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## **Between the Private and the Public Sphere**

### **Pentecostals dealing with Witchcraft in Ibadan, Nigeria**

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#### **Abstract**

Since the 1980s, Pentecostalism has grown immensely in Nigeria. At the same time, witchcraft fears have intensified and stories about flying women, ritual murders and secret cults have been spread through the Nigerian media. Books allegedly written by former initiates of witchcraft are read by Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike. Witchcraft beliefs are cultivated in Pentecostal churches, and researchers credit much of their appeal to the fact that they take such beliefs seriously and address them publicly. This paper gives an example from the field by comparing two Pentecostal churches in urban southwestern Nigeria to discuss how and under which circumstances Pentecostals deal with witchcraft in a public or private manner. It concludes that Pentecostals appropriate global discourses when dealing with witchcraft and oscillate between the private and the public sphere in doing so.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism; Islam; witchcraft; Yoruba; African traditional religion; Christianity.

#### **Introduction**

Since the 1980s, witchcraft fears have intensified in Nigeria and stories about bewitched men, ritual murders and secret cults have become (p. 161) omnipresent in the Nigerian media.<sup>2</sup> The topic has been largely perpetuated through Pentecostal networks.<sup>3</sup> Books by former initiates that claim to have escaped the clutches of witchcraft are widespread and are read by

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 109–10; Misty L. Bastian, 'Bloodhounds Who Have No Friends': Witchcraft and Locality in the Nigerian Press." In J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in post-colonial Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 129–66; Misty L. Bastian, "Vulture men, campus cultists and teenaged witches. Modern magics in Nigerian popular media", in Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (eds), *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities. Modernity, witchcraft and the occult in postcolonial Africa* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 71–96.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Discourses of Demonization in Africa and Beyond", *Diogenes* 50.3 (2003), p. 61; Opoku Onyinah, "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case History", *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5.1 (2002), pp. 107–134.

Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals alike.<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist Peter Geschiere, who wrote about witchcraft in modern-day Cameroon in the 1990s, attributed the proliferation of Pentecostal churches in African societies in general to the fact that they addressed witchcraft and provided a public space to deal with the secretive force:

The rapidly increasing popularity of Pentecostal and Spiritual churches in many parts of Africa might be related to this search for a public place to deal with witchcraft. Indeed, this popularity seems to be based to a large extent on the supposed success of these movements in dealing with witchcraft. And this seems to be related, again, to their effective public rituals of witch cleansing.<sup>5</sup>

This paper contends that witchcraft is a name for relations, in which the researched subjects have positioned themselves. They do that in different ways to assert their relevance and influence in the public sphere. Based on field research conducted in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria in 2015/16, it shows that, contrary to Geschiere's remarks, there are many different positions Pentecostal churches can take to deal with witchcraft. As will be shown in this article, well established Pentecostal churches acknowledged witchcraft as an important discourse they had to deal with. They tended to handle it in a secluded, rather private manner. Thus they concurred with the dominating normative discourse which tabooed (p. 162) witchcraft in public. Instead smaller and independent Pentecostal churches were inclined to give *aje* – the Yoruba word for witchcraft and witch – a prominent place in public. This correlated with their constituencies' socioeconomic and educational background as well as their relationship with popular Islam, which represents the majority religion on the ground.

First, the article will discuss the topics of Pentecostalism and witchcraft in the broader setting of Africa to explain how both relate to each other and to locate the article within past and present research. Then the township in Ibadan and its most important social and institutional players will be presented. In order to show how Pentecostals positioned themselves, the article will subsequently focus on how the most important religious, governmental and economic institutions dealt with witchcraft in the public sphere. Finally, the article will analyse two Pentecostal churches and their different approaches to witchcraft.

### **Pentecostalism and Witchcraft in Africa**

The academic consensus is that African Pentecostals have become an important force within African Christianity. One of the reasons suggested is the fact that they ascribe a reality to witchcraft and other evil forces that had been considered superstition by anthropologists, missionaries and colonial officials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, in the early days of colonialism and African-European encounter, witchcraft had often been incorporated with essentialist concepts of African religion and thus was ascribed a certain reality. Breaking with essentialism and establishing a functionalist approach, E. E. Evans-Pritchard rejected witchcraft as a real phenomenon in his 1937 work *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*: "A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicine. Witchcraft is a psychic act."<sup>6</sup> Instead he defined witchcraft as a matter of the social realm and attempted to show the logic guiding witchcraft suspicions and accusations in Zande society. Evans-Pritchard's work on witchcraft in Africa gained momentum especially during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Then the independent former colonies and their religions, social

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, pp. 77–120.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997), pp. 205–6.

<sup>6</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 1.

lives and politics became topics of specific interest in the European academia yet again. Contrary to earlier expectations, the belief in witchcraft did not (p. 163) seem to vanish in Africa. In fact, in many regions of post-war Africa, anti-witchcraft movements drew in large crowds.<sup>7</sup> In 1970, the first African to become head of the Department of Religious Studies in the prestigious University of Ibadan, Bolaji Idowu, asked in an article titled “The Challenge of Witchcraft” that “Africans should be regarded and treated as human beings, as persons”<sup>8</sup>. In the article, Idowu tried to reclaim the African “world-view” from European misconceptions and stated: “In Africa, it is ‘real’ that the majority of people believe that there are witches and there is witchcraft. Witches and witchcraft are sufficiently real as to cause untold sufferings and innumerable deaths.”<sup>9</sup>

With post-colonial sentiments on one side and the secularization theory on the other, Jean and John Comaroff stated in *Modernity and Its Malcontents* in 1993: “There are, in short, many modernities. ... Conquered and colonized societies, to take the obvious example, were never simply made over in the European image, despite the persistent tendency of Eurocentric scholars to speak as if they were.”<sup>10</sup> Geschiere explored this thought in his 1997 work *The Modernity of Witchcraft*: “To many Westerners, it seems self-evident that the belief in witchcraft or sorcery is something ‘traditional’ that will automatically disappear with modernization. But this stereotype does not fit with actual developments in Africa.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Geschiere tried to take witchcraft as a serious, time-appropriate, modern matter locating it in discourses on wealth, power, politics and kinship in post-colonial Cameroon. However, the idea of multiple modernities ultimately cuts the bond between local and global discourses on witchcraft. Though it tries to legitimize African local discourses on witchcraft, it exoticizes the latter reintroducing the criticized asymmetry through the back door.

(p. 164) Focusing on Pentecostals, this article will show that it is misleading to play out the discourse of witchcraft as something that does not belong to the public sphere, and the discourse that views witchcraft as constitutive of an allegedly genuine African public sphere or as cultures against one another. Rather, both discourses are well known and appropriated by the researched subjects in the course of their identity making, depending on the specific socio-political context they find themselves in. Pentecostals on the ground oscillate between both concepts when dealing with witchcraft, in a way that allows them to present themselves as relevant social actors in the public sphere.

While conducting research about witchcraft in Cameroon, Geschiere’s attention was caught by the fact that African Pentecostals seem to attract a large following by performing witch-cleansing rituals. In contrast to the post-colonial state, Pentecostal churches would take witchcraft beliefs seriously and find more satisfying public means of “neutralizing these

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<sup>7</sup> M. G. Marwick, “Another Modern Anti-Witchcraft Movement in East Central Africa”, *Africa* 20.2 (1950), pp. 100–12; P. Morton-Williams, “The Atinga cult among the South-Western Yoruba: A sociological analysis of a witch-finding movement” *Bulletin d l’Institut Francais d’Afrique Noire* 18.3–4 (1956), pp. 315–34; R. G. Willis, “Kamcape: An anti-sorcery movement in South-West Tanzania”, *Africa* 38.1 (1968), pp. 1–15.

<sup>8</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, “The Challenge of Witchcraft”, *Orita* 4.1 (1970), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Introduction”, in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds), *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. xi.

<sup>11</sup> Geschiere and Roitman, *Modernity of Witchcraft*, p. 2.

dangerous forces”.<sup>12</sup> This converges with scholars who have described Pentecostals’ attitude in the framework of a discourse of tradition.<sup>13</sup> Allan Anderson understood Pentecostals as ultimately concerned with “the existential needs of the African worldview”.<sup>14</sup> Ghanaian researcher Opoku Onyinah took a similar approach in his book *Pentecostal Exorcism*, while adding much needed empirical material. Thus, he embedded Pentecostal conceptions of witchcraft within an Akan worldview.<sup>15</sup> Still working on Ghana, anthropologist Birgit Meyer took a slightly different approach. For her, the discourse on demonization (witchcraft, evil spirits etc.) was a way by which Pentecostal groups negotiated their identities vis-à-vis the missionary-established mainline churches.<sup>16</sup> Studying Nigerian Pentecostalism, Ruth Marshall took the question of identity further and (p. 165) put it in a larger political context. To her, the Pentecostals’ way of dealing with witchcraft was part and parcel of specific “*political spiritualities*”,<sup>17</sup> a strategy to become “new subjects”.<sup>18</sup> Yet, due to the attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of the Nigerian context, her work begs for more empirical data, which may help qualify her findings. This study aims at filling this gap by providing an ethnographic account of a much smaller, yet no less relevant context.

### **A Township in Ibadan and its major social and institutional players**

Ibadan is located in the southwestern part of Nigeria, about two hours away from the coastal metropole of Lagos by road. Approximately five million people live in Ibadan, which makes it one of the biggest tropical cities in Africa.<sup>19</sup> The specific township where the author conducted fieldwork is situated in the Ibadan South-East Local Government<sup>20</sup> and populated by approximately 10,000 inhabitants. As the area only began to be developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many inhabitants do not hail from Ibadan originally. However, most of the inhabitants identify as Yoruba.

The major social and institutional players within the township were religious actors, official governmental institutions and economically influential private organizations. Mosques and churches had been built in the township since its initial development. Overall, locals estimated that Muslims accounted for 60 per cent of the population and Christians made up 40 percent. Among Muslims, popular Islam was especially strong. Muslim and traditional healers (*alfas* and *onisegun/ babalawos*) were well established in the township and had many customers. Muslim healers were often well respected members of local mosques. Within the Christian

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Gifford, *Ghana's new Christianity: Pentecostalism in a globalizing African economy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Allan Anderson, “Exorcism and Conversion to African Pentecostalism”, *Exchange* 35.1 (2006), pp. 116–33.

<sup>14</sup> Allan Anderson, *African Reformation. African Initiated Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), pp. 167–168.

<sup>15</sup> Opoku Onyinah, *Pentecostal Exorcism: Witchcraft and Demonology in Ghana* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Birgit Meyer, “‘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 Southeastern Ghana”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22.2 (1992), pp. 98–132.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, pp. 46, 128–9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Laurent Fourchard, “Ibadan, Nigeria”, in UN-Habitat (ed.), *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements* (London: Earthscan, 2003), p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> Local Governments are the smallest units of Nigerian Federalism.

community, many attended missionary mainline or African independent churches (AICs) as these churches had deep roots in the township and its neighbourhood. Since the 2010s, however, Pentecostal churches were also rising to be an aspiring minority within the township. Many of these Pentecostal churches (such as Deeper Life Bible Church or Redeemed Christian Church of God) succeeded in presenting themselves (p. 166) as well-known brands. Thus they were able to rent or even build houses for their services in prominent places in the township. Their members were often well-educated, socially established or at least aspiring to be so, and had often been members of the missionary mainline churches before they became Pentecostals. Other Pentecostal churches remained focused on the founding pastor. They convened in less exposed and hidden places and were attended by less educated and overall socially less influential people.

Officially, the township was governed by the Local Government (LG), an institution that was introduced to the Nigerian public to substitute the colonial system of Indirect Rule in 1947. It helped incorporate “the growing class of the educated men” and thereby suspended the rule of often illiterate traditional chiefs at the lowest level of the Southwestern administration.<sup>21</sup> The LG was first and foremost a political institution but was also responsible for administering Customary Law through its Customary Court, a legal institution that had been formed under British administration for the incorporation of local ideas of law and order. Formally, it was the LG who established the rules for social conduct in public. Informally, however, the township’s population was under the protection and guidance of a private and economically influential organization called the Landlords’ Association (LA), which had been commissioned by the township’s private landowners. The area was divided into ten zones in order to effectively administer the township – with an elected representative each, the Zonal Chairman, and an elected leader, the General Chairman. Usually the Zonal Chairmen were pensioners well beyond their sixties and most of them were well educated. The LA Chairmen saw themselves responsible for peace and security in the township. They stepped into conflicts among inhabitants to resolve them and hired security guards who patrolled each zone during the night. Through these practices, they regulated the public space and determined what should be public and what should be private.

### **Witchcraft and the Public Sphere in the Township**

In the township, people were overall reluctant to talk about *aje* – the Yoruba word for witchcraft or witch. When asked about *aje* “events” – anything they had seen or heard about *aje*, such as accusations, (p. 167) confessions or exorcisms – a shy laughter or a confused look were the usual reply. Nobody denied the existence of *aje*, yet only a few people admitted to having seen or heard anything specific. Thus, while there was a common understanding of what “it” was, *aje* was not an issue to be publicly debated. At best, the interviewed agreed that *aje* were at least potentially evil and that one had to protect oneself against them. Yet, beyond the official taboo, problems were regarded as potentially caused by *aje*, and people sought experts who could be traditional, Muslim or Christian working on their own or linked to churches and mosques.

This corresponded with the governmental approach to “it”. *Aje* was regarded as a topic that was brought up in cases of conflict but could not be treated according to its legal framework, thus appropriating a discourse of secularity. The registrar of the local Customary Court reported that *aje* had never been tried as a stand-alone case, the reason being that there was no specification about the punishment for *aje* in the constitution. According to him, there would

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<sup>21</sup> Opeyemi Ola, “The Study of West African Local Government”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6.2 (1968), p. 238.

also be no proof or evidence of their crimes as *aje* operate mysteriously. Thus *aje* as an accusation would not be admissible in court. However, he admitted that he had presided over many civil matters where the issue of *aje* was frequently brought up. Often, the accusing parties would claim the accused came to them in their dreams, to which the registrar ironically responded in the interview: “Can nightmare be brought to the court? It’s not possible!”<sup>22</sup> Thus *aje* was not dealt with from a local governmental and legal institution while its representatives referred to the secular nature of the state.

A similar approach dominated the informally governing LA. The General Chairman of the LA had never had any experience of *aje* accusations in the township. He made the specific modern environment of the township responsible where unlike in older parts of Ibadan, the inhabitants were educated and could easily mind their own businesses in their respective compounds: “We, all of us, came to buy our own pieces of land to settle down – so if this man, we don’t like our faces, we may not be friendly. He will do his own government in his own house. I do my own in my own house.”<sup>23</sup> Thus according to the LA Chairman, interferences in private matters seldom occurred. The General Chairman also suggested *aje* was dying out because of growing Muslim and Christian religious affiliations, thereby affirming a particular thesis of modernization. Asked (p. 168) about the hypothetical procedure in case of an *aje* accusation, he referred to the proceedings used in general conflicts.

General Chairman: I will step in, if the misunderstanding is eroded to cause problem. I talk to the person and I beg the person they called *aje* that “This one is a small child! He or she doesn’t know what she is talking about and you have a child like him or her, so don’t be annoyed! If your own child does that to another person, he will not kill the person.”

Author: But what if that person is really *aje*?

General Chairman: If she is really *aje*, there is nothing you can do. You are not God. And the case will be between Him and her.<sup>24</sup> ()

He thus applied the same logic to *aje* accusations as the registrar. Though both didn’t doubt that it was possible that witches existed, they affirmed a scientific worldview where physical evidence against witchcraft was impossible and thus accused witches had to be left alone. The General Chairman even stated that a person accused of *aje* had to be pleaded with to secure a harmonious co-existence. The normative forces within the township were thus eager to keep *aje* out of the public sphere referring to the discourse of secularity.

As a result, people were forced to look for experts on *aje*, which were found among traditional and Muslim healers, Christian prophets and Muslim imams. Almost all of these experts dealt with witchcraft in private. The Muslim healer Alfa Yunus<sup>25</sup> claimed to be such an expert. People from all places and social extraction came to be healed from what they regarded as caused by *aje*: barrenness, “no sales”, joblessness or failing exams in school or university etc. Single customers were treated in private consultations. Like most of his healer colleagues, Alfa Yunus did not find it necessary to advertise his services and relied on word of mouth. During the private sessions with his customers, Alfa Yunus consulted his oracle of sixteen cowries (*eerindinloogun*). Instead of the *opele*, a chain of cola nut pieces used by the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview, April 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, April 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, April 2016.

<sup>25</sup> In order to protect the identity of interviewees, all names used are pseudonyms.

traditional healers (*babalawo*) during divination, he inquired about his patients' problems through sixteen cowries, which he threw on a tablet.<sup>26</sup> The pattern then suggested the (p. 169) answer to the question. Another popular oracle used by Muslim healers in the township was *ijobe*, a plate of sand, into which a certain pattern was pressed, which again suggested the solutions to the patients' problems.

When the oracle revealed an *aje* – in this case meaning witch – to have caused the problem, Alfa Yunus claimed to consult the specific *aje* that had allegedly caused the problem to know what the witch wanted. He told the author he could not give any names when asked about the witches living the township. While Alfa Yunus consulted with the *aje*, the *aje*'s identity could not be revealed to any outsider, not even the customer. In general, healers showed no interest in publicly exposing or talking about *aje*. Alfa Yunus justified solving *aje* problems privately by elevating the *aje*'s moral status: "Not all of them are wicked. God uses them as cane to punish those that do not know God, to discipline the disobedient."<sup>27</sup> Thus *aje* victims were deserving of their tribulations and had to resolve them on their own, aided by the healer. The Chief Imam of a very popular mosque in the township, himself a former healer, agreed with that saying: "They are used as instruments for destruction and punishment for those who disobey God's injunction."<sup>28</sup> Declaring the *aje* God's moral police, he gave them a place that needed no public exposure. Instead their position in society was acceptable and even legitimate.

Though traditional and Muslim healers practiced in the private sphere, behind closed doors in compounds or houses, the sacrifices they offered to the *aje* and other spiritual forces could sometimes be seen in public. Alfa Yunus explained that he would usually put the *ebo*, a sacrifice consisting mostly of animal parts, meant for the *aje*, in a three-road junction or beside the river. Sacrifices were identified as such in the public sphere and even to people who did not consult traditional healers, they marked the *aje*'s existence as they were said to take the sacrifices, if they were pleased with it. These practices were mostly not disturbed by the local authorities but rather quietly, sometimes even openly acknowledged as effective. The LG's youth leader for the area, a young and well-educated Muslim, testified that their medicine, *oogun*, which is also translated as charm, worked, even if he himself mostly stuck to praying as means of protection against the *aje*'s mischief.

To some extent, Christian and Muslim exorcism practices against *aje* were similar to traditional and Muslim healing practices, though the theological implications were quite different. Often individuals sought (p. 170) the pastor, prophet or imam in a private face-to-face setting. Through prayer, sometimes combined with fasting, or the recitation of verses from the Bible or the Qur'an, pastors and imams were either already able to deliver and heal the affected or could at least determine the means of healing. Such means often included the use of blessed water or oil. In case of AICs, blessed soaps for bathing were also sometimes prescribed. The application of exorcism practices against *aje* implied that *aje* and problems connected with *aje* were thought of as spirit-possession (either through demons or jinn).

Though Christian and Muslim exorcism practices often took place in private settings like traditional and Muslim healing practices, there were also cases of exorcism – especially in

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<sup>26</sup> For details see Obajemi Jegede, *Incantations and Herbal Cures in Ifa Divination: Emerging Issues in Indigenous Knowledge* (Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Religion, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Interview, April 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, June 2015.

AICs and Pentecostal churches – where *aje* deliverances were conducted during night vigils. The practice of night vigils was highly controversial in the township to the extent that the LA tried to regulate it. According to the LA General Chairman, people who did not live in the township should leave by nightfall and inhabitants should not engage in noisy activities (“night parties”). Churches were equally asked to keep the noise down, which mainly affected the practice of night vigil that usually lasted from nightfall to break of dawn and during which churches usually used microphones and loudspeakers. The main reason given for the LA’s regulation of night vigils was the security of the township. The General Chairman claimed that the hired night guards could not detect thieves, if there was too much noise. Yet, the churches often understood the night vigils as the most important form of security from *aje* and ultimately any evil force.

In summary, traditional, Muslim and Christian healers consulted for *aje* problems dealt with *aje* in a rather private setting. Though some of them pushed the boundaries into the public sphere through night vigils or publicly visible offerings, they were in implicit accordance with the normative discourse through which actors in the formal and informal government of the township tried to keep *aje* out of the public sphere.

### **Pentecostalism, Witchcraft and the Public Sphere in the Township**

Pentecostal churches in the township oscillated between the discourse of secularity and the discourse of tradition through their ways of dealing with witchcraft. Two cases shall be discussed here in more detail: the Deeper Life Bible Church and an independent Pentecostal ministry. These cases were especially interesting as they showed two different approaches to witchcraft in the public sphere. In the first case, any (p. 171) reference to *aje* was kept away from the congregation and the public space, whereas in the second case, *aje* was frequently referred to in the church services, by the pastor and the members. Both the independent ministry and the Deeper Life Bible Church branch were founded around or shortly after 2010. The Deeper Life Bible Church had been founded in the 1970s during the formation of the Nigerian Pentecostal movement. In the 1990s, it had become a national brand with approximately up to 400,000 members in Nigeria and about 22,000 in Ibadan.<sup>29</sup> So by the time of this research, the Deeper Life Bible Church branch within the township was already well-established as an aspiring congregation of 60-80 people with its own church building at a prominent place in the township, whereas the independent ministry held its services in a small and less exposed rented room in the compound the pastor lived in. The independent ministry attracted only a few members who were overall less educated and socially less influential than the members of the Deeper Life Bible Church branch.

In the Deeper Life Bible Church branch, the name *aje* was only mentioned during prayer sessions as one of the evils the congregation wanted to seek refuge from with God. Members of the church knew *aje* mainly from church services broadcasted on TV or through hearsay, although they connected it generally with possession by the devil. Even the pastor responsible for the services held in Yoruba, a carpenter, said:

They said there are some called *aje*. I heard it and we are told on the radio, hearing from one person to another confirming there are some called *aje*. But I don’t have any relationship with them. So I cannot say “This is what *aje* look like!”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Matthews Ojo, “Pentecostalism, Public Accountability and Governance in Nigeria”, in A. Harneit-Sievers und N. Obiorah (eds), *Pentecostalism and Public Life in Nigeria: Perspectives and Dialogue* (Lagos: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, April 2016.



The pastor leading the English services of the church, a university-educated veterinarian, was a little more outspoken about the topic but when asked about deliverance for the ones possessed by *aje*, he stressed that his own church laid focus on solving this kind of matter privately:

There are some people that specialize in such deliverance. After they have prayed, they have to fall on the ground, roll and vomit and all that. We don't usually practice that because it can eventually scatter the church because some people will misinterpret. I heard of a particular church where we have witches and wizards. So when a new pastor came to that (p. 172) church with the power of God and he said right in this church, they are going to send away all the evil spirits in the church. And as he pointed to a particular person "You are a witch!" He pointed to another "You are a wizard!" The people in the church and some ordinary people around the church, immediately they know "Okay, this one is a witch!" ... Both the witch and no witch left the church. If somebody is having it and want to do the church any evil, the Lord will open the eyes of the leaders. ... If the Lord opens somebody's eyes to see, he will call the person and speak directly as Paul speak to that damsel that was possessed with demons.<sup>31</sup> The spirit of revelation – so you speak directly to that person! ... We just want to protect the church because that is what Christ died for.<sup>32</sup>

The pastor associated *aje* deliverances with revealing people's identities as witches in churches and ultimately in the public space. From hearsay, he inferred that such instances could cause a schism in the church. In order to prevent the church from dissention, *aje* deliverances were dealt with in private. The church leaders were relied upon to be given divine insight into who was an *aje* and talk to them directly. So the evil was revealed but in a way that would not disturb public peace and would protect the unity of the church that Christ commanded. The church thus showed an approach similar to that of missionary mainline churches in the neighbourhood, which is not yet reflected in the research literature about Pentecostalism. Similar to these churches, the Deeper Life Bible Church had become a brand already. Its leaders were thus focused on stabilizing and unifying its inner forces. *Aje* was regarded a topic that would ultimately threaten this project, if given too much attention.

A different attitude towards *aje* was expressed in the independent Pentecostal ministry. It had been founded by Prophet Victor, an Igbo who had grown up in the Southeast of Nigeria. He was a charismatic character who tried to establish his small congregation in this community. According to his testimony, he had been an armed robber in the 1970s and 1980s and was born again during a revival in the late 1980s held by the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International in the prison he served time in. He had then received a divine call to evangelize and found a ministry. He funded his ministry with contributions gathered through his side-job as a speaker at revivals and crusades.

These crusades were also one of the main avenues for his church to attract new members. A typical example is Ruth, the church's Sunday School Teacher. The young woman had met Prophet Victor during a (p. 173) revival meeting in her church in Lagos in 2011. That time, she suffered from a personal crisis due to her lack of economic success and her seeming inability to find a husband. Prophet Victor told her that she should come with him to Ibadan to pray and fast for seven days to determine her problem and the solution. After seven days of praying and fasting, he revealed to her that her family's *aje* – in this case meaning witches – were preventing her to be successful in life and that she should distance herself from them to break their influence. Subsequently, she moved to Ibadan, where she made a living by selling recharge cards for mobile phones. Her wedding in March 2016 finally proved that with the help of Prophet Victor, the *aje*'s influence had been broken.

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<sup>31</sup> He referred to Acts 16.16–22.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, April 2016.

Tayo had also grown up in Lagos and then become a member of Prophet Victor's church. The girl had been rejected by her extended family, when her parents died. As an orphan with little education, her life prospects were slim, when Prophet Victor took her in to live with his family in Ibadan in 2012. Tayo was haunted by dreams, in which she met with fellow *aje*. In a deliverance session, she was set free from *aje*. Though she still acted overall disturbed and confused, she claimed she is successful now, representing a common Pentecostal strategy of proclaiming good things to make them happen (also known as "Word of Faith" teaching).

Dealing with *aje*, Prophet Victor's ministry was not limited to public deliverance sessions. His work also included deliverance practices conducted in private counselling sessions. Through such, he was also able to recruit new church members. Tope is a case in point. A Muslim convert, she joined Prophet Victor's ministry in 2013, after he had delivered her during such a counselling session. Before, she had dreamt of dying during her last pregnancy, which made her fear for her life. People had suggested that a family *aje* was trying to make her lose her child. After Prophet Victor's deliverance, she had had a safe delivery at home.

However, unlike the well-established Pentecostal churches in the township, the independent Pentecostal ministry did not confine *aje* to private counselling sessions or night vigils. Instead Prophet Victor called on his congregation to pray, to "fight and destroy" *aje* without ceasing night and day. The Deliverance Hour held during a weekday morning served as a platform for such prayer fights, during which the members would fervently utter their prayers aloud and Prophet Victor would go around to pray for those displaying great agony. These actions were often initiated with a prayer like this: "All the activities of the witches in my life, Lord, I destroy them in Jesus' name! Let us pray!" (Deliverance Hour, (p. 174) March 2016). The services potentially open to everybody thus focused on *aje* every week.

This shows that there were both private and public ways to address *aje* in Prophet Victor's ministry. On a social level, the counselling sessions were similar to the healers' services discussed above. Individuals, at most accompanied by family members or close friends, attended these sessions. Conducting these private consultations, Prophet Victor was also very clear about keeping the names of the ones delivered from *aje* out of the public:

Some of them who have confessed and are really converted, they are here with me. Some of them are there [in the church] with me. But it's not something you will call them to because... you know our setting. "Aaahh, she is a witch!" They'll be running from the person. So that is why we make it secret. It is not something you can elaborate or call the person to begin to talk in public. They will disown the person.<sup>33</sup>

He abstained from giving their names as he feared that the name *aje* could ruin their social life and stigmatize them. "To make it secret" seemed to be the only viable option to secure their lives and integrity. Thus Prophet Victor implicitly succumbed to the taboo of the township and the secrecy connected with the name *aje*. However, like the Deeper Life Bible Church branch and most of the other Christian churches in the township, he opposed the traditional and Muslim healers who he saw as conspirators secretly working with the *aje* and in their favour. Tope, one of the above-mentioned members, once thought about seeking a healer's services and was told off by Prophet Victor saying she could never come to his church and at the same time take their *oogun*, translatable as medicine and charm. He also explained that most of his Muslim converts had been possessed before their conversion, a comment seemingly combining aspects of possession with healing practices quite common among the predominantly Muslim environment:

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<sup>33</sup> Interview, June 2015.

Most of them are possessed. You know they have been initiated into this spiritual something before their conversion. So the covenant will still haunt their life: what they have eaten with Satan, what they have been drinking with Satan. If it is not flushed, it will be disturbing their Christian life.<sup>34</sup>

Customers of traditional and Muslim healers were usually given an herbal remedy to eat or drink or otherwise insert into their body, which (p. 175) according to Prophet Victor, brought them under the influence of Satan. To break the evil covenant, a deliverance which brought out or “flushed” the traditional remedy thought of as an initiating substance had to be conducted. The traditional remedy had to give way to the remedy provided by God, thus proving the incommensurability of a traditional and a Christian solution to *aje*. Through his treatment of *aje*, Prophet Victor competed directly with traditional and Muslim healers, trying to establish his services as superior in an environment where the services of such healers were very popular.

### Conclusion

This paper has shown that Pentecostals oscillate between dealing with witchcraft in private and in public. This is the case even though they generally understand witchcraft as spirit-possession and usually apply deliverance rituals to battle it. Against Geschiere who argued that the success of Pentecostal churches was to be explained with their way of dealing with witchcraft in public, the article has indicated that Pentecostal churches have many different possibilities to successfully establish or maintain their position in the public sphere. Pentecostal churches which had already succeeded in establishing themselves as a local and national brand preferred to treat witchcraft behind closed doors, thus following what this article has called the “secularity discourse”. With this attitude, they aligned themselves with the stance taken up and suggested by the likewise socio-politically influential local figures: both from the official and the informal government institutions. This was the best way to secure their success, as it prevented conflicts and other fractions, which could damage their projected identity as an expanding brand and a socially relevant force. Smaller and independent Pentecostal churches, however, drew from what this paper has called the “tradition discourse”, which did not exclude witchcraft from the public sphere and was thus closer to the popular attitude towards *aje*. For charismatic pastor-founders like Prophet Victor, this was the best way to attract people who would otherwise consult traditional or Muslim healers, and thus increase the visibility and social relevance of their churches.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, August 2015.

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