

Opposition and Survival Strategies of African Independent Churches in Mbeya, Tanzania, 1960s–2000s.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the opposition to, and survival strategies of, African Independent Churches (AICs), which emerged in Mbeya region in the 1920s. These churches were against historical churches and colonialism because historical churches would not incorporate African traditional beliefs in Christianity and the colonial government exploited Africans, which led to the AICs experiencing opposition, resulting in their decline in other places in Tanzania. In Mbeya, AICs remained and continued to flourish in the post-colonial period, contrary to people's expectations, which prompted the researchers to carry out this study, drawing on oral interviews, archival documents and secondary sources. This article examines the opposition to the growth of AICs and their various strategies for surviving the opposition. It argues that post-colonial opposition emerged from different spiritual doctrines, the disturbance to historical churches' economy, the failure to abide by government laws and the lack of direct impact on the community in areas with established AICs. Regardless of the opposition, AICs spread their teaching intensively, which comprised giving people the opportunity to overcome some psychological problems; combining faith and culture; and women being given opportunities in the churches that operated independently. Hence, AICs flourished in Mbeya and Christianity kept on growing.

Key words: Independent Churches, Opposition, Survival Strategies, State, Historical Churches

1.0 Introduction

Mbeya region is among the regions in Tanzania with many Christian denominations. In 2016, 450 were reported by the Mbeya District Office. This was also reported by different sources including internet source.¹ This evidence of many denominations is well seen in town landscape, especially in areas with high population within the town, like Simike and Sae. Proliferation of religious denominations was first seen in Mbeya before colonialism. This unique characteristic has distinguished Mbeya from other regions. Taking the example of the Nyakyusa ethnic group, in the late pre-colonial period the group had about a hundred chiefs, each with religious power.² This shows that the Nyakyusa area had about 100 priests for religious activities. Wright has noted that these persons catered for both the spiritual and material wellbeing of their people.³ This feature influenced the nature of religious affiliations in the area. Some of the evidence for this comes from early missionary accounts, which show that the people in Mbeya were very religious in the pre-colonial period.⁴ Sundkler and Steed, for example, noted that “in

¹ <http://mrnoma.blogspot.com/2016/12/mbeya-ndo-mkoa-unaongoza-kwa-kuwa-na.html>

² Mbeya Southern Highland Zonal Archive (MSHZA), History of Diocese of Mbeya Part I: Social and Political Background 1825-1898.

³ Marcia Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika, 1891-1941: Lutherans and Moravians in the Southern Highlands* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 31.

⁴ Bengt Sundkler & Christopher Steed *A History of the Church in Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 535.

coming to the Nyakyusa, the missionaries soon found that they had entered a highly religious area where the cults of “Kyala” and “Mbasi” had many devotees.”⁵ Hence, before the establishment of Christianity in Mbeya, proliferation of religions was already evident in the area.

In the 1890s, Christianity penetrated Mbeya region and interrupted the dynamics by which ingenious religions were being propagated. Many people were converted into Christianity and started to adopt western culture. In Mbeya, as elsewhere, Christianity comprised not only the teaching of and belief in Jesus Christ, but also entailed accepting western ways of life some of which were contrary to the word as it originally came with the Bible.⁶ With the help of the colonial government and missionaries, Christianity spread spontaneously.⁷ For instance, Moravian missionaries demanded assurance and security from the German government in order to proceed.⁸ By the 1920s, Christianity had expanded throughout the region. Schools were set up as training centres where Africans were converted. The disruption brought about by Christianity was noticeable in the structure of the community, marriage, land and property

⁵ Sundkler and Steed, *Church in Africa*, 535.

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 9: 20-23 in the *Bible: The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

⁷ Angetile Y. Musomba, *The Moravian Church in Tanzania Southern Province: A Short History* (Nairobi: IFRA, 2005), 4.

⁸ Musomba, *Moravian Church*.

ownership, religious leadership, laws, taboos and use of the vernacular.⁹ Africans loved Christianity, especially the kind that could accommodate some aspects of their culture.

Three decades after the introduction of Christianity in Mbeya region, some Africans reacted against the activities of historical churches, after becoming aware of the western culture embedded in their teachings. Africans wanted to continue with polygamy, drink their beer, live a communal life, and preserve their languages and way of dressing. Thus, during the British colonial period Africans in Mbeya found a platform for expressing their misgivings on the teachings of historical churches. They formed AICs to challenge historical churches.¹⁰ Dissatisfaction also centered on issues such as control over income, institutional identity, banning of the use of alcohol, discrimination in churches, struggle for power and the failure of historical churches to relate Christianity to traditional African culture.¹¹ As a result, all the historical

⁹ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (London & Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 116-130.

¹⁰ M.B. Akpan, "Liberia and Ethiopia, 1880-1914: the survival of two African states", in *General History of Africa Vol. VII* edited by A. Adu Boahen (California: Heinemann, 1985), 282.

¹¹ C.K. Omari, C.K., "The Making of an Independent Church: The Case of the African Missionary Evangelical Church among the Meru of Tanzania," in *East African Expressions of Christianity* edited by I. N. Kimambo and T. Spear (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1999); R.O.O. Ositelu, *African instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches*, (London: Lit Verlag Munster, 2002), 47.

churches inevitably produced AICs after large numbers of their followers joined the new religious platform. With time, some AIC leaders split off as a result of conflicts with fellow leaders. As a result, new AICs continued to emerge with different names and leaders.

In 1984 it was estimated that there were about 12,000 AICs on the African continent, with a total membership of about 30 million.¹² Barrett reports that at the beginning of the 1980s the AICs claimed thirty-one million adherents throughout the African continent.¹³ Some authors have named the new churches the new centers of universality.¹⁴ Extant literature indicates that all countries in Western, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa have AICs. Country-wise, South Africa offers a more striking example because it has more AICs than any other country in Africa.¹⁵ AICs were connected to the resistance movement against political and cultural imperialism in Africa through the agents of Western colonialism and missionary activities.¹⁶ In order to survive,

¹² G. Oosthuizen, "The African Independent Churches," *Centenary, Africa Insight* No.15 (1985), 70.

¹³ Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, 815.

¹⁴ K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 111.

¹⁵ D. Venter, D., *Engaging Modernity: Methods and Cases for Studying African Independent Churches in South Africa*, (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 20.

¹⁶ Elia S. Mligo, *Jesus and the Stigmatized: Reading the Gospel of John in a Context of HIV/AIDS-Related Stigmatization in Tanzania* (California: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 193-197.

AICs adopted different strategies. This article examines the historical processes by which AICs emerged and struggled for their survival and development. Because the colonial chapter of this history is fairly well covered by the existing literature, this article concentrates on the postcolonial period. It focuses on ALCs' efforts to survive opposition from the historical churches and the postcolonial state.

2.0 Geographical Context of AICs in Mbeya

Early AICs in Mbeya region include the Watch Tower under Hanoc Sindano located in Mbozi, the African National Church under Paddy Nyasulu in Rungwe, the Last Church of God and His Christ under Ben Ngemela in Rungwe and the Little Flock Church under Sem Mboma in Mbeya District.¹⁷ In the region, AICs first appeared in Mbozi, Rungwe and Mbeya districts, where the development of historical churches and economic transformations were more notable. In the post-colonial period new ALCs emerged and developed. The Last Church of Tanzania, Restoration Bible Church, the Evangelical Brotherhood Church, the Tanzania Forward in Faith Church and the Winners Church were some of the most prominent among these.¹⁸ Many AICs were established in town centres where the population was dense and more prone to new cultural influences. However, some AICs operated on a non-institutional basis, and so their

¹⁷ Anthony Makunde, *Yafahamu Makanisa Yaliyoko Tanzania* (Songea: Benedictine Publications Ndanda-Peramiho, 1997), 13, 93, 107 -144.

¹⁸ Mbeya District Office, List of Churches in Mbeya.

activities took place in areas not designed for religious institutions. Patric Mbaao notes that this happened when AICs failed to acquire land legally and were not prepared to wait.¹⁹ Under such circumstances AIC leaders ended up buying or renting houses, or using their own houses for services. However, many AICs in Mbeya succeeded in buying or renting houses in slum areas such as Simike, Nzovwe, Iyunga, Mama John and Ilomba.²⁰ Some AICs operated near people's homes, causing disturbances. Examples of these were the Faith Church, Calvary Church of Tabernacle and the House of Freedom Church.²¹ AICs positioned themselves in strategic areas to get followers. Most members in slum areas were poor, while those in the town centre were rich, especially big traders and some workers. It would however be incorrect to attribute the propagation of ALCs to economic status only, as people were attracted to these churches by a wide range of interests.

3.0 AICs in Mbeya, 1920s to 1950s.

During colonialism, AICs were believed to have been founded for political reasons to resist colonial domination through religion. Ranger points out that "a very different and more constructive answer to the political and social problems of colonialism was given by the African National

¹⁹ Interview with Patrick Mbaao, Sabasaba, 15.09.2014.

²⁰ Interview with Frank E.P. Mwaitebele, Tunduma, 25.09.2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Church.”²² AICs were against colonial rule and the historical churches. Missionaries encouraged African people to work for the colonialists to earn their living. Sometimes, African Christians were required to work on missionary farms for low wages.²³ Emmanuel Mwasile stated that AICs emerged for political reasons, because the British government dominated Mbeya and the church was in the hands of foreign missions.²⁴ In Tanzania, and Mbeya in particular, the early forms of independence struggles were ethnically based rather than national. Among the instruments used were AICs, youth movements and elitist associations.²⁵ In this way, AICs inevitably became a liberation tool. In relation to political issues, Gunner explains that in the African context AICs as a whole seemed to have played little part in the bitter nationalistic struggle, because AICs only emerged when African countries started to become independent.²⁶ However, the role played by AICs cannot be so belittled, as they were a notable political tool. They exerted economic, social and cultural demands. AICs survived and succeeded in accommodating some African traditions, which is why the colonial state saw them as a threat to its interests and

²² Terence O. Ranger, *The African Churches of Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: The Historical Association of Tanzania, 1972), 16.

²³ Interview with Emmanuel Mwasile, Iwambi, 24.09.2014.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Akpan, “Liberia and Ethiopia, 1880-1914”, 279.

²⁶ Elizabeth Gunner, *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 6.

responded accordingly. Hence, AICs experienced opposition from both the historical churches and the colonial state.

From the beginning, two recurrent themes in the history of the western missionary movement, both at home and in Mbeya, were those of nationality and ecclesiastical character.²⁷ Wherever western missionaries went in different parts of the world, they needed health facilities, funds and protection, which meant that they depended on the nation, organisation and individuals. This dependence determined the nature of the message, and the relationship between groups. The characteristics of missionaries who penetrated Africa were no different from those of the colonialists they were related to, because, as E. Okon explained, colonialism aided missionary work in Africa.²⁸ Michael Crowder also insisted that early missionaries in West Africa had the dual purposes of promoting legitimate trade between Africans and Europeans and converting Africans to their own religion.²⁹ E. Ayandele argued that Christian missionaries were the spiritual wing of secular imperialism.³⁰ Mbiti

²⁷ Wright, *German Missions in Tanganyika*, 1.

²⁸ Etim E. Okon, "Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Africa: Objective Contemporary Analysis," *European Scientific Journal* 10, No. 17, (2017), 192-209, here 198.

²⁹ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 111.

³⁰ E.A. Ayandele et al., *The Growth of African Civilization: The Making of Modern Africa. Vol.2* (London: Longman, 1968), 135.

quoted the Gikuyu proverb that says, “there is no Roman priest and a European, both are the same.”³¹ Walter Rodney contended that missionaries were agents of imperialism.³² Although there is a glaring absence of scholarly consensus on the role of missionaries in colonizing Africa,³³ Christian Missionaries did play a major role in the establishment of colonialism Africa. Thus, AICs in Southern, Central and East Africa met with opposition as they were regarded as anti-colonialist. Allowing their growth in a colony meant creating opposition to the state that could finally lead to decolonisation.³⁴ For this reason, the colonial government confront them verbally and with force, as well as by denying their leaders economic support they often needed. At a point in time, AIC members found themselves excluded from positions of power and influence.³⁵ For example, Paddy Nyasulu, who had been educated and became a leader of an AIC, was employed as the mission storekeeper and later on

³¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 23.

³² Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: L'Ouverture, 1972) 277.

³³ Okon “Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Africa”

³⁴ TNA, File No. 25/8: Rungwe.

³⁵ Interview with Emmanuel Mwasile, Iwambi, 24.09.2014; Interview David Nicholas, Simike, 14.09.2014; interview with Juma Jacob, Nzovwe, 18.09.2014; Interview with Sheria Segerea, Tunduma, 25.09. 2014; interview with David Mwamingila, Rungwe, 23. 09. 2014; Njeru Wambungu & John Padwick, “Globalization: A Perspective from the African Independent Churches”, in *Journal of African Instituted Church Theology*, Vo. II. No.1, (2006), 6.

as a government clerk in Malawi and Tukuyu in Tanzania. He was dismissed from his position in 1923 due to his involvement with the AICs.³⁶

However, this did not lead to the collapse of all the AICs that emerged during colonialism. They continued to survive in Mbeya region, with the exception of the Watch Tower Church. Hanoc Sindano, its leader, preached that “the authority of chiefs, administrators and historical churches were anti-Christ, they should be ignored and disobeyed, taxes should not be paid and fields did not need to be cultivated by Watch Tower followers”. He added that the colonialists made Africans work very hard and were given low wages, and so he insisted on praying that Europeans would be forced to return to their own countries to enable Africans to control their resources.³⁷ Sindano used pamphlets published by the Watch Tower Bible Society in South Africa in propagating his opposition against the colonial state.³⁸ The Watch Tower Bible Society was not itself an AIC, but their publications were highly influential.

³⁶ Interview with Angolwisye Malambugi.

³⁷ Quotation from Ranger, *African Churches*, 14-15.

³⁸ T. O. Ranger (1972), 13-14. Watch Tower Bible Society with an African headquarters in Cape Town, was not a church, African workers could find attractive interpretation of the Bible through pamphlets prepared by this society, through reading those who discovered its truth were free to go and spread it, to organise the congregations and even the church, this how AICs emerged, 13-14.

Because Sindano believed that the whites' system was oppressive, he decided he must fight it through religion.³⁹ As a result of his influence, some people in Zambia and Mbozi were converted and became members of the Watch Tower. Thus, there was widespread response to Sindano's teaching that soon brought him into conflict with the British colonial administration.⁴⁰ In the late 1930s the Watch Tower's presence in Tanzania was restricted⁴¹ because Sindano refused to obey the orders of the colonial government, which is why it could not stand by as this would undermine its authority. However, at the end of the colonial period in Tanzania, the Watch Tower was no longer regarded as being opposed to the colonial government. This is because it had changed its name to Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) as well as their church policy. This happened when they developed a close relationship with JWs in America. In the age of independence, they refused to salute the flag and regarded politics as the agency of Satan. As a result, JWs were seen as incompatible with the maintenance of peace, order and good

³⁹ Ranger, *African Churches*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ T. O, Ranger, "Christian Independency in Tanzania", in D.B. Barrett (ed), *African Initiatives in Religion*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971), 126; Tanzania National Archival (TNA), File No. 1733/27, Control of Nyasa Workers Suspected of Watch Tower Believers.

governance. In due course, Watch Tower AIC declined while JWs as a nun-church association developed.⁴²

4.0 AICs from the 1960s to 2000s

In the post-colonial period, AICs established themselves so firmly that they were no longer just protestant movements. They established themselves theologically and defended their discourses as genuine expressions of the Christian faith from the African perspective. They also added African traditions to the Christian faith.⁴³ The word of God which was taught was not different from that of global Christianity, except that it contained African traditions. In the 1960s, some of the beliefs of the AICs were modified. For example, the AICs allowed polygamy during colonialism, but in the post-colonial period men were not allowed to take another wife, although they could keep the wives they already had. Similarly, the use of drums in church and the ways of singing and dancing were modified.⁴⁴ Antoni Makunde argues that the growth of AICs in postcolonial Mbeya was partly stimulated by the fact that in this period the historical churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, were trying to integrate African culture in Christianity, just as the AICs

⁴² C. G. Baeta (ed), *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (Oxford: International African Institute, 1968), 356.

⁴³ O. Kealotswe, "The Nature and character of African Independent Churches in the 21st Century: Their Theological and Social Agenda," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 40 (2), 2014, 229.

⁴⁴ Interview with Emmanuel Mwasile, Iwambi, 24. 09. 2014.

were doing.⁴⁵ Ian Linden has shown that, in the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church articulated the benefits of the theology of enculturation, and declared that the gospel had to be proclaimed in a manner that respected local cultural values.⁴⁶ The 1960s was also a period when the historical churches across Africa were re-evaluating their role in the newly independent countries.⁴⁷ The old certainties of the historical churches, based on their identification with European culture, were fast being eroded in the 1960s.⁴⁸ In this situation the AICs stood a good ground as they maintained a close tie with local cultures.

In the 1970s, AIC operations were based on how African Christianity was to be expressed by carefully discussing their beliefs concerning the major doctrines of Christianity, such as the sacraments of baptism, Holy Communion and marriage. In the 1980s, AICs emphasised that their followers should be ethical, because AICs leaders associated the period of crisis with punishment from God. It is important to note that AICs reflected the changes that occurred in the community, and so they struggled to bring about spiritual

⁴⁵ Interview with Antoni Makunde, Mlowo, 26.09. 2014.

⁴⁶ Ian Landen, *Global Catholicism: Diversity and Change Since Vatican II*. (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 2009).

⁴⁷ Brian Stanley, "Christianity and the End of Empire," in *Missions, Nationalism and the end of Empire* edited by B. Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-15.

⁴⁸ David Maxwell, "Decolonization," in *Missions and Empire* edited by N. Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 285-306.

changes there. For example, revivalist groups gained momentum during this period in the whole of East Africa.⁴⁹ They organised seminars and evangelical meetings which took place in different cities in East Africa. In addition, the emergence of Pentecostalism in the 1980s, with its distinct beliefs, led to the growth of AICs.⁵⁰

In the 1990s, the growth of AICs coincided with the rapid growth of economic disparity caused by privatization and poor social services, and so they continued to meet people's spiritual needs.⁵¹ Thus, in the post-colonial period AICs kept on growing. They did not die out in Mbeya as the Malakite Church in Mwanza did. In 1953, the Church of Holy Spirit was formed amongst the Haya by seceding the Evangelical Lutheran Church, but by 1962, half of its members had been won back. In 1956, the Tanganyika African Church was formed among the Gogo by seceding from the Church Missionary Society, but the majority of its members returned to the Anglican Church in the early 1960s. In 1958, some Nyamwezi seceded from the Moravian Church, but in 1960

⁴⁹ J.R. Mlahagwa, "Contending for the Faith Spiritual Revival and the Fellowship Church in Tanzania," in *East African Expressions of Christianity* edited by I.N. Kimambo and T. Spear (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota 1999), 296-306.

⁵⁰ Päivi Hasu, *Prosperity Gospels and Enchanted World Worldviews: Two Responses to Social-economic Transformation in Tanzanian Pentecostal Christianity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵¹ Interview with Frank Mwaitebele, Tunduma, 25.09. 2014.

the majority returned.⁵² In Mbeya, the AICs, which emerged in the colonial period, continued to exist and new ones were established at different times.

5.0 State Opposition to African Independent Churches

In Mbeya, these churches emerged during colonialism, except for the Watch Tower; and those that emerged in the post-colonial period expected support from the government, as in their operations they emphasised African initiatives. However, David Nicholous has revealed that the AICs were not supported by the state as expected. Opposition by the state continued in different ways, because most leaders in different positions in the government were members of the historical churches. These AICs were seen as a problem to the nation, run by uneducated people, who were not prepared to change, and their followers were seen as backward people. The government took no notice of these churches because they were weak economically, and so it failed to support them with social services like education and health, unlike the historical churches.⁵³ David Nicholous adds that opposition was not direct in Mbeya, but government leaders had inherited colonial tendencies and were not prepared to change, advise or support AICs, but spoke negatively to them all the time,⁵⁴ because AICs had far

⁵² Ranger, "Christian Independency", 124.

⁵³ Interview with David Nicholous, Simike, 14.09.2014.

⁵⁴ Interview with David Nicholous, Simike, 14.09.2014.

less to offer than the well-endowed historical churches.⁵⁵ The government demanded religious institutions to register so that they could enjoy various rights, including owning land for religious purposes. Some AICs were not registered as the government demanded. One member of an AIC revealed that, when they wanted to register their church, they faced hindrances, which resulted in their church remaining unregistered. The barriers caused by people in power and failure to abide by the law governing religious institution resulted in AICs being blamed for not abiding by the procedures.⁵⁶ The Government opposed those AICs which were not prepared to follow procedures and it was intolerant, which caused some churches to start their services without being registered. For example, in 1964, the government refused to allow the International Pentecostal Holiness Church from Zambia to continue with services in Mbeya district without being registered.⁵⁷ Some AICs were opposed to the policy as they were usually formed without a clear plan and could not properly follow orders and abide by some procedures. One AIC informant claimed that when they wanted to register their church, they faced various

⁵⁵ David Maxwell, "Post-colonial Christianity," in H. McLeod (ed), *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianity, C. 1914-C. 2000*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 412.

⁵⁶ Interview with Frank E.P. Mwaitebele, Tunduma, 25. 09.2014.

⁵⁷ Southern Highlands Mbeya Zonal Archives (SHMZA), File No. MDC/M.40/21, *Maombi ya Kuandikishwa kwa Makanisa na Mahubiri*.

barriers, and so they ended up running their services unregistered.⁵⁸ These barriers caused by people in power resulted AICs being blamed for not abiding to the procedures.

Various AICs were running their activities in areas not designed for religious institutions when they failed to acquire land legally. Very few succeeded in renting land, and so they were unable to put up a church building. Their leaders ended up buying houses or using their own houses for the services. Many AICs were located in slum areas, such as Simike, Nzovwe, Iyunga, Mama John and Ilomba, where houses were cheap and it was easy to get followers.⁵⁹ It should be noted that those who established independent churches came from historical churches, and it took years for them to become stable economically. Thus, they opted to build churches where it was affordable without following the procedures.

Some AICs were a challenge to the government because they opposed the efforts it made to resolve some problems. For example, the *Kanisa la Uamsho la Roho Mtakatifu*, forbade their followers from being vaccinated but to depend on prayers only. In the 1990s local leaders reported this church to the district officer in Mbeya.⁶⁰ Danstan Hepelwa has

⁵⁸ Interview with Frank E.P. Mwaitebele, Tunduma, 25.09.2014.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Interview with Juliana Mbilinyi, Simike, 13, 09. 2014.

revealed that the founder, Nise Mwasomola, was opposed by the government due to her erroneous understanding of the need for vaccination. Followers' children, like anyone else, were likely to suffer from diseases and so they needed to be vaccinated. But this ALC church did not allow the vaccination to take place as required. With such behaviour, it is not surprising that the government disapproved of this church.⁶¹

Some AIC leaders were not even prepared to work with other religious organizations in Mbeya. They supported cooperation in their church but in real life they lived in disunity. No organisation in Mbeya guided these churches, and it was difficult even for the government to relate to these churches. For example, independent churches that emerged from protestant churches were asked by the government to register under the umbrella of the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), which represents almost all non-Roman Catholic Christians in the country. Pentecostal AICs were asked to register their churches under the umbrella of the Pentecostal Council of Tanzania (PCT). AICs in Mbeya were neither members of CCT nor PCT until 2000.⁶² It was difficult for the AICs to be under CCT or PCT because

⁶¹ Interview with Danstan Hapelwa, Veta, 20.09.2014.

⁶² Interview with Daudi Sichinga, Mbeya City, 14.09.2014.

leaders of these organisations were not prepared to accept them as members because they were regarded as enemies.⁶³

Different AICs in Mbeya believed more in miracles, and justified this without providing proof of what they claimed had happened. In some cases, people stopped engaging in any meaningful work but still believed that a miracle would happen to resolve their problems. Some relied on spiritual power even on issues of illness, rather than seeking medical help. Some AICs were against traditional and modern medicine, as their leaders emphasized on spiritual healing through prayers even for people who suffered from prolonged ill health. Juliana Mbilinyi, for instance, recalls that when she was pregnant and was advised to undertake a caesarean section she refused and instead she asked Nise Mwasomola, the AIC leader, to pray for her. The hospital officials were not prepared to take risks, but she continued to withhold her consent. This resulted in misunderstandings between the hospital staff and family members, but after a long delay Juliana delivered her baby normally.⁶⁴ The hospital administration complained bitterly about government's approval of the existence of this type of church in the region.⁶⁵

⁶³ Interview with Domianus. T. Kongoro, Mbeya City, 16. 09. 2014.

⁶⁴ Interview with Juliana Mbilinyi.

⁶⁵ Interview with Juliana Mbilinyi.

6.0 Opposition by the Historical Churches

Opposition from the historical churches against the IACs was based on the fact that they took away some of their members, thereby reducing the offerings contributed by them. Hence, leaders of historical churches opposed AICs using abusive language for the purpose of retaining their members,⁶⁶ and tried to turn people in the community against them. Meanwhile AICs sometime behaved in ways that were difficult for members of the community to accommodate. Their families lacked unity and they created conflicts. In some families, members who joined AICs rejected their parents because they differed in their beliefs. Emmanuel Mwasile reported that there were various incidences relating to marriage associated with AICs. Some women deserted their husbands who were not prepared to follow them, as they remained members of the historical churches. Opposition to AICs developed because they were seen as the source of different problems in the family.⁶⁷ In other words, opposition developed due to the power that women had gained in AICs. Barrett claims that, in AICs, women were given the opportunity to recover some of their traditional status that had been undermined by the teaching

⁶⁶ Interview with Lusekelo Cheyo. Iwambi, 21. 09. 2014; 05. 11. 2014.

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Mwasile, Interview at, Iwambi, 26. 09. 2014.

of the historical churches.⁶⁸ AICs were opposed by historical churches due to the problems created in the community and the power women were given in these churches.

As noted earlier, people who introduced AICs were previously members of historical churches. They gathered together in a group, understood and respected each other, and regarded all other denominations as less worthy and unspiritual. Therefore, when individuals from historical churches joined an AIC, they were criticised by historical church members, treated with suspicion, not spoken to, experienced unfriendliness, and faced lack of unity in the family. Nsaligwa Kimanga narrated that, Nise Mwasomola, founder of *Kanisa la Uamsho*, was a member of Pentecostal Assemblies of God and was given power by God to preach and deliver the sick. Her charismatic gift was not accepted by the historical churches which opposed it and she was asked to leave. As a result, in 1978 she established her own church.⁶⁹

AICs have been neglected as an area of enquiry for many years. When they were first studied or assessed by Europeans, they tended to portray them as being exclusively related to superstition. Compared to the historical churches, they were often presented as the work of the devil, while

⁶⁸ Barret, *Schism and Renewal* 147; J. Seeley, "We have the Healing Power: Independent Churches and Women in Urban Kenya," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 9, No. 2 (1984), 58-70.

⁶⁹ Interview with Nsaligwa Kimanga, Simike, 13.09. 2014.

other social researchers came up with mystifying terms, such as atavistic, separatists, millennialists, sects, cults, syncretistic, neo-pagan, quasi-Christian, magico-religious and heretical.⁷⁰ Very loose terminologies were used to describe the AICs by historical churches, such as ‘kiosk and ‘money monger’, and they were not recognized.⁷¹

In the post-colonial period in Mbeya, when historical churches had a problem, their leaders were given the opportunity to involve CCT, TEC or PCT, but the leaders of AICs were excluded from these organisations.⁷² The historical churches did not see the importance of working with AICs. For example, the mission of CCT was to facilitate and coordinate the united witness of member churches and church-related organisations in evangelism, by building the capacity of their members to evangelise and engage in networking, advocacy and socio-economic development for the benefit of the community. However, Hapelwa argues that what CCT observed was division between Christians, as some churches under CCT were not prepared to be grouped with AICs. Moreover, for years CCT favoured certain

⁷⁰ H. Pretorius and L. Jafta, “A Branch Springs Out: African Initiated Churches,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History* edited by R. Elphick and R. Davenport (London: Oxford, 1977), 211.

⁷¹ Interview with Juliana Mbilinyi, Simike, 13. 09. 2014.

⁷² Interviews with Mbuba Medrick, Nzovwe, 18. 09. 2014; Interview with Danstan Hapelwa; Interview with Emmanuel Mwasile.

denominations without accommodating the newly founded churches with a protestant base.⁷³ The historical churches did not involve AICs in different religious activities. For example, Emmanuel Tumwidike of the Restoration Church wanted his church to join PCT as a new member, because it was Pentecostal, but the PCT leaders refused to let that happen.⁷⁴ Christians preached the importance of unity, but disunity, isolation and individuality dominated their umbrella organisations.

With the emergence of AICs, the liturgy was made more African, whereby African drums, dresses, singing and dancing reflected African culture. In this sense, the gospel was contextualised and made relevant to the thought patterns of the converts. In this connection an informant remarked that historical churches were opposed to AICs because they added their own ideas to Christianity.⁷⁵ Medrick Mbuba argued that AICs were opposed by the historical churches because they were concerned that the AICs had combined traditional and modern forms of worship, which they disapproved.

Traditional churches also opposed the AICs because of their interpretation of the Bible. The issues of polygamy, drinking alcohol, the way of singing in the church and a much shorter period of teachings before baptism were some of the

⁷³ Interview with Danstan Hapelwa, 26.09.2014.

⁷⁴ Interview with Emmanuel Tumwidike, Esso Juu, 26.05.2015 & 05.11.2016.

⁷⁵ Interview with Juma Jacob, Nzovwe, 18.09.2014.

practices which contravened established beliefs in historical churches, making their cooperation with these churches impossible. The Last Church of God and His Christ and African National Church supported polygamy, which was not allowed by the historical churches.⁷⁶

During the colonial period, law and order was enforced in areas where Christianity had been established, fines were levied and church discipline was exercised, particularly against alcohol use and polygamy. This drew a sharp line between the Christian and the traditional worlds.⁷⁷ Members of the historical churches and those of the AICs were all Christians but followed different doctrines, such as the one on marriage where AICs allowed polygamy, which made to be seen as the enemy of historical churches.⁷⁸ Disagreements over doctrine was one of the reasons why Christianity split into different denominations throughout its history.

AICs were attacked by western Pentecostal churches, which blamed the AICs for bringing so-called pagan elements into

⁷⁶ Interview with Patrick Mbao, Sabasaba, 15.09.2014; John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History* (Nairobi: Pauline's Publication, 1994), 479.

⁷⁷ Sundkler & Steed, *History of the Church*, 537.

⁷⁸ Interview with Emmanuel Mwasile.

the church,⁷⁹ and regarded them as non-Christian.⁸⁰ Because of this opposition, the number of Pentecostal churches in Mbeya grew as the services they were running attracted followers. Therefore, the restoration of normality to AICs will take a long time, not only in Mbeya but also in the nation as a whole. To a large extent, AICs are still divided along the lines of their origin, such as ethnicity and the historical and Pentecostal churches from which their members split. For this and related reasons, AICs were slow to make an impact and address the challenges posed by a rapidly changing society. One of the weakening factors for the AICs is fact that of some of its members became rich while others remained poor.

7.0 Survival Strategies of AICs

The survival of the AICs since colonial times has been attributed to several strategies which enabled them to endure various storms that came their way. In this regard, an informant has argued that the teaching of the word of God was the clear foundation of the churches' existence, enabling them to survive and be relevant to their members and society.⁸¹ Thus, AICs based their teachings mostly on the

⁷⁹ Wilson B. Niwagila, *From the Catacomb to A Self-Governing Church; A Case Study of African Initiative and the Participation of the Foreign Missions in the Mission History of the North-Western Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania 1890-1965*, 2nd Edition (Auflage: Verlag and Der Lottbek, 1991), 243; Interview with Juliana Mbilinyi, Simike, 13.09. 2014.

⁸⁰ Interview with Juma Mwampamba, Kalobe, 19. 09. 2014.

⁸¹ Interview with Lusekelo Cheyo.

Old Testament, while historical protestant churches taught mostly from the New Testament.⁸² In addition the historical churches interpreted the Bible from the western theological perspective. The ACIs prioritised on Bible teaching in the church as well as in members' homes.⁸³ This benefited church members and attracted non-members, thus making the church permanently different from the historical churches. Commenting on this, an informant noted that quoting of Bible verses was common in AICs,⁸⁴ and members were encouraged by their leaders to read the word of God. Gottwald concluded on progress by saying that Bible teaching enables people to understand what the Bible says about God and mankind.⁸⁵ This means that people would always go to where they might find "good pasture," which is what they were getting at AICs.⁸⁶

AICs eventually survived in Mbeya by changing their initial approach to government and following the required procedures. In this regard, David Sichone argued that, when

⁸² O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A presentation of its results and problems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 5.

⁸³ Interview with Nathaniel Ndabila, Uyole, 19.09. 2014.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ N.K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A socio-literary introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 6.

⁸⁶ J. A. Gyadu, "United Over Meals Divided at the Lord's Table: Christianity and the Unity of the Church in Africa," *Transformation*, Vol. 27, No. 1. *Special Issue: The Global Christian Forum*, 2010, 16-17.

the conflict between Lufingo Njela and Ephraim Sichone in the Last Church of God became tense in Mbozi in 1972, the district officer advised Ephraim Sichone to come up with his own name for the church. Thus, in 1973, the Last Church of Tanzania emerged as a new church and was given permission to establish itself.⁸⁷ Another example was the case of the Evangelical Brotherhood AIC. Following a conflict in the Moravian church, the Evangelical Brotherhood AIC was formed, and in order to survive it decided to follow government orders. This resulted in its being registered on August 16, 1995, with registration number 8186.⁸⁸

The leadership style in AICs and their strategies enabled them to survive most the challenges that emerged from inside and outside the church, because their principles of leadership were in line with those of Moses, Paul, David and Jesus Christ. AIC leaders were close to their followers at all times, and had informal means of training their leaders and future leaders.⁸⁹ This followed their realisation of the fact that the church had to produce its own well trained leaders who would be capable of dealing with the problems of the

⁸⁷ Interview with David Sichone, Vwawa, 4.11.2014.

⁸⁸ Southern Highlands Mbeya Zonal Archives (SHMZA), File, The Moravian Conflict Kyela.

⁸⁹ Interview with Marry Kategile, TEKU, 11.09.2014; Interview with Asulumenye D. Mwahalende, 10.09.2014; Interview with Kael Mwaisumo, Simike, 14.09.2014; Interview with Lusekelo Cheyo; Interview with Kastory Msingwa, Tunduma, 25.09.2014.

modern African society.⁹⁰ David Nicholas has emphasised that, although AICs had leaders that attracted people, they needed to be formally educated for the survival of AICs, because the number of educated people in society had increased.⁹¹ Therefore, church leaders needed to be well equipped to address the issues of hardship, disease, hunger and any other problems members faced; which meant they had to keep in close contact with them.⁹² This was the case in Mbeya, where AICs were taken seriously, because they demonstrated that they were a community of Christians.

There is a consensus that culture has impact on faith.⁹³ The AICs in Mbeya completely subscribed to this view. Incorporating African culture in the operations of AICs has, since their inception, been a defining feature of them, so that Africans feel at home embracing Christianity. In different parts of Africa AICs gained followers as they protested against western forms of worship. They also introduced several new elements in the liturgy. In Mbeya, for example, they used local languages in preaching, such as the

⁹⁰ S. Kohls, "A Look at Church Leadership in Africa", *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 17, No. 2 (1998), 2

⁹¹ Interview with David Nicholas, Simike, 14.09. 2014.

⁹² Interview with Oyi Mwasambili, Mbeya City Centre, 12.09. 2014; Interview with Abiud Simkoko, Mlowo, 24.09.2014; Interview with Medrick Mbuba, Nzovwe, 18.09.2014.

⁹³ S. Kurgat, "The Theology of Inculturation and the African Church," *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* I (2011), 31-41.

Nyakyusa, Safwa and Nyiha languages.⁹⁴ Efforts were also made to introduce local African melodies and hymns, and to translate European hymns into the local languages. All these efforts to incorporate African culture in AIC services made a deep impression on their members and attracted non-members. AIC leaders believed that the purpose for the coming of Christianity to Africa was to spread the name of Jesus and salvation in accordance with the behaviour, environment and culture of African people and not to spread European culture in African churches.

It has however been noted that AICs differed in what they accepted or refused, as not all of them accommodated aspects of African culture. For example, in Zambia, Alice Lenshina of the Lumpa Church preached against witchcraft, and rejected traditional rituals, adultery, divorce, polygamy, tobacco and alcohol. These teachings were effective in attracting people from different backgrounds to the church.⁹⁵

In yet another innovation, some AICs identified areas and designated them as holy. On these lands they built houses for the purpose of prayer and worship. The houses were sometimes called “houses of prayer,” and the land itself as holy ground, similar to what African religions called sacred places. This, African culture was maintained by the church

⁹⁴ Interview with Hamad Mwakilundwa, Tukuyu, 22.09.2014.

⁹⁵ Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Asmara: African World Press, 2001), 136.

in various ways.⁹⁶ In such houses space was sometimes made for the purpose of prayer and counselling. This is exemplified by Nise Mwasomola, founder of *Kanisa la Uamsho la Roho Mtakatifu*.⁹⁷

Operating independently was one of the strategies that enabled AICs to keep on growing. Oyi Mwasambili explained that the independent struggle by the leader or founder mattered a lot to AICs. The founder acted as the investor, and so had to design a mechanism for the church to survive, which is why some AIC leaders preached against poverty,⁹⁸ and worked to fight against poverty among church members through economic empowerment, because they saw that those on a low income were often powerless, weary, isolated and vulnerable, which was a spiritual issue that needed to be addressed by the church as one its primary responsibilities.⁹⁹ The AICs made great efforts to provide formal and informal entrepreneurial training for their members. Professionals in the areas of bookkeeping, marketing and good business practices were invited by church leaders to provide training in entrepreneurship, as a result of which churches were

⁹⁶ Interview with David P. Mwashilindi, Nzovwe, 19.09.2014.

⁹⁷ Interview with Nsaligwa Kimanga, Simike, 13.09.2014.

⁹⁸ Interview with Oyi Mwasambili, Mbeya City Centre, 12.09. 2014.

⁹⁹ A. Mpesha, *the Role of the Church in Microcredit Financing for Business Development in Tanzania*, (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 2004.), 5.

enabled to start microcredit schemes for church members.¹⁰⁰ Through this strategy, the church could be seen as emancipating its members not only in terms of their spiritual welfare but also their economic wellbeing. Although this developed slowly, the AICs made some progress. People were able to construct their own churches through this strategy. Some AICs established committees for the purpose of developing their churches dealing with evangelism, finance, health and information.

In AICs women occupied leadership positions, which was one of the reasons why about three-quarters of the people in the church were women, and this study found that women were ordained as church leaders. It has been argued out that the importance of ordaining women was that if the church failed to ordain them it automatically prevent them from taking on other religious roles and thus limit them on the basis of their gender.¹⁰¹ Therefore, recognising the importance of women in the church enabled the churches to use their talents, which helped AICs to endure the storms they experienced from time to time. This survival strategy of AICs was also utilised by the new waves of Pentecostalism, Evangelism and the prosperity gospels of the 1970s and 1980s; which had far-reaching impacts.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Oyi Mwasambili; Interview with David Nicholas; Interview with Abiud Simkoko, Mlowo, 24.09. 2014. Interview with Medrick Mbuba. Nzovwe, 18. 09. 2014.

¹⁰¹ K. Daniel, "The role of women in the Church in Africa", *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 2, no. 6 (2010), 126-139, here 131.

8.0 Conclusion

The AICs emerged in Mbeya and elsewhere in Tanzania due to indigenous people's dissatisfaction with the teachings of mainstream churches. As soon as they emerged, they faced opposition from both the mainstream churches and the government. These two institutions opposed the AICs because they threatened the foundation on which they were built. The opposition against the growth AICs also resulted from the fact that they threatened economic gains of the mainstream churches. Although the AICs have generally had limited social significance in Tanzania, they have played a significant historical role by attempting to impart Christian message in non-traditional ways. By using non-conventional approaches and methods they were able to provide some meaningful answers to questions that the mainstream churches had left unanswered from the point of view of the local communities. By allowing some of the cultural practices that mainstream churches had abolished and interpreting the Bible by closely associating its messages with the established African cultural principles, the AICs made the converts feel at home. It was mostly due to their successes in addressing some of the basic contradictions between the teachings of the mainstream churches and African cultures that the AICs in Mbeya survived the strong opposition they have been facing since their inception.