

The warning from Uganda

By Edwin Madunagu

ward transportation to paradise — where there are no thieves, no bankers and no revenue collectors — and prepare to go to heaven. The point of departure to heaven was to be the Church.

The members did as they were told. They assembled on the night of December 31, sang, danced, prayed, and then lay down and slept. They were shocked to wake up the following morning in the church for they had expected to resume their life in heaven. The pastor, after rebuking them for their lack of faith, then offered an explanation: the Lord had sent him a message, probably a letter, that the world would no longer end on December 31, 1999, but a year later, on December 31, 2000. The congregation then demanded to know how they would survive for one year, since they had parted with all they had. That was where their problems — and those of their pastor and Church Elders — started. As the agitation for the return of their properties gained in strength, the Church leaders — the direct beneficiaries of the dispossession of the congregation — planned a series of actions aimed at liquidating the deceived members of the church in its four main branches.

After holding a Council of Elders' Meeting, the church leadership announced a Night of Deliverance for March 17, 2000, and instructed all church members, especially those who had donated their earthly belongings to God, to attend. The leaders then went to town and bought large quantities of explosives and incendiary chemicals and several boxes of match. As the congregation assembled for the Night of Deliverance, the leaders opened a massive and sustained attack. They thereafter dis-

appeared after ensuring that all escape routes from the hall had been sealed. Similar attacks took place about the same time in all the four branches of the church. At first it was thought that this was a case of mass suicide, but with further investigation it became clear that what had happened was premeditated mass murder. As at the time writing, more than 1,000 corpses had been recovered from various locations belonging to the church and its leaders.

It was after this tragedy that the following essential facts about the doom pastor and his church started to emerge through public testimonies: he was a psychiatric patient who, on conditional discharge from government psychiatric hospital, failed to report for check-up; reports about his bizarre activities and mode of preaching were regularly filed with both the police and the government right up to the tragedy; several top people in society, including police, judges, politicians and businessmen and women had belonged to the church which is now openly referred to as a religious cult.

My question is: if in this tragic story Uganda had been substituted with Nigeria and Kanungu had been substituted with a remote community in Nigeria, how many people in Nigeria would have received the story with greater doubt than that with which they had received the Ugandan story? Maybe children and imbeciles. The truth is that every community in Nigeria today harbours doom pastors and bizarre religious cults. In every city, in every community in Nigeria there are religious cults with names more grotesque than those of the Ugandan movement. The names and practices are mainly corruptions of the orthodox Christian names and practices. They feed

on the poverty, ignorance and misery of people: Their response to mass poverty is to ask poor people to donate the little they have to the church, fast and engage in grotesque prayer sessions, and watch out for witches in their families and neighbourhoods; on ignorance, they are told that knowledge comes through visions induced by stupor; and on loneliness and misery, the doom pastors assure their victims that it is sufficient to be friendly with Jesus Christ. If luck were to be removed from human affairs, and if effect were to follow cause logically and in proportion, then the Ugandatype tragedy would, and ought to, be happening here in Nigeria everyday.

The buildings housing the doom churches range in design from ultra-modern to ancient and primitive; the sizes range from palatial to ghetto-like. Their names are more bizarre than Uganda's Church for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, with at least one of words "faith," "ministry," "revival," "restoration," "deliverance," "crusade," and "triumphant" appearing in the name of each of them. They all claim to be Christian with Jesus Christ as focus of worship. They all use the Holy Bible and employ heavy music, singing and dancing in worship. Each has a leader and founder called Pastor or Evangelist, or both. Most of the leaders are men. When a man is pastor, a woman — invariably his wife or concubine — is deputy pastor; where the leader is a woman, a man, called the Elder, poses as an adviser; but he is the de-facto controller.

The membership of the churches is heavily dominated by women and children; there are normally two languages of worship: English and vernacular, each heavily corrupted; the churches operate continuously, with some worshippers permanently or

semi-permanently residing there. The doom churches operate as healing centres with the leader as chief healer: not healer of sickness alone, but of witchcraft, evil spirits, poverty, misery, misfortune, functional illiteracy, etc. The patients pay for each act of "healing" through their noses. Each has visioners and prophets; the organisation is simply the leader on the one hand, and the followers, on the other; the leader is the chief executive, secretary, accountant, treasurer, cashier and security officer; each gives centrality of place to donations and dues — indeed the most visible church activity is donation or offering. In order to retain their captive members in stupefying ignorance, the pastors ban politics, public affairs and scientific discourse from their churches. Although each of the churches has politicians as leading members, they all denounce politics as evil; several of them are built near primary and secondary schools which the church members regularly invade to preach. The authorities and some teachers in many schools have turned the schools into doom churches, with the pupils and students as forced members.

As I was reflecting on the scourge of doom churches and their long-term effect on society, my mind drifted again to the *Sharia*. It occurred to me that in their different ways, both represent a huge historical degeneration, a throw-back in history, a significant backward slide in humanity's march from savagery, superstition, primitivity and alienation. When we add to this state of affairs the continuing social degeneration in the spheres of economy, politics and morality, we begin to appreciate the real state of our society at the beginning of the millennium. It is not enough to bemoan the tragedy in Uganda. You should rather look closely at your own community and wait patiently for the Nigerian versions of the tragedy, or try to prevent them.

LET us go over the story to see if such a tragedy can happen, or may indeed be happening, in Nigeria. About a decade ago, in Kanungu, a semi-rural community in Uganda, a middle-aged priest in one of Christianity's orthodox churches, was defrocked for claiming, among other things, that he had made physical contact with Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and God, and had been given harsh messages from them to the priests, members of the church and the world. The church authorities believed the defrocked priest had lost his head. The man bowed and disappeared. Eight years later, he reappeared in the same community, bearing the same name, and almost the same looks (except for his slight ageing) and manner of dressing. He had however, acquired a foreign accent and greater eloquence in speaking. After hiring a roof over his head, and assuming the title pastor, the returnee established a church which he called *The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God*, whose doctrines and messages were exactly the same as those of the rebel faction which he had unsuccessfully attempted to establish in the orthodox church. The membership of the Movement (or rather Church) grew very fast, especially among the poor and the sick. Most of the congregation were women and children.

Shortly before the end of the last millennium, about September 1999, the pastor announced to his congregation and the public that God had told him (the pastor) that He intended to end the world at the end of the millennium, that is, at midnight on December 31, 1999. Only His chosen children, members of the church would go to heaven. The members were then asked to sell off all their earthly possessions, hand over the proceeds to the pastor and his Council of Elders for on-