

Eto: A critique of the Aladura healing rituals in Nigeria in light of Jesus' healing miracles



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Eto [ritual] stands for the sacred preparations made by Aladura prophets and prophetesses for their clients for therapeutic purposes. The practice of *eto* shares striking similarities with Yoruba traditional methods of medication. There is, however, the argument that the Aladura healing rituals might as well be an imitation of Jesus' methods. Therefore, this article examined these rituals in light of Jesus' use of spittle for healing with a view to ascertaining if they are justified as a Christian practice. Applying the reader-oriented and descriptive methods, this article discovered that, apart from the affinities with Jesus' methods, some people are convinced that the Aladura healing process is divinely directed and efficacious. However, the research also found some healing practices among the Aladura which contradict Christian belief. This article concluded that, barring these abuses, the Aladura healing process is justified as a Christian practice.

Contribution: This research is a contribution in Christian ethics. It postulates that the healing rituals of the Aladura churches in Nigeria could be an acceptable Christian practice if the excesses are avoided.

Keywords: Aladura healing rituals; Yoruba religion and medicine; Jesus' healing miracles; saliva and therapy; Christianity in Nigeria.

Introduction

In Yoruba language, '*aladura*' means one who prays. 'Aladura Churches' refer to those churches well known for 'praying vibrantly and fervently' (Ademiluka 2022:5). The term is, however, used collectively for the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), the Church of the Lord (Aladura), Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), and the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) (Adegboyega 2007/2008:166; Johnson 2011:151; Komolafe 2016:39). The term originated from these churches' mission of 'identifying with the power and authority of prayer' (in Yoruba, *agbara ati ase adura*) which is depicted in the stance of their leaders that prayer power solves problems (Adegboyega 2007/2008:166). Hence, the Aladura churches are characterised by 'a strong faith in divine healing' so much that, in their early days, they rejected the use of both native and Western medicines for healing (Johnson 2011:151). In fact, the emergence of the Aladura Pentecostal movement was strongly associated with divine healing, having been formed during the 'global 1918 pandemic' of influenza (Fagunwa 2020:57) during which time the group rescued many lives with prayer and consecrated water (Alana 1995:2; Omotoye 1996–99:64). Apart from prayer, also dominant in the tenets of these churches, is their attention to healing deliverance from the powers of darkness (Turner 1967:33). Although they emerged in Yorubaland in Nigeria, Aladura churches have long spread to other parts of the world, particularly Britain, Europe and America (Oshun 2000:242). In the context of the Aladura, *eto* stands for rituals, that is, the 'sacred preparations' that are made by the prophets and prophetesses for their clients for healing purposes (Ogungbile 1997:105). Although this article focuses on the Aladura churches, it is important to note that healing rituals are not limited to them, but are common among other African Initiated Churches (AIC). Ntombana (2015:106) notes that, since their separation from the mainline churches, most of the AICs have embraced African rituals and have fully practised and 'incorporated them in their Christian faith'.

Most writers on rituals admit that 'a definition for ritual is illusive' (Dube 2019:480). Hence, Grimes (1995:5) states that the concept of ritual is, perhaps, 'the hardest religious phenomenon' to comprehend. Nonetheless, Platvoet's definition (1995:41) seems appropriate at least for the purpose of this article. For him, a ritual is an 'ordered sequence of stylized social behaviour ... performed at a special place and/or time, for a special occasion, and/or with a special message'. In this definition, the elements of special space, time and message mark ritual as 'something out of the ordinary' (Nel 2017:106). According to John (2014:2), ritual refers to 'those conscious ...

symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences'. The idea of 'sacred presences' in this definition signifies the extraordinary nature of ritual as mentioned above. Thus, as a bodily engagement, ritual brings the human body 'to the encounter with the transcendental realm' (John 2014:2). This corroborates the fact that rituals are a religious phenomenon (Platvoet 1995:41) and brings to the fore the significance of the human body 'in religious experience' (John 2014:2). The connection between ritual and the human body in turn depicts the relationship between ritual and healing. The latter relationship is shown, for example, in the belief in traditional African communities that sorcerers and wizards can attack 'a specific body part of [their] victim' (Dube 2019:484). It is for this reason that healing rituals are always 'closely related to rural religious practices' (John 2014:2).

The notion of ritual and healing as a part of religious practices has been applied to Jesus' healing miracles. While some will not agree that he was a magician, many scholars admit that Jesus' healings involved rituals (Craffert 2008:290). In fact, some hold that the Aladura healing methods are influenced by the healing miracles of Jesus (e.g. Alana 1994). Nonetheless, some aspects of the Aladura healing practices call for concern and, therefore, critical comparison with that of Jesus. For instance, before the advent of Christianity in Nigeria, if one came across some eggshells or white cloths wrapped around something at a road junction, there was no doubt as to their source: they were objects of sacrifice prescribed by a traditional medicine man or woman. Nowadays, such prescriptions might as well be from an Aladura prophet or prophetess. The level of syncretism is so high that many wonder if the practice of *eto* is Christianly at all.

Therefore, this article examines the Aladura healing rituals in light of the healings of Jesus in Mark 7:32–35, 8:22–25 and John 9:6–7 with a view to ascertaining if the preceding is justified as a Christian practice. In other words, is the practice of *eto* acceptable based on Jesus' own practice? Many scholars have written on various aspects of Aladura healing practices in Nigeria (e.g. Alana 1994; 1995; Moller 1968; Ogungbile 1997; Omotoye 1996–99; Omoyajowo 1982). While most of the others discuss the nature of these practices, Alana (1994) posits that the healings of Jesus must have had an impact on the Aladura methods. This article differs from all of these earlier works in that it attempts to query the Aladura healing rituals from the Christian perspective.

While acknowledging the source and form criticisms of Western scholars for the study of the selected healing miracles of Jesus, this article adopts the 'reader response' approach which appraises the impact of the text on the reader. In other words, the reader response criticism envisages what readers 'become upon correct reading of the text' (Cranford 2002:159). It applies the descriptive method for the Aladura healing rituals. The descriptive method, as used here, simply means to 'describe a phenomenon and its characteristics' (Nassaji 2015:130). This work begins with the description of the Aladura healing practices in Nigeria from

where it proceeds to the examination of Jesus' healing miracles involving rituals. Finally, this article appraises the practice of *eto* from the Christian perspective.

Aladura healing rituals

The Aladura healing practices do not exist in a vacuum, but stem from the African (particularly the Yoruba) worldview which confines issues of 'healing to the mystical or spiritual dimensions' (Oshun 2000:246). In this regard, Moller (1968:114) describes the C&S, for example, as 'an expression of the interaction between Christianity and traditional Yoruba religious beliefs'. As Ogungbile (1997:105) rightly observes, rituals take a significant aspect of the life of the Yoruba. Among this ethnic group, rituals of personal and communal significance are performed on all occasions. In the traditional African setting, rituals are necessitated by the perpetual fear of the power of witches and evil spirits as well as the anxiety about what the future holds. Among the Yoruba, for instance, witches are particularly regarded as the archenemies of man, inflicting diseases and all manner of misfortunes on people (Ruel 1965:16). Missionary Christianity did not attach any importance to these forces, repudiating them as superstitions and advising reliance on faith (Ntombana 2015:105–108). Emerging out of the African milieu, the Aladura churches, however, take the problem of evil forces as a reality (Johnson 2011:154). This would explain why rituals take 'the major functional and elaborate aspect of healing' in Aladura Christianity (Ogungbile 1997:105). In the worldview of the Aladura, well-being connotes all-round wholeness. This means that well-being refers not only to physical, but also spiritual and psychological health. Hence, diseases and misfortunes are believed to have physical, spiritual and metaphysical causes. Thus, Aladura Christians are highly conscious of evil spiritual forces conceived as inhabiting 'human beings [as well as] some natural phenomena' (Ogungbile 1997:99). To the Aladura, these evil forces can only be overcome by certain ritual preparations. Sacred preparations (*eto*) have to be made not only to forestall the machinations of the unseen evil forces, but also to solicit support from the benevolent ones (Omoyajowo 1982:170).

Hence, the Aladura rituals are addressed to healing in the sense as described above; that is, towards well-being in the physical, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. The process of healing usually begins with the 'spiritual diagnosis' conducted by the prophets or prophetesses for their clients (Ray 2000:186). Individuals who have any kind of problems, irrespective of their status and religion, consult these prophets and prophetesses 'for inquiry into the cause of [their] problems' and to obtain prescriptions of rituals necessary to subvert the machinations of the spiritual forces behind the problems (Ogungbile 1997:100). As Idowu (1973:46) puts it, every person who goes to the Aladura mediums receives 'a diagnosis of his trouble as well as the necessary prescription of what to do'. When a client thus consults an Aladura healer, the procedure usually involves the latter offering 'an extemporaneous prayer. He may go into momentary ecstasy and come back with a divine message

for the client' (Ogungbile 1997:106). That the prophet's message is divine, signifies the claim that the Aladura healing methods, including the objects prescribed, are directed by the 'divine power of the Holy Spirit' (Ogungbile 1997:109; cf. Adegboyega 2007/2008:167). Thus, in the process of prayer, the prophet discloses the cause of the illness or whatever the problem may be, and then prescribes the required rituals.

Ogungbile (1997:107) notes that these sacred preparations (*eto*, as they are commonly called) make the 'sense and essence of, and give meanings to, the whole operations of Aladura healing ministry'. They are expressed through the use of concrete materials, symbols, actions and words; thus, the employment of *eto* 'exposes the attitude of traditional Yoruba worship which is not done in abstraction' (Ogungbile 1997:105). The list of the objects used in the preparation of *eto* cannot be exhausted. It includes items such as candles, sponges, soap, water, olive oil, palm fronds, cloths, handbells, staff, fruits, salt, honey, wine, crucifix images, animal parts, et cetera. (Ogungbile 1997:107). Non-concrete ingredients include prayer, fasting, the reading and recitation of psalms, alms giving, and similar actions (Ogungbile 1997:107).

Aladura healing rituals involve various forms and methods. The commonest method is 'hydro-therapy, which is the use of consecrated water for healing purposes' (Ogungbile 1997:99). *Omi iye* [lit. water that gives life] is very popular among the Aladura churches. To obtain *omi iye* from the prophet or prophetess, members often carry water in bottles and gallons to the church or crusade grounds to be consecrated (Ademiluka 2007:104). Apart from giving consecrated water to be drunk by clients, Aladura prophets and prophetesses often prescribe ritual baths with soap and sponges in flowing streams. The holy bath, as it is commonly called, is well known with the CCC and the C&S Church. With consecrated sponge and soap, the client goes to bathe in a flowing river, saying certain prayers or incantations prescribed along with the bath. At the end of the bath, the client 'throws the sponge into the river and goes away without looking back' (Ademiluka 2012:37). Perhaps, because of the 'constant use of streams and water for therapeutic purposes', most Aladura churches, especially the CCC, are built near streams (Ogungbile 1997:107). In the absence of streams and rivers, especially in the cities, some Aladura churches sink wells in their church yards and consecrate the water for therapeutic and other purposes. For instance, Pastor Simeon Ajayi, President of Christ Apostolic Mission in Lagos, referred to a well inside his church which 'cures every ailment' (Ademiluka 2007:104).

Effecting healing through fasting, prayer and spoken words is what Olayiwola (1989:40) categorises as metaphysical therapy. In the Aladura practice of *eto*, prayer is rarely done alone, but usually with the accompaniment of certain objects and actions. The commonest of the actions is the reading and/or recitation of the Old Testament psalms. Generally, members of African Independent Churches believe that 'virtually all illnesses are curable with psalms' (Ademiluka

1995:224). In his booklet, *Effective uses of psalms*, Tarnner (2007:15) asserts that every single psalm has healing potentials (cf. Adamo 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, etc.). Psalms are often used in conjunction with some methods of African medication such as reading them 'into water, oil or a concoction to be bathed, rubbed on the body or eaten' (Ademiluka 1995:221). For example, according to Ogunfuye (n.d.), Psalm 143 can be used as follows to cure fever:

Put some water in a pot; then put some young palm leaves in the water. Add some olive oil to the water. Then read Psalm 143 into the water seven times ... for three days, and let the patient bathe with the consecrated water. (p. 49)

Bolarinwa (n.d.) prescribes Psalm 3 for curing toothache. The patient should read the psalm into a cup of warm water three times and rinse his or her mouth until the tumbler is emptied. 'Repeat the process from time to time until the pain is over' (Bolarinwa n.d.:9). It is similarly claimed that Psalm 119:17-32 can be recited for the healing of various eye problems, while Psalms 9 and 147 can be used to cure impotence and snakebite (Ademiluka 1995:224). Psalms are used in the form of amulets, that is, they are written on parchments and put in a consecrated bag to be placed under the pillow or worn on the body (Ademiluka 2006:59).

Aladura rituals have respect for certain sacred places and specific times. Adewale (1988:106) opines that, as in Yoruba religion, Aladura churches have some places dedicated for ritual performance, which include road junctions, riverbanks, groves and mountains. Also reminiscent of the operations of Yoruba herbalists is the Aladura 'symbolic use of the term *agbala*', which refers to the backyard where the sacred preparations are made by the prophets or prophetesses for their clients (Ogungbile 1997:107). Most often, to ensure their efficacy, it is demanded that rituals 'are performed at the correct place and time' (Ogungbile 1997:107). This is seen, for instance, in the Aladura prescription of alms. Sometimes, to effect healing, clients are directed to give alms in money, clothes, fruits, salt, et cetera, to physically disabled people at marketplaces or road junctions at specific times of the day or night (Ogungbile 1997:105). The idea of performing rituals at specific times most likely derives from the traditional Yoruba belief that evil forces usually operate at certain hours of the day and night. Hence, Aladura prophets or prophetesses usually recommend the morning hours of, for example, 3:00 and 6:00, and evening hours at 21:00 for their clients to combat witches and sorcerers with prayers, which usually have ritual accompaniments (Ogungbile 1997:107). Pregnant women are often instructed to fetch water for rituals in early morning hours with the carrier 'not talking to anyone while on this mission' (Ogungbile 1997:107). Some healing processes require performing certain actions a specific number of times or using a specific number of an item, for example, ringing a bell or shouting 'Hallelujah!' or 'Amen!' three or seven times, or lighting seven or 14 candles, bathing with seven sponges, reciting a specific psalm three or seven times, or fasting for 3 or 7 days. Ogungbile (1997:107) opines that the 'most common numbers are three, seven and multiples of seven'.

As the methods are not employed exclusively of one another, the significance of places and time in Aladura healing rituals can be demonstrated in Ogunfuye's (n.d.) prescription of Psalm 109 against evil forces. If a person perceives that an enemy is behind his or her problem, he or she should go to an open field in the night or by one o'clock in the afternoon with three candles. The person should light the candles, 'one in the north, one in the east, and one in the west'. The person would then stand in the middle of the candles and read Psalm 109, and pray against the enemy mentioning the enemy's name and that of his or her mother (p. 66).

In this section it has been demonstrated that healing in the Aladura churches is preponderantly influenced by the African perception of health and healing practices, which are never done in abstraction, but with the accompaniment of rituals. Oshun (1983:50) attests that the Aladura healing practitioners 'refute the assumption' that their methods are based on those of African diviners and herbalists. To them, these rituals have 'biblical legitimization', as they conform to biblical practices. As earlier mentioned, Alana (1994) asserts that the Aladura healings have been influenced by Jesus' methods. Hence, in the section below this article examines Jesus' use of spittle in his healing miracles with a view to assessing the extent to which the Aladura healing practices can be justified by Jesus' methods.

Rituals in Jesus' healing miracles

The healings of Jesus should first be examined in the Graeco-Roman context of the 1st century. In that society, there existed two categories of healers, namely the so-called professional healers 'who healed people through therapeutic regimens of self-analysis, confession, and forming correct beliefs about the world', and the folk healers who were the ordinary people who knew the folk wisdom and utilised it for healing (Pilch 2007:20). Jesus' role is commonly understood as that of a folk healer 'who acted perfectly in accord with folk traditions of his Middle Eastern culture' (Pilch 2007:22). Botha (1996:8) states that healing by charismatic individuals such as Jesus was well known in Jewish circles in the 1st century – the skill which was traditionally believed to have been inherited from King Solomon. Ben Dosa who lived about a generation after Jesus was a rabbi reputed to have 'performed cures similar to those of Jesus' (Botha 1996:8). In the Jewish society of the 1st century, physicians were apparently common (Mk 2:17; 5:26; Lk 4:23; Col 4:14), but their reputation generally was not too good; hence people 'often sought healing elsewhere' (Botha 1996:7). Possibly attesting to this view is the story of a woman whose condition became worse despite the protracted treatment she had received from physicians (Mk 5:26). Moreover, due to their poor economic status, the commoners had little access to professional physicians, and had to rely on traditional healers who were ready to 'use their hands and traditional remedies like spittle and risk failure' (Botha 1996:8). Thus, with his healing miracles Jesus shared 'affinities with the spiritual trends of his time' (Vermees 1973:58). He belonged to the group of 'charismatic Jewish wonder-working holy men'

with the power to cast away unclean spirits and heal a variety of health issues (Botha 1996:8).

Some of the healing miracles of Jesus involve rituals, particularly the narratives in Mark 7:32–35, 8:23–25 and John 9:6–7. In Mark 7:32–35 a man who was deaf and dumb was brought to Jesus to be healed. Taking the man aside from the crowd, Jesus 'put his fingers into his ears, and spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, Jesus sighed, and said to him, "Eph'phatha," that is, "Be opened"'.¹ And the man began to hear and to speak clearly. Similarly, in Mark 8:22–25 some people brought a blind man to Jesus and implored him to touch the man. Leading the blind man out of the village, Jesus spat 'on his eyes and laid his hands upon him' and asked if the man could see anything. The blind man replied that he saw men, but they looked like trees walking. Jesus laid his hands upon the blind man's eyes again, and he began to see clearly. To heal another blind man (Jn 9:6, 7), Jesus 'spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay'. Thereafter, Jesus told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The blind man did and came back with his sight restored.

The one ritual element that is common to the three healing narratives is the use of spittle. Scholars have severally pointed out that the two stories in Mark are omitted in Matthew and Luke, both of whom used Mark as a source. Two possible reasons are adduced for this omission, namely the use of spittle and the healing in stages in Mark 8:22–25 (Cunningham 1990:15; Riistan 2015:261). Meier (1994:691) opines that Matthew and Luke omitted these stories because they are strange and would constitute an embarrassment to their readers. The authors were 'uncomfortable with Jesus using spittle' for healing, because that would associate the gospel of Jesus with magical practices (Cunningham 1990:15). For, in the cultural environment of the 1st century, 'the use of saliva was indeed open to magical interpretation' (Riistan 2015:264). The healing of the blind man in Mark 8 is the only instance where healing by Jesus does not happen immediately, and he has to spit violently in a man's face. For Matthew and Luke, 'Jesus resembles a magician' (Riistan 2015:264) in this story, and they would want to avoid such a presentation of Jesus the Messiah (Cunningham 1990:15). Supporting the idea of the strangeness of the blind man's healing in Mark 8, Meier (1994:693) states that 'having Jesus spit in a person's face does not seem to fit any stream of Christology in the early church'. According to Capps (2008:59), the action of spitting and the two-stage recovery do not present Jesus as relying on supernatural powers, but as one who 'worked within the laws of nature as any other physician'.

Many scholars argue that the two-stage healing in Mark 8:22–25 is the only occurrence in the Gospels. In antiquity healing in stages was quite rare, as miracle stories 'usually stress the suddenness of the miracle' (Keener 1993:156). Therefore, this narrative most likely represents an acted parable to illustrate that Jesus' disciples 'have begun to see

1. All quoted Bible references are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

but [still] remain blind' (Keener 1993:156). Iverson (n.d.) opines that the two-stage healing is an 'implicit commentary on the disciples' spiritual blindness'. They are confused not only about the mission and identity of Jesus, but also about their own role in that mission. Hence, Mark here uses blindness as a parable to illustrate the disciples' lack of understanding. Jesus' conviction that his disciples did not clearly understand his mission is shown in his question to them in the scene immediately preceding the two-stage healing: 'Do you not yet perceive or understand?' (Mk 8:17). Riistan (2015:268) explains that both before and after this narrative, the pertinent question is about 'the disciples' ability to comprehend' the meaning of discipleship. Hitherto they have been spiritually blind; the two-stage healing symbolically representing their gradual understanding.

Thus, according to these interpreters, Matthew and Luke omitted the healing miracles of Jesus under reference because of the oddity of the miracles arising from the use of spittle for healing and gradual healing. For the Aladura healers, however, such a consideration is irrelevant. For them, the stories are contained in the Bible and therefore can be emulated as Jesus' healing practice.

D'Atri (n.d.:6) notes that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' healing miracles indicate that they involved a collection of actions, including command, touch, 'magical techniques' and combinations of all of these. The author clarifies that 'magic' is used here to describe 'healings that seem to employ established techniques', such as the use of spittle and Jesus' use of 'foreign words' such as *talitha cum* (Mk 5:41) and *ephphatha* (7:34). The previous section demonstrates that the Aladura healing rituals also involve the employment of spoken words, touch and the combination of these elements with a variety of objects. In view of the affinities with the practices of Jesus, Alana (1994:17–25) concludes that the Aladura healing rituals must have been influenced by Jesus' methods. Here the emphasis will be on Jesus' use of spittle – that being the element that makes the healings most conspicuously ritualistic and reminiscent of the Aladura practices. Among the Jews, spitting certainly had a negative impact on the person spat on. In the Old Testament a person spat on by another who had certain diseases became unclean and had to be ritually purified (Lv 15:8; Nm 12:14). In the New Testament, the treatment of Jesus at crucifixion indicates that spitting was an 'expression of scorn' (Riistan 2015:262; cf. Mt 26:67; Mk 14:65). However, as will be seen presently, at the same time 'saliva was known to have a therapeutic value' (Riistan 2015:262). The passages being treated narrate how Jesus used spittle for healing. Mark 7:32–35 simply states that he 'spat and touched' the tongue of the deaf and dumb man; in Mark 8:22–25 Jesus spits directly on the blind man's eyes, while in John 9:6–7 he makes clay of his spittle, anoints the blind man's eyes with the mixture and tells him to go and wash at Siloam. In Mark 7:32–35 it is not clear where Jesus actually expectorated. It is possible that he simply spat on the ground and that action had nothing to do with the touching of the tongue, that is, played no role in the healing process

(Lenski 1946:310). This position, however, may not be correct in view of Jesus' action in the healing narrative in Mark 8:22–25 where he applies saliva directly on the blind man's eyes. Similarly, in John 9:6–7 Jesus applies the mud that he has made with his saliva to the blind man's eyes. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that in the healing of the deaf and dumb man, Jesus might have spat 'directly on the man's tongue or ... on his own hand which he then touched to the man's tongue' (Cunningham 1990:18).

It is generally believed among interpreters that Jesus' healing techniques 'were common to magicians' in the culture within which he operated (Cunningham 1990:17). Smith (1993) states that apart from prayer, magicians 'might resort to physical means' such as touching the affected part of the body or taking hold of the patient:

Fluid could help to make the contact closer, [and] the readiest form of fluid was spittle, and both spittle and the act of spitting were commonly believed to have magical powers. [Hence,] we find Jesus, like other magicians, smearing spittle on his patients or using a salve made with spittle. (p. 128)

Some scholars attest to the fact that in Jesus' days, spittle was commonly believed to have a therapeutic value (Taylor 1966:352) and that 'saliva was beneficial for diseased eye' (Guthrie 1994:1045). Similar to Jesus' method, the Roman emperor, Vespasian, is reported to have healed a blind man by putting his saliva on the blind man's eyes (Remus 1992:860). Hence, for some Jesus was simply a magician, and this is claimed to be buttressed by the fact that he was 'accused of performing miracles by the power of Beelzebub'² (Dube 2018:6; cf. Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22).

However, some other scholars argue that, even if Jesus used methods similar to those of heathen healers, 'Jesus was no magician; his power came from His own person and not from magic' (Cunningham 1990:17). Commenting on the healing of the deaf and dumb man, Cunningham (1990:18) admitted that saliva 'was commonly used as a healing agent in natural remedies and in magic', but insisted that here Jesus does not intend it to be of any therapeutic value. Rather than being magical, Jesus' actions in the miracle are determined by the nature of the patient's condition. According to Cunningham (1990), given that the man was deaf and dumb, Jesus makes gestures that will enable him to know where his healing is going to come from:

[T]he two gestures of placing his fingers in the man's ears and of touching the man's tongue were signs to the man that it was these two areas that Jesus intended to heal ... [Therefore,] the saliva was not an instrument of healing but symbolised the healing power that would come upon this man's tongue from Jesus himself. (pp. 17–18)

Cole (1994:963) similarly believes that Jesus' actions were intended to instill faith in the man that his healing was done by God and not magic. Thus, deafness and dumbness were imitated respectively by fingering the man's ears and

² Possibly a corruption of Baal-zebul, the local deity of Ekron (2 Ki 1:2–3). In early Judaism, Baal-zebul was 'appropriately applied' to Satan (Keener 1993:80).

touching his tongue. Looking up to heaven and sighing were signs of prayer comprehensible by a deaf and dumb person. Keener (1993:154) seems to buttress the argument that Jesus' actions in this miracle are mere signs to aid healing when he states that 'on spittle, Jesus may be acting out "healing," "speech" and "from God" to let the man know what he is about to do'. In the same vein, Cole (1994:964) interprets Jesus' spitting on the blind man's eyes in Mark 8:22–25 and his laying of hands on him as signs that a blind man can feel. Therefore, 'there is nothing magical about spittle [*but*] only an outward aid to faith and understanding'. Writing on Jesus' use of the mixture of saliva and clay in John 9:6–7, Guthrie (1994:1045) concludes that, even though Jesus applied currently used methods of healing, 'he did not attach any superstitious value to them'.

Thus, according to these interpreters, Jesus did not intend the use of spittle and mud to be of any therapeutic value. It was only a sign to aid the patients' understanding, and not part of the healing process. While the modern readers have no means of knowing Jesus' intention, it is not likely that Jesus' audiences understood his actions in that way. Rather, the accusation that he was under the influence of Beelzebub would suggest that Jesus was looked upon as a magician or one of the folk healers. In the section below, this article appraises the extent to which the Aladura healing rituals can be justified by Jesus' methods.

Appraising the practice of *eto* from the Christian perspective

In the first place, Jesus' application of spittle is reminiscent of some African healing techniques, and this can encourage the Aladura healing approach. As in Jesus' society, in Africa there is the belief that saliva has some healing potency – the belief which provides an 'appropriate setting for the understanding and application' of the miracles under reference (Cunningham 1990:21). For instance, Jesus' spitting on the eyes of the blind man is very much at home in the use of saliva as 'potent liquid and base for some kind of medicines and charms' (Ebhomienlen & Ogah 2013:4). This is seen in traditional medication whereby medicine men chew certain herbs such as 'bitter kola and alligator pepper and spew the juicy product on ... an ailing part of the body' to heal it (Ebhomienlen & Ogah 2013:4). Saliva is also used by African medicine men 'to symbolise authority and power' (Cunningham 1990:21). That is why sometimes the healer mixes his saliva with certain preparations to be eaten by a patient or used for incision. As a seal of authority, 'after an incantation the healer commonly expectorates' on the affected part of the patient's body (Cunningham 1990:21). Therefore, apparently finding legitimate support for their healing rituals in Jesus' miracles, Aladura prophets and prophetesses combine African techniques with prayer and the reading of the Old Testament psalms for healing. Jesus' method of healing the blind man in John 9:6–7, for example, will lend support to the holy baths of the C&S and the CCC earlier mentioned.

Nonetheless, as already discussed in this article, the Aladura healing practices reflect 'African context of traditional medicine' more than they reflect the methods of Jesus (Ademiluka 1995:224). Adegboyega (2007/2008:166) opines that 'only a trivial differences' exist between the Aladura methods and those of the traditional Yoruba medicine man. 'All the known [*traditional*] materials, procedures, and techniques relative to healing ... are brought into full play'. Aladura healers would, however, argue that their use of African materials and techniques does not render their practices unchristianly. After all, as seen in the previous section, Jesus' use of spittle was in accord with practices common among his contemporary traditional healers. Above all, Aladura prophets and prophetesses would profess that their rituals are justified by their efficacy. Idowu (1973:46) reports that the Aladura prophets claim that their methods are 'efficacious for every eventuality'. Ogungbile (1997:109) seems to support this claim, finding his premise in the fact that 'despite our medical developments ... people still troop in large numbers' to the Aladura churches for healing. Adamo (2012:23) asserts that the efficacy of the use of the psalms with African practices 'is never doubted' among members of these churches. There are claims of testimonies to the effect that 'people of diverse diseases receive their healings' through the Aladura healing methods (Ogungbile 1997:107). According to Adegboyega (2007/2008):

The application of the *Aladura* [*processes*] had eventually yielded some success and good report. Some had claimed excellent healing and had displayed every sign of excellent health, which has been recorded. Such healing had been in areas such as mental illness of various kinds, including those resulting from bodily effects. (p. 167)

However, Ademiluka (2012:44) plausibly suggests the fact that the Aladura ritual healings work does not validate them as a Christian practice, because 'without combination with Bible reading or the name of Jesus they may still work'. After all, the herbalist's preparations have their efficacy without any divine involvement. Therefore, rather than the claim of efficacy, the validity of the Aladura healings as a Christian practice would reside more in the claim that the healing process, including the actions and materials used, is divinely guided. As expressed by Adegboyega (2007/2008:167), they are 'claimed to be from the Holy Spirit' (cf. Ogungbile 1997:101).

It is noteworthy, however, that there are healing practices of the Aladura that tend towards the bizarre, so much that the practitioners have been accused of 'patronizing the herbalist for medicine' and occult power (Adegboyega 2007/2008:167). As already mentioned during this study, there are practices like making sacrifices at road junctions at midnight, being naked while reading certain psalms, and mentioning the name of a perceived enemy and that of his or her mother. Also significant in this regard is the preparation of psalms texts into amulets in the form of African charms. Going beyond Jesus' simple application of spittle, these practices 'reflect the techniques of African magic and sorcery' (Ademiluka 2012:44).

Conclusion

Aladura healing practices exhibit some observable characteristics that seem to align them more with African traditional religion and medicine than with Christianity. The Aladura prophets or prophetesses, however, claim that their healing rituals have biblical legitimation. Such legitimation they would find in Jesus' healing miracles in which he applies spittle for healing. Apart from their affinities with Jesus' methods, many would anchor the validity of these rituals in their efficacy with the supporting testimonies. There is also the claim that their healing process is divinely guided in that the Holy Spirit reveals to the healers the solutions to their clients' problems. In view of their similarities with the methods of Jesus and the claim of divine involvement, which need not be doubted, at least in many cases, Aladura practice of *eto* is justified as a Christian practice. This conclusion, however, is not applicable to the excesses tending towards sorcery. Rather than aligning with Jesus' practices, these excesses tend to blur the demarcation between Christianity and African magic just as they have impacted negatively on the image of the church in Nigeria, particularly the Aladura group.

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