

The Big Man of the Big God

Popular Culture, Media, and the Marketability of Religion

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African Pentecostals have embraced new media technology to be relevant and respond to the marketplace of popular culture. In turn, the media have also transformed the Christian message and indigenous values.

The goals of this reflection are to explore how African Pentecostalism deploys media technology and popular culture in its missionary strategy and in turn is being shaped by both popular culture and the media technology. Given the fact that media technology has an innate culture and that popular culture is driven by a different spirit, how can these serve as resources and challenges in Christian evangelism and representation? We first briefly explain the Pentecostal conception and theology of mission that privilege experience of the Holy Spirit as the driving force for evangelism. Second, it is argued that the contours and emphases within the movement in each decade from the 1970s informed its missionary foci. Third, as the use of media technology became important from the 1980s, we reflect on how the movement interacted with popular culture and deployed the various media.

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Pentecostal Conception of Mission

With the power of the Spirit, Jesus was able to perform miracles, resist the devil, avoid sin, cast out demons, heal the sick, and work to better the lives of the poor and oppressed. Pentecostals believe that people who have repented, been baptized, and received the Holy Spirit have the same power and privilege to participate in God's reconciling enterprise through Christ. In African Pentecostalism, indigenous worldviews and cultures loom large in the understanding of salvation and the goal and strategy of mission. The global church is preeminently engaged in mission to culture; the question is whether the contemporary African Pentecostal movement recognizes the mandate to engage the whole of culture.

Brief History and Contours of African Pentecostalism

Some early revival movements, some of which appeared early in the contact with the missionary message and were precursors of African Pentecostalism, would be the Antonian movement of the eighteenth century led by Beatrice Vita Kimpa in the Congo and the careers of Xhosa prophets, such as Nxele and Ntsikana in South Africa. All emerged from the *ngunza* or indigenous religious traditions (see Thornton). Though short-lived, they reflected two enduring tendencies in African Christianity: the appeal of the charismatic elements of Scripture and the deployment of this spirituality as a response to the pains in various colonial encounters. African Christianity can thus be said to be an extension of African indigenous religiosity. Unlike the *ngunza* religious entrepreneurs, a prophet movement emerged in the 1900s, the noontide of colonialism, led by individuals who had contact with the Christian missionary message. Their impact on the religious landscape lingered longer and dovetailed into later movements.

In the sixty years between 1910–1970, most of the continent witnessed the rise of African Initiated Churches, dubbed *Zion* in southern Africa, *Abaroho* (people drunk with the spirit) in eastern Africa, and *Aladura* (praying people) in western Africa. In contemporary literature a debate rages whether they should be regarded as Pentecostals. Quite notable is the insurgence of charismatic movements within many mainline churches between the years 1920–1950. One explanation is the destabilizing impact of the crisis-ridden period from the interwar years to the aftermath of the Second World War.

These movements sowed the seeds and set the revivalistic model of mission that lasted into the 1970s when a youthful new charismatic form emerged nicknamed *Aliliki* in Malawi, *Guerillas for Christ* in Kenya, and *Bible Carriers* or *Born Again People* in Nigeria. These changed the religious landscape of Africa using the old evangelical model that privileged intensive, direct evangelism (door-to-door, street preaching, outreaches, prayer camps, and long arduous itineration into

dangerous environments). Spartan and puritan, with emphasis on holiness and self-denial, they expected miracles in daily life situations, especially material benefits, healing, and even the capacity to raise the dead. Ecumenical and operating in groups, they flowered first among secondary school students before engulfing the universities.

In the 1980s many of the youth leaders founded their own ministries, some networking with international Pentecostal movements. Typology varied: some insisted on being evangelistic ministries while others focused on prosperity, deliverance, and healing. This period witnessed the emergence of megachurches and an expanding deployment of new media technology to repackage Pentecostal mission. The rise of deliverance ministries and healing camps reflected the great awareness of the demonic aspects of the indigenous map of the universe. The faith theology that pulsed from America was reconstructed to answer questions from the interior of their world-views. Some scholars interpret the allure of the prosperity gospel as the extraneous influence of the American electronic church caused by the dependency syndrome—replicating in the religious sphere the African pathology in the political sphere. Others vigorously rebut that the prosperity ethic derives from the goals of primal religion and that it is a means of embedding the Christ figure in the indigenous worldview. The African worldview portrays a precarious world in which religious rituals tap the resources of the munificent spirits used to contest the machinations of the evil spirits. Pentecostals image Christ as the all-powerful one who saves people from the wiles of ubiquitous evil spirits. One of their choruses exclaims: “Jesus power, super power!” (Kalu, 110–37). Unlike the youthful charismatic movements of the 1970s, many of the leaders were highly educated and professional people.

Meanwhile, the intercessory ministry grew rapidly in the 1990s. The Intercessors for Africa networked throughout the continent, focusing on *Redeeming the Land*, as Barrister Emeka Nwankpa entitled his book. The avowed goal was delivering African nations from spiritual forces that have stunted economic growth and scourged the fate of the black race. Africa becomes the privileged site for evangelization; the vision was to mobilize intentionally an army for what God was about to do in Africa and through Africa. The role of intercession as a form of political praxis was not lost on the political leaders.

From the mid-1990s to the present, the process of reverse flow or mission to the Western world has intensified. Meanwhile the streak of anti-intellectualism in early Pentecostalism in Africa gave way to new ministerial formation strategies

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that included investment in cost-intensive higher education. Many churches, especially Pentecostals, have founded private universities as means of changing the moral temper of nations through faith-based education.

It should be added that a number of classical Pentecostal and parachurch groups from the Western world essayed to evangelize Africa. Before Azusa Street, some Holiness groups had targeted Africa, especially western Kenya and South Africa. Black Pentecostals such as Church of God in Christ (COGIC) sent missions to Liberia. Some missionaries were solo entrepreneurs; others were delegated as group efforts. Many missions, including the Assemblies of God and International Foursquare, came at the invitation of the indigenous folks. It was not till the 1980s that external presence increased enormously as televangelists surged into Africa creating a different Pentecostal culture. The parachurch organizations such as Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, Women Aglow, The Gideons Bible International, and others expanded in many parts of the continent within the last two decades. It is argued that this form of pneumatic response to the Gospel resonated deeply with earlier phases and expressed the type of Christianity that Africans wanted. An indigenous missionary impulse has been central in African Christianity.

Religion, Media, Popular Culture: The Terrain

A central feature of the African religious landscape of the 1980s was the insurgence of American Pentecostal prosperity gospel and faith-claim theology. These came with an elaborate media representation, including electronic communication designed to reshape religious consciousness. This shift or valorization of the mode of communicating the Gospel created a new culture, values, and meaning system. It had an enormous impact on doctrine, polity, liturgy, and ethics in the Pentecostal movement. Scholars in the 1990s ignored background issues about media technology and hailed the triumph of modernity and externality signified by the homogenizing cultural flows of global cultural influences (see Hackett, 258–77). Indeed, there should be a three-level analysis in (a) the history of the medium or technology involved and the institutions that support it; (b) the immediate and intermediate points of the production process; and (c) the point of consumption of particular media and cultural products (Warren, 106). It should be realized that electronic media technology became available to both the American Pentecostals and their African networks about the same time and elicited much enthusiasm from both as a new instrument for forging transnational relationships, reaching the masses, promoting direct encounter, and enabling world evangelism. They saw a medium that could reinforce the message and vision.

In America, fundamentalists and most evangelicals accessed print, radio, and television at different points in time. They effectively used the print media, but

they could not use the radio up to the 1940s and were shut out of television between the 1950s and until the 1970s when technological and cultural changes and relaxed state regulations from “sustaining time” to “paid time” enabled the emergence of elaborate television access. Billy Graham, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts experimented with television from the late 1950s, and Pat Robertson’s *700 Club* joined in the next decade. Robinson’s *Christian Broadcasting Network* was the first of the Christian talk shows of the electronic church era and the first to lease satellite time to distribute his product to the cable television system. The 1970s opened a strong window featuring Jerry Falwell and Jim and Tammy Bakker’s *Praise the Lord Club* (PTL) that functioned from 1974–1987 and was important for the Nigerian Pentecostal movement. PTL expanded into Nigeria through the ministry of Benson Idahosa. Others joined in the 1980s and thereafter. The point is that novelty, experimentation in cultural production, and expansion into the outside world occurred in the 1980s in both cultural contexts and reinforced the new theologies.

Television *deeply* penetrated most of Africa only in the 1980s. Before then, radio and print were the chief media. While missionaries concentrated on oral communication, education, and charitable institutions, evangelicals exploited magazines, tracts, and radio. Muslims were still debating in the 1960s whether the Qur’an should be broadcast by radio and whether radio technology may resignify and desecrate the holy words. In the last two decades, the constitutions of various African nations, far from separating religion’s and state’s concerns, allow media to become sites of the politics of religious difference and conflicts.

There are certain dimensions of the increased deployment of media that should be spelled out. Pentecostals were not the early adaptors of media communication of the Gospel but were, in fact, latecomers. Second, religious broadcasting is a form of broadcasting shaped by the technology and the industrial values and culture that sustain it. Electronic media has its own version of reality and concocts a culture for the consumption of images that support life structures understood as patterns of choices and ways of living. Therefore, we should expect that it could be both a resource and challenge to the Gospel message and mission of the church whether the issue is evangelism, discipleship, Christian nurture, or inculcation of family values. Religious users could attempt to shape media to their needs, but media too could reshape the religions and even trivialize the content and create a counter-religious culture. Third, there is often a thin line between religious and secular techniques in the use of media communication; improved

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technologies define the style. Finally, the religious media that hit Africa in this period were produced from a certain religious and cultural context, namely, by neo-evangelical, fundamentalist revivals of recent years in America, tied to the conservative mainstream who share common symbols, values, and moral culture. The question is less about externality or the political agenda of this group and more about the modes of appropriation by local actors and the fit into new cultural contexts. The questions should be how African churches have used the new media technology and how the technology—characterized by a culture of packaging, merchandizing, and competition in a cost-intensive market and legitimization of popular culture—reshape the message of Christianity, its authenticity, its capacity to speak prophetically to power and be a source of salient moral values. What happens when the ethics of electronic media emerge within the African indigenous ethical system? When individualism, commercialization, and marketing of spiritual services emerge in a context where communalism is privileged? Where ritual agents neither advertise nor emphasize fees? In traditional religion a ritual agent becomes famous based on efficacy.

Discourses on Pentecostalism and Media in Africa

Certain discourses have dominated the study of religion and media in Africa, namely, globalization and modernity. However, as Hoover cautions, a predominantly global discourse misses the local cultural nuances (Hoover, 21). The discourse of globalization buttresses the image that Pentecostalism in Africa is an extension of the American electronic church and a vanguard of the political agenda of the American moral majority. Another discourse, market theory, argues that a religious space is similar to a marketplace. Therefore, religion becomes commercialized and packaged as an attractive product to compete in a competitive marketplace. Market theory discourse argues that marketing strategies enable religious businessmen to dupe gullible consumers by selling their books, video, audiotapes, and all manners of wares, using the sales techniques honed in the secular marketplace. This theory assumes that religion is a finished product for passive consumers, but in reality people are co-producers of religions. It adds that the glitz mixes religion with entertainment. The preacher and television star become inseparable as the “Big Man of the Big God.” Media pander to materialism and financial gain, focusing on the individual’s desires and quest for prosperity.

The rebuttal is that entertainment appears crucial for the survival of religion in the marketplace of culture. Religion and popular culture are enmeshed to attract youth already wired in an electronic culture and bored with the equally packaged institutional religion. Schultze (2003) builds on two dimensions: the connection between business, commerce, and televangelism and the utilization of popular culture techniques in televangelistic mission. Religion and popular culture seem

to have a reciprocal influence on each other in creating a Christianity wherein it is difficult to distinguish popular entertainment from religion. Carrette and King (2004) provide the flip side of the coin by arguing that secular corporate interests have taken over spirituality to subvert individuals and seduce them into consumerism; that advertisements use its cultural cachet and brand products by associating them with personal fulfillment, inner peace, happiness, and success in relationships. Warren concurs: “*Merit* is a cigarette. . . . *Life* is a cereal for breakfast. *Joy* and *Happiness* are fragrances for the body. Unlike the human values they are drawn from, these names are all products available for a price” (63). The authors conclude that the market has taken over the responsibility of religion, and neo-liberalism attempts to revalue all values and define the goal of life itself. If religion is commercially minded, commerce may be deemed to be religiously minded! The entire communication industry, whether use by Pentecostals or others, produces, reproduces, creates, and fosters a commodity culture. Should Christian missionary strategy contest and avoid electronic media as a “satanic realm”? Some would think so. Other analyses advise religious leaders to “spoil the Egyptians,” acknowledging the futility of condemning the mass media in the matter of exercising cultural agency or discernment. Media primarily enable a valorized strategy for making disciples.

Marla Frederick of Harvard Divinity School examines how televangelists respond to the spiritual needs of people and help them to grow and absorb Christian spirituality into everyday life. These programs serve as a counseling discourse and for individual transformation; they may also serve as motivational, self-help, teaching resources that change lifestyles and enable the achievement of progress and social uplift. But she asks: do televangelists encourage people to engage society or do they merely encourage listeners to contribute to their own individual social and spiritual advancement? For an answer, she avers that conversionist theology (with emphasis on sanctification) tends to be apolitical, to focus on the emotional and spiritual needs of individual believers, and to suppress the focus on social ills. But psychologically it may help create self-empowerment by pointing inward because the new individualistic faith is a matter between the individual and God (see Schultze; Carrette and King). This has enormous import for the authenticity of the message and for the black church that has served as the forum for civil rights agitation. In Africa,

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it could reduce the political relevance of the church. Further, Percy shows that much of what televangelists do in the United States and Africa (such as faith healing, miracles, and appeals for money) are banned in Britain by the watchdog Code of Advertising Standards and Practice (97–119). These are regarded as exploitation of human inadequacy and degradation of the people they appeal to. This raises the fundamental question: how evangelically effective is the television medium as a mission tool? This is the point in Berit Brethauer's assertion that "televangelism is hardly an effective way to provoke change in religious identity. Nor do religious media often bring about a radical personal transformation from a born-again experience" (206) though her case study of Schuller does not prove the assertion.

Pentecostal Representation in Advertisement and Print Media

Critics image advertisements as vehicles of commerce. But Percy rebuts that advertising is not necessarily selling: it does not convert but persuades people to take a second look; it is a legitimate option given the pluralistic nature of the modern world characterized by freedom of choice and competition. Ukah focuses on the use of posters among Pentecostals in Africa (2006, 18). He affirms that "Pentecostal entrepreneurs use posters to contest and create visibility, shape and influence people's attitudes to religious producers, break down resistance to social acceptance of the new religiosity, shape expectation, and create *needs, desires* as well as spiritual threats."

Early Pentecostal posters and handbills from the 1970s to mid-1980s were relatively austere, and emphasized the words of the message, in black-and-white background. But by the late 1980s, Pentecostal representation borrowed heavily from popular culture and the advertising style of politicians. Government leaders install huge billboards with pictures of themselves smiling down at the public and exuding assurance that the country, state, or city worked best under their leadership. Pentecostal leaders now likewise promote their anointing as successful "Big Men of the Big God." The dress and lifestyle of the Big Man of God become essential ingredients of the composite culture. Ukah aptly observes that "part of the proselytizing potential of the poster thus is located in its design to appeal to . . . a public willing and desirous of sharing in the wealth of God displayed in the life of the pastor whose image proudly gazes out from the poster" (2006, 13). Thus, where Paul called himself a bondservant, the new pastor engages in a personality cult, flaunting his person, wealth, and status. Style becomes important for enhancing the message: the glossy photographs of the leader, his wife or family, and of members who celebrated happy events serve as mission statements asserting the believer's capacity to refuse defeat from the harsh, disabling environment

and to pose as one who overcomes. Does the medium reshape the messenger, trivialize the message, and distort the image carved by the simplicity of Jesus? Equally, it has become the mark of a successful pastor to publish books, whether ghostwritten or by themselves. My initial conclusion is that this is the medium where local appropriation has been most visible with popular self-help resources and commentary on political matters. Likewise, the production of books, house magazines, posters, and handbills can sustain a financially beneficial publishing enterprise for many ministries.

Television in Pentecostal Missionary Strategy

There is a linkage between television culture and the prosperity gospel that promoted the concept of the Big God whose will is to prosper God's people materially, physically, and spiritually because the blood of Christ's atonement and many promises in the Scriptures assure these. When Benson Idahosa linked with Bakker and other proponents of the faith-claim theology, the character of Pentecostalism changed dramatically in seven ways, through the rise of: (1) the mega-church with thousands of members and branches; (2) the rich "Big Man of God"; (3) mega-projects—elaborate church center, Bible school, businesses, elaborate stadia outreaches; (4) increased access to electronic medium: radio, television, video- and audiocassettes; print media: glamorous house magazines, handbills, posters, billboards, books; clothes: T-shirts, caps, fashion; and music; (5) a radical shift in ecclesiology from congregationalist polity to episcopacy with centralized, bureaucratized administration; (6) an emphasis on fivefold ministry—prophets and apostles controlled evangelists, teachers, and deacons (lower cadres of church workers), while the wife of "the man of God" organized sodalities for women; (7) the importance of titles as many acquired doctorates either *honoris causa* or by outright purchase. Idahosa became a reverend, doctor, professor, and archbishop! Both the secular and religious entrepreneurs use the same communications strategies and interact closely. The proprietor of Kingdom Transport Services says that his success came from the pastor's teachings. This reinforces the message that business success and prosperity comes from generous giving to ministries.

The proliferation of religious television programs may turn off many people. In England people refer disdainfully to "God channels." In some African countries, efforts have been made to restrict "miracle outreaches" from television programs. Few in Africa have their own recording studios. Admittedly, The Redeemed Christian Church of God and Christ Embassy (Nigeria) embarked on extensive development of a television network. In 2003, it pioneered the first 24-hour *Christian Network from Africa* to the rest of the world. Costs rather than antimodernity ethics deter the African Instituted Churches from extensive use of television. Attention needs to focus on the impact of the contents of television programs

consisting of healings, miracles, people slain in the spirit, short motivational homilies, and promotion of literature and goods. The power of television is poignantly indicated by the phenomenon of television ritual, as many devotees either stretch their hands toward the tube or put their hands on television sets so as to receive blessings or healings during the broadcast. The question still remains that when the image is carefully packaged to convey a defined message, create an impression, and elicit imitation, does this affect the nature of the Gospel? Many testify that the teaching in favorite programs helps the deepening of their Christian lives. This cannot be ignored because of the lurking dangers in the relationship between Gospel, popular culture, and televangelism.

Radio Cassettes and Music in Pentecostal Mission

Africans have manifested greater cultural agency with audio- and video-cassettes and music. Audio materials, whether sermon tapes or music, are widely used in motor parks, homes, offices, taxis, and buses. Home videos in English and various vernaculars have become important tools of evangelization and have provided Pentecostals with lucrative vehicles for projecting ideas and images (Ukah 2003, 203–31). In Nigeria, a movie industry nicknamed *Nollywood* is thriving. Pentecostals have invested heavily in this industry by producing films that critique the ethics of contemporary society and dramatize how and why the audience should seek Christ as the solution to many life problems. Critics point to the lurid emphasis on the demonic in the portrayal of spiritual warfare and deliverance themes. But there is no denial about the popular interest in these films and their didactic, moralistic character. Muslims have abandoned old taboos to imitate Christians.

Street preachers in Nairobi and bus preachers in Nigeria are aspects of the expanding strategies for personal witness and the soul-winning focus of mission. Orality and proclamation buttressed by an emphasis on vigorous homiletics are still very important in Pentecostal missiology. The pulpit, witnessing visits, and *taxi talk* are still key strategies for evangelization.

Many have commented on the lively, cathartic liturgy of Pentecostal churches. The rise of *praiseco* as an alternative to discotheque among Pentecostals has spawned a large industry. In the 1970s puritan ethics triggered a debate whether born-again Christians could use the rhythms of popular music: will the spirit invoked in these contaminate the saints? But by the 1980s, *reggae* and *cha-cha* became acceptable; soon, musicians dug deep into indigenous music appropriating both the lyric and rhythm. Praise names used for the deities, kings, titled men, and indigenous spirits were exploited to praise God. God became the paramount chief, king of smaller kings, the one to whom people could run for refuge, the voice that ended all pleas and gave justice, the river that broke the bridge, the flare of

lightning that reveals the path on a darkling plain. Christ as a lover, friend, husband, and brother become significant images in songs that sound like romantic melodies. In Nigeria, an exponent of *juju* music, Ebenezer Obey, converted to Pentecostalism in the early 1990s and set up a ministry that brought this form of popular culture into the mainstream of Christian music. Music and dance that use the styles of traditional culture have completely transformed the liturgy and mood of African churches. Indeed, even politicians now use gospel songs in their campaigns.

Media in Pentecostal Missiology

Meyer and Moors argue that by deliberately and skillfully adopting various media technologies, new religions employ different styles grounded in public culture to present themselves as alternatives to both the secular establishment and mainline churches that are ambivalent about spending large budgets on advertisement. Pentecostals form new religious-based identities, claiming their own public sphere. They use cassettes and videos as instruments of Christian education. The public presence of religion in the information age compels the examination of the heightened relevance of the media in contemporary missiology and the co-optation of popular culture in religious representation. This trend has been heightened by the salience of Pentecostalism and its use of media in contemporary African religious space. Religious expression cannot be heuristic but must perforce engage popular culture. By privileging evangelism (even if it causes re-affiliation), Pentecostals have been creative in their response to popular culture. But there must be attention to the fact that media technology can be both a resource and a challenge, and to the need to engage the structures of society in a holistic mission.

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