

## THE CONCEPT OF BAPTISM IN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

by Kenneth Enang

The tormenting tropical sun was burning mercilessly and its scourging heat excruciating painfully as *African Apostolic Church* transformed Ufuku stream to a focus of a baptismal pilgrimage on a Sunday in April in 1974. For elder Efiang Essien, his baptism candidates, dressed in white, and their friends from Okon Ikot Essien, who standing at the beach continually boomed out African hymnes, it was a joyous occasion without parallel<sup>1</sup>. When the solemn moment arrived for baptism to be administered, the adult candidates, now stripped naked to the waist, stepped into the stream. The tall slender elder having prayed over the water to sanctify it, immersed each candidate three times using the trinitarian formula as in the baptism practice of the mission churches. As baptism progressed an usually large crowd of curious onlookers, who had flogged out from the surrounding villages to fetch water that afternoon, peered with great interest at what was obtaining. After the ceremony the newly baptized resorted to a rather strengh drenching running to return home. The running was a symbolic gesture of their flight from what they had now been freed from — sin and devil. It also meant their inward breaking up of ties with them and turning towards Christ. As one could depict from their faces their countenances mirrored the feelings of a supreme satisfaction that they have now been given a full share in the life of their community and that for the first time.

This summarized account of the baptismal rite of the *African Apostolic Church* is not only typical of this particular church but also of other cluthes of independent churches scattered around the Cross River State and Imo State of Nigeria<sup>2</sup> and as a matter of fact characteristic of their South African counterparts<sup>3</sup>. The happiness expressed at such baptism is not simply an emotional outpouring of feelings but an expression of an inward joy which lies behind the understanding of the sacrament of baptism in the independent churches of genuine African origin. We shall now turn to this understanding and diagnose it under different headings.

<sup>1</sup> Okon Ikot Essien lies 30 km and Ufuku stream 35 km North of Ikot Ekpene, Cross River State, Nigeria. For more on the number of the independents in this area cf. ENANG, *Community and Salvation in the Nigerian Independent churches*, in: ZMR 59 (1975) 255, 259.

<sup>2</sup> For Imo State see DAVID ROBERTS, *Some Independent Churches*, a paper presented to Interchurch Group Study at Uyo, June 1963, 2.

<sup>3</sup> See V. W. TURNER, *The Waters of life*: a paper read at a conference on Modern African Religious Movements at North Western University, April 1965, 4.



### *I Baptism as rite of incorporation*

One very important thing that strikes an observer at the ceremony is the presence of a vast number from *African Apostolic Church* just as at baptism of some European pentecostals<sup>4</sup>. This is quite unlike baptism in the old churches where the participation of the whole or part of the community is scarcely observed, and when necessary condemned to the incognito of the sacristy<sup>5</sup>. But here we observe the difference: the community takes share at the joy of the baptism and its active participation demonstrates in bold relief the community's full acceptance of the newly baptized. The newly baptized themselves are conscious too of their being accepted in the presence of their brothers and sisters in faith into their community. The individual is being initiated into a lively community of faith and given an identity and, as MACQUARRIE puts it, "delivered from the isolation of meaninglessness"<sup>6</sup> and given a meaning in the community in which he, in spite of being there for sometime, had had no identity, no meaning. From this very moment the accepted has full rights as other baptised: to receive the Eucharist, to prophesy, to lead in prayers and to read the bible<sup>7</sup>.

The theology of the old mission churches perceives clearly baptism too as a sacrament of initiation into the church<sup>8</sup>. This incorporation entails entry into a christian church seen as the community of the Holy Spirit<sup>9</sup>, and as the body of Christ<sup>10</sup>. This involves the adherence in faith to the sacred community of the Lord, better expressed, to Christ himself into whom one is baptised<sup>11</sup>, an enduring incorporation into him<sup>12</sup>. From this very underlying understanding baptism excludes it being understood exclusively as a mere incorporation into a social formation called the church but rather into a community which is not simply a social organization but a community of the Lord himself, animated constantly by his very spirit. We can go a little further in this view. Since the baptised is not simply enrolled into the records of the church but into Christ himself, it follows therefore that as far as Christ is ever enduring, baptism leaves upon the baptised what traditional theology calls sacramental character: *signum spirituale et indelibile*<sup>13</sup>, impressed upon the soul. It is a sign of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. J. HOLLENWEGER, *Enthusiastisches Christentum*, Zürich 1969, 439—440.

<sup>5</sup> HOLLENWEGER, op. cit. 439, 445.

<sup>6</sup> J. MACQUARRIE, *Principles of Christian Theology*, London 1974, 408.

<sup>7</sup> This explains why non-baptised in some independents do not prophesy, receive the Eucharist and conduct bible reading.

<sup>8</sup> K. RAHNER, *Studies in Modern Theology*, London 1964, 269; *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults*, London 1973, 245.

<sup>9</sup> MACQUARRIE, op. cit. 409.

<sup>10</sup> *1 Cor. 12,13*. The *Jerusalem Bible* is used for all biblical quotations and references in this article.

<sup>11</sup> *Rom. 6,3*.

<sup>12</sup> RAHNER, op. cit. 272.

<sup>13</sup> RAHNER, op. cit. 270.



belonging ever to Christ, his flock and militia even if the sheep quits and the soldier disperses<sup>14</sup>. From here follows that baptism cannot be repeated as far as this signum remains unblotted out even if the baptised exercises a brief duration in his presence in the church or his social duration and involvement extinguishes after baptism.

The African independent churches seem to be very distant from such understanding of baptism in relation to its duration and unrepeatibility. They understand baptism, as sacrament of initiation, as a mere inscription into the register of a social structure called the church. Admission to full or partial membership of a particular church is by baptism. That is why those who fluctuate from one independent group to the other are rebaptised on each occasion the change occurs<sup>15</sup>. Some independents are even so strict about the rites of their particular church that they maintain that the validity of baptism depends upon these rites and consequently rebaptize members from other churches who swing over to them, as BAËTA records about the Ghanaian independents<sup>16</sup>. Understood in this way, baptism is no longer incorporation into Christ, the centre and the enduring climax of all christian rites but as an "entry ceremony for a religious society"<sup>17</sup>. As a result, baptism is almost on the verge of being robbed of its christian and christocentric significance.

Why do the independent churches rebaptise? I think the first and clearest answer is to demonstrate what they are: to show their independence. This stretches not only into their organization, administration, worship and leadership<sup>18</sup> but reaches far into their rites. Becoming a member of a particular church embodies undergoing the independent rite and ceremony of the church involved. Their independent rite is the only valid one that can confer the benefits inherent in and disseminated at baptism. The structure of their understanding is influenced too by the Ephesian episode in the *Acts*, in which *Luke* records a rebaptism of the christians in the name of the Lord after they had already received John's baptism of repentance<sup>19</sup>.

It still seems, however, that there is something else which constitutes a parallel to the pattern of rebaptism practised by the independents. In the traditional religion, joining a new society or deflecting from one to the other, say for example the secret Ekpo among the Annang or the Ekpe among the Ibibio and Efik of Nigeria, entails undergoing all the initiatory rites of that particular society, even if one had been a member of this society in another clan or village or primal society. One has not only to offer all that is demanded for the initiation ceremony, but has

<sup>14</sup> RAHNER, op. cit. 271.

<sup>15</sup> H. TURNER, *Pagan Features in West African Independent Churches*, in: *Practical Anthropology*, 12, July-August 1965, 148.

<sup>16</sup> C. G. BAËTA, *Prophetism in Ghana*, Liverpool-London 1962, 50.

<sup>17</sup> TURNER, op. cit. 148.

<sup>18</sup> ENANG, op. cit. 255.

<sup>19</sup> *Acts* 19, 1—6.



to embrace all the ceremonies of the rites de passage. These practices have forcefully raised their heads again in the actions of the independents, if not in the traditional form, surely in the concept expressed here in a new way.

## *II Baptism as Purification Rite*

Apart from viewing baptism as an initiation rite, another powerful strain of thought in the independent churches with regard to this sacrament envisages it as a purification ceremony.

In the mission churches baptism, understood as rite of purification, involves two principal moments: conviction of sin and repentance<sup>20</sup>. Christian baptism in this sense is like the baptism of John the Baptizer; "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"<sup>21</sup>, "I baptise you in water for repentance"<sup>22</sup>. This coloured the early churches' understanding as evidenced in the acts of the apostles<sup>23</sup>. Conviction of sin and repentance do not simply mean recognition of sin and sorrow for it but turning towards the life of grace and reconciliation. Where grace and reconciliation reign there does baptism destroy the roots of sin and confer its purificatory value, since the baptised in the very act of baptism has now turned towards Christ himself, reconciled himself with him who alone has the power to destroy sin<sup>24</sup>, in any form of its appearance, be it personal or transmitted. The reality of salvation experienced in baptism is palpable in this relation to Christ and in this movement towards him lies the end of baptism in its concept as rite for the forgiveness of sins<sup>25</sup>.

The African independents do grasp well the purificatory significance of baptism but they stretch it to a further length. For them the reality of the destruction of sin at baptism is not grounded once and for all in Christ who conquers once and for all every sin. Rather the reality, even though embedded in Christ, flows from the very ritual act, in the actual application of water. This ritual employment of water destroys sin everytime the rite is celebrated. Everytime a person sins, his personal sins can be washed away through repentance and rebaptism. This affords once again an explanation why the independents rebaptize a practice that reduces baptism to a mere act of purification that can be repeated as needs be<sup>26</sup>.

A further typical understanding of baptism as cleansing rite by the independents lies in the connection between sin and misfortune. Mishap, for example sickness, according to them is a result of either personal sin or it is attributed to a malicious supernatural force. To get rid of the misfortune, the cause of it must be eradicated. Since baptism washes

<sup>20</sup> MACQUARRIE, op. cit. 408.

<sup>21</sup> *Mk. 1,5.*

<sup>22</sup> *Mt. 3,11.*

<sup>23</sup> *Acts 2,38.*

<sup>24</sup> *A New Catechism*, op. cit. 245—6.

<sup>25</sup> *1 Cor. 6,11.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. HOLLENWEGER, op. cit. 443.



away personal sin and destroys it, it follows that it annihilates sin that was the root cause of personal misfortune. Therefore "baptism is used as an effective ritual for the treatment of personal problems, such as sickness"<sup>27</sup>. Because baptism in this sense is closely linked up with personal sin, *African Apostolic Church*, in spite of the founder being an offshoot from the Catholic church and versed to some degree in Catholic doctrine<sup>28</sup>, as well as pockets of others in this area vehemently reject infant baptism since infants do not commit any sin<sup>29</sup> and consequently need no purification, no reorientation.

Another reason for the rejection of baptism is the exaggerated personalism found in the independent churches which break away from the protestant churches. Here the independents emphasize personal decision, acknowledgement of sin, repentance and the free decision to be baptized. Baptism is therefore to be received when one makes a personal decision, a personal response in faith to the grace of God. This existential dimension is important and seems to be behind the baptismal practices of the New Testament in which the recipient participates actively in the very action of baptism, for example, the response of faith to Peter's discourse at Pentecost made by his hearers who submitted afterwards to his baptism<sup>30</sup> or the Ethiopian who heard Philip's words of the Gospel<sup>31</sup>.

The reality of baptism goes, however, far beyond the conscious decision. In this sacrament, the child is incorporated into Christ and the community of faith. Being incorporated into Christ, his life as a christian starts and coincides with the beginning of the individual life. Faith sown now as seed will extend and grow and later be ratified by the child when he grows up. As incorporation into a community "the center of the child's life is shifted from his isolated individual being to the body of which he is now a member"<sup>32</sup>. The undue stress on the existential aspect at baptism forgets that human existence is not an isolated existence but an existence among and with others. Certain African independents haven't reflected seriously on this aspect of administering infant baptism as an incorporation into a community. This is surprising, especially in Africa where existence and its development in a society goes without o say. The rejection of infant baptism is certainly governed by the extreme biblism of the independents and the extreme personalism of some protestant traditions but the rejection seems too to be in conjunction with

<sup>27</sup> H. W. TURNER, op. cit. 148.

<sup>28</sup> Elder Efiang refracted from the catholic church in the forthies during sickness and, according to his personal verbal account, received a vision to found a church.

<sup>29</sup> Varied independents in Africa do however practise infant baptism. Cf. for example the *Musama Disco Christo Church* in Ghana; BAËTA, op. cit. 51. Many European, Australian and Latin American pentecostals follow the same example, HOLLENWEGER, op. cit. 441.

<sup>30</sup> *Acts* 2,41.

<sup>31</sup> *Acts* 8, 26—40.

<sup>32</sup> MACQUARRIE, op. cit. 411.



certain African traditional custom of initiation whereby grown ups alone are accepted into certain sacred societies, for example Obon and Ekong in Nigeria.

### *III Baptism instructions*

In describing baptism in the *Ghanaian Church of the Twelve Apostles* BAËTA writes, "no instruction is required or given"<sup>33</sup>. This confirms the observations of many a writer on the independents with regard to preparations before baptism<sup>34</sup>. A fierce number of the independent groups do not bother about prebaptismal instructions, do not allow a waiting period of the catechumenate as in the mission churches as they know the more they keep their adherents to wait for baptism, the more the new clients evaporate from them to join others which would administer a quick baptism. Quick baptism serves as an attractive bait to draw new streams of people into their communities especially if such people had undergone a long probationary period in the mission churches with no immediate prospect of being baptised or they have been refused baptism for one reason or the other. This is very true when polygamists are refused baptism in the mission churches but receive it immediately they find their entry into the independent groups.

A marked departure from this attitude of non preparation is demonstrated by the *African Apostolic Church* scattered around Nigeria, especially in the Cross River State. This special group invests tremendous energy in preparing their adults for baptism as in the mission churches. The writer attended some baptism classes in elder Efiang's African Apostolic at Okon Ikot Essien in 1974 to have an idea of what was taught. The instructions were heavily biblical ranging from the patriarchs of the Old Testament down through the prophets till Paul. The older attendants at the instructions classes showed a marked difficulty in getting off head the names of all the prophets as was demanded by the instructor.

This practice seems to hinge largely on Efiang's long experience in the Catholic church, his former church before the nocturnal vision urged him to establish his own church. Another ground for the scrutiny and severe preparation is to be found in the exaggerated existential participation of the baptism recipient, already mentioned above, which makes African Apostolic take such strides before adult baptism. Only the personal involvement, according to their theory on baptism guarantees the full efficacy of the sacrament. The step by step preparation corresponds to the African traditional rites for example, in the women fattening ceremony in which the initiates are confined to homes for three or six months and during this period are initiated by degrees with strong and tampering scrutiny into the mysteries of womanhood.

<sup>33</sup> BAËTA, op. cit. 18.

<sup>34</sup> H.-J. GRESCHAT, *Kitawala*, Marburg 1967, 23.



#### IV African names at baptism

A very striking and impressive practice by the majority of the independents is the use of African names at baptism. Some independents do however toe the line with the mission churches in this respect and such independents verge almost on the extreme of giving 'heavenly names' to the baptised with which they are known within the church while still keeping up their former names for all other activities outside the church<sup>35</sup>.

In the mission churches when names are changed at baptism we are often directed by the conviction that at the entrance of the new way of life with God and Christ, old names should give place to new ones to mark the start of this new life of grace. This conviction is supported by the scriptural stories about Abraham and his wife Sarah<sup>36</sup>. In the case of Abraham, in spite of all the orthographic variations of the patriarchal name P has successfully given a theological explanation of the double tradition of the name showing the greatness of the man who is now called to be the father of a great people, "your name shall be Abraham for I make you father of a multitude of nations"<sup>37</sup>. The New Testament records such a change of name at the first encounter of Simon with Jesus when the former became a disciple. The vacillating and impulsive Simon is bestowed with a new name signifying prophetically the moral and spiritual vigour he was then to demonstrate as he starts a new life with the Lord<sup>38</sup>. Although there is no clear evidence of change of name when baptism was administered in the very early decades of christianity, change of name was later inspired by veneration of the apostles<sup>39</sup> and also by the inward urge to follow the examples of illustrious men and women who had been credited by God<sup>40</sup>. With the acceptance of christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire names came to be associated with either the doctrines of faith; *Anastasius*, *Anastasia* (resurrection), *Salutia* (salvation) or with christian ideas; *Theodore* (God's gift), *Fides* (faith), *Elpis* (hope) or even with christian attitude; *Victoria* (victory), *Irene* (peace)<sup>41</sup>. The regular giving of names became more pronounced as histories of saints became rooted in christian literature and OT and NT names were popularized in the 14th century<sup>42</sup>. This and the insistence on the veneration of saints against protestant denial during the reformation drove Tridentium to urge parish priests to give names of saints to all

<sup>35</sup> BAËTA, op. cit. 50; HOLLENWEGER, op. cit. 440.

<sup>36</sup> *Gen.* 17, 5, 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Gen.* 17, 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Jn.* 1, 42.

<sup>39</sup> EUSEBIUS, *Hist. eccl.* 7.25.14.

<sup>40</sup> F. X. MURPHY, *Names, Christian*, in: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, Washington D. C. 1967, 201.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 202.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*



the baptised<sup>43</sup>, a practice that has remained effective in the catholic church till today and transferred to the missions<sup>44</sup>.

The idea behind the change of names in the mission churches, particularly in the catholic church, in Africa is in itself not bad. To cut oneself off from past ways of life and be dedicated to the new in Christ is an admirable exercise. This is very clearly demonstrated by the newly founded religious congregations in Africa in which the superiors demand such alterations to symbolize putting off former 'wordly identifications' in order to be more dedicated to the new service of Christ. By giving the names of saints, the baptised is made to understand that he has been provided with a heavenly protector who will now pray for him and bring his prayers before God. The protected is too prodded to emulate the virtues of his patron saint.

The independents have departed seriously from this idea. They maintain that African names are good enough to be retained at baptism. In this view they are not alone. Taking the names of saints at baptism is good but keeping to African names is not bad either. African names are not simply distinguishing appellation as the person called Udonneh is marked off by his very name from the person named Akpan but they are also an identification of essence, nature and function. In a word, African names have each a meaning. Here we give just a few examples. In the Nigerian Cross River State Idorenjin means *Elpis* (hope) of christianity, Nsikan has the same meaning as God is mightier than man (*Victoria*), Ima Obong denotes God's love (*Agape*), Eno Obong God's gift (*Theodore*), Uduak Obong carries the same meaning as God's will (*Quodvult-deus*) and Emem bears the meaning of peace (*Irene*) while Mkpaha means immortality (*Athanasius*). As can be detected from their very meaning, all these names bear the marks of christian ideas and ideals and for this very fact have a great meaning for those who bear them. As MBITI remarks the names mark the various occasions in the life of a child or "describe the personality of the individual, or his character, or some key events in his life"<sup>45</sup>. Thus a child as the only son or daughter of the parents could be named Idorenjin in this area of Africa, to express the fact that this child is the only hope of the parents.

Retaining of African names at baptism by the independents is again explained by the very meaning of the great sacrament itself. In the sacramental action Christ himself is the principal baptizer and into his name is baptism administered<sup>46</sup>. The reality of salvation accruing to the baptised at baptism is seriously bound up with the name of Christ and not with any other name. God's grace operates where and when it wills, not

<sup>43</sup> ibd. 203.

<sup>44</sup> A feeble attempt has been made to alter this situation in Nigeria since after Vatican two but no serious breakthrough has yet been achieved.

<sup>45</sup> J. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London-Edinburg 1969, 118.

<sup>46</sup> *Acts* 2,38; 10,48; *Rom.* 6,3; *Gal.* 3,27.



when one takes up a foreign name. Therefore the name of Christ and the very act of baptism itself are paramount here, not the name of any other person.

If the free grace of God worked wonders in the life a Mary Magdalene when she turned to Christ, if this very grace and no other could inspire an Andrew and a James to noble and magnificent spiritual deeds for Christ, there is no reason why the same grace, when it begins to operate in the baptised, should not urge an Ima Obong in Africa to courageous deeds for Christ when he is baptised with this name. After all Andrew and James, at least there is no scriptural evidence, did not alter their oriental names to take up, say European or African names when they started their new life in Christ. Yet God's grace wasn't ineffective in them. Added to that, no saint would discontinue his intercessional role if his name is not picked up at baptism but only called upon to interpose during prayers. Further still God does not judge a person by a notable collection of names he accumulates at baptism or at any other sacrament but by his deeds.

#### *V Baptism and the Holy Spirit*

In the relation between baptism and the Holy Spirit the independents clearly distinguish between baptism of water in the name of the Lord and baptism of the Holy Spirit. Baptism of water preceeds that of the Holy Spirit. For this view they have carved out strong biblical support from the early christian practice as recorded in the *Acts*, "for as yet he had not come down on any of them: they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus"<sup>47</sup> and "every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"<sup>48</sup>. Baptism of the Holy Spirit is therefore a sort of supplement, an addendum to the first baptism in the name of the Lord, according to the view of the independents. Without the latter the former cannot be given.

If a baptised intends to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit he must fast, pray and confess his sins<sup>49</sup>. Added to that he must make his request known to the evangelist who, through the imposition of hands, prays for the person concerned to receive the Holy Spirit as recorded in the *Acts*<sup>50</sup>. The *Acts* mentions too that baptism of the Holy Spirit can ensue from prayers in the christian community<sup>51</sup> or even through the words of the Gospel. From these data from the early baptismal practice in the apo-

<sup>47</sup> *Acts* 8,16; cf. also the two baptisms in *Acts* 19, 2—6.

<sup>48</sup> *Acts* 2,38.

<sup>49</sup> J. C. MESSENGER JR., *Religious Acculturation among the Anang Ibibio*, in: W. R. BASCOM and MELVILLE J. HERSKOVITS (eds.), *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, Chicago 1959, 287.

<sup>50</sup> *Acts* 8,17; 19,6.

<sup>51</sup> *Acts* 2,1ff.



stolic church one could, at first glance, issue the independents with an unflinching support. Yet if one compares another portion of the *Acts* — the story of Cornelius — with the ones which seem to make a distinction between the two versions of baptism, one discovers that baptism of water in the name of the Lord is not an absolute prerequisite for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Cornelius' house the Holy Spirit came first upon Peter's listeners before they were actually baptised with water in the name of the Lord<sup>52</sup>.

The whole separation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit from baptism in the Lord's name is in accordance with the independents' understanding of the Holy Spirit. For them he is a powerful force from God for the cure of ailments and seeing visions. He is palpable in visible signs like speaking with tongues, bodily movements and prophesying<sup>53</sup>. At the first baptism no such external signs are perceived. But at the possession with the Holy Spirit, his presence is made observable in signs to those present as is recorded in the *Acts* at the first pentecost.

The independents have, however, failed to understand the fact that baptising in the triune name, as a vast majority of them practise, involves the Lord as well as the Holy Spirit and that the frequently quoted passages of the *Acts* 2,38 and 8,16 do not contradict *Acts* 8,17 and 19,2—6 but that the variations are only a matter of historical development. The old form of baptismal formula in *Acts* 2,38 finds continuity in *Acts* 19, 2—6 where indication is made of the change to the new form. To be baptised into Christ means to receive the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism is principally, therefore and different from John's baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit and the reception of the *pneuma* is synonymous with reception of baptism<sup>54</sup>. Because one enters into an intimate union with Christ at baptism, and since every Spirit, if it is holy, is the Spirit of Christ, Christ himself is the one who baptises "with the Holy Spirit"<sup>55</sup>, the very person who bestows upon the baptised the gifts of the Holy Spirit<sup>56</sup>. This does not involve separate baptisms, not two distinct moments. It does not mean either that the recipient of the gifts of the Spirit has experienced such a change in him that he can exhibit "some extraordinary charismatic manifestations"<sup>57</sup>. It rather means that the baptised, taken into Christ, has now been made capable of the work of justification carried out imperceptibly in his spiritual existence by the Spirit of Christ.

<sup>52</sup> *Acts* 10,44ff.

<sup>53</sup> HOLLENWEGER, op. cit. 372—389; M. J. McVEIGH, *God in Africa*, Cape Cod 1974, 64,69.

<sup>54</sup> *Mk.* 1,8; *Acts* 2,38.

<sup>55</sup> *Mt.* 3,11.

<sup>56</sup> B. NEUNHEUSER, *Baptism*, in: *Sacramentum Mundi*, New York, London 1969, Vol. 1, 137.

<sup>57</sup> MACQUARRIE, op. cit. 409.



## VI Baptism and African religion

In the course of this article we have shown how African traditional religion has reappeared in various degrees in the concept of baptism in the independents, for example in the initiation rites, the giving of names and in baptism understood as sacrament of purification. As pointed out above purification means in the independents cleansing from the root of sickness, sin. This view is aided by the way water confronts man in his existence in the ordinary way. It can be a symbol of threat and destruction, it can suggest life and regeneration, it has the beneficent value of cooling and refreshing<sup>58</sup>. Water too, as oil and fire, represents reality in its cleansing aspect<sup>59</sup>. The bible shows that water plays an important part in special rites of purification<sup>60</sup>. This varying and versatile understanding of water, especially in its purifying reality that has moulded the views of the independents in Africa, gathers its foundations in the African religion. In African religion water is a visible phenomenon used for washing away physical and internal impurities<sup>61</sup>. It is the sacred fluid which disseminates not only regenerative effect but also cleansing power. This traditional understanding of the use of water to clear off impurities of sin and defilement has emerged forcefully in the independents. That is why the *Church of the Twelve Apostles* in Ghana bathes men and women and scrubs them thoroughly during baptism<sup>62</sup> to bring about the essential aspect of washing as was practised in the traditional religion when a priest would bath a sick person to get him rid of his ailments. To bring about the same understanding during healing ceremonies in *African Apostolic Church*, which we have been mentioning in this article, the evangelist intones:

"Mmong mmong eyet idioknkpo" (*Water water washes away sins*)

"Mmong mmong eyet idioknkpo" (*Water water washes away sins*)

"Mmong mmong eyet idioknkpo" (*Water water washes away sins*)

The Zionist water beliefs and practices by washing, drinking and immersion is to be traced back to this traditional root. The expressed aim of baptism is the curative rite of getting people rid of the bad luck of "imikhokha, the results of breaking a taboo or moral norm"<sup>63</sup>.

The practice of total immersion by a good number of the independents<sup>64</sup> goes back too to the traditional religion in which a culprit would be immersed and washed by the officiating priest to clean him of his

<sup>58</sup> TH. FAWCETT, *The symbolic Language of Religion*, London 1970, 28.

<sup>59</sup> TH. FAWCETT, op. cit. 29; GEO WIEDENGREN, *Religionsphänomenologie*, Berlin 1969, 234.

<sup>60</sup> Ex. 30,18,21; 40,7; Lev. 11,32; 14,8ff, 15,5; Lk. 7,44.

<sup>61</sup> M.-L. MARTIN, *Kirche ohne Weisse*, Basel 1971, 224.

<sup>62</sup> BAËTA, op. cit. 18.

<sup>63</sup> V. W. TURNER, op. cit. 9.

<sup>64</sup> V. W. TURNER, ibid., H. W. TURNER, op. cit. 147; D. ROBERTS, op. cit. 1,3.



felony. The same complete washing can be observed in the traditional treatment of the common tropical disease called malaria whereby the sick is totally washed outwardly with the hope of an inward positive result.

The curative dimension of water and the total immersion deeply grounded in the African religion and transferred by the independents to their understanding and practice at baptism is not without results. The sacrament of baptism is far pushed into the realm of magic<sup>65</sup>. Such understanding, of course, has been highly influenced by the bilbe itself which is the only literature to which the independents cling tenaciously. A strong drift of biblical thought concerning the etiology and therapy of sickness sees this evil in the sphere of the religious<sup>66</sup> so that the goal of turning to Christ by the affected is to redeem the sick from his alienated state<sup>67</sup>. Equally convinced is the NT that sickness and death come as a result of the activities of the demon<sup>68</sup>. Healing means expulsion of the unclean spirit causing the sickness, the victory over such an evil spirit and the arrival of the kingdom of God<sup>69</sup>. Jesus appears in his healing actions on the dumb and blind demoniac as a powerful exorcist who overthrows Beelzebul, the prince of the devils<sup>70</sup>. It is not only Jesus himself who is the successful exorcist, his very name has exorcizing effects and deprives satan of its power<sup>71</sup>. That is why the early christian community uses his name to cast away satan and its accomplice<sup>72</sup>. Baptism in the name of Jesus is consequently an anti demonic rite as far as it remits previous sins<sup>73</sup> caused by the devil.

Armed with this understanding, anyone baptised therefore in the independent churches has the sure hope of being freed from the present attacks of the devil and his sickness cured by him in whose name the baptism is administered and, perhaps and most important, he is given a guarantee against further destructive assaults of what many Africans believe to be their archenemy, the devil. As a matter of fact, this view about baptism as defensive means against satanic intrigues is not only prominent among the independents but also common among many catholics. The writer encountered an interesting case confirming this statement in 1974 in Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria, as he postponed the baptism of a child because his parents weren't prepared to embrace their responsibility of bringing up the child in christian faith. On the parents' unabating pleading for the child's baptism he asked them why they displayed such insistence upon baptism and not upon christian life. The answer ran, "we want to secure him through baptism against every possible attack of the devil". By that the catholic parents meant that baptism would guarantee the child health

<sup>65</sup> M.-L. MARTIN, op. cit. 227.

<sup>66</sup> O. BÖCKER, *Christus Exorcista*, Mainz 1972, 70.

<sup>67</sup> Mk. 1,32.

<sup>68</sup> Mk. 2,5; 9,25.

<sup>69</sup> Mt. 12, 28—29.

<sup>70</sup> Mt. 12, 22—29.

<sup>71</sup> Lk. 10,18; Acts 19, 13—17.

<sup>72</sup> BÖCKER, op. cit. 168.

<sup>73</sup> Acts 22,16; Eph. 5,26.



and ward off any sickness that might be caused by any evil force. In this opinion they were not far from the independents. Our christianity in the West too has not been free from this magical connection between baptism, sin, sickness and the devil. One needs only to open some chapters of the old Roman ritual on baptism and one will be shocked at the great emphasis placed on this very point. Geo Widengren reports that this idea was afforded a prominent place in the sermon delivered at emperor Constantine's baptism. The emperor's leprosy was supposed to be cured by the waters of baptism, the devil causing it at the same time exorcised and new life given to the ruler<sup>74</sup>. The exorcising action is believed to go back to Christ himself. This belief, apart from biblical support, is strongly engraved in African religion in which some benevolent divinities are maintained to be capable of protecting people against malicious intrigues and intents of evil men and spirits, for example the Afikpo of Nigeria attribute such protective ability to their egbo divinity<sup>75</sup>.

This extremely magical view about baptism, even though inspired to a certain extent by the bible itself, cannot be regarded as truly representative of the whole biblical teaching concerning baptism. Let us consider, for example, the role of baptism as a rite of purification. The anti demonic water rite of apocalyptic Judaism expressed in John's baptism and in the baptism of the young early christian community has been placed on a new ground by later biblical reflexions on baptism. The central meaning of water of baptism is no more exclusively washing away of sins<sup>76</sup> but is christologically evaluated. There is no more the exorcistic, jewish water lustration that had infiltrated into the early church's understanding of baptism in its aspect of purification. Rather the whole reality of the water of baptism having the power to cleanse from sin is linked with the death of Christ which alone takes away sin<sup>77</sup>. *I Pt. 3,21* polemizes strongly against any understanding of baptism as a magical lustration. Baptism is a pledge and a commitment to Christ to have a good conscience<sup>78</sup>, the washing of the heart which makes the reality of baptism thrust daily to the forefront in the life of the baptised. This new move from magical understanding to a soteriological, grounded in Christ, runs through Paul's teaching when he departs from the indicatives in his teaching in the first part of Romans six about baptism to the emphatic imperatives of the same chapter.

The choice of river as a place for baptism is biblically warranted: John the Baptist executed his baptism in the Jordan. The groups of churches under consideration prefer this and refer to it as the antecedent of their baptism. They attach the anchor of their practice to the positive qualifi-

<sup>74</sup> G. WIDENGREN, op. cit. 234.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. S. OTTENBERG, *Statement and Reality: The Renewal of An Igbo Protective Shrine*, in: *International Archives of Ethnography* 51, 1968, 144.

<sup>76</sup> *Jn. 13,10; Acts 22,16.*

<sup>77</sup> *Rom. 6,3; I Cor. 15,4.*

<sup>78</sup> *Heb. 10,22.*



cation of water abundant in the New Testament. Water is a sacred element; God founded the world upon it<sup>79</sup>. It is a place of sacred theophany: the call of the first disciples<sup>80</sup>, and the demonstration of Jesus' doxa when he changed the nocturnal failure of Peter into a splendid success<sup>81</sup>. The New Testament attributes supernatural powers to water so that its power, as in the pool of Siloam<sup>82</sup>, possesses anti demonic healing effect. In certain passages invisible agents exercise authority over particular water<sup>83</sup>. The healing effect of water comes from the angel which stimulates it. Such scriptural evidence does profoundly impigne upon the independents to choose the river as a place for baptism in contrast to the mission churches which baptise by affusion.

Yet this choise is more than mere borrowing from the scripture. African religion has a great influence here. In Africa water is considered as the residential area of major divinities; some destructive, some good and helpful<sup>84</sup>. Ndem, a divinity in Calabar, Nigeria, is supposed to have its abode in the Calabar creek<sup>85</sup>. The Yoruba associate the Olokun with the sea and among the Asanti the great Tano is involved in river cult<sup>86</sup>. Since water is considered sacred because sacred deities dwell in it, it can purify and produce life<sup>87</sup>. If by sacrifice the water gods are pacified in case of floods or strong tidal waves and in case of certain ailments, the afflicted is blessed with recovery, when the deities are propitiated, it follows therefore, that the independents which lay strong stress upon the cleansing dimension of water, would now shift their scence for baptism to a river where Christ would conquer evil spirits which provoke misfortunes and let water produce its purificatory values in the baptised. Again as the old deities would cause water to bring about life, so the new life won at baptism in Christ is now a direct product of Christ's very action brought about by the life giving element of water which he himself, Christ, uses as a vehicle for the new life reality.

## VII Conclusion

Examining the understanding of the sacrament of baptism in African independent churches we can conclude that the sacrament has undergone a lot of reinterpretation to some extent. In certain aspects like purifi-

<sup>79</sup> 2 Pt. 3,5.

<sup>80</sup> Mt. 4, 18—22; Mk. 1,16,20.

<sup>81</sup> Lk. 5,5.

<sup>82</sup> Jn. 9,7.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Pond of Bethsaida, Jn. 5,4.

<sup>84</sup> R. F. G. ADAMS, *Oberi Okaime: A New African Language and Script*, in: *Africa*, 17 (1) 1947, 24. E. G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, London 1974, 50.

<sup>85</sup> *Nigeria*, 52, 1957, 166.

<sup>86</sup> PARRINDER, *ibid*.

<sup>87</sup> PARRINDER, *op. cit.* 49.



cation, incorporation and the Holy Spirit baptism has been subject to much distortions.

Such misunderstanding has, nonetheless, not been without biblical model and influence. As can be discovered too in various aspects of this article, a good portion of African traditional religion in the practices and beliefs of the independents has featured prominently. The traditional beliefs are not simply on the fringes of many activities but have strongly bubbled and effervesced to the surface. The very fact that they emerge again and again in the practices, even though externally christianized, affords the beliefs with pillars upon which they can lean themselves for long in African minds.

Yet this old understanding in new form notwithstanding, one is profoundly impressed by the way the independents have tried to make baptism a sacrament understood and accepted by the people who receive it. This is clearly demonstrated in the active participation and in the retention of African names. Instead of jeering at the independent groups of churches and their rather shallow theological understanding of the sacrament, one should rather admire their efforts to relate christianity to the African ways of life. Perhaps they are the hope for any initiatives to bring the message of the gospel to the people concerned in their culture. They represent an attempt to meet the demands of the insatiable hunger of those who look for what has finally arisen new to them in Christ and which challenges them totally in their complete human existence to give an answer of some sort in their own historical and cultural situation to this special call — a response which gives their longing and life satisfaction and meaning.