

UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICES THAT DEFINE PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In parts of Central and Southern Nigeria, there are Pentecostal Churches everywhere. Many of the pastors in charge of the churches are often implicated in different acts of wrongdoing. Despite this, the churches are often packed with worshippers. Ordinarily, pastors' wrongdoing ought to minimize the devotion adherents bestow on their pastors. But in the Nigerian context, the involvement of pastors in wrongdoing tends to draw more adherents. This is a puzzle that this paper examines. Three objectives, including the examination of what draws Nigerians to Pentecostal Christianity, were examined. Documents from diverse sources were accessed as data. The documents were displayed in text boxes and interpreted. To avoid high-inference interpretation, comments were elicited from research participants. Key themes of Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity's message are found to focus on prosperity, miraculous healing, and neutralization of witchcraft. These themes resonate with indigenous religious world-view. In the African religious world view, unemployment, poverty, diseases, accidents, untimely death and so on cannot afflict victims if not through the human agents that work with the demons. Nigeria's Pentecostal pastors tap into this myth to construct anxiety-reducing sermons. The sermons promise adherents freedom from unemployment, poverty, accidents and diseases. Aspects of the data that see Pentecostal sermons as mere puffery necessitate a recommendation that urges Pentecostal pastors to put their message beyond demagogy by explaining in practical terms, how to attain the amazing hopes their message hold out.

Keywords: Understanding practices, pentecostal christianity, Nigeria, prosperity, sermons

Introduction

Every message that is disseminated is inscribed with framing. In framing, explicit elements of a text lead the text producer to “textualize the world in a particular way,” more so, “in a way that leads the readers to interpret in a manner intended by the text producer” (Fairclough, 2001, p.71). Text producers use framing to subtly ask readers to understand and evaluate meaning from the encoder’s standpoint. “Framing controls how something is understood” (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, pp.144 & 177; Carvallo, 2010, pp.17-18; Kuypers, 2010, pp. 300 – 302). Nigerian Pentecostal messages are framed messages. Nigerian pastors bring in different message elements when they frame their sermons. The juxtaposition of different message elements highlights the intertextual nature of Nigeria’s Pentecostal gospel messages. Intertextuality of a text implies that “texts interconnect and interact with each other serving to modify, alter or reinforce textual meaning” (Watson 2003, p.49). To be sure, a text is a “product of the process of text production” (Fairclough, 2001, p.20). Eco, (1976, p. 276) sees a text as “ a multiple source of unpredictable speech acts whose real author remains indeterminate, sometimes being the encoder of the message, at others, the addressee who collaborates in determining its meaning(s). ” For O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2007, p.91), a text is “ any media item such as photographs, advertisements, films, magazines, websites, television program, newspaper article and so on.”

Stephens (2011) has documented how textual elements are arrayed to interact and produce a desired effect in gospel messages. Stephen’s formulation mirrors Nigeria’s Pentecostal pastors’ message-creation and dissemination practices. Message-creation practices in Nigerian Pentecostalism include the glorification of prosperity, theatrical musical displays, unreserved dance steps and so forth (Akaiigwe, 2013). “Eloquent tokens or rhetoric of presentation” (Mayhew, 1997, pp.19, 274-283) features in Nigerian gospel messages. Display of “symbols outweigh discursive argument” (Mayhew, 1997, p.269) in a message that contains rhetoric of presentation. Rhetoric of presentation is a self-contained mode of constructing messages. It relies on “employing just the right images/words in a manner that thwarts critical analysis and places rhetorical tokens beyond redemption” (Mayhew, 1997, p.19). Pentecostal Christians are often made to accept that a mere proclamation that *Jesus is Lord*, for instance, guarantees a life in paradise. Such proclamations exemplify the “eloquent tokens” (Mayhew, 1997, p.276) of Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity. The claim that abundant wealth is waiting for only those who pay their tithes (Udegbe, 2013) is another exemplar of the eloquent tokens that feature in Nigeria’s Pentecostal messages.

Pastors and the Devotion they Command

To pin down the number of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is not easy (Eyoboka, 2004). Modest estimate holds that one in every twenty houses in urban areas of South-South, South-East and South-West of Nigeria is a Pentecostal church. Nigeria's Pentecostal churches are often packed with worshippers. The devotion of worshippers to their pastors is solid. For the teeming Nigerian Pentecostal worshippers, the word of the pastor is sacred. To gain the approval of the pastor, worshipers do whatever the pastor demands. Some worshippers indulge in stealing to enable them fulfill the obligation of tithing and sowing of seeds, (Johnson, 2010). Tithing is a belief among Pentecostal worshippers that they must forfeit ten percent of their monthly or annual income for the upkeep of the pastor/church. Sowing of seed premises the belief that a Pentecostal worshipper wins God's favor in terms of the amount of money the worshipper donates to the pastor/church. Nigerian Pentecostal worshippers believe that their pastors can influence God to help them get a high position in Government (Johnson, 2010). Pentecostal Christians in high public positions donate huge sums of money and valuables like expensive cars to their pastors to help motivate the pastors to ask God to protect the donor's position (Obijiofor, 2013). At the prompting of their pastors, some worshippers sometimes step forward to proclaim that they are witches (Oke, 2012).

It might sound plausible to attribute the deep devotion Pentecostal worshippers bestow on their pastors to impeccable character of the pastors. But comments about the character of Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria suggest otherwise. In FESTAC Town area of Lagos, pastors have been implicated in loan scams (Laba, 2003). Reacting to rampant misdemeanor among pastors, a fellow pastor was moved to decry the excesses of his colleagues in these words

...forget adultery, fornication and other sins of the flesh... the secret of affluent lifestyle – sleek jeeps, imposing mansions, designer clothes and swanky women – with which the pastors are associated is as a result of providing spiritual guidance to armed robbers who in turn give them a princely share of the booty after operation

(Oyeleye, 2003, p.36).

Recent reports indicate that Nigeria's Pentecostal pastors are sinking deeper in sleaze. A pastor has been alleged to rape a 12 year old maid (Olatunji, 2013). It has been alleged that a 60 year old pastor is in police custody for selling a month-old baby (Madukwe & Nwopoke, 2013). Onu (2013) has reported that Nigeria's security forces had been trailing a pastor whose church is a depot for kidnap victims. Pastor Chukwuemeka Ezeugo, also known as Reverend King is on a death-row after an Appeal Court in Lagos rejected his appeal to overturn a death sentence on him for killing his

follower – Miss Ann Uzoh. Reverend King was alleged to have, in August 2006, doused Miss Ann Uzoh with petrol and set her ablaze. Miss Uzoh was accused of committing fornication (Obijiofor, 2013). Despite being on a death-row, followers of Reverend King still pack his church – Christian Prayer Assembly – located in Alao Estate in Lagos. Reverend King still shepherds his flock from his prison cell, admonishing them “you must continue in the faith I taught you” (Kalio, 2013, p. 5). In line with Reverend King’s footsteps, his followers have threatened violence if the authorities in Nigeria go ahead to hang him.

The Problem

Historical accounts of the clergy of Christendom have remained depressing. The hallmark of that history is expressed in violence, murder, greed and immorality. From the time Cain killed Abel and beyond, the clergy of Christendom have wallowed in sleaze. Their venality ranges from the sale of indulgence, collection of simony to even the sale of the Papal Office (Cairn, 1981). The clergy have also been implicated in the atrocity of burning persons who the clergy branded heretics (Woodrow, 1990; Cairn, 1981). Ordinarily, the misconduct of the clergy, past and present, ought to trigger loss of devotion amongst the followers of the clergies of Christendom. Rather than that, more adherents flock to places of Christian worship. This is a puzzle. Christians ought to demonstrate obedience to their superiors in the Lord. But to show such to pastors who are often implicated in depraved acts is disturbing. This puzzle is examined under three objectives. The objectives seek to:

- (a) Review how Pentecostal pastors and their followers read the Bible
- (b) Ascertain what entices Pentecostal adherents to their pastors
- (c) Discuss the implications of the key themes of Pentecostal sermons

The Design of the Paper

Drawing on Bogdan and Biklen (1982) as cited in (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.66), I “scouted for possible documents and people who might be the source of data.” My data collection activities targeted “sites, subjects, topics and theories that facilitated data analysis” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.66). I scouted for documents that portray the religious belief of Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria. My data gathering effort started with document-based data because of the relevance of such data. The entailments of the utterances I used as data were produced when the persons who uttered them did not reckon that their utterances will be used as data. The use of

such utterances ensured that their data-value is protected from “subject reactivity” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pp. 67 & 109; Smith, 1996, p. 190).

I sourced documents/utterances from three Nigerian national newspapers – *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* and *Punch*. I also sampled four utterances from *Walking in the Anointing* – (Ibiyeomie, 2012). The author of *Walking in the Anointing* owns one of the biggest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. *Walking in the Anointing* is sampled because of its wide circulation amongst Pentecostal worshippers in Nigeria. I consider the selected utterances as data in the light of the notion that “talk, gestures, one-word quotations or lengthy story-like quotations” are among the things that count as data in qualitative research (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, pp. 4 & 18; Keyton, 2001, p 70). I displayed the selected textual data in titled boxes. I displayed research participants’ comments in-text, justified left and right. The date that each research subject made their comment is noted.

My analysis of these diversely-sourced data is guided by known traditions of qualitative data analysis. The data analysis procedure in this paper drew on Creswell’s (2007, p. 150) view of what a qualitative researcher does with data. According to him, the researcher “enters with data of texts or images... and exits with an account or a narrative. In between, the researcher touches on several facets of analysis and circles around and around” (2007, p. 150-151).

Data Display - BOX (i) Ideological flaws in Attribution

S/NO	Exemplars	Sources
1.	Any believer who must be relevant in this end time must be anointed.	Ibiyeomie (2012, p. 1)
2.	Anointing is God’s will that we increase financially.	Ibiyeomie (2012, p. 16)
3.	...Christ did not emphasize on sin. He emphasized what you can see... I want to ride big jeeps and live in mansions.	<i>Daily Sun</i> , 12 January 2013, p. 44
4.	For you to be anointed for kingdom wealth, you must sow. If you desire the anointing for kingdom wealth, you must fulfill kingdom obligation... be not deceived, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap: Galatians 6:7 & 9. When you sow faithfully, you reap the anointing for wealth.	Ibiyeomie (2012, pp. 59 – 60)
5.	Do not let the devil deceive you; those who pay their tithes and offerings will be positioned for the massive wealth transfer that is coming.	<i>Vanguard</i> , 25 February 2013, p. 60

Analytic Interpretation

BOX (i) above contains five textual data. The data are sampled from three sources. The textual samples are categorized as texts that exemplify ideological flaw in attribution. The entailments of a text are said to be

ideologically flawed when the intention of the speaker or the encoder is to appropriate only “a partial section” of the meaning of the text and avoids or “masks” the other section that does not only “contradict” the favored section but displays the real significance of the whole utterance (Eco, 1976, pp. 275 & 297; O’ Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005, p. 177; Lanigan, 1988, p. 247). An ideologically-tainted text can also be described as a framed text. Framing is a “process whereby a communicator,” wittingly or otherwise, “constructs a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation in a particular manner with some facts made more noticeable than others” (D’angelo and Kuypers, 2010, pp. 47 & 300; Richardson, 2010, pp. 17 – 8; Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, pp. 14 & 177).

Exemplars 1 and 2 of Box (i) typify framing. They also exemplify the key theme in the gospel of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria. The key theme is the proclamation that the will of God is for Christians to live in material prosperity. The source of exemplars 1 and 2 endorses such belief by justifying the entailments of the two exemplars with the citation, respectively, of Deuteronomy 8:18: and Psalm 112: 1-3

But thou shall remember the LORD thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth...

Blessed is the man that feareth the LORD... wealth and riches shall be in his house.

(Source: Ibiyeomie, 2012, pp. 46 & 47 citing the old King James Version of the Bible).

The source of exemplars 1 and 2 intends to use Deuteronomy 8:18: and Psalm 112: 1-3 to drive home the claim that God expects every Christian to be materially prosperous. By wealth and riches, Nigeria’s Pentecostal pastors do not mean other connotations that do not associate *wealth* and *riches* with physical material things. The entailments of exemplar 3 Box (i) make the point. Pastor Kingsley Nwangwu made the utterance cited as exemplar 3. He is the General Overseer of Winners Life Ministry. In that exemplar, Pastor Nwangwu claims that while on earth, Christ’s message de-emphasized sin but extolled material wealth. Pastor Nwangwu underscores this claim by voicing his cravings for big jeeps and mansions as entailed above in exemplar 3, Box (i).

But the source of exemplars 1 & 2 cites another Bible text with connotations that warrant wondering whether Nigerian Pentecostal pastors reckon with some other connotations that Bible’s *riches* and *wealth* connote. The source of exemplars 1 & 2 Box (i) cites Proverbs 8:18 – 21:

Riches and honor are with me; yea, durable riches... my fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver.

(Source: Ibiyeomie, 2012, p. 49 citing the old King James Version of the Bible)

The context in which *riches* is used in Proverbs 8:18 – 21 as cited above gives it a different connotation from the one promoted on pages 47 & 48 of Ibiyeomie (2012). The section of Proverbs 8: 18-21 with a connotation that differs from that of Ibiyeomie (2012) is “...my fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold and my revenue than choice silver...” In the worldly economic system, gold and silver do not only symbolize but epitomize financial prosperity. If there are riches and honor that are more durable than fine gold and choice silver as Proverbs 8 : 18- 21 indicates, it could also be true that riches and wealth as used in Deuteronomy 8:18 and Psalms 112:1-3 have meanings that transcend that of financial prosperity as commonly promoted by Nigerian Pentecostal Pastors.

To enrich interpretation, I sourced for the meaning people ascribe to riches and wealth when they read Deuteronomy 8:18; Psalm 112:1-3 and Proverbs 8:18-21. The first person who volunteered comment is Dr. Nnamdi Okoroma – a writer on morality, corruption and restitution. To him, riches and wealth as cited in *Deuteronomy* 8: 18 and *Psalms* 112:1-3 are

not material wealth and/or riches. Health is wealth. Let’s not forget that. The churches myopically attribute riches and wealth to material wealth. No! Riches and wealth in those sections is the decency that enables everyone to get anything by the grace of God. It goes beyond money – cars, houses and so on. I tell people; the prosperity these pastors emphasize is to hoodwink their credulous adherents. The adherents are impoverished by the striving to meet the unrelenting badgering to pay tithes and give offerings. Who benefits from this extortion? Yes, I call it extortion and exploitation. It is the pastors. God does not need your money before He gives you anything...

(Source: Comment from Dr. Okoroma: June 18, 2013)

I called his attention to words like extortion and exploitation in his comment. I asked him to comment on why Pentecostal adherents fail to realize that the prosperity that the pastors emphasize hardly translate to prosperity of the parishioners. He enthused:

Don’t you watch the television? What do you discern when you see the mode of worship – the theatrical displays, the questionable testimonies, the heavy drumming, dancing and all that. It is overwhelming! Worshippers feel entranced and mesmerized. They are carried away. Yes! They can’t ask question. They can’t reason. Pastors take advantage of that. When the worshippers are suffused with such euphoria, the prosperity sermon is brought in to sweeten the spectacle. Worshippers are told that the key to material prosperity is just for them to pay tithe and give offerings. Making people to expect prosperity without emphasizing hard work is a sin. Yes! It is a sin because it

promotes all manner of vices – laziness, greed, corruption, irrationality...

The long comment recalled me to the entailments of exemplar 4, Box (i). That exemplar contains parts of the Bible book of *Galatians 6:7 – Do not be deceived, God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows (New International Version of the Holy Bible)*. I showed Dr. Okoroma how the sources of exemplars 4 & 5, Box (i) have framed *Galatians 6:7*: The sources had framed that Bible portion to shore up the key teaching in Nigeria’s Pentecostal message. The claim that God rewards Christians according to the amount of money and material things Christians give to God is a dominant message in Pentecostal sermons in Nigeria. The words of Bishop Clement Unegebe cited as exemplar 5 of Box (i) is not only instructive but affirms the meaning that Nigerian Pentecostalism ascribes to sowing and reaping in the Bible. When I asked Dr. Okoroma to comment on such manner of framing, his view is:

The place the Bible says you reap what you sow has nothing to do with sowing in the church, but in the mind. The statement is for salvation not for materialism. The work of God in the hard way is sowing...

On July 3, 2013, I also got a comment on the subject of riches and wealth from an aspiring pastor. His view is:

Look the issue of faith in God is subtle. You have to be creative to handle it... Bible truth could be managed. Riches and wealth might not exclusively mean material prosperity in context A. But in context B, it might mean material prosperity. The meaning depends on the context. When you find yourself in a context where ascribing the meaning of material prosperity to riches and wealth can draw people to God, there’s nothing wrong... that’s what end justifies the means is all about!

Text Box (ii) Mixture of Religious Beliefs

S/NO	Exemplars	Sources
1.	...Nigerians believe that when there is an outage, it is caused by witches and demons.	<i>Punch</i> , 24 January, 2013, p. 15
2.	Ogun State Command of Federal Road Safety Corp has warned commercial drivers and motorists to stop relying on charms while driving ...we find some of the charms strapped on the waist or arms of victims. Some charms are tied to the steering.	<i>Punch</i> , 5 April 2013, p. 18
3.	Religion in Nigeria is more a theatrical display than personal convictions... most armed robbery gangs in Nigeria patronize a pastor for fortification prayer before venturing out to wreak havoc.	<i>Punch</i> , 5 April 2013, p. 23

Analytic Interpretation

In Christianity, every denomination affirms the existence of demons. What is contentious is how the awareness of the existence of demons influences Christians' devotion to God. Some Christians take a rigid position on this. Such Christians believe that strict devotion to God shields Christians from malevolent powers of demons (Awake, 2011). Christians who hold such strict view easily cite two Bible texts: James 4: 7 – *Submit yourself, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* They also cite 1 Corinthians 10: 21 & 22 – *You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons (New International Version of the Holy Bible).* Many Nigerians profess to be Christians of the Pentecostal denomination. There is a way the entailments of exemplars 1-3 of Box (ii) demonstrate that Nigerian Christians, more so the Pentecostal Christians do not hold a right view about how the existence of demons should influence their relationship with God. Exemplars 1-3 could be read to mean that Nigerians do not believe that their Pentecostal faith affords enough safeguard against the devil.

In Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity, there is a special cadre of adherents known as workers. Workers are the most committed among the adherents. Their devotion is so total that they work voluntarily in their different Pentecostal churches. They work as crowd and traffic controllers. They supervise sanitation duties and so on. I tapped a comment from one of such workers – a young lady who works for one of the big churches located in the Government Reserved Areas of Port Harcourt. On July 14, 2013, she commented on the things that entice Nigerians into her Pentecostal Christian denomination.

Everybody comes for different reasons. In my church, many like the short service sessions. Some come because there's no restriction on mode of dress. Some come for solution to their health problems – i.e. they come for healing. Some come for contacts – in my church we have many big people, politicians and oil company executives are members. The presence of such persons attracts worshippers who seek contacts for jobs, or contracts and employment. There are times the big personalities announce vacancies in their offices in the church. Different persons come for different reasons.

Results and Discussion

The socio-economic condition in Nigeria is difficult. There is widespread unemployment and poverty. Insecurity is rampant. Social infrastructures like health care services are bad (*Punch* Editorial, (2013, p.18). The depressing socio-economic atmosphere pushes both the clergy and laity into religious zealotry. All the exemplars of Box (ii) smack of

extreme religious beliefs and practices. As the entailments of the exemplars demonstrate, religious beliefs induce misrecognition of the sources of social problems. Instead of demanding that government improve power supply, for instance, Nigerians blame witches and demons for the appalling shortage of electricity in the country.

Lack of good road network is among the problems that face Nigerians. Bad roads cause accidents. But the data indicate what Nigerians blame demons when accidents happen. Emphasis on demons and witches compel Nigerians to attribute avoidable accidents to bad luck. With this mindset, problems that social action will solve are considered from indigenous spiritual standpoint. Nigerians resort to charms. They enlist into cultic confraternities. Emphasis on easy access to riches teases some Pentecostal adherents into armed robbery. Such adherents approach pastors for fortification prayers – exemplar 3, Box (ii). They do that in line with the dominant religious world view of Nigerian Pentecostal Christians. Nigerian Pentecostal Christians embrace the claim that “humans can and do manipulate the spiritual” domain to “affect the physical” one (Taiwo, 2008).

Where people believe that power outage and accidents are caused by demons, persons who induce such beliefs are revered as agents that shield people from demonic attacks. This is where Nigerian pastors carve a niche for themselves. Their sermons are tooled to legitimize their intercessory role. The preferred mode of worship in all the Pentecostal churches is spell-binding. It mesmerizes. The “intertextual” (Watson, 2003, p. 49; Fairclough, 2001, pp. 127 & 155; O’Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2007, p. 400) attributes of Pentecostal worship in Nigeria include heavy rhythmic music. The heavy rhythm whips up frenzy and impels worshippers into involuntary vigorous dancing. The pastor intersperses the heavy drumming and dancing with a sweetener – the promise that all worshippers are destined to be rich provided they pay tithe and give huge amount of money to meet the obligation of seed sowing.

Parts of corpus of data in this in this paper blame the spellbinding style of Pentecostal worship for inducing irrationality on the worshippers. The idea is that the euphoria of heavy drumming occasioning involuntary dancing erases the composure worshippers need to question fallacious teaching/claims. Another section of data accuses Pentecostal liturgy of sin. The charge is grounded on sermons that tell worshippers that the key to material prosperity does not rest much on hard work as it does on the worth of worshippers’ offering and tithe. Data also hint that Pentecostal pastors justify the “framing” (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, pp.144 & 177; Carvallo, 2010, pp.17-18; Kuypers, 2010, pp. 300 – 302) of Bible texts to suit temporal contexts on the “polysemous” potentials of Bible texts (Sillars and Gronbeck, 2001, P. 152; Condit, 1991 pp. 365-384).

Also found is the belief that beyond the quest for salvation, many things entice Nigerian Pentecostal adherents into embracing the faith. Among such things is economic reason. Highly placed persons in the society – influential politicians, oil company executives and so forth attend the Pentecostal Churches. Persons seeking economic opportunities like employment and contracts come to churches where the influential persons attend. Many others attend in search of miraculous healing. Yet, others attend because the Pentecostal churches do not prescribe dress code for parishioners.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, Pentecostal Christianity has redefined the way many Nigerians think about Christianity. If the traditional value of Christianity had urged adherent to be obsessed with ascetic decorum, Pentecostal Christianity connives at hedonistic complacency. Where traditional Christianity seeks to inculcate the virtues of holiness, righteousness, forgiveness and repentance, Nigeria's Pentecostal Christianity promotes material prosperity as the yardstick of identifying the chosen. In Nigerian Pentecostalism, emphasis on prosperity is accentuated in the same measure as vengeance against perceived enemies is promoted. These Pentecostal values accord with the African world view. The accordance is part of the reason Pentecostal gospel attracts Nigerians.

One thing Nigeria's Pentecostal Christianity has not explicitly explained is how every adherent should earn the material prosperity it emphasizes. Such explanation should extend to why persons of other faiths still acquire material prosperity despite the fact that they do not profess the Pentecostal faith. Until such explanation is made, the suspicion in some quarters that prosperity gospel is a mere mumbo-jumbo designed to entice the credulous will not go away.

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