

Paradigms of Women Leadership in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

The work is on the women leadership role and many things in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria. In the Cherubim and Seraphim Church allows and encourages women to participate in the ministry of the church. Women have, in fact, played prominent roles in the affair of the church since its inception in 1925. Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Captain Abiodun Akinsowon jointly established the church in 1925 as a spiritual society. From the inception of the church, Orimolade and Captain Abiodun led the group in prayers every evening after work. Apart from Captain Abiodun Akinsowon, there are other outstanding women leaders in the church as shown in the work of Professor Omoyajowo. Leaders such as Captain C. Abiodun Emmanuel, Madam C. Olatunrinle, the first Superintendent Mother of the Western Conference, Akanke Igbalaolu founder and leader of the Redemption Band of C&S, Igbo No 1(Ibadan); Mother-in-Israel Esther Mewaiyewon, the virtual founder of the first Onitsha Branch and the present leader of the Mount Zion C&S branches in Warri and Sapele, and Mrs Adebisi who pioneered the establishment of the society in Northern Nigeria. Within the society, women are elevated to such high offices as Mother Cherub, Mother Seraph, Captain and Mother-in-Israel which rank with Apostles and Senior Apostles. The high spiritual mother of the United Church of Cherubim and Seraphim is in fact, the female counterpart of the Archbishop of the section and is accorded the same dignity as any Baba Aladura.

Keywords: paradigms, women leadership, leadership, cherubim and seraphim

INTRODUCTION

The Cherubim and Seraphim movement church, also known as the C&S church, *is a church denomination in Nigeria* that was founded by Moses Orimolade Tunolase in 1925. Historically, Moses Orimolade Tunolase received considerable attention when he claimed to have healed a girl, Christina Abiodun Akinsowon, from a long-term *trance* in which she could neither speak nor hear. After the healing event, Orimolade Tunolase and Abiodun Akinsowon teamed up, as father and adopted daughter, and offered their services to heal and pray for people.

On the Cherubim and Seraphim group claims to have dreams and *visions* that facilitate the connection of God and humanity. In 1925, they said that Jesus Christ had directed them to name their circle of follower's *Cherubim Seraphim*, after an angel they claimed to have seen in their dreams. Two years later, they added "Cherubim" to the name of their church, making their *congregation* the Cherubim and Seraphim. Several years after the creation of the Cherubim and Seraphim, different *denominations* following in its traditions broke off and formed new churches. The Church of

Aladura, which began in 1930 under the lead of Josiah Oshitelu, was one of the churches that began under similarly spectacular circumstances as the Cherubim and Seraphim.

The establishment of Cherubim and Seraphim Church came at the time members of the Faith Tabernacle were sensitive to spiritual matters. This is to say that the issue of *Aladura* movement did not take absolute root in the formation of the Cherubim and Seraphim church as it is called today. The establishment of the church was not unconnected with the experience which a 15 years old girl had in 1925. The girl attended an annual Christi corpus precisely on the 15th June, 1925 with two of her cousins. Abiodun was the daughter of Akinsowon, B. A, a clergyman of Saro descent in the African Church at Porto Novo where he was also an agent of the firm of John Holt. She had a Creole connection and today she had quite a number of relatives in Dahomey. At the annual Christi Corpus, Abiodun saw an angel under the umbrella of the host speaker' and it occurred to Abiodun that she was the only one who saw the vision. She couldn't make any headway in the vision, she saw

but after the meeting the angel accompanied her home. On getting home she fell into a trance. It is difficult as much as it is unnecessary to explain why she had to fall into a trance because if the experience can be seen and be considered as divinely planned and authorized it is enough to say that Abiodun falling into a trance was God's way to handle the situation.

However, in the trance, Abiodun experienced that she was taken to a celestial region, taught very many mysteries, and was told that unless she came by somebody who could pray well, she would die. Perhaps, Abiodun was able to tell her uncle about the prayer option she was given in the trance. This, presumably, might have mandated the uncle to contact Moses Orimolade Tunolase who was at this time a freelance evangelist, already known for his praying activities. Orimolade was born at Ikare in Akoko area, Ondo state in the 1840s, to a man called Tunolase. His ministry took off from the sickness he had for a period of seven years. However, before this sickness he was already a Christian. He saw a vision in his sickness bed that he should go and drink from a nearby stream for healing. This he did and was well, though, he remained lame for the rest of his life. It was after this recovery that he began to wander about preaching in the locality and then further afield. He was said to have gone to Jos, Kano, and Ilorin and by 1925 was in Lagos when this incidence happened to Abiodun Akinsowon.

It was him that the uncle of Abiodun invited to come and pray for her. Orimolade's visit to Abiodun for this prayer also indicated a miracle at work. The miracle was that Moses Orimolade walked under a heavy downpour but was unbeaten by it. From this prayer, Abiodun recovered from her trance. After her recovery, Abiodun went to Orimolade at his residence. It was from this visit that both of them agreed to start a spiritual society. At the start of this spiritual group there was no definite name given to it. The two of them agreed to fast for three days so that God himself might give the group the name of his choice. Few others who were already members of this group were all informed about this request. At the end of their fasting, a woman saw the letters 'SE'; this was finally interpreted by a clergyman Rev. Barber of the U.N.A. Church as *Serafu*. The group was therefore given the name *Egbe Serafu* on the 9th of September, 1925. Later that same year, Arch Angel Michael was made the patron of the society. This choice had nothing to do with Abiodun's experience in trance or with the prayer potentials of Orimolade but that the choice was by vision. The additional name *Kerubu* or *Cherubim* was added in 1929 hence became *Egbe Kerubu ati Serafu* (Cherubim and Seraphim).

At this point, the group was not seen as church and the relationship of this group with the existing churches was cordial. Archdeacon Sodeinde and Rev. Barber of the Anglican Church served on the anniversary committee. This explains the depth of the group's relationship with the existing churches. With time people began to see that the members of the Cherubim and Seraphim started either by error or by conviction, to compare themselves with heavenly Seraphim's. Other loopholes seen in this group included the indecency of the members and also that the group would soon become a rival group within the church system. The group however, continued to grow and was totally opposed to the use of charms by its members, and also stood against any contact with the Herbalists (*Babalawo*). However what brought the Seraphim to people's notice more than anything else were the huge anniversary processions, involving thousands of people arranged in white robes with special uniforms and adornments for different ranks and sections. Better still formation of the group was timely in that its establishment coincided with the outbreak of the 1924-1926 Lagos bubonic disease. The people in Lagos kept on flooding the society because of the prayer they needed for healing purposes since they needed prayers to avert the contagious disease.

The ministry of the society kept on flourishing and people were coming from far and wide for prayers from the two leaders in the persons of Abiodun and Orimolade. Their prayers at the initial stage were holding in members homes. The agreement to this point was sound and every members of the group was blessed but one small misunderstanding that developed into an uncontrollable dimension between Orimolade and Abiodun came up in 1928. The problem was a case in which an Ijesha girl, Olayinka by name came to Orimolade for prayers. After the prayers, Olayinka did not leave Orimolade's house. Abiodun feared *Baba Aladura* (clergyman) was falling under the influence of Olayinka Ijesha. The case was reported to the group's Praying Band headed by Ezekiel Davies. It was the praying band that prevailed over Olayinka by forcing her to move out and taking Orimolade to Davies' home. Orimolade did not like the way and manner he was treated for he felt suspected unnecessarily. His feeling was not enough to explain away the vulnerability of Orimolade's spirituality to be opened to a test uncalled for and even probably be influenced by Olayinka. The separation did not provide any solution to the problem instead; it made it worse than ever before. The quarrel was so much that the administrator of Lagos colony advised them to part ways. Before now, the two parties had substantial bodies of followers who got involved in this fight. The nature the misunderstanding took brought about the dimension it went.

Moses Orimolade henceforth, started to suffer all kinds of humiliation from the members on the part of Abiodun. He was told to have a moral reform, to stop getting money from those people he prayed for, and that he should stop praying against people. All these factors led to his rejection as the father of the society which was good for him by virtue of his age and spiritual experience. Orimolade and Abiodun became two parallel lines that never learn to unite any more for anything. All the reconciliatory attempts made by different individuals failed; notable among them was the one made by one Sosan an Egba man. He intended to reconcile the two forces together with the use of the power of Alake Ademola of Abeokuta. Olumuyiwa of the praying band wrote that Orimolade's heart was the throne of devil ... it is impossible to come under his way again. Abiodun herself didn't see the need for coming together anymore. The separation was permanently accepted as ideal and undisturbing.

After a repeated failure of the reconciliatory moves, Orimolade concentrated his ministry and works in and around Lagos. He did not embark on a missionary work as did Abiodun. On the whole it could be said that Orimolade and Abiodun only disagree on the issue but their spiritual ideologies remained identical. Immediately after the protracted quarrel and schism, Captain Abiodun championed the cause of planting and spreading Cherubim and Seraphim society in some Yoruba towns and cities.

Captain Abiodun seized the opportunity of Egba membership of her group to visit Abeokuta. There, they held a short service at Ake Square adjacent to Alake Palace. Oba Alake and other Egba Obas received the Seraphim on the occasion which they sang a royal Egba anthem. Those who were present at the occasion entered their names in a book. One of the early Egba converts was William Folarin Sosan of Kenta Okejigbo in Abeokuta. The same man related that Alake gave the delegates the opportunity to preach before the Egba Council. We must bear it in mind that Chairmanship of Sosan of the Cherubim society at Abeokuta resuscitated the almost moribund Cherubim society in Abeokuta area. Therefore, one can see that Abiodun found a reliable person like Sosan to see that the Cherubim Society was firmly planted in Abeokuta. It is said that about two evangelical groups visited Ijebu Ode in 1927. It has been discovered that Captain Abiodun led the group of the Cherubim and Seraphim to Ijebu Ode but the extent of her evangelistical campaign there.

Furthermore, Captain Abiodun did not limit her evangelical commitment to Abeokuta only. She led a band of missionaries to Ibadan where she stayed in the

house of a man called Falade, an Ijesha man, who happened to be her kinsman by marriage. Abiodun and her followers in white gowns paraded the streets of Ibadan singing hymns and preaching sermons. Their impact was mostly felt at the Ibadan leading markets of Agbeni, Ojaba and Oje. Apart from eloquence with which Abiodun was the admiration of Ibadan people; her beauty also caught the attention of some members. Her preaching was that; 'renounce idols and juju and rely on prayer for all your needs is truly effective'. Abiodun made such a considerable spiritual impact that a man called Kuforiji had to rush out of his church to listen the sermon of Abiodun at Agbeni market; only to become a staunch member of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

In 1928, Abiodun visited the Ilesha branch of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, which a carpenter by name Adegbokun, S. had established in September 1927. It is on record that Adegbokun was influenced by the activities of Cherubim and Seraphim at Lagos. Abiodun asserted before the reigning Owa of Ilesha that rain would not fall but by the power of Seraphim. Of course, the Oba, Owa Obokun believed her. This point shows to us today that Abiodun was recognized within the royal circle of Ijebuland.

The situation at Ondo was little bit different to what we have had before. The planting of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church was through the efforts of one Christianah Olatunrinle who was a successful, influential and popular trader in the town. In 1927, she visited Lagos to see the Director of Prisons for she had the contract of supplying Ondo Prison with food. And while she was at Lagos, she met Captain Abiodun and Orimolade doing evangelism. Olatunrinle might have been more impressed by seeing a woman like herself leading a religious group. Abiodun's evangelistic commitment continued to Ondo, Ijebu, Ikorodu, Dahomey, Ikale, Badagary etc. This quarrel was as a result of who should claim legitimacy as the Supreme Head of Cherubim and Seraphim. This problem was no problem to any contemporary assessor of the situation since Moses Orimolade, before his death, had renamed his own order as the "Eternal Sacred Order". This notwithstanding Abiodun had the single cause to speak up on the issue of leadership. She was of the opinion that she and Orimolade were cofounders, said that since he had died, she was the sole leader. Were there no prophetesses in the Bible? She asked, and had not Queen ruled the British Empire? This statement left Cherubim and Seraphim Church to continue doing evangelical duties based solely on individual's claim to vision.

The church has grown interestingly but the *Aladura* movement, particularly among the South Western Nigeria was almost coming to a close after the death of Madam Olatunrinola in 1941; Sosan W. F. of Abeokuta in 1957, Pastor Odubanjo of the C.A.C. in 1959, Evangelist Joseph Babalola also in 1959 and Orimolade's death long before them in 1933. Abiodun Akinsowon who later married to one Mr. Emmanuel and hence, known as Abiodun Emmanuel. She contributed to the growth of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria and was recognized as a force undoubted within the rank and file of the Cherubim and Seraphim membership.

Paradigms of Women Leadership in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church

In the Cherubim and Seraphim Church allows and encourages women to participate in the ministry of the church. Women have, in fact, played prominent roles in the affair of the church since its inception in 1925. Moses Orimolade Tunolase and Captain Abiodun Akinsowon jointly established the church in 1925 as a spiritual society. From the inception of the church, Orimolade and Captain Abiodun led the group in prayers every evening after work.⁶⁰ Apart from Captain Abiodun Akinsowon, there are other outstanding women leaders in the church as shown in the work of Professor Omoyajowo. Leaders such as Captain C. Abiodun Emmanuel, Madam C. Olatunrinle, the first Superintendent Mother of the Western Conference, Akanke Igbalaolu founder and leader of the Redemption Band of C&S, Igbo No 1(Ibadan); Mother-in-Israel Esther Mewaiyewon, the virtual founder of the first Onitsha Branch and the present leader of the Mount Zion C&S branches in Warri and Sapele, and Mrs Adebiyi who pioneered the establishment of the society in Northern Nigeria. Within the society, women are elevated to such high offices as Mother Cherub, Mother Seraph, Captain and Mother-in-Israel which rank with Apostles and Senior Apostles. The high spiritual mother of the United Church of Cherubim and Seraphim is in fact, the female counterpart of the Archbishop of the section and is accorded the same dignity as any Baba Aladura.

According to Alana, the *Iya Alakoso* (Mother Superintendent) is usually a prominent post in the various groups of Cherubim and Seraphim and is normally occupied by a woman. The post is said to be a charismatic one which carries along with it spiritual responsibilities. Prophetesses too abound in large numbers in various groups of Cherubim and Seraphim. They have played leading roles in the expansion of the society everywhere. Like their male counterparts, prophetesses are often involved in itinerant preaching,

usually carrying hand bell and iron rod or staff moving on their feet from one location to another.

However, while the Cherubim and Seraphim have thus enhanced the leadership of women in the church, there are still evidences of the traditional male superiority and gender discrimination/disparity in the priesthood. In the first place, the leadership position of Abiodun Akinsowon was rejected by some men within the church as shown in the work of Omoyajowo. The reluctance to accept her as a leader of the whole society echoed in the letter forwarded to her from the Alake of Abeokuta in March 31st, 1934 as clearly indicated in the work of Omoyajowo. In part, the letter reads; "it will however be the pleasure of Oba Alaiyeluwa, the Alake, if you will Agree to his decision appointing you as the supreme head of all the women in the societies in Nigeria which he think is a high honour which any reasonable worker in the Lord's vineyard should accept. This offer was however rejected by her.

What could be deduced from the above is that, men probably do not support having a woman as their spiritual leader or founder at that time. Then this must have presumably informed the church to have a separate hierarchy in the priesthood exclusively reserved for women.

Secondly, in the church, there is evidence of gender discrimination. Women who are in their menstrual period or who have just had sexual intercourse are considered unclean and not allowed to enter the house of prayer. Similarly, a woman who had just given birth to a baby is also exempted from the house of prayer for forty days, if the baby is a boy and for eighty days, if the baby is a girl.⁶⁴ This is done in accordance with the Old Testament theology. In my honest opinion, I do not think giving birth to a baby contaminated women in anyway. Rather, I think this period should be seen as a period of rest for a woman and nothing else. Besides, menstrual cycle of women is very important as it ensures her productivity. Then, sexual intercourse done in a godly that is performed by legal couples should not be seen as something defiling. These should be viewed in a positive way rather than using it as a basis for restricting her participation and involvement in spiritual matters.

Lastly, there is still evidence of the traditional male superiority especially in the priesthood of the church. Although most members are women, men are given more opportunities to lead than women. The priestly hierarchy in the church has ten ranks for men while only six were reserved for women.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it is necessary at this juncture to add that, the Cherubim and

Seraphim church gives an encouraging picture as far as the issue of women’s priesthood and leadership roles are concerned. In the Cherubim and Seraphim, it would appear that the male hierarchy encompasses the priestly function as well as while the female hierarchy does not. But the fact still remains that, it is difficult having an accurate statistics of the priesthood of the church because of three major reasons.

First, as early as 1935, just ten years after the founding of the Cherubim and Seraphim society, it had split into six factions each claiming to be independent of the others. In Lagos alone, by 1971, the Registrar of Companies had registered not fewer than fourteen sections. One of the Lagos sections; The Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Mt. Zion, Ebute-Meta had over 400 branches.

In the second place, only a few sections of the society keep records of any kind. They all consider it a grievous sin to keep statistics of their society. They assert that it is against the will of God because King David quickly realized his sin when he took a census of his subjects (2 Sam. 24: 1-9).

On other reason why an accurate statistics of the male and female in the priesthood of the church cannot be compiled is because of its general weak administrative structure. The Cherubim and Seraphim is one Aladura church that does not have a common system of administration. The effect of this is that, there are no avenues for the determination of the strength of the society. Branches spring up according to the wishes of individual members and such branches are administered according to the direction of their respective founders. In spite of these difficulties, the Cherubim and Seraphim must be having altogether no fewer than 4,000 male priests and 3,000 female priests in Nigeria. However, the table below shows the selected position for male and female in the priesthood of Cherubim and Seraphim Church (Movement):

MALE	FEMALE
The Supreme Head	Mother Cherub
The General Superintendent	Mother Seraph
The Superintendent	Prophetess
The Senior Apostles	Lady Leaders
Apostles	Lady Aladura
Evangelists	Prayerlist
Senior Pastors	
Leaders	
Aladura	
Pastors	

Source: Ajimuse Omowumi: *The Administrative Structure in Cherubim and Seraphim Church Movement*, 2007 and J. Adegoke, *The Cherubim and Seraphim: Beliefs and Practices* (Osogbo, Adegoke Press, 2007), p. 1, 6, 26.

The above reveals an important of priesthood segregation by gender. Besides, it shows that there is gender segregation within the same priesthood or job classification of the church. Although the church gives women opportunities to participate in the ministry of the church women are still valued differently and still have different level of status and power. The differential is related to sexism in society generally. Besides, there is nothing wrong if the two sexes in the priesthood bear the same nomenclature. The idea of having different names given to the priestly hierarchy does not need to arise. This patterns of difference in hierarchy become systems of inequality and privilege for both sexes.

CONCLUSION

Despite religion’s long history of gender disparity in the leadership as reflected in the various denominations, women have also experienced profound support, encouragement and satisfaction in religion. For many women, religion provides a place in which they find a sense of worth as valued children of God. Also for many women, religion provides an environment in which they experience real community with other women. For instance, women in the traditional marriage who work in the home may find their only real social outlet in the church. Here, they build connections with other women and participate in personally meaningful experiences in a community context.

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