

# DOCTRINAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN INDIGENOUS SABBATHARIANISM IN IGBOLAND, 1916-2000.

By

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## **Abstract**

*Indigenous Sabbatharianism was found in Akwete in Southern Igboland in 1916. Right from that time, attempts have been made at various stages to improve on the doctrine of the movement. The movement in its Igbo origin was not a Hebraist movement. It was a movement found by a Prophet figure Dee Ekeke Lolo, who was first converted to Christianity before claiming to have caught a vision in which God instructed him to observe the Saturday rest. Initially the movement in its practices syncretized traditional, Jewish and Christian religious traditions. With the passage of time and the patronage of the movement by educated individuals, the doctrine of the movement began to be improved towards pure Christian doctrine but still with eyes towards observing Jewish holidays, Saturday worship and some of the laws in Leviticus 11, 12 15 and Deuteronomy 14. It is the survey of the doctrinal transformations that have taken place in the movement that is the task of this paper.*

## **Introduction**

Sabbatharianism entered Nigeria in 1914 (Omolewa, 1978), particularly in Western Nigeria but had two differing roots in Igboland. The first, orthodox or western missionary variety, Seventh Day Adventists appeared in 1922/3. The Larger history is not the concern here (see Chuta, 1986). The second variety, the indigenous Sabbatharianism which emerged in 1916 was found by a prophet figure known as Dee Ekeke Lolo (Anyaegebu, 1993). This variety which emerged in Akwete in southern Igboland has flowered and crystallized into different forms. The emergence of the indigenous Sabbath movement has added a new face in the Igbo church historiography. This movement has been grouped together with other independent churches under the genre of Aladura churches. A close look at the Aladura churches shows that indigenous Sabbatharianism differed from the other independent churches in its observance of the Sabbath day (Saturday) rest.

Literature on independent churches has burgeoned, Turner (1965), Peel (1986) and Omoyajawo (1982), studied various groups in their Yoruba origin. Iwuagwu (1971), pioneered a focus on Igboland but not on Sabbatharianism. Turner (1976) in his discussion on new religious movements in Africa gave a short shrift to Sabbatharianism. The Hebraist movement identified by Turner, was yet a small but distinctive sect that had turned its back on traditional religious practices by its repudiation of the magico-religious elements. There are besides, other peculiar characteristics of the Hebraist movement. First was its adoption of the biblical traditions of the Old Testament, with its overt identification with ancient Israel. Members of this group regard themselves as African Jews. Second was the rejection of the

New Testament and its distinctive Christology of the Christian position. What it means is that, the Hebraist movement identified by Turner was not a Christian movement as such, as Kalu (1975) has observed.

Generally, in its adoption of some of the Jewish religious observances, the Hebraist movement upheld the Sabbath (Saturday) as the congregational day of worship as against the Sunday observance of the western Christian tradition. In practice therefore, the Hebraist movement discussed by Turner was an East African Phenomenon. This is buttressed by the fact that in West African sub-region, up to the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there could not be identified any sect of the Hebraist type. For in the first and second decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century western missionary Christianity was firmly rooted in the sub-region. Therefore, any religious movement that appeared in the sub-region during the period had the stamp of one or the other elements of the Christian orthodoxy. The doctrinal transformations that have taken place in the course of the growth and development of Sabbatharianism in Igboland in the period, 1916-2000, is the concern of this paper.

Dee Ekeke Lolo, the founder of indigenous Sabbatharianism was originally a traditionalist before converted to Garrick Braide Christianity by Garrick Braide men. Much clarification is called for and this is related to the background of Dee Ekeke Lolo. This background reaffirms the mode by which indigenous Sabbatharianism appeared in Igboland. This points back to Garrick Braide movement which entered Igboland just before the death of Garrick Braide in 1918 (Kalu, 1977, Tasié 1978, Chuta, 1986; Anyaegbu, 1993). Garrick Braide was a native of Bakana in the Niger Delta region and was a member of the Anglican Niger Delta Pastorate, Anglican Church. As a zealous member of the church, he led a prayer group and increasingly became charismatic. Initially, he enjoyed the support of his Parish Priest, H.A. Kemmer. But as he became very popular and turned to widespread healing and exorcism, official clout drove him beyond the pales of the Niger Delta pastorate to found his own movement in 1914. Members of his movement were dressed in white calico, and moved from one community to the other calling people to abandon traditional worship and return to the worship of one true God. In places they visited, they routed shrines of deities in demonstration of their faith and to show people that the traditional gods were powerless when confronted with the power of Jesus.

Trade between the Delta and southern Igboland was extensive, so, the influence of Garrick Braide movement was soon felt on the Igbo seashores. Akwete is a coastal town and was known as a gateway between the Delta region and the Igbo hinterland. Dee Ekeke Lolo, a retired soldier of the British Royal force, was recuperating in his home town Akwete when Garrick Braide men struck the town in 1916. Moses Ukwu and one Benjy, both Garrick Braide lieutenants led the movement into Akwete. On their arrival with their group, they marched round the town, chanting victory songs and finally headed to the famous Ñwaiyieke Shrine, routed it and set the shrine on fire. Dee Ekeke who witnessed the whole episode, was among the first to surrender his traditional cult objects and joined the Garrick Braide Christianity. He tarried with the group for about a week, before he claimed to have caught a vision which posited Saturday (Sabbath) as the day of rest as against the practice of the Braide Christianity which observed Sunday rest. He pulled out and began to observe the Sabbath day rest in his house with the members of his family.

Dee Ekeke, evolved a ritualism, which emphasized spiritual healing and exorcism; and which rejected traditional religion. In his ministration, there were much of traditional symbols, practices and instruments. Ritual was more important than the scriptures, precisely because he was an illiterate. He had a Bible which was bound with a red ribbon and never made reference to it. His major thrust was healing, and deliverance. He invoked the name of Jesus in his ministrations but only as a òChristus victorö. The Bible was not central to his ministry nor was there any affirmation of the lordship of Jesus Christ which was a major indices for identifying a Christian organization. He established a Sabbath healing home in Akwete. Although he observed the Sabbath day rest, in practice, his ministry was neither Christian nor Jewish. He could not develop any doctrine of his own but depended heavily on what he gathered from Christian and traditional religions elements.

Dee Ekeke trained a number of young man who later founded Sabbath missions. Among this protégés were, Jeremiah Osolu, Mark Onuabuchi of Amichi and Nwoye Ikpeogu from Ogbunike. Mark Onuabuchi was the most enterprising and carried the Sabbath movement further in to various areas in Igboland. He married about seventeen wives who with their sons and daughters established new branches of his mission-òChrist healing Sabbath Missionö. The traditional core base insured that his group like that of Dee Ekeke Lolo was not a Christian organization and it emphasized healing and deliverance. He held tenaciously to the traditions bequeathed to him by Dee Ekeke Lolo.

Michael Amakeze (Alias Musa) of Nnobi was among the protégés of Mark Onuabuchi. He demurred the over does of traditional symbols and practices in Mark's ministration and proceeded to refine the Sabbath movement. He found his own Sabbath organization, known as Holy Sabbath of Christ the king. He moved on to introduce some Christian tradition elements in his ministration, by affirming the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ and his atonement for our sins. He established ministerial institute in the hope that this may aid in the solidification of the centrality of the Bible in the movement. In spite of this, his theology remained unsystematic and confusing. He continued to perform animal sacrifice for sin arguing that new sins require these. As he was not grounded in theology, he could not grasp the difference in the Old Testament forms, such as tresspass and sin offerings. Amakeze utilized local ingredients extensively. His methods of purification and initiation rituals as described by former adherents depict unacceptable elements when judged by the scriptures. His process of purification and initiate

involves weird rituals which commences with a ten-day dry fast (without fluid or food). When the individual is drastically weakened, he would be led out to an open space at night, stark naked and positioned in a circle decorated with four sets of palm fronds and candles. Palm fronds in Igboland is a sacred symbol, signifying the presence of spirits, invoked for all manners of purposes (Kalu, 1991). After offering some prayers, a kid goat is used to cleanse the body as the procession wades to a river bank. Incantations continue, until the goat is thrown away and the client wades into the water for a ritual bath. Amakeze's Sabbath brand, mixes Christian confessions with cultic practices, some of which are convergent with Igbo traditional religiosity.

Hyde onuaguluchi, a protégé of Amakeze was not satisfied with the level of doctrinal development in Amakeze's Sabbath practices and disagreed with Amakeze's doctrines and practices. Perhaps, because he was educated, he moved on to place the Bible as central and accepts Christ's sacrifices for our sins as final (once and for all). He rejects animal sacrifice for sin. He further created a community of New Israel which observes Jewish calendar, laws, religions practices and names as refined through Christ. Healing and deliverance are part and parcel of the total gamut of ministry and not the sole emphasis. He goes beyond others before him to recapture the undergirding Hebrew religiosity. He has established his Sabbath mission, God Sabbath mission in his home town, Achi.

A strange element in this regard is the growth of Riches of Christ Sabbath mission, led by Edozie Mba. He has a chequered history. Suffice it to say that in 1973, he led a number of zealous scripture union members to form Evangelical Pentecostal ministry-Riches of Christ Ministry. It was a Sunday, observer Pentecostal ministry. Disappointed by the intrigue surrounding the appointment of leadership for Grace of God Mission after Riches of Christ had agreed to integrate with Grace of God in 1978, Mba pulled out and consolidated his group, Riches of Christ mission. An internal crisis which ensued in the church in the first half of the 1980s shattered his group into four different ministries. Edozie Mba recuperated in the United States for a while, took a flight to Israel and returned later to declare his conversion to the truth of Sabbath. His Sabbath mission is still Pentecostal but observes Jewish holidays, Saturday worship and some of the laws in Leviticus 11, 12, 15 and Deuteronomy 14.

Certain general doctrinal features of the indigenous Sabbath movement become clear:

- They lack a strong systematic theology and are, therefore eclectic in the use of the Bible. Much of the doctrines betray poor understanding of the basic elements in biblical theology.
- The indication is that some groups have moved towards a predominantly Christian position but are looking back to ensure that no iota of the law is lost. Weak biblical theology may explain this.
- There is yet no case of complete practice of the Orthodox Judaism among the Sabbath movements in Igboland.

**Conclusion:**

From the foregoing it becomes evident that Sabbatarianism entered Igboland through two different modes-the western missionary variety represented by the Seventh Day Adventist and the Sabbath movement initiated by Dee Ekeke Lolo which flowered into various forms as we have today in Igboland.

Dee Ekeke Lolo did not develop any doctrine. As an illiterate, he merely syncretized Christian ideas with the traditional religious cult practices. He opened a Sabbath Healing and deliverance clinic. He invoked the name of Jesus Christ in his healing ministrations but only as a *Christus victor*. His protégé, Mark Onuabuchi also an illiterate held tenaciously on the traditions he inherited from his mentor, Dee Ekeke Lolo.

It was Michael Amakeze, the founder of the Holy Sabbath of Christ the king mission, who began to prune the traditional core base embedded in the practices of his master Mark Onuabuchi. In his Christology he tried to follow the orthodox Christian stand but was choked up by only accepting the atonement made by Jesus Christ for the sins, we inherited from Adam. He performed sin offerings for sins committed by individuals. Hide Onuaguluchi, the founder of God's Sabbath mission, Achi, who was trained by Amakeze demurred the practice of performing sin offering by Amakeze and went further to affirm that Jesus Christ atoned for our sins once and for all. He therefore condemned the performance of sin offering. Thus improving on the doctrines he inherited from Amakeze. While some of the Sabbath groups were developing towards Christianizing their doctrines but still held to the observation of Saturday as the day of worship, Edozie injected his own Sabbath brand. This time, he retained his Pentecostal doctrinal traditions but with some amendments. He observed the Saturday worship, Jewish holidays and some of the laws observed in orthodox Judaism. In fact up to the period of this study, Sabbath movement was still grappling with its doctrinal position. They stood, between Christianity and Judaism.

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