Thirty years is not a long time in the history of a religious group, even in the case of the African independent churches whose phenomenal growth over the last century continues to attract attention from the corridors of academic, ecclesiastical and political power. However in thirty years a religious group can undergo a transformation, not least the independent churches which are particularly characterized by their 'mobility' and 'movement'. It is precisely the volatile and dynamic nature of these churches that seems to have led to the confusion among both members and academics alike, regarding their terminology. It is not the aim of this paper to propose any over-arching scheme of classification, but rather to trace the growth and development of one particular West African independent church—the Celestial Church of Christ through its course of existence of just over thirty years, and to examine the dynamics of these movements. By the same token we shall perhaps understand how the confusion over terms has arisen.

Profile of the Church

The Celestial Church of Christ was founded in 1947 in Dahomey by Samuel Biléou Oschoffa, a carpenter of Gun and Yoruba origin. Oschoffa had been reared in the Methodist tradition. He received some education under the tutelage of various local Methodist ministers, but to this day claims that God chose him because he was illiterate. After a three month sojourn in the bush, he performed several healing miracles on his return and started to attract a nucleus of followers. A decisive turning point for the nascent religious movement was the 'inaugural vision' where it was revealed to Oschoffa that he was to found a church in which people would
worship God alone and therefore find the salvation and protection they sought.

The naming of the movement, which also occurred as a result of a vision in the early stages, revealed something of its original self-concept—a factor which we must take into account in our analysis of the group. The word 'church' does not appear in the (French) title—Le Christianisme Céleste—and an attempt was made to retain the same concept in Gun—

\textit{Agun wiwe olon ton}

(Holy Assembly of Heaven)

and in Yoruba:

\textit{Ijo mimo ti Kristi lati prun wa}

(Holy Assembly of Christ from Heaven)

The early growth and development were marked by this desire to remain a spiritual-healing movement with very little internal organization. However as Weber has shown, charismatic leadership in its pure form is short-lived before the process of routinization sets in. The personal and informal following of the Pastor Founder (Oschoffa) gradually developed into a permanent congregation with fixed rites and duties. As numbers grew, people being attracted by the healing and problem-solving activities of the movement, 'parishes' were created which in turn necessitated the distribution of circulars concerning the standardization of practice with regard to especially spiritual discernment, prophetism and 'fetichist deviations'. During this initial period of growth in Dahomey, the movement was characterized by an essentially rural membership—farmers, fishermen and a few retired civil servants.

Seven years after its creation, the Celestial Church of Christ made a request for official authorization. The interesting, but now obsolete title which was submitted marks a further progression.

Société religieuse d'UNION DE LA SAINTE TRINITE dite EGLISE du CHRISTIANISME CELESTE, fondée à Porto-Novo en 1947, ayant pour but de prier on prêcher la morale sur la doctrine CHRETIENNE pour le bien du monde entier.

The word 'église' has been introduced into the title. There is also an indication that evangelism was already being envisaged on a worldwide scale rather than a national or local basis, although these