CHAPTER FIFTEEN

African Christianity

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity was predominantly a white Euro-American religion with 83 per cent of all Christians living in the Global North. Today, it is a global religion where over two-thirds of the world's Christians are non-Westerners, who live in the Global South. Christianity is on the rise in Latin America, Asia and especially Africa: a trend that is predicted to continue in the second half of the twenty-first century. This has had a large impact on the nature of Christianity as a world religion. In the 1970s, Christianity was the religion of the haves. Today, the numerous and most devoted adherents of Christianity are the world's poorest inhabitants, and prosperity churches are mushrooming. Global Christianity is the religion of the have-nots (Jenkins 2011). In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant, a German white European Protestant philosopher, held the opinion that Christianity was part of the European civilization and that, consequently, non-Europeans including Africans, were incapable of understanding the divine and true Christianity (Ault 2013). Today, Christianity in Africa is increasingly important at the world stage. The prognoses show that by the year 2020 Africa will be the most Christian continent in the Global South and that by 2050 most Christians in the entire world will live in Africa (Jenkins 2011). In 2018, Africa houses over 1.2 billion people and is the second most populous continent on earth. It has a predominantly young and fast-growing population, in most African countries in excess of 2 per cent a year. Beyond 2050, it will be the only continent with a substantial population growth[1] (Factbook 2017; Kazeem 2017). No doubt, Africa's impact on the nature of Christianity will continue to increase.

I will explore explanations for the appeal of Christianity, and Pentecostalism in particular, for contemporary Africans. Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that is predominantly popular in those African countries with the fastest population growth. Alongside Catholicism, it is the most rapidly growing religion on the African continent.

THE SURGE OF PENTECOSTALISM IN AFRICA: KEY REASONS

I will discuss four key reasons for the surge of Pentecostalism. To illustrate the reasons for the religion's surge, we will delve into the moving images of Nollywood films. The burgeoning Nigerian film industry, which is native to Africa, is characterized by a global export of its films to Africans in both African and African diasporic communities. The Nollywood films express the popular cultural imaginations of many young Africans,

whose precarious lives are affected by globalization and neoliberalism and who find solace in the hopeful and comforting religious expressions that Pentecostalism in Africa entails.

NEOLIBERALISM, GLOBALISATION AND CHRISTIANITY

In the Nigerian feature film *Maroko* (2016), written by Yinka Ogun and directed by Femi Odugbemi, some influential urban housing project developers demolish a low-income area in Eti-Osa Lagos State to make space for luxurious flats for the new urban elites. Consequently, over 300,000 Nigerians are unlawfully evicted. Entire families become homeless and displaced. The film tells the story of the precarious life of the African youth who grow up under these disenfranchised conditions. It concentrates on their struggle to fill their bellies, stay healthy and find shelter against the forces of nature. The poor and homeless are on the losing end of the neoliberal market and the mechanisms of globalization. In the absence of a social safety net due to a failing African state, Maroko's poor and young Africans elsewhere with similar fates find a new home in an improvised Pentecostal church. These Christians give the African youth shelter, a social network and a message of hope. Odugbemi's Nollywood film, which is based on the real forced eviction of Maroko's underprivileged in July of the 1990s, is exemplary for the fate of many deprived Africans who find solace in Pentecostalism (Megbolu 2009; Nations 2017).

Pentecostal churches in Africa were first founded in the 1920s by marginalized African church leaders, many of whom came to Sierra Leone after migrating from the United States. They founded, for instance, the Zion churches in South Africa, the Aladura movement in Western Africa and the Church of God on Earth in Central Africa. Pentecostalism, inspired by the New Testament, places supreme importance to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christians, speaking in tongues and the display of the miraculous and healing through personal prayer in daily life (Gore 2009; Lehmann 2009; Woodhead 2009).

The rapid spread of Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa is not coincidental. The success of this belief coincides with the dark side of global capitalism on the predominantly young African population, such as youth unemployment, low youth wages,[2] poor housing opportunities, over-expensive health care and the overall precariousness of life of the poor in the urban African slums. Pentecostalism is especially attractive for the African youth, which stands at about 75 per cent of the total population of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa (News 2016). This form of Christianity offers a moral value system that linguistically connects to and gives access to the neoliberal job market to the millions of young Africans for whom the official doors to attractive jobs are locked. The Pentecostal youth is empowered by the words of their pastor, who ensures that Jesus can materially reward them and make them rich overnight. The belief of these youngsters enables them to become part of the global economy by investing in Christ, which means that they should materially and spiritually invest in their church. It offers them an identity, a social network and a home in a society that is experiencing 'tremendous political instability and religious violence and there are key vectors that could cause the state to fail in 2030' (Kinnan 2011: 4). The prognoses indicate that states in Africa will weaken and the relative power of religious organizations will grow (Council 2008). The church fills the void left by the African state, which does not offer any social network and very limited financial support.[3] A classic Nollywood production that links up to the popularity of Pentecostalism among Africa's youth is *Living in Bondage* (1992). This influential video film, which has been analysed by various scholars (Haynes 2011, 2013; Ugor 2016), is directed by Christ

Obi-Rapu and written by Kenneth Nnebue. It tells the story of Andy Okeke, a young unemployed husband, who lacks self-esteem due to his deprived situation. His family is forced to migrate to the city of Lagos, where he observes the financial success of some of his contemporaries. This fuels Andy's eagerness to become one of the haves, which isn't going well. He succeeds in his endeavours by entering into a satanic cult and signing a pact with Lucifer and offering his wife to Old Nick by killing her. Only by becoming a member of a Pentecostal church, Andy repents his sins and succeeds in leading a morally acceptable life. Pentecostalism offers a moral economy and an alternative entry into the global capitalist market less lurid than the satanic cults that metaphorically express the dark side of global neoliberal capitalism.

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM – AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS AND PENTECOSTALISM IN AFRICA

The success and growth of Pentecostalism in Africa cannot be understood without knowledge of Africa's Indigenous Religions (AIR), which predate the introduction of Christianity on the continent and are often referred to as a form of pre-Pentecostalism. Despite the criticism of Pentecostals on AIRs, Pentecostalism is embedded in the African traditional belief in spirits, such as those of the ancestors and those that dwell inside plants, animals and inanimate objects. But where the adherents of AIR adhere to the idea that all spirits can behave either good or bad depending on the circumstances, the Pentecostals believe that except for the Holy Ghost, all spirits are evil and bring misfortune (Wiredu 1992; Müller 2013). Spirits can, for instance, enter the body of a human being to cause health problems or turn that person into a wrongdoer. On a community level, spirits can destroy all crops in the natural environment or bring communal diseases. For the Pentecostals, the veneration of spirits by indigenous religious believers is the cause of almost all misfortune. Their pastor calls upon the Holy Spirit to protect the Pentecostals against the evil doings of these spirits (Müller 2011, 2013). This is the topic of the Christian Nollywood film *The Prodigal Ones* (2008), written and directed by Mike Bamiloye and analysed by the scholar Paul Ugor. In the film, a rich Nigerian Pentecost family in Texas (USA) used to pray in an overseas branch of the Lagos-based 'Redeemed Christian Church of God'.[4] When the protagonist transfers money to his mother in Nigeria so she can attend and pay for an ancestral ritual, a masquerade, the overseas family members are brought into moral decay. The film demonstrates to fellow Pentecostals that, even transnationally, the veneration of ancestral spirits can be detrimental. It ends with a scene in which the pastor prays for the family to break their bond with the evil ancestral spirits and for the Holy Spirit to descend upon them (Ugor 2016). Pentecostalism thus criticizes the African Indigenous Religions but owes its success to the continuation of its members in a belief in Africa's indigenous spirits.

PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANITY AND ITS LIBERTY FROM THE COLONIAL HERITAGE OF AFRICA

A third key reason for the success of Pentecostalism in Africa is that unlike European missionary Christianity, Pentecostal Christianity does not have its roots in the era and culture of European colonization. Since the fifteenth century, Southern European Catholic missionaries legitimized their urge for expansion and exploitation of Africa's

resources and people with their Christian mission and faith. Portuguese and Spanish missionaries condemned the African Indigenous Religions, which they referred to as 'fetish worship' (*feitiço* in Portuguese). They believed that Africans worshipped animals, nature and things, whereas, in reality, Africans venerated the spirits and power that dwelled inside animate and inanimate objects. The Southern European colonialists, who came to Africa with their missionaries, felt superior to Africans. They morally marketed their colonization of African territory by their preparedness to civilize the, in their eyes, 'underdeveloped' Africans by bringing the gospel. Since the seventeenth century, missionaries of other European nations, both Protestants and Catholics, continued to condemn the AIR. The missionaries promoted the Christian God as a supreme being and suppressed the veneration of African ancestors. Not surprisingly, regarding the attitude of these missionaries towards Africans, they were not very successful in their attempts to convert Africans to Christianity. Even though the conversion to this new religion could bring them socioeconomic benefits, such as an increase in wealth and access to Western-style circles of trust, most Africans remained loyal to their ancestors. They continued to perform African indigenous religious rituals (Müller 2013).

Only after African prophets started to bring the gospel, Christianity was successfully planted in Africa. Mass conversion to Christianity did not take place before the 1910s when African men of God became involved in the business of proselytization. After all, only African missionaries understood how to convey the Christian faith such that fellow Africans would comprehend and appreciate God's messages to them. The African missionaries brought the Christian religion closer to the traditional African way of life. For them, God was not an abstract and distant entity. Instead, they perceived Him as an active God, a mobile force that will remain present in the heart of all Africans to love and empower them, as long as they actively worship their Lord. In the spirit of these African forefathers in the Christian faith, Pentecostals actively perform religious ceremonies that include dance, music and trance. The emphasis in Pentecostalism does not lay on the metaphorical interpretation of the biblical text but on the religious experience and the intuitive understanding of the divine (Walls 2003).

THE PENTECOSTAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Pentecostal sermons in Africa are spectacular. The pastors use their microphones to scream out the healing message of God and aim for a direct success of their interactions. The Pentecostals often fall into a trance and scream loudly. These screams are, in their view, caused by the evil spirits that dwell inside them and which need to be exorcised for them to be healed. Drummers support the ceremony, and members are encouraged to clap and sing in praise of the Lord. Their God is a mobile spiritual being, whose spiritual power directly influences their lives. God can use His power to their advancement in the here and now. He manifests Himself by descending the Holy Spirit upon His believers and by empowering holy objects, such as the Bible. The Bible is perceived as a powerful book because it is believed to be an object that literally contains the power of God. Those Pentecostals who are in touch with the Bible and other holy objects or animals can feel Him entering their bodies. They experience that their bodies are filled with His blessings and with the Holy Spirit. This offers them protection against the Devil and other evil forces that inhabit the universe and manifest themselves in the same way as God. These forces can attack any person and make (deadly) victims among all those who are unprotected by

the love and light of Jesus Christ. For Pentecostals to pray for Holy Spirit of God is not a symbolic act but of vital importance to their direct well-being. In Africa, no condition is permanent, and those who are blessed today with good health and fortune can fall ill tomorrow and vice versa. Pentecostals in Africa, therefore, take their time to repeatedly tune into the music of the universe and to fill their bodies with the protective light and the warmth of God (Müller 2013, 2013). In the Nollywood film *Career woman* (2014), written and directed by Chidi Anyanwu Chidox, the protagonist, Anita Okoronkwo, is a successful lawyer, who used to be poor. Anita is convinced that her success is the result of her own and her mother's many prayers to God. She is convinced that her wealth and success depend on the strength of her own and her family's faith in the Lord. Like many other Pentecostals, this young African woman is committed to the belief that her stamina and talents are the results of God's blessings. Anita is exemplary for Pentecostals, who generally believe that their future in Africa will be great as long as they can bodily experience the love and protection of God. This is a comforting belief for the many young Africans, who often do not have the education to read and (metaphorically) interpret the Bible and who live a precarious life in the absence of a protective welfare system and a well-operating nation-state.

CONCLUSION

Pentecostalism in Africa provides an answer to the many urging questions and emotional needs of a generation of young Africans, who struggle to survive in the globalized economic jungle in urban megacities in Africa, such as Lagos. Nollywood is the aesthetic expression of these questions and needs that are caused by the disenfranchised state of the majority of Africa's youth within the global neoliberal capitalist system that determines so much of the quality of their lives. The surge of Pentecostalism in Africa is likely to continue in the second half of the twenty-first century.