

**THE ADVENT OF THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH NIGERIA AND THE EULOGISTORY OF  
PASTOR E. E. OKON, 1931 – 2010**

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**Abstract**

The history of The Apostolic Church Nigeria remains one of the most significant narratives in the development of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria and West Africa. Yet, despite the remarkable spread and influence of the church, historical distortions, institutional amnesia, and conflicting interpretations have continued to obscure the actual origins and growth of the movement. Central to these controversies is the place of the late Pastor Eyo Edet Okon, whose role in the establishment and expansion of the church in Eastern Nigeria has often been either exaggerated or inadequately represented. While some traditions erroneously regard him as the founder of the church in Nigeria, others diminish his strategic contributions to the growth of Apostolic Christianity in the region. This study examines the advent of The Apostolic Church in Nigeria and reconstructs the historical significance of Pastor E. E. Okon within that development. The paper adopts the framework of eulogistory — a historiographical approach that critically studies the celebration, memorialization, and heroic reconstruction of historical figures without abandoning empirical historical methods. Through this lens, the paper interrogates how memory, reverence, oral traditions, institutional narratives, and regional loyalties have shaped the image of Pastor Okon in Apostolic historiography. Using socio-historical and interdisciplinary methodologies, the study relies on oral interviews, church records, anniversary publications, memoirs, and secondary historical materials to reconstruct the emergence of The Apostolic Church in Nigeria from its formal affiliation with the British Apostolic movement in 1931. The paper argues that although Pastor E. E. Okon was not the founder of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, his evangelical zeal, pioneering efforts, linguistic mediation, and leadership in Eastern Nigeria made him one of the most influential indigenous architects of the church's expansion. The work concludes that preserving accurate church history is essential for preventing institutional confusion and for understanding the broader development of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

**Introduction**

The history of The Apostolic Church Nigeria has increasingly become a subject of debate among scholars, clergy, and members of the church due to conflicting interpretations regarding its origins and historical evolution. The controversy became more visible during the church's "centenary celebration" held in 2018, barely thirty-seven years after the celebration of its Golden Jubilee in 1981 and only seventeen years after its seventieth anniversary in 2001. Such chronological inconsistencies generated questions concerning the actual origin date of the church in Nigeria and exposed the problem of institutional historical consciousness within modern Pentecostal movements.<sup>1</sup>

The confusion surrounding the church's history has also affected the memory and interpretation of notable personalities associated with its expansion, particularly the late Pastor Eyo Edet Okon. In many quarters, Pastor Okon's role in pioneering the church in Eastern Nigeria has been elevated to the extent that some mistakenly identify him as the founder of The Apostolic

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<sup>1</sup> An address of Felicitation presented by the National President of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, Pastor S. E. Iqwe, at the "controversial" centenary celebration of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, 9th – 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2018. See Daily Sun Newspaper of July 12, 2018, P.13.

Church in Nigeria. Conversely, other narratives attempt to minimize his contributions despite the overwhelming evidence of his strategic importance in the spread of Apostolic Christianity across present-day Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and parts of Cameroon.

It is within this context that this study introduces the concept of eulogistory. Eulogistory may be defined as the historical reconstruction and critical interpretation of individuals, institutions, or movements through the lens of praise, collective memory, reverence, and commemorative narratives. A eulogistory is thus a narrative form that blends tribute and praise with historical record – telling the life story of a person not merely as chronology, but as memory, legacy, and moral inheritance. Unlike mere hagiography, which often abandons critical historical analysis in favor of glorification, eulogistory seeks to balance admiration with historical objectivity. It studies how societies remember, celebrate, mythologize, and institutionalize the legacies of prominent figures while simultaneously interrogating the factual foundations of such memories.<sup>2</sup>

Eulogistory therefore combines eulogy and history to examine the intersection between memory, identity, heroism, oral tradition, and documented historical reality. In African religious historiography, eulogistory becomes particularly relevant because many church histories are preserved through oral testimonies, anniversary speeches, funeral tributes, revival narratives, and institutional commemorations that often blend fact with reverence. The study of Pastor E. E. Okon through the framework of eulogistory allows historians to critically examine why his image occupies such a monumental place within the collective consciousness of The Apostolic Church in Eastern Nigeria.

Historically, The Apostolic Church was formally established in Nigeria in 1931 following the affiliation between the Nigerian Faith Tabernacle movement and the British Apostolic Church movement headquartered in Bradford, England. The revival activities of Evangelist Joseph Ayo Babalola, assisted by leaders such as Pastor Odubanjo, provided the spiritual atmosphere that facilitated the introduction of Apostolic Pentecostalism into Nigeria. Prior to this affiliation, Babalola had already gained prominence through healing campaigns, prophetic activities, and revival meetings in Western Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid spread of the movement attracted opposition from colonial authorities and orthodox missionary churches because of its emphasis on divine healing, prophecy, fasting, public revivalism, and denunciation of traditional religious practices. In response to persecution and in search of institutional support, the Faith Tabernacle movement sought affiliation with the British Apostolic Church. This relationship culminated in the arrival of British missionaries in 1931 and the formal adoption of the name "The Apostolic Church."<sup>4</sup>

From Western Nigeria, the movement expanded into Eastern Nigeria through Creek Town, Calabar, and surrounding communities. It was in this eastern expansion that Pastor E. E. Okon emerged as a major indigenous figure. As one of the earliest converts and local collaborators of the Apostolic missionaries, he functioned not only as an evangelist and interpreter but also as a cultural intermediary who helped the missionaries navigate the social and geographical terrain of the region. His commitment to the Apostolic faith, his missionary journeys across riverine communities, and his eventual rise to the office of Apostle made him one of the most revered personalities in the history of the church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The word, "Eulogistory" is the coinage and conception of the author, Dr. Thomas Thomas. Thomas is a poet and historian, thus, he coined the word from "eulogy" (a poem or piece of writing that praises somebody), and "history" (the study or writing about past events).

<sup>3</sup> David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*. (Benin City: Justice Jeco Press and Publishers Ltd., 2005), P.26

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, P.27

<sup>5</sup> *Brief History of The Apostolic Church Nigeria* (published in the 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday anniversary booklet of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, 2001)

This paper therefore seeks to reconstruct the advent of The Apostolic Church in Nigeria while critically examining the eulogistical place of Pastor E. E. Okon in the development of the church. By separating historical facts from exaggerated claims without diminishing his genuine contributions, the study contributes to the preservation of accurate Pentecostal historiography in Nigeria.

### **The Advent of The Apostolic Church in Nigeria**

The emergence of The Apostolic Church Nigeria in Nigeria cannot be separated from the wider Pentecostal revival movements that swept across different parts of the world during the early twentieth century. In Nigeria, the rise of indigenous evangelical and healing movements created fertile ground for the acceptance of Apostolic Pentecostalism. One of the most important of these movements was the Faith Tabernacle movement, which later collaborated with the British Apostolic Church missionaries to establish what became formally known as The Apostolic Church Nigeria in 1931.<sup>6</sup>

Before the arrival of the Apostolic missionaries from Britain, revival activities had already begun in Western Nigeria under the leadership of Joseph Ayo Babalola. Babalola, who originally had an Anglican background, became widely known for his healing campaigns, prophetic ministry, fasting, and revival preaching. His Pentecostal disposition eventually brought him into conflict with orthodox missionary Christianity, leading to his excommunication from the Anglican Church alongside Elder Olayemi. Through the influence of Pastor Odubanjo, Babalola later joined the Faith Tabernacle movement where his ministry expanded significantly.<sup>7</sup>

The revival meetings organized by Babalola at Ilesha and surrounding communities attracted unprecedented crowds. Reports of miraculous healings, prophetic utterances, and even the raising of a dead child transformed the movement into a major religious phenomenon in colonial Nigeria. His denunciation of witchcraft, sorcery, idolatry, and indigenous religious practices resonated with many converts who viewed the movement as spiritually powerful and transformative.<sup>8</sup>

However, the activities of the revivalists soon attracted opposition from colonial authorities and established missionary denominations. The movement's emphasis on divine healing encouraged many adherents to abandon hospitals and orthodox medical treatment. Public revival meetings, all-night vigils, and attacks on indigenous spiritual practices were interpreted by the colonial administration as threats to public order. Consequently, leaders of the Faith Tabernacle movement, including Babalola, were arrested at different times.<sup>9</sup>

The persecution experienced by the movement created the need for international affiliation and institutional protection. The leaders of the Nigerian Faith Tabernacle therefore initiated correspondence with the Apostolic Church in Bradford, Great Britain. Their objective was not merely spiritual partnership but also protection under a recognized missionary structure within the British colonial system.<sup>10</sup>

The response from Britain led to the arrival of Apostolic missionaries such as Pastor D. P. Williams, Pastor A. Turnbull, Pastor W. J. Williams, Evangelist I. J. Vaughan, and Pastor D. C. Hopkins. Following extensive doctrinal interactions with the Nigerian revivalists, the Faith Tabernacle leaders accepted the doctrines, ecclesiastical structure, and name of The Apostolic Church. This affiliation formally established The Apostolic Church in Nigeria on September 23, 1931.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Adamo, Reading and Interpreting the Bible, P.26

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., P.26

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., P.27

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., P.27

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., P.27

<sup>11</sup> Brief History of The Apostolic Church Nigeria (published in the 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday anniversary booklet of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, 2001)

The adoption of the Apostolic name represented more than a mere institutional change. It marked the beginning of a distinct Pentecostal identity characterized by prophecy, healing, fasting, speaking in tongues, strict holiness, vibrant worship, and aggressive evangelism. Although disagreements later emerged between some Nigerian leaders and the British missionaries, leading eventually to the formation of the Christ Apostolic Church, the Apostolic movement had already secured a permanent place in Nigerian Christianity.

The spread of the church from Western Nigeria into Eastern Nigeria constituted another major phase in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Evangelist Babalola, accompanied by Apostolic missionaries, extended revival campaigns into Calabar, Creek Town, Uyo, Oron, and other communities of present-day Akwa Ibom, Cross River, and Rivers States. It was within this eastern expansion that the late Pastor E. E. Okon emerged as a foundational indigenous figure.

### **The Advent of The Apostolic Church in Creek Town and Eastern Nigeria**

The introduction of The Apostolic Church Nigeria into Eastern Nigeria occurred at a time when Christianity itself was still consolidating its influence within many Efik and Ibibio communities. Creek Town, one of the earliest centers of missionary Christianity in Eastern Nigeria, had already experienced the presence of the Presbyterian Church since 1846. The Methodist Church also later established a foothold in the region. Nevertheless, indigenous religious practices and secret societies such as Ekpe continued to exercise considerable social and spiritual influence.<sup>12</sup>

Pastor Eyo Edet Okon was born into this transitional religious environment. His parents were originally members of the Presbyterian Church before his father later joined the Methodist Church. Thus, young Eyo Okon was exposed to Christian teachings from childhood, although the wider society around him still reflected strong indigenous religious traditions.<sup>13</sup>

The Apostolic Church arrived in Creek Town around 1933 through the missionary activities of Evangelist Babalola, Pastor Eyo Nkune Okpo Ene, Pastor C. E. O. Mfon, and European missionaries such as Evangelist I. J. Vaughan. The church was first planted in the house of E. N. Okpo Ene near the residence of Okon's family. Pastor Okon's father became one of the earliest supporters of the movement and eventually donated land for the construction of a permanent church building.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of the Apostolic movement represented a major religious shift within the region. Unlike earlier missionary denominations that were perceived as relatively conservative in worship style, The Apostolic Church introduced emotionally expressive worship practices such as clapping, drumming, dancing, prophecy, fasting, healing sessions, and public revivalism. These practices appeared unusual to many locals who consequently nicknamed the church "Mmia Ubok" meaning "the hand-clapping church."<sup>15</sup>

The church also distinguished itself through its uncompromising attitude toward indigenous spiritual practices. Whereas earlier missionary denominations were sometimes accused of tolerating certain traditional practices for strategic reasons, The Apostolic Church adopted a stricter posture against participation in secret societies, ancestral worship, and ritual practices. Members were discouraged from associating with traditional cult institutions, and converts were encouraged to abandon charms, fetishes, and ritual objects. Despite this radical spiritual orientation, the early Apostolic Church depended heavily on structures previously established by older missionary

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<sup>12</sup> The author learnt this from some indigenes of Creek Town when he lived at Etubom Bassey Ita Bassey's house, Otung, and later at Ukwak-ke-ubok's house at Asiaha Obufa, Adak Uko during his studentship at Government Secondary School, Creek Town, Odukpani LGA, between 1993 and 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Tunde Adebisi, et al., *The Humble Apostle* (Lagos: Eagle Express Media Services, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Elder E. T. Udom, 86 years, Elder, The Apostolic Church Nigeria, Otung Otong Assembly, Obotim Ikot Ekong District, Etinan Field. 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2024. (Elder Udom was ordained Elder of The Apostolic Church Nigeria in Ikot Esu, Creek Town in 1961).

churches. Schools attended by early Apostolic converts were largely founded by Presbyterian and Methodist missions. The Efik Bible and hymn books used by the church were products of earlier missionary linguistic efforts, especially those of the Scottish Presbyterian mission. Consequently, although the Apostolic Church contributed immensely to spiritual revivalism, it benefited from educational and linguistic foundations already laid by earlier denominations.<sup>16</sup>

The expansion of the church across Eastern Nigeria and into parts of Cameroon occurred rapidly due to aggressive evangelism, healing campaigns, and indigenous participation. The movement appealed strongly to ordinary people because it addressed fears relating to witchcraft, sickness, spiritual oppression, and social insecurity. Through prayer camps, prophecy, and itinerant evangelism, the church established assemblies across riverine and rural communities.<sup>17</sup>

The success of this expansion was due not only to foreign missionaries but also to indigenous workers who understood local languages, geography, and customs. Among these local pioneers, Pastor E. E. Okon emerged as one of the most important figures.

### **The Eulogistry of Pastor E. E. Okon**

The place of Pastor Eyo Edet Okon in the history of The Apostolic Church Nigeria occupies a unique position within the church's collective memory. His life represents one of the clearest examples of how religious leadership, oral tradition, institutional remembrance, and regional identity can combine to produce an enduring eulogistical legacy.

Pastor Okon was among the first group of indigenous converts baptized into The Apostolic Church in Creek Town in 1933. From the beginning, he demonstrated unusual commitment to the Apostolic faith. Although he had promising prospects as a teacher, he abandoned that career path in order to dedicate himself fully to evangelism and church work. This decision initially generated opposition within his family, especially from his elder brother who considered formal education and teaching more prestigious and economically secure.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Pastor Okon's commitment to ministry soon became impossible to ignore. His enthusiasm, discipline, and willingness to endure hardship convinced many people that he possessed an extraordinary spiritual calling. His role extended beyond preaching. Because European missionaries were unfamiliar with the terrain, language, and culture of Eastern Nigeria, Pastor Okon functioned simultaneously as interpreter, guide, cultural mediator, and evangelist.

He traveled extensively through difficult riverine environments, accompanying missionaries across creeks and villages to establish new assemblies. Such journeys required courage, endurance, and sacrifice, especially during a period when transportation infrastructure in the region was extremely poor. Through these missionary expeditions, Pastor Okon became deeply associated with the expansion of Apostolic Christianity throughout Eastern Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

His rise within the church hierarchy was rapid. In 1935, only two years after the church was planted in Creek Town, he was ordained as an Elder and Evangelist. By December 1936, he entered full-time ministry within the Calabar Area of the church. In 1952, he attained the office of Apostle, one of the highest ecclesiastical positions within the Apostolic tradition. His ordination was conducted by Pastor D. C. Hopkins, the resident European superintendent of the Calabar Area.<sup>20</sup>

The influence of Pastor Okon extended far beyond administrative leadership. He became a symbol of indigenous Apostolic identity within Eastern Nigeria. His humility, spirituality, missionary

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Adebisi, et al., 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Gleaned from the funeral souvenir programme of Pastor E. E. Okon, 2010.

sacrifices, and longevity in service transformed him into an iconic figure whose image became inseparable from the church's history in the region.

It is precisely this monumental influence that generated historical misconceptions regarding his status. Because his ministry coincided with the rapid growth of the church in Eastern Nigeria, many people gradually came to associate the entire regional history of The Apostolic Church with his personality. Over time, oral narratives and commemorative traditions elevated him to near-foundational status, with some adherents mistakenly referring to him as the founder of the church in Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

From a eulogistical perspective, such exaggerations are not unusual. Communities often magnify the contributions of highly respected leaders in order to create symbols of identity, continuity, and spiritual legitimacy. In African Christianity particularly, funeral tributes, anniversary publications, oral testimonies, and revival narratives frequently reconstruct religious figures in heroic dimensions. Pastor Okon's memory therefore evolved not simply through factual historical records but also through emotional reverence and institutional commemoration.

Nevertheless, historical accuracy demands a distinction between pioneering influence and actual founding status. The Apostolic Church was formally introduced into Nigeria through the affiliation between the Nigerian Faith Tabernacle movement and the British Apostolic Church in 1931. Pastor Okon did not found the church. Rather, he emerged as one of its greatest indigenous pioneers and architects in Eastern Nigeria.

Even so, the eulogistical significance of Pastor Okon remains immense. His ministry shaped the identity of the church across generations. His leadership inspired countless indigenous ministers. His role in evangelism strengthened the localization of Pentecostal Christianity in Eastern Nigeria. Most importantly, his life embodied the fusion of indigenous agency and foreign missionary Christianity that characterized the broader history of African Pentecostalism.

## **Conclusion**

The history of The Apostolic Church Nigeria demonstrates the dynamic interaction between indigenous revivalism, foreign missionary collaboration, and African Pentecostal expansion during the colonial period. The church officially emerged in Nigeria in 1931 following the affiliation between the Faith Tabernacle movement and the British Apostolic Church. From Western Nigeria, the movement spread rapidly into Eastern Nigeria where it established strong roots in Creek Town, Calabar, Uyo, Oron, and surrounding communities.

The church introduced new forms of Pentecostal spirituality characterized by prophecy, healing, fasting, expressive worship, and aggressive evangelism. These practices distinguished it from earlier missionary denominations and contributed significantly to its rapid expansion throughout Nigeria and parts of Cameroon.

Within this broader historical movement, Pastor E. E. Okon occupies an important eulogistical position. Although he was not the founder of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, his pioneering contributions to the spread and consolidation of the church in Eastern Nigeria made him one of the most influential indigenous leaders in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism. His missionary sacrifices, leadership, humility, and spiritual dedication transformed him into a legendary figure within the collective memory of the church.

The study has shown that eulogistry provides an important framework for understanding how religious communities construct, preserve, and celebrate historical memory. Through

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Elder E. T. Udom, 86 years, Elder, The Apostolic Church Nigeria, Otung Otong Assembly, Obotim Ikot Ekong District, Etinan Field. 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2024. (Elder Udom was ordained Elder of The Apostolic Church Nigeria in Ikot Esu, Creek Town in 1961).

eulogistry, historians are able to examine both the factual contributions of historical personalities and the symbolic meanings later attached to them by collective memory and institutional reverence.

Ultimately, preserving accurate historical records remains essential for the future of the church. Without proper documentation, institutional memory becomes vulnerable to distortion, exaggeration, and collective amnesia. A careful reconstruction of the history of The Apostolic Church Nigeria therefore not only preserves the integrity of the past but also strengthens the identity and continuity of the church for future generations.

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