

WOMEN AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN YORUBALAND: THE ALADURA EXPERIENCE**DR. JEGEDE, Gabriel Gbenga**

Department of Religious Studies

Faculty of Arts

University of Ado-Ekiti

Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

Abstract

The recent decision of Anglican Church in England to soft-pedal on its hitherto rigid position on the issue of ordination of women into priesthood has again re-opened discussion on this very controversial subject. In the Old and the New Testament, women such as Deborah, Ruth, Esther, Dorcas, Mary Magdalene, etc. played important roles in the socio-political and religious affairs of their people. Also, Priscilla was given a very important role in the puritanical Montanist movement in the early church. In contemporary Christianity in Yorubaland, women are being ordained as Pastors in some Pentecostal and African Independent Churches. However, the mainline churches still maintain their opposition to the practice. Many view such opposition as a product of the patriarchal tendencies in Yoruba culture which has enthroned or institutionalized male domination in virtually all facets of the people's life. This paper therefore examines women's leadership roles in Yoruba Traditional Religion. It discusses the traditional or cultural beliefs among the Yoruba which seem to hinder the total acceptance of women as priests in the church. The paper reveals that some of the Aladura Churches in Yorubaland have recorded appreciable successes among the people due to the active roles played by some women in their evangelical ministries.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Beijing Conference of 1991, women's interest and consciousness about their rights, privileges, status and deprivations in the society have featured more prominently in public discourse. Both in the print and electronic media, women rights organisations buy sufficient air time to enable them draw public attention to issues affecting women. Also, in virtually all spheres of life, women in contemporary society have challenged male dominance and clamoured for equal treatment or proportional representation in leadership positions. It is important to note that the catch-phrase of women during the 2011 general election in Nigeria was the agitation for "thirty-five percent Affirmative Action" which means thirty-five percent representation at all levels of governance. To show their seriousness in respect of this, many women organisations in the country organised fund-raising dinners for female contestants and openly campaigned for them, irrespective of political affiliations.

Despite the affirmation of secularism in the constitutional provisions of many countries, religion has continued to feature prominently in social, economic and political activities. The interest in religion has made it an important institution in any society. This has therefore increased the tendency to control it for the benefits of certain groups' interests. Since women in many societies are very active participants in religious activities, the clamour for recognizable leadership positions in the various religions has recently become a very touchy issue in public discourse. In our contemporary secular society, many women occupy notable positions of authority in politics, social, educational and economic sectors. The church is considered as just a part of the social activities of man. Naturally, women probably believe that since they have been able to compete keenly with their male counterparts in other spheres of human existence, leadership positions in religious organizations should not be exceptions. This seems to have re-opened discussions on the status of women in the church vis-à-vis their acceptance by men in respect of spiritual leadership positions.

However, cultural values, traditional beliefs, norms and superstitions have been the major obstacles in the realization of women's aspiration to spiritual leadership positions in the church and in many religions of the world. The submission of Awolalu is in line with this thesis:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have their origin in the East where the society is patriarchal - and where the final authority rests with the father who is the head of the family...., and since the three religions emanated from that kind of environment, unavoidably they have imbibed the prevailing culture.¹

This background is necessary because Christianity, Islam and Judaism have influenced Africans more than the other world religions. It is important to note that while God in these three religions is conceived as male, in African Traditional Religion, God has both the male and female elements. In other word, God is considered both as father and as mother. Most probably, it is this idea of God that has made it possible for male and female to hold leadership positions in the indigenous religions in Africa. This paper attempts to relate the acceptance of women leadership in Yoruba traditional religion and culture to the emergence of women as church leaders in the Aladura Churches among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria.

The Status of Women in Judaism

In Judaism, there was a strong patriarchal emphasis.² For this reason, the dominant view on the status of women was based on male inclined culture. This tendency was well-entrenched in the Jewish religious system. In fact, Judaism considered women as inferior to men. They (women) were therefore seen as mere possessions of their husbands. Among the Jews, a woman was seen as a property and therefore had no separate identity of their own. The book of Deuteronomy 24:1 reveals that the matrimonial law of the Jews was highly discriminatory against women. In the Jewish law under reference, only men had the right to divorce. Any woman who desired divorce could only get such reprieve in accordance with the whims and caprices of her husband and such divorce could only be granted at his instance.

Even in contemporary Jewish society, women's access to justice in the rabbinic courts of justice is seriously curtailed.³ Thus issues that are germane to the interests of women rarely get the desired legal backing. This has encouraged and aggravated further discrimination against women.

Besides, women in the Jewish society are not granted unrestricted participation in religious worship. For instance, part of the requirements for the commencement of worship are ten men (minyan) of thirteen years and above.⁴ Women and children are classified in the same category as they do not form part of the required quorum during public religious activities.

However, in recent times, women rights activists have challenged this religious discrimination and moved further to advocate for the acceptance of women into the rabbinate.⁵ In response to this challenge, many Jewish women are now being encouraged to study the torah. This new development has raised the tempo of religious consciousness of women among the Jews. Thus anti-feminist views in religious arena are gradually being suppressed.

Status of Women in Christianity

Christianity developed in the midst of two Mediterranean cultures. First, in the Jewish, and later in Graeco-Roman world, within these cultures, women were considered as "inferior and subordinate to men".⁶ Therefore, women were usually excluded from political and religio-cultural leadership.

However, given the Jesus' liberation theology, the early church seemed to have been shaped in a form akin to the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic visions. These visions offered hope that could give liberation to those who were oppressed, such as women and slaves. A critical study of Mt. 15:28, Lk. 7:37-47 and Jn. 4:7-27 lend credence to the assertion that Jesus was a strong promoter of women's liberation and dignity.

Paul, one of the notable apostles that shaped the course and champion the cause of Christianity after Jesus Christ found it difficult to detach himself from the Jewish ideas about the status of women. He was not well-disposed to the idea of women offering prayer or prophesying during public worship. He demanded that to do so, they should cover their heads (I Cor. 11:5). Elsewhere (Col. 3:18), Paul advises women thus: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as it is fit in the Lord". Even though, there are passages in Paul's letters which outlined certain obligations of husbands to their wives, his overall position is that women are inferior to men. Women, he believed must keep quiet and be satisfied with living in a submissive relationship to men. Surprisingly, Peter, who unlike Paul, was very close to Jesus and witnessed how he dealt respectively with women, also expressed views akin to the one espoused by Paul who could be regarded as a misogynist (I Pet. 3:1-7).

Apart from the above biblical passages, in I Timothy 2:11-15, Paul declares "I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." In this passage, Paul's intention was to give a definitive basis for women's continued subjugation in the church. He also intended to refute any thought that this suppression and subordination has been changed by the redemptive power of Christ.

There is no doubt that the above verses in I Timothy has shaped to a great extent the “dominant church teachings about women in Christianity”,⁷ until very recent times. Over the years, fundamentalists among Christians have taken the text of I Timothy 2:11-15 as highly authoritative and accepted it hook-line-and sinker. However, contrary to this fundamental position, the text was intended to curtail the liberationist understanding of Christianity by women at that time. It was also to nip in the bud the excesses of women such as Maximilla, Priscilla, Theda, among others, who against the wishes of their husbands decided to abandon marriage in order to travel freely and preach the gospel.

Today, the mainline churches in Yorubaland are yet to accept nor come to terms with the liberationist view of gender relations by accepting women spiritual leadership. For instance, the attempt by Bishop Haruna (of the Kwara Anglican Diocese) to ordain some women into the priesthood in 1995 was totally rejected by the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). According to Obijole⁸, the roles or functions allotted to women in the mainline churches are secondary in nature. Even in the Roman Catholic Church where women (Sisters) perform supportive spiritual roles, they are statutorily not regarded as spiritual leaders. In the Methodist and Anglican Church, at best, women are only allowed to function as Lay readers. In the Baptist Church, women only serve as deaconesses. Within the Pentecostal Churches, women are allowed to occupy leadership positions. In the Church of God Mission, Mrs Margaret Idahosa serves as the President and Archbishop. Also, Pastor (Dr) Nkechi Iloputaife currently serves as the General Overseer of Faith Revival Ministries World Outreach at Satellite Town, Lagos. There are many other examples.

Women Leadership in Yoruba Traditional Religion and Culture

Culturally, women in Yorubaland are not allowed to occupy the highest leadership position in the traditional administrative setting. At best, they are allowed to lead their women counterparts in the community. Women are also allowed to represent the interests of their gender group in the Council of Chiefs and in the Oba-in-Council at the palace. Though a woman can serve as a regent after the demise of a king, a town, quarter or district cannot be permanently led by a woman. For women who are appointed as chiefs, each community has in-built mechanism to curb their excesses. Also, in religious realm, women are not allowed to participate nor witness certain rites which are regarded as the exclusive preserve of men. A good example is the Oro cult.

Given the above, we can deduce that as a patriarchal society, the equality of men and women is not an accepted norm. Orebiyi agrees that the Yoruba and the Jewish culture on the status of women are similar:

The superiority of men over women is unquestionable. Women always play subordinate roles at home, in politics and to some extent in religion. Women were identified with leakage of secrets: therefore, they were banned from the councils of men when decisions were being taken and implemented.⁹

However, the gender-based social division of labour and power sharing among the Yoruba has created the chance for women to display their ritual and even political powers. Since traditional religion among the Yoruba is a communal one and not an affair of the individual, women have the chance to hold religious offices as men also do. Thus, women in many communities in Yorubaland own exclusive deities, shrines and cults where they are priestesses, diviners, prophetesses, seers, doctors, healers, mediums and herbalists.

In fact, Yoruba traditional religion has both feminine and masculine images of Olodumare (God).¹⁰ Thus, priestly functions are not the exclusive preserve of men alone. It is important to note that water bodies like the sea, rivers and lagoons are said to be inhabited by deities and are therefore treated with reverence and in many cases, worshipped at shrines with specially appointed priestesses.¹¹ Yemoja, the most prominent of the river deities in Yorubaland, like the Osun (Osogbo) goddess, she is the mother of an avalanche of river deities, mother of fishes and the giver of children. Other deities for whom women are exclusively the priestesses are Oya (one of the wives of Sango) and Orisa Oko (Mother Earth or fertility goddess). In women's relationship with these divinities, their official responsibilities include offering prayers, conducting both public and private rites and making prescribed sacrifices as occasions demand. Women priestesses are also possessed by the spirits of their respective goddess or goddesses to enable them communicate with them and pass messages to their devotees as directed.

Apart from priestly roles, the institutionalization of the office of Iyalode in almost all Yoruba communities has gone a long way in empowering women.

According to Bolanle Awe, Iyalode is a title for a charismatic woman “designated as the political leader and charged with the responsibility for articulating the views of Yoruba women in government within any Yoruba society.”¹² Iyalode who is well recognised as a High Chief often exercise control over a council of fellow women chiefs to adjudicate on feminine issues.¹³ It is important to note that the appointment of an Iyalode is usually based on proven records of honest achievements and control of sufficient economic power which can enable her to function effectively in line with the dictates of her new status.

Women Leadership in the Aladura Churches

When Christianity was introduced to Yorubaland, many women accepted the new religion with enthusiasm. But their attempts to re-enact their hitherto traditional religious status in the new faith was subtly rebuffed. Women leadership in the church at the initial stage was unsuccessful because the foremost mainline churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and the Baptist) were not well disposed to it. This was due to their conservative interpretation of the biblical injunctions (I Timothy 2:11-15; I Cor. 14:34-35) earlier discussed in this paper. However, with the emergence of the Aladura Churches as from the second decade of the 20th century, women began to occupy notable leadership positions in these independent churches.

The churches often classified as Aladura are the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C), Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S), Church of the Lord (Aladura) (C.L.A) and the Celestial Church of Christ (C.C.C). These churches began to emerge as from the second decade of the 20th century as a result of the charismatic activities of a good number of individuals. They include Pastor Ayo Babalola, St. Moses Orimolade, Pastor Josiah Oshitelu, Pastor Samuel Bilewu Oschoffa, Sofia Odunlami, Captain Abiodun Akinsowon, among others.

Despite the highly intimidating numerical strength of women in the mainline churches coupled with their active participation in various church activities, they have been systematically excluded from the ordained ministry and the hierarchical structure. But given the experience of the Aladura Churches and that of the Pentecostal and neo-pentecostal churches, there has been a radical departure from the status quo. Owanikin lends credence to this position:

There has been a remarkable revolution against the conservative order of male chauvinism and domination practised by the early mission churches on the part of women evangelists, visionaries and church founders, mostly within the Charismatic and Pentecostal folds.¹⁴

As it has been noted earlier in this paper, the rights of women have certainly been curtailed by the role(s) assigned to them by a patriarchal society which the Yoruba nation epitomizes. The division of labour and social distribution of roles among the Yoruba have been the root cause of the psychological male-female dichotomy. The discrimination against women in respect of church leadership has been aggravated due to African cultural dictates buoyed-up by taboos and superstitions. The acceptance of this cultural norm in the church can be seen as a product of gender arrogance on the part of men to maintain the traditional status quo and the seeming total submissiveness on the part of women. This postulation agrees with Baur’s position:

Men strive to dominate and are reluctant to listen and accept; while women are too ready to submit, thus neglecting initiative and leadership. In the pastoral work of the church, these attitudes ... would be enhanced by the priestly-hierarchical mentality that sees women as only fit to receive and obey.¹⁵

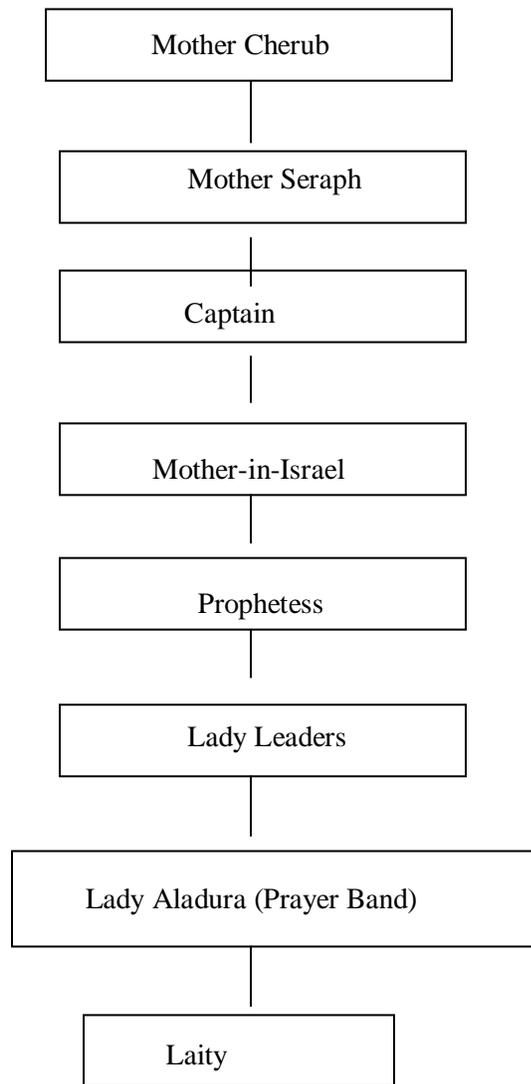
However, contrary to the rigid stance of the mainline churches on the status of women concerning the controversial issue of spiritual leadership in the church, the Aladura Churches in Yorubaland have toed the line of the Montanist Movement.¹⁶ This schismatic group in the early church accorded women the right to hold positions of authority in the church. For instance, Montanus (the sect’s leader) gave women, especially, Maximilla and Priscilla positions of authority in the church. This probably made him to incur the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is important to note that at the formative stages of some of the Aladura Churches in Yorubaland, many women played active and notable roles. Examples of such women were Sophia Odunlami and Captain Abiodun Akinsowon of Cherubim and Seraphim society. Miss Odunlami (later Mrs Ajayi) was a member of “Egbe Okuta Olowo Iyebiye”, otherwise called “Precious Stone” or “Diamond Society”. The prayer group metamorphosed to “The Faith Tabernacle” that later became the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C).

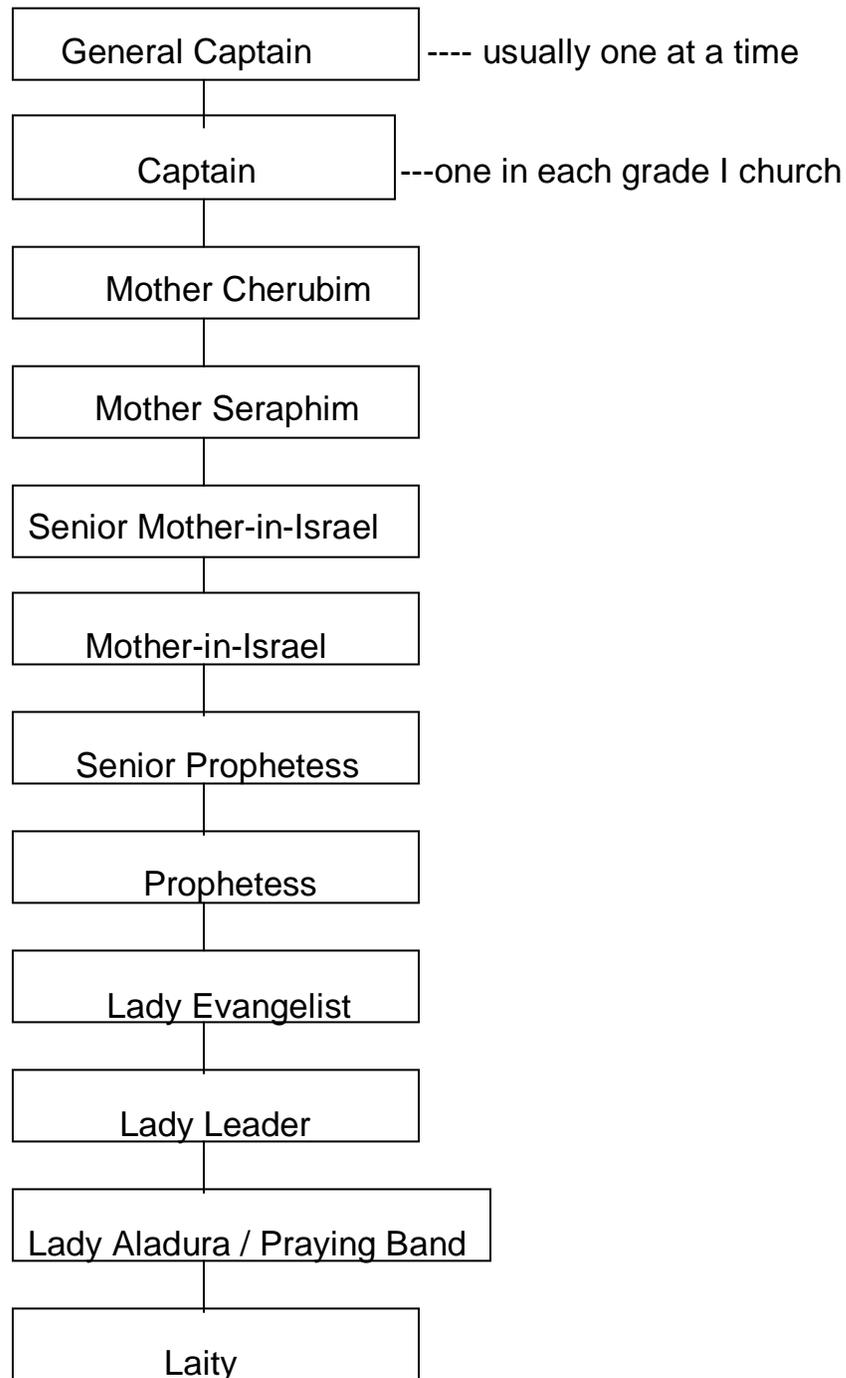
Miss Odunlami was said to be a wonderful instrument in the hand of God for healings and deliverance.¹⁷ She gave a prophecy that only rain water mixed with lime juice could effectively cure the influenza epidemic which ravaged Yorubaland as from the second decade of the 20th century. On 18th June 1925, Abiodun Akinsowon felt into a trance when she tried to look into the chalice carried by the Catholic Archbishop on Corpus Christi public procession. She regained consciousness after twenty-one days under the care of the Aladura Band led by Saint Moses Orimolade.¹⁸ She became the first visioner of the Aladura Band that later became the Cherubim and Seraphim Society. After her separation from St. Moses Orimolade in 1929, Captain Abiodun Akinsowon became the spiritual head of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, while Orimolade adopted the designation: “The Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Society”.

Apart from Abiodun Akinsowon, the success of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society in Ondo was attributed to the efforts of Madam Christianah Olatunrile. She was a successful timber contractor before joining the society. She was hitherto the Iyalode of St. Stephen’s Anglican Church, Ondo and the first General Superintendent of the Western Conference of the church as from 1931. The important roles played by women in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church at the formative stage has made it imperative for the various factions of the church to accord due recognition to women in their hierarchical structures. The recognition given to women in the leadership structure of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church can be seen from the charts below:

General Female Officers (in many factions of C & S)

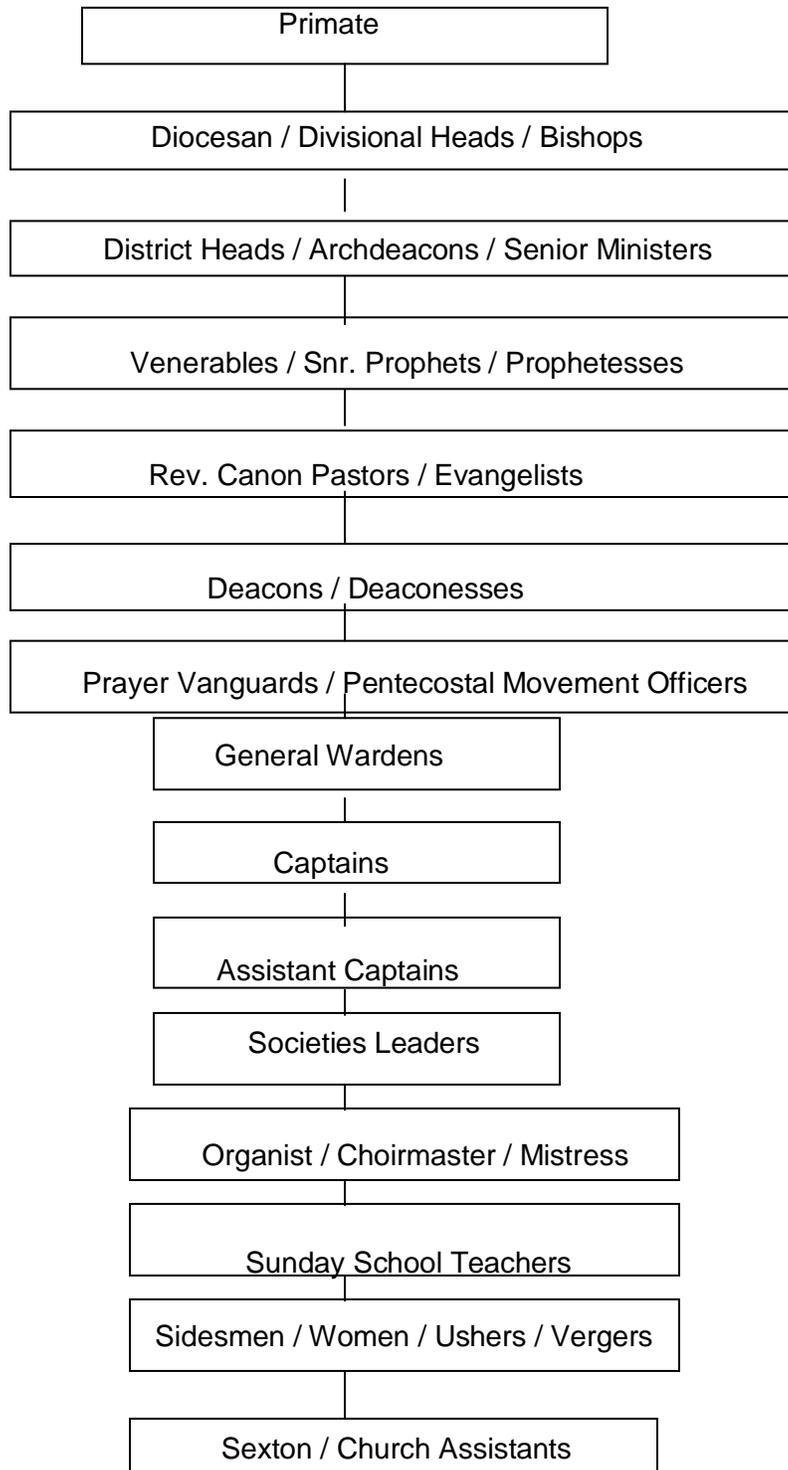


Female Officers of Atunbi Mose Cherubim and Seraphim Church Worldwide



In Ekiti, two schismatic groups of The Church of the Lord (Aladura) are being led by women. Most Rev. Mother R.O. Gbadura of the Church of God (Aladura), Ikere-Ekiti and Primate (Mrs) E.O. Babayemi of the Jerusalem Church of the Lord International, Ado-Ekiti are leaders of their respective churches with large number of male and female worshippers. They also have many branches in other parts of Yorubaland. Also, Rev. Mother Besede Owayin is a leader in the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in Ekitiland. In fact, the position of Primate being currently occupied by Dr (Mrs) E.O. Babayemi is the highest in her church. The common administrative and hierarchical structure for male and female in the Jerusalem Church of the Lord International and some other splinter groups of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) is shown in the chart below:

Hierarchical Structure of JCLI for Male / Female (2005)



Note: The Jerusalem Church of the Lord International (JCLI). The church is a schismatic group from the Church of the Lord, Aladura (CLA).

In the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C), a woman could establish a church through her revival or spiritual charismatic gifts, but she could not be the Pastor or Shepherd in Charge of the Church. This is because in the C.A.C’s doctrinal belief, women are not allowed to lead. However, the charismatic leadership of Prophetess D.S. Oyekan, founder of Christ Apostolic Church (a.k.a Agbala Daniel), Evangelist Bola Are and Evangelist Bola Odeleke of “Agbala Olorun Kii bati”, Lagos exemplify women leadership in the church.

Besides, the “Good Women Society” of the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C) epitomises the important roles played by women in the Aladura Churches in Yorubaland. It is worthy of note that the restrictions hitherto placed on women by the mainline churches notwithstanding, the Aladura movement, as can be seen from the examples cited above, has rediscovered the spiritual leadership of women. The successes recorded by the women church leaders earlier mentioned seem to have inspired many spiritually inclined women in the various churches in Yorubaland. This development has spurred some other churches to assign more leadership roles to women in their fold.

Conclusion

From our discussion thus far, it can be deduced that the controversy surrounding the question of leadership role for women in the church has caused division within the orthodox Roman Catholics and the Protestants. Recently, about fifty priests of Anglican Church threatened to quit the church over the decision of its top echelon to ordain female priests. This paper has also revealed that Christian Church teachings have over the years justified women’s subordination in the church and society. However, the Aladura Churches in Yorubaland having imbibed certain elements of the traditional religion and culture, have provided alternative positions that have accorded due recognition to women in respect of church leadership. The denial of women their rights in respect of pastoral (leadership) positions by the mainline churches, ostensibly in obedience to Pauline theology, is in matters of religion quite alien to the Yoruba and incompatible with the people’s cultural and traditional religious values. Apart from holding leadership positions, women in Aladura Churches are also engaged as seers and glassolates. They perform ablution, purificatory rites and certain maternal health care services. It is therefore recommended to other churches to put in place necessary arrangements that will make women in their churches to play more pragmatic roles that are germane to the health, maternal and reproductive needs of women in Yorubaland.

Finally, women should strive hard to ensure that there is gender balance in the enrolment of students into the theological colleges of the various churches. If women wish to occupy prime positions in church leadership structure, they need to fight all obstacles militating against the theological education of women. This is one of the essential requirements for church leadership.

References

1. J.O. Awolalu, “Women from the Perspective of Religion”, in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume X / 2, December, 1976, p. 95.
2. P.O. Kemdirim, “Gender in the Cosmology of World Religions”, in *D.I. Ilega (ed.), Studies in World Religions*, Ado-Ekiti, Hamaz Global Publishing Co. 2001, p. 130.
3. P. O. Kemdirim, “Gender in the . . .”, p. 131.
4. J. Hastings, et al (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. III, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980, p. 582.
5. P. O. Kemdirim, “Gender in the . . .”, p. 131.
6. J. Bowden (ed.), *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, London, Continuum Publishing Company, 2005, p. 1230.
7. J. Bowden (ed.), *Christianity*. . . , p. 1231.
8. O. Obijole, “St. Paul on the Position of Women in the Church: Paradox or a Change?”, in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume XIX / 1, June, 1987. Also, G.K. Falusi, “Women from the Biblical Perspective”, in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Volume X / 2, December, 1976, p. 159.
9. O. A. Orebiyi, “Dynamism of the Bible and Yoruba Culture”, in D.O. Akintunde (ed.), *African Culture and the Quest for Women’s Rights*, Ibadan, Sefer Books Ltd., 2001, p. 73.
10. J. A. Omoyajowo, “Women’s Experience of God and Ultimate: The Africa Example”, in *New Ecumenical Research Association Conference Paper*, Seoul, Korea, August 9th -15th, 1984, p.1.
11. E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Ikeja, Longman Nigeria Limited, 1982, pp. 129-139; K. Kojo Anti, “Women in African Traditional Religion”, Washington, a paper prepared for the Women Centre, Eastern Washington University, U.S.A, unpublished, p. 1.
12. B. Awe, “The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System”, in Alice Schlegel (ed.), *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 144.
13. O. W. Ogbomo, “Women, Power and Society in Pre-Colonial Africa”, in S.A. Ajayi (ed.), *African Culture and Civilization*, Ibadan, Atlantis Books, 2005, p. 361.
14. R. M. Owanikin, “The Priesthood of Church Women in Nigerian Context”, in M.A. Oduyoye (ed.), *The Will to Rise*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 206.
15. J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, London, Paulines Publications Africa, 1998, p. 481.
16. H. R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, pp. 63-65.
17. D. Ayegboyin & S. A. Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective*, Lagos, Greater Heights Publications Limited, 1999, p. 66; P. A. Adebisi, *History of Christianity in Ekitiland, 1893-1973*, Lagos, C.S.S Limited, 2003, p. 131.
18. J. A. Omoyajowo, *Diversity in Unity: The Development and Expansion of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria*, Ibadan, U.P, 1982, p. 85.