Nigerians Stand Against Occult Healer Masquerading as Evangelist

Leaders in the African nation say T.B. Joshua pretends to be a Pentecostal preacher and is duping Christians

A Nigerian occult healer who has attracted followers from at least 10 countries—including South Africa and the United States—is a false prophet sent to deceive Christians, according to church leaders in Nigeria. But the controversy surrounding this mysterious man has created a rift in the African country's huge Pentecostal movement and raised questions among secular observers about the legitimacy of divine healing.

The dispute revolves around T.B. Joshua, 38, and The Synagogue Church of All Nations, which Joshua founded in Lagos. Although Joshua quotes the Bible frequently and peppers his televised sermons with references to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he routinely employs unorthodox methods of spiritual healing that resemble shamanism.

He often scribbles "supernatural writing" and gives the messages to his followers, instructing them to post the pieces of paper on walls in order to obtain healing. He claims that miracles accompanied his birth in 1963, and he told a Nigerian newspaper in December that he has used only one of the seven special powers given to him by God.

Joshua sometimes calls down invisible fire from heaven on people's body parts to cleanse them from sexual sin. And he told one reporter that he is a vegetarian because it is

impossible for anyone who eats fish to cast out demons.

“He is an occultist,” said Anselm Madubuko, pastor of the 12,000-member Revival Assembly Church in Lagos. “Joshua claims he was born again in his mother’s womb. It is tragic that Spirit-filled people are led astray by him.”

Another Pentecostal leader, Chris Okotie, went further to call Joshua’s organization an anti-Christ cult. “Joshua has a mandate to take over the spiritual leadership of Nigeria,” Okotie told The New Treasure, a weekly Nigerian newspaper.

That warning comes too late for many American, European and South African charismatics, who have been circulating testimonials of healings videotaped in Joshua’s meetings. When word spread that Joshua could heal AIDS and cure infertility, some Christians apparently bought his claims without investigating his doctrinal views.

A South African charismatic, Bennie Rothmann, hosts a Web site to promote Joshua’s popularity in his country. L&B Video Conversion Center in Los Angeles distributes Joshua’s videotapes in the United States. Charisma’s calls to the company were not returned.

“It is puzzling why Americans are drawn to him,” said Ayo Oritsejafor, pastor of the 26,000-member Word of Life Bible Church in Warri. “Where and when did he get saved? Who is his pastor? That is what I would like to know.”

Joshua has told reporters that he hopes his miracle meetings will make Nigeria like Mecca or Jerusalem. “The signs and wonders that God is doing here can turn Nigeria into the

greatest Holy Land or tourist center in the world," he said last year.

But Joshua's critics said his miracles are either faked or performed by occult powers, and they claim that people who allegedly were healed later got sick again.

Joseph Thompson, a Nigerian minister who is a staff pastor at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., dismisses Joshua as a charlatan. Thompson is especially incensed that South African and American Christians would support Joshua even after church leaders in Nigeria have unequivocally denounced him as a fraud.

"This shows such a huge lack of discernment in the body of Christ," Thompson told Charisma. "They don't realize that there are people in Africa who use occult powers to do miracles."

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), headed by Bishop Mike Okonkwo, labeled Joshua an imposter in a statement released three months ago and published in Lifeway, a new magazine for Nigeria's Christians.

"As far back as 1996, PFN has unequivocally alerted unsuspecting Christians and the general public on the dangers of infiltrators who have modernized cultism by injecting the name of Jesus Christ into their largely unbiblical practices," Okonkwo said. "It is necessary that we reiterate this position that the Synagogue [Church of All Nations] falls into this category."

The controversy grew more intense in November when Chris

Okotie, a former Nigerian pop star who now pastors the Household of God Church in Lagos, accused prominent Nigerian evangelist Chris Oyakhilome of secretly joining Joshua's movement. The furor erupted after a newspaper published a photograph of Oyakhilome and Joshua praying for a man in a wheelchair.

After warning Oyakhilome in a letter that he must renounce all ties to Joshua, Okotie appeared on national television and announced that Oyakhilome had sold out to the devil by accepting money from Joshua to buy TV airtime. Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria now fear that the ugly public scandal will tarnish their reputation in a country that struggles with corruption in all levels of society.

Some of the world's largest Pentecostal movements are based in Nigeria. In December, an estimated 3 million Christians gathered at a campground outside Lagos for the annual Holy Ghost Congress, sponsored by the fast-growing Redeemed Christian Church of God.

J. Lee Grady in Lagos, Nigeria