

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (4), Serial No. 21, July, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

Towards Church Indigenization: A Critical Examination of the Problems and Prospects in the Deeper Life Bible Church in Northern Nigeria (Pp. 408-422)

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Abstract

The Deeper Life Bible Church started as a Bible study group at the residence of Pastor W. F. Kumuyi in August 1973 with fifteen members.(1) It did not occur to Kumuyi that when they gathered in his parlour as a small group for a systematic digging deep of God's word that it will one day go ground Nigeria and beyond with large followership. That little group growth started in the western part of Nigeria with a lot of students graduating from the University of Lagos, Federal College of Education (Technical) Akoka, Lagos and the Yaba College of Technology (Yaba Tech) Lagos and they formed the earlier population and as they graduated they went for the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC), and they carried along the 'fire of revival' all over the nation (Nigeria). The Northern part of the country was not exempted. What began in various centres as Bible study blossomed into a full denomination. The bulk of the leaders were from the southern part of the country. They dominated the bulk of the leadership and a few indigenes that came into Deeper Life Bible Church were the minority in the north. The leadership of Deeper Life Bible Church took a decision to get the northerners into its fold, hence the indigenization policy in May 1994. This article sketches this indigenization policy; its problems and prospects and possible solutions.

Deeper Life Bible Church Indigenization Policy

The Deeper Life Bible Church came into northern Nigeria several years after other denominations had been established and were completely indigenized in structure and leadership style. Deeper Life did her best to reach the indigenous people, but realized that their response was nothing to write home about, hence the necessity to completely indigenize the Deeper Life Bible Church in Northern Nigeria.

The need to reach the indigenes and get them into the leadership position has not been the battle of Deeper Life alone. Indigenization is a global phenomenon. For example, the Christian and Missionary Alliance church were faced with this problem in her attempt to penetrate the far eastern part of Asia with the gospel. The gospel was seen as the Whiteman's religion which has little or nothing to give to the indigenes such as the Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc. And the few that actually became Christians were minority compared to the majority who were not interested in Christianity and this was a mind bugging problem and the executive of the Christian and Missionary Alliance were not silent, hence:

In 1927 the Alliance Mission officially inaugurated the indigenous church policy, aiming at full self-support, self-government, and self-propagation. These terms were interpreted to mean:

- i. Self-reliant: Support by oneself or itself. It meant the support of the Pastors had to come from church offerings or from personal income or both. It allowed, however, that contribution could be received from interested persons or sources within the same city or country.
- ii. Self-government: All matters pertaining to the church – its committees, its property holdings, its treasury, its discipline, and preaching – were matters to be administered by the nationals.
- iii. Self-propagation, the witnessing of the national church in accordance with the Great Commission Acts 1:8 (p. 2).

We can see that this church was definite in her objective towards the native or the indigenous church that anyone who wishes can get along with their vision.

All missionary work conducted by the Christian and Missionary Alliance had a twofold objectives: first and the immediate objective is the widespread

preaching of the gospel, and ultimate objective is the building of the indigenous church.

Another church that faced up to this issue is the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (CBN) or *Ekklesia Yanuwaa' Nigeria* (EYN) with headquarters at Kwarhi in Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State. When their first missionary Dr. Kulp arrive in Nigeria, he worked with other missionaries around Borno, Adamawa, Taraba, states, etc, and there were converts (indigenous) and as their efforts expanded, the reality of indigenizing the work dawned on them.

Their missionary Manual has the following: it shall ever be the policy of the mission to train the native Christians toward the standard of self-support of the work (p. 3).

In fact, by the 1940's it had become clear to many missionary societies that if Christianity was to take root and expand in Africa it could be necessary to raise a class of highly trained Africans to govern and administer the local churches. The leading church missionary strategist Henry Venn was more than ever persuaded, given the vastness of Nigeria, that the only way his society could make any significant impact there was by establishing a church that was led, administered and maintained by Africans, that is a self-governing, self-supporting and self-prorogating church.

In fact, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and Sudan United Mission (SUM) right from he beginning adopted the position that: "A missionary society could not really claim to be established while its work was confined to stations manned by expatriate missionaries, hence the policy of training and involving indigenous people in the missions' work development at the earliest time (p. 4)."

For example, the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 did not affect the work of the Sudan United Mission (SUM) so much, because by then, the evangelistic work in the older districts of the mission's work in Nigeria was almost entirely in Nigerian hands and the missionary service to the 'heathen' was largely through the local church. The (SUM) believed that a "consecrated African can reach his own people as no European can" (p. 5) and special efforts were made to encourage the native "Christians to give their testimonies and to conduct meetings making them less dependent in view of these that all the Deeper Life State and Regional Overseers met for

three days in May, 1994 at Kaduna to consider this indigenization issue in the north.

Prior to this time, nothing of this nature had ever come up in the Deeper Life set up but the religious excesses in the north coupled with the issue that had been mentioned that the bulk of the Deeper Life leaders and leadership were from the south and therefore the impact was not felt either in getting the indigenes in the north to the church or get them involved in the leadership in the church.

Indeed it was in May, 1994, that the issue of indigenization came to the open and all the full-time pastors from the south were asked to hand-over to the indigenes of the north in order that they might lead their people properly and raise up fellow indigenes into effective leadership position.

After seventeen years of experimenting with the idea of indigenization policy, this article examines a few problems associated with it and some prospects and proffers a possible solution for other churches especially those with Pentecostal/Charismatic persuasion that may want to adopt this policy in future. Below are a few problems associated with indigenization.

Problems: Possibility of Tribalism and Ethnocentrism

According to *Encyclopaedia Americana*, "Tribe is a group of families who have a feeling of community through occupying a common territory and following similar customs" (p. 5). More recently, tribes has been applied to any people having a common territory and customs who are not part of a state society. The term may refer to a group of 'primitive' people, who visit one another, intermarry, and meet together for major religious ceremonies, and who retain a common dialect and customs through these associations. Or as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* puts it "tribe is a group of people speaking a common language, observing uniformed rules of social organization, and working together for common purposes such as trade, agriculture or warfare (p.6).

So it could be seen that from the dictionary definitions, tribe is that which makes people have a common identity, but human-beings being what they are changed the whole idea, hence tribalism had had bad connotation.

Tribalism is a major problem in our nations. Centuries of distrust and hostility between tribes are not easily forgotten. In Nigeria, tribal hostilities causes internal wars, and more conflicts may occur in the future.

A complete society such as the church is made up of diverse tribes, tongues, and languages that depict the universality of the gospel. And when in a local assembly, the strength of membership is overlapped by a certain ethnic group, there is the tendency or possibility of seeing others (in the same group) as the minority group, and the minority complex might even pave way for a possible faction and this gives room for ethnocentrism.

The Deeper Life Bible Church started in Lagos (which is owned by Yorubas) but more or less a land for all and sundry. As Deeper Life started, it had a Yoruba cultural set-up which has one way or the other affected their membership and to now indigenize it amounts to giving room for other tribes to carry on Deeper Life as it suits them. The indigenization issue has brought about tribalism and made the ministry lost focus and disunity has set in. Before, there was no consciousness of where you come from but now the reverse is the case.

A critical observation of the events of Acts 6:1-4, will show that the Early Church in Jerusalem was outnumbered by the Palestine Jews – a fact which resulted in the preferential treatment of the Hebrew widows in the daily distribution in the first century church.

In fact, the idea of indigenization has allowed tribalism to set in as the northerners feel that the southerners are superior to them, hence the inferiority complex in which they go about the indigenization issue. They feel that now the opportunity has been given to them, they must monopolize everything leaving little or no room for the southerners.

From thorough investigation, it discovered that the whole idea of indigenization is good, but there is the general misconstruction by the indigenous leaders as if indigenization is the same as tribalism and its shown in their attitude as if they have been waiting for the opportunity and in fact, a lot of the southerners no longer see themselves as belonging and all the sensitive and enviable posts are now manned by inexperienced and sometimes incompetent hands and a kind of marginalization has set into the various local churches of Deeper Life Bible Church in the north.

Incompetent and Untrained Hands

It has been observed that a visionary and competent leader is one that influences his people and they naturally follow him, not by force or cohesion, but simply because the leaders is an example and they are wooed into his course of action. The apostle Paul instructed his son in the faith to avoid the

error of putting into a place of responsibility (in the church, where he functioned as the resident pastor), individuals who are novice – one that is still learning and without experience.

The research shows that as a result of the mass exodus of the non-indigenous leaders from the north who have been the bedrock of the gospel in-road of the Deeper Life Bible Church, that a lot of untrained hands have taken over the work and that has had its own demerits, set backs and terrible detriment to the expansion of the gospel in the north.

So many of the indigenous leaders were simply appointed to take up leadership work without any divine call to the ministry. Their lack of maturity for the work of the ministry has made the morale of the people to be very low coupled with little zeal and willingness to do service for God. A lot of the southerners are not happy as they are seeing the work done by former non-indigenous leaders crumbling to the foundation.

The issue of indigenization has its devastating blow on the Deeper Life ministerial structure. For example, a person called to reach out to difficult area may find it hard to re-adjust and putting another person in his place in the name of indigenization will make such a work to lose its fervour.

There is great implication when church leaders are deficient of the vital ingredients that should stand the test of time. A minister's efficiency can positively influence the state of affairs in a ministry such as the Deeper Life Bible Church.

It is therefore very glaring that when there is in any church or Christian ministry, ministerial inefficiency, the people, that is, the members will naturally react and that might result into people no longer zealous and committed to the cause of that church or they may even end up joining other churches.

In fact, Chinua Achebe said, "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." The Nigerian problem, he concluded, is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership" (p.7).

Nailing it up completely the issue of untrained hands and incompetent leadership in any sphere of human activities, Paul A. Mwaipya has counselled:

When a nation allows some of its mediocre citizens to take charge of all its policy making activities, it is most likely to succeed in maintaining smooth functions of its social unit and in facilitating systematic developments, nor can it promote and preserve human dignity. What generally happens in such a nation is the rights, the practice of political intimidation, which in turn develops fear of national leaders. Indeed mediocre leadership is notorious for practicing nepotism, favouritism, suppression of liberty, equality, freedom of expression, and freedom of choice. Above all, it does everything possible to overlook and underrate the significance of the principle of merit. No wonder, it ruthlessly discourages competition (p. 8).

Low Self-Esteem Which Leads to Discouragement

There is no doubt that what a person believes about himself will invariably control him or her much more than what is actually true about him. This is crippling many indigenous Deeper Life leaders in the north who have been recreated by the Lord to accomplish good and great things, but each time they compare themselves with their predecessors they become inferior in their own eyes, hence the Bible says “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before hand and that we should work in them.” (Ephesians 2:10).

The indigenes themselves have not yet accepted indigenization in heart and in life, in a lot of churches, English is still very much in use as many indigenes have been used to English language at the expense of their native languages. They do not courageously rise up to the challenge of indigenization and study their languages and use it as a way of passing gospel across to their people.

Each Christian has the potential to live above the elements of the world and not to lose the battles of this life which they face daily especially as it related to the gospel and this is because they see themselves in the eyes of the past.

The word of Jesus is true “A prophet has no honor except among his people” because a lot of our people are familiar with us, it brings contempt. We hear them tell us about our former lives even when we tell them we have experience rebirth or regeneration which changes a person’s heart,

disposition and character. They ridicule us and no doubt this has its own setback for the propagation of the gospel.

Each of these new indigenous leaders could renew their minds according to Biblical injunction: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and accepted and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2).

When the indigenous leaders or workers do not renew their minds from the thoughts of their past to the thoughts of God, they will easily be discouraged. When they see themselves in God’s eyes – instead of the eyes of abuse, fear or failure, they can rise up and lead their people properly.

Conclusively, the words of Josh McDowell are food for thought:

One of the most profound efforts of a poor self-image can be seen in the attitude a person develops towards his or her world. Person with an unhealthy self-image have a fearful, pessimistic view of the world and of their ability to cope with its challenges. They see unexpected or new situations as threats to their personal happiness and security, seemingly planned as attacks on them personally. They see the world as closing on them, pushing, and crushing them (p. 9).

Financial Burden

Many of the people that live in the north are rural dwellers and have terrible financial setbacks because those who call themselves non-indigenes withdrew from the churches. And lack of funds can hinder a church’s ministry, causing needed programs, mission, projects, and additional staff to be put aside because of poor budgeting.

The indigenization has brought about set back in the areas of man power. When the non-indigenous pastors were around, they began a lot of physical structures such as church building, pastorium, generators, etc. But with their exit, a lot of them have been left undeveloped and hardly would one see new structures embarked upon.

Christians will continue to be immature and undeveloped until they settle the money question. Finance is a big factor for the physical and material growth of the Christian ministry, but when there is misappropriation,

mismanagement and misuse of people's tithes and offerings and many times it can even result into fractionalization in a local assembly. Men and women are prone to raise eye-brows; the tendencies are without a doubt, in terms of finance.

The above factor is perfectly true in that the finances of the Deeper Life in the north has been coming from non-indigenes who were leaders, they were gingered into giving, but with indigenization, the tempo has reduced drastically.

Finally, it has brought about a lot of setbacks. Instead of the Deeper Life moving forward, you see a lot of lukewarmness on the part of the non-indigenes in giving and that has affected the financial strength of the various churches in northern Nigeria. A lot of the indigenes find themselves in a kind of a cross road as they are unable to respond to the financial obligation of the ministry.

Deeper Life Messages Has Not Affected Indigenes

A lot of the works of the Deeper Life in reaching out to people are done using the English language. Their various publications: cassettes 'search the Scripture' (the Sunday School Manuals), the Christian Women Mirror Magazine, Campus Pearl (mean for higher institutions) are all in English. Only in recent times, they brought out an Hausa Magazine "Gaskiyau Yan" meaning "Today's Truth". The fact that Hausa is the lingua franca of the north does not mean everyone in the north understands Hausa.

The indigenes are not able to relate the preaching, teachings of Kumuyi in cassettes and magazines to their people. Interpreting it into Hausa does not convey perfectly to the people's comprehension. This is not a good way of reaching the grass rooters. A lot of the indigenous leaders go to the headquarters in Lagos for conferences and they hear a lot of messages and its been difficult for them to translate and relay the same ideas they got to their people properly. That shows why one see what is happening in the Deeper Life in cities and comes to the rural areas, lot of differences and disparity is noticeable and this anomalies will continue as long as the indigenization concept continues except they decide to train and develop translators and interpreters.

The truth is that such good materials such as the Search the Scriptures use of Sunday Schools has not been made available even in Hausa language to enable a lot of persons understand not to talk of the indigenous languages.

The indigenization is not yet fully felt even when the indigenous leaders decide to form Hausa churches. It is still the English speaking branches that draw much attendance. The indigenes in their bid to use Hausa language and interpret still find Hausa Bible difficult to read and understand. The Deeper Life leaders have not made adequate effort in getting the messages into their indigenous languages.

Negative Attitude of the Non-Indigenes to Indigenization

Many non-indigenes have left the church not because the Deeper Life is not preaching the truth rather they view it as another tribal umbrella in which all sorts of discrimination and marginalization is perpetuated.

It can be seen that the inherent problems associated with indigenization by the Deeper Life leadership negatively as so much such as: the disunity it has caused amongst its fellowship; the suddenness in which it was introduced and carried out and the consequent mass exodus of its members to other churches; the spiritual set back it has caused and generally apathy to the things of God now unlike before: physical structure left behind by the non-indigenes in almost all places in the northern Nigeria has had little or no attention in developing them; the majority of the indigenes are illiterates and unable to respond to the challenges before them; envies and strife etc, are so many to enumerate in small work as this but the very few mentioned are very fundamental for the existence of the church and a radical and dramatic steps must be taken if there will be future for the Deeper Life in the north.

Positive Sides to Indigenization Potentialities come to the Fore

The wealthiest spot on this planet is not the oil fields of Saudi Arabia or the gold mines of South Africa. The richest deposits on our planet are not many blocks from our houses – in our local cemetery. Buried beneath the side of those sacred grounds are songs that never were written, paintings that never filled a canvas. ~~Ideas that have never become reality, isol many souls~~ that never were won. Tragically, our graveyards are filled with potential that never was fulfilled.

As one criss-cross the length and breath of Deeper Life Bible Church in the north one grieves over the wasted, broken, disoriented lives of leaders found who indigenes are.

Only a small percentage of the six billion people in this planet will achieve a significant position of their true potential. The potential remains untapped

because they did not understand the nature of the potential principle: Potential is not what you have done, but what you can do. Not what is, what could be.

What is potential? Dormant ability. Untapped strength. Unused success. Hidden Talents. Capped capability.

There is a wealth of potential with every Christian. But they must decide if they will deprive the world of bless it with the valuable, potent, untapped resources blocked away within them. Most men and women (especially some timid Deeper Life indigenous leader) never realize their full potential because they do not understand the keys to a fulfilled and effective life and prosperous leadership.

The indigenization no doubt has helped in the development of man-power. As the non-indigenes left (Pastors) for the south, a vacuum was created and some of the indigenes took over and rose up to the challenges before them. The laities were not left behind but in some places were groomed to be preachers, teachers and missionaries to their people.

Like a child who loses his father and left with no helper, the child will have to respond to the challenges before him, so indigenization has left the indigenes with no choice but to respond to the vacuum created by the mass exist of the non-indigenous leaders.

According to Myles Munroe, he said that there are at least ten keys to discovering ones potential and seeing its full achievements:

- i. You must know (be related to your source). To understand how much potential you possess, you must understand the source from which you come (God).
Vol. 5 (4), Serial No. 21, July, 2011. Pp. 408-422
- ii. You must understand how the product was designed to function. God designed human beings to function as he does.
- iii. You must know your purpose. God created us and give us life for a purpose. Whatever that purpose is, we possess the potential to fulfill it.
- iv. You must understand your resources. God, in his wisdom, provided human being with tremendous material and physical resources to

sustain and maintain as we proceed in realizing developing and maximizing our potential.

- v. You must have the right environment.
- vi. You must work out your potential ... work is a major key to realizing your potential.
- vii. You must cultivate your potential
- viii. You must guard your potentials.
- ix. You must share your potentials.
- x. You must know and understand the laws of limitation (p. 10).

Consecration and Commitment

There are no better occasions or situations when men are bent to changes and challenges than when the unexpected happens. Indeed, at no time from the research did most of the full-time Pastors ever dreamt that a thing like indigenization will ever happen nor is the indigenes ever expected themselves to take over as they have always look up to the southerners for inspiration.

Necessity they say is the mother of invention and while some of the indigenous leaders are still showing attitude of apathy and luke-warmness, yet others have risen up to their feet to accept the challenges before them and indeed many are triumphing over the wrongs and struggles they met.

The Unreached Are Reached and Cultural Barrier is Broken

The supreme task of the church is the evangelization of the world. The churches and ministries, fundamentally exists as the agency of God in the local communities and the world at large. Hence, wherever and whenever a local church is born, the objective will be to preach Jesus Christ to the people and then get them incorporated into the local church.

Towards Church Indigenization: A Critical Examination ...

Indigenization has helped to bring about grass-root participation that can easily help get the gospel across to the indigenes. An indigene understands the customs, cultures and problems of his people. Even though this is a slow method of penetrating with the gospel yet it still has its own merits.

Undoubtedly, the sort of class of individuals will reach their class. There is no doubt that the non-indigenes did not labour, but they cannot reach the indigenes like the indigenes would.

The indigenes are known to his people and can relate with them culturally. The indigene can minister to the cultural needs of his people and be able to make distinction between those customs and cultures that are good and those detrimental to the spiritual welfare of their people.

The research recalled an incident in which the founder of DLBC in that particular areas was ignorant of a lot of the customs; traditions etc, of that area, but when an indigene explained things to that individual (the pastor) thing became clear and there was a tremendous growth of DLBC in that locality and a lot of the indigenes who were potentials but having been standing aloof got into the church working force and a lot of them rose up to the top of the church hierarchy.

Language Barrier Is Broken

It has been said over and again that the Deeper Life Bible Church was started in the University of Lagos and in most of her pulpits, English language is used. And because English language is our lingua franca; its usage has become detrimental in the communication of the gospel in our indigenous language, but with indigenization, a lot of the languages are coming up to the fore especially in the northern Nigeria.

Indigenization has helped to break language barrier. Before indigenization, the southern languages were used frequently is Igbo and Yoruba churches next to English language and it so dominated that it did not profit the indigenes and the indigenes remained aloof and non-challant to the gospel generally, But now the Hausa language is more used and all the suspicion they had that the Deeper Life was a church for English speakers and hearers and for southerners has been dispelled to a great extent.

Sense of Belonging

Anyone who has stayed long in the north will applaud the decision of Deeper Life to indigenize.

There was a religious riot in 1980 in which so many lives were lost and properties worth thousands if not million were destroyed. The same religious riots had taken place at Kafanchan, Zaria, Kaduna, Jos, Bauchi, Gombe, Yola, Maiduguri, etc, and each time the same ugly news and churches that have southerners in majority are reduced drastically.

For example, in 1991 religious uproar, the Deeper Life lost so many members and many had to flee for their dear lives, but indigenes of any part of the north would have no place to go outside their place and take care of the churches in case, of the above which we have enumerate.

Finally, the positive sides are equally many such as organizing large conferences in which the indigenous languages are used, and all the wrong notions and ideas that because Deeper Life was founded in the south, it was automatically a southern church have been dispelled by the introduction of indigenization.

Prospects for Indigenization

The leadership of Deeper Life must have studied widely before taken the decision concerning indigenization.

No doubt there are a lot of hurdles to cross but with time one hopes a lot of this obstacles will be overcome and things stream-lined.

Praying for the indigenous by the non-indigenes will go a long way to encourage the work. It would be good for the leadership of Deeper Life Bible Church to look at the negative sides of indigenization that were mentioned and work at improving them. The article is not a closed chapter, rather more researches can be carried out by scholars so as to find out any gap indigenization may have created and need for it to be closed up.

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