

SYMBOLIC ENACTMENTS AND RITUALIZED CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AMONG PENTECOSTAL CHRISTIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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1. Introduction

This research paper is about the relationship between religious belief, actions and attitudes of Pentecostal Christians towards the environment. Ethnographically positioned, it captures the ritualized and symbolic cognitive beliefs and practices of Pentecostal Christians in South Africa as well as the associated discourses. The paper also offers a discussion of the need to properly understand religion and shifting from text to territory. This requires methodological change of not just studying religion as written text but repositioning ourselves by studying it as a lived phenomenon to be studied through ethnographic accounts. It further explores some resilient Pentecostal belief patterns by showing how the environment is increasingly being seen in ritual terms.

Being a guiding principle of life and a practice of people's spirituality and their belief system¹ religion has come to occupy a central place in human existence. Due to the centrality of religion to human social life, we cannot overlook its analytic power and implications in understanding the environment. Since religion has guidelines for behaviour, it directly or indirectly determines how people relate to the environment and how they construct their worldviews in relation to it. Extensive fieldworks done among Pentecostal Christians in KwaZulu-Natal reveal that, according to their belief, every place (town, city, country) is governed by territorial spirits. These spirits are perceived to live in rivers, mountains, the sea, etc. These environments are believed to be enchanted and according to Pentecostal Christians, it is their responsibility to deliver themselves through aggressive prayers and win the environment for God. For these Christians, the ability to prosper are clear indicators that the environment is being impacted with new energies.

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¹Lucious Von Fredricco, www.helium.com/ite.

2. The Research Context

The strategy adopted for this research was participant observation and in-depth interviews. I also did opportunistic interviews whenever a visiting preacher from either Nigeria or Ghana was in KwaZulu-Natal for crusades. Some of the informants indicated that their ability to own three hair salons, a car, and a flat in South Africa is evident that the land is responding to their needs and that they have been accepted in the new space. Interviews with those who have been in South Africa for more than five years but who are still unable to prosper reveal their belief that the land has not welcomed them.

There are usually different forms of narratives but I decided to use my own research among Pentecostal Christians in KwaZulu-Natal where I have been engaged in research since 2001. The fieldwork was done amongst African migrants, a group of people who live transnational lives and are desperate to eke a living in the midst of the adverse realities of living out of their country of origin.

Since the purpose of the research was to capture peoples' experiences, I decided to focus on members of the Redemptive International Power Ministry. This church offers a social space in which new immigrants from other African countries can meet and form social relations. It naturally also gives people opportunities to assess the viability of niche markets. Newcomers often use the contacts they make in this religious space to learn how to go about renewing their visas since most of them enter the country only with a tourist visa. Since most of the members of this church came into South Africa with this type of visa, it becomes difficult for them to assess employment in the formal sector. The visiting and resident pastors of these Pentecostal churches however organize crusades where the message of restoring hope is preached to the people. These crusades are coupled with the practice of fasting and prayer. I participated in these meetings for the sake of data collection. Information collected was supplemented and crystallized through in-depth interviews with fifteen people. This church was made up of fifty regular members but whenever there was a visiting preacher in town attendance at services for the entire period of the crusade fluctuated from one hundred to sometimes three hundred.

A common form of prayer in these services was the exorcistic injunction: Any power in the sea, land or air blocking my blessings, scatter! In Jesus name! Everyone would be expected to repeat these prayers several times as loudly and violently as they can so that the

offending powers located in the environment would eventually obey and depart. Crusades are intentionally organized so that the immigrant population would be filled with the Holy Spirit and thus be empowered to resist the forces of adversity in this foreign land and pave the way for their eventual success in life. People come to these crusades with firm expectation that the prayers offered fervently and in faith are effective in exorcising the evil powers that are located in the environment.

In South Africa, most immigrants are unable to purchase houses, buy new cars, and raise start-up capital for big business because of their inability to access bank loans. All these adversities drive them directly into the hands of especially the visiting preachers who promise to offer prayers and use substances from the environment which will alter their circumstances. In most of these meetings, Christians are told to collect soil and bring to the crusade venue for the preacher to pray over them. After prayers are offered, they are requested to wake up at midnight and scatter the soil outside their residence. They are enjoined to speak to the land (soil they scatter) and cause it to be favourable to them. According to their belief in the power of the spoken word as recorded in the book of 2 Corinthians 4: 13, "I believe therefore I have spoken," believers repeat those recognized scripts which has become a kind of 'truth.' One such prayer, for example, is: "In this land, I will buy houses, cars and my business will prosper, in the name of Jesus!" They believe that this new magical means will help them attain otherwise unattainable ends. They regard actions of this kind as constituting a "new magic for new situations." The activities described here could be understood in terms of a worldview that asserts that human lives are a battlefield in which fierce struggles rage between spirits located in the environment that wish human beings well and those that seek to harm them.

2.2. Shifting the Methodology from Text to Territory

Previous understanding holds that texts constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations, and processes.² According to Fairclough,³ texts are sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity and can provide good indicators

²A. E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*, London: Sage Publications, 2005.

³N. Fairclough, "Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis with Discourse Analysis", in A. Jaworski, and N. Coupland, eds., *The Discourse Reader*, London: Routledge, 1999, 183-212.

of social change. In the context of beliefs which operate at the level of experience, such understandings has short-coming because text are political and often carry embedded meanings.

To properly understand the ritualized constructions of space, there is the need to shift our interpretation from text to territory.⁴ This requires methodological change of not just studying religion as written text⁵ but repositioning ourselves by studying it as it as lived phenomenon to be studied through ethnographic accounts. This may result in an awareness of reality of what in a different context may be deemed 'unreal.'⁶ In this context, the ethnographic account will consist mainly of experiences that cannot be seen or measured. Privileging experiences takes into account the subjectivity of the informants and that of the researcher. This approach gives the researcher the opportunity to move in and out of the emic-etic dichotomy. Acknowledgement of the researcher's position and the dynamics of the different levels of interpretation provide reality without privileging a particular subjectivity over another.

As one engages in the domain of privileging peoples' beliefs or experiences and using these as the starting point for understanding the environment, it becomes crucial to remember that these are highly subjective. According to Bruner, lived experience, comprising thoughts and desires, words and images is the primary reality.⁷ People are seen as active agents in the world rather than passive reproducers of the systematic aspects of culture. Hastrup⁸ notes that individual sensations and subjective viewpoints are generalized and presented as objective knowledge. She further suggests that there is a discursive space in which reasonable ways of talking about the environment may be meaningfully juxtaposed.

The difference is made here between realist ethnography and reflexive ethnography. Realist ethnography will contextualize a belief in

⁴E. W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, New York: Verso, 1989; T. A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Catholic Shrine in Miami*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁵R. A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

⁶K. Hastrup, *The Challenge of the Unreal. Cultural History*, London: Routledge, 1987, 1:50-62.

⁷E. M. Bruner, "Experience and Its Expressions," in V. Turner, and E. M. Bruner eds., *The Anthropology of Experience*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.

⁸K. A. Hastrup, *Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory*, London: Routledge, 1995.

terms of the positionality of the people practicing such belief while reflexive ethnography recognizes the experiences of the ethnographer as a co-creator of meaning. Contextualisation itself does bring in the presence of the ethnographer because his/her presence jointly with those of the informants constitute the understanding generated in that context. Hastrup notes that the place incorporates the ethnographer; in an important sense, she is the ritual context-maker.⁹ She does not construct reality, even if it is never uncontaminated by her knowledge interests. She is part of the defining consciousness of the space. By shifting our methodology from text to territory, I am trying to highlight the experiences that are embedded in the spaces we study of both the researcher and the researched.

2.3. Challenges of This Shift for the Researcher

For a classical Geographer, an environment is a mere physical entity where everything can be seen, felt and touched. While this is now changing in the field of Human geography it has never really been the case of proper understanding from the perspective of religion. In religion, the environment had long been understood as being imbued with spiritual meaning. The environment is a religious and cognitive entity with diverse subjectivities which are socially constructed. What is considered real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; but also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental or the inexplicable.¹⁰ According to Mbembe,¹¹ understanding the visible is hardly complete without investigating the invisible. The visible is in the invisible and vice-versa. Here, the environment is more than a mere locale, but a setting where things happen and the socially constructed ways in which people engage with it.

As a researcher how does one capture the complex web of meanings, explanations and experiences when one has ones' own? Such a study entails multivocal lattice of the various actors, including the researcher, with diverse forms of interpretation. Every experience is a type of script with multiple layers of interpretation. As I inducted myself in the field trying to understand and build knowledge on how African migrants are increasingly relating to the environment and their personal circumstances in ritualized terms, I realized that I had to deal with the interpretation of different layers of construction:

⁹Hastrup, *Passage to Anthropology*, 57.

¹⁰B. Okri, *The Famished Road*, London: Vintage, 1991.

¹¹Achille Mbembe, "'The Thing' and Its Double in Cameroonian Cartoons" in K. Barber, ed., *Readings in African Popular Culture*, Oxford: James Currey, 1997.

- The construction of the Pentecostal pastors
- The construction of Pentecostal believers

The major challenge I encountered was how to juggle these different levels of constructions in a manner that depicts its specificity without necessarily evoking a discourse based on scepticism. This challenge was further highlighted by the dangers of my own construction (being a member of one of the categories listed above) infiltrating and taking prime position within my analysis. Here, Knorr-Cetina's concept of methodological situationalism¹² became important since it enabled me to prioritise the situations of the migrants, which paved the way for the analysis of micro-reasons surrounding their participation in the different rituals.

Faced with the data, I had to interpret them, without which it would be meaningless. Geertz noted that what we call our data are really our own construction of other peoples' constructions.¹³ Within these parameters, I had to try and find my way through the piled-up structures of inferences and implications which constitute the discourse of everyday exchange.

Because of the complexity involved in this study, I realized that the phenomenon under investigation would be best understood if located in the interpretive and hermeneutic paradigm (s) of ethnographic research.¹⁴ These approaches demonstrate a continual engagement with participants' interpretation or recognized systems of meaning and the contextual script embedded in a hermeneutic circle.

3. Space, Place and Religion

Because human beings are situated in territories and the fact that people believe that they are rooted in a place and derive their identity out of that rootedness it become difficult to understand them out of their environment. Malkki calls it the 'metaphysics of sendentism,' which she believes,

¹²Knorr-Cetina, "The Micro-Social Order," in Fielding, N., ed., *Actions and Structures*, London: SAGE, 1989.

¹³Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description" in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

¹⁴W. Goodenough, *Culture, Language and Society*, Reading: Addison Wesley Modular Publications, 1971; E. C. Hirschman, "Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 1986, 23-49; N. K. Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism*, Newburg Park: Sage Publications, 1989; Roy D'Andrade, "Cultural Meaning Systems," in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*, A. S. Richard, and R. A. Le Vine, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

territorialises our identities.¹⁵ Gellner¹⁶ had pointed earlier that this has to do with the manner in which researchers have often conceptualized the spatial arrangements of peoples. Space and place has often been a key area of interest to Anthropologist because the people they study are located in it.¹⁷ Elsewhere Ojong, and Sithole,¹⁸ have noted that this has been the basis for place assuming essentialist characteristics. On his part Dougan¹⁹ has argued that essentialist conceptualizations serve the key function of providing permanent, clear and thick boundaries.

The tendency to territorialize beliefs is authentic to Pentecostal Christians because of their long-term association with the environment in ways that their view of reality cannot be fully understood outside their embeddedness to it. Reference is made to the book of Acts of the Apostles in the Holy Bible (Acts 17: 26): "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." Christians hold the belief that when God places someone in an environment, he also makes provision for their survival: "Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there on one of the mountains I will tell you about." "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son" (Genesis 22: 3, 13). It is therefore destiny according to these Christians for their identity to be territorialized. Gupta and Ferguson have argued that these embodiments are lived in spaces. According to such point of view, being anchored in a place is essential for human existence and survival.

¹⁵Lisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and Territorialisation of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees" in Gupta A. and Ferguson J. eds., *Culture, Power, and Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, London: Duke University Press, 2002.

¹⁶Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

¹⁷Herietta Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991; H. Moore, *Space, Text and Gender: An Anthropological Study of Marakwet of Kenys*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

¹⁸Vivian Besem Ojong and Mpoli Pearl Sithole, "The Substance of Identity: Territoriality, Culture, Roots and the Politics of Belonging," *African Anthropologist* 14, 1&2 (2007), 89-98.

¹⁹M. A. Dougan, "Spectre Is Haunting Europe... Free Movement of Persons and the Eastern Enlargement" in C. Hillion, ed., *Enlargement of the European Union: A Legal Approach*, Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2004.

Generally speaking, people's experiences are embedded in places. Low and Lawrence-Zuniga aptly noted that the relationship between people and their surrounding entails more than attaching meaning to space, but involves the recognition and cultural elaboration of perceived properties of environments in mutually constituting ways through narratives and praxis. As Anthropologists, we are most concerned about ways in which people relate to their environments and how this relationship is mutually constituted. Often people who inhabit a place feel something about their environment and act in ritualized ways. In the case of migration and displacement when the environment is new and there is no prior attachment and energies linking people to it, they resort to rituals and if existing rituals are insufficient, they invent new ones.

4. Ritualised Conceptualization of Place

Since religion has guidelines for behaviour, it directly or indirectly determines how people relate to the environment and how they construct their world view in relation to it. These ritualized constructions refer to the idea that the environment is imbued with spiritual power. From a theoretical stand-point, place plays an important role in religious writing because every religion originates from a specific locale which are imbued with spiritual meaning. Place has been described in literature as having localizing tendencies,²⁰ or as imbued with ideas.²¹ In most West African countries where most of the informants come from, when a child is born his or her umbilical cord is buried in the ground. This does create a strong tie between that individual and the environment and associated with it are rituals. These rituals have become structural cognitive scripts which guide the behaviour of people, inform the thought patterns and serves as a guide to action.

The invisible world that most Africans believe to exist may be inhabited by all kinds of invisible beings and spirits of various sorts undoubtedly hold a prominent place in it.²² McAlister²³ noted that space is

²⁰R. Fardon, ed., *Localising Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990.

²¹A. Appadurai, "Introduction: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory," *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988), 16-20; "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place," *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988), 36-49.

²²S. Ellis, and G. T. Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, Johannesburg: Wit University Press, 2001.

²³E. McAlister, *Rara: Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and Its Diaspora*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

infused with spiritual energies and can be ruled by principalities and powers invested with theological and spiritual significance. Lefebvre asserts that human beings relate to the environment on all levels, physically, mentally and socially.

According to La Fontaine,²⁴ ritual is purposive; the participants believe that they are accomplishing their aim in what they do. The social life of individuals changes constantly but what is relatively constant is the part played by ideas and beliefs through which individuals both perceive events and evaluate their own and others' behaviour. The migrants in the study come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and the context of their lives had changed significantly. The hard realities of making a living abroad create a high level of anxiety for migrants. As it is the rhetoric of the migration process, old ties and connections are left behind. Migrants find themselves in an impersonal place and therefore hold on to their beliefs as a means of conquering adversity in the country of abroad. Before emigration some had formal paid employment; in South Africa, however, their social locations have changed significantly. Currently some are car guards, street vendors, hairdressers, fashion designers, and most are found at the margins of the mainstream economy. In order to survive under such new and often challenging circumstances, these people have turned to their beliefs that the environment can either retard or advance their progress in life since it harbours certain 'evil spirits.'

Interview with Pastor Joseph (a visiting pastor from Nigeria who claimed of having a travelling ministry called end-time message) in September 2009 in Durban confirmed the Pentecostal belief that evil spirits have their strongholds in the environment which impacts on peoples' lives negatively. He quoted the scripture in Mark 5: 8-10: "For Jesus had said to him, come out of this man, you evil spirit. Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again not to send them out of the area. In referring to the above Pastor Joseph said that evil spirits inhabit particular places and although they possess human beings, they are not afraid to be exorcised as long as they could remain in the same environment. So these evil spirits in the scripture lived in Gadarenes and wanted to remain there. In Mark 5:12, the evil spirits pleaded with Jesus "send us among the pigs, allow us to go into them." Similarly, interviews with Pastor Andoh of Redemptive Power ministry confirmed these beliefs.

²⁴J. La Fontaine, *Initiation*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985.

He however referred to ground and place symbolically. He referred me to a scripture in Ephesians 4:27: "And do not give the devil a foothold." He said Christians should not give evil spirits "ground" or "place." For him, it represents an empty space or ground. It means Christians should not allow evils spirits residing in the environment space to live in their lives. I interviewed three married women from Zimbabwe who all told me that immediately they arrived in South Africa they were warned to guard against the spirit of "lust" which governs South Africa. They were warned by other Christian women who were earlier migrants to be protective of their husbands because the spirit of lust which leads to divorce is in South Africa. They cited examples of some migrant women who have been abandoned by their husbands who are now married to or co-habit with South African women. I was later referred to one of the women (Jane) whose husband has abandoned her. This is what she said: *My husband left me and our three children in Ghana and came to South Africa in 2005. In 2007, he bought out ticket and we arrived only to discover that he was living with another woman. He rented a house for me and the children and only visited us during the day. When I inquired, he told me that he had to marry her so that he could stay legally in the country but he lied about my relationship with him to the South African woman. He told her that I was simply his children's mother and he had no other relationship with me. I was advised by my Christian sisters to pray and break the spirit of divorce and lust which were controlling my husband. After the interview, she referred me to Ana (a Nigerian woman) whose husband also treated her in a similar manner. When I interviewed Ana, I discovered that her husband lives in the same house with her but they sleep in separate bedrooms and have no sexual relationship. She said, "The spirit of this environment is a wicket spirit; I wonder how many women will lose their husbands in this country. I am trusting God to deliver my husband from this spirit."*

Heward-Mills confirms these beliefs:

I have known of people who had happy marriages until they moved to certain countries. Thereafter their marriages deteriorated rapidly. I said to a divorced friend, 'perhaps you wouldn't have divorced if you hadn't come to this country.' He said to me, 'I agree with you 100%; this would never have happened if I had stayed in my home country.' He continued. 'In my country divorce is unusual but here, even pastors divorce easily.'²⁵

²⁵Dag Heward-Mills, *Demons and How to Deal with Them*, Wellington: Lux Verbi, BM, 2008.

He further advises that when one moves into a new physical location, it is ones' spiritual duty to assess what kind of spiritual presence pertains because evil spirits always have the tendency to dominate areas with their evil presence.

These women and others in the research have resorted to the use of ritual prayers to restore their marriages. They all believe that with appropriate prayers, the spirits in the place which are controlling their husbands will be over-come. They have now turned to the rituals discussed in 2.1, what Comaroff and Comaroff,²⁶ have termed "the constant pursuit of new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends." Elsewhere they have described it as a mode of producing new forms of consciousness and as a means of retooling culturally familiar technologies as new means for new ends; new magic for new situations.²⁷

Since ritual is a purposive behaviour, it accomplishes its objectives of transition and maintenance of both the social and the moral order.²⁸ Some in the Durkheimian school of thought believe that ritual has the ability to bind society while those in the Levi-Straussian believe that rituals are symbolic meanings embedded in structures. My major interest here is trying to understand how Pentecostal Christians believe that rituals can impact their lives in transforming ways; specifically when the place of the rituals have to be reconceptualised. Attention is placed on the symbolism of certain aspects of the environment like water, soil and how peoples' experiences become embedded in new spaces. As I inducted myself in the field trying to understand how through rituals space can be reconceptualised, it became clear that these rituals are believed to influence believer's destiny and causes a change in their outlook in life.

5. Conclusion

From the above discussions it is evident that people relate to the environment in ritualized ways. Participating in the services, interviewing people and trying to understand why rituals were symbolically demonstrated through prayer, the functionality of belief or ritual was

²⁶John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony," *American Ethnologist* 26, 2 (1999), 279-303.

²⁷John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, eds., *In Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

²⁸A. R. Radcliff-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1952; Max Gluckman, *Politics, Law, and Ritual in Tribal Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1965.

brought in question and not necessarily the perception or subjective reasoning surrounding the ritual. Every ritual is intended to serve a function and in this case 'a way of deriving explanations' for the inexplicable circumstances that these migrants find themselves in. Their involvement does provide some hope and a 'thread' to hang on to. By symbolically enacting the rituals as a response to their lived experiences, the rituals become meaningful and it does facilitates the means to their subjective reasoning. Having documented the experiences of Pentecostal Christians I am afraid of drawing broader conclusions on the relationship between religion and the environment. This is because the study population was constituted by migrants and by its nature; migration creates a sense of emptiness, disconnectedness and alienation and migrants in most cases would look for ways of filling the gap. Through the invention of new religious rituals, a new consciousness as well as a new cosmic relationship is created in the new milieu. The challenge of migration and settlement heightens their consciousness to the role of ritual as a coping mechanism and a feeling of empowerment to combating the forces in the environment adverse to their lives. What is clear is the ways in which these migrants make sense of their world and construct reality around religious rituals relating to the environment. I am not suggesting here that migration creates conditions for rituals to be invented but rather that humans have the tendency to relate with the environment in ritual terms and when displaced either by force (in the case of natural disasters or war) or by choice (as in the case of economic migrants), they will re-connect with the environment in ritualized terms. These are conscious actions taken with the intention of experiencing change in their lives and serves as a means to an end. Pentecostal practices of this nature as the analysis portrays is not text-based but easily malleable since it is oriented towards solving the problems of the people and is highly pragmatic.