

Stains on the robe

• Tales of worshippers endangered by abuse of practices in Celestial Church, C&S, others

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*Against the backdrop of the controversial incident involving a socialite, Kayode Badru, who got burnt to death during a prayer session at a parish of Celestial Church of Christ in Alagbado, a Lagos suburb, **KUNLE AKINRINADE** revisits similar incidents and other recent controversial practices in white garment churches.*

The beautiful face of 39-year-old Folashade Esther Ogunseye turned into a frightening look nine years ago after she was involved in a fire incident that left her neck gummed to her shoulder. Then a delectable 30-year-old prophetess, she was said to have gone into trance for seven days sometime in July 2012 at the Celestial Church of Christ, Genesis Model Parish, Agbado, Ogun State, and a feast was thrown to celebrate the spiritual feat, despite her warning against such celebration.

However, a costly mistake ruined the celebration when a male member named Elijah suddenly sprayed Onalia perfume on members who swathed Ogunseye with lighted candles in their hands. The perfume instantly ignited fire from the lighted candles and Ogunseye and four other members who were celebrating with her, including an elder of the church, were set ablaze.

The victims were rushed to a nearby hospital from where they were transferred to Orile Agege General Hospital for treatment. However, while others recuperated quickly and were discharged, Ogunseye, who suffered severe burns that changed her once beautiful face, is living with the ugly scars till date.

"I had warned them not to celebrate the trance; that I didn't want any noise. Rather, I asked them to pray for me silently, but they refused.

Lamenting the incident, Ogunseye said: "It was not the first time I would be falling into a trance. The ill-fated one happened to be my fourth.

"Besides, I warned Elijah not to pour perfume on me, but he would not listen. See what has happened now."

She added: "Maybe, I prayed for somebody when I was in the spirit and the thing now bounced back on me during the celebration."

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Like Ogunseye, a thanksgiving held at a parish of the Celestial Church in Abule Iroko community near the Toll Gate end of Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway was brought to an abrupt end when one of the members sprayed perfume on a joyous woman, Mrs. Akinokun, who had lighted candles in her hands.

The woman, whose husband built the church, suffered severe burns that have since badly altered her once radiant face.

Other controversial practices

There have been reported cases of abuse of members and others at white garment churches where controversial practices such as brutal exorcism and sexual assault on female members are reportedly carried out by sexual perverts acting as church leaders.

One of such cases was that of Ayo Adun Parish of the CCC, off Ibari Road, Alagbado area of Lagos in the late 1990s. There the woman who founded the church, a prophetess, burnt the fingers of some children in a bid to make them confess to a crime and for her to exorcise the evil spirit she said was responsible for their bad behaviour.

The incident, which gained traction after it was reported on a popular programme on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) anchored by the duo of Frank Olye and Abike Dabiri, was widely condemned by the public. The prophetess was subsequently arrested and prosecuted, but she has since returned from prison to oversee the church.

In April this year, Miss Bola Ilesanmi rushed out from the downtown stream in the Alagbado area of Lagos State screaming and panting like one who had just seen a ghost. Her entry and exit from the river were brief. Earlier, she had been accompanied to the stream by a middle-aged man robed in a white garment with a loin that suggested he was a member of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. According to the graduate of Economics from a notable public university in Lagos, her sudden exit was a result of an attempt by the 'man of god' who escorted her to the stream to sexually molest her.

"I was almost raped by the church elder who took me to the stream," She said.

"It happened that he jumped on me while I was trying to undress, but I quickly pushed him away and stopped removing my dress, while he bolted through the other side of the stream when I screamed."

While Ilesanmi was lucky to escape the antics of the 'man of God', Dupe Makinde, a resident of Isaje area of Abeokuta, Ogun State, was not. The 30-year-old was allegedly raped in 2013 by one Pastor Sobowale during a 'spiritual bath'.

According to the police, the 46-year-old Sobowale, founder of Glory Church of Christ Aladura, Oke-Itoku, Abeokuta, Ogun State, had recommended the spiritual bath for the lady for deliverance from evil attack. But midway into the spiritual bath held in his church premises, Sobowale sneaked into the bathroom and raped the lady whose face was already covered with soap lather.

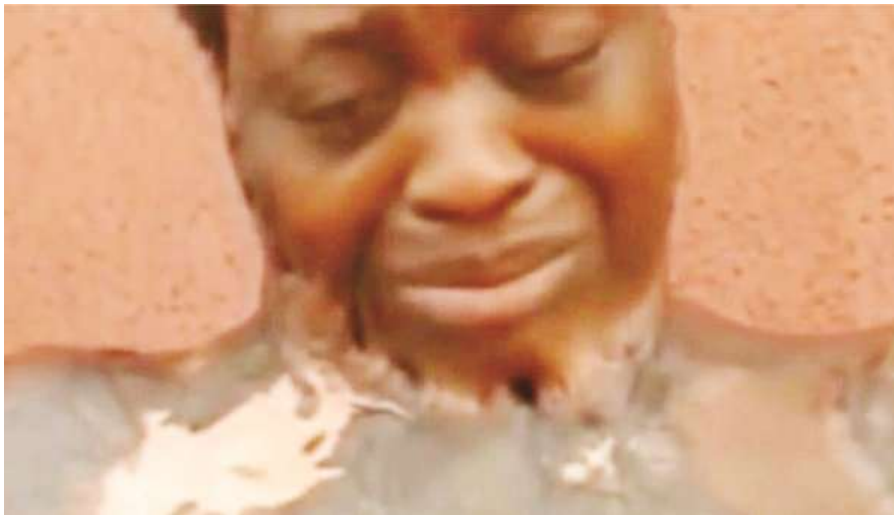
Sobowale was subsequently arrested and arraigned before a Magistrate's Court sitting in Isabo, Abeokuta, on September 2, 2013. The prosecuting counsel, Paul Etusi, told the court that Sobowale grabbed the complainant while she was in a bathroom and raped her.

"The complainant (Makinde) had already put the soap on her face as she began bathing when the pastor suddenly entered the bathroom, grabbed and raped her with soap on her face," Etusi said.

He added: "He (Sobowale) asked the woman to come to the church to take a spiritual bath for her deliverance. But while the complainant was having a bath, the accused barged into the bathroom, grabbed the woman and raped her.

"The accused has committed an offence contrary to section 357 and punishable under section 358 of criminal code of law of Ogun State, Nigeria, 2006."

Sobowale was remanded in prison on the order of the presiding Magistrate, Mr. A. Araba.



A similar exercise went awry and took a fatal dimension around 3pm on August 15, 2013, when a 13-year-old Toheeb Odusanya died in Ogun River during a spiritual bath conducted by Samson Bamgbose, the shepherd of a parish of Celestial Church of Christ at Alaapa village, Abeokuta.

Bamgbose was said to have taken some members of the church including the deceased minor to the nearby river for the spiritual bath without the boy's parents' consent. The boy allegedly drowned in the course of the exercise prompting his parents to report the incident to police.

One month later, the priest was arraigned before an Abeokuta Chief Magistrate Court, Isabo, Ogun State on one count of criminal negligence which caused the death of the teenager.

The police prosecutor, Paul Etusi, told the court that "Bamgbose took the little boy to the river without his parents' consent. He did not take the necessary precaution, and allowed the boy to drown," the prosecutor said.

The application of potassium bicarbonate, called 'green water' in Celestial Church's parlance, has also become a subject of controversy lately. It is believed that the water possesses the efficacy to make the sick vomit poisonous substances either taken or eaten in the dream. There are, however, reports linking the liquid substance to death when ingested by sick persons.

On May 19, 2018, a lady, Rahamat Audu, 25, was said to have died after she was given 'green water' by one Prophet Michael Dominic of the Celestial Church of Christ, Jesusegun Parish, Santana Bus Stop, Ajangbadi, Lagos.

Dominic allegedly administered the controversial water on the lady who had gone to the church in company with her boyfriend, Ifeanyi Enyinna, to seek spiritual healing. But she was said to have died after taking the concoction.

According to Eyinnaya, Audu had complained of persistent coughing and thereafter sought spiritual healing at the church. He said that Audu had felt better for a while after taking the water only for her condition to relapse moments later.

He said: "On Friday, on my way to the market, the younger brother of the prophet called and told me that my girlfriend was not feeling fine. "I met her in a very bad condition and I asked the prophet what the problem was. He told me that I needed to pay N1,500 for spiritual work and she would also need to be on drip.

"The prophet's wife is a nurse, and she told me that the cost of administering the drip would be N5,000.

"Before I knew it, she had defecated on herself. I took her to the bathroom to clean her up. On the way back from the bathroom, she fell and died."

Eyinnaya and Dominic were arrested and prosecuted by the police for criminal conspiracy leading to Audu's death.

Clerics, expert expressed divergent views

Some clergymen have linked the reported cases to some barbaric practices in white garment churches.

Founder of Love and Fire Ministry, Ogba, Lagos, Pastor Esau Ogbonna, explained that the white garment churches commonly practice Judaism which permits spiritual bathing.

Ogbonna said: "Spiritual bathing, burning of incense and candles is extraneous to Christianity as a religion. These practices are common with Judaism, which is an offshoot of Christianity.

"As Christians, we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ through whom we are reconciled with God and not through ritual practices. "Those who attend or patronise white garment churches do so for the purpose of receiving spiritual healing or deliverance for ailment or problems often associated with spiritual attacks.

"However, they are often subjected to sexual assault, extortion, manipulated visions, trance and forcible exorcism by misguided priests who use false indoctrination to hypnotise them."

In his reaction to the case of Ogunseye, the Shepherd-In- Charge of the church, Prophet Dele Ogundipe, noted that members of the church involved in the ill-fated celebration violated the rules and regulations of the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC).

The prophet said: "In the Celestial church, there is nothing like trance or going to the mountains for seven days.

"In our church, we don't do any trance celebration. We don't go to streams or the bush; we are not fetish and we don't do anything barbaric.

"I have always warned all church members to steer clear of anything that is not in the vision of the church.

"People have been saying it was a strange fire but there is nothing like that. It was the perfume that was poured on her that caught fire because of the lighted candle at the altar.

"This is a lesson to everybody that if they want to employ anybody, they should not employ an illiterate, because they would not know how to handle things," he added.

It will be recalled that the authorities of the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) had issued a statement blaming the death of a socialite Kayode Badru, who was burnt to death during a prayer session at CCC Imole Cathedral, Alagbado on abuse of perfume by members of the church.

A statement issued by the pastor of the church, Rev. Emmanuel Oschoffa, urged the pastor-in-council to prevent such abuse in the future.

Oschoffa explained that the spraying of perfume on worshippers was a strange practice imported into the church by some persons.

The statement reads in part: "Calvary greetings to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who has called us into His Glory.

"Due to the incessant abuse of spiritual perfumes within the church, His Eminence has found it imperative to state for record purposes and correction that henceforth, spiritual perfumes intended to be sprayed, sprinkled or poured with a lighted candle should be diluted with water.

"The spraying or pouring of undiluted spiritual perfumes in its volatile state with a lighted candle is an imported culture not originally part of the tenets of the Celestial Church of Christ. "The laid down usage of spiritual perfume within the spheres of a lighted candle by the pastor founder, Saint SBJ Oschoffa, is by mixing it with water. It is high time we retraced our steps for a greater Celestial Church of Christ.

"We are all advised to adhere to this directive. Any parish or member that goes against this directive will be solely responsible for the resultant effect.

"The pastor has also directed the pastor-in-council to come up with a policy document to curb alien practices that have been introduced into the tenets and doctrines of the church to safeguard the church's divine culture as instructed by the Spirit of God through the pastor founder," the statement added.

An expert, Adeolu Adeniran explained that the use of potassium bicarbonate otherwise called 'Green Water' has no spiritual healing potency.

Adeniran, a pharmacist, described the chemical substance as a medication or a mineral supplement used in treating low amounts of potassium in the blood.

"There is no spirituality in the so-called 'Green Water' made from potassium bicarbonate. The prayers the white garment priests claim they say on the water are just to deceive people they administer the water to.

"Human blood possesses a normal level of potassium which is necessary to help cells, heart, kidneys, nerves, and muscles function properly, and enough of the mineral substance can be got from eating a well-balanced diet.

"However, certain health conditions like severe diarrhea and vomiting can lower potassium levels in the human body, and this is dangerous. This can result in irregular heartbeats, cramps, and muscle weakness.

"In the case of green water, it is made from unprocessed or raw potassium bicarbonate and administered without measured dosage, which is dangerous for human consumption because the minerals prescribed in hospitals come in tablet forms that can be ingested orally or dissolved into water and sipped depending on doctors' prescription.

"Taking raw potassium bicarbonate in form of Green Water would result in allergic reactions such as severe dizziness and troubled breathing that could lead to death in some cases."

Senior Evangelist Elijah Ademola of CCC Miracle Centre Parish, Agege, however, explained that "nothing is wrong with administering green water on people suffering from spiritual attacks.

"The rule is that only a small quantity is required to heal people and it's usually administered with corn pudding or pap commonly called ogi, which must be a bit watery.

"However, the water is sometimes wrongly administered by priests who don't have the basic knowledge of the required quantity and an idea of the health condition of people they are giving the green water."

In his reaction, Prophet Ishmael Olaoluwa of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Agbo Igbala, Alimosho, Lagos said: "Spiritual bath in river or stream or bathroom is not wrong. There are biblical antecedents to the practice even in the days of Jesus Christ.

"However, some perverted priests are the ones indulging in using it to sexually assault or sleep with women.

"The public should note that for every human endeavour, there would always be unscrupulous persons. But that should not result in unnecessary generalisation or demonization of a denomination.

"There have been reports of some Pentecostal pastors involved in unpleasant or unholy practices, yet there are good priests among them, which means that we cannot use the indiscretions of a few to taint an entire denomination."

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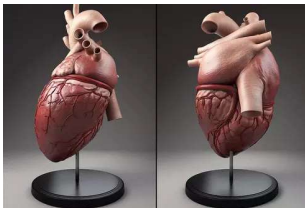
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