CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BOUNDARY-CROSSING INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES (AICS) ON YOUTH IN EMUHAYA DISTRICT, WESTERN KENYA

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The initials AIC, as the designation of a genre of African expressions of Christian faith of great variety, are themselves understood in different ways. Interpreting the acronym as “African Independent Churches” signifies that they are independent in their origin and organization. On the other hand, using the acronym to mean “African Instituted Churches” signifies that they came into being by the initiative of Africans and may or may not be independent (see Pobee, 2002). Other groups of scholars have referred to these churches as “African Indigenous Churches” (see Hayes, 1992); this last terminology connotes that such churches retain an African ethos and that their theology has developed a distinctive local flavor. Hayes points out that these three categories—African independent churches, African instituted churches, and African indigenous churches—may overlap to some extent but not completely. The official term for these churches when they emerged, as Bengt Sundkler (1961:18) insightfully argues, was “native separatist churches,” to imply that they were splinter groups from the mainstream missionary churches. This term, as he observes, was widely unacceptable, especially to South Africans, because the term “native” was offensive to blacks during the period of apartheid. It also implied that these churches resulted from schisms in the mainstream churches, which was not always the case.

In this study, I use the term AIC to mean African instituted churches. The churches described here were started as a result of African church initiatives in African countries, but some are also affiliated with wider bodies that include non-African members. They therefore attract membership from diverse cultural as well as geographical contexts.

No matter what ‘I’ stands for, AICS represent to their members “a place to feel at home,” to borrow Welbourn and Ogot’s (1966) phrase. The negative attitude of Western missionaries toward African culture dictated that the Africans were dressed in European garb, both literally
and theologically. Pobee (2002) explains that AICS in effect protest the verbal and cerebral mode that puts Western Christianity beyond the reach of ordinary people's comprehension and experience. Instead, they offer a celebrative religion, making considerable use of symbols, music, and dance. Thus, they represent an African cultural renaissance, in reaction to the cultural imperialism of the mission work of the historic churches. Pobee further argues that the churches of the West and their daughter churches in Africa are stamped with individualism, which characterized Western society after the industrial revolution. This goes against the ethos of African society, which proverbially views life in communitarian terms. Missionary Christian religiosity thus drew forth a counterforce from Africans, leading to the formation of AICS, which respect the culture of African communities.

It is significant at this point to note that the African instituted churches have been described as open to collaboration with churches within and outside Africa (see Hayes, 1992). In studying the role of African instituted churches, there is a tendency to focus on the leadership structures and the dynamics of their development and spread. Scholars have paid less attention to the importance of AICS for African youth. It is this lacuna that the present chapter intends to fill, using three case studies.

An Overview of AICS and Youth in Africa

The emergence of AICS is complex. As just noted, these movements can be seen as reactions against colonialism or as renewals of African religious beliefs and practices. They can also be seen as splinter groups, in that many originated through splits from mainstream denominations. In any case, they began in the colonial period and continued to expand, especially after independence—despite official efforts against them. In 1969, for example, the Kenyan government refused to register new breakaway churches (Nandi 2001: 2). Some of the leaders of AICS, for example Elijah Masinde of Dini ya Msambwa and Otieno Dunde of Mumboism, were arrested on allegations that their movements were subversive. The insistence of these movements on the renewal of African ways of worship—indeed the whole notion of a specifically African religiosity—was seen as a distraction to proper Christian evangelization. This did not, however, deter formation of more AICS, and the state's decision not to register new religious groups