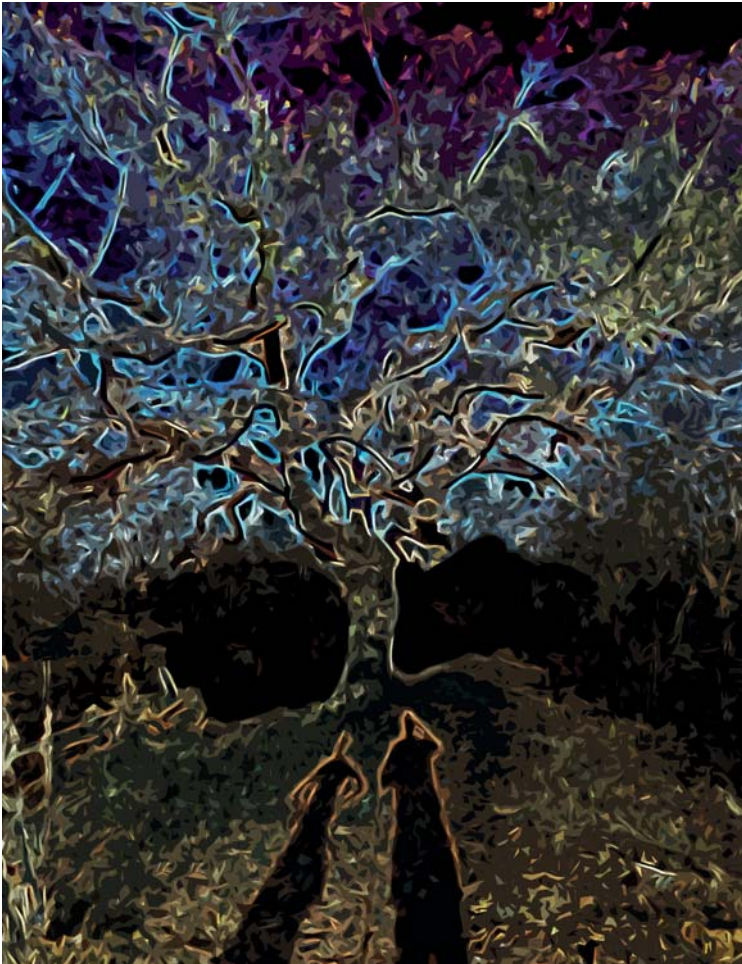Hermen Kroesbergen, Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Philipp Öhlmann (Eds.)

The Grammar of the Spirit World in Pentecostalized Africa

LIT

The Grammar of the Spirit World
in Pentecostalized Africa

Studies on Religion and Culture

Religious Communities and Sustainable Development

Studien zu Religion und Kultur

Religiöse Gemeinschaften und nachhaltige Entwicklung

edited by / herausgegeben von

Wilhelm Gräb (†) & Philipp Öhlmann

The series *Studies on Religion and Culture. Religious Communities and Sustainable Development* focuses on volumes in the fields of empirical research on religion, religion and culture, and religion and development. The series is highly interdisciplinary, providing space for contributions from all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. An important common frame is an approach that considers religion as lived religion and investigates its interrelation with cultural, social, political, economic and ecological spheres of life and society.

Band/Volume 8

LIT

The Grammar of the Spirit World in Pentecostalized Africa

Edited by

Hermen Kroesbergen
Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps
Philipp Öhlmann

LIT

Cover image: Morula Tree at Goo-Moremi Sacred Site, Botswana.
Illustration by Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps based on a photo
by Philipp Öhlmann

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Notes on Contributors

Elias Kifon Bongmba holds the Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair in Christian Theology at Rice University. His books include *African Witchcraft and Otherness: A Philosophical and Theological Critique of Intersubjective Relations* (SUNY Press, 2001), *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), *Facing a Pandemic: The African Church and the Crisis of HIV/AIDS* (Baylor University Press, 2007), *Witchcraft as Social Diagnosis: Traditional Ghanaian Beliefs and Global Health* (with Roxane Richter and Thomas Flowers).

Serawit B. Debele is a Junior Research Group Leader at the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, University of Bayreuth, Germany. She received her PhD in 2015 in History of Religions from the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. She is the author of the book *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*. Her ongoing project focuses on Ethiopia, Tunisia and Sudan.

Mikel Burley is Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Leeds, UK. His publications include *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary* (Bloomsbury, 2020), *Rebirth and the Stream of Life: A Philosophical Study of Reincarnation, Karma and Ethics* (Bloomsbury, 2016), and *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips* (Continuum, 2012).

Thaddeus Eze is a Pastor of St. Mauritius Parish Nordkirchen in the Diocese of Münster, Germany. He obtained his master's and doctorate degrees in Social Anthropology from the Institute of Ethnology, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. His publications include *Beyond the Scrapyard. An Ethnography of Igbo Migrants in Germany* (ULB Münster, 2021).

Maria Frahm-Arp is a Professor in Christian Studies at the University of Johannesburg. She is the author of *Professional Women in South African Pentecostal Churches* (2010) and *Into the Deep: Finding God in the Midst of Suffering* (2014). Her work focuses on the lived realities of Pentecostalism in South Africa, and she explores the interconnection of gender, politics, economics and Pentecostalisms.

Andreas Heuser, theologian and political scientist, Professor for Extra-European Christianity, University of Basel; his recent publications include "Afrikanische Unabhängige Kirchen (African Independent Churches)," in: Hock; Jahnel (eds.): *Theologie(n) Afrika: Ausgewählte Schlüsselbegriffe in einem umstrittenen Diskursfeld*, 2022, 55–76; "Outlines of a Pentecostal Dominion Theology,"

in: Bedin-Fontana; Luber (eds.): *Political Pentecostalism: Four Synoptic Surveys from Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, 2021, 187–246; Heuser; Koehrsen (eds.): *Does Religion Make a Difference? Religious NGOs in International Development Collaboration*, 2020.

Hermen Kroesbergen is currently a Pastor in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and a research associate at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. His book *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2019) inspired the theme of this volume. His most recent work is *Faith Envy: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Weil on Desirable Faith* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps is a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She has written on narratives about evil in African Christianity as well as religious coping during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia. Her most recent publication is *Speaking of Satan in Zambia: Making cultural and personal sense of narratives about Satanism* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2022).

Tanya Marie Luhrmann is the Albert Ray Lang Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University, with a courtesy appointment in Psychology. Her work focuses on the edge of experience: on voices, visions, the world of the supernatural and the world of psychosis. She uses a combination of ethnographic and experimental methods to understand the way people feel their thoughts and imagine their minds in different social settings, and what follows. At the heart of the work is the question of how things come to feel real to people.

Birgit Meyer is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University, where she directs the research programme Religious Matters in an Entangled World (www.religiousmatters.nl). For more information, see https://www.uu.nl/staff/BMeyer.

Joyce Dainess Mlenga is a Lecturer of Theology and Religious Studies at Mzuzu University, Malawi. Her publications include *Dual Religiosity in Northern Malawi: Ngonde Christians and African Traditional Religion* (Mzuni, 2016) as well as several book chapters and papers.

Genevieve Nrenzah is a Researcher in the Religion and Philosophy Section of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Her publications include "Invalidating Indigenous Religious Traditions via Christianity Popular Ghanaian Gospel Songs Music." *Pentecost Journal of Theology and Mission* 4, 2023, 41–60; "Religion and Commodification: The Ghanaian Churches' Covid-19 Economy," *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology*, 11 (1), 2021, 133–155; "Doing Feminism on the Street: Culture, Media Perspectives, and Neo-Gender Groups in Ghana," *Journal of Black Women and Religious Cultures*, 2 (2), 2021, 1–23.

Emmanuel Ofuasia teaches philosophy at the Philosophy Department of National Open University of Nigeria. He specializes in: Process Ontolog; African Philosophy of Religio; Animal Rights; African Logic; and Ifaì Studie. He is widely published in these areas and has received local and international grants from organizations and institutions such as: Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion; the John Templeton Foundation; Culture and Animal Foundation; Institute of African and Diaspora Studies in the University of Lagos, Lagos.

Philipp Öhlmann is a scholar in the field of religion, development and sustainability. He holds a Dr. phil. in diaconal studies from Heidelberg University and is currently Feodor Lynen Research Fellow at the University of Botswana. Recent publications include "Religion and Labor Market Performance: Is It What You Believe or How Much?" (*Religions* 12, 2021) and *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development. Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches* (edited with Wilhelm Gräb and Marie-Luise Frost, Routledge, 2020).

Opoku Onyinah holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. He is a former chairman of the Church of Pentecost, worldwide, with its headquarters in Ghana. His publications include *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology* (Deo, 2012), *Spiritual Warfare: A Centre for Pentecostal Theology Short Introduction* (CPT Press, 2012), *Apostles and Prophets: The Ministry of Apostles and Prophets throughout the Generation* (Wipf and Stock, 2022).

Johnson Uchenna Ozioko holds a doctorate degree in both Philosophy and Theology. He currently teaches Philosophy of Religion and African Philosophy in the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome. He is the author of *Rationality of the Christian Faith in Richard Swinburne* (Urbaniana University Press, 2019), *Faithful Witnesses of Christ* (Urbaniana University Press, 2017), *Passion and Commitment* (Paulines, 2007), as well as many other philosophical and theological articles in different peer-reviewed journals.

Aleksei Rakhmanin is a doctoral researcher with a background in religious studies. Now he is finalizing his dissertation on the philosophy of religion in the early Wittgensteinian tradition at the University of Helsinki.

Lovemore Togarasei (PhD) is Professor and Programme Leader at Zimbabwe Open University in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. He teaches courses in Biblical Studies and African Christianity and has published widely in the area of the Bible and social transformation in Africa. He is the co-editor (together with Ezra Chitando) of *Lobola (Bride price) in Contemporary Southern Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Bernhard Udelhoven is a member of the Missionaries of Africa and has worked in Zambia since 1989. He studied social anthropology in London. At present

he ministers as Parish Priest in Lumimba Parish in Zambia's Luangwa Valley. His publications include *Unseen World: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism* (FENZA, 2021).

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Grammar of the Spirit World in Pentecostalized Africa

Hermen Kroesbergen, Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Philipp Öhlmann

References to the spirit world are an integral part of life in many African contexts. Spirituality intersects with the physical world and social relations. It has profound influence on various sectors of individual and communal life as well as on wider society. Even scholars who personally would never speak of a spirit world cannot hope to give a fair account of what is going on in Africa without in one way or another acknowledging the importance of these references to a spirit world.

On the one hand, it seems obvious that for many people in Africa, the spirit world is real – in Africa it is something one has to take into account in every aspect of life. On the other hand, it is not always clear what this reality of the spirit world entails. What does it mean for the spirit world to be real? This is the question that will be investigated in this book, focusing on African contexts and in particular African contexts influenced by Pentecostal Christianity.

This volume emerges from a workshop on "The grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa," held in September 2021 as part of the Programme Point Sud 2020. Originally planned as an in-person event in Accra in 2020, the workshop was postponed to 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was hosted virtually by the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ghana. The event was convened by Hermen Kroesbergen, Wilhelm Gräb, Philipp Öhlmann, Vanessa Rau and Josiah Taru. The aim was to bring together different disciplinary and international perspectives to reflect on what it means to say that for people in Pentecostalized Africa, the spirit world is real. Among the contributors to this book are anthropologists, philosophers and theologians, and the interaction between these disciplines contributes both to the width and depth of the discussions.

The choice for African Pentecostalized Christianity is a pragmatic one: the majority religion of sub-Saharan Africa is Christianity, and across all denominations, this Christianity has been highly influenced by neo-Pentecostal practices and ideas (Adedibu and Igboin 2017; Anderson 2019; Gifford 2015; Kroesbergen 2019a; Lindhardt 2015). The prevalence of concepts such as the spirit world, powers, mystical causality, and holism within African Pentecostalized Christianity makes it an interesting case to study references to the spirit world. At the same time, the relevance of the spiritual in Africa extends beyond Pentecostal Christianity (cf. Mbiti 1990).

In this introduction, first the background of investigating the kind of reality of the spirit world will be highlighted. How does this investigation differ from other scholarly investigations that concern the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa? Second, the angle of grammar in a broadly Wittgensteinian sense, which is used by the contributors to this volume in exploring this kind of reality, will be introduced. Third, there will be an overview of the different chapters that make up the rest of this book.

Investigating the Reality of the Spirit World

Some years ago, in 2001, the anthropologists George Clement Bond and Diane M. Ciekawy edited a volume discussing the discourse on witchcraft in Africa, *Witchcraft Dialogues* (2001). In the introduction to this volume, they distinguish four main positions in academic studies regarding the reality of witchcraft (2001:6). These four positions apply to research into the spirit world more generally as well. Academic studies of what people in Africa say about the spirit world – from anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, theology, or other fields – can be divided into four groups, based on their position concerning the existence of this spiritual realm. Whether one discusses witchcraft, ancestors, or the importance of the man of God, scholars use one of the following presuppositions:

1. the spirit world is real;
2. there is no spirit world: ideas about the spirit world are mere superstitions that will – or, at least, should – fade away;
3. the spirit world could be real or not, and further research will tell us what is real and what is not (– this position is not very common in international scholarship about Africa but does have a presence within African academia);
4. it does not matter whether the spiritual realities are real: what matters is that people believe that they are real, and, therefore, they are real in their consequences in social, political, economic, and other respects – and these consequences can be investigated.

Despite the wide range of research covered by these different positions, one assumption is shared by them all: scholars from all four positions assume to know what it means for the spirit world to be real or be taken as real. Even the last position, which intends to leave the question of reality aside, still assumes to know what it means for the people they are investigating to believe that a spirit world exists. Classical as well as postcolonial research concerning Africa assumes to know what is meant by saying that a spirit world exists, despite their different ways of dealing with such statements.

This book questions what is assumed in this research: for many people in Africa, the spirit world is real, but according to what rules do people judge whether the spirit world is real? What role does it play in people's lives to claim the existence or not of a spirit world, and what can we learn from that about what they take

this 'existence' to be? What does it mean to say that for people in Pentecostalized Africa, the spirit world is real?

Within African philosophy and theology, all four positions mentioned above can be found. John S. Mbiti, for example, states over and over again that the spirit world is real – position one – however, qualifying this by adding 'for African people**s**': "Whatever science may do to prove the existence or non-existence of the spirits, one thing is undeniable, namely that for African peoples the spirits are a reality and a reality which must be reckoned with, whether it is a clear, blurred or confused reality" (1990:89). This may imply a shift to position four: people in Africa believe the spirit world is real, and, therefore, for them, it is real in its consequences. As Jan Platvoet and Henk van Rinsum argue, such a methodological agnosticism has become the leading position between the warring camps of positivism and religionism during the past half century in the academic study of religions (2003:162).

Okot p'Bitek (1971) represents the second position: spirits in the African context are not something real out there. When examining the Luo religion, he tries to prove that it is a purely this-worldly system and that considering it to be something spiritual is a Western (Hellenistic) misrepresentation. Anthony Appiah, on the other hand, holds that references to a spiritual realm are or have been reasonable within an African context: "The evidence that spirits exist is obvious: priests go into trance, people get better after the application of spiritual remedies, people die regularly from the action of inimical spirits" (1993:118). It all depends upon how we interpret this evidence. In this way, Appiah leaves it open to further research, as fits position three.

Communication between scholars holding these four different positions could be increased by taking a step back and investigating the questionable presupposition shared by all four positions: that it is clear what it is to consider the spirit world to exist.

Within the anthropology of Africa, investigating the grammar of spiritual realities can provide a way out of the deadlock between on the one hand a metaphorical interpretation of African practices – as can, for example, be seen among scholars associated with the modernity of witchcraft paradigm, of which Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps writes: "Authors following the witchcraft and modernity mode of analysis seem to interpret narratives as allegorical tales that need to be deciphered to find their true meaning" (2020:862); and on the other hand an ontological approach, of which Kroesbergen-Kamps states in the same article: "According to the ontological perspective, different expressions and beliefs are not just culturally specific ways of responding to the world, but reflect ontologically different worlds" (2020:867).

To most people in Africa, the spirit world is real, and not a metaphor. Yet, merely stating this does not help us understand African practices: in what way is it real? 'Methodological ludism' (Knibbe and Droogers 2011) as suspending

one's epistemic stance and accepting the realities of people under study – "identifying temporarily, in a serious way, with believers' claims of true knowledge" (2011:283) – does not provide a way out here either. In the attempt to temporarily identify with people's claims of true knowledge, scholars still assume to know what it is to make such a 'claim to true knowledge' in this context. It accepts references to the spirit world at face value and, thereby, leaves the grammar of speaking of a spirit world itself un-investigated. This volume aims to contribute to filling this lacuna.

Addressing the issue of what it means to speak of the spirit world has consequences outside the scholarly disciplines of philosophy, theology, and anthropology as well. Within global sustainable development programs, for example, religion in Africa is acknowledged as providing coping mechanisms in difficult circumstances, but it has proven difficult to take the perception of the world as inhabited with spiritual forces seriously and take this into account in cooperation (Öhlmann et al. 2020). Looking at African Pentecostalized Christianity from the point of view of its grammar in a Wittgensteinian sense may contribute to it being taken seriously instead of being sidelined as superstitious, metaphorical, or ontologically a different world.

What do people who speak of the spirit world mean? What kind of claim is made when someone says that a particular prophet is true or false? To say that a particular prophet is a true prophet or a false prophet may look like a factual claim, but such a statement plays a different role in people's lives. What is the concept of reality involved in the debate about this strand of Christianity in Africa? If we ask ourselves how people learn to speak of the spirit world, we realize, for example, that objects and images may play a role here, but a very particular role. The image of a prophet on a TV channel shows what people would see when they were present in that particular church. The images of spirits in Nollywood movies stand in a very different relationship to reality. You might be in the same room where people see a spirit in the movie, but you yourself see nothing. Children learn this difference from a very young age. Spirits and people have a different kind of reality. This is worth investigating. Focusing on the grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa – on the kind of reality it has – as is done in this volume, offers a different perspective that could be used to move academic research on Africa forward.

This volume seeks to challenge – or, at least, interrogate – the assumption that we know what it is for the people to believe that a spirit world exists. We should not assume to know what it means for the spirit world to be real. Where most of the existing literature on African contexts starts from one of the four positions mentioned above, the inquiries of this book investigate on a deeper level the kind of reality involved when people in African contexts speak of the spirit world.

Grammar as the Angle from Which to Investigate the Kind of Reality of the Spirit World

Investigating the kind of reality the spirit world has within African contexts, the contributors to this volume let themselves be inspired by the concept of grammar as coined by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein noted that "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)" (2010:#373). Previously, Wittgenstein had assumed that meaningful language works as a picture of objects out there in the world. When writing the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein had come to realize that there are many more ways in which we use language. Words are not merely pictures of objects but are used for many different purposes within varied concrete contexts. As a philosopher, Wittgenstein set out to find ways to do justice to the variety of uses language has.

Theologians of a particular denomination describe how the word 'God' is used properly within that denomination, without assuming that the word 'God' is a kind of picture that could be compared to some object out there. Yet, there are correct and incorrect uses of the word 'God' within that denomination. Describing the boundaries between correct and incorrect uses of particular concepts is what Wittgenstein calls 'grammar.' Without the prescriptive aspect of theology, philosophy – and anthropology for that matter – is involved in a similar enterprise. Without assuming that a word must be used as some kind of picture, watch and see how it is in fact used.

Theology will tell you that God is not an object in the way tables and chairs are objects, but endeavour to describe the kind of a thing 'God' is. Similarly, anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians alike would do wise to investigate what kind of thing the spirit world is that plays such an important role in Pentecostalized African contexts. Instead of assuming to know what it means that for people in Africa, the spirit world is real and adopting one of the four positions described above, the contributors to this volume engaged in the more fundamental project of investigating the grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa. The contributors to this volume consider what different disciplines can learn from one another concerning the often unnoticed assumption within their research that it is clear what it means to speak of a spirit world that is real.

This is not a book about Wittgenstein, but his concept of grammar is used to evoke novel, relevant, and deepened discussions about what is at stake in the many references to the spirit world in the African context. The contributions to this book provide an in-depth and interdisciplinary discussion of the African perspective. The multidisciplinary character of this volume deepens the discussions from each individual discipline. Each discipline grasps what is meant by the reality of the spirit world in African contexts in its own particular way. The benefits of the interdisciplinary debate concerning this topic are brought out in particular by the chapter in this volume that contains highlights from the discussions between

the different participants to the workshop from which this volume originated. The question of the kind of reality the spirit world has is fundamental to anthropology, philosophy, religious studies, and theology alike, and these disciplines benefit mutually from sharing their insights into this far too often neglected presupposition of research into African contexts.

Content of this Book

Among the themes that feature most prominently in the contributions to the volume is, first of all, the nature of this investigation itself: what kind of research is adequate to clarify the grammar of what people say concerning the spirit world?

Second, while investigating the grammatical rules that apply to the spirit world, several possible starting points are suggested and explored. We might focus on the extent and way in which language concerning the spirit world is instrumental. This brings out important characteristics of the grammar of the spirit world that often prove confusing, in particular when this aspect is left hanging. Another possible starting point for investigations into the grammar of the spirit world is the extent and way in which language concerning the spirit world is metaphorical or involves abstractions of concrete realities. A third way to approach the grammatical rules that govern language concerning the spirit world is to inquire whether the personal character of this language changes the way we speak of the spirit world compared to more objective or factual aspects of reality.

Third, the contributions to this volume show the importance of health as a connection point. How health brings together body and mind seems to be related to how we speak of material things and is connected to the grammar of the spirit world.

Following this introduction, the articles in this volume are clustered according to four central themes: *Grammar*, *Spirits*, *Practices* and *Healing*.

In the first section, *Grammar*, the chapter "African Indigenous Religions, Spiritual Beings and the Debate over Religion and Superstition" by Mik Burley approaches African indigenous religion from the perspective of philosophy of religion. In a pluralist approach to philosophy of religion, the chapter problematizes the differentiation of religion and superstition. The author identifies a fourfold typology to this distinction: (1) religion is superstition, (2) there is an "important distinction" between the two, (3) the "poetry of life" view and (4) the "messy motivations" view. He subsequently applies this typology as an interpretative framework to West African Yorùbá religion, highlighting the hermeneutical value of viewing indigenous religion through the lenses of the latter two approaches. The advantage of these approaches, Burley argues, is that they do not superimpose distinctions between true, religious beliefs and imaginary, superstitious beliefs.

Hermen Kroesbergen in Chapter 3, "Language for What Cannot Be Explained, Controlled, or Predicted," aims to investigate what difference it makes

to believe in the spirit world. Despite what people say about their own beliefs, in their lives people are well aware that the kind of reality of the spirit world differs from the kind of reality of tables and chairs, so what kind of reality does the spirit world have in the lives of people? Kroesbergen suggests that language referring to the spirit world is used precisely for that which does not fit in the ordinary world of tables and chairs. It explains the unexplainable, while in their lives people acknowledge that these things remain unexplainable at the same time. It controls that which is and remains uncontrollable. It predicts that which in principle cannot be predicted. Speaking of the spirit world is looking for words for what cannot be put into words.

In the fourth chapter, Bernhard Udelhoven takes us on an exploration of the question on what people mean by the statement "Witchcraft is real!", which is also the title of his contribution. Based on an in-depth engagement with Kroesbergen's (2019b) work on language of faith, and his rich personal experience as a parish priest in Zambia as well as rich empirical material from the context of his work, Udelhoven investigates the epistemologies of witchcraft and the ways witchcraft is discussed. He stresses the intertwinedness of the "witchcraft space" with "ambiguous interpersonal relationships". Stating that witchcraft is real is, in the author's view, an affirmation that the "mysterious event is linked to the activities of a fellow human being, the witch." Despite the inherent tendencies of othering and the potential for exploitation amidst social and political volatility, this need not necessarily lead to violence. Rather, as the author illustrates, the cases can be resolved through processes of communal mediation.

Under the title "Witchdemonology: The New Face of Witchcraft in Africa", Opoku Onyinah proposes the notion of witchdemonology as the new grammar key of witchcraft in Africa in Chapter 5. Drawing on material from the West African context, the author coins the concept of witchdemonology as describing the contemporary synthesis between two historical African Traditional notions and practices of (anti-)witchcraft and Western Christian notions of (and practices of protection from) demons and the devil. Onyinah shows that witchdemonology, a core element of the contemporary grammar of the spirit world in Africa, is constituted by forms of religious hybridity of African Traditional Religion, Mission Christianity, African Initiated Churches and global Pentecostalism.

The second section of the volume focuses on the theme of *Spirits*.

In the sixth chapter, Alexei Rakhmanin considers how spirits could be considered as proper interlocutors as a way to take animism seriously. He reviews various academic stances with respect to animism, such as academic neutralism and methodological agnosticism, but argues that these are too thing-oriented rather than person-oriented. Rakhmanin uses Wittgenstein's ideas to formulate an alternative. Rather than explaining the spirit world away or finding the truth of one or more spirit worlds, we should be aware of how much the language of spirits is connected to communication and ethics between people. Rakhmanin suggests we

can use literature to open up this personal dimension of reality for people who are not accustomed to viewing the world in that way.

Johnson Ozioko's contribution engages with "African Traditional Religion and the Grammar of the Spirit World" in Chapter 7. The article is based on the assumption of the ubiquitousness of the spirit in African religion in culture. Against this background, the author draws on novels that are arguably among West Africa's most influential fictional texts, the trilogy by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe consisting of *Things Fall Apart (1958)*, *Arrow of God* (1960) and *No Longer at Ease (1964)* to analyze the meaning the word "spirit" can have in traditional Igbo religion and culture. Ozioko's chapter thereby shows that there is no uniform usage of "spirit", but "the word spirit covers a very wide semantic area in the context of African Traditional Religion."

The three chapters in the third section of the volume, *Practices*, turn the attention to performative aspects of the Grammar of the Spirit World.

Elias Kifon Bongmba in his article "The Grammar of the Spirit: A Reflection" (Chapter 8) identifies and critically analyzes three strands of the Grammar of the Spirit in African Pentecostalism. First, a "grammar of proclamation", which focuses on divine promises and blessings. The second one is a "grammar of power", "which involves the naming of leaders as well as the demands, commands, and the power the leaders have over the faithful". Third, Bongmba identifies a "grammar of prediction" whose central feature is prophecies on future events. Bongmba draws on key literature in the field and uses selected Pentecostal-Charismatic church leaders as illustrations of his arguments. He emphasizes that the "Pentecostal discourse is presented in a grammar that invites believers to embrace the world imagined through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a world that reorients the believer to the power of the Spirit, the practice of the Spirit-filled leader, and powerful things the leader can do 'in the Mighty name of Jesus.'"

In Chapter 9, Andreas Heuser challenges the common view of Pentecostal epistemology as experiential and spontaneous. Under the title "Copy and Paste! Or: Theo-linguistic Strategies of Streamlining 'Charisma' in African Pentecostal Megachurches", the author identifies two strategies of building and maintaining charismatic authority in Ghanaian megachurches: first, a "theology of copy and paste", whereby the key aspect is a close imitation of the charismatic leader by subordinate leaders and adherents; and second, a "theology of accusation", whereby dissent and criticism of the leader's charismatic authority is framed in blasphemic terms. The author thereby elucidates processes of the maintenance of charisma in Ghanaian megachurches.

Genevieve Nrenzah focuses on the audible dimension in Chapter 10, "The Grammar of Sound in Ghana's Indigenous Religious Traditions and Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity". Nrenzah investigates the role of sound in Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and Indigenous Religious Traditions, high-

lighting the spiritual meaning of sound and tracing its use in the practices of both religious traditions. The author thereby highlights the importance of the auditive dimension as a contextualized link of the spiritual and physical worlds: the grammar of sound, as a sacred code mediates between the spiritual and physical realms.

The fourth section of the volume comprises two chapters on the theme of *Healing*.

In Chapter 11, "Relational Affliction and the Grammar of the Spirit World", Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps investigates the importance of relationships in the way people in Africa view afflictions and how this often functions as a connection to the spirit world. Kroesbergen-Kamps presents a religious life story of a Zambian pastor. This story is illuminating because it does not fit easily within any interpretative schemata we might wish to use as researchers. The pastors encountered different kinds of afflictions and approached them in a variety of ways: sometimes the hospital was visited, sometimes a traditional healer, at other times a Christian pastor and prayers were deemed adequate. The only thing that stood out in all cases was that affliction shows something is wrong in personal relationships, and through these relationships the illnesses are related to the spirit world. Rather than viewing ideas about spiritual causation as an inadequate attempt to treat an affliction medically, they bring out that the spirit world is not something theoretical but always something relational.

Lovemore Togarasei in Chapter 12, "Spirits and Illness: Batswana Christians' Views of the Causes of Illness", uses a very different method for investigating the importance of health as a connection point to the spirit world. Between 2018 and 2020, a large-scale quantitative and qualitative study was conducted to establish how religious beliefs impacted health-seeking and health-provision behaviours among the people in Botswana. Togarasei argues that the health system needs to be revised to accommodate for the importance of the spiritual aspect of health as experienced by Batswana. Through his research, Togarasei discovers that the spirit world is real in connection with health problems. Although the existence of reality cannot be proven scientifically, Togarasei proposes to use Wittgenstein to argue for taking this spiritual reality seriously nonetheless.

Discussions were the core business of the workshop that led to this volume. Rather than reading out their full papers, the contributors were asked to share a short version of their paper beforehand and merely introduce this paper so we could dive straight into the discussion. This resulted in very interesting, interdisciplinary debates. In Chapter 13, "Voices: Highlights from the Discussions," you find some of the most interesting parts of these conversations. It sets out with discussions concerning learning to communicate with spirits, experiencing spirits and healing through spirits. Debating the spirit world from this practical angle took us to the heart of the matter: what kind of reality does the spirit world have? This is discussed explicitly in the second half of this chapter. It concludes with the remark that at some point we should get beyond bracketing and ask, "Okay, what

does it mean for something to be real or not real?" This book is intended as a first step in that direction.

Finally, in Chapter 14, the Conclusion, there is a summary of the main findings in the joint investigation by the authors of this book, and suggestions will be made for fruitful further avenues of research. We cannot continue to assume that either we know what it means for the spirit world to be real, or we can leave that question aside completely. We need to face this question head on and this book is intended as an encouragement to do so, proposing that the concept of grammar is a good starting point in this regard.

Bibliography

Adedibu, Babatunde, and Benson Igboin, eds. 2018. *The Changing Faces of African Pentecostalism*. Akungba-Akoko: Adekunle Ajasin University Press.

Anderson, Allan. 2019. "Charismatic Churches and the Pentecostalization of African Christianity." *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, edited by Jehu J. Hanciles, 52–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appiah, Anthony. 1993. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

P'Bitek, Okot. 1971. *Religion of the Central Luo.* Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau.

Bond, George Clement, and Diane M. Ciekawy, eds. 2001. *Witchcraft Dialogues: Anthropological and Philosophical Exchanges*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Ganzevoort, R. Ruard, and Johan Roeland. 2014. "Lived Religion: The Praxis of Practical Theology." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1: 91–101. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2014-0007.

Gifford, Paul. 2015. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*. London: Hurst.

Gräb, Wilhelm. 2018. *Vom Menschsein und der Religion. Eine praktische Kulturtheologie*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Knibbe, Kim, and André Droogers. 2011. "Methodological Ludism and the Academic Study of Religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3/4: 283–303.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019a. "Religion Without Belief and Community in Africa." *Religions* 10, no. 4: 292.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019b. "The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism." *HTS Religion and Society Series* Vol. 6. Durbanville, South Africa: AOSIS.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, Johanneke. 2020. "Witchcraft after Modernity: Old and New Directions in the Study of Witchcraft in Africa." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10, no. 3: 860–873.

Lindhardt, Martin. 2015. "Introduction: Presence and Impact of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa." In *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, edited by Martin Lindhardt, 1–53. Leiden: Brill.

Mbiti, John. 1990. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann.

McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Öhlmann, Philipp, Stefan Hunglinger, Wilhelm Gräb, and Marie-Luise Frost. 2020. "Religion and Sustainable Development: The 'Secular Distinction' in Development Policy and Its Implications for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities." In *Religion in Motion: Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and Discourse in a Globalizing World*, edited by Julian Hensold, Jordan A. Kynes, Philipp Öhlmann, Vanessa Rau, Rosa C. Schinagl, and Adela Taleb, 119–37. Cham: Springer Nature.

Platvoet, Jan, and Henk Van Rinsum. 2003. "Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confession and Contesting an Invention." *Exchange* 32, no. 2: 123–153.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2010. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: John Wiley.

Part I: Grammar

Chapter 2

African Indigenous Religions, Spiritual Beings and the Debate over Religion and Superstition

Mikel Burley

Introduction: African indigenous religions in the philosophy of religion

Like the religions of most indigenous peoples, African indigenous religions have routinely been neglected in mainstream Western philosophy of religion. Among the handful of exceptions is Arvind Sharma's *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (2006), which uses the term 'primal religions' to denote the traditions that are these days more commonly called indigenous religions, including some that are rooted in Africa. But Sharma's book is constrained by its attempt to shoehorn the thoughts and practices of indigenous peoples into a conceptual framework modelled on an introduction to philosophy of religion authored by John Hick (see Hick 1990). As commentators on Sharma's book have observed (e.g. Grillo 2011, 805), its deployment of Hick's framework results in Christianity being treated as the paradigm in relation to which other religions are to be analysed. Hick's own work, meanwhile, exemplifies a tendency to privilege the so-called 'great developed world faiths' (Hick 1990, 3), primarily Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. According to Hick, these faiths promote individual salvation or spiritual liberation, in contrast to "primitive" or "archaic" religion, which is more concerned with keeping things on an even keel, avoiding catastrophe' (3). Although sweeping distinctions of the sort that Hick is making need not be entirely misconceived, the grounds for accepting the distinction will be lacking if one side of the contrast (in this case, the forms of religion dubiously identified as 'primitive' or 'archaic') remains under-examined.

Changes are, however, afoot in philosophy of religion. As its practitioners become aware of this subdiscipline's blind spots, editors of anthologies and journals are recognizing the value of including material on African and other indigenous religions alongside pieces on more conventional topics. A related development is the growing interest in distinctively African philosophies (see, e.g., Afolayan and Falola 2017; Adamson and Jeffers 2018–2021), an interest that is likely to bolster the level of attention given by philosophers to African religions.

The present chapter is a contribution to what I have elsewhere termed a *radical pluralist* philosophy of religion (Burley 2020), an approach that, in the spirit of D. Z. Phillips's 'contemplative conception of philosophy' (Phillips 1999; 2001), seeks to do conceptual justice to the variety of forms that religion can take, with-

out rushing to advocate or repudiate any of those forms from some supposedly universal standpoint. At the same time, this radical pluralist or contemplative approach shines a critical light on presuppositions that philosophers of religion bring to their enquiries, not excluding Phillips himself and others who have been influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. The aim of the chapter is to reflect critically upon the relation between two areas of discourse in the study of religion. One of these is the area in which general characteristics of African indigenous religions are identified, especially the idea of 'spiritual beings' or 'divinities' to whom prayers and sacrifices are offered; the other is the ongoing debate over the relation between religion and superstition.

My contention is not that there is any simple account to be given either of the relation between religion and superstition or of the principal characteristics of African indigenous religions. Rather, I propose to show that, by means of the critical and comparative investigation exemplified here, we may recognize the dangers of oversimplifying the complex conceptual relations at issue. We thereby become equipped to avoid distorting the religious practices and outlooks into which we are enquiring. More specifically, I argue that a fourfold typology of views about the relation between religion and superstition can usefully illuminate interpretive possibilities concerning African indigenous religions. While explicating these possibilities, I critically scrutinize the views in the typology themselves. Notably, I highlight a reductive demythologizing tendency that may be encouraged by certain Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers, including Phillips, who assume instrumental motives to be incompatible with religious ones.

Before turning to African indigenous religions, and to the traditional religion of the Yorùbá people of West Africa as a case in point, let us begin, then, by examining the debate over whether a coherent distinction can be made between religion and superstition.

Religion and Superstition

The relation between religion and superstition is both important and controversial. It is important because 'superstition' commonly carries pejorative implications; religious adherents are thus liable to object to characterizations of religion – or, more specifically, characterizations of their own religion – as superstitious. Relatedly, 'religious' (or 'genuinely religious') may imply depth, significance and a worthiness to receive serious attention, including philosophical attention, whereas 'superstition' often implies frivolousness. Unsurprisingly, then, there is a history of 'superstitious' being among the terms used by people with power – in situations of colonial or missionary intervention, for example – to disparage the local traditions that they wish to suppress or supplant (Chidester 1996). For philosophers of religion, the subject is pressing, for how the relation between religion and superstition is understood makes a difference to what religion is thought to consist in.

But the topic is controversial both because of the political implications to which I have just alluded and because of the competing views about the nature of the relation and whether there is a clear difference between religion and superstition at all.

From the views that have been articulated in the literature, a fourfold typology can be derived that is sufficiently nuanced to avoid riding roughshod over the intricacies of specific positions. The first type of position may be termed the 'Religion *is* Superstition' view. It maintains that there is no genuine distinction to be made because both religion and superstition are equally lacking in epistemic credibility; indeed, religion is simply a mode of superstition. Foremost among proponents of this view in recent years have been the New Atheists. Richard Dawkins, for example, approvingly quotes Jerry Coyne's remark that 'Science is but one form of rationalism, while religion is the most common form of superstition' (Coyne, quoted in Dawkins 2016, 92); and in a television documentary of his own, Dawkins proclaims: 'There are two ways of looking at the world: through faith and superstition or through the rigours of logic, observation and evidence – through reason' (Dawkins 2007). On this picture, then, there is a binary opposition between rational ways of thinking and acting, on the one hand, and irrational ways, on the other; science is aligned with the former, whereas religion, faith and superstition all belong in the latter category.

The second type of position may be termed the 'Important Distinction' view, for it maintains that, as D. Z. Phillips puts it, 'The distinction between religious belief and superstition is extremely important' (1993, 73). On this view, to conflate religion with superstition would be to overlook at least two significant characteristics of religious commitment. First, it would involve misguidedly assuming that religious acts, like superstitious ones, are performed out of instrumental or prudential motives – as 'a way of getting things done' – and that the desired outcome is achieved by means of mysterious 'quasi-causal connections' (73–74). Second, it would miss the extent to which genuinely religious acts are woven into the fabric of the believer's life, whereas superstitions are relatively superficial. For example, if someone who rarely engages in prayer suddenly, when confronted with severe danger, cries out 'O God! O God!' and 'promises' God that she will 'do anything in return' if only God will protect her from the imminent threat, then there is likely to be something superstitious about the act. While admitting that further detail would need to be known before a judgement could be made on whether a given act is religious or merely superstitious, Phillips remarks (again with reference to prayer) that 'unless prayers play a certain role in the person's life after the crisis is over, they are not characteristic of the *religious* role of prayer in the life of the believer' (Phillips 1965, 116).

A third type of position may be termed the 'Poetry of Life' view, after a phrase that Brian Clack borrows from Goethe (Clack 1995, 114). Clack objects to Phillips's view on the grounds not that religion is really nothing more than

superstition, but rather that the acts which typically get called superstitious often possess 'a curious depth'; this depth may contribute to an enrichment of our sense of being in the world – to what Goethe termed 'the poetry of life' (*die Poesie des Lebens*) (Goethe 1833, 298) – and is liable to be obscured when the acts in question are characterized as relatively trivial (Clack 1995, 114). Contrary to Phillips, therefore, Clack maintains 'that far from being "extremely important"', the supposed distinction between religion and superstition is 'unfortunate and radically unworkable', operating not to identify a genuine distinction at the descriptive level, but merely to differentiate those acts and beliefs of which a given individual or group approves from those that are perceived as shallow or worthless: 'What we believe is religion; what *they* do is superstitious' (Clack 1995, 113). It might be noted that there is an equivalence between the Poetry of Life view and the Religion *is* Superstition view, inasmuch as each of them rejects the distinction between religion and superstition. The key difference, of course, is that the Religion *is* Superstition view not only conflates religion and superstition but deprecates both of them, whereas the Poetry of Life view discerns value in them both.

Before proceeding to the fourth position in the typology, we should pause to register a respect in which both the Important Distinction view and the Poetry of Life view might recognize a given act as possessing depth while nevertheless locating its depth in different aspects. If we consider, for example, the act of deliberately damaging an effigy or an image of someone, perhaps by sticking pins into it or setting it alight, a proponent of the Important Distinction view could maintain that such an act has the potential to carry a deep significance. If one were, under certain circumstances, to refuse to damage an effigy, this refusal could be understood in moral terms. One perceives a moral connection between the act of damaging the effigy and one's attitude towards the person it depicts: such an act would be, at the very least, an expression of disrespect. To motivate the refusal, there is no need to suppose that damaging the effigy would somehow (mysteriously, magically) harm the depicted person; indeed, to entertain such a supposition would be to hold a belief that is superstitious and confused (see Phillips 1993, 115–116). From the perspective of the Poetry of Life view, meanwhile, it may be precisely the thought of a mysterious and inexplicable connection between damaging an effigy and harming the person it depicts that captivates us, imbuing the act – whether it be the act of attacking the effigy or of refusing to do so – with the fascination that it has (Mounce 1973, 358; Clack 1995, 114). On this view, even if one persists in regarding the act, or the refusal, as superstitious, it would be a mistake to fail to acknowledge the potency, and the poetry, of the thought it embodies. Calling it the result of confusion would be to dismiss that poetic potency too hastily.

The fourth type of position in the fourfold typology may be termed the 'Messy Motivations' view, for it maintains that, in real-life practices of religious partici-

pants, the contrast on which the Important Distinction view relies – between, on the one hand, trying to get something done by means of 'quasi-causal connections' and, on the other hand, undertaking a non-instrumental act that is more intimately integrated into one's life – seldom obtains. Citing, as a case in point, the practice among some Roman Catholic women of praying devoutly to St Jude, Terrence Tilley remarks that what is prayed for are most definitely 'this worldly' benefits, such as the healing of illnesses, yet there is no reason to deny that the prayers are religious (Tilley 2000, 349). To do so would be to impose a 'stipulative definition' upon the term 'religion' that dislocates the term from the very contexts in which it is at home and which give it the sense and life that it has – a procedure at which Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers such as Phillips would normally balk (Tilley 2000, 349–351; see also Bloemendaal 2006, 407; Clack 2012, 265–266).

In responding to this type of objection, Phillips has made two main points. First, while acknowledging that the motives of religious practitioners may indeed sometimes be mixed, he adds that the possibility of mixed motives does not undermine the conceptual distinction that he is making between religious motives and superstitious ones (Phillips 2000a, 360). Second, Phillips urges his critics not to be too quick to assume that where instrumental or prudential motives appear to be in play, there is not an alternative interpretation available – one that perceives an internal relation between the act and the end for which it is performed (Phillips 2000a, 359, 360). Phillips does not respond directly to Tilley's example of the women who pray to St Jude, but it is not difficult to imagine what he might have said. While recognizing that instrumental motives (and hence, by his own lights, superstitious impulses) *could* be a factor in these acts, Phillips would want to allow that this need not be the case: even prayers that are formulated as requests for intercession by a saint could turn out to be something more like the bringing of one's hopes and desires to the saint – or to God via the saint. As Phillips puts it in another place, 'After all, it is these desires and not any others which threaten to overwhelm [the person who prays], and through which he must seek God' (Phillips 1965, 122). Whether, in any given instance, this is what is going on, or whether there is something more instrumental (and hence superstitious) at issue, would depend on the surroundings; ultimately, it might depend upon the role of prayer in the person's life as a whole.

Without needing to deny that Phillips is making important conceptual distinctions between different kinds of motivation, the question that a proponent of the Messy Motivations view is apt to press is the following: even if, in a given case, the motive behind someone's act can be shown to be instrumental (prudential, self-serving), why should this be decisive in precluding the act's being described as religious? If, in a philosophical investigation of the term, 'religious' is being used descriptively rather than with a prescriptive or normative intent, then the philosophical investigation must afford conceptual space for regarding certain in-

strumentally motivated acts as religious, since such acts simply are among those to which 'religious' applies in everyday discourse.

The debate outlined in this section between four types of views concerning the relation between religion and superstition is of intrinsic interest, and much more could be said about it than I have said here. My primary purpose in discussing it, however, has been to provide a conceptual and interpretive framework that may be helpful for analysing certain views, both actual and possible, of practices associated with African indigenous religions. There is nothing unique or peculiar about African indigenous religions in this respect: the framework could just as readily be applied to other varieties of religion. But African indigenous religions are what I am exploring in this chapter. Without simply imposing the framework upon the religious phenomena in question, the important task is to show how thinking about the phenomena in light of the framework opens up lines of interpretation that would not otherwise be available while also facilitating critical reflection upon the framework itself.

Interpretive Possibilities in the Study of African Indigenous Religions

There is widespread agreement among scholars of African indigenous religions that many of the practices performed by adherents of these religions have a strong instrumental component. Of the practices concerned, especially salient are those commonly described as ritual sacrifice. Borrowing from Edmund Leach (1968) the notion of 'practical religion' – namely, forms of religion that prioritize practical matters of everyday life over more rarefied doctrinal matters – the anthropologist Andrew Apter speaks of 'the instrumental logic of ritual sacrifice', a logic that, he maintains, is implicit in the sacrificial practices of the traditional religion of the Yorùbá people of southern Nigeria and neighbouring regions (Apter 1992, 98 and Plate 16). As Apter puts it, the style of worship in this religion 'feeds' the deities (òrìṣà) 'with offerings and sacrifices in return for requested services'; hence, for example, women who long to have children may offer sacrifices in the hope of becoming pregnant, hunters may do so in return for abundant game, and students for success in their exams (Apter 1992, 98).

Concurring with the thought that there is something inherently transactional, reciprocal or functional about the sacrificial practices performed within Yorùbá and many other traditional African societies, some commentators have denied that these practices are religious at all. The philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, for example, asserts that 'it is a commonplace of African studies that the African attitude to the spirits . . . is purely utilitarian' (Wiredu 2010, 39). Such an attitude, he notes, 'is not really religious' so 'it would seem inappropriate to call the "rituals" in question religious' (Wiredu 1998, 34). Similarly, Olusegun Oladipo maintains that because, in indigenous African societies, the divinities are feared or respected 'only to the extent that [they] are able "to prove themselves" by delivering the

desired goods', what the people display towards these divinities 'can hardly be regarded as a religious attitude' (Oladipo 2004, 358).

Neither Wiredu nor Oladipo considers himself to be denigrating the attitudes or practices to which they refer: they merely deem 'the concepts of religion and worship to have been misapplied' in the cases concerned (Wiredu 1998, 34). Nor do they deny that there is any religion in the societies they describe; it is just that, as Wiredu puts it, 'An attitude of genuine religious devotion cannot be . . . conditional' – it cannot be utilitarian or self-serving in the way that the sacrificial rituals are (34). Although these philosophers are not using terms such as 'superstitious' or 'confused' – which would undoubtedly carry derogatory implications – it is striking that their distinction between 'genuine religious devotion', on the one hand, and acts that are 'utilitarian' or performed in the hope of receiving 'the desired goods', on the other, parallels what, in the previous section, I termed the Important Distinction view. To the extent that the latter view is susceptible to criticism, it may therefore be the case that these characterizations of African indigenous religions are similarly susceptible. This is a point I shall return to in subsequent sections. Before we get to those, however, it will be helpful to adduce a specific example of an African sacrificial ritual to give sharper focus to the discussion.

Elaborate descriptions of several sacrificial rituals among the Yorùbá are provided by J. Omosade Awolalu (1973). Of these, the following is representative of what many scholars of African religions have termed sacrifices of expiation, propitiation or appeasement, the relevant term in the Yorùbá language being ẹbọ ètùtù (see Fatokun 2013, 76; Akin-Otiko 2019, 17).

> Before the foundation of his house was laid, a man slaughtered a goat and poured its blood into a small hole dug in the ground. The severed head of the victim was carefully wrapped in a piece of white cloth and buried. Over the spot, a tree was planted. Sacrifice was brought annually to the foot of the tree. When we asked why this particular sacrifice was made, we were told that there was a powerful spirit on the plot of ground on which the building was erected, and that this spirit was disturbed and aggrieved because of the building put up there. If the anger of the disturbed spirit was not assuaged by means of prescribed offerings, the owner of the building, or his son, might lose his life. The spirit was, therefore, believed to be appeased with the blood immediately given and with the annual offerings made at the foot of the tree. (Awolalu 1973, 82)

How, then, is a ritual such as this to be interpreted? There are many methods that could be deployed. For my purposes in this chapter, I am going to begin with the fourfold typology of views of the relation between religion and superstition outlined in the previous section.

From the perspective of the Religion *is* Superstition view, it would not matter whether the sacrifice of a goat under the circumstances described by Awolalu were to be deemed religious or superstitious; either way, the act displays a lack of rationality because, on this view, there is no good reason either to believe in spirits

or to suppose that sacrificing goats could have anything to do with preventing the owner of a building or his son from being harmed. From the standpoint of the Important Distinction view, meanwhile, the interpretive options are more varied. If, after consideration of the available contextual information, it were to be judged that the motivation behind the ritual was indeed to dissuade an aggrieved spirit from somehow bringing about the death of the owner of the building or his son – as though there were some 'quasi-causal connection' between decapitating a goat and preventing these deaths – then, by the lights of the Important Distinction view, the ritual may be construed as superstitious and confused. However, despite the answer that, according to Awolalu, the sacrificer gave to the question of why the sacrifice was performed, a proponent of the Important Distinction view is unlikely to regard that reply as decisive in determining whether the motivation is confused. As Phillips has insisted on more than one occasion, being philosophically attentive to people's practices is not reducible to simply asking them to give an account of those practices: questions of philosophical interpretation 'cannot be settled by Gallup poll' (Phillips 2004, 7; see also Phillips 1965, 1–2; 2000b, 40–41). It does not follow that what people say about their practices should be ignored: far from it. But what they say should not be treated as the final word. One reason for this is that all of us can engage in practices without having a well-formulated account of why we do them. Another reason is that, in some instances, the account someone gives of a practice may be on the same logical level as the practice itself; in other words, there may be a sense in which the 'account' does not explain the practice but is itself an aspect of the practice. Deriving from Wittgenstein, this observation is close to what Phillips means by there being an 'internal relation between belief and practice' (Phillips 2001, 299).

Relevant to this point are comments made by Wittgenstein in response to passages from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein observes, for instance, that 'the characteristic feature of ritualistic action is not at all a view [*Ansicht*], an opinion [*Meinung*], whether true or false, although an opinion – a belief [*ein Glaube*] – can itself be ritualistic or part of a rite' (Wittgenstein 1993, 129). Elsewhere, in an unpublished notebook, Wittgenstein reflects upon the sort of case in which it is claimed of a small-scale community that they 'believe they are descended from an animal (e.g. a snake)' (Wittgenstein 2016, MS no. 116, 283, my translation). We might wonder how they could believe such a thing; however, Wittgenstein continues, the more apt question is 'How *do* they believe it?' – how does the belief enter into and inform their lives?

> They say, for example, words that we translate into the English phrase "We are descended from . . ." – "But that is not all!", one immediately says; they have the most varied customs and laws; which all rely on this belief (and thus show that we have translated their words correctly . . .)! But why should we not say: these customs and laws are not based on that belief, but they show to what extent, in what sense, such a belief exists. (Wittgenstein 2016, MS no. 116, 283, my translation)

What Wittgenstein is *not* doing here is proposing that, in cases such as the one he mentions, it makes no sense to speak of belief. Rather, he is urging caution about assuming that we already know what it would be to believe that, for example, one's community is descended from a snake and that all we need to do to explain the community's practices is recognize that this belief underlies them. Wittgenstein is emphasizing that the difficult task is to understand what it *means* to believe that one's community is descended from a snake and that, to get closer to this meaning, it is precisely to the practices of the community that we should look.

Applying this line of thinking to the Yorùbá goat sacrifice, what needs to be resisted is not so much the thought that the belief in angry spirits motivates the practice, but rather the temptation to assume that what it means to believe in angry spirits is readily comprehensible prior to an examination of the form of life in which that belief has its place – a form of life in which ritual sacrifice plays an integral role. It is for this reason that a philosophical approach influenced by Wittgenstein, when developed in a particular direction, shades into cultural anthropology. Nonetheless, there remains room in the Important Distinction view, which is influenced by Wittgenstein and carried forward by Phillips, for the possibility that sacrificing goats or speaking of being descended from a snake may turn out to be superstitious, in the sense of involving confusion about causal relations. I do not wish to take issue with this aspect of the view. I do, however, consider there to be a tendency in the thought both of Wittgenstein and of Phillips that has the potential to encourage what we might call (to borrow a term from Christian theology and biblical studies) a demythologization of worldviews that, in significant respects, diverge from those that prevail in contemporary Western secularized societies. Over the next two sections, I first elaborate on this point and then indicate how ideas that inform the Poetry of Life and Messy Motivations views of the relation between religion and superstition may help us avoid the kind of demythologizing which results in a distortedly reductive understanding of a religious or cultural worldview.

Demythologizing Indigenous Worldviews?

The demythologizing tendency of the Important Distinction view comes to the fore when a philosopher such as Wittgenstein or Phillips ventures an account of a given practice that is intended to show that the practice need not be construed as superstitious. In Phillips's work, we see the tendency in action when, for example, he proffers an account of blood sacrifice, including the sacrifice of human beings, that avoids the assumption that the practice is intended to 'ward off' a perceived threat. The kind of interpretation to which Phillips seeks an alternative is one that dismisses sacrificial rituals 'as primitive, superstitious practices' that, though 'understandable', are 'mistaken attempts to appease supernatural powers, in an effort to ward off the terrible in human life' (Phillips 2007, 205). Without denying that

some rituals may indeed be accurately described in these terms, Phillips rejects 'the general thesis' that this is the only interpretation available. Adopting that general thesis would involve overlooking 'the possibility that what gives rise to such terrible rituals is precisely that – awe at the terrible' (205). Phillips speculates that it is the 'predominantly utilitarian' character of modern Western culture that impedes our ability to comprehend how, instead of striving to avert danger, the rituals in question could be treating the terrible 'as a sacrament' (205; compare Rhees 1994, 578; Wittgenstein 1979, 3e).

The effort of Phillips and others to foreground interpretive options that avoid dismissing sacrificial rituals as superstitious is commendable and hermeneutically perceptive. The irony is, however, that Phillips's prior commitment to a sharp distinction between religion and superstition, with the latter being characterized in terms of confusion about causal relations, results in an unnecessarily constrained choice between two interpretations. By the lights of the Important Distinction view, typified by Phillips, a blood sacrifice must be *either* an attempt 'to ward off the terrible in human life' – in which case it is superstitious and confused – *or* an outpouring of awe in the face of that which is terrible, in which case the practice may qualify as religious. Admittedly, a third option is also allowed, which is that the ritual could be partially superstitious and partially religious, but the crucial point is that, according to this interpretation, the extent to which it is an attempt to ward off the terrible is precisely the extent to which the ritual is superstitious and confused. Ruled out is the possibility that the worldview (form of life, conceptual system) of those who perform the ritual is such as to give sense to a practice that involves shedding the blood of a living creature to ward off danger or, as the case may be, to appease an angry spirit who has been disturbed by the building of a house on the land it inhabits. Simply put, the possibility is being ruled out of a worldview within which an act of ritual sacrifice can be instrumental yet not confused.

Insofar as the intelligibility of such a worldview is being precluded, the effort to find a non-superstitious interpretation results in the demythologizing both of the ritual and of the worldview more generally. The cause of this result is an unduly restricted conception of what religious (or 'genuinely religious', 'properly religious') acts may consist in. We saw the same restriction in the case of Wiredu's and Oladipo's respective views on the concept of religion in the previous section. A difference between their position and the Important Distinction view, however, is that while affirming that sacrificial rituals are indeed utilitarian in purpose, Wiredu and Oladipo, among other interpreters, do not doubt the intelligibility of a worldview that can give sense to that utilitarian motivation. On the contrary, along with Apter, they may wish to affirm the contention that there is an 'instrumental logic of ritual sacrifice' (albeit while denying that this logic has anything to do with religion). In this respect, they avoid the demythologizing implications of the Important Distinction view.

To develop interpretive options that go beyond the demythologizing tendency, we shall revisit the Poetry of Life and Messy Motivations views of the relation between religion and superstition. Before doing so, however, I wish to bring out a further source of the reductive demythologizing approach by analysing a passage from Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer to which I have not yet referred. The passage is one in which Wittgenstein is reflecting upon Frazer's speculations about a practice exhibited by headhunting warriors of the island of Timor. As described by Frazer (1922, 212), the practice involves the leader of a victorious warring expedition being required to reside for two months in an isolated hut, where he undergoes 'bodily and spiritual purification' before returning to normal communal life. 'That these observances are dictated by fear of the ghost of the slain seems certain', Frazer writes; in response to which, Wittgenstein raises the question of why Frazer chooses the word 'ghost'. According to Wittgenstein (1979, 8e), this choice of 'a familiar superstitious word' indicates that Frazer well understands the 'superstition' (*Aberglauben*) that he is seeking to explain. 'Or rather', Wittgenstein continues, Frazer 'might have seen from this that there is something in us too that speaks in support of those observances' (8e). Wittgenstein then proffers an analogy: despite his not believing in the existence of 'human-superhuman beings [*menschlich-übermenschliche Wesen*] which we might call gods', there may nevertheless be occasions on which he, Wittgenstein, would utter a phrase such as 'I fear the wrath of the gods', and it would make sense for him to use these words. What this shows, Wittgenstein supposes, is 'that with these words I can mean something or express a feeling that need not be connected with that belief' (8e).

When trying to understand Wittgenstein's point, we have to remember that his notes on Frazer are merely jottings that he never revised or edited for publication. All the same, the analogical method displayed in this passage resembles that which he deploys elsewhere, both in the remarks on Frazer and in other writings. Surprisingly, he here seems not to be accentuating the intimate connection between belief and practice; on the contrary, he is suggesting that a form of words – 'I fear the wrath of the gods' – can retain a sense even when spoken by someone who has no belief in the existence of any gods. From what Wittgenstein says in many other places, we can infer that part of his point in this instance is that understanding the behaviour of the Timorese warriors does not require imputing any specific belief to them. They may have no belief in 'human-superhuman beings' (or ghosts) and yet their behaviour – their felt need for the leader of the expedition to isolate and purge himself after shedding the blood of enemies – remains intelligible to us.

A problem with these comments of Wittgenstein's is their apparent failure to recognize the difference that having a belief in something can make to a life, whether to the life of an individual or to that of a community. Naturally, we can imagine Wittgenstein or someone else exclaiming, in twentieth-century Cam-

bridge or Vienna, 'I fear the wrath of the gods', and doing so in a context that gives some sense to those words. But this is very different from imagining someone using those words (or their local equivalents) in, say, ancient Greece (or in twenty-first-century Yorubaland, for that matter). When, for example, Hesiod, writing around 700 BCE, forbids his brother Perses to cross a river without first praying and washing his hands, lest the gods be 'angry with him and bring trouble upon him afterwards' (*Works and Days* 737–741, in Hesiod 1914, 57), these words gain their force, in large part, from the pervasiveness of the belief in the gods in the surrounding culture. In such a culture, we would see what it means to believe in the gods, and to fear their wrath, in multiple aspects of life – in the rituals, prayers and festivals and in the everyday discourse and behaviour of the populace. In twentieth-century Cambridge, meanwhile, talk of fearing the wrath of the gods, spoken by someone who confesses no belief in them, is liable to sound insubstantial by comparison.

In much of his work from the 1930s onwards, Wittgenstein is alive to the importance of context – the flow or weave of life – for determining the meaning of our words. In the comments I have just been discussing, however, he loses sight of the significance of the religious and mythological dimensions of a culture for infusing words with the sense that they have. Consequently, were we to pursue the line of interpretation that he encourages in that passage, we might end up with an impoverished and demythologized understanding of the place that temporary isolation and purificatory procedures have in the lives of the Timorese warriors whom Frazer describes.

We see an example of where the demythologizing tendency can lead in recent defences by Hermen Kroesbergen of what I am calling the Important Distinction view of the relation between religion and superstition. To diminish the ontological implications of talk of a spirit world, especially among Pentecostal Christians, Kroesbergen argues that 'Belief in the spirit world, both in Africa and in Europe and the USA, is not a belief in a particular kind of entity, but it expresses one's personal response to the world' (2019, 116). Also denied by Kroesbergen is the instrumental motivation behind many practices related to a spirit world, for the belief 'is not a practical means one uses to obtain whatever one desires'; instead, 'It is a personal spiritual response to the world, it is the way in which one speaks to oneself, and it is the picture one uses in one's actions and statements' (120). Assertions such as these are helpful insofar as they encapsulate a possible direction in which to look, freeing us from the twofold assumption that talk of a spirit world *must* involve belief in the existence of 'a particular kind of entity' and that prayers and rituals which *appear* to have an instrumental purpose must in fact have such a purpose. If, however, we were to recall Wittgenstein's advice regarding the people who speak of being descended from a snake, then we would be less eager to deny that belief in a spirit world is a belief in certain entities. Instead, we might see the asking of questions such as what it means (or *could* mean) to believe in a spirit

world as being bound up with – internally related to – the question of what kind of entities the spirits are believed to be. As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Philosophical Investigations:* 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (2009, §373). In certain places, Kroesbergen explicitly endorses the latter view; what he is keen to stress is that whatever talking about spirits amounts to, we should not assume that such talk shares the same rules as talk about, say, physical objects (e.g. Kroesbergen 2019, 95). Even so, we see the temptation to slide from this cautious approach to the denial that believing in spirits involves 'belief in a particular kind of entity' in the passage that I quoted from Kroesbergen above.

Addressing questions about the kind of beings that spirits are believed to be would ultimately require extensive anthropological study of the believers concerned. Philosophy, however, can free up conceptual space for the contemplation of diverse interpretations of the ethnographic material. Sometimes, as we have seen, philosophical commitments serve the opposite purpose: closing down rather than opening up interpretive options. But this need not be the case. In the next section, I return to the Poetry of Life and Messy Motivations views of the relation between religion and superstition to show how these interpretive orientations can help rather than hinder cross-cultural understanding.

Poetry and Messiness in the Study of African Indigenous Religions

As we have seen, when addressing the question of how to interpret the kind of ritual exemplified by the goat sacrifice described earlier in this chapter, following the Important Distinction view of the relation between religion and superstition is liable to lead us to either write off the ritual as superstitious and confused or treat it as somehow embodying an attitude of awe (or, more broadly, what Kroesbergen has called a 'personal response to the world'). What the view disallows is our holding the ritual to be a deliberate attempt to appease the spirit who has been agitated by the building of a house on the land where it dwells and to deem it, insofar as it *is* such an attempt, genuinely religious. This prohibition by the Important Distinction view forecloses an interpretive option that would otherwise be appealing in light of what many anthropologists as well as sacrificial practitioners themselves say about the relevant practices. Although the risk of assuming that we know full well what it means to believe that a spirit can be placated by decapitating a goat is a real one, there is also a risk involved in dismissing too swiftly the possibility that the worldview of which the practice is partially constitutive does in fact enable those who inhabit it to regard the world as populated by spirits that are, precisely, 'a particular kind of entity'.

If a key obstacle to accepting the latter possibility is the difficulty of understanding what such a worldview would be like, various methods are available to try to overcome this difficulty. One of these, which is central to the Poetry of Life view of the relation between religion and superstition, is to transcend crude

dichotomies between, for example, realism and non-realism or cognitivism and non-cognitivism by looking to poetic modes of discourse to form a bridge of understanding between one worldview or cultural outlook and another. Consider, for instance, the many poetic resonances of 'blood' in Western discursive contexts, including the conceptual connections between blood, life and spirit, whether in overtly religious or in other settings. 'Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood', affirms Nietzsche's Zarathustra, for example. 'Write with blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit' (Nietzsche 1969, 67). Blood is here associated with the source of life: life in fluid form. It is, of course, possible to distinguish between writing with one's blood in a literal and in a figurative sense; yet even in a literal sense – cutting open a vein and dipping one's pen in the dark red liquid that seeps out – is apt to carry poetic connotations: it is to pour one's life into the act of writing, giving expression to one's spirit. Or it might be an act of piety, as when Saddam Hussein allegedly donated around 28 litres of his blood over a period of three years to be used to write a copy of the Qur'an (Smucker 2001; Chulov 2010). Even if the latter story is untrue, the fact that what Saddam is purported to have done can readily be understood as a pious act tells us much about the poetic meaning of blood.

The equation of life with blood is present in the Judaic and Christian traditions, from where it bleeds into Western culture more generally. 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood', reads Leviticus 17:11, 'and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul' (*The Bible* 1997, 143). And it is against the backdrop of this sanguineous imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures that many New Testament verses relating to the blood of Christ gain their sense (see Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman 1998, 100). In an extensive cross-cultural study of sacrifice, E. O. James observes how the ritual shedding of blood, typically animal blood, is often perceived as an offering of life and not as the taking of it: 'The outpouring of the vital fluid . . . is the sacred act whereby life is given to promote and preserve life, and to establish thereby a bond of union with the supernatural order' (1933, 33).

Imagery of this kind runs so deep in many cultures that the feasibility of separating the symbolic from the instrumental aspects of sacrificial practices becomes questionable. So too are the poetic associations with goats, as a sacrificial animal, prevalent in numerous societies from ancient times to the present. There are affinities between, for example, the worship of Osiris in ancient Egypt, Dionysos in ancient Greece and Ògún, who is the Yorùbá patron deity (òrìṣà) of warriors and metalworkers. In each case, male goats are held to embody qualities of virility and fertility, and their sacrifice has been central to ritual performances (Zabus 1998, 218). These days, it is more often dogs that are sacrificed to Ògún, but goats remain a common sacrificial victim in the case of other Yorùbá divinities or spirits (Pemberton 1997, 130).

The traditional Yorùbá worldview is one in which the world is populated by *òrìṣà*, who have pervasive roles in the lives of ritual participants. What it means for one's life to be pervaded by encounters with such beings comes through in the proverbs, myths, dances, artistic productions and in the whole traditional culture of the Yorùbá. These cultural elements inform values and norms, which are in turn constitutive of the religious practices, making them the practices that they are. There may be instances in which it would make sense to say of those who are performing a particular practice that they do not really believe in the *òrìṣà* for whom, ostensibly, the practice is being carried out. There is, after all, such a thing as merely 'going through the motions' of a ritual without one's heart being in it. But were this to become the case with everyone involved, the character of the practice would change: it would no longer be the practice it once was (without its necessarily *looking* any different on the surface).

What the Poetry of Life view facilitates, as I am developing it here, is an opening of the imagination. It encourages a 'what if' attitude vis-à-vis the world-view under examination, such that one who does not already share this worldview may entertain the thought of what it would be like to belong to a community in which believing the world to be populated by divinities or spirits, some of whom demand that animals be sacrificed in their name, is commonplace. The question of how this belief affects the believer's life and how it bears upon the life of the community has no concise answer. As we have observed, coming to understand what the belief consists in is not dissociable from coming to see the difference it makes, and this will require some degree of immersion in the cultural themes – the stories, songs, festivals and suchlike – of the people concerned. Without inviting us to relinquish our critical faculties, the Poetry of Life view, as conceived in these terms, urges us to appreciate the extent to which our own lives are suffused with poetic motifs, and to use this appreciation as a gateway to noticing resemblances as well as discrepancies across and within cultures.

The Messy Motivations view complements the Poetry of Life view insofar as it helps to free us from the grip of a picture in which, for a practice to be truly religious, it cannot be driven by instrumental impulses. The view allows for the possibility that a religious practice may be primarily instrumental, or both instru-mentally motivated and the embodiment of an attitude that would not otherwise be the attitude that it is, without its distinctively religious status thereby being diminished. In a case such as that of the Yorùbá goat sacrifice, one might admit that (as Phillips and others would be apt to contend) the verbalized belief that this act will propitiate an angry spirit need not be treated as logically prior to the sacrificial act: the belief, as Wittgenstein mooted, may be part of – internal to – the rite, as opposed to existing independently of it. We might even hesitate to use the notion of expression in this context, for to say that the rite *expresses* the be-lief would risk implying, again, that the belief exists independently and could in principle have been expressed by other means. Yet none of these concessions to

the Important Distinction view should lead us to conclude that there is anything suspect about characterizing the sacrificial ritual as instrumentally motivated: the motivation can, in a sense, be internal to the practice yet still be instrumental. And, *pace* not only Phillips and Kroesbergen but also Wiredu and Oladipo, to claim that an instrumentally motivated act is *eo ipso* nonreligious is, as Tilley and others have maintained, not to leave everyday language intact but rather to foist 'a philosopher's inappropriate gloss on religious practice' (Tilley 2000, 349).

Concluding Remarks

My argument in this chapter is not intended as a form of apologetics, whether in support of African indigenous religious practices or of anything else. The point is one of hermeneutics. In the spirit of D. Z. Phillips's contemplative and radically pluralist hermeneutical approach, I have sought to promote methods that enlarge rather than reduce the range of *possibilities of sense* that may be found in practices that are characteristic of African indigenous religions. In this respect, I have to some extent used Phillips against himself, since I have argued against Phillips's exclusion of instrumentally motivated acts from the category of genuine religion and have done so on the basis of the broadly Wittgensteinian principle, endorsed by Phillips, that, *ceteris paribus*, philosophy has no good reason to interfere 'with the actual use of language' (Wittgenstein 2009, §124). 'What's ragged should be left ragged', as Wittgenstein affirms (1998, 51); in other words, being 'ragged' need not imply that any tidying up is called for. Though not, in itself, a unique contribution on my part, this line of argument has been developed here through an analysis of different conceptions of the relation between religion and superstition and with recurrent reference to African indigenous religions, giving particular attention to aspects of the traditional religion of the Yorùbá. The chapter thus affords new directions for an expanded philosophy of religion to pursue.

By coming to understand the meaning, or possible meanings, of a religious practice in relation to the worldview or conceptual environment in which it has its life, one does not automatically become more sympathetic to the practice at issue. Indeed, there are likely to be instances in which the more deeply one understands a practice, the more objectionable one finds it, perhaps along with other features of the form of life of which it is a part. Blood sacrifice is a particular case in point: some people may feel revulsion at such practices and this revulsion may be intensified rather than diminished when the details and surroundings of the practice are further investigated. Supplying rational support for these visceral reactions is a task that some philosophers consider it their business to carry out, and there need be nothing wrong with that. There remains a risk, however, of moral reactions getting in the way of contextual understanding. We see such obstructions coming into play when philosophers adopt moral criteria for identifying certain religions or conceptions of divinity as 'authentic' and decrying others as 'morally

defective' (Hick 2004, 353, 339). Such moralizing is precisely what a radically pluralist approach strives to avoid.

The indigenous religions of Africa are many and varied, as are the versions of larger-scale religions that are firmly established on the African continent, most notably Christianity and Islam. So too are the interrelations between these various types of religion complex and intricate. It would be misleading to imply that a typology of views pertaining to religion and superstition is the only, or the best, conceptual and interpretive framework through which to engage in the philosophical study of African religions. It is one among many. And in view of the controversial history of applications of the concept of superstition to African traditions, it is one that must be treated with sensitivity. But as the foregoing discussion has indicated, the approach can be mutually illuminating: providing an entry point for the philosophy of religion to examine African religions while also shedding light on the fraught debate over the relation between religion and superstition – and hence on the ramified concept of religion itself.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Adamson, Peter, and Chike Jeffers. 2018–2021. "History of Philosophy without Any Gaps: Africana Philosophy." Podcast series. https://historyofphilosophy. net/series/africana-philosophy.

Afolayan, Adeshina, and Toyin Falola, eds. 2017. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Akin-Otiko, Akinmayowa. 2019. "The Significance of Sacrifice in Yoruba Religion and the Scope of Sacrifice to *Èsù-Òdàrà*, the Mediator Divinity." *Cajolis: Calabar Journal of Liberal Studies* 21, no. 2 (April): 17–24.

Apter, Andrew. 1992. *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Awolalu, J. Omosade. 1973. "Yoruba Sacrificial Practice." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 5, no. 2: 81–93.

The Bible: Authorized King James Version. 1997. Edited by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bloemendaal, P. F. 2006. *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D. Z. Phillips's Philosophy of Religion*. Leuven: Peeters.

Burley, Mikel. 2020. *A Radical Pluralist Philosophy of Religion: Cross-Cultural, Multireligious, Interdisciplinary*. London: Bloomsbury.

Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Chulov, Martin. 2010. "Qur'an etched in Saddam Hussein's blood poses dilemma for Iraq leaders." *The Guardian*, December 19, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/19/saddam-legacy-quran-iraqi-government.

Clack, Beverley. 2012. "Being Human: Religion and Superstition in a Psychoanalytic Philosophy of Religion." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 70 (July): 255–279.

Clack, Brian R. 1995. "D. Z. Phillips, Wittgenstein and Religion." *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (March): 111–120.

Dawkins, Richard. 2007. *The Enemies of Reason, Part 1: Slaves to Superstition*, directed by Russell Barnes. Channel 4, August 13, 2007.

Dawkins, Richard. 2016. *The God Delusion: 10th Anniversary Edition*. London: Transworld.

Fatokun, Samson Adetunji. 2013. "The Concept of Expiatory Sacrifice in the Early Church and in African Indigenous Religious Traditions." In *African Traditions in the Study of Religion, Diaspora and Gendered Societies: Essays in Honour of Jacob Kehinde Olupona*, edited by Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye, 71–84. Farnham: Ashgate.

Frazer, Sir James George. 1922. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Macmillan.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 1833. *Goethe's Werke* Vol. 45. Stuttgart and Tübingen: Cotta.

Grillo, Laura S. 2011. "The Urgency of Widening the Discourse of Philosophy of Religion: A Discussion of *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* by Arvind Sharma." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 4 (December): 803–813.

Hesiod. 1914. *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. London: Heinemann.

Hick, John H. 1990. *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hick, John. 2004. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

James, E. O. 1933. *Origins of Sacrifice: A Study in Comparative Religion*. London: Murray.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019. *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism*. Cape Town: AOSIS.

Leach, E. R. 1968. "Introduction." In *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, edited by E. R. Leach, 1–6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mounce, H. O. 1973. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *Philosophy* 48, no. 186 (October): 347–362.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1969. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin.

Oladipo, Olusegun. 2004. "Religion in African Culture: Some Conceptual Issues." In *A Companion to African Philosophy*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, 355–363. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Pemberton III, John. 1997. "The Dreadful God and the Divine King." In *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, edited by Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd edition, 105–146. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Phillips, D. Z. 1965. *The Concept of Prayer*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Phillips, D. Z. 1993. *Wittgenstein and Religion*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Phillips, D. Z. 1999. *Philosophy's Cool Place*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Phillips, D. Z. 2000a. "Practices, Practice, and Superstition: A Response to Terrence W. Tilley." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (June): 357–362.

Phillips, D. Z. 2000b. *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Phillips, D. Z. 2001. *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Phillips, D. Z. 2004. *Religion and Friendly Fire: Examining Assumptions in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Phillips, D. Z. 2007. "Philosophy's Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect – A Reply to Henk Vroom." In *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, edited by Andy F. Sanders, 197–211. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Rhees, Rush. 1994. "The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy." Edited by Timothy Tessin *Philosophical Investigations* 17, no. 4 (October): 573–586.

Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, eds. 1998. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Sharma, Arvind. 2006. *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Smucker, Philip. 2001. "Iraq Builds 'Mother of All Battles' Mosque in Praise of Saddam." *The Telegraph*, July 29, 2001. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1335735/Iraq-builds-Mother-of-all-Battles-mosque-in-praise-of-Saddam.html.

Tilley, Terrence W. 2000. "The Philosophy of Religion and the Concept of Religion: D. Z. Phillips on Religion and Superstition." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 (June): 345–356.

Wiredu, Kwasi. 1998. "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion." *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4: 17–46.

Wiredu, Kwasi. 2010. "African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View." In *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper and Philip L. Quinn, 2nd edition, 34–43. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1979. *Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'*, translated by A. C. Miles and Rush Rhees. Retford: Brynmill.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1993. "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*." In *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, 118–155. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1998. *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, edited by G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, revised by Alois Pichler, translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th edition. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2016. *Wittgenstein Nachlass Ms-116: XII, Philosophische Bemerkungen*, edited by Alois Pichler. Bergen: Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen. http://wab.uib.no/transform/wab.php?modus=opsjoner.

Zabus, Chantal. 1998. "The Yoruba Bacchae: Wole Soyinka's De-Aryanization of Greek Civilization." In *(Un)writing Empire*, edited by Theo D'Haen, 203–228. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Chapter 3

Language for What Cannot Be Explained, Controlled, or Predicted

Hermen Kroesbergen

Before we moved to Zambia in 2011, I had never thought much about Africa. I knew people over there believed strange things about spirits and witches and so on – okay, so be it. When we moved there, two important things changed. First, I needed to take a stance towards these beliefs in the spirit world; I needed to find out how I would relate to them. Second, I lived my daily life among people for whom the spirit world was a reality, and I experienced how our practical lives and ways of reasoning were not very different, nonetheless.

This second aspect reminded me of my own situation in reverse back in the Netherlands. As a Christian in a secular context, I noticed that people were sometimes puzzled about me being fairly ordinary in life and behavior except for having these strange beliefs about God and Christ and miracles and so on.

If we accept that what a belief comes to is shown in the difference that this belief makes in someone's life, what does belief in God come to, or, in Africa, belief in the spirit world? In case we are together and heading for the same destination, but I believe it is eastwards and you believe it is westwards, one will be able to see our differences in beliefs in the different ways we are heading. People who believe in the spirit world or not, on the other hand, go to the same shops, same places of employment, make the same calculations, and so on. So, what difference does it make to believe in the spirit world, or God for that matter?

The main puzzle that I will try to solve in this essay is how to do justice to what people say and do concerning the spirit world in such a way that, first, they do not look too strange or silly – since, in fact, these people are most often quite ordinary and normal – and, second, to do so in a way that is to some extent recognizable to the people involved themselves – since the statements and practices concerning the spirit world are *their* statements and practices after all. This is a puzzle because presenting them as people like me necessarily downplays the spirit world, whereas taking people at their word concerning the spirit world does make them strange in my eyes. To solve this puzzle, we first need to be clear about the facts concerning the strange things that people in general – including me – appear to believe about the spirit world.

The Situation

In 1993, essays by the anthropologist Robin Horton were published under the title *Patterns of thought in Africa and the West: Essays on magic, religion, and science*. In the introduction, Horton apologizes for the title. He considers it to be accurate, but he is worried that it suggests he will "attempt to make sense of everything under the sun" (1993, 1). Horton's work did receive quite a bit of attention over the years, but his tendencies to generalize and provoke do make his work seem less popular amongst anthropologists nowadays. Nonetheless, because of his generalizing approach and straightforward way of phrasing things, he does bring out ways of thinking that remain hidden behind case studies and jargon in some other anthropological studies that try to make sense of the strange things people in Africa (appear to) believe.

According to Horton, the apparently strange things that people in Africa believe about spirits and witches and so on, are simply wrong explanations. He (1993, 58) says:

> By all normal criteria of assessment, many of the religious beliefs of pre-literate cultures *are* primarily explanatory in intent; [...] by the criteria of the sciences, many of them *are* mistaken; and [...] to wriggle out of admitting this by the pretense that such beliefs are somehow not really what they obviously are is simply to distort facts under the influence of extraneous values.

According to Horton, religious and spiritual statements are clearly – 'by all normal criteria of assessment' – intended for the explanation, prediction, and control of worldly events. People speak of witchcraft to explain accidents for which they do not have other explanations; they visit diviners for predictions about the future because they want to know what will happen, and they use charms and traditional medicines in order to attempt to control what will happen. In the West, science has made these ideas superfluous, but in many parts of Africa, religion and spirituality still function in this way, Horton observes.

Other anthropologists critique this assessment, Horton (1993: 58) notes, for portraying traditional religious beliefs as "the product of childish ignorance." In their own analysis, they argue that religious and spiritual statements may look like explanations, but actually something quite other than explanatory etcetera. They might be comments on society, for example, hidden in a metaphorical disguise. According to Horton, this is wriggling out of admitting the obvious: people use a concept like 'witchcraft' as an explanation, and people from the West with more developed sciences find it hard to take such an explanation seriously.

Likewise, anthropologist Webb Keane (2004, 433) notes that many of his colleagues in their description of African rituals try to remove the belief in "its efficacy from the domain of physical causality" in order to avoid "the accusation of [African rituals] being bad science, of trying to accomplish material results (such as making rain) on the basis of faulty premises (the magical power of words)." In

their metaphorical or symbolical interpretation of what people in Africa say about the spirit world, many scholars of Africa fail to acknowledge that "the practitioners do not see their rituals as achieving their effects simply by convention" (2004, 433). For the people involved, spiritual discourse is not merely metaphorical, but it is related to explanation, prediction, and control if it is not a straightforward attempt to explain, predict and control. Spiritual discourse attempts to explain, according to Horton, Keane and many of the people using spiritual language themselves, even if admitting this runs the risk of portraying this language as childish, ignorant, and bad science. Bad science or not, people in Africa take their practices involving the spirit world as ways to explain, predict and control the world around them.

Scholar of African religion Paul Gifford (2019, 96f) draws the following contrast between patterns of thought in religious Africa and the secular West:

> Religion, along with its values and morality, always attempted to explain reality (what I have called the inevitable cognitive element of religion), and this explaining was done in terms of other-worldly forces. [...In the West,] such explanations, though not discredited, have been marginalized by a far more powerful form of explanation.

Gifford takes explanation to be an inevitable aspect of religion, and, in this respect, religion has been replaced by science in the West. The practices that still carry the name 'religion' in the West are no longer truly religious because they no longer even claim to explain, predict and control. "The institutions run on, purportedly the same, although the rationale underlying it has been profoundly changed," as Gifford (2019, 101) says, and Horton would definitely agree. Religion in the West nowadays claims to be in the business of meaning of life, communal feelings, or morality, since its proper functions – explanations, predictions, and control in terms of other-worldly forces – are no longer viable in a context permeated by the far more successful sciences.

Gifford, Horton and others are correct in observing that religious and spiritual statements often appear to be attempts at explanation, prediction, and control. This aspect is what makes African statements about spirits and witches and so on often appear strange or even the fruit of 'childish ignorance,' to use Horton's phrase, for people coming from the West. This is no different within the West concerning the lack of understanding between religious and secular people. My statements as a Christian will often appear strange and childishly ignorant to my secular compatriots. Gifford, Horton and others show that there are two important facts to keep in mind in researching African discourses and practices concerning the spirit world: (1) spiritual statements appear to be about explanation, prediction, and control, but (2) if they are, they are so obviously flawed from a scientific point of view that it is hard to take them seriously.

A third important fact, however, is the fact that (3) these people who seem so strange in their spiritual statements appear quite ordinary during the rest of their

lives – people in Africa to me from the West, and me as a Christian to my secular compatriots. If spiritual people are childishly ignorant in one aspect of their lives, you would expect this to show in other aspects of their lives as well. But, as I mentioned above, people who believe in the spirit world or not go to the same shops, the same places of employment, make the same calculations, and so on. How to account for this third fact that these people who seem so strange in one respect are so normal in all other respects?

Horton and Gifford consider religion as a respectable attempt at explanation, prediction, and control which has unfortunately failed. Horton tries to rescue aspects of spiritual explanations to be taken up in the science of psychology. Gifford focuses on how religions in the West are engaged in futile attempts to reinvent themselves as self-help groups and so on. The other-worldly core of religion will inevitably eclipse, Horton and Gifford assume, since, as Gifford writes (2019, 98), "one cannot be modern and think that malaria is caused by witchcraft or that AIDS can be cured with incantations." Without such other-worldly explanations, the old religious institutions may still roll on, but they will no longer be truly religious, according to Horton and Gifford.

Other anthropologists have tried different routes in an attempt to do justice to the third fact mentioned here – people in Africa and religious people elsewhere are not crazy. Statements about the spirit world are not really about explanation, but they are metaphorical assessments of society or power, or they are philosophical quests for the meaning of life.

According to Horton and Gifford, religion used in this way would not be truly religious either. They see this as a reinterpretation of religion. Horton (1993, 117) observes that his students in Nigeria can hardly make sense of these reinterpretations: "they react with sheer puzzlement at such a weird, perverse interpretation of spiritual discourse. Away from the customary politeness of the classroom, I can imagine them asking each other: can Westerners really be *this* mad?" According to Horton, for his students, spiritual discourse is so obviously about explanation, prediction, and control that symbolic interpretations seem completely absurd.

Personally, I recognize this response to metaphorical interpretations of language concerning the spirit world both from teaching and participating in workshops and conferences in Africa and from how I would feel myself if my sermons were reduced to metaphors. It does not do justice to what is being said about the spirit world. At best, it is a futile attempt to hold on to the discourse concerning the spirit world in a context in which it has already lost its value. Is there an alternative for either dismissing language concerning the spirit world as outdated, or metaphorically reinterpreting religious discourses and practices?

Beyond Explanation, Prediction, Control

People in Africa speak of the spirit world with amazing fluidity. For example, people speak of spirit doubles or charcoal changing into corpses, and they do so with complete certainty, yet in other situations, such spirits or transformations do not enter the conversation at all.

During a workshop for Roman Catholic priests working all over Africa, half of the participants argued that charismatic deliverance from evil spirits should become a regular part of their work, whereas the other half wished to stick with more traditional church services. I sympathized with the latter group, but then a charismatic priest started to talk about how he often prayed against parishioners' spirits of anger or lust. I would have no problem with that, but that sounds psychological or metaphorical to me. I doubt that these were the same kind of spirits as the demons detected by traditional healers he spoke of earlier.

In Zambia, we noticed that on the one hand, people were joking about people who pray vehemently to 'bind the evil spirits of this and of that'. They did not seem to take it seriously. Yet, on the other hand, many of these very same people seemed to take T.B. Joshua with his binding of spirits very seriously indeed.

The way people in Africa deal with the spirit world is often characterized as pragmatic; people are said to be 'bargaining with the spirit world'. People use then this traditional healer, then that Pentecostal prophet, then that voodoo priest – whatever helps. This might suggest that they firmly believe in a given spirit world with many different entities that are 'simply real' for them, and they try to make use of it in the most profitable way. However, I wish to suggest they are pragmatic not only in their shopping for solutions but concerning the language of the spirit world as well. What is an unquestionable reality during one part of a conversation might be discarded as an exaggerated metaphor later on in the same conversation. People do not seem to have a stable picture of what realities are there in the spirit world, nor do they seem to care much about constructing such a picture.

Speaking of the spirit world seems to be a way of looking for words for what cannot be put into words, to explain what remains unexplainable, and so on. They desperately long for an explanation, and this shows itself in their quest, but simultaneously, they are aware that explanations will probably never be reached. Therefore, on the one hand, whatever one is hinting at with those words is not something to be taken lightly; on the other hand, it is easy to switch and mix and match.

I propose that the best way to understand language concerning the spirit world is to consider it to be language about what *cannot* be explained, controlled, or predicted.

When a Christian visits Lourdes and against all expectations, she is healed, people say, 'It is a miracle!' or 'The Virgin Mary healed her!' This may sound like an explanation for an unexplainable event. It might be a way to cope with the unexplainable, however. If the Vatican sends out a research team to investigate

whether the healing truly was a miracle, the investigators will not check the supposed explanation. Rather, they will check whether there are no other explanations available (cf. Moore 1995:117). If there are no explanations, then it is deemed justified to call something a genuine miracle or divine intervention. Those words are legitimate in case no explanation can be found.

Similarly, a potter among the Azande concludes that witchcraft is in play from the mere fact that his pot is broken. He knows that he is an experienced potter and he used good clay, so there is no other explanation; therefore he says, "It is broken – there is witchcraft", anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1937, 67) notes. The potter has not established the cause, but he knows there are no other plausible causes.

Elsewhere Evans-Pritchard (1965, 90) compared the concept of witchcraft to the concept of chance or luck: "the witchcraft explanation supplements that of natural causation, accounting for what we would call the element of chance." He did not elaborate on this. Chance or luck, however, is not simply supplementing explanations of natural causation; but referring to luck or chance is admitting that we do not have an explanation. We call something 'luck' or 'bad luck' not when we have discovered the cause that something happened but speaking of 'luck' or 'bad luck' implies that we do not know the final cause.

In a paper and later in my book on the *Language of Faith in Southern Africa* (2019), I suggested that this works the same for all languages concerning the spirit world. Saying that there are spirits or gods behind something is not claiming to have discovered the culprit, but it is acknowledging that we do not know what the reason was. We speak of the spirit world when we could have spoken of mystery or luck just as well. Spirits, witchcraft, or gods explain the unexplainable, which becomes no less unexplainable by speaking of spirits, witchcraft, or gods. Just like we speak of luck or bad luck when no other explanation is available, references to the spirit world do not explain, predict or control situations, rather, they are ways of dealing with what we cannot explain, predict or control.

In my view, this is the best way to do justice to the three facts mentioned above. Spiritual discourse does concern our desire for explanation, prediction, and control, although it does not itself provide such explanations, predictions, and ways for control. Spiritual discourse does not clash with scientific explanations but deals with what is – or happens to be – beyond science. And people engaged in spiritual language are not very different from secular people; they simply engage with what is beyond our capabilities of explanation, prediction, and control differently. Some people speak of luck; other people speak of spirits. To use language concerning the spirit world is a way to speak about what cannot be explained, controlled, or predicted anyhow.

Neither Simply Real, nor Metaphorical

The perspective that I have summarized above was not accepted when I presented this view during a workshop with Western anthropologists who study Africa. 'For them all of it is real', so I was told, assuming that my view denies the reality of the spirit world. I was accused of applying my Western Christian perspective, which, having gone through Enlightenment, was demythologized and internally secularized.

Free from such Western Christian biases, these anthropologists claimed to be able to see Africans for who they really are, and for Africans, all of it is real. Africans truly believe, for example, that diviners can make rain or stop it. Their rituals are not merely ways to deal with the unpredictability of the weather. Someone told me about a friend of his in Benin who had held his expensive outdoor wedding during the height of the rainy season. This was not a problem his friend had reassured him, since he knew a voodoo priest who could ensure it would be sunny on that particular day. The personal and financial risks he took by planning the outdoor wedding during the rainy season prove that he genuinely believed the voodoo priest controlled the weather, so I was told. And indeed, it did not rain.

The sentiment that 'For them all of it is real' is the core of the newer approach of the ontological turn in anthropology. According to those proposing an ontological turn, spiritual discourse deals with the world objectively as it is for the speakers (cf. Viveiros De Castro 2011, 133). If someone from Benin says the voodoo priest can make and stop the rain, then for him, the voodoo priest can make and stop the rain. It is the world in which he lives. Likewise, if for a pre-Enlightenment Christian Mary at Lourdes healed her, then for her, Mary's intervention is the explanation for her healing, plain and simple.

If I present other interpretations – such as that language concerning the spirit world is a way to speak about what cannot be explained, controlled, or predicted – then this merely shows that my own religion is no longer truly religious. According to these anthropologists, my being a Christian in a secular context does not help me to understand the African perspective but, in fact, it confuses me. As secular anthropologists, they claim to be better suited to do justice to African religious practices. Spiritual statements appear to be about explanation, prediction, and control – the first fact I listed above – because they *are* about explanation, prediction, and control. The second fact listed above – if spiritual statements are about explanation, prediction, and control, then they are so obviously flawed from a scientific point of view that it is hard to take them seriously – merely shows a lack of imagination, according to these anthropologists. It may be hard to imagine for someone raised in the West, but for people in Africa, statements concerning the spirit world deal with the reality in which they live straightforwardly. If someone asks a voodoo priest to stop the rains on his wedding day, then he obviously believes that the voodoo priest has the power to stop the rain on this particular day.

In contrast, I wish to argue that this way of reasoning by these anthropologists shows a lack of imagination. I agree that the metaphorical or symbolical interpretations, dismissed by Horton and Gifford as well, are flawed and fail to do justice to what is happening in using spiritual discourse. The ontological anthropologists are correct in dismissing this interpretation; they are wrong, however, in assuming that the only other possible interpretation is to say that 'For them all of it is real' and they are wrong in thinking that 'For them all of it is real' is a fitting interpretation for practices in Africa like the rain ceremony in Benin mentioned above.

I am not sure what to make of this individual case in Benin, but it does not change my perspective. If the voodoo priest controls the weather, he could make shiploads of money on the Dutch coast. Beach club owners would be happy to pay him millions if he could ensure a summer with only sunshine along the North Sea coast. If the voodoo priest joined the UN climate control group, he might be a billionaire even faster. Does he and do the people around him not know this? Or is no one interested in money?

As far as I know, there are no billionaire voodoo priests along the North Sea coast or at the UN in New York. Two possible reasons I can think of are: people do not know that this skill could make them rich, or they do not want to be rich. Yet, because of my experience living in Africa, I find both of these assumptions hard to swallow. People live their lives just as rationally and with just as much interest in money as I did back in Europe. And if there were technical difficulties of some kind specific to magic that make upscaling difficult, one would expect people starting institutes to try to solve such difficulties. These institutes do not seem to exist either. Therefore, they must know that the rituals concerning rain operate on a different level. It might be real, but not in a straightforward sense – not for secular people from the West, not for me as a religious person from the West, but not even for those invoking voodoo priests in Benin themselves. People in Benin do know that the way the world works, such a miraculous skill could make them rich on a global level; and there are people in Benin who are interested in making money – their belief in the rainmaking or rain stopping skills must one way or another coexist with these two facts.

Similarly, I would not feel taken seriously if someone uses the ontological approach to interpret my own religious statements as a Christian pastor in the West. I would be glad that my interlocutor did not take my religion to be childishly ignorant or bad science. I would be glad as well if she does not interpret my statements as purely symbolic or metaphorical. If I pray for the environment or the healing of my relative, I am not merely making a comment about society or expressing my feelings – I pray to God. Yet, I would not be happy with the 'For him all of it is simply real'-stance either.

I would feel misunderstood when my prayers are taken metaphorically, but I would not want to be seen as believing that there is a man with a beard on a

cloud who is controlling everything down here either. Soviet atheist propaganda posters showed Yuri Gagarin pointing out that he did not find any God behind the skies, but I wonder whether any religious person was surprised by this 'discovery.' Religious people in the West or in Africa are well aware of the facts of the world – the ontological approach ignores this.

Philosopher of religion Brian Clack (2005, 114) tries to look for a third way by considering the story of the magical sword of the Cambodian 'King of Fire': if ever this sword is drawn from its scabbard, it would bring about the end of the world. Clack warns us not to dismiss this story as mere superstition. Something more is going on here than bad science or plain childish ignorance, he argues. The story touches us, Clack observes, in a way that ignorant stupidity would not. Clack (2005, 114) says:

> Looked upon in an overly rationalistic manner, one will obviously conclude that what is involved here is a blunder about causality, but rather than concerning ourselves with the errors involved in thinking that a sword could have this property, we should... reflect on the fascination that envelops us when we entertain the possibility that it *might*. We may then come to recognize the essentially poetic nature of such acts: a sword is drawn and the world ends.

Stories about the spirit world or such a magical sword fascinate even people for whom in a causal sense they would not even be considered as possibly true. If someone in the style of Yuri Gagarin were to draw the sword to prove its irrelevance, few would be surprised if the world kept on turning. Many of these same people, however, might be enveloped by the fascination that Clack mentions here. I do not disagree there, but I wonder whether the way Clack describes this fascination is the most accurate. He says it is fascinating in entertaining the possibility that it *might* – the possibility that the world might actually, physically end when this sword is drawn.

It is quite easy to imagine circumstances in which this story would make sense metaphorically. The drawing of the sword might count as a declaration of war, and if there has been peace for a long time, an actual war might end the world as the people now living know, for example. It is no longer the same world if conflicts are solved by brute force; a world ends if the King of Fire draws this sword.

Clack's observation that dismissing the story as a blunder about causality does not do justice to the story and to our own response to the story is correct. A metaphorical interpretation does not do much justice to it either. To me, the metaphorical description I have attempted above does not ring false, but it does feel flat. There could be much more to the story, for the people involved and also for us in our responses to it. Yet, saying that 'For them, all of it is real' or imagining that 'All of it is real' does not cover this fascination either, nor does it do justice to the practice. That the world ends when the sword is drawn is not just one extra fact about the world that these people are aware of while others, like us, are

not. If it were a simple fact, it would be flat again; the meaning of this story would be reduced to some curiosity, a strange fact that only a few people are aware of.

When I personally pray for something to happen, I am not 'entertaining the possibility' that there might be a man with a beard on a cloud who will bring about what I ask him to do. That is not what I am doing – I know there is no such man and Yuri Gagarin checking was not necessary to prove this point – nor would saying that one considers the possibility that it is factually true cover the fascination that Clack notices within himself concerning religious practices. Neither metaphorical nor ontological interpretations do justice to spiritual language. So, is a different approach possible?

A Different Approach

Clack presents the example of the magical sword in response to the work of his colleague D.Z. Phillips. Phillips uses a strict contrast between superstition and faith – he is the main representative of the Important Distinction view in Mik Burley's article in this volume. If people believe in mysterious causal connections that clearly do not exist, then they are superstitious even if they use the most pious religious language, he argues. Clack's counterexample is intended to show the limitations of such an approach. People believe there to be a causal connection between the drawing of the sword and the end of the world, he observes, and we fail to do justice to this practice by dismissing it as a blunder about causality and therefore superstition.

We can recognize here the first two facts that I mentioned above: (1) spiritual statements appear to be about explanation, prediction, and control: the end of the world could be explained by the sword having been drawn, the end of the world is predicted if the sword is ever drawn, and the end of the world can be controlled by drawing or not drawing the sword; but (2) all of this is so obviously flawed from a scientific point of view that it is hard to take them seriously, to believe all of this would be a big error and blunder about causality. Clack himself does not deny this second fact, but he argues that it is not useful as a conclusion. He looks for ways to do justice to the third fact as well: (3) these people who seem so strange in their spiritual statements appear quite ordinary in the rest of their lives; in this case, their practices do even fascinate us, Clack notes.

Clack's solution oscillates between an ontological approach: he wishes to imagine that all of it was true in the plain sense of the word, and a metaphorical or symbolic approach: he concludes by speaking of the 'essentially poetic nature of such acts.'

Phillips, on the other hand, in my reading, provides a new solution. He does not hide or, to use Horton's phrase, try to wriggle out of the second fact – that if the practice were taken causally, it would involve a blunder about causality – as Clack observes, but this is not his conclusion either. Phillips proposes a different

way of looking at spiritual discourse, concerning prayers for rain or healing; for example, he (1965, 121) writes:

> When deep religious believers pray *for* something, they are not so much asking God to bring this about, but in a way telling Him of the strength of their desires. They realize that things may not go as they wish, but they are asking to be able to go on living whatever happens.

Listening to the words people utter, you may be tempted to conclude that people think they have found a different, additional way to control the outcome of particular events, yet the lives of these same people show that they are very well aware that prayer does not work that way. People pray about things that they really want – they strongly desire their spouse to be healed or there to be no rain on their wedding day – and they are aware that there is a limit to what they can control. Therefore, they turn to God or the spirits with their desire beyond what they can control in the material world.

They feel the need to do something with this desire that has no practical use, so they take it to God, hoping that in this way this fervent desire will not destroy them and that they will be able to continue their lives whatever happens. Whether their spouse is healed or not, whether it rains on their wedding day or not, they need to go on and live with whatever may come their way. They know everything is possible – miracles do happen – and they know that their desired outcome may not be likely, but the desire is there and they feel the need to do something with it, so they take it to their God or ancestors to surrender this desire into their hands like the people praying or invoking voodoo priests themselves know that whatever will happen is no longer in their own hands.

People using spiritual language and practices themselves know that their claims about the spirit world are different from their beliefs about tables and chairs. They know that health and the weather cannot be controlled through their practices in a way that could be used globally. They plead with a higher power in a concrete situation, but if you suggest to them to monetize this on a global scale, they would themselves tell you that this makes no sense. People will tell you that they do things to appease an angry spirit in order to make or stop the rain, and in a personal, spiritual way, this is fine, but in a table-and-chair or scientific way, it is plain nonsense.

During our time in Zambia, the government introduced national days of prayer and fasting to boost the economy. People surely believe this helps, nonetheless, they have also voted out the ruling party because the economy is still sloping. They are well aware that just praying harder is not going to change the economy. I would say the 'helping' that is expected from prayers is finding ways to deal with the unpredictability and lack of control we have over the economy.

If you interview people about their prayers or rain rituals, they will probably tell you that they think prayers or rain rituals help or help in addition to other meth-

ods. But their lives show that these same people know that there are no voodoo priests in the climate control committee and no prayer warriors on the payroll of the Davos World Economic Forum, and that they know that these people would have been there if the rituals had worked in a straightforward sense. Therefore, we should not take what people say about their rituals literally. Their lives show that what they mean is that the rituals and prayers are really important to them, that they really hope it won't rain on their wedding day, and that the economy improves.

Their lives show that for them, all of it is not real in a straightforward table-and-chair sense, but it does matter very much to them. It is *not* real for them in the table-and-chair way. Yet it is important. If we accept that what a belief comes to is shown in the difference that this belief makes in someone's life, what belief in God comes to, or, in Africa, belief in the spirit world is finding a way to cope with the contingencies in life, to admit that these are out of our own hands however much we may have wished it to be otherwise.

Conclusion

Spiritual statements appear to be about explanation, prediction, and control, but, in as far as they are, they are so obviously flawed from a scientific point of view that it is hard to take them seriously. Spiritual language is a way to cope with what cannot be explained, predicted, or controlled. And these people who seem so strange in their spiritual statements appear quite ordinary in the rest of their lives because in their lives they show that they are well aware of the different nature of their spiritual statements and acts.

Religious practices are a way to deal with what cannot be controlled; even the fluidity of the language used concerning spiritual matters itself is evidence that supports this conclusion. If we pay attention to what a belief comes to, as is shown in the difference that this belief makes in someone's life, we see that the language concerning the spirit world is not metaphorical, nor is it true for them in a table-and-chair manner, but grammatically it provides ways to speak of what cannot be explained, predicted, or controlled in our lives.

Bibliography

Clack, Brian. 2005. "Wittgenstein and Religion." *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1: 111–120.

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1965. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Gifford, Paul. 2019. *The Plight of Western Religion; The Eclipse of the Other-Worldly*. London: Hurst.

Horton, Robin. 1993. *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West; Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keane, Webb. 2004. "Language and Religion." In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti, 431–448. Oxford: Blackwell.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019. *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa; Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism*. Cape Town: AOSIS.

Moore, Gareth. 1995. "Tradition, Authority and the Hiddenness of God." In *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, edited by Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, 134–160. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Phillips, D.Z. 1965. *The Concept of Prayer*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Viveiros De Castro, Eduardo. 2011. "Zeno and the Art of Anthropology." *Common Knowledge* 17, no. 1: 35–45.

Chapter 4

"Witchcraft is Real!"

Bernhard Udelhoven

In Zambia many people speak of witchcraft when bad things happen – not metaphorically, but in a way that suggests concrete, physical encounters. Witchcraft is a fuzzy notion that people process through different images and frameworks (traditional, Christian and Pentecostal, folkloristic, cinematic, etc.). Even when it is difficult to point out exactly what witchcraft means, believers make the point that there is something out there called witchcraft, much like a parallel world, and that its presence demands a public response. By being real, they don't mean to say that it is just real in the thoughts of the believer (as a phenomenological or psychological truth) or in its social consequences (as social fact), even if many anthropologists have analysed witchcraft in such terms.[1] We also benefited from studies that looked at witchcraft's intimate connection with Africa's political and economic life, or how it shares in the logic of modernity (for example, Geschiere 1997). Yet it is wrong to conclude that witchcraft stands metaphorically for evasive and ambivalent realities, be they modern or traditional. Neither is witchcraft a placeholder for the unknown. When Zambian believers say that "Witchcraft is real!", they know witchcraft as a mysterious and unsettling force that is intrinsically related to the person, soul or "shadow" of the witch (there is no witchcraft without a witch, male or female) and that finds an entry point into the life of a victim, manipulating its body and fortunes. In her summary about recent scholarship on African witchcraft, Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020) draws out that a number of anthropologists remained unsatisfied with studies that explained or interpreted the persistence of witchcraft beliefs in view of something else (psychology, social life, power, modernity, etc.) In contrast to human rights approaches that look at witchcraft beliefs as superstitions, these studies turned towards ontology in attempts to take people's own beliefs in witchcraft seriously. Our own sense of reality should not remain unchallenged by their worlds. Inspired by the "ontological turn", such approaches suggest that witchcraft should not be explained away or interpreted but taken at face value for what people take it for if we want to understand the lives of the people whom we study.

---

[1] An example of the former would be Monica Wilson's assertion of witchcraft being the standardised nightmare of the group (Wilson 1951), or Claude Lévi-Strauss' inquiries into the concept of witchcraft being part of the structures of the human mind (Lévy-Strauss 1961). An example of the latter would be Max Marwick's study of local court cases in regards to witchcraft accusations (Marwick 1965).

At the same time, believers in witchcraft also know that the realness of witchcraft is very different from that of other invisible forces, say electricity or magnetism, that are predictable and that follow universal laws. Witchcraft can be doubted and is doubted, also by the believer. This paper is about what the believer means and implies by its realness, but also about what is not implied.

In the church, we find three dominant answers about the realness of witchcraft; let me call them reductionist, minimalist, and cosmological respectively. The reductionist approaches say that witchcraft does not exist out there, or that it is not what people think it is. In other words: believers in witchcraft are mistaken or confused. Witchcraft concerns are responded to with educational programmes. Such efforts have helped people to debunk false empirical causalities, to look for alternative models of explanation, and increase medical and other types of knowledge and information. But when witchcraft turns out to be non-explicable, witchcraft beliefs are not abandoned in response to explanations. Witchcraft shares this characteristic with other religious notions. For example, the arguments of Richard Dawkins (2008) in his bestseller to prove that belief in God (the "God-hypothesis") is a delusion held by Christians in the face of strong evidence to the contrary were very compelling for non-believers, but Christians still hold on to their beliefs (and I am one of them) even after reading his book. Dawkins' efforts are laudable where they show Christians that they are holding on to outdated theories and false empirical beliefs. But where he thinks that God is believed in as a hypothesis, he misses a point. The same is true for witchcraft. The intellectual attempts of the past hundred years to prove to people in Zambia that witchcraft does not exist have not overcome the beliefs – not even within the academic elite. Philosopher of religion Hermen Kroesbergen (2019) argued that there is a personal dimension involved in African notions of witchcraft that is not captured by an intellectual thirst for explanations: a response to the world that makes it different from a hypothesis or that goes beyond what a hypothesis is about. In the church, reductionist approaches also carry the contradiction that Christian non-empirical spiritual beliefs are exempted from reductionism, while people's beliefs in witchcraft are not.

Minimalist approaches acknowledge that witchcraft exists out there but hold that it is something very rare; it should not affect our common life. The few cases that may exist require specialist attention, for example, of a qualified team of exorcists. They are usually not meant for public consumption but are isolated and dealt with in private. By acknowledging the reality of witchcraft, the church also confirms its own spiritual powers that can deal with it. But witchcraft is not allowed any scope to disturb public life or our established ways of gaining knowledge. The minimalist position makes out of witchcraft an objective fact, even if it is a very rare fact, and assumes that a qualified team can distinguish real attacks from imagined attacks by means of exclusions of other possibilities (medical, psychological, and any natural causes). Only real witchcraft merits a specialised intervention. For

all other cases, the minimalist position coincides with the reductionist one. But where in Africa do we find the specialists who are able to exclude all known (and even the yet unknown) natural causes? I have described elsewhere (Udelhoven 2021, 32–36) the problems that this position faces in view of authority (Which final instance should determine what is "genuine witchcraft" and what is not?) and of the public role that witchcraft demands in Africa.

Cosmological positions regard witchcraft as an ontological reality (witchcraft is real out there) that pervades the whole cosmos; it is part of, and a possibility in, everyday life. Many theological approaches link witchcraft to the devil. Witchcraft in this view may sometimes stand in opposition to the natural world, but it does not need to, since natural and supernatural worlds form one single whole. Pastors who operate from a cosmological position acknowledge these realities in their daily ministries and may answer people's concerns with prayers and prophecies to discern causes and solutions for witchcraft-related afflictions. Such cosmological approaches were accepted enthusiastically by many Christians. However, when they come in the form of hard, objectified, ontological affirmations of witchcraft, they can play into its dehumanising processes, including witch hunts. Many critical voices suggest that they are contributing to the proliferation of witchcraft discourses (Gifford 2015), an increase in spiritual insecurity, and, by emphasising witchcraft's potency, even of actual witchcraft practices. This gives the ontological turn a dangerous potential when "taking beliefs at face value" leaves the academic confines and justifies interventions. The person of the witch, no longer fully human, is "rightly" treated as a wild animal that needs to be destroyed or encaged. Roxburgh (2016) showed that people who killed witches in Ghana felt morally in the right. Buying into a fixed or hard ontology of witchcraft can justify property grabbing, expulsion, torture, and killings of alleged witches on the ground that innocent people have suffered spiritual violence at their hands (the deaths of children, accidents, and misfortunes), and that people need to prevent such spiritual forms of violence for the future. Even if such penal measures have no room in Zambian law, and even if local African institutions often manage to mitigate violence (Ashforth 2015; Roxburgh 2016), we should not be blind to the violent dynamics that many witchcraft narratives take. These are not inventions or exaggerations of Western human rights discourses but are inherent in the grammar of witchcraft that makes alleged witches look much less human. Taking witchcraft seriously means taking these dynamics seriously too.

If spiritual and physical forms of violence are seen to be on the same ontological level (in the worldview of the believer, witchcraft is supposed to be as real as physical violence), then we are quickly locked into a stalemate situation in our search for a creative solution towards the problem of witchcraft. But what if the realness of witchcraft in people's beliefs, unlike that of physical violence, is better described as being elastic, mutable, and relational? We would win a cre-

ative dimension in our search for approaches that take people's witchcraft beliefs seriously while avoiding playing into the dehumanising tendencies of the beliefs.

In this paper I explore this elastic, mutable, relational, and oscillating dimension that is implied when believers in witchcraft state that "witchcraft is real!" Where ontological approaches of anthropologists, or minimalist and cosmological approaches of the church, eclipse this dimension, they become trapped in conceptual confusions. In the first part of this essay, I look at the connection of ontology with morality and build on Kroesbergen's theoretical insights that draw out the situational character of the ontology of witchcraft that we encounter in Zambia. By locating witchcraft in the irrational, weird, and the unsettling, I show that witchcraft is usually not part of the primary reference system through which people analyse the causalities of daily life. Hence, coming to grips with witchcraft beliefs goes beyond an investigation about the realities that supposedly make up people's worlds or their views about the possibilities of human agency. In the second part, I present some concrete contexts from my parish ministry in which witchcraft became a certainty for specific families, and other contexts in which such a certainty was allowed to fade away. I am highlighting the oscillating character of witchcraft that becomes overpoweringly relevant on one day but moves back into oblivion on another day. Instead of studying witchcraft in the context of a clash of irreconcilable ontologies, for example, between the Western hegemonic modernity project that makes witchcraft a non-entity and indigenous African responses that continue to navigate through the perplexities of supernatural realities (see, for example, Roxburgh 2016), Kroesbergen's questions make room for an approach that allows witchcraft beliefs to change or to be softened through constructive engagements, when we try to grasp also that which is expressed by witchcraft besides the question of its ontology, namely, in the words of Kroesbergen, how its affirmation constitutes a specific response to the world. To the same world in which also the non-believer lives.

Ontology and Morality

Not long ago, I was told the sad story of a toddler, still unable to walk by himself, who went missing on the farm of one of our parishioners without leaving any traces. The parents of the boy, and also others, reported that they mysteriously saw him several times afterwards, weeks apart, but when they tried to approach him, the toddler disappeared. Sometimes they heard him crying – but there was nobody. A diviner (*ng'anga*) confirmed that "the toddler has been sold to Dubai, where he works for business people". For the family, this particular interpretation seemed to be a possibility, even though they did not know where Dubai is or what working for business people means for a toddler. "Witchcraft is real!" said a woman when we talked about the events, and people took up her comment with an affirmative murmur.

The woman ascertained witchcraft as a fact, but this fact did not make redundant the need to send out search parties for the missing toddler, in which the whole community participated, unfortunately to no avail. If I say, "The road to Lundazi is real!" or "Electricity is real!" nobody in Zambia will answer me with an affirmative murmur; instead, people will be wondering what is wrong with me. "Witchcraft is real!" makes a different sense, because it can be doubted and is constantly being doubted, also by believers (Bubandt 2015), and the woman may have seen in me a representative of this doubt. When it is affirmed against doubt, it switches the modus for looking at reality to a different level that transcends common sense and ordinary logic.

The explanation of an event through witchcraft is never one that sheds any light on the practice of witchcraft so that also non-witches could use it. Hence, Kroesbergen (2019, 47–50) insists that it is hardly an explanation in any ordinary sense of the word. Those who speak about witchcraft, the non-witches, do not investigate how to exploit any technological aspect of witchcraft. They rather point to the limits of everyday common-sense logic for coming to terms with such terrible events, and they demarcate its moral component that expresses a sense of urgency.

In this sense, let me compare "Witchcraft is real!" with the exclamation that "Climate change is real!" after a thunderstorm or heavy flood hits a village – be it in Zambia or in my native Germany. Unlike witchcraft, the motion of anthropogenic global warming is supported by a mainstream consensus of the scientific community. But the arguments are complex. Emissions of greenhouse gases originating from human activities are small compared with natural sources, and the earth witnessed major warming periods as well as thunderstorms and floods also before the advent of large-scale burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. Climate predictions not only rest on innumerable measurements (empirical facts) but also on a number of models and extrapolations. By saying that "Climate change is real!" the speaker does not communicate that he/she masters the equations about balances of carbon dioxide absorption and emissions. Rather, the statement has become part of an awareness of a new way of looking at the world that distinguishes our generation from the past. Implicit is a call for a common, binding commitment towards change and care for the planet and for submitting to a regime of policies that can address the issue.

Like climate change, the statement "witchcraft is real" conveys something that could be denied but should not be denied. Such acclamations seek to push public awareness to recognise a serious moral crisis that needs to be addressed. Both climate change and witchcraft locate the crisis in human actions through causalities that demand the help of specialists to be determined. However, unlike the actions responsible for climate change, those of the witches and those able to identify witchcraft belong to a logic that is grounded in a parallel world that can

never be fully penetrated by mundane modes of reasoning. Only the spirit world is able to enkindle such extraordinary faculties.

The moral dimension that connects to the reality of witchcraft and that is never fully independent of the spirit world has many facets. Maybe the sentence "Witchcraft is real!" linked the heartbreaking event of the missing toddler to other local witchcraft narratives and thus added more fuel to the desired ostracization of disliked personalities in the community who bypass its moral code. Maybe it subsumed the local misfortune into a cosmic battle since some Christians also commented that we are in the end times of the world, giving weight to specific Christian discourses that can deal with this new situation. Maybe it sought a relationship to other events of missing children in our area, one of whom was found dead with tongue and genitals cut out, leaving little room for doubts that the body parts were used or sold in relation to witchcraft practices. Whatever the case, the statement "witchcraft is real", unlike the statement that "the Lundazi road is real", claims not only its existence but points to a dangerous moral crisis that cannot be solved by mundane thinking alone.

Where is this crisis of witchcraft located? In the case of the missing toddler, the witch has not yet a face. We can call it anonymous witchcraft or nameless witchcraft (in contrast to named witchcraft) in the sense that witchcraft is affirmed without a clear hint about the identity of the witch. It is, however, in the nature of witchcraft that, once affirmed, people will also be looking for a culprit. Witchcraft implies that there is a witch and a victim, and that there exists a relationship between the two. Usually, people locate witchcraft in closely knit relationships. As Peter Geschiere (2013, xvi) said, "The horror of the djambe [witchcraft, as known in parts of Cameroon] seemed to be condensed in the realization that the people with whom one has to live and work – whom one has to trust – can become particularly dangerous." Witchcraft is tied to relationships and is understood in its ontological existence as a relational force. I will draw out in the second part of this essay some of the implications of this statement. First, however, I want to engage with Hermen Kroesbergen's arguments about the ontology and instrumentality of witchcraft.

Witchcraft Narratives: Intellectual Hypotheses or Responses to the World?

Kroesbergen (2019) asks what people do with a specific witchcraft belief and also what they do not do with it. Let me look at two of his examples. In the Zambian college in which he taught, he heard about a pastor, brilliant and engaging in the past, who now came across as being absent and weak in his sermons. People in the congregation rumoured that he was sending his spiritual double to the pulpit, while he himself was sleeping in his bed. One day some congregants wanted to know the truth about this. They left the service during one of his uninspiring sermons, went to the pastor's house, and found indeed the real pastor sleeping in his

bed. The reference to an empirical test (going to the pastor's house) functioned in the narrative as concrete proof that witchcraft was not a rumour – it was real. Nevertheless, Kroesbergen remarked that this realness did not lead to discussions among the students and lecturers about how to make sure that exams were written by physical persons and not by spiritual doubles. Even the staunchest believers would consider it weird if a college started offering preaching classes for spiritual doubles to make their sermons more inspiring. It made sense to assert the empirical realness of spiritual doubles in some contexts but not in others. The second example: Colleagues of Kroesbergen talked about a thief who stole a bag of charcoal on the road in an area that is known for its anti-theft magic; upon reaching home, the thief found that the charcoal in the stolen bag had turned into a human corpse. Kroesbergen's students and some colleagues were adamant in affirming that such things do happen in Zambia. But Kroesbergen pointed out that this realness did not affect other areas of their common lives. Nobody expected that an item placed into a drawer might change overnight into something else.

Kroesbergen takes issue with Robin Horton's renowned thesis that in the absence of modern science, traditional religious notions in Africa were basically about explanation, prediction and control (Horton 1993) – hypotheses that explain the puzzles of our common-sense experiences and that allow people to engage instrumentally with reality. By staying within the tradition that sees religion as answering to intellectual quests, Horton considered religious notions as attempts of theoretical thinking that aim at making reality manageable.

Kroesbergen does not advocate a return to symbolic and sociological interpretations of religious actions (where religious notions stand metaphorically for social realities or for something else) or to relativist conclusions (different cultural ideas and ways of establishing the truth and of verifying truth claims are incommensurable with each other) that Horton tried to overcome by his stress on the continuity between religious and scientific thought. But he questions a view about the causal instrumentality of religious beliefs that ignores internal and conceptual connections between a religious action and the intended outcome. He gives the example of rainmaking as a religious ritual (Kroesbergen 2019, 289–292). People expect that a certain ritual will cause the rain to come. But what does "to cause" mean here? It is not a cause whereby one can describe and experiment with the specific steps that lead to the coming of the rain. When it fails, people will not examine the causal steps of the practice but rather question the moral integrity of the person who performed the ritual. They will not play around with it. Such a ritual is performed in the way it ought to be performed – it is woven in an identity discourse. "It is part of who they are and what they value" (293). That is how one should ask for the rain if one lives here. The missing rain, the ritual, and the coming of the rain are not three independent realities but are recognised to have internal and conceptual connections; they belong together, in the same way as, for

example, the shore lies next to the ocean – not in an accidental but in a conceptual manner.

Looking at the narratives of a spiritual double or charcoal changing into a corpse, people's aim in telling such stories was not to study the principles of metamorphosis and use them for more productive activities, as one would expect from explanation, prediction, and control. "These stories are not presented as hypotheses about the world that invite further investigations; instead, they convey the message 'do not steal' or 'this pastor has a problem'" (Kroesbergen 2019, 30). They underline a moral imperative and assessment in reference to the spirit world. For Kroesbergen, religious notions, also in Africa, reach the border and go beyond what can be explained, predicted and controlled.

Kroesbergen's arguments are a contribution to the age-old debate about instrumental and expressive or normative forms of rationality in religious beliefs,[2] but ask questions, especially about ontology. While reading his book, I asked myself: if people want to make a moral imperative, then witchcraft surely needs for them also an ontological reality out there; without it, the moral imperative will have no base and will not lead to anything. For example, what effect would a parent hope for when saying that "God watches you when you steal!" if neither the parent nor the child believes in the reality of God out there? Also, the concept of witchcraft is embedded in an ontological and instrumental reasoning process.

Kroesbergen, I guess, would not disagree. He does not deny that people make ontological statements about the spirit world and see it acting in instrumental ways. But he would add, when one engages people in questions and reflections, that they see the ontological reality of witchcraft or of the spirit world to be of a special, non-universal kind:

> The spirit world may be very real and someone from Africa may bump into it around every corner, yet he or she is aware that his or her European friend does not bump into it around every corner. (2019, 3)

Kroesbergen denies that we are true to people's beliefs when we understand them from the viewpoint of an "object model" (witchcraft is something out there for the believer that can be described independently of faith and subjective belief) or a hypothesis. Their ontological statements about witchcraft are tied to a personal dimension; believers are aware that what is absolutely compelling to themselves is not necessarily so to others, and that there are elements involved in their reasoning processes that go beyond what can be universalised. Kroesbergen sees in different spiritual beliefs different responses to the world. We could say that the believer is aware that the dimension of faith puts him/her into a privileged posi-

---

[2] I am referring here to the discussions between John Beattie, Peter Winch, I. C. Jarvie, Joseph Agassi, John Peel, David Schneider, Dan Sperber, John Skorupsi, Melford Spiro, Charles Taylor, and many others, in reference to the works of Edward Burnett Tyler, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Evans-Pritchard, to which also Horton's thesis is a contribution (see Penner 1986).

tion of looking at the world that is not available to others who stand outside of this faith-perspective. And since a personal response has something to do with a commitment, we could also say that this becomes part of an identity discourse: implicitly, it establishes a boundary between believers and non-believers, and thereby also a binding moral discourse for those inside the horizon of belief.

In our discussion about beliefs that concern the instrumentality of witchcraft, we need to make a distinction between empirical practices, on the one hand, that are performed by witches or attributed to them, and that are meant to activate witchcraft, for example, the use of specific charms, rituals on graveyards, or what is known in Zambia as ritual crimes (like incest, or murder for human body parts – concrete crimes that are committed with the intention of channelling the forces of witchcraft towards specific aims), and on the other hand, the actual forces of witchcraft that are intrinsically unobservable and unknowable, even for the practising witch. The former can be described through an object model, but not the latter. For offences that are known in Zambia as ritual crime, people simply go to the police (independent of church membership or a specific faith), but for witchcraft proper, they consult a diviner or go to a specific church (depending on personal faith), and they are aware that others may not believe in the same prophet or diviner that they do.

Witchcraft is known to the believer as a relational force that becomes connected to the life (or soul or "shadow") of the witch, but notions such as "the soul" or "the shadow" are as evasive as witchcraft itself. The connection to the soul makes witchcraft fundamentally different from other invisible realities that exist independently out there, say magnetism or electricity. To observe witchcraft, one needs to have established an affinity with the one who employs it and with the victim. Witches become themselves transformed (dehumanised, "othered") by their practices to such an extent that the instrumentality of witchcraft remains by necessity part of the "witchcraft paradox" or "witchcraft dilemma", by which I mean that the secrets of witchcraft are known and can only be known to the witches alone. By the time we observe witchcraft at work, we are either its victims (witchcraft has established a connection to us) or we are ourselves, witches. In Zambia, people speak meaningfully about witchcraft and understand each other about witchcraft only in contexts that honour this witchcraft paradox as part of its grammar. Witches are "other".

As a Catholic priest, I receive prayer requests from people asking me to bless their homes or to give holy water or incense to protect them from witchcraft attacks. Clearly, people want to instrumentally influence the reality of witchcraft through such means. Still, Kroesbergen would rightly say: Those who come to me for holy water are not surprised that others go to different churches and that the prophet of one person is the charlatan of another. In other words, he maintains that such elements of wanting to control witchcraft are not seen to be independent of personal belief and even faith (in prayer, in holy water, in a prophet, in God),

which people recognise as subjective and which is tied to a personal response,[3] and hence also to an act of the will. Therefore, certain empirical questions (What is the success rate of holy water?) make no sense to the believer. The instrumental success of a religious practice to ward off witchcraft attacks lies in the eyes of the beholder. Believers use "religious instrumentality" only within the horizon of an already existing relationship of faith – we cannot step out of this horizon in our investigations of instrumentality; it cannot be objectified.[4]

Witchcraft and the Weird

Everywhere, people need to juggle various overlapping models when they have to deal with evasive realities (Overing 1990), models or frames that do not always fit together into one single and coherent picture. Sometimes witchcraft can become more persuasive when other causalities can be eliminated, but at other times it can also be the reason behind a known cause. Even when "witchcraft is real," the commitment to witchcraft beliefs is not necessarily absolute. It can be one voice among others that people juggle.

In the case of the missing toddler, witchcraft was ascertained when the extended search parties in the surrounding forest, which contains hyenas, lions and leopards, brought no traces. Predating animals are recognised by the trails they leave behind. Nobody said that God took the child. That is not what God would do. We had another case where a youth got lost in the forest and was later found in a confused state. This was attributed to spirits, not witchcraft. Spirits do not abduct a child permanently. The child will survive the ordeal and may even come back with extraordinary powers or faculties because that is how spirits do things. But unlike spirits, witches know no mercy – humans can become utterly evil, more than predatory animals or spirits. Witchcraft is tied specifically to the evilness of humans.

This insight about the regularity of the activities of spiritual agents reminds us of Horton's thesis that religious notions, like those of science, bring order to reality. "Like atoms, molecules, and waves, then, the gods [of traditional beliefs] serve to introduce unity into diversity, simplicity into complexity, order into disorder, regularity into anomaly." (Horton 1967, 52). The traditional healer knows the differences and regularities between the manifestations of God, spirits, ghosts, and of witchcraft and how to apply these to different forms of disease or misfortune. Horton, however, did not give an answer to the question of how any of these

---

[3]   Kroesbergen explains this point when looking at the difference between praying for finding a parking space and using a parking app (2020, 97–104).

[4]   Kroesbergen (2014; 2018) goes further still by insisting that we can draw a conceptual difference between the intention of the instrumentality of a belief and its expression as a personal response to the world and calls the former superstitious if it is seen in isolation from the aspect of a fundamental relationship to the spirit world (or God) that does not depend on the success rate.

notions gains its significance for the believers. As Hans Penner (1986, 226 – in the footsteps of John Beattie), put it in his critique of Horton,

> The problem is not, do the gods "serve to introduce unity into diversity ..." and so on, but, rather, is there any significance at all to "the gods." An expert on religion may indeed presuppose "a basic modicum" of regularity in the behavior of the gods, but this assumes that "the gods" is a significant, intelligible, theoretical term!

Kroesbergen asks when and where (in which life-contexts) do the gods, or witchcraft, become significant and intelligible terms, and he appeals to Wittgenstein's way of grounding language in specific life-contexts that give meaning to the words. Wittgenstein compared language with games; it is woven into actions, and the meaning of the words depends on the particular rule or game being played. As we learn how to play football on the pitch without first reading the rule book, so people in Zambia learn how to speak sensibly about witchcraft, and to be understood, without first having to go through sets of definitions of a complex, fuzzy, changing, and ambivalent concept. "There's certainly such a thing as learning the game without explicit rules" (Wittgenstein 2005, §62). Rule books say very little about the experience of playing football, and definitions of witchcraft about how people learn to manoeuvre around this force. The realness of witchcraft is an issue in specific life contexts; people want to do something when they refer to witchcraft, and they also learn about witchcraft in these contexts. These constitute the pitch, so to say, where we learn about its rules or its "grammar".

The meaning of witchcraft is therefore tied to the question of what people do with the belief and how they manoeuvre specific life-situations in relation to a notion that is grounded in a recognition of the potential of human evilness. We have already seen that the idea of witchcraft comes to the forefront in specific situations (for example, during the need for healing or in a crisis) but can also shift back into the background when the object model is actually sufficient for coping with day-to-day life. At first, this reminds us of Horton's insight that the need for hypothetical and theoretical propositions – be they scientific or religious – is felt especially in situations where common sense fails to provide answers (Horton 1967). For Horton, the common-sense observation (in later publications, he speaks about "primary theory") becomes then a particular instance of the wider theory or hypothesis that is applied to it. Kroesbergen, in contrast, says that witchcraft is never an explanation in any ordinary sense of the word. There is no continuity between the theory of witchcraft and ordinary common-sense explanations. I propose that the shocking intrusion of witchcraft or of the spirit world into people's lives becomes an event that suspends *temporarily* the whole arsenal of common-sense logic, empirical certainties, and even that of wider theories. Yes, witchcraft does "explain" a puzzling event through a wider theoretical concept, but not in Horton's sense that implies unity between theory, the puzzling event and common sense; instead, it shifts the whole argument and level of logic to another level, in

which witchcraft now is real and in which ordinary explanations are recognised as having come to a halt. Reference to witchcraft becomes a switch that turns on our attention to a parallel world.

Spiritual Worlds and Oscillating Ontologies

Such a view, together with Kroesbergen's arguments, rests on a distinction between the rules that govern people's assessments of material and spiritual realities or, if one prefers, natural and supernatural ones: Only the former can be universalised and are part of our common world; the latter depend on a personal connection, and this dependency is recognised in the belief. Many scholars insist, of course, that natural and supernatural, material and spiritual dimensions are very fluid in "African thought" (if there is such a thing): that the natural and supernatural worlds form one single interwoven cosmos where the material aspects cannot be fully separated from the spiritual aspects (Olupọna 2014). But this does not speak against our argument. Even where the material and the spiritual are seen as two sides of the same coin (one depends on the other), people know the difference between the two sides. Of crucial importance is in my opinion the element of surprise, the non-ordinary, that signals the intervention of the spiritual worlds. When Kroesbergen discussed his examples with some of his European colleagues in the field of anthropology, they confessed that, after spending a long time in Africa and hearing so many stories about witchcraft, they did not find it weird any longer that charcoal can turn into a human corpse, or that a pastor can send out his double. For them, this had become a normal scenario. But in contrast to the acculturated anthropologists, believers in witchcraft have not lost this sense of strangeness; they continue to consider such events to be weird. This weirdness is the very reason why people talk about witchcraft and why such stories are able to acquire a transformative power. It is part and parcel of witchcraft's grammar. Without the element of surprise, of being truly out of the ordinary, such stories cease to be what they are; the language about witchcraft would turn into a flat and meaningless venture that people in Zambia, I believe, would not waste their time with.

This means that we cannot take witchcraft (or demons or the spirit world) simply as facts of life in Zambia for Zambians in a presumed Zambian or African ontology or worldview. It is a fallacy to believe that witchcraft stories, and the same applies to confessions and testimonies of witches and Satanists, can be easily understood if we just know the context of Zambian cultures and beliefs about physical and spiritual entities that make up their world. As Kroesbergen showed with his stories, witchcraft in Zambia is usually not part of the reference system through which people explain their day-to-day world. ("People don't expect items in their drawers overnight to change into something else.") We should rather say that appeals to witchcraft often seek to suspend the primary reference systems

temporarily, for a specific *extraordinary* purpose. In response to a threatening but unknowable situation, people switch to an alternative way of making sense in reference to authority figures who may have "teeth" for dealing with the space in which this non-ordinary, mysterious force develops its presence. For witchcraft, this space is located in fractured or broken personal relationships that threaten to break up families and neighbourhoods.

I have described elsewhere (Udelhoven 2020) a situation in our parish in which a local community called in a famous diviner to point out their witches in a public event that all people were forced to attend. The diviner had the temporal function of pointing out the witches to the community, by means of operating from a non-ordinary sense of logic that was "switched on" for this specific purpose when the community submitted to the diviner's procedures. The specific mode of operation was signified by a large red flag that was erected before each house and that signalled "danger". For as long as the flag was up, the household was bound by specific rules that enabled the diviner to sniff out evil medicines and potions of witchcraft. After the brief event, logic switched back to the usual mode. The diviner needed to work in conjunction with the headmen and family heads who had the power to reorder family relationships and to evict or to fine the culprits; without the presence of these authority figures, the operation had no teeth. I argued that this particular event did not seek to challenge the educational, political or religious establishment; instead, people created a temporal space in order to deal with the problem of witchcraft, and then go back to their old churches, old schools, and old political alliances. It is an example that an appeal to witchcraft does not necessarily seek to become a part of ordinary logic, or to replace it, or to challenge a scientific or an empirical outlook, or common sense, for day-to-day living; often it does not even seek to challenge the primary religious outlook. It can, however, in other cases pose such fundamental challenges (I gave examples in the same article), and an acceptance of any hard ontology of the world of witchcraft would imply this, but my point is that it does not need to. Witchcraft's ontology is elastic: it can be hard, but it can also be soft. I argued that our own efforts of dealing with the situation bore some fruits, meaning that the ontology of witchcraft in this case was not just a pre-given, unnegotiable and unchanging fact for believers; it could actually be discussed and such discussions provoked small changes in the understanding of witchcraft.

The Epistemology of Witchcraft

If witchcraft beliefs come with inherent doubts, they also need inherent certainties to have persuasive power. Let me turn now, in the second part of this essay, to some examples from our parish life that qualify this sense of certainty. In many workshops on witchcraft, I had the opportunity to ask people about their certainties, and here is the answer of an elderly headman:

> I know that witchcraft is real because of three reasons. (1) There is a word for witchcraft, and if there was no witchcraft, we would not have a word. (2) Since we use medicines to cure, medicines can also kill. (3) I have listened to witches who confessed all what they were doing. Why would they confess to such terrible things if they were not true?

His first reason shows that the man did not problematise the relationship between language and reality. For him, we learn to speak about witchcraft, because there is already something out there called witchcraft. We are in the object model. Wittgenstein may have asked him some questions, much like those with which he challenged in his *Philosophical Investigations* Saint Augustine's view on language: Since we cannot see witchcraft, how do you point at it or learn about it? How do you teach somebody who does not know what witchcraft is? People may answer by referring to particular stories or events, but already Evans-Pritchard noted that people feel out of their depth when a non-believer confronts them with its contradictions (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], 31). Even when people use the object model to describe it, witchcraft evades it when one tries to nail it down.

In spite of using the object model, the old man was well acquainted with the ambivalence that surrounds the certainty of witchcraft, since he himself had been accused in the previous year by an incoming diviner of "keeping bad medicines in his house", a charge that implies witchcraft and that he and his family denied. His son (the chairman of our church) had paid a fine to the diviner "to stop the noise". The ambivalence and non-conclusiveness of witchcraft when applied to his own situation did not make him doubt the concept as a whole. Any individual occurrence can be doubted (and is doubted), but not the concept as a whole – which is also an acknowledgement about the limitations of the ordinary concepts and logic to explain all that is in the world. On the one hand, witchcraft is dealt with in conversation as a pre-given, objective fact. On the other hand, people recognise that it slips away into contestable and subjective opinions when one tries to nail it down to concrete applications. Where we miss this second aspect in our ontological investigations of what is meant by witchcraft's realness, we will become entangled in contradictions, much like Wittgenstein's fly bumping again and again into the fly glass.

The second reason given by the headman links witchcraft to the realm of medicines (*mankhwala*) and thereby to concrete practices that people use and are acquainted with. In Zambia, effects of medicines are sought not only on the chemical and biological level of interaction with the human body. Medicines are also used to mediate powers and characteristics between humans, plants, animals and significant landmarks, and to manipulate other people in body, mind, and willpower (husbands, co-wives, lovers, judges, employers, customers, and so on). Medicines can also mitigate forces of ritual (sexual) pollution. Many people value the world of traditional medicines from Zambia's flora and fauna, but when used to manipulate others, they can easily slide into the world of witchcraft.

Since medicines are also used to counteract and to protect from witchcraft attacks, medicines and witchcraft are sometimes seen to be working on the same level. Both build on an interconnected and relational view of the human self that accept interpersonal mediating dynamics. "Healing and killing" is understood in a very wide sense that also includes relationships and success.

In the rural area of our parish, specific families guard their own traditions of medicines, and family members in town may decide to come back to their home village, travelling 1,000 km, for certain medicines even if there are countless healers nearby in town. Medicines need to be collected in specific ways, at specific times and places; they are embedded in the realm of relationships of trust. The correct use of medicine can link up with other family systems of scrutiny, for example, about sexual taboos and ideas of ritual pollution that are mitigated through medicines. Such scrutiny incorporates people into a given family authority structure (Udelhoven 2022), which brings back the point that medicine, like witchcraft, is, on the one hand, regarded as being universal and, on the other hand, as being dependent on the incorporation in a given network of belonging. Such aspects make "healing" and "killing", "medicines" and "witchcraft" transcend the object model.

The third reason that the headman gave for his certainty about witchcraft speaks about puzzling testimonies or confessions of witches. Several scholars have given accounts to help us to better understand such testimonies (Lévi-Strauss 1961; Rowlands and Warnier 1988, Udelhoven 2021; Kroesbergen-Kamps 2022). I want to stress for my present argument the untamed nature of many confessions. The headman did not refer to semi-coerced testimonies, where, when proven guilty by diviners, confessing to witchcraft can be a calculated way of remaining part of family and kin or of commanding respect. He meant testimonies of witches that are inherently shocking and unsettling, which demonstrate that beneath the quiet status quo looms an evil abyss that evades control by the ordinary ways of making sense out of daily life. A recognition of this abyss that is tied to personal relationships and that escapes ordinary categories of thought is part of what "witchcraft is real" means. It cannot be grasped through the object model.

Personal Certainties

I have looked at three reasons for certainty about witchcraft "in general" that a headman gave: it is part of language, part of the world of medicines, and some people identify themselves openly with this shocking reality. The fact that these reasons for certainty operate on different levels indicates that one single reason may not be enough to convince somebody; witchcraft remains underdetermined. Similarly, any single manifestation alone is also rarely seen as providing enough evidence for witchcraft. Several points of evidence or proof and even several divinations need to work together.

Many people come to an acceptance of witchcraft through a personal journey or through participation in specific events. Take the following three examples:

(Testimony 1). I learnt the truth about witchcraft when I lived in the Luapula Province. You know, as children we hear stories about witches. But I thought: these are only stories. I came to see that witchcraft really works when a famous healer, Sansakuwa, came to the village I was living in at that time. There was a big witch. Sansakuwa said that he failed to overcome his witchcraft unless we beat up the chief to the point of bringing him close to death. Only then would the witch's charms become exposed. Now, how can you go and beat up the chief whom everybody respects? Anyway, people wanted to deal with the witch, and they gathered us youths together with instructions to go and beat up the chief. We did, and when we then went to the house of the witch, all his charms were plainly visible. When the chief recovered, he did not give us a case, but instructed people to go and deal with the witch [kill him], because everybody had already suffered so much from his deeds. From that moment I knew that witchcraft is real and that it works, and that we are not just dealing with stories.

The balance of the man's convictions shifted towards belief when he saw a single demonstration of a divination that, in his view, was utterly empirical ("All his charms were plainly visible.") Interestingly, the impossibility of witchcraft was overcome by another impossibility: to beat up the chief. Witchcraft here is not understood as an ordinary power and also needs an extraordinary event in order to be overcome.[5]

I have often tried to make such demonstrations also work the other way around: by making someone doubt the processes of divination, by exposing hidden trickery in a diviner's handling of witchcraft (Udelhoven 2021, chapter 12, drama 17). Such public exposés were often attended by large crowds and appreciated. But already Evans-Pritchard argued that people may not stop believing in witchcraft even if many divinations are debunked. Specific demonstrations seem to be supportive, not constitutive, of belief or disbelief. Nevertheless, the testimony demonstrates that each person has to find his/her own way of coming to grips with witchcraft. Belief is not just a culturally pre-given datum but depends on appropriation, personal reasoning and reflection – and on participation in certain events. The above testimony is also part of a professional identity: The youth remained in the services of Doctor Sansakuwa and then became a healer in his own right; he and his wife are still healers today. The story of the manifestation of witchcraft underscores the healers' powers over witchcraft. His own professional existence is related to the existence of witchcraft. He is well acquainted with the

---

5   I asked the man if the chief was linked to the witchcraft of the witch but was told that he was not. In my own understanding, beating up the chief refers to a moral impossibility. As witchcraft needs to be activated through a morally impossible act (sleeping with one's own sister or mother, or killing a person), it also needed to be defeated by an impossible act. However, chiefs usually do have a relationship to witchcraft; their own office of authority is itself linked to mystical powers that enable them to make sure that witchcraft and witches are contained. Some chiefs are also suspected to have used witchcraft in order to outwit their rivals to the throne.

element of trickery of many healers in his profession, but this does not invalidate for him the concepts of witchcraft and divination. He explained that being a healer exposes him to the realities of witchcraft and makes him more sensitive, elevating him to a privileged position to recognise these forces.

> (Testimony 2). It happened in 1982. I was twelve years old. My grandfather, Kacheche, had a sister who was pregnant, yet her husband beat her up and kicked her private parts, so that she died. Kacheche told his family: "Bury my sister, but I am not going to cry, and I will not attend the funeral." While they buried, he went to Mapamba (an area 60 km away) and bought a *nyanga* [a charm for witchcraft]. The *nyanga* was called Solola [meaning: "to draw out", like a piece of firewood from a pile].[6] When he came back, he buried Solola at the grave of his sister and said: "You, Solola, *solola* [draw out] from those who killed my sister. Draw four people, two men and two women!" True, after only one or two days, people started to die in the husband's family. First the aunt died. Then the sister. Again, the brother, and finally the husband himself. They died without any sickness. So, the family of the husband came to Kacheche to beg for mercy. "We have done wrong! Please forgive us, that our brother beat your sister to death!" My grandfather answered, "Now I will forgive you." He unearthed the charm and returned Solola to the diviner in Mapamba from whom he had bought it. After this incident, my grandfather was feared by everybody, including the chiefs. "He is a witch!" But he was not a witch, because he returned the charm and never killed again.

The fact that four people died after an open use of revenge witchcraft became empirical proof for the existence and power of witchcraft. Also in other versions of the narrative, four family members of the culprit died, but their identities differ: in one version, the husband did not die. I guess that the way we put stories and testimonies together resembles the work of a photographer who has many options at his/her disposal about what to put inside the frame and what to leave out. We may present some facts in a certain light to allow them to prove a theory or a point. In any case, four deaths that occurred after an open threat showed to people a causality, not a coincidence. With such reflections, we are pretty much in the range of how Horton saw religious notions to provide basic explanations. But the testimony also brings out very powerfully the agency of the force of witchcraft that may be employed for a purpose but that also has a personal name (Solola) and that makes its own choices. Witchcraft here is not just an abstract force. It is a person, employed by Kacheche, who thereby becomes himself associated with this mysterious and lethal force. Where witchcraft has its own willpower, the level of explanation acknowledges definite limits about control and prediction. The charm's existence and components, and mode of working, remain clouded in mystery. Only a faraway diviner may know more, but he is out of reach. Explanation is placed in an inaccessible realm. Instead of lifting the cloud of secrecy and

---

6   The word *kusolola* can also be used for finding a scapegoat for an offence and saddle the offence onto a culprit, as happened in this event.

mystery, witchcraft as explanation intensifies it. Despite the testimony's insistence that Kacheche was not a witch, he remained associated throughout his life with witchcraft and with knowing secrets that are not accessible to others – people who employ the force of witchcraft become themselves "othered".[7]

> (Testimony 3). How I came to that witchcraft is real. It was in 1988 while living in the village of my husband. I was pregnant and gave birth. After three weeks I became very sick. I became so thin that today we would say that I had AIDS. I could not eat anything. When people gave me fresh water to drink, it smelt terribly so that I could not drink. My children bought a chicken for me and prepared it. But to me, it looked and smelt like rubber-strings. I was angry, "How can you cook rubber for me! This is not a chicken!" They said, "She has *mashave*! [spirits]" and beat the drums, but it was not *mashave*. They brought me to the hospital, but it was not something for the hospital. After praying many times for death, I had a dream. I was flying – *fii* – I was flying like this and I entered inside [the sky] where God is. There was a silver gate and a harsh man who looked very angrily at me. With a single wink he rebuked me to turn back. I turned around and found myself awake on the floor. I was angry with God that I was still alive. After some weeks, I called the family of my husband with whom I was staying and told them plainly: "When I have died, you must bury me in my home village. I am not from here! I have to rest next to my mother!" They became afraid and started to discuss how to bury me: head to the East [as is the tradition of the husband's Chewa family] or to the West [as is the tradition of her own Wiza family]. I just remained quiet while they discussed. Then they sent my sister-in-law to place medicines on my head. They made incisions and also gave me medicines to drink in a cup. After only a week, I started to feel well and I was totally cured. Since then, I know that witchcraft is real.

At first, I could not understand the connection to witchcraft and thought rather that the story demonstrated the power of traditional medicines. But upon asking, she made it clear that the family of her husband had bewitched her. They wanted to kill her because they hated her, especially the mother-in-law. It was only their fear of what could happen at the funeral that made them bring the medicines to undo their witchcraft. During her sickness, the husband lived in town where he took another wife. The woman recognized her sickness intuitively as witchcraft because of a range of ambivalent signs and the gradual exclusions of other explanatory possibilities. Maybe the weird illness had to be witchcraft since it legitimised her coming back to her home village from a difficult marriage and the complete break with her husband's family. For my present argument, I have selected this story because it embeds the certainty about witchcraft into other religious elements. An existential experience tipped the balance from doubt to belief, while at the same time it also acknowledged the personal character of such certainties. Again, as in Testimony 1, witchcraft was overcome by a non-replicable impossibility: this

---

[7]   Not surprisingly, the death of Kacheche himself was also attributed to witchcraft in the stories that circulate in our area: A youth publicly challenged him, "I am more powerful than you!", and Kacheche mysteriously died a short time after this challenge.

time a religious one, the meeting with the gatekeeper at the door of heaven. One cannot come to terms with witchcraft through ordinary means. She was saved by an act of grace. The religious vocabulary shifts the explanation of witchcraft as the source of her sickness to an intimate level that other people cannot refute but that they too can only accept as binding within the horizon of faith.

Speaking about Witchcraft

Let me come back to the case of the missing toddler in the stage in which it is still a case of anonymous witchcraft – the witch is yet to be named. In our parish, people come quite easily to us priests with such anonymous or unnamed cases, as they also come to church with cases of demon possession, Satanism (where it is another form of anonymous witchcraft) and spiritual afflictions that do not yet clearly accuse a given family, or where a witch lives very far away. However, once a concrete, nearby person becomes implicated, such easiness is interrupted. People become very careful about whom they speak to and who may be listening. Labelling a person as a witch is a legal offence in Zambia. One also risks a direct confrontation with the powers of the witch. And one clearly positions oneself and takes sides in a dispute that concerns life and death. Many people have "burnt their fingers" because they talked too lightly about named witchcraft. They were no longer commentators "outside the pitch" but had actually entered the ground themselves, where they had to face the force of the game. People therefore need to learn how to speak *around* witchcraft, through allusions.

In our area, witchcraft is first and foremost the concern of the affected families (accusers and accused), and each family knows who has authority to speak on its behalf. Any witchcraft accusation is a truth claim. People know competing diviners who can validate or falsify a specific truth-claim about witchcraft, but in the last instance, such validation is the business of the specific family, not that of the community at large. I consider this point to be important when we want to consider the ontology of witchcraft – in the way it is believed in. In as much as everyone may affirm that "witchcraft is real" as long as we talk in general terms, the authority over an evaluation of truth claims about specific incidences and also about the appropriateness and trust given to a diviner is recognised as belonging to a specific and small group of people, in our rural area that of kin and family. This is an implicit recognition about the limits of universal and independent appraisals of witchcraft-related truth claims.

Wanting to Believe and not Wanting to Believe

Personally, I have always operated from a sceptical viewpoint when I come into contact with what people called witchcraft in the course of my pastoral work.[8]

---

[8]   I have described one such unsettling experience elsewhere (Udelhoven 2021: chapter 15).

Maybe I have more models of explanation ready at the back of my mind, or maybe I simply do not want to believe. Life in our parish is full of uncanny situations and strange coincidences. People under witchcraft attacks often manifest extraordinary bodily reactions for which I lack explanation, but these do not force me to believe in witchcraft. I doubt that the events of the three testimonies, had they happened to me, would have forced my pattern of thought to switch to the level of belief. Am I alone with such doubts? Doubt is part of the whole world of witchcraft (Bubandt 2015). Many people have stories to tell about witchcraft, but they also have doubts. Witchcraft is not simply a fact of life. Nils Bubandt calls it an *aporia*, an unsolvable puzzle, and he says that it is recognised by believers as such.

Appeals to named witchcraft usually come with the appeal of readjusting or breaking local relationships; witches are no longer fully human or they are more than human. However, it is not always in the interest of the concerned parties to sever relationships with each other, and there can be occasions where people do not want to identify witchcraft in a given event, even after seeing evidence of witchcraft. Or where they no longer want to believe that a person's witchcraft is still a threat, or where they simply want to forget about a witchcraft incident. Take the following example from our parish:

An elderly man in one of our prayer centres had been implicated a number of times in witchcraft stories and had also been named as a witch by some diviners. Nevertheless, the accusations seemed to do him little harm. He sometimes even came across as enjoying being an elder who knows something about witchcraft. One day he asked his grandson for tobacco, who refused, upon which he threatened him with the words: "You will see!" – a clear threat of witchcraft. At night, the young man dreamed that he was strangled by his grandfather. He woke up with a boil on his neck. In the following weeks, the boil grew and developed into a tumour that became infected. The young man's parents refused hospital treatment since they knew it was witchcraft. Several times they demanded from the grandfather to remove the witchcraft attack. "If he dies, we kill you too!" He tried to give him some local medicines, but to no avail. In the end, the infection was so bad that an intensive stench prevented people from visiting the dying man in his hut. At his funeral, the family demanded that the grandfather alone carry the coffin with the body to the grave. But the man was feeble and failed. People feared that the family might beat him to death there and then. Other family members, including some church members and our catechist intervened. "Let us bury the boy with respect! Other things we will sort out later!" They diffused the situation, and people buried the young man in the usual way of mourning. I was not present at the burial but managed afterwards on my visit to the area to speak with a number of family members who appeared to be looking for a solution that would unify their family but also protect the old man from being lynched. I also spoke with a well-known local healer, who was closely related to the family and who also appeared to be

working for unity, though he told me that the grandfather was indeed a witch. A month after the burial, the family meeting took place. Our catechist was invited to the meeting. The healer, together with other elders, called for calm, asking the old man "to promise from now on to stop using any form of witchcraft." The man accepted and made the promise. The meeting was described to me as a success.

Before the meeting, I thought about several scenarios. Maybe the old man would have to leave the village to settle somewhere else. Being expelled would have been a terrible situation for him since he was much involved in local affairs. Casting him out would divide the family, the oldest clan in the area, who have much local influence. Local strength depends on family unity. People know that witches do not work alone; they initiate other family members, even across generations; one proven case of witchcraft can associate the whole family with witchcraft. Casting him out as a witch would also have positioned the family at loggerheads with the church, with which a significant part of the family identified. If witchcraft beliefs are flexible and adaptable to many different situations, can they not also be adapted to fall into the background, or even be forgotten?

It is a fact in Zambia that in times of crisis, emotions related to witchcraft can be bundled against a suspect, which often leads to lynch justice, but then again, once the storm is over, one can live a normal day-to-day life with the suspected witch for many years to come, in relative calm. The above events happened in 2016, and for six years, we experienced such a period of oblivion. I did not witness further witchcraft allegations in the family, not even between the old man and the parents of the boy. However, in recent months two more strange deaths of youths occurred in the same family, and the name of the old man has reappeared as a possible culprit, posing the need for further family meetings.

A last example from our parish: Anastasia, an elderly woman and committed member of our church, crushed her leg in a motorcycle accident. The driver of the motorcycle, her grandson, had overlooked a ghastly hole in a bridge. He himself remained unhurt in the accident. On the same trip, he had fallen two other times "without any reason at all". The woman was brought to the hospital, more than 100 km away, and the family spent a lot of money for transport and treatment. The wound did not heal, and the doctor proposed the amputation of the leg, to which the patient at first agreed but which the family refused. Unfortunately, the infection started to affect the whole body. When Anastasia stopped eating and when it became clear to the caring family that she was dying, a number of family members from our village wanted to visit her, but those caring for her refused. "Don't come! The witches are with you in the village!" Being denied the right to be with a dying family member is a serious issue. When I asked people in our area about the incident, I received very mundane explanations. "Why should that be witchcraft? The motorbike had no breaks!" "The boy was too young to ride such a big motorbike!" I was told that the witchcraft allegations were fuelled by divisions in the family that had a long history. After her death, the family decided,

after long discussions and against the explicit wishes of other family members in town, to bring the body back to our area and bury her at home. We gathered at the house in anticipation of receiving the body. I feared open witchcraft accusations at the burial. When the body arrived at night, two accompanying men gave a speech. The first one blamed the family members in our area for consulting the wrong family branch in town: the branch that spoke of witchcraft and prevented people from coming. Though he was intoxicated by alcohol, his speech came to me as a relief in the sense that "the real family branch" distanced itself from the witchcraft rumours. After the first man was removed as a public speaker ("He is drunk!"), the second man also explained calmly that the death was due to a motorcycle accident and not witchcraft. "Each person has a day to be born and a day to die, and this day is decided by God alone." At the graveside, he officially repeated this narrative, explicitly denying that the cause of death was witchcraft.

I do not know how the shift had come about from witchcraft to an act of God. Many family members were Catholic, and they knew that an insistence on witchcraft would lead to a fallout with their church and that it would widen the family rift between the different factions – beyond repair. A granddaughter of the deceased was joining religious sisterhood and the feast of her first vows was drawing near. Is it not possible that "not wanting to believe", knowing what words about witchcraft can do, tipped the balance towards a much more benign death that allowed also for the possibility to reunite the family?

Conclusion

In arguably the most widely discussed text on African witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard suggested that witchcraft beliefs among the Zande, when one is consistent and consequent with them, lead to logical contradictions in the blind corner of the believer. In other words, there are limits trying to place witchcraft beliefs into any fixed ontology. In order to mitigate ontological contradictions, "beliefs are not absolutely set but are variable and fluctuating to allow for different situations and to permit empirical observation and even doubts" (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], 109). His observations provoked volumes of discussions about the rationality of religious and cultural beliefs. Many anthropologists tried to rescue African beliefs from the label of inconsistency. Some simply sent the argument "back to the sender": Evans-Pritchard, not the Azande, made "category mistakes". The logical contradictions that Evans-Pritchard saw may have originated in his own scepticism about witchcraft, his absolute belief in Western science, and then comparing witchcraft over and against science, which made it always appear with contradictions. An example of this view is put forth by Martin Mills (2013) who stresses the ordinariness of witchcraft in people's thoughts, of it being interwoven in everyday life and crafts; if one extends witchcraft's capabilities also to the ordinary no-

tion of personhood and human agency, such presumed contradictions may simply disappear.

Mills is right to look at witchcraft from the perspective of a cultural understanding of personhood and agency. But is there any need for rescuing witchcraft beliefs from the label of the inconsistent, the extraordinary or the irrational? Must they be part of a consistent ontology? Life anywhere is full of contradictions, the more so when we deal with ambivalent human relationships, and witchcraft is always embedded in such relationships. Witchcraft in Zambia (for example, the ability of metamorphosis, to fly, or to manipulate the thoughts and bodies of others) may be considered a real possibility; it is nevertheless recognised also by the believer as irrational and weird. As Kroesbergen showed, people who believe in witchcraft do not necessarily want to challenge an empirical outlook on the world in their day-to-day lives. Very often the realness of witchcraft comes to the foreground during tragedy that is woven into multilevel relational and micro-social crises, and, interestingly, it can also disappear back into the background once people have moved on. Witches (real witches, past witches, or rumoured witches) and non-witches then live ordinary lives again – not only next to each other, but with each other too.

Kroesbergen showed that we do not need to deny people's experiences with witchcraft and also that we do not need to approach witchcraft through the object model, and that we should not, even when people use empirical language to describe it. We should look at witchcraft's sense of being real in the context of the response to the world that believers make through appeal to this force. Such a response is always woven into and directed at relationships and builds up an identity discourse for those who accept that "witchcraft is real". It reveals an abyss in the microcosm of human relationships that cannot be comprehended by ordinary models of explanation. Its logic is located in a parallel world outside our bounds.

For the pastoral setting, I have proposed elsewhere (Udelhoven 2021) an approach that allows a pastor to help a patient come to a meaningful personal response, without objectifying the truth claims about the witch-others. It is an approach that is more of an art (a playful rearrangement of witchcraft elements in order to facilitate reconciliation) than a fixed method. For the church, the fact that families exercise discernment about witchcraft as families or as fractions of families has direct pastoral consequences: pastoral interventions, like private prayers, blessings, and counselling, may work very well in cases that concern anonymous or unnamed types of witchcraft, but they are of limited help when concrete persons are alluded to as witches, unless such prayers are accompanied by sitting down with all willing parties of the family in an official and often very lengthy family meeting. Here traditional healers have often been more successful than churches, in the sense that they are consulted by family authority figures who have teeth to deal with concrete relational conflicts beyond religious boundaries or church affiliation.

But to come to such public meetings in which witchcraft can be discussed with a view to putting the search for a common solution in the foreground, and absolute knowledge about witchcraft in the background, requires a common language, a way of speaking about witchcraft in the public forum, that facilitates dialogue between believers and non-believers that helps them to find agreements and to agree on their disagreements, and that does justice to the relational and situational ways in which witchcraft becomes real – its oscillating character. This is a concern for future research.

I have reflected in this paper on what people do when they say that "Witchcraft is real!" but also when they decide to no longer speak about witchcraft. By referring to witchcraft, they are not explaining how this force works ("Only witches can know!") First and foremost, they acknowledge the limitations of mundane concepts to account for all that is in the world. They affirm the existence of a hidden, mysterious and evil parallel world that links the tragic event to the activities of a fellow human being, the witch. Where a person is identified with this evilness (there is no witchcraft without a witch), one enkindles dehumanising dynamics that are always part of the grammar of witchcraft.

Can such "grammar" change? Wittgenstein compared it with a river finding a new riverbed: something that takes time, and yet that does happen. Unnegotiable beliefs, such as witchcraft, can be renegotiated where people refuse to buy into their dehumanising discourses and where creative engagements are facilitated. There is a point where believers in witchcraft themselves also want to believe in a different way. By recognising in witchcraft assertions a response to the world, we may also recognise that such a response feeds on dehumanising images. Evil is located in the other, not in oneself. In Zambia, most people who struggle with witchcraft are also Christian and profess a faith that seeks to be re-humanising. My hope is that more theologians engage with the language and grammar of witchcraft and become part of the process of its transformation.

Bibliography

Ashforth, Adam. 2015. "Witchcraft Justice, and Human Rights in Africa: Cases from Malawi." *African Studies Review* 58, no. 1: 5–38.

Bubandt, Nils. 2015. *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island*. Kindle: Cornell University Press.

Dawkins, Richard. 2008. *The God Delusion*, reprint. Mariner Books,

Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, abridged edition. Oxford University Press.

Geschiere, Peter. 2013. *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in comparison*. University of Chicago Press.

Geschiere, Peter. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft. Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Gifford, Paul. 2015. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*. London: Hurst.

Geschiere, Peter. 1967. "Traditional Thought and Western Science", *Africa* 37: 50–71; 155–187.

Geschiere, Peter. 1993. "African Traditional Thought and Western Science." In *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science*, edited by Robin Horton, 197–258. Cambridge University Press.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019. *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism*. Cape Town: AOSIS Ltd.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2018. "An Absolute Distinction Between Faith and Science: Contrast without Compartmentalization." *Zygon* 53, no. 1: 9–28.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2014. "'Superstition' as a Contemplative Term: A Wittgensteinian Perspective." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77: 105–122.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, Johanneke. 2022. *Speaking of Satan in Zambia: Making Cultural and Personal Sense of Narratives about Satanism*. Cape Town: AOSIS Ltd.

Kroesbergen-Kamps, Johanneke. 2020. "Witchcraft after Modernity: Old and New Directions in the Study of Witchcraft in Africa." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10, no. 3: 860–873.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1961. "The Sorcerer and His Magic." In *Structural Anthropology*, 167–185. New York: Basic Books.

Marwick, Max. 1965. *Sorcery in Its Social Setting: A Study of the Northern Rhodesian Chewa*. Manchester University Press.

Mills, Martin A. 2013. "Evans-Pritchard and Human Agency." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4: 873–875.

Olupọna, Jacob. 2014. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Overing, Joanna. 1990. "The Shaman as Maker of Worlds: Nelson Goodman in the Amazon" *Man* 24, no. 4: 602–619.

Penner, Hans H. 1986. "Rationality and Religion: Problems in the Comparison of Modes of Thought." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no. 4: 645–671.

Rowlands, Michael, and Jean-Pierre Warnier. 1988. "Sorcery, Power and the Modern State in Cameroon," *Man* 23, no. 1: 118–132.

Roxburgh, Shelagh. 2016. "Witchcraft and Violence in Ghana: An Assessment of Contemporary Mediation Efforts." *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 56, no. 224: 891–914.

Udelhoven, Bernhard. 2022. "Domestic Morality, 'Traditional Dogma', and Christianity in a Rural Zambian Community." *Zambia Social Science Journal* 8, no. 1: 1–27.

Udelhoven, Bernhard. 2021. *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism*. Lusaka: FENZA.

Udelhoven, Bernhard. 2020. "Religion, Witchcraft and Politics." In *Competing for Caesar: Religion and Politics in Post-colonial Zambia*, edited by Chammah J. Kaunda, and Marja Hinfelaar, 145–172. Fortress Press.

Wilson, Monica Hunter, 1951. "Witch Beliefs and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4: 307–313.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2005. *Philosophical Grammar*, edited by Rush Rhees, translated by Anthony Kelly. University of California Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th edition. Wiley-Blackwell.

Chapter 5

Witchdemonology: The New Face of Witchcraft in Africa

Opoku Onyinah

Introduction

Edward Evans-Pritchard's pioneering work on witchcraft among the Azande people of Congo concluded that the belief in witchcraft was a principle of interpreting human misfortunes (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Following Evans-Pritchard, the phenomena of witchcraft and sorcery in Africa have become prominent on the agenda of anthropologists. Various terms and interpretations have been offered in attempts to understand these phenomena in Africa. Evans-Pritchard's classic distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, which has been altered by other anthropologists, is relevant in many places in Africa. The assumption is that witchcraft is an inherent quality and a psychic act. The witch performs no rites, utters no spells, and possesses no medicine. Sorcery is the deliberate employment of magic rites, the use of spells or mechanical aids in the attempt to bring a result. It can be used either for a good or an evil purpose (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 21; Macfarlane 1970, 44–46). Others have, however, attempted to amalgamate the two in one term. For example, John Middleton and E. H. Winter combine the two in the term "wizardry" (Middleton et al. 1963, 13). Mary Douglas' use of the term sorcery significantly includes witchcraft (Douglas 1963, 4–7). The problem with these terms is that often they do not work when applied to societies other than those researched into, and sometimes they fail to be relevant some years after the research was carried out. Consequently, there is a constant struggle about terms to identify these phenomena.

Other significant interpretations offered, following Evan-Pritchard's own, include the works of J. Clyde Mitchell, Middleton and Winter, Max Marwick and Mary Douglas; they theorised the function of witchcraft as a release of tension within certain types of African social structures (Kluckhohn 1944, 67–68; Mitchell 1956, 201; Middleton et al, 13; Marwick 1970, 101; Douglas 1970, xviii; Goody 1970, 207–244). The studies of S. F. Nadel, M. Gluckman and Hans Debrunner also demonstrate that witchcraft belief is the outcome of social instability, such as famine, rapid change, oppression and economic distress (Nadel 1952, 286; Gluckman 1959, 101; Debrunner 1959). Other works, including Margaret Field's case studies and analysis of so-called witches in Ghana, reveal how witchcraft is rooted in the psychological reactions of those suffering from ill health, misfortunes and inability to control their destinies (Field 1937).

These interpretations have led some anthropologists and missionaries to assume that witchcraft belief was only superstitious and to be dispelled with modernity. For example, George Parrinder, a Methodist missionary in West Africa, argues, "an enlightened religion, education, medicine and better social and racial conditions will help to dispel witchcraft beliefs" (Parrinder 1958, 202–203). This has not been the case; although Parrinder's enlightened religion—Christianity—has grown in Africa, belief in witchcraft has survived and even been revived.

The studies on witchcraft and sorcery in Africa in the late twentieth century, such as those of Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer and Jean and John Comaroff, show that the concept is no longer "traditional" but operates as a very important aspect of "modernity" (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1999; Meyer 1998, 316–349; Meyer 1998, 751–776; Comaroff 1993; Meyer 1994, 45–68). In some of these presentations, images of witchcraft and sorcery are presented in modern forms through the local consumption of global commodities (Parish 1999, 427–447; Colson 2000, 333–358); they show how witchcraft and sorcery are domesticated in personal violence and also how the phenomena are involved in politics (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 2000).

Current studies on witchcraft among Pentecostals, such as the research of Koen Stroeken in Northwestern Tanzania, Katrien Pype in 'contemporary Kinshasa' (Congo), Steven D. H. Rasmussen also in Tanzania (Stroeken 2018, 257–279; Pype 2018, 115–114; Rasmussen 2008/2009), Asonzeh Ukah and Magnus Echtler in Nigeria, Leo Igwe in Northern Ghana and Mensah Adinkrah in Ghana, show that witchcraft is very prominent in the Pentecostal type of Christianity (Ukah and Echtler 2009, 73–92; Igwe 2016; Adinkrah 2015; Newell 2007, 461–490).

Combating of and protection from these witchcraft and sorcery activities, therefore, have become a common concern. Formerly, these aids were sought from the priests of the gods (shrines), sorcerers or medicine men. Currently, in an ongoing development started by the African Initiated Churches in early twentieth century, almost all churches include exorcistic activities, referred to as "deliverance",[1] in their programmes. Thus, some scholars now observe the "Pentecostalisation" of Christianity in Africa (Onyinah 2012, 171–231). The main agenda of this sort of Pentecostalisation is deliverance, which is encouraged by the fear of the dealings of spirit forces, including witchcraft, sorcery and demons.

This study argues that the advent of Christianity in Africa and the introduction of Satan, as an embodiment of evil who works with his allied demons have changed the grammar of witchcraft in Africa. I wish to introduce a new concept—witchdemonology—which can be considered as the synthesis of the practices and beliefs of African witchcraft and Western Christian concepts of demonology and exorcism (Onyinah 2012, 171–231). When Africans are talking of witchcraft now,

---

[1]   Basically, the term "deliverance" is used to include all the rituals involved in setting people free from demonic activities.

they may be talking about an amalgamation of many alleged life-threatening fears. I begin by giving a brief background to exorcistic activities in Africa which led to the teaching of witchdemonology, then I describe witchdemonology and draw a conclusion.

Most of the research in this paper is based on my experience as a Pentecostal pastor since 1976 as well as some field research I carried out in 1997, 2001 and 2017. It is also based on my appointments as the first International Missions Director and then as the Chairman of the Church of Pentecost of Ghana, which has branches in 135 countries, and also as the President of the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC) for seven years. My duties included visiting churches in Ghana and the rest of the world, training leaders, and settling cases, including witchcraft and demon possession. Having retired from active ministry in August 2018, I still lecture and have set up a centre which educates church leaders and societal leaders on how to handle witchcraft and demon possession cases. Thus, I am presenting this paper from an insider's perspective.

Antecedents to Witchdemonology

Protections by the Deities and Anti-Witchcraft Shrines

The study of the much-researched Akan people of Ghana shows that before the colonial era, there were tutelary deities in many people groups in Africa, who were in charge of the various clans; the priests of these deities also handled witchcraft-related issues (McCaskie 1995, 26; McCaskie 1981, 125–154; Osei-Agyeman 1990). In the early part of the twentieth century, a movement of anti-witchcraft shrines emerged in many countries to combat witchcraft activities. When the various colonial governments saw it necessary to suppress the activities of the shrines because of some allegations levelled against them, they could not succeed. The failure is evident in later occurrences which show that their activities resurfaced in the African Initiated Churches. Much literature abounds on the anti-witchcraft cults and need not concern us here (Debrunner 1959; McCaskie 1995; Acquah 1958, 141–143; Christensen 1959, 257–278; Christensen 1954, 389–398; Field 1940, 138–149; Tigare 1947, 1–8).

Introduction of a Personalised Devil

With the establishment of Christianity in Africa, some missionaries taught that the belief in the spirit forces was superstitious, while other missionaries who saw non-Christian religions as in league with the devil. Consequently, the impression the Africans got was that devil and demons were the powers behind these spirit forces and the African cultures. By the introduction of a personalised devil and the association of the gods with demons, they strengthened the belief in witchcraft and sorcery (Mobley 1970; Isichel 1995). Yet, it is alleged that they failed to provide

for the holistic needs of the people, especially those of healing, exorcism and protection.

The African Initiated Churches

It is against this backdrop that the African Initiated Churches emerged. Prophetism was central to the ministries of these churches. Almost all of them had healing camps (also called gardens or centres) where people went in order to get their problems solved. For Professor C. G. Baëta, a Ghanaian theologian, "the 'spiritual churches' represent a turning away from these traditional resources of supernatural succour in order that help may be sought, for the same purposes, from the God proclaimed in the Christian evangel" (Baëta 1962, 135). This notion of 'turning away' is questionable in the sense that just as some of the priests of the traditional shrines were taken to court and dealt with on the grounds of accusing people indecently for their dealing with witchcraft issues, including exploitation and immorality, so were some of the pastors of these churches taken to court on similar abuses (Breidenbach 1979, 600–601; Beckmann 1975, 55). Professor Bengt Sundkler, a Swedish-Tanzanian church historian and missiologist, concludes about the Bantu prophets in South Africa, and similarly in many countries in Africa, that their assertions and promises are "more high sounding than they are sound" (Sundkler 1948, 236).

Classical Pentecostal

At a time when prophetism seemed to dwindle within the African Initiated Churches, Classical Pentecostalism grew.[2] Classical Pentecostals emphasise the baptism of the Holy Spirit that empowers individuals to serve God and protects them from evil forces. Professor E. Kingsley Larbi, a Ghanaian Pentecostal theologian, hits the nail on the head when he states that "the key to the tapping of these unlimited abilities is the *glossolalic* experience, hence the stress on the need for everyone to experience this phenomenon." (Larbi 2001, 277). It was believed that witches could not kill or hinder the progress of those baptised in the Spirit. They could prosper and progress without the devil's interference. However, the Classical stance was shorted-lived as this was undermined by the aggressive proliferation of the third-wave Pentecostal concept of demonology, which is next on our agenda.

Indigenous Christianity Enhanced by Americanism

Two trends developed within West African Christianity during the 1970s. The first of these is the circulation of books and cassettes from Western preachers,

---

[2]   The term Classical Pentecostalism is used here in connection with Pentecostal churches that have direct or indirect reference to the Azusa Street revival, or Pentecostal churches that were started by the Western Pentecostals.

especially American preachers such as Oral Roberts, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Reinhard Bonnke and later on Benny Hinn, which were sought to enhance the preaching of many ministers. Many sermons followed materials drawn from these ministers, especially that of the "seed faith principle," set by Oral Roberts, which is centred on prosperity and faith healing by Hagin. This practice was very common in the 1970s and the early 1980s (Hunt 2000, 331–347; Jackson 1987, 19–24; Anim 2020).

Since the teaching of prosperity is in agreement with the African traditional concept of prosperity and well-being, a ministry, often called "Prosperity Gospel," developed out of this. The Prosperity Gospel's assumption is "God's guarantee of material wealth to *all* Christians, and *all* Christians have the right to good health" (Anim 2020, 24). It is claimed that all Christians can take possession of these through the exercise of faith and positive confession. Many ministers followed this teaching.

The second trend, which took place in the latter part of the 1980s, was the growing interest in books and cassettes (both video and audio), which increased people's awareness of demons and how to exorcise them (Hagin 1976; Cerullo 1984; Irvine 1973; Brown 1992; Brown 1987). Some Christians, both intellectuals and non-intellectuals, began to reinterpret these teachings in culturally relevant ways and put them into practice. A brief review of literature on "demons" in the African context shows that the belief was all over Africa south of the Sahara (Onyango 1979; Heaven 1985; Kaniaki and Mukendi 1991; Adekola 1993; Uzora 1993; Umunna 1999; Tanee n.d., Omoobajesu n.d., Eto 1981). These developments led to what I refer to as "witchdemonology."

Witchdemonology

Definition

The term "witchdemonology" is used instead of the usual Western terms "demonology" and "witchcraft" for a number of reasons. First, witchcraft in Western thinking includes the practice of magic, the use of spells, and the invocation of spirits. "Witchcraft" in many African cultures is the belief that some people possess supernatural powers, which may be used for good or evil. It is supposed to be done in secret. Second, "demonology" is the Christian doctrine that there are evil spirits in league with Satan who can also take possession of people and force them to become agents of destruction (Onyinah 2020, 187–211). None of the traditional definitions of demonology and witchcraft fit with the contemporary African situations.

Current studies by anthropologists on African witchcraft indicate that in many places, the central figures are the devil and his cohorts, particularly witches, who are considered responsible for mishaps (Ukah and Echtler 1998, 261; van Diik 1992, 1–25; Marshall 1993, 213–214; Ranger and Vaughan 1993, 213–246).

These are shown in horror films, dramas, and television shows, and are discussed in talk shows. These are also evident in various church prayer meetings and on social media" (Meyer 1992, 98–132).

The term "witchdemonology", coined from both witchcraft and demonology, describes the beliefs and practices of the "deliverance ministry" in Africa, which is a synthesis of the practices and beliefs of African witchcraft and Western Christian concepts of demonology and exorcism. The aim of this ministry is to break people free from the influence of Satan and his allied evil powers, especially those who bring about afflictions, bad habits, curses and failures in life. The names of many of the churches and prayer centres are evidence of their goals in combating this kind of evil.

The Content of Witchdemonology

Witchdemonology accepts the reality of witchcraft, demons and deities; the belief in territorial spirits and mapping them out; the belief in ancestral curses, and the identification of demonic realities and curses in both Christians and non-Christians. In order for people to be set free to prosper in life, special prayer sessions called "deliverance meetings" are held, either in groups or in private sessions. The goal of deliverance is to set people free from evil powers that hinder their progress in life.

Witchcraft and Demonology Used Interchangeably

The terms "witch" and "witchcraft" are used interchangeably with the terms "demon," "demonology" and "evil spirit." Demon possession is described as when a demon comes to live in one without one's consent. It is considered a covenant of soul and evil spirit without one's permission. Witchcraft is taken as an advanced or higher form of spirit possession. From this background, it is assumed that almost all traditional priests and sorcerers are witches.

Based on some of the writings of Pentecostals and Charismatics, such as Dickason, Kraft, and Hagin, the origin of demons is linked with the fallen angels (Kraft 1993, 66; Dickason 1987, 175; Hagin 1976). It is held that these fallen angels with disembodied spirits found themselves in rivers, seas, mountains, rocks, trees and in humans, and that these have become the gods of the Africans. All Africans are therefore under a curse because their ancestors worshipped the demons.

Introduction of Ancestral Curses

The ancestral curse is a new "doctrine" which has emerged with "witchdemonology." Although this concept has its basis in traditional beliefs of ancestral

veneration, the emphasis was not based on curses, but on blessings.[3] The Pentecostal concept of the ancestral curse, however, is the belief that the consequences of the sins committed by the ancestors are recurrent in their family lines. The effects of these curses in a person's life include chronic diseases or hereditary diseases, mental breakdowns, emotional excesses, allergies, repeated miscarriages, repeated unnatural deaths, such as suicides and accidents, continuing financial insufficiencies, frequent breakdown of marriages, and abnormal behaviour such as extreme anger tantrums or extreme introversion.

Introduction of Territorial Spirits

Linked with the origin of demons/gods and ancestral curses is the strong belief in territorial spirits, specifically promoted by the third wave theologian Peter Wagner (Wagner 1993). Belief in territorial spirit is based on the notion that demons assume a hierarchy with powers of greater and lesser ranks having specific geographical assignments.

The proponents of the deliverance ministry have assumed that the real sources of African problems are the controlling powers of various territorial spirits, such as poverty and idolatry. This is to say that Africans' problems do not just depend upon scientific and modern development. Africans must wage 'spiritual warfare' against these spiritual enemies to break free the African continent (Nwankpa 1994, 9; Oshun 1998, 33).

Beside the signs which give an indication that a person is placed under ancestral curses, it is believed that there are signs which hint that a person is demonised or a witch. One of the surest signs proponents of this ministry offer is that such people are especially uneasy in the presence of 'a spiritual person'.

Demonic Doorways

There are many ways through which demons are said to enter people and be passed on to their families or others. The term for this process is a demonic "doorway" or "opening." Idolatry of any kind is said to be a major opening. Idolatry includes the worship of traditional gods (family, clan or any type), consultation with a deity and covenanting with a deity on behalf of the family, clan or people groups, receiving the ministration of traditional medicine from a traditional priest, participation in a family gathering or a festival where libation is poured and sacrifice offered to the ancestors, and having a name that is assigned to a god. Thus, all the institutions and activities of the traditional cultures are seen as dangerous to healthy living, for they attract demons which can torture people's lives. Biblical texts used to explain this include Exodus 20:3–5; 1 Timothy 4:1–2; and 1 Corinthians 10:20–21.

---

[3] People who were venerated as ancestors, the living dead, were those who led a prospering and meaningful lives; these people thought to be closer to the Supreme Being were to intercede for the living.

Other demonic doorways which deliverance exponents assume include sinful deeds and worldliness (Lk 22:3). Visits to places considered 'worldly' such as the disco and concerts are also classified as examples of these doorways. It can be a single sinful act or the persistent practice of it (habit) that opens the way for demons. For example, while it is held that a single act of adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, sexual abuse or premeditated lie opens the door for demons, it is the repeated acts of masturbation, fornication, pornography, or exaggeration in conversation that truly opens the way for demons.

Still other activities which may become demonic doorways are involvement in any other religion apart from the 'one prescribed by the Lord,' which is evangelical Christianity,;nd any type of emotional pressure from childhood experiences (Jam. 3:16). This includes pressures from homes where parents are in conflict with each other, children are rejected, or one or both parents are alcoholic, cruel or abusive, especially sexual abuse. Prenatal influences also are said to attract demons. Furthermore, it is propounded that demons may enter a human being through emotional traumas like the death of a loved one, survival in a car accident, murder, or the explosion of a building. Those who watch such incidents on the television are also vulnerable to demon entry (Onyinah 2002, 183).

Familiar Spirits

It is assumed that all evil acts have their demonic counterparts. For example, a demon of fornication enters the one who fornicates, while the demon of lust enters the person who watches pornographic videos or pictures. While the Bible reveals the seriousness of sin and the need to get over it through Christ (e.g. Eph. 4:25–32), this 'doctrine' claims that all evil acts and experiences come from demons and open doors for them. The logical inference is that demons are at work any time some evil behaviours or diseases occur in the lives of both Christians and non-Christians.

The discourse so far indicates that everybody, including Christians, could be witches, demon possessed, or could inherit ancestral curses. It is, therefore, purported that in addition to salvation, every African Christian needs deliverance from witchcraft, demons, ancestral curses or diseases, before they will be set free.

Prayer groups have been formed within the churches to cater for this need. In some places, residential prayer centres have been established to accommodate the sick. Deliverance becomes a major activity there. The centre of attraction at the prayer centre is the leader. In such centres, the leaders prescribe specific days of fasting and prayer to their clients. In some places, 'accused' witches, self-proclaimed witches, or accused demon-possessed persons are chained until they are delivered or otherwise.

Deliverance

There are three types of deliverance offered—personal, mass, and high prophetic session. The process of deliverance, whether mass or personal, may take two or more hours.

Personal

Before the main deliverance session, some clients might have seen the exorcists already in their homes or other private places. Often a form with exhaustive questions seeking information about the background of the person is required to be filled out, after which an interview is conducted to find out the supernatural causation of the problem. A personal deliverance can be conducted for such persons. Prayer is often said repeatedly with gestures to "break," "bind" or loosen the power of the devil over a person. Shouting the "blood of Jesus" and "the name of Jesus" is used repeatedly to rebuke witches and all evil powers (Onyinah 2020, 187–211).

Mass

The mass session is where the whole congregation is asked to pray. The persons who had already seen the exorcists as well as others who need deliverance are asked to move to the front of the congregation and form queues. At this time, the exorcists give them instructions, which differ from person to person. However, often instructions are given to participants to write names of parents and family members known to them and keep them for the deliverance rituals.[4] After the initial instructions, the congregation sings with much expectancy, accompanied by clapping of hands and musical instruments. The leader may give instructions on how to pray to break the powers of evil powers (e. g. demons, witches and ancestral curses); thereafter he may pray.

Some leaders sell special canes at church for the purpose of caning the witches spiritually.[5] Shouting the 'blood of Jesus' and 'the name of Jesus' is used repeatedly to rebuke witches and all evil powers. When people struggle or fall down, some of the team members continue to cast, bind or break the power of evil in them. When there is resistance, the leader engages in dialogue with the person, asking the name of the demon. Sometimes people begin to speak in a way which shows that a spirit has taken over. Such people become points of attraction, and the leaders engage in active dialogue with them.

---

[4]   After the rituals, such papers are burnt or destroyed as signs of breaking.
[5]   Note the action is done in the absence of the witch, which is believed to be the person's enemy. This means that though the action is done physically, none is whipped.

Sign of deliverance

As the process of deliverance goes on, people may cough, vomit or urinate. Through the teachings of deliverance proponents such as Derek Prince, it has come to be accepted that demons may go out through any one of the orifices in the human body (Prince 1998, 233). Thus, these acts are considered signs of successful deliverance. It may take two to three hours before the rumpus cools down, but this is not the end of the session. The leader may call those with specific needs and pray for the groups in turns.[6]

High Prophetic Session

This emphasis on deliverance has opened the door for a high level of prophetic ministry, which is identified by Anim as "Super-Charismatic[ism]" (Anim 2020, 64). The desires of many people are to prosper, to have good health, and to be protected from evil forces. Consequently, once people are not prospering or do not have things going the way they expect, they must find out the reason for their apparent failure.

Ministers under this umbrella claim to diagnose people's problems through the word of knowledge or prophecy, which is very similar to the divinatory-consultation aspect of African traditional religions. Some prophetic advice is quite alarming. Some prophets may tell clients that the cause of the problem is an identified witch in the family. When pressure is put on some people, they may accept to be witches or demon-possessed. Some prophets may ask their clients to carry blocks and then offload them as a sign of relief of a burden. Others may stamp on people, even pregnant women, as a way of deliverance. Still others punish their client for failing to obey their instructions by asking them to carry bags of cement. In South Africa, a minister asked his members to eat things such as grass and snake, and on another occasion drink petrol as Coke to prove to the members that the prophet had received special powers from the Lord to change things. In some serious situations, others may even exorcise by using chairs to beat the person. Some people claim to be healed or delivered after such meetings (Daily Motion, 2021; Science-Technology, Life Achieve 2021).

Challenges in Dealing with the Situation

People's views about the prayer centres cannot only be seen in the way people patronise the centres and such churches, but also in the way most adherents, includ-

---

[6]   For example, prayers may be said for traders to receive capital for good business, for farmers to receive rain and a good harvest, for government workers to receive promotion and higher salaries, for broken marriages to be restored, for weak marriages to be strengthened, for single people, especially women, to get married, fand or money for those in debt to be able to pay. Sometimes, when prayer is being said for money, people are requested to open their hands, stretch their clothes, or take up their coats to receive.

ing highly educated people, politicians, and government officials, testify about their experiences—healing, deliverance or otherwise, by so-called prophets. In my personal conversation with a professor of theology, I was informed how a fellow professor had to give his newly bought vehicle to a prophet who claimed that the Lord wanted him to give it to him and buy the newest model. On the one hand, this ministry takes the culture of the people into consideration, by dealing with related beliefs and threatening fears in their newly acquired faith through a synthesis of both old and new patterns. On the other hand, it reinforces the 'primitive' animistic belief system that keeps communities in servile fearfulness and hampers progress; they cannot bring the African out of the fear of witchcraft and other supernatural powers. The process of deliverance, which often involves breaking ties with families, eventually divides the traditional extended family system and promotes individualism. Furthermore, accusations of witchcraft prevent people from acknowledging the responsibility for their wrongdoing, their sins and their inadequacies, and put them on someone else, often a poor person, who becomes the enemy of the whole community (Onyinah 2012).

Conclusion

This study has shown that the new grammar for witchcraft in Africa is witchdemonology, which is an amalgamation of African and Western concepts of demonology combined with the claim to exorcise people from these evil powers. Although colonial governments and the early missionaries tried to stamp out the practice of exorcising people from witchcraft, the attempts bounced back in the ministries of the African Initiated Churches. Protection from evil powers was the centre of attraction in early Pentecostalism as well. The current situation is that deliverance from evil powers is practised by almost all churches. The abuse and challenges that come along with witchcraft and its related practices are many, yet African governments have closed their eyes on them There is a call for African governments and the clergy to stand up to the challenge of dealing with the situation.

Bibliography

Adekola, Sunday. 1993. *Understanding Demonology*. Ibadan: Scripture Union.

Adinkrah, Mensah. 2015. *Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Anim, Emmanuel K. 2020. *Who Wants to be Millionaire? An Analysis of Prosperity Teaching in the Charismatic Ministries (Churches) in Ghana and Its Wider Impact*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.

Anderson, Allan. 2019. "Charismatic Churches and the Pentecostalization of African Christianity." In *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions* 4: 52–72. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baëta, Christian Goncalves Kwami. 1962. *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of 'Spiritual Churches.'* London: SCM Press Ltd.

Brown, Rebecca. 1992. *He Came to Set the Captive Free*. Springdale: Whitaker House.

Cerullo, Morris. 1984. *The Miracle Book*. San Diego: Morris Cerullo World Evangelism.

Colson, Elizabeth. 2000. "The Father as Witch," *Africa* 70, no. 3: 333–358.

Comaroff, Jean, and John Comaroff, eds. 1993. *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

DailyMotion. 2015. "African Pastor Makes His Followers Eat Snake During Service." Accessed December 28, 2021. https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3a8lf5.

Dickason, C. F. red. 1987. *Demon Possession and the Christian*. Chicago: Moody Press.

Douglas, Mary. 1963. *The Lele of the Kasai*. London: Clarke.

Douglas, Mary. 1970. "Introduction: Thirty Years After Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic." In *Witchcraft Confession and Accusations*, edited by Mary Douglas, xiii–xxxviii. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.

Douglas. "Witch Beliefs in Central Africa." In *Witchcraft Confession and Accusations*, edited by Mary Douglas, 72–80. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.

Evans-Pritchard, E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

Esther Goody. "Legitimate and Illegitimate Aggression in a West African State," In *Witchcraft Confession and Accusations*, edited by Mary Douglas, 207–44. London: Tavistock Publications.

Eto, Victoria. 1981. *How I Served Satan Until Jesus Christ Delivered Me.* Warri: Christian Shalon Mission.

Field, Margaret J. 1937. *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*. London: Oxford University Press.

Field, Margaret J. 1960. *Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatric Study of Rural Ghanat*. London: Faber and Faber.

Geschiere, Peter. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* London: University Press of Virginia.

Hackett, Rosalind I. J. 1998. "Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3: 258–277.

Hagin, Kenneth. 1976. *Demons and How to Deal with them*. Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Evangelistic Association.

Heaven, U. Heaven. 1985. *How to Cast Out Demons or Evil Spirit*. Lagos: Heaven and Blessing Books.

Hunt, Stephen. 2000. ''Winning Ways': Globalisation and the Impact of the Health and Wealth Gospels." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, no. 3: 331–347.

Igwe, Leo. 2016. "The Witch is not a Witch: The Dynamics and Contestations of Witchcraft Accusations in Northern Ghana." PhD diss., University of Bayreuth.

Isichel, Elisabeth. 1995. *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to Present*. London: SPCK.

Irvine, Doreen. 1973. *From Witchcraft to Christ: My True Life Story*. London: Concordia Press.

Jackson, R. 1987. "Prosperity Theology and Faith Movement." *Themelios* 15, no. 1: 19–24.

Jane, Parish. 1999. "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines Among the Akan." *Africa* 69, no. 3: 427–447.

Kaniaki, and Mukendi. 1991. *Snatched from Satan's Claws: An Amazing Deliverance by Christ*. Nairobi: Enkei Media Service.

Kluckhohn, J. Clyde. 1948. *Navaho Witchcraft*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1944.

Kobylinski, Andrzej. 2016. "The Global Pentecostalization of Christianity and Its Ethical Consequences." *Chicago Studies* 55, no. 2: 100–120.

Kraft, C. H. 1993. *Defeating Dark Angels*. Kent: Sovereign World.

Larbi, E Kingsley. 2001. *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*. Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies.

Macfarlane A. 1970. "Definition of Witchcraft." In *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, edited by Max G. Marwick, 44–46. London: Penguin Books.

Marshall, Ruth. 1993. "'Power in the Name of Jesus': Social Transformation and Pentecostalism in Western Nigeria 'Revisited.'" In *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa: Essays in Honour of A. H. M. Kirk-Greene*, edited by Terence Ranger, and Olufemi Vaughan, 213–246. London: Macmillan in Association with St. Anthony's College, Oxford.

Meyer, Birgit. 1999. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Meyer, Birgit 1998. "Make a Complete Break with the Past: Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 3: 316–349.

Meyer, Birgit. 1998. "Commodities and Power of Prayer: Pentecostalist Attitudes Toward Consumption in Contemporary Ghana," *Development and Change* 29, no. 4: 751–776.

Meyer, Birgit. 1994. "Beyond Syncretism: Translation and Diabolization in the Appropriation of Protestantism in Africa." In *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Charles Stewart, and Shaw Rosalind, 45–68. London: Routledge.

Meyer, Birgit. 2000. "Money, Power and Morality in Popular Ghanaian Cinema," *Ghana Studies* 4: 65–84.

Meyer, Birgit. 1992. "If You Are a Devil, You Are a Witch, and If You Are a Witch, You Are a Devil': The Integration of 'Pagan' Ideas Into the Conceptual Universe of Ewe Christians in South-eastern Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, no. 2: 98–132.

Middleton, John, and E. H. Winter, eds. 1963. *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, London: Regan Paul.

Mitchell, J. Clyde. 1956. *The Yao Village: A Study in the Social Structure a Nyasaland Tribe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mobley, Harris W. 1970. *The Ghanaian's Image of the Missionary: An Analysis of the Published Critiques of Christian Missionaries by Ghanaians 1897–1965*. Leiden: Brill.

Newell, S. 2007. "Pentecostal Witchcraft: Neoliberal Possession and Demonic Discourse in Ivoirian Pentecostal Churches." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37, no. 4: 461–490.

Nwankpa, Emeka. 1994. *Redeeming the Land: Interceding for the Nations*. Achimota: African Christian Press.

Omoobajesu, E. O. N.d. *My Experience in the Power of this World Before Jesus Saved Me*. Lagos: Omoobajesu.

Onyango, Symons. 1979. *Set Free from Demons: A Testimony to the Power of God to Deliver the Demon Possessed*. Nairobi: Evangel.

Onyinah, Opoku. 2020. "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case Study." In *Witchcraft Accusations in Global Perspective*, 187–211. Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag.

Onyinah, Opoku. 2012. *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana*. Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing.

Oshun, Chris O. 1998. "Spirits and Healing in a Depressed Economy: The Case of Nigeria." *Mission Studies* 15, no. 1: 32–52.

Parrinder, George. 1958. *Witchcraft: A Critical Study of the Belief in Witchcraft from the Records of Witch Hunting in Europe Yesterday and Africa Today*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Prince, Derek. 1998. *They Shall* Expel *Demons: What You Need to Know about Demons-Your Enemies.* Harpenden: Derek Prince Ministries.

Pype, Katrien. 2018. "Branhamist *Kindoki:* Ethnographic Notes on Connectivity, Technology, and Urban Witchcraft in Contemporary Kinshasa." In *Pentecostalism and Witchcraft*, edited by Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy, and Ruy Blanes, 115–144. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rasmussen, Steven Dale Horsager. 2008/2009. "Illness and Death Experiences in Northwestern Tanzania: An Investigation of Discourses, Practices, Beliefs, and Social Outcomes, Especially Related to Witchcraft, Used in a Critical

Contextualization and Education Process with Pentecostal Ministers." PhD diss., Trinity International University.

Science-Technology, Life Archives. 2014. "Outcry as South African Pastor makes Faithful Drink Petrol." https://www.aa.com.tr/en/science-technology/outcry-a s-south-african-pastor-makes-faithful-drink-petrol/116562.

Stroeken, Koen. 2018. "Witchcraft Simplex: Experiences of Globalized Pentecostalism in Central and Northwestern Tanzania." In *Pentecostalism and Witchcraft: Spiritual Warfare in Africa and Melanesia*, edited by Knut Rio, Michelle MacCarthy, and Ruy Blanes, 257–279. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tanee, Zacharias. N.d. *Delivered from Demons*. Yaounde: IGH.

Ukah, Asonzeh, and Magnus Echtler. 2009. "Born-again Witches and Videos in Nigeria." In *Global Pentecostalism: Encounters with Other Religious Traditions*, edited by David Westerlund, 73–92. London: I.B Tauris.

Uzora, Iyke Nathan. 1993. *Occult Grand Master Now in Christ*. Benin City: Osabu.

Umunna, Leonard. 1999. *Victory Over Temptation Part 1: Origin of Temptation and the Way Out*. Lagos: WordPower Communication Int'l. Co.

Van Dijk, Rijk A. 1992. "From Camp to Encompassment: Discourses of Transsubjectivity in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26, no. 4: 1–25.

Wagner, C. Peter, ed. 1993. *Engaging the Enemy: How to Fight and Defeat Territorial Spirits*. Ventura: Regal.

Part II: Spirits

Chapter 6

Spirits as Interlocutors or Taking Animism Seriously

Aleksei Rakhmanin

"Let us be human"

Ludwig Wittgenstein

"This is what we do. This is how we are"

Norman Malcolm

Invited to participate in the talk on spiritual matters regarding the Wittgensteinian philosophy, I take this opportunity to put together several ideas that reshape today's human sciences. In doing so, I am going to combine two perspectives: the one of the study of religion and the philosophical one, more or less grounded within the Wittgensteinian tradition. I believe that this combination may be operative in dealing with matters that are at the core of the present discussion. The question is how someone can understand statements that self-evidently and thus most certainly disagree with her basic ontology. The reason why such statements or practices may and often do seem weird to outsiders is that they contradict fundamental assumptions of 'how the world works'.

As Hermen Kroesbergen notes in his contribution to the volume, when a Westerner comes across manifestations of a traditional way of comprehending the world that she finds vague or perplexing, the immediate reaction of anthropologists would be, "for them this is so". Having some background in anthropology, I find this attitude reasonable, and anthropologists who are not insiders are usually trained to *embody* it. Their primary interest is to study how people live their lives, so anthropologists have to take the presuppositions of these people about how the world works for granted. This is both an epistemic and ethical position. I have neither the intellectual nor the moral right to regard my interlocutors as being in a specific – one may add, culturally appropriate – delusion. Generally speaking, this is what methodological agnosticism is about. This position, in religious studies associated with Ninian Smart (Smart 1973, 54, 57), presupposes that a researcher excludes from the body of scientific investigation the questions as to the existence/non-existence of supernatural agents and powers, considering

them unanswerable.[1] A researcher relies on accounts of those who believe in what they believe, such as, for example, spirits or other metaphysical beings – after all, it is the "real" (in phenomenological, or psychological sense) character of those agents that is substantial in the investigation, no matter whether they exist or not.

Methodological agnosticism has been widely accepted in academia for the last decades. The division between 'the real' and 'the existent' created an opportunity to put aside ontological questions while the scientific investigation goes on. Yet, sometimes we get to the point when we ask such questions in the most *genuine* manner – what view of reality is the true one (that is, the only one)? Fortunately, such moments of genuineness do not happen too often, yet this does not make the question meaningless. After all, even if I genuinely allow that "it is what people believe in", my own language allows a conceptual trick, as this phrase implies that people may take as real something that is not, and this is what 'belief' is all about. Moreover, in the last decades, an influential discourse has emerged in which such a way of reasoning is seen as highly problematic and which stresses the importance of *genuine* ontological concern. Postcolonial and/or poststructuralist thinking and new developments in anthropology such as new animism and ontological turn have made methodological agnosticism look as biased as alternative positions of atheism or naturalism, and ontology is once more a topic of discussion (I primarily mean Harvey 2005; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2014).

I will proceed as follows. First, I am going to map some central issues regarding this problem within present-day religious studies. I believe three developments are both challenging and contributing as to how to deal with the worlds of spirits.[2] I will then introduce several ideas developed by Wittgensteinian philosophers that I believe have the advantage if not to settle the discussion, but at least to clarify it. Finally, I will show how this approach may address spirits within the life of language. Before that, however, I think it is reasonable to delineate why ontological questions demand addressing after all, and why philosophy matters in answering them.

Two Kinds of Ontological Assumptions

My argument is this: there is a drastic disparity between two ways of dealing with ontologies. One of them I would call the 'natural' ontology, as a person usually "grows into" it – to use a Wittgensteinian expression (Malcolm 1977, 147) – in living her life. It is within this natural ontology that I am interested in ontological

---

[1]   Of course, that implies a specific understanding of the nature of science. Interestingly, methodological agnosticism is being criticized on the basis that it allegedly promotes a view on science that safeguards the privileged position of academic knowledge (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, 290, 298).

[2]   I prefer to use the concept 'spirits' here, as this helps avoid the inevitable yet idle question of whether these agents are really 'supernatural', or they are 'natural' in some specific sense.

matters as they may affect my living. Here I have a strong urge for certainty – I want to know for sure how things are. However, within the natural ontology, this strong attitude is accompanied by 'weak' language, in the sense that it has no explicated criteria of conceptual work except those embodied in practice. The second way of dealing with ontologies may be called epistemic since it is being obtained within the process of academic training (and this is a training I would say in a Wittgensteinian sense of *Abrichtung* in the *Brown Book*). It provides me with highly elaborated conceptual means and yet has no strong attitude to ontological certainty. Within this framework, we want to know others coherently. The academically appropriate knowledge makes it grammatically necessary to appreciate conceptual diversity. Moreover, it is usually argued that academic training allows overcoming the conceptual limitedness of natural language. However, I do not think that it is an inherent limitedness or limitedness at all. It is what differentiates ordinary language from conceptual tools, and that is what makes it natural.

Now, the problem starts when we carry our natural strive for ontological certainty into conceptual diversity, which is common for the study of human beings. This strive, I argue, is not a conceptual matter; it is a matter of attitude. Maybe an analogy would help. When I encounter someone who speaks in a foreign language, it is natural for me to assume that she not only speaks a different language but also speaks differently – she can find expressions for something I don't get and *vice versa*. That does not mean that the question of whose language is better makes no sense. It does make sense, as I want to be certain – if the issue really matters – that I know how things are. And if there are no distinctions in her language which are vital for me, between dreaming and awakening, for instance, I would reasonably conclude that my language is better. But this "better and worse" situation is far from establishing what is rational and what is not. We do not ask whether it is rational that one language has a case system and the other does not. If we ask, we would be told that we do not understand what language is.

One of the problematic features of the division between 'real' and 'existent' implied by methodological agnosticism is its inner incoherency. It often seems that in this pair, the use of 'existence' is usually quite logical – it is the 'all or nothing' matter of quantification: a thing either exists or does not exist. The 'real', on the other hand, refers to a range of positions; it is 'more or less' real, or 'in a sense real'. What often happens is that a researcher combines the logical appliance of existence with her basic strive for ontological certainty. This goes against both the basic presumption in academic epistemology and natural habits of language. Who is this "I" who can decide what exists? This "I" is a person in her natural state, and not under a scientific role, yet using the apparatus of strong epistemologies available in science. However, this may be a symptom of interesting conceptual dynamics.

What debates in recent decades have revealed is the basic limitation of agnosticism. Interestingly, the criticism comes from both camps, so to speak. Natu-

ralists argue that agnosticism, which epistemically allows people to have diverse concepts of reality, is not genuinely scientific, as science demands that one have strict and firm ideas of what exists.[3] Methodological agnosticism, therefore, is just a legitimization of a mistaken view of reality, and epistemically faulty, as a researcher certainly knows the facts, or at least should commit to facts as the opposite to what people take them for (Martin 2018, 69).[4] The opponents of the naturalistic paradigm propose various alternatives – such as liberal naturalism and emergent approaches that widen the basic notion of the 'natural', reformed agnosticism, ludism, and within philosophy specifically, various forms of pluralism (Burley 2018). These projects have one critical element in common, namely that they show an increasing awareness that ontology cannot be neglected in the study of religion. This is an interesting departure from the paradigms of the past. Indeed, within a constructivist paradigm, it is enough to have a human activity to study it; within methodological agnosticism, if a religious tradition occurs, it would be enough to study it. Now, religion is not enough anymore to study religion; it should be studied within the order of being. The opponents to naturalism, however, go further and declare that the old approaches, methodological agnosticism included, are all too Western and bear all the signs of cultural and intellectual (not to mention political) oppression. The stance – sometimes implied, sometimes explicit – that advocates of a renewal paradigm share is that one cannot be genuinely concerned with ontologies while posing them within the framework of one particular culture, which is ontologically hostile to other cultures.

Three Sets of Ontological Assumptions in the Study of Animism

In dealing with the issue of how spirits are real, the approaches of cognitive science, the 'new animism', and the ontological turn are most representative. The idea suggests itself that those developments range from a naturalist paradigm to a perspective that opposes it.

Let us first look at the cognitivists. The very project of cognitive science has been strongly based on the natural view of the universe, ranging from radical views such as eliminativism to more provisional ones (the book by Barrett is exemplary – Barrett 2004). In the case of studying spirits, the proponents of the cognitive approach reanimated the old evolutionist concept of 'animism', which is used to refer to the specific mental ability of humans to populate the world with human counterparts who, while being partly human, allegedly possess abilities that make them more than human. Significantly, various theories generally labeled 'animism' consider personhood to be its core element that either affected

---

[3]   cf.: "…if Moore said 'I know that this is wine and not blood', Catholics would contradict him" (Wittgenstein 1969, 32)

[4]   "not only explanations but even 'mere' descriptions logically entail ontological assumptions about the world".

the evolution of the species or resulted from it. According to these theories, the crucial aspect of human cognitive activity is to detect agents everywhere (e.g. Barrett 2004, 31–44). The task of cognitive science dealing with religious phenomena is thus to explain this animistic attitude as a natural, that is evolutionary, fact of human natural history. The logic suggests that in order to do that, it is necessary, on one hand, to detect this ability in other species as well in order to show the evolutionary continuity in nature, and, on the other hand, to show that this animistic ability is not specific to 'religion' but exists outside of religion as well.

While the cognitive approach may be regarded as one of the main tenets in today's religious studies, it remains an object of criticism. Both epistemic and ontological criticism are important to the present discussion. On one side, critics legitimately say that the apparatus of cognitive science is all too Western and non-reflexive – take, for instance, the uncritical usage of 'religion' (Strenski 2018, 207–209; to be fair, the proponents of the cognitive approach do not seem to regard this objection as deserving any attention). This would be just another argument about effective and ineffective tools in doing research if there were not a more serious concern. Indeed, on the other hand, it is said that the epistemic apparatus of the cognitivists is grounded within the native – that is Western – worldview, and hence cannot be objective. One of the presuppositions of this alleged naturalism is that the order of reality is confined to things or can truly be described only in things-like concepts. I guess the basic assumption here is that this order precludes agents from violating it – nature remains 'natural' only insofar humans do not interfere with it.

The epistemic premises of the cognitive approach can be also detached from a naturalist basis in terms of ontology. For instance, Justin Barrett is well known for his idea that the naturalness of religious belief is the result of God's creation (Barrett 2004, 121–123). In other words, naturalism can be reformed in such a way that it becomes a subset of a Christian framework. Another example of non-ontological naturalism is Tanya Luhrmann's research on how people around the world engage in 'paracosms' and communicate with spirits (Luhrmann 2020, esp. 25–57). The analysis she has provided leaves a reader to make her own decision – whether described spiritual beings exist because people create them, 'kindling' their reality with nothing but human cognitive abilities, or whether people train their special abilities that make it possible to detect and interact with these beings. Thus, while cognitive scientists usually describe such 'animistic promiscuity' as the imaginative inhabitation of the world with supernatural agents, one can re-describe it as the interaction with actual inhabitants of the world. While this significantly exemplifies that the cognitive approach may be agnostic, for my purposes here, another aspect of the cognitive theories of agency, or animism is important. Whether the basic attitude is agnostic or strictly naturalistic, they claim that the ability of *personal communication* to spirits is a fundamental aspect of animism. It is through

communication itself that spirits – whether they are imaginative or existent – become real for humans.

The second group of critics of methodological agnosticism are the so-called new animists. The 'new animism', as it is developing today, takes the communicative aspect of these phenomena as crucial. Now, this development is not really united, and the term 'animism' here serves more as a label than a unifying concept. What the researchers within this program really share is the claim that objects- or things-oriented ontologies are fundamentally misleading when we deal with animism. Within the animistic way of conceptualizing reality, spirits are not things, but persons, and what within 'Western' ontology is obviously a thing must not necessarily be a thing for an animist. Instead of describing this worldview as another instance of Western ontology, we must – in order to interpret it correctly – adopt the 'indigenous' ontology, which is totally different from an umbrella 'Western' one. The fundamental feature of this ontology is its relational nature, which one must understand directly here – relations shape the world, and relations are always personal. As Graham Harvey puts it, "[a]nimists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others... animism is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons" (Harvey 2005, xi). Despite the difference in how these persons with whom humans have relationships are defined – super-persons, other-than-human persons, etc. – the vital point is that a relationship is always social. It means that those agents are not excluded from reality into some transcendental anywhere but are embodied in every instance of interaction.

The third group of scholars who attack the lack of ontology in methodological agnosticism proposes an ontological turn. The ontological turn is even less unified than the new animism is. What the proponents of the ontological turn surprisingly share with both the cognitivists and the new animists[5] is the idea of the fundamental role of agency and relatedness in studying humans. Whereas the traditional modern view allegedly remains focused on an individual in her privileged autonomy, the proponents of ontological turn stress that to be human is to be interacting with others. This is especially evident when it comes to the criticism of things-oriented approaches, which supposedly result from the taken-for-granted naturalistic worldview of a researcher. Various instances of ontological turn are grounded in two basic assumptions. First, anthropology should not take ethnography as just the object, but adopt it as a means of conceptualization, and conceptual matters should be ontological – "[t]he epistemological problem of how one sees things is turned into the ontological question of what there is to be seen in the first place" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5). Second, within these ontologies, human agencies are just one of the agentive species. It is noteworthy that here the con-

---

[5]   Importantly, the same authors often represent both the ontological turn and new animism.

cept of a human being is under fundamental reconsideration. In the most detailed form, this approach was elaborated by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who proposed several concepts to grasp the fundamental disposition (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 39–93). Animism implies that there are multiple species, humans included, operating in the world; perspectivism refers to the fact that the world is different from each of these species' point of view; and multinaturalism conceptualizes the fact that species share one culture and different natures, so their visions of the world are not culturally, but naturally relative.

For my present purpose, it is perspectivism that is the most significant, as it reveals one feature of animism that is not so evident in the other approaches. It refers to the fact that in order to communicate with spirits, one has to adopt their vision that is culturally the same but naturally different. This change of perspective, I argue, as well as the presumption that the world is the crossing of the viewpoints of different species, is what actually makes animism and the grammar of communicating with spirits intelligible *within the ordinary language*. The main point here is that the world consists of persons and not things – persons are interested in persons in the first place. That perspective makes the 'world' itself a 'personal' concept.

I don't think that it is reasonable to look for a reconciliation between those positions – they are effective as they are. Yet what the cursory review shows is that within the three paradigms is the fundamental conception that the comprehension of reality is relational and interpersonal. This certainly goes against the long tradition of making Cartesianism the natural mode of reasoning. And certainly, it makes Cartesianism a counter-intuitive view.

The Concept of Person and Concepts as Personal Relations

Interestingly, authors such as Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro make Cartesianism the ideal representative of modern thinking (Ingold 2011; Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2014). Proclaimed to be thoroughly things-oriented, Cartesianism seems to reject personality/personhood as a constructive aspect of reality and reduce the concept of individuality to a fragmented unity of elementary items that are constitutive of things. In this paradigm, 'self' is detectable only by introspection, and hence, personality is ultimately private. While such typical Cartesianism postulates – or as its proponents would say, demonstrates – the Absolute being, God is also known by humans through introspection. This means that communication between man and God is excluded, and God is not a person but a principle (the question remains whether human beings are persons in this picture). Now, the Cartesian view of reality is highly counter-human, as it leaves no room for communication, not only between humans and God – who is demonstrated to be the only One – but also between humans. Others

can never be truly other than my Self. Thus, I would hardly call Cartesianism – however stereotypical of modern thinking – a natural worldview.

Another aspect of this worldview is that it makes observation of persons impossible. As observation is reserved for things only, while introspection is privileged to observe the Self, the subject has no means to detect other persons *qua* persons. Therefore, a true anti-Cartesian view would presuppose turning the picture around and putting not things but persons as the ground for seeing the world. Observation then is indistinguishable from communication assumed as the fundamental aspect of 'reality', which is framed not as the order of things, but the order of persons. I think it is not only philosophical speculation but also a quite common-sense view that every human, being a person, is interested in persons primarily. To adopt a Wittgensteinian stance, "This is what we do. This is how we are" (Malcolm 1977, 152): it is in our human nature as persons to interact, so for human beings, ontology is *naturally* concerned with persons, and this is beyond the possibility of an ultimate justification. Some of our most basic or fundamental beliefs are such that they cannot be justified: "We recognize them as natural human tendencies . . . After all, explanations come to an end. In referring something to a natural human tendency haven't we reached rock bottom?" (Malcolm 1991, 219). In what follows, I propose not to move beyond that rock bottom and take as a fact that humans interact with spirits. Taking our human ability to communicate with other beings for granted may be a starting point to another philosophical endeavor, that is a study of how spirits are possible to interact with, how they are persons.

Though the presented survey on the developments in human science may give the impression of oversimplifying things, it is enough for me to stress the point crucial to my contribution. Despite the fundamental difference as to how to define "natural", the human ability to find spirits and relate to them may be regarded as natural from either an externalist (spirits are there) or an internalist (spirits are there *in* human cognition) perspective. In both cases, it is essential that the nature of spirits is relational, that they are as real as humans relate themselves to them (see Udelhoven 2021, 23–25, *esp.* 54–55). It is here that we get to Malcolm's "rock bottom" of our "natural history" (Wittgenstein). It is possible to pose two kinds of questions, starting from that rock bottom. One is the empirical type of questions, which – if they are about existence or reality – are out of point unless they are preceded with the questions of the second, conceptual type. Indeed, what kind of answer to "Do spirits really exist?" would be sufficient to settle the question? Or rather the question should be reformulated *properly* – "Do orisha exist?", "Does Chukwu exist?", or "Does Jesus Christ exist?" etc.

The questions on existence are not empirical – they are conceptual, or grammatical (in the Wittgensteinian tradition). They are the questions of the usage of words that can be most perplexing and harmful in the sense that they produce "mental cramps" because they couch the very core ways of our reasoning.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard such a study as "just" linguistic, as being all about language. I argue that grammatical investigation implies ontological decisions – here I think Holbraad and Petersen's claim cited above is entirely on point. Every concept has meaning only insofar as it grows from the lives of human beings. To use Malcolm's interpretation of Wittgenstein again, concepts are there "like our lives". It is therefore unrealistic to pose conceptual questions – not to say answers to them – without making the decisions about how the world works for those concepts to be used. The spiritual reality is not only 'natural' in either of the two aforementioned senses but also ontological insofar as it is conceptualized in our language, and it is ontology that makes our language natural. The response to two possible objections may clarify my claim.

The first possible objection is the tendency I have mentioned earlier to take natural ontology as a copy or variant of the epistemic one (as introduced above). I guess there is an expectation that a natural ontology would be as rigorous and consistent as we expect from the epistemically developed approach with its strict language. I do not see why this must be so, and moreover, in philosophy, it was this exact opposition between the vagueness of natural language and the coherency of *calculus*, an epistemically preferable language that in no small part gave rise to the analytic tradition. That said, a philosopher might conclude that, being fuzzy, natural ontology is not ontology at all. That would be the same as denying that ordinary language, not being a *calculus*, is not language at all. The ontology of ordinary language is fuzzy and may be called 'unstable,' but again that is what makes language natural. As soon as one stops taking *calculus* as a template for language, ontology may as well be conceptualized differently. It is noteworthy that the expectations of natural ontology to be conceptually rigorous or strict might follow from the confusion of attitude to knowing things and means of getting it, which are 'weak' as I have noted.

The second possible objection would be the demand to characterize this fuzziness of ordinary language ontologically. I claim that this follows from the communicative nature of conceptual reality. Indeed, if every concept is the result of the conversational activity of persons, it is always *personal*, it is in the stream of life of those who are living, and as this stream is not static, the concept is fuzzy by its very nature. It belongs to my mind no more than to the minds of others, and if a philosopher is genuine enough, she can never tell where the border between the minds lies. Moreover, nobody can tell *with certainty* where the border between things, persons, and concepts lies. Within the conceptual whole where our live takes place, I claim, the most certain are those elements which make life comprehensible. If it appears that other-than-human persons are parts of the communication between humans and affect their lives, then they *participate* in the communicative process. If one is to understand these others, she should communicate with them, and it is not wise to ignore one's communicants, however extraordinary they may be.

These two ideas have an implementation regarding the opposition between things- and persons-oriented approaches. Obviously, the natural ontology demands the latter, and within this type of ontology, the concept of 'person' inevitably becomes grammatical; from its usage, it follows how the world works. It would be premature to conclude that conceptualizing spirits as persons would be enough to understand the grammar of communication with them. However, it is a starting point. Like every concept, 'person' is fuzzy. Is my cat a person? I am sure *she* is, though I am not so sure about other cats. Is my mom's plant a person? Probably, I would say yes, in contrast to other plants I am indifferent about. Is a valuable piece of art a person to one who relates to it? Is a fetus a person? (Hallamaa 1997). All of these questions become meaningful once we realize there are no clear-cut ways of marking how we use 'person'.

Significantly, within the Wittgensteinian tradition, the first attempt to speak of religious beliefs seriously was made by John Wisdom at the time he initiated his seminal discussion of the concepts of other minds.[6] Wisdom explicitly – yet briefly – discusses the animistic aspect of religious belief (see his "Gods" and "The Logic of God"). When a child whose father died contemplates how the father would have judged her actions, or what line of behavior is appropriate in the eyes of one who created the world, this reflection is far from being unintelligible or mistaken (Wisdom 1945, 186, 202 *et passim*). We know certain things *for certain* because those who are not here at the moment (be it spirits, ancestors, or dead parents) communicate them to us through every act of our communication with others. Every serious decision about actions demands that humans reflect on these things, i.e., are aware of being in communication with them. Now, what is the most conceptually intriguing is that at some point it becomes misleading to demand justifications that others have minds, or that I can know another person's mind. One of the "rock bottoms", in Wisdom, was this one: we interact as persons without knowing for certain what a person is, or rather – interacting as a person is knowing 'person'.

As Peter Winch famously claimed about rationality, it is "not just a concept in a language like any other... It is a concept necessary to the existence of any language" (Winch 1965, 318), and I see no reason why this is not the case with 'person' as well. And, notably, understanding spirits as persons primarily changes the ways of studying their grammar. To use another of Winch's suggestions, one may delineate the process of concept-formation here (Winch 1977, 196). Indeed, what does it mean that spirits are persons? For one part, it means that the world as being conceptualized within communication is shaped by the interaction with spirits (cf. to perspectivism). For another, that would mean that the possibility to communicate with spirits is not an occasional characteristic of them, but an

---

[6]   See his "Other Minds" series, published in 1940–1944 (Wisdom 1952) and *esp.* his "Things and persons" (Wisdom 1948).

essential part of the grammar of 'spirits' as 'persons'. Indeed, a person is someone to whom I can and do talk.

In all that, the question remains in what sense spirits are real – are they real as tables and chairs, or mathematical entities, or other minds? "It is part of the job of a philosopher to show us these differences, and in doing so he shows that we mean when we talk of the reality of a chair is very different from what we mean when we talk of the reality of God" (Moore 2005, 214). Do spirits inhabit the world or live exclusively in our minds? From the perspective I propose, this question should be rephrased – there are all sorts of 'the real' in conceptual life, yet I would say that the most real are those elements that make communication possible. Compare that to the sense of 'the real' to which Rush Rhees refers in his grammatical studies of the language of morality and religion: when I say, "This is the real issue" while speaking about moral uncertainty, I introduce the matter of reality that, according to Rhees, is no less substantive than one of the physical things talk. It is the reality of the conditions of discourse (Rhees 1997, 24). As 'person' is a concept – among others – thanks to which reality of discourse 'hangs together', to use Rhees' expression, it is ontologically grounded, and so are spirits.

Grammar of the Spirits

In the following, I am going to set several conceptual consequences of this understanding of spirits. On one hand, I will keep in mind the characteristics of spirits explicated within the three approaches discussed earlier. The fact that these features are repeatedly identified despite the differences in approaches themselves is remarkable. On the other hand, I will be following the grammar of 'talking to a person' in (my) natural language. On several occasions, I will also illustrate this grammar by referring to narrative fiction, namely, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Though this is not the topic of my paper, it is still worth mentioning that the conceptual work through which literature arises may be revealing both in studying cognitive mechanisms with regard to religion (Luhrmann 2020, 25–32) and in appreciating religious matters philosophically (Burley 2017).

If spirits are persons, then the communication with them becomes personal. Literally, this means that the interaction with spirits cannot be regarded as just the projection of humans; otherwise, it would not be communication. The projection is of course an aspect of any communication, which among other things makes it predictable, but – within the natural logic of 'talk' – I can never reasonably regard a person I am talking to as my projection. Here, the possibility of communication breakdowns must be taken into account – as they happen between human beings. Even more important here is doubt in the situation of communication.[7] Within everyday communication, the matter of doubt is fundamental as it reflects the lack

---

[7]   I am grateful to Bernhard Udelhoven for this point.

of absolute certainty as to how our expressions will be interpreted, how communication itself will be carried out, and what lines shouldn't be crossed (for instance, whether the joke I'm about to make might be taken offensively). As the communication with spirits cannot be absolutely certain (since they are independent persons and not copies of myself), I would say that the matter of doubt becomes its necessary condition. In general, one of the conceptual requirements for talking with spirits would be the balance between predictable and unpredictable actions. Talking is an activity where different options are open to the participants, and some of them may not – and sometimes should not, as in the case of disagreement – meet the expectations fully.

This latter element is explicit in spontaneous actions taken by spirits. An important feature of a religious attitude is to appreciate that agents live their own lives besides humans. This means that the communication between humans and spirits is always a fragment within the lives of the latter, and outside this communication, they proceed to live independently (cf. to multinaturalism). Therefore, there is a possibility that humans take spirits' actions as communication, i.e., speech addressed to them, while actually it is talk between spirits not intended for humans.[8] Our communicational habits imply that there can be an intervention into others' talk, and specific conceptual means convince us if the talk is meant for us. Another grammatical aspect of this would be that spirits own their own language, which may be the same as humans' but may differ from it as well. In her contribution to the conference, Joyce Mlenga described how the Ngonde distinguish between, on the one hand, the talks spirits are conducting among themselves and, on the other, talk of spirits and to spirits that concern humans. Yet, humans as well have to learn the language of spirits through experience and *observation*. Notably, the communication here is not verbal in both directions – humans observe the actions of spirits, while, according to Mlenga, "when the spirits respond in audible voices, people run away".

Understanding spirits as persons demands that they *speak* and not just use language. The distinction here is analogous to the one Rush Rhees made in his "Wittgenstein's Builders". In an influential metaphor, Wittgenstein presents an elementary language as similar to the communication of builders. According to Rhees, this metaphor may give an impression of the building's language but not of the builders' language. The latter implies elements that are actual outside the

---

[8]   Compare this to Hallowell's iconic report on communication with 'superhuman persons' among the Ojibwe: "An informant told me that many years before he was sitting in a tent one summer afternoon during a storm, together with an old man and his wife. There was one clap of thunder after another. Suddenly the old man turned to his wife and asked, 'Did you hear what was said?' 'No,' she replied, 'I didn't catch it.' My informant, an acculturated Indian, told me he did not at first know what the old man and his wife referred to. It was, of course, the thunder. The old man thought that one of the Thunder Birds had said something to him. He was reacting to this sound in the same way as he would respond to a human being, whose words he did not understand" (Hallowell 1960, 33).

building itself, while ". . . the activity of the builders does not give you an idea of a people with a definite sort of life. Do they have songs and dances and festivals, and do they have legends and stories? Are they horrified by certain sorts of crimes, and do they expose people to public ridicule?" (Rhees 1960, 184). The crucial distinction here is the one between using language and speaking or talking. Following this line of thought, the question may be asked whether the communication of humans and spirits bears signs of communication between spirits themselves.

This feature may be also understood, among other issues, as an instance of redundancy, an aspect of language that makes it the medium for communication. An expression may be meaningful in several ways, and not all of them are actual in a particular situation. This results in the ambiguity of the speech and the necessity to interpret it – the tendency of spirits to act counter-intuitively, that is in their own logic, is revealed when the communication with them requires the participation of a specialist, the switch between the modes of discourse, or the adoption of a particular spirit's nature (cf. perspectivism and multinaturalism). And that also implies the difference in the concept of personality when applied to spirits and humans – the communication shows the difference in their natures.[9]

Another aspect of the balance between redundancy and economy in language is the occurrence of idiomatic expressions, which refer not to the world but to the language itself. As Achebe famously said, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". An outsider may well take some of the elements in the conversation with spirits as 'formal' or non-informative, yet this may be a display of an important aspect that makes using language talking. Not everything in the speech act refers to the situation of communication, and certain aspects that may seem redundant may as well connect this situation to other cases of speaking, both human and spiritual.

This leads to another aspect – spirits as persons are 'recognizable' (Udelhoven 2021, 62–63, 216 *et passim*). The occurrences, like in the example Mlenga gave, that are occasional for the outsider may be meaningful as communicational situations for those who recognize these occurrences as speech. Again, that speech may not be addressed to humans, but still, it may, so there should be means to differentiate between these possibilities. Importantly, the question "How do you see the difference?" may be meaningful here only up to a certain point. It is not as eccentric as it may seem since such situations are quite common in the communication between humans. For instance, when I come into the room and see that things are not in their usual place, I can immediately recognize which of my relatives visited it. The question of how I know that rapidly becomes meaningless. If I say that my wife was there, can the question "How do you know that?" be

---

9   One of the most significant analyses of the matter done within Wittgensteinianism is Gareth Moore's discussion of the grammar of 'Spirit' (Moore 205, 215–218). Though it concerns theistic traditions, it can be developed to contribute to the present discussion as well.

answered reasonably? What kind of answer could that be, except the recourse to the arrangements of things and a reference to my wife's habits?

Finally, maybe the most significant aspect of understanding spirits as persons is ethical. I do not mean the well-established view that supernatural agents are part of the moral order in this or that society, and even not the fact that humans and spirits communicate in accordance with the rules established in a given society. In this case, I mean research ethics in studying the grammar of spirits. As I claimed, the communication between humans and spirits makes all concepts more or less spiritual. In their interactions, people embody this aspect of concepts referring to what is right and wrong. However, what happens if we exclude spiritual beings from the talk of spirits?

A couple of elements in Wole Soyinka *Death and the King's Horseman* may reveal how this grammar of communication as ethical is totally incomprehensible if spirits are excluded from it. Soyinka himself warned against reading the drama as if it were a representation of the conflict between the Yoruba and the Westerners, the more so that the conflict in the drama is embodied in the figure of the Elesin (see Burey 2017, 17–18), who are supposed – and eventually failed – to accompany the King in the latter's afterlife journey. The narrative implies that the Elesin is to commit self-sacrifice, and one of the elements in the drama, even its main character, are drums calling the Elesin. In the drama, the drums and their changing tones are not stage requisites but persons without whom things do not happen. For those who know spiritual language, they are voices, while for the Westerners, they are noises (cf. that with the drums' talk in Achebe[10]). This is not far from what usually happens in the communication between people: if I do not want to understand another person, I declare her statements to make no sense, to be gibberish. Drums are interlocutors, and not requisites – in the latter case, the entire situation shifts into nonsense. Another episode that shows the ethics of communication is Pilkings' wearing the masks for the ball as if they were requisites. Amusa, a converted Muslim, should, according to Pilkings, be resistant to the fact that he and his wife are dressed in the clothes of death. However, Amusa refuses to speak to them, and Pilkings called it "rubbish". "I no fit," says Amusa: he does not belong to the situation of communication with spirits, while Pilkings does not see spirits here. One may read this episode as the epitome of the clash between religious and non-religious worldviews; yet Pilkings thinks that Amusa is immune to native beliefs as a Muslim, that his religious self rejects "mumbo-jumbo". However, persons cannot be rejected in the face of them, and Amusa's attitude reveals the ethical grammar of communication: spirits are there and ignoring them would

---

[10] "There were seven drums and they were arranged according to their sizes in a long wooden basket. Three men beat them with sticks, working feverishly from one drum to another. They were possessed by the spirit of the drums"; "The drums went mad and the crowds also" (Achebe 1994, 47, 50).

be immoral. Here, spirits make communication between Amusa and the spouses *im*possible.

Since the entire happening is the one of death and dying (Soyinka insisted that the play should have no breaks – dying has no act-waits), death itself is a communicative agent in the drama. When a person or a group has to deal with death, this is a *personal* affair, and the interlocutors of those who are dying are dead as well as living ones. So, the Elesin's failure to follow the dead Alafin – *no matter for what reason* – is an act of disrespect in its literal sense. Again, spirits are communicants who make understanding possible. Moreover, they are real, as humans exhibit their moral obligations to spirits, and these obligations, communicated in action and reflection, frame the stream of life, which would be incomprehensible otherwise.

I do not want my view to make an impression of some sort of Wittgensteinian spiritualism or spiritual Wittgensteinianism. What I have tried to do is to show that the grammar of spirits as related to the grammar of 'person' in ordinary language finds significant accordance with a wide variety of features of animism, as explicated within quite diverse theoretical positions. What philosophy can contribute to these is the demonstration that within ordinary language, 'person' is a grammatical concept, which, though determining the entire structure of language, is far from being unequivocal in its usages. However, this vagueness is not a defect of any kind. This inner ambiguity not only allows us to conceptualize reality in a number of ways, appropriating ourselves to the cases of real communication, but also frames these cases. This grammar – weak and fuzzy – thus may itself restrict our natural attitude for certainty without giving up natural language, and hence without adopting any sort of strict epistemology. More importantly for the present issue, it can open the view to the worlds of spirits *from within* natural language.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. 1994. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books

Barrett, Justin. 2004. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.

Burley, Mikel. 2017. "'The Happy Side of Babel': Radical Plurality, Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2: 101–132.

Burley, Mikel. 2018. "Religious Pluralisms: From Homogenization to Radicality." *SOPHIA* 59: 311–331.

Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hallamaa, Jaana. 1997. "The Concept of Person and God as Trinity of Persons." *Philosophical Studies in Religion, Metaphysics, and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Heikki Kirjavainen*, 140–159. Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society.

Hallowell, Irving. 1960. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View." In *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Stanley Diamond, 18–49. NY: Columbia University Press.

Harvey, Graham. 2005. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: Hurst and Co.

Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Axel Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: an Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.

Knibbe, Kim, and Andre Droogers. 2011. "Methodological Ludism and the Academic Study of Religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 3-4: 283–303

Luhrmann, Tanya. 2020. *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Malcolm, Norman. 1977. "On Groundlessness of Belief." In *Reason and Religion*, edited by Stuart C. Brown, 99–100. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Malcolm, Norman. 1991. "Philosophical Confusion and Sin." In *Peter Geach: Philosophical Encounters*, edited by Harry A. Lewis, 215–227. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Martin, Craig. 2018. "Incapacitating Scholarship: Or, Why Methodological Agnosticism Is Impossible." In *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, edited by Jason N. Blum, 53–73. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Mlenga, Joyce. 2022. "The Material and Spirit Worlds Among the Ngonde of Northern Malawi: Two Realities of a Different Kind." *Present Volume*.

Moore, Gareth. 2005. "Wittgenstein's English parson: some reflections on the reception of Wittgenstein in the philosophy of religion." In *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, edited by D. Z. Phillips, and Mario von der Ruhr, 209–228. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Rhees, Rush. 1960. "Wittgenstein Builders." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series* 60: 171–186.

Rhees, Rush. 1997. *On Religion and Philosophy*, edited with an Introduction by D.Z. Phillips assisted by Mario von der Ruhr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strenski, Ivan. 2018. "What Can the Failure of Cog-Sci of Religion Teach Us about the Future of Religious Studies?" In *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, edited by Jason N. Blum, 206–221. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Udelhoven, Bernhard. 2021. *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism*, 3rd edition. Lusaka, Zambia: FENZA Publications.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology*, edited and translated by Peter Skafish. University of Minnesota Press, Univocal Publishing.

Winch, Peter. 1964. "Understanding a Primitive Society." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 4: 307–324.

Winch, Peter. 1977. "Meaning and Religious Language." In *Religion and Reason*, edited by Stuart C. Brown, 193–221. London: Cornell University Press.

Wisdom, John. 1945. "Gods." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45: 185–206.

Wisdom, John. 1948. "Things and Persons." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 22: 179–215.

Wisdom, John. 1952. *Other Minds*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Chapter 7

African Traditional Religion and the Grammar of the Spirit

Johnson Uchenna Ozioko

Introduction

Many who have reflected on African Traditional Religion agree that the category of the spirit constitutes a pervasive element of the African traditional religious universe (Ekeke and Ekeopara 2010; Ugwu 2017). The traditional religious world of the African is one densely populated by spirits in their variegated manifestations, expressions and even hierarchies. Thus, the word *spirit*, in the context of the African Traditional Religion, does not seem to have a univocal referent; it is used to refer to different realities, and it is employed in various occasions. It is against this backdrop that this paper wishes to philosophically investigate the different uses of the word *spirit* in the context of African Traditional Religion. It begins by, first, trying to clarify what African Traditional Religion is, and then it will attempt an adumbration of what constitutes the religious pantheon in the traditional African context. It will then shed light on the category of the spirit to investigate its uses in the context of the traditional religious universe of the African. In conclusion, it will be argued that the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the category of the spirit in contemporary African religions, especially as evidenced in Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, is inalienably connected with the pervasive and ubiquitous use of the category in the traditional religious background of Africans. Let me at the onset concur with different authors who have cautioned against the tendency of unwarranted generalizations about African realities, as if Africa were a tiny village made up of homogeneous groups of people. Rather, Africa is a vast continent composed of highly diversified and heterogeneous cultural, ethnic, language, and even religious groups. For this reason, I have chosen, for purposes of methodological precision, to restrict my analysis of the use of the word *spirit* in African Traditional Religion to the Igbo cultural group of Nigeria. Though what is obtainable among this circumscription may not be found in the same way among other African cultural groups, it seems, however, undeniable that the same practices and beliefs find expression by immeasurable degrees in other parts of Africa, particularly the sub-Saharan Africa whose cultural unity has been persuasively defended by different African scholars (Diop 1960; 2000; Obenga 1973).

Understanding African Traditional Religion

When we talk of African Traditional Religion, we mean the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of Africans. It is the religion that resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans. It is practised today in various forms and various shades and intensities by many Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians (Awulalu 1975, 1). Clarifying the meaning of "traditional" used to qualify the African religious phenomenon, Awulalu explains that "the word means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as connecting the past with the present and the present with eternity. This is not a 'fossil' religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practised by living men and women". For Ikenga-Metuh, African Traditional Religion means the "institutionalized patterns of beliefs practiced by various African Societies from time immemorial in response to the 'Supernatural' as manifested in their environment and experience" (Ikenga-Metuh 1987). African Traditional Religion is a lived reality that involves and permeates the totality of the life of many African peoples. It is a cultural heritage that determines the spontaneous and subconscious relations of the African peoples and their interpretation of reality (Olupona 2014, xxiv).

The prodigious African religious scholar, John Mbiti, made the incisive observation that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti 1969, 1). Religion so suffuses and penetrates every aspect of the African world and life that the whole African world is a religious world. In fact, in Africa, religion and culture are so intertwined that African religion has been called a cultural religion and African culture a religious culture. As Mbiti would say, "It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe" (Mbiti 1969, 262). When we talk about the African religious universe, we are not just referring to the visible material world. According to the African worldview, the universe embraces both the visible and the invisible, the sacred and the profane, all arranged in their hierarchy and chained to the human being's well-being or oppression, happiness or unhappiness, as the case may be. In the African religious pantheon, the visible and the invisible, the profane and the sacred, are so intimately united that they become like the two sides of the same coin. They are inseparable and in constant interaction (Onwubiko 1991, 3). The two worlds and their inhabitants are united by participation in a common life force. At the highest echelon of the hierarchy of beings in the African religious universe is the Supreme Being, God, recognized by most African peoples and cultures as the source of life and the creator of all that exists. From the Supreme Being, the life force originates directly and then flows and diffuses to every other being, sometimes directly and most times through different intermediaries. Directly below the Supreme Being in

the hierarchy are different divinities who may be considered the most immediate collaborators of the Supreme Being. Next to the deities are other spirits who may be good or bad. Some of them are the disincarnated spirits of some dead people who, for some reason, have not been able to find their place among their ancestors. The most predominant spiritual beings in the African religious pantheon are the ancestors referred to as the "living-dead", in the sense that though dead, they continue to form practical parts of their earthly families and clans, constantly influencing their lives, decisions, and choices. Many African peoples also believe in the existence of genies and other telluric forces and the spirits of witches and wizards who, though coming from living persons, are believed to have the capacity to leave their bodies, sometimes inhabit lower animals and cause havoc to others.

The visible African world is also organized in a hierarchical form. In many parts of Africa, the king or queen occupies the apex of this hierarchy. There are then the clan heads. They are also seen as symbolizing the presence and authority of the ancestors among their descendants. Different families have their family heads who are the centre of family life and worship in their various families. Of course, family in Africa is not just circumscribed to the idea of parents and children but is instead an extended family which embraces all those linked by the relationship of blood, marriage, and even friendship. It includes the living, the dead, and even the yet-to-be-born. Members of different families are united under the clan head, and they form one community. Below the human being in the African traditional religious pantheon are animals, plants, and other inorganic beings. They are all at the service of man, either contributing to enhancing or diminishing his life (Mulagu 1973, 121–127). At the centre of the entire hierarchy of beings, both visible and invisible, is man, his life, and well-being. In this light, the traditional African worldview has been considered to be both spiritual and anthropocentric: "It is a spiritual worldview because all the spiritual beings are believed to be

constantly in action in the world of humans. It is anthropocentric because the actions of God and the other spiritual beings are generally directed towards humans for their sustenance and well-being; and infra-human realities are thought to be ordered towards the promotion of human life" (Onah 2012).

Grammar of the Spirit in African Traditional Religion

In their article, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology", Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara portrayed the spirits as "strangers, foreigners and outsiders in the category of things that should be defeated using spiritual powers" (Ekeke and Ekeopara 2010, 209). This is, to say the least, a very defectively narrow understanding of the term *spirit*. In as much as there are spirits which are considered negatively as portrayed by these authors, the term *spirit* in the African traditional religious ontology has so many other posi-

tive connotations which these authors did not bring to bear in their considerations. Even though a particular category of beings is designated spirits in the African religious pantheon, the use of the word *spirits* is not limited to this specific category but seems, in one way or the other, applicable to virtually the entire spectrum of beings occupying the African religious universe. It is used with reference to beings in both the visible and the invisible realms; to both animate and inanimate beings; to both spiritual as well as material beings. Perhaps this justifies Bonaventure Ugwu's suggestion that "Africans understand and use the term spirits in two different but related senses: the generic sense and the restricted sense" (Ugwu 2017, 79). Whereas the restricted sense may be identified with the particular category of beings referred to as spirits in the hierarchy, all other uses of the word *spirit* outside this particular category may be said to fall within the purview of the generic sense of the use of the word *spirit.*

As earlier indicated, my analysis here will largely depend on what is obtained among the Igbo cultural group of Nigeria. In examining the use of the word *spirit* among this group, I make recourse to the trilogy of novels by the renowned Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God*, and *No Longer at Ease.* Though fictitious, these novels, especially the first two, are set in African villages, and they very aptly capture the reality of traditional Igbo culture. They describe the customs, beliefs and traditional culture of the traditional Igbo people of Nigeria and offer us a clear image of the Igbo people in their traditional sociocultural milieu, especially at the onset of African encounter with foreign cultures through colonization. As Ezenwa and Ohaeto rightly observed regarding *Arrow of God*, it "synthesizes the mythic, religious, cultural, economic and social traditions of the Igbo in a bid to explore the African condition" (Ezenwa and Ohaeto 2000, 99). Udofia adds that, "more importantly, the novel asserts the supremacy of the world of the spirits in the affairs of the people" (Udofia 2014, 107).

In Achebe's trilogy, there are 106 occurrences of the word *spirit*, appearing 52 times in *Arrow of God*, 46 times in *Things Fall Apart*, and 8 times in *No Longer at Ease.* A careful analysis of the word *spirit* in these occurrences reveals at least 12 referents. The most frequent use of the word is with reference to the ancestors, occurring 53 times: 26 times in *Things Fall Apart*, 24 times in *Arrow of God*, and 3 times in *No Longer at Ease.* The ancestors, as earlier indicated, constitute the most prominent spiritual beings in the African traditional religious pantheon. They are often referred to as the "living-dead" in the sense that though dead, they continue to form practical parts of their earthly families and clans, constantly influencing their lives, decisions, and choices. They are often targets of African traditional worship. Africans so prize them that people foreign to the culture have often erroneously reduced the

entire African Traditional Religion to ancestor worship. A spectacular way through which the ancestors usually manifest their presence among many African societies is through the masquerade cult. For instance, in the Igbo religious tra-

dition, masquerades represent the ancestral spirits, and it is believed that the ancestral spirits communicate through them. Though underneath the mask is a human being, the mask has transformed the person into an ancestral spirit for the Igbo people. That is why unmasking a masquerade is akin to killing the ancestors. Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, recounts a particular religious ceremony held annually in honour of the earth deity. During this ceremony, the masquerade "*Egwugwu*" – an ancestral spirit – used to dance to grace the celebration. Enoch, a zealous and energetic Christian convert, unmasked an "*Egwugwu*" on one such occasion. This was reckoned a very grievous offense to the clan since he had practically killed an ancestral spirit in doing so. In Achebe's trilogy, there are many references to these masquerades as spirits or ancestral spirits.

Next to the ancestors in the frequency of occurrence in Achebe's trilogy, we find the use of spirits with reference to the vast category of beings strictly referred to as spirits. Here, we have 33 appearances: 10 times in *Things Fall Apart*, 20 times in *Arrow of God*, and 3 times in *No Longer at Ease*. Most often, people who have written about the spirits in African Traditional Religion would only concentrate on this category. But as we have noted, even though the strict sense of the word is with reference to them, the use of the word is not exclusive to beings in this category. In this circumscribed category of the spirits, there is a vast area of referents. Some of them are benevolent and benign, and so are often believed to be responsible for people's fortunes. In *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, the eldest man in the village, reprimanding Okonkwo for calling Osugo a woman, said that "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (20). It was, however, "not true that Okonkwo's palm kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself" (20), because his achievements were based on solid personal efforts. Many other spirits are believed to be wicked and malevolent. These are the evil spirits which are to be avoided as much as possible; they "are dreaded by Africans because of their negative impacts on human existence". It is particularly with respect to this category of spirits that Bonaventure Ugwu asserts that "The fear of evil spirits is the beginning of wisdom for many African people", informing us that "Most of the evil spirits are not known by particular names but some of them are identified by a group nomenclature. Among these are: 'Ghost spirits', 'Ogbanje or Abiku spirits' and 'Witchcraft spirits'" (Ugwu 2017, 80).

Ghost spirits are made up of "persons who were very wicked while on earth, or whose dead body was not buried with appropriate rites and who died badly such as by hanging, drowning or some unknown diseases", and so are not admitted into the revered abode of the ancestors. Consequently, "their spirits continue to wander and cause trouble among the living". Achebe in *Arrow of God*, for instance, recalls the quiet retreat called *Oso Nwanadi* held by the six villages of Umuaro "to placate the resentful spirits of kinsmen killed in war" (196). The *ogbanje* spirits are believed to be "wandering spirits who specialize in the sadistic mischief of finding their

way into wombs to be born in order to die. The traditional explanation is that there is a company of spirits whose members are under an agreement to undertake in turns this errand of mischief: before those who are thus assigned to leave the company temporarily, they enter into a pact that they will return, that is, die at certain named dates and times" (Ugwu 2017, 81). Achebe offers a vivid picture of the activities of the *Ogbanje* in his *Things Fall Apart* in the condition of Ekwefi, one of Okonkwo's wives who "had borne ten children and nine of

them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three" (56). He informs us that "No *ogbanje* would yield her secrets easily, and most of them never did because they died too young – before they could be asked questions" (59).

Regarding witchcraft spirits, Ekwunife observes that witchcraft constitutes "an endemic belief of Africans from time immemorial. . .rooted in the mysterious element of African traditional religious culture" (Ekwunife 2011, 19). According to Bolaji Idowu, "African concepts about witchcraft consists in the belief that spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind or estate; that witches have guilds or operate singly, and that spirits sent out of the human body in this way can act either invisibly or through a lower creature

– an animal or a bird" (Idowu 1973, 175–176). There are also sea spirits called *Mami wata* (*mammy water*) which are usually depicted as half-woman, half-fish in the sense that they are represented as having the body of a woman and the tail of a fish. In some places, these sea spirits even have their own cult and are venerated. The greatest personification of the evil spirit among the Igbos is in what many call *Ekwensu*, the devil incarnate. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe narrating one appearance of the *Egwugwu* recounts that "He sang, in a terrifying voice, that Ekwensu, or Evil Spirit, had entered his eye".

Though divinities and deities are second in the hierarchy of spiritual beings in the African religious ontology, in Achebe's trilogy, the word *spirit* is used with reference to them only three times. This may probably be because the divinities do not belong to the category of beings which, as we have noted, are strictly denominated spirits in the African religious ontology. Idowu, for instance, would argue that spirits are "those apparitional entities which form separate category of beings from those described as divinities" (Idowu 1973, 173). Following him, Ekeke and Ekeopara maintained that "when we refer to spirits in African religious ontology, we are not referring to divinities or to ancestors" (2010, 216). It is clear that these authors use the word *spirit* in the very strict sense of it. The divinities are spiritual beings who may be considered the most immediate collaborators of the Supreme Being. They draw their existence directly from the Supreme Being and depend on him for their being and operations. As Onah (2012) explains, "Some of them are personified attributes of the Supreme Being, like the thunder divinity, which usually represents God's wrath. Others are God's manifestation in some natural phenomena like the sun (regarded in many African cultures as the God's son),

and the earth (which also represents the maternal aspects of the deity), mountains, seas, and so on". People have often called these divinities gods, which is why some people have concluded that African religious belief is polytheistic, thinking that the Supreme Being is only a *primus inter pares* with the other divinities. But this is mistaken, since, as Ikenga-Metuh (1981) rightly affirms, "they are created by God and are subordinate to Him. They are his messengers. Their intimate but subordinate relationship with God is conceptualized in terms of Father/Son, Chief/messenger or lord/servant relationships". There are also some dead heroes and prominent ancestors who are later sort of divinized and thus share the rank of the divinities.

Even though the instances are few, the word *spirit* is nevertheless used with reference to the divinities in Achebe's trilogy. In *Things Fall Apart, Agbala* is the popular deity recognized as the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves and was consulted in the face of calamities and disasters, wars and sickness, or if someone has committed an abomination. Talking about the priestess, Chielo, Achebe tells us that "Once in a while Chielo was possessed by the spirit of her god and she began to prophesy", and that "Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied

when the spirit of Agbala was upon her" (36). In *Arrow of God*, Obika, recounting his encounter with the divinity of wealth, "Eru, the Magnificent, the one that gives wealth to those who find favour with him", said, "I knew it was a spirit; my head swelled" (8). Both Agbala and Eru are divinities, but the word *spirit* is used with reference to them.

The word *spirit* is also used in Achebe's trilogy with reference to what has been called a man's double or guardian spirit. As noted by Bonaventure Ugwu (2017, 82), "There is also the fact of guardian- spirits or man's double. The belief here is either that the essence of man's personality becomes a sort of split entity which acts as man's spiritual counterpart or double, as among the Yoruba, or Igbo, or that the guardian-spirit is a separate entity as among the Edo. This double is bound up with the issue of man's destiny on earth; that is, destiny depends on how far this entity is in good state itself. The Ori (Yoruba) or Chi (Igbo) or Ehi (Edo) guards one's steps and brings prosperity, or else puts obstacles in one's paths". As Achebe observed elsewhere, "There are two clearly distinct meanings of the word *chi* in Igbo. The first is often translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit- double etc. The second meaning is day or daylight but it is most commonly used for those transitional periods between day and night or night and day. Thus we speak of chi ofufo meaning daybreak and chi ojiji, nightfall". Our interest is, however, with the first meaning. Of this first meaning, Achebe affirms: "*Chi* is an individual personal god which accounts for the fortune or misfortune that one experiences in life. Hence, the meaning of a person's life is only realized as a collaborative venture *mu na chi m so* between the person and his *Chi.* People often make statements like I am in agreement with my personal god

or *Chi* as a reference to the collaborative dimension in the individual/*Chi* relationship. However, there are situations in a person's life when it is believed that one's *Chi* may work against him". For I. Chukwukere (1983, 519), "Chi constitutes the foundation of Igbo intelligence, providing a 'satisfactory explanatory model for the diversities of human personality and the broad category of causation". It is in this sense that the Igbo people say that "Ofu nne na-amu mana o bughi ofu chi na-eke", meaning that the same mother gives birth to children, but the children do not come from the same *Chi*. In other words, the differences between children of the same mother, especially in terms of character and fortunes, is a consequence of the *Chi* of each individual person. According to Francis Arinze (1970: 88–89), "Most Ibos believe that each individual has a spirit, a genius or spiritual double, his *chi*, which is given to him at conception by *Chukwu* and which accompanies this individual from the cradle to the grave. *Chi* is strictly personal (. . .) The ordinary Ibo man regards his *Chi* as his guardian on whose competence depends his personal prosperity". There are three appearances of this use of the word *spirit* in Achebe's trilogy. In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, addressing the people of Umuaro who, misguidedly led by Nwaka, wanted to take a war to Okperi, told the story of a great wrestler who, having won every man in the world, decided to go to the land of the spirits to wrestle with the spirits too. He threw every spirit that encountered him. Then finally, "They sent him his personal god, a wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth" (27). In *Things Fall Apart*, talking about the tragedy that befell Okonkwo in his first son Nwoye's embrace of the new Christian religion, Achebe affirms that "At first it appeared as if it might prove too great for his spirit" (125); "But it was a resilient spirit" (125).

A closely related use of the word *spirit* with reference to a human being's guardian-spirit or spiritual double is when it is used with reference to the human being himself or the essential component of the human being, that is, with reference to the spirit of men. We find four appearances of this use of the trilogy, once in *Things Fall Apart*, where it is reported that "Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit" (20); twice in *Arrow of God;* first is with reference to Ezeulu when in convincing his son, Oduche, to join the church said: "My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow" (47), and secondly, with reference to Akubue who, during the Court Messenger's visit to Ezeulu from Okperi, intervened "to save a situation which his spirit told him was fraught with peril" (140); and once in *No Longer at Ease* with reference to Obi when it is reported that some of his thoughts about the past "seemed to release his spirit". In all of these instances, the word *spirit* seems to refer to what may be termed a person's inner being, the soul or the heart, but the heart not in terms of a biological entity but in terms of the innermost core of the person. Apart from the spirit of already existing human beings, spirits are also attributed to yet-to-be-born children. Some trees are held sacred because they are believed to be abodes of the spirit of unborn children, and so women in search of the fruit

of the womb often have to go to these trees with the hope of getting children. A clear example of this usage of the term *spirit* is found in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where, talking about a sacred silk tree standing at the village square, he claimed that "Spirits of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born. On ordinary days, young women who desired children came to sit under its shade" (34). Besides the use of spirit with reference to individual human beings, there is also a collective spirit attributed to groups of people, like a clan or a village. We find two appearances of this particular use of the word *spirit* in Achebe's trilogy. In *Things Fall Apart*, after the destruction of the church following the unmasking of an ancestral spirit by Enoch, Achebe tells us that "for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified" (139). Also in *Arrow of God*, when Mr. Goodcountry was posted to Umuaro following his exploits in the Niger Delta Pastorate, Achebe recounts that "Within weeks of his sojourn in Umuaro he was ready for a little war against the royal python in the same spirit as his own people had fought and conquered the sacred iguana" (216). In both cases, the word *spirit* is used with reference to a group of people; it is thus a collective spirit.

In Achebe's trilogy, the word *spirit* is also used with reference to inanimate things, so that even drums have spirits. In *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, he talks about seven drummers who "were possessed by the spirit of drums" (34). Not only tangible things, but even events like war are also endowed with spirits. In the same *Things Fall Apart*, recounting a gathering of the rulers and elders of Mbanta to decide on what action to take regarding the desecration of their sacred python, he wrote that "the spirit of war was upon them" (117). In fact, one who is not of the Igbo cultural extraction might understand the uses of the word *spirit* here as merely figurative ways of speaking, but for the traditional Igbo person, these things really have spirits. The word *spirit* is also used with reference to people's character, countenances, demeanour and moods. Still in *Things Fall Apart*, talking about her favourite child, Ezinma, who he would have preferred to be a boy, Okonkwo said that "she has the right spirit" (48). Another use of the term *spirit* in the trilogy is with reference to the Holy Spirit, but this is really not in the African traditional religious context, as it already shows the influence of Christianity, and it is used in the Christian context. In *Arrow of God*, talking about the phenomenal growth of the church in Umuaro under Mr. Goodcountry, Achebe wrote that "He allowed the credit to go to the Holy Spirit". There is yet one final appearance of the term *spirit* in the trilogy that has a totally different meaning that has nothing to do with African Traditional Religion or with any religion at all and would not in any way be translated in Igbo as *mmuo*. We find this in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, where spirit is used with reference to a very strong alcoholic drink, whiskey. When the chief protagonist of the novel, Obi, visited Sam Okoli with Clara and was offered whisky, he replied, "I don't touch spirits" (54).

It is curious that there is nowhere in the whole trilogy where the word *spirit* is used with reference to the Supreme Being. But as Ugwu wrote, "The highest of all

spirits is God, the Creator of the universe" (80). The Supreme Being, as we ear-
lier noted, occupies the highest echelon of the hierarchy of beings in the African
religious universe. He is conceived as a supreme personal being who is omnipo-
tent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, and just. For Africans, in general,
everything that exists, both great and small, all the elements of which the universe
is composed, both visible and invisible, as well as every phenomenon manifested
in them, owe their being to the Supreme Being, God, and it is he who continues
to conserve them in existence. He created everything as a whole in which every
element is in relation to all the others, with the human being at the centre. This
accounts for the interaction, communication and reciprocal influence that define
the relationship between all existent beings, both animate and inanimate, and they
have their foundation in God. Every new movement or phenomenon in the uni-
verse finds its meaning in relation to the whole which has its origin in God. He is
the principle of life and unites all things in being. Different African peoples have
different names for this one Supreme Being. In Igbo language, among the most
prominent names given to the Supreme Being is *Chukwu*, which can be literally
translated "the great *Chi* or the great God"; He is "Source Being" which connotes
"the Great One from whom being originates" (Ekeke and Ekeopara 2010, 211).
We have seen earlier that *Chi* features prominently among the referents of the
word *spirit* in Achebe's trilogy. So, even though in the trilogy there is no direct
reference to the Supreme Being as spirit, from the analysis of the name given to
the Supreme Being, it seems clear that He is the highest of all spirits; he is the
Supreme Spirit.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis reveals that the word *spirit* covers a very wide semantic
area in the context of African Traditional Religion and confirms Idowu's affirma-
tion that "Spirits, according to African belief, are ubiquitous; there is no area of
the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot
be inhabited by a spirit" (Idowu, 1973: 174). As testified by Ugwu (2017, 78),
"There is nothing and nowhere in the life of an African that the presence and
operation of spirits is not found. The farm lands, markets, mountains and hills,
bushes and forests, streams and rivers, cross roads and homesteads are abodes
of the spirits". This is precisely why "the history of every African is hammered
out in relationship with spirits of all kinds". This also explains, to a large extent,
the overwhelming emphasis on the spirits that seems to characterize present-day
Christianity in Africa. As different authors have argued, though many Africans
have embraced Christianity and Islam, they have not entirely been weaned from
their traditional religious mentality, since especially in critical moments and situa-
tions, their deep-seated traditional mentality holds sway; in such instances, "their
traditional beliefs and values constitute the foundation of their decisions and ac-

tions". Ugwu (2017, 80) has perspicuously enunciated the relationship between Africans and the spirits in terms of fear, possession and well-being in the context of African Traditional Religion. These are exactly the same factors that seem to lubricate the wheels of the present-day emphasis on the spirit in the Christian context. It seems, therefore, obvious that the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the category of the spirit in contemporary African religions, especially as evidenced in neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, is inalienably connected with the pervasive and ubiquitous use of the category in the traditional religious background of the African. In fact, to be able to understand the fascination or quasi-obsession of contemporary African Christians with the spirits and with the things of the spirits, a necessary standpoint is a comprehension of the grammar of the spirit in an African traditional religious context.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Penguin Books (2017).

Achebe, Chinua. 1960. *No Longer at Ease*. New York: Penguin Books (2017).

Achebe, Chinua. 1964. *Arrow of God*. New York: Penguin Books (2016).

Achebe, Chinua. 2014. "Chi in Igbo Cosmology." March 20, 2014. https://youngafrikanpioneers.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/chi-in-igbo-cosmology/.

Arinze, Francis. 1970. *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

Awolalu, Joseph Omosade. 1975. "What is African Traditional Religion." *Studies in Comparative Religion* 9, no. 1.

Chukwukere, I. 1983. "Chi in Igbo Religion and Thought: The God in Every Man." *Anthropos* 78, no. 3/4: 519–534.

Diop, Cheikh Anta. 1960. *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire* [The Cultural Unity of Black Africa]. Paris: Présence africaine.

Diop, Cheikh Anta. 2000. *Nations nègres et culture. De l'antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturelles de l'Afrique Noire aujourd'hui* [Negro Nations and Culture: From Ancient Egyptian Negro to the Cultural Problems of Black Africa Today] I et II. Paris: Présence africaine.

Ekeke, Emeka Charles, and Chike Ekeopara. 2010. "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology." *American Journal of Social and management Studies* 1, no. 2: 209–218.

Ekwunife, Anthony N. O. 2011. *Christianity and the Challenges of Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa*. Enugu: Snaap Press.

Ezenwa-Ohaeto. 2000. *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Idowu, Bolaji 1973. *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. London: S.C.M.

Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. 1981. *God and Man in African Religion*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.

Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. 1987. *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: IMICO Publishers.

Mbiti, John S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

Mulagu, Vincent. 1973. *La religion traditionelle des bantu et leur vision du monde* [Traditional Religion of the Bantu and Their Vision of the World]. Kinshasa: Presses Universitaires du Zaire.

Olupona, Jacob K. 2014. *African Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Onah, Godfrey Igwebuike. 2012. "The Meaning of Peace in African Traditional Religion and Culture." August 21, 2012. http://beeshadireed.blogspot.com/20 12/08/the-meaning-of-peace-in-african.html?m=1.

Onwubiko, Oliver Alozie. 1991. *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. Enugu: SNAAP Press.

Udofia, Julia. 2014. "Arrow of God and the Sanctity of Spiritual Value." *Okike – An African Journal of New Writing* 52: 105–119.

Ugwu, Bona Ikenna. 2017. "Spirits in African Worldview: Implications for the Church in Africa." *Ministerium – A Journal of Contextual Theology* 3, no. 1: 76–88.

Part III: Practices

Chapter 8

The Grammar of the Spirit: A Reflection

Elias Kifon Bongmba

The grammar of the spirit is a fascinating idea because it invites us to think about (and beyond) the linguistic implications of the Christian faith. The bulk of that language is built around the sacred scriptures, church teachings, significant synodical documents such as the documents of Vatican II, encyclicals, and pastoral letters. I believe also that the idea of the grammar of the spirit should encompass all that is communicated and even sung in the Christian tradition. It would take a much longer study to broadly define the idea of the grammar of the spirit, but for this essay, I have chosen to comment on the practices of proclamation, praise, pronouncements, and prediction in the Christian tradition.[1] These practices have been the bread and butter of the Christian tradition. The idea of proclaiming, preaching, and prophesying is part of the biblical and ecclesial tradition, and as such, it remains a rich heritage of the Church. I will take the idea of the grammar of the spirit for this discussion to begin a conversation on aspects of African Pentecostal discourse and highlight the grammar of proclamation, the grammar of power, and the grammar of prediction. The focus on the grammar of the spirit is, in my view, a conversation that ought to be a concern for many because the Christian movement by design, history, and practice, is a community of "grammar." In this discussion I emphasize that the faith community has a range of grammars that are deployed to communicate the message, teachings, and practice of the faith community. The range of grammars include the grammar of music, the grammar of proclamation, the grammar of piety, and the grammar of service.

Speaking broadly, we can also state that the grammar of the spirit emphasizes the Trinitarian distinction of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is the Godhead on which the history of the Christian faith is grounded. The grammar of the Spirit that emerged at Pentecost gave birth to the ecclesial community, and those early disciples became the forefathers of the Christian tradition because they had received a new language to communicate their faith. However, one must stress that the gift of the new grammar of the spirit was not a one-

time event, because earlier, the disciples were told the Holy Spirit would come to stay with them. Given this history, it is clear that today the Christian grammar of the spirit recognizes the enduring nature of the promise of Pentecost, and its contemporary manifestation in different grammars is testament to the fact that Pentecost is continuous experience.

There are different ways of thinking about the grammar of the spirit, and I have chosen to discuss what I call the grammar of proclamation, the grammar of power, and the grammar of prediction because in many ways, these grammars are the public face of Christianity, especially of Pentecostalism in Africa. The rise of modern Pentecostalism has made a concrete connection to the events of Pentecost, as well as brought a new focus on the biblical texts that report the drama that took place on the Day of the Pentecost, and in doing so, expanded the theological discourse on the third person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit.

In general, we should state that much of the Pentecostal grammar of the spirit today centers around the word about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the power and presence of the Spirit, and that perspective stands in and follows the tradition of the church. It is a common thing to hear Pentecostals quote the Bible, even when scholars are shocked that certain texts are used out of context. The grammar of proclamation depends on the art of appropriating and simplifying the text to make it speak to and address a need or empower the believer. The practice of the grammar of proclamation counts on the fact that members of the faith community will accept the Bible as the word of God. They count on the fact that even if other modes of interpretation such as the allegorical, historical, cultural, and the political are available, the word that is spoken comes from the Bible, which is the word of God. Contextual interpretation may have its place, but central to the grammar of proclamation is the view that what is proclaimed by the man or woman of God is as relevant today as it was when those words were written.

I should point out that I have decided not to include the grammar of praise, which one could describe not only as the "yam, corn, beans or your bread and butter and the life wire of Pentecostalism," but also one of Pentecostalism's most enduring legacies because it has given people songs to sing, dance, and draw inspiration for difficult times, including surviving the postcolonial political practice. It remains to be seen if the Pentecostal song has become an opiate of the masses, but for now, even those of us who are not Pentecostals have something to sing and dance, and that is a gift to the faith community. Therefore, one cannot doubt that Pentecostal inspired music has had a revolutionary impact on Christian music and certainly reshaped the African song forever. Mapping that song is a project for future research which will engage musicologists and other scholars of the African religious world. But there is no doubt that the grammar of praise has taken over the Christian world not only by the very nature of its creativity, but also by the critical development of the cultural and Christian dimension of the African song, which today makes people of faith dance all over the continent.

There is no doubt that all over Africa the grammar of the African song is alive and is transforming music and musicology as we know it. It is safe to say that of all the other grammars that I discuss here, the grammar of praise remains with worshipers in a special way because the faithful take the music everywhere they go and listen to it in their cars, and other communication tradition devices. The grammar of praise fills stadiums, auditoriums, sanctuaries, and even makeshift worship spaces. The grammar of praise glorifies God, teaches the faithful, comforts people, and prompts people to celebrate. One cannot say how many people testify that they sing a certain song at a time they feel discouraged, or even when they are filled with joy. It is the only grammar of the spirit that has made some outside the clergy wealthy, even if some of the musicians who have made it in song tend to migrate to the position of pastor. The numbers here are not large enough to cause alarm, and thank goodness that praise and worship remain central aspects of the public phase of the Christian faith and its worldwide traditions.

The Grammar of Proclamation

The first grammar of the spirit that I will focus on is the grammar of proclamation. The outpouring of the Spirit has amplified Christian grammars of proclamation to a new decibel and accelerated it with the use of all communication tools available to us today. Parts of the Christian family today have become a community of the grammar of the Holy Spirit in a very concrete way through the proclamation and praxis of the Christian leaders, exemplified *par excellence* by Pentecostalism and its leaders in Africa. These Pentecostals around the world have reinvented preaching with a powerful performance. I am sure that, wherever he is, Jonathan Edwards, whose sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was so powerful that it generated an awakening, wonders why the execution of the grammar of proclamation has become so bombastic and comes in ways that feel like everyone is being bullied "in the mighty name of Jesus."

I must stress here that the idea is not to reject Pentecostal preaching and its multifaceted mode of communication. I call attention to the things the preachers say and the choice of language they use and the meaning they attach to those words, which in my view, make up a new grammar of the spirit. I must reiterate that some Pentecostal leaders have just taken these grammars to a new level, but they do not have a monopoly on the grammars that I will call attention to in this reflection. One cannot expect in such a short study to exhaust the grammar of proclamation by the leaders of the Pentecostal tradition because it would take a much longer study. There is also the fact that the grammar employed by many preachers today fascinates and confounds but sometimes leaves a lot to be desired, and here I simply mean that some of the proclamations spell out a world and lifestyle that opens up many questions, especially when it involves the idea of wealth and health. It is therefore important that members of the faith commu-

nity start to listen and interrogate the grammar of the spirit that comes from faith leaders to explore and engage in critical dialogue with Pentecostalism.

First, of the many things one could say about the idea of the grammar of proclamation is that it is grounded in the biblical promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. There are two texts in the New Testament where Jesus promised his disciples power that would come from the Spirit. In John 14:15–17, Jesus told his disciples, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with your forever, even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him, but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." This passage was a preparation for things that would happen when Jesus would not be physically with the disciples. In this passage, the key idea is that the Father will send a comforter to the disciples, but it is difficult to understand the passage because if Jesus is asking the Father to send the Spirit, how does he say that the disciples know him already because "he lives in you"?

This passage has been interpreted in different ways by faith communities. For example, Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot has pointed out that Muslims interpreted the words of Jesus as referring to the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (see Gampiot 2017, 123). Kimbangu referred to this passage when he alluded to his own divine nature. The choir of the Kimbanguist church in one of their songs claimed that Kimbangu was indeed a spirit, and Gampiot states "his identity as the Holy Spirit in a Black body is highlighted, as is his mission as the liberator of African (9a) peoples. The Kimbanguist believe that Kimbangu is the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, which makes him a key in their understanding of the mystery of the Holy Trinity" (Gampiot 2017, 124). This is a case where an African charismatic leader employed the grammar of the spirit to establish his own divinity. Our interest here is not in whether that claim was true but in showing that the historical record that Jesus talked about the coming of the Spirit provides a grammar for this claim.

The second reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit is reported in the Book of Acts, when on Feast Day of the Pentecost, the Spirit of God descended on the disciplines, filled them with power, and they were emboldened to proclaim the story of their master Jesus who was crucified and was buried. Still, he rose again, was seen by many, and ascended into heaven. We are again told that, before Jesus ascended, he told his followers that they would receive power, then the Holy Spirit would come, and they were to bear witness and tell the story of Jesus through the entire world. Therefore, Pentecost was an inaugural event whose consequences could not be measured but could only be grasped by faith in the promise that those who would receive the Holy Spirit would serve as witnesses for Jesus beginning in Jerusalem and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The grammar of proclamation is grounded in the Bible, and, secondly, from the events of the day of Pentecost, the faith community later called Church was born. This means that his followers were called out of their existing faith tradi-

tions to follow Jesus, who was no longer living physically on earth, but had gone back to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit to empower and comfort them in their task of communicating the message of Jesus. The idea of being called out remains complex. The calling did not imply a geographical dislocation, nor did it imply a cultural dislocation, as has been the struggle within African Christianity. Thankfully, theological and ecclesial reflection and transformations in the twentieth century underscored that Jesus and the community named after him was for all people around the world. This idea would lead to the notion of enculturation as one way of grounding the grammar of the Spirit locally.

Third, the grammar of proclamation has been described in many ways as evangelism, soul winning, and proselytization. The manner of articulating that grammar called variously with two terms indicating its complexity with two opposite words. The grammar of proclamation is a practice of soul winning, implying that proclamation is an art of persuasion. Historically, this communication was largely grounded in the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again, was the Messiah who had come to redeem humanity from sin and reconcile them to God. He died on the cross to take away the sins of all who would believe in him. He rose up from the grave and ascended to heaven and will come back one day to take his own followers to be with him forever. This proclamation launched the task of recruiting people into this community that would be called Church. On that day of Pentecost, a handsome number of 3,000 people reportedly accepted this message and joined the movement, and what is often called the Apostolic Church was born. The grammar of proclamation in Pentecostalism is traced to this world-changing event, and today's proclaimers have found new cultural, theological, philosophical, and even political ways of articulating that grammar of proclamation.

The grammar of proclamation is a mimetic practice that recalls the promise that was made to the disciples, namely, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in all Jerusalem Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." The grammar of proclamation was deployed to reaffirm the promise that Jesus, who had gone up to heaven, would return someday, but in the meantime, the Comforter, the Spirit, would be with them because he takes up residence in the believer's life. Thus, the grammar of proclamation counts on the promise of a helper who would empower the believers to be witnesses. Therefore, the grammar of proclamation affirms the first promise, the proclamation that followed, and the power that transformed a timid group of disciples to a triumphant, soulwinning bunch; a transformation that remains central to the grammar of proclamation today.

There are several ways of thinking and understanding the promise of the text. Without getting into the complexity of critical textual exegesis, we can affirm that the presence of the Spirit came with power. Both the presence and power were endowments for the followers of Jesus and the disciples, and all other followers

could count on the power of the Spirit as they went about propagating the message of Jesus. The coming of the Spirit inaugurated the faith community that was to carry out the mission of Jesus to all parts of the world. Seeing the coming of the Spirit as an inaugural event for the church enables readers today to appreciate and also seek new ways of understanding and executing the grammar of proclamation that was launched by the events of the day of Pentecost for a radically different age. The task of today calls for a grammar of proclamation that will grow, ground, and groom the faith community to reflect the love and spirit of Jesus and also actualize the reign of God in the lives of people.

I think that the grammar of the Holy Spirit was bearable and shareable because the members of the new community, who had a short time with the public ministry of Jesus, also had a significant history to draw from, and they also had access to the sacred texts and traditions of the Hebrew Bible, even as the early disciples focused on the teachings of their teacher, Jesus the Christ. Jesus, as he promised, had sent them a paraclete to be their advocate and empower them for the task of proclaiming his teachings. The disciples were in a unique position of implementing the performative side of the grammar of the spirit, and since then, the results of that practice have been documented throughout church history in accounts of conversion, miracle stories, establishment of faith communities, and what has emerged as the worldwide church. The Reformation fires that burned throughout Europe were an elaboration of the grammar of the spirit, and they certainly extended the reach of the grammar of the spirit.[2]

There is no doubt that the central modern performative act of the grammar of the spirit took place at Azusa Street a little over a hundred years ago when the preaching of William Seymour ignited the Azusa Street revivals, and the story of the Church was rewritten, giving birth to a new era. The Christian tradition has not been the same since those revivals at Azusa Street. The events of Azusa Street would generate a new grammar about the founding, founder, and earthly father of the modern Pentecostal movement. Much of the arguments point to the fact that the articulations of Seymore, an African American who moved from Houston to Los Angeles, practiced the grammar of proclamation that led to a revival that would rekindle revival around the world and also give birth to the modern Pentecostal movement (see Anderson 2013, Kalu 2008, Ojo 2006, Wariboko 2014). The explosion we have seen in Africa has brought to light new narrative grammars that have enriched the history of Christianity, and a robust theology, even if some of those grammars leave a lot to be desired. Scholars like Alan Anderson, Ogbu Kalu, and Nimi Wariboko have invited readers through their publications to explore the historical trajectory of Pentecostalism in Africa, offering insights that guide readers to understand how the grammar of the spirit has been deployed in such an explosive and transformative manner. Their work and that of many

---

[2]   The idea here is from a hymn by John W. Peterson, "The Holy Spirit Came at Pentecost".

scholars give readers an opportunity to explore the grammar of the spirit in its current S*itz im Leben* in Africa and around the world. The result, in my view, is a superabundance of narratives, new accounts, and studies that document and chart the teaching of modern Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism was a wing of Christianity which could have been considered to be on the margins of the *communio fidelium*, but that is not the case anymore because the movement has energized the faithful and opened multiple avenues of services, placing the communities built on the grammar of the Holy Spirit at the center of ecclesial life, at least in Africa and Latin America (see Pew Research Center 2014). Elsewhere around the world, individual Christians have expounded and expanded the grammar of the Spirit, and this has resulted in the phenomenal growth of the faith community. The followers have sung Kevin Mayhew's song, "All over the world, the Spirit is moving, all over the world as the prophet said it would be, all over the world there's a mighty revelation, of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."[3]

The grammar of the Holy Spirit has been expanded by the Pentecostal preachers today in many ways, which has broadened the vocabulary of the ecclesial community. In doing so, some Christian leaders have changed how the message of the faith is transmitted and practiced. The choice and use of terms reflect biblical language and images to emphasize the presence and power of the Spirit in people and the faith community. While the grammar of the spirit, as I have stated, was revealed clearly on the Day of Pentecost, it is just right to expect and understand that the grammar to proclaim the faith has expanded to consider historical circumstances. The changes in the grammar do not alter the source and power behind that grammar, the Holy Spirit. The choice of terms to communicate the Pentecostal perspective has certainly expanded the range of the language of faith. The communication of the grammar today always returns to the scriptures to draw from it what we might loosely call "period terms", for example, "power" and "Holy Ghost." Often, we hear the expression "Holy Ghost Power" invoked, but in general, where the faithful and their leaders have invoked that power, the inspiration has come from that original grammar that promised power to the believers (see Ward 2012). Revivals were also a replay of the grammar of the spirit, which in the twentieth century increasingly took on local meanings and charted new paths for the growth of Christianity and the locals who were active leaders of the revival often ignored the concerns of Europeans who were concerned the revival could get out of hand (Hoehler Fatton 2012, 74–75).

The grammar of proclamation has been used to make the case that the Pentecostal experience was not a one-time shot but constituted the life and power in the Spirit in individual Christians and in the church. The experience of that life and power is open to members of the faith community. The single most distinctive aspect of the grammar of the Spirit is that, throughout the world, the Pentecostal

---

[3] See lyrics at https://divinehymns.com/lyrics/all-over-the-world-the-spirit-song-lyrics/{#}goog le_vignette. Accessed September 5, 2022.

revivals in their modern, postmodern, and postcolonial manifestations have rein-
stated and domesticated the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, making it a
transformative force in world Christianity, especially in the Global South. While
one could see this as an oversimplification of the complex and historic transactions
that describe and define Pentecostalism today, central to the contemporary Pente-
costal proclamation is what we hear preachers proclaim as "Holy Ghost Power,"
which they invite and often demand and command to come and reside in individ-
uals and in the Church. The preachers make it clear that the Holy Ghost is here
already, and it is up to the believers to ask for and receive that Holy Ghost power.
All the Church needs to do is recognize the presence of the Spirit and allow that
power to direct the activities and lives of all members of the ecclesial community.

Today, what we might describe as a return to the "matter" of the text in any
Christian message is what I see as the core grammar of proclamation. It is a gram-
mar whose performance uses "period instruments," because many of the leaders
of the church today employ biblical terms in different ways to identify the distinct
age in which the Church operates. Ministers today emphasize Holy Ghost Power,
Holy Ghost Fire, and they command in the mighty name of Jesus, affirming New
Testament texts that "therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him
the name above all names, that are the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus
Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:8–11).[4] This aspect of
the grammar of the Spirit is where most of the rhetorical exuberance, or as some
might describe it, the excess, of Pentecostalism inspires and initiates new action
or opens up the movement for criticism.

The simplicity of the promise of the presence and residence of the Holy Spirit,
and the powerful and many times emotional execution of the grammar of procla-
mation is intended to drive the message home and make sure that many people will
not miss the gifts of the Spirit or find themselves out of the orbit of the power of the
Spirit and hence cannot see what the Spirit is doing before their own very eyes.
One could argue that the promises of healing, success, promotions, and wealth
come with their perils, but that is something for Pentecostal theologians to sort
out. For now, the grammar of proclamation demonstrates that the little we know
of the wonders of the Spirit of God is that its grammar has enlivened, expanded,
and enriched theological discourse today, even if one were to contest some of
the communication and practice, especially in contexts where Pentecostals seem
to have such spiritual drama that some wonder why the promises of power have
not changed things dramatically, leaving people wondering why it is the case that
the crop of the gospel continues to thrive yet compete with the weeds which are
constituted by some of the problematic proclamation and practice of many of the
Pentecostal leaders who have been accused of the many scandals.

---

4   Text taken from https://biblehub.com/philippians/2--10.htm. Accessed September 5, 2022.

Nimi Wariboko has given us what I consider a good description of the grammar of proclamation in one of his brilliant books, *The Pentecostal Principle.* Wariboko argues: "The Pentecostal principle is a synthesis of both the Protestant Principle and Catholic substance and the animating toward a theonomous connection with the divine path of existence" (Wariboko 2012, 1). Wariboko's theological and philosophical studies of Pentecostalism have broadened the grammar of Pentecostalism, and in doing so, he has enriched Pentecostal thought and practice. Wariboko has pointed out that *The Pentecostal Principle*, among the many philosophical and theological avenues he maps out, addresses:

> the social ontological truth of the concrete religion-cultural order of historical expressions of Pentecostalism. This work attempts to lay bare the ''inner greatness,' the historical-ontological essence' of Pentecostalism as a phenomenon of our epoch without conferring ontological dignity on any Pentecostal movement on the ontic level (Wariboko 2012, ix).

Wariboko also argues that our world has changed dramatically and affected communication and how we do business and commerce. In such a world, "Pentecostalism (in its fury, abundant energy, and rapid growth) is the religious archetype of the impetus of our age" (Wariboko 2012, ix).

This insightful statement adds new meaning and depth to our interest in the grammar of proclamation. In such a world, Pentecostal leaders have invented new terms and reinterpreted old ones to educate people about wealth and commerce, sometimes in a style that is akin to Tetzelian indulgence tactics, when it comes to the grammar of proclamation that exhorts the faith to offer offerings and tithes. The faithful are bombarded every day about giving, especially tithing. The men and women of God are able to build impressive church structures and camps which are spaces for retreat from the world, but these places also double as grounds for the gathering of wealth, much of which goes to the leaders. There is something challenging and, I would argue, wrong about the grammar of money, which has become center stage in the grammar of the spirit and ecclesial life.

The Grammar of Power

The second way one can think of the grammar of the Holy Spirit is to consider it as an extension of the grammar of power. It is a grammar that involves the naming of leaders as well as the demands, commands, and the power the leaders have over the faithful. This, to many observers of the ecclesial community, is a new development which shatters all we have seen in pastoral leadership. I do not pretend that I can give an exhaustive discussion of all the issues here in the African context, because the scale and expanse of the grammar of power are enormous. First, some of the leaders of some Pentecostal Churches today are called different names that spell out the grammar of their power. These names include the primary

title "pastor," which many of them actually take. They also follow the biblical example and call themselves men of or women of God, and they often announce even at social gatherings that the "man of God is in the house" and expect some deference and respect. In many social and cultural gatherings in Houston, where I live, I often hear someone announce that all the men of God in the house should stand up.

The new faith leaders also decide the terms they will use to describe themselves. The grammar of power here is comprehensive because one could think of the names and titles which have exhausted all the titles in the bible. However, some, like Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, have kept the name pastor. It is not difficult to see why he has done this because he presents as a very humble person who speaks softly and distances himself from the bombastic shouting which many Pentecostals exhibit. But one must also note that this is a complex issue. I will elaborate the example of Adeboye. As Asonzeh Ukah has pointed out, there is a lot to be desired in the basic appellation by Adeboye that he is "pastor" because he is the head of a vast empire that has its *raison d'etre* in the grammar of the spirit, and sitting at the head of that global empire is Pastor Adeboye (see Peel 2008, xxiii). Some Pentecostal leaders are called Apostle, Evangelist, and Bishop. While these are recognizable titles that in other faith traditions reflect training, service, and ordination, the new pastors just claim these titles and come up with garments that reflect the title they have attributed to themselves. This naming in religious terms seems to be the ultimate expression of the grammar of power that places the man or woman of God in a different position. It is a complex world, and Karen Lauterbach has given us a portrait of the kind of apprenticeship that is involved in the path to leadership in the Pentecostal Churches (see Lauterbach 2016).

We must emphasize that every religious community shapes the grammar of power and the leadership which it will exhibit in both formal and informal ways; hence, what we are seeing develop in Pentecostalism reflects some of the norms in faith communities that have been in existence for a long time. However, there is a difference that one understands when it is examined, as Ukah (2008) has done in his study, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*. While the power, wealth, and influence that lie behind seem to be shielded by the simple appellation "pastor" preferred by Adeboye, it is also the case that the global power he has amassed has been questioned by some because of the role which some think he has, might have, or could have played in shaping political leadership in Nigeria to reflect the values of the Nigerian people. The question for many people here is what would have happened if Adeboye used his grammar of power to publicly criticize the political leadership in Nigeria for poor governance that has allowed corruption to continue or failed to carry out a consistent dialogue with militant groups like Boko Haram.

On the other hand, there are those who might argue that we do not know the pastoral conversations he has with the politicians. I think that is a reasonable guess and assumption because we do not know what he says to Nigerian politicians who seek his spiritual guidance. Such a question of position is legitimate. But what we see is a lack of action, and observers would be remiss if they did not point out that leaders like Adeboye seem to have abandoned one exercise of the grammar of power which they could have channeled to promote critical political discourse at a time when African nations need it most. One cannot fail to point out that when the grammar of power has failed to speak out against political and economic malpractice, the words of comfort, assurance, and promise of wealth do not address the needs of the many who feel abandoned by God and wonder why all the rhetoric of well-being, wealth, and winning is proclaimed amidst conflicts that tear the political community apart.

The amnesia which some pastors demonstrate when it comes to politics can be very unsettling. I experienced this firsthand in Katy, Texas, shortly after the Chibok schoolgirls were kidnapped. Pastor Adeboye came to dedicate the building of a Redeemed Church in Katy, Texas. The Chibok girls were still very much in the news, and I thought that we were in the presence of one of the most influential Christian leaders in Nigeria and looked forward to what he would say to reassure the congregation, wondering if he would cast his remarks with a realpolitik or even offer a theological perspective, which would help the faithful to see the events in apocalyptic terms and interpret the events that are going on with religious militancy as part of the rhetoric of the end times, or a part of the challenges of living in the end times as Christians expect the return of Christ. I also hoped that he might offer a bold political theological analysis and then comfort and challenge the faithful to remain strong because, according to the Christian proclamation, which many of them tout, the Holy Ghost Power covers believers and nothing will harm them. But he led the entire service without mentioning the events in Nigeria or the kidnapping of the Chibok girls. My niece and I had quite a fight in the car when we were going back home.

Throughout Christian history, religious titles have ranged from catechist to Pope. What is new in contemporary African Pentecostalism is the proliferation of titles that designate preachers. They use biblical titles such as "pastor," "apostle," "prophet," "evangelist," and "man of God." I do not want to give the wrong impression here or cast an aspersion on anyone who feels called by God, but the grammar of power associated with these titles in some circles leaves a lot to be desired. Additionally, I do not want to dismiss the pastoral tasks many of the Pentecostal leaders perform in recognition of the call they have received to the ministry. Nor do I want to dismiss the validity of independent ministry since many Pentecostal pastors have their beginnings by setting up their own churches and serving as independent leaders. In large organizations like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, many pastors serve in local congregations that are part of the world-wide

organization; hence, there is a level of complexity here that is sometimes lost if one focuses on the individual pastors in a local church.

When one examines some of these titles as part of the grammar of power employed in Pentecostalism today, it becomes clear that these titles are performative in a real sense because these labels proclaim what a leader thinks, claims, and promises to deliver to the people. But one must ask the question what could happen if their power is used to influence direct social change because they have used their voice to speak on behalf of those who live below the margins of society. Speaking for myself, I can only dream of what could have happened if a world Christian leader like Adeboye had exercised the grammar of power by engaging in a dialogue that could resolve some of the problems in Nigeria. As I have indicated in mapping the grammar of power, one must ask these questions because even when some Pentecostal leaders talk of the many things around wealth, many of them ignore the social, political, and cultural context in which wealth is generated. They have a spiritual obligation to the people to employ the grammar of power not for their own self-aggrandizement but to offer constructive perspectives on the social well-being of members of the political community and should, in the tradition of prophetic politics, criticize or condemn negative politics which uses schoolgirls in a struggle which requires serious theological, textual, intellectual, and political solutions.

Staying with the grammar of power, the title which defines much of the power in Pentecostalism is the title "prophet." If we take the title "prophet," which is very popular among Pentecostals today, one must argue that we would be remiss if we fail to think of the biblical roots and definition of the prophetic tradition. The prophetic grammar and its pronouncements can be described as broad rhetorical and spiritual practices that pronounced and prescribed practices which at the religious level, called on the leaders and their communities to walk in the ways of the Lord. Central to the practice was the promotion of social justice, as the Hebrew Bible prophets proclaimed and prosecuted the lack of such practice during the reign of different kings, including King David, the man of God's heart. There is no doubt that this dimension of the prophetic imagination and praxis could be and has been dangerous and cost the life of, for example, Archbishop Janani Luwum in Uganda in 1977. Idi Amin did not want to hear the prophetic word about his governance, and it is the case that many leaders today would not want to hear a critique of their work. Similarly, Cardinal Tumi faced challenges with the regimes of president Ahmadu Ahidjo and President Biya of Cameroon (Bongmba 2016; see Tumi 2006; 2011). Luwum and Tumi demonstrated that it was up to the one endowed with the prophetic word to tell leaders of today who are acting like King Saul of old who failed to practice justice, that God could reject today them as he rejected Saul as King of Israel.

But today, the grammar of power exhibited by many faith leaders in African Pentecostalism has failed to tell political leaders, especially the religious leaders

who actually associate with politicians and perhaps sponsor them, the truth about misrule in some countries, let alone the neglect of the poor and the widows who we are commanded to support. Many faith leaders today give the impression that they have a divine word about current events or the future of individual members of the faith community and their nation and human destiny. Many times, the faith leaders focus on wealth, and there is little about justice. To be fair, many of the Pentecostal pastors today emphasize hard work and encourage the faithful to be diligent and start businesses and do something to help themselves and others. These new grammars of power have injected an optimism in communities where every new year there was merely a prophetic word from the leader about the good things that were going to come to members of the faith community without encouraging people to action.

If I can return to Wariboko's *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, I would like to point out that he discusses the spell of the invisible and the excremental vision which propels the vision and discourse of *Nigerian Pentecostalism* Wariboko analyzes the subtle ways in which leaders of Nigerian Pentecostalism, especially Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Bishop Oyedepo, have drawn from the language of revelation and vision to communicate the importance for their followers to desire God and promote practices that empty the self. Wariboko also discusses the epistemological perspectives that highlight the sensual and carnal manifestations of the erotic and spiritual with a textual analysis that reflects a complex interplay of the visible and invisible and the ongoing power struggle to overcome this worldly life, even if such conquest will not undermine the believer's ability to dominate this world through the power of Jesus and the indwelling Spirit. While these leaders also promote social services, as it is said of the late T.B. Joshua, their discourses that privilege only the spiritual dimensions of life often ignore the political. It is precisely this neglect of the political that shortchanges the message of prosperity because today's wealth cannot be created outside the political context that should provide political and economic space and the regulatory infrastructure that can help the citizenry experiment with big dreams. Additionally, the current focus on miracles tends to drop the ball on broad social-political matters, as we have known since the historic publication of Walter Rauschenbush's *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (1997; see also Rauschenbusch 2008). What this language and the grammar of power ignore is the social conditions of the people who are the targets of these visions.

The many declarations that come from the men and women of God have ignored an important and, one would argue, core aspect of the prophetic ministry in the Hebrew Bible: the call for social and economic justice. When we quote Amos 5:24, we ignore verse 23, where the prophet tells the people, "Take away from me the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let jus-

tice roll on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."[5] There is no doubt that Pentecostalism has changed Christian music forever and for good. When the Prophet Amos said, "let justice roll down like a mighty stream," he was calling for a political practice that took into consideration the needs, hurts, and distress of all people especially the poor and most vulnerable members of the community.

Thinking of the demonstrative powers of the man of God, one wonders why the grammar of leadership in the Pentecostal Church places so much emphasis on the leader who is or must be a miracle worker! One cannot quarrel with Pentecostals for calling their pastors "Daddy" because we have lived with the idea of "Father" in the Catholic tradition for a long time. We cannot even quarrel with the term, "the Lord's anointed" who cannot be touched, because that is a biblical expression. Wariboko draws from contemporary philosophical discourse to interpret images of excrement to highlight the Pentecostal call to the faithful to depart from things that are despised and take on the new in a process of *natality* that informs a new way of seeing and being in the world. He draws from African novelists to elucidate the idea of the grotesque in spiritual life in a postcolonial world marred by the abuse of power, corruption, and greed. I think there are several ways of understanding Wariboko here, but one of those might be to raise the not-so-subtle question: are we seeing a grotesque manipulation of titles as a practice of the grammar of the spirit in a world where thought and practice can afford to lose some of the enchantment of biblical language? In other words, can the ecclesial community still fulfill its mission to expand the reign of God in the here and now without inquiring about the will of God in a world where political practice has been diminished through a despoliation and destruction of political and economic practice which has unleashed a destitution that is destroying African societies? This is the question we must ask as we think of the grammar of power employed by the men and women of God who claim to be custodians of the will and the mighty power of God (and actually declare it regularly). We must ask if this grammar of power given as part of the Christian revelation is a phantasm or the new trick to avoid politically tough discourse.

This is not to say that there is no good coming out of the growth of Pentecostalism and the focus on economic issues by their leaders. One could argue that the men and women of God are good at marketing the message of God and are indeed growing the faith community. Worrying about the excesses of the grammar of power in this case misses the larger story. One must concede that this critique of the grammar of power manifested by Christian leaders ignores the broad social good that is taking place because of the work of local faith leaders. But one must also ask what could possibly happen not only in terms of the creation of wealth, but also in terms of the overall execution of the social contract if faith leaders

---

5   Citation from the Berean Study Bible (see https://biblehub.com/amos/5--24.htm). Accessed September 4, 2022.

returned to a grammar of power that promoted a rigorous engagement with the quest for justice that could open a path for communities to create stable and thriving communities so that all may experience well-being. In pursuing that line of argument, it would be unfortunate if one failed to acknowledge that in some communities, a moral language and practice has always accompanied revival, as was the case with the East African revivals. My point here is that even that must be weighed against the excesses and what seems to be the greed and neglect of the men and women of God today.

The Grammar of Prediction

Third, let us now think of the complexity of the grammar of the spirit by looking at the grammar of prediction. Pentecostal pastors in Africa are always declaring and predicting things that will or should happen. I call this a grammar of prediction that has lost a sense of boundaries or the ability to recognize and appreciate human finitude. A good place to begin is with the late Prophet T.B. Joshua, a well-liked minister of God whose Synagogue Church of All Nations was indeed a house of faith for many nations as pilgrims came from all over the world to worship, hear a prophetic word, and be healed from their ailments. A few years ago, I was traveling to Zanzibar and the plane stopped in Dar-es-Salaam to drop passengers and take the people traveling overseas. A woman came on board and took the seat next to me. We struck up a conversation, and she told me she was going to Lagos to visit the Prophet's Church. I asked if she had been to Lagos before and she said no. I asked what she did for a living (forgive my nosing into someone's business), and she said she was a high school teacher. When I told her that a high school teacher in many countries might not be able to afford such an expensive trip, she told me that she had taken a loan from the bank. As I asked many more questions, she looked at me and asked if I was a professor. I asked her why she asked that question, and she simply said because I was asking too many questions. I confessed that I was one. We talked for a while, and as the plane approached the runway in Zanzibar, where I would disembark, I pulled out my phone and gave her the contacts of my colleagues teaching in Lagos at the time, and said, "I hear Lagos is a complex city. If you get into trouble, call any of these colleagues and tell them I gave you their phone numbers." The fact that this woman was traveling about a third of the way across Africa indicates the impact of the T.B. Joshua ministry.

I have chosen Prophet T. B. Joshua to illustrate the grammar of prediction because he acted it out with boldness, flair, and sometimes a quite smiling presence. I must also acknowledge that Prophet T.B Joshua displayed the grammar of prediction in different ways. He was a colorful leader. I think that with his death on June 5, 2021 in Lagos, the faith community lost one of their most charismatic figures and one who reportedly served the needy around the world. Regardless

of what one thinks of the excesses in his deployment of the grammar of prediction, the Church is poorer today because of his early departure from this world. Prophet T.B. Joshua's philanthropy speaks to a grammar of the heart and tells his story of love. Among his many publications is "100% Answered Prayers with 363 Days Daily Devotional," which anchored his predictions in a life of devotion. But there is a problem with the grammar of prediction when leaders like T.B. Joshua pronounce prophetic words that do not happen.

When the SARS coronavirus (COVID-19) emerged and began its destructive march, it was reported online that Prophet Joshua employed the grammar of prediction in a very specific proclamation in which he declared that the virus would go away. It was widely reported that, "Nigerian prophet, TB Joshua has revealed that current epidemic of #Coronavirus will come to an end on the 27th of March 2020" (Illuminaija, n.d.).

This prediction did not happen. At the time of writing this paper, September 6, 2022, it was estimated that there have been 611,133,560 cases and 6,506,543 had died from the disease. It was also reported that about 588,687,029 had recovered from the disease (Worldometer, n.d.). These are staggering figures by any imagination, which makes one ask: how did the man of God get it so wrong? The follow-up question here could be: what was going on in the minds of the many worshippers of Prophet Joshua's church when they think of his very emphatic declaration that did not happen? Prophet Joshua gave a very specific communication, stating emphatically that the coronavirus would come to an end on March 27, and it did not, but instead, the Delta and the Omicron variants came, and millions died, and the number of cases skyrocketed, even though many, thankfully, recovered from the illness. One wonders what happens to the grammar of prediction when such a definitive command, which comes from the man of God, fails.

Without engaging in a full discourse analysis, the facts of the grammar of prediction are very clear here. When COVID-19 started, the prophet declared that he, not God (and that is an important distinction), had given COVID-19 seven days to go back to where it came from. He could have said, "I will pray to God that God should save people from the scourge of the virus," but he did not do that and instead declared he had given COVID-19 seven days to go back to where it came from, and here we would assume it would disappear. Let us be clear, going back to where it came from is not a reference to a country but may be seen as a reference to the formation of the virus itself. What he declared did not happen. He had to turn to Plan B. It is reported that on December 31st, 2020, Prophet T.B. Joshua said, "This so-called monster, COVID-19, generally known as affliction, has three stages. We are getting to the end of the first stage. The second stage will be tougher than the first stage, but it will not affect all countries. Some countries will be affected while others will not be affected. The third stage will be tougher than the second stage. The two last stages will not be widespread like the first stage" (Prophet TB Joshua 2021).

I must state here that I think after the first prediction failed, T.B. Joshua may have been onto something, which one could say seemed to be an understandable (even if still unreasonable) speculation when he stated that there would be three stages of COVID-19. The first stage, he pointed out, was coming to an end. He stated that during the second stage, the virus will not affect some countries at that stage. We do not know why some countries would have been exempted, if it was medical preparedness or just the sheer will of God. Could it be that the Delta variant was the second wave T.B. Joshua spoke about? Prophet Joshua also said that the third stage would be tougher than the first and second stages. Given the seriousness of the Delta variant and the Omicron variant that followed, and we could wonder if the world was living in the third stage already? Or was all of this a pattern of the grammar of prediction which requires that if the first prediction does not happen, then one comes up with another prediction as a strategic refocusing of the message to make it look like the speaker had received a new revelation that superseded the previous declaration?

The question for me here is not why this specific prediction did not work as the Prophet boldly predicted, but why do faith leaders engage in the grammar of prediction in a world where we have the scientific tools to understand our world and the political and economic tools to work together to find solutions? I suspect that I am not the only one who has these questions. One must also bear in mind that some other Christian leaders in Nigeria called into question these dramatic proclamations, and one could argue justifiably that Joshua did not represent Christianity in Nigeria because the Christian Association of Nigeria distanced itself from his style of ministry, and even the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) also rejected the antics of Joshua's style and described him as an imposter. This is something to consider so that one does not group all Pentecostal Churches into the same category. In the case of the predictions about COVID-19, Prophet Joshua's exercise of the grammar of prediction failed.

Let us consider another excess of the grammar prediction. During the 2021 European Cup Finals, Pastor Emmanuel Kobi Badu prophesied that England would beat Italy. Let us do a small discourse analysis of what I thought was the prophetic word of that year. The man of God declared, "Today, England will win Italy."[6] It is a short declarative sentence, and he said it with a matter of fact assurance: "Today England will win Italy." In case there was confusion, the prophet told the audience, "I have said it again," and declared that it is the word/work of God. If his audience wondered why he was saying this, the prophet reminded them that it is his job to say what God is saying. In other words, he is not recalling something in the past or engaging in a mere wager about the game that would be played on that day. On that day, he was merely the *porte parole*, and in that humble (but also the Pentecostal mighty) capacity, he was declaring what God had decided.

---

6   My remarks here are taken directly from a commentary I wrote for a Wimbum Forum in the USA July 11, 2021.

The prophet, then waxing strong with spiritual power, wanted to be sure everyone understood what he was claiming, so he asked his audience, "You hear what I said?" He then moved to ground his message and assure his audience by saying that he was not only reporting what God told him, but he assured his listeners that he had "seen it on YouTube" In other words, before the sporting competition took place, the prophet had seen everything as it would transpire. Thank goodness for YouTube! It had become the prophetic crystal ball of the 21st century. The messenger of God then ended with the declarative statement, "England will win the cup."

This was a forceful performance, organized to ensure that his listeners (mainly Africans who adore the Premier League British teams) get the prophetic word about their favorite European team and also know that God was on their side and had already picked the winner. It was not a question of fair competition anymore because God had already decided who would win. One would like to know if God just knew England would be a better team or if God picked England to win, something that would change the simple question "Why Lord?" to an unholy question because one is questioning the will of God. But since God's word and the word of the prophet did not come through this time, one wonders if God is still God at all, and if the prophet can be trusted on something so important to African football fans. Why did God (some might say his message) misfire of all things on something as important at the European Cup finals? Remember, the prophetic word came from God, and the prophet was clear about that. I do not know about you, but if God fails in a real big deal like a soccer game, can one trust God or her messenger, or is it the case that someone on the English side made some big mistake which God could not correct? Regardless of how one reads this disappointment to England and Africans, it seems to me that something is at stake here. Can one trust God with more important things? Before one says that I have posed an impious question, think about the prediction. The same prophet predicted that Trump would beat Biden and that too did not happen.

The speaker spoke as a messenger who had a prediction given to him by God. We have lost the ability to recognize a lie because even normal processes which are carried out based on essential competencies that require training, practice, and disciplined habituation are now constantly attributed to God, who directly speaks through prophets who cannot rescue the African continent. I think it is a sad day for faith. Prediction is an important aspect of the grammar of faith but of late in Africa, it has gone astray.

Concluding Reflection

In this brief reflection, I have called attention to different aspects of the grammar of the spirit as a conversation starter because I am thinking aloud and looking for other ways of understanding the grammar of the spirit. I have not sketched out

fully what the idea of the grammar of the spirit looks like, but I have pointed to some areas where I will be carrying out further investigation and interpretation. Pentecostal discourse is presented as a grammar that invites believers to embrace the world imagined through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a world that reorients the believer to the power of the Spirit, the practice of the Spirit-filled leader, and the powerful things the leader can do "in the Mighty name of Jesus."

The grammar of the Holy Spirit has created a theological imaginary that is fascinating. It has redefined world Christianity and configured its march into the future on the divine presence and power of the Holy Spirit. But to some observers, the grammar of the Holy Spirit today is being truncated by the grammar of proclamation, power, and prediction. These practices have opened up more questions that the messengers who employ the grammar of the Spirit do not always answer. The abundance of the miracles proclaimed leaves much to be desired in a world where the power of miracles in the mighty name of Jesus still misses many people who have sung faithfully the hymn based on Second Peter 3:9, "Pass me not, oh gentle Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by. Savior, Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling, do not pass me by" (Crosby and Doane 1986). The question for the scholars of religion, theologians, and philosophers might be: how can we deploy the grammar of the Spirit in a way that reflects the reality of the world and habitat we share, that is realistic and not always grounded on miracles but takes into consideration what culture, education, and science offer us as clues to understand the grammar of the spirit? This is a difficult question to answer. Can the grammar of the spirit be tamed? It depends on who you direct the question to. For now, the grammar of power, proclamation, and prediction offers many opportunities to rethink and appreciate in a new human way the presence of the Spirit and seek a new grammar of faith.

Bibliography

Anderson, Allan Heaton. 2013. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bongmba, Elias Kifon. 2016. "Church and State in Cameroon: The Political Theology of Christian Cardinal Tumi." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51, no. 3: 283–304. DOI:10.1177/0021909615612110.

Crosby, Fanny J. (text), and William H. Doane (music). 1986. "Pass Me Not." In *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, edited by Tom Fettke, and Ken Barker, hymn no. 337. Nashville, TN: Word Music.

Gampiot, Aurélein Mokoko. 2017. *Kimbanguism: African Understanding of the Bible*. College Station: Penn State University Press.

Hoehler Fatton, Cynthia. 2012. "Possessing Spirits, Powerful Water and Possible Continuities." In *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, edited by Kevin Ward, and Emma Wild-Wood, 73–88. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

Illuminaija. n.d. "'Coronavirus Will End On The 27th Of March 2020' – TB Joshua Prophesies." Illuminaija.com. Accessed May 11, 2023. https://illuminaija.com/news/coronavirus-will-end-on-the-27th-of-march-2020-tb-joshua-prophesies/.

Kalu, Ogbu. 2008. *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lauterbach, Karen. 2016. *Christianity, Wealth, and Power in Ghana*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Ojo, Matthews A. 2006. *The End Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Peel, John D. 2008. "Forword." In *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power. A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria*, by Asonzeh Ukah, xix–xxiv. Trenton, NJ: African World Press.

Pew Research Center. 2014. "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region." https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2014/11/Religion-in-Latin-America-11--12-PM-full-PDF.pdf.

Prophet TB Joshua. 2021. "TB Joshua Speaks On COVID-19 (Dec 31st 2020)!" Facebook video, March 25, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/tbjministries/videos/tb-joshua-speaks-on-covid-19-dec-31st-2020/1936127839875757/.

Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1997. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, with an introduction by Donald W. Shriver. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

Rauschenbusch, Walter. 2008. *Christianity and the Social Crises in the 21st Century*. New York: HarperOne.

Tumi, Christian Wiyghan. 2006. *The Political Regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, and Christian Tumi, Priest*. Douala: MACACOS.

Tumi, Christian Wiyghan. 2011. *My Faith: A Cameroon to be Renewed*. Douala: Editions Veritas.

Ukah, Asonzeh. 2008. *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press.

Ward, Kevin. 2012. "Introduction." In *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, edited by Kevin Ward, and Emma Wild-Wood, 3–10. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.

Wariboko, Nimi. 2012. *The Pentecostal Principle: Ethical Methodology in New Spirit*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Wariboko, Nimi. 2014. *Nigerian Pentecostalism*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Worldometer. n.d. "Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic." Accessed September 6, 2022. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/.

Chapter 9

Copy and Paste! Or: Theo-linguistic Strategies of Streamlining "Charisma" in African Pentecostal Megachurches

Andreas Heuser

In this chapter, I introduce the concept of "theo-linguism" within megachurch Pentecostalism. It is a neologism that may help to unfold a key concern of megachurch Pentecostalism, namely the emphasis on profiling the genius of "charismatic heroes". In general, megachurch "Apostles" and "Prophets" claim superior access to divine revelation and exclusive knowledge of spiritual power. However, by presenting the concept of theo-linguism, I refer to a specific grammar supporting both, the construction and the perception of "charisma" in such churches. Evidently, the theo-linguistic grammar intentionally carries heavy theological language and expresses theological meaning underlying, directing and framing charismatic authority. By relating to peculiar theological reasoning, the term "theo-linguism" asserts an essential element of Pentecostal self-understanding, in the first place. In the second place, an analysis of Pentecostal theo-linguism shows characteristic resignifications in view of the theological language applied. In other words, the charismatic aura is sustained by theo-linguistic strategies, as it were. My designation of "theo-linguistic strategies" refers to the grammar of constructing "charisma" by redefinition of key theological terms. The redefinition of classic tropes centers around the focal themes of Christology and of "blasphemy". The resignification processes regarding both themes demand new inventories in the theological grammar. In the following, two different, yet complementary, theo-linguistic complexes can be discerned. The first complex deals with the reframing of a Christological grammar in a "theology of copy and paste", completely oriented to orchestrate the charismatic aura of a megachurch leader by repetition. The second complex seeks to protect and immunize charismatic authority over against internal critique. In this regard, the theo-linguistic strategy is anchored in a "theology of accusation" that defines any criticism from inside a church as blasphemous intervention.

By identifying specific theo-linguistic strategies, I indicate a significant redirection in the research on megachurches thus far. I suggest addressing theological frames as a backbone in the formation of megachurches. Theo-linguistic strategies provide greater coherence to an ecclesial body that strives for international outreach and to be recognizable in wide megachurch networks as well

as in a diversity of public spheres. We may also speak of theo-linguistic ratio-nalizing of charismatic power in multi-site megachurches. I will interrogate the megachurch reliance on theo-linguistic strategies by presenting the double-bind theological complex mentioned. The detection of such theo-linguistic complex leads into West African megachurch life. My primary data are generated from Ghanaian megachurches and my analysis of relevant literature by founder-leaders. However, despite the gravitas of locality and the wide-ranging fragmentation of megachurches, the same or at least analogous theo-linguistic strategies may be identified in numerous other megachurch policies. Repertoires will be simi-lar. They guarantee internal coherence in organizational and theological terms, and guide endeavors of international, multi-site expansion. Following some in-troductory location of so-called megachurches within current Pentecostal Stud-ies, I shall outline the concept of theo-linguism. Thereafter, I briefly highlight a double-faced theo-linguistic complex, operational within certain Pentecostal megachurches. This complex is characterized by a dense theological grammar, composed of what I call here a "theology of copy and paste" and a corresponding "theology of accusation". Some concluding remarks critically reflect the limita-tions of theo-linguistic strategies, which are functional in internal communication yet dysfunctional in conflict resolution outside.

Megachurches – Introductory Reflections

Unmistakably, the upsurge of megachurches is one of the major features in the relief of contemporary global Christianity. The megachurch phenomenon stands specifically for a most spectacular ecclesial structure within the wide range of Pentecostalism. However, it is not restricted to Pentecostal church are-nas. Megachurches claim attention in various respects; however, in a critical overview of the actual research literature, sociological approaches seem to enjoy more currency than ecclesiological and theological perspectives (Heuser 2021a). Megachurches can be defined by at least three organizational markers. Firstly, they constitute a novel brand of church institution organized around "charismatic" celebrities usually identified as founder leaders, making them the "owners" of the church with great impact on current affairs. Secondly, megachurches defy the im-pression of monadic systems by pointing at megachurch network structures of dif-ferent levels and composition. Megachurches seek regional, but more importantly so, international visibility through networking policies that pushed them to the surface of global Christianity in a fast manner. Such networking seems instrumen-tal too in setting up sub-branches in different geographical locations, giving rise to multi-site megachurch structures. A third organizational characteristic refers to the massive usage of new technologies of mass communication, relying on profes-sionally run media empires, as it were, aiming at "missionary" outreach but also at building up strong internal cohesion of a multi-site megachurch aspiring towards

international expansion. Such organizational features, amongst others more, do support some of the reasons stated in current research to explain the emergence of megachurches in the tapestry of global Christianity in a broader picture.

Again, the remarkable appearance of megachurches in global Christianity is mostly interpreted from sociological theoretical frames. The relevance of megachurches, observed latest in the outgoing quarter of the 20th century, is linked to processes of urbanization and especially to a global megatrend of megacities; it is further linked to widening sectors of the middle class in most countries, providing for new accesses to social upward mobility and geographical migration. Megachurches, with their fluid network connectivity, would fit perfectly in what became known in social theory as the contemporary "rise of the network society" (Castells 1996; Christerson and Flory 2017) that displays the fundamental role of information technology. In the literature on megachurches and especially of a North American provenience, still the broadest corpus of literature on the theme, we can discern arguments linking the rise of megachurches in terms of economic market theory. They explain megachurch culture as a competitive model on the religious marketplace designed to continuous innovation. This has paved the way to introduce a mere statistical definition, counting the attraction of a megachurch in a numbers game. In a widely shared definition, a megachurch is counted by the participation of at least 2000 members in weekly programs and on a constant basis (Thumma and Travis 2007, xviii). It has become a general conviction to typify megachurches merely along such statistical and organizational data.

Most recently, however, two voluminous collections aim at opening research horizons and locating megachurches in society. They portray social dimensions of megachurch life in order to overcome inward-looking or statistical presentations. There is some mention of theological scripts in such novel framings, however, remaining on a superficial level of analysis. This is obvious in view of a most recent handbook on megachurches, edited by sociologist of religion Stephen Hunt (Hunt 2019). In his introduction, Hunt provides a broad conclusion: "Virtually all these megachurches display what is generally accepted as components of a conservative theology even those within mainline denominations" (Hunt 2019, 6). He leaves it with such a generalizing statement on conservatism by basically circumventing theological debates. In one contribution to this handbook, one finds allusion to theological formats. Andrew Davies accounts for theological questions in his chapter on "The Evangelisation of the Nation, the Revitalisation of the Church and the Transformation of Society: Megachurches and Social Engagement" (Davies 2019). He shows interest in the social capital, so to speak, of African megachurches deploying "some innovative practice" (Davies 2019, 222). Davies qualifies the theological motives that would undergird such endeavors just as "varied" (Davies 2019, 234). So, we are left in theological obscurity, not to speak about dictions and principles of how to manage the socio-political praxis in megachurches.

Similarly, the other topical publication on megachurches of late shows interest in their social praxis. Here, allusion is explicitly made to theological concerns. The volume *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice* (2019) by theologians Mark J. Cartledge, Sarah L.B. Dunlop, Heather Buckingham and Sophie Bremner exemplifies the socio-political contours of megachurches in the London metropolitan area. The authors specify the social praxis of megachurches as a whole in terms of "public theology". At a closer look, what they describe is a mostly soft-spoken form of public theology. Their definition is far from referring to interventionist political praxis and civil society activity, but comes close to the meaning of *diaconia*, or *caritas*. The authors define public theology in megachurches as "social action for the benefit of those outside of their communities" (Cartledge, Dunlop, Buckingham, and Bremner 2019, 27). However, by profiling megachurch public theology, this volume orientates scholarly attention from statistical to theological codes. In the summary, the authors contradict themselves with regard to their observation of a megachurch public theology: "On the whole, they (megachurches, A.H.) do not get involved in the political processes and challenge the structures, preferring to influence individuals as opportunities arise" (Cartledge, Dunlop, Buckingham, and Bremner 2019, 310). Even though such a use of the term "public theology" is inconsistent with its meaning as a political category, the volume gives hindsight at international networks, and it provides background information on travelling concepts and exchange platforms of spiritual and ritual praxis, characteristic for megachurch ecclesiology. But how to explain the shift from an earlier Pentecostal ethos of world denial towards megachurch social praxis, first observed by Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori (2007) in their study on urban middle-class "progressive Pentecostalism"? I suggest looking at precisely theo-linguistic strategies related to the making of a cohesive megachurch structure.

Discerning Megachurches' Theo-Linguistic Strategies

By suggesting a closer investigation of theo-linguistic strategies, I advance from an observation that might directly contradict an overall imagery. Habitually, Pentecostalism is accredited to as a manifestation of a dynamic church culture replete with expressive modes of religious communication. This is certainly true with respect to ritual inventions or liturgical performances and, for instance, the multiform explorations of online religion shaping what Peter Oderinde terms "Online Lived Pentecostalism", i.e. the intense usages of social media platforms for spiritual and theological exchange (Oderinde 2022). Yet, Pentecostal rhetoric represents in many ways jargonized language. It is replete with signifiers of charismatic-derived power, a compendium of mantras shared in global Pentecostalism. The semiotic signs of existential reinvention contain thematic filters for preaching, praying and public representation. It does not take refined maneu-

verings into Pentecostal theologizing to discern samples of such core theological fragments. I restrict myself to just a random illustration of important elements in Pentecostal self-description. These are also relevant markers of megachurch spirituality. The "breaking-through" *topos*, for instance, relates to the imminent expectation of divine interventions in all-day life. Another constant in Pentecostal theology circles around "born-again" experiences, calling for public testimonies of possibilities and of dramatic changes in one's biography, thus affirming the (re-)inventive power of the Holy Spirit. Yet another code more specific in the contemporary megachurch inventory may refer to "prophetic" proclamations and visionary. "Prophetic" proclamations foresee the reversal of colloquial norms and, again, support potential newness or alternative options even in sociopolitical lines. Such visionary claims resonate in global network activity around Pentecostal dominion theology, a more recent anchorage of political variants of Pentecostal theologizing. Dominion theology might be noticeable here and there in rather fragmented versions, addressing themes of greater or lesser relevance in certain local contexts. Yet, despite such a fragmentary outlook, from a systematic perspective, megachurch dominion theology departs from eschatology and shows affiliation, for instance, with some dictions of spiritual warfare (Heuser 2021b). One could expand those varieties in Pentecostal megachurch theology. Nevertheless, the canon of formative elements mentioned suffices here for illustration. How to explain such a catalogue of recurring themes and theological tropes in megachurch self-portrayals? It is at this crossing that theo-linguistics comes in.

In a recent publication, social anthropologists Simon Coleman and Saliha Chatoo (2019) describe the dynamics of integration and exclusion in megachurches concerning selected religio-cultural aspects. Even though they do not consider theological formats, their conclusions bear some relevance for assessing the theo-linguistic arguments presented here. Coleman and Chatoo are interested in the monitoring process enabling megachurches to relate to popular culture. They refer to the vitality of liturgical and ritual performances experienced in megachurch life. Megachurches engage actively with popular culture and seek to translate certain elements from this huge reservoir into church life. By selecting expressions of popular culture, megachurches enhance the affiliation of (young and new) members and intensify their patterns of membership participation. This incentive to integrate popular cultural features into megachurch life, Coleman and Chatoo call an "enclaving" process. However, this attitude towards popular culture is monitored by a subsequent strategy of validation. This kind of filtering mechanism they call "encroaching". While the dynamics of enclaving refers to the outside world, let us say the reception of "secular" music, the encroaching process seeks to mediate limits of cultural incorporation praxis and to set up norms of reception inside a megachurch. Through internal mediation, megachurches accept "the value of popular culture as a means of communication, but one whose morality needs to be monitored" (Coleman and Chatoo 2019,

100). In other words, the enclaving / encroaching procedures refer to discourses inside a megachurch. Thus, Coleman and Chatoo identify a two-sided procedure of acceptance and adoption of popular culture on the one hand, and of direction, exclusion or adaptation on the other hand. Although identifying "moral" reasoning, Coleman and Chatoo do not dive into theological arguments. They leave faith arguments raised for or against specifically selected practices aside. Conversely, megachurch discourses rely on such theological discernments; they are in need of navigating popular culture by encircling the fields of moral denunciation, to put it into Pentecostal language. The spiritual warfare campaigns are pointing at but one such element of discernment. Such areas in the spiritual life of megachurches would connect, in my understanding, with the effects of theo-linguistic negotiation inside a megachurch.

Negotiation practices inside megachurches establish uneven fields of communication. In substantial contradiction to communication theory, which is interested in putting up non-hierarchical structures for the sake of what is considered the common good (Habermas 1981), this mediation inside megachurches relates to asymmetrical dynamics. Against the overall perception of the "democratization" of charisma as the secret of contemporary Pentecostal dynamics (cf. Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 96–131), megachurch theo-linguistics orchestrate a hierarchy of charismatic experience. It climaxes in a tendency of "spiritual elitism" (Eriksen 2015, 62). The strategic contents of Pentecostal megachurch theo-linguism explicitly refer to a dense complex of two corresponding theologies. Theo-linguistics includes first a theology of charismatic "copy and paste", and second a corresponding charismatic theology of control, termed a "theology of accusation". Both theologies intertwine. Both the theology of accusation and the theology of copy and paste can stand on their own; however, the interlinkages are strong and form a recognizable complex. Its linguistic grammar manifests in diverse modes of *internal* organization. It deserves mention that the theo-linguistic arsenal is functional within Pentecostal megachurch communication but finds its limits in external conflict management and inter-religious discourse (see below). Here, I will concentrate on the internal theo-linguistic organization of megachurches.

Theology of Copy and Paste

The theo-linguistic strategy of copy and paste refers to Christology and contains a redirection from the imitation of Christ to the imitation of the charismatic hero. Pentecostal religious culture is characterized by practices of imitation. In general terms, the Pentecostal emphasis on narrative theology cultivates a habitus of copy and paste of charismatic "representatives" (*Stellvertretung*) of divine power. The role model is God's "giants" on earth, and Pentecostal spiritual life seeks participation in charismatic agency by exact reproduction of the original, that is, the church founder as the genuine source of church life.

Let me insert some indications of a theology of copy and paste extracted from a participant observation. The scenario relates to "Pure Fire Miracle Ministries", a Nigerian-led megachurch in Accra, Ghana. In 2017 I took part in a strategic warfare seminar offered at the headquarter on a regular basis. In certain parts of the year, this program was a constant in the weekly program of that church. At the time of my participant observation, or more precisely, of my observant participation, the Nigerian founder-leader Prophet Enock Aminu happened to be absent in Nigeria. In the absence of the Nigerian church founder, his local leaders stood in and led the spiritual warfare program in their own capacities. Participants, however, did not consider his absence something dramatic or even deplorable. Very obviously, this program, advertised widely in national newspapers and in publications of the church that could be bought at the headquarter, did not suffer any loss in the quality of action or guidance. In a break, while studying more of the church brochures that were lying around, I realized they were replicating almost literally the weekly communications and themes of the monthly newspaper messages authored by the founder. The local leaders acted the way the founder would have done if present. Instructions given, even the intonation of explanations or the bodily performances, corresponded to the rhetoric and practical role model of the founder. The same praying style, spatial layout for warfare rituals, the scale of themes – was a complete copy of the spiritual warfare praxis of the original. For participants in this weekly training course, the founder-prophet, though not available in person, was present in the copy. His theology, bodily movement and voice language were "there"; his "absent real" was inspiring the liturgical behavior of an "army" of spiritual warriors. While exerting warfare prayers, charismatic genius became signified in representative agency. In order to represent the original, the representatives must have undergone meticulous training, including long sets of memorization of the prophet's writing and rehearsals of prayer rituals. The enactment of charisma would not happen on the spot through learning by doing; it would rather result from strict copy and paste performance.

This very topic is unfolded in theological terms by Bishop Dag Heward-Mills, one of the leading figures in the Ghanaian megachurch circle. Dag Heward-Mills is founder of the family of churches known until 2017 as "Lighthouse Chapel International". Nowadays, the megachurch has specific subdivisions, forming a singular megachurch network, still headed by Heward-Mills. Heward-Mills has gained some reputation as a prolific writer and author of several publication series. One of the most popular series is on church growth. The copy and paste theme makes a central piece in the church growth series. In his publication on "Church Growth", first published in 2011, but immediately followed by a second printing in 2012, Heward-Mills portrays copy-practices as "God's method of producing greatness" (Heward-Mills 2012a, 226). He insists on the "art of copying" (Heward-Mills 2012a, 225) as a key concept in forming megachurches. For Heward-Mills, the technique of copying relates to eschatology. The scarcity of

eschatological time necessitates the urgency of imitation. Copying a role-model means saving precious time in the imminent expectation of the millennium. In the millenarian time span, copying is more efficient than learning by trial and error; the millenarian fever does not invite for experimenting around. "Copying gives you access to strategies and formulae" (Heward-Mills 2012a, 232); it provides straight access to "great teaching and preaching" (Heward-Mills 2012a, 234) as key to successful church growth. His ultimate advice to his followers is to learn and exert copy and paste practices: "Shameless copy, photocopy, photograph, re-play, rewind and repeat what those great men do" (Heward-Mills 2012a, 235).

The theo-linguistic strategy indicates a total imitation praxis of the "great men" (sic) of God. It validates the visionary praxis of the megachurch leader-founder. The praxis of copy and paste is about confirming his (more rarely her) autonomous charisma. Pentecostal megachurches seek to conserve the exceptional charismatic impulse and, accordingly, cultivate the character and profile of the "charismatic hero", the prophetic "giant", and the visionary "man of God". In other words, the grammar of copy and paste relates to the charismatic elite; an ordinary believer or member can feel the visionary pulse by "shameless" copy and repetition but not by claims of charismatic invention of one's own. Hence, the theo-linguistic strategy involved in the theology of copy and paste implicitly de-marcates the limits of charismatic experience among believers. It reverses the said Pentecostal democratization of charisma, initially meant to describe the general, common experience of the Holy Spirit among the rank-and-file of Pentecostal believers. In passing, there is a corresponding grammar for ordinary believers to support charismatic claims in an active capacity, too. Its repository is linked to another Pentecostal template, the template of public confession and testimony. At first glance, such testimonials are personal accounts of singular faith events, typ-ically organized around stories before and after an extraordinary intervention in one's life and belief, such as, in Pentecostal terms, conversion (cf. Drønen and Eriksen 2021). Despite the personal character, believers apply a rather uniform rhetoric and theological raster of public testimonials. Through this kind of ritu-alized praxis, they participate in the internal cohesion of a congregation and, by consequence, assist the conservation of the charismatic field, as it were, in that megachurch. Yet, the grammar of public confession and testimony does not excel in theo-linguistic streamlining. Poignantly, the rhetoric of testimonials hardly ap-plies features of literal memorization, nor does it even demand habitus adoption, as is the case with copy and paste strategies fostering elitist charisma.

Following Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, the copy and paste attitude may be understood in terms of a peculiar rationalization of charisma (We-ber 1980, chapter 3; cf. Weber 2011). However, the difference is striking. Ac-cording to Weber, formalized processes of bureaucratic organization affect the rationalization of charisma. The copy and paste praxis of charismatic authority in megachurches is affected by theo-linguistic strategies of control. Embedded in

eschatological scripts, the copy and paste strategy reduces charismatic plurality; it centers charismatic dynamics in the person of the founder-leader. The theo-linguism of imitation denotes a kind of streamlining prototype "charisma". It is streamlining charismatic spiritual experience and praxis for the solid construction of the one charismatic body, the megachurch. In other words, copy and paste performance seeks to expand the nimbus of the "charismatic" virtuoso. Inversely, it claims the validity of borrowed charisma. In a sharp reading, the copy and paste attitude redirects the *imitatio Christi* to conform to the visionary church leader.

In summary, the theo-linguistic scheme is not primarily about "destroying arguments" (Marshall 2016). By contrast, it is about safeguarding arguments even in absentia of a charismatic hero by exact reiteration. The copy and paste regime guarantees the real representation of the inspired genius in theology, ritual, individual habitus, and social life of the megachurch. Whereas the theo-linguistic strategy of copy and paste serves the internal coherence of the megachurch, the analogous "theology of accusation" delivers reasons for sanctioning "subversion" through blasphemy judgements.

Theology of Accusation

Theology of accusation denotes an epistemological instrument to prevent subversion against a megachurch leader (Heuser 2020). If copy and paste is the principle for forming a megachurch community, the corresponding theology of accusation provides the grammar for dealing with apostasy, resistance and conflict. It means to curtail any critique of prophetic action or silence opposition against official church policy. The accusation is directed thus to heretics within the fold of church members, and especially against critical voices among the megachurch hierarchies. We find an illustration of such a theology of accusation in another standard theological guidebook authored by Bishop Dag Heward-Mills. His *Basic Theology*, published in 2012, is used as a manual in the internal formation of Lighthouse church leaders at diverse levels. With the topic of "accusation", Heward-Mills identifies "the most important section of this textbook" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 161). We still keep in mind that in his agenda, church growth features prominently. This finds resonance again in this teaching standard. Also, in *Basic Theology*, he urges for church cohesion and defines as one of the greatest problems the attitude of *accusation* against the "mighty giants of God" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 161). For him, the attitude of accusing leadership is part of a satanic arsenal to decenter charismatic authority from within the church. Heward-Mills defines accusation as a special weapon of Satan to empower enemies and expand the demonic army, so to speak, inside the church: "Accusation is Satan's topmost strategy for dealing with an unconquerable enemy" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 159). The Satanic strategy is disguise, or else mimicry. Heward-Mills insists that accusation incidences are powerful because of the highly visible agency of accusers.

According to him, the arguments presented in the accusation are clad with high credibility. The accusation policy makes use of "spiritual weapons" fired from the close entourage of a church leader: "Every close person is a potential future accuser. Friends, close associates, personal assistants, husbands, wives, children are all at risk of becoming accusers. Actually, almost all accusers come from this list" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 165).

It is obvious that in this context of accusation, Heward-Mills formulates a strong hermeneutics of suspicion. Suspects are less so the ordinary members but the elite of megachurch membership. No one is to be trusted fully and with no hesitation. The spiritual "giant" leader occupies the sole position on the top level of the megachurch hierarchy. In defiance against any kind of accusation, Heward-Mills introduces a heavy theological argument. He equals accusation against a megachurch leader with blasphemy. By this theological turn, he removes any trace of legitimacy to which an accusation from within the top levels of a given hierarchy might aspire. Labeling any debate about internal conflicts as blasphemous insurrection against the "mighty giants of God" carries a pretentious theological turn. In classic terms, blasphemy is considered a "sin of the tongue" directed against God (Wils 2007; Wüthrich, Gockel, and Mohn 2020). Heward-Mills redirects blasphemy as abusive speech against a church leader. "Blasphemy," according to Heward-Mills, "is unauthorized interference with God-ordained authority" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 150). His warning of blasphemy as betrayal against charismatic "giants" goes along with a call of unquestioned loyalty and stern discipline of language use in the rank and file of church membership: "Be careful what you say about men of God" (Heward-Mills 2012b, 151).

The theology of accusation, in sum, centres on a turn in the concept of blasphemy. It categorizes blasphemy as a speech act of disloyalty over against charismatic authority embodied by the "mighty giants of God". The theo-linguistic strategy demands uncompromising solidarity with the church leader and defines critique of charismatic leadership as demonic mimicry. Thus, the theology of accusation forms part of demonology to protect charismatic authority against spiritually framed subversion. Therefore, and with some consequential thinking, Heward-Mills considers his "loyalty/disloyalty" series as the other main publication series next to his Church Growth Series (Heward-Mills 2000). The theo-linguistic repertoire presents a strategy of immunization. Linguistically, the "giants of God" monopolize charismatic authority and decipher adversaries as heretics. Such an immunization policy takes away any doubt of exerting authority on the one hand, and it sensitizes against additional charismatic claims raised within a given megachurch hierarchy. The plausibility of charismatic truth rests solely with "God-ordained authority", represented by the "unconquerable enemy".

Preliminary Conclusions

The discernment of a theo-linguistic complex composed of two interlinked theologies to stabilize, enhance and protect charismatic authority in megachurch settings seems perplexing. After all, it provides evidence over against idiomatic formulae of experiential Pentecostal theologizing. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas once termed Pentecostalism as exceptional in the sense of unfolding an "experiential religion of difference" (Woodhead and Heelas 2000, 148–149). They refer to Pentecostal epistemology as experiential, shaping spaces for enthusiastic spirituality. This has become a common designation ever since. It is largely a shared conviction to mark a charismatic and Pentecostal worldview as an expression of an ecstatic experience perceived as transcending rational experience. In this tune, Pentecostal theologian Wolfgang Vondey identifies Pentecostal theology as a "play of imagination", providing space for "improvisation" and hermeneutical experiments (Vondey 2010, 40–46). However, the findings on Pentecostal theo-linguistics interfere drastically in such conventional verdicts of Pentecostal imagination. The findings reveal charisma as theo-linguistically formatted. By identifying theo-linguistic strategies of control, protection and immunization against criticism, we envisage some rational characteristics of constructing charisma. I assume that the very rational composition may be one reason to explain why those theo-linguistic strategies surrounding charismatic aura were left widely uncommented on or even unnoticed thus far.

In view of Pentecostal megachurch life, two corresponding theo-linguistic inventories can be described: an imitational policy of copy and paste that aims at embodying borrowed charismatic aura on the one hand, and the theology of accusation targeting charismatic rivals on the other hand. Both strategies link social organizational aspects, or else the ecclesial outfit of a given megachurch, with theological reasoning. However, the theological arguments brought forward reinterpret classic Christological and hamartiological motifs. By this resignification of classic theological terms, the charismatic hero demonstrates the power of interpretation. Yet, the powerful aura has an ambivalent side, too. The "giant of God" turns into the absolute and unquestionable megachurch leader, but a leader who remains vulnerable. His ideal type status deserves substantial security measures in a spiritual environment full of charismatic imagination. Needless to say that Pentecostal megachurches tremendously expanded the occurrence of charisma in recent decades. In order to navigate a vast and competitive field of charismatic claims, they apply a set of encroaching practices. Yet, different from the cultural terrain analyzed by Coleman and Chatoo, the encroaching practices operating to safeguard charismatic authority are monitored by theological filters – and more precisely, they consist of a theo-linguistic format that calls for primary resonance within the space of a megachurch.

This theo-linguistic strategy reminds of the "language game" referred to by Ludwig Wittgenstein to explore the social aspect of language. By introducing the

notion of a "language game", Wittgenstein connects the intentionality of language to the social contexts of generating meaning (cf. Eriksen 2015, 50). The context-specific discourse of the Pentecostal megachurch language game is to generate and to rectify exceptional charismatic aura accredited to church founders. The language game applies core theological arguments, yet by way of critical resignification. The analysis of the twin complex of the theology of copy and paste and the theology of accusation brings to light that the Pentecostal language game invests in highlighting the mundane, social and ecclesial arguments. The exclusive nimbus of so-called charismatic giants is instrumental for church growth purposes and for keeping structures of loyalty within expanding megachurches, often developing into multi-site megachurches with international flair. Remarkably enough, such theo-linguistic strategies, although deploying core theological themes, manage to bypass the severe consequences they have for theological discourse. The copy and paste mandate reroutes the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*, or succession (*Nachfolge)* of Christ) to the imitation of a self-declared charismatic individual. The theology of accusation redirects the hamartiological language of blasphemy from a sin of tongue against God to a critique against a megachurch founder. In both re-readings, Christological as well as theological terms are turned into anthropological criteria to construct, expand and glorify the prestige of the charismatic megachurch hero. The language game rather unfolds as a strategic reversal of theological terms into anthropological arguments.

However, as mentioned in passing above, the theo-linguistic strategies can only unfold their "encroaching" capacity in internal megachurch discourse. Here, they seem to be manifest to solve internal megachurch disputes. Yet, when entering the wider social terrain outside a megachurch they lose sovereignty at once. I have exemplified the limits of megachurch representation of heroic charisma in a detailed Ghanaian case study on Archbishop Duncan-Williams (cf. Heuser 2018; Heuser 2020). It shows the failure of the theology of accusation. Caused by his accusation (sic) of Islam as a form of "black magic", voiced in a streamlined sermon, he became severely ostracized in public discourse. In the ensuing controversy, his stature as one of the pioneering megachurch leaders in West Africa was seriously endangered. His main opponents were representatives of young, urban-based Muslim intellectuals. By additional intervention from ecumenical and political factions, Duncan-Williams had to apologize in public. The "mighty giant", who positions himself as church father of the West African megachurch scene, felt bereft of his power of argumentation. Consequently, when applied to inter-religious conflict, the theology of accusation may even turn against the "sender", in this case undermining the authority of a charismatic hero.

In conclusion, megachurch language games enforce theo-linguistic strategies of streamlining charisma. It seems right to state that they operate well within Pentecostal African megachurches but not in relation to the outside world. Future research may discern both, whether and how the interconnected strategies of "copy

and paste" and the theology of accusation remain specific to, or translate beyond Pentecostalism.

Bibliography

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. 2005. *African Charismatics: Current Developments Within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. Leiden: Brill.

Cartledge, Mark J., Sarah L. B. Dunlop, Heather Buckingham, and Sophie Bremner. 2019. *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice*. Leiden: Brill.

Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Coleman, Simon, and Saliha Chatoo. 2019. "Megachurches and Popular Culture: On Enclaving and Encroaching." In *Handbook of Megachurches*, edited by Stephen J. Hunt, 84–102. Brill: Leiden.

Christerson, Brad, and Richard Flory. 2017. *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davies, Andrew. "The Evangelisation of the Nation, the Revitalisation of the Church and the Transformation of Society: Megachurches and Social Engagement." In *Handbook of Megachurches*, edited by Stephen J. Hunt, 214–239. Brill: Leiden.

Drønen, Tomas S., and Stian Eriksen. 2021. "Conversion." In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Global Pentecostalism*, edited by Michael Wilkinson, Connie Au, Jörg Haustein, and Todd M. Johnson, 145–148. Brill: Leiden.

Eriksen, Stian. 2015. "The Epistemology of Imagination and Religious Experience." *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 69, no. 1: 45–73.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* Vol. 2. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Heuser, Andreas. 2018. "'Visioneer Reborn': Online-Machtpoker zwischen Mega-Ministries und 'Pentecostal Muslims' in Ghana." In *Religion – Macht – Raum: Religiöse Machtansprüche und ihre medialen Repräsentationen*, edited by Daniel Cyranka, and Henning Wrogemann, 15–40. Leipzig: EVA.

Heuser, Andreas. 2020. "Aufstand gegen die 'Giganten Gottes': ein Pentekostal-Islamischer Blasphemiestreit in Ghana und die Erosion der Theologie der Anklage." In *Blasphemie: Anspruch und Widerstreit in Religionskonflikten*, edited by Matthias D. Wüthrich, Matthias Gockel, and Jürgen Mohn, 167–184. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Heuser, Andreas. 2021a. "Pfingstbewegung und Megakirchen – neue Forschungstrends." *Verkündigung und Forschung* 66, no. 2: 84–103.

Heuser, Andreas. 2021b. "Outlines of a Pentecostal Dominion Theology." In *Political Pentecostalism: Four Synoptic Surveys from Asia, Africa, and Latin*

America, edited by Leandro L. Bedin-Fontana, and Markus Luber, 187–246. Regensburg: Pustet.

Heward-Mills, Dag. 2000. *Loyalty and Disloyalty*. Accra: Parchment House.

Heward-Mills, Dag. 2012a. *Church Growth ... It Is Possible!*, second printing. Benin City: Hosanna Christian Bookshop and Publishing House.

Heward-Mills, Dag. 2012b. *Basic Theology*. Benin City: Hosanna Christian Bookshop and Publishing House.

Hunt, Stephen J., ed. 2019. *Handbook of Megachurches*. Brill: Leiden.

Marshall, Ruth. 2016. "Destroying Arguments and Captivating Thoughts: Spiritual warfare prayer as global praxis." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no. 1: 92–113.

Miller, Donald, and Tetsunao Yamamori. 2007. *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Oderinde, Peter A. 2022. *Digital Spiritualities: Social Media and Nigerian Pentecostal Churches in Switzerland*. Zürich: LIT.

Thumma, Scott, and Dave Travis. 2007. *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What we can Learn from America's Largest Churches*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Vondey, Wolfgang. 2010. *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda. Pentecostal Manifestos*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Weber, Max. 1980. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie. Fünfte, revidierte Auflage, besorgt von Johannes Winckelmann*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Weber, Max. 2011. *Religion und Gesellschaft. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. Eggolsheim: Dörfler.

Wils, Jean-Pierre. 2007. *Gotteslästerung*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen (Insel).

Woodhead, Linda, and Paul Heelas. 2000. *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wüthrich, Matthias D., Matthias Gockel, and Jürgen Mohn, eds. 2020. *Blasphemie: Anspruch und Widerstreit in Religionskonflikten*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Chapter 10

The Grammar of Sound in Ghana's Indigenous Religious Traditions and Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity

Genevieve Nrenzah

Introduction

In Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity[1] (PCC), the invocation of powerful spiritual forces to combat the beliefs and practices of Indigenous Religious Traditions (IRTs) dominates the sacred terrain. Van Dijk is accurate in asserting that Pentecostalism's main message is one of tradition's challenge. Pentecostal leaders and followers frequently disagree with the political claim of "traditionalism" at the local level (Van Dijk, 2001; Arthur A., 2018). In other words, while the state is finding means of going back to traditions by incorporating practices at the state level, the Pentecostals are busily casting IRTs as being rooted in the past with a discourse that assumes that the African spiritual world is a virtual repository of demonic gateways that provide a place of abode for evil spirits. These "gates" give the demons the right to invade life and circumstances. The IRTs are tagged as evil by PCC, notwithstanding the assertion that the IRTs boast of spiritual powers they claim are secretly obtained by PCC pastors and displayed in their miracle services on television and in prayer camps. PCC seems to be monopolizing and manipulating "sound" in decoding the IRTs' world, even though the IRTs' religious officials also invoke their gods or spirits using the same medium of sound. A sound is a "vibration that travels through the air or other medium and can be heard when they reach the ear of a human or animal" (Nrenzah, 2015). Sounds might have different meanings according to a particular context, but for Africans, sound is described as the vehicle that transforms an intangible idea into a material form—connecting thoughts or imperceptible matter. For instance, an IRTs' *bosomfo* mouthpiece is able to translate an inaudible message spoken by a priest in trance to a client meaningfully, making a material sense out of the intangible message.

 In Ghana, sound is an essential element in the religious traditions of IRTs and PCCs. Sound itself is evocative and has mystical powers utilized by representatives of the IRTs and PCC traditions to summon spiritual powers with tremendous energy and authority to produce tangible results. Despite its centrality in two major religious traditions, it has yet to receive the attention it deserves in academic

research of Ghanaian spirituality. Research into this critical dimension will un-earth new insights into African spirituality. Hackett has lamented that discourses of "sound relating to indigeneity are more often embedded in popular or scholarly accounts of performance, and expressive practices" (Hackett, 2017). Engelhardt claims that Vatican II or Hasidism have debated the appropriateness of sonic ex-pression and acoustic experience to clarify doctrine and indicate that they "meet the spiritual and social needs of particular communities and relate the sacred to a particular soundscape" (Engelhardt, 2012) and acknowledge their importance. In her article, exploring the sonic sacralization of urban space in the multicultural city of Accra, De Witte reminds us of the "difference in religious spatiality and the similarity in the sound concerning the spiritual" (De Witte, 2008) of PCCs and IRTs. In post-genocide Rwanda, debates about the voice of Pentecostals and the "noise pollution" pursued by the Rwandan government awakened attention to "the materiality of sound and voice" (Grant, 2021). Sounds have always been connected in "correspondence between musical sound and cosmic phenomena" (Adegbite, 1991), which is why Hackett aptly stated that the "study of sound re-lating to religious ideas and practice is not forcibly about music" (Hackett, 2012). In consequence, sounds in religious settings must be analyzed exclusively in the diverse meanings that sounds emanate. Just as with the terms 'religion' and 'art,' there are languages that do not reflect the concept of 'music' as it is understood in Western cultures. Instead, they may prefer vocalized forms of expression, such as recitation in Islam (Hackett, 2012).

This study is about the ideological discourse that has set a repetitive tug of war between the PCC and IRTs. The "religious clash over sonic sacralization of urban space is a competition for symbolic control of spaces, but also as a spiritual struggle over the invisible" (De Witte, 2008). Whoever wields sonic power over the city also controls it spiritually. I explore the two religious traditions and their participant's encounters with the so-called spirit environment in a physical world through their diverse performative activities. I argue that sound as a performative activity is contextualized, in that it serves different purposes in different contexts.

The question is, how possible is it for one to translate and make sense of divine soundscape in a religious context as a participant observer? By way of explanation, a different image may be created, amalgamating two supposedly in-compatible worlds and words of the physical and the spiritual. Therefore, what intellectual and ethical obstacles must be overcome to present the findings ob-jectively? To respond to the query, "describing and analyzing sound—whether in terms of how it is produced, perceived, used, or transmitted—requires a variety of disciplinary perspectives from the natural, social, and human sciences" (Hackett, 2012), I, therefore, employ these various tools in the analysis of the data to an end. In this article, having established that sound is essential to Africans and, in this case, IRTs and PCC, we shall address the nature and role of sound in IRTs

and PCC and examine the different types of sounds and the roles they play in the IRTs and PCC.

Examining Sound in Indigenous Religious

Sound is a spiritual category in Akan cosmology. According to the Akan of Ghana, a person is composed of three elements—*okra* soul, *sumsum* spirit, and *nipadua* body. Just like *nkrabea*, destiny, sound is a mark of a person's uniqueness. For example, a person's voice expresses the *sumsum* or the personality spirits that he/she inherits from the father. No two voices can be the same. No two people can have the same voice; there could be semblance, but it cannot be the same.

Sound is evocative; specific sounds induce particular states of mind and manifest certain spiritual presences. The Nzema word *ewole*, snake, when uttered, can manifest as a snake. The Nzema would generally not refer directly to snakes, especially at night or on farms. When they talk about snakes, they use pseudonyms such as string, rope, and crawler. Based on the sound of the name, they do so based on the belief that there is a mystical link between a name and the named. Names are sounds that magically manifest their owners. Sound links with the essence of beings, but sound also says something about spirits' character. A violent and aggressive spirit exhibits this trait through sounds when it possesses the priest or priestess. In a performative environment, such a deity could command or be attracted to louder singing, more aggressive drum beating, and faster tempo—gunshots, whip cracks, shrill whistles, and other bizarre stuff. A caring, warm, motherly, and protective deity will exhibit or ask for softer music, a slower tempo, and gentler dance moves.

For IRTs, sounds substantiate power in a competitive way, especially in dealing with their competitors. Sound plays an important role in the performances of conjuring things (money, clothes, egg, watches, and so on) in public spaces to display their spiritual base. There is also a social aspect of sound. It encourages collective and democratic participation, a sense of egalitarianism—communality. It has an entertainment value and sustains the life of the performance through singing, clapping, whistles, drumming, clapping, and so on. In communicating human problems to deities in the IRTs, sound is the central ingredient in linking up or connecting. A point to note here is that participants/clients/subscribers of IRTs can speak to the priest/priestess who informs the deities. From thereon, the priest/priestess takes over the communication. The deity possesses the priest/priestess, who is not privy to what transpires until the deity leaves the priest's body. A client/subscriber states:

> In the sound of these inaudible murmuring from the mouth and gestures from the body, if they were words, what was the priestess telling the client – is it a message of joy, much joy, grief, or much grief? There was the frightening joy of hearing the priestess utter as if to herself and then looking the way of the client and the *Bosomfo*,

and then sudden grief of incommunicability on her face in murmuring. In that grief, she seemed to look up to the Heavens quietly and then came a smile with a serious look on her face and onward communication murmuring and this time with hand gestures looking at the client and then a clap. She was sitting still and suddenly relaxed (as observed by Genevieve Nrenzah)

The description of an experience of Adwoa Bobiye, a frequent subscriber of IRTs shrines, depicts sounds like a mode to facilitate communication between the spirits and IRTs functionaries, subtly or obviously for onward transmission to humans. It sets the appropriate mood for the priests/priestesses to communicate with the deities and act as the catalyst for communication. Though this is the case, especially participants/clients need to comprehend the grammar of sounds as a tool that summons and sustains the presence of the deities in performances in religious arenas in the moment of the action to benefit fully from the experience. In IRTs, whether in private or public, two roles and modes are displayed. First, sound must be made to invoke the deity, and second, when the deity is invoked and possesses the priest/priestess to confirm its presence, the sound is used in communicating the message from the deity to the human audience. The private and public categories will be discussed in what ensues.

Sounds in Private and Public Religious Activities of IRTs Functionaries and Clients

The private religious activities in IRTs are primarily executed in the privacy of the shrines, and secondly, in public activities such as *agor?* or *ak?m afahye. The agor? or ak?m afahye are occasions* that usually proceed religious worship such as *akwasidae.* In both activities, the *Bosomfo* sets the pace for the performances. The *Bosomfo* of an Akan Indigenous religious shrine is the mouthpiece of an indigenous priest/priestess and the interpreter of utterances in private and public spaces. He starts by hitting the *dawuro gong gong* and then handing a bell to the priest or priestess. The priest or priestess then continues ringing the bell until the deity possesses them. What is significant to note here is the sequence of the sound of the bell. The sound of the bell at the start is at a very high peak and full of energy. The sound apexes then gradually descend with less exuberance until the last ring and a shake-off of the priest/priestess, which makes the priest/priestess drop the bell on the floor automatically to signal the takeover of the priest/priestess by the Spirit. From this time onwards, the priest/priestess transforms from a physical form (man or woman) to a spiritual form, a deity, and hence speaks mysterious sounds that could only be interpreted by a spiritual specialist *(Bosomfo).* The priest/priestess speaks with the tone of the voice of the deities. These are different from their normal voices. The only person who can understand what the priest utters and their overall message is the *Bosomfo.*

To the outsider, a client/subscriber, the sounds coming from the priest/priestess are mere unintelligible words (I say so referring to myself on the field, seated right at the back of a priestess in the divination room), hearing no single meaningful word from the priestess. Even though the sound emitted from this priestess Oforiwaa and the many others I interviewed sounded like a baby murmuring or singing. The *Bosomfo*, who understood the grammar of the gods, interpreted the information the gods were giving through the priestess/priest to individuals or a community.

The second use of sound takes place in the context of public performances such as the *agor?* or *ak?m afahye*. These two are gatherings where indigenous religious priests and priestesses perform in groups in the eyes of the public. In such instances, the procedure of libation is initiated, and the drummers, clappers, and singers make the sound to invoke the Spirit. The musical group/band performing to invoke the Spirit are primarily trained professionals belonging to a particular shrine who know the tunes of particular deities and how to make sounds from the drums to invoke them.

Noticeably, on the *agor?* and *akom* platforms, priests and priestesses dance with exuberance to the sound of the drumbeat. The faster the tempo of the drumbeat, the easier it is to set the mood required by the deities for possession to begin. The drum and other instruments take precedence over the human voice in public performances. It is rightly so because the performer, priest/priestess at that moment, needs the drum's sound to communicate with the spirits.

What happens in these two acts of communication through sound (private and public), confirmed by the *Bosomfo*, is that the deities could not descend on or "mount" the priest/priestess without the inducement of sound. He said, "musicians and the priest themselves cannot force the deities to appear or possess them. Sounds attract the deities to the scene of call" (Paa interviewed by Genevieve Nrenzah, 11 March 2020). When they arrive at the call of sound or music scene, they exhibit their presence by mounting or possessing priests/priestesses or sometimes bystanders they wish to use, taking an embodied form to interact with and communicate with humans. "Libations are also often poured on effigies which are receptacles of the deities to invoke them to inhabit it to listen to the supplication of clients"(Nrenzah, 2015) but ultimately, utterances of sound are enacted.

Performances of Sound in IRTs

The performance of sounds in the IRTs, whether in private or public religious activities, does three things sequentially that are interconnected in IRTs. First, it summons the deities through invocation. Findings from the field indicate that deities do not sit in one place because they work around the clock at the disposal of humans in the spiritual world.

Consequently, when invoked, they must travel or journey from their spiritual worlds to possess humans and their representative effigy in the physical world. These journeys have stages. A deity must be awoken through the pouring of libation and sound. A deity must prepare to set off from his or her abode to the place of call. The call of the deities can be done in two ways. In the first level, the IRTs priest/priestess could place a call to the deities by pouring libation on the effigies, which serve as representatives of the deities in the shrine, to come and inhabit the effigies to listen to a supplication. Effigies in the shrines are representations of the deities. They could be compared to cell phones, as the medium for communication, as there is always a 'call' by the priest and a receiver on the other side by the deities (Nrenzah, 2015, p. 162). In another way, the priest/priestess could also invoke the deities to mount him or her, connecting the next level I wish to point out.

The second level is to set the communication after placing the call. Communication is a two-way affair, and it can commence only when the other party (deity) decides to pick up the call. A deity must arrive at the ritual venue and descend or possess a priest or inhabit an effigy as a sign of picking the call. When the deity inhabits a priest/priestess automatically, the act transforms the status of the priest/priestess from the state of humans to that of the spirits. The spirits possess humans and become one with them. The act elevates the human to a high degree of moral or spiritual purity of excellence. The possession of the priest/priestess confirms the presence of the deity that he accepted the call. Sound is used to communicate the deity's message to the human audience. Analyzing the first and second levels of the 'call' to the cell phone analogy, we can say that the priest or priestesses summon the deities by placing a call to them through the pouring of libation on the effigies. The deities then respond to the call by journeying from their comfort zones in the spirit world to inhabit the effigy or taking embodied form in the priest/priestess to listen to the priest's reason for the summoning.

The third level in the sequence is that the religious agent changes into the deity. What is even more fascinating is that the grammar of the *Bosomfo* also changes in his address of the deities, acting through the priest/priestess at that moment to "venerate" appellations such as Nana, which means Your Highness, venerable ancestor, elder, and king, dasebre: *osiadieyo* promise keeper as well as others. I note two ways in terms of sound grammar or language of the Spirit. The invitation or invocation of the Spirit is done through sound. The beating of the gon*g gong dawuro* by the priestess, and the singing, drumming, and clapping by the musicians are sounds or languages understood by the spirits. When the Spirit comes to inhabit the priest or priestess, the Spirit exhibits his presence through another grammar, this type of inaudible murdering directly to the *Bosomfo* or sometimes a client looking at the *Bosomfo* because the clients or those present can only hear murmuring and see movement of the mouth. They cannot comprehend what is being communicated until it has been translated. The almost inaudible sound is well

understood by only those who speak the language of the Spirit *(Bosomfo)*. When he gets the full import of what the Spirit is saying, he then informs the gathering if it is a public activity or a client if it is private. Later, when the Spirit leaves the body of the priest/priestess, he/she is briefed on what transpired when he/she was possessed. When the Spirit inhabits a priest, it controls the body; as such, the priest/priestess will only know the activities he performed once briefed by the *Bosomfo*.

The participants, singers, and drummers must know what lyrics, tones, rhythms, tempo, modality of clapping, bell ringing or chanting is required at the different stages of the particular deity's journey. Sound facilitates the smooth transition from one phase of the journey to the other. Those who understand the grammar of the Spirit make the experiential process smooth. I will now discuss sound as used in the Pentecostal traditions in Ghana.

The Pentecostal and Sound

Pentecostal outbursts worldwide may be causally linked to earlier North American initiatives, but in Ghana, they started in the 1960s. The first Pentecostal wave is credited to the activities of Apostle Peter Newman Anim, who is also often referred to as the "father of Ghanaian Pentecostalism" (Owusu-Ansah and Adjei-Acquah, 2020). The Church of Pentecost, Assemblies of God Church, Christ Apostolic Church, and the Full Gospel Church of God are associated with the first wave. The second Pentecostal wave that has swept through urban centres of Africa since the 1970s is a charismatic type of Pentecostalism that developed with individuals who studied under Benson and his All Nations for Christ Bible Institute. Dr Mensa Otabil's International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), Bishop Duncan Williams' Christian Action Faith Ministries (CAFM), Action Faith International, and Eastwood Anaba Fountain Gate Chapel belong to the second wave. These churches "quickly attracted a massive membership from a young, urban, upwardly mobile, emerging middle class, aspiring to success" (Van Dijk, 2001). Their leaders displayed a strong personal, charismatic kind of leadership.

Pentecostalism is a "stream of Christianity that emphasizes experience, so those who seek 'membership' do not have to go through a catechism" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). The condition of becoming a member is to accept Jesus as Lord and master over one's life; by this proclamation, a person is "born again," which follows a fierce denunciation of IRTs by completely "breaking with the past" (Meyer, 1998). Churches from these two waves are often taken collectively as Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches (Meyer, 2004). The name Pentecostal stems from the Day of Pentecost in the upper room experience in Acts 2:1–47, so one crucial tenet of the PCC churches is speaking in tongues. Tongues are spoken as a spirit language in communication with God.

Sound is important within the Pentecostal strand of Christianity in Ghana. The sound of speaking in mysteries of tongues is synonymous with its tradition. In Ghana, apart from the sound of speaking in tongues, there is clapping, drumming, hooting, joyful noises, and, a recent addition, laughing to glorify God in annoying the devil. For the Pentecostals, those acts mentioned above are a means of communicating with Jesus Christ and God. God will protect them from their enemies and provide sustenance in this world. Prayer is communicating with God spiritually.

Interestingly, the Holy Spirit is the third part of the Trinity. The physical connection between God's son Jesus Christ and his followers was impossible after he ascended into heaven. He, therefore, sent the Holy Spirit to "fill and edify" the Christian to pray more in tongues to communicate in that mood with God and break the devil's stronghold supposedly residing in an indigenous religious belief system that worries the Christian. The audible sounds made through praying in tongues, sometimes accompanied by clapping, shouting, hooting, and whipping, are bombs fired at the devil's camp.

The PCC Performance of Sounds

The PCC performances with sounds are manifested diversely. For instance, a member can speak of his or her new life in Christ. Another can testify to a healing experience. Someone could suddenly prophecy, whether in tongues or plain speech. Sometimes a member's reflection on a personal dream as some form of the direction of a divine injunction is shared in church amidst shouts. Someone narrates a revelation or approves a preacher's point by shouting 'Amen' or 'hallelujah' as often happens. In the PCC case, insiders would not consider the sounds used in communicating those acts unusual or aberrant dynamic behaviour. These sounds are rather considered natural to Pentecostal spirituality and accepted as well as expected, though critically at times since not all noises are believed to represent the Holy Spiritss (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005)

Recently, a new addition to the many avenues is laughing. When the Pentecostals are happy, about a battle, they have fought through prayer and fasting and supposedly won, they make a joyful noise to glorify God. They take time off from one to five minutes to laugh. "Laugh to thank God for supplying your needs; laugh hard. Even if you have not gotten your breakthrough yet, laugh because God will make you laugh soon. Laugh, laugh at the devil. Satan is a loser. Laugh that you have already won your battles ahead of the war and the devil has lost. Continue laughing, laugh, and laugh; make the devil annoyed that you are happy, and he will flee. Laugh, laugh, hahahahahahahaha, amen." The narrated 'laughter' episode is captured in the Moment of Glory Prayer Army (MOGPA), whose leader, Rev. Osei Bonsu (Rev. O. B), calls himself the commander-in-chief of God's army (MOGPA prayer activities as observed by the author). Note that the

name of this religious group depicts a militant group, and the leader calls himself commander. A commander commissioned to "die" all devil activities to pave the way for the kingdom of God.

Sound is conveyed through prayers, prophecies, consultation, slaying in the Spirit, visions, and even dreams. The Pentecostal performance of sounds is pursued in private spaces, individually at homes or other places, and publicly, communally in churches, prayer camps, or designated areas like a forest. The Pentecostal pastors, prophets, and leaders lead the offensive against the enemy to emit God's protection. These spiritual leaders give clients or members specific information. The information is termed *"akwankyere"* or direction, and clients or members follow through to meet their needs. *Akwankyere* could range from a simple act of prayer to days or even months of praying and fasting. One could be directed to use religiously potent products such as posters, water, oil, shear butter, and other customized items by spiritual leaders. *Akwankyere* could be extreme asceticism: fasting without food for days (dry fasting). Ritual bathing of members/clients by the pastor/prophet could also be a direction. using spices and herbs and denying oneself of sleep in the night to perform a ritual and others.

Significantly, unlike in the IRTs, where only the priest/priestess speaks the spiritual language, in the PCC communicating with the spiritual language of tongues could be done by any member who has accepted Christ as his saviour and is baptized with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ghanaian Pentecostals experience the "Holy Spirit as a Spirit of renewal, a source of 'vitalizing breath/energy for the glowing splendour of the church" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). Tongues in PCC are the spiritual key that links directly to God with no interference from Satan because it is said to be "*Onyame Kasa*," God's language*, Kasa fuforo* new language. It is said to confuse the devil, as the devil does not understand it. Blurting in the sound of tongues in PCC comes in two ways.

First, a gift comes with being born again or receiving one's saviour. With this type, individual Christians in the church pray with it congregationally when a prayer topic is given during meetings. It does not need interpretation, as it is a direct address to God, who gave the language to the individual.

The second form is God's response to the gathering toward the end of the prayer session or worship. 1 Corinthian 12:7–11 spells this out:

> The Holy Spirit is uniquely given to each of us. That is for the good of all. To some people, the Spirit gives a message of wisdom. To others, the same Spirit gives a message of knowledge. To others, the same Spirit gives faith. To others, that one Spirit gives gifts of healing. To others, he gives the power to do miracles. To others, he gives the ability to prophesy. To others, he gives the ability to tell the spirits apart. To others, he gives them the ability to speak in different kinds of languages they had not known before.

> Furthermore, to others, he gives the ability to explain what was said in those languages. All the gifts are produced by one and the same Spirit. He gives gifts to each person, just as he decides (1 Corinthians 12:7–11)

Tongues are also a gift often spoken by Christians who know what is spoken and can interpret it. When members of the first category have finished praying in tongues to God, they are instructed to wait silently until God speaks to both the group as a whole and to specific individuals. In this form of communication, the person speaking spontaneously bursts out and blurts out inaudible sounds interpreted by the individual or another person in the gathering. When this happens, all others are commanded by the person leading the service to keep quiet to listen to God's message for the church. The message could be addressed to one person or to the whole gathering and could come in the way of encouragement, scolding of individuals or the group for doing something terrible that needs to be changed, or even blessings from God.

With this language, what happens is that sometimes someone spontaneously breaks up and starts speaking in a high tone above everyone else in the gathering. When it happens that way and the pastor or prophet discerns the voice and message is not from God, he commands the person speaking to shut up because the information coming is from Satan, not God. It sometimes becomes dramatic as the supposed evil Spirit challenges the pastor to defy his orders and continue speaking. At this point, the expert on God's language can decipher that the devil that has possessed the person to speak is stronger. He can either single-handedly continue praying tongues of fire to deliver the victim or ask for reinforcement from those at the gathering to form a circle around the victim to cast powerful prayer missiles of sounds to disable the evil Spirit in the person. In this deliverance session, the said Spirit leaves the victim without putting up a fight or flight back. The evil Spirit is noticed physically to have left spiritually when the person calms down, comes to her usual self, and is aware of her environment. Sometimes he/she may be asked what happened.

We should be aware that during the battle of spirit power exchanges between the prophet and the victim, the victim is unaware of what is transpiring as Satan uses the victim to pursue his evil agenda. The situation could be likened to experiences of the IRTs priests/priestesses. In IRTs, the priest/priestess is unaware of the deity's presence until the deity leaves the body. Probably, the PCC branding of IRTs as evil stems from this experience, meaning that when the possession takes over a person, that person becomes unaware of the environment he/she finds herself in. However, when a Christian communicates with God in tongues, he is aware of the communication. He cannot understand what he is blurting out unless, of course, the Holy Spirit edifies them. The paradox here is that sometimes a Christian gets 'slew' in the spirits and becomes unaware of the language spoken or the message given until the Spirit of God leaves the person's body. In delegalizing IRTs, the PCC points accusing fingers at the "other" for that unclear process, but

the PCC having the same experience is 'right'. The situation, for me, exposes the idea of "entitlement" and power over others by being a child of God. The situation brings to mind George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where we read, "All Animals are Equal, but some are More Equal than others" (Orwell, 2021). Similarly, the PCC suggests that all humans are the creation of God, but some are his children, and others are not. Alternatively, some are good, and others are evil. The PCC, the masters, are the pigs whose 'spirit possessions' are good, and IRTs and the others are the humans whose 'spirit possession' emanates from the devil's camp and are as such evil.

In IRTs, practitioners, priests/priestesses must place a call to the deity by inviting the deity to come and listen to the supplication of a client placed through the priest. The priest is unable to link up with the deities in the spirit world without the sound of the gong, ringing the bell, and/or drums. In the PCC, the call is placed directly to God. The preparation is done by charging the environment through praises to God, climaxing it with worship. At the tail end of worship, messages from God are given through the speaking of mystery tongues.

It is often speculated that Ghanaian Pentecostalism builds mainly on elements of IRTs; that Pentecostalism has borrowed extensively from IRTs and made them her own. However, this idea has been disputed by Asamoah-Gyadu, who believes that each religious tradition owns what they have and use. The fact that there are similarities does not mean one is copying the other. The Pentecostals are at war with evil, evil stored in the IRTs, and sound appears to be the weapon in combating the stronghold to receive protection and provision from God. To this end, sound in the Pentecostal circles is discharged for fundamental reasons of protection and provision.

Conclusion

The sound of music demonstrated in diverse conduits is a crucial component of Ghana's IRTs and the PCC. The language of the Spirit, sound, is used contextually in the communication between humans and the supernatural in private or public spaces. In IRTs, it is used in connecting with the deity and the PCC for connecting with God to tap powers to destroy the IRTs base. The ideological stance of the PCC and the IRTs plays a role as well— underneath the surface usage of sound is important within the competitiveness of who controls the spiritual space in a city, for example.

The significant thing to note is that sound is the channel and language through which religious people communicate with the spiritual world in a contextualized manner. Sounds energize, sounds soothe, sounds invigorate, sounds communicate, sounds reflect, and sounds refer to both the phenomenal reality and the supernatural. While the indigenous religious functionaries call their deity's visitations through sound, the PCC uses sound to invite a visitation of God through the Holy

Spirit and to dispel evil in IRTs, which is perceived as a blockage of blessings from God by instigating people to sin.

Before there can be any form of communication, sound must be produced; first, invocation of God or a deity, and second, when God or deity is invoked, his presence must be confirmed. In IRTs, possession of the priest/priestess is one mark, but an expert on the language of the Spirit, the *Bosomfo* interprets the deity's mind. For the PCC, the presence is felt individually as individuals freely link up with the Spirit of God directly or through a pastor/prophet. On some occasions, God speaks through sounds of tongues through individual members gifted with the gift of interpretation for it to be translated or interpreted for the edification of the PCC faithful. In the case of the PCC, the language used is twofold. First is the supplicant's language that he directly blurts out to God, that is, speaking in tongues to God. The second is when someone speaks a language to communicate the mind of God, and another, with a gift of the grammar of the spirit, interprets the language that has been spoken.

Sound is a sacred code that decodes the spiritual realm of others (IRTs) for the way to be cleared for smooth connection to the super-spiritual realm; that is to say, sound precedes every activity within the IRTs spaces. All the sounds we hear are only a fraction of all the vibrations in our universe. It is when we tune our minds to it; sounds from speech, music, and nature (trees, sea, man, and animals) only become sound. In a sacred space, we attentively do hear when we tune our attention to the direction of sound and in participatory performances resulting from spiritual transfers between the physical world and the spiritual realm in the hope of receiving solutions in life because ultimately that is the reason behind the encounter. People organize their reality out of this experience. In the religious environment, all but the experts on the grammar of the deities may know this interpretation of sound.

Bibliography

Adegbite, Ademola. 1991. "The Concept of Sound in Traditional African Religious Music." *Journal of Black Studies* 22, no. 1: 45–54.

Arthur, Justice. A. 2018. *The Politics of Religious Sound: Conflict and the Negotiation of Religious Diversity in Ghana*. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Asamoah-Gyadu, Johnson Kwabena. 2005. *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. Leiden: Brill.

Day, M. James. 1993. *Speaking of Belief: Language, Performance, and Narrative in the Psychology of Religion. The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 3, no. 4: 213–229. DOI:10.1207/s15327582ijpr0304_1.

Doubleday, Veronica. 2008. "Sounds of power: An Overview of Musical Instruments and Gender." In *Ethnomusicology Forum* 17, no. 1: 3–39.

Dunn, David. 1997. "Nature, Sound Art, and the Sacred." *The Book of Music and Nature*, 95–107.

De Witte, Marleen. 2008, "Accra's Sounds and Sacred Spaces." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 3: 690–709.

Engelhardt, Jeffers. 2012. "Music, Sound, and Religion." In *The Cultural Study of Music*, 321–329.

Grant, Andrea Mariko. 2021. "Public Religion after Genocide: Pentecostal Sounds and Voice in Rwanda." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 2: 194–204.

Gidron, Yotam. 2021. "Negotiating the Sounds of Born-again Christianity: Aesthetic Provocations in Western Ethiopia." *Material Religion* 17, no. 4: 490–516.

Hackett, Rosalind. 2017. "Sounds Indigenous: Negotiating Identity in an Era of World Music." In *Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)*, 108–119. Brill.

Hackett, Rosalind. 2012. "Sound, Music, and the Study of Religion." *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 48, no. 1: 11–27.

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2019. "The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism." *HTS Religion and Society Series* Vol. 6. AOSIS.

Lamote, Frederik. 2010. "Regenerating Divine Sounds or How to Translate Sound." In *Media Interpretation Workshop, Date: 2010/05/04–2010/05/05, Location: Centre for West Africa Studies, Birmingham*.

Meyer, Birgit. 1998. "'Make a Complete Break with the Past.' Memory and Post-colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3: 316–349.

Meyer, Birgit. 2004. "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-charismatic Churches." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 447–474.

Mbaegbu, C. C. 2015. "The Effective Power of Music in Africa." *Open Journal of Philosophy* 5: 176–183. http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2015.53021.

Nrenzah, Genevieve. 2015. *Modernizing Indigenous Priesthood and Revitalizing Old Shrines: Current Developments on Ghana's Religious Landscape*. PhD. diss., University of Bayreuth, Germany.

Owusu-Ansah, Sylvia, and Philip Adjei-Acquah. 2020. "Pentecostalism and Sustainable Development: The Case of Perez Chapel International." In *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development*, edited by Philipp Öhlmann, Wilhelm Gräb, and Marie-Luise Frost, 212–226. London: Routledge.

Orwell, George. 2021. *Animal Farm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Dijk, Rijk A. 2001. "Contesting Silence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana." *Ghana Studies* 4: 31–64.

Vettiyolil, Abraham. 2014. "Wittgenstein on the Grammar of Religious Beliefs." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2: 1–12.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1967. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by GEM Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Part IV: Healing

Chapter 11

Relational Affliction and the Grammar of the Spirit World

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps

Illness and affliction are a fact of life. But globally, responses to a lack of well-being differ, for example, in the way a cause is identified, in the conceptualization of what the cause could be, or in the treatments that are accepted. In African thought, afflictions are often related to problems in the spirit world, such as troubled relations with ancestors, attacks by evil spirits, or witches using their invisible powers. This is especially the case if an affliction, whether it be an unexplained illness or a streak of misfortune, is protracted. In this chapter, I investigate the grammar of affliction and its relation to the spirit world in the Zambian context.

For this investigation, I use material from my research into religious life stories of young pastors in the Reformed Church in Zambia. In recent years, the religious landscape in Southern Africa has changed tremendously. Pentecostal churches have mushroomed, and the traditional mainline churches are undergoing a transformation under the influence of a grassroots Pentecostalization. In this context, the religious identity of the pastor in a mainline church is under close scrutiny. Pastors in mainline churches find themselves at a crossroads between a classical or a more Pentecostal style of faith. My research investigates transformational development at the intersection of Pentecostalism, religious identity and self-representation.

Dan McAdams (1993:11) calls life history the 'personal myth', a narrative that contains the things we find true and meaningful in our life. Telling stories, according to McAdams and others, is the way in which we construct our identity. In her research on lived religion in the USA, Nancy Ammerman (2014) has used a creative, innovative method to investigate spiritual narratives. She uses techniques similar to those in life-story research to elicit narratives about religion in everyday life, combined with an audio diary and prompts to take photographs of spaces connected to spirituality by informants. Drawing on both McAdams (see also 1998) and Ammerman, I ask my respondents to share narratives about key moments in their religious lives, such as high points, low points and turning points. These narratives are not pieces of cerebral theology or doctrine but show how my informants live their religion. The perspective of lived religion has been popular in the past years in Western countries, but few studies have been done on how African people experience and live their faith. Part of the interview also consists of taking a portrait photograph of the interviewee as a pastor, according to their wishes. The

interview is then transcribed and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. In this chapter, I will use some preliminary findings from this research.

If there is such a thing as a grammar of the spirit world, I will argue, it is a grammar that is inscribed on the body. It is the body that signals whether something is wrong within relationships, including the relationship with the spirit world. This perspective fits with a broader turn to the material and embodied aspects of religion and human behavior that is prevalent in current anthropology. This chapter emphasizes this embodied nature of beliefs in the context of philosophical reflections about the reality of the spirit world.

Affliction and Healing in Pastor James' Life Story

James is a young pastor in the Reformed Church in Zambia. He finished his theological education less than 10 years ago and is one of the informants in my research on religious identity. His life story notably consists of a series of narratives about affliction and healing, often in relation to both the spirit world and Christianity. In this section, I will follow James' life story with a focus on his narratives about affliction.

James starts his life story with the affliction of his mother, who had trouble conceiving him, the fifth of eight children. She felt 'things moving in her stomach' – a well-known affliction in the Zambian context for which traditional healers are often sought out. James' parents also seek the help from a traditional healer, after which his mother gets pregnant and he is born. His mother is, however, still ailing, and she is unable to breastfeed him for more than six months on the recommendation of the local hospital.[1] She dies in the year James first goes to school.

James' family opts for traditional healing as well as visiting a hospital in the case of his mother's health problems. Traditional healing occurs in another instance in James' youth as well. One day, when playing soccer with his friends, James gets into an argument with one of the boys. They start to fight, and James hits him. "From the village setup," he told me, "we believed that this friend was coming from a family where the grandmother, it is believed – it is believed, no one has seen it – but it is believed that she is a witch. Everyone knows that she is a witch. That's what people believe in the village. My personal experience was that after that fight, two days later, my leg got swollen from here up to downwards. It got big." Swollen legs are, like things moving in the stomach, an ailment that is related to invisible, spiritual causes, especially witchcraft. James tells his uncle, who has some knowledge about traditional healing, about his problem. He makes tattoos on James' leg, a common practice in traditional healing, and the swelling disappears.

As a child living in a rural area, traditional healing is a viable option to deal with afflictions for James and his family. Some Pentecostal Christians see any in-

---

[1]   The median duration of breastfeeding in Zambia is 21 months (Katepa-Bwalya et al. 2015:2).

volvement with traditional healing as an entry point for satanic forces in one's life, but James doesn't seem to feel bad about having used the services of traditional healers during his youth. In time, however, Christianity becomes increasingly important in James' own life, and in later cases of affliction, he rejects the option of traditional healing.

His first memory of a healing experience was when James was about to go to grade 10 in secondary school. But since his mother had died and his father was unable to work, there was no money to pay the school fees. A relative had sponsored him up to that point but was unable to do so any further. It reminds James of what happened to his siblings: 'Our first-born sister stopped school at grade 9, second-born sister grade 9, third-born brother grade 9, the brother before me, he stopped school in grade 6. Then it was me. Again, when I reached grade 9, I stopped. So, it's like when you're reaching grade 9, you have to stop school.' James' distress over not being able to go to school expresses itself as a physical pain. 'I had no sponsorship,' James says. 'It was so painful, so painful that I started developing. . . I felt like there's too much heat in my heart, like the heart is expanding.' James realizes, 'Oh, there must be an issue here, concerning our education.' What happens to him is not just a physical reaction to mental stress. There is more going on. The fact that no one in his family was able to continue school after grade 9 leads James to the conclusion that there is a spiritual problem as well. It is at this time that friends introduce him to the church, where people pray for him and James' Christian faith comes alive. Now that he has become a true Christian, the blockade stopping his education is lifted. His physical pain stops, and he is able to find a sponsor for his school fees. Looking back, he says, 'I thank God for what this friend of mine did and that he was able to lead me to Christ. For me the way opened. That's how I was able to finish school. Out of eight of us I was the only one who went to college.'

An important turning point in James' life is when he becomes born again. Like many Zambian Christians, he is able to pinpoint the exact moment in which he made the personal choice to surrender to Jesus Christ. A related memory is of an all-night prayer James attended on a Friday night. After prayers, when he goes home, he wonders, 'Is it that I've got a problem with my eyes? What is it with my eyes?' He suddenly realizes that he now sees things in a different way. He prays about it and talks to a youth leader. The leader explains, 'You know, when you are not yet born again, the way you look at things is different from the way you look at things when you're born again.' For James, this is literally an eye-opening moment.

As a young adult in the Reformed Church in Zambia, James comes into contact with Christian forms of healing. A student pastor on attachment to his church invites him to a session where he meets 'clients' to be prayed for. The clients manifest, meaning that they are possessed by spirits, and through the prayer of the student pastor, they are delivered. James is interested and wonders, 'Can I be able

to do this?' He feels not ready to pray for other people until his own pastor teaches him. This pastor allows him to come and help him pray for people who come looking for help. What happens next is a vivid memory from James' adult years. The pastor prays for a woman who had been using charms. Against the instructions, the woman failed to destroy the charms she had been using, and therefore, she cannot be completely delivered from the demons that have possessed her through these traditional techniques. Family members run back to the village where the woman came from and bring the woman's charms and traditional medicines. When they are destroyed and the pastor prays again for the woman, she is finally delivered. Seeing this makes James sure that ministry is his calling as well.

In church in his youth, someone prayed for him, and the pain went away. The power of prayer is inspiring to James, and he starts to help other people. 'I can say at one time I even thought I'm supposed to specialize in helping people who are heartbroken because of what I experienced myself. When I was helped, after some few months, I also began to help people just by narrating my personal story, narrating my personal story to people that I know who were healed from their problem.' James' own experiences with affliction make him sensitive to the afflictions of others and give him the ability to help.

James' most extensive narrative about affliction concerns his wife, Jenny. At the time, they had been married only a couple of months. One morning while at work, James received a phone call telling him that his wife had been admitted to the hospital because she had lost the ability to speak. After three days in hospital, the doctors still had no clue what could be wrong with Jenny, so he took her home again. After a week, there was no progress, although at least she could communicate by writing notes. Jenny's affliction is worrying not only to the young couple themselves. 'People encouraged us to go for prayer, invite an evangelist, because something odd is going on. We invited him for prayers, we prayed together. Nothing.' After two weeks, Jenny wrote in her notebook about a dream she had where she was surrounded by people and felt oppressed. Right after that, she started vomiting. At night, the same thing happened: Jenny wrote that she felt oppressed again, and this time, she vomited two stitching needles. For James, this was a clear sign that Jenny's affliction was spiritual in nature. When the needles were disposed of, Jenny started speaking again. The people around them still were unsure about Jenny's healing. They told James, 'No, this is very serious and this is very strange. You need to do something about this.' When James asked what they should do, they advised him to seek further consultation from a traditional healer. James said, 'We're not going to do that.'

The story of Jenny's affliction is strangely unresolved. The hospital could not help her, and looking back on it, James is convinced that the cause of her affliction was spiritual. But prayers from an invited evangelist did not help her, and James does not even mention praying for her himself. James rejects traditional medicine, but the narrative is not a story about the victory of Christian healing either.

As a pastor, attending to the afflicted is part of James' daily work. He remembers a case in his congregation where he was called because a member, whom he knew was HIV positive, was dying. 'We rushed to the scene,' James says. 'We found people. All of them, their faces are downcast and they're seated on the ground. Others are crying.' They treat the home of the sick person as if it is already a funeral home. James is surprised. He said to them, 'But why are you crying? She's not dead yet. She's still alive.' He decides to take action. 'We just offered a prayer and then we looked for a taxi. We booked the taxi and then we took her to the hospital. Then she was given medication, then we continued praying with her at the visitation house. Then she recovered. As I'm speaking today, she's still alive.' The people around her had already given up, but James saw that she could still be helped. Although he prayed for her, he attributes her recovery to the medication in the hospital: 'If we had not received that call and if we had not gone there, I think this time around we could have said we buried that person.' In this case, James' trust in Western biomedicine is greater than that of his congregants who wait for the sick woman to die.

In another case, biomedicine does not seem to be an option for James. A mother from a different congregation came to him and said, 'Me, I've got a child who is fitting, so we want you to help us saying prayers.' The child appears to be epileptic, prone to seizures. James obliges, provided that the family takes time to pray and fast as well. After a few prayer sessions, the child was no longer suffering. James told the child, 'The moment you feel the signs and you want to fit, stand on your own, because we're not going to be there for you every day. Pray whenever you feel those signs of fitting are coming, be determined to say, "I'm not going to fit. I'm going to be strong. I'm not going to fall down. I'm going to be in perfect health."' Seizures seem to be an affliction that can be overcome through mental strength and God's support.

James is not always able to help. A final narrative about affliction is still fresh in his mind, as it happened very recently. A woman had given birth without major problems, but in the hospital, it was discovered that she had a heart condition. How could a healthy young woman suddenly develop such a life-threatening condition? James starts asking questions to the relatives: 'How is the relationship with the mother or any of the relatives?' They tell him that there was a problem between the woman and her mother; they are not even speaking to each other. For James, it is clear. 'That is the root cause. She needs to be asked questions, she needs to be talked to.' He urges the family: 'Talk to this person, and if you cannot talk to this person, invite me. I go and just have a chat. Not praying, but just a chat with this person.' But before this can happen, the woman dies in hospital.

James' narratives about affliction are surprisingly diverse. When confronted with affliction, there exists a buffet of options, from traditional healing to biomedicine to Christian faith healing. Certain symptoms, like swollen legs and things moving in the stomach, are linked to traditional healing. For others, like

HIV/AIDS, biomedicine is the chosen solution. In many cases in James' life story, relationships play a greater role in the affliction than they would in a Western context. I will expand on this topic in the next section.

Relational Afflictions Inscribed on the Body

In James' life story, afflictions have an important place. As a pastor, it is his calling to help others – the word "help" occurs 56 times in James' interview – and he finds that his own experiences with affliction help him to do so. What can James' experiences teach us about the grammar of affliction in this Zambian setting?

First of all, it is clear that responses to affliction are diverse in contemporary Zambia. Different conceptual systems related to affliction coexist. In some cases, the choice for a particular system seems self-evident. A suspected case of witchcraft involving swollen legs gets treated by Zambian traditional methods of healing, involving tattoos and other medicines. A woman who is HIV positive is taken to the hospital. A child who suffers from seizures can be helped through prayers. In all of these cases, there is in James' narrative no discussion or doubt about which system of healing to choose.

In other cases, therapy shopping is visible. This is particularly clear in the narrative about James' wife, where the hospital and its Western biomedical perspective is a first option for treatment, while Christian faith healing as well as traditional healing are also mentioned as alternatives when the affliction turns out to be protracted and mysterious. According to Kateřina Mildnerová (2015:96), who did research on therapy-seeking behavior in Lusaka, Zambia, 'Therapy management itself is never a matter of individual choice. Rather it is a process of negotiation between a healer, a patient and his significant others (kinsmen, friends or neighbours.)' Jenny's story also shows the importance of the network of family and friends in accepting a specific diagnosis and treatment. People tell James that he should seek out an evangelist or a traditional healer to receive better help.

Mildnerová states that in general different conceptual frameworks of affliction and healing are treated as complementary rather than conflicting (2015:37). Sometimes, however, tensions between different frameworks are apparent in James' narratives, especially regarding traditional healing. A woman who uses charms needs to burn these traditional medicines to become healed of her affliction. From a Christian perspective, in which all spiritual agencies beyond the Christian Trinity are seen as agents of the devil, traditional forms of healing that make use of other spiritual forces are suspect and are believed to cause more harm than good. This is probably also the reason why James and his wife do not opt to seek out a traditional healer in the case of Jenny's mysterious affliction.

A big difference between Western biomedicine and both traditional and Christian faith healing is that affliction is not just seen as a physical matter, both in its causes and in its symptoms. When James struggles to find the money to continue

his secondary school education, it is an affliction for him, an affliction which he shares with his siblings. It is as if there is an invisible barrier for them to continue after grade 9. For James, it is Christ who is able to heal him from this affliction, curing both the physical pain of his heavy heart and helping him find a sponsor to pay his school fees, thereby breaking this barrier. James does not dwell on the cause of this affliction that plagues his family, but in cases where he does speak about causes, it is clear that these causes go beyond biomedical agents like viruses and bacteria. Witchcraft can be a cause of affliction, as can oppression by spiritual forces. None of these causes would be recognized by Western biomedicine.

A central role in the causation of disease in James' African and/or Christian perspective is played by relationality. In many of James' narratives, it is a bad relationship that is the root cause of an affliction. In the case of the woman who died of a heart problem, James even says this literally: the problems in the relationship with her mother are the root cause of the woman's problems. If James could have helped the woman by speaking to her about this relationship and maybe even mending it, the woman might have lived. In other narratives, relationships are key as well. His fight with a boy on the soccer field is punished with swollen legs, induced by the invisible powers of the boy's grandmother. If the relationship between James and the boy had not soured, he would not have had the problems with his legs.

It is not only relationships within the physical world that are important in the causation of affliction. Relationships with the spiritual world can be disrupted and mended as well. A very straightforward example is the narrative of James' turning point in faith. He has been a Christian all his life, but in his teenage years, his faith deepens and he becomes born again. This experience goes together with a physical sensation in his eyes. For James, being born again is not something that happens in his mind or in his heart; it happens to his body too. After he is born again, he sees the world in a different way, so much so that he thinks something happened to his eyes. Faith, for James, is literally an eyeopener. Here, an expression that I would normally read as metaphorical ('You see the world with different eyes when you are born again') is explicitly taken as literal. His newfound relation to the spiritual realm, in this case to the Christian God, is inscribed on his body by changing the way he sees.

A bad relation with the spirit world, on the other hand, can cause problems. This is the case when James' wife falls ill, and he interprets it as the attack of an evil spirit. James' interpretation of his wife's mysterious illness as a spirit attack fits with historical descriptions of demonic possession. In his history of possession in the western world, Brian Levack (2013) mentions both losing the ability to speak and vomiting strange objects as classical symptoms of spirit possession. An evil spirit, an inhabitant of the spirit world, can enter the body and make it ill. Fighting against the spirit will cure the body again. Strangely, the fight against the spiritual force is missing in the case of James' wife. It is, however, present

in another case in which a mother with a child who is 'fitting' comes to James. He orders a strict regime of prayer and fasting and empowers the girl to fight against the seizures by focusing on Jesus. Although he does not say it explicitly, it seems that the fits (again, as is common in the history of demonic possession) are interpreted as caused by a spiritual force that can be combated by faith in a stronger spiritual force, namely the Christian God.

This relational aspect of affliction, which is clearly present in James' narratives, is largely missing in the grammar of affliction as it is used in the West and in the biomedical perspective. Can this insight teach us something about the grammar of the spirit world as well? This is the question I will investigate in the final part of this chapter.

Relationality and the Spirit World

From James' narratives about affliction, we have learned that affliction in this African context is a relational issue. Afflictions are linked to problems in relationships, both with other living human beings and with the beings that populate the spirit world. In this section, I will use Robin Horton's two dimensions of religion to highlight what this means for the conception of the spirit world in general.

Robin Horton was a British social anthropologist who lived in Africa for over 40 years, doing research as well as teaching at several universities in West Africa. His interpretation of religion in Africa inspired him to broach topics with relevance to the global study of religions, such as an attempt to define that slippery concept of religion. In his 1960 article 'A Definition of Religion, and its Uses', Horton (1960:211) describes religion as 'an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society.' In religions, people enter into relationships with beings from beyond the natural, ordinary world. According to Horton, these relationships can be situated between the poles of communion, in which the relationship itself has an intrinsic value, and manipulation, in which the relationship is used to gain something (Horton 1960:212).

Horton's article on the definition of religion is well known and has been republished in his collection of essays *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (1993). The article that I will use in this deliberation, however, was written 10 years after the original definition of religion article and shows a development in Horton's thought. In 1971, Horton published an article on African conversion in response to John Peel's study of the Aladura churches in West Africa. It is this article that is most interesting for my purpose in this chapter. Here, Horton describes religion as having two dimensions (Horton 1971:95ff). One dimension focuses on the complex of explanation, prediction and control. This dimension is of a this-worldly nature. Its aim is to make life within the physical world understandable and bring it under control. The other dimension is communion and focuses on the relationship with spiritual or divine beings.

At a first glance, these two dimensions correspond with the two poles Horton mentioned in his article on the definition of religion. Religious forms of explanation, prediction and control can be viewed as a form of manipulation, while communion ascribes an intrinsic value to the relationship with a spiritual or divine being. There is a difference, however. In his response to Peel, Horton describes only the communion dimension of religion as relational. In the purest dimension of explanation, prediction and control, God, gods and spiritual beings are not seen as beings to enter a relationship with. According to Horton, in this dimension, God is a theoretical construct, a logical placeholder necessary within a theory about the world (Horton 1971:95). The world can only be explained, predicted and brought under control if the existence of a God or spiritual being is presupposed. There is no need for a relationship with God as a theoretical construct in the same way that a personal relationship to the number zero is irrelevant to most people.

Horton does not claim that such a pure form of religion as explanation, prediction and control actually exists. In fact, he writes (1971:96): 'The contrast, then, is between religions in which the gods are both theoretical entities and people, and a religion in which the gods are only people.' In African religions, both the dimension of explanation, prediction and control and the dimension of communion come together. In Western religion, however, the dimension of explanation, prediction and control has been eclipsed by better scientific understandings of the workings of the world. God is no longer needed to explain events in the natural world, to predict what will come or to bring the world under control; we have science for that now. What is left in Western religion is the dimension of communion with God.

How does Horton's discussion of these two dimensions of religion help us to understand the grammar of the spirit world in an African context? When I hear stories about afflictions caused by agents that are not biomedical in nature, such as spirits or witchcraft, it makes me think of Horton's dimension of explanation, prediction and control. From my Western perspective, seeing a child that suffers from seizures as afflicted by spiritual forces is a faulty explanation of what is happening to the child. This faulty explanation leads to faulty predictions about when seizures are going to happen – for example, when the child is not being prayerful enough – and faulty ways of attempting to control the seizures – for example, through rituals of prayer and fasting. My initial response is to disregard the dimension of explanation, prediction and control as incompatible with a scientific worldview and irrelevant for true religion.

As an anthropologist, it is important to be aware of one's own presumptions, such as those that I described above. For me, James' narratives about affliction, combined with Horton's ideas about the two dimensions of religion, acted as an eyeopener. For in James' narratives, affliction is not merely an outcome of a view on religion that emphasizes explanation, prediction and control. In the afflictions James experienced, the spirit world is not only treated as a theoretical construct,

but as something to have a relationship with as well. Like bad relationships with the people around you, a disturbance in the relationship with the spiritual world can make one ill. To me, this is a powerful reminder not to treat the spirit world in an African context as a kind of failed science, but to be sensitive to the relational aspects of affliction and the spirit world.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented episodes from the religious life story of a Zambian pastor. Many of these episodes were related to afflictions. A closer look at the different narratives shows that affliction in an African context is related to relationships, both with other human beings and with the spirits and divinities that populate the spirit world. In this context, afflictions are not interpreted primarily as biomedical issues, but as relational disturbances that are inscribed on the body. This marks an important difference between the grammar of affliction in such an African setting and in the West.

In the final part of this chapter, I have used Robin Horton's ideas about two dimensions of religion to overcome my own prejudices in seeing African relations with the spirit world as solely centered on gaining explanations, predictions and control over adverse events. Rather than viewing ideas about spiritual causation as a failed attempt at science in which the entities that populate the spirit world act as theoretical constructs, the narratives about affliction discussed in this chapter remind me that the spirit world is approached not in a theoretical way, but relationally.

Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy T. 2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horton, Robin. 1960. "A Definition of Religion, and Its Uses." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 90, no. 2: 201–226.

Horton, Robin. 1971. "African Conversion." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2: 85–108.

Horton, Robin. 1993. *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katepa-Bwalya, Mary, Victor Mukonka, and Chipepo Kankasa, Freddie Masaninga, Olusegun Babaniyi, and Seter Siziya. 2015. "Infants and Young Children Feeding Practices and Nutritional Status in Two Districts of Zambia." *International Breastfeeding Journal* 10, no. 5. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13006-015-0033-x.

Levack, Brian P. 2013. *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

McAdams, Dan P. 1993. *The Stories we Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: The Guilford Press.

McAdams, Dan P. 1995. "The Life Story Interview." *The Study of Lives Research Group*. https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/4/3901/files/2020/11/The-Life-Story-Interview-1995.pdf.

Mildnerová, Katařina. 2015. *From Where Does the Bad Wind Blow? Spiritual Healing and Witchcraft in Lusaka, Zambia*. Wien: LIT Verlag.

Chapter 12

Spirits and Illness: Batswana Christians' Views of the Causes of Illness

Lovemore Togarasei

Introduction

The rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa is no longer news in the academic study of Christianity in Africa. Among many other writers who have described this rapid expansion, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) says Africa is the heartland of Christianity today. Indeed, statistics confirm this. As of 2018, the African continent had more Christians than any other continent of the world, with estimates pointing towards the doubling of the 2018 figures by 2025 (Johnson, Zurlo, Crossing and Hickman 2018). Although already addressed by some, what requires further scholarly enquiry are the reasons for this expansion. What is attracting Africans to Christianity? While the search for prosperity is an attraction for those joining Pentecostal charismatic churches (Togarasei 2011), the search for health and healing seems to be the major factor across all the different types of Christian churches at home in Africa (Boyo et al. 2020). This paper therefore discusses the search for healing and wholeness as one of the Christian attractions in Africa. As Allan Anderson (2000, 290) states, especially in connection with Apostolic and Zionist churches in South Africa,

> Healing from illness plays a major role in the life of African Pentecostals of every type. Prophets in particular, but also ministers, bishops, pastors, evangelists and other church healers, are deeply involved in that practice. Healing is one of the reasons that people join these churches for, and in many cases the main reason. It forms a prominent part of the liturgy of these churches every week, and one can hardly visit a Pentecostal or Zionist church without observing this emphasis and the rituals associated with it.

While agreeing with Anderson and others that healing is a central attraction of Africans to Christianity, this paper seeks to establish the Christian understanding of the spirit in the context of health seeking. The paper draws on data drawn from a study conducted in Botswana between 2018 and 2020, in which we sought to establish the impact of religious beliefs on health seeking and health provision behaviours among Batswana. With the objective of understanding Batswana grammar of the spirit world, the paper focuses on how the respondents understood spirits in disease causation. As stated above, several earlier studies have shown

the connection between Christian expansion in Africa and the search for health. Charismatic Pentecostalism, for example, is known for drawing huge crowds (that has resulted in megachurches) who often come for healing and the promise of prosperity. This is despite the growth and expansion of modern medical facilities in most African countries, for example, in Botswana where nearly all people live within a radius of 2,5 km to 5 km of a modern health facility (Togarasei, Mmolai and Kealotswe 2016).

Using Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory on the grammar of religious beliefs, it is the thesis of this paper that an understanding of the grammar of the spirit world among African Christians will help us understand the search for faith healing by African Christians as it explains their views of the spirits and disease causation. Although he wrote on different aspects of the philosophy of language, when it comes to religious language, Wittgenstein argued that religious beliefs have their own language (he referred to it as a language game), which language is only understood by the insiders. He said concepts like God, love and sacrifice used in theology are to be understood in the context of their use in celebrations, festivals and conventions (Bell 1975, 310). Vettiyolil (2014, 4) explains this theory by Wittgenstein, further saying, "These concepts are used in a particular way by the believer and gain meaning. These words gain meaning not because of any object referring to them outside language but because of words related to the people who use them individually or collectively." Informed by this theory, the paper therefore seeks to establish the Batswana language of the spirit in relation to disease causation.

Background and Methodology

This paper is drawn from a larger study that was conducted between 2018 and 2020 in Botswana. The aim of this study was to establish how religious beliefs impact health seeking and health provision behaviours among Batswana and, from the findings, to propose reviews of theological, medical and health education for the purposes of promoting holistic health through the integration of medical, traditional and faith healing. The study adopted a mixed methods approach. Beginning with a detailed review of existing literature, it collected quantitative data using questionnaires and qualitative data through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews. The quantitative and qualitative tools sought to collect information from four different groups of people (medical health practitioners, traditional healers, faith healers and health seekers) on their views on causes of illness, medication, collaboration of alternative health systems, organ and blood donation and curriculum issues in religion and health. Data for this article is, however, limited to views on causes of illness as supplied by participants who identified themselves as Christians. This aspect of the study yielded data that closely associated illness and health with the spirit world. The participants were drawn from

8 different geographical areas representing the north–south and the rural–urban divides of Botswana. The areas are Gaborone, Molapowabojwang, Kanye, Francistown, Masunga, Ttutume, Mahalapye, Maun, Sehithwa, Bobonong, Lentswelemoriti, Molepolole, Letlhakeng, Hukuntshi, Lehuthutu, Tsabong and Werda. The respondents were drawn from the three Christian umbrella organizations in the country: the Botswana Christian Council (BCC) for mainline churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB) for Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC) for African Independent Churches. They were selected through random sampling (for quantitative research) purposive sampling (for qualitative research). This paper presents the respondents' views on the causes of illness and from there, discusses their understanding of the spirit. Following the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, the respondents were given codes only understood by the researchers. It is these codes that the paper uses in identifying respondents.

Although the language of the spirit is often associated with Christians of the Pentecostal fold, Botswana, like many other Southern African countries has been 'pentecostalized' to an extent that even non-Pentecostal Christians also thoroughly utilize the Pentecostal language. This is particularly so when it comes to health and healing and the place of the spirit as presented below.

Batswana Christians, the Spirit and Illness: Study Findings

Christians in our study came from three population groups: faith healers, health seekers and medical practitioners. We present findings from these three groups of people. The quantitative descriptive data established the causes of illness as reported on a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1. strongly agree, 2. agree, 3. neutral, 4. disagree and 5. strongly disagree. Interviews and focus group discussions generated qualitative data that we present in narrative format.

Faith healers' views

Although faith healers generally believed (strongly agreed to agreed) that bacteria and viruses, stress and bad lifestyle cause illness, they equally believed that the devil and evil spirits, lack of protection from God, wrath from *badimo* (ancestors) and witchcraft also cause illness. They were, however, neutral in relation to illness being caused by disregarding taboos, wrath or curse from God and not appeasing ancestors. In interviews, faith healers and other Christian respondents also attributed illness to spiritual factors like evil spirits and witchcraft. Below are some of the responses given to the question on the causes of illness:

> "Most times you find that a lot of illnesses are caused by depression, and this depression is caused by evil spirits that require God to cast them out" (HUFH002).

"...but as a pastor I have realized that there are some illnesses that are spiritual. When I talk of spiritual illness, I mean those caused by unclean spirits" (HUFH001).

Other respondents, especially from Pentecostal churches, said *badimo* (ancestral spirits) are demons that can cause illness when they are unhappy, and that they are linked to familial spirits.

Respondents' association of illness with spirits is further confirmed in their views concerning healing and modern medicine. Among other things, the study sought to establish Christians' views of the efficacy of modern medicine and modern medical practitioners. The following table summarises their views:

Table 1: Faith Healers' views on the benefits of modern medicine (N = 66)

	Their medicines prevent illness	Their medicines relieve pain	Their medicines are affordable	Their medicines come in right dosages	Their medicine has less side effects
Mean	2.16	1.68	2.34	1.80	2.57

	They relieve stress through their counseling	They offer an integrated approach to healing	They provide psychosomatic healing.	They address the roots of illnesses such as witchcraft	They can address badimo or God who may be the sources of illness
Mean	2.16	2.58	2.42	4.38	4.64

As can be seen from the table, faith healers and all other respondents agreed that modern medicine is generally beneficial to patients. It prevents illnesses, relieves pain, is affordable and comes in the right dosages. They also agreed to the effectiveness of modern counselling strategies as it provides psychosomatic healing. However, as the table above shows, they had reservations and so chose to be neutral when it comes to modern medicine as offering an integrative approach to healing. Further, they openly disagreed with the statement that modern medicine addresses the root causes of illnesses such as witchcraft, *badimo* or God. As table 2 below shows, they were neutral on medical doctors' knowledge of the causes of illness, while they agreed that the disadvantages of medical doctors are that they do not seek spiritual causes, that they do not believe in witchcraft and that their medicines have side effects.

Table 2: Faith Healers' views of the disadvantages of modern medicine (N = 66)

	They do not know the causes of illness	They do not seek spiritual causes	They do not believe in witchcraft
Mean	3.25	2.18	2.05

For the above disadvantages of modern medicine and their practitioners, respondents advocated for spiritual healing, which they considered holistic. There was an overwhelming agreement that, through his Spirit, God is the ultimate healer who can even heal without medication, as stated by one respondent, "Yes, God can help you without any medication. By just prayer he can heal you" (MOFH 001).

The belief that God can heal without medication could lead one to think that the respondents were against use of modern medication. This was not the case. Rather, they emphasised that, "God can heal without any medication, he can heal with medication" (MOFH 002). Another respondent elaborated, "as a pastor, I believe in two types of healing. The first one is where God uses modern medical practitioners to heal, another one is that God uses prayer and laying on of hands to heal illnesses" (MOFH 003).

Health seekers' views

Quantitative data shows that health seekers held neutral views in relation to human illness being associated with the spirit world: God, angry ancestors, sin, witchcraft or a curse by evil spirits. However, from the in-depth interviews, they pointed out spiritual factors as being behind illnesses. For example, some Christian health seekers were of the view that *badimo* cause illness when an individual does not appease them:

"Sometimes "*Sedimo*" would turn their backs on you. ………There is a way that we give *badimo* "*Bogobe*" to bring them closer to us and if you take a long time without giving them, they turn away from you" (TSHS 003).

"I believe so because *badimo* work hand in hand with God. They also test an individual like God does, to assess how an individual will react to the illness and treats it" (TSHS 001).

When it comes to healing of diseases, health seekers were adamant that through his spirit, God is responsible for all healing. In responding to whether God can heal without medication, the majority of health seekers were of the view that God is capable of healing without any medication. Interview results reveal that health seekers believed that among the common and efficient methods used by God to cure various diseases are Faith in God, Prayer/Word and Miracles. It was pointed

out that God heals through faith. Responding to how this takes place, it was explained that in the first place, if the patient has faith in God, she/he can be healed without having taken any medication, as stated by one of the respondents, "yes, God can heal when you pray in truth, when you seriously pray. Even when a person is sick and I pray unto God seriously for that person, that person will get healed" (BOHS 001). This was a view shared by almost all the respondents. One respondent, however, qualified it thus, ". . .but I think that when the hospitals have failed and I continue to pray there can be a difference" (GAHS 001).

Medical doctors' views

Although membership to Christianity was not among the criteria for inclusion in the study, a number of the recruited medical practitioners identified themselves as Christians. In this section. we present findings from these respondents on the subject of spirits and illnesses.

From the descriptive results, medical practitioners cited physical factors (bacteria and viruses), stress and behavioural factors (bad lifestyle) as the main causes of illness. They, however, adopted a neutral position in relation to wrath from God, disregarding taboos, not appeasing ancestors, witchcraft, lack of protection from God, the devil and evil spirits and curse of God as possible factors that can cause illness. The chart below summarises the results.

On accounting for the relationship between faith and health, medical practitioners were of the view that faith motivates medication adherence, spiritually helps with the healing process, influences good behaviour and health, and also that faith and healing are connected to some spiritual forces. Respondents said the following:

> "Psychologically, someone has to have faith that medical drugs can cure in order to be motivated to take the drugs" (TSMP 001).

> ". . . . .We have been taught to look at the patient collectively and see how we can help even when the patient believes that their illness is caused by their spirituality. You have to help according to how you have been taught" (TSMP 002).

> ". . . . .I also believe that how you think about the disease has a great impact in your recovery, like your belief, some people if they strongly believe in something they can get better. Like performing traditional rituals, after that they can get better . . ." (GAMP 004).

> ". . . . . if you look at the spiritual aspect, of course. But that one I am not much aware of, am not oriented to it, but by having been brought up by traditional parents, I believe that there is that spiritual aspect, that is, there is a link between some illnesses and spirituality, but I cannot specifically say there is a certain spirit which can cause this kind of illness" (MOMP 006).

When asked about where they placed God in human illness, medical practitioners acknowledged the power of God in health and healing. They also recognised patients' religious beliefs while sticking to medical diagnosis and treatment. They also described the Bible as a blueprint for healthy living. The following are some of their responses:

> "I believe God is above everything, even when I am personally experiencing some social problems in my life, when I come to the hospital, I ask for his strength and wisdom to help his people with diligence" (TSMP 002).

> "I do respect their spiritual beliefs, but I deal with the physical aspects using whatever medical approach that I have. I counsel them depending on what I think the condition is" (MAMP 009).

> "I place God above all, but I encourage patients to take treatment fully while also praying to God for healing" (FRMP 008).

> 'I think God has an influence in people being healthy, the Bible cites healthy behaviours like 'don't steal, don't kill, love one another as you love yourself.' But I think I cannot talk more about God because he is a supernatural being, we haven't seen him and we don't know him" (MHMP 007).

Medical practitioners were also asked about how they respond to patients who believe their illness is associated with God's anger or sin. Most of them alluded to acknowledging patients' religious beliefs while ensuring that they stick to medical diagnosis and treatment. The following quotes elaborate their views on the subject:

> "That is his/her belief and I won't oppose her/him but I will treat the patient from what I observe. Remember that science believes in experimentation and what you see, so medicine is part of science therefore I will work with what I see, the signs and symptoms I get from the patient" (TSMP 004).

> ". . . . .in our situation, we tend to concentrate more on what we can do for this person, knowing that whatever the cause, the final Healer is God Himself, I am just an instrument. So basically I try to check scientifically. . . . . . but there are cases where you find no cause of illness, you try to help them eh!, in a Christian way, counselling and praying for them" (MAMP 010).

When it comes to medication and healing, medical practitioners were more appreciative and accommodative of faith healing than traditional healing. They expressed the views that faith healers treat most diseases that are related to emotions, feelings and spirituality:

> "Faith is psychological so I can encourage this one. . . . . .we are talking about its psychological impact, if the patient believes in prayer it's ok because there is no harm. I disapprove when it involves use of chemicals" (TSMP 001).

"I accept the ones who practice healing by word/praying because personally I know the Word of God heals, but we cannot base on that alone we have to consult the hospital" (GAMP 002).

They were more comfortable with faith healing that does not use other forms of media as stated by one respondent: "It just depends on one's belief, someone can lay a hand and pray for the patient, for me it is harmless. I am not comfortable with the ones that are drunk or eaten" (MHMP 002).

Based on their beliefs, we asked the medical practitioners whether they encourage their patients to consult faith healers. Though they were accommodative of faith healing, they did not officially refer patients to faith healers: "I do not encourage it but cannot force them to stop. . .." (GAMP 002). Many said they allowed faith healers to pray for patients but did not necessarily invite the faith healers to hospitals or refer patients to them (see also section on collaboration), "I cannot call them but I have seen in Marina (the largest referral hospital in Botswana) pastors coming in to pray for patients" (MHMP 001). Only one participant said they sometimes advised (not formally refer) patients to see faith healers,

> "An example I can give is when a patient has emotional problems. You can advise them to go talk to their pastors, that is, when faith pitches in. Faith has a role in my work because I always encourage my patients, especially those with chronic diseases like BP, TB to believe that God can heal them, ...if you are still alive today you should have hope" (MHFGD MP).

Discussion: the grammar of the spirit in understanding illness and healing

What can be discerned from the above findings is the centrality of the spirit in illness and health. Health seekers, faith healers and medical practitioners all mentioned something about the place of the spirit in health and healing. Two forms of spirits can be identified from the views expressed by the respondents: the malevolent spirit associated with ancestral spirits and the devil and the benevolent spirit of God. While the malevolent spirit causes illness, the benevolent spirit comes in to give and protect life. In Christian parlance, the malevolent spirit is spirit in lower case (spirit), while the benevolent spirit is spirit in upper case (Spirit). The Spirit derives from God the Creator and therefore has overall authority over all. This is where we need to begin in our attempt to understand what the Christians mean by spirit. It is my conviction that an understanding of this can help countries like Botswana that have no policies on alternative health to acknowledge the need for such policies.

The centrality of the spirit in understanding African cosmology is reflected from the research findings presented above as well as in literature based on findings from elsewhere in Africa. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2013), for example, succinctly captures this in a book chapter in which he discusses the spirit world in African thought systems and practices. Africans believe in the reality of the spirit

world and the ardent desire to engage with it for the purposes of human survival, health, fruitfulness and longevity. In line with our findings, Asamoah-Gyadu highlights that these spirits are not only real, but also evil is hyperactive. As a result, much religious activity and energy goes into restraining sources of supernatural evil and their influence on human life. As noted by our respondents, this is where prayer and other rituals come in to reverse the effects of the malevolent spirits. For Christians, these malevolent spiritual forces need to be responded to spiritually by appealing to the super Spirit of God. Whilst other medical procedures can address physical ailments, ailments with a spiritual cause or origin need to be responded to spiritually. As Asamoah-Gyadu correctly notes then, this explains the continuities between African beliefs in mystical causality and the attractions to pneumatic forms of Christian piety. He presents this idea succinctly, capturing the findings of this study when he says, "If Western mission Christianity dismissed African beliefs in the evils of witchcraft as nonsensical, African-initiated Christianity of the pneumatic type affirmed such beliefs and provided alternative rituals for dealing with them within a Christian context" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013, 32).

In a world guided by science, there has been a neglect of 'things spiritual' at policy levels, despite the fact that some of the policy makers belong to and believe in 'things spiritual'. It is because the spiritual world has no empirical evidence that policies shy from it. The responses of some medical practitioners show this belief and attitude. The medical practitioners demonstrated that while their training and professional policies undervalued or even dismissed the place of 'things spiritual' in health and healing, their upbringing and socialization made them believe that the spirit is real and at work. It is here that Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory on the grammar of religious beliefs can help. For Wittgenstein, "religious language does not give an explanation of supernatural entities as does natural science, which explains natural entities and facts. The meaning of religious language is divorced from its doctrinal footings and finds its meaning in ordinary life situations" (Vettiyolil 2014, 1). This is expressed in the respondents' understanding of the place of the spirit in illness and healing. Their belief in God (who is the Ultimate Spirit) as the source of all means disease causation and healing can only be explained in terms of the spirit. Thus, although they believe and talk about one having depression, hypertension, diabetes or cancer, these medical conditions have spiritual causes behind them. This explains the respondents' (especially health seekers) position that modern medicine does not address the root causes of illness.

Years ago, I listened to and documented one Pentecostal preacher who attributed cancer to the spirit of a cat or a monkey (Togarasei 2009). While this does not make much scientific sense, for believers, this makes a lot of sense. It helps them to explain why medical doctors are not able to cure certain conditions. As stated by our respondents, medical doctors and their medicines do not get down to the root cause of diseases, which is the Spirit or spirits. The respondents agreed that the devil and evil spirits, lack of protection from God, wrath from *badimo*

(ancestors) and witchcraft also cause illness over and above other physical and scientific causes. As presented above, they were neutral on disregarding taboos as causes of illness and on medical doctors' knowledge of the causes of illness. The 'neutrality' should, however, be understood in context. In Botswana, like in many other African countries, missionaries' onslaught of African traditional cosmologies still hangs strongly in people's consciousness. As a result, many people do not want to publicly associate with traditional beliefs. This is particularly so when they respond to interviews where they want to present a particular 'politically' correct position. Neutrality in our respondents' responses therefore needs to be considered critically.

In the context of this study, it leans more on the side of agreement than disagreement. This was confirmed in people's association of diseases with the devil. While traditional cosmology was battered by Christian missionaries, Christian cosmology, with its talk of the good Spirit of God and the evil spirit of the Devil, provides an acceptable language for Christians to associate illness with malevolent spirits. This way, the respect and fear of the ancestral spirits and witchcraft are upheld and, at the same time, denounced. The healing language of faith healers as they exorcise evil spirits from the sick confirms this as they shout, "Puma Satan" (Come out Devil) (Maxwell 2006, 106). As observed by Silas S. Ncozana (2006) in relation to Tumbuka Christians of Northern Malawi, African Christians have not completely abandoned their traditional cosmology of the spirit. Thus, the language of spirit possession and spirit affliction is still common among African Christians, though in some cases the traditional spirits are now demonized. These are accused of causing illnesses while the Spirit of God is associated with healing. While there might be no scientific evidence of the spirit causing illness or the Spirit providing healing, this does not mean the non-existence of the spirit as reflected in the language of our respondents. This is because, as Wittgenstein observes, religious beliefs are not based on historical or scientific evidence. They go beyond the physical.

Conclusion

Despite the many years of attack on African cosmology beginning with the coming of the missionaries (Amanze 1998) and the emphasis on scientific cosmology in present times, many Africans have kept their traditional beliefs, especially when it comes to spirits and disease causation. The rise of African Independent Churches has seen this traditional spirituality brought into the church. Based on findings from a recent study, this paper has demonstrated that despite policies not recognizing spirituality in health and healing practices, the majority of Botswana Christians believe the spirit is necessary in understanding health and healing. The paper advocates for policies that promote holistic health by incorporating faith and spiritual healing in mainstream medical practice. Using Wittgenstein's theory

of the grammar of the spirit, it has argued that reality is not only based on empirical evidence. While the spirit is not empirical, it is a reality in the language and world of believers and therefore should be considered when devising policies.

Bibliography

Anderson, Allan. 2000. *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa*. Pretoria: UNISA.

Amanze, James N. 1998. *African Christianity in Botswana*. Gweru: Mambo Press.

Johnson, Todd. M., Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing. 2018. "Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 1: 20–28.

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. 2013. "Spirit and Spirits in African Religious Traditions." In *Interdisciplinary and Religio-Cultural Discourses on a Spirit-Filled World*, edited by Veli-Matti Karkkainen, Kirsteen Kim, and Amos Yong.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. 2015. *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Africa*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Boyo, Bernard, Michael Bowen, Scholastica Kariuki-Githinji, and James Kombo. 2020. "African Christianity and the Intersection of Faith, Traditional and Biomedical Healing." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 2. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939320961101.

Maxwell, David. 2006. *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement.* Oxford: James Currey.

Ncozana, Silas S. 2006. *The Spirit Dimension in African Christianity: A Pastoral Study Among the Tumbuka of Northern Malawi.* Malawi: Kachere Series.

Togarasei, Lovemore. 2006. "Cursed be the Past! Tradition and Modernity Among Modern Pentecostals." *BOLESWA: Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy* 1, no. 2: 114–132.

Togarasei, Lovemore, Sana K. Mmolai, and Obed Kealotswe. 2016. "'Quinine,' 'Ditaola' and the 'Bible': Investigating Batswana Health Seeking Practices." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2: 97–117.

Vettiyolil, Abraham. 2014. "Wittgenstein on the Grammar of Religious Beliefs." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2: 1–12.

Chapter 13

Voices: Highlights from the Discussions

Participants: Elias Kifon Bongmba, Mik(el) Burley, Serawit B. Debele, Thaddeus Eze, Maria Frahm-Arp, Hermen Kroesbergen, Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Tanya Marie Luhrmann Birgit Meyer, Joyce Dainess Mlenga, Emmanuel Ofuasia, Philipp Öhlmann, Johnson Uchenna Ozioko, Aleksei Rakhmanin, Lovemore Togarasei, Bernhard Udelhoven

Discussions were the core business of the workshop that led to this volume. Rather than reading out their full papers, the contributors were asked to share a short version of their paper beforehand and merely introduce this paper so we could dive straight into the discussion. This resulted in very interesting, interdisciplinary debates. In this chapter, you find some of the most interesting parts of these conversations.

As editors, we have debated how to present these discussions. We concluded that there is value in showing the back and forth of a discussion, and therefore we decided to share the (slightly cleaned-up) transcripts. In some cases, we have taken the liberty of changing the sequence of responses in the discussions, or added a response from a different session, if it was beneficial for the flow of the text. We also deliberated over whether to anonymize the speakers. In the end, we thought that we should give credit to the speakers for their valuable contributions and keep their names. However, we also recognize that words spoken in a spontaneous conversation are not as well thought through as the thoughts we present in our academic work. Therefore, we decided to give the speaker's first name – which is also generally how they would be addressed in the conversation.

The chapter sets out with discussions concerning learning to communicate with spirits, experiencing spirits, and healing through spirits. Debating the spirit world from this practical angle took us to the heart of the matter: what kind of reality does the spirit world have? The discussion on this question is presented in the second part of this chapter, which is structured into two sections on the reality of spirits and a discussion on the question "Can we say 'witchcraft is real'"? The chapter ends with a reflection on methodological agnosticism. It concludes with the remark that at some point we should get beyond bracketing and ask, 'Okay, what does it mean for something to be real or not real?' We hope that this book will provide a first step in that direction.

1.1. Learning to Communicate with Spirits

In this first section, you find discussions of how people learned to communicate with spirits. Remembering this brings out how the kind of reality of the spirit world differs from other kinds of realities. The first discussion here brings out the particular ways in which people learn to communicate with spirits. This shows the peculiar character of the grammar of the spirit world.

Spirits can communicate with people, but it soon becomes clear that this communication differs from ordinary conversations people have. An obvious difference is that spirits are invisible, but that is not the only issue. Spirits are rarely engaged in a two-way conversation. They can send messages, but it is difficult to answer back to them. Also, their messages are not straightforward. They may come in dreams or in experiences that are interpreted through a shared tradition. The knowledge of this tradition may be exclusive to those who have been initiated, had some kind of training, or have a special gift. The communications of the spirits can also be limited to a specific group: their descendants or their followers.

Joyce	I'm interested in how children learn to speak of the spirit world. What is it that parents do and how do children learn to speak about the spirit world? Children learn to speak of the ordinary world and of the spirit world. It's like both of them are realities but of a different kind. Since both of them are realities, the language that is used is not different. The language that is used in ordinary life is the same language that is also used to refer to the spirit world, more especially the ancestors. The ancestors are considered to be the elders, just like the elders of the village. So the language that one would use to address the elders of the village is the same language that is also used to address those who are in the spiritual world. Elders in the village deserve respect, so those who have been promoted to the spirit world, they are also supposed to be respected, to be venerated, just like we'd do with the chiefs, the elders of the village.
Hermen	So on the one hand, children speak in the same language about spirits and about elders in the village, but on the other hand, children also learn that there's a difference. How do they learn the difference?
Joyce	The difference is that spirits are invisible while the others are visible. They can see them; they can talk to them, and the elders can talk back to them. But when it comes to the ancestors, when they talk to them, they can't talk back. That's why I said that there's a conflict, because when the spirits talk back, people become frightened, and they run away because they don't expect

the spirit to talk back to them. They just want to have it in their mind that, "The spirits have heard me." Or even elders, they don't expect the spirits to talk back to them, in audible voices, that is. When they talk back in audible voices, people become frightened, and they run away. So even though there is a two-way communication, they don't expect to hear audible voices from the spirit world. They can speak to the spirit world, but the spirits are not supposed to speak in audible voices, otherwise they will get frightened and run away.

Emmanuel   If no one claims or had spoken or has a two-way conversation with them, how did these people know that they, for example, reside in the bush in the afternoon?

Joyce   Children come to learn about these things through socialization, so they pick up these things when they grow up. What it means is that their parents believe that these spirits reside in the bush, so as children are growing up, they also pick that. It's a belief. It's part of the belief system of these people. Those are the things they believe, and most of the times, people share about their experiences, about maybe an encounter with spirits when they go to the bush. For example, when you are walking in the bush, maybe you are fetching firewood and things like that; parents teach their children that spirits communicate.
As I've said, there's both verbal and non-verbal communication. Spirits sometimes, when they see you, they argue. One of them would be saying, "That is Joyce." Another one would say, "No, that's not Joyce; it's Jane." So what the spirits do is they break a piece of stick. If you look back, if you hear that sound and you look back, then they believe that it's indeed Joyce. But if you do not look back, then they know that that is not Joyce. "I was telling you, it's not Joyce."
People normally have encounters, most of the times, with the spirits in the bush. But in the evening, that's when they come home. There is a belief that maybe the spirits do not really want to be seen. That's what some people say, but I don't believe in that, because even in the afternoon, they can't be seen.

Bernhard   I'm also reflecting about the differences between the ordinary language and non-ordinary languages. Here, we have these shrines for ancestors. Not many have them but quite a few still have them, these kind of small huts, and then we remember the ancestors in them. Sometimes we put beer, and sometimes we

put strips of cloth. I have attended it several times. Now, people would not really expect the spirits to answer, but this two-way communication, for us, it would be maybe more in dreams, that somebody from the clan, a clan member would maybe have that dream. Even those huts would be often constructed on account of a dream, sometimes of an elderly woman but somebody important in the family.

That would be something I have seen, that dreams definitely are very important for this kind of two-way communication. But it's a bit of a different language then, in a dream, than in the ordinary language in that sense. People say, "No, no, I dreamt of my ancestor, and I have to erect this shrine." So at least it is quite direct communication also.

Joyce   Yeah, I agree with you. The ancestral spirits do communicate in different ways. Dreams are also one of them. Sometimes they can use mediums. Maybe, sacrifices that are given at the shrine; you'll find that people put food there; it's a kind of communication. They're offering sacrifices maybe for appeasement and other things. And when people see the ants the next morning, they believe that the ancestors have received the sacrifices. If they're praying for rains and the rains come, they believe that the ancestors have responded, and people will have the rains. There is two-way communication, but it works differently from ordinary communication between people. Although even between ordinary people, the communication is both verbal and non-verbal. But not often through dreams. It's only the dead who can come back through dreams. That's interesting.

Thaddeus   Where I come from, people also communicate with spirits at particular places. For example, where the umbilical cord is buried is significant because over the years, if the child becomes sick or something, normally there's a tree that will be planted at that spot. That's where sacrifices are performed. That's where you communicate to the person's spirit.

There is also an initiation process when you belong to the spirit cult, a masquerade cult, for example. When you come of age, you get initiated. In the period of that initiation, you learn the language of the spirit, how to communicate with the spirit. It's a coded language. An ordinary person will not be able to understand, even if they communicate among the members. So you have to be initiated in order to be able to gain this language and to communicate with it. So there are different levels.

Then there are mediums, that are those who are trained; they are experts in this communication who will be able to say, "This is what the spirit is saying, and this is what you should do." You may be there, listening to some kind of noise, or you may not even hear anything, but he is hearing something, he's telling what the spirit is saying.

That's why I was a little bit confused when you said the language of the spirit is just like any other language. I don't think it's like any other language. Then it's not spiritual anymore.

Lovemore   These ancestral spirits can speak through a medium, who is a living being and the spirits come through that person, and they communicate. The medium can speak in ordinary language, but they can also speak in some other language that needs interpretation, so there would be an interpreter. Even when the spirits talk, the language is a bit different from the ordinary. It's different in the sense that it can be spoken in an unusual way that shows that this person is no longer the ordinary person we often interact with. The spirits have possessed him, and so they speak.

I also wanted to comment on dreams. My own experience is that a friend can dream about me and talk to me in their dreams, or I can dream about them. Often, within the traditional setting, the language and the message spoken in dreams is taken more seriously than what I could say to you in our ordinary conversation. So, if I were to come to you and say, "Joyce, last night I had this dream," that dream, whatever its message, you take it more seriously than my own personal opinions I could just give you in an ordinary conversation.

Joyce   Yes. When you speak to someone concerning the dreams, and you say, "I dreamt about this and that," people will take your words seriously. They even take them more seriously if they come from the ancestral spirits. Because when we look at the levels, we have the living and the living dead, who are the ancestors. The ancestors are more elevated than the living because they're considered to be closer to God than the living themselves. So you're right when it comes to dreams. But you'll find that people may doubt, even though you give them the message that you consider to be important, that came through your dreams, people may doubt. But when they get it from the ancestors, they may take it very seriously.

Concerning the communication through mediums, the spirits are considered to be bilingual. They speak the language of the

living, but they also speak a language which only the mediums can understand. That's why the mediums themselves also speak a strange language which the people cannot understand, but the medium claims to be communicating with the ancestors in that strange language. So the mediums can speak a language that ordinary people cannot understand, and yet they claim to be speaking with the spirits.

Johanneke   It seems to be that it's important whether a spirit is part of your community, like the ancestor spirits are part of the same community as you are, so you communicate with them; but the ghosts or other spirits, they do not belong to your community, and there seems to be no communication there. Am I right in thinking that?

Bernhard   Here also, ancestors seem to be very important for their own family but not really for another person's family, and that you are not really even allowed to interfere with the ancestors of somebody else. But then we have other spirits here who even have cults where people, totally unrelated to each other, they can learn it, they can be initiated in it, they can be introduced to it, they can dance with it and so on. So, how do I know that I belong to this group and to the other group? Sometimes you are not really allowed to respond to it because you're an outsider to it; but at other times, you are actually part of it, or the message even concerns you. I find that quite complicated sometimes, to know to whom it is addressed, to whom it is not addressed and so on.

Joyce   Indeed, ghosts are not part of the community, but ancestors are. The ancestors do come back to those of their own. For example, my ancestors cannot go and interact with another family. If that ancestor goes there, then he'll be regarded or she'll be regarded as a ghost because the people will not be able to recognize that particular spirit. When we talk about ancestors, they are those that the community will be able to recognize. So they normally go back to those who are their own.

   That it can be complicated to understand the communications of spirits also became apparent in a discussion on the messages that prophets in Christian churches deliver to their audiences. Here, it is not what the spirit says that is difficult to understand or interpret, but how it is delivered by the prophet, who used a jargon that is specific to this particular church.

Hermen   You mentioned the statement, "Once I understood what the
            prophet meant, I found peace." So there's a difference between
            hearing what the prophet says, and, if I, as an outsider, read what
            the prophet says, and really understanding it. That shift between
            knowing what he says and really understanding it, can you say a
            bit more about that?

Maria   Yes. I was trying to highlight something that takes place in the
            language of this church. Words like 'locating', 'offenses', et
            cetera, it's a whole new vocabulary you have to learn. If you
            are not steeped in the church and you just enter the first time,
            you may misunderstand what the prophet says. Very often, the
            church will say that people misunderstand things because they
            don't understand the language of the church. For me, this partic-
            ular phrase, which so many people say in different ways, high-
            lights that you need to spend time in the church; you need to
            understand the language of the church in order to understand
            what the prophet is saying. So it's a case of you need to become
            socialized and understand this particular grammar and language
            of the church, which doesn't happen on first-time entry.

1.2 Experiencing Spirits

It takes time to learn to communicate with the spirit world and how we commu-
nicate with the spirit world differs from one place to another. With regard to the
spirit world there seem to be many different grammars around the world, and from
the previous discussions it has become obvious that a shared tradition is necessary
to understand or interpret the messages of the spirit world. In the following discus-
sions, we turn from communications with the spirit world to experiencing spirits
in general. Here also, there is a great cultural variety. How do people discern if a
spiritual experience really means that there is a spirit trying to communicate with
them? Spirits seem to be more real or, at least, differently real, in particular con-
texts. Tanya Luhrmann has written extensively on how spiritual beings become
real in various cultural contexts, and in this discussion, she elucidates her ideas on
this.

Tanya   I think that there is pretty good evidence that people have what
                 you might call a different cognitive attitude towards supernat-
                 ural things than natural things. They always mark supernatural
                 things as different from what I'll call tables and chairs, in many
                 different ways. For example, people might tell you that God is
                 completely and absolutely real, but in fact, they don't really be-
                 have that way. They don't ask God to feed their dog. They might
                 pray when the car breaks down, but they might also call the car
                 mechanic. They do a lot of things that limit God's intervention.
                 They don't actually treat God as a human. That's why I'm so
                 interested in the amount of work they take to make God real.
                 Voices and visions are always more common than smelling and
                 tasting God. That's just very, very robust. It doesn't matter what
                 religion you look at; it doesn't matter the country you look at;
                 it is always more common that people hear or see God than that
                 they smell or taste God.
                 It is pretty clear that between local worlds, there are big differ-
                 ences too, so that in Ghana, in Vanuatu, people have a lot more
                 spiritual experience than they do in the US. That's really ro-
                 bust. Is that because God is more present in Ghana or Vanuatu?
                 I would be open to that perspective. You could also say that in
                 the US, people are sort of having those experiences, but they
                 don't realize they're having these experiences. You could say
                 there's something cultural about the US that leads people to just
                 discount these experiences.
                 But there are real big differences. Christians want evidence
                 that there is this external being that's interacting with them. So
                 Christians really value surprise. Buddhists really aim to have a
                 calm mind that is imperturbable from this teeming morass of
                 sometimes unpleasant spirits around them. Buddhists do not
                 value being surprised by spirit, and that shows up in the way that
                 they talk about their experience.

In different contexts, different experiences are evaluated as representing con-
tact with the spirit world. Like in the previous discussions on communicating with
spirits, training is important here. Churches provide formal structures in which
these practices are embedded. At the same time, however, there is, especially
in Christian churches, an emphasis on spontaneity over formal structure when it
comes to experiencing spirits. Spontaneity seems to need a basis of formal training
to actually happen.

Hermen   To speak of real-making practices shows something about spiritual reality, that we need these practices to experience the spirit world as real. But on the other hand, there's also a tension there, I think, that within those practices, what you experience as real is typically that which is not organized. So on the one hand, you need to organize it and practice it, but on the other hand, one of the main discerning criteria is spontaneity, that which is not organized. It's important to practice your imagination, to exercise that; that helps, but also, if you discern, "Is this really God speaking to me?" then you try to find out, "Okay, am I not imagining things? Is there something more going on here than what I have arranged myself? Is it really God?" So there's, I think, a tension there between those two aspects.

Tanya   Humans have experiences that you might identify as spiritual, whether or not they call them spiritual. Twenty-five percent of Americans experience sleep paralysis. That happens to humans. The more you practice, the more you're likely to have these experiences. So the more that you pay attention to the texture of your thought, the more richly diversely textured your thought will become. I think that there are some basic features of the human experience that religion interacts with. I mean, God has got to reach through human stuff in order to reach the human.
We can compare it to sports. People who perform at the Olympics, they're practicing for years in order to have a spontaneous athletic performance that is fantastic. So when a good athlete goes out onto the competition ice, they don't want to think. They want the event to just happen.
I know that people who are people of faith can be a little freaked out by comparing spiritual practice to athletic practice. It sounds like, "Hey, we're making this on." I think that an anthropological view of the story can always be read in two ways. You can say, "Look, you understand the practices. You're seeing that this is all human stuff. It doesn't mean anything." You could also say, "This is the way that humans are able to hear a God who's always talking." That's the way that some Christians read my work. "We have to figure out what works with these practices when we get people who are ignoring God to be able to listen to what God is trying to say."

To what extent is the experience of the spirit world shareable? If the experience is embedded in a tradition, there is a good chance that others will understand and validate an individual's experience. As the following response shows, this is however not always the case.

Bernhard   Sometimes these details of demons, they can be so realistic, but
                they can clash with how other people see the same events. Then,
                somehow, a bubble can burst, in a sense, that people don't know
                what is real or what is not real anymore. Somehow, it was so real
                and so empirical real for them but not for the others, and then
                they get questions they cannot answer. So sometimes, if it is too
                graphic and too much detail, it may also limit it, in the sense that
                it becomes no longer shared with the others who are also part of
                the story. They can no longer share all those details anymore.

1.3. Healing through Spiritual Means

One area of life where the spirit world becomes particularly real in the lives of many people is health. The reality of spirits becomes present through either threatening the health of people or the promise to restore it. The peculiar grammar of the spirit world is poignant here as well, because of the obvious clash with other practices, in particular the scientific, Western approach to health. This clash of approaches brings out the kind of reality the spirit world has, which differs from the kind of reality addressed through the scientific, medical approach. The government organizes and regulates this medical way of treating illnesses, but how can it or should it deal with healing through spiritual means?

The first discussion in this section addresses the question of whether traditional forms of healing and interaction with the spirit world are accepted in the wider community. If we accept that a specialist in spiritual matters is able to cure illnesses, then why has the UN or a similar organization not employed such specialists in their efforts to counteract the COVID-19 pandemic, for example? An obvious answer is that traditional practices are not deemed scientific in the way that Western allopathic medicine is. For example, the success of traditional healers is not as replicable as Western medicine, and there is disagreement on methods and concepts among healers.

Mik The United Nations has not hired an Ifa diviner to help cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason is that an organization such as the United Nations is so committed to Western allopathic methods of healing or pharmaceutical medicine that they wouldn't take seriously the divining practices of Ifa healers. I think it's quite a fascinating clash of perspectives. There are these alternative accounts or explanations that can be given of the same situation, and it's not obvious to me how one resolves the issue.

Emmanuel The kind of way that healing takes place amongst traditional healers in Africa will be termed to be unscientific, and it would not actually fit into the allopathic therapy that is redolent in the Western medical orthodox allopathic way of healing. You see, this is because if someone in China has a headache, and he takes a 500-milligram paracetamol, it may stop that headache. The same applies for anywhere, any other person having a headache and getting that treatment. But when it comes to homeopathic treatment, it does not work like that: 500 milligrams of paracetamol in homeopathic medicine for someone may kill him, whereas he may just need just 50 milligrams of paracetamol. So that's one of the reasons why the UN, for instance, do not call someone from the Yoruba way of doing medical practices to come, because it is not scientific, according to what the UN would brand as scientific.

I think perhaps we should see how perhaps further research and funding into these alternative medical practices can be explored. Maybe something new and better can come from there.

Bernhard I find that many African healers and also many faith healers, among themselves, do agree on some things, but they disagree with many other things among themselves. It is very hard for them to become one body, also a political body, which can present one common stance to certain issues because many healing practices are very, very personalized. Two healers may find a different personal approach, both very successful, but not necessarily the same. Therefore, it is much more difficult for African healers to come together and present as the Western scientific community does. Whether you are from Zambia or from China, you can agree on the procedures, verification, and so on, but this is not the case for African healers nor for faith healers. It makes it very difficult to be represented in the United Nations.

Another question is how governments should deal with this kind of healing that they do not deem acceptable enough to use for themselves. Since many people are making use of traditional healers, should they be regulated in some way? Or are the questions this leads to too puzzling for governments to answer?

Hermen Could the result of an investigation into traditional healing practices be, "It is correct that we have no policies for this because this is something that falls outside the jurisdiction of government," or, "The spirit world is not something that belongs to policies"? Instead of helping the Minister of Health in Botswana to draw up a policy about spirits, I think maybe you can tell him, "Don't be puzzled about it; this is just how it is."

Lovemore Okay. It's not for the government to regulate the spirit world. But I can give you a simple example: that in some countries, if I am absent from work because I've not been feeling well for two days during which time I consulted a traditional healer or a prophet, this is accepted. The healer/prophet could actually write a note which is acceptable by my employer, that this person came to me to consult, this and that. But in Botswana, that is not acceptable. That is not acceptable. That's what we mean; that it's not policy on regulating what they should do that we seem to be advocating for, but a recognition and a respect of alternative health systems, which is accepted by the World Health Organization anyway, but the country has not yet come up with a policy to. . . not to regulate, but perhaps to recognize and direct people on how they should deal with this officially.

But maybe there are more deep-seated differences between traditional healing and Western medicine as well. Western medicine is profoundly instrumental: its aim is to cure a disease and no more than that. Are traditional and religious forms of healing instrumental in the same way, or is there more to these practices?

Emmanuel Instrumentality plays a very big role in religion. There's a particular Yoruba saying that says that the deity that cannot assist me should leave me the way I was. So you realize that this instrumentality is something that is entrenched in traditional African religion. For instance, if somebody is ill, the person is first of all divined to know which spiritual being has been angered or needs to be appeased. Then whilst this is done, the next level is to graduate into the physical manifestation and uses of herbs and stuff.

Now, there are cases where these things do not work. For instance, I am one of those that used to ask, "If we had so much powers, how come missionaries were able to subdue us? How come the colonialists were able to subdue us if we had these so much powers in Africa?" So that is one question that I hope I'll be able to get answers to here as well.

Hermen   I'm a pastor in a congregation, and I do pray with people who are ill in my congregation, but I would never dream of proposing to the United Nations to include prayer in their World Health program. For me, that shows that it's clearly a different kind of practice. I would have thought that others would have recognized the same, but apparently not everybody does.

Bernhard   If somebody prays for healing, he wants an outcome. If he doesn't get that outcome, he goes somewhere else, he goes to the shrine, and so on. He is concerned or she is concerned with a very concrete outcome. Now, if you invoke the Christian faith for your outcome, you invoke much more than your outcome. If you invoke the shrine for healing, you invoke much more than just the healing. For example, in Pentecostal Christianity, if you embrace it, you give your life to Jesus. That's part of the package, which also kind of excludes other models.
                I'm very much aware that people do simultaneously use different ways, but then my question is, when it doesn't work in all the ways. . . Yesterday, I was at a funeral. We prayed for healing, but it did not work. I would even think that the person may have also done other alternative ways of getting healed, apart from the hospital and also apart from the Christian faith. But when it doesn't work in either of them, if you do not get any outcome, I think then we are left with what is more. When you invoke a shrine or when you invoke the Christian faith, there is something much more than this instrumentality that you invoke. I think it's quite important to find out what that more is what you're actually in for when you go for one specific way or path.

Hermen   Religion is not only instrumental, and if it is, it is also something more. I would like to propose the following example: if you have little money left and you want more because you need to entertain guests this weekend, you can buy a ticket for the lottery, or you can pay tithes or make a sacrifice to your ancestors. If you fail to tithes or make a sacrifice to your ancestors, then you're doing something morally wrong. But if you're not buying

a lottery ticket, you may be losing out on a chance, but you're not doing something morally wrong. I think that already shows that there is a difference in the kind of instrumentality. There's something more coming with it.

2.1. Reality and Spirits

Here we get into the really thorny issues: in what way is the spirit world real? Our discussions are not about claiming that certain claims are right or wrong, true or false, but on the kind of reality that we are speaking of. Is the spirit world real in the same way as tables and chairs are real?

Hermen   Let us look at the example of a goat sacrifice for a particular
              goal, for example for building a house. I can imagine that some-
              body learns that you have to sacrifice a goat if you want to build
              a house. If the house turns out to be a good house which stands
              for many years, you thank the ancestors to whom the goat was
              offered or sacrificed. If the house breaks down after a year, you
              say, "Oh, something was wrong with the sacrifice." I have no
              problem with that at all. You could say: well, that means that
              they mean it instrumentally. But I would guess that those same
              people who say these things, who thank the gods or the ances-
              tors or blame them or say that the was something wrong with
              the sacrifice, that the same people who say these kind of things
              would not be surprised to find that in the Netherlands, houses
              keep standing for many years without ever a goat having been
              sacrificed. Because they are not surprised, I would say that that
              shows that they know that this relationship is different from the
              relationship between cement and stones.

Mik   I want to disagree. The difficulty here is to pinpoint the area of
              disagreement, perhaps, because I'm certainly not inclined to
              deny distinctions, and what you've just drawn attention to is an
              important distinction or an important difference between two
              ways of believing or two types of belief, and obviously very
              closely connected with practice. There's not really a distinction
              between the belief and the practice in this vicinity.
              I think the disagreement concerns what we want to say about
              this tricky concept of, as I've called it, reality or the real. You
              imply that there is a straightforward sense in which the houses in
              Amsterdam are real and remain standing, independently of any
              goat sacrifices having been performed. That's a straightforward

sense of real or reality. And then there's this peculiar, idiosyn-cratic, non-standard, not straightforward sense of reality in which the angry spirit that is being placated or appeased by means of the sacrifice is real. I think we stray into, potentially, reductive and demythologizing territory when we draw that kind of distinction between different conceptions of reality or the real, because we imply that there is this standard concept of re-ality and then there are the ones that sort of hover around the edges or are marginal or somehow diverge from that, and hence they're the awkward cases that we need to somehow interpret in a way that brings them into conformity or doesn't cause too much disruption of the standard concept of reality that we're assuming. That's where I'm supposing there's a disagreement between us.

Hermen   To me it helps to say 'straightforward real' if we talk about stones and beams to build a house, and a different kind of real if we talk about goat sacrifices. If you say you accept the dis-tinction, but you don't accept the word 'straightforward real', okay, then we drop the word 'straightforward real'. That's not a problem for me. But to me, it helps to see that distinction.

Mik   I think your own labels take us down the wrong track. This no-tion of non-straightforward, it starts us off on the wrong path, and we then find ourselves having to give some extraordinary explanation for that kind of belief, that kind of conception of reality.

Bernhard   In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives the example of the table. Grammatically you can say that a table thinks or grows, but it doesn't make any sense. The same would apply, let's say, to different types of spirits. For some spirits, it makes sense to say certain things, but maybe for God, it doesn't make sense to say this. God, for example, the Supreme Being, would not take a child. If an old person dies, yeah, that can be God, but not a child. If a child is taken, it's not God. It can be witchcraft, or it can be another spirit, but then the child will come back, and so on. Meaning, each term has its own grammar.

Birgit   For me, this discussion boils down to the question of what con-stitutes reality. I find your approach to think about realities as, perhaps, constituted through grammars that we need to investi-gate very, very important. And then, indeed, the question

is, how to translate from one grammar to the other without say-
ing, as scholars, that anything goes. I think the current craze
about conspiracies and so on urges me also to insist on cer-
tain scholarly grammars and to insist that we do some work of
translation rather than ascribing reality to something that in our
frameworks cannot be assigned existence.

On the other hand, I do think that there are many occasions
through which scholarly grammars may also have to be changed
in the process of translation. So I would keep that possibility
open. But I would be very careful to just mess up a sense of re-
ality and then say, for example, "Yes, witchcraft is real." I would
say: What is real for whom and on what grounds? This is a po-
litical and epistemological and normative question. We should
problematize these translations and also show that there is a cer-
tain one way of translating from a kind of Western, Eurocentric,
hegemonic perspective through which Africa long has been sub-
ject to analysis, to grammars from here, and we need to prob-
lematize that. But it doesn't mean that all grammars can just be
replaced and switched, and witchcraft is one of the most tricky
ones. That's why I'm really intrigued.

2.2 Can We Say, 'Witchcraft is Real'?

During our discussions, the statement 'witchcraft is real' proved to be a fruitful
example in investigating the kind of reality the spirit world has. What do we mean
when we say this or deny it? What is the grammar that is being used in speaking of
something spiritual like witchcraft and its reality? These questions are discussed
in Udelhoven's chapter in this volume, but also led to a lively discussion during
the conference.

Hermen   I want to hear a bit more about the statement 'witchcraft is real'.
           If I understand you correctly, you say it's not intended as a fac-
           tual statement or a statement of science, but it is intended as an
           encouragement to take up a particular stance and even to follow
           particular authorities. It's not a statement of fact, but it's more
           like an encouragement. What kind of statement it is might also
           be shown from the further discussion that follows in the conver-
           sation, so I would like to hear how you yourself respond when
           people tell you, "Witchcraft is real," and whether there has been
           developments over the years, that earlier on you used to respond
           in this way but you found out it did not work, then you changed

to another way, or you experimented with it. What has been your own response to people saying to you in an actual conversation, "Witchcraft is real"?

Bernhard   Well, take the example of a family who approached me because their child was missing, and people spoke of witchcraft. I went to the farm, we prayed together, and still the child didn't come back, and I'm totally lost with the story myself. I have no explanation where this child could be. There are wild animals where I stay; there are lions, but as I said, there were no footprints and so on.

Yeah, I would definitely always, as a pastor, pray. I would take it seriously in that sense, that it is a condition which affects people spiritually. Even if I don't believe myself in that force of witchcraft in that way, I do see it as something which affects a person on a spiritual level. I try to pray. I think I'm praying now much more for those cases than at the beginning of my ministry. I think I now take it much more seriously. I want to be part of the discernment processes that people go through, so if I come in, "Witchcraft is not real," I'm already out. I'm no longer part because I have excluded myself from the whole discernment process which is going on in people's lives.

Hermen   So you allow people to believe that you accept the statement "witchcraft is real," which they might take as an encouragement?

Bernhard   I would say that, yes, witchcraft is real in the sense... I can always give it a sense: that something is affecting this family very dramatically and very negatively, and that I do acknowledge, and let's call it witchcraft in that sense. But I would never call it witchcraft in the sense that I dehumanize another person. That would be my red line. In my dealings with people, I will not cross that red line.

Johanneke   In my own research, I have noted that saying that witchcraft is real often has a rhetorical function in an epistemological discussion between different realities, between a more enchanted and a more secular worldview, or what you would call it.

Alexei   I really appreciate your idea that real is not so much an epistemic concept as moral concept. I think it's quite the way some Wittgensteinians used to use it as well. I think that when wit-

chcraft is real, well, let us consider how we use such phrases as "Soul is real," or "Justice is real," or "Beauty is real". It is not a statement on facts but on how facts should be appreciated. My question is this one: Did you consider that your own language, I mean, as a European person or as a Westerner in a wider sense, has changed? I mean, you use concepts like empirical, like evidence, like demonstration, and did your fieldwork and your observations make some differences to how you use these concepts now as compared to 10 or 20 years ago?

Bernhard   Well, definitely in my fieldwork I got many examples of inter-personal connections that from my own upbringing I would be very unfamiliar with. But here in Zambia... for example that people dream about each other, that people know when somebody dies in their families, I collected many examples of that. Out of body experiences, things like that, or inter-subjective realities... I would say that in the interviews, cases and so on I have been in, there are many things which happened in dreams and so on, but which also turned out, in a way... For example, somebody found a body of somebody eaten by crocodiles on account of a dream; the dream guided him to that space. These kinds of things do happen here in Zambia sometimes, sometimes. I'm becoming more open to such realities than before.

2.3. Spirit of Illiteracy? Literal/Metaphorical Spirits?

In discussing the kind of reality the spirit world has, we discovered how many different kinds of reality seem to be involved when we speak of spirits. Sometimes spirits seem to be very concrete; at other times they seem to be more metaphorical, for example, when we speak of the spirit of illiteracy. How can we make sense of these differences? The context in which someone speaks about, for example, a spirit of illiteracy is important to establish in which way it is taken.

Hermen   In a documentary about a Pentecostal church in Ghana, I think it was Mensa Otabil who was saying that in his church, he tries to fight all negative things, and then he started to make a list. He wants to fight ancestral curses; he wants to fight evil spirits from the bush; he wants to fight the demon of illiteracy. Do people not know or feel that the demon of illiteracy is a different kind of demon than the other demons? You can pray very hard against ancestral curses, but does praying very hard against illiteracy work? Otabil also founded a university, so maybe he

thought that this was something else. But is it all mixed up? Do people not see a difference between the demon of illiteracy and the evil spirit from the bush, or do they experience differences?

Johnson   In the various uses of the word *spirit*, we can consider some of them may be metaphorical. For example, when you talk about the spirits of war, it's not as if there is a particular spirit that is behind a war, but that it is a use of the word *spirit.* My investigation is about the uses of the word *spirit* in the African context. You will see the different examples of how they are used. You discover that some of them are also used metaphorically. But the important thing is that the African talks about these as spirits. So spirits of war, spirits of drum. . . because for the African, everything has a spirit. There is a spirit that operates, that drives every action.

Thaddeus   Different Pentecostal churches are just cashing in on this idea of the spirit to promote their business, because it wouldn't make sense to say there is a demon of illiteracy. I think Otabil was trying to say, "I look at the problem of the people. I try to empathize with them, so to say, understand what their problem is, and then to look for solutions." So it's not just for him to pray, but also to look at their daily problems that affect their lives and see how we could respond or help them to respond to it. Now, when people are ignorant, he'll teach them. When people do not have a job, he tries to provide jobs for them. People are not educated: they will build schools. That was the way I understood what he's saying.

Philipp   Maybe Mensa Otabil would not say you can pray away illiteracy, but he would say that even attending the university or school does not work without prayer, so maybe you could see it that way around. But that's just my interpretation of what Otabil might say.

Bernhard   I would look at the context: where would somebody go for an ancestor, and where would somebody cast out the spirit of illiteracy? What is the specific life situation there? I see, for example, cases where people go to school but then after grade 3, they drop out. They open a book, and it doesn't make any sense to them. They just don't get into this habit of reading. Yeah, they are being helped in the church. They cast out this spirit, hopefully in the same way as Jesus cast out some sicknesses like a

demon, like when he healed the mother-in-law of Simon Peter, the sickness goes as if the sickness was a demon. He more or less casts it out. So I see the context a bit in that situation, that a person is struggling, or the mother is struggling for the son or the daughter who is hopeless in school and brings that person to church. I'm trying to look at the context in which somebody would like to pray out that demon. And then the same, I would like to look at the context in which somebody would find an ancestor. I think that context would give the answer.

Alexei   I think that it is quite obvious, at least for me because of my own fieldwork, that what is in one context is quite literal, then it is absolutely metaphorical in another context. Here, we have all these phenomena like for instance witchcraft, sorcery, magic, interaction with ancestors, churches, and so on. Let me give you one example. Far north, men usually are quite skeptical about chants, because they take it as quite a feminine way of doing things, like that's for women. But before taking their boats to sea, they all do chants because it is inevitable, because before coming to sea, you have to be sure that everything is going to be okay. So in one context, it makes no sense to the practice, while in another context, it is all about it, for one and the same person and maybe at the same time.

Johanneke   On this metaphor/literal distinction, sometimes people speak of a spirit of illiteracy, and they seem to mean illiteracy is like a spirit holding someone back. It is similar to what a spirit would do. That's what I would call a more metaphorical sense. At other times, they seem to think that there is an actual demon called Illiteracy that needs to be cast out. And there are also some kind of gray areas that are in between those, where people speak of a spirit of illiteracy that seems metaphorical to me, but then they proceed on casting something out, so what are they actually casting out then? There seems to be a huge gray area.

Serawit   Okay, illiteracy holds us back just like spirits do. Would this statement hold every time in all contexts? I'm also struggling to imagine a literal sense of spirits. To speak about the literal and metaphorical sense of the realness of spirits, we have to have a concrete idea of how spirits can be literal. In the sense of being embodied by someone? Perhaps one way of going about this could also be looking at the perspective of what the spirits do and from there, determining whether they are real. So we're tal-

king about real or reality in a different sense, not really in terms of existence but in terms of, perhaps, from the point of view of what they do.

Lovemore   I will give an example of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit embodies someone, it gives them the ability to prophesy, to heal, to see visions, depending on the church or the people that we are talking about, isn't it? So, I also think that evil spirits or other bad spirits, they might also have the same capabilities of embodying people and probably affect or shape what they can do or what they can't do. So, we need to be a little bit careful on whether that is taken literally or metaphorically. Because I have also seen people trying to cast out demons of poverty, demons of illiteracy. What then does that mean? Is it really a demon that causes you to be illiterate … I think, because they then try to cast it out. So that might not actually be metaphoric. I'm just speaking from examples or cases that I know.

Mik   I wanted to thank Johanneke for explaining the way that she was conceiving of the metaphorical/literal distinction in this context. It does clarify it. It seems as though if we treat the term "spirit" as having its primary sense as that of something analogous to a person, then the notion of illiteracy holding one back could be construed as a metaphor in so far as it's being personalized. It's being conceived of as though it were some sort of person. If, as I said, there's a very close conceptual relation, and I think I concur that there is, between the notion of a spirit and the notion of a person, then I can see the point of calling it a metaphor. It looks to me as though that's where this notion of a literal/metaphorical distinction is coming from.

Joyce   I tend to think that maybe sometimes we use, or the Pentecostals use, spirits to explain something that is unexplainable, or maybe the extremes that are there. If there is something that is difficult to understand, it's like, "What could be the cause of this?" And then everything is blamed on the spirits.
            This discussion has reminded me of what happened to my two-year-old daughter many years ago. My daughter was two years old, and I had a helper who was taking care of her because I was working. Then one day when I walked into our home, I found this helper praying for my daughter, binding the spirit of crying, binding the spirit of hunger, because my daughter was crying all the time, and then she couldn't understand why my daughter

was crying. I found her praying, shouting on top of her voice. So the issue is: she couldn't understand why my daughter was crying. Even after eating, she could still cry. And she was busy praying against the spirit of hunger, the spirit of crying. And yet we know that children are supposed to cry. So I tend to think that maybe sometimes the rush to call it a spirit of hunger, the spirit of laziness, the spirit of sleep, just because they can't explain the cause of the sleep, the crying, and everything else that is there.

Johanneke   If you personalize a concept like illiteracy or like crying and you go on to exorcize that spirit, can we say that that is a confused sense of using the grammar of spirit, or is everything allowed?

Bernhard   I'm not sure if it was a confusion what the helper did, but I think it was an abuse. Because to shout at the child without being invited by the family... Now, in Zambia we do have rituals to make a child stop crying. For example, people believe in our parish that a child that cries continually needs to have a new name. In the ritual in which the name is changed, the whole family comes together. They eat very well. They drink beer. It's a feast. The whole family is there, and then the child is given another name. And indeed, from what I hear, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It seems that it works in many cases. Is it a biological explanation – the mother eats very well and feeds the child better – or is it a spiritual explanation? We can argue about it, but in the end, it's a very holistic solution. The prayers of the help, on the other hand, it's a shortcut. Just praying for somebody, it's what I would call a spiritual shortcut. To cast out the crying demon there, it's too easy. I believe that spiritual healing is more complex and more holistic and more involving, more engaging than just one little prayer that's because you yourself are angry, the help suddenly shouts with all the anger at the child. In that sense I would see it more as an abuse rather than a confusion.

3. Methodological Agnosticism

When discussing what people say concerning the spirit world, we as researchers are often involved ourselves as well. A particular response is considered as an abuse, for instance. How can we distinguish between our personal and our scholarly interests in the context we are investigating? Methodological agnosticism, a

withholding of our judgment about the phenomena that we are, as scholars, investigating is often promoted. In the discussions, this notion was problematized in different ways.

Tanya
I would say that as a scholar, doing the kind of work that I do, I don't try to say, "This is real, and this is not real." I try to say, "Okay, these are the kinds of experiences people have, and these are the kinds of experiences they don't have." So I try to focus on, okay, when people hear a voice and there's no human who's speaking, what are the characteristics of that voice? Are there voices that are not mad? That's one of my main scholarly questions. Are there experiences which you can't explain away as madness? I think that that's true, that spiritual experiences have a shape in people's experience you can't attribute to a psychiatric illness. I'm kind of open to whether people really are experiencing a God who's reaching in or whether they're not. I think that's a theological question. I think the effort to try to figure, to provide a map, almost independent of ontological commitments of how spirit operates in the world, is really important.

Alexei
We are ready to meet extraordinary practices when we deal with the natives because we know that they are Others, so they can believe in things we do not think are reasonable to believe. But, once we look at ourselves, what is the real difference between me talking to my dead father and me talking to my heavenly Father? On the philosophical level, what is the difference? John Wisdom points to this fact, that, okay, we all have these strange experiences in our daily life, in our ordinary life, which are mainly focused on religious practices and beliefs.

Johanneke
What I have found is that methodological agnosticism is problematic empirically. If you say, "It doesn't matter whether spirits exist for my research. I personally do not believe in them, but I won't let that affect my research," the problem is that if you don't try to imagine that spirits exist, you will ask different questions. You will still have your own mindset and ask the questions that come from that mindset.
What you see in, for example, the study of witchcraft in Africa is that a lot of people say that witches are some kind of a metaphor for economic conditions or other social conditions. I think if you see it that way, you may be a methodological agnosticist, but you haven't asked the right questions to the people you are discussing. You won't ask how the presence of a spirit, for

example, makes someone feel because you haven't considered the possibility that spirits are real. So just saying, "I don't know whether spirits exist, and it doesn't matter for my research," I think that's a limited point of view. I think you should really question these ideas to see what your position is and how that affects your research.

Elias Do you think in the study of religion we have come to a point where we can begin to put aside those things that were very popular, such as phenomenological epoché and methodological agnosticism? Because, in a way, there's probably a pretense about that. Even if we cannot say concretely that the things we think about when we study religion are real, we do not even know if the gods exist and so on and so forth, but I think your interesting probe makes me begin to wonder: are those kinds of expression really meaningful anymore, or that whole notion of phenomenological bracketing? When you bracket something, what needs to happen before you can pick it up?

Alexei Well, let me reformulate it. Is it possible to keep away from bracketing in the study of religion? As far as the study of religion or religious studies is concerned as the business done in academia, no, I don't think so. Actually, despite all the criticism, I think this is the best way to study religions without any prejudice. Yes, we lose something, but yet we gain something in this practice, practicing this phenomenological epoché. Because the other way around, it would be either theism, and that poses a lot of questions as to how I should study Muslims while being an Orthodox Christian or a Catholic, or that would be atheism, which is even worse. So I think that this is the only position by now.

Elias I appreciate your comments, but I think it leaves a lot to be desired. Not from you, but at least from our enterprise because here we are gathered to talk about the grammar of the spirit world, and these are things we can hardly lay our hands on, yet the best training has all pushed us towards an agnostic approach or a bracketing approach, which makes it rather challenging. I mean, I'm not opposing your finding. It just makes me really begin to think of the methodological approaches.

Alexei Well, I think what is happening right now is the practicing of methodological agnosticism. Because it is reasonable for us to

take this attitude. Well, there can be different grammars, so we have bracketed our own agenda here. Because I don't know how the spirit world is structured.

Elias   For instance, assume a faith perspective and say that these things exist, or in old theological language: these things were revealed and so forth. I think I get your point about reintroducing theism into it, but sometimes one thinks these are inevitable. I mean, even if I don't wake up every morning and think there's a God watching every step that I am taking, the whole ground of religion and religious life is premised on that. I am wondering if all of the things and the key phrases that they gave me in graduate school, if they actually work at all.

Aside from these methodological issues, there is another problem with methodological agnosticism that some of us encountered, namely its claim that it is better not to judge the positions of the respondents in our research. Is that always possible or even desirable?

Bernhard   When we are moralizing or normative, we can be blocked, in the sense that we do not understand. When I came to Zambia, and even up to today, many practices of witchcraft I do not understand because I block them in my mind. They're not allowed to be real because they go against my normative judgment. I think it's a normal thing, but I also think we have to first of all listen, and I think that's what we are here encouraged to do. Before we say witchcraft is real or it's not real, let us first listen what actually is it. What is it people are actually saying by it? That's why I try to give a working definition in the way that I believe people understand it, while I wouldn't understand it personally in that way.

But the moment somebody dehumanizes the other person, which is implicit in that definition – once you get initiated into witchcraft you are no longer truly human – that's where I feel obliged to come in with my normative judgements and say, "Sorry, but here I am also an actor in the story, and I have to come in." Because people approach me for those cases, and I'm involved in actual disputes of witchcraft.

Mik   Yes, of course, the context in which one's having the discussion is going to be absolutely crucial. If one's writing for an academic journal, that's one thing. If one's actually engaging

	with people who hold the beliefs, then that's going to be another context. Is that right?
Bernhard	Yeah, that's right. And also we need to understand what people actually are saying. I do agree that our own judgments block our understanding. But in the end, I cannot remain without a judgment. We have also to be careful what in the end we legitimize. If I, for example, say, "Okay, for people, witches are no longer human," I also legitimize the killing of witches, in a way. I have to be aware of that also, I believe.
Hermen	Here we are trying to get beyond bracketing and asking, "Okay, what does it mean for something to be real or not real?" instead of simply saying, "Oh, let's put that question aside." But we are still struggling with methodological agnosticism and find it hard to see how we can leave it behind.
Alexei	At some point, we should, because that's all philosophy is about.

At some point, we should get beyond bracketing and ask, "Okay, what does it mean for something to be real or not real?", according to the last speakers in this chapter. We may try to objectively describe how people learn to communicate with spirits, experience spirits, or use spiritual means for healing practices. Yet, we do have a personal stance with respect to the kind of reality the spirit world has as well. Investigating the reality of spirits through the examples of witchcraft and illiteracy as spiritual realities proved that bracketing breaks down at a certain point.

Whether we believe that the spirit world is real or that there is no spirit world; whether we think that the spirit world could be real or claim that for us as researchers it does not matter whether spiritual realities are real, we need to go one step beyond. We need to ask ourselves what it is for the people we are investigating to believe that a spirit world exists. This book is intended as a first step in that direction.

Chapter 14

Conclusion: Investigating What it Means for the Spirit World to be Real

Hermen Kroesbergen

The spirit world plays a central role in research on Africa by anthropologists, philosophers, theologians and scholars of religion. This is no surprise since the spirit world is at the heart of many people's lives in Africa. Yet, what rules are used to distinguish true and false, real and imaginary, existing and non-existing with regard to the spirit world? What does it mean for people to speak of the spirit world? This question has often been ignored in research on Africa out of fear of losing one's neutrality as a researcher.

The assumption that is present in much research on Africa is: "For them (or us) the spirit world is real." Obviously, in some way this is true – people speak of the spirit world, live with it, think with it – but what does it mean for the spirit world to be real? What kind of reality does the spirit world have for people in Africa? In order to truly understand what is going on in the lives of people in Africa, these questions are indispensable. Therefore, these far too often neglected questions were the focus point of the articles and discussions in this volume, hoping to spark a fundamental, new line of research.

Throughout this volume, the concept of grammar was used to clarify what it means for the spirit world to be real in the context of Pentecostalized Africa. From different contexts, angles and disciplines, the authors investigated what rules apply when people speak of the spirit world; and, consequently, what kind of reality is involved when people speak of the spirit world. By looking at the role spiritual language plays in the day-to-day lives of people, the authors have tried to discern what is meant by this spirit world and its reality.

This conclusion takes stock of where we stand with regard to the investigation into what it means for the spirit world to be real, as we started with the workshop from which, subsequently, this volume of articles derived. We will start by summarizing the main findings of both the workshop and the articles in this book concerning three themes that proved to be especially relevant for the investigation of the spirit world. Thereafter, questions that merit further attention will be outlined to encourage further study on this topic.

The first theme the authors of this volume returned to often is the investigation itself. What kind of research is adequate to clarify the grammar of what people say concerning the spirit world? How can a researcher remain neutral without ne-

glecting the fundamental questions of what it means for the spirit world to be real and what kind of reality the spirit world has? What does such a kind of research involve?

The second theme concerns several possible starting points that were suggested for investigating the grammatical rules that apply to the spirit world. We might focus on the extent and way in which language concerning the spirit world is instrumental. This brings out important characteristics of the grammar of the spirit world that often prove confusing, in particular, when this aspect is left hanging. Another possible starting point for investigations into the grammar of the spirit world is the extent and way in which language concerning the spirit world is metaphorical or involves abstractions of concrete realities. Yet another way to approach the grammatical rules that govern language concerning the spirit world is to inquire whether the personal character of this language changes the way we speak of the spirit world compared to more objective or factual aspects of reality.

The third and final theme that came to the fore in our discussions was that health is an important connection point between the spirit world and the material world. How health brings together body and mind seems to be related to how we speak of material things is connected to the grammar of the spirit world.

Before highlighting some questions that remain after the discussions in this volume, let us first summarize the preliminary findings subdivided into these three themes.

Research

One important conclusion of the workshop was that we need to challenge the assumption that the only option for a scholar concerning the reality of the spirit world is to say about their informants "For them the spirits are real." For this approach misses the grammar of the spirit world: what does it mean for the spirit world to be real? In other words, an important question that triggered a lot of discussion and divergence of opinion among the participants in the workshop that resulted in this volume is whether methodological agnosticism and bracketing still work. Many of the participants wondered whether these approaches were too much "thing-oriented" or "table and chair-oriented", as it was sometimes described. Are these methods blind to the realm of spirits and the questions that we tried to address during this workshop? Does one lose something with a scholarly distance in the way this is implemented through methodological agnosticism and bracketing? Several participants suggested that this scholarly approach might have caused the blind spots which made a project like this one necessary. The kind of reality that the spirit world has might remain out of focus as long as people bracket themselves and their own perspectives while researching.

On the other hand, it was argued strongly that, as scholars, researchers do not want to make judgments about good and evil in spirits, healers, anointed objects,

etc. As scholars, they should stay out of these internal theological or partisan discussions. Yet, some participants wondered if a red line is crossed in cases that involve the accusation of child witches or the dehumanizing of supposedly crash-landed witches. Can someone and should someone remain neutral in such cases? What would it even mean to be neutral when witnessing obvious atrocities?

Refraining from moral judgment is central to the scholarly approach, yet, on the other hand, people – including scholars – are never neutral observers. Everybody does have a personal stance concerning the reality of particular spiritual agents. Is there a way in which one can acknowledge and also use this, without excluding oneself from the scholarly debate?

As participants in the project from which this volume results, we set out to discuss what it means for people to speak of the spirit world. To us, this investigation appeared to be fundamental and preceding a lot of other research on Africa which seems to take for granted that people know what it means for the spirit world to be real. However, while engaging in our project, we discovered that an important even more fundamental and anterior question is what it is to investigate what it means to speak of the spirit world. Our investigations themselves became an important topic for investigation.

Grammatical Rules Concerning the Spirit World

Second, when we engaged in our actual investigations, it turned out that there were different starting points to investigate the grammatical rules concerning the spirit world. On the one hand, people use ordinary words for the spirits, on the other hand, they are invisible and therefore quite extraordinary. On the one hand, people communicate with spirits, on the other hand, they do not do so through audible voices, but more through dreams, mediums, special occurrences, and the like. On the one hand, people experience the spirit world as a reality out there that exists whether they want it to exist or not, on the other hand, people need to learn, exercise and practice before the spirit world becomes real for them. Such complexities or ambiguities concerning what people say concerning the spirit world, make it complicated to discern the grammatical rules that are used in spiritual discourse.

For people who live with the spirit world, the spirit world is real, but the kind of reality is always different from the kind of reality that tables and chairs have, even for the most fervent of believers. The spirit world offers solutions, but these are always complex and holistic in the sense that they are intimately connected to many other aspects of people's lives as well. These solutions are never easy shortcuts, but they always engage people within their context and their relationships, within their entire lives. This complicates the investigation of what it means for the spirit world to be real. One cannot put a spiritual reality in a laboratory.

Spiritual explanations are often used when there are no table-and-chair explanations available. This in itself shows that the nature of these explanations is different, but how different and in what way different, remains a matter for debate.

The spirit world offers methods of control that are used, especially when there are no reliable table-and-chair methods of control. If witchcraft (or magic or spirits) became common technology, it would no longer be witchcraft (or magic or spirits). This again shows that the nature of these methods of control is different, but how and in what way they are different, again remains a matter for debate.

Several ways of bringing out this difference were proposed by the authors of the articles or arose from the discussions thereof. Some participants deemed language and practices concerning the spirit world to be fundamentally not instrumental; others emphasized the fact that the spirit world is used instrumentally, albeit in a particular way. A further elaboration of this debate could be a fruitful starting point to investigate the grammatical rules that apply to language and practices involving the spirit world.

Instrumental?

It appears to be evident that people use the spirit world in some way instrumentally. What people look for in dealing with the spirit world is more than just emotional well-being; people do really plead for things to happen. In most practices concerning the spirit, world provisions are made that relativize the instrumental aspect – one should not merely use one's ancestor for one's own purposes, just as one would not want to merely use one's neighbor instrumentally – but even these provisions in themselves show that the instrumental aspect is important concerning what people do and say concerning the spirit world.

For example, many people will keep looking for answers from a prophet who claims to have special access to the spirit world, even if a prophet's predictions are correct no more than 10% of the time. On the one hand, this shows that instrumentality is important and, on the other hand, that it functions in strange ways. This makes instrumentality an interesting starting point for investigations into the grammar of the spirit world.

People use spiritual means in some way as instrumental; however, if people involve spiritual solutions, they always invoke more than just the instrumental outcome. To use Luhrmann's phrase, there is an entire paracosm involved. It is a package deal. By involving either the ancestors, the Holy Spirit, or a water goddess, one makes an important choice that reflects in other aspects of someone's life as well. People become part of the worldview or paracosm or dream of the healer or pastor or diviner whom they turn to, with or without the desired outcome. This is one of the ways in which the instrumentality of the spirit world is different from the one involved when one restricts oneself to the material world and methods that can be tested scientifically.

In general, one could say that the spirit world is often invoked when other ways to influence reality do not seem to work. Spiritual instruments are used when there are no instruments of the table-and-chair kind, or at least no completely reliable instruments of that kind. For example, schools in themselves are no guarantee to end illiteracy, so people might want to add prayers to this tool of the table-and-chair variety to fight illiteracy. If all else has failed, spiritual solutions often seem to function as a last resort or stopgap. Yet, this is not always the case. Sometimes people use spiritual means first, for example, when the cause is deemed spiritual. In the case of the fear of witchcraft, people do not start by trying to stop it through pragmatic means, but they immediately turn to charms.

Spirits are often invoked where other means or explanations fail but using them presupposes that the gods or the spirits already have a place in people's lives. They are never merely instrumental tools to be used; but they are embodied in so many ways in the social fabric of people's lives. The process of making God or a spirit a gap-filler for things that cannot be explained can only start if the gods are already there in some other way in people's lives. People have many options (God, devil, demon, witchcraft, nature spirit, shades of the dead, et cetera), each with a specific way of doing something. It is important to be aware that God or spirits have a place in their lives also in many other regards as well.

Above that, spiritual causes and solutions for misfortune in themselves can be real in many different ways. Instrumentality involving the spirit world can exclude other approaches to an issue, or it may stand side by side with medical or practical reasons, or in somehow undetermined ways relate to other discourses of instrumentality, or they may appear where other causes are simply lacking, all of this sometimes in one and the same person's life.

Investigating the many different ways in which instrumentality concerning the spirit world plays a role in people's lives is an important way to bring out the grammatical rules of the spirit world's particular kind of reality. Investigating the extent to which spiritual language is metaphorical or abstract is another.

Metaphorical/Abstractions?

Several authors of this volume and participants in the ensuing discussions suggested that the grammar of the spirit world might be clarified by comparing it to the grammar of metaphors, abstractions, or literature. It is interesting to ponder whether understanding literature is a good comparison for living with the kind of reality of the spirit world. On the one hand, this comparison seems to make living with the spirit world less strange and more accessible to outsiders; on the other hand, the comparison might fail to do justice to the kind of reality that the spirit world has for people involved. One's ancestor, a mountain god, or Jesus Christ has more reality – or at least a differently evaluated reality in a person's life – than Little Red Riding Hood, Harry Potter, or Okonkwo.

Nonetheless, literature can help deepen our understanding of what it is to live with spirits. It can do so either through quasi-ethnographic novels (for example, those written by Achebe) or through magical-realist occult movies from Nollywood. Such graphic portrayals provide access to the grammar of the spirit world for people to whom it would be merely incomprehensible otherwise.

The way and extent to which language concerning the spirit world functions like metaphors or abstractions in people's lives is open for debate. On the one hand, such a concept gives one a grasp on what is going on in this kind of language; on the other hand, it might gloss over important aspects that are particular to the kind of reality involved for people who speak of the spirit world. In this case, it might help to use specific examples. Are abstractions like money or the state good comparisons for the kind of reality of the spirit world? Where do these abstractions play a similar role to spirits for someone living with the spirit world, and in what respects do we note differences?

A question that came up again and again is whether, if one thinks of spiritual language as similar to literature or metaphorical language, one will ever get close to those for whom the spirit world is real. The latter treat spirits very differently from literary characters or metaphors in their lives, yet these comparisons might be a valuable access point to grasp something of the grammar of the spirit world, nonetheless.

The grammatical rules concerning the spirit world can be clarified by investigating to what extent practices involving spirits are instrumental and by investigating the similarities and differences between spiritual language and metaphors, literature or abstract concepts. A third promising starting point for these grammatical investigations is to focus on the personal aspect of discourse related to the spirit world.

<div style="text-align:center">

Personal?

</div>

The reality involved in speaking of the spirit world differs from the language concerning tables and chairs. This difference might be accounted for by focusing on the personal aspect of spiritual language. Language involving the spirit world has to do with person-to-person relationships. The spirit world is always connected to something particular, contextual, or individual. This is an important aspect of the grammar of the spirit world, which could provide a fruitful starting point for clarifying the grammatical rules involved in speaking of this world.

The spirits that people deal with are personal in the sense that they are often specifically connected to their own group. They are not universally transmittable or objective in that sense. Likewise, spiritual methods of control do involve objectively given techniques on the one hand, but their efficacy always depends upon the specific gifts or calling of the healer or diviner as well. The personal aspect can

be seen in most aspects of the language of the spirit world. Without the context of personal, concrete relationships, much of the spiritual discourse makes no sense.

If one would suggest exporting spiritual practices to a global scale or otherwise abstracting them from concrete, personal contexts, people themselves would say that this is nonsense, however much they would emphasize the objective, concrete reality of these practices otherwise. In this way, language concerning spirits differs significantly from language concerning, for example, tables and chairs. Next to investigating instrumentality and the way in which spiritual language is metaphorical, a promising point of entry for bringing out grammatical rules for language and practices involving the spirit world is to focus on the personal aspect of this kind of discourse and its use.

In research into what it means for the spirit world to be real and what kind of reality the spirit world has for people in Africa, it is important to clarify the nature of these investigations themselves and to identify a fruitful starting point for engaging this peculiar kind of language and practices. A third conclusion that can be drawn from the articles and discussions in this volume is that health is very important, both in people's involvement with the spirit world and in other aspects of life. Health connects the spirit world and the material world. This distinction between a spiritual and a physical realm in itself requires further investigation – in particular when used in the African context – yet we can agree that people in Africa and elsewhere speak differently about spirits than they do about tables and chairs. Speaking differently about something implies using a different grammar and suggests a different kind of reality. One area where these different kinds of realities clash is health.

Health as a Connection Point

Language concerning the spirit world is often connected to health issues. For many people, health problems are the most common reason to deal with the spirit world. Health proves to be an important connection point between language concerning the spirit world and the material table-and-chair reality. This makes health an important field of study concerning the grammar of the spirit world, for here there is often a clash between spirit solutions and biomedical table-and-chair solutions. These clashes and the debate surrounding them can bring out clearly how reality functions in what people say concerning the spirit world.

In Botswana, for example, as was discussed in one article in this volume, spiritual healing is not acknowledged in government health policies, whereas quantitative research shows it is very important for people. Somehow it should be recognized, as many researchers and participants in this volume feel, but how? The concreteness of such a case could provide valuable insights into the grammar of the spirit world, which is connected to many of the issues that have been raised in this book. For example, if spiritual healing became regulated and tested like

biomedicine, would it no longer be spiritual healing since then it would no longer fulfill the grammatical rules of being personal, contextual, a stopgap, an explanation when all other explanations fail, et cetera?

Because there is a well-established scientific tradition in medicine, the peculiarities of investigating discourses and practices involving the spirit world are clear when we look at the issue of health. With regard to Western medicine, there is a strong tradition of safeguarding neutrality in research. How do investigations into practices related to the spirit world relate to that standard of objectivity? Should it aspire to similar standards or is a different approach required in investigating the grammar of the spirit world?

Instrumental logic is the baseline of health-related research. If one can scientifically prove that something works, it is fine, whether or not we understand how it works. Instrumentality is key. How does this relate to engagements with the spirit world? People seem to participate in practices whose worldviews do not match without experiencing any difficulties. Does this show a similar focus on instrumentality as in medical science or is something else going on here? What is more important in this respect: the similarities or the differences?

Should health solutions involving the spirit world be compared to pharmaceutical options in hospitals or to metaphorical ways of finding meaning like one finds in literature? And how does this relate to the importance of the personal aspect when it comes to spiritual practices? It does not matter who administers the paracetamol to you for it to work, but it does seem to matter which practitioner administers a spiritual health solution to you. What does this mean? What does this tell us about the grammar of the spirit world?

For many people, health is their most important link to practices involving the spirit world. As the articles and discussions in this volume show, health is also an important connection point to better understand the grammar of the spirit world.

The articles and discussions in this volume have made a start in investigating what is already accepted in existing research, namely the kind of reality that the spirit world is supposed to have. Much research with respect to Africa assumes to know what is meant by saying that a spirit world exists. Yet, according to what rules do people judge whether the spirit world is real? What role does it play in people's lives to claim the existence or not of a spirit world, and what can we learn from that about what they take this 'existence' to be? These questions bring out what could be called the 'grammar of the spirit world.' In a genuinely multidisciplinary way, this book has made a start with investigating this grammar and the question of what it means to speak of a spirit world that is real. Yet, a number of questions concerning the grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa were raised but did not receive as much attention as they should have. As an encouragement for further research, this conclusion will finish with some important questions that remain after the discussions in this volume.

Remaining questions

Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations inspired the approach that was used in this volume. He proposed an important method for investigating the kind of reality of something. According to Wittgenstein, we should ask ourselves how children learn to speak of something and what criteria are used to determine whether or not a child has understood the meaning of a particular word (for an elaboration and application of this method, see Kroesbergen 2022). These questions have been touched upon in some of the articles and discussions in this volume, but the investigation of the grammar of the spirit world could benefit from applying this method more consequently.

How is a child taught to speak of the spirit world? How does a child discover similarities and differences between spirits and people? How do we check whether a child has correctly understood what is being said about the spirit world? Asking ourselves these questions reminds us of the fact that people do not learn to speak of spirits by being shown a material person or thing, nor do we refer to a particular thing to check whether someone has used spiritual language correctly. An additional inquiry could take place into how disputes are settled related to spiritual matters. Instead of assuming to know what it means to speak of spirits, these kinds of questions invite us to investigate the depth and grammar of what people speak of when they speak of the spirit world.

It would be beneficial to investigate further how people learned to say 'I believe in spirits' or 'I do not believe in spirits', how one checks whether the words are used correctly, and what is at stake in disputes surrounding such a statement. Or, for that matter, how people learn to say, 'Spirits are real!' and how they learn to provide a wide array of stories when they feel that you – or they themselves – doubt the existence of a spiritual realm. Investigating the grammar of the spirit world challenges the assumption common to much academic research on Africa to know what it is for spiritual matters to be 'real'. If it turns out that people who speak of spirits are not speaking of certain mysterious entities, this may reframe much of the scholarly research on what is going on in Africa. Philosophers, for example, may be more used to speaking of reality, while anthropologists may be more used to describing concrete examples. But using Wittgenstein's grammatical questions as a starting point, both are on equal footing despite their differences in methodology and perspective.

Both the philosopher who investigates, for example, communitarianism in Africa and the anthropologist who investigates testimonies about Satanism did learn to speak of the spirit world in a particular way and encountered conflicts that related to the spirit world in their specific research contexts, for example. By focusing on such trans-disciplinary questions, scholars from different disciplines, each with their own methodologies and perspectives, can nonetheless engage in a meaningful and fruitful dialogue that can impact each of the disciplines in its own way.

The starting point for the research in this volume has been the assumption that is present in much research on Africa: "For them (or us) the spirit world is real." Let us try to continue on this quest to clarify the grammar of the spirit world in Pentecostalized Africa by investigating what it means for the spirit world to be real.

Bibliography

Kroesbergen, Hermen. 2022. "'Everybody Would Agree' A Novel Wittgensteinian Approach to Philosophy of Religion." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 92, no. 1: 49–63.

What does it mean for the spirit world to be real? Scholars from different disciplines investigate this topic focusing on the role played by the spiritual realm in Pentecostalized Africa. The grammatical angle of their research proves to be a fruitful avenue to clarify the kind of reality or realities the spirit world has. This novel approach takes us beyond most existing research by investigating the often unaddressed assumption that we know what it means for the spirit world to be taken as real. This volume shows the importance of paying close attention to the grammar according to which people speak of spirits, Spirit, witchcraft, ancestors and other aspects of the spirit world.

Hermen Kroesbergen is a Research Associate at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and a pastor in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps is a Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam.

Philipp Öhlmann is Feodor Lynen Research Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Botswana, Senior Associated Researcher at the Centre for Rural Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Research Associate in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.