

# Pentecostal Prosperity and the Political Economy of Contemporary Nigeria

**Sam Krinsky**

**Fulbright Scholar, Department of Sociology  
University of Ibadan**

**DOI: 10.36108/NJSA/7002/50(0110)**

Vol. 5 Issue 1, 2007

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to unravel the various strands of the prosperity gospel, the belief that personal material abundance should necessarily accompany Christian righteousness, as preached and practised in Nigeria. It offers explanation for the popularity of the prosperity gospel by examining ways in which it both reflects and critiques some of the most pressing moral and ideological contradictions confronting many Nigerians. The data are collected in the city of Ibadan through interviews of key informants, informal conversations with pastors and lay adherents, observation of Pentecostal services, and review of published audio, video and written material.*

## **Introduction**

Pentecostal Christianity is perhaps the most dynamic social movement to have emerged in sub-Saharan Africa in the post-colonial period, registering spectacular growth that has, in both numbers and influence, only accelerated in recent years. Although congregations with a self-understanding as ‘Pentecostal’ have been present in Nigeria since 1923 (Ayegboyin & Ukah, 2002, p. 78) the tradition remained relatively marginal in the larger field of Nigerian religious life for much of its history. Rather, the more recent and extraordinary growth of the movement is more directly traceable to a new variation that first emerged within the campus fellowships of southern Nigeria’s secondary and tertiary institutions in the early 1970s. By the end of the decade, several of these fellowships had already developed into more fully institutionalized churches and denominations, catalyzing a new wave of independent church establishments and evangelization crusades that began to spread across the sub-continent. In conjunction with similar trends in Latin America and parts of East Asia, African Pentecostalism has witnessed spectacular growth over this period, especially through the 1990s and 2000s (Anderson, 2001; Marshall-Fratani, 2001). Nigeria, and Yorubaland in particular, has throughout this period remained a focal point of African (and global) Pentecostalism (Anderson, 2001).

On an international level, Pentecostalism is identified most typically by the doctrine of Holy Spirit Baptism, whereby salvation and/or confirmation is received through an ecstatic infilling of the Holy Spirit, necessarily evidenced by speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) (Anderson, 2001, p. 168). The word Pentecostal is also closely associated with the practice of spiritual ‘gifts’ known as *charismata*, that is derived from this experience of having been infilled with the Holy Spirit. These *charismata* are described in Acts 2:17-18,

Romans 12:6-8, and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (Poewe, 1994, p. xi), and include healing, prophecy, discernment, and revelation, among others. Pentecostals are distinguished by a belief that the *charismata* held by the apostles in the first days of Christianity are again present in the modern world, indicating the coming end of days known as the *eschaton* (Archer, 2004).

The idea that personal material abundance should necessarily follow Christian righteousness – a doctrine popularly understood as the ‘prosperity gospel’ – has become an increasingly prominent feature of Nigeria’s never Pentecostalism over this period, even as the movement was strongly associated with a strict asceticism in its early years. Although highly controversial at first, the prosperity gospel – has become a broadly accepted position within Nigerian Christianity. While there certainly is a wide spectrum of economic value represented within the movement, ranging from more ‘holiness’ or ‘otherworldly’ – oriented churches to a host of ministries focused almost entirely on the acquisition of material blessings. ‘Prosperity,’ broadly speaking, is a discernible tendency in almost all sites of Pentecostal belief and practice, though it may be present to a greater or lesser extent at different moments and in different churches or denominations.

This paper is an attempt to unravel the various strands of the prosperity gospel as practiced and preached in Nigeria presently and to explain its vast popularity by examining the ways in which it both reflects and critiques some of the most pressing moral and ideological contradictions many Nigerians – and especially young Nigerians – have been forced to confront in a period so often characterized in terms of scarcity and crisis.

In particular, I believe a great deal of prosperity gospel’s appeal derives from its striking ability to simultaneously critique each side of the highly contradictory mix of both neo-patrimonial and neo-liberal modes of accumulation that have come to define much of Nigeria’s political economy in the post colonial era.

Paradoxically, however, although reform is the stated goal of the movement (and that of much of the rest of society, as well), more often than not, the prosperity teachings nonetheless still exhibit a set of values and logics that have been highly structured by the very same set of supposedly malevolent practices and institutions so vociferously demonized in their preaching. Whereas the critique of anti-social and ultimately self-destructive strategies of accumulation (whether in neo-liberal or neo-patrimonial form), endows the movement with a strong moral legitimacy in the eyes of its mostly upwardly aspiring adherents, the life-strategies recommended in their place, in order to remain plausible, must still address the reality of a political and economic order that, it would seem, strongly rewards predatory and self-serving agendas over and against more socially productive activities.

Given this seemingly intractable tension, Nigeria’s prosperity Christianity frequently exhibits a considerable moral ambivalence both towards the various means by which wealth is accumulated and the often conflicting set of social responsibilities that weigh heavily on everyday economic decision-making. I

believe it is largely for this reason that the prosperity gospel has been the source of so much controversy in recent years; although all agree that the movement is very much structured around its extremely harsh critique of unearned wealth, it is on precisely this same point that the movement is so frequently castigated by many non-adherents.

The following discussion, in addition to examining the Pentecostal critique of prevailing economic norms, will also focus considerably on the ways in which it very much mirrors the society it defines itself against.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Prosperity Gospel: An Overview**

Although Nigeria has become one of the leading centers of prosperity theology internationally, the prosperity movement (alternatively known as The Prosperity Gospel, The Faith Gospel, The Gospel of Prosperity, and the Health-Wealth Gospel) first emerged as an influential tradition within Christianity globally when preachers such as Kenneth Hagin and Kenneth Copeland began propagating their uplifting message to American Pentecostal circles in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (Gifford, 2002).

Many of the early Nigerian prosperity prophets and preachers, including the pivotal figure Benson Idahosa, then leader of the Church of God Mission International based in Benin City, received early support and training from prosperity institutes in the United States (ibid; Anderson, 2001). The works of both early and contemporary American prosperity preachers circulate widely in Nigeria presently, and Nigerian pastors broadly advertise their spiritual and intellectual debt to the movement's most prominent American figures. Although some observers have attempted to characterize the growth of the movement as a symptom of America's cultural imperialism, within Nigeria this form of Christianity has been sustained primarily by the innovations and enthusiasm of native-born Nigerians and bares their imprint strongly.

At its core, the prosperity gospel essentially boils down to a theological argument that all human debts and misfortunes have already been bought and paid for by Christ's sacrifice upon the cross, and that every Christian can live victoriously over sin, sickness, and poverty through their acceptance of Jesus as their Lord and Saviour (Gifford, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The data presented here is primarily the product of fieldwork conducted in the city of Ibadan, Oyo State, from September 2006 through July 2007. Methods of data collection include formal interviews with key informants, informal conversations with pastors and lay adherents, observation of Pentecostal services, and review of published audio, video and written material.

<sup>2</sup> In Nigerian Pentecostal discourse, the word 'Christian' often has a double meaning Pentecostal adherents will often refer to a 'Christian' as anyone professing belief in Christ, whether or not they have been genuinely 'born-again.' The term 'nominal Christian' is often also used in this sense. The word 'Christian', however, also refers

Pentecostal pastors often articulate this theology using a discourse of legal and natural law, such that the believer has a certain number of inalienable rights by God that can be claimed through dutiful obedience to his conditions for success, revealed to mankind both through scripture as well as the prophecies and revelations of his ‘anointed’ men and women. When the material and biological (i.e. health and fertility) blessings fail to materialize promptly, the defense is often made that God is not actually in breach of the ‘covenant’ he has formed with the Christian through his or her born-again experience, but rather it is only the timing and the precise specifications of the blessings that are at the discretion of God alone.

The prosperity gospel as practiced in Nigeria also draws heavily on a philosophy of ‘positive thinking’, similarly originating in the post-war economic expansion of the United States (ibid). Although ‘positive thinking’ remains analytically distinct from the theological position mentioned above, the philosophy’s core affirmation that one’s subjective experiences have the power to favourably alter social and material surroundings is also an important component of Nigerian prosperity thought. In most cases, this powerful property of human thought (attributed also to the spiritual power intrinsic in words themselves) is understood as working both through psycho-social as well as essentially esoteric or miraculous processes.

However, Nigerian prosperity preaching also exhibits a strong affinity to the more well-known Protestant-capitalist justifications for profit maximization closely associated with the works of Weber (Weber, 2001) and Smith (Smith, 2000). Briefly stated, this tradition argues that market forces are sufficient for ensuring that the pursuit of wealth be inextricable tied to the satisfaction of social needs (ibid), such that through hard work, ascetic discipline, and an entrepreneurial spirit, the dutiful Christian may aspire to please God through service to the social body simply by following his or her personal profit-motive (Weber, 2001). Labour is also frequently understood in normative terms within this tradition, conceived as just penitence for original sin. As such, labour also doubles as a disciplinary strategy in many respects, both through aiding in the management of personal anxiety and through its utility in overcoming the types of desire usually associated with sin (ibid).

---

exclusively to people who have been ‘born-again,’ indicating that they have fully and truly accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal Saviour, received salvation, and thereby been joined to the mystical body of Christ. The first usage refers to a religious practice, the second refers to a spiritual ontology, which may or may not be affected by the performance of traditional liturgies or sacraments. It is not uncommon to hear Pentecostal adherents refer to their prior life as that of ‘a Christian’ but not that of ‘*a Christian*’, with the emphasis indicating the switch between the two meanings that occurred during one’s born-again experience. When accusations of impropriety are made against professed born-again Christians, Pentecostal adherents typically rely on this double meaning to distance themselves from the accused, claiming that the transgressor was not, in fact, a genuine *Christian*, but only a nominal Christian or an impostor – the sin being proof enough that they had not truly been saved.

These three broad streams of thought – prosperity theology, positive thinking, and Protestant self-realization through labour – collectively characterize the better portion of what is understood as prosperity Christianity within Nigeria presently, although the prevalence of each argument or practice may vary between churches as well as within churches overtime. It should also be noted that different pastors and even the laity generally exercise considerable freedom in fashioning their own idiosyncratic interpretations and tend to apprehend these arguments rather holistically; although the above distinction is useful for its analytical clarity, it should not be mistaken as reflecting any kind of popularity perceived categorization of prosperity preaching within Nigerian thought.

However, before proceeding any further, it is also crucial to take note of the fact that Christianity far from the only intellectual tradition influencing the economic values of Pentecostals or any other Christians in contemporary Nigeria. Africa's distinct brand of post-colonial Christianity is a complex mixture of both Euro-American and African intellectual and cultural traditions, and Nigerian Pentecostal adherents are, in fact, strongly influenced by a whole other set of values originating in the indigenous or traditional philosophies of pre-colonial Africa.

Often enough, these pre-Christian beliefs are able to blend relatively seamlessly with accepted Christian doctrines. The extent to which Pentecostal thought in Yorubaland still revolves so centrally around a presently Christian concept of personal destiny – also known as *ori* in Yoruba Traditional Religion – is a prime example. Dr. Olukoya, general overseer of the popular Pentecostal Denomination Mountain of Fire and Miracles has even instructed his followers to “place your hands on your heads, because your head is a symbol of your destiny” (Observation, October 9, 2006, Ibadan) when leading prayer, echoing with a great deal of precision the traditional belief that one's “inner-head” (Idowu, 1962) is where destiny ultimately resides.

Moral action in the physical world, in the new religion as in the old, is equally framed in terms of its ability to frustrate or satisfy favourable destinies the point of religious practice in both systems being largely to improve the quality of one's life in the lived world. However, whereas *ori* in the traditional political economy referred primarily to fertility and longevity as well as the corresponding accumulation of social respect that large families and old age conferred, this same concept of life-path has been amended in an age of greater inequalities to also encompass social mobility and financial success in more explicitly quantitative terms.

Furthermore, in terms of the positive thinking elements in Nigeria's prosperity preaching, a close affinity can also be found to the still quite strong tradition in which thoughts and words are understood as affecting the material world through the power of spiritual entities, a notion that very much acts as a

kind of primary premise upon which much of Yoruba Traditional Religion is based.

### **Prosperity through Labour: The Holiness Tradition**

The Deeper Life Bible Church, founded by Pastor William F. Kumuyi, is one of the earliest and most influential of the new wave of Pentecostal churches that emerged from the campus fellowships of the early 1970s. Deeper Life, as it is popularly known, is broadly understood as representative of the 'holiness' ethic that defined the movement in its early days, and a closer look at Kumuyi's own evolution from a strict anti-materialism in this early period to a decidedly more capitalistic outlook at present can be instructive in the larger history of the movement.

For instance, the strictness that for many defines the Deeper Life Bible Church and the holiness ethic more generally is something also clearly evident in Kumuyi's own background. Echoing a common Pentecostal testimony, Kumuyi recalls his pre-salvation upbringing in an Anglican household as characterized by a predominantly moralistic understanding of sin and faith:

*Basically we knew that the Bible was very important as the word of God. But I didn't have an experiential knowledge of who Christ was and what he could do in our lives. We just went to church as a regular thing in the family, but I didn't have the experience of an intimate relationship with the Lord. My father was very strict; he wouldn't do this or that because of his religious background. (Ankomah, 2006)*

It was not until Kumuyi had already completed secondary school and was working as a mathematics teacher in Ikenne that he became a member of Apostolic Faith, a British-based and extremely ascetic denomination characteristic of the classical Pentecostal churches, and was born-again through a salvation experience on April 5th, 1964 (ibid).

Kumuyi's later spiritual development, like that of many other early Pentecostal leaders, took place primarily within the confines of a university campus when, in 1973, an initial 15 people began a non-denominational bible study group in Kumuyi's flat at the University of Lagos, where he was then lecturing and pursuing post-graduate work in mathematics (ibid). In 1977, he broke off his association with the Apostolic Faith over what he felt were too rigid controls over lay proselytizing, and transformed his informal fellowship into a full-fledged church in 1983 (ibid).

Kumuyi was also in his early period an active member of the Scripture Union (ibid), what was undoubtedly the most influential organization in the early days of the movement, and one noted for its extreme asceticism and other-worldly orientation. To this day, the epithet 'SU' is still applied to many Nigerian Christians pursuing what their peers consider a Christian life too extreme in its sobriety and intolerance both for sin and the material world, more generally. 'SUs' were known as people who did not laugh or tell jokes, maintained shabby appearances, and refused to study for exams as they were

seen as pointless exercises given the imminence of Christ's impending return (Marshall, 2006). Although this initial wave would pass over into a considerably more moderate phase amidst the rising tide of prosperity preaching in the 1990s especially, this early holiness ethic would leave a lasting imprint. Churches such as Deeper Life even forbade its members from watching television or drinking soft drinks well into the 1990s (Ibid).

In many congregations, the spectacle of a pastor owing his own car – even an inexpensive one – was considered a cause for outrage (ibid), implying that the pastor had been corrupted by a materialist, vain, self-interested, and inequitable world.

It is impossible to account for the enormous hostility towards both material goods and especially physical pleasures exhibited by the early Pentecostal movement without keeping in mind the tremendously destabilizing influence of the oil boom whose rise was closely contemporaneous to the early Pentecostal revival. The spectacular growth in both oil revenue and corruption that typified Nigeria in the 1970s and early 1980s – and the even more spectacular economic collapse that followed – is a history well-rehearsed at this point and needs no further elaboration here. Rather, it should be enough to call attention to the ways in which the spectacle of fast money bearing little relationship to any observable process of production (Apter, 2005) violently upended the previous understanding that social mobility could be achieved through hard work, education, self-discipline, and Christian obedience. This morally sanctioned framework for participation in the national (and international) economy had been forged largely through interaction with the mission churches (i.e. Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran) that bore the principal responsibility for education in the colonial system. They had arrived in Africa promoting the new Holy Trinity of Christianity, Commerce and Civilization (Peel, 2003). Mission education in the colonial period was largely oriented to disciplining and preparing colonial subjects for bureaucratic work in the civil service or otherwise for merchant jobs in an expanding agricultural economy (Mbembe, 2001). Although a Christian message of diligence, obedience, and patience was well-tailored to the realities of that earlier era (and, in fact, recognition from the social superiors who preached those very messages was crucial to economic and social success), the expanded personal freedoms, consumption possibilities, and extravagant graft of the oil years made the older disciplines harder to maintain.

The radical anti-materialism of the new wave Pentecostals should be understood both as a profound critique of the moral vacuum that was seen to accompany a growth in material wealth, and also a bitter reaction to the oil-fueled upstaging of this formerly agreed-upon criteria for social mobility. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that many outstanding students who had sacrificed a great deal of their youths in the struggle to gain acceptance to elite institutions would seek to challenge the emerging constellation of less

restrictive values and behaviours that were rapidly displacing their formerly privileged social positions.

Through aggressive evangelization and demonization of the afro-centric youth culture that typified the era, the early converts essentially were trying to reassert an older set of values in which they were already deeply invested, but whose social and material value had rapidly depreciated in the rapidly expanding oil-enclave political economy of the new age. However, once the Nigerian economy began to descend in its infamous decline, the corrupting effects of wealth no longer seemed such a concern when most people were only struggling to get by.

Kumuyi's evolution in this period, as is the case with the holiness tendency in Nigerian Pentecostalism moderated considerably to a far more positive attitude towards profit-oriented economic behaviour. Although preaching on the need for honesty and integrity in the vocation to which one has been 'called' is not inconsistent with the initial thrust of the movement, the emphasis did shift markedly to a far more worldly orientation and away from the more exclusive emphasis on victory over sin and the imminence of Christ's return that characterized the early days of the movement.

The vast distance Kumuyi has come since his SU days can be seen clearly in his regular contributions to *New African*, a pan-African news magazine which targets an international business and political elite. Kumuyi's columns in this value often take the form of bullet points, dispensing rather generic leadership advice than often makes little or no reference to God, Christ, or salvation.

A recent column begins:

*Are you a leader at the helm of your organization? And you think you've got all it takes to keep the organization running and moving up? But if good communication skills aren't among your credentials, your leadership is heading for storms. Effective leadership without effective communication is impossible.*  
(Kumuyi, 2007)

In lieu of scriptural references, Kumuyi proceeds to draw his points from an extensive list of American business school instructors and motivational speakers. Rather than apostles of Christ, the former SU member now exhorts his readers to follow in the footsteps of figures such as Gandhi, Nkrumah, and Lincoln, as well as "Europe's business celebrity and former chairman of ABB... Percy Barnevik, General Electric's Jack Welch, Chrysler's Lee Iacocca, and the brilliant constellations on the Fortune 500 CEOs" (ibid).

These figures were all ostensibly – and bizarrely – listed together for their outstanding communications skills, with no mention of the social, political, or religious significance of their lives. We can see clearly in the text that, notwithstanding whatever might have been sincere in his original message, Kumuyi's ultimate preoccupation has become, at present, social status in and of itself, devoid of any social, political, moral, or even spiritual considerations.

To be sure, Kumuyi's columns do still harp on his favourite themes of integrity, hard work, patience, and self-improvement, frequently citing his own success in building Deeper Life into an international church as a prime example. However, it appears that the question of ends that so roused Kumuyi's generation in its youth is carefully evaded in the pastor's present construction of moral leadership. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of status, it would seem, now hinges almost exclusively on the means by which it is attained. And although the strident refusal to countenance any form of corruption, among other favored talking points, is clearly a moral idea, other aspects of executive management – such as communications, for instance – factor into Kumuyi's vision principally in that they lead to power and prominence, once again, regardless of the ends to which such power is directed.

Furthermore, by the conspicuous non-invocation of Christ in his pleas for a more righteous economic elite, Kumuyi, even more astoundingly, implies that proper moral behaviour, especially in the economic field, is, in fact, a real possibility even without salvation through Christ. This position, if directly stated, would openly contradict one of the claims most essential to Nigerian Pentecostal teachings about wealth: not only in the pursuit of wealth illegitimate in the absence of salvation, but that it is also doomed to failure.

The 'Adamic' nature, in the most common Pentecostal formulation in Nigeria, is one that characterizes all non-Christians and makes them inextricably prone to self-destruction through indiscipline and over-consumption; sustained economic success is therefore a providential impossibility without the saving power of the Holy Spirit. No matter what temporary successes they might realize on the way, the unfaithful always end tragically.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Born-Again claims for moral superiority rest heavily on the notion that without Christ, sustained wealth is not only sinful, but impossible.

In practice, the members of Deeper Life and other holiness churches tend to stress piety, sobriety, diligence, self-reliance, commitment to their immediate families, and also trust in God as rather straightforward and reliable mechanisms for ensuring a relatively favourable realization of one's Christian destiny. While many do believe that God intervenes to secure employment or other financial benefits for his faithful, or else as a sign intended to galvanize their faith, the overall message is one of economic austerity and self-reliance

---

<sup>3</sup> Although Pentecostal adherents often have the afterlife in mind when prophesying the impending downfall of powerful figures who have prospered through anti-social or predatory behavior, more often than not they are referring to calamities that will befall the wicked in this life, a position more in accordance with traditional ideas about the role of the supernatural in enforcing social morality than Euro-Christian emphases on posthumous judgment and damnation.

quite consistent with the classic Weberian theories of rational, modernizing economic behaviour (Weber, 2001). It is also one well-tailored to the official rhetoric of the Nigerian state in the era of structural adjustment.

### **Prosperity through Miracles: The Faith Tradition**

Despite Pastor Kumuyi's drift over the years to his present ambivalence regarding questions of wealth and status, The Deeper Life Bible Church still very much represents the 'holiness' ethic among Nigerian Pentecostals more broadly. However, there also exists on the other end of the spectrum a vast array of what are known as more explicitly 'prosperity' churches, whose numbers have grown astronomically throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Such churches tend to promote a vision of economic behaviour far less conservative than that of their 'holiness' counterparts.

Perhaps no church, and no single person, better epitomizes the present popularity of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria than Bishop David Oyedepo, founder and leader of Living Faith International (a.k.a. Winners Chapel). Winners lay claim to one of the largest memberships of any Pentecostal denomination in Nigeria, and also the Faith Tabernacle, located in Ota, Ogun State, reputedly the largest church auditorium in the world. Although the church's detractors will claim that it advocates an amoral Christianity that demands no sacrifice of its vain, greedy, and naïve adherents who seek 'salvation' primarily for the material rewards they expect it to deliver, the core message of many of Oyedepo's sermons are actually indistinguishable from that of Deeper Life, even if the manner in which they are delivered is considerably more flashy.

Through sermons, books, cassettes, dvds/vcds, billboards, t-shirts, bumper stickers, writing tablets, and pens – just to cite a few of the many Winners-branded products I have seen – Oyedepo ceaselessly educates his followers on the importance of hard-work, productivity, efficiency, self-improvement, patience, self-reliance, planning, education, diligence, and piety not only as essential components of the entrepreneurial spirit in Nigeria but also as required of all true Christians. Oyedepo frequently agitates against corruption, exhorting his congregation never to accept money from politicians, that doing so will invite ruin, and that many powerful figures who sit atop the neo-patrimonial structures of post-colonial Nigeria will suffer divine retribution for their predatory accumulation of wealth and power. He argues that faith in God, commitment to one's nuclear family, and social contribution through national, political and business leadership are appropriate ends to which an entrepreneurial spirit should be devoted, are of high normative value in and of themselves, and surefire strategies for financial success.

These are all reliably safe themes to preach on in contemporary Nigeria. However, Oyedepo also expounds on several rather more controversial topics that, although they draw big responses from crowds, often sit uneasily with the less objectionable moralizing against greed, corruption and valueless living that are standard fare in Christian churches of any stripe in Nigeria.

In essence, Oyedepo wants his followers to be rich. Not just to get by. And not just to live comfortably as a reward for diligent labor. Rather, Oyedepo wants his people to get rich by strategically triggering divine interventions, and thereby amassing fortunes on the basis of minimal work, and with little concern for the social contributions and participation in a national economy. Oyedepo's favourite talking point – by far – is the divine law, revealed to him prophetically, stating that in order for his people to get rich in this manner, they must first 'sow their seed' in the form of tithes and other financial contributions to his church, and only then do they become eligible to reap supernatural blessings 'a hundredfold' of what was put in. "All you need to do," Oyedepo proclaims, "is to favour His Kingdom and you will encounter kingdom wealth without sweat" (Oyedepo, 2005, p.123).

This unapologetic statement of a fairly straightforward interpretation of prosperity theology, will most likely appear as particularly vulgar to observers more accustomed to Euro-Christian tradition that is still very much inspired by a pre-capitalist understanding of the spirit world. While the historic, largely pre-monetary modelling of production, consumption, and exchange in the spiritual realm does still find its way into Nigerian Pentecostal speech (i.e. sowing and reaping, shepherd and flock, the harvesting of souls, the miracle of the loaves and fish, etc). It is now accompanied by a new lexicon derived primarily from capitalist economy accompanied by a new lexicon derived primary from capitalist economy theory. Oyedepo even goes so far as to speak of contributions to the church as "righteous investments" (ibid, p.360), thanksgiving to God as "an unshakeable strategy for unlimited prosperity" (ibid, p. 295), and that through attendance at all-night vigils, "God is adding value to your life (Observation, December 7, 2006, Ota, Nigeria). What was once imagined as the universal brotherhood of all believers is now more likely to be referred to as a set of "profitable" and "productive friendships" within the Church (Oyedepo, 2005, p.300). "Invest in Christianity," the prophet urges his congregation: "be investing in spiritual resource materials" (Observation, December 5, 2006, Ota, Nigeria).

In Pentecostal economics, factors such as faith as well as Naira, in fact, can circulate freely between visible and invisible realms, distributing costs and benefits to all participants according to relatively standard notions of investment, profit, and interest. These in their broad outlines, should be familiar to everyone possessing even a rudimentary sense of modern economic processes. Furthermore, this economy is thought to be structured by an elaborate system of binding spiritual contracts (known as 'covenants') that enforce the proper functioning of market relations in much the same way secular markets depend on state-enforced webs of contract law.

It is within this framework that Oyedepo situates most of his reaching on 'giving' – a notion, as he defines it, quite far removed from traditional norms of Christian charity, and more akin to his use of the word 'investment' in other

contexts. In brief, Winner's does not officially maintain that it is legitimate purely to seek wealth for one's own self-aggrandizement.

Rather, Christians, through their love of Christ, must be sincerely motivated to give as much as they can to God and His works (in practice, this usually means contributions to Winner's Chapel itself), and will only be prospered by God as a result if the giving was not motivated by a desire for gain in any way. "Don't give for the sake of receiving," Oyedepo (2005) writes; "that's the wrong kind of giving" (p.122)! The logical structure of the argument, however, typically contradicts the moral message it claims to be propagating: while an emphasis on giving is sometimes found in Christian books and other media, they are almost always advertised by appeals to self-interest. The back cover of Oyedepo's 400-page tome *Understanding Financial Prosperity* (2005), for instance, hooks the reader with promises of "divine impartation\* to make you a celebrity on earth," and motivates potential readers to "Get ready for a flight into realms of untold wealth!".

Of particular interest is the fact that although Oyedepo does frequently include some obligatory teachings about social giving, he also makes it abundantly clear where the Christian should concentrate his efforts: "Don't ever give any man what you won't give to God! That's not correct" (ibid, p.112). And also:

*Oh yes, I'm involved in ministering to the poor and the needy; but there's nobody I will minister to in this world with things near what I minister to God. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart. . . .' that's the first and the great commandment. You don't go to the second when you have not done the first. (ibid).*

As Oyedepo never specifies any conditions in which a Christian's giving to the Lord will be complete, the logical implication is to give infinitely to the Lord and thus never to anyone else. Despite this seeming embrace of economic individualism and ringing endorsement of the merit-favoring principles of the market (and by market, I mean the spiritually-mediated arena of economic exchange in which the righteous always prosper), a closer look at the mechanisms by which many adherents understand themselves to be getting prospered reveals a wrong counter-logic more analogous to the neo-patrimonial elements of Nigeria's political economy. This occurs more than any of the idealized properties of capital that appear so prominently in the Bishop's prophecies.

Although frequent testimonies are offered in which bank accounts mysteriously reveal the rapid multiplication of Christians' savings without any explanation whatsoever, in response to point questions about *how* God prospers his faithful, most respondents I have spoken with state quite clearly that God works predominantly through the benevolence of intermediary patrons sent for that purpose - and who might be willing to bestow a small dash to a fellow Christian.

In fact, the vast majority of testimonies to financial miracles I have encountered privilege some form of affective resource distribution, usually in the form of small gifts from one acquaintance to another, the value of which is primarily symbolic and does not have a significant long-term impact on the

recipient's well-being. Such gifts usually are narrated as having arrived right at the recipient's most desperate point of need, and especially when the giver is ostensibly unaware of the desperate moment the recipient is in.

However, to cite just one example of how supposed acts of divine intervention tend to flow through existing patronage-networks in a manner that *can* also significantly impact individuals' financial status, an assistant pastor at a small, single-congregation Pentecostal church in Ibadan offered the following testimony:

*I was 'born-again' in October 1987. I was 27 years. And then I was based in Ilesha, that's in Osun State. I had finished my masters and I had finished youth service, and I was trying to get a job . . . I had not been able to secure any good job. So myself, and some of my friends, we started an eatery. And my other two friends had their regular jobs, so I was always staying at the eatery, marketing our chicken and chips and drinks and suya. That's all we were really serving . . .*

*I won't say being 'born-again' was something my father taught me. My father, he was a teacher, and a Reverend in the Anglican Church, and he had always been trying to get me to attend church regularly. But we quarrelled over that. That was way back in 1981, while I was still a student in the university. Then, as a student in the university, I joined, let me say, one club, the palm wine drinkers club. I was a member. Even a high officer there, and so I got to know a lot more about the Yoruba traditional religion. That is one of the aims of the club, to still propagate the Yoruba traditional religion. I got to know all of these things. . . it's not in any particularly strict or serious manner. No. It's just to say look 'look, look, look, you are a Yoruba man or an Igbo person or a Hausa person.' Just to say that you have a culture. There is not any particular indoctrination. Like a social club. You can't drink beer like there or any of that stuff What we drink is just palm wine. Nothing spiritual. No. Just like us, just young guys, just feeling like doing it. God from one institution to another say we are going on libation. And what we would do on libation is just get drunk...*

*No. It was not through my parents that I became a Christian. Because I remember one incident, that was in 1981. I am home, and my father calls my attention, and asks me who I want to worship, because I refused to go to church with him. He said who do I want to worship? Do I want to be Christian or what do*

*I want to do? I told him Sango. He gave me an ultimatum not to miss church the next day. But there was libation, that was night, and I slept through church, and my father, he kicked me out. . . I heard on the radio, later, that he was dead. That was one month later . . .*

*I was very bad after my masters . . . I was selling chicken and chips, and people would talk to me like I was just somebody. I am old enough to be a lecturer and they are ordering me around! . . .*

*I was invited to a Full Gospel meeting by my friend, a Deeper Life. It was there I first heard the salvation message. I began to pray for things to change. I said to God, that for things to change, I will be a Christian. Nothing happened.*

*I got a call then from my uncle who I had not spoken to. His friend was hiring for a lecturer. And I did everything wrong. My resume was late. I was late to the interview. I already applied to the same job once, but did not win. But the friend of my uncle, and he was on the committee, and kept saying how good my answers are, and then everyone thought they were good answers....*

*The job made me start looking for God. (Interview, May 2, 2007, Ibadan, Nigeria).*

## **Conclusion**

Richard Joseph (1987), in his seminal text *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*, succinctly summarizes the prevailing mode of the country's political economy as one that primarily "rest[s] on the justifying principle that. . . offices should be competed for and then utilized for the personal benefit of office holders as well as their reference or support group" (p.8). Given the Nigerian state's displacement of much of the nation's private sector beginning with the surge in oil revenues in the early 1970s, this has meant, in practice, that a critical portion of the wealth circulating within the nation- space does not flow through competitive markets that, at least in theory, might reward merit and productivity. Rather, wealth circulates within affective social networks where political support is exchange for preferential treatment from office holders. In periods of economic growth, this system can be maintained for extended periods. However, in periods of economic decline, these networks that so many Nigerians rely on for survival both directly and indirectly become stretched very nearly to their breaking point (Cooper, 2002).

Although Pentecostalism is now present to some extent within nearly every socio-economic subcategory in the country, it still draws its greatest support from the same demographic pool in which the movement first emerged: among students and youths, among people conversant in English,

and among people who have had some education (and therefore great expectations placed on them to help support other members of these very much informal support structures), but little in the way of skills or opportunities to earn a satisfactory living even for themselves, let alone any dependents. These are clerics and teachers, students and small business owners, traders, and civil servants.

Social pressures for the redistribution of wealth typically are experienced as tremendously onerous by this population (Smith, 2007) as their social, usually familial networks are able to make powerful claims on their limited incomes, given especially that much of their earning power has been made possible by others' sacrifices in raising money for school fees and other supports early in life.

At the same time, however, these networks are also seen to be instrumental in the individual's continued striving for greater success that is, after all, still so dependent upon the kinds of opportunities only a well-placed friend or relative can secure. This is a class caught in the middle, and the ambivalent and contradictory attitudes it exhibits towards the principle of affective resource distribution so foundational to the traditional moral economy. This reflects its ambivalent position in the contemporary social hierarchy.

Although a world of open and competitive markets, where each individual can earn a living strictly on merit and comfortably enjoy a full measure of autonomy is a fantasy indulged in by many - and one actively encouraged not only by many pastors, but also by much of the international development theory, *as well* - the reality is something quite far removed.

Nigerian Pentecostals may proclaim the existence of a world where hard work can triumph over any circumstance, but are nonetheless also more than ready to accept the idea that hard work alone is not always sufficient, that money is often acquired without work, and that wealth need not bear any clear relationship to any observable processes of production. And in a world of endemic graft, a high incidence of theft, armed robbery, and most controversially also a host of deceits and cons collectively referred to as '419', most Nigerians need little convincing of this basic point, and even carry some of its implications over into their understanding of the spirit world itself.

It is far from an original contribution of mine to note that human understanding of unseen worlds are very often constructed through analogies with the prevailing social order. I believe that this principle has been very much at work in shaping the evolution of Pentecostalism in Nigeria as the reciprocity posited between the convert and his God (and/or prophet), can, at times, appear not so unlike that which binds the client and his patron. Both relationships are structured by binding but yet unwritten contracts, both are considered moral within their own social frameworks, both seek to channel money deriving from an unseen origin within networks defined largely by

shared communal-cum-spiritual ties. Also, in both cases are opportunities for economic advancement thought to be exchanged primarily for the successful mobilization of souls/clients in support of the patron's power and prestige, and in both cases do resources flow downwards in the form of selectively restricted privileges and upward in the form of regular tributary payments (i.e. tithes/dash).

In the case of many common practices of '419' furthermore, the parallels between the Pentecostal logics of accumulation and those which the movement's adherents most vociferously critique stand in even greater relief. In a situation where fake real estate agents run a thriving business pretending to sell people's houses while they are away at work, and in a context where unemployed graduates are faced with ready-made opportunities to impersonate oil executives in international internet scams (Smith, 2007; Apter, 2005), it should come as no surprise that the prosperity gospel should reflect an economic calculus largely calibrated to the value of appearances. If many Nigerians think presently that they can get rich quick largely through the presentation of a carefully crafted staging of wealth, it is because many Nigerians actually can; dissimulation *is*, after all, perhaps the most important core of what is meant by '419' (Smith, 2007; Apter, 2005; Ruth, 2006).

"Who you sit with determines how you speak," proclaims Oyedepo, echoing this common understanding of social mobility: "You can't sit with lawyers and not speak like lawyers" (Observation, December 5, 2006, Ota, Nigeria). Therefore, it is essential to "associate with people who are higher than you. That is how you improve yourself" (Observation, December 7, 2006, Ota, Nigeria). In much the same spirit, Oyedepo (2005) encourages his followers: "let your appearance and language express abundance.... so shall you be prospered" (p. 288).

Verbal assurances that such strategies never fail are most typically offered at nearly every available opportunity in the more flagrant prosperity churches, and almost always are accompanied by carefully patterned testimonies further advertising their effectiveness. And yet, at the end of the day, the question still stands as opaque as ever as to whether or not any of this preaching actually works. Does it succeed in changing people's behavior? If so, does this new behavior significantly improve the individual's financial well-being? Does it have an aggregate on the wealth of the nation as a whole?

These are not easy questions to answer. However, if we are to accept Oyedepo's basic premise that the Church essentially acts like any other bank except that it yields a miraculously high rate of returns, then the economic philosophy he advocates is, in fact, the very archetype of the saving, planning, ascetic, gratification-deferring, entrepreneurial ideal posited by early modernization theorists such as Arthur Lewis, and of course, also Weber in an earlier era (Leys, 1996). Indeed, prosperity appeals to invest in the Lord and work hard in his service through profitable activities do very much double - inadvertently - as an extraordinarily ambitious campaign to raise sub-Saharan Africa's historically low savings rate.

In effect, some of these funds are even being invested rather profitably, in the form of elite universities and other private schools in precisely the same period when the Nigerian state and major international partners such as the World Bank have greatly reduced support for higher education (Polgreen, 2009). Although more strongly holiness-oriented pastors such as Kumuyi articulate a less miraculous vision of how a certain ethic is transformed into economic value, the major points of emphasis bare a close resemblance to

Oyedepo's in this respect.

Unfortunately, the question of whether or not such preaching is producing a cumulative effect on the Nigerian economy is most likely impossible to address definitely; membership in a Pentecostal church is, after all, a strictly voluntary endeavour, meaning that any differential in financial success between members and non-members could be explained equally by the distorting self-selection of the data set. Given this property of the movement, it is different to say categorically that any one trend is happening *because* of the incursion of the prosperity churches, but only that they appear to be a popular vehicle for the articulation of the very same set of economic and social tendencies that have made them so compelling in the first place.

What can be said with greater certainty, however, is that Nigeria's prosperity Christianity does appear to offer a surprisingly appealing venue for the mediation of desire and its frustration in a context characterized by excesses of both. To my mind, it seems plainly apparent that many of the most pressing social dilemmas Nigerians have been forced to confront since the rise of the oil economy in the early 1970s relate to the enormous and still expanding chasm separating a relatively high set of expectations for personal prosperity and social freedom, on the one hand, and the comparably meager opportunities for the satisfaction of such desires, on the other.

Simply put, the vast pool of underemployed graduates populating Southern Nigeria's cities and towns in this period have been socialized to aspire to a standard and style of living that is squarely beyond their reach, and nonetheless have been impressed upon to shoulder a degree of social indebtedness to familial and social networks that they are unable to afford.

That the prosperity gospel in and of itself would be capable of satisfactorily resolving these contradictions in the absence of other independently developing and surely quite profound changes in the objective conditions of the Nigerian political economy is certainly far too much to demand. What most adherents to definitely gain from the prosperity churches, however, is an undeniable ability to enjoy themselves during services, to feel 'rich' (even if the riches are still pending), and to proclaim proudly "I am a Winner!" despite whatever else may be taking place in their lives. It provides its adherents with a chance to collectively acknowledge their wants and desires while still attempting to discipline themselves against temptations to engage in criminal or otherwise anti-social behaviors in pursuit of that wealth, freedom, and prestige, the newly sanctified value of which they defend through their practice.

While some adherents may actually come out ahead through the connections and new confidences developed through membership in the Pentecostal churches, easily as many participants greatly misplace tremendously valuable time and money in a type of 'investment' that is unlikely to produce any significant material results. Most damaging, however, the diversion of resources into Christian activity and away from intra-familial networks has significantly frayed many of the already quite fragile social bonds that most analysts agree have been instrumental in helping people across the sub-continent manage the uncertainties associated with what has broadly been termed a development 'crisis'.

However, it must be restated that any attempt to apprehend the aggregate consequences of these essentially generational trends is inevitably a rather speculative task. I would argue that any observer of Nigerian society should take seriously the points of concern raised in churches such as Deeper Life or Winner's Chapel, targeted as they are to so many of the most pressing of the nation's socio-economic tensions.

Whether this movement will survive another generation and remain relevant to those raised in its wake is one of the more intriguing questions posed by this present juncture in the country's history. That this movement has captured the imagination of so many young Nigerians striving to transform themselves, their lives, and their society, should be beyond doubt; whether this effort has the capacity to actually succeed, if only in part, in the transformation it invokes - and whether for better or worse - is a question still very much up in the air, and one that may indeed have significant ramifications for the nation's overall development, both in this generation as well as those yet to come.

### References

- Anderson, A. (2001). *African reformation: African initiated Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc.
- Ankomah, B. (October, 2006). Deeper Life: Year of Transformation. *New African*, 455, 1-24.
- Apter, A. (2005). *The Pan-African nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*. Chicago: The University of Chicago press.
- Archer, K.J. (2004). Pentecostal Story: The Hermeneutical Filter for the Making of Meaning. *Pneuma*, 26(1), 36-59.
- Ayegboyin, D. & Ukah, A. (2002). Taxonomy of Churches in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective. *Orita: Madan Journal of Religious Studies*.
- Barber, K. The Religious Desegregation of Popular Moral Discourse in Yoruba Theatre and Video Drama, 1948-1993. Unpublished paper.
- Cooper, F. (2002). *Africa since 1940: the Past of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gifford P. (2002). *Ghana's new Christianity: Pentecostalism in a globalizing African economy*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Idowu, E.B. (1962). *Oṣiṣṣe: God in Yoruba belief* London: Longmans.
- Joseph, R. (1987). *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumuyi, W. (June, 2007). *New African*. London: IC Publications. Reprinted from www.kubanetnet.
- Leys, C. (1996). *The Rise & Fall of Development Theory*. Nairobi: EAEP.
- Marshall-Fratani, R. (2001). Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism. In Marshall-Fratani, R. & Corten, A. (Ed.), *Between Babel and the Pentecost: transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (p.1-28). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Marshall, R. (2006). *The Politics of Pentecostalism, 1975-2000*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oxford University.
- Mbembe, J.A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. Studies on the history of society and culture, 41: Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oyedepo, D. (2005). *Understanding Financial Prosperity*. Canaan Land,

- Nigeria: Dominion Publishing House.
- Peel, J.D.Y. (2003). *Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Peel, J.D.Y. Olaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development *The Journal of Development Studies*: 139-165.
- Poewe, K.O. (1994). *Charismatic Christianity as a global culture*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.
- Polgreen, L. (May 20, 2007). Africa's Storied Universities: Jammed and Crumbling. *The New York Times*, 12.
- Smith, A. (2000). *The Wealth of Nations*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Smith, D. (2007). *A Culture of Corruption: everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weber, M.T. Parsons, et al. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.