

THE QUESTION OF POWER IN AFRICAN PENTECOSTALISM

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Abstract

Should the charismatic theology of anointing be considered a democratizing influence in Africa or a reiteration of mediatorial forms of power? This article seeks to answer this question by analyzing African traditional religious power structures in comparison to modern African theologies and practices of Pentecostal anointing. This comparison, however, highlights the problem of drawing direct lines from Africa's past to its present; Pentecostal rupture from a traditional past is paradoxically both a break from and connection to pre-colonial conceptions of the self and community. Ultimately, this article argues that while both traditional religions and modern Pentecostal anointing favor mediatorial structures of power, the Pentecostal proclivity for rupture and adherence to the biblical tradition leave open the continual possibility for democratization in African Pentecostalism.

Introduction¹

In comparison with other traditions, spontaneous liturgies of African Pentecostal² churches evoke a sense of democratized power where the

charismatic flow of the Spirit is accessible to all and working through all. This is often held in stark contrast to more liturgical forms of worship and hierarchical church structures that seem to demarcate carefully mediatorial roles and positions of authority. This observation is often carried forward into an argument that Pentecostal churches should be recognized as a powerful force for democratization within African nation states. Despite this body of thought, the growth of powerful and autocratic leadership within African Pentecostal churches presents a troubling counter-narrative. The charisma of the Spirit is often understood to reside on certain individuals in special ways or in unique quantities. Due to this, “anointed” individuals often have access to immense amounts of power and resources via their communities of faith. This power can be leveraged for any number of ends. Many leaders have birthed educational initiatives or developmental organizations, many have launched crusades and proliferated churches, and still many have translated their power into the language of status via personal jets, mansions, and political leverage.

The aim of this article is not to pass judgment on the activities of such pastors, but to examine the historical precedents, social contexts, and particular theologies that shape the use of power within these communities. Should Pentecostal leadership be understood as a democratizing force within Africa or just the latest reiteration of traditional hierarchies of power? By looking at the power structure of traditional African religious systems in relation to the Pentecostal concept of “anointing” it will become clear that Pentecostal forms of leadership can easily correspond to traditional African power structures. Yet, Pentecostalism is more than just a reformulation of Africa’s past. The power dynamics of African Pentecostalism are part of what Birgit Meyers calls “an elaborate discourse and ritual practice” that oscillates between past and modern identities.³ As such, a growing body of research has illustrated that the question of African Pentecostal leadership, whether it is democratizing or dictatorial, bears upon Africa’s colonial history and contemporary questions of governance. Rather than a reification of traditional or democratic power structures, Pentecostal leadership provides a window into the ongoing discussion of African leadership and use of power. Due to the preponderance

of source material and scholarship on African Pentecostalism hailing from West Africa, particularly Ghana and Nigeria, this paper will most likely reflect West African perspectives. Yet, the dynamic interaction of Pentecostalism, traditional religion, and good governance remains a question for much of the continent.

Power Structures in African Traditional Religions

One is wary to venture into any dialogue that generalizes the religious structure of an entire continent, and this article should not be seen as an attempt to simplify the complexities and particularities of Africa's traditional religions. However, John Mbiti's seminal *African Religions & Philosophy* has done much to demonstrate that there are many similarities among African traditional religious systems.⁴ This work attempts to draw connections between the diversity of African traditional religions in an effort to translate the spirituality of African societies into Western categories. As such Mbiti's work is itself a generalized translation of sorts; it foregoes the precision of locality by trying to isolate general practices and categories. One such category, "specialist," is an umbrella term for individuals who exist in special social roles that "have a language, symbolism, knowledge, skill, practice, and . . . 'office personality' of their own which are not known or easily accessible to the ordinary person."⁵ Roles such as medicine-men, mediums, priests, prophets, rainmakers, kings, queens, and chiefs can all be considered under the category of "specialist." The distinctions of the various roles within the category of "specialist" can be hard to define as some tribes might not have one kind of role, but incorporate extra functions onto another role. Similarly, individuals might occupy multiple roles (rainmaker and medicine-man) at a single time. What can be said about each kind of specialist, however, is that they are "concrete symbols and the epitome of [humanity's] participation in and experience of the religious universe."⁶ Specialists are bridges by which the reality of the spiritual world is actualized to and accessed by the community. As such, specialists inhabit a mediatorial role between the spiritual and the human realms.⁷ Take for example the case of the medicine-man. Within African traditional religions, spiritual causality is a given. Sickness, even death,

is understood to be the result of a spiritual cause;⁸ however, tracing the chain of causality is not a straightforward process. Medicine-men specialize in a holistic process of healing by which the physical ills and spiritual roots are treated.⁹ Though magic and various cures are usually understood to be accessible to every member of the tribe, a heightened level of training is necessary to address the spiritual roots of more grievous illnesses. This knowledge can be passed on through oral traditions, yet the personal encounter of the medicine-man with divinity is essential to effective medicinal practice.¹⁰ This insistence on divine knowledge brings into focus a more general view of medicine within African religion; at least in traditional cultures, “unconsecrated medicine has no meaning.”¹¹ Medicine-men function, then, to mediate the spiritual and physical world through the activity of healing. Similarly, mediums provide a direct bridge to the spiritual world through ecstatic experiences¹² and priests provide a bridge via ritualized ones.¹³ Though kings/queens/chiefs are not present in every African society, Mbiti notes how, when present, they embody this mediation in their very person, becoming divine symbols of their “people’s health and welfare.”¹⁴

Individuals might occupy several mediatorial roles within a community, however, it is quite often the case that traditional communities will have multiple “specialists” for particular needs and/or divinities. What is more, these mediatorial roles are often caught up in the political dynamics of their context. The Asante society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a perfect example. As politics saw a shift to patriarchal kingship, the queen mother retained her position as “co-ruler” along with her son.¹⁵ On a more popular level, these shifts might have “diminished the political visibility of women,” yet “their role as social critics and as ritual specialists [remained] germane to the functioning of the body politic.”¹⁶ Similarly, Jacob Olupona has argued that traditional Yoruba kingship is founded on a distant matriarchy and that the positions of *Opoji* (female-chief) and *Lobun* (woman-king) continue to offer female centers of power in Yoruba society through the control of the ritual and mythic corpus.¹⁷ Thus, the role of spiritual “specialist” should not be too readily equated with authoritarian forms of power nor should it only be understood in its functionalist sense. Mbiti’s “specialist” gives the impression that religious power was the prerogative

of the few, a company apart, approached only in times of urgent need. “Specialists,” however, were often organized into complex hierarchies grafted into the structure of society itself. While speaking of the Yoruba, Bolaji Idowu’s assessment that “[i]n all things, they are religious”¹⁸ could be applied to most traditional cultures of Africa. At the end of the day, “specialists” were also community members.

When it comes to authority, one category of specialist is particularly important in light of the growth of African indigenous churches (AICs) and the Pentecostal movement: prophets. Interestingly, however, Mbiti does not see prophecy in the biblical sense as part of traditional African religion. Rather, prophecy seems to arise in African religion as Christianity becomes part of the religious milieu.¹⁹ Prophetic movements and their penchant for establishing new religious groups is by and large foreign to African religion, as religious belief was so fluidly integrated into everyday life that radically breaking with a certain belief was all but impossible.²⁰ Yet, that is not to say prophecy is unimportant. Writing seven years before Mbiti, C.G. Baëta declared that prophetism was “a perennial phenomenon of African life, and that the basic operative element in it seems to be personal in character.”²¹

Today, prophetic movements continue to draw attention for their intermingling of religious and political spheres. To many they appear as political responses clothed in religious garb. Yet, as far back as 1962, Baëta saw that prophetism “may be (and often is) entirely a matter of personal inward, usually religious, experience or development.”²² Harold Turner takes this a step further and declares that all prophetic movements should be seen “at the bottom spiritual and religious movements. They are not social, economic, or political reactions disguised as religious movements.”²³

What then is the character of these religious movements? Can they be called Christian? African prophets appear to be a synthesis of traditional African religious roles and Christian impulses for reform. Prophets are clear spiritual leaders who are endowed with an inordinate ability to impose their will by virtue of spiritual force; to their followers, prophets’ lives become repositories of spiritual direction and power.²⁴ The second question, however, has plagued scholars up to today. In much of Turner’s work, categories such as “prophet-healing,”

“spiritualist,” and “Pentecostal” are readily and admittedly conflated.²⁵ His complex taxonomy does not even include the word “Pentecostal.”²⁶ Lamin Sanneh offers a more nuanced view of the matter. In his *West African Christianity*, he discusses prophetic movements and Pentecostal movements together under the heading “Charismatic Churches,” detailing how various prophet-leaders interacted with Pentecostal materials and persons. Yet, while he notes that there is a distinction between the two movements, he leaves the readers to decide for themselves into which category a movement falls (though both are highly praised).²⁷ From Aladura churches, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim Society and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) to the Harrist and Kimanguist churches, the line between prophet and Pentecostal is seldom easy to define. Traditional religious practice and concepts can pervade a setting where traditional religious beliefs are denounced and individuals claim to be “Spirit-filled” Christians.

However defined, both Pentecostal churches and prophetic movements continue to have and celebrate prophet-leaders. Like all specialists before them, prophets provide powerful access to the nigh uncontrollable chains of spiritual causality that manifested in physical and social turmoil. In turn, by addressing the spiritual roots, prophets raise expectancy for physical and social renewal. It is no surprise that healing features so prominently in many prophetic movements, nor is it surprising that in certain forms prophets are viewed as politically dangerous.

Understanding the Anointing

Defining the “Anointing”

In many ways, the mediatorial role of specialists in African traditional religions seems antithetical to a Pentecostal theology of anointing. Upon further reflection, however, the relationship between the two becomes more complex. Avoiding the intricacies of an in-depth theological definition, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu has offered a three-part understanding of the term’s functional use in Africa: (1) “Anointing” refers to the practice of applying olive oil and praying for those who

are in need of healing; (2) “Anointing” is used in reference to someone whose ministry has produced tangible results (e.g., “That man healed me, he must be anointed”); and (3) “Anointing” refers to special services that are intended to mediate the power of the Spirit.²⁸ Asamoah-Gyadu’s functional definition is helpful in two ways. First, it recognizes the symbolic nature of the term “anointing.” The term is a religious marker signifying the active presence of the Spirit on people and situations. As such, the term “anointing” is a theological shorthand by which people communicate that the power of God is at work in any given context. Second, Asamoah-Gyadu’s definition highlights the spatial and temporal particularity of the anointing. The anointing is not a way to speak of a generalized presence of the Spirit in the world; one cannot refer to the sustaining work of the Spirit in holding together the cosmos as “anointing.” Rather, the term refers to the specialized manifestation of the Spirit’s work and the process by which others enter into a specialized manifestation of the Spirit. When looking over the three uses of anointing, the mediatorial nature of the term is unmistakable. Either charismatic figures utilize their anointing to enact change for others via spiritual power or liturgical practices enable others to become anointed themselves. “Anointing,” then, refers to the specialized location whereat the spiritual and physical worlds interact with one another.

Anointing as Democratizing

Yet, understanding the anointing and Christian leadership as purely mediated via special practices and spiritual elites is somewhat misleading. As Sanneh has argued vociferously, the embrace of the vernacular by Christianity is an inherent embrace of pluralism. Furthermore, the use of the common tongue for religion in Africa has ultimately taken the power out of the hands of the traditional African religious elites.²⁹ As a concept born out of Christian contexts, the Pentecostal “anointing” could carry with it this democratizing, de-centralization of power. Joel 2:28 is understood in its most populist sense, with all having access to the Spirit.³⁰ Thus, while Pentecostal leaders are expected to have a powerful anointing on their lives, the presence of differentiated spiritual gifts within the community prevents such leaders from presenting themselves as experts.³¹ In a way, the preponderance

of the Spirit on the whole community creates a sort of checks-and-balances; the Spirit cannot reside solely on any one individual. If leaders can be experts on anything, it is only helping others employ their own special anointing.³² As case-in-point, Asamoah-Gyadu presents the prominence of lay leadership within Pentecostal circles. Ecumenical lay fellowships like Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International and Women Aglow have demonstrated that spiritual power is no longer held solely by recognized clergy, but that even the most ordinary person can have access to the Spirit.³³ This has caused an ecclesiological crisis of sorts throughout many parts of Africa, shifting past power dynamics; "pastors or ministers are no longer regarded as having exclusive access to 'deity.'"³⁴

What results is a reorientation of the African religious marketplace. Within African mainline denominations, Pentecostal practices have been adopted to placate and/or capitalize on the fervor of those who have adopted Pentecostal beliefs and practices. AICs that rely heavily upon mediated experiences have fared worse. As the power of the Spirit is made available to more people, the customer-client relationship that sustains many of the prophetic leaders of AICs has begun to collapse.³⁵ From this perspective, the argument for democratization seems adequate. Individuals, no matter their gender, race, or economic status, are able to access the Spirit without continually defaulting to mediatorial specialists; anyone can be anointed. And while it is true that some individuals might demonstrate a greater anointing, this does not automatically disqualify the particularity of anyone else's anointing. Pentecostal belief in the universal accessibility of the Spirit, at least theologically and rhetorically, points towards a lay-oriented democratization of spiritual power.

Anointing as Dictatorial

Theology and rhetoric, however, do not always reflect practice. Despite Pentecostalism's theological conviction and rhetorical insistence on the democratizing power of the Spirit, a theology of anointing has seldom resulted in democratic utopia. Early Pentecostals struck similar notes as Asamoah-Gyadu, if not more dramatic. U.S. Pentecostals at the turn of the twentieth century claimed that the movement was

devoid of human leaders, and that only the Holy Spirit guided it. While a powerful conviction, it was far from the truth. Rather, as Grant Wacker has observed, from the movement's inception, there have always been powerful, effective, prophetic leaders whose ministries guided Pentecostal identity and practice.³⁶ Like contemporary leaders, these early Pentecostal leaders were marked by their possession of spiritual giftings; anointing was a prerequisite for Pentecostal leadership.³⁷ An American strain of pragmatism, however, seemed to keep these leaders in check. While early Pentecostal leaders could easily become autocratic, there were boundaries of doctrine and practicality that kept them from achieving the status of "religious founder" as seen in other American sects.³⁸

One should ask, then, if African Pentecostalism is subject to the same sort of dynamics at play in early U.S. Pentecostalism. Helpful in assessing these cultural differences is the work of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Study. Two ideas are specifically helpful: (1) the power distance index and (2) the individualism index. Looking at the first, according to Hofstede et al., power distance can be defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."³⁹ A country with a high-power distance index generally accepts this unequal distribution; a country that does not accept this inequality has a low power distance index. Importantly, the United States has a low power distance score while most African nations have a high power distance score.⁴⁰ The United States and Africa also dramatically differ in their individualism indexes. A low score in the individualism index indicates a collectivist understanding of society while a high score indicates a more individualistic conception of society. Unsurprisingly, the United States ranks as the most individualistic nation while African nations tend to be much more collectivist. Importantly, Hofstede et al. have also drawn attention to the fact that these two indexes are correlated. "Many countries that score high on the power distance index score low on the individualism index, and vice versa. In other words, the two dimensions tend to be negatively correlated."⁴¹

What do these findings have to do with the place of the anointing in each culture? The low-power index and individualistic temperament of United States society might correspond to Wacker's argument that American pragmatism kept charismatic individuals in check. If Hofstede et al.'s analysis is reliable, then American society tends not to tolerate the unequal distribution of charisma, and this authority is readily undermined by Americans' willingness to strike out on their own if they deem a situation too unequal. In African society, Hofstede et al.'s analysis would indicate that an unequal distribution of power is acceptable so long as the needs of the community are being fulfilled. This predictive scale then makes sense of Asamoah-Gyadu's tempering some of his own perspectives on the innate democratizing power of the anointing, especially in light of the rise of neo-Pentecostal churches and more extractive forms of leadership. With the American holiness ethic of classical Pentecostalism seemingly jettisoned, leaders have increasingly been able to legitimize their positions via the icons of modernity. A perfect example would be televangelists who use the airwaves to become the mediators of a different sort of spiritual gifting, one readily translatable into luxury lifestyles.⁴² In this new style of leadership, "Miraculous healing is important . . . because of the combination of African and Christian ideas of mystical causality in their worldview."⁴³ The special anointing of prominent Ghanaian televangelists has effectively allowed them to recreate a mediatorial position between viewers and the miracle-working God.⁴⁴ In Nigeria, a similar development is taking place as anointed leaders occupy increasingly prominent places in their communities. Pastors have become CEOs, bishops, archbishops, even patriarchs.⁴⁵ These titles reflect the effective reinstitution of patrimonial relationships that mirror traditional and contemporary African power structures.

The struggle to patronize political authority, the desire for diplomatic passports and applications to government for funds to undertake pilgrimages to Jerusalem are symptomatic of the search for worldly power and relevance characterizing contemporary Christian leadership. If the chief has a stool bearer and oloyeame, the Christian pastor now has an armor bearer.⁴⁶

While the miraculous is still an important marker for someone's anointing, the trappings of secular power (titles, money, and political influence) are utilized *to enhance the perception* that the Spirit is at work in someone's ministry. Rather than empowering others, many Pentecostal leaders have found a number of ways to continue to consolidate power. Asamoah-Gyadu, among others, sees this as a problem produced by the advent of neo-Pentecostalism. However, Wacker's observations of early U.S. Pentecostalism coupled with African traditional religions' penchant for mediatorial positions could indicate that the inordinate influence of charismatic individuals will remain a part of all African Pentecostal communities as both seem to favor at least some degree of charismatic authority; the roots run deep in both directions.

Anointing as African

This paradoxical pull of power (between autocratic leaders and democratic spirit) is not surprising to any scholar of Pentecostalism, yet it has its own distinct character in the African context. The development of prophetism within AICs was but the first step in a process of theological synergy "that enhanced the importance of traditional religions for the deepening of Christian spirituality."⁴⁷ In Sanneh's words, prophetic movements and Pentecostal spirituality allowed many Africans to "advertise their Christian intentions without undervaluing their African credentials."⁴⁸ Prophet-leaders and Pentecostal pastors draw upon the biblical tradition of the Old Testament to enhance their mediatorial role while advancing Christian intentions.⁴⁹ True to a holistic African worldview, however, the salvation and healing mediated by these leaders is not merely spiritual or psychological, but material.⁵⁰ One cannot forget Mbiti's inclusion of the chief/king/queen as a form of spiritual specialist. While early U.S. Pentecostalism was built off a millennialist, holiness asceticism, African Pentecostalism builds off of a holistic, communitarian cosmology. Can its leaders be expected to be rich in the spirit realm and poor in the material realm? Can charismatic individuals, full of the power of the Spirit, simultaneously divest themselves of political power? Traditional African worldviews would suggest the answer trends toward "no," or at least so long as the broader collective feels this centralized power is serving the community. Still, this does

not mean that the debate over the role of tradition in Christianity is over and that the mediatorial role of those with a powerful anointing is cemented, nor is it clear to what extent these anointed individuals are or are not forces of democratization in Africa.

Charisma and Governance

Pentecostalism and Africa's Past

In Paul Gifford's lengthy study of the rise of prominent Pentecostal pastors in Ghana, he posits that "'Big Man' syndrome is the curse of Africa" and that the image of the televangelist and his jet might just be the curse's Christianized manifestation.⁵¹ While Gifford understands the argument for Pentecostalism's democratizing influence, his own study suggests that the anointed "Man of God" is increasingly dominating the religious landscape of West Africa and creating new forms of patron-client relationships.⁵² As Clifton Clarke has noted, however, Gifford's study is overly narrow in its depiction of the Pentecostal community of Ghana. His focus on megachurch leaders in urban centers leaves a large blind spot that cannot be ignored. Had Gifford looked beyond the megachurch, Clarke argues, he would have seen a variety of Pentecostal communities that focus on empowering individuals for economic and socially productive futures.⁵³ The critique is well placed, yet even Clarke admits that the Pentecostal community of Ghana remains apprehensive about a future in which such leaders become increasingly visible.⁵⁴

At the same time, it should be remembered that Pentecostalism's power structures were once seen as a force of ecclesial liberation. Though sometimes incorporated into colonial administration, colonial dominance in Africa meant the disempowering and/or dissolution of traditional power structures.⁵⁵ Protestant and Catholic practices and ecclesial patterns often only exacerbated the undercutting of these structures, mimicking colonial rule within their institutions. For Catholics, ecclesial structures and practices in Africa were dominated for centuries by the agenda of the West, and it was only Vatican II that saw this trend shift dramatically. The council's focus on the role of the bishop

and its turn toward enculturated rites led to a new era in which the Roman Catholic Church in Africa became driven by African priorities and persons.⁵⁶ At some level, one would expect Protestantism, with its emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers,” to have already allowed for a sort of democratization, or Africanization, of church structures from its very inception on the continent. Yet, as with Catholics, paternalistic Western oversight would be the rule until the 1960s. Thus, while African Protestant converts did most of the mission work on the continent, the actual control of mission institutions was not handed over to Africans until the 1960s as anti-colonial movements swept the continent.⁵⁷ It must not be forgotten that this period also saw a remarkable rise in AICs, and that if one goes back a little further both trends are foreshadowed in the revivalist prophetic movements of the early 1920s.⁵⁸

As Paul Kollman observes in his 2010 piece on classifying African Christianity, however, even these typical historical timelines and classifications become problematized when one introduces the experience of Pentecostal churches.⁵⁹ Following the “three-wave” model of Pentecostal growth, Kollman draws attention to the fact that all three periods of Pentecostal spread and growth are represented in Africa, and that these successive growths cannot be adequately described by the typical post-colonial narrative.⁶⁰ Furthermore, mapping Pentecostal churches’ (from any of the waves) perspectives onto debates about colonialism is even more difficult. As Kollman observes, “liberationist leaders have decried the political quietude supposedly inculcated by more overtly sectarian (often [Pentecostal/Charismatic]) ways of being Christian.”⁶¹ In other words, Pentecostals are often characterized as being too ambivalent towards issues of colonialism by fellow African Christians. At the same time, the earliest Pentecostal missionaries may have been part of a vanguard of non-colonial approaches to mission in that they relied heavily upon lay African leadership, were ritually flexible, and had a penchant for sharing cosmological assumptions with Africans.⁶² Due to this, Anderson argues that all African Pentecostal churches should be considered “essentially of African origin (even when founded by Western missionaries) and fulfill African aspirations” since they find their “roots in marginalized and underprivileged society struggling to

find dignity and identity in the face of brutal colonialism and oppression.”⁶³ Pentecostalism, thus, proved different in its initial structures in that it provided a way for Africans, as Asamoah-Gyadu says, to “take their spiritual destiny into their own hands.”⁶⁴ Thus, Pentecostal belief and practice did uniquely offer a means by which African Christians could engage Christianity on their own terms, even, perhaps, outside the bounds of the post-colonial dialectic. One cannot assume, however, that the Pentecostal task is just the “Africanizing” of Christianity. Rather, much Pentecostal discourse in Africa consists of rupture with traditional African religion.

Meyer notes the important role of “the past” within Pentecostal discourse, arguing that the common motif of “rupture” within Pentecostal testimonies of conversion is just the “language of modernity as it spoke to Africans through colonialization, missionization and, after Independence, modernization theory.”⁶⁵ In other words, the Pentecostal discourse of rupture corresponds to modernity’s focus on the self’s continual renewal and progress. Rather than a reiteration of traditional religion’s desire to build social bonds and broker harmony between the spiritual and material, Pentecostalism seeks to set believers loose from spiritual structures and social bonds. Whereas traditional religions held together tribes, Pentecostalism creates individuals.⁶⁶ Pentecostal practice, then, provides a fire at which the modern African person can be forged by breaking with the past, yet “it is essential to realize that the alleged break from ‘the past’ is only made possible through a practice of remembrance in the course of which this ‘past’ is constructed.”⁶⁷ The “past” can only be broken with *as it is constructed*, providing the character of the division to take place. In other words, by breaking with the past, Pentecostal belief is inadvertently bound to it. Meyer’s observations are important for this discussion of leadership in that they point out the complexities of describing any religious form as directly correlated to another. Pentecostal leadership has formed as a result of a perceived rupture with the past, yet that rupture is informed by the conceptual categories from which it broke. Traditional specialists and Pentecostal miracle-workers cannot be considered a manifestation of the same reality, though the relationship between the two is continually being brokered.

Pentecostal Leaders and the Question of Governance

This dynamic is important when you consider that in a country like Nigeria, Pentecostals represent approximately thirty percent of the population.⁶⁸ Following Meyer's approach, Ruth Marshall has posed the question of Pentecostal influence in Nigeria's political environment. In her words, the growth of Pentecostalism is a response to the "urgent desire to institute forms of sovereignty that would redeem the individual and collective past from a history of subjection and auto-destruction, and rescue the individual and the nation from the experience of radical uncertainty."⁶⁹ Yet, Marshall considers Pentecostalism's individualistic and agnostic relationship to political structures to have stymied its ability to produce the change it so desired.⁷⁰ Yet, Marshall is only one voice. Many Pentecostals and scholars of Pentecostalism believe that it continues to offer valuable contributions to the building up of democratic civil society in Africa.

Matthews Ojo points out that many Pentecostal bodies and leaders understand themselves to be *the* answer to present problems of governance despite continual setbacks.⁷¹ Though the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria expressed concerns about the corruption taking place in Pentecostal circles as far back as 1997, an end of corruption does not seem close at hand.⁷² Ever more powerful leaders finding ever less accountability seem to be flourishing in Nigeria. Still, Ojo believes in the untapped democratic potential of African Pentecostalism, arguing:

The Church can teach tolerance, dialogue, discipline, etc. and sustain such with their own examples. What we need is value-formation within the Pentecostal constituency as well as in the civil society. Pentecostal churches already have within their bodies institutions, though informal, such as home cells or house fellowships, through which democratic values can be taught and experienced.⁷³

Clarke sees in Pentecostalism a remarkable ability to foster and create grassroots movements and demonstrate "people power" to elected officials through the religious occupation of secular spaces.⁷⁴ Furthermore,

he sees Pentecostalism as an ally to pan-Africanism through its calls for self-love and its positive affirmation of multi-ethnic communities.⁷⁵ On a more general note, Kwame Bediako likewise sees the “way of Jesus” (preached by Pentecostals and non-Pentecostal Christians alike) offering a positive critique of traditional ontocracies.⁷⁶ He argues that the Hebrew Scriptures validate the desacralization of public power and that the non-dominating power of Jesus provides a different conception of power altogether.⁷⁷ In short, while anointed leaders flourish in Pentecostalism, so do the roots of democratic values.

Looking Forward

Of course, the relationship between spiritual and political power is notoriously hard to map, but if traditional African frameworks are any measure then the connection between the two is undoubtedly significant. Pentecostals’ relationship with the past (pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial) remains important in constructing new paradigms by which the exercise of power might be more responsibly controlled. While Gifford’s “Big Man” curse seems an ever-present reality in the life of African Pentecostalism, the perennial pull of Pentecostalism’s democratization remains a resource from which Pentecostals can and do construct new forms and structures of power. The anointing remains strong in the life of the laity, and while mediatorial specialists continue to thrive among Pentecostal communities, perhaps the history of African Christian prophets demonstrates that there are limits to the authoritarian exercise of power as there was with U.S. Pentecostals. Pentecostalism, despite the undue influence of a select few, has historically proven to be a flexible vehicle by which African Christians can reconstruct their relationship with the past and present so as to create a better future. As African Pentecostals continually encounter their spiritual pasts, one can hope that the cessation of the Spirit’s power into the hands of the few will be one past from which the Pentecostal church can rupture. In some circumstances, this might mean a break from traditional mediatorial power structures, yet even here there are examples in which multiple centers of mediatorial power protected communal well-being. At the same time, Ogbu Kalu recalls that young Pentecostals

of the 1970s once rallied against Christian “Big Men” accumulating the trappings of secular power. Perhaps many African Pentecostals have already ruptured from traditional mediatorial pictures of power.

Many questions remain. What does the rupture with the collective past mean for modern Pentecostal individuals? How do Pentecostals navigate post-colonial constructs when their history may, at least to some degree, lie elsewhere? Why has there been a resurgence of Pentecostal “Big Men” in recent decades? Whatever the answers to these questions, what is clear is that whatever comes next in African Pentecostal leadership will undoubtedly be related to Africa’s past, drawing from the bounty of resources available to African Pentecostals: the Scriptures, traditional religions, Pentecostal history, and more. Indeed, the collectivist bent of African society is much more closely aligned with the collectivism exhibited by the cultures of the Christian Scriptures; the prophetic concern for the poor or the shepherd-king metaphor, for example, value mediatorial positions for their collectivist good. African traditional religion holds many parallels. If today’s “Big Men” exude all the pomp of modern individualism and consumeristic luxuries, perhaps tomorrow’s will exude the justice and humility of Scriptural, traditional, and communal leadership. These resources from the past can provide ways forward, yet the fires of Pentecostal rupture will continue to create individuals and communities that are connected to but distinct from that past. One can only hope that these fires might truly become the democratizing force that Ojo, Clarke, Bediako, Asamoah-Gyadu, and others foresee.

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Notes

1 A previous version of this paper was presented at the 46th Annual Meeting of the Society of Pentecostal Studies. Prior to that, it went through several drafts with the guidance of Dr. Dana Robert and Fr. Jean Luc Enyegue, S.J. I would like to thank them and the editors of *Spiritus* for their help in refining this present article. Their observations and suggestions have helped to bolster the paper's main argument; any faults that remain are my own.

2 This paper will utilize the term "Pentecostal" as an umbrella term to refer to churches that variously fall under the labels of "Classical Pentecostal," "Neo-Pentecostal," "Charismatic," "Renewalist," and, at times, "Spiritualist." This choice is due to the general scope of the present work. While sub-categorization is useful in closer studies, a clear and generalizable categorization of communities via practice and self-identification is seldom easy to establish. See Anderson's discussion of this problem in Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge, U.K./New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 103–106.

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