THE HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF INDEPENDENT CHURCHES IN SOUTH EAST AFRICA

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Three decades ago Bengt Sundkler produced the standard work on independent churches in South Africa. More refined work has since been done on similar movements elsewhere in Africa, but in South Africa Sundkler has only been bettered by Sundkler. This essay examines Sundkler's classifications of "Ethiopian" and "Zionist" with respect to churches in Natal and Zululand. It will be argued that Sundkler's classifications make excellent sense from a longitudinal or historical point of view but are misleading when used to describe the poles of a continuum. The social origins and motives of Ethiopian independents will be shown to be dramatically different from those of the Zionists who appeared some decades later.

Approaches to the Study of Independent Churches

The study of independent churches in Africa is a growing and crowded field. Publications have increased exponentially during the last quarter century and mastery of the literature is probably already beyond the grasp of any single scholar. This mushroom growth reflects the inherent interest of the subject matter rather than the emergence of a new discipline. Africanists who cannot agree on a working definition of religion are unlikely to succeed in bringing all the fascinating varieties of African churches and theologies under the roof of a single academic hothouse. "Independent" is merely the latest term to be applied to

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churches variously (and inadequately) identified in older studies as "syncretist", "nativist", "separatist", "prophetic" or "messianic". Naturally the explanations advanced to account for phenomena so variously named are very numerous. One earnest investigator has listed more than eighty causes under twelve different headings.

One way of reducing this towering heap of documentation to coherent, discrete piles is to chart trends in interpretation. The first students of independent religions in Africa were uneasy white churchmen, settlers and colonial officials. Missionaries and their sponsors worried that black secessions from established denominations meant heresy at best and a return to paganism at worst. Settlers blamed "Ethiopian" preachers for plotting against white rule in dark corners of town and country. Officials could often see anti-colonial designs in black religious movements which even missionaries regarded as harmless.

After the Second World War in a very different climate of opinion a generation of serious and able scholars—some churchmen, some academics—turned these fears inside out. The anti-colonial content of the Independent churches was emphasised in order to highlight the failings of church and state. Bengt Sundkler steeped himself in the lore of South African independency and produced a classic work which blamed the state for limiting black opportunities and the church for pushing Christian Africans out of the orthodox denominations by factionalism, paternalism and segregation. Georges Balandier acknowledged a debt to Sundkler in a series of important books and articles beginning in the nineteen fifties but concentrated much more than Sundkler had done on the proto-nationalist and nationalist elements in


Cecilia Irvine, 'The birth of the Kimbanguist Movement in the Bas-Zaïre 1921', Journal of Religion in Africa, 6, 1974, 23-76, describes the way in which Belgian officials and the Catholic Church combined to overrule Protestant attempts to conciliate the Kimbanguists.