

The Pentecostal prosperity gospel in Nigeria: paradoxes of corruption and inequality*

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ABSTRACT

Preachers of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria criticise politicians' greed and government corruption, even as many church leaders amass great wealth themselves. Drawing on ethnographic research, this article explores the relationship between Pentecostalism's prosperity gospel and political culture in Nigeria, especially as it pertains to problems of inequality and corruption. The analysis builds on a case study of one particular prosperity church in the city of Umuahia. It addresses the paradox that this brand of Pentecostalism articulates widespread discontent with the venality plaguing national political culture, while at the same time offering divine justification for the pursuit and accumulation of wealth. Examining not only Pentecostals' interpretations of corruption, but also people's responses to scandals within these churches, the paper attempts to understand why Nigerians who are so aggrieved about corruption and inequality are at the same time drawn to churches that appear to reproduce many of the same dynamics.

Keywords: Pentecostal Christianity, prosperity gospel, corruption, inequality, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In south-eastern Nigeria, Pentecostal Christianity is firmly established, not only as a popular religion, but also as a dominant feature of the political and cultural landscape. New churches seem to spring up in rural communities and urban neighbourhoods nearly every day. Sunday services overflow and people attend

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all manner of additional prayer meetings, Bible studies and other church-related events throughout the week. Television and radio stations broadcast extensive Pentecostal programming. Billboards and banners everywhere announce evangelical crusades, deliverances, miracle-working and opportunities to participate in spiritual warfare against the Devil. Trucks, buses, cars and motor-cycles are adorned with born-again bumper stickers and painted-on attestations of faith. Popular music and ubiquitous Nigerian-made videos frequently feature themes inspired by Pentecostal Christianity. Politicians make not only political and economic promises, but also spiritual pledges. Even the services of rival Protestant and Roman Catholic churches increasingly adopt elements obviously borrowed from Pentecostalism.

The variation in Pentecostal practices is immense, including within south-eastern Nigeria. Precise definitions about what counts as Pentecostalism are diverse and contested, among both believers and analysts (Anderson 2002). One brand of Pentecostal practice that is especially popular in Nigeria is what is often referred to as the ‘prosperity gospel’. Followers of prosperity churches generally share with other Pentecostals ‘the *experience* of the working of the Holy Spirit and the *practice* of spiritual gifts’ (Anderson 2002: 48; italics in original). In other words, they believe in prophecy and divine healing and they may also speak in tongues. But particularly characteristic of prosperity churches is an emphasis on material rewards in the here and now. Prosperity churches promise the faithful not only spiritual salvation, but also improved social and economic circumstances.

At the same time that these churches are so popular, they are also controversial, in Nigeria and among scholarly observers. Perhaps chief among the misgivings about prosperity churches for non-members is the combination of aggressive requirements regarding tithing by congregants, who are often already struggling financially, and the relative affluence (and in some cases the extreme wealth) of church leaders. In Nigeria, these concerns are sometimes fuelled by media accounts of church scandals, but they circulate in popular discourse as well, including when ordinary citizens see what they believe are corrupt elites trying to legitimise their ill-gotten riches through religious performance.

All of this has led some Nigerians to view prosperity churches as profit-making enterprises for their charlatan leaders and religious cover for illicit wealth. But the members of these churches certainly do not see things this way. Instead, they commonly interpret the riches that accrue to church founders, pastors and successful fellow congregants as evidence of God’s blessing. Further, they see their own faith and tithing as yielding many benefits, even when they are not visibly prosperous in monetary terms. In these circumstances, it seems ironic that prosperity churches frequently tap into Nigerians’ discontents about corruption – and the inequalities and injustices it enables – to attract followers. Preachers routinely rail against venality even as they attribute their own wealth to the rewards of faith. In this article, I use a case study of one particular prosperity church in Umuahia, a small city that is the capital of Abia State in south-

eastern Nigeria, to explore the question of how followers of prosperity churches are at once deeply discontented about corruption-induced inequalities and at the same time see the disparities in their own churches not as the result of exploitation or fraud, but as proof of God's work. To uncover the dynamics that explain this apparent paradox, I examine beliefs about and practices of corruption in Nigeria, as well as the ways that followers of these churches perceive themselves as prospering even as they appear to remain poor.

SETTING, METHODS AND AUTHOR POSITION

The material for this article is drawn primarily from several months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2012 in south-eastern Nigeria. But it also builds on observations from almost eight years of living, working and conducting research in Nigeria between 1989 and 2019. Since I began doing anthropological research in Nigeria, it has been literally impossible to ignore the presence and influence of Pentecostal Christianity. Consequently, even when I was working on other topics, I was also interested in – and paid attention to – the social and political impact of Pentecostalism. In 2012, I began a research project specifically about Pentecostal Christianity. I focused on several prosperity churches in and around Umuahia.

In addition, I trained and employed two Nigerian research assistants to undertake interviews and conduct participant observation in eight churches in Owerri, the capital of neighbouring Imo State. In all, my team and I conducted extended interviews with 64 members of a dozen different churches, more than a dozen pastors, and numerous other key informants. But it was through long hours of participant observation that we gathered and learned most of what I am able to present here about how the popularity of Nigeria's prosperity churches can be understood in relation to the problem of corruption.

It took me half a dozen years after completing the research in 2012 before I felt able to begin writing about the project. This was because during and immediately after my fieldwork I found it nearly impossible to empathise with or understand my interlocutors' faith. Specifically, I could not understand what appeared to me to be their blind allegiance to preachers who, from my perspective, were exploiting them. I was very much one of those observers who Coleman has characterised as assuming that 'Prosperity Christianity is ultimately about siphoning money away from the pockets of gullible followers towards the bank accounts of rapacious preachers, and that it does so by making outrageous and fraudulent claims about the possibility of acquiring wealth or health through tithing or giving donations' (Coleman 2014: 74). I could not honestly adopt the non-judgemental stance that is a hallmark of anthropology and so I became, in Robbins' words, 'tongue tied' (Robbins 2020: 26). Even now, I have not achieved the ideal(ised) anthropological relativism with regard to prosperity churches in Nigeria, at least when it comes to wealthy owner/founders, elite politicians, and their performances of faith. But with the aid of time, reflection and the insight of scholars with more nuanced religious sensibilities than

my own, I aim below to analyse and explain the intertwining of Nigerians' discontent about corruption and their simultaneous attraction and allegiance to the prosperity gospel.

PROSPER AND GO TO HEAVEN

I attended many services at Prosper and Go to Heaven Mission in Umuahia while I was conducting research in 2012.¹ The Sunday I describe here was, however, a special day. Charles Oriaku, the founder and General Overseer of the church, was in town and would preside over the service. He originated from a community called Olokoro on the outskirts of Umuahia and had grown the small ministry he started there approximately 10 years earlier into a much-expanded church with congregations in Olokoro, Umuahia, and several other cities. At the time, Oriaku was based in Kaduna, a majority-Muslim city in northern Nigeria with a large Christian population.

Before Oriaku made his entrance, the service proceeded typically. Moments dedicated to collective individual praying created a cacophony in which no one person's words could be distinguished, but the resulting sound was mesmerising. A choir sang beautifully to the accompaniment of a band that included an electric guitar, bass and keyboard, as well as a drummer. The choir aroused many in the congregation to dance and sing along, and almost everyone clapped their hands in rhythm. Later in the service, a young lady testified, with her family by her side, how, through Jesus, God had cured her of a terrible illness. Her testimony was followed by one of four different collections that day. Congregants paraded – indeed, danced their way – to the front of the church to drop naira (Nigerian currency) notes into a large glass box for all to see. The local pastor and prominent lay members of the church led prayers and readings. Like most Pentecostal church services in Nigeria, the mood was lively.

But when Charles Oriaku was introduced, members of the congregation greeted their General Overseer with thunderous applause. The atmosphere became electric. One could sense the excitement his presence generated. In his sermon, he spoke of how, in the Bible, God tested people's faith by asking them to sacrifice the first among things they loved, most notably the request that Abraham sacrifice his first son. God ultimately rewarded the sacrifices of the faithful, Oriaku exclaimed. He provided many examples, including his own sacrifices in starting his church, which, he said, initially left him in poverty but ultimately led to his prosperity. Oriaku's oration culminated in asking all the members to donate their first month's salary (this was the last Sunday of January) to the church. Church leaders passed out papers upon which congregants were asked to write down their pledges and cell phone numbers, in recognition that few, if any, church members would be capable of contributing such sums on the spot.

Oriaku buttressed his appeal for this hefty gift to the church by telling his followers that their contributions would help support a church-run orphanage he

had established in northern Nigeria. In his ministry in Kaduna, he explained, he had discovered that the city had a huge number of orphans. He referenced the well-known phenomenon in mostly-Muslim northern Nigeria of child begging, including efforts organised by madrassas – informal schools where children are taught the Quran. While children in madrassas are not necessarily orphans, and while child-begging has a very different cultural-religious valence in Nigeria's Islamic North than in the Christian South, Oriaku mixed his appeal to help impoverished orphans with the pledge that he would also save their souls. Above all, he emphasised that a sacrifice of one's first month's salary was expected by God. It was a seed, he said, that would be rewarded manifold in the future.

Although people submitted their pledges with no obvious hesitation, I found it hard to ignore the possibility that these kinds of contributions made Oriaku and his family strikingly rich. In his remarks, Oriaku asserted that his faith and sacrifices had led God to provide him great spiritual and material wealth. I do not know anything about Oriaku's finances. But I saw his house in Olokoro. It was a mansion. Further, Oriaku and his wife arrived at the service in a late-model Mercedes Benz. Characteristic of prosperity church leaders, rather than trying to understate his wealth and relative privilege, Oriaku used it as a tool to convince his followers of the power of his message. His oratory was laced with references to the prosperity that being born again had brought to him and his family. He even boasted about the recent purchase of a brand-new car for his wife.

In contrast, most of his congregants were far from rich. A majority of folks arrived at church on foot or on the backs of motorcycle taxis. They were civil servants and small business people. They were teachers and tailors. While many might be described as belonging to Nigeria's aspiring middle class, significant wealth was a hope for the future rather than a current condition.

I asked many church members their opinion about Oriaku's message that his personal prosperity was the work of God. Everyone said that his relatively opulent lifestyle was evidence of the rewards of handing one's life to Christ, which they believed would benefit them in the same way. For example, Nkechi, a 43-year-old mother of four who had a small shop selling cloth for making women's clothing in Umuahia's main market, said, 'We are happy that the father of our church is bountifully blessed by God. It is his reward for steadfast faith and the sacrifices he has endured to build a house of God. All the faithful shall benefit from God's blessing' (Nkechi 2012 Int.). No one I interviewed thought Oriaku's wealth was ill gotten, or at least no one would say so to me.

The people I spoke with also believed their own lives were – or would become – better through their participation in his church and through being born again. Many people told me that their fortunes had improved since they became born again and specifically since they joined Oriaku's church. People talked of things like new business opportunities, a child's admission to secondary school, or finding a flat to rent in a tight urban real estate market. Njoku, a

34-year-old father of three who had been unemployed for several months when he joined the church, said, ‘When I found this church, I had no job. But one of my brothers in Christ introduced me to someone who had a bike for *okada* [a motorcycle taxi]. I have been riding for him, and – God willing – I will soon be able to purchase my own bike. Our *oga* [leader/boss] is right. Those who sacrifice and give their lives to Christ will be rewarded’ (Njoku 2012 Int.). Church members seemed widely convinced that they were benefitting from their born-again faith, not just spiritually but materially. Whereas critics of the prosperity gospel might interpret Oriaku’s riches as the result of charlatanry, to his followers the General Overseer’s prosperity was seen not only as a beacon of hope, but also as the manifestation of salvation made possible through being born again.

THE RISING POPULARITY OF PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY IN
SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

After the initial conversions to Christianity during colonialism and until recent decades, the vast majority of people in south-eastern Nigeria, primarily Igbo-speakers, belonged to either the Catholic Church or mainline Protestant denominations such as Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Lutheran (Ekechi 1971; Isichei 1995). While Pentecostal churches also have a long history in Nigeria, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that these churches’ popularity grew significantly (Ojo 2006). The first Pentecostal churches in the region emphasised ascetic lifestyles and preached reward in the afterlife, particularly among the poor and dispossessed. In the competition for membership with the more established denominations, these so-called holiness churches began to make some inroads. Members of these churches, such as the influential Deeper Life Church, dressed conservatively. Women were forbidden from wearing jewellery. Moral codes were puritanical. Relatively few people in the middle and upper classes participated (Isaacson 1990; Ojo 2006; Akoda 2012).

But over the past 30 years, a new brand of Pentecostalism has swept Nigeria and other parts of Africa, preaching a gospel of prosperity (Gifford 1990, 2004; Meyer 2004; Maxwell 2006). These ‘new-breed’ churches, as Nigerians call them, and their born-again members now stand out in south-eastern Nigeria’s religious landscape. Precise membership figures are hard to come by. The Nigerian government does not ask questions about religion or ethnicity in the national census, viewing these issues as too politically combustible given the tensions between the Muslim North and Christian South. By one recent estimate, 26% of Nigerian Christians were thought to be Pentecostal (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010). My impression is that in south-eastern Nigeria the proportion must be higher.

Social-science scholarship on Pentecostalism in Africa generally, and in Nigeria specifically, has focused, in part, on trying to explain the recent popularity of these churches (Marshall 1991, 1993, 1995, 2009; Meyer 1999, 2004). Some of the literature emphasises the appeal of the relational and

ethical aspects of Pentecostalism's beliefs and practices (Klaits 2010; Daswani 2011, 2013, 2015; Werbner 2011). Other scholars connect the popularity of born-again Christianity specifically with the problems of modern life (Maxwell 1998, 2000; Meyer 1998a, 1998b, 2004; Gifford 2004). These scholars argue that Pentecostal messages, practices and new social networks have helped Africans in various ways to interpret, find hope in, adapt to and succeed in the contexts of rapid urbanisation, globalisation and the expansion of capitalism. The prosperity gospel in particular endorses – and promises fulfilment of – people's aspirations for wealth, consumption and middle-class lifestyles and at the same time condemns the greed, corruption and immorality that seem to accompany on-going transformations.

PENTECOSTAL BELIEFS AND NIGERIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

Nimo Wariboko's book, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* (2014), provides a thorough and insightful account of Pentecostal Christianity in contemporary Nigeria, including an analysis of its political ramifications. Wariboko develops a thesis about the paramount importance of what he calls 'the spell of the invisible' for Nigerian Pentecostals. Although he acknowledges the historical shifts that have taken place in Nigerian Pentecostalism, including the widely acknowledged evolution, noted above, from more otherworldly, ascetically oriented 'holiness' churches toward the predominance of the prosperity gospel over at least the last two decades, he argues that central to Nigerian Pentecostalism throughout has been the spell of the invisible. By this he means the belief that behind (but also always manifested in) the visible (or phenomenal) world is the invisible (or noumenal) world of God (but also the Devil). Nigerian Pentecostal spirituality is above all else about revealing the truths and realities associated with this invisible realm. Wariboko explains:

The fundamental premise of Pentecostal spirituality is to contest reality as the conditions and limits to access knowledge and truth, while endowing it with spirit. The spirituality of Nigerian Pentecostals seeks to raise self-conscious subjects who can do something to themselves in order to access the noumenal realm for knowledge. They do not believe that subjects are locked in the phenomenal realm. This is counter to the premise of Western philosophy, which argues that the self-conscious subject cannot modify the conditions and limits of her access to knowledge and truth. (Wariboko 2014: 42)

Wariboko's explication of the spell of the invisible in Pentecostal thought resonates with anthropological accounts of how Nigerians (and other West African peoples) view the relationship between spirituality and politics (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004). As Ebenezer Obadare (2018) observed in his recent book, *Pentecostal Republic: religion and the struggle for state power in Nigeria*, power and politics in Nigeria are increasingly carried out with reference to the spiritual realm, in a form heavily influenced by Pentecostal Christianity. The view that Nigeria's political-economic problems are at their core spiritual in nature unites a wide range

of discourses about the troubles in Africa's most populous country. Everyday conversations, media exposés, and Nollywood video films are replete with examples of the ways that ordinary citizens interpret the workings of politics in relation to an invisible spiritual sphere, whether in a traditional idiom of witchcraft or through the more recently adopted argot of Pentecostal Christianity (Smith 2001*a*; Ukah 2003; McCall 2004; Ellis 2008). Pentecostalism taps seamlessly into long-standing local understandings that under the surface of everyday political struggles lurks an even more consequential spiritual battle. Pentecostalism promises privileged access to, insight about and influence in this invisible domain.

Ruth Marshall's book, *Political Spiritualities: the Pentecostal revolution in Nigeria* (2009), provides another compelling account of the political impact of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, including a trenchant critique of the dominant literature. In Marshall's analysis, religiosity cannot be reduced to a reaction to politics or economics. She shows how Pentecostal faith intertwines with political and social life, revealing the paradoxes that characterise contemporary Nigeria. Rather than explaining Pentecostal spirituality as a psychosocial means of 'domesticating modernity', as Marshall suggests much of the literature in anthropology does (e.g. Comaroff & Comaroff 1997, 2002; Meyer 1999), she argues that Pentecostal beliefs and practices are in and of themselves politically productive as well as religiously powerful. Marshall contends that the subjectivities engendered through Pentecostalism create possibilities for redemption and radical change, having the potential for what she calls 'insurrectional force' (2009: 48). Yet, ultimately, Marshall concludes that Pentecostalism is not having the revolutionary political impact its followers expect. In her view, Nigerian Pentecostalism is characterised by too much fragmentation and individualism, as well as a tendency towards theocratic or despotic politics rather than emancipatory democracy. Prosperity churches in particular pose unresolved questions about the political repercussions of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, especially with regard to the intersecting problems of inequality and corruption.

PENTECOSTAL PROSPERITY AND INEQUALITY

The number of prosperity churches in the country seems to keep growing, with entrepreneurial pastors starting new churches seemingly every day. Certainly, that was the case in Umuahia when I conducted my research in 2012. Indeed, by that time two popular jokes had long circulated about religious entrepreneurialism. In the first, it was said that for recent graduates facing Nigeria's bleak employment situation, the two best options were to start an NGO or found a church. Implied in the joke was not only a recognition of the immense growth in these sectors, but also an insinuation that they offered opportunities for prosperity through less-than-honest means (i.e. fraud or corruption). The second joke played on stereotypes that different cities and subgroups in Igboland were known for dominating particular sectors of the market. In that joke it was said that while, for example, the city of Nnewi was

known for manufacturing motor vehicle spare parts (Silverstein 1984) and the town of Orlu specialised in pharmaceuticals (Peterson 2014), Umuahia had become the hub for the founding of new churches. The implication was that churches – and religion – had become a business.

In reality, most new churches were small and their founders were unlikely to become rich. But a few prosperity churches started in Nigeria have become mega-churches, with international memberships and enormous congregations. A quintessential example is Winners' Chapel, started in Lagos in 1983 (Gifford 2004: 56–61). Even 15 years ago, when Paul Gifford was writing about it, Winners' had already spread to 38 African countries, had over 400 branches in Nigeria, and boasted an auditorium in Lagos that held over 50,000 worshippers. Several other churches, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), which did not begin as a prosperity church but has moved significantly in that direction (Ukah 2008, 2018), have grown similarly large or larger. RCCG's Redemption Camp on the Lagos–Ibadan highway, for example, regularly draws many hundreds of thousands of worshippers (Ukah 2008).

The leaders of Nigeria's biggest Pentecostal mega-churches are thought by many citizens to be among the country's richest men and women, with vast holdings in real estate and business, some owning personal jets, schools and private universities. Similar perceptions are evident in scholarly literature. For example, Birgit Meyer, in her review of contemporary African Christianity, describes:

flamboyant leaders of the new mega-churches, who dress in the latest (African) fashion, drive nothing less than a Mercedes Benz, participate in the global Pentecost jetset, broadcast the message through flashy TV and radio programs, and preach the Prosperity gospel to their deprived and hitherto-hopeless born-again followers at home and in the diaspora. (Meyer 2004: 448)

In Nigeria, David Oyedepo, the founder and bishop of Winners' Chapel was estimated to be worth \$150 million and reportedly owned a \$30 million Gulfstream jet (Nsehe 2011a, 2011b). Chris Oyakhilome, founder of Christ Embassy, was said to be worth \$30–50 million, and T.B. Joshua, head of Synagogue Church of All Nations, was reported to be worth \$10–15 million (Nsehe 2011b). Others are believed to be worth millions of dollars. While many of these estimates of church leaders' wealth have been contested and may be exaggerated, nonetheless, the immense wealth of these men is frequently the topic of media coverage and popular discourse (Fasua 2012; Akinbode 2013). Further, even pastors of much smaller churches, such as Prosper and Go to Heaven Mission, appear to live well above the means of their followers. Although there is still almost certainly more money to be made in Nigeria through corruption associated with the state and with the oil industry than through religion, the long-standing local joke that an unemployed graduate's best monetary option might be to start a church reflects both the perception and the reality that many pastors do very well preaching the prosperity gospel. Whether or not their wealth is the result of fraud (as critics contend) or evidence of faith and divine gifts (as prosperity church preachers and the followers profess),

Pentecostal leaders – including in prosperity churches – have embraced critiques of corruption as a staple of their religious discourse.

PENTECOSTAL CRITIQUES OF CORRUPTION

Nigerians constantly complain about the prevalence and corrosive effects of corruption in their country. It is perceived to be so common that they frequently refer to it simply as ‘the Nigerian Factor’ (Smith 2007). Corruption is, of course, a complex phenomenon, not least because it occurs on different scales, from massive looting to petty favours (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2006); its moral valence can depend on the social situation and the position of the actors (Chabal & Daloz 1998); and accusations of corruption can be wielded as a political weapon (Pierce 2016). Average Nigerians occupy a paradoxical position vis-à-vis corruption, at once victims, critics and participants (as they sometimes must be in order to make ends meet or to fulfil their social obligations to others). At times, in the context of Nigeria’s patron-client-oriented political economy and its kinship-centred values, practices that might look from one perspective like corruption can feel from another position like the moral thing to do (Olivier de Sardan 1999; Smith 2001*b*). Further, those who benefit from corruption the most, and therefore occupy the position of patrons, are judged partly on whether or not they use at least some of their wealth to help others. While some readers might conclude it would be advisable not to employ such a messy, multivalent label to a diverse array of morally charged practices, huge numbers of Nigerians use the term on a daily basis and insist that corruption is a national malady.

Corruption is seen by citizens in Nigeria as so bad that they frequently reckon it to be a problem of religious dimensions. The perception of ubiquitous corruption is associated with the commonly shared notion that Nigeria is spiritually adrift – and therefore morally, politically and economically in crisis (Marshall 2009; Smith 2007, 2014; Wariboko 2014). Pentecostal pastors preach that it is only possible to overcome the problem of corruption by addressing the spiritual crisis that underpins it. Prosperity churches in particular promise a spiritually righteous path to achieve many of the same material benefits – and social rewards – that others obtain through corruption.

For millions of Nigerians, the prosperity gospel has become the lens through which they interpret, criticise and – some critics would argue – justify the social inequalities that are often attributed to corruption. Attention to Nigerians’ experiences with and understandings of corruption can help elucidate both the appeal and the political effects of Pentecostal prosperity churches. This is not to say that the rise of these ‘new-breed’ churches should be understood primarily as a response to corruption. But examining their popularity and their political effects in relation to corruption offers insights that are productive and well warranted, especially given the way in which Nigerians themselves perceive the relationship between the two.

Scholars of Pentecostalism in Africa have noted the role of the born-again movement in criticising corruption, with Pentecostal leaders pushing for greater influence of religious morality in the public spheres of politics, civil society and state governance. Twenty-five years ago, Marshall documented the growing involvement of Pentecostals in the public sphere and showed that their agenda sometimes included fighting corruption and its associated injustices.

One can see in the Pentecostal circles the beginnings of the creation of a kind of ‘public space’ in which the critique of government and social ills connected with misgovernment are organised through interdenominational interest groups. Pentecostal lawyers’ groups, bankers’ associations, women’s fellowships, students’ and Youth Corps groups, to name a few, are all involved in the project of the redemption of their respective fields. Attacking corruption, exploitation, illegal practices, and ‘spiritual degeneration’ in the institutions of what others have called ‘civil society’, the Pentecostal movement not only debates civic virtue, but is attempting to bring it into the civic sphere of the nation. (Marshall 1995: 251–2)

Many of my friends and acquaintances in Nigeria who belong to Pentecostal churches believe that they hold themselves to a higher standard of moral accountability than people who are not born again. Several friends who founded local non-governmental organisations consciously marketed their outfits as more accountable and transparent because of their born-again credentials. Elsewhere, I have written about how, in local government elections in a community on the outskirts of Umuahia, a group of born-again university students I knew organised themselves into a coalition that promoted the examination of candidates’ credentials in terms of their capacity to fight corruption (Smith 2007). These assessments implicitly included a judgement about whether the office seeker truly accepted Jesus as his personal saviour. One of the bright young men, Emeka, who engineered the youth coalition, said to me:

Everyone knows that our politicians seek office with one goal – to enrich themselves. Nigeria rewards people who steal money, build big houses, drive Mercedes Benz, share government contracts with their friends, and buy fancy chieftancy titles with big praise names [honorific names that signal some kind of achievement or status]. I’m not saying that no Christians are involved. Even some so-called born agains are corrupt, but people who have really accepted Christ are more straightforward. They have more integrity. They fear God. (Emeka 2006 Int.)

The youth coalition was able to arrange meetings with several candidates for the local government chairmanship and councillorships, as well as receive from them proclamations of strong Christian faith and fear of God. In the end, they did not endorse one particular candidate and even the most ardent members of the coalition agreed that corruption plagued the election and continues to characterise the operations of the local government administration. But Emeka remained adamant that religion would triumph: ‘All the selfishness and greed of our politicians is because they do not fear God, but one day justice

will prevail and the words of Jesus will come to pass, if not in this world, then in the next' (Emeka 2006 Int.).

But despite the hope among many born-again Christians that the spread of their faith will have a cleansing effect, the answer to the question of whether prosperity churches, and Pentecostal Christianity more generally, have had a positive impact on politics, inequality and corruption in Nigeria is anything but clear-cut (Obadare 2018). Indeed, the growing predominance of prosperity churches has complicated the role of charismatic Christianity in its criticism of corruption. Large numbers of middle class and elite Nigerians who belong to prosperity churches – not to mention their pastors – are able to justify their wealth and success in religious language, even as some may have acquired their wealth through various mechanisms of corruption.

CORRUPTION IN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

Pentecostal Christianity has achieved its tremendous following in Nigeria in part because it offers such appealing critiques of corruption and other forms of immorality perceived to be associated with modern social change (Marshall 2009; Smith 2014). But, as noted above, even as Nigerians join Pentecostal churches, especially prosperity churches, in droves, some other citizens suspect that many of these churches are little better than personal moneymaking enterprises for their founders and leaders. Chinansa, a 38-year-old secondary school teacher in Umuahia, who was a member of the Anglican church, voiced an opinion similar to what I heard from many Nigerians who were critical of prosperity church pastors, 'Some of these guys run their churches like a business. Their goal is to get as many customers as possible to pay as much as they can squeeze from them. It's all about money. And if the owner dies you will see that the church is inherited by his wife or children like personal property' (Chinansa 2012 Int.). Scholars have made similar observations. Marshall notes that in Nigeria, 'Approximately 80 per cent of churches founded throughout the late 1980s and 1990s have become de facto the private property of their founders' (2009: 182). Along the same lines, in an essay examining the accounting practices of Pentecostal churches in West Africa, Ukah writes, 'Aside from beliefs that are mobilised against accounting for money and greater public disclosure, the structure of authority in these churches further hinder (sic) public accountability. They are founded and *owned* by a single individual ... There is no higher human authority than the founder-owner' (Ukah 2007: 642; italics in original).

Newspapers and magazines regularly feature stories about corruption in prosperity churches, sometimes exposing even the most popular churches. For example, the cover of the 19 July 2004 edition of one of Nigeria's leading news magazines, *Newswatch*, announced in a bold headline, 'Scandal Rocks Winners Chapel'. The article described a dispute over \$50,000 that was required to be remitted annually from a Ghanaian branch of the church to the headquarters in Lagos. The opulent lifestyle of many of the leaders of

Nigeria's new generation prosperity churches is frequently tied to insinuations of materialism and corruption. Nigeria's huge video entertainment industry includes numerous films in which the corruption of pastors is a favourite plot (Haynes 2000; Ukah 2003). The media and popular gossip are the most common venues for these accusations. An example of this strain of criticism was aired in a 2004 Voice of Biafra International radio broadcast, at the time a popular station in south-eastern Nigeria. The radio commentator lamented:

Look at our Churches; bishops, priests, and pastors will gladly accept a bag of money from a man they know to be a criminal even if the money is still dripping with blood of the victim. They will put this person in the front seat in the Church, sing his praises and tell the congregation what a wonderful person he is. Because everyone knows that this person is a murderer and an armed robber the pastor will simply say, 'Thou shall not judge, let God be the judge'. What kind of nonsense is that? There used to be bishops and priests who had moral character and who would stand up for honesty, justice, and morality no matter who was involved. (Voice of Biafra International, 4 December 2004)

While the above critique is more extreme than most of the misgivings about prosperity churches voiced by my interlocutors in south-eastern Nigeria, nonetheless, many people lamented that some of these churches and their voluble preachers were using the guise of religion simply to pursue money. Both critics and ardent followers of the prosperity gospel agreed that venal corruption was the bane of social, political and economic life in contemporary Nigeria. But whereas critics saw prosperity churches as yet another manifestation of the nation's political-moral ills, followers believed they were the path to salvation.

PROSPERITY FOR THE FAITHFUL: GIFTS, SACRIFICES AND SOCIALITY IN A TIME OF GROWING INEQUALITY

When I asked members of Prosper and Go to Heaven Mission whether they felt comfortable with the General Overseer's wealth, they praised Charles Oriaku's leadership and cited the same biblical passages about the rewards that come to the faithful that Oriaku used in his preaching. For example, Chima, a 35-year-old tailor who joined the church in 2011 said: 'Wealth is God's reward. After all, Jesus said, "I come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Our father [as many members of the church referred to Oriaku] is bringing the wealth of faith in Christ to our entire church and, God willing, to the whole world' (Chima 2012 Int.). Similar to other followers, Chima went on to say that his own fortunes had improved since he joined the church. Of course, many born-again Christians fail to experience monetary prosperity when they join churches like Prosper and Go to Heaven, but even among those who have not yet achieved their economic dreams, there is a strong sense of benefit.

In order to understand the perspectives of the faithful with regard to prosperity, inequality and corruption in Nigeria, it is instructive to ask how is it that followers of these churches see themselves as prospering, even in circumstances of hardship relative to what their pastors seem to promise (not to mention in comparison to wealth that elites, including some church leaders, possess). To interpret believers' experiences, it is necessary to situate the social effects of these churches and their messages in relation to the wider political-economic context in contemporary Nigeria. Instead of exacerbating corruption and inequality as critics contend, adherents of the prosperity gospel see their churches as places that help them address these problems. Specifically, I argue that Pentecostals reap benefits from church membership in navigating the changing dynamics of patron-clientism – the hierarchical system of reciprocity that connects 'haves' and 'have-nots' in Nigeria's political economy. In a clientelistic political economy, this leverage is central to their positive interpretation of prosperity churches vis-à-vis issues of corruption and inequality.

Several scholars of the prosperity gospel in different settings around the world have provided insights upon which I build. Premawardhana (2012), for example, conducted in-depth ethnographic research in a prosperity church in the Boston area that attracted mainly people from the local Cape Verdean community. Challenging his revulsion at aggressive tithing that he initially perceived as pure exploitation, Premawardhana (2012: 98) found that rather than alienation, congregants experienced church rituals as creating 'mutually-obligatory bonds of gift exchange that extend one's sense of self beyond atomistic individualism'. With regard to tithing specifically, he concludes, 'The act of sacrifice transforms the giver from a passive sufferer into a possessor of rights who can exact recompense and even demand it' (2012: 100). One becomes, he suggests, a creditor rather than a debtor – or, I might add, a patron rather than a client. All of this he argues, may not transform objective conditions, but it does transform how believers experience them.

Emphasising the themes of sacrifice, reciprocity and sociality, Coleman draws on decades of study of prosperity churches in Sweden and elsewhere (including Nigeria) to argue that adherents are immersed in 'a Christian landscape made up of gifts, exchanges, and mutual interactions that recall models of dividual as much as individual forms of self-cultivation' (Coleman 2015: 296). Coleman points to the centrality of reciprocal sociality and sacrificial giving in Pentecostal prosperity church practices, a perspective that contrasts with interpretations that see the prosperity gospel as a handmaiden for capitalist individualism. Like Premawardhana, Coleman's insights suggest the importance of paying attention to the experience of believers. Further, both scholars demonstrate the need to understand not only the causes of the prosperity gospel's popularity, but also the social effects in the lives of followers.

In an analysis of the dynamics of inequality, morality and sociality among followers of the prosperity gospel on the Zambian Copperbelt, Haynes (2012) develops an argument upon which I build most directly in my approach to the relationship between the changing face of patron-clientism and the

problem of corruption as understood by prosperity church followers in Nigeria. Her emphasis on sociality is similar to Premawardhana and Coleman. But rather than focusing primarily on rituals and practices within the church, as they do, Haynes follows ‘the lives of local believers as they unfold outside the church’ (2012: 123). Her findings illustrate how people create and negotiate exchange relationships in a context of economic differentiation and material inequality. In other words, she shows how Zambian Pentecostals manage to reap benefits from church-related patron-client ties, even in a context of political-economic upheaval and uncertainty.

The Pentecostals I studied relied similarly on relationships forged in their churches to navigate patron-client hierarchies. Prosperity churches are positioned in somewhat contradictory ways in relation to Nigeria’s traditionally patronage-oriented political economy. On the one hand, as I have noted, church leaders preach fervently against state corruption and the distribution of Nigeria’s wealth through networks of patronage based on ties of ethnicity, place of origin and kinship. As Nigeria’s economy evolves, and as urbanisation and other social transformations push against privileging face-to-face social relations for access to economic, political and social well-being, the prosperity gospel’s critique of personalistic favouritism resonates with much of the public. On the other hand, Pentecostals have begun to create their own patronage networks, resulting in communities that are also hierarchical, but in which they feel they belong (Marshall 1995, 2009). People see their faith, their churches and the relationships created in these new congregations as enabling them to navigate a rapidly changing and, in many ways, highly insecure social landscape.

Uzoma, a 21-year-old unemployed secondary school graduate who migrated to the city from his rural village after his family could not afford to send him to university, told of the support he receives from his congregation:

My father could not afford to send me to university. He has two wives and eleven children. My family expects me to help train my juniors, but how can I when I cannot even find a job? In Nigeria there are no jobs unless you know somebody. My father is a poor farmer ... Until I was born again, I did not have anyone to assist me. Now I have many brothers and sisters and I know that if I follow Jesus, He will deliver me. That is my only hope and the only hope for Nigeria. (Uzoma 2004 Int.)

Similarly, Chinyere, a 41-year-old mother of five who runs a hair salon in Umuahia, said that her fellow church members helped support her business and she theirs:

When I started my salon, I worried that I would not have enough customers to make a profit. My husband was sceptical. But our pastor says that all of us in Jesus’s flock should support each other. He actually announced it in church when I opened my business! My sisters in the Lord have been some of my most loyal customers. I do the

same for them. When I can buy from my fellow church member I do. We shall all prosper together, by God's power. (Chinyere 2012 Int.)

Even if belonging to a prosperity church does not miraculously make people rich, most followers firmly believe that their faith has transformed their lives not just spiritually, but also materially. The social ties created through church participation, including the sense of sacrifice engendered by tithing, binds people in mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships, including across economic hierarchies (Haynes 2012; Premawardhana 2012; Coleman 2015). While traditional forms of patron-clientism are often perceived as corrupted – either because ties based on kinship, community of origin or tribe are seen as undermining bureaucratic ideals of merit and accountability, or because still-valued ties of affection are believed to be for sale to the highest bidder – born-again Christians experience their new social networks as upright and honest. In the minds of the faithful, prosperity churches have helped solve their material problems, above all because they are leading the fight to address the underlying spiritual crisis.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I used a case study of one Pentecostal prosperity church in Umuahia in south-eastern Nigeria to examine the more general question of these churches' impact on political culture in Africa's most populous country. Specifically, I aimed to reconcile the seeming paradox of people's attraction to and experiences in these churches with their more general discontent about the role of corruption in exacerbating inequality. To critics, many prosperity church preachers looked like charlatans. In contrast, their followers saw them as offering a path to salvation. Even as popular pastors vociferously lamented the consequences of Nigeria's notorious corruption in their preaching, these church leaders mostly rose above suspicion regarding their own disproportionate riches, which they commonly touted as evidence of their faith and God's blessing.

Over the past three decades, Pentecostal preachers have delivered a message that speaks with great resonance to Nigerians' belief that unacceptably high levels of inequality and corruption are the consequence of a spiritual crisis – these disquieting realities are thought to have invisible underpinnings (Smith 2001*a*; Ellis & Ter Haar 2004; Wariboko 2014). Prosperity churches appeal to a widely held view that there would be plenty of wealth to go around in Nigeria, were it not stolen and squandered by corrupt politicians who assure their power through manipulations in a devilish supernatural realm (Smith 2007; Ellis 2008). Pentecostalism promises Nigerians access to and belonging in a more glorious invisible world, where prosperity is the reward for faith rather than the fruit of evil.

Without a doubt, Pentecostal pastors have helped elevate discontent about corruption in national discourse. Part of Pentecostalism's appeal is its capacity

to speak to people's anxieties about a changing society in which many feel insecure about the future. Preachers provide a compelling interpretation of Nigeria's ills, and, perhaps above all, they offer hope (Robbins 2004). The hope offered by the prosperity gospel is not only for spiritual redemption and God-granted success. It is also a hope that as urbanisation and the spread of capitalism erode the traditional foundations of livelihoods, political authority and sociality, which were rooted in face-to-face social relations like kinship and patron-clientism, viable alternatives will reveal themselves and take hold. These alternatives are social as well as spiritual. Attention to the everyday experiences of Pentecostals, both inside and outside their churches, suggests that the benefits of faith come via quotidian social relations enabled by church membership as well as from perceived spiritual transformation (Haynes 2012; Premawardhana 2012).

Followers of the prosperity gospel report many rewards, even if they do not immediately (or ever) become rich. But a better understanding of the lived experience of these born-again Christians does not easily translate into accurate predictions about the long-term impact of these popular churches on Nigeria's moral and political economies. At times, Pentecostal Christianity seems to be part of a potentially positive process of social change, as people seek alternative idioms of accountability to corruption-tainted forms of patron-clientism, and as they wish for a political economy in which citizens do not merely survive but instead thrive. Yet my findings suggest the limits of the prosperity gospel's politically constructive possibilities. Specifically, the role that these churches themselves play in the reproduction of inequality suggests that they often perpetuate rather than challenge socially problematic disparities. Preachers of the prosperity gospel – especially the owner-founders of bigger churches – appear to become rich from the contributions of their followers. More broadly, the moral legitimacy provided to elites if they donate significant sums to their churches mitigates Pentecostalism's potential as an 'insurrectional force' (Marshall 2009) that could reshape Nigeria's political culture.

As Wariboko (2014) emphasises, the capacity to access and intervene in the invisible world is a major part of Pentecostalism's appeal. But attributing injustice to an unseen realm can shield the powerful in this world. Nigeria's political elite benefit from the popular belief that their wealth and control are due to manipulations in a supernatural sphere. Such a view makes corruption seem like a problem of Biblical proportions requiring God's intervention rather than a constellation of mundane, material processes that can be challenged and changed by ordinary human action.

Christianity brings potentially potent moral resources for critiquing inequality and corruption, rooted both in Old Testament social prophets and in Jesus's teachings. But in the hands of many Nigerian Pentecostal pastors and their prosperity gospel, it instead offers moral justification for inequality and distraction from its political consequences, thus undermining other locally resonant critiques. Corruption connected to the state and to electoral politics is widely branded as bad, but the 'God-given' wealth of church elites – even when their

neighbours and fellow congregants have little or nothing – is portrayed as spiritually ordained. As much as believers find succour in these churches, many prosperity gospel pastors seem to be creating new moral bases for economic disparity rather than challenging steep inequality itself as politically and morally problematic.

The congregants I interviewed at Prosper and Go to Heaven Mission did not see Charles Oriaku's wealth and his demands for contributions as evidence of charlatanry – quite the opposite. But in recent years corruption scandals have surfaced in some Pentecostal churches, with pastors and other officials accused of misusing church money. Critical reactions to the inordinate wealth of particular pastors and their followers suggest that the Pentecostal critique of corruption and greed can be turned back on those who flout what they preach. Although Nigeria's prosperity churches have appeared to critics to make a few people rich at the expense of many others, its moral messages may also sometimes provide political ammunition in a fight against corruption and inequality. But as long as the prosperity gospel interprets the accumulation of wealth as evidence of a believer's faith and God's blessing, this popular brand of Christianity is unlikely to promote a class struggle that matches its call for spiritual warfare.

NOTES

1. I use pseudonyms for names of local churches, pastors, and people I interviewed. In order to protect identities and privacy I have also altered slightly the descriptions of individuals.

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