

## **Freedom from the Past and Faith for the Future: Nigerian Pentecostal Theology in Global Perspective**

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*This paper discusses the nature of Nigerian Pentecostal theology and its contributions to intercultural theology, with particular reference to deliverance and success-oriented theologies. It suggests that Nigerian Pentecostal theologies resonate with the search for spiritual power in traditional piety. However, they are elaborated in forms that are consistent with global Pentecostal culture and modern modes of living, and are practical and progressive in orientation.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between gospel and culture is at the centre of contemporary theological reflection and is closely linked to the evolving relationship between the global and local, a defining feature of post- or late modernity. Gradually, a new understanding of contextual theology is emerging, which allows for diversity and hybridity in theological and liturgical expression. Robert Schreiter (2004: 127-28) refers to this as a new ‘wholeness’, a ‘renewed and expanded concept of catholicity’, which may serve as a theological response to the challenge of globalization and will involve an ability to hold disparate theologies together in tension as contributing to the whole. He calls for a stronger sense of intercultural exchange and communication. According to Walter J. Hollenweger (1986: 28-29), an inter-cultural approach to theology proceeds on the assumption that all theologies are contextually conditioned and that each contributes to the whole without any assuming a sense of superiority over the others. For Hollenweger, one of the presuppositions for an intercultural theology is the recognition that others are important for showing ‘how conditioned,

parochial, or ideologically captive our own theology is.’ Thus it is important for theologians and religious practitioners in the global North to listen to the voices of those in the global South. The emergence of migrant communities, such as those represented by African initiated churches in Europe, provides new opportunities for intercultural exchange.<sup>1</sup>

Post-colonial attempts to develop African theology have followed two broad routes. The first - African Christian theology - is concerned with cultural identity and liberation from European cultural domination. Early African writers, mostly Western trained, sought to strengthen African Christian identity by exploring the continuities between Christianity and Africa’s primal religious heritage. The second approach - liberation theology - is concerned with socio-political and economic injustices, and concentrates on liberation from class domination and neo-colonialism through social change and praxis (Young 1993: 13-33; Bediako 1996). However, as David Maxwell (1999: 4) correctly observes, this Africanisation ‘from above’ often turns out to be as externally imposed as the early missionary enterprises themselves. It reflects a tendency for African theologians to neglect the actual operation of the churches at the grassroots and to deny any ontological reality to the old powers. However, there is an alternative channel of Africanisation, one that emerges ‘from below’. Increasingly, scholars are paying closer attention to ‘ordinary’ theologies,<sup>2</sup> those emerging from the experiences of local African Christian communities as they reflect upon the Scriptures and their own context. Often buried in sermons, songs, prayers, testimonies and popular literature, these emerge as local churches seek to live out their faith. As local Christian communities, African Pentecostal churches are now recognised as an important source for African theological reflection. Theirs is an enacted theology that emerges through reflection and practice, in contrast to the more formalised written theology of the European mission churches.

In a recent book on theological methods, Elaine Graham *et al* (2005: 10) suggest that all theology is not only contextual in nature but possesses a practical function: to form individual character, to build the collective identity of Christians, and to enable the faith-community to relate to the surrounding culture and communicate its faith to the wider world. For African Pentecostalism, this practical function is an overriding concern, influencing the shape of its theology and the form of its expressions, whether in sermon, song, testimony or treatise. It may not be expressed in language that would satisfy the academy, but this should not be allowed to detract

from its value nor from its potential to contribute to intercultural theology. While the practical concerns of African Pentecostals tend to focus on issues like healing, economic security and fertility, their theologies also reflect a concern for character formation, identity construction and contextual relevance, as we will see later.

John Parratt (1995: 207) has suggested that African theology throughout the Continent finds common ground in three basic elements: the Bible and Christian tradition, African culture and religion, and the contemporary socio-political context. Paul Gifford (1998: 333) has taken issue with this, insisting that Africa's new Pentecostal churches largely ignore Christian tradition, demonise African religion and culture, and dismiss the contemporary socio-political situation as theological irrelevant. In this paper I will argue that African Pentecostalism appeals to popular religious sensibilities precisely *because* it resonates with the pragmatic and power-oriented nature of African indigenous spirituality, while at the same time allowing individuals to break free from the religious and social ties of the past and construct new identities for themselves. By doing so, it helps to alleviate the dilemma of dual allegiance to church and traditional cult so prevalent in mainstream African Christianity.

My treatment is limited to an examination of Pentecostal theology as it has emerged within Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and the location of one of the most vibrant Christian communities in world Christianity. Since the 1970s, Nigeria's religious landscape has been transformed by the emergence of new, locally instituted, Pentecostal churches, with a more modern and global orientation than their Aladura predecessors. Nigerian Pentecostals have also exerted significant influences upon Pentecostals in other regions of Africa, as well as further afield, through transnational exchanges of ministry, media and theological education. Nigerian pastors are regularly invited to speak at conferences in such countries as Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and South Africa, and some of the largest congregations across Africa have been planted by Nigerian denominations.<sup>3</sup> Many of the ingredients that make up the religious repertoire of Nigerian Pentecostal churches are found within African Pentecostalism generally.

Due to rapid expansion and adept use of media technologies, these churches have recently attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines (Ojo 2006; Hackett 1998; Marshall-Fratani 1998; Ukah 2008; Smith 2006; Ayegboyin 2005; Burgess 2008). Nigerian theologian Deji Ayegboyin (2005: 36) identifies three broad categories: 'Holiness Movements', 'Prosperity

Organizations’, and ‘Deliverance Ministries’, though there is considerable overlap between the three. One of the largest is Deeper Life Bible Church, which has planted more than 6,000 branches across Nigeria. Another is Living Faith Church (also known as Winners’ Chapel), which has recently opened the largest church auditorium in the world, the 50,400 seat Faith Tabernacle in Lagos. Due to the missionary ambitions and migratory habits of its members, Nigerian Pentecostalism has spread around the world and is especially strong in Britain and North America. Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), for example, has congregations in more than one hundred nations. In London, which has by far the largest Nigerian community in the U.K., there are over eighty Nigerian initiated denominations and independent churches. The largest single congregation in Western Europe is the London-based Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), founded by Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, which has grown to around 12,000 in fifteen years. The largest Nigerian initiated denomination in Britain is RCCG, which has planted more than 250 congregations in under twenty years. Its flagship congregation, Jesus House, has over three thousand members.

## **READING THE BIBLE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Nigerian Pentecostals claim to derive their theology directly from the Bible. While they may handle it in an uncritical way by neglecting its historical context, as Gifford (1998: 333) suggests of African Pentecostals in general, this is partly because they wish to make it relevant to local contexts. It is also because they are reluctant to divest the Bible of its supernatural character. Like liberation theology, Nigerian Pentecostals seek to understand local contexts and culture in the light of Scripture, but they do so by retaining a literalist approach to biblical hermeneutics. They look for correspondences between their own life situations and the Bible, and expect Biblical texts to have practical relevance and problem-solving potential. Thus they could be said to follow more contemporary reading strategies, which stress the role of the receiving communities. In this sense, as Philip Jenkins (2006: 41) has pointed out, they have much in common with postmodern theories of reading.

Nigerian Pentecostals also have a fondness for narrative texts and find particular affinities between the biblical world and their own. This leads to a preference for the Old Testament and the narrative portions of the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Old Testament characters, such as Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Hannah and Ruth, are especially popular as illustrations of the fruits of God's blessings and miraculous intervention.<sup>4</sup> Their pragmatic hermeneutical approach sometimes leads to allegorical readings of biblical narratives. Without abandoning a commitment to biblical literalism, they find multiple layers of meaning in the text, which satisfy African Pentecostal aspirations for a practical and experiential form of Christianity. They also expect the Word of God to have life-changing potential through the ministry of the Spirit. For instance, a Nigerian Pentecostal Bible study, produced by All Christians Fellowship Mission, states: 'God's word has intrinsic power – that is, it carries its power within itself. . . It therefore carries the power of God and fulfils the purpose of God.'<sup>5</sup> This is what Pentecostal theologian Steven J. Land (1993: 100) refers to as the fusion of Spirit and Word in Pentecostal spirituality. The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures makes the Word alive and powerful today by transforming those who encounter it.

Yet this pragmatic approach to the Bible can lead to what the Ghanaian theologian Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2006: 215) refers to as a selective hermeneutical method, where the tendency is to wrench biblical texts out of context to support predetermined arguments. Asamoah-Gyadu suggests that this 'proof-texting' approach can result in 'truncated, if not erroneous, views on theological issues'. It is especially apparent in the way Nigerian Pentecostals construct their theologies of deliverance and prosperity, as we will see later. Ogbu Kalu (2008: 266-67) calls it 'bumper sticker' hermeneutics or 'experiential literalism', where '[p]ersonal and corporate experiences are woven into the hermeneutical task,' fusing the horizons of the past and present with a 'pragmatic hermeneutical leap'.

Nigerian Pentecostals are sometimes intolerant of alternative readings of Scripture by those outside their particular constituencies and are liable to accept without question the interpretations of their leaders. In Bible studies I have attended in Nigeria and Britain, while there is scope for dialogue and disagreement between members over interpretation and application of biblical texts, the opinion of the General Overseer or local pastor is rarely challenged publicly, presumably in recognition of their status and their role as power brokers. This is also reflected in the choruses of

‘amen’s’ and ‘hallelujah’s’ that follow their declarations from the platform during church services and conferences. This reluctance to tolerate alternative readings may be connected to the idea that the actual words of the Spirit-anointed leader are loaded with spiritual power. Gifford (2008: 206, 218) refers to this as a performative or declarative use of the Bible, whereby the preacher, through the use of his words, is able to ‘effect what the words say’, thus elevating his or her position to an entirely new level. By rejecting the particular meaning attached to the preacher’s words, Pentecostals risk forfeiting the practical benefits associated with them. Thus, the leader’s interpretation is accepted, not on the basis of intellectual argumentation, but on the empowering and transformative potential of the words themselves.<sup>6</sup> However, whatever lies behind this tendency, it does seem to militate against dialogue not only with other Pentecostals, but also with non-Pentecostals. In this sense, it runs counter to Hollenweger’s model of intercultural theology, which is driven by ecumenical and multi-cultural concerns.

## **GOSPEL AND CULTURE**

While the intention of Nigerian Pentecostals is to be biblical, their theology is also shaped by local concerns and contexts. This is in keeping with Hollenweger’s (1987: 29) observation that all theology is culturally conditioned. Despite a tendency to demonise traditional culture and to present themselves as modern individuals, Nigerian Pentecostals interpret Christianity through the lens of existing religious categories and especially the traditional search for spiritual power, a pervasive theme in societies such as the Yoruba and Igbo (Okorochoa 1987: 206, 278; Peel 2000: 216-17). For the Yoruba, the quest for power (*agbara*) to enhance life is the hermeneutical key to understanding their attraction to all religion, including Pentecostalism.<sup>7</sup> In Yoruba culture, the ‘good life’ is summed up in the state of *alafia* or ‘peace’, which, according to J. D. Y. Peel (2000: 91, 219), embraces protection, practical guidance, health, fertility, success and material prosperity, all fruits of power looked for in Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Peel’s intellectualist approach to religious change, which was first articulated in his study of the Aladura movement in Nigeria (Peel 1987), characterizes Yoruba religion as essentially ‘this-worldly’ - concerned with explanation, prediction and control of space-time events. He sees a central continuity between Yoruba traditional religion and the Aladura

phenomenon. The Yoruba were attracted to Aladura precisely because it offered a similar system of explanation, prediction and control, but one that was more suited to an expanding world brought about by exposure to modernising influences.

There are two aspects of the traditional religious belief and ritual system, which have translated successively into Nigerian Pentecostal culture and form the basis for other elements of theology and practice. The first is the belief in a plurality of lesser spirits, corresponding to Robin Horton's lower tier in his theory of African conversion. In his seminal article on African conversion, Horton (1971) argued that the response of traditional societies emerging into the wider world is for less attention to be paid to the lower tier of lesser spirits and more to the upper tier occupied by the Supreme Being.<sup>9</sup> However, Birgit Meyer (1999: xxiii) has shown, in contrast to Horton, that globalising and modernising forces may even stimulate an emphasis on the lower tier of lesser spirits. One of the key elements of Yoruba traditional spirituality, for example, is the continuing belief in an invisible world (*orun*) of benevolent and malevolent powers constantly interacting with the visible material world (*aye*). Because of the activity of these powers, and their potential manipulation by human agents, this world is a dangerous and precarious place (Ray 1993: 270).

The second aspect is a belief in the efficacy of prayer (*adura*, Yoruba). Yoruba religious rituals, such as prayer, divination and sacrifice, are intended to attract benevolent powers and repel malevolent ones. Thus Yoruba religion is highly pragmatic, and worship is expected to bring tangible benefits in terms of the 'good things' of this life: children, prosperity, health and longevity. Peel (2000: 90-1) regards Yoruba indigenous prayer as a purely technical instrument for securing practical benefits, rather than a 'vehicle for moral reflection' or a 'colloquy with the divine'. Yoruba theologian Jacob Olupona (2003: 185) takes issue with this, finding evidence for Yoruba communion with the *orisa* (deities) for its own sake in *oriki orisa* (the Yoruba prayer of praise).<sup>10</sup> According to Thomas Lindon (1990: 222), in *oriki orisa*, the names, deeds, and character of the *orisa* are proclaimed as an act of worship during festivals and other important occasions. However, while there is an element of elation in the act of worship itself, Lindon suggests that *oriki orisa* should nevertheless be regarded as 'efficacious prayer', a means of moving the deity to grant the worshippers' petitions. The Yoruba religionist Omosade Awolalu (1979: 101) also refers to the importance of communion with the deities through *oriki orisa*. Yet he too notes the pragmatic

nature of this encounter. ‘The idea is that when the praise-names are given, or sung, the divinities will be moved to pay attention to the worshippers and thus heed their requests and wishes’.

While they reject the traditional system of divination and sacrifice, Nigeria’s new Pentecostals, like their Aladura predecessors (Harris 2006: 5; Ray 1993: 267-68), have retained the belief in the influence of lesser spiritual entities over the material world and the efficacy of prayer as the key ritual for influencing the powers. Sociologist Joel Robbins (2004: 128-29) refers to this tendency ‘to preserve people’s beliefs in the reality and power of the spiritual worlds from which they have broken’ as perhaps the most distinctive quality of global Pentecostalism generally in comparison with other forces of cultural change, and one that distinguishes it from other forms of Christianity. At the same time, as Robbins points out, Pentecostals tend to demonize the indigenous spirit world and then devote much of their energy to struggling against it, thus reinforcing its existence and its relevance to post-conversion life. Peel (2000: 314-15) refers to the way Nigeria’s new Pentecostals regard these ‘hidden forces’ as potential hazards, impeding personal progress and preventing individuals from achieving their destinies. For Peel, the advantage they have over the older African initiated churches is that they can address these needs in terms of theologies that have international currency within the global Pentecostal constituency, and in ways that are thoroughly modern.

Deliverance theology, with its focus on liberation from the influence of evil spirits, is perhaps the best example of this. While it resonates with traditional piety, it is elaborated in forms that are consistent with global Pentecostal culture. This is evident from Gifford’s work on Ghana’s new Pentecostal churches. Gifford (2004: 89) shows the close similarities between Christian deliverance and Ghana’s pre-Christian religion, where more attention is paid to the lesser deities than to the Supreme Being. However, the way it is expressed is influenced by Western deliverance specialists, whose books are readily available across Africa.<sup>11</sup> Deliverance theology is also modern in its orientation. While it is viewed in negative terms as the removal of the effects of past religious and social associations, it is oriented towards the present and the future in ways that seem to resonate with modernity’s notion of the autonomy of the self and its call to make a break with the past (Meyer 1998c: 182-208). Nigerian Pentecostals promote deliverance as a means of severing ties with social and religious pasts (especially those associated with ancestral curses, blood covenants and sinful lifestyles), thus removing obstacles to personal progress and enabling the construction of new religious identities. Yet the goal is primarily ethical rather than social, and the result is not so



much increased autonomy and individuality but a new commitment to Christ and a new set of communal relationships. From an initial focus on holiness and healing, deliverance theology in Nigeria has been extended to include economic circumstances, geographical localities, people groups and socio-political structures.

A prime example of this is Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM), described by Ayegboyin (2005: 37) as a deliverance ministry *par excellence*. It is currently one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, with over three hundred branches nationally, and with congregations in Europe and North America. Its headquarters, located along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, claims to be one of the largest single congregations in Africa, with an attendance of over 200,000 at a single meeting.<sup>12</sup> MFM's founder, Daniel Kolawole Olukoya, is a former scientist, with a PhD from the University of Reading in the UK. Prior to starting the church in 1989, he was a member of the Christ Apostolic Church, one of the early Aladura churches in Nigeria.

MFM describes itself as a 'do-it-yourself Gospel Ministry' and promotes 'violent prayer' as the solution to 'stubborn problems' (Olukoya 1999a). According to Olukoya (1999a: 9), '[t]he only language the devil understands is the language of violence and resounding defeat', and he exhorts his followers to 'fight until every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed'. Because of its emphasis on protecting and delivering people from the activities of malicious spirits, Afe Adogame (2005: 3) suggests that it should be classified under the rubric of the 'security gospel' rather than the 'prosperity gospel' movement. One of Olukoya's many publications, entitled 'Prayers to destroy diseases & infirmities', is described as a 'spiritual warfare manual specifically targeted at destroying diseases and infirmities'. Another, entitled 'Dominion Prosperity', promises to lead believers 'out of the dungeon of poverty' and place them 'on the mountain top of prosperity'. Like all MFM publications, they are filled with anecdotal evidence and biblical references. Other titles, such as 'Dealing with Local Satanic Technology', 'Overcoming Witchcraft', 'Power against Marine Spirits', and 'Dealing with the Evil Powers of your Father's House', reflect the church's preoccupation with deliverance from witchcraft and evil spirits, as well as past associations with 'occult' powers and traditional religious culture. MFM publications also contain an elaborate liturgy of prayers designed to liberate Christians from demonic powers and remove obstacles to individual progress and prosperity.<sup>13</sup> It is this written liturgy that sets it apart from most other Pentecostal churches. However, MFM's prayer methodology is very different from other church traditions that

employ written liturgies. In meetings I have attended, members are encouraged to combine repetitive recitation of prayers with violent bodily movements in order to dislodge evil spirits that have gained access through ancestral covenants, witchcraft or idol worship.

The appeal of deliverance theology is obvious in a hostile economic environment like Nigeria, where access to medical facilities and to state funds is severely restricted. Its popularity also stems from its close affinity to biblical cosmology. Unlike many Westerners, Nigerian Pentecostals are reluctant to divest the Bible of its supernatural character and are particularly drawn to the Gospels and Acts, where healing and exorcism occur on a regular basis. Books on deliverance are filled with biblical references, often interpreted in imaginative ways to make a point or buttress an argument. Some contain elaborate demonic typologies based on extra-biblical material of unknown provenance. The focus of deliverance is on problems that beset African Christians in particular. Yet MFM believes that Western Christians are not immune to the effects of these malevolent powers, and it is keen to promote its deliverance methodology outside the African continent. According to Olukoya (1999c: 44), witchcraft is a global phenomenon, which manifests itself in diverse ways in different localities. Britain's liberal migration policy and multicultural society are sometimes blamed for allowing alien spirits from outside Europe to gain entry, resulting in ungodly behaviour such as homosexuality, gun crime and terrorism. Thus, deliverance theology is promoted by MFM as essential if Christianity's decline in the West is to be reversed. In Britain, where it has grown to over forty branches in eight years, MFM holds regular deliverance programmes, aimed at releasing people from the influence of satanic powers. However, these meetings appeal mainly to African migrants. For example, during the 2007 'Great Deliverance and Anointing Service' in London, which attracted over 3,000 people, the audience was overwhelmingly African, with only a few white people in attendance. According to one of my informants, British people are generally reluctant to embrace deliverance theology because they are ignorant of the presence and malignant influence of evil spirits within their borders.

For churches, such as MFM, problems associated with demons and targeted during deliverance sessions include bad dreams, sickness, poverty, unemployment, business failure, marital distress, barrenness, and in the case of migrant churches in Britain, immigration and visa issues. It reflects the pragmatic nature of Nigerian Pentecostal theology. For example, a branch of MFM in London, held a programme in May 2006, entitled 'Speak Woe unto your Problems'. And a flyer advertising

its monthly Prayer and Fasting Programme 'Enough is Enough' states: 'Have you had enough of Satanic Attacks, in your Marital Life, Finance, Career, Business, Settlement, Health, etc? Do you want to display violent faith and stubborn aggression against all negative forces operating in your life? Then join us at MFM Dagenham Branch'. Olukoya's books are full of testimonies describing the favourable outcome of deliverance, which are intended to support his teaching and generate faith in his followers. They sometimes sound strange to Western ears but are familiar territory to Africans accustomed to a world inhabited by unseen spirits. One of MFM's unique innovations is its 'Do-IT-Yourself' deliverance strategy (Olukoya 1996), which Ayegboyin (2005: 61) refers to as a major shift from the deliverance methodology in most African initiated churches. According to Olukoya, self-deliverance enables Christians to remain free from 'demonic pollution' without recourse to the services of deliverance ministers.<sup>14</sup> As Adogame (2005: 6-7) observes, it 'serves as a source of spiritual empowerment to the laity in the acquisition and retention of spiritual power, and plays down on the interlocutory role of the clergy as the bridge between members and the spiritual entities.'

While other Nigerian initiated churches may not place as much emphasis on deliverance as MFM, the modern concern for progress, new beginnings and the transformation of the self is a strong current that runs through Nigerian Pentecostalism, both at home and in the Diaspora.<sup>15</sup> This is reflected in the following extract from a church newsletter:

The month of 'New Beginning' is a prophetic month for us in the Gateway Family. . . . For this New Beginning, I stand to tell you that your past is not a prerequisite. Nothing you have done or have not done is strong enough to limit the extent of God's love. Do not let your past successes or failures be a stumbling block to what God is about to do. That is why in Isaiah 43 vs. 17 - 19, He says: 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing....' Be ready as we step into our month of great starts. God asked me to tell you that in this month all your past errors will be wiped out.<sup>16</sup>

A ministers' conference I attended in Nigeria, organised by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, opened with the General Overseer, Enoch Adeboye, leading his audience in the following prayer: 'Father we have come as a team, but I am here as an individual. Do something new in my life. . . Father, I don't want to go back the way I came. Speak to me; challenge me; change me.' 'Do something new in my life' are words from a popular chorus often sung in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and they sum up the expectation of participants as they meet to worship, pray and listen to the Word of God. In one of his books, Adeboye links this motif of 'new beginnings' and individual

transformation to the experience of the new birth and the biblical image of the ‘new creation in Christ’:

When God decides to put an end to the past and begins a future, He can do it in such a way that it will be difficult for you even to remember what had happened in the past....He is the Controller of the past, present, and future. That is why the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that if any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new. . . If you say you are born again and you have not seen any dramatic change in your life, you better come again and make sure that you are truly hooked up to Jesus. Let this day be a new beginning for you – a new beginning of joy; a new beginning of victory; a new beginning of prosperity. Ask Him to do a new thing in your life today (Adeboye 1999: 92).

However, in Nigerian Pentecostal rhetoric ‘new beginnings’ are not limited to the moment of new birth, but can occur at any time in response to faith. This is reflected in a sermon, entitled ‘Cut the Cord and Connect with God’, preached by Yoruba pastor, Bioye Segun,. Employing an allegorical reading of Ezekiel 16:1-14, where the prophet likens the people of Judah to a new-born baby, Segun exhorts his audience to ‘cut the cord’ tying them to their ‘negative past experiences’, so that they can move forward into a new year ‘filled with promises, fulfilment and good things’. ‘The past must remain in the past and the good news is that your future is never going to be like your past – your future is bright, glorious and destined. God is not seeing you in your past, He is seeing you in your future - when He saw the baby in the main text above, He saw it’s potential.’<sup>17</sup> Another example is a statement in a promotion brochure for an annual conference entitled ‘Maximise Life 2008’, organised by the London-based New Wine Church, a Nigerian initiated congregation with over 2,000 members:

At Maximise Life 2008 we are starting anew! We are going to release ourselves from the limitations of the past and seek the anointing of God to propel us forward into a destiny of promise, provision and promotion to higher levels. With a wealth of international ministers on hand to pass over their wisdom and anointing, these will be eight awesome days in July 2008 that you will forever remember as your New Beginning!

Here it is the power of God, mediated by his anointed ministers, which releases people from their pasts so that they can start afresh and fulfil their God-ordained destinies. Annual conferences are important ritual events for Nigerian Pentecostals and provide the setting for significant religious encounters. In some ways they are reminiscent of traditional religious festivals, such as the New Yam Festival, which symbolizes the end of one work cycle and the beginning of another, and provides an opportunity for devotees to renew their covenant with the ancestors and spirits of the

land. However, Pentecostal conferences are on a much larger scale and are global in orientation. In Nigeria, RCCG's Annual Convention and Holy Ghost Congress are the most popular and attract several million participants.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, one of the largest is RCCG's bi-annual Festival of Life (FOL), hosted by Pastor Adeboye, which attracts over twenty-five thousand, mainly African, participants during one night of praise, prayer and preaching. The theme for the March 2008 FOL was 'Behold, I Will Do a New Thing' and included a guest appearance from German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. KICC's annual International Gathering of Champions (IGOC), described on its website as Europe's premier Christian conference, claims to attract 200,000 participants over a one week period. The 2008 IGOC, entitled 'Empowered to Prosper', featured Bishop T. D. Jakes from the USA, Dr Mensil Otabil from Ghana, and Bishop David Oyedepo from Nigeria. Speakers at Royal Connections' Winds of Change (WOC) annual conference have included Rev George Adegbeye from Nigeria, Bishop Dag Heward-Mills from Ghana, Pastor Ghandi Olaoye from the USA, and Bishop John Francis from London. Over the years, WOC conference themes have included 'Winds of Change', 'Behold, I Make All Things New', and 'Taking it to the Next Level', again reflecting the preoccupation with individual progress and transformation among Nigerian Pentecostals.<sup>19</sup>

The related ideas of 'making anew' and the transformation of the self seem to resonate with sociologist Anthony Giddens' concept of the reflexive self, a characteristic of late modern or post-traditional societies. Giddens (1991: 5) suggests that, in contrast to traditional societies where identities are inherited and fixed, late modern subjects are increasingly free to reinvent themselves and revise their biographical narratives. 'In today's world, we have unprecedented opportunities to make ourselves and to create our own identities.... The modern world forces us to find ourselves. Through our capacity as self-conscious, self-aware human beings, we constantly create and recreate our identities' (Giddens 2001: 30). Yet, as the above examples illustrate, the transformation of the self in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse is always related to the individual's experience of God's power and authority, and invariably linked to ethical renewal. It is God, through his Spirit, who removes the hindrances of the past through forgiveness of sins and deliverance from demonic influences, and enables believers to construct new identities for themselves.

Another example of this is a sermon I listened to recently at a RCCG church in Birmingham, based on the Old Testament story of Queen Esther. Beginning from the biblical text, the pastor

explained Esther's change in fortunes in terms of the favour bestowed upon her by King Xerxes. In keeping with the pragmatic nature of Pentecostal spirituality, he then applied this to his mainly Yoruba audience by linking personal progress with divine favour. 'When favour comes your way, it can change your life around', by giving you 'uncommon provision', 'moving you from the gutter to the best place', and making you 'the most important person in that place'. 'This month multiple promotions will come your way. . . People will come and serve you, bow down to you. . . This year, some will move from obscurity and be celebrated'. However, the enjoyment of divine favour is conditional upon faith. The pastor also encouraged us to repeat out loud statements such as 'favour must come my way this morning' and 'this is my month of favour', and ended by leading us in prayers to this effect.<sup>20</sup>

## **CONSTRUCTING LOCAL IDENTITIES**

Rather than consciously try to adapt Christianity to African culture by incorporating elements of traditional religion, as many African theologians have tried to do, Nigerian Pentecostals find other avenues for constructing local Christian identities. One is an historical approach that emphasizes African contributions to biblical, Christian and secular history, and identifies various historical and cultural processes responsible for the continent's current social ills. Significantly, while they are critical of Western imperialism and its effects on African societies, Nigeria's new Pentecostals are generally grateful to Western missionaries for introducing the gospel. The main causes of Nigeria's present predicament in Pentecostal discourse are her traditional cultural patterns rather than global forces. As Ruth Marshall-Fratani (1998: ) notes, Pentecostal critique of Nigeria's present social, political and cultural forms 'focuses not on external interventions such as colonialism or capitalism, but rather on the *practices* of local agents', and specifically their personal rejection of Christ, which 'opens up the space in which the failure of the nation is manifested'.

KICC's Matthew Ashimolowo adopts this approach in a recent book, entitled 'What is wrong with being black?'. Ashimolowo (2007) begins by emphasizing the role of Africans and African societies in biblical and secular history. While he condemns European imperialists for plundering the rich natural resources of the African continent, for racism, and for creating a culture of

dependency, he insists that many of Africa's social ills are cultural in origin and include persistent idolatry, witchcraft, superstition, distorted family values, tribalism, poor governance and inferiority complex. Here his approach is similar to the Ghanaian Pentecostal, Mensa Otabil, so admired by Paul Gifford (2004: 113-39).<sup>21</sup> Like Otabil, Ashimolowo focuses on the minds of Africans and the need to confront prevailing cultural trends. His solution to the African dilemma and the alleviation of poverty is the transformation of African minds and hearts through studying the Bible and recognising the rich contributions that Africans have made to world civilisation.

Building identity by focusing on the positive contributions of black people to society is also the approach adopted by *Leadership & Lifestyle*, a magazine published by Trinity Chapel, a London-based Nigerian-initiated church. Its vision, expressed in its mission statement, is 'to empower people, particularly people of colour, and equip them with tools and tips to develop the leader in them; to promote positive images of the man and woman of colour and people from other communities who have and have had a positive influence on society; to be a voice for the man and woman of colour in the developing world'.<sup>22</sup> Each issue contains interviews with successful, mainly African, black people who have made positive contributions to society, as well as articles on leadership, career & development, money matters, health, and fashion.

A second way that Nigerian Pentecostals reinforce local identities is through the promotion of success-oriented theologies, which link faith and prayer with the expectation of material prosperity and success. For RCCG's Enoch Adeboye, poverty is a curse which brings untold physical and psychological hardships in its wake. In his book *Heaven on the Move*, he refers to the lame man found begging for alms at the gate of the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 2): 'The lame man was lonely in his poverty until heaven passed by. Nobody is a friend of a poor man. ... The loneliness, rejection and disregard that poverty brings are a serious problem. From the day heaven moved upon him, his loneliness was removed. . . . Everybody likes to associate with a success story' (Adeboye 2007: 16-8).<sup>23</sup> Similar sentiments are expressed in a MFM publication, entitled *Poverty must Die*: 'Poverty is a force of destruction and it is an instrument of evil. Good things cannot stay where poverty prevails. Indeed, poverty attracts sickness, death, uncertainty, worry, fear and other agents of destruction into people's lives. Poverty must die for you to live a fulfilling life' (Oyewole & Ebofin 2000: 6-8). Olukoya believes that Nigeria's current economic decline is spiritual in origin and directly linked to its celebration of FESTAC (a major black arts festival held in Nigeria in

January/February 1977), which allowed access to the demons of poverty. ‘The country used her oil money to sponsor the demons. Since then, she has not fully recovered and the results are there for all to see. Poverty is, without a doubt, a spirit and we must deal with it seriously’ (Olukoya 1998: 9). Prosperity teaching in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse is partly a reaction to the ‘poverty’ gospel that has characterized much of Christian spirituality. For Olukoya, prosperity, rather than poverty, is the heritage of every Christian. ‘The doctrine that a believer should be poor and suffer from financial insufficiency is a very wrong one. It is not in line with the word of God. As far as the Bible is concerned, Christians are not supposed to be languishing in poverty’ (Olukoya 1998: 9).

Much criticised by both Western and African theologians (Ayegboyin 2006; Asamoah-Gyadu 2006: 215-22), these theologies of success and prosperity must be understood within the particular contexts they arise. In the case of Nigerian Pentecostal appropriations, existing religious preoccupations, local socio-economic context and global forces all came into play. To use an agricultural metaphor, there needed to be a fertile soil, a favourable climate and access to a ready supply of seed. As we have noted, Nigerian societies, such as the Yoruba and Igbo, traditionally associate the deities with prosperity. Related to this is an emphasis on achievement, progress and prestige, where status and moral standing in the community are associated with symbols of success acquired through religious power, and the redistribution of wealth for the benefit of others. Thus there are close affinities between traditional religious aspirations and prosperity teaching, with its emphasis on material acquisition through faith, and this facilitated its assimilation into Nigerian soil. As Kalu (2008: 259) notes, one of the reasons for the popularity of the prosperity message is its resonance with African indigenous concepts of salvation, abundant life, and the goals of worship.

However, there are also discontinuities between Pentecostal prosperity teaching and traditional concepts of wealth accumulation, which have exposed Nigerian Pentecostals to criticism from the wider community. In indigenous cultures, such as the Yoruba and Igbo, the rich are bound by obligations of reciprocity, which require them to redistribute their wealth to kin and community of origin through patronage networks. There is also a link in the popular imagination between the achievement of wealth and power, on the one hand, and human sacrifice, on the other. For example, it was generally believed that the Ijebu Yoruba used human beings, either to conjure up money or for the funeral rites of their kings. Iheanyi Enwerem (2003: 194, 202) refers to this as ‘money-magic’, which he suggests has resurfaced in contemporary Nigeria due to an environment



characterized by economic decline and increasing poverty. This has resulted in the widespread belief that wealthy people, especially those who fail to redistribute their wealth for the benefits of others, must have acquired their money through engaging in occult ritual practices and witchcraft.

There is a growing anthropological literature exploring the way that emerging inequalities in sub-Saharan Africa, brought about by the penetration of global capitalism, are expressed in discourses about the occult or what Geschiere calls ‘the modernity of witchcraft’ (Geschiere 1997. See also Comaroff & Comaroff 1999; Meyer 1995, 1998a, 1998b). The paradox of the processes of globalisation, according to Geschiere, is that they appear to reinforce cultural heterogeneity rather than erode it. One example is the ‘ease with which witchcraft discourses in Africa incorporate the money economy, new power relations, and consumer goods associated with modernity. . .’ (1997: 8). In a recent article on Nigerian Pentecostalism, Daniel Smith (2001) suggests that the inequality that gives rise to modern discourses of the occult in relation to wealth accumulation in Africa is marked simultaneously by resentment of the wealthy and the desire to benefit from their patronage. He explores the relationship between occult practices and so-called ‘prosperity’ churches by examining the role of religion in a crisis which erupted in September 1996 following the discovery of incidents of ritual killing in the city of Owerri, south-eastern Nigeria, allegedly committed in pursuit of ‘fast-wealth’. Smith argues that what the town’s *nouveau riches* did with their money shaped popular interpretations of how this wealth was acquired. Because they flouted their wealth and failed to ‘fulfil the reciprocal obligations of patrons prescribed by a morality rooted in kinship’ (2001: 593), they became targets of popular resentment, resulting in the destruction of their property. It was generally believed that their acquisition of ‘fast-wealth’ was achieved through satanic rituals.

What was unusual in the case of the Owerri crisis was that the premises of several ‘prosperity’ churches were also burned by the rioters, suggesting that they too were implicated in the rumours of occult activity. Smith notes the paradoxical position of Nigerian Pentecostalism in this respect. While it offers a critique of inequality and ‘illegitimate wealth’ acquired through witchcraft and the occult, the movement ‘has also produced its own inequalities and embodies the very materialism that motivates so much discontent’ (2001: 608). Thus, Pentecostalism is ‘positioned in somewhat contradictory ways in relation to Nigeria’s patronage-oriented political economy’. Pentecostal leaders preach against state corruption and the distribution of wealth through patron-client networks

based on ethnicity and kinship. However, they too have their own patronage networks and hierarchical social structures, which have allowed some of them to accumulate wealth on an unprecedented scale (2001: 589-90). One way of explaining the popularity of Pentecostal prosperity teaching in Nigeria, according to Smith (2001: 602), is that it provides a moral justification for individual ambition and accumulation, free from the obligation to kin and community.

Smith's analysis is a convincing account of why prosperity detached from the obligations of reciprocity, as portrayed in some sectors of the Nigerian Pentecostal constituency, has elicited apparently conflicting popular reactions. However, as I suggest below, not all Nigerian Pentecostals have neglected their reciprocal responsibilities. Some Nigerian Pentecostal churches and individuals, while adhering to a doctrine of prosperity, are redistributing their wealth through social welfare initiatives in their local communities, their places of origin, and further afield. The impulse behind this, from a participant point of view, is not only traditional concepts of reciprocity and redistribution of wealth, but obedience to the biblical mandate to love one's neighbour.

If we return to our agricultural metaphor, two other conditions contributed to the absorption of prosperity teaching into Nigerian soil: a suitable socio-economic climate and access to a ready supply of seed, in this case the message itself. Matthews Ojo (1996: 106) states that in Nigeria prosperity and success as religious ideas were 'indigenously developed as a response to the socio-economic changes of the 1980s'. Contrary to Gifford (1990), who stresses the American origins of prosperity teaching in Africa, Ojo (2007: 208) insists that Nigerian Charismatics read their Bibles for themselves and appropriated its message to suit local contexts, suffering from economic decline caused by corrupt political regimes and IMF-inspired Structural Adjustment Programmes. However, global flows through media, transnational exchanges of ministry, and theological education were crucial in shaping Nigerian prosperity theology. While it resonated with traditional piety, and satisfied local religious demands, it was expressed in standard American form (Burgess 2008: 235-36). Perhaps the best example of this is the principle of 'seed faith', lifted directly from American Word of Faith teaching, which encourages Christians to expect financial returns from their giving. My own research has shown that American healing evangelists were visiting Nigeria as early as the mid-1970s, during the oil boom years, and by the late 1970s, Nigerian Pentecostals were travelling to the USA, where they imbibed the emphasis on prosperity propagated by their American sponsors (Burgess 2008: 198-99).<sup>24</sup>

One criticism levelled against prosperity teaching is that it can distract the church from its diaconal and missionary responsibilities. This is the approach adopted by Nigerian Pentecostal, Yemi Adedeji. Adedeji is Events & Marketing Officer for the Anglican Church Mission Society, but he is also a pastor in RCCG's Jesus House. In an article, published in a RCCG magazine, Adedeji (2007: 12-3) criticises the need-oriented and success-oriented Christianity in Britain today, especially among those from an African background. He asks what will happen once all our needs are met, when our enemies are overcome, when we have become successful. He calls upon Christians to re-orientate their lives toward loving God and loving others, rather than focusing on their own needs. Success does not always bring fulfilment. Christians need to understand the nature of godly fulfilment, which comes from loving God and others, and fulfilling the 'mission of Christ'.

Yet in some Pentecostal texts, success and material prosperity are directly linked to Christian service. For example, a Nigerian Pentecostal Bible study entitled 'God Delights in our Prosperity', states: 'God's primary aim is that financial prosperity should serve as a source of blessing to others and the church. . . . It is therefore evident that God's faithfulness in giving His children financial prosperity is not primarily for the benefit of the beneficiary'.<sup>25</sup> RCCG's 2007/2008 Sunday School Manual, which is used by congregations in Nigeria and Britain, contains the following statements: 'It is not evil to have possessions provided they do not become so precious to you that they take the place of Jesus in your heart. . . . We need money to do the work of God, to print tracts, to preach over the radio and television, to build churches and to maintain them, among other things. Therefore, it is not wrong to be rich and to prosper – 3 Jn 2'. In some Nigerian Pentecostal churches, members are encouraged to raise money for local and global mission initiatives and social welfare projects. One example is RCCG's Africa Missions programme, which raises money by encouraging church members to contribute financially to missions and development programmes in Africa. For many of Nigeria's new Pentecostals, successful Christians are those who use their money to finance the work of the gospel rather than merely enrich themselves. Much of this money comes from Nigerians in the Diaspora. For example, the London-based Gateway Ministries, led by Pastor Eddie Iduoze, has set up a Business Club to help business owners 'gain Kingdom wealth for the advancement of the gospel, through individual financial success'.<sup>26</sup>

For some Nigerian Pentecostals, money itself is a neutral entity which can be used for good or ill. In keeping with his dualistic and supernaturalistic worldview, MFM's Daniel Olukoya warns Christians against being controlled by 'mammon', 'an evil spiritual power that grips men and enslaves them through money'. The important issue, for Olukoya, is one's attitude to money. It is the love of money, rather than money itself, which is the root of all evil. If one's attitude is right, then the 'mammon spirit' will be unable to exert control, whether one is rich or poor.<sup>27</sup> Similar sentiments are expressed in RCCG's 2007/2008 Sunday School Manual: 'If your desire to be rich is not motivated solely by a desire to serve God only, you will soon discover that the more you have, the more you want. . . It is not evil to have possessions provided they do not become so precious to you that they take the place of Jesus in your heart.' For RCCG's Sola Fola-Alade, successful people are those who make their money work for others rather than for themselves: 'Contrary to popular belief, the true value of a man is not measured by the duration of his life, or amount of dollars he has in the bank, but his donation to others in his lifetime. Your life will ultimately be measured by the worth of your character and contribution to society.'<sup>28</sup>

Prosperity teaching has also been criticized for discouraging Christians from productive economic activity. In the case of Ghana's charismatic churches, Paul Gifford (2004: 155-58) suggests that the focus on faith, giving, deliverance and the pastor's gifts leaves insufficient room for the place of work in achieving 'victorious prosperity'. Rather than transforming Ghana's economic situation, Gifford argues, faith teaching may actually have the opposite effect by encouraging Christians to pray for prosperity rather than engage in productive activity. Yet in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse hard work, self-discipline, and financial responsibility are often promoted, alongside faith, as necessary conditions for success and material prosperity. The importance of work in Nigerian Pentecostal theology is reflected in this statement from a booklet, entitled *Youth with a Purpose*, written by a leading Igbo Pentecostal: 'If you till your land, work hard, and you are disciplined in your work habit; if you are not a lazy person that likes dozing and sleeping all the time, God will bless the work of your hands and prosper you' (Okoye 1993: 125). Some Yoruba Pentecostals express similar sentiments. For example, a sermon preached by RCCG's Enoch Adeboye states: 'When you ask God to prosper you, what He will do is that He will give you work to do that will bring in money' (Adeboye 2002: 74). An oft-quoted Scripture is Deut 8:18:

‘But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth...’.<sup>29</sup>

Nigerian initiated churches in Britain also regard hard work and financial responsibility as necessary conditions for prosperity. The sociologist Stephen Hunt (2000: 12) suggests that, in the case of RCCG, prosperity is more likely to be promoted in terms of ‘management of monies’, ‘self-help’ and ‘entrepreneurial effort’, rather than USA-style faith teaching. According to Hunt, this must be seen as ‘a reaction to the “squandering” ethos that has become almost synonymous with Nigerian life over the last two decades’ (2000: 13). Nigerian initiated churches in Britain, such as RCCG, organise seminars on business management, investment, job skills and debt management. As a participant myself, I have attended a number of these seminars, addressed by successful businessmen and investors, usually of African origin. I have also found church members to be hard working, self-disciplined, and often highly-skilled, and it is these qualities, combined with an expectant faith in God’s providential control, which enable them to compete successively in the job market. Thus, prosperity teaching can be a motivation to economic mobility through work as well as faith. It encourages good stewardship of material resources and the attainment of job-related skills, as well as dependence on providential provision. Ogbu Kalu (2008: 262) believes that, when presented in this form, Nigerian prosperity theology resonates with the traditional focus on divine and human agency in poverty alleviation. He refers to the Igbo concept of *Chi*, ‘a personal spirit that a person inherits and that determines their fate and destiny in life’s pilgrimage’ (2008: 262). The Igbo have a proverb that says that ‘onye kwe, chi ya ekwe’ (when one affirms, the personal god will confirm). Thus in Igbo traditional thought, poverty, or its absence, is attributed to both supernatural and human agency.

In a recent study, based on empirical research of six churches (including RCCG and Living Faith in Nigeria), sociologist Asonzeh Ukah (2007: 642) argues that, contrary to public perception, West Africa’s prosperity churches are ‘profit-making enterprises’, rather than public institutions established for the common good. He identifies a lack of accountability as a significant problem, which has been recently brought to the fore by events in Africa and elsewhere, such as the administrative takeover of the London-based KICC, following allegations against Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo for using church funds for personal enrichment. Nigerian Pentecostal churches in Britain, such as RCCG, are now more conscious of the need to be financially accountable, partly

because this is a condition for maintaining charitable status, but also because, for some of them, their strong holiness ethic discourages the acquisition of money through illegitimate means. Jesus House, for example, now publishes a financial report in its Annual Review, which is on public display in the church's entrance foyer.<sup>30</sup> What is significant perhaps, in the light of Ukah's thesis, is that as a charitable institution, Jesus House gives away large amounts of money to support missions and social programmes at home and abroad. The activity of some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria also belies this self-serving image. One example is Tony Rapu's This Present House in Lagos, which has set up The Freedom Foundation to provide a legal framework for its social welfare initiatives. The various arms of the Foundation include: Help (for HIV/AIDS related projects); Bethesda (to support the education of children from poor families); and House of Hope (for the rehabilitation of drug addicts). Every week members provide free food and medical/counselling services to some of the city's poorest people.<sup>31</sup>

Some Nigerian Pentecostal pastors have rightly been criticised for using prosperity teaching for personal enrichment at the expense of their churches' impoverished members. Yet most churches in the global North would agree that the pursuit of prosperity and success is a desirable goal, even though they may prefer to achieve this through secular means, through hard work and wise investment. What Nigerian Pentecostals have done is to develop a theology in keeping with their holistic understanding of salvation, which combines secular and sacred means to achieve these ends. In a context, such as Nigeria, where unemployment and deprivation are rife, and access to public funds is severely restricted, the focus on the role of faith in poverty alleviation and economic mobility is a welcome addition to the religious repertoire.

## **SUFFERING IN NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL DISCOURSE**

Another criticism often levelled against Africa's new Pentecostal churches is that by focusing on prosperity and success they lack a viable theology of suffering, which allows for the possibility of divine chastisement, and neglect the message of the cross (Gifford 2004: 50). Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2006: 218, 232), for example, believes that the 'selective hermeneutical method', employed by Ghana's prosperity teachers, leaves little room for biblical texts which attach positive

value to Christian suffering and warn of the potential dangers of material wealth. Thus, imbalance is at the heart of the gospel of prosperity. While he commends Ghanaian charismatics for addressing people's 'situations and circumstances in a relevant manner', and for assisting them in acquiring a new self-image, he criticises them for insisting that suffering will always go away in response to faith (2006: 231-32). As such, Asamoah-Gyadu argues, prosperity teaching falls short of the message of the cross and is an indication that its proponents 'have not come to terms with this paradox of a powerful God acquainted with grief and suffering' (2006: 228-29).

While not as prominent as prosperity, suffering is certainly an element in Nigerian Pentecostal theology. However, it is normally regarded as a temporary phase to be overcome through faith and prayer. Always the focus is on practical Christianity, how to respond to suffering when it comes, how to overcome so that it can be turned to one's advantage. Sometimes theologies of suffering emerge as individuals reflect upon their own experience of crisis in the light of the Bible and Christian tradition. In his book, *Seasons of Life*, Olukoya of MFM uses a meteorological metaphor by likening the experience of suffering to the cycle of the seasons:

Suffering means distress, anguish, trial and all forms of problems that are unpleasant to the human body, soul and spirit. The saints who have gone ahead of us had at one time or the other experienced their own time of suffering. Therefore, suffering is unavoidable. Apostle Paul suffered many hardships like any other saint who desired to make heaven. Do you want to be a champion? If yes, you must pass through a season of affliction and suffering. 'I will never suffer' is a false religion of modern day Christians. The Scripture teaches that you must partake in Christ's sufferings. . . Although showers of blessings can be experienced by you, but this may not prevent seasons of afflictions from coming. . . Some believers write themselves off when passing through affliction and suffering. This type of Christians do not realise that affliction is for a short time and that it will soon pass away (Olukoya 2005: 9-10).

Another example is found in a magazine article, written by Agu Irukwu, Igbo pastor of Jesus House in London, shortly after he had suffered the loss of his wife from cancer. Here Old Testament examples are used to illustrate the temporary nature of suffering:

According to the word of God (John 16:33), we accept that there will be trouble in this life, but Jesus assures us ultimately of victory. In the bible, Job had a new beginning after an encounter with God, and God spoke a word that caused him to receive a double portion of everything he had lost during the previous series of calamities. Joseph stepped into new beginnings after the ordeals of the pit and the prison. David stepped into a new beginning in the aftermath of the storms of war and persecution.<sup>32</sup>

Again we see the emphasis on new beginnings, referred to earlier, which encourages those suffering from adverse circumstances to have hope for a better future. This is a familiar theme in Nigerian Pentecostal theology and helps to explain its popularity, especially in contexts where suffering of various kinds is an endemic condition for many, and where enjoyment of the 'good life' is the expected outcome of religious observance.

Nigerian Pentecostals attach a variety of meanings to the experience of suffering. Sometimes it is regarded as an enemy to be overcome through faith, especially if it is believed to be satanic in origin. In this case, problems such as sickness, barrenness, poverty and failure are believed to be caused by human or spiritual agents of Satan, who are then counteracted by means of aggressive spiritual warfare. Here we see elements of continuity with traditional religious cultures, such as the Yoruba and Igbo, where affliction is often blamed on the activities of malicious agents, such as witches or evil spirits, and various preventative and purificatory rites are performed to immunise potential victims against their attacks (Peel 2000: 166; Awolalu 1979: 69-74; Ikenga Metuh 1981: 116, 97, 101; Okorocho 1987: 131) Using Job as an example, London-based RCCG pastor, David Oludoyi (2007: 48), refers to 'Satanic storms', intended to frustrate a person's destiny. 'We are told that Job got up one day and everything was fine, but by the end of the day he had lost everything he had! That was a satanically-orchestrated storm. Satanic storms come to harass your destiny, to stop you faith, to discourage you....but glory to God, every storm that comes across you is an opportunity in work clothes. Behind every storm, there is an opportunity for you'. For Oludoyi, even 'Satanic storms' can be turned to our advantage if we respond appropriately. 'No matter what it is, a sickness, a child that is misbehaving, the loss of a job, deportation – whatever it is, as long as you love the Lord, he will take you up higher. What the enemy meant for evil will turn around for your good' (2007: 75-6).

Leke Sanusi, Yoruba pastor of RCCG's Victory House parish in London, allegorises the story of David and Goliath to show how Christians should respond to suffering by engaging in aggressive spiritual warfare:

Goliath is any stubborn problem that keeps threatening, troubling and tormenting your life. This could be anything from sickness to a particularly trying situation. It could be an opposition or perhaps a recurring negative pattern. ...If you have a symptom that threatens your body on a daily basis, not allowing you to rest, you have a Goliath that you must exterminate (Sanusi 2003: 9).



In keeping with the Pentecostal preference for narrative, Sanusi blends his own experience of suffering into his theological account by referring to the ‘Goliath of barrenness’, which his wife suffered for eight years of their marital life, as an example of how personal suffering can be overcome through persistent prayer (2003: 20). In an extended account of this experience, entitled *None shall be Barren*, Sanusi (2004) describes the process the couple underwent in their quest for a child. To understand the extent of their suffering, we must take account of Yoruba traditional culture, where barren women are stigmatised and married men without children are expected to take additional wives. According to Peel (2000: 91), a barren woman is unable to enjoy *alafia*, and ‘her desire for children was likely to surpass all other needs’. Sanusi’s narrative, which begins in Nigeria prior to his Christian conversion, demonstrates the experimental, even consumerist, approach to religion within Yoruba culture. Despite seeking assistance from medical doctors in Nigeria and London, traditional *babalawo*, and Islamic priests, their problem remained unresolved until they became born-again Christians and began to engage in aggressive spiritual warfare. A turning point occurred in 1998 when Pastor Adeboye prayed for them during their ordination service in London. The following year his wife gave birth to a boy. What is significant is at no point in his narrative does Sanusi admit to the possibility that childlessness may be the will of God for them. Even the subtitle of his book is suggestive: ‘A testimony of a couple’s trials and triumphs over barrenness’.

In a recent article, Asamoah-Gyadu (2007: 443) challenges the tendency for African Pentecostals to reinforce traditional worldviews of causality by alienating childless couples as ‘faithless victims of supernatural evil’. He argues that this approach is pastorally deficient because it neglects the needs of those who may never have children, making their suffering ever more painful. A more balanced approach to childlessness, according to Asamoah-Gyadu, is to focus attention on the cross as a ‘symbol of trauma’, and to work with childless couples so that they can feel the ‘empathy of Christ’ (2007: 458). However, the testimonies of those, such as the Sanusi’s, who through persistent prayer are eventually able to conceive, encourages others to expect favourable outcomes if they follow similar prayer strategies. This approach also focuses on the cross, but as a symbol of victory over the forces of evil.

Suffering is also linked to divine chastisement, though this is less common in Nigerian Pentecostal texts. Yet even here the focus is on the positive outcome of suffering and its temporary nature. In one of his early writings, Adeboye of RCCG, whose reputation for teaching holiness has

remained intact despite a recent focus on prosperity, uses the biblical metaphor of ‘dying to self’ to explain the necessity and purpose of divine chastisement:

The soldier must die but the process of dying is a very unpleasant one. Hebrews 12.11 says: ‘Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby’. When the Lord is killing you, the process can be very painful. But at the end of the process, the result will be good. He had to kill me before certain things began to happen in my ministry. . . Unless you are dead, you are of no use to Him. . . . At times when suffering comes your way, you think it is from the devil. No, God could be the one planning it. How long you suffer depends on how long it takes you to die (Adeboye 1992: 23-6).

In the biblical text quoted above, the father/son motif is used as an illustration of the way divine chastisement can shape individual character. However, for Adeboye there is another dimension to the experience of suffering. By referring to the positive effects upon his ministry, he makes a link between suffering, personal piety and power for service. In a more recent publication, Adeboye explains why holiness is important for effective ministry.

God requires purity before power. Our God is a holy God. He demands that His children be like Him. One of the reasons for this is that those who operate the gifts of God are usually targets of attack from the enemy. Another reason is that the gifts of God are precious and are meant for the pure and holy. The third reason is so that the operator of the gifts of God may not be a castaway in the end. God demands purity before giving power (Adeboye 2004: 36).

A similar understanding of suffering is found in another article by Igbo pastor Agu Irukwu of Jesus House:

Perseverance, which also means endurance or patience, is described often times in the Bible (particularly in the New Testament epistles) as a quality that every child of God should possess. Our faith certainly requires that we persevere in the face of challenges, and to be patient for the manifestation of our hope, as promised by God...In Romans (5.3-4) Paul explains that we are to rejoice in our sufferings (challenges), because suffering produces perseverance and perseverance produces character which in turn produces hope and hope does not disappoint. And as we already know, a key ingredient of faith is Hope (Hebrews 11.1)...Therefore, as we forge ahead – living a fasted life, persevering in the face of all odds, walking by faith, praying and meditating on the Word, our God will accomplish great things through us and give us reasons to celebrate as Hope becomes manifest.<sup>33</sup>

In this case, the motif of change is again brought to the fore by emphasizing the redemptive qualities of suffering in terms of the moral transformation of the self and effective service. Also by

describing sufferings as ‘challenges’, Agu presents them in a positive manner as obstacles to be overcome rather than accepted passively. This understanding of suffering represents a rupture with both Yoruba and Igbo traditional piety, which have no notion of God as loving father or the redemptive possibilities of suffering in terms of ethical renewal. In Igbo traditional culture, for example, affliction can either result from the activity of witches and evil spirits, or as punishment by the Supreme Being, deities, or ancestors for violations of the moral code (*omenala*) (Ilogu 1974: 154; Okorochoa 1987: 130-38). What is lacking in Igbo, as well as Yoruba traditional religion, is the idea of divine grace, of God’s enabling power bringing about a moral transformation of the self (Okorochoa 1987: 80; Idowu 1994: 167).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have emphasized the pragmatic and power-oriented nature of Nigerian Pentecostal theology. This is reflected in the space allowed for prayers and testimonies in Pentecostal worship services and literature.<sup>34</sup> Testimonies are intended to rehearse God’s blessings in a public setting. They reflect a preference in African Pentecostal discourse for narrative forms of communication, similar to those found in the scriptures. Regular thanksgiving services provide the ritual setting for Nigerian Pentecostals to express their gratitude to God for his providential control. While it may be difficult to substantiate claims that recourse to prayer and faith can influence material realities, it would be wrong to dismiss too quickly the numerous testimonies recounted in church services, recorded in popular literature, or posted on the internet. In one RCCG thanksgiving service I attended recently, people lined up to share testimonies of divine intervention, which included protection during the recent hurricane in the US, the granting of a visa extension, physical healing, the offer of a lucrative employment contract, the successful completion of postgraduate studies, and the birth of a child. For Nigerian Pentecostals, their theology has validity, not only because it is drawn from the Bible and resonates with traditional aspirations, but also because it works. This pragmatic approach is one of the ways that Nigerian Pentecostalism can contribute to intercultural theology.

Nigerian Pentecostal theologies, with their practical orientation, their sensitivity to local culture and context, and their openness to the power of the Spirit, present a challenge to the more rationalistic and systematic theologies of the global North. Deliverance and success-oriented theologies, while they remain open to abuse, provide a means for individuals to leave behind the influences of their pasts and build new identities for themselves. In this sense, they offer hope for the future to those struggling with sin, sickness, and adverse economic circumstances.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Some of the fieldwork for this paper was conducted as a Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham under the NORFACE-funded programme, entitled 'Transnational Nigerian Pentecostal churches, networks and believers in three Northern countries: migrant churches as a potential and potent social force'. I am grateful to my colleagues, Dr Kim Knibbe and Anna Quaas at the Free University (Amsterdam) and the University of Heidelberg respectively, for their comments on an earlier draft. I am also grateful to pastors E. A. Adeboye, Agu Irukwu and D. K. Olukoya for allowing me access into their respective churches.
- <sup>2</sup> Jeff Astley (2002: 56) defines 'ordinary theology' as 'the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind.'
- <sup>3</sup> For example, the largest churches in Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, and Zimbabwe were started by Nigerians. In 2001, the Accra congregation of the Nigerian-initiated Winners' Chapel was attracting around 13,000 to its Sunday worship meeting, and its current pastor is a Ghanaian (see Gifford 2004: 56).
- <sup>4</sup> For example, the sermon texts at RCCG's monthly Holy Ghost services during 2001 were largely taken from OT narratives (see Adeboye 2002).
- <sup>5</sup> All Christians Fellowship Mission, *Teaching the Whole Counsel of God. New Life Sunday School*, Abuja: Christian Education Department, All Christians Fellowship Mission, 2001, 32.
- <sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Kim Knibbe for this suggestion (personal communication, 9 October 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the Yoruba concept of spiritual power, see Harris 2006: 55-62.
- <sup>8</sup> The Igbo have similar goals and expect similar benefits from religious observance: the search for salvation in the form of *ezi-ndu* (the good life). See Okorocho 1987: 206, 278.
- <sup>9</sup> Horton takes as his point of departure Peel's study of Aladura (1968). For critical responses to Horton and Peel, see Fisher 1973, Ifeka-Moller 1974, Ikenga-Metuh 1986, Hefner 1993.
- <sup>10</sup> See also Ranger (2001: 656), who also takes issue with Peel on this point.
- <sup>11</sup> For a theological analysis of deliverance theology in Ghana, see Asamoah-Gyadu 2006: 164-200.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.mountainoffire.org/mfmstart.htm> (accessed 21 October 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> One example is Olukoya's book *Prayer Rain* (1999b), described on its front cover as the 'most powerful and practical Prayer manual ever written'. It contains over 500 pages of prayers, targeting such problems as hidden

curses, evil blood covenants, marine witchcraft, poverty, marital lateness and marital distress, sickness, and destiny killers.

- <sup>14</sup> D. K. Olukoya, 'The Process of Self-Deliverance', [www.mountainoffire.org/mfmpages.htm](http://www.mountainoffire.org/mfmpages.htm) (accessed 21 October 2008).
- <sup>15</sup> See for example, Adeleke 2008. Adeleke is senior pastor of the London-based RCCG parish, House of Praise.
- <sup>16</sup> Pastor Eddie Iduoze, Gateway Ministries, *Newsletter*, Vol. 2, Issue 8, August 2008. Gateway Ministries was originally a church plant from Trinity Chapel, a RCCG parish in London, but now has independent status.
- <sup>17</sup> Bioye Segun, 'Cut the Cord and Connect to God', online sermon, 16 January 2005 (accessed 15 July 2008).
- <sup>18</sup> For a discussion of RCCG conferences, see Ukah 2008: 234-53.
- <sup>19</sup> Royal Connections is a parish of RCCG in London.
- <sup>20</sup> RCCG House of Praise, Birmingham, 5 October 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> Significantly, Mensa Otabil wrote a recommendation for Ashimolowo's book and has spoken at KICC's annual conference.
- <sup>22</sup> Leadership & Lifestyle, 'Our Vision', [www.leadershipmagazine.net/vision.htm](http://www.leadershipmagazine.net/vision.htm) (accessed 15 October 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> For a discussion of prosperity teaching in RCCG, see Ukah, *Pentecostal Power*, 183-96.
- <sup>24</sup> See also Ukah, *Pentecostal Power*, 153.
- <sup>25</sup> Redeemed People's Mission, 'Lesson 9. God delights in our Prosperity', *Redeemed Adult Sunday School Lessons*, 1998, 26.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Gateway Ministries: The Profile', *Trinity Chapel. Celebrating 10 years of God's Grace*, 2007, 91.
- <sup>27</sup> D. K. Olukoya, 'Power to prosper', online sermon, [www.mountainoffire.org/power\\_%20to%20\\_prosper.htm](http://www.mountainoffire.org/power_%20to%20_prosper.htm) (accessed 5 June 2008).
- <sup>28</sup> Sola Fola-Alade, 'The Real Measure of Success', *Publisher's Thought*, [www.leadershipmagazine.net/publisher.htm](http://www.leadershipmagazine.net/publisher.htm) (accessed 21 July 2008).
- <sup>29</sup> This was the text used by Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo to advertise KICC's 2008 International Gathering of Champions conference.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, Jesus House, *Going the Extra Mile. 2007 in Review*, 2008, 32-45.
- <sup>31</sup> Tony Rapu, a medical doctor, was formerly pastor of Apapa Parish, one of the largest RCCG congregations in Nigeria, and was also responsible for starting RCCG parishes in Europe and the US, including London's Jesus House.
- <sup>32</sup> Agu Irukwu, 'In The Crucible with Pastor Agu. A New Beginning', *Outflow*, September 2007, 5.
- <sup>33</sup> Agu Irukwu, 'In The Crucible with Pastor Agu. Forging Ahead', *Outflow*, July 2008, 5.
- <sup>34</sup> See for example, Odulele 2004. Odulele is senior pastor of Glory House, a large Nigerian initiated church in London's East End. Testimonies in the book are divided into the following categories: healing and health, powerful transformations, immigration, employment and financial supply, family and fertility.

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3 Ruth Marshall, *Political spiritualities: the Pentecostal revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Richard Burgess, *Freedom from the Past and Faith for the Future: Nigerian Pentecostal Theology, including the Netherlands*.<sup>14</sup> Literature on Pentecostalism and evangelicalism as global religious movements<sup>14</sup> and in particular a recent study of new mission churches in Europe furthermore puts this development in the broader context of the missionary ambitions of evangelical and Pentecostal movements from the Global South<sup>15</sup>.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, there are particular conceptions of history and the future, oppositions between tradition and modernity at stake that are radically different for all parties involved.