

On the Theologico-Theatrical: Explaining the Convergence of Pentecostalism and Popular Culture in Nigeria

As the supply of 'assurances of salvation' in the Nigerian religious market exceeds supply, Pentecostal pastors are turning to popular culture to help expand their congregations, writes Ebenezer Obadare.

Dilemmas

Over time, Nigerian Pentecostalism has taken on many of the externalities of popular culture in Nigeria, creating a unique composite of spirituality and secular entertainment. This enfolding of Pentecostalism and popular culture is one of the more fascinating aspects of the continued evolution of Nigerian Pentecostalism. What accounts for this joining at the hip? What socio-cultural and economic dynamics are at work here? Whither the imperative in Nigerian Pentecostalism to outsource the work of inspiration to performers and jesters? What light does this convergence of the spiritual and the profane throw on both?



Christ Embassy Ibadan North “Night of Bliss” poster with comedians Buchi and Bishop Chikancy among others Photo Credit: Ebenezer Obadare.

My answers to these questions fall under three not necessarily distinct rubrics, but before offering them, I will supply two vignettes to demonstrate the phenomenon.

Vignettes

In October 2015, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Lagos Province 20, was in the middle of preparations for a three-day outdoor crusade, and Pastor Toyin Ogundipe, who is also professor of Botany at the University of Lagos (UNILAG), needed a personality who could be relied upon to galvanize the audience. After weighing his options, Pastor Ogundipe decided that popular Fuji musician, Alhaji Wasiu Alabi, better known as Pasuma (or “Paso” for short), was the ideal candidate for the job, and he rang him up. Although a Born Again Christian, Pastor Ogundipe, a lover of [Fuji music](#), apparently saw nothing wrong with inviting Pasuma, a practicing Muslim and one of the most famous faces in the Nigerian entertainment industry, to come and fire up a Christian audience. Pasuma would later confirm as much [in an interview](#), pointing out that during the telephone conversation with Pastor Ogundipe, the latter had brushed aside his initial rejection of the invitation by reassuring him that all he needed from him, Pasuma, was to “come there... so we can get one or two or three people to change their lives. We want to use you to change some people’s hearts” (10:55).

Although Pasuma and Pastor Ogundipe clinched a deal, the crusade would not go ahead as planned, for hardly had the poster of the event featuring, among other things, a large picture of Pasuma sporting his trademark dark glasses gone into circulation when it ran into a storm of criticism. Most of the criticism centered on the propriety of inviting into the “sacred space” of a church “crusade” a “Special Guest Artist” who (1) happens to be a practicing Muslim, and (2) whose music is notorious for its profanity and ribaldry. As criticism mounted, the RCCG hierarchy intervened quickly by canceling the planned crusade and suspending the errant pastor.

As it happens, Pastor Ogundipe was not the first pastor of a major Pentecostal church to invite a secular artiste to, as it were, light up his congregation. In April of the same year, Senior Pastor Bolaji Idowu of Harvesters International Christian Church Center, Lekki, Lagos, had drawn flak for inviting emerging singer-songwriter Korede Bello to perform his hit song, ‘God Win,’ to the congregation in celebration of Easter Sunday. Of the many condemnations of Pastor Idowu, the [angst-ridden statement](#) by US-based Pastor Olusola Fabunmi of the RCCG, City of Faith in Maryland, went farthest in summarizing the concerns of those worried by what they saw as the latest instance of the church’s seemingly inexorable surrender to “the world”:

But it’s written here, that when we chose (sic) the way of the world, we have clearly chosen our paths; becoming an enemy of God. Please, there must be a clearly defined boundary of who sings, and/or ministers in churches. Some of the questions that come to mind are: is he born again? Sanctified with the spirit of God and baptized in the Holy Spirit? Also, let’s ask ourselves, what’s even the purpose of people singing in churches and Christian concerts? So I believe very strongly that one major purpose of choristers or Psalmists singing is to prepare the minds and hearts of the people for the word of God.

Since these two incidents, and for all the widespread condemnation, the entanglement of Nigerian Pentecostalism with Nigerian popular entertainment has in fact intensified. For instance, during field research in Ibadan in the summer of 2017, I observed that popular artistes were represented on a significant number of billboard advertisements for Pentecostal church events. In some of them, the entertainers in question were, like the aforementioned Pasuma, described as “Special Guest Artistes.” Like visual prompts intended to arrest the gaze and tantalize the prospective attendee (this being Nigeria, I often wondered whether some of the artistes in those advertisements were even aware of their presence in them), other billboards carried only the images of popular entertainers without any information as to their specific roles in the advertised events. The odds of sharing the pew with WizKid¹ next Sunday? What better way to find out than to be physically present at Sunday service?

Gospel Comedy



Poster for hybrid church-comedy program featuring gospel entertainer Olarewaju Bolaji (Big B) and comedians Woli Arole and Woli Agba, among others
Photo Credit: Ebenezer Obadare

Furthermore, and in a notable deepening of the trend, not only is it gradually becoming de rigueur to invite standup comics to perform at regular Sunday services (a practice that, similar to the invitation of Pasuma and Korede Bello, has drawn fire from a section of the Christian community)² a new sub-genre of Nigerian comedy known as “Gospel Comedy” appears to have taken form. The leading names in this emerging comic form are, in no particular order Woli Agba (real name Ayo Ajewole), Akpororo (Jephthah Bowoto), Mazi Prosper, Bishop Chikancy, Buchi (Onyebuchi Ojeh), M.C. Crucio, Woli Arole (Bayegun Oluwatoyin), DA 13th Disciple (Adefuwa Oluwagbemiga), Gee Jokes (Adejobi Omogbolahan), and Aboki 4 Christ (Olufemi Michael). By definition, if not practice, Gospel Comedy crystallizes the emerging convergence of Pentecostalism and popular culture in Nigeria. And because they are self-confessed Christians, hence speaking from within the fold, gospel comedians, unlike “regular” comedians, appear to enjoy greater artistic license regarding otherwise theologically sensitive material. As a matter of fact, such is their desire to emphasize the primacy of their identities as Born Again Christians that many of them (Woli Arole for instance) typically preface their commencements with the caveat that “I am not a comedian.”

Propositions

I propose the following explanations.

I. One explanation is that such is the inherent permissiveness, some would say promiscuity, of Yorùbá metaphysics, that such an embrace could not be avoided. There is solid literature on the subject, notably the late sociologist J.D.Y. Peel’s oeuvre, which locates this permissiveness in the dynamic copresence of three religious traditions (Islam, Christianity, and indigenous Orisa) in the Yorùbá space and imagination. In [a recent study](#), I drew on this scholarly tradition to argue that a culturally mandated amity among otherwise competitive religious traditions is a major explanation for Muslim adoption of Pentecostal devotional and evangelistic repertoires in western Nigeria. The point is that given the power and widespread acceptance of this metaphysics, the extension of an invitation to a popular entertainer who happens to be a Muslim is not the singular act of transgression it would appear to be at first glance. Nor is there any obvious contradiction in a Born Again Christian like Pastor Ogundipe being partial to Fuji music as many Yorùbás, Muslim and Christian, are. Indeed, not only has the Fuji scene always been the best place to judge the vitality or otherwise of popular culture as conducted in Yorùbá,³ the music itself has played an outsize role in the liberalization of the Yorùbá public sphere. One conclusion from this is that, in extending an invitation to Pasuma, Pastor Ogundipe was unwittingly validating two facts, one cultural, the other sociological.

The cultural fact is that although both the pastor and the entertainer profess allegiance to two different faiths, they remain, culturally speaking, *sons of the same mother*. Further, Pastor Ogundipe was validating the sociological fact of Fuji's undoubted eminence as the most innovative form of popular music in contemporary western Nigeria. While a full development of this observation falls outside the ambit of this discussion, I note in passing that over time, and in part through a process of steady appropriation that is classic Yorùbá, Fuji music has transcended its religious origins in urban working class Muslim Ramadan ritual to become a transnational, class-neutral, crossover secular genre. As a crossover genre, not only has it internalized the Yorùbá *idea* of Jesus as a cultural figure for multi-purpose social invocation, which means that Christian songs of appeasement for heavenly intervention have been assumed into its repertoire; it has taken full advantage of Jùjú's decline as a Yorùbá musical form.⁴ Pasuma is, if nothing else, the very emblem of this transition, arguably the most successful crossover artiste in the contemporary Nigerian music industry. Hence the appeal—Fuji's and Pasuma's—to Pastor Ogundipe. Nothing, it seems, not even Pentecostalism, a force of nature in its own right, can resist the propulsive energy of Fuji.

II. A second explanation has to do with the specific character of Pentecostalism itself, especially as a form of mediation "taking place" in a public sphere underwritten by liberalization and commercialization of the media. Anthropologist Birgit Meyer's [astute observation](#) regarding Ghanaian Pentecostalism's transgressiveness applies to the Nigerian context: "Relatively undisturbed by the state, but all the more indebted to the emerging image economy, Pentecostalism has spread into the public sphere, disseminating signs and adopting formats not entirely of its own making and, in the process, has been taken up by popular culture. In the entanglement of religion and entertainment, new horizons of social experience have emerged, thriving on fantasy and vision and popularizing a certain mood oriented toward Pentecostalism" (308). Similarly, in his work on Malawi, anthropologist Rijk van Dijk [shows how](#) Pentecostal ideology unwittingly created "the space to experience witchcraft in terms of mockery, laughter and amusement" (99). In Nigeria, and as I have argued elsewhere,⁵ the incorporation of Pentecostalism into popular culture is indicated by, among other things, the [celebrification](#)⁶ and eroticization of the figure of the pastor; the [appropriation](#) of media technologies by Pentecostal churches; and the conversion of many popular entertainers to Pentecostalism (cf. anthropologist Jesse Weaver's [work on the religious conversion](#) of comedians and musicians in Ghana), resulting in the further blurring of the boundaries between secular and religious entertainment. Significantly, not only are popular entertainers converting to Pentecostalism; in an emergent trend, a growing number of retirees from the Nigerian movie industry, Nollywood, are taking up pastoring. The list of retired movie stars who are now bona fide pastors of Pentecostal churches includes Eucharia Anunobi-Akwu, Ernest Azuzu, Kanayo O. Kanayo, Zack Orji, Larry Koldsweat, and Liz Benson. One result of all this, especially the appropriation of media technologies, is the transformation of the religious landscape across the African continent. A more directly relevant effect is what Hackett [describes as](#) the facilitation of "homogenizing cultural flows" (258). The mutual interpenetration of Pentecostalism and popular culture in Nigeria sits against this all-important backdrop.

III. A third explanation for the convergence of Nigerian Pentecostalism and popular culture is the commercial imperative, i.e., the need by churches to adapt to the changing conditions of an intensely competitive religious marketplace. One effect of the success of Pentecostalism as the dominant form of Christianity in Nigeria and several key African countries is the sheer explosion in the number of churches. As Pentecostalism has exploded, so also has its appetite for space, as historian Olufunke Adebayo [demonstrates in her analysis](#) of Pentecostal appropriation of public spaces like nightclubs, hotels, and cinema halls in Nigeria. I propose (1) that the identified success of Pentecostalism has led to a glut in the supply of "religious goods," and (2) that Pentecostal churches' cultivation of popular culture, as illustrated by the overture to popular entertainment figures, is in part explicable by the logic of competition in a saturated religious marketplace. I argue that because the *supply* of what Robert B. Ekelund, et al., [describe as "assurances of salvation"](#) arguably now exceeds its *demand* in the Nigerian religious market, churches, especially Pentecostal churches, are forced to come up with all manner of "product differentiation" innovations in order to either hold on to loyal patrons (existing members of the congregation) or attract new customers. This is why, for instance, the billboard advertisement of the RCCG Lagos Province 20 that I referred to at the beginning not only features an image of Pasuma, but also tantalizes prospective attendees with "gift items" like flat screen televisions, motorcycles, mass transportation tricycles popularly known as "Keke Marwa" or "Keke NAPEP," and electric power generators. A related and no less plausible argument is that, in a context of serious and persistent economic deprivation, "assurances of salvation" are no longer enough to draw crowds to church; accordingly, churches have to offer other products (entertainment, commodities, etc.) *in addition to* their core product.

Summary

The intertwining of Pentecostalism and popular culture in Nigeria is a complex phenomenon, and the foregoing is merely a sketch and a preliminary attempt to offer an explanation. While Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon, the power of local inscription means that general hypotheses must be advanced with caution. In the Nigerian Yorùbá world, a pragmatic cultural disposition gives rise to a Pentecostalism that is accepting of popular culture, generating new spiritual and artistic forms that warrant scholarly analysis.

This article was first published on the [Contending Modernities blog](#).

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

End Notes

[1] Popular Nigerian entertainer. Real name Ayodeji Ibrahim Balogun.

[2] The [most vocal critic of this practice](#) is Pastor Mike Bamiloye, founder of the Mount Zion Faith Ministries. Accessed June 3, 2018. Interestingly, as dramatist, actor, producer, owner of a television station—Mount Zion Television—and pioneer in the Nigerian Christian film industry, Bamiloye arguably played a leading role in introducing Nigerian Pentecostalism to popular culture.

[3] I thank Tade Ipadeola for this insight.

[4] Jùjú's slow decline is due to many reasons, and awaits a full accounting. My tentative guess is that the decline owes in part to the conversion of one of Jùjú's leading exponents, Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey, to Pentecostalism in the early 1990s, marking the importation of Jùjú into "the mainstream of Christian music" (see Kalu 2007, 25). Crucially, the importation was facilitated by the fact that in its basic identity as a form of popular culture, Jùjú was essentially "Christian". If my guess is right, Jùjú is a victim of Pentecostalism's success, insofar as Pentecostalism further blurred the line between Jùjú and Christian Gospel music.

[5] Ebenezer Obadare, "The Charismatic Porn-Star: Social Citizenship and the West African Pentecostal Erotic" *Citizenship Studies*, 22(6), 2018. Forthcoming.

[6] As opposed to 'celebritization.'

Further Reading:

Olufunke Adeboye, "A Church in a Cinema Hall? Pentecostal Appropriation of Public Space in Nigeria" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 42(2): 145- 171, 2012.

Rijk van Dijk, "Witchcraft and skepticism by proxy: Pentecostalism and laughter in urban Malawi" In Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, ed. *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, Witchcraft and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2001).

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Robert B. Ekelund, Robert F. Herbert, Robert D. Tollison, *The Marketplace of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006).

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Ebenezer Obadare, "The Muslim Response to the Pentecostal Surge in Nigeria: Prayer and the Rise of Charismatic Islam" *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2/1: 75- 91, 2016.

Jesse Weaver Shipley, "Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana" *Cultural Anthropology*, 24(3): 523- 552, 2009.