Seven Lean Cows

Salawu Olajide
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How Nigerian Charismatic Christianity Became a Thing

It takes two hours to get past Third Mainland Bridge when traffic is thick. I am squeezed beside a petite woman in a congested bus. Her head hangs over the phone screen. A young preacher vibrates on the screen, and she mutters along.

Amen. *Amen*. I look in her direction and down at the phone, and she shoves the device away. I quickly stare out the window so that my invading her communion with God would not stop her prayers. I am more flustered because I know what she is doing. At 7 am Nigerian time, thousands of Africans all over the globe awake to a fire altar erected by Jerry Eze, the lead pastor of Streams of Joy International.

The clouds crack open above us, gently ushering dawn as the bus covers several meters, leaving more places behind. Passengers who have not dozed off are glued to their phones. Each one of us has found work in the corporate section of Lekki, on the other side of the bridge, away from our low-end homes in Ikorodu, Ketu, and Lagos Mainland, places we can afford to live. With most heads bowed, I wonder if they are praying too, having missed morning prayers just to meet up.

No. I actually wonder why they need to tune into anything at all to pray. This revised standard version of morning devotions. My most recent Spotify playlist distracts me. It is built with songs I

played over and over, enough for the algorithm to set them on repeat. Zabron Singers' *Sweetie Sweetie* fills my head. In my unfortunate sitting position, I struggle to create more space for my stiff limbs. Then, I check on the woman.

As a non-participating observer, I see followers testifying on Twitter about the wonders God has done for them through these daily prayer programmes, beckoning others to join. Some fervent followers send the links to my Facebook Messenger. One sent me a voice message explaining why I was missing out. From the look of things, an inevitable revival of spiritual fervency looms. We are witnessing Nigerian Christians forgo denominational boundaries and religious biases to access divine intervention.

The sheer popularity of these daily prayer movements (hosted by popular Pentecostal pastors) surprisingly coincides with an upsurge of economic recession and a seemingly bleak future for the Nigerian state. Judging by the facts, there could be a positive correlation between these fast-rising sophisticated prayer movements and the economic and political problems of contemporary Nigerian society. What does it mean when an impecunious people collectively abandon confidence in poorly performing governments and turn to prayer?

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The bus diverts onto the Lekki-Epe Expressway. It is daylight. A homeless man is perched at the Marwa bus stop, studying his surroundings as if he had just roused from slumber. Many more like him are spilling from their hiding places onto the highway.

When everyone was locked away in their homes during the pandemic, I told my mother I wanted to go to a mountain. Ikorodu was a dying flame, too still and deserted, yet when I tried to pray, the voice of God felt distant, calling me, I felt sure, from a prayer mountain. I wanted to go, because several others were going, and I was missing out on a lifetime experience.

My mother, speaking like the devil's advocate, told me there was no God on the mountain that is not in her house.

"I have fasted and prayed on a mountain." I wanted to be able to say. That feeling of self-satisfaction mixed with the fear of missing out.

Elnathan John writes in his book *Be(com)ing Nigerian*: "The fact that you choose to open every meeting with multiple prayers does not mean that you intend to do what is right." Non-religious observers are often startled at the average Nigerian obsession with charismatic modes of prayer. My contacts who have sworn to agnosticism or publicly declared indifference to an organized religion partake in these daily morning prayers, filling their WhatsApp status with links for others to join in and pray or sing along.

I can rationalize this involvement by the fact that religious institutions are able to start and thrive in a place where systems go to crumble. *This God works.* During the days of the Late Prophet. T.B Joshua, founder of Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), foreigners flocked into the country in their droves to experience the power of God through the preacher. Nigerian Pentecostal churches have set up world-class universities and charity organizations and provided jobs for thousands of citizens. At some point, it became the vision of a singular denomination to plant a church in every street across Nigeria, and that vision has come to fruition.

We are willing to commit faith and substance to these systems because they have proven to be serious-minded and effective, especially in times of great distress. The wave of charismatic Christianity as we know it in Nigeria exploded in the 1970s with several elements such as University

students, Western televangelism, and economic austerity, leading to the upsurge. The movement began with indigenous revivalists and preachers with little or no theological background or link to American Pentecostalism taking over moving vehicles, markets, roadsides, and schools, preaching and converting sinners to Christ.

Pentecostal crusades became the order of those days, resulting in scores of healing, restoration, deliverance, and miracle revivals and crusades. This multi-dimensional movement reaped a bountiful harvest of souls that formed a generation of independently-owned Pentecostal and Aladura churches that restructured the shape of African Christianity in this landscape, a deviation from the template of Catholic and Protestant denominations handed over by Western missionaries. According to Ojo, by 2000, membership in Pentecostal groups had advanced to 16% of the total Christian population in Nigeria and spread to about 2 million of the Christian populace in Ghana, and 300,000 each in Benin and Burkina Faso.

It was in one of these numerous Pentecostal churches that my three-month-old self was dedicated to God a little over two decades ago. In all this time, my family had attended at least seven Pentecostal churches, seeking God on several mountains.

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Nigeria is such a praying nation.

I pour over this thought off-handedly because I do not enjoy thinking about my roots this way. There's a tinge of guilt that accompanies such thinking, especially when you publicly identify as a religious person.

I am a praying person: I love this God and the promises He offers.

Yet, despite the astonishing success of Pentecostal movements and missions in West Africa, we are often ridiculed for praying too much because our extreme reliance on supernatural interventions has not reflected in our dilapidating roads, nor terminated the horde of kidnappers plying the highways, nor steadied the exchange rate.

Many spectators scorn religious adherents for not directing their fervor towards the country's corrupt leaders and epileptic political systems, but rather propagating that reformation in this immensely dysfunctional state can only be divinely effected. Hence, our preoccupation with the principles of accessing God, mostly through sacrificial prayer and spiritual gifts of prophecy and discernment, even to a disregard of worldly precepts.

"Is it by prayer?" The unchurched would ask. "Go and look at China."

But what can Christians do that they are not already doing? Pentecostal political activism, which began with the founding of institutions like the Nigerian Student Christian Movement and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, has dulled; however, their age-old objective of governing and introducing reforms through prayer and political influencing is slowly being revived through daily prayer movements in these times. I recall that during the ENDSARS Protests in October 2020, thousands of youths took over the streets in all 36 states in what became a daily Prayer Walk, where Christians called upon God for salvific intervention in songs, prayers, tongues, and street charity. Having been a student of biblical prophecies and maxims, I genuinely believed that this obstinate nation was experiencing a revival.

Maybe I expected God to strike a mighty rod and condemn our ruthless leaders to oblivion as we prayed. Perhaps I, like millions of other Nigerians, am tired of the homeless children who tug at my

pockets on my way home every day, roaming barefoot. I earnestly want my family to be whole, as if it were not a part of this broken country.

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A man hands me a flier when I descend from the bus before taking a turn towards the road that leads to my office. It's an invitation to a "Signs and Wonders" programme. In front, there is an elderly woman smiling at me. She is holding a megaphone and some Christian tracts. She gives me another pamphlet and mutters a God bless you. I cannot immediately confirm if they are from the same denomination so I collect it because I don't want to offend.

Nigeria is such a religious frontline.

My mother announced she was going back to the Anglican Communion when the lockdown lifted. All my life, I had quietly followed her to several denominations, purging myself of former doctrines to sponge new ones. I was growing tired of the disparities I witnessed in all these churches. How so differently they approached God, the Bible, and our religion. So, I informed her I wasn't raised Anglican and wouldn't be going. I squeezed my soul dry from all the *religions* that had taken root in my body. Just like when she dissuaded me from going to a physical hillside, because she secretly believed it was probably aimless: I want to try to find God in a less distorted, more uniform way.

The Nigerian church is a type of colonization. A government begins when a group lays claim to power or receives the ability to influence a territory. I propose that the explosion of these prayer movements all around the country not only parades as an emblem of hopelessness but has also roused a subtle competition among religious denominations for domination.

No matter that these diverse Pentecostal movements have thrived for long and fanned the flame of African Christianity alive, why then the excessive clamor for the attention of adherents in the form of daily prayer meetings even right in their homes or in public vehicles going to the office? It shows that Nigeria is not such a secular state. The vast majority of Nigerians are inundated daily with the articles of its major religions: in the media, in the streets, and everywhere else. Even elections in the country are, to a great degree, exercises in religious supremacy or visibility. Hence, the religion that seems to have had the most access to the presidency in the history of Nigerian politics is usually the one perceived to have the greater population of devotees, while the second largest religion plays runner-up: although the 2023 elections have shown that these standards can be bent at will.

The tussle for space between the two dominant religions in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam – is well-documented. Ebenezer Obadare, an associate professor of Sociology in the University of Kansas, has argued that the Pentecostal surge has created a firebrand Islam. An evidence of this, he argues, is how, in 2000, the Nasirul-Lahi-L-Faith Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) moved their regular prayer meetings to an undeveloped piece of land, along Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, where many Pentecostal churches have their biggest prayer camps. He also claimed that NASFAT is a response to the Pentecostal explosion in a fiercely competitive marketplace and that, in a sense, charismatic Islam has come to stay.

Even in times when I hand out tracts on the street, inviting churchgoers and the unchurched to my church, I feel something is not right. There is more than one church or mosque within any given 100 meters in modern-day Nigeria; the online religious space is equally saturated. While we continue to brood over the politics of religious competition, I wonder what the Nigerian people would look like, scrubbed clean of the multiplicity of religious voices, pointing them at God. Would we be wealthier, saner, safer, and less divisive? Is it still the same, one true God, or simply just diverse chaotic prayer movements?

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There is a story in the Bible of Joseph rising to fame after interpreting Pharoah's dream. How it happened: he interpreted the king's puzzling dream as Seven Years of Plenty, followed by Seven Years of Famine. Note that in Pharaoh's dream, the seven years of famine were represented by an appearance of seven lean cows. Following Joseph's expert directive, the people of Egypt worked so hard to store grain during the years of plenty, and they were able to export to the world when the famine came.

Today's Nigeria is in deficit.

There is no grain to store up: the foreign reserves are sucked dry; arable land is wasting and desolate; the brightest minds are fleeing to developed countries. Now triggered by persistent famine, we are constantly subjected to failing policies aimed at trimming the fat, impoverishing the already wretched, and watching ourselves struggle for the barest minimum in a country with great potential.

The pioneers of these daily prayer movements are convinced of imminent doom, and in a bid to provide solace and hope to despairing members (as churches in America did during the Great Depression of the 1930s), have continued to beckon on a God that appears passive towards Nigeria's state of affairs because that is the only thing they know to do. We can only beg God to help.

The seven lean cows have guzzled the fattened cows.

Raised in a Pentecostal home in the heart of Mainland Lagos, it took several years for me to realize that as a child, I prayed because I was always needy. Many Christians, especially people in the lower echelon of society, crippled and humbled by the poverty of their existence, are most likely to aspire to shelter under the loving arms of God, or in many cases, religion. If we extrapolate my family's situation and our religious leanings, we may notice that it's a reflection of how Nigerian Christians interact with the society that birthed them.

Otherwise, when a society has attained abundance, its religion begins to concern itself with matters of the soul more than physical needs. Until then, human suffering and intimacy with God are almost kith and kin. We pat our backs with hope. Turmoil becomes a bit pleasurable, or even desired because you are taught that there are depths of God you cannot know, unless you're stripped of all human dignity (See the Book of Job for clarification).

Even now, despite the explosion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, I cannot help but notice that people are unconsciously drawn to a 'Jehovah Overdo' mostly when sucked in a pit of suffering. In between an office break or while in traffic in the early hours of the morning, the Nigerian Christian will tune into YouTube or Mixlr and pray. Market women may abandon their matrimonial beds at night for vigils at the church premises. A woman might risk losing her phone just to pray in a public bus.

An even greater problem exists. The Nigerian brand of Christianity, in a bid to resolve outputs of economic failures, presents a gospel of individual prosperity, thus elevating exceptionalism and leaving little room for communalism. Even those based in supposedly stable Western countries are not left out. Everyone is hustling for a miracle, desperately, lest their poverty-infested roots catch up with them. It would seem that at the core of Nigeria's evolution as a society, religion has the highest responsibility, and not the government.

On the bus home, I watch many church buildings lit up and people trooping in. I resolve to attend the midweek service once I get home. The flier remains crumpled in my trouser pocket, washed, dried, and pressed—such Signs and Wonders.

Iruoma Chukwuemeka is a writer from Nigeria. Her works have appeared in *Isele, Lolwe, The Weganda Review*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist for the Inaugural Abebi Award for Afro-Nonfiction.