

SPIRIT IN THE WORLD: Research Themes in African Pentecostalism

By Ogbu Kalu

Professor of World Christianity, McCormick Theological Seminary

Chicago, USA.

I will concentrate on research themes in African Pentecostalism. As happened with the study of African Instituted Churches, theory has outstripped and stunned historical data. Discourses on modernity and globalism based on limited data from urban manifestations of the movement have skewed the representation of African Pentecostalism. Tourist scholars have drawn large conclusions and profiles from minimal data-the type of scholarship and research method that could hardly pass muster in the western world. The first focus of research will be a call for a ceasefire so as to catalyze ground-zero retrieval of historical data. This could be done by broad regions: West, East, Southern, Central, Maghrib and Horn of Africa. Second, language has been a barrier. The charismatic flares in non-Anglophone contexts have received less attention. In each region, a fuller coverage should be encouraged.

Third, following from this will be a study of Pentecostalism as a rural phenomenon. Cultural discourse has shown that charismatic Christianity responds to the challenges of the indigenous worldviews. In rural areas, the focus towards land deliverance and witchcraft eradication become prominent. This does not mean that we should ignore the responses of the new Christianity to contemporary cultures and contexts. Fourth, a generational interpretation indicates that the face of the movement has changed in every decade. Layers of the old persist but new vistas emerge. It should be necessary to show the changing trends. This will save us from characterizations that are out of date or that pretend that such a dynamic movement is static. Indeed, one needs to pay attention to the mortality rate of the ministries.

Fifth, this fact relates to another major issue, namely the shift in ecclesiology. Pentecostal ecclesiology has shifted rapidly from the anti-hierarchical diatribes of the 1970s to the implosion of episcopacy. This cries out for examination. Who is ordaining whom? Sixth, what is the role of African Americans in contemporary African Pentecostalism? We know that African Americans were important in the evangelization of Africa; they were important in promoting Ethiopianism that laid the ideological roots of other forms of religious radicalism; they co-operated with early Pentecostal movements in Africa; many of them went out on Pentecostal mission from Azusa Street. What is going on now? The literature harps on how Africans read white people and try to imitate them. Rosalind Hackett once tried to suggest that we explore different directions in the linkages, south-south, intra-Africa etc. But what about linkages to Africans in Diaspora-in the United States, West Indies and Latin American black population?

Seventh, less attention has been paid to in-depth studies/thick descriptions of major ministries, developing models such as intercessory bands and prayer camps and biographies of major urban and rural players, to the literary output of the protagonists-is this derivative? or respond to real needs? To what extent has the collapse of economies encouraged local production? Eighth, studies are emerging on the Pentecostal uses of media technology in its evangelical strategy. Most studies have simply locked into the discourses in the western world and have not looked at the history of media technology in Africa, the level of penetration and ideology of media in the African continent. Indeed, some scholars study media use as a means of demonstrating the force

of externality- this is a pity because there is much going on. Ninth, related to this is the emergence of new models of ministerial formation, especially Pentecostal intervention in tertiary education. Its full meaning has not been explored especially its critique of the state. We need to evaluate its achievements. The dilemma of growth in the Pentecostal movement deserves attention.

Tenth, the political import of the explosion requires the exploration of the public spaces in various sectors of the continent. Two themes, for instance, are Pentecostal development of a theology of dialogue, a theology that engages the violent face of religious pluralism. In many eastern African countries, the old mobilization system is collapsing as insurgent Islam redefines the nature of states such as Tanzania, Somalia and even Kenya, and as sharia states emerged in Nigeria to provide an example of new possibilities under democratic dispensation. The second is about Pentecostal contribution to social infrastructure and services beyond the walls of each fellowship.

Finally, the reverse flow in Pentecostal mission has been noted. Its size, character and implications deserve a closer examination.

My overall feeling is that we should encourage our students to dig more deeply into the changing historical, religious/theological, cultural and instrumentalist dimensions of charismatic explosion in Africa. A Pentecostal lay person once observed that there is always an uncomfortable dissonance between the feeling inside and the verdict of scholars about that feeling. It is as if someone is telling you that your new joy in the Christ is not for real. You are there because of a number of socio-economic factors, as if one is engaged in a weak response to the challenges of the eco-system. The spiritual dimension should be taken seriously despite the skepticism about religious experience. We must realize that the dancing mad man is hearing some music. Some spirits are drumming and blowing the conch.