

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND THE TRANSMISSION OF DIVINE SENSATION IN A NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

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ABSTRACT. This article examines how, and to what effect, the members of a Pentecostal Christian church in southwest Nigeria construct authority through prayer, song and dance and sermons. During more than thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), I found that church members emphasised the palpable transfer of divine power from church service leaders to audience members. I explore how the sensual logic of worship performances renders service leaders spiritually authoritative in the eyes of their congregations. Further, I investigate the entangled relationship between authority produced through worship on the one hand and RCCG pastors' bureaucratic positions on the other particularly with respect to pastors' perceptions of the worth of their official roles.

Every week during which I conducted fieldwork in the Yoruba-speaking Nigerian town of Ile-Ife in 2010–2011, I looked forward to hearing Sister Esther sing at Sunday service. As I walked into Grace Sanctuary, a branch of the Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), I would single out Sister Esther on stage.¹ Throughout the choir-led praise and worship session that began the Sunday service, she seemed to take up more space than she normally did. Even when other choir members shifted their weight shyly from side to side, Sister Esther shimmied the bulk of her black-and-white uniformed body with a force that appeared to drive forward each song's beat. Her smile reached out to me, helping me slough off my self-consciousness during the obligatory period of song and dance.

Once the service had ended, Sister Esther's children and choir sisters crowded around her, as if attracted by the force of her fervency. After several Sundays of peering through Sister Esther's thicket of friends and family, I made my way through her social circles to request an interview about her service in the choir. Flattered by my interest, Sister Esther agreed. In the interview held later that week before an evening choir practice, Sister Esther told me in English about an encounter with a woman who had seen her sing at church: "The woman said, "You were just showing the whole thing. It was you that ministered to me most". She continued, "Some people might not even want to listen before. But by the time they see you describing, showing, their life will

¹ When I began fieldwork, the pastor of Grace Sanctuary worried that some church members would not be comfortable with publically circulated representations of their intimate experiences of God. To respect the pastor's wishes, I have used pseudonyms for church sites and individuals in Ile-Ife.

be touched”.”² When I asked Sister Esther what exactly her singing described, she explained, ‘I describe the message of God and God Himself’. As our conversation unfolded, she suggested that the ‘touch’ of her ministration was inspired by such a strong force that it crossed the physical boundary of the stage and impacted the people around her.

During more than thirteen months of fieldwork with Grace Sanctuary in 2010 and 2011, I found that RCCG members defined ministration as a collective worship session in which a leader, or minister, helped the congregation feel God’s presence through song and dance, prayer, or sermons. I explore the category and act of ministration as a local form of charisma, which I define as perceived spiritual authority resulting from the interaction between an audience and a figure whom that audience view as divinely empowered. My study builds on a robust anthropological literature reframing Max Weber’s notion of charisma, which he approaches as a fixed ‘quality’ of ‘exceptional powers’ (1968:241). By contrast, anthropologists have shown that charisma is constructed in cultural and historical settings (Fabian 1994). In this vein, Thomas Csordas (1997) frames charisma as an embodied rhetorical action understood by practitioners as divinely authorised.³ I use Csordas’s notion of charisma-as-rhetoric to understand how RCCG ministers establish spiritual authority for as long as a ministration lasts. Whereas the embodied rhetorical conditions that Csordas traces among Catholic charismatic largely pertain to verbal action, I focus on the bodily patterns through which congregational worship produced ministers’ charisma. In mimetic performances, RCCG ministers and audiences collaborate in the transfer of what they perceive as God’s powerful touch.

My analysis of the sensual logic undergirding charismatic performances in the RCCG draws on recent ethnographic research about how Pentecostal Christians mediate, and thereby construct, encounters with the divine.⁴ Pentecostals worldwide form relationships with God that manifest themselves in visions, sounds and feelings of the Holy Spirit (Anderson 1999, Pew Research Center 2006). Many Pentecostals, RCCG members included, consider perceptions of the Holy Spirit to be an index of intimacy with God and describe divine sensations as everyday occurrences. Probing the felt dimension of Pentecostal life, anthropologists of Pentecostalism and Christianity more broadly have explored the corporeal and material work involved in worshippers’ ‘emotional regimes’ (Pyne 2015:119), ‘labor of immediacy’ (Brennan 2012:412) or ‘sensational forms’ (Meyer 2009:11). This literature illuminates how the bodily practice of ministra-

² I carried out most of my interviews with RCCG members in English. While I typically began an interview in Yoruba, my interlocutors often responded in English, knowing that this was my first language. Redeemers also spoke English to one another on a regular basis: they were fluent in the language and saw it as a sign of upward mobility and professional success. See also Marshall (2009) and Gifford (2004).

³ See also Kirsch (2008).

⁴ For the purposes of this article, I use the term ‘Pentecostal’ interchangeably with ‘Pentecostal-charismatic’ or ‘charismatic’.

tion is not only a communicative form, but also a way for RCCG ministers to cultivate what they see as the substance of their messages: God's presence as manifested in sensation.

After examining the production of ministers' charismatic authority in services, I turn to the complex relationship between charisma-making and a second sort of spiritual authority in the RCCG: pastoral status, which is ordained by high-level pastor-administrators and marked by printed certificates bearing the church's insignia. Following ethnographers of religion who investigate 'the space between what is ideal-typically categorised as "charismatic" and "institution"' (Kirsch 2008:8), I approach pastoral authority, like charismatic authority, as a social practice undergirded by 'intrinsically unstable' norms (Gramsci 1971, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:61). For their part, congregations view pastors as stable moral and spiritual authorities whose bureaucratic positions lend them influence over congregations' habits of worship and lifestyle choices. Despite their supposedly secure roles, however, pastors grapple with anxiety about deserving their pastoral authority in the eyes of God. For this reason, they use performances of charismatic authority to substantiate their connections to the felt divine.

*THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD,
HIERARCHY AND ACCESS TO GOD'S PRESENCE*

The RCCG is rooted in local and global traditions of spirit-focused worship. It was founded in 1952 when Josiah Akindayomi left an Aladura church, an early twentieth-century independent church whose name translates as 'one who prays'. Aladura churches taught members to contact God through intensive prayer and Bible reading, departing from Britain's less spirit-centred Church Missionary Society mission (Ray 1993, Peel 2003). Akindayomi went on to found a church identified with the American- and British-influenced Pentecostal movement (Ukah 2008). Generally speaking, the Pentecostal movement is founded on worshippers' desire to experience 'gifts of the Spirit'; personalised sensations of God therefore became salient for southwest Nigerian RCCG worshippers in the 1980s and 1990s (Ukah 2008).

From that point on, the RCCG combined an emphasis on personal relationships to God with an accent on the mediation of God's presence by church officials. The RCCG is one of the largest churches in Nigeria – its website reports that it has two thousand churches in the country (Redeemed Christian Church of God 2013) – and the institution's size lends itself to a complex organizational hierarchy.⁵ The simultaneity of what Weber might call the RCCG's 'rational-bureaucratic' authority on one hand and its congregants' multiple modes of mediating divine touch on the other bears out the asser-

⁵ While I am not able to confirm the figure referred to above, the RCCG's impact across southwest Nigeria is undeniable.

tions of Johannes Fabian who, in his book “Jamaa: a charismatic movement in Katanga” (1971), argues that the charismatic ability of exceptional individuals does not necessarily decrease with the growth of bureaucracy (see also Fabian 1994, 2004).

Following a nation-wide evangelising strategy, the RCCG has ‘planted’ churches in every neighbourhood of Ile-Ife, a town of more than sixty-five thousand residents.⁶ At the time of my research, each church was led by a pastor, assistant pastor and several deacons. All of these positions were part-time, though the church paid the pastors and assistant pastors a small stipend for their efforts.⁷ Pastors of ‘parishes’ or neighbourhood-level churches report to the pastors of ‘area’ churches such as Grace Sanctuary, which encompass several neighbourhoods. Area pastors are supervised by ‘zonal’ pastors, who report in turn to ‘provincial’, ‘regional’, and ‘state’-level pastor-administrators. Parish, area and zonal pastors are assigned to new churches every two to three years; halfway through my fieldwork, for instance, Pastor Oluseun was transferred from Grace Sanctuary to a church on the outskirts of Ile-Ife, and Pastor Ajayi arrived to take his place. To my knowledge, all officially recognised RCCG leaders in Ile-Ife at the time of my fieldwork were male and aged twenty-five and above; I knew of only one female deacon.

Church officials report to General Overseer Enoch Adeboye, administratively and spiritually the most powerful figure in the RCCG’s hierarchy. Long-term Grace Sanctuary members spoke about the excitement of beginning to worship under the ‘spiritual umbrella’, or leadership, of Adeboye, who assumed the role of General Overseer in 1981. One afternoon during an idle conversation about Adeboye – his spiritual accomplishments were a favourite topic of conversation among church members – a teenager told me, ‘God’s blessings increase ten-fold under the umbrella of a great man of God’. Although Adeboye is based in the RCCG’s headquarters in Lagos (Nigeria), RCCG members with whom I spoke held that believers under his tutelage could access God’s presence and ultimately spread it to other Christians.

RCCG pastors in Ile-Ife are also viewed as spiritually and morally authoritative, if less so than Adeboye. Consequently, congregations look to pastors as leaders with the ability to instruct others about ‘righteous’ Christian lifestyles: everyday habits and attitudes that cohere to God’s wishes as expressed in the Bible. For example, most church members obeyed when Pastor Ajayi instructed healthy adult church members to fast during the day throughout the month of February in exchange for God’s blessings. Similarly, when Pastor Ajayi condemned the act of listening to popular Afrobeat music, my acquaintances in the church took the admonition seriously. Church members repeated the pastors’ cautions and instructions to me and to one another, amplifying his moral presence in the church community. Pastors regularly convey teachings during sermon

⁶ The RCCG operates alongside a number of other Pentecostal institutions in Ile-Ife, as well as Islamic mosques and Catholic, Baptist and Anglican churches.

⁷ Most pastors held full- or part-time jobs to supplement the stipend they received from the RCCG. For instance, Grace Sanctuary’s Pastor Oluseun was a university professor, and Pastor Ajayi was the manager of a construction company.

ministrations, but they also deliver advice to members of their congregations during home visits, spiritual counselling appointments and informal conversations.

Even as the RCCG is formalising distinctions of authority, the church continues its decades-long emphasis on members' personal relationships with God. Pentecostalism is a distinctly 'individualist and egalitarian religion',⁸ and I was repeatedly told that being Christian was about 'your personal relationship with God'. According to church members, once a person has been born again – a prerequisite for membership in the church – he or she becomes a child of God and deserves his love and forgiveness. This democratic orientation toward God's presence persists across social differences in Grace Sanctuary's 500-member congregation. Most church members have graduated from secondary school, but the church branch attracts members from a spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds and ages.

The RCCG's egalitarian orientation means that any born-again RCCG member has the potential to transmit the Holy Spirit's presence to other worshippers in ministrations. Pastors and choir members minister most frequently during sermons and songs respectively. Meanwhile, other church members lead prayers and songs on a regular basis. Before a Bible study or a Sunday sermon, there are prayers and sung worship lasting between ten and thirty minutes. Abbreviated ministrations are also performed at occasional Thanksgiving ceremonies at the end of Sunday services, when the congregation is invited to praise God publicly for their blessings.

SPIRIT, LIFE AND POWER

Redeemers, as RCCG members call themselves, speak English during most services.⁹ However, they sometimes used the term 'ise iranse' (lit.: act of the messenger) to refer to ministration. During our interview, Sister Esther framed her singing as an embodied message in which she 'described' and 'showed' God's felt presence to a born-again audience so that 'their life will be touched'. Sister Esther also used the word 'life' later in the interview when contrasting entertainment and ministration, insisting, 'I don't want to sing to entertain. I want to minister life to people'. In a survey of the theme of immediacy in ethnographic research on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, Katrien Pype examines how Pentecostal and charismatic groups invoke 'concepts of "life" or "living"' to 'suggest that certain persons, objects, or events are empowered with the Holy Spirit' (2015:351). Indeed, Sister Esther's use of the term 'life' is inextricably bound

⁸ Erikson (2014). See also Cox (1995) and Robbins (2004).

⁹ Most Grace Sanctuary members learn English in school, so all services are conducted in English with the exception of one Yoruba-language Sunday service. RCCG branches in Ile-Ife hold services in either Yoruba or English, depending on the educational level of the majority of members.

up with understandings of both spirit and power within redeemers' Nigerian Pentecostal cosmology.

Redeemers are taught that, during worship, the Holy Spirit enters and merges with the believer's spirit (*emi*), which is contained within the concentric layers of the heart and the body. Pastor Ajayi, the pastor of Grace Sanctuary, reminded the congregation of this model of Christian personhood during a Sunday sermon about obedience to God. 'The man has a body, a soul, and a spirit. The real you is within – the spirit. He is the inward man'. In making this statement, Pastor Ajayi used the term 'soul' as interchangeable with 'heart'; in other sermons, he referred to the body, heart and spirit. Redeemers use these English words interchangeably, but in Yoruba they refer to the person's moral consciousness as 'okan'. During the same Sunday service, Pastor Ajayi explained, 'The state of your spirit, your heart, will determine your thinking; your thinking will determine your action; your action will determine your way of life; your way of life will determine your destiny'.¹⁰ Even after the event of worship, in which the divine enters the 'real you', redeemers say that a person's actions are to some extent shaped by the Holy Spirit.

In his sermon, Pastor Ajayi distinguished between the 'inner man' – the spirit and heart – and the person's 'way of life'. Just as often, redeemers use the term 'life' to refer to a person's spiritual being. In fact, redeemers invoke the word 'emi' to denote both spirit and life, pointing to a similarity between the two ideas.¹¹ In some cases the ambiguity between spiritual well-being and one's broader life experiences suggests an equation between physical and spiritual well-being. Church members frame bodily and material health in terms of the strength of their felt connections with the divine, as do some other Pentecostal communities across Sub-Saharan Africa.¹² When Sister Esther told me that she wanted to 'minister life to people', her words may be interpreted in two ways: first, that she wanted to reinvigorate the listener's spiritual connection with the transcendent; and secondly, that the listener's relationships, job or health outside the church would be affected by her singing.

While redeemers sometimes use the term 'life' to refer to God's presence, they just as often invoke the word 'power' (*agbara*). People use metaphors of machinery to explain how spiritual power enlivens a minister. 'You cannot move without that source of fuel', my friend Deji told me after church one Sunday, speaking earnestly and quickly. A former Grace Sanctuary member, Deji now worked as a pastor-in-training at House of Joy, a parish church under the jurisdiction of the area-level Grace Sanctuary. I had attended his ministrations before and had been struck by the urgency of his utterances. 'The Spirit is like an inner dynamo', he went on; 'It energises you to pray and fast, and gives you a discerning spirit. It is a propelling force'. The Holy Spirit is believed to be

¹⁰ Redeemers believe that the Holy Spirit only enters a pure, sin-free spirit. For this reason, church members confess regularly during prayers in order to cleanse themselves for the presence of God.

¹¹ For comparable cases, see Pype (2006:206) and De Witte (2008:700).

¹² Gifford (2004), Klaitis (2010), Marshall (2009)

as invisible as electricity and to propel bodily movement as it works. Like electricity, redeemers tend to measure God's power in terms of intensity; they use the English word 'strength', a synonym of *agbara*, to describe divine touch. I was reminded of God's generative power at every Sunday service when ushers handed out Grace Sanctuary's news bulletin, called "The Dunamis" after the Greek word for power or ability.

Deji's explanation of divine power suggests that RCCG ministers who possess *agbara* are thought to be possessed by God. Alongside pleas for spiritual power – 'give me power' ('fi owo agbara re gba mi') – I heard prayers for God to 'take control' ('ya isakoso'). During an interview, a teenager in the choir called Kemi articulated her sense of being directed by God to perform solos at Sunday services in front of hundreds of spectators, many of them older and more highly educated than she was. Kemi was an orphan who lived with distant relatives, and she struggled to find the funds for necessities like clothing and school fees. If she felt anxious about what others would think of her, Kemi said, 'I just thank God, because He never starts anything He can't end. For me to lead [the singing], it's not as if I was the one leading it. It even got to a stage when I couldn't even think what to sing. But I believe in the presence of God. He has to lead'. Redeemers approach performances of ministration as acts of shared agency with the divine; bodies become vessels through which God moves.

And in the context of ministration, God also moves listening congregation members. Bukky, my college-aged research assistant and a devoted member of the RCCG, told me about ministering for the first time during her freshman year in college. At that point she had been a member of her campus ministry for several months and had recently been baptised. Her father was a Muslim and her mother a Christian, and as a child she had not been particularly involved in either faith. Bukky described how she was asked to pray during an evening service. Her nervousness gave way to a sense of strength: 'There was so much power in me; so much authority'. She remembered how other members of her campus RCCG ministry began to speak in tongues when she touched their foreheads and shoulders.

Bukky went on to speculate that her obedience to God in the weeks leading up to the ministration had contributed to its power over listeners. She had read the Bible daily at that time, she said, and had recently finished a month-long fasting program. According to redeemers, God can empower any Christian minister to touch other believers as long as that minister is intimate with God. Bukky told me during our conversation about her first ministration experience, 'You must have a relationship, a communion with God. You cannot give what you don't have'. Since redeemers view ministers as mere vessels for divine power, ministers are spiritually authoritative for only as long as the performance lasts.

Redeemers see God as so mighty that ministrations automatically transmit the Holy Spirit through a vessel-like minister as long as that minister and the audience have already been born again. For this reason, I never witnessed a 'failed' ministration in the RCCG. After a notably quiet evening worship service at Grace Sanctuary,

Bukky explained that the service may well have ‘touched the spirits’ of the congregation, but maybe people were tired, she speculated, or felt particularly introspective. Further validating the notion that the transmission of God’s presence was automatic among born-again redeemers, the morning after an all-night vigil, Pastor Ajayi led a weary congregation in prayer, those present hardly mirroring the pastor’s gestures. However, during informal conversations after the vigil I found they assumed Pastor Ajayi had embodied God’s presence. The enthusiasm of worship did not necessarily affect the extent to which divine power was transferred across a crowd.¹³

MINISTRATION AS CHARISMATIC PERFORMANCE

The fact that the efficacy of ministration in the RCCG was taken as a given leads me to draw on Thomas Csordas’s (1997) research on American Catholic charismatic ritual from the 1970s to the 1990s. Csordas locates the production of charismatic authority in language, building on Johannes Fabian’s (1971) view of religious movements as constituted by discourse. While Fabian points to the ability of charismatic figures to shape social reality through language, Csordas emphasises the way in which charismatic communication not only transforms communicative conventions, but also follows from them. The ‘rhetorical apparatus’, he writes, is one of charisma’s ‘conditions of possibility’ (1997:153). For this reason, Csordas unpacks the motives and metaphors that constitute speech activities, such as prophecy. In a similar fashion, I explore the constellation of ideas, assumptions and patterns surrounding the making of charismatic authority in redeemers’ ministration performances.¹⁴

The taken-for-granted nature of the spiritual power conveyed by redeemers’ ministrations contrasts with Thomas Kirsch’s (2002) study of song in St. Moses God’s Holy Spirit Church in Zambia. There, charisma is constructed through performance – as it is in Csordas’s analysis – but its transmission depends on an audience’s response to a leader’s utterances. For instance, the charisma of Zambian hymn singers is predicated on ‘strong communal involvement’ in the moment of worship: when audience members do not respond to a singer’s hymn, that singer fails to produce charisma (Kirsch 2002:58). While Kirsch’s findings lead him to pinpoint the production of charisma in specific

¹³ However, I noticed that the more often a person ministered, the more energetically the congregation tended to respond to that person. While enthusiasm did not necessarily indicate the successful transfer of God’s power during a ministration, I speculate that the repetition of ministrations over time shapes a congregation’s perceptions of a minister, and even their embodied responses to that minister’s songs, prayers or sermons.

¹⁴ While this paper focuses on sermons, song and prayer as common platforms for ministration in an effort to understand the basic assumptions and patterns undergirding what redeemers perceive as the movement of God’s power, further research might address the linguistic differences between these communicative forms in the context of the RCCG.

interactive situations, redeemers' insistence on God's unfailing power highlights the power of assumptions and habits guiding ministration performances in the RCCG.

These assumptions and habits coalesce around ministration's call and response format. I heard only one explicit description of this format, at the beginning of an evening Bible study at Grace Sanctuary. Mrs Adeyanju, Grace Sanctuary's choir mistress, instructed church members, 'God needs to hear you. When you hear "Praise the Lord", say "Hallelujah". When you hear "Hallelujah", say "Amen". And when your leader cries to God, you cry out, too. P r a i s e t h e L o r d!' She tested us, drawing the syllables out and upward toward the roof. 'H a l l e l u j a h!' Those of us in the audience shouted dutifully. Usually, ministers and congregations take part in an unspoken understanding that ministration entails audience participation. The audience is expected to pray if the minister prays and to sing if the minister sings. Both parties usually move expressively, with torsos, arms, and feet shifting and turning in time to the performance. Ministers and audience members perform the transmission of God's felt power both collaboratively and habitually.

GOD'S POWERFUL PRESENCE AS A QUALISIGN

Redeemers' emphasis on perceiving God's power during ministration leaves little doubt that God's existence is, for them, a real, sensual fact. However, developing a nuanced understanding of redeemers' bodily feeling is analytically tricky. First, I do not know God's power in an 'immediate manner': I am a non-Christian agnostic and a researcher committed to maintaining some distance between my own world views and those of my interlocutors. Even if I did subscribe to the same ideas and assumptions as redeemers, it would be impossible to ascertain the similarities between my fleeting sensations and those of a redeemer. The most valid way for me to approach ineffable felt experience is by situating sensation within a socially meaningful context. The concept of the qualisign does this work.

Linguist Charles Peirce (1977) defines the qualisign as a sensual property that cannot be abstracted from the time and place of its embodiment. 'Mere potential' until they manifest themselves (Keane 2003:415), qualisigns inevitably combine, or 'bundle', with other corporeal properties.¹⁵ When I first arrived at Grace Sanctuary, I could only perceive random physical properties in a worshipper, like tensed muscles, squinting or half-closed eyes, and repetitive motions like clapping, pacing, or shaking the arms. Once I acquired the redeemers' vocabulary of spiritual experience, I gradually developed the ability to categorise this combination of qualities as God's power. In other words, I learned the significance of the qualisign of God's power by understanding its effects on the people around me.

¹⁵ See also Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986).

As is the case for other signs, these effects are mediated by contextual assumptions – here, redeemers’ assumption that God exists and that he manifests his power in the body. I did not necessarily share these assumptions, but I learned how they undergird the recognizable qualisign of God’s power. I also began to appreciate and enjoy the social energy of ministrations, since I could translate into academic terms why they were so contagious.

My use of the term ‘qualisign’ focuses on a rhetorical approach to charisma based on the bodily patterns of ministration performances. In his analysis of spoken language among Catholic charismatics, Csordas points to the inextricability of communication and bodily action. He argues, ‘The stripping away of the semantic dimension’ in the language of tongues, or glossolalia, ‘is not an absence but the drawing back the discursive curtain to reveal the grounding of language in natural life, as a bodily act’ (1997:238). The term ‘qualisign’ provides a means for examining the movement of visual, but not necessarily verbal, communicative signs.

At the same time, my view of charisma as a bodily act allows me to consider it, as well as the bodily act of ministration, in relation to ethnographic literature that examines the assumptions, concepts, processes and social relationships surrounding Christian sensation.¹⁶ These anthropologists of Christianity join Csordas in framing Pentecostal human-divine relationships as always embodied, culturally mediated phenomena. For example, Vicki Brennan (2012) examines how choir members in a Yoruba-speaking church in Lagos, Nigeria, create emotional responses to music. In what she calls ‘the labor of immediacy’, choir members repeatedly listen to sound recordings of hymns to instil in themselves a sense of direct connection to the divine. Redeemers who take part in ministrations model what Brennan calls ‘the discipline and disciplining work’ of worship (Brennan 2012:412). Through the deliberate repetition of ministration during weekly and even daily participation in collective prayers, sermons, and songs and dance, they perform – and in the process, re-establish and even intensify – felt relationships with God. Ministration, then, fosters ministers’ intimate connections with God at the same time as it facilitates the passage of God’s presence from ministers to audience members.

TRANSMITTING GOD’S POWER: MIMESIS, SENSATION AND DISTINCTION

Brennan’s notion of the labour of immediacy might be applied to RCCG audiences as well as to RCCG ministers. Through repeated ministrations, the former learn to interpret and react to the qualisign of God’s power using a causal, sensual logic. I witnessed this logic during a thanksgiving service, when church members lined up to ‘testify’, or describe and give thanks for God’s blessings. An elderly woman on crutches hobbled

¹⁶ Asamoah-Gyadu (2005), Brennan (2012), De Witte (2011), Meyer (2009), Pype (2015)

to the front of the church and knelt down with difficulty, folding her hands and bowing her head. The church seemed to hold its breath as the woman broke into a keening Yoruba worship song. After a few lines, the elders sitting in the front rows of the audience began to sing along. Next, the married men and women sitting behind the elders joined in. The song rippled back through the crowd, toward the ushers standing against the building's back wall. The church pulsed with sound, and the woman wept.

After the service, I discussed the elderly woman's moving ministration with my research assistant. Bukky described what it was like to be a born-again church member in the audience that morning:

That woman on the crutches – she didn't say anything. She just sang. But I could feel in my spirit as if I was just crying in that position. That's why I began to sing along. And what she said, it wasn't about what she was facing in an accident. It wasn't about what she was facing in her home. But I can translate that this person is passing through a difficult time. She's just asking God to take control.

Bukky suggested that observing the elderly woman '[ask] God to take control' affected her in two ways. First, when Bukky saw the ministration, she felt how she imagined the elderly woman felt. Bukky felt as 'if I was just crying in [the] position' of the testifying woman – a position of spiritual obeisance and faith. Second, because she saw and empathised with the woman, Bukky did what the woman did, singing along.

Bukky's empathetic response to the elderly woman invokes the 'sacred mimesis' of South African Apostolic faith healers studied by Richard Werbner (2011). Werbner describes how patients' suffering 'is mirrored on [healers'] bodies and dramatized by their gestures of pain' (2011:183). In Werbner's ethnography, 'the overwhelming weight – with empathy, vicarious experience, intercession, and spiritual mediation – is on the charismatic leader' (2011:188). Bukky implied that ministers in the RCCG were perceived as being responsible for 'spiritual mediation', the transmission of God's touch. However, in the RCCG the onus is on audience members rather than on ministers to physically 'mirror' and 'dramatize[e]' God's power. Bukky suggested that she sang like the older woman because she had no choice but to feel and act like that woman.

Bukky's description highlights an ambiguity I often noticed when discussing ministration with redeemers at Grace Sanctuary. When people spoke about being moved, they usually referred to external, observable bodily action, but also, and at the same time, to internal feelings. In some contexts, redeemers suggested that outer movement was irrelevant to spiritual experience. One redeemer told me, 'I don't need to shout during a service. It is kind of a communion'; that is, there was no necessary link between inner feeling and outer movement. Nevertheless, redeemers assumed that expressive action usually did follow inner sensations of God's presence. For example, Sister Esther told me that, when she saw someone standing still while she ministered, 'I used to go and push them if they are standing by my side. "Ah ah! Other people are dancing! But you! You are just standing. You have to move! With everything, in the Spirit"'. Redeem-

ers used the appearance of worship as a shorthand for the movement of God's presence from one person to another.

Guided by the assumption that divinely inspired feeling guides bodily movement, ministers and congregation members alike move one after another, demonstrating a causal connection between their visually and purportedly viscerally similar experiences of God. The logic of redeemers' ministration manifests what anthropologist Nancy Munn calls 'intersubjective spacetime', a network of relationships between people 'formed in and through acts and practices' (1992:90). The term 'intersubjective' highlights the always shifting relationship between actors, whose exchanges create qualities of self, others and things. In her study of a Papua New Guinea island society involved in the *kula* circuit, for instance, Munn explores how certain acts generate qualisigns that manifest themselves on the Melanesian body. For instance, the qualisign of lightness is linked to food exchange in trading networks. When actors give away food, their bodies become lighter. In this chain of events, a light body indexes, or points to, the transmission of food. In a fashion similar to Melanesian food exchange, RCCG audience members' embodied performances of God's power index a minister's embodied performance of that power.

Inasmuch as Redeemers understand the Holy Spirit to merge with human spirits during ministration, charismatic performances entail the extension of ministers' spirits to audience members. There are similarities here between redeemers' charisma-making and Munn's notion of 'fame', which she defines as 'a capacity to develop spatiotemporal relations that extend beyond the self'. However, Munn's intersubjective spacetime ranges across the villages and even islands, expanding and contracting with the movement of Melanesian trade relationships. By contrast, redeemers contain ministration within a demarcated time and space. Ministrations have clear beginnings and endings, and likewise unfold within a marked space, being held as they are within the walls of a church. For God's power to pass from ministers to the congregation, both parties need to gather together. The transmission of God's presence within the RCCG only occurs face to face, not through audiocassettes or television. The interpersonal transmission of divine power is 'sacred' in the sense of being 'set apart' (cf. Durkheim 1995:47).

The spatial and temporal containment of redeemers' ministrations is linked to another difference between Munn's and redeemers' models of self-making. In the context of Papua New Guinea trade, the qualisign's significance is determined by an action's consequence: for example, the exchange of food leads to bodily lightness. In contrast, redeemers' ministration performances use the qualisign of God's power as both a consequence of an action and as the action itself. As noted above, ministers' embodiments of God's power reportedly trigger congregation members' embodiments of that power. Put differently, ministration entails the immediate repetition of the qualisign of God's power across the bodies of both ministers and congregation.

The repetition of God's power during ministration may heighten the social, moral and spiritual hierarchy involved in charismatic performances. Peirce explains that the

qualisign 'is not exactly the same throughout a second' (1977:33). The congregation's mimesis of the minister's performance is slightly different, and therefore new. By performing God's power for a second time, an audience also performs their difference from ministers: they are less directly connected to God than the minister, who mediates between heaven and earth. While a ministration lasts, ministers are temporally and spiritually 'closer' to God's presence, and therefore have spiritual authority over an audience.¹⁷

'THE FUEL IS BURNING DOWN': LEGITIMISING PASTORAL AUTHORITY

One Sunday morning in February 2011, Grace Sanctuary's all-female choir began a particularly energised set of praise songs. The choir's pitch, tone and ensemble work had steadily improved over the previous months, bolstered by several young women who had returned home due to a strike at a local university. The congregation confirmed my sense of the choir's growing ability by making loud and joyful responses to its singing. Halfway through the ministration, however, Pastor Tokede called the session to a halt: 'My spirit is telling me that this ministration is not right. We need to get on with the Word of God'. Pastor Tokede's behaviour could be attributed to bad manners or poor time management during a full Sunday service. Instead, I suggest that his actions stemmed from anxiety about maintaining his bureaucratic, or pastoral, authority.

More specifically, Pastor Tokede may have noticed an ambiguity in his pastoral status, to which he was now responding. In one sense, his pastoral office fixes in place his social and moral influence over the congregation's lifestyles and values. Given pastors' required training and long-term commitment to the RCCG, described below, pastors are assumed to have a powerful connection with the divine both before and after their ordination as church leaders. At the same time, they themselves expect to be able to reaffirm their spiritual authority through consistent and enthusiastic ministrations. In the end, pastors' perceptions of the strength or weakness of their intimacy with God motivates their gruelling preparation for ministrations and tight control of service schedules.

The fact that the choir consisted of women may have made its popularity particularly threatening to Pastor Tokede. Redeemers were inculcated with the idea that God derived woman from man, creating her out of man's rib in the Garden of Eden (see also

¹⁷ As in Katrien Pype's study of dance among Kinshasa Pentecostals, redeemers bring the individual and the community 'in touch with a higher realm' by transporting divine perceptions across an audience (Pype 2006:313). However, redeemers' use of ministration to create moral, social, and spiritual distinctions within the worship context contrasts with the Pentecostals in Kinshasa, who use worship to distinguish Christians from non-Christians. Further research might explore redeemers' circulation of spiritual feeling among congregation members with respect to their relationships with both non-Christians and Christian non-redeemers. The pastor's caution surrounding my publication of accounts about divine experience, referred to in Footnote 1, points to redeemers' perception of non-Christians as a rich area of analysis.

Bendroth 1993). On several occasions during my fieldwork, pastors pointed out this passage to the congregation: 'And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man' (Genesis 2:22). The RCCG's gendered teachings combine with accepted divisions of labour to discourage women from becoming pastors; women are expected to care for children and the household and to have little time for additional responsibilities (MacIntosh 2009). Alongside the gendered tensions that were threaded through Pastor Tokede's exchange with the choir, however, he may have faced a concern about his ability to serve as a transmitter of God's felt power.

My interviews with pastors tended to circle back to the issue of 'anointing', a term redeemers used to denote pastors' divine connections. Tolu, a lively pastor in his late twenties who led an RCCG parish for unmarried adults, discussed the danger of his losing his anointing:

Even if you have the Spirit of God, it might start reducing. As soon as the presence of God departs – you can still perform miracles, but you gradually discover that the Spirit has gone. It is like when you have a generator and the fuel is burning down. The fuel is like the Holy Spirit. The engine of the generator is like the anointing. When the fuel is going down, the Spirit is going down – the engine is still working. But suddenly the generator will stop.

Tolu explained that the possibility of a 'reduced' anointing motivated him to spend hours at a time communicating with God. He described 'crying to God' in both his church and his bedroom, alternately praying, singing and reading the Bible.

My interview with Tolu illuminated pastors' sense that the spiritual connection legitimising their pastoral status is temporary. Once the fuel of the Holy Spirit burns down, a pastor will be left with the material shell of a 'generator' that does not work. He would be a fraud, an imposter lacking the divine power that allows pastors to use their status for the good of the congregation. Pastors respond to this anxiety, at least in part, by performing – and therefore reconstituting – intimacy with God during ministration performances. During an interview in his office, Pastor Oluseun, the pastor who preceded Pastor Tokede at Grace Sanctuary, described the intensity with which he prepared for Sunday ministration. The night before a ministration, he would pray, fast and sing in order to invoke the Holy Spirit in his spirit. 'I always mount the pulpit with the power of God and the grace of God upon my head. And when I minister I see God on display'. While I cannot confirm Pastor Oluseun's habits of preparation before delivering a service, his words convey the internal pressure he felt to deliver powerful ministrations to his congregation.

Pastors did recognise that bureaucratic processes secured their administrative status through printed documentation, even if this documentation did not strengthen their embodied relationships with God. When I first entered the cavernous office of the Osun State provincial pastor after waiting several months for an appointment, I noticed the mosaic of framed certificates behind him. Together with the man's huge wooden desk, the papered wall seemed to barricade him physically against the possibility of

socio-moral disenfranchisement. For redeemers, certificates are emblems of normative rules, written proof that the holder meets the standards to possess pastoral authority within the RCCG.

If a person has not earned a certificate for a particular position, on the other hand, redeemers assume that he does not belong in that position. This was the case for Deji, whom Pastor Ajayi had invited to train as a pastor at a tiny parish called House of Joy down the road from Grace Sanctuary around the time I began my research.¹⁸ When I watched Deji interact with the congregation, I saw that his humour, energy and humility gave him a particular knack for leadership. He performed God's presence artfully, balling his hands into fists and taking on the ragged, raspy voice that more experienced pastors invoke at the climax of a sermon. Deji's audiences responded with movements of their own, dancing when he danced and praying when he prayed.

Deji's ministrations allowed him to embody charismatic authority, but without an official designation from church pastor-administrators this spiritual power did not translate into the perceived stability of pastoral authority. I noticed the distinction that pastors and other redeemers drew between charismatic and pastoral authority when I visited my acquaintances in the Provincial Headquarters one morning. A thin man entered the building and asked the secretary for a bottle of Coke. He looked tired, as worn out as his threadbare suit. When the man introduced himself as the pastor of House of Joy, I realised that he must be Deji's direct spiritual advisor. Once the head pastor sat down to drink a glass bottle of Coke, I mentioned that I was friends with a 'pastor' in his church called Deji. At this, the parish pastor's smiling face turned stormy. 'Deji is a pastor-in-training', he corrected me. 'I have told that man he is not a pastor yet', he grumbled; 'It has not been cleared with [Provincial] Headquarters'. This short exchange suggested that Deji's ability to pastor was limited without the validation of a certificate.

The fact that Deji had not attended the RCCG's School of Disciples or Bible College – both required courses for aspiring pastors – may have heightened the pastor's sensitivity regarding Deji's status. Each of these programs meet weekly for several months and focus on the RCCG's doctrine and the responsibilities of a pastor to his 'flock'. Furthermore, though Deji had been a born-again Christian for most of his life, until a year prior to this episode he had attended a different Pentecostal church. Typically, aspiring RCCG pastors serve as RCCG members for at least five years before assuming an ordained leadership position. The congregation of House of Joy was unaware of Deji's lack of training and his short tenure as an RCCG member. However, the pastor of House of Joy was aware of Deji's lack of credentials and may have seen this as definitive.

Even with a certificate, a Bible College graduate cannot become a pastor until an appropriate position opens up and the provincial pastor approves of the placement. A

¹⁸ Since the parish-level House of Joy is included in Grace Sanctuary's area-level jurisdiction, Pastor Ajayi has authority over its pastor.

policy enforcing the rotation of pastors to new local churches every two to three years facilitates the integration of new pastors into the ranks of the church's bureaucracy. These rotations also give long-term pastors the opportunity to move up the bureaucratic ladder, from the position of parish pastor to assistant area pastor or area pastor.¹⁹ Aspiring pastors' negotiation of placement policies depends in part on their relationships with senior pastors. I spent time in the Provincial Headquarters lobby each week and noticed a stream of pastors passing through to deliver greetings and news from their congregations. In this regard, RCCG pastors' experiences are comparable to Karen Lauterbach's (2010) in her research into neo-Pentecostal churches in Kumasi (Ghana) where young pastors rely in part on patron-client relationships with senior pastors in order to gain prestige. Similarly, aspiring pastors in the southwest Nigerian RCCG draw on this regionally embedded 'big man' leadership model to acquire authority from upper-level pastors within the institution.²⁰

However, if RCCG pastors rely on senior pastors to obtain leadership positions, they depend on the presence of congregations to prove they are worthy of the social, spiritual and moral responsibilities accompanying a pastorship. Here again, RCCG pastors echo pastors in Lauterbach's study, who balance their patron-client relationships with other allies such as family and friends. Yet, RCCG pastors' reputations rely mostly on the perceptions of family and friends within their congregations. In particular, they depend on the participation of their congregations in ministration performances to demonstrate their intimacy with God.

As far as I can tell, RCCG congregations do not share pastors' anxieties about demonstrating pastoral authority. Rather than expecting pastors to validate their intimacy with God through ministrations, congregations tend to judge pastors' spiritual authority on the basis of bureaucratic titles. As a result, congregations respond with particular enthusiasm to high-level pastors' ministrations. When Assistant Provincial Pastor Olaleye paid a rare visit to Grace Sanctuary, the congregation treated him like a rock star on tour. To me, Assistant Provincial Pastor Olaleye's sermon looked similar to Pastor Ajayi's usual Sunday sermon. Both men increased the volume and intensity of their orations as they preached, spoke in tongues when they reached a critical point, and punched the air to accentuate the point. In front of Pastor Olaleye, however, people shook their torsos more vigorously than usual, kneeling on the dusty ground. The visit of Pastor Olaleye also occasioned more intense bouts of speaking in tongues than I witnessed at any other time during my research. During most Sunday services, people did not change their bodily stance when they switched from human language to divine language during prayer. One morning, however, six congregation members were 'slain in the Spirit', swooning and falling over as ushers raced to catch and cover them with

¹⁹ To my knowledge, RCCG pastors are not demoted to less authoritative positions when they are transferred to another church. At the worst, they remain at the same level of bureaucratic authority.

²⁰ See also McCaskie (1995) and Shipley (2009).

purple blankets until they regained consciousness. Pastor Olaleye's leadership position in the RCCG signified to the congregation the pastor's felt connection with God, which made his ministration particularly powerful.

Even when congregations respond to pastors' ministrations with little enthusiasm, their members do not question pastors' abilities to serve as 'men of God' any more than they question the spiritual power of non-pastoring ministers who elicit unenthusiastic responses from a congregation. Pastoral status is in itself enough to sustain a congregation's general perception of a pastor's spiritual closeness to the divine. Congregational perceptions of pastors do vary: in Pastor Tokede's case, some church members complained about his harsh approach to guiding the congregation through prayer and worship. Pastor Tokede sometimes scolded the congregation for lacklustre participation during ministrations or for failing to give generous donations. However, to my knowledge congregation members did not doubt the strength of the pastor's divine connection or his ability to pass God's power to them. Based on my analysis of spiritual authority in the RCCG, I suggest that Pastor Tokede's skirmish with the choir may have been provoked by his own anxiety surrounding the enmeshed categories of charismatic and pastoral authority.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, southwest Nigerian Pentecostal pastors in the Redeemed Christian Church of God see their bureaucratic authority as contingent on the continued intensity of their felt intimacy with the divine, which they perform and reconstitute in acts of ministration. Pastors' sense of spiritual precarity leads them to reject the clear distinctions congregation members draw between the fleeting authority of ministers, performed only during worship, and the stable authority of pastors. They instead adopt a view of pastoral authority similar to that of the anthropologists of Christianity and charisma discussed in this paper: pastors attempt to revive their relationships with God through embodied practice, day after day, week after week. However, while anthropologists might characterise pastors' authenticating practices as social and therefore as subject to subversion, pastors have no doubt that, with enough prayer, song and dance, God's infinite power will give life to their spirits and enable them to physically 'describe' the divine presence to worshipping congregation members.

Pastors' concerns about maintaining a felt connection with God can be seen in the light of scholarship regarding the aspirational logic engrained in the history of Protestant thought. Within what Webb Keane (2007:16) calls a distinctively Protestant 'semiotic ideology', an inner, immaterial essence – for instance, a redeemer's experience of God – is expected to give form to outer, material expression, in this context, ministration performances or inscriptions of pastoral status on certificates. While anthropologists of Christianity examine the implications of a modern semiotic ideology

for subjects' social judgments, Christians worry about the sincerity of others' words and the authenticity of others' actions.²¹ Meanwhile, RCCG pastors' self-doubts point to the connection between modern Christian thought and self-perception. Future research might explore how the project of 'matching' inner feeling and thought to outer practice shapes the way Christians across diverse locales view their own moral, spiritual and social identities. This line of inquiry may be particularly relevant to Pentecostal Christians, given this group's emphasis on ineffable divine feeling, which rejects containment in material bodies, words or images.

Yet, Pentecostal Christians do use the material world to manifest divine feeling, if not to capture it with certainty. Anthropological research on the construction of Christian feeling shows how worshippers 'are enabled to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit with and in their bodies' (Meyer 2010:742; emphasis in the original). Redeemers' ministrations show that the tactile, auditory, visual and textual forms of mediation through which Christians create spiritual sensation are inseparable from the production of authority.²² To the extent that authority within Christian groups shapes and is shaped by bodily perception, ethnographic research on the production of religious feeling offers a valuable lens for the comparative study of charisma. Just as importantly, however, these anthropologists' approaches to religion in terms of material practice helps analysts avoid what Thomas Kirsch identifies as the 'problem' of treating 'Weberian ideal types not as heuristic analytical tools, but as reality' (2008:6). As redeemers demonstrate, local categories of Christian spiritual authority collide and intertwine as they are lived out from day to day.

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²¹ Bauman (1983), Keane (1998), Robbins (2001)

²² See also Asad (1993), De Witte (2009) and Pype (2012).

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