

Conclusion: Power Must Change Hands: COVID-19, Power, and the Imperative of Knowledge

The substantial part of this book was already written when the COVID-19 apocalypse hit and things changed for the whole world. I had already sketched the conclusion to this book. The closing thoughts considered how the paradoxes of Pentecostal power as a dominant force and sometimes as embattled might continue to play out in broader cultural contexts. As the primary means of Pentecostal self-recognition, power aggregates the sum of their worship, habits, values, and collective memories. It is not just external characteristics that define power identity, but also their politics, attitudes, and partisan divides on various cultural issues. In a society like Nigeria, people have been through many years of military dictatorship and have witnessed authoritarian uses of power. The transition to democratic forms of government – despite its initial promises of liberation from state oppression – has fallen short of empowering the people. Subsequently, they have become more prone to seeking supernatural power that would manifest through them in the sociopolitical sphere. My proposed quest was to raise the questions of the constitution and history of power identity, how they interact with other ideological elements that make up the society and the changes that have occurred within the social milieu as people manifest power identity.

The modes of strategic self-differentiation that define Pentecostals, I noted, were best explored through their performances. While Pentecostals, like most Christians, generally balk at the idea that their boisterous worship activity was “a performance,” they also understood their actions as processes of producing meanings that ultimately establishes their power identity. Consequently, they are constantly in a performative mode as they position themselves against an *other*. The power identity, unlike identities based on physical characteristics or marked in material ways, cannot be taken for granted because it is frequently challenged and has to be continuously performed power to be sustained. The unceasing will to perform power has broader social

implications in a supposedly democratic society like Nigeria because it means power is constantly tested against an *other* to establish its reality.

Power identity is unique because its makeup is performative, and the condition of its existence is based on the continuity of its performance to disrupt an existing order and inaugurate the Pentecostal status before all witnesses. They have to unceasingly mobilize both social and spiritual imaginaries to generate the range of acts that will challenge the social order and confirm their identity. The impossibility of ever standing at ease, their never taking a break from the eternal vigilance of watching over their identity so as not to lose it, defines their social behavior at all levels. Thus, when COVID-19 happened in 2020, it not only tested the claims of Nigerian Pentecostals – particularly its leadership – as the people of power, their actions made me consider how power identity as it is presently constituted could hold up during a world-altering event like the pandemic. It became another transitional phase for a faith whose power identity was already in a process of social transitions.

At first, when the news of a viral disease began to roll in from China in the earlier part of the year 2020, it seemed all too remote for anyone to be anxious. When the first case of COVID-19 got to Nigeria in late February, it was through an Italian worker in a Nigerian company who had flown into the country. Even though there was some panic that the disease had finally berthed, the bigger fears people grappled with were spurred by the well-meaning foreign organizations who kept saying they worried about Africa and their well-known fragile medical system in the face of the disease. The World Health Organization noted that the threat to Africa was “considerable.” The billionaire philanthropists, Bill and Melinda Gates, had some unpleasant predictions about the fate of Africa in the coming months. Already, the challenge several European countries faced circulated in the media and Africans rightly agonized about what would become of less-endowed countries like theirs if rich and powerful countries with advanced medical systems could not stand up to the disease. There was so much palpable fear in the minds of people as they tried to discern what was happening, but there was nothing in the way of knowledge or insight they had that adequately responded to such a befuddling moment. Since this book and its writer were caught in the vortex of events, I decided to use this conclusion to offer my reflections on what the COVID-19 pandemic portends for all, especially for Pentecostalism, a faith and cultural movement of people whose identity is power.

One of the earliest interventions from the Pentecostal circuit came from David Elijah of the Glorious Mount of Possibility, who went viral when he claimed he was going to China to “destroy coronavirus.” According to him, “Where there is a prophet people cannot die. I cannot be a prophet in this world and China is dying. It is not possible!”¹ He would soon become a meme online and the target of many fake news websites who claimed he had been infected with the virus while praying for people in China. Another, Kingsley Innocent “Talknado,” described the virus as a hoax, and the funds budgeted for tackling the disease was simply another means for Nigeria’s corrupt political class to release the funds they would eventually embezzle. He even added that coronavirus could never enter Nigeria, and if it ever did, it would be destroyed by “corrosive anointing.”² At that time, people had begun to worry: these pastors, unable to offer anything more than such self-aggrandizement, appeared rather frivolous.

By the time the number of cases began to multiply and the world’s most powerful economies went into a tailspin, people looked around wildly for answers. As the nation started to shut down to slow down the spread of the virus, a people who had long been accustomed to seeking the face of God in puzzling situations and listening to their pastors wanted to know what was happening. Nigerians used to sensationalist prophecies by their pastors at the beginning of every new year could not fathom why the spiritual sensors of their leaders failed to detect one of the most significant historical events of the twenty-first century so far. The apocalypticism of COVID-19 thus exposed not only the vulnerability of our human bodies – both rich and poor alike – and our constructed global economic and political systems, the effects landed on the consortium of Pentecostal pastors too. Nigerians, thoroughly bewildered by the scale of events, turned to their pastors to ask how they could not have seen any of these incidences coming.

In some of the WhatsApp messages shared at that time of great bewilderment, people quoted the Bible, Amos 3:7, where God said he would not do anything without revealing it to his servants, the prophets. They asked themselves how come none of God’s prophets

¹ <https://wrqk.iheart.com/featured/the-stansbury-show/content/2020-03-09-a-nigerian-pastor-says-he-will-prophetically-destroy-the-coronavirus/>

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uPl6AWnS9g

saw this coming and forewarned the people of God? How could they not have seen all of the effects of COVID-19 ahead? Where were the power and the anointing that pastors had always boasted to restore the world furiously spinning out of control back on its orbit? By the time people started asking questions and even the most powerful pastors who had previously always claimed access to arcane knowledge came up short, it was clear that the pandemic had demystified the Pentecostal pastorate, their claims of miracles of healing, the foresight of their prophecies, and the unrestricted access pastors say they have to the supernatural realm.

Pentecostals, the people of power, found themselves in dire straits where the power to manipulate signs and symbols to produce meaning did not answer to this world-changing event. Over the years, they had built powerful empires in the forms of huge cathedrals and enterprises, enthroned politicians to become a part of the political elite, and they had been at the forefront of the production of public culture. However, COVID-19 did not respond to the various forms of power they had accumulated and performed for the public. The period of the initial lockdown was a traumatic one in the history of contemporary Nigeria because it showed people who did not have the right divination instruments to interpret the times and were therefore as lost as those deemed powerless. Everything they had flaunted as proof of their power now seemed pretty useless in combatting this life-changing event.

Putting up stunning architectural masterpieces and drawing large crowds are some of the ways churches have established their degree of power within the social culture. For instance, in 1999, Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith International (Winners' Chapel) dedicated the Faith Tabernacle, a church building with a capacity to seat up to 50,000 people. By 2015, the Bishop announced they were commencing Faith Theatre, a building that would sit up to 100,000 people. In 2018, Pastor Paul Eneche of Dunamis International Gospel Centre dedicated Glory Dome, a church with the reputed capacity to contain 100,000 people, about the largest in the whole world. In 2019, Pastor Adeboye said during a church program that he would not rest until he had built a church the size of Ibadan (one of the largest cities in Africa with 1,189 square miles). He said, "If anybody tells you Pastor Adeboye is dead, don't believe them because God is going to build us the auditorium as big as Ibadan. Until that is done, I'm not going anywhere." Each time these pastors have put up or have announced

they would be putting up these buildings, they draw flak from people who have seen these projects as self-glorification projects. When the pandemic broke, none of those conventional ways of performing power responded to the crisis.

It is not surprising that people ask their pastors for clarity at a crucial moment in history when they were confounded by a crisis of meaning and expect an answer. For centuries, religion has been a source of meaning-making for people as they are caught in events that upend their world. Also, as I showed in Chapters 1 and 2, when Pentecostals say they are a people of power, there is a legitimate basis for that assertion. Abuse by military dictators eroded intellectualism and the trust people should have had in their government and institutions. After the years of corrupt leadership, people have grown thoroughly cynical of their government and eminently distrustful that bureaucratic efforts are sincere enough to improve their lot. Also, trained expertise long ago left the deliberative public square and their spaces mostly taken up by pastors and religious leaders. Some of them, professors of science before they became pastors, still towed the familiar path of mysticism and relentless pursuit of demonic forces. That exchange left Nigeria bereft of critical insights necessary to confront moments such as the one birthed by the COVID-19 virus. The sense of uncertainty became more acute as the days passed and people remained in isolation, fatigued from inactivity. With no sense of clarity of what was happening on a larger scale, and no other sources of information than conspiracy theories forwarded across WhatsApp and other social media networks, people resorted to seeking alternative and unofficial sources of information. The pastors themselves scrambled for answers as the fear of what would befall the country in the face of this unprecedented event hit.

From declaring the pandemic a demonic attack to sharing conspiracy theories, Pentecostal leaders' response to their anxious congregants to provide a moral meaning to the moment fell short of the reassurance the public needed. The world these pastors now operate in, as I showed in much of Chapters 3 and 4, is one where their ability to make meanings and generate myths is also attenuated by the public who easily generate momentum through the force of social media commentary. Consequently, they met the pastor's intervention with ridicule and severe criticism. As the days passed and there was still no more clarity on what the role of pastors would be in the mega-drama unfolding in

the world, pastors who could not figure out their roles in this meaning-changing event reached for familiar gimmicks of attributing things to demons and some mystical forces that wanted to institute a new world order.

As I described in both Chapters 1 and 2, Pentecostalism has regularly used the specter of the devil to evoke notions of radical evil and thereby provoke people to pray against contrary situations. As such, when the pandemic hit, the allure of the whole world being embattled by a secret elite group who wanted to take over the world was too powerful to resist. This also circulated in the USA, where some claimed the pandemic was about a coming new world order being instituted by those who wanted to take over the US presidency from the Lord's chosen, Donald Trump. As I also mentioned in Chapter 2, Trump's presidency is important to a subset of Nigerian Christians because he represents the political power they vicariously gained after they lost ground in their own country.

These reactionary tactics were also responses to being routinely ridiculed by people who wondered why they could not re-enact miracles of healing by saving the world from COVID-19. Some people definitely believed that there was indeed a global elite conspiracy afoot, but across social media networks other people gleefully circulated memes, jokes, and long essays about the failure of people who had always claimed to be people of power to rise to a historical moment. They were ridiculed for waiting for scientists to come up with a vaccine for COVID-19 so that they could safely resume their healing miracles. These responses during the pandemic, especially when churches were shut, suggested Pentecostal leaders were trying too hard to wrest control back from the consequences of the pandemic. Unlike the joke factory where they can control the production through their relationship with comedians as I described in Chapter 5, this global event was well beyond their purview.

These roiling issues, the attacks on church institutions and their counter-attacks demonstrate a few developments: first is the fact that Pentecostals might have maintained a power identity over the years, but their claims to supernatural power were demystified even as the established hierarchies were being inverted. The pandemic-induced corrosion was a culmination of many years of the systematic challenge of their role as mediators of meaning. As Chapters 3 and 4 of this book demonstrate, the social media and the various activities that take place

on it have been crucial to the “see finish” of these pastors, especially ones who have always claimed special access to divine supernatural power. There has already been the “proletarianization” of power and the incumbent diminution of their authority. The anti-authoritarian impulse of divine revelation that can take place outside the purview of leadership power is already asserting itself in moments such as the *Free the Sheeple* movement and the inherent democratic critique of #MeToo #ChurchToo. When the #ChurchToo moment occurred and people claimed everyone was just as anointed as their leaders, they were already seeking to clip the wings of the powerful leaders. In the past, an anointed man of God telling his congregation that God had revealed to him that the pandemic was a plot against the US president would have stayed largely within the precincts of his church while the effect of that vision on his congregation seeped out into larger the culture. However, these days those messages escape the bounds of their church as soon as they have been delivered. They find their way to social media where a contrarian audience lampoons them, and a believing congregation has to become hyper-defensive on behalf of their faith.

Second is the fact that though they might be a people of power and have established that in various ways, the COVID-19 pandemic showed the limits of the kind of power that they have accumulated. The public opposition to their building another church as big as Ibadan, for instance, is an important criticism, and it testifies to what people desire from formidable institutions such as the church. The churches have already impacted every sphere of the society with its ethos: media, popular culture, politics, education, economic systems, publishing, commerce, and even transnational global flows. There is virtually no area left untouched, and there is no sphere of cultural activity that they are not already involved in, either directly or indirectly.

As I showed in Chapter 6, even newborn children are already imprinted with the name of Jesus and the underlying politics of power demonstration. They will grow up in a society dominated by huge cathedrals, but equipped with scant scientific answers to challenging questions posed by the realities of living in a global world. Critics who say Nigeria needs more factories and not more churches thus reflect a desire to see the Pentecostal church do more in terms of developing a social agenda rather than raising up bigger cathedrals. Pentecostals have acquired immense economic and political resources,

and most of the tools of social reproduction now lay within their hands, but COVID-19 showed the limits of that power. Spouting conspiracies theories of 5G technology and a new world order, anti-China sentiments, pro-Trump arguments, devil-blaming rhetoric, and so on, were an attempt to grapple with the apocalyptic moment of COVID-19. They have acquired the power to manipulate signs and symbols to generate even more power, but they were greatly confounded by the event of the pandemic.

So, what might be the way forward for people who identify themselves by power? The response of two pastors to the pandemic particularly interests me here, and they might be pointers to directions worth pursuing. One was Pastor Temitope B. Joshua, the leader of the Synagogue Church of all Nations, who prophesied in the early days of the pandemic that on March 27, 2020, the pandemic would simply “go the way it came”: whether a vaccine was developed or not, it would just disappear. Before resorting to preaching conspiracy theories retailed from QAnon, Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries International also said God told him that the virus would go the way it came, and it would simply “disappear.” He said, “You are going to discover you will not hear about it anymore. Because the same way it came, is how it will go. Everything will return to normal. Don’t fear.” They made these prophecies early in the pandemic, clearly underestimating its potential impact in the following months. It is quite tempting to dismiss these pastors as merely swinging a bat to hit anything by sheer coincidence, but what they said is actually consistent with scientific understanding of the lifecycle of viruses and diseases. Viruses truly do “disappear” after containment initiatives like social distancing, quarantines, and travel restrictions have slowed down the spread of the disease. Those public health initiatives are deemed to have worked when the transmission chain is broken, the virus can no longer find new vectors, and existing carriers have recovered.

So while they might have masked their response in religious language, in playing the role of epidemiological experts, they still deferred to objective knowledge. If they could do that privately in order to make public prophetic declarations, why mystify knowledge? Why not tell the congregation what science says about viruses and let the people see the secular sleight of hand that underpins such prophecies? The lesson from the pandemic is the imperative of power changing hands. The title of one of the regular programs of the MFM megachurch, *Power Must*

Change Hands, should be regarded as a call to Pentecostals and the wielders of power within its ranks. After years of claiming the power to bend reality and change the course of human affairs, there is a need to face the fact that power needs to change hands from the myth-making prophets whose utterances are based on inspired visions to those who foretell based on informed and rational knowledge.

Why not let power change hands to those of actual scientists who generate this knowledge? In a 2009 *New York Times* article written about the exploits of the African Pentecostal churches in the USA, it was striking to note that one of the pastors, the head of the RCCG church in North America at the time, and a former automotive-design engineer with an M.B.A. and some business experience running a Wendy's franchise, brought all those secular experiences into setting up the church chain in the USA. While many claims can be made about how the power of God instituted diaspora churches, the empirical reality is that worldly business knowledge and techniques also played an important role. Pentecostalism would not have been as successful if the pastors had not been trained up to a certain level of education and expertise. The reality is that much of their power and success came from mastery of secular knowledge, so why is there so much mysticism?

Pentecostalism attained prominence because its proponents claimed a close alliance with supernatural forces. However, beneath the public act of praying for miracles and receiving them, non-spiritual techniques that actually make things work are also applied but mostly redacted making natural phenomena appear as magical. Those who claim ability to manipulate the supernatural to make things happen are treated as a repository of transcendent knowledge. Rather than people seeking to empower themselves, knowledge and understanding are cloaked in mystery. The trouble is that the mystification of scientific knowledge has its limitations for social growth and development. The fact that religious leaders themselves depend on rational techniques shows the imperative of ripping the veil and letting the people see that the wizard behind the curtain is just an ordinary man working a set of machines. There is no supernatural force healing people or rewarding them with an untold wealth that can match the near-endless possibilities engendered by secular knowledge of social development and modern medicine. Approaches to faith practices and power grabbing need evolve to accommodate knowledge. Although the Pentecostal belief in magicality has had its role in propelling Pentecostal movement adherents to

great heights, COVID-19 showed the limits of how much the mythologization of temporal concerns and solutions could be sustained. To play in the exacting confines of the secular, there is no other choice than to face up to the long-term powerlessness or irrelevance of the claims of supernatural powers in the affairs of the modern world.