

Introduction: Power Identity: Politics, Performance, and Nigerian Pentecostalism

When I began the fieldwork for this research in Nigeria, one of the questions that I frequently confronted from the Pentecostal Christians to whom I introduced myself as a scholar of performance studies was the correlation between Pentecostalism and my academic discipline. In those moments, reeling out academic studies that have variously established that theater and religion have always been interwoven from as far back as Ancient Egypt and Greek societies would have, at best, elicited an indifferent shrug.¹ I could also have mentioned that religious rituals in African societies have always had dramatic elements; that in both profane and sacred settings, the communication of meaning to both human and divine witnesses takes place through repetition of symbolic actions. However, as someone raised in the Pentecostal culture myself, I knew that kind of academic explanation would likely backfire. Nigerian Christians, generally, are sensitive to allusions that their religious practices have any African syncretic elements. Pentecostals especially do not take kindly to the insinuation that their practices are not purely divinely inspired. To draw lines that connect what they do with “rituals,” a terminology they associate with “pagan” practices rather than as a form of symbolic communication, was to lose them.²

The answer I often provided was that worship activities such as singing, dancing, preaching, speaking in tongues, miracle performance, hand laying, prophetic utterances, prayers, ecstatic worship,

¹ See, for instance, McDonald & Walton, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*; Wise, *Dionysus Writes*.

² Albrecht in *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* notes the same about Pentecostals in the USA, although they have a slightly different reason for the disavowal of “rituals.” He says that to them, “rituals represents something ‘dead’, meaningless or even ‘unscriptural’, and ‘unscriptural’ mechanical religion.” Rather than such a niggling term, they use less-charged expression such as “worship services,” “spiritual practices,” or “Pentecostal distinctives.”

and so on were all performative in nature.³ It is, therefore, worth studying these ritual activities as performance acts to understand the various rites through which people communicated with God, and how they navigated their identity as both Pentecostals and as political subjects. What they did within their churches mattered if one wanted to understand the contemporary Nigerian social character. Sometimes, I supplemented my answers with Bible verses. Often that was enough, although in some other cases I was further prodded to clarify. They could understand studying Pentecostalism as religion or sociology, but performance?

I learned to recalibrate my standard explanation to convince people that my conceptualization of Pentecostalism as performance was in no way pejorative or belittling of their faith practices. In fact, the approach underscored my taking them seriously enough to understand how they generated meanings through their actions. I tried to simplify my research by saying the disciplinary tools of performance studies are to critically investigate Pentecostalism: what they do, why, and what factors they contend while doing. My characterizing Pentecostalism as performance, I explained several times and in various ways, was in no way a judgment of the boisterousness of their worship activity or their general activities. It was so I could use the right analytical approach to examine their actions, the thoughts that created them, their assumption of their identity as social actors, and the transformations that occur when the truth of social conditions are dramatized through acts of fervent worship.

One of the pastors that I approached, a senior administrative member of one of the most prominent Pentecostal churches, was not to be easily moved. He said, “Performance?! You think we are playing here? No, we are not performing here. We, are making power happen. Even when you see us sing and dance, we are not playing. If we are performing anything at all, it is power! Power! We are a people of power! Power is our identity!” I was momentarily taken aback by the characterization of a religious identity category that sidestepped familiar essences of theology or doctrines, and pivoted straight to its ambitions. To say that for

³ The range of activities are general to Christianity, but these listed activities are almost peculiar to Pentecostals. The Pentecostal liturgy and worship are quite diverse, and too inflected by local contexts for one to homogenize or universalize them successfully.

Pentecostals, power is the distinct marker and their means of self-differentiation means power is not only capable of activating social processes and coercing situations but also stands in the place of the “self,” the one whose performances enacts or actualizes. The “I” of the identity is an embodiment of power and the body itself as a place of power inscription. His response gave me pause, and I was prompted to further think of his answer in several ways. My engagement with his response formed the direction I pursued in this book. I follow this self-conceptualization that construes identity primarily through the point of its desire, power, and expresses as much in multiple sites of social relations. Consequently, I explore seven theses on power throughout this book.

First, by telling me that power is the Pentecostal identity, he clarified how Pentecostals operate within a social milieu that affirmed and contested their desires for being, and how their faith practices continuously imbue the social matrix with saliences that also facilitate their performances of power. I was used to sights of people praying; eyes closed, fists bunched like a hammerhead and swung to crush the air and all the oppressive forces it harbors while they chanted “Power! Power! Power!” However, by directly stating that power was their identity, he had helped me apprehend the ideology that distinctly underwrote their ritual actions. At that point, I could fold up the research and go home since he already handed me the answer that I sought. However, I still had more work to do to clarify certain questions. If power is the identifying marker of the Pentecostal, what cultural practices constitute it? What are the histories, desires, knowledges, tools, and innate divergences of this identity, and how do they interact with other ideological elements that make up the society? How is the social milieu being transformed by the Pentecostal performance of their identity as the people of power? In talking about power as the Pentecostal identity, he also challenged me to consider its organization and performance across various levels. Definitely, that power cannot be uniformly performed across every stratum of the Pentecostal demographic. It would be instructive to see how people who stood at the social margins feel empowered through Pentecostalism.

Second, by using the present tense to tell me what they do – *we are performing power* – he alluded to the ritual activities through which they strove toward their desired status as permanently ongoing.

Cultural studies have typically explored identity along the lines of cultural sameness and strategic differentiation, raising questions of how people choose to see themselves in relation to other groups. As much as identity is construed based on the many ways that history is instrumentalized to generate an essence and mark the positioning of the self against an *other*, what makes it perceptible is the performance aspect. Its beingness requires a consistent series of action and stylized behavior to become what it is, or what it purports to be. Identity is not a given; its recognizability as a distinct category also depends on the consistency of performing it. If power is that distinctive marker of Pentecostals, it also means they act in a series of determining ways to articulate their striving to attain and embody that power. From an internal conviction of divine form of empowerment now conjugated into an external determination of identity, they impersonate an ideal through which they also intuit their “cosmically empowered identities . . . a singular poetic impulse to bring self into being and manifests in acting.”⁴ Power performed is not only inscribed into the body, the persona too becomes all about power itself and all its actions are oriented toward confirming that defining identity. There is no thought or action that is not about acquiring and performing power.

Third, the nonstop nature of this identity performance also registers the flimsiness of power as it is performed. As I will show in the forthcoming chapters, the moral authority generated through Pentecostal power performance is continuously contested by various other people who seek their own power within the construct of Pentecostal power. The sense of immediacy and continuity in “we are performing power” also suggests a restless grasp for more power on the part of these subjects who become the place of power inscription. That coincidence of site with the end goals means they cannot *not* perform power. Their activities are means as much as the ends, and the Pentecostal subject has to be seen performing power perpetually. In discussing the power and authority Pentecostal leaders embody, political theorist Ruth Marshall, noted, “the authority and fortunes of pastors rise and fall. They are subject to close and critical scrutiny on the part of converts.”⁵ The social and ritual

⁴ Mason, *The Performative Ground of Religion and Theatre*, 8–9.

⁵ Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*.

activities that engender their power is transient, too fleeting and too variously challenged for it to be broadly accepted as a foregone conclusion. That fragility necessitates their performing power to sustain their perception as people of power.

The possibility that the power they gain can be lost just as easily means there is an element of paranoia always underlining their actions. They stoke anxieties that generate the impulse to develop more power to sustain what is already attained. Power identity is fluid and can be easily disassembled. Those for whom power has become their identity also have to keep doubling down on power practices to maintain that identity. Power has to be performed unceasingly because of the frequent destabilizing threats this identity faces from social forces. As power is hierarchical, it also has to compel both adulation and reverence, and remind people of its existence and what it can do. The repetition of these processes can lead to authoritarianism and crudeness in using the instruments that produce power. If performing power transforms one's social status and informs one's identity within a society, the processes by which that identity is established can also be the means of its disestablishment. The constant need to perform power will run into social conflicts and impasses that will delimit that power.

Fourth, production of the empowered self through performance is personally transforming and has social implications. As a religious movement whose doctrinal practices and vernacular are quite pervasive, especially in the urban areas, their social practices also condition political impulses. To a large extent, social practices also condition political impulses. Their theology of domination is explicitly confirmed in the way they try to control the social sphere, and their self-identification as the "people of power" thus makes complete sense. The cultural realm, notes historian Christina Klein, is that "privileged space in which politically salient meanings can be constructed and questioned, where social categories can be defined and delimited, where shared values can be affirmed and contested."⁶ In that same cultural realm, indices of identity are established, performed, transferred, memorized, and reiterated.⁷

⁶ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

⁷ Here, I allude to performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor, who said "performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge,

Fifth, despite Pentecostal proponents having never hidden their intention to dominate the cultural arena, it is still striking that a faith movement can be defined by the will to power. Pentecostal ethicist Nimi Wariboko, speaking about the Pentecostal understanding of power that rationalizes a fixation on power is a form of identity, said, “knowing that ... reality is split between the seen and unseen world ... and extracting knowledge from the invisible realm to explain, predict, and control the visible world is an important identity marker for Nigerian Pentecostals.”⁸ Their fixation with supernatural power creates real-life consequences through manipulating the invisible. This was expected as Pentecostalism developed in the context of various kinds of crises of modernity, development, and identity.⁹ For the youth population that poured into the urban centers in the 70s, Pentecostalism provided an identity by which to bypass provincial identities and embrace a new life in Christ along with other promises of upward mobility. Pentecostal faith not only “reconstituted the Christian identity under the hammer of failures and shortcomings of the Nigerian state and under the pressure of immense difficulties of economic survival,”¹⁰ it also transcended a mere identity label of “Christian.” Pentecostalism promised that the processes of conversion and transformation could “reconstitute their experience of the world.”¹¹

Sixth, power in Nigerian Pentecostalism is informed by inherited notions of power: the belief that supernatural forces undergird the manifestation of everything tangible, and access to this form of power will determine every other form of power, whether social, political, or economical. Nigerians have watched, and therefore implicitly understand, how these various forms of power have been performed through the years of authoritarian government and how the hegemonic performance of power reached into the transcendental to maintain its hold on the public. Pentecostals particularly have learned the dimensions of power – to achieve certain goals, as a condition of existence, and as a form of identity – and embodied the understanding that these three coexist, cofunction, and are mutually determining. When the pastor

memory, and sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior.’” Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 2.

⁸ Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 39.

⁹ Vaughan, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*.

¹⁰ Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 32.

¹¹ Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 141.

said “power is our identity,” he meant that the faith movement’s pursuit of goals through various ritual and social performances has, over time, become both their unique self-presentation and self-recognition, as well as their existential condition. Both their goals and the conditions of their existence are reciprocal presuppositions that are diagramed and performatively enacted by identity. Pentecostals’ identity not only points to these but also participates in their power and glory.

Finally, I consider the simultaneous rejection and acceptance of my characterization of Pentecostalism as a performance as equally instructive. This pastor’s reaction, which Western theater scholars might identify as an “antitheatrical prejudice,”¹² (that is, the intuitive aversion to acts that are theatrical partly because its mimetic nature is associated with the art of “deception”), was understandable. If one viewed his objection as protecting his faith from being discounted as mere frivolity or artifice, it made sense that he resisted the idea of construing Pentecostal practices as play or ad hoc constructions of spectacle that might fall apart under a critical gaze. Yet, his unease was telling in other ways too. What repulses people and how they show it can effectively dramatize the social conflicts, tensions, and power negotiations ongoing in that society. The stage, whether the proscenium one of the traditional theater or the banal one on which we perform everyday life, can magnify broader historical struggles, the cultural shifts and political contentions that created such sensibility.¹³ His acceptance that they do perform – although what they do is power – leads me toward the social history of Pentecostalism as a faith movement that has undergone several epochal shifts and has evolved to the point of describing itself by what it has achieved.

Performing Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism as Performance

At the early stages of this research, much of the study of Pentecostalism was being carried out in anthropology, history, religious studies, and political science. They were producing important work on techniques of Pentecostal religious practices ranging from invocatory prayers to mediated liturgies. While some of them touched

¹² Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*.

¹³ Freeman, *Antitheatricality and the Body Public*, 2.

on the dramaturgical aspects of Pentecostal worship, and even applied performance theories in their studies, the elaboration of the creative dimensions of these performances that performance theory engagement would have highlighted was often missing. The religious social activities still out of range of scholarship focus are ones crucial to understanding the nature of the movement because they help critical reflection on the production and reception. The ones that I highlight here show Pentecostal religious performance are not all about collective obedience and social compliances to religious authority. Instead, they demonstrate more nuanced ideas of Pentecostal identity constructions. With the malleability of its theoretical constructs and applicability to virtually every cultural product, performance studies presented the best methodology to examine Pentecostal aesthetics, embodied actions, and political consequences.¹⁴

Excitingly though, ongoing studies in performance scholarship literature have begun to explore the nexus between the discipline and various religions, opening up more channels of understanding how the performative nature of religion – and its rituals – facilitates belief and seals believer identity. These wide-ranging works prompt us to pay close attention to how believers themselves increasingly understand religious activities – from worship to proselytization – as performative, and astutely use that level of conceptual awareness to their advantage.¹⁵ Theater studies, these studies rightfully note, has always engaged the aspects of religion through a critical analysis of mutually evolved history and shared elements such as spaces, lighting, embodiment, aesthetics, and the dramaturgy of liturgy. Recent work by theater studies scholar David Mason, for instance, critiques the approach of theater and religion that takes one as reflecting the other to open up a path for understanding how their imbricated foundations powerfully express their mutual truths.

Several works from performance scholars have compellingly studied the relationship between theater and (mostly) Christianity just as theater scholars are engaging religion critically and providing a grid of thought broadly applicable to performance studies.¹⁶ For instance, theater scholar Elizabeth Schafer has looked specifically at the

¹⁴ Bial & Brady, “Introduction” in *The Performance Studies Reader*.

¹⁵ Palacios, “Introduction: Performing Religion.”

¹⁶ For instance, there is Jill Stevenson’s study of how the belief systems of evangelical Christians in the USA inflect their engagement of performance genres.

relationship between theater and Christianity, exploring their complex intersected histories as they navigated the borders of the real and realism.¹⁷ She noted that theater can deliver an appearance of what is real through stagecraft, and that ability to mimic the real might unsettle belief. While scholars have trained their focus mostly on Christianity (especially in its nondenominated forms), others in the growing corpus of scholarship construe the category of religion in more encompassing ways.¹⁸ Performer and scholar Cia Sautter, in exploring the performance of religion and the attendant effectual power of the sacred, attempts to free the sacred experience that can come through the performing arts from the compartments of the Western mind that experiences religion and performance as disparate.¹⁹ In a similar vein, for performance scholars Claire Chambers, Simon du Toit, and Joshua Edelman, the meaning-making practices of religion do not only happen through abstract or formal theology, but performed ritual acts.²⁰

These works are critical in understanding how contemporary scholarship is finding fresh convergences in the imbrication of theater/performance and religion beyond looking at the thrill of the former as a religious experience, or the rites of the latter as merely construed to satisfy instincts for entertainment.²¹ Indeed, virtually any cultural or public practices can be studied as performance events, and the multiple perspectives of these works have been quite illuminating.²² By collating the depth and intricate details of actions used to express one's faith, these works disentangle overlaid structures of meaning and point us to the larger imports of embodied religion being acted out in sacred and profane contexts. However, much work that purports to reconcile theology with embodiment and performance reveals itself as still wedded to classic Western ideas of construing religion as formal liturgy and practices of faith as lacking spontaneity. Approaches toward

¹⁷ Schafer, *Theatre & Christianity*.

¹⁸ An example will be Marvin Carlson's study of the conjunction of Islam and theater.

¹⁹ Sautter, *The Performance of Religion*.

²⁰ Chambers, Edelman, & Toit, "Introduction" in *Performing Religion in Public*, 1–2.

²¹ Childers, *Performing the Word*.

²² Although not primarily a performance scholar, political theorist, Ruth Marshall, vigorously engaged the performative component of spiritual warfare by Pentecostal/Evangelical in her investigation of their modeling of truth. Marshall, "Destroying arguments and captivating thoughts."

performance of religion and spirituality that deploys performance as a methodological tool to free religion from the abstraction of dead-rigid dogmas supposedly challenges the binary between faith and reason, personal experience and rationality. This rediscovery of the liveliness of religion reflects concerns that are peculiar to Western societies and do not consider the ways African Pentecostal practitioners, for instance, have long abandoned orthodoxy and built livelier theology through their creative performances whether in the sacred space of church or just in daily life. Religious practitioners in the Pentecostal denomination self-consciously create for the worshippers, the “experiences designed to foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities.”²³

While some of the contemporary scholarship of religion and theater/performance still grapples with how the theories of the latter can adequately illuminate the study of the former, Pentecostals have been unabashedly borrowing the tools and techniques of theater/performance to curate livelier religious experience and encounter for worshippers. Pentecostals, especially in Africa, may recoil at any suggestion that their activity has something to do with “theatre,” “performance,” or even “drama,” yet, even a superficial study of their activities as they plan worship activities that would take place within the church (as well as online) and their reflexive analysis of each worship session says otherwise. Their careful construction of their religious leaders as persons who embody the power of God to the degree to which it appears in the church and among the congregation, their use of modern technology to enhance embodied experience, and the general ways they try to shape the event of church services, show how much they innately grasp their faith practices as a performance event.²⁴ Their attitude of seeing worship as a performance and planning accordingly (for both their present congregation and even prospective members) shows how much they appreciate the rich potential of performance to generate conceptual frameworks that motivate people and ultimately establish their power identity. With that in mind, it now behooves the researcher to

²³ Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 4.

²⁴ This phenomenon, of course, is not limited to Africans. For instance, anthropologist James Bielo, explored how fundamentalist Christians created a theme park in Kentucky where the Bible story of creation is staged into an experiential encounter for the purpose of religious conversion, education, and of course, entertainment. Bielo, *Ark Encounter*.