

" SCRATCHING WHERE IT ITCHES":THE RESPONSE OFTHE MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLES MINISTRIES' TO HUMAN SICKNESSES

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Introduction

Having and maintaining a good health is undoubtedly a perpetual desire of all and sundry. The occurrence of sicknesses in human beings, animals and probably other living organisms is a perennial reality. While in other living organisms, the concept of "sickness" may have a biological variance, in human beings and animals, there is no doubt that it connotes a distortion in the balance of health. That human sicknesses occur based on hereditary traits, improper health care, poor diet, infections with sexual diseases and through other means, is no longer in question. However, what remains a subject of interest is that which relates to human approaches in seeking healing or restoration of balance in health.

Over the years, different religious traditions and cultures have devised ways of responding to the reality of human sicknesses. For instance, in African Religions, certain persons are believed to have access to the herbal and mystical powers of the universe. Such persons are referred to as medicine-men. In African traditional societies, they are regarded as friends, physicians, psychiatrists and spiritual consultants. It is to such persons that sicknesses are referred. Geoffrey Parrinder was right as he noted that in African Traditional Religion, both diviners and herbalists have overlapping roles which make them serve as medicine men. The diviners diagnose the disease or discover the solution to a certain sickness. On the other hand, the herbalist is believed to possess the widest knowledge of the curative properties of herbs, plants and

roots.² From either of these or both, the individual in the African traditional context seeks healing from diverse ailments. However, major

_____ criticisms which have been raised against such traditional approaches

to sicknesses include a lack of measurements for the herbal intake and the mysticism in which some activities of the medicine-men are shrouded.

These notwithstanding the "medicine-man" medium in such traditional societies, has continued to provide respite for many persons in conditions of ill-health. Our concern here is not a discussion of the rightness or wrongness of the approach of the "medicine-man", rather, it is a vivid example of human attempts to seek healing in the event of sicknesses.

The first part of the title of this paper, "Scratching where it itches" is a verbal description of a familiar scenario in many parts of Africa and in particular, Nigeria. In the Nigerian context, it is common for someone whose back is itching to attempt to scratch or ask someone else, usually a friend or family member to help scratch his or her back. In the process, the one with the itching back gives guidance to the helper in navigating to the particular area where it itches. No relief is experienced until the helper scratches the exact spot where it itches. This contextual analogy gives a figurative perspective of the response of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) to the problem of human sickness. In her response to the issue of sickness, the MFM attempts to "scratch where it itches" with the intent of securing a lifelong healing.

In this paper, the issues of primary concern include among others, a brief history of the MFM, the beliefs of the MFM about human sicknesses, MFM's attempt to "scratch sicknesses where they itch" and some general reflections on the response of the MFM to human sickness.

A Brief History of Daniel Olukoya and His Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries

_____ Daniel Kolawole Olukoya, the founder and General Overseer of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry was born in 1956 to the family of Mr. and Mrs. Olukoya a retired police officer and petty trader respectively. He started his primary education at St. John's Christ Apostolic Church Primary School, Akure, in Ondo state, the hometown of his mother and later moved to Lagos to complete his primary education at the St. Jude's Primary School, Ebutte-Meta. Thereafter, he proceeded to Methodist Boys High School Lagos for his post-primary education. From there, he went to the University of Lagos, where he studied Micro-Biology, and came out with a first class honors degree.³

After his graduation, he taught as a Research Assistant in the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research (NIMR), Yaba, Lagos. From there, he proceeded to the University of Reading, United Kingdom, under the commonwealth scholarship, where he studied Molecular Genetics and obtained a PhD degree. He later returned to Nigeria in 1984 to continue his appointment with NIMR. He equally served as a lecturer and external examiner to some Nigerian Universities, the University of Lagos and the University of Benin. By 1993, Olukoya had risen to the post of the Head of Genetic Department. In 1998, due to ministerial pressure, he had to resign his appointment, having risen to the post of the Deputy Director General of the Institute. In his field of specialization, he had an indigenous laboratory of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology. He has many scientific publications to his credit.⁴

Olukoya claimed that he became converted in 1974 and began pasturing what he referred to as his first Church in 1981.⁵ Olukoya, who was a member of the Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C), left the Church in 1988, as a result of a conflict in the Church.

The MFM started in 1989 with a prayer group of seven already meeting in Olukoya's house in Yaba, Lagos shortly before that time. The prayer group then transformed into a deliverance ministry. In that same year, when the membership increased to twenty-four, the group moved to the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research (NIMR), and organized a School of prayers on Wednesdays and a Mid-week service held on Thursdays. Still in 1989, due to further space constraints, the group moved from NIMR to a bigger hall at 60, old Yaba Road, Adekunle, Ebutte Meta, Lagos State. Soon again, the number soared higher and the Church constituted a source of traffic hold-up for motorists in the old Yaba area where she was located. This development made the Church to relocate again to a plot of land at 13, Olasimbo Street, Onike, Yaba, in 1994. It was in this year, that the full Sunday services began, and the name Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries was taken as the name of the group.

The expansion of MFM continues to be a subject of interest, not only within Nigerian and African Pentecostalism, but, within global Pentecostalism at large. Since her founding in 1989, MFM has continued to record significant expansion not only within Nigeria, but Africa and other continents of the world. In Nigeria, MFM has her presence in nearly all the states, with an average of 15 to 20 or more branches per State. As at 2009, Lagos alone was said to have had over seventy branches of the Church.⁷ In Africa, MFM claims to have her presence in twenty countries, including Nigeria. These include Uganda, Kenya, Togo, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Namibia, Malawi, Liberia, Ghana, Ethiopia, Cote D'voire, Congo Brazzaville, Central Africa, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Benin Republic and Tanzania. Other branches of the Church are located in three other continents of the world-Europe, Asia and North America.

Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries is a full gospel ministry which is "devoted to the Revival of Apostolic Signs, Holy Ghost fireworks and the unlimited demonstration of the power of God to deliver

to the uttermost".¹⁰ The official logo of 'he group is that of a mountain burning with fire, and enclosed within two concentric circles. The mountain which symbolizes MFM is believed to be higher than any problems individuals may have, while the fire is symbolic of God's presence and also a representation of the power of God which when called upon, would consume Satan and his cohorts.¹¹

The group lays emphasis on absolute holiness within and outside of individuals. This is viewed as the greatest spiritual "insecticide" and requirement for making heaven. MFM is a do-it-yourself Gospel ministry, where individual members are trained to wage war and fight spiritual battles to dislodge the plots of enemies and that of Satan. The beliefs of the MFM are conspicuously printed in their magazines and other documents.

Likewise, their various websites glaringly contain these beliefs. They include the following:

1. The Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, the only basis for our faith and fellowship.
2. The one true God, eternal existence in three Persons. God The Father, God The Son and The Holy Spirit.
3. The fall and deprivation of mankind, necessitating redemption through the Blood of Jesus Christ.
4. The Salvation of Mankind is through the Redeeming Work of Jesus Christ and the Regenerative Work of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is seen as an act of separation from that which is evil.
5. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit-Acts 2:4, 10:44 and 19:1-6.
6. We believe in Restitution for past wrongs where possible.

7.The Ordinance of the Church, the Lord's Supper and Water Baptism.

8.The Church Universal,both visible and invisible.

9.The Ministry,divinely called and scripturally ordained as that approved of Almighty God.

10.Divine healing as provided by the Lord Jesus Christ.

11.The Rapture,ushering all believers into the Marriage Supper of the

Lamb, and the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ when He will physically land on the earth.

12. The Millennial Reign of Christ.

13. The Fire Judgment.¹²

Like many other Pentecostal groups, the MFM also believes in the issue of Baptism of the Holy Spirit (see statement 5). The scriptures used in support of this claim are Acts 2:4, 10:44 and 19:1-6. It is interesting to note that these are the same texts a lot of Pentecostals worldwide allude to in their biblical defense of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Similarly, the other beliefs in divine healing, judgement, etc, as indicated above are observable in almost all Pentecostal groups.¹⁴ The beliefs of the MFM enumerated above are largely derived by the group from the Bible.

It is significant to add to the discussion on the MFM that the group is essentially a deliverance ministry, hence her emphasis on deliverance. Deji Ayegboyin informed that in terms of functions, the New Pentecostal groups in Nigeria can be grouped under three main categories—the Holiness Movements, such as the Deeper Life Bible Church founded by William F. Kumuyi, the Prosperity Organisations, such as the Living Faith Winners' Church, founded by David Oyedepo and the Deliverances Ministries.¹⁵ The MFM in her functions and activities belongs to the third category. While it can be argued that the other categories also involve in deliverance activities, it is however arguable that none of these other groups practice the act of deliverance in an identical form or in a similar frequency as the MFM does. The group is popularly known as 'MFM', or 'Fire! Fire!! or 'Die by Fire!'. It is indeed a deliverance ministry par excellence.¹⁶

MFM's Perceptions on Human Sickness

In a previous work, this writer had argued that the worldview of the MFM is that which shares certain beliefs in Yoruba cosmology on evil.¹⁷ We noted above in earlier discussions that Olukoya,

the founder of the MFM, is a Yoruba from South-western Nigeria. 'reality of evil.'¹⁸ In Yoruba cosmology, Wande Abimbola asserted that there are eight agents of evil. In a collective sense, they are known as ajogun (warriors against human beings). These include: iku (death), arun (disease), ofo (loss), egba (paralysis), oran (trouble), epe (curse), ewon (bondage or imprisonment) and ese (accident or any other evil which affects human beings).¹⁹ It is these agents of evil that are largely perceived as being responsible for human predicaments. Furthermore, for the Yoruba, the cosmos is believed to be saturated with wicked spirits: demons, witches, wizards, sorcerers and other evil influences people wield against each other through heartless magicians and other such spiteful persons in the community. These malevolent spirits are believed among the Yoruba to be the origin or agents of evil in human lives. A notable evil which these "warriors" against human beings cause is illness.

Among the leadership and membership of the MFM, no one is in doubt on the fact that, human sickness, in whatever form, is regarded as an evil which must be combated. This is why in many of the prayer books written by the General Overseer of the group, words are not economised in clearly revealing that sicknesses are evil, hence series of repeated prayers must be said against sicknesses. For example, in *Prayer Rain*, which is the most popular prayer book of the MFM, prayers are said against various types of sicknesses. Thus, the perception of the MFM about human sickness is that which sees it as a malady which largely has its root in the activities of malevolent spirits. In latter discussions, the writer would allude to some prayers points on seeking healing in the event of an illness as itemized in the *Prayer Rain*.

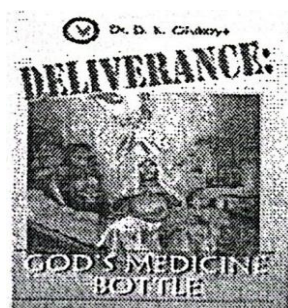
"Scratching Where it Itches"

In the 10th statement of beliefs of the MFM (listed above), the group clearly submits that she believes in "Divine healing as provided

by the Lord Jesus Christ". This belief not only presupposes the reality of human sicknesses, but in addition, presents an affirmation of the ability of God to heal the sick. However, the question of concern here is, how does the MFM hope to attain divine healing in the lives of sick persons? In her desire to realize divine healing, the MFM, seeks to get

to the roots of sicknesses through her practice of deliverance prayers. The response of the MFM to sicknesses is offering vigorous deliverance prayers; this is the group's attempt at scratching where it itches.

It is interesting to note some of the imageries on deliverance on many of the cover pages of the books written by Olukoya. The inner cover pages of many of Olukoya's books claim that the artistic cover illustrations on the books are drawn by Shade Olukoya, his wife. One of such book-cover illustrations that fit our discussion here is the book *a man in the lion's den surrounded by six lions*. On the *cover Deliverance: God's Medicine Bottle*, the cover illustration shows ground beside the man are the left over bones of people already devoured by the lions. Directly above the man is a hand holding a bottle opened with tablets of different shapes and sizes dropping over his head in the den (see figure below). This illustration at a glance, suggests that it is the medicine poured on the individual from above that has prevented the lions from devouring the individual. In the book, Olukoya argues that individual can be set free.



Therefore, it is to the issue of deliverance in the MFM that we must now turn our discussion. In short pungent expressions, Olukoya describes deliverance thus:

1. It is to close the doors opened to the enemy
2. It is to damage the works of Satan in your life
3. It is to undo heavy burdens
4. It is to break evil yokes
5. It is to possess one's possession
6. It is to escape from every satanic prison
7. It is to capture back what the enemy has stolen
8. It is to be victorious in your dreams at all times
9. It is to serve quit notice on every infirmity
10. It is to kill every satanic embargo
11. It is to break every evil covenant
12. It is to destroy the chains of darkness
13. It is to break curses and spells
14. It is to hunt down and destroy destructive habits
15. It is to send back evil arrows to the senders
16. It is finding your place in the market square of life

17. It is the destruction of satanic dreams
18. It is release from the altars of affliction
19. It is release from witchcraft cages
20. It is correct positioning
21. It is to break the chain of poverty.

In the ninth entry above, Olukoya defines deliverance as, "serving quit notice to infirmities" or sicknesses. The major way by which this is done in the MFM is through militant prayers which are offered in contention against perceived malevolent spirits which are believed to be responsible for the illness. In the book Prayer Rain, Olukoya in his discussion on "Destroying Disease Germs", identified three major steps in the prayer of deliverance. The first is scripture reading. Some of the passages listed include Exod. 15:26, Ps.30:2, Ps.55:18 and others. The second step is praise worship. This is a session in which the sick person or those praying for him go into a time of singing praises to God. And the third in the deliverance session is the actual list of prayer items for deliverance.²¹ Some of these deliverance prayer points include:

to die in Jesus name *destroyed every agent of blood disease in my blood.*

I hold the blood of Jesus against you spirit of.....

(Mention what is troubling you)

Every spirit hindering my perfect healing, fall down and die now in
Jesus name

Father, let every agent of sickness working against my health
disappear in Jesus name

I release my body from every curse of infirmity, in Jesus
name, etc.²²

The prayer points above as enumerated by Olukoya clearly locates the "roots" of these diseases in the activities of "agents", "spirit" and "curse", all of which are outside of the sick person. To argue in Africa that sicknesses or diseases cannot be caused by any of these "realities" would be an attempt to argue against the obvious. This is

because it is real in the experiences of many Africans. However, to also locate the cause of all sicknesses in the activities of agents, spirits, curses, enemies, etc., would be inadequate and also detrimental to the sick person who should be made to realize other maxims or possible causes of ill-health to which attention must be given.

Some Reflections

The warfare deliverance prayer approach to sicknesses by the MFM is a spiritual response to obliterating ailments in sick persons. It is an approach that subscribes to the spiritualization of human sicknesses. From her teachings and practices, there is perhaps no doubt that the MFM believes that through deliverance prayers for the sick, the group scratches exactly where it itches with the intent of realizing divine healing. The proof for this claim abounds in the lives of such claimants in the group. This has its own merits. It clearly expresses the ardent belief by the group that God has the "power to deliver to the uttermost" as it is often expressed in the MFM. In addition, depending on deliverance prayers for healing helps to build a spiritual identity by the group as a proof of her "deliverance commission". Furthermore, it goes without saying that relying on deliverance prayers for healing may not be financially demanding. Although it could be time consuming with repeated visits to the MFM programs and perhaps to some of the pastors, nevertheless, many of the members and those who patronize the group consider it more financially affordable in comparison to Western medicine.

However, there is a dilemma here. If we consider our earlier analogy of the scratching of "itching backs" in Africa, the one who has experienced this would agree that, there are times that the one helping to scratch may scratch at a wrong place. Also true is the fact that the itching at the back may have been caused by several factors, such as weather, cloth material, dryness, and so on. Therefore, the dilemma is that, while the spiritual approach of deliverance prayers can help

accentuate a realization of divine healing, yet, it is not all sicknesses that have their roots in spiritual causes.

How do we therefore reconcile this dilemma? The scripture would

help towards this end. In Lk. 5:27, Jesus said those who are whole do not need a doctor rather; it is the sick who needs a doctor(paraphrased).

In this context,the Pharisees and teachers of Law(who had high moral selfopinions) had accused Jesus of eating with the tax collectors and sinners (both groups that were considered as persons who disobey

God's commandments). In His response, Jesus emphasized the reality

that it is "the sick that needs a doctor". There is no doubt that the

response of Jesus on one hand could mean that He was the spiritual physician who has come to bring health to persons who are spiritually

sick.²³ However,the statement of Jesus apart from being a spiritual reality is also a literal reality;the sick needs a doctor. It is in this regard

that some Pentecostals express some skepticism. This writer cannot

but remember the story of some family friends who are MFM members.

The wife was pregnant and was slightly past her expected delivery

date.The doctors expressed the need for her to be operated upon, but

she chose to be prayed for in the Church, apparently, the baby died in

her and had to be evacuated in the hospital. The death of the baby

caused some damages in her womb and a decade now after the incident;

she has not been able to conceive again.

In the above sad narrative, can we blame God? Were the prayers not answered? This writer believes that the MFM and other Christians - must understand that God can work through diverse means (which do not negate the scriptures) to bring about healing. He could choose to heal through deliverance, he could choose to heal through Western Medicine, and He could choose to heal through a combination of both approaches. This position places on Christians the need for openness to God's dynamism in the matters of realizing divine healing.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the response of the MFM to the problem of human sickness. From the discussions, it is clear that the response of the MFM to sicknesses is her desire to realize healing in individuals is the "spiritual approach". This is an approach which spiritualizes human sickness and seeks to combat sickness through vigorous warfare prayers of deliverance. While it is true that as a deliverance group per excellence, some members attest to the potency of this approach in their lives. The dynamism of God in the matters of healing and the diverse nature of human sicknesses presupposes more than "a spiritual causality" or a spiritual approach alone. If ultimately it is believed that healing comes from God, then, He can choose to heal through diverse means. The openness of the MFM members and other Christians to this reality would help to further bring about healing in sick persons.

Endnotes

_____The Phrase Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries is used_____

synonymously in this work as the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church. This is because the MFM runs the ministry largely as a Church, but chooses to maintain the nomenclature ministries.

2Geoffery, Parrinder. *An African Traditional Religion* (London: Harper and Row Publishers: 1976), 103-105.

3John Olayiwola (ed.) "An exclusive interview with Dr. Daniel Olukoya", in *Maintaining the Fire on the Altar 1* (MFM Press, 2008), 17.

4Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, 'About the General Overseer', http://www.mountainoffire.org/about_go.html (Accessed on January 25, 2012).

5Daniel Olukoya, 'Dangers at the Gate of Death', in *Maintaining the Fire on the altar*, 18.

Deji Ayegboyin, "...But Deliver us from Evil..." *The Riposte of the MFM and Its Implications for the Reverse in Mission*, *ORITA Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. XXXVII (1&2), June & December (2005): 37.

'This list was obtained from the MFM Headquarters in Lagos, but also available on her website, 'MFM World branches', <http://www.mfm-ireland.org/fire/mfm-branches> (Accessed on January 30, 2012).

8This list was obtained from the Headquarters of the MFM, on January 29, 2008. The list is also available online, MFM Network Africa, <http://www.mountainoffire.org/network.html> (Accessed on January 30, 2012).

MFM Network Africa, <http://www.mountainoffire.org/network.html> (Accessed on January 30, 2012).

1 ° About MFM. http://www.mountainoffire.org/about_us.html (Accessed on January 28, 2012).

"Ayegboyin. "...But deliver us from evil..." *ORITA*, 37.

12Statements of Beliefs. http://www.mountainoffire.org/about_us.html (Accessed on January 30, 2012).

13See William and Robert P.Menzies Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience,Chad Owen (ed.), Perspectives on Spirit Baptism, Allan Anderson,Spreading Fires,Harold D.Hunter and Cecil M. Robeck,The Azusa Street Revival and its Legacy, and others.

14See Guy P.Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology.(Los Angeles, CA: Four Square Media, 2008),15.

5Ayegboyin, "...But Deliver us from Evil..." ORITA,36.

17 See.

18 The writer is a Yoruba man from Oyo State of Nigeria, the major home of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. The world view on evil is that which considers it a reality, not a fiction. This is largely based on the-day-to-day mysterious happenings among the Yoruba. For instance, it is a common thing to hear ~~about the~~ trading of destinies, where someone mysteriously steals, the 'wealthy destiny' of another.

University Press, 2004), xix. *Awon Oju Odu Merere Indilogun (Gbedan:*

2 ° MFM International Website " What is Deliverance? " <http://www.mountainoffire.org/index.php/spiritual-growth/deliverance/what-is-deliverance> (Accessed on February 21,2013).

21 D.K Olukoya, Prayer Rain (Lagos: MFM Publication, 1999),571-575.

22 Ibid,573-575.

23 See Bible Exposition Commentary on the New Testament, Word Search Version 9.