

The historical voices of the African Independent Churches: towards new development

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Abstract

In the first publication by Bengt Sundkler in 1964, the AICs were regarded as interesting sectarian groups, fit to repent and to be incorporated into the mainstream churches. There have since been numerous debates on the AICs, but with very little or no impression made on them. However, their interest in having their voices heard has emerged from debates at the respective universities and colleges in South Africa. The booklet entitled *AIC speaking for ourselves* was one such outcome. In this booklet the AICs expressed their own views and history. In 1998, Du Toit¹ of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion and Archbishop Ngada of the AIC published selected conference proceedings on the AICs concerns; this was done in a publication entitled *Hearing the AIC voice*. It was followed by the Multi Event in Cape Town in 1999 where the AICs, together with other grassroots communities, made their voices heard, in order to be included in South African public policy by the policy makers. The AICs were confident that their public vote was their strength as it proved in the 1994 democratic elections. This article discusses the developmental changes and the emergence of the AIC's voices. The critical observation- and literature review methods were used in this article.

Introduction

The African Independent Churches (AIC's) lived in the shadow of past experiences imposed on them by Western explanations, reasons and theories. They had to define their lives, identity, religious and cultural practices according to Western values. Any African indigenous practice that lacked Western taste was viewed as primitive and uncivilised. Instead of implementing their practices, the AIC's spent most of their time explaining themselves to those who adhered to Western values. Initially the AIC's were viewed as sects and not fully Christian. They had to explain their Christian status to Western ways of thinking. This account was reflected in their book "AICs Speaking for themselves" published by ICT in Braamfontein (1985). This book gave a full account on how they viewed themselves and felt about their rejection from the mainline churches. It is, however, interesting to note that, irrespective of this, the AIC's never succumbed to pressures of forcing them to shift from their belief system into the different, western self-identities. It is from this point that Du Toit's book, *Hearing the AIC voice* (1999), became relevant in attempting to encourage further debates from within the AIC's. The value of these debates was to suggest that a paradigm shift was necessary from Western values and self-justification to self-decisiveness and intellectual growth. Besides the self-fixed historical affinity of the AIC's as they are in South Africa, we are forced to look into the broader developments of the organisation of the African Independent Churches (OAIC). This focus will help to expose the possible avenues for purposeful development and international exposure. It has also become evident that the AIC's in their incoherence² and sporadic developments since 1994, have shown very little progress in their development. The blame could however be placed on the need for a new roadmap towards standing for themselves. A lot of time was wasted by trying to explain themselves to the Western values instead of focussing on doing their theology from their own perspective.

South Africa, for instance, has been viewed initially as the "hub" of the development of the AIC movement. It was like this, because earlier through the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Christianity was regarded as the foremost religion. This notion was also professed from the same churches throughout the African continent. However, their growth in terms of a united voice has declined tremendously. Since 1994 the "AIC veterans" in South Africa have disappeared off the scene in vast numbers, largely due to their aging and poor health.

¹ Prof Cornel du Toit is the Head of Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) at Unisa and this contribution is part of a Festschrift dedicated to him on his sixtieth birthday. The contribution made in this article is to appreciate his book entitled: *The AICs Speaking for themselves*. I have established that his publication with Bishop Ngada was more prophetic in the way the AIC's are developing in this present time. I highlighted some angles of developments as I was part of most of the workshops and meetings relating to the development of the "New Vision for the AIC's" through the OAIC's Headquarters in Nairobi Kenya.

² Incoherence is referring to the continental lack of ecumenicity which has vocally disadvantaged their purpose of becoming one united body.

The passing on of the AIC veterans have serious consequences for the new generation; it has caused a generation gap where they stand the risk of not leaving a legacy for the younger generation. This suggests a lack of knowledge impartation to their followers, and ends up in emerging leadership conflicts. Nonetheless, the establishment of the OAIC headquarters in Kenya, Nairobi has become a vital bridge to overcome this challenge. It is yet to be seen whether its central initiative will manage to register the majority of the AIC's on the African continent, including South Africa.

In South Africa and Zimbabwe for instance, the AIC's acted in their own "secluded" operational territories which portrayed a picture of self sufficiency in terms of support and accountability in their respective contexts. A signal has developed from the attitude of the early "AIC researchers"³ who somehow were significant, yet stereotypical in their research and findings. The publications of Sundkler on the AIC's in 1948 and the revised reprint in 1964 as well as other publications in later years became the only vital foundational sources and accepted research work for the early AIC's. Oosthuizen among other veterans, could also not be disregarded for his contributions. Indeed, most of the written sources came from white researchers. The AIC's were labelled as interesting sectarian groups only fit for research work, especially by the mainstream churches. Many debates on the AIC's have since been arranged to influence predominant views on the AIC's, but with very little progress. The question on the AIC's voices that begs to be answered is whether or not they will still have a resolute voice in South Africa?

Steering the AIC's towards the hearing of their voices

It should be clearly stated that the representatives of the AIC's were not necessarily representative of all the AIC's, although the leaders were regarded as the fathers of the movement. Du Toit's co-editor, Archbishop Ngada was a representative of the spiritual groups. It should be clearly understood that Ngada, at the time, was a rival of Reverend Bishop Makhubu who had been the director of the AIC "hub", Khanya College for African Initiated Churches (KAIC) in Johannesburg.

Makhubu was not part of Du Toit and Archbishop Ngada's book *Hearing the AIC's voice* (1999), but he is the author of, *AIC, speaking for ourselves* published by the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in 1985. How could then such a small book represent the entire AIC? The book nevertheless played a vital role apart from internal squabbles and rivalry. The opinions of AIC leaders concerning the significance of their voices in the public spaces were the same. However, the purpose the book *Hearing the AICs voices* became more relevant at that stage.

The book entitled *Hearing the AIC voice* edited by Du Toit and Ngada, which contains conference proceedings from seven presentations of the AIC members echoing the voices of the AIC, was submitted for publication in 1991. The expressed voices in the published articles were more on unity and future challenges than anything else. In the preface, Du Toit remarked:

When one listens carefully, a voice can be heard of a people who have come out of age, speaking and accounting for themselves. The last time a similar publication saw the light was in 1985 under the title *Speaking for ourselves*, published by the Institute for Contextual Theology. The AICs have grown from a "study object" of research and interpretation to self speaking, interpreting and criticizing subject.⁴

Indeed, *Hearing the AIC's voice* is prophetic in that its foretelling stories became a reality inside and outside the movement, not only in South Africa but also on the African continent and elsewhere. Although the stronger voice at the conference was from Archbishop Ngada's spiritual group, the contribution of Reverend Tshelane with his theme "The quest for unity and structure inside and between AIC groups" was noteworthy. He did not give much expression to the "missing link" of other voices including those of Reverend Makhubu's wing.⁵

Another article by Reverend Molisiwa entitled "The social impact of the AIC's with reference to literacy, poverty and exploitation of the people" emerged as a major theme and has also emphasised the OAIC's strategic plan. The plan formed part of a better vision for a better world in the contemporary faith development among the AIC's on the African continent. With Molisiwa's theme in mind, the book by Du Toit and Ngada has somehow become the vanguard publication and a foretelling of meaningful discussion on unity, poverty and support of AIC's on the African continent and elsewhere. The next section will briefly look at the AIC's vision.

Vision for a better world

³ AIC researchers refers to the mostly white researchers who were interested in doing research among these churches.

⁴ University of South Africa; *Hearing the AIC voice* (1999)

⁵ Makhubu was the Chair of the Theological desk of the AIC and the principal of Khanya Institute for the AIC Theology (Khaic).

AIC's in South Africa have been very fortunate in that most of the scholars who researched them were from the mainstream or mission churches. Most of the "expenses" relating to the outcome of the research were paid by the researchers themselves. When the challenge⁶ was raised at the OAIC headquarters in Kenya, Nairobi, the response was that money from the overseas sponsors had dried up and that it was time for the AIC's to fend for themselves.

The drying up of foreign financial support left the OAIC to search for alternative funds and self support. In doing so they proposed "a vision for a better world"; a strategy which focussed on self-support. The strategy would provide abundantly for everybody in the AIC's specifically in poor communities. The OAIC then raised the following points⁷ as their strategic focus. They wanted to:

- improve the lives and opportunities of the rural and urban poor;
- strengthen the food security of the rural and urban poor;
- focus on Africa's children and young people;
- empower and invest in Africa's women;
- focus on health and wellbeing by responding more effectively to health challenges and HIV and AIDS;
- establish a just community by promoting economic justice, good governance and anticipated citizenship and
- ensure a relevant theological foundation for the AIC's.

Several workshops were organised to discuss the points mentioned above and to make sure that they are realised. These points were backed up by the scriptural text:

Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert, and streams in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:18-19, NIV).

The OAIC confirmed that "vision for a better world" was an invitation to start a journey of development for the AIC's. There were numerous ways in which one could support cooperate with them. For instance, the leaders of the chapters or churches could be invited to join the OAIC. This also included the individuals who could pray or sponsor with supportive gifts. They were actually looking for the best views and wanted to support those who could write and promote the OAIC interest of self publicity.

The vision for a better world was structured in three key parts:⁸ the first part describes the OAIC. The second part describes the challenges that confront the AIC members in general, communities and citizens of Africa and their challenging realities. The final part describes the organisational and institutional actions that needed to be embraced in order to rise to this challenge in an effective, coordinated and vibrant manner while they were anxious to secure the future of the organisation. The OAIC, at the same time, was concerned about the theological makeup of the AIC range which will be discussed next.

Expression of the new vision of the AIC theologies

Since I described the other two parts (i.e., AIC voices and vision for a better world) in the previous section, I will focus on the third part relating to "theological educational interest." The new vision for the AIC theologies and ecumenism came through the revival of the OAIC as a much needed surprise to many of those who worked with the AIC's. Organisation of the AIC Consultation on Theology and Ministerial Formation that was held in Kenya, Nairobi from 1 to 3 December 2009, emphasised the theological expansion among the AIC's. This was a very important consultation, since it was a watermark for the OAIC's⁹ new vision outline. This vision reflected on the AIC's as the people of God who built on their African cultures and values, transformed by the biblical truth and the Holy Spirit to create an abundant life in the community for their children and the world.

The OAIC vision highlighted a positive valuation and critique of African culture as the inescapable, God-given, and historical context for interpreting the gospel. It also helped to create the original AIC theologies to be part of their "founding vision", emphasising the power of the gospel to transform people, theologies and churches continuously so that the challenge of the gospel could remain fresh and focused on contemporary realities. The vision also wanted to highlight the understanding of the church as a movement of the people of God called by Him and empowered by His Spirit to undertake the new initiatives, especially in building ubuntu

⁶ A challenge that AIC's research were done mostly by people from outside the movement.

⁷ Nicta Lubaa presented a "vision for a better world: abundant life for all in community," Strategic framework 2009-2013.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ OAIC stand for Organisation of the African Instituted Churches working in seven regions throughout the continent including: East Africa, Southern Africa and Madagascar, Democratic Republic of Congo, West Africa Francophone, West Africa Anglophone and Nigeria and at country level OAIC works through Chapters.

(Shalom), a human society without poverty, exploitation or disease. It had to articulate and communicate the AIC's vision of the human community of God throughout the African continent and globally.

Padwick¹⁰ singled out the current strategic framework for OAIC vision for a better world (2009-2013) by identifying the following broad objectives for the Department of Theology of the AIC's on the continent:

- (a) to strengthen the OAIC department of theology in order to become an effective tool for policy development and implementation;
- (b) to facilitate the articulation, communication, and renewal of AIC founding visions and development of theologies;
- (c) to enhance the AIC understanding and practice of mission, especially in cross-cultural and urban settings as well as among young people and
- (d) to promote positive teaching of AIC theologies and AIC issues in non-AIC theological institutions.

Some of the consultation objectives were to develop the guidelines and criteria for building the country's regional and international resource team. The team would be responsible for overseeing the training programme at national level. The other objective was to represent the OAIC theologically and internationally in ecumenical dialogue.¹¹ This level of interaction was necessary for the AIC's theological development and promotion of uniting different Christian churches beyond AIC circles. The constant revisiting of the ministerial training among the AIC's was an attempt to rediscover a suitable strategy for establishing AIC theology as a matter of urgency. This was to be done in order to compete meaningfully with other global theologies.

Constant self renewal focusing on ministerial training

The rediscovery of the AIC's interest in the International Christian Communities (ICC) and their development has encouraged a meaningful partnership internationally. But what do the AIC's have in store to promote their historical theological interest globally? Significantly the AIC's have discovered their shortcoming and lack of international exposure due to a lack of agility and technological growth.¹² Indeed AIC's are sporadic, but are fast growing in its diaspora into the Western world. A question concerning the value of diasporic churches and what they are advocating overseas can be asked. This concern will foster a need to investigate the value of the AIC's ministerial significance and outward development beyond its geographic frontiers.

The ministerial training for the grassroots ministry remained a challenge for the World Council of Churches (WCC) who pledged some funds for projects to alleviate poverty and the empowerment of the AIC's and other African rural communities. This was mentioned in the 2009 programme on Theological Education Desk of the World Council of Churches manual.¹³ The manual was written by the staff of the Ecumenical Theological Education Programme to which the OAIC is well connected. It is from this perspective that the AIC's, through the OAIC, decided to draft a handbook on developing African Independent Church Theologies for today. The manual extrapolated information from the AIC's, their understanding and worldview from where the founding vision for contemporary mission was drafted.

It was to place the whole world of the AIC's in motion. This came through the help of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)¹⁴ which has led to "The OAIC Just Communities" conference which was held in at the Methodist Guest House in Nairobi, from 12-15 September, 2010. The conference was earmarked to respond to the following questions: How could ordinary citizens question the government at local or national level over the quality of services they receive? How could AIC's ask questions of institutions like families, economic structures, political systems, and government, and how well could they enable people to live their lives with dignity? As a new key to the OAIC programme, the conference aimed at promoting the economic justice, accountability, and emancipated citizenship. OAIC as a result, wanted to foster the new dreams, visions and hopes of AIC founders for a just society.

The foundation of just communities came about with renewed excitement in the AIC circles through the OAIC in the twenty-first century. The latter organisation drafted a manual entitled *OAIC vision for a better world: abundant life for all in AIC community and beyond* edited by Lubaa and Padwick (2009:1-40). The

¹⁰ Padwick 2009, 1-4.

¹¹ Lubaa, Nicta. OAIC Consultation of AIC Theology and Ministerial Formacio, 2009.

¹² Refer to Padwick on page 6 point (b) above, "the development of the AIC theologies in South Africa."

¹³ See the Theological Education in World Christianity, (2009), 47-49.

¹⁴ High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals Summit was held in the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 20-21 September 2010 and the following objectives were tabled: The six round-table meetings would have the overarching objective of "Making it happen by 2015", and each one will focus on one theme, as follows: Addressing the challenge of poverty; hunger and gender equality; Meeting the goals of health and education; Promoting sustainable development; Addressing emerging issues and evolving approaches; Addressing the special needs of the most vulnerable; Widening and strengthening partnerships.

manual contains the strategic plan for the AIC's not only on education but also on social life. The question of vision for a better world was well articulated by the Chair of the OAIC Reverend Daniel Okoh who said the following:

AIC's are essentially popular Christian movements motivated by the Spirit of God and by a shared sense of mission. This strategy is a tool to facilitate the OAIC, its member churches and the communities they serve to sharpen that mission, and to use the social and spiritual resources in our midst to be more effective in working and living our calling.¹⁵

The vision is not merely theoretical as it runs concurrently with the AIC community interactions through various AIC associations, regions and local assemblies. Its aim is to improve the capabilities and livelihood opportunities of the poor in rural and urban areas. OAIC on behalf of the AIC's, wanted to secure food security for poor people in rural and urban communities in Africa. They wanted to strengthen the ability of members of churches and affiliated community organisations to respond more effectively to health inequalities and other challenges to health and wellbeing, especially HIV and AIDS.

Through "Just Communities", the OAIC wanted to promote economic justice, good governance and emancipated citizenship. The strategic plan wanted to build the capacity of AIC and OAIC chapters to develop and implement appropriate theological education for their members. They wanted to improve their capacity for strategic communication with a view to communicate the vision and mission of OAIC and AIC's more effectively. They also wanted to ensure quality, value-driven, and effective accountable practice at all levels of the organisation. Lastly they wanted to secure sustainability and a prosperous future for the OAIC. All of these are the strategic foci for the AIC between 2009 and 2013.

Trained theologically without becoming over-dependent

The question of dependency had been common among many of the AIC's and their leaders had taken this seriously. The AIC's inculcated Christianity in Africa in such a way that it had considerable consequences for African theology. Daneel¹⁶ considers their significance to be twofold:

It lies firstly in their spontaneous indigenisation of Christianity uninhabited by direct Western control, and secondly in their erection of 'bridgehead between the Christian gospel and traditional thought forms'.

Mijoga (1996) and Fashole Luke¹⁷ said that African Independent Churches constituted part of raw material for building African theologies. He pointed out that a critical study had to be made of these churches to assess their value for the development of African theology. In Anderson¹⁸ the theology of the AIC's is obscured. He arrived at this conclusion by posing the question: To what extent are the traditional concepts of God carried over into Pentecostal-type Christianity?

The Saint John of Manku belongs to the Pentecostal churches in South Africa, but it is specifically regarded as an African indigenous church and a family of the AIC's. Some theological opinions and observations are that Pentecostal-type AIC's overemphasised pneumatology as the Africa spiritual world, particularly the ancestor cult, which formed new expressions.¹⁹ It is also said that the overemphasis of pneumatology means that God is neglected and Jesus Christ is overshadowed. I do not agree with this criticism, because the terms "Our God", "the Son Jesus" and "Holy Spirit" are prominently used by the AIC's in their prayers.

Perhaps information in the previous paragraph needs to be highlighted to point out limitations of the kind of theology in theory expected from those who will venture into the future theology of the AIC's. Dependency in terms of the subheading above may denote two markings: first, it may imply that the AICs need to be aware of the purpose of their study of theology. Second, they may need to guard against the temptations of satisfying their sponsors, particularly from the Western world, who may want to affect their objectives in their study of theology. Of course, no one suggests that the AIC's must isolate themselves from the ecumenicity. According to Boseto (1982), ecumenical relations are always foreign and are on the lips of Geneva and the Vatican. It means ecumenism denoting unity in the church is not the AIC's idea, but an idea which the circular Christian church has experienced and robust debates have taken place on it before. From an AIC perspective, it may only mean

¹⁵ Lubaaie, Nicta. OAIC Consultation of AIC Theology and Ministerial Formacio, 2009.

¹⁶ ML, Daneel. *Fambidzano-Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989),54-57.

¹⁷ Fashole, Luke FE. *The question of Christian Theologies*, in Anderson, GH & Stransky, TF (Ed), *Mission trends no 3*. New York: Paulist, 1976.

¹⁸ Anderson, Tumelo: The Faith of African Pentecostals in South Africa. (1993),97.

¹⁹ Oosthuizen. *Causes of religious Independentism in Africa*. Alice: Fort Hare Press. (Alice: Fort Hare Press, 1968),129.

integration, accommodation and unity strengths with other Christian churches cross cultures. AIC's are then merely to share the experiences although it does not seem very clear who may have to carry the responsibility of compiling the curriculum of the AIC's. The educational adventure differs from country to country.

In South Africa today it is very difficult to register a college, because education is centralised. It invites colleges to register with the South Africa Qualification Authority (SAQA) which is not easy to fulfil. From another perspective, it means that education needs to be shared even with strangers. No one knows who will lead education in future, it might be led by minority groups including the AIC's – the only way for groups such as the AIC's is to register their colleges independently; which have proven to be difficult. The other alternative is through partnerships with the already registered and advanced educational institutions. The question relating to the relevant objective that will serve the AIC needs: this is still unanswered: Is it the AIC's who have the capacity to sustain themselves or are there other avenues? This is to be investigated for future development.

AIC's reclaiming space through the OAIC

The OAIC has embarked on a long-term programme to help AIC leaders and members to articulate their belief systems and theologies; and to develop an alternative value system based on a Christian's form of ubuntu. This will provide a basis for engagement in contemporary political processes. We describe this process as "reclaiming our space"²⁰ – the space in African society that historically was denied the AIC's by colonial and post-colonial governments and which their leaders must claim back for themselves by means of proclaiming AIC values and visions as valuable contributions towards building a humane African society. The process began in 1996 at an OAIC continental workshop in Johannesburg on "The Founders Vision: A Theology of Development for African Independent Churches".

In September 2004, a conference in Pretoria entitled "Critical Solidarity in the Face of HIV/AIDS: Initiatives from the African Independent Churches" challenged AIC leaders from 11 countries to apply their unique social and spiritual capital to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and in October 2004, a workshop in Accra assisted AIC leaders in Ghana in dealing with the issues of globalisation (Mijoga).

The AIC's in South Africa, let alone the whole Southern African region, have developed inwards and outwards. In South Africa, for instance, the AIC's are registering their voices in government circles while in some areas they receive advice from the OAIC. This helps the AIC's to become part of the entire AIC continental community. In diaspora, the AIC influence is carried to other parts of the world including the Western world while they also learn from their new contexts.

The Multi Event 1999 was also a watershed moment where the AIC's and other religious communities had a chance to engage with the government. AIC's, as part of the other eleven community-based organisations, expressed their "voices from the Periphery" backed up by Revelation 7:9a, 13 which reads:

After this I look and before me was a great multitude that no one could count ... The one of the elders asked me: 'These in white robes-who are they, and where did they come from?

Sokutu (*one of the eleven community based organisations representatives around South Africa prepared themselves to participate in the ME99 event*), a presenter, mentioned that:

... spurred by both specific religious conviction and ubuntu value that they espouse as Africans, to take the initiative to alleviate the ills of their troubled country, such as the crime rate, violence, alcohol abuse, ecological and environmental disasters, unemployment with its offsprings – poverty and HIV/AIDS.²¹

Conclusion

This article endeavoured to appreciate the contribution made by Du Toit and Ngada in their book *Hearing the AIC voice*. Their book has tossed some forecasts towards a mind shift from worrying voices to actual developments and growth among them. Indeed the AIC's could develop and begin to express themselves in their own way to be known in a much better way. The clear indications have shown a great potential towards the alleged signs of growth among them. The OAIC vision for a better world became a meaningful way and the new hope for the AIC's future development. It should be understood that OAIC was an organisation that was developed by the AIC's continentally. It was developed by leaders and representatives of the AIC's throughout Africa. The AIC's in South Africa have played a pivotal role through the late Reverend Makhubu, the late Archbishop Ngada, Archbishop Ntongana, Bishop Mali, Archbishop Khumalo and others.

²⁰ Lubaale, Nicta. OAIC Consultation of AIC Theology and Ministerial Formacio, 2009.

²¹ James, Cochrane. *Religion in public life: Multi event 1999 Conference proceedings*, (1999), 58-9.

The OAIC's emphasis on abundant life for living up to the founding vision became the focus area and a new initiative for the organisation. The whole idea of the vision for a better world emanated from the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) ranging from fighting extreme poverty to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education. All these targets have 2015 as a deadline.²² OAIC has decided to use these millennium development goals as a benchmark for its growth and development for a better future. The article highlights some of the issues of significance including theological training and development for higher learning. OAIC aimed at encouraging AIC's to strive to improve lives and provide opportunities for poor rural and urban dwellers, including children to improve their livelihood.

By expressing their new vision of the AIC theologies wanted to focus on self renewal in ministerial training at the grassroots levels. They also wanted to develop a theology at higher levels without becoming over-dependent. The idea of the AIC's reclaiming of space through OAIC is vital for advancing their ambitions for a better future. This will not impede on the local development by any means. It means those who have been working on the AIC's can still do so as it will help to expand and advance the growth and interests of the movement.

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²² <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>