240.

11. *Spirit, Son and Father*, New York, 1958, Preface of the book.