

〈専任研究員〉

The Celestial Church of Christ in Nigeria*

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Introduction

The Celestial Church of Christ (CCC or Cele Church)¹⁾ is an Aladura church founded originally in 1947 by Samuel Biléhou [Biléwu/Biléou] Joseph Oshoffa in Dahomey (present-day Republic of Benin), French West Africa. The Cele Church later underwent rapid growth in neighbouring Nigeria. The word *Aladura* means ‘praying’ in Yoruba [Peel 1968: xi], and Aladura churches refer to the Africanised Christianity movement that developed in the 1920s within Yoruba society, mainly in the area spreading from present-day Southern Benin to Southwestern Nigeria. Aladura churches are a type of African-initiated church (AIC) formed as a breakaway from the Western missionary Christian churches, with common characteristics such as a belief in fervent prayer, possession, exorcism and faith healing.

There were at least three major denominations of such Aladura churches before World War II. The Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), founded in 1930 by Joseph Ayo Babalola; the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S)²⁾, founded in 1925 by a young lady called Abiodun Akinsowon and an Anglican evangelist called Moses Orimolade; and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) (CLA)³⁾, founded in 1925 by the Anglican catechist Josiah Olunowo Oshitelu.

These so-called ‘White Garment’ Aladura churches gradually began to develop during the period of Nigerian nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, and grew rapidly, especially in the 1960s after Nigeria’s independence. For example, in just five years during the 1960s, the CAC is said to have established 15 churches in Ibadan, a city in southwestern Nigeria. The C&S and CLA also experienced a rapid expansion of their congregations similar to the CAC during this period [Omoyajowo 1978: 96]. However, from the 1970s on, a new trend of the Christian movement, called the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, emerged in Nigerian society, and as a result, the growth of Aladura churches such as the C&S gradually slowed. The stagnation or decline of the Aladura churches is more pronounced today.

This paper examines the Cele Church, a new denomination of the Aladura churches that was established after World War II and underwent rapid expansion in Nigeria from the 1970s onwards. The Cele Church was founded in French Dahomey in the late 1940s, about 20 years later than the C&S and the CLA, and reached British Nigeria in the 1950s. It grew rapidly during Nigeria’s oil boom

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of the 1970s. Since the death of its founder Oshoffa in 1985, the Cele Church has been beset by repeated crises of succession and fragmentation but still seen relatively strong growth — particularly in southwestern Nigeria and urban areas in some Western countries.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the Cele Church, which continues to enjoy relatively strong growth even as many Aladura churches today exhibit severe stagnation or a remarkable decline.

1. The Foundation and Development

Oshoffa, the founder of the Cele Church, was born in 1909 in Porto Novo, Dahomey, French West Africa. His father, a carpenter, had several wives and many children, all girls, and all but one of his daughters died young. The father, a devoted member of the Methodist church, prayed to God for a son who would succeed him, vowing that if his prayers were answered, he would dedicate his son to the service of God. Oshoffa was thus born. To keep his promise, Oshoffa's father tried to leave Oshoffa in the care of a Methodist Church pastor when he was seven and again when he was 13 and tried to have him trained to become a pastor. However, after two unsuccessful attempts, his father gave up trying to raise him as a clergyman and taught him carpentry. Until the age of 27, Oshoffa earned his living as a carpenter, but after his father's death, he turned to the timber trade, acquiring ebony and other wood from the forest and selling it to carpenters in town for a living [Agbaje 1995: 171-173].

In this context, on 23 May 1947, Oshoffa hired a paddler to harvest mahogany and ebony trees, as was his usual practice, and took a small boat into the forest near a village called Toffin. That day, an eclipse was reportedly observed in Porto Novo and the surrounding area. Although Oshoffa had little formal schooling, he had acquired basic reading and writing skills during his time with the Methodist Church clergy and was at least able to read the Bible. He always carried the Bible with him, and even when he was at work, he often had time for prayer. On the day of the eclipse, Oshoffa was working, reading the Bible, and praying in the forest. Suddenly, he heard a voice and could not open his eyes. The voice said, 'LULI. This means the Grace of Jesus Christ.' When Oshoffa finally opened his eyes, he saw a white monkey with two teeth each on its upper and lower jaw and winged hands like a bat. He also saw a bird with a multicoloured tail spread out like a peacock. There was also a coiled snake, its mouth like a cobra. Eventually, each of these three animals disappeared into the forest or the sky, but Oshoffa felt this event had triggered some kind of change within him [CCC 1980: 5].

When Oshoffa returned to the boat, the paddler was suffering from stomach pains. When asked, the paddler confessed that he had secretly eaten some of Oshoffa's soup while Oshoffa was away. Oshoffa admonished the paddler, placed a hand on his stomach, and healed him. However, cured of his stomach-ache, instead of thanking Oshoffa, the paddler ran away from him, scared of his strange spiritual powers. Thus, Oshoffa was left alone in the forest with a small boat and wandered alone for the next three months. He survived by eating honey and drinking river water. During this time, he had many visions and prayed fervently. After this wondrous experience in the Toffin forest, Oshoffa returned to his daily life and performed various miracles, such as resurrecting the dead, which attracted people's attention [CCC 1980: 5-7].

On 29 September 1947, while he was praying with some friends at his home in Porto Novo, a divine revelation came to Oshoffa in the form of an angel: that God wished to send Oshoffa to preach to the world [CCC 1980: 7]. Having received this revelation, Oshoffa eventually founded his own church, the Cele Church. Every year, the Cele Church celebrates 29th September, the day Oshoffa received the message from God, as the anniversary of its founding.

After the founding of the Cele Church in 1947, Oshoffa gradually gained followers, mainly in Porto Novo, but also faced much criticism and slander from missionary churches such as the Catholic Church and Aladura churches such as C&S. Therefore, in the 1950s, Oshoffa decided to move the base of operations of the Cele Church from Porto Novo in French Dahomey to Lagos in British Nigeria, partly on the enthusiastic advice of his followers. At the time, there was a small fishing village called Makoko on the outskirts of Lagos, where a small church was built by seven Egun fishermen who were members of the Cele Church in 1950. Although Oshoffa himself did not immediately move to Nigeria, he frequently travelled from Porto Novo to Makoko, where he began to develop active missionary activities with miracles and healing work.

Two men joined the Cele Church during this period of pioneering missionary work at Makoko, both of them later becoming important church leaders. Samuel Olatunji Ajalenkoko and Alexander Abiodun Bada both worked for the company Nigerian Breweries at the time. Ajalenkoko and Bada later became the core of Oshoffa's inner circle and the core of church administration in Nigeria, and the three later became known as the 'inner circle' or 'Big Three' of the Cele Church⁴. Bada, in particular, succeeded Oshoffa after his death [Adogame 1999: 26-31].

As a latecomer among the Aladura churches in Nigeria, the Cele Church was not able to expand much in the 1960s, when earlier Aladura churches such as CAC and C&S were growing rapidly. However, when Nigeria experienced incredible economic growth during the 1970s oil boom, the Cele Church grew rapidly. During its time in Porto Novo, the Cele Church had mainly targeted the town's relatively poorly educated fishermen and peddlers. On the other hand, after relocating to Lagos in the 1970s, the Church succeeded in attracting a wide range of urban middle-class and elite groups, including military personnel, entrepreneurs, lawyers, teachers, and civil servants, and rapidly expanded its reach [Hackett 1980: 213-214].

As a result of this remarkable growth of the Church in urban Nigeria, Oshoffa himself finally decided to move to Nigeria in 1977. His newly established residence and chapel were located in an area outside of Lagos known as Ketu, which became the International Headquarters of the Cele Church [Adogame 1999: 31].

The growth of the Cele Church in the Nigerian community that began in the 1970s continued into the late 1990s, albeit at a slower pace. Despite the absence of accurate statistical data on the membership of the Cele Church, this section examines in some detail the expansion of the Church in the late 1990s, in particular based on the materials they published.

Individual churches under the Cele Church are referred to as parishes. Table 1 shows the number of Cele Church parishes in Nigeria by state in 1995 and 1999. According to the table, the Cele Church had a total of 1,864 parishes in Nigeria's 27 states and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory in 1999. However, if we look at the state-wise data, Lagos State stood out with 844 parishes (45.3% of all parishes in Nigeria), followed by Ogun State with 278 parishes (14.9%), Ondo State with 233 parishes (12.5%), and Oyo State with 109 parishes (5.8%). These states are all located in southwestern Nigeria,

which is predominantly Yoruba, suggesting that although the Cele Church expanded beyond the Yoruba region, it remained a Yoruba-centric denomination.

Comparing the number of parishes in 1995 and 1999 also reveals that the number of Cele Church parishes in Nigeria as a whole increased by 215 in four years, a 13% increase. By state, there was little increase in the number of parishes in the southeastern and northern states, whereas Lagos accounted for 168 newly established parishes (a 25% increase) and Ogun State for 35 parishes (14%). Thus, even in the late 1990s, the Cele Church in Nigeria was still experiencing significant growth in the Yoruba areas of the southwest, especially in urban areas such as Lagos.

Table 1 Cele Church Parishes in Nigeria by State

	State	1995	1999	Increase/decrease
Southwestern	Lagos	676	844	168
	Ogun	243	278	35
	Ondo	226	233	7
	Oyo	106	109	3
	Osun	66	66	0
	Edo	71	74	3
	Delta	47	47	0
Southeastern	Anambra / Enugu	10	10	0
	Cross River	4	4	0
	Imo	15	15	0
	Rivers	6	7	1
	Abia	10	10	0
	Akwa Ibom	22	22	0
Northern	Niger	20	24	4
	Bauchi	3	4	1
	Abuja Federal Capital Territory	13	15	2
	Kwara	48	38	-10
	Kogi	15	16	1
	Plateau	10	10	0
	Kaduna	17	17	0
	Benue	4	4	0
	Kano	4	4	0
	Katsina	2	2	0
	Sokoto	2	2	0
	Kebbi	1	1	0
	Adamawa	5	5	0
Borno	3	3	0	
	Total	1649	1864	215

Source: CCC [1995; 1999].

Table 2 shows the number of Cele Church parishes abroad in 1995 and 1999 by country. In 1999, the Cele Church had 323 parishes outside of Nigeria (excluding Italy and Ghana), of which 122 parishes (37.8% of all overseas parishes) were located in Western countries, and 201 parishes (62.2%)

were in Central and West African countries. Among the Western countries, 49 parishes were in the USA and 42 in the UK, both of which have large Nigerian immigrant communities. In Africa, Cele Church parishes were almost exclusively established in West African countries and some Central African countries, with 136 parishes (67.7% of the parishes in Africa) in Côte d'Ivoire.

The total number of Cele Church parishes outside Nigeria increased by 72 from 1995 to 1999 (28.7%). By region, 54 new parishes were established in Western countries during this four-year period, representing a rapid growth trend of 79.4%. In particular, considerable expansion was observed in the USA, the UK, Germany, and France. In contrast, the growth in the number of parishes in Central and West African countries remained almost flat, with the exception of Gabon. Thus, in the second half of the 1990s, Cele Church activities outside Nigeria generally stagnated in African countries, despite active growth in Western countries. According to the 2008 edition of the CCC data, in addition to the countries listed in Table 2, new parishes were established in Belgium and the Netherlands in Europe, and in Guyana and Martinique (French overseas departments) in the West Indies [CCC 2008: 60-61].

Table 2 Cele Church Parishes Abroad by Country

Region	Country	1995	1999	Increase/decrease
Europe & North America	UK	26	42	16
	Canada	2	2	0
	Austria	3	4	1
	Germany	4	10	6
	France	7	15	8
	USA	26	49	23
Africa	Cameroon	7	7	0
	Niger	2	2	0
	Sierra Leone	1	1	0
	Togo	12	12	0
	Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo)	1	1	0
	Côte d'Ivoire	140	136	-4
	Burkina Faso	1	1	0
	Gabon	1	23	22
	Senegal	1	1	0
	Benin	17	17	0
	Total	251	323	72

Note: In addition to the countries mentioned in Table 2, according to CCC [1995, 1999], Cele Church had 15 parishes in Ghana in 1995 and 6 parishes in Italy in 1999. However, the two countries are excluded from the table, because in the former case, the number of parishes in 1999 and, conversely, in the latter case, the number of parishes in 1995 are not known, making comparative discussions difficult.

Source: CCC [1995, 1999].

2. Succession Struggle

The leader of the Cele Church is known as the Pastor. Within the church, the Pastor has immense authority and discretion. For example, as will be discussed later, Cele Church has a complex Spiritual Rank System, in which all members in principle are given a spiritual rank, but the Pastor has the ultimate authority over the system. The Pastor also has a great deal of influence over the budget allocation and expenditure of the large sums of money collected in the headquarters from Cele Church parishes in Nigeria and abroad. Given the authority and influence that the Pastor has within the Church when Pastor-Founder Oshoffa suddenly passed away in a car accident in September 1985, succession in the Cele Church was seriously disputed, as in the case of other new religions.

Originally, during Oshoffa's lifetime, there was a deep-seated feud within the Cele Church between the mainstream, mainly the Nigerians, and the minority, mainly the Beninese. The Nigerian mainstream believed that the Nigerian congregation had supported the growth of the Cele Church, and so it was only right that the leadership of mission management should be vested in Nigeria and not in Benin. The Beninese minority, which prided itself on being the cradle of the Church, opposed this and was increasingly dissatisfied with such Nigerian-led management of the Church. The dispute between the two sides quickly intensified immediately after Oshoffa's death over the issue of where his body should be buried. While the Nigerian mainstream wanted to bury Pastor-Founder Oshoffa's body in Imeko, a town in Ogun State, southwestern Nigeria, where his mother was born, Beninese believers wanted to carry his body to Porto Novo, which was his birthplace and the birthplace of the church, for burial⁵. Ultimately, in October 1985, Oshoffa's body was buried in Imeko as per the wishes of the Nigerian majority, but the Beninese minority strongly opposed to this boycotted the funeral ceremony and performed a funeral in Porto Novo without Oshoffa's body. [Adogame 1999: 62-63]. After this clash between the two factions over the issue of the Pastor-Founder's burial site, a leader within the Beninese minority named Agbaosi declared himself to be Oshoffa's representative and eventually came to claim himself as the sole legitimate Pastor of the Cele Church, in opposition to the Nigerian mainstream movement as discussed below.

The more serious conflict over the issue of Oshoffa's succession, however, arose not from the Beninese minority, but rather from within the Nigerian mainstream. Soon after the burial of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa, the Nigerian mainstream leadership appointed Bada as his successor as the Second Pastor. Bada was one of the first members of the Cele Church in Nigeria, along with Ajalenkoko, as mentioned above, and has since played a central role in the running of the Church as Oshoffa's confidant. At the time of Oshoffa's death, Bada filled the position below that of Pastor, and in that sense, his appointment as successor Pastor seemed quite natural to many followers.

However, Bada's appointment as Pastor did not go smoothly. Although his nomination as Pastor was announced to the general congregation and received a degree of acceptance in December 1985, three months after Oshoffa's death, he was not officially installed as Pastor until two years later, in December 1987. Behind this significant delay in Bada's formal appointment as Pastor was a deep-seated feud within the leadership over the question of succession. In particular, a leader named Josiah Kayode Owodunni strongly protested Bada's appointment as Pastor and filed an action before the courts seeking an injunction against his appointment. Although Owodunni's request for an injunction

was eventually dismissed and Bada was able to take office as the Second Pastor at the end of 1987. Owodunni continued his legal battle to invalidate Bada's appointment as Pastor. Finally, in January 1992, Owodunni's case was partially upheld by the Lagos State High Court, which banned Bada from wearing the formal dress and continuing on as the Pastor. Furthermore, a Supreme Court ruling in June 2000 invalidated everything Bada had said and done as *de facto* Pastor since December 1985. Owodunni then followed up on this Supreme Court ruling by claiming that he, not Bada, was the legitimate Second Pastor of the Cele Church. Thus, the question of Oshoffa's succession was the subject of a long legal battle between the Cele Church leadership, which supported Bada, and the senior leader Owodunni, who challenged his legitimacy, which eventually led to the Supreme Court ruling invalidating Bada's appointment as Pastor, and the situation remained in turmoil for over a decade.

However, in the midst of all this, Bada passed away in September 2000, three months after the Supreme Court ruling, and Philip Hunsu Ajose, a senior church leader, was elected by the Cele Church leadership as his successor soon afterward. However, Ajose passed away suddenly just six days after taking over as the Third Pastor in February 2001, thus reigniting the succession battle. Eventually, Emmanuel Mobiyina Friday Oshoffa (see Photo 1), the eldest son of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa, was appointed as the Fourth Pastor in December 2002. Even with the election of a Pastor from the Oshoffa family, the struggle for succession did not calm down easily, and Gilbert Oluwatosin Jesse, one of the leading figures in the Church at the time, eventually announced himself as Pastor. After Jesse's sudden death in 2003, a layman named Paul Surulere Maforikan took over the title of Pastor as Jesse's legitimate successor and, using the name of the Cele Church, began to develop his own activities based in Lagos.

In addition, overseas, Godwin Bolanle Shonekan, a church member from the US also objected to Emmanuel Oshoffa's appointment as the Fourth Pastor and claimed the title of Pastor himself.

Thus, the conflict regarding succession within the Cele Church, which began with the death of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa in 1985, developed over the years, with several self-proclaimed Pastors in addition to Emmanuel Oshoffa. However, despite the apparent chaos and confusion surrounding the question of succession, the majority of Cele Church parishes support Emmanuel Oshoffa as the legitimate Fourth Pastor, and the organisation itself has so far largely maintained its cohesion.

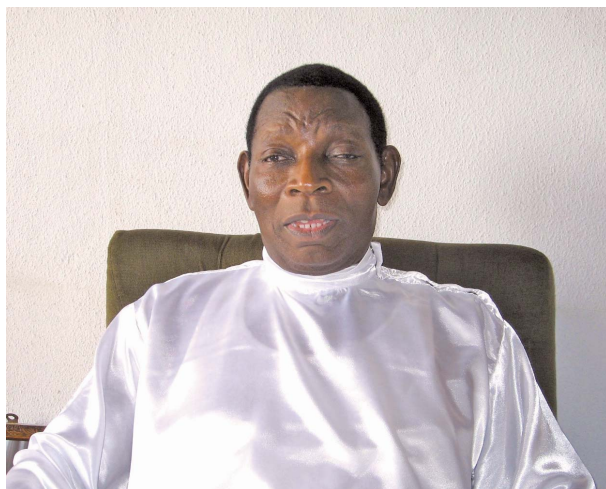


Photo 1 The Fourth Pastor Emmanuel Oshoffa

Emmanuel Oshoffa, the eldest son of the Pastor-Founder Oshoffa, was born in Porto Novo in 1948. After he received his primary and secondary education in Dahomey, he studied biology at a French university. He became a full-time staff member of the Cele Church in 1986 and was appointed to the high spiritual rank of Superior Evangelist in 2000 by the Second Pastor Bada. He became the Fourth Pastor in 2002 following the sudden death of the Third Pastor Ajose (Photo taken by the author at the Cele Church World Headquarters in Imeko in 2008).

3. The Organisation and Holy Place

The official name of the Cele Church as an international organisation is the Celestial Church of Christ Worldwide. Since the late 1970s, when Pastor-Founder Oshoffa moved to Nigeria, it has located its International Headquarters in Ketu, Lagos. In addition to the Mission House, which houses the headquarters, the Pastor-Founder Oshoffa's residence, a chapel, and the residences of Bada and Ajalenkoko have been established in Ketu, and the site has served as the centre of the Church's operations. However, due to the age of the building and its cramped space, plans to relocate the International Headquarters near Sagamu, a town close to Lagos, have been discussed [Adogame 1999: 103].

The three core bodies involved in denominational management — the Pastor-in-Council, the Board of Trustees, and the World Committee — meet regularly at the International Headquarters in Ketu. The Pastor-in-Council is the highest decision-making body of the Cele Church and consists of leaders from within and outside Nigeria, including the Pastor. The Board of Trustees consists of a small number of trustees appointed by the Pastor, who deliberate and decide mainly on the financial management and administration of the Church. The World Committee was established to restore the schism that arose after the death of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa and is made up of representatives from all over the world.

In addition to the International Headquarters, the Cele Church also has a supreme headquarters in Porto Novo, where the Church was founded; a Nigerian National Headquarters in Makoko, Lagos, which became a missionary base in Nigeria; and the World Headquarters in Imeko, where Pastor-

Founder Oshoffa is buried. Thus, although the Cele Church has four formal 'Headquarters', the International Headquarters, Supreme Headquarters, National Headquarters, and World Headquarters, at least the Supreme Headquarters in Porto Novo is a stronghold of the Beninese Agbaosi sect and is, therefore, less influenced by the Church's leadership.

Other than the various factions mentioned above, the Cele churches around the world are divided first into over 40 dioceses under the International Headquarters in Ketu [CCC 2008: 25]. Dioceses in African countries outside of Nigeria, as well as in Western countries, have adopted the One Country One Diocese System in principle, but in Nigeria, especially in the southwestern states, there are multiple dioceses due to the large number of churches. Dioceses are further subdivided into smaller units such as districts and circuits, the smallest of which is the parish, which is almost synonymous with an individual church.

Each diocese, district, and circuit has its own representative or deputy representative, while the smallest unit, the parish, has a Shepherd, or *Oluso-agutan* in Yoruba, who is a clergyman. The Parish Shepherd is, in principle, a full-time staff member dispatched or appointed by the Church and is regarded as the Pastor's representative in the parish [Adogame 1999: 104]. Thus, the Cele Church has a vertically layered structure, with the International Headquarters in Ketu, where the Pastor and Pastor-in-Council are located, at the top, and parishes around the world at the bottom, with intermediate parts grouped and controlled by units such as diocese, district, and circuit.

In contrast, the funds required to run a denomination frequently flow in the reverse direction, from the parishes at the bottom to the International Headquarters at the top, from downstream to upstream, so to speak. Each parish collects worship and thanksgiving offerings from believers and organises bazaars and other events to raise funds. As a rule, one-third of the funds collected at the parish level remain in each local parish, and two-thirds go to the International Headquarters [Adogame 1999: 104]. From the funds thus raised, International Headquarters finances the personnel costs of the Pastor, the managerial and other full-time staff of the church, other operational costs, and the construction of the Cathedral and International Conference Centre currently underway in Imeko.

Although not directly related to the organisational chain of communication or funding channels of the Church, Imeko has been given a special status within the Church. As the birthplace of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa's mother and his burial place, Imeko is also known as the Celestial City, and many pilgrims visit it every year as a sacred place for the Church. Pastor-Founder Oshoffa often used to gather his followers on the shores of Porto Novo every December for an event called Convocation [CCC 1980: 32], but after the leadership of the Church shifted to Nigeria, the emphasis gradually shifted to Imeko. Since then, during the Christmas season, large numbers of Cele Church believers from all over the world descend upon this small town in Nigeria near the Benin border to attend congregational meetings that last for several days while they camp out.

The Cele Church purchased a large plot of land in Imeko, on which it has built the residences and cemeteries of pastors, including Pastor-Founder Oshoffa, as well as the cemeteries of Bada and Ajalenkoko, a small chapel, and meeting and accommodation facilities. In addition, since December 1984, the Cele Church has been building an international conference centre and a huge cathedral on the same site at the initiative of the Pastor-Founder. When the International Conference Centre is finally completed, the Cele Church's representative offices around the world will be established in the conference centre to facilitate mutual exchange and cooperation.⁶⁾

4. Doctrine and Facilities

The doctrines of the Cele Church have much in common with other Aladura churches. Examining the affinity between Aladura churches and Yoruba traditional religion, Benjamin Ray notes that though the founders of Aladura churches rejected many of the pagan elements found in Yoruba traditional religion, they inherited from them two elements of belief: invisible spirits and the effectiveness of ritual acts [Ray 1993: 268]. In other words, while Western Christianity denies belief in spiritual beings other than the omniscient and omnipotent God and the Holy Spirit, Aladura churches acknowledge the existence of various spirits found in traditional Yoruba religions and regard the human world as being full of such spiritual beings, especially evil spirits. To live in such an evil and dangerous world, Aladura churches teach that, first, human beings must themselves exorcise evil spirits through rituals using holy water, holy oil, incense, candles, etc., and that, second, it is necessary to draw on the spiritual power of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and angels through fervent prayer, which is a characteristic of the Aladura Church.

The doctrine of the Cele Church, which developed based on this common belief system in Aladura churches, first positions the heavenly world, *orun* in Yoruba, as a safe world protected by God and the Holy Spirit, whereas the earthly world, *aye*, is a dangerous world filled with evil spirits. And the Cele Church is doctrinally said to embody a holy and safe heaven on a wicked and dangerous earth. The name 'Celestial Church of Christ' is a clear expression of the fact that the Cele Church is truly 'heaven on earth'. The believers of the Cele Church, while living their daily lives on earth, where evil spirits are still present, regularly leave the space of their everyday life and go to the church as a heavenly space protected by the Holy Spirit and angels, where they purify themselves through worship, praise, and prayer, and then try to live their daily lives on the evil earth again. In addition, some believers with specific problems, such as illness or family discord, may voluntarily 'take refuge' in the church premises for a few days or weeks to protect themselves from 'attacks' by various spirits, such as sorcerers and evil spirits, in addition to regular attendance at services. Such temporary escape or retreat to the church is called *Abe ado* in Yoruba in the Cele Church [Adogame 1999: 153].

Thus, the doctrine of the Cele Church, which acknowledges the various spiritual entities found in Yoruba traditional religion and regards the confrontation with them as an important theme of religious practice, differs significantly from that of the Western missionary churches, for example, concerning the theological position of Jesus Christ. In Western Christian theology, Jesus is generally regarded as the Saviour sent by God for the redemption of all humanity. In the Cele Church, on the other hand, Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, the only Lord and Saviour of mankind, but his most important role is to act as man's best helper in the fight against evil spirits. In the Cele Church, the acceptance of Jesus as the Saviour of mankind is important, at least in the profession of faith, but in the actual life of faith, the deliverance from evil spirits through the blessing of 'Jesus the Helper' is more important than the deliverance from sin by the atonement of 'Jesus the Saviour'. Jesus in the Cele Church, like God, the Holy Spirit, and angels, is positioned as a holy spiritual being who, in response to the fervent prayers of believers, gives humans the power to fight or triumph over evil spirits.

Thus, the doctrines of the Cele Church are strongly influenced by Yoruba traditional religion, where the confrontation and triumph of the Christian holy spiritual beings, such as God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and angels against the evil spirits of Yoruba traditional religion, such as witchcraft, magic, and evil spirits, which bring misfortune and calamity, is an important motif.

In addition, the doctrines of the Cele Church are also influenced to a certain extent by the Catholic Church and Islam. For example, the worship of the Virgin Mary in the Cele Church is probably influenced by the Catholic Church, which Pastor-Founder Oshoffa also attended for a time. Many similarities between Aladura churches and Muslim culture have also long been noted [Fisher 1970: 269-277]. The Cele Church has a number of prohibitions that are compatible with Muslim cultural practices, such as not drinking alcohol or eating pork, not wearing shoes on the church premises, men and women not being seated next to each other in the chapel, and menstruating women not being allowed on the church premises.⁷⁾ The strong influence of Muslim culture on the doctrine and belief practices of the Cele Church may be related to the fact that many of Pastor-Founder Oshoffa's relatives were Muslim and he was familiar with the Muslim way of life from an early age [CCC 1980: 11].

In the Cele Church, a house of worship is called *Ile Esin* or *Ile Adura* in Yoruba. The former means 'house of worship', and the latter means 'house of prayer'. The Cele Church calls Sundays the 'Lord's Day', Wednesdays 'Mercy Day', and Fridays 'Power Day', and various services and prayer meetings are held on those days of the week. When worship services and meetings are held in the chapel, lit white candles are placed at the four corners of the chapel, and at the entrance, incense is burnt, and holy water is sprinkled to exorcise evil spirits. During Sunday services, after the congregation has entered the chapel, a wooden staff in the shape of a cross is placed at an angle at the door to prevent the entry of evil spirits.

As the church premises, including the chapel, are a holy celestial space, it is forbidden for anyone who enters them, whether they are believers or not, to put their feet on the ground. In addition, all believers are required to wear a white soutane (*sutan*), symbolising purity, and female believers are required to cover their heads with a hat or other covering.

The Cele Church chapels usually have an area called 'Mercy Land' in English or *Ile Aanu* in Yoruba, which is surrounded by a block wall or metal fence [Adogame 1999: 155-157]. Mercy Land is covered with beach sand and is the place where the foot-washing ceremony is held in which the parish Shepherd and leaders wash the feet of the general congregation once a year, and where the faithful are free to pray, have a time of contemplation, and fast. Mercy Land also often has wells and water features, water from which is used as holy water for believers to apply to their bodies or drink. This holy water is believed to have healing and exorcism properties.

Inside the Cele Church, the Mercy Land is supposed to be a replica of the wilderness where Jesus Christ wandered for 40 days and triumphed over the temptations of the devil [Ray 1993: 277-278]. However, the Cele Church, which originated in Yoruba communities on the West African coast, is thought to have originally had a close relationship with the coast. This may be evidenced by the fact that several miracles have been set on the coast according to the doctrines of the Cele Church, such as Oshoffa lowering the water level of the sea to stop the erosion of the coastal area and Jesus appearing on the beaches of Lagos [CCC 1980: 12-13, 21-22]. In other words, the Mercy Land attached to each chapel in the Cele Church might not represent the wilderness of Israel during the New

Testament period, but an imitation of the West African coast of the time when Pastor-Founder Oshoffa lived.

5. Rituals and Spiritual Ranks

The Cele Church is a denomination that places great emphasis on collective rituals. The collective rituals of the Cele Church can be broadly divided into regular and non-regular rituals, the former being divided into three main types: weekly, monthly, and annual.

Weekly rites include the Bible Study and Service on the Lord's Day (Sunday), Prayer Meeting and Service on Mercy Day (Wednesday), and service on Power Day (Friday) for pregnant mothers and prophets (prophetesses).

As a monthly ritual, a meeting called the New Moon Service is held on the first Thursday of each month at midnight, for which believers bring a bottle of water and a white candle and gather at the church at 10 pm for two hours of praise, prayer, and dancing. The candles brought by the faithful are later collected, and seven candles each are offered and lit around the main altar in the chapel, and the water bottles are collected from the faithful and the altars in Mercy Land. A service is then held, signalling midnight, for the forgiveness of sins and sanctification [CCC 1991: 51-53].

The Cele Church also has some unique annual rituals in addition to common church events such as Pentecost and Easter. For example, the first Friday of every July is Holy Mary's Day, with a ritual commemorating the event of Oshoffa's vision of the Virgin Mary in a trance on 15 July 1977. There is also a Harvest for Youth on the first Sunday of June in all the parishes, a Nigerian National Headquarters in Makoko on the first Sunday of August, and a Supreme Harvest for adults at the Nigerian National Headquarters in Makoko on the first Sunday of August and at the Supreme Headquarters in Porto Novo on the first Sunday of October. Furthermore, each Cele Church parish conducts its own Harvest throughout the period from approximately August to November. The event is an occasion to thank God for various favours and the fulfilment of prayers, and chapels are decorated with colourful balloons and tape to create a festive atmosphere. In addition to these events, as mentioned above, every year during the Christmas season, congregations from all over the world gather for a large-scale Annual Convocation. These three annual rites — Holy Mary's Day, Harvest, and Christmas Convocation — are part of the Sacraments in the Cele Church [CCC 1980: 32-33].⁸⁾

In addition to these regular rites, a variety of other rites are also performed in the Cele Church from time to time as needed. These include baptisms, naming ceremonies, cornerstone ceremonies, consecration ceremonies, funerals, and weddings, and their liturgical methods are prescribed in detail by the Church, from the items to be prepared in advance to the ceremonial programme and scriptures to be read on the day [CCC 1991].

The Cele Church has a unique concept of spiritual ranks, and all believers are, in principle, assigned to one of the spiritual ranks. Figure 1 shows the main spiritual ranks and their hierarchy in the Cele Church. The spiritual orders in the Cele Church can be broadly divided into the upper order and the lower order. The spiritual orders in the upper order, with the exception of the Pastor, are based on the name 'Evangelist', which is only given to male believers. In contrast, there are three main types of spiritual orders in the lower ranks: Leader, Elder, and Prophet (Prophetess), with the ranks in the Leader line being granted only to male believers, while those of Elder and Prophet (Prophetess) are

given regardless of gender.

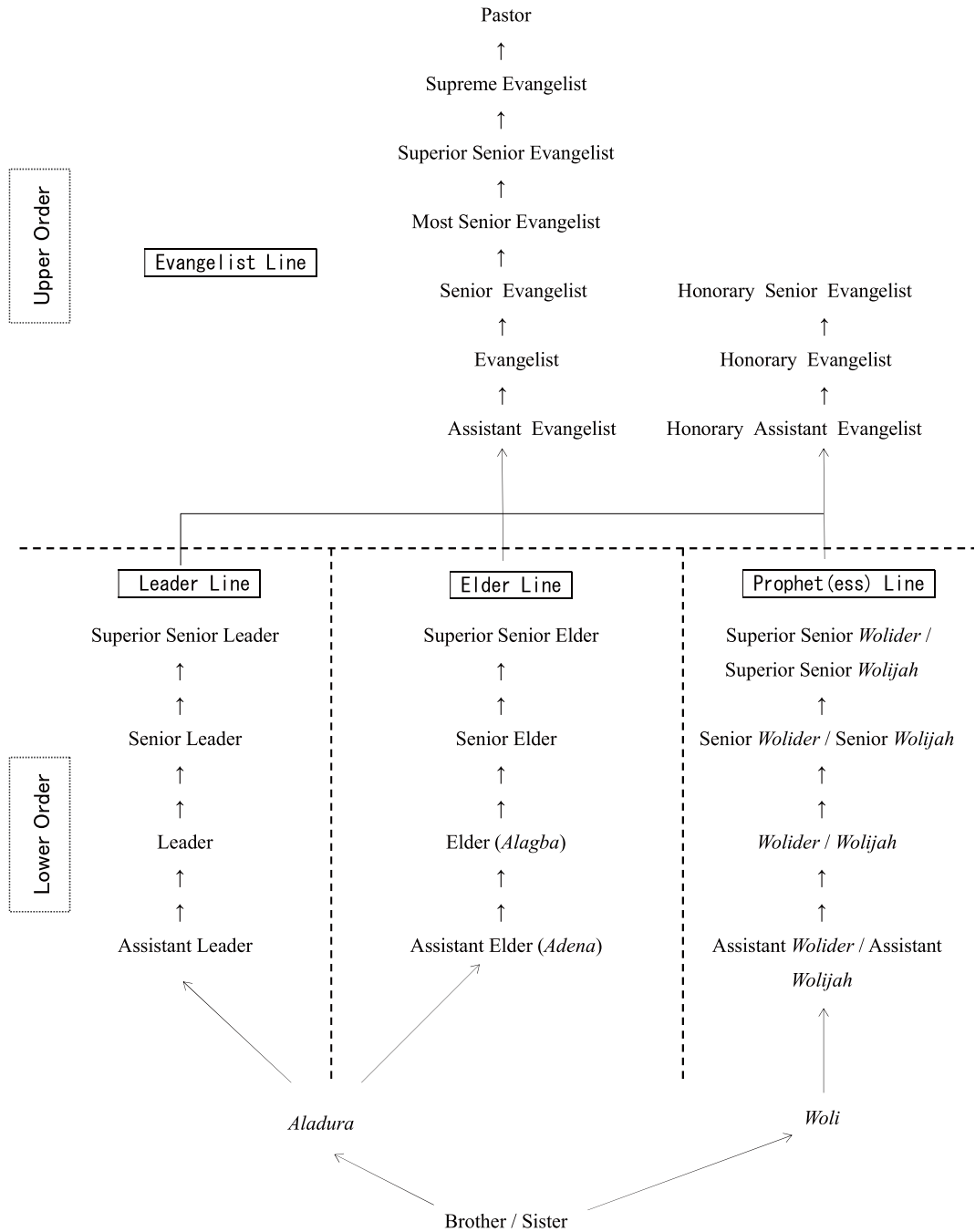


Figure 1 Spiritual Ranks

Source: Adogame [1999: 94].

At first, male newcomers are called 'Brother', and female newcomers are called 'Sister'. They are

then consecrated by the Pastor with anointing oil, usually after a period of about two years. At that time, those deemed to have gifts and abilities suitable for prophethood are given the rank of *Woli* in Yoruba, while others are given the rank of *Aladura*. Those classified in the Prophet (Prophetess) line are then given the spiritual ranks of Assistant *Wolider*, *Wolider*, Senior *Wolider*, and Superior Senior *Wolider* for men and the ranks of Assistant *Wolijah*, *Wolijah*, Senior *Wolijah*, and Superior Senior *Wolijah* for women. *Wolider* means male prophet, and *Wolijah* means female prophet. On the other hand, those appointed as *Aladura* are promoted to the rank of Leader or Elder in the case of men, and to the Elder line in the case of women. Although these three lines — Leader, Elder, and Prophet (Prophetess) — are independent of each other, they have a certain degree of correspondence in their grades; for example, the spiritual rank of Senior Leader in the Leader line is almost equivalent to Senior Elder and Senior *Wolider/Wolijah* in the Elder and Prophet (Prophetess) lines.

Whether Leader, Elder, or Prophet (Prophetess), ordinary believers can usually only be promoted to the spiritual rank of Superior Senior. In contrast, a very limited number of influential people and executives are given the spiritual rank of Evangelist, which belongs to the upper order. Evangelists are broadly divided into two main categories: full-time Evangelists, who are paid a salary or allowance by the church, and part-time Evangelists, who have other main jobs and are involved in church administration and who are given the adjective 'Honorary'. Needless to say, the core of church administration is carried out by the full-time staff of the upper spiritual orders, such as Most Senior Evangelist and Senior Evangelist, under the Pastor. Among those who are given spiritual orders such as Honorary Senior Evangelist and Honorary Evangelist, many are professionals such as lawyers, military personnel, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs, who contribute to the operation of the Church by offering their expertise, various forms of facilitation, and financial support.

The Pastor is ultimately in charge of ordaining these spiritual orders, and those to be ordained must attend the Annual Convocation in Imeko at Christmas time, where they are presented with their new spiritual orders in person by the Pastor. In this way, the position and authority of the Pastor as the supreme leader of the Church is reaffirmed, and unity is maintained and strengthened.

It should be noted that all members of the Cele Church are broadly divided into two groups in terms of the lower order's spiritual hierarchy: church administrators, who are classified in the Leader and Elder lines, and Prophets (Prophetesses), who are classified as Prophets. When, for example, a person from the former group, Leader or Elder, is appointed as Shepherd of a parish, a person from the latter group, Prophet, is chosen as his assistant, and so on, and the balance and coordination between the two groups is sought in various aspects of church administration [Adogame 1999: 99].

6. Gender and Prophecy

Gender has important implications in the Cele Church. For example, as mentioned above, the core of the Cele Church administration is almost exclusively dominated by male believers since female believers cannot be promoted to the higher spiritual rank of Evangelist. In addition, female believers are not in principle allowed to preach or read the Bible in the chapel [CCC 1980: 50], and women who are menstruating or have just given birth are considered unclean and are not even allowed to enter the church premises.

These gendered characteristics of the Cele Church are also strongly reflected in the arrangement

of separate spaces for men and women in the chapel. Figure 2 shows the gendered space in the chapel (*Ile Esin*) of the Cele Church. The separate spaces for men and women in the chapel are hook-shaped, appearing like a reversed letter L. When a service is held, male congregants first enter through the door at the rear right side towards the front altar. Then, the general congregation takes their seats at the back (Layer III), choir members in the middle (Layer II), prophets in the middle (Layer II), and senior leaders in the area closer to the altar (Layer I). Female believers, on the other hand, enter through the door at the left rear and take their seats in the rear (Layer III) for ordinary believers, in the middle (Layer II) for prophets, and in the middle (Layer II) for choir members. Female believers are not even allowed to enter the altar area, let alone be seated at the front of the chapel. Thus, the chapel of the Cele Church is clearly gendered, with the exception of some areas,

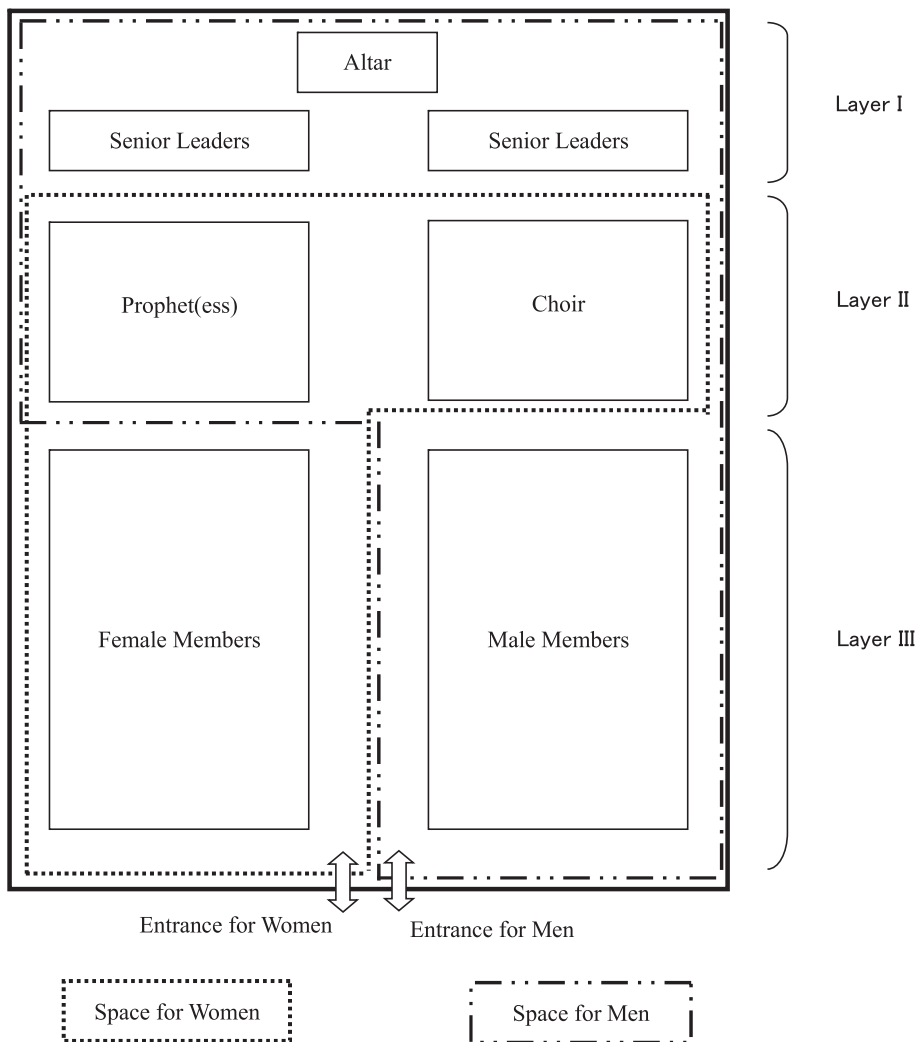


Figure 2 Gender and Space in Cele Church's *Ile Esin*

Source: By author.

such as the choir, where men and women are mixed.

However, Figure 2, which shows the gendered spaces of the Cele Church chapel, also suggests that female congregants play two important roles in worship: prophecy and praise [Olupona 1987: 62-63]. Indeed, Layer I at the very front of the chapel is dominated by the male superior leadership, followed by Layer II closer to the altar, where the prophecy and choir seats are located, and where female rather than male believers play a central and active role. The worship in the Cele Church is centred on the male leaders of Layer I and the prophet and choir of Layer II, in which women play an active role, followed by the male and female lay members of Layer III at the back of the church. As a rule, female members of the Cele Church are not allowed to preach or read from the Bible in worship services. Instead, some of the female believers take an active role in prophesying revelations from God and praising God in the area closer to the altar than the general congregation, thereby actively contributing to the running of the service. In this sense, Cele Church worship may be seen as a cooperative activity between men and women.

Worship services and meetings of the Cele Church emphasise visions and prophecy, in which female believers play a particularly important role. Prophecy involves seeing visions guided by the Holy Spirit, and prophecy is hearing God's voice through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although anyone anywhere can experience visions and prophecies, in the Cele Church they are most often carried out by those who have been ordained as prophets, especially in the form of possession in the chapel or Mercy Land as a heavenly space.

Each parish usually has several members responsible for visions and prophecies, who are possessed during services and meetings, see visions and hear voices, and deliver various messages about the Church and individual members of the congregation. Such messages can be divided into three main types: first, prophetic, which speaks of events in the near future; second, explanatory, which reveals the identity of the spiritual entity responsible for the calamity or misfortune; and, third, approving, which announces the acceptance of prayers and offerings from the faithful [Adogame 2003: 251]. The Cele Church states that *Wolijah*, female prophetesses, in particular, play an active role in conveying messages from God through such visions and prophecies.

Conclusion

Research on Aladura churches in Nigeria has been actively attempted since the 1960s, mainly by Western African researchers as part of AIC research [e.g. Peel 1968]. However, with the slowdown in the growth of Aladura churches and the rise of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in Nigeria, Aladura churches have gradually lost the attention of Western scholars. Instead, Nigerian scholars began to carry forward and develop the work on Aladura churches, which continues to this day.

It is true that many of the Aladura churches in Nigeria are now in decline. Because of this, many researchers have come to regard the Aladura churches as a 'relic of the past' that no longer leads to new discoveries. But is this really true? Do we no longer have anything to learn from Aladura churches about Africans? This paper identified the existence of an Aladura church that continues to quietly expand its denominations, develop its own religious practices, and meet the religious needs of many people. This paper is only a fairly general research note on the Cele Church. However, it is hoped that it will serve as one of stepping stones for future research on Aladura churches in Nigeria.

Notes

- 1) The Cele Church is named *Eglise du Christianisme Céleste* in French, *Ijo Mimo Ti Kristi Lati Orun Wa* in Yoruba, and *A Gun Sisen Wiwe Kristi Ton Son Olon Me Wa* (or *A Gun Wiwe Olon Ton*) in Egun.
- 2) For details about the C&S, see Peel (1968).
- 3) For details about the CLA, see Turner (1967).
- 4) When the author visited the Cele Church in Makoko on 5 April 2008, the walls of its conference hall were decorated with portraits of Bada and Ajalenkoko on the left and right respectively, with Pastor-Founder Oshoffa at the centre.
- 5) In mainstream Nigerian opinion, Oshoffa had given instructions before his death that his body should be buried in Imeko if he died in Nigeria and in Porto Novo if he died in Benin, and that the burial site should be consecrated by the Order [CCC 1980: 3].
- 6) Interview with R.O. Ajanlekoko, son of Ajanlekoko, who was a member of Oshoffa's inner circle and a senior member of the Order (8 April 2008 at Imeko).
- 7) Other taboos include, for example, not committing adultery, not participating in any idolatry or black magic, not smoking, not wearing black or red clothing except for uniforms, not using candles of any colour other than white in the church, and not bringing dead bodies into the church [CCC 1980: 29-30; CCC 1991: 145]. Cele Church members are also encouraged to eat as little as possible, for example, kola nuts, which are traditionally believed to be often used by evil spirits in Yoruba society [Olupona 1987: 61].
- 8) The other four sacraments are Baptism, Holy Communion, Foot washing, and Easter.

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