Samuel I. Britt


In *The Children of Salvation: Ritual Struggle in a Liberian Aladura Church*, Samuel Irving Britt, Gordon Poteat Professor of Asian Studies and Religion at Furman University, comprehensively details the history, practices, and beliefs of St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord. This Liberian branch of the Nigerian Church of the Lord Aladura (from the Yoruba ‘praying ones, or owner of prayer’ [3], identifying it as prophetic) is located in Paynesville City, a town twelve miles outside of Monrovia where Britt taught classes at the local Baptist seminary and conducted fieldwork for his doctoral dissertation between August 1983 and February 1985. Drawing extensively on his doctoral research for this monograph, Britt contends that at the core of the beliefs and practices of St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord in the early 1980s was the theological trope of ‘ritual struggle’, which he defines as ‘the strategies of ritual action, ethical behavior, and predispositions toward the world consistently expressed in Aladura churches’ (3).

Developing this theme over six chapters, Britt shows how ritual struggle reflected Liberians’ anxieties about the social and economic changes wrought in Paynesville City by migration, increased industrialism, and competition between skilled and unskilled laborers for limited jobs. These societal forces overturned the established order, permitting an incursion of malevolent external forces (e.g., *jina*, witches, Night-[wo]man and Mami Wata) and negative internal forces (e.g., self-doubt, hatred, jealousy, greed, and self-interest). Living the Aladura way meant waging a war against these forces by praying the psalms, fasting, observing menstrual customs, and participating in holy baths within sacred spaces. This ritualized discipline of body, mind, and emotions allowed Aladura adherents to gain virtue and realize their self-identity—an identity that eschewed ethnic divisions, aggressive individualism, and the occult powers that dominated the world around them. Thus ritual struggle not only allowed Aladura followers to influence the trajectory of their eternal destiny, it also allowed them to imagine an ideal community.

A second but equally important theme of Britt’s monograph is the central role of the prophet in Aladura churches in Liberia. The prophet’s virtuous leadership ensured the efficacy of ritual struggle because he was the person who mediated spiritual power in the Aladura community. He had to consecrate holy materials (e.g., the rod, cross, candles, incense and holy water) and
holy places (e.g., the Faith Home and Mount Olive/Mount Tabborrar, a sacred enclosure where a thirteen-day celebration took place every year). During the healing process in the Faith Home, his dreams and visions were important tools for diagnosing spiritual ailments and treatment for patients, and holy baths required his prayers. The prophet was a spiritual technician without whom nothing would function properly.

Britt’s book highlights the limitations of the ethnographic present for making historical arguments. Britt conducted interviews with fifty Aladura ministers, twenty of whom belonged to St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord. These interviews, along with Britt’s observations from his own participation in the spiritual life of the Aladura churches in Paynesville City between 1983 and 1985, form the evidentiary mainstay of his argument. Indeed, outside of contemporary scholarship, Britt only cites textual evidence at two points in the book (93, 150). Because his source base primarily covers the early 1980s and he employs an ethnographic perspective that prioritizes first-person data, Britt’s sweeping claim that ritual struggle is crucial to understanding how the Aladura community has made sense of the ‘events and trends of the last twenty years’ in Liberia is overstated (ix). The First and Second Liberian Civil War would have made it difficult for Britt to return to Liberia to conduct more interviews with ministers at St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord after he completed his doctorate in 1992, so his evidence for ritual struggle in Liberian Aladura communities following the early 1980s is limited to diasporic communities in Washington DC and Hyattsville, Maryland. The relationship between ritual struggle and the Liberian civil wars still needs to be documented.

Britt could have improved his monograph by placing his discussion of St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord in the larger social, political, and economic context of mid-to-late twentieth-century Liberia. This would have helped clarify why Aladura adherents believed the Aladura way provided their only hope for restoration. For instance, the stories in chapter 3 about how St. Peter’s ministers became prophets suggest that secular society had failed them at some point (81-82), but this line of questioning remains undeveloped. Although rooting his analysis of St. Peter’s United Church of the Lord in the Liberian context would have required Britt to expand his evidentiary base to include Liberian governmental records and other secular materials, perhaps a fruitless task given the paucity of documents that survived the civil wars, this reader thinks it would have been worth the effort.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, The Children of Salvation: Ritual Struggle in a Liberian Aladura Church remains a detailed and informative
ethnography of Aladura beliefs and practices in Liberia during the early years of Samuel Doe's regime.

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