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## **Pilgrimage to Imeko (Nigeria): An African Church in the Time of the 'Global Village'**\*

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### **African Independent Churches: 'glocal' churches**

African Independent Churches, or AICs (to use the expression established by English-speaking missionaries), do not form a very coherent or homogeneous category<sup>1</sup> The diversity of these churches stems largely from the fact that their 'independence' has been established on the basis of an ethnic identity, which leads to churches being referred to as 'indigenous' or 'national', or by a split following [---] among other things [---] a refusal by the mother church to allow equality, as with the 'separatist' churches of South Africa, or on the initiative of a prophetic revelation bearing a messianic message, or by an innovation in ritual or healing technique, where they are known as 'prophetic churches'. Such autonomy, which is naturally viewed in relation to the hegemony of 'white' Christian churches, is not without its ambivalence. Missionary evangelism in Africa has itself contributed to the spread of Christian culture and civilization, which claims the authority of universal values and aims to impose its lifestyle on the whole world, yet it has also helped to construct or reinforce particular ethno-cultural or ethno-religious features, in some cases through a systematic policy of translating the Scriptures into indigenous languages. The number of African Independent Churches is, therefore, as much the expression of an aspiration towards autonomy as of sudden new developments in the process of 'indigenization' of Christianity, espoused by the missionaries themselves. This paradox in the missionary enterprise is especially evident within the Protestant sphere of influence, since its missionary strategy consisted of basing the hegemony of a homogeneous, fundamentally Biblical, religious culture on reducing the number of churches or denominations, thus promoting local or national forms of appropriation of prophetic organization, liturgy or spiritual healing.

The transnational authority claimed by the prophetic or 'ethnic' churches constructed on a Christian matrix, of which the Aladura churches of Nigeria are a particularly vivid illustration, is inseparable from their aspiration to be a 'Church like all the others' (that is, their mimetic zeal). While some nowadays aspire to 're-evangelize' Europe, this is done in the name of an evangelical message, which [---] they say [---] has been forgotten in Europe ('return to sender', as it were) and not in order to Africanize it [---] although this in no way prevents the initial message being enriched on the round trip by some of the virtues of 'African spirituality'<sup>2</sup>.

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\* Translated by Karen George

<sup>1</sup> For a good study focusing on South Africa, see Kiernan (2000).

<sup>2</sup> I am thinking of the healing ministry practised by Monsignor Milingo, former Archbishop of Zambia, in Rome itself [---] see Gerrie ter Haar (1996).

The African Independent Churches, in their multiplicity and diversity, present certain common features that provide evidence of a sort of 'hybrid precipitate' of African ritualism and colonial bureaucratic legalism, of concern with the efficacy of magic and pragmatism about the power of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup>. Tolerance of the pagan coexists with a zeal for liturgical orthodoxy. Individual aspirations find their full expression in a strong sense of community within 'tribal' churches or 'nations of prayer'. These churches impose an intense cultic life of prayer on their faithful throughout the whole week, despite the constraints of work, school or domestic life. But for Sunday worship, in particular, large crowds of several hundred people assemble [---] still more for itinerant evangelist campaigns. Members' lives, therefore, are a combination of completely localized community life (prayer groups, house churches, parishes) and exceptionally large mass gatherings linked to evangelist campaigns or pilgrimages. In such crowds, no one knows anyone else, since they belong to a multiplicity of families, ethnic groups and even different nationalities, living mostly in an urban environment. Through trajectories of immigration, religious duties, the missions or other functions that some carry out, or even through visits by foreign dignitaries, the lives of members of these churches are increasingly governed by the networked rhythms of national and international exchanges.

By way of example, an eyewitness account, recorded in Brazzaville, of conversion to the Celestial Church of Christ [---] which is of Beninese and Nigerian origin [---] tells us more about the local context in which this Church became established in the Poto-Poto district than about its beginnings in Ivory Coast, the tribulations of its arrival in Seine-Saint-Denis in the Paris suburbs, or memories of visits to the Pastor-Prophet in his district of Lagos in Nigeria: in other words, the individual story of each member is part of the overall story of the church. The way in which the Celestial Church of Christ came to be set up in Brazzaville lies at the intersection of two stories of transnational life: that of a long-established shopkeeper from Benin, whose mother had been cured by a Celestial visionary at Cotonou, and that of a senior Congolese civil servant, a Catholic, who went to Paris for a serious operation and discovered the cause of his illness through diagnosis by a visionary from a Celestial Church parish in the suburbs of Paris. I could cite endless examples of such itineraries of conversion and healing, which are constantly crossing borders: like that of Bobo, a young mixed-race Gabonese from Libreville, who came across the Celestial Church of Christ during a journey to Abidjan, where he was desperately searching for his father, a white man, whom he was able to find thanks to a visionary from the parish of Cocody.

African prophetic churches of the Celestial type have confirmed their transnational authority by accompanying the movement of migration and formation of African Christian diasporas (Gerrie ter Haar, 1997[**1998 IN REFS**]). One of the first questions that arises is how ethnographic practice, which traditionally respects the unity of place and time and works on communities of belonging or relatively localized, interacquainted groups, can understand this new deal. It can be easy for ethnologists to find their markers in local roots and in the interacquainted groups, within which they are used to working: they are not really at ease in the anonymity of the crowd. But at a time when the actors of religion are moving from one African capital to another, along transnational religious networks, and where the religious itineraries of members of the same church provide evidence of individual mobility and of an accumulation of scattered reference sites, ethnologists must enlarge their 'terrain' to include the space in which the subjects they are investigating move around and become interacquainted.

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<sup>3</sup> See Comaroff and Comaroff (1997), especially Chapter 2.

In order to follow these prophets and pastors across borders, to live according to the rhythm of these migratory, fairly cosmopolitan individuals, anthropologists must themselves practise a travelling ethnography [---] what might be called a 'multi-sited' form of ethnography (Marcus, 1998), made up of a multiplicity of situations and intensive encounters, from a parish with its cults and its calendar of festivals, through journeys and pilgrimages, to contacts with the African diasporas of the European suburbs [---] and suspend their long visits, based on coresidence in a given place and re-examination of a familiar community, regularly revisited. Or at least, they must do so for a time: ethnographic investment in the life of a particular parish or local gathering remains vital, for several reasons.

First and foremost, there must be some counterpoint to frequenting exclusively literate, cosmopolitan individuals, and some better way of measuring the routinization of acts of worship in the community of believers. This might be provided by, for example, living with those who escort the group of the elect, sharing the preparations, vicissitudes, hardships, expectations and revelations of a journey of pilgrimage or the intense moments of prayer and the miracle cures in an evangelist campaign. Secondly, this is not a one-way traffic: it cannot be said that we simply pass from a local, ancestral religiosity, rooted in relations of belonging to family, village or neighbourhood, to a mass religiosity that finds an appropriate place of expression in the anonymity of summarily converted sheds, abandoned former cinemas or stadia rented for the occasion. Both similarly distanced from the Sunday meetings of instituted or established churches, two movements well and truly intersect or coexist: (1) the movement towards a mass phenomenon, which matches a certain type of proselytism and missionary 'crusade' (calling on the virtuosi of media evangelism like Reinhard Bonnke), where the crowds thrill to a collective liturgy made up of chants and thundering sermons, as well as to spectacular evidence of miracles and healing; and (2) a movement towards the recreation of communities, relying on the initiative of small prayer groups, district meetings or 'house' churches.

To talk about 'macroethnography', as Arjun Appadurai does (1991: 197) is probably rather provocative and likely to lead to some misunderstanding, since the work of anthropologists takes its meaning solely from localized situations of interaction or interlocution, where they engage with the actors. Even a phenomenon like globalization can always be understood in the given situation, through a localized entrée. However, there is risk in these 'glocal' situations, because of the absence of markers derived from long familiarity with the 'terrain' and deeper knowledge of the history of local cultic traditions (from the Bwiti to the Vodou [---]) not to speak of the risk of giving way to journalistic investigation or religious tourism. Can we still talk about anthropology, when 'in-depth' knowledge of the cultural matrix<sup>4</sup> [---] which gave rise to the description of ethnography as a kind of 'thick description' (in Geertz's sense, multiple layers of meaning relating to the same event or the same ritual act) [---] can no longer be mobilized, or is revealed as irrelevant? In reality, local cultural matrices are widely transmitted (especially among the young) through a network culture that is fostered by frequenting the same reference sites (holy places, mother parishes, soon even Internet sites), by the memory of the same events marking the history of the church (death of the Prophet, the church's fiftieth anniversary), and by the maintenance of interacquaintanceships formed during migrations and pilgrimages. The circulation

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<sup>4</sup> What, for example, has become of the relevance of Yoruba culture or voodoo for understanding the depth of ritual in a ceremony in the Aladura Churches, whether for the anthropologist or for the grassroots Congolese or West Indian congregation? Cf. Adogame (1999).

of sacred (or contested) texts, of printed material and of audio or video cassettes has overtaken local cultural codes and initiatory secrets.

The network and media culture in which converts to Pentecostalism are immersed (prayers, Bible readings, witnessing conversions, deliverance and miracles etc.) means that they find themselves in the Sunday meeting, in large gatherings at evangelist campaigns and in weekday prayer groups, all within the same delocalized community of 'brothers in Christ' [---] in what is, to all intents and purposes, a virtual meeting of believers (Marshall-Fratani, 1998). This culture is by no means foreign to the African prophetic churches; however, even though globalization is generally synonymous with a loss of sense of place, African-style transnationalization goes hand in hand with a strategy for territorializing the religious identity within an enlarged space. 'African-style transnationalization' describes the expansion, beyond its initial borders, of a religion that may have been born of a local syncretism, and is certainly rooted in a reference territory, notably through attachment to holy places, as well as marked by certain original features of its ethnic and national identity, such as the use of an ethnic language regarded as sacred (Yoruba or others). Such a process can be illustrated by the histories of Senegalese Mouridism, Ivory Coast Harrism, Congolese Kimbanguism [---] or that of the Celestial Church of Christ. This is the example I favour, and I will develop it here by focusing attention on the implications of a pilgrimage, showing that the model of the primitive, universal Church, symbolized by the gathering of angels of God (celestial beings), is still confronted by the demons of ethnic and national identities, and that migrant religion may go hand in hand with an overweening parish-type logic. This is perhaps one of the major differences that, within the globalization of 'indigenous' forms of Christianity (Brazilian or Korean, European or African), separate the churches of the evangelical or Pentecostalist sphere of influence and the prophetic African churches.

### **The Celestial Church of Christ: migration and the umbilical bond**

The establishment of the Celestial Church of Christ in Africa has been recorded over a long period of time, and this clearly shows that its expansion has not really followed [---] or at least, did not initially [---] what might be called a 'missionary strategy'. Somewhat in the image of the way Senegalese Mouridism has become established worldwide, in which traders have played the role of 'missionaries' as much as do marabouts, or the way Islam has expanded in Black Africa, economic migrants and political refugees have, without any doubt, provided the main base for the transnational expansion of the Church, and they remain its chief agents. The focus of the original revelation is situated immediately next to the border between French-speaking Benin [---] formerly Dahomey [---] and English-speaking Nigeria. The Prophet and Founder, Oschoffa, was a grandson of slaves and Yoruba migrants from Nigeria, and he was dedicated to God at the time of his birth by his Methodist father, who had Dahomey citizenship and lived in Porto Novo. Although the Church was officially founded in 1947 in Dahomey, following various revelations, in 1951 the Prophet went to Nigeria to escape persecution, invited by Toffin fishermen from lakeside villages who had introduced the Church into Nigeria in 1950. The first Celestial community in Ivory Coast was also set up in the 1950s, as a result of the immigration of a classmate of Oschoffa, a railway employee. This breaching of the borders imposed by the coloniser, against a background of migration, exile and persecution, helped to forge the identity of this Church and facilitated its expansion into other countries in Africa. It was through the intermediary of Benin migrants,

fleeing the Kerekou regime or attracted by the profits to be made from black gold, that the Church was transplanted to Gabon and throughout Equatorial Africa in the 1970s. Its establishment in Europe and the United States was due mainly to Celestial migrants originating from Ivory Coast or Nigeria, often students or managers. The Diocese of France and the Overseas *Départements* and Territories was largely founded by Ivory Coast Celestial Christians; since 1986 it has been led by Emmanuel Oschoffa, one of the Prophet's sons, and is frequented by many West Indians, among others. The Diocese of London and the USA Diocese have set up web sites.

Establishment was achieved in most countries through 'sanctuaries' that were initially set up in homes, enabling the people known as 'visionaries'<sup>5</sup> to hold their clairvoyant consultations or to offer their services on all health or other problems to a clientèle in the host country, or through 'prayer groups' that brought together Benin or Nigerian migrants in the same community with 'national' Celestial Christians. For a first church and a 'mother parish' to be established, some gifts from a benefactor would be needed (a senior civil servant or a woman trader miraculously healed and converted by the Celestial Church), or else resources would be mobilized by a community of migrant workers. But, in most African countries, the politics of single-party regimes, with their bans on cults, sporadic exploitation of xenophobia and pursuit of immigrants, condemned this church to be built up clandestinely. This 'sojourn in the Wilderness' has given it a 'martyr church' identity, and has limited the proselytism of its visionaries.

Nowadays, the Celestial Church of Christ offers its followers a very intense and familiar parish life, an integrated and strongly hierarchized community that 'guarantees' separation between the sexes, but offers everyone prospects for promotion through the ranks. The terms 'Pastor', 'Evangelist' and 'Elder', which are Protestant-inspired and originally anticlerical, here cover a very elaborate system of ranks, which recalls traditional initiatory societies as well as Catholicism. The admission of those who have been baptized (Celestial Christians may also be called 'those who wear the robe') to the status of missionary, or 'Evangelist', is particularly highly valued; yet at the same time [---] and somewhat paradoxically [---] the proliferation of ranks, statuses and functions enables everyone to have some rank or other (according to a very African logic).

Such a strongly integrated and hierarchized parish life can be found in many African churches; but here it is inseparable from a regular obligation to make pilgrimages, especially for the member who wants to advance through the ranks. Pilgrimage to the holy places revealed by the Prophet institutes a strong link between the efficacy of ritual anointment, which controls advancement through the ranks, and the charismatic presence of the Pastor, who is the Spiritual Head of the Church.

### **From the tomb of the Prophet to the body of the Celestial City**

At the birth of African Independent Churches, their claim for identity immediately became strongly linked to the annexation of holy places, such as the place of the original vision or the burial site of the founding prophets, transformed into sites of oracles, intercession and offering, visions or healing (Ranger, 1987). This was a response to the missionaries' grip on ancestral lands and to their attempt to appropriate the tombs of kings and local chiefs under the pretext of saints' relics, thus creating a different geography of the sacred. The past and present history of the Celestial

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<sup>5</sup> For amplification of the issues relating to this ministry of visionaries, see Mary (1999).

Church of Christ clearly illustrates what is at stake in this choice or appropriation of the places that determine the religious itineraries of members and pilgrims.

The transnationalization of the Church took place on the basis of a strong identification and affiliation to the personality of its Founder, Papa Oschoffa, as well as on maintaining the umbilical link with the historic sites of his birth and of the revelation and with the places he lived and died, transformed into places of worship. The project for the Celestial City of Imeko, near the border between Benin and Nigeria, was conceived by the Prophet himself and implemented from 1983 onwards; it was connected with a desire to territorialize the Church's message. In accordance with the divine mission entrusted to the Prophet and to the vocation of Celestial Christians to embody the Assembly of the Saints on Earth, this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil, and [---] as it were [---] establishing Heaven on Earth. As in the whole Yoruba tradition, the efficacy of prayer requires the mediation and the annexation of a sacred space, or shrine. As Benjamin Ray has noted: 'Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices therefore require the construction of sacred space, where the forces of the invisible "other" world can be brought into this world and effectively controlled' (Ray, 1993: 268). Each parish of the Celestial Church of Christ is structured around a church conceived as a 'House of Prayer', which alone represents the part of the celestial world where members [---] likened to the angels of heaven in their white robes [---] regularly gather together. The church, the 'prayer garden', the hall of visionaries and the 'convent' of the sick are all consistently subject to ritual purification and sanctification, through the sprinkling of holy water and the lighting of candles, in the aim of driving out the forces of evil. The sick are called to labour in a sequestered setting, with long sessions of exposure, even lying on ground sanctified by being sprinkled with holy water, on a mat protected at the four corners by lighted candles, in order to receive the vibrations and the benefits of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The choice of the site of Imeko, as is always the case with when choosing to establish a holy place (the building of a certain church or the revelation of a particular river for baptisms by immersion) is obviously bound up with a vision reported to Papa Oschoffa in 1973 by a visionary, one Pa Muri Adoye (Adogame, 1999: 157). The chief message, delivered by the usual troop of angels dressed in white and descended directly from heaven, was that the Celestial City must be built at Imeko, on the precise site known as Igbo-Ifa, a forest traditionally dedicated to the Yoruba deity Orunmila, who presides over the divinatory cult of Ifa [---] with a view to completely rooting all pagan forces out of this place. The second message was that Mecca would be closed, that Jerusalem would cease to be in its accustomed place, and that God had chosen Imeko as the New Jerusalem. This provided confirmation of the mission first transmitted by Christ in person to Oschoffa on 29 September 1947 and renewed by two further apparitions of Christ, at Makoko and on the beach at Lagos in 1954: firstly, to found a Church to worship the true God and to break with fetishism and idolatry, and then to fulfil the promise of the original Christianity in Africa, to be the 'Ark'.

The conflict over the succession, which has lasted since the death of the Prophet in 1985, has been expressed in a variety of ways, including a fierce internal battle between claimants to the supreme title of Pastor for control of the holy places and for the right to fix places of pilgrimage. The Prophet had always said, as is written in the *Constitution*,<sup>6</sup> that if he died in Benin, he wanted

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<sup>6</sup> The first reference document on the Church, published in 1972 in Benin, in French, under the title *Lumière sur le Christianisme Céleste*, has been sharply and heavily debated by Bada's followers; it has never been translated into English. The other reference text, entitled *Constitution* (compiled in the form of 200 articles) was written in

to be buried at Porto Novo, the historic site of the mother parish, or if he were to die in Nigeria, at Imeko, the site of his own mother's tomb, and that his tomb should become a place of worship and a place of pilgrimage for his 'children'. It turned out that following a car accident in September 1985 on the road to Ibadan, which he miraculously survived for a time, the Prophet Oschoffa actually died in Nigeria. He was buried with great pomp, on 19 October, with quasi-national funeral rites, at Imeko, in the state of Ogun, as 'a son of Yoruba country', to the great disgust of partisans of the mother parish of Porto Novo in Benin. They even went so far as to mobilize the Benin government to reclaim the Prophet's body, the appropriation of which thus became a national and international political issue [---] and, given the considerable interests represented by the market in anointing devices, not just a symbolic one. Particular security measures were taken by the Nigerian police in response to rumours that the corpse would be kidnapped or disinterred. The 'Benin partisans' organized their own funeral rites for the Pastor, without the body, but in the presence of all his family in Porto Novo, who had seen him born and brought him up, and they then erected a statue to take the place of a tomb.

Bada, the leader of the Nigerian Church, subsequently negotiated with the Benin partisans for recognition as the Prophet's successor and Head of the Church, in exchange for his renunciation of the status of Pastor and, in particular, for re-establishing the Christmas pilgrimage to its original site at Seme, the beach area of Porto Novo. Although the choice of Seme Beach has been presented in Church tradition as the subject of a revelation and so 'prescribed by the Holy Spirit', in fact, since the departure of the Prophet for Nigeria in 1976, this pilgrimage had already been to Imeko, for various reasons including Kerekou I's Marxist-Leninist regime's policy of repressing any manifestations of religion. Repeated attempts at compromise, some of which were initiated by the Benin political authorities, between the partisans of the Mother Parish in Benin and the Nigerians have failed. In October 1996, at the height of a possible *rapprochement*, a global 'convention' at Imeko announced that a Christmas pilgrimage would be made to Seme that year. This involved the fantastic undertaking of organizing a two-part pilgrimage, on the PK10, adjoining the beach at Seme, with Bada dividing himself between the Nigerian Celestial Christians at Imeko on Christmas Eve and a visit to Seme on Christmas Day to anoint pro-Bada members from Benin and Ivory Coast: it aroused the indignation of members in Porto Novo, who put an end to this 'mascarade'. The great majority of Benin Celestial Christians now celebrate Christmas at Seme, in their eyes the only authentic site and the expression of their fidelity to a real national tradition; while the Nigerian Church continues to gather at Imeko, which is a sort of Rome or Vatican in the heart of the African bush, where thousands of pilgrims of the Nigerian persuasion, both English-speaking and French-speaking, from many African and European countries, now make their pilgrimages to the holy city. In such a context, it is clear that the journey of the pilgrim, whether from Benin, Congo, Ivory Coast or the West Indies, is part of a policy of marking places with an identity and, for the Church's leaders, part of an aim to territorialize a transnational religion that intends to maintain its umbilical bond with the land of the Ancestors. Here we are fairly close to what has been observed in the relationship of Kimbanguists in the town of Nkamba in the Congo (formerly Zaire), the place of origin of the Founding Prophet, Kimbangu, or of the great Magal pilgrimage of the Mouride Brotherhood, which celebrates the return from exile of Amadou Mbambare to the town of Touba in Senegal. Similarly, one could mention the building of the cathedral of Yamoussoukro by Houphouët-Boigny, the Father of the Nation of Ivory Coast, in

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English by the Prophet's advisers after 1976 and published with his agreement in 1980, but it is viewed by the Benin partisans simply as a text emanating from the Diocese of Nigeria.

his Baoule 'village', and looking at this from another angle, we can again see the same stakes, in terms of identity, in the building of Marian sanctuaries as part of the policy of constructing a Catholic national identity in France in the late nineteenth century (Hervieu-Léger, 1999: 97).

### **At stake in the pilgrimage: anointment and rank**

Nevertheless, it is difficult to maintain the comparison between the tradition of Christmas pilgrimage to the 'holy city' of Imeko and other equivalent traditions: pilgrimages to Mecca, to Lourdes, or for the Mouride Brotherhood, to Touba. Pilgrimage here is not a matter of personal choice linked to an undertaking or a promise; and even though proximity to the Prophet's tomb and the presence of the Pastor favour numerous miracles, it cannot be said that the expectation of the miracle of a change in one's life or a cure is the primary motive for the journey. After all, the Church offers each and every one in the parishes a permanent service of consultation with visionaries and of healing works.

Pilgrimage is no longer linked to the preferential or temporary choice of a pilgrim form of spirituality [---] as is illustrated in our societies by the success of pilgrimages (Hervieu-Léger, 1999). The journey to Imeko and the gathering at the tomb of the Prophet may be accomplished on the basis of a degree of filial piety. Celestial Christians from all across the world, who have never set foot on African soil and who did not know Papa Oschoffa in his lifetime, make it a duty to go and gather at his tomb, in the same way as they visit the places he lived in at Ketu (Lagos) or Porto Novo. Some dissidents, known as 'Oschoffists', who disagree with Bada make the pilgrimage to Imeko in order to bear witness to their exclusive fidelity to Oschoffa; they refuse to swear allegiance or submit to an obligation to be anointed and, moreover, they demand the temporary suspension of anointment so as to put an end to the trade in his blessings<sup>7</sup>. But in the Church's Constitution, the Christmas pilgrimage is described as a 'convocation' of members: it has been ordained by the Holy Spirit, and for 'consecrated' Evangelists, being in Imeko at Christmas is obligatory, if only because they must accompany the members who will have to be anointed on this occasion. In fact, the great mass of those who go on the pilgrimage do so first and foremost in expectation of the blessing of anointment. The spiritual power of sanctification and regeneration by holy oil on the forehead is, for Celestial Christians, part of the tradition inaugurated by Moses and by the 'sons of Levi' and part of the story of the redemption of the first of these, Aaron, who had committed the sin of idolatry. Anointment enables one to gain part of the power of the Holy Spirit, but above all it is the condition for advancement through the ranks, within a Church where everyone has a rank, from the simple *dehoto*, or Man of Prayer, up to the Supreme Evangelist, and where all have in front of them the example of what we might call a 'precursor'.

In its own way, this cultic strategy reinvents the essential link between an initiatory journey, rites of passage and change of status, for which the price to be paid must always be a sacrifice (Rivière, 1989). The whole strategy rests on the link established between: (1) anointment, which only the Prophet or the Supreme Pastor is empowered to perform; (2) advancement through the ranks, proposed by parish committees, which determines the place one occupies in the Church hierarchy; and (3) the fact that anointment takes place mainly during the annual pilgrimage to the holy places revealed by the Prophet. This last point is somewhat flexible in application, with the

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<sup>7</sup> This is the position of Ediemou Blin Jacob, a major historical figure of the Celestial Church of Christ in the Ivory Coast, who boasts of personally having a key to the mausoleum of the Prophet, because of his links with the family.

Pastor authorized to anoint at exceptional festivals, during visits to foreign countries (for members who cannot travel) and in isolated, newly-established parishes which are engaged in the battle against diabolical forces (in truth, these are often places of confrontation between 'factions' in the Church), or to anoint 'honorary Evangelists' who hold this title without having any priestly obligations [---] local worthies or figures whose political (and financial) support may prove decisive.

The efficacy of the ritual of anointment is predicated on a strong link between the charismatic presence of the Pastor, the Spiritual Head of the Church (with believers doing their best to touch his robe), and the power that emanates from holy places. At Christmas 1999, rumour was rife in all the parishes of the Celestial world that Pastor Bada was ill and had gone into hospital in London, and that he would probably not be able to go to Imeko. A Christmas at Imeko, on the approach of the Third Millennium, without the presence of the Pastor [---] the news was so unthinkable that many people thought it was an attempt at sabotage by opponents and dissidents. Should they continue to organize the pilgrimage or not? Bada's representative in Ivory Coast, the Diocese from which most French-speaking pilgrims come, decided (in relation to what is, we should remember, a 'convocation ordained by the Holy Spirit') to suspend the Christmas pilgrimage, except for 'consecrated' Evangelists and those who wanted to visit the Prophet's tomb; at the same time, it was announced that anointment would be performed by the Pastor during another festival at Imeko, in February 2000. One of the arguments put forward by the Head of the Diocese was that this was a good opportunity to separate the celebration of the festival of Christmas from the trade that surrounds anointment.

Thus, it is easy to grasp how the unity of the Church has become subject to recognition of the sole, same Prophet or Supreme Pastor, since he has an absolute monopoly over anointment and over the single, exclusive choice of the place of pilgrimage. We can also understand how the choice of place includes a major economic and political stake, for it offers each camp an opportunity not only to take stock and assemble its troops, but also to get back its 'anointment money'. For many believers (from either side), there is no doubt that the dispute over the place of pilgrimage (Seme or Imeko) is linked to a financial stake and that they think the other camp is just seeking to carry off all the currency in the business. This is probably also the reason why President Kerekou of Benin personally intervened several times in the problem of the succession and unity of the Church. In Africa, Church affairs rapidly become affairs of state.

### **The pilgrimage, first and foremost a journey**

Immersion in the 'global village' that is the Celestial City of Imeko during Christmas week opens up the basic congregation, at least for a few days, to a transnational community network. Such a unique gathering of Celestial Christians from many countries (and, above all, from Europe or the United States) is evidence of the global presence of the Church and of its unity. The presence of 'whites' (light-skinned West Indians and white journalists, or even researchers) is especially highly valued and validating. But the 'global village' of Imeko is in no way an emotional community of delocalized, deterritorialized individuals coming together in the same pilgrim spirituality. Spiritual and material preparations for the journey are made in the parishes, and, as a result, it is an

assembly of delegations from dioceses and from nations, each preceded by its 'totemic' banners<sup>8</sup>, that presents itself before the Pastor to be anointed. The Celestial Church is a federation of dioceses and nations, framed and guided by their own leaders.

Parish organization of the pilgrimage is a big affair, mobilizing all the parish officials and committees. On the procedural level, the head of the parish and a council of officials decide those to be promoted, firstly [---] for the simple baptized [---] to the rank of *dehoto* or Man of Prayer and, next, which grade others will attain within the three main bodies (Doctors, Visionaries and Evangelists). All are invited to be anointed by the Pastor. But, for each individual, this is only the beginning, since getting to Imeko is expensive, especially for the rank and file Church member. For someone living in Abidjan, in 1999, it cost about 35,000 CFA francs (practically the equivalent of the monthly minimum wage), including 15,000 francs contribution to travel costs (a seat in a coach, with driver and petrol), the same amount for the general organizational expenses of the Diocesan Headquarters, including obtaining group visas from the embassies of Ghana, Togo and Benin, and finally 5,000 francs for the anointment fees. The difficulty in planning the expenditure and the journey lies in the fact that, for example, out of 70 places booked in a coach for a parish, 10 days before departure, the parish head or the committee are sure of only 20 confirmed travellers. There is then some negotiation between the limited means of some individuals and the possibilities for redistributing the tithe, in which the parish committee may be able to demonstrate some generosity. The economy relating to anointment reveals in passing that, although these churches offer, in a statutory sense, possibilities for internal promotion that mean some people [---] especially the young unemployed or school 'drop-outs' [---] might be able to use the ministry of the vision as an opportunity for self-validation, to gain a position and a social role, all this is subordinate to the financial constraints on access to the blessing of anointment [---] a blessing that must be paid for.

For several years, pilgrims and coaches from all the parishes of Ivory Coast have massed together at the Bon Berger parish in Abidjan, situated between the airport and the sea coast, on the Grand Bassam road. This is, in fact, the original parish of the Head of the Diocese, and this gathering enables him, one might say, to review his troops and [---] according to his adversaries [---] levy his share of the fees for anointment. The journey to the 1998 pilgrimage mobilized about thirty coaches and nearly 2,000 believers to Abidjan, not counting those who flew in for the occasion, at least as far as Cotonou, and gathered in the host parishes to make the journey from Cotonou to Imeko (between 6 and 8 hours by coach, if all goes smoothly).

Therefore, the pilgrimage is first and foremost a journey, with risks and dangers: getting there and coming back cannot be taken for granted<sup>9</sup>. On the road, the uninterrupted litany of chants initially creates a joyous sense of departure, but the repetitive, almost compulsive dimension of the prayer and the hymns, coupled with the knowledge that a prayer meeting has already taken place every day for over a week, in the end dissipates this atmosphere. For the whole of Christmas week, life consists of nothing but group prayer and repeated chants. The unavoidable crossing of the paths of Benin partisans from Cotonou with pilgrims coming to Seme and those coming to Imeko takes place with affected mutual ignorance: they do not even greet one

<sup>8</sup> This organization into 'Christian villages' and 'nations of prayer', preceded by their totemic emblems, is also found on pilgrimage marches to St Faith's in Zimbabwe (Ranger, 1987: 179).

<sup>9</sup> The observations that follow draw partly on a journey I made to Imeko at Christmas 1998, organized through the (pro-Bada) Cotonou parish of Sikecodji. I am grateful to the Chairman of the Parish Committee, Paul Gonçalves, Secretary of the World Committee, for having facilitated this journey by obtaining my visa for Nigeria and, above all, arranging for me to be received with all honours as a 'French researcher' by Pastor Bada.

another, although they wear the same white robes. Equally astonishing is the fact that when the Imeko pilgrims have to cross Seme Beach or even Porto Novo, they are forbidden to stop, even though these are holy places for all Celestial Christians. Parish groups from the same camp, whose paths cross, are organized independently: some hire a coach, others a 'Titan' or big lorry, and others vans or bush taxis. Relations between parish groups and between national groups (from the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo etc.) are equally distant and, even though travellers can expect numerous setbacks on the way, mutual assistance is rather limited. Moreover, once on the spot, parish and [---] especially [---] national delegations remain relatively separate in their camping areas.

The whole route is marked by border crossings, involving long hours of waiting. You have to go through all kinds of checks, imposed by those 'have to eat', as they put it: that is, policeman, guards and customs officials, who [---] in the absence of any proper wages [---] hold the travellers to ransom and count on the fact that the pilgrims 'can pay, will pay' and are at their mercy, especially on the outward journey. One can understand the need to 'armour' oneself with prayer, possibly with 'strength prayers' or 'fighting prayers', in order to get to the Holy Land, a relative haven of peace and safety in the ocean of insecurity and danger that Nigeria represents for everyone. At Christmas 1998, our journey was an interminable epic in a hired coach, whose repeated engine breakdowns (it 'ran out of steam' and no longer allowed the vehicle even little jerks forward) eventually required an appeal to 'St Michael's fighting prayer', with four candles placed on the road at the four corners of the coach in order to drive away the forces of evil. Even the desperate driver (who was not a Celestial Christian) ended up leaving it to the Holy Spirit, and to his (and my) astonishment, the engine actually restarted, and we got there in the end. This long journey of hardships, in a hostile space inhabited by diabolical forces that form an obstacle to the progress of the angels towards the Celestial City, has all the characteristics of crossing that dangerous liminal zone to be found in initiatory rites of passage<sup>10</sup>.

### **To see 'the Celestial City'**

Imeko is a small village in a fairly hilly region, rather spread out; its native population and its market are largely sustained by [---] and probably mostly there as a result of [---] the pilgrimage. The appearance, in the depths of the bush, of big concrete buildings and rather disproportionately large installations, with building work often in the early stages, mostly incomplete, and sometimes reduced back to its foundations, may seem incongruous. At the outset, following a plan revealed through a celestial vision, the project was to build a vast cathedral, a Prayer Garden, a residence for the Pastor, inns for each diocese, a conference hall etc. Subsequent additions include a large statue of the Prophet and, in particular, his mausoleum [---] a vast glass case on top of the tomb, decorated with flowers, surmounted by a sculpture of Oschoffa's head and surrounded by staircases where believers come to give thanks.

All dioceses across the world were supposed to take part in funding the building of these places: symbolically, each diocese helped to fund a column in the cathedral under construction. This incomplete edifice, of which the base, the perimeter walls and some columns exist, functions

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<sup>10</sup> Rivière talks about this 'meso-world of the hazards of the journey and of the elsewhere' or about a 'mesocosm' situated between the microcosm of the village in the familiar world and the macrocosm of the fundamental universe (Rivière, 1989: 247).

in its virtual state, and though one can see the original plan in the image of these concrete girders rising to the sky, it has something of the surreal about it. On Christmas Eve, the lighting, especially the thousands of candles carried by the faithful, all dressed in white, lends these places a certain magic; but daylight brings back the crude reality of the concrete, the scrap iron, the piles of sand or breeze blocks, the rusty skips of machines [---] in a word, a vast building site. This space of crude concrete, formwork remains and rods of scrap iron is revealed as, on the whole, rather dirty for a holy place. Processions of spotless white robes stroll around in the middle of the rubbish that accumulates over many days from a large concentration of human beings. It should be said that the crowd, which congregates in this place for several days and nights, sets up where it can, sleeps on mats anywhere (under lorries, in the coaches, in the holy places), eats as it can, and also washes and lives as it can. The lack of collective facilities and of any real parking for cars, coaches and lorries transforms these holy places, day and night, into an immense, spreading camping ground. The rest of the year, apart from the building works, these sites lie relatively fallow, and teams of members occasionally come to clean the ground and to make some kind of preparations for the ceremonies.

### **Pastoral magic and spectacular liturgy**

The magic of the Pastor's presence, the agitation that surrounds the way he moves about and his gestures, in a night illuminated by candles and against the background of a massive assembly of white-clad members [---] all these seem necessary to give some consistency to the enchanted, imaginary picture of the Celestial City and to the feeling of the marvellous that continues to dominate the pilgrims' memory and narratives on their return. For his devotees, who often come from far away, the Pastor is a quasi-mythical, sacred or 'holy' figure. The 'little Vatican' of his residence and the figures surrounding it (the Pastor's secretaries; the diocesan Heads who have the rank of bishop; the *most*, who are the highest and most influential figures, looking rather like cardinals in their coloured robes) make one think of the court of the king of Abomey. You take off your shoes in all the places where the Pastor has walked on the ground (he walks barefoot, as do all 'consecrated' Evangelists); men go bare-headed in front of him. The Pastor is highly skilled in pomp, costume and staging, making dramatic use of events, varied responses, carefully studied pauses [---] and the mass media. He is a man of inner strength and charismatic power, enabling him to perform miracles and cures: people rush forward to touch him, hold up children and bring the sick to him. Because of his claim to succeed the Prophet-Pastor Oschoffa, Bada [---] who was only a clerk [---] is condemned to behave like a true prophet, making prophecies and foretelling miracles. Everything that happens during these intense periods, as well as in the following days (like the accident, which we sadly witnessed, when a coach on the return journey fell into a ravine with all its passengers) will have been prophesied by the Pastor (*a posteriori* [---] which is expected).

But the real impact of what one sees at Imeko comes from the grandiose nature of a place and a ceremonial that take on their full splendour only in the lights of Christmas Eve. Sites like the basilica of Yamoussoukro look almost Roman, and the number, the sheer mass of [---] predominantly Nigerian [---] devotees, is truly impressive. The way they are arranged is very catholic (in the spirit of the visionary message received by the Prophet), but distances are sharply reinforced [---] given the dimensions of the whole [---] between, on one side, the Holy of Holies,

where the dignitaries, the *most* and the Pastor are placed, and, on the other, the mass of believers, with men on the right and women on the left (as in all the churches). There are numerous, appropriately dressed stewards responsible for crowd control, provided by the State of Ogun. Everything here evokes the atmosphere of the ceremonial nights of African cults (Bwiti or others), especially the separation of men and women in space, justified by the suspicion that constantly weighs on the latter and makes them the favoured target of the attendants watching to ensure that people stay in their places and stay awake to maintain the rhythm of the chants and pay attention to the worship. It should also be stressed that, in gaps during the ceremony, important guests [---] primarily white people [---] are given privileged treatment in ‘private lounges’, at a distance from the ritual sites. The total number of prohibitions to be respected in these preserves, as far as clothing and behaviour are concerned, is both enormous and constantly transgressed (no crossing your legs in front of the Pastor; men [---] though not women [---] to go bare-headed, even in direct sun, in the presence of the Pastor, who alone wears a cap).

The liturgy is very ponderous, fixed by a highly organized, detailed programme (even though there can be changes at the last minute), very close to the Catholic liturgy, and not very charismatic in its manifestations: this is because of the distance from the Holy of Holies, where a large part of the ritual unfolds, as well as the absence of any call to believers to take part, or any choruses, chants with dancing, or manifestations of visionary trances, all of which usually make Celestial worship a very hectic, festive ceremony. But in other aspects, this is an African-style Protestant liturgy, with its long reading of texts (translated each time into three or four languages: Yoruba, English, Gun-Gbe, French) and its interminable preaching. There is an astonishing coexistence between a ceremonial machine that runs all night under its own momentum and a very relative, even very relaxed, level of attention on the part of those present. The constant comings and goings (from midnight to dawn on Christmas Eve, or during the Sunday worship of nearly five hours under the sun) recall a cinema with continuous showings, where one can go in and out at any hour. Gradually, during the night, some will go to sleep on their mats or on piles of sand on the building site. Others, still awake, are just required to stand up and sit down, as at a mass, or to repeat the litany of St Michael or the Alleluiah. The important thing is to be there, on the same soil, possibly visited in one’s dreams by the Holy Spirit, while the ritual takes place, even though one may be slumped asleep a few metres from the Holy of Holies, where the Pastor is working, leading the worship right through, in splendid isolation, with his famous [---] and surprising [---] health and resilience.

The atmosphere changes abruptly and the crowd of believers becomes restless when things move on to the blessing of offerings (candelabra, crosses, candles, St Michael’s eau-de-Cologne, bunches of bananas etc.) and to prayers for deliverance and healing, said by the Pastor in person, although here very discreetly. It is important to note that, in parallel with the official ceremonies, consultations with visionaries are always packed, and the most famous ones have their ‘visions’ in the most unexpected, improvised places. One is left with the impression of a religion that is always ready to go with the times, to espouse elements of one thing after another, in a sort of ceaseless dissolve [---] a fascinating, elusive, ‘chameleon’ religion.

The amount of lighting and camera equipment that surrounds all the important moments of the ritual and, above all, the Pastor’s movements throughout the whole liturgy should be noted. The film equipment forms part of the liturgical apparatus and the waltz of the cameras accompanies the interplay of the actors. The whole of Christmas worship at Imeko appears to be broadcast directly on an Ogun State television channel (for those who cannot go there). In Africa

now, any official event, as well as any ceremony, religious festival or family celebration, includes its team of photographers, cameramen and sound operators. This omnipresent technical, photographic and film equipment obviously poses no problem, as long as it has been officially authorized. It would be unthinkable for individuals to manifest the slightest vexation when faced with the often insistent eye of the camera, even at the moment when they are taking part in this ceremony, since the relevant authorities have given their backing. It is clear, objectively, that the liturgy is disturbed by the film equipment, which sometimes overrides the attention expected to be paid to the gathering, so that people have to be ritually recalled by the attendants. Watching 'television' or listening on video or audio cassette to scenes of the ceremony (or sometimes both at once) is very common, and transforms worship into a sort of virtual reality<sup>11</sup>.

### **The anointment market: between trance and transaction**

For over a week, even throughout the night of Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day itself, and at the same time as worship is taking place at the sacred sites, the market in religious goods is at its height: people selling candles, so-called St Michael's eau-de-Cologne, soap, seven-branched candelabra and liturgical vestments, alongside yams, cans of oil, bottles of Coca-Cola, doughnuts, tinned food and other things. Religious objects, calendars, photos of the Prophet or of Christ (one would think one was in Lourdes) are obviously more important than books. Liturgical guides, Bibles and the Blue Constitution are sold on the same level and on the same stands as Nigerian English-language newspapers. Audio cassettes of Celestial Church liturgical chants or video cassettes on the life of the Prophet are lost among cassettes of light music or the latest hit movies.

But the biggest market is the market in anointment, and this is at the heart of the system of ritual itself. Anointings take place in the prayer garden; they can be organized for the period before Christmas, and they start again the day after [---] in fact, they spread over more than a week. This is a real machine of ritual, which requires long preparation, gets the future anointees into the right frame of mind, and deals with the very elaborate organization of moving national groups around: they have to line up in serried rows, men and women separately, and leave their places quickly in order to allow others in. The anointing ceremony is conducted by the Pastor in a masterly fashion and, deliberately, at a very spirited pace, in an atmosphere made more dramatic by some people [--] especially some women [---] going into trances, provoked partly by the Pastor's touch and the sensation of the oil that he puts on their foreheads and hair. Women arrange their hairstyles so that their hair will not prevent the oil from spreading over the scalp and forehead and from producing its expected spiritual effects.

The vast machinery of anointment and all the jiggery-pokery with holy oil are accompanied by public haggling over cost, in an unashamedly obtrusive, unhampered logic of return for service. Payment (and this is an important issue) must be made in *naira*, the Nigerian currency, as a result of which there are actually moneychangers at the entrances to all the places where members gather and wait to be anointed. In principle, all these issues of registration and payment should be regulated in the parish context and managed by the Parish Secretary, but up to the last moment, sometimes only five minutes before the Pastor's arrival, there are always latecomers who have not

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Marshall-Fratani (1998). The author was able to observe, in an African Pentecostal Church in Nigeria, the liturgical usage of closed-circuit television, which had no function other than to enable devotees to combine the direct view with the 'television view' of the worship taking place.

managed to get the necessary sum together. At Christmas 1998, a major incident held up the ceremony of anointing members from Benin: the Pastor's accountants (he really needs them) invoked failure to prepare lists and an insufficient sum allocated to pay for the anointments, and suspended the whole ceremony. This resulted in the Pastor imposing a long, rather humiliating, and probably deliberate wait of several hours, punctuated by attempts to negotiate. The Secretary of a Benin parish put it this way: if we don't pay the agreed price, then the Pastor 'will not pay either' [---] in other words, no money, no anointment.

On their return, the pilgrims, now ensconced in their new grades, have to recount 'what we saw' to those who stayed behind, or to confirm that they 'clearly saw' the Supreme Pastor in person (even that they have touched him) as well as the grandiose, sublime enterprise of building the 'Celestial Jerusalem' [---] proof, if there were any, of the truth of the prophecy and of the strong basis of expectation that enables them to come back to everyday life again.

### **Conclusion: when the Prophet died...**

Although what is at stake in the success of some contemporary pilgrimages is clearly far removed from the great historical pilgrimages, Danièle Hervieu-Léger sees them as a 'metaphor for religion in movement', associating the need for mobility with the desire for individuality (Hervieu-Léger, 1999: 98). In the African pilgrimages that I have mentioned here, the metaphor of the pilgrimage combines with the metaphor of the journey, as well as with metaphors relating to rootedness in a place or a somewhat imaginary land of origin. For Celestial Christians visiting Imeko, as for the Mouride Brotherhood going to Touba, this opportunity to affirm identity through an umbilical bond to the ancestral land (though fairly well sublimated among West Indians and black Americans who are making their initiatory journey to Yoruba territory) is linked to migration experienced as exile or loss of roots, and to the promise of a return from exile. The gathering in the Celestial City clearly has a transnational, world dimension, but it is not the end point of a personal pathway distanced from the Church institution. On the contrary, it falls squarely within an insitutional logic of initiation, and consecrates the hierarchy of the Church through anointment.

That said, there have been constant developments since the death of the Founding Prophet: the system is falling apart on all sides, and reforms are called for. Under the influence of Pastor Bada, who is institutional in outlook but has been called to manage the sacred trust of the Prophet's revelation, the Celestial Church of Christ has strengthened its worldwide bureaucratic organization in parish, district and diocese. There has been a systematic policy of travelling, visiting parishes throughout the whole world (including London and Paris), and of media exploitation through the televised recording of acts of worship, distribution of cassettes of sermons and setting up Internet sites (in London and New York). The appointment of pastoral emissaries responsible for winning over new countries (China, Australia etc.), the proactive organization of evangelist and revival campaigns, and the opening of schools, seminaries and even a theological institute in Nigeria<sup>12</sup> all mean that the Church increasingly presents itself as a charismatic evangelical church, keeping its African and Yoruba roots quiet.

The discussion about Bada's illness and his absence from Imeko at Christmas 1999 sustained those who would like to dissociate the spirituality of the pilgrimage from the trade in anointment, and even to suspend anointment as a symbol of the pastoral monopoly. Despite his

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<sup>12</sup> See Adogame (1999: 84).

miracles, Bada, the Prophet's clerk, never ceased to be contested as Pastor, even in Nigeria, let alone as Prophet. The conflict over the succession led Agbaossi, the Representative of the Mother Parish of Porto Novo, to claim multi-pastoralism. Bada died in London in September 2000 and was buried in Imeko. The new Prophet, whose coming was announced by Oschoffa, is still awaited. The World Committee's designation of Senior Evangelist P.H. Ajose, Head of Overseas Diocese, as Bada's successor, was evidence of an aim to open up the Church to the world and sustain the process of 'routinization of charisma', initiated by Bada; but the rapid death of this new Pastor [---] who was already blind [---] has been interpreted by some as a prophetic message, and is giving new impetus to the expectation of the coming of the Prophet's true successor. Celestial Christians like to think that the pilgrimage to the Celestial City, the place where heaven comes down to earth, is a regular reminder that they are not of this world, that they are made in the image of the Founding Prophet, whose Yoruba first name, Bilewu, echoes a traditional expression: 'If you prefer to live in this world, you are welcome to do so, but if you prefer to live up there in heaven, you will be allowed to go there'.

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