Journal of African Languages and Literary Studies (JoALLS)

ISSN 2633-2108 (Print) ISSN 2633-2116 (Online)
Indexed by IBSS, COPERNICUS, EBSCO and Sabinet
Volume 5, Number 1, April 2024
Pp 107-126

Making Divinity out of the Mundane: Faith and the Failing Indices of the Postcolony in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31920/2633-2116/2024/v5n1a6

Nnaemeka Ezema
University of Ibadan
emekacezema@gmail.com
+2348037478912

&

Dele Maxwell Ugwanyi
Enugu State University of Science and Technology
+2348039507777

Abstract

One of the confounding debates about modern Christian faith in Nigeria is the blurring line between divinity and the mundane. While critical works in literary studies have engaged early Christian proselytization in Africa as both a source of enlightenment and instrument of colonialism, critical attention on the disparate perceptions about modern Nigerian churches appears marginal among literary scholars. As the line between the material and the transcendental is almost becoming imperceptible, this study uses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, Okey Ndibe's Foreign Gods, Inc. and Sylva Nze Ifedigbo's Believers and Hustlers to interrogate this religious leitmotif. Using Achille Mbembe's idea of the Postcolony, this work engages the Christian faith as one

of the vestiges of colonial encounters which keeps reinventing itself in response to intervening social realities. This work underscores weak institutions and poverty among the indices of a failing state that give rise to new brands of Christian practices in the texts.

Keywords: *Faith, Pentecostalism, Men of God, Nigerian literature and the Postcolony*

Introduction

The growing contention about the proliferation of modern churches in Nigeria calls for an enquiry into the emerging trends of Christian practices in the country. While churches in Nigeria continue to multiply, the practices in these churches become direct reflections of the conditions of the Nigerian state. Kalu's (2008) observation that "the character of modern African Pentecostalism changed in every generation" (ix) prompts one to enquire the factors responsible for the change. While these changes may not be restricted to Pentecostalism alone, it exemplifies the general dynamics in Christian evangelism and its response to social and economic realities of the time. This paper, therefore, explores how the evolving Christianity in Nigeria embodies the contemporary challenges of postcolonial Nigeria. It attempts to examine how eternal salvation, as a professed goal of the Christian faith, gets entangled with materialism and reflect the weak structures of postcolonial Nigeria.

Even though, the changing trajectories and influences in religious practices may be applicable to other religions as well, Christianity has, arguably, yielded itself to criticism in African literature more than any other religion so far. The argument, as highlighted by Paustian (2014) that "the Bible was … a pawn of deceptive politics" which was used to "facilitate not only the colonization of land or of culture, but the colonization of vision and consciousness, negating the victim's capacity to even see the scene of his dispossession" (2) is one of the dominant reproaches against the missionary activities in Africa. The idea of the otherworld is seen by critics as a ploy to dull the critical senses of Africans in order to exploit them. In any case, despite Irele's (2009) observation that as the products of missionary schools "that a didactic and evangelical purpose came to predominate literary expressions of the early writers, as they were intent … producing works of moral edification, as part of Christian teaching" (4), many early African writers were also instrumental to the struggle for colonial liberation. Institutions

run by the mission in collaboration with the colonialist, ironically, "became the training ground for Africa's most vocal, persistent, and militant anticolonialists" (Paustian: 2014, 3). Early writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thion'g'o, Mongo Beti, among others, explore the impact of conversion to missionary Christianity and the conflict generated. While these writers focused more on the inroads made by the early White Christian missionaries, their collaboration with the colonial government and the conflicts generated in the process, modern Nigerian novelists have shifted the gaze to Christian practices beyond the era of the white Christian missionaries.

Literary critics like Irele (2009), Mark Mathuray (2009), Asamoah-Gyadu (2010) Kamau-Goro (2010), Paustian (2014) have well explored the literary reflections of the activities of the white missionaries as represented in earlier African literature, but minimal attention seems to have been given to the present state of the Christian faith as reflected in the recent African fiction. This study goes beyond overt and vague connections between Christian evangelism and colonial enterprise to explore the major underpinnings of religious practice in postcolonial Nigeria. It shifts from the various images of Christian missionaries in the Nigerian novel to examine how the modern Nigerian writers explore the new methods of Christian conversion, the new promises of the Christian faith, the relationship between the Christian leaders and their followers in Nigeria after the white missionaries have gone. In the main, the paper attempts to study the connection between the failing indices of the Nigerian state and the changes in Christian evangelism. It attempts to examine how the quest to meet socio-economic desires has become one of the major attractions to the emerging version of Nigerian postcolonial Christian practices. In other words, the paper seeks to find out how the high rate of unemployment, failed social institutions, general economic pressures, pervasive corruption and other forms of illicit financial dealings, among other symptomatic instances of a failing state, constitute a challenge that makes modern Christianity an appealing alternative in Nigeria. Basically, the paper explores the shifting traces from normative standard of social behavior and ascetic morality of Christian practices to quest for mundane satisfaction in the Nigerian novel. The paper is a qualitative study that uses the indicative feature of a failing state to demonstrate how the indices of state failure breeds new Christian belief and practices. Consequently, three texts from different Nigerian authors, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, Okey Ndibe's Foreign God's Inc. and Nze Sylva Ifedigbo's Believers and Hustlers have been selected

for this study. These texts reenact the new trends of Christian practices in twenty-first century Nigeria as direct outcomes of the institutional and political shortcomings of Nigeria. In portraying these Christian activities, they hold the Postcolony to close scrutiny.

Modern Nigerian Christianity

The emergence of African Pentecostalism at the heels of independence of many countries in Africa appears to fill the vacuum created by the return of the white missionaries to Europe but it is also an outright protest against the style and content of the evangelical mission of the earlier church. Following the cultural nationalist orientation of Ethiopian Movement with its charismatic Christianity, a spirit of anti-structure and resistance to "colonial Christianity" (vii), the African Pentecostalism embarked on a mission with a mandate – "Africans must evangelise Africa" Kalu (2008: ix). Christian evangelism thereby changed from a colonialist enabled mission to the appropriation of the Christian message with indigenous cultural belief. This forms part of "culture theology" enables "inculturation" and creates a new perception of despised African cultures. To this extent, the "message inspired Pentecostal cultural policy that recognized the powers in the African world and crafted a theology of salvation that honed the cleansing and witchcraft eradication strategies of the ancient days" (ix). With intense reliance on Christ's redemptive intervention on the afflicted people in the Bible, the Pentecostals disagree with the missionary that "the gods are nothing". Weaving Christ into the African universe, the Pentecostals and some other mainline churches acknowledge Christ as a figure with infinite power to liberate the people from the demonic forces of the gods and their agents.

While this reinforced the battle for identity through religious influences, infusing some indigenous religious practices, it gives Christianity in Africa its main utilitarian essence beyond the hereafter. The new Christianity prevailed and dominated the greater part of 1970s through the early 1980s, the strategy of Christian evangelism in African continued to take new forms in diverse and unpredictable ways. The emergence of the mega-churches in Nigeria, however, brought another radical departure from "the familiar image of African prophets from Zionist, Nazarite, or Aladura churches, dressed in white gowns, carrying crosses and going to pray in the bush," to "the flamboyant leaders of the new mega-churches, …" Meyer (2004: 448). Using flashy television and radio programmes, the new set of preachers became global with their

spread and nomenclature. The sharp contrast between these two sets of preachers marks the fast-changing trends in African Pentecostal churches. While the media facilitate the wide outreach of the new evangelism, the glamour and glitz of the media raise questions about the commerciality of Pentecostal mission. Prosperity Gospel by the "big men of God" dominates the theme of the message, televised healing and spiritual liberation provide a riveting appeal to many.

This brings into focus the economic dimension to modern African Christianity. Maxwell's (1998) and Mbembe (2001) trace the rise of Pentecostal Christianity to the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme in many African states. "The drying-up of means of livelihood under the onslaught of structural adjustment threatens to lead, not only to the prolonged withering away of the state, but also to an extraordinary fragmentation of the market". Mbembe (2001:57). While the withdrawal of welfare services by the state and its attendant hardship appear to aggravate with each passing regime, the growing structural injustice is often explained away as the spirit of poverty related to the debased life of African ancestors. As a result, the "ancestral spirits account for the precarious existence of Zimbabweans in the age of liberal Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes (ESAPs)" Maxwell (1998:358). Even though Zimbabwe is the point of reference in Maxwell's study, similar experiences are replete in Nigeria and elsewhere, with families and villages consulting religious leaders for deliverance from ancestral curses\bondages.

Whether this is an appropriation of indigenous culture in Christian practice or a sheer belief in the redemptive potency of Christ's power in both spiritual and economic challenges is not very clear. This fundamentalist trajectory, however, becomes a strong influential movement, not just in the Pentecostal churches alone. From established protestant churches and other orthodox churches, it breaks into the Roman Catholic Church in various forms. The liberal "nondenominational fellowships that born-again Christians attend without leaving their churches" (Meyer, 2004: 452) creates an opportunity for Christians and, sometimes, non-Christians to attend to their specific spiritual and material needs outside their respective denominations. As a result, Pentecostalism, Adelakun (2022) notes, constructs a new identity that eclipses provincial identities, strives to manipulate the invisible for a real-life consequences and then "embrace a new life in Christ with other promises of upward mobility" (6). For Adelakun, this brand of identity is marked through a manifest

performance of power and unrelenting attempt to accentuate the presence of power in order "to achieve certain goals, as a condition of existence, and a form of identity" (6). Power, in this respect, is usually evoked against social conflicts and tension. Similarly, Wariboko's (2014) observation that Pentecostal faith "reconstituted the Christian identity under the hammer of failures and shortcomings of the Nigerian state and under the pressure of immense difficulties of economic survival" (32) further implicates the state in the upsurge of Pentecostal evolution. While the growing misery in the polity remains unattended to, poverty is further demonized as the spiritual consequences of unbelief. Whereas the ambition to upturn the table and face frontally the demonic hands of poverty brings about the substitution of the gospel of eternity with prosperity gospel, the wretchedness of poverty becomes synonymous with "the specter of dread that the devil evokes" Adelakun (2022:58). While researchers like Maxwell (1998, 2006), Meyer (2004), Haynes (2012) Wariboko (2014), Ebenezer Obadere (2016) and Abimbola Adelakun (2022) have extensively explored this trajectory of Christianity in Africa and its direct relationship with the failings state, such scholarly engagement on the Nigerian novel has hardly gained desired attention. This present effort, therefore, attempts to explore the reenactment of the emerging trends of Christianity in the Nigerian novel and then situate these new trends within the failing indices of the Postcolonial Nigeria.

Failing Indices of the Postcolonial State

This paper seeks to iterate the Postcolony as a contemporary experience, it engages the modern Christianity as a part of the intersecting realities that not only co-exist with the Nigerian state but also manifests its failings. While there is a lack of consensus on what really constitute a failed state, we are going to glean from scholarly perspectives some of the attributes of state failure. Dorff's (2000) idea of "failing state" instead of the usual terms, "state failure" or "failed state" which dominate the titles on this subject appears most apt here because "failed state" and "state failure" "are clearly final form". In Nigeria, however, just like most postcolonial African states, "state formation is a historical process that is open-ended and continually subject to contestation" Di John (2011: 3). For instance Angola which Mazrui (1995) considered a failed state may not be so categorized today despite its current challenges. Also, while Helman and Ratner (1993), Mazrui (1995), Rotberg (2003), Ottaway and Mair (2004), Torres and Anderson (2004) have outlined the

attributes of failed states, all the attributes operate at different degrees in different states. For instance, while loss of territorial control, inability to maintain public order, political instability, among other things are the instances of state failure identified by these scholars, all these may not fully apply to the current Nigerian state. However, neo-patrimonial politics, pervasive corruption, poverty, organized crime, inability to provide basic social services are some of the identified indices of a failing state that have perennially dogged the Nigerian state. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore these indices and see how they inspire new Christian orientations in the texts.

Emerging Trends of Christianity in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel

Despite a considerable high critical responses that Adichie's Americanah (2013) and Ndibe's Foreign God Inc (2017) have attracted, critics have not closely examined the religious perspective of the novel. Critics like Pahl (2015), Levine (2015), Sackeyfio (2017), Androne (2017), Cruz-Gutierrez (2017), Ndigirigi (2017) and Mcmann (2018) appear to be more interested in the transnational trajectory of the novels and their manifest global consciousness. The incisive critique of the modern Christian practices as seen in the novel has not received adequate critical response. Similarly, critics appear not to have taken note of Ifedigbo's Believers and Hustlers (2020) and the elaborate depiction of modern Christian practices in Nigeria.

In Americanah, for instance, Adichie centralises Ifemelu's mother as the reflection of the new Christian order. The belief and teaching of Pentecostal movement in reaction to the postcolonial condition is encapsualetd in Ifemelu's mother – and this echoes realistically in Ifemelus's entire household. In the first instance, the mother's conversion and abandonment of her Catholic faith, which in this instance, reflects the old Christian order, dramatizes Mbembe's (2001) submission that "the act of conversion is … involved in the destruction of the worlds" (229). Clearly, the abandonment of one belief system in preference to another suggests a fundamental change and the collapse of the rejected world. Adichie externalizes the transformative nature of conversion and the shock that it evokes as Ifemelu stares stunned,

> … feeling herself in a trance, with things happening that she did not understand. She watched her mother walk around their flat, collecting all the Catholic objects, the crucifixes hung on walls, the rosaries nested

> in drawers, the missals propped on shelves. Her mother put them all in the polyethylene bag, which she carried to the backyard, her steps quick, her faraway look unwavering. She made a fire near the rubbish dump, at the same spot where she burned her used sanitary pads, and first she threw in her hair, … and then, one after the other, the objects of faith (2013: 55).

Ifemelu is one of the protagonists in the story whose detachment from her mother is traced to this change of a new Christian belief. The convert, in a full exercise of her conviction, practically demonstrates a resolved rejection of familiar religious rituals which is in line with Mbembe's observation that "the act of conversion should be accompanied by the abandonment of familiar landmarks, cultural and symbolic" (229). While this abandonment may not always be total in some instances, burning these landmarks at the spot where sanitary pad is disposed does not only mark the totality of the rejection but also the swift degeneration of the sacred into the spurned in the changed perception of the convert. While this holds true of religious objects, it can also manifest in other tangible and intangible symbols that reflect religious and cultural beliefs. This is why the woman now reviles the cultural significance of the hair as a symbol of womanhood under whose shadow motherhood is fashioned.

Adichie's crystal portrayal of the change of faith from Catholic to Revival Saints, Miracle Spring, Guiding Assembly – the stream of new churches Ifemelu's mother is converted into – indicates the departure from the Christian practice brought by the white missionary to the Africanised Christianity. While this seems to illustrate a certain kind of colonial liberation, it actually reflects the tense economic challenges weighing down on Ifemelu's family. The Catholic meditative prayers usually led by Ifemelu's mother appear impotent to the grueling hardship worsened by the husband's job loss. The mother reflects Adelakun's (2022) observation that the new brand of Christianity makes people see "money as about the only remaining visible symbol of spirituality" (111). There is a sense of urgency that makes Ifemelu's mother desperate to actualise a financial breakthrough as she goes whole out to experiment with any church that holds the promise of financial liberation. With the reassurance of Pastor Gideon, the pastor of Guiding Assembly Church, that they do not serve a poor God, the mother finds solace and hope for economic breakthrough in the church. Convinced that "If she worshipped with the prosperous,… then God would bless her as He had

blessed them"(57), she exemplifies a new theological orientation that suggests that wealth can be transferred by association.

Adichie appears to dramatise Kalu's (2006) and Adelakun's (2022) positions that the church demonises poverty and sees demons in both the innocent and the bizarre. The essence of this 'intriguing and elaborate system of demonology' (81), as Kalu would describe it, is to construct an invincible structure of power that not only strengthens belief but also makes members appear vulnerable without the power invoked in the church. As such, they transform the ordinary into the miraculous – a recovery from catarrh becomes a divine rescue from demonic attacks. This is to continually reinforce the conviction of the congregants on the immanent presence of power in the church and in the pastor, "the powerful man of God" and presents the church as a place of refuge from the ubiquitous presence of demons hovering around the world. Basically, this becomes a strategy deployed by the modern church "to sustain the perception as people of power" Adelakun (2022:5). People's desperate search for health and promotion as exemplified here underscores the failure of the state to provide basic health care and the failing administrative state that is run through clientelism and official flummery.

Beyond that, Ifemelu's misgivings with regard to the wealth of the pastor raises the questions about the real intent of the religious exercises. Agitated in her young mind, "Ifemelu did not think that God had given Pastor Gideon the big house and all those cars, he had of course bought them with money from the three collections at each service, and she did not think that God would do for all as He had done for Pastor Gideon, because it was impossible …" (58). Through this journey into Ifemelu's mind, Adichie brings to the fore the business aspect of the prosperity pastor into view. While this is a direct critique of the prosperity pastors, it also buttress the dominant thinking that operates in some churches where prosperity is a direct reward for religiosity. It casts shadow on the impeccable moral attributes of the earlier church and centralises wealth, despite its dishonest source, as the main attribute of God's blessing, God's faithfulness. Guiding Assembly Church demonstrates Meryer's (2004) argument that many Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches "represent prosperity as a God-given blessing and resent the mainline churches for legitimising poverty by referring to Jesus Christ as a poor man" (459). This aligns with Obadare's (2016) observation that instead of righteousness firstly, "Pentecostal churches seem to have placed an indecorous emphasis on wealth and personal accumulation" (1).

Ifemelu's mother makes this situation clearer in the relationship between The General and Aunty Uju.

Aunty Uju is a cousin to Ifemelu's father. She is a young graduate medical doctor who later becomes a mistress to a general in the Nigerian army. With his influence and power, The General finds a job for Ifemelu in the military hospital "that has no doctor vacancy", buys her a luxury car and new edifice in a highbrow area of Lagos, Nigeria. While the source of all these recent acquisition is a common knowledge to all the members of the family, Ifemelu's mother insists that they are a manifest miracle of God in the family. Aunty Uju's new job and her subsequent position as a consultant when all her mates are scampering to run abroad, take "the American medical exams or the British exams, or, tumble into a parched wasteland of joblessness" (59) is not seen as an instance of a dysfunctional society but a direct outcome of the divine grace. Adichie reenacts an ailing society where access to means of livelihood and professional growth is tied to personal relationship rather than individual merit. While such a faulty system grows to destroy public institutions, even health institutions, in Adichie's Nigeria, the new found faith creates a new world of meaning and terms it the outcome of a divine invocation of favour. Here, nepotism is given a religious hue while the system of the state continues to degenerate. The General is characterised as a divine instrument through whom the blessings of God trickle down to the faithful. In other words, the sacred is framed in the mundane. The authorial voice affirms that it is a way to "spread the cloak of religion over ... petty desires" (69). It is, perhaps, in view of this that Adelakun observes: "… people create a moral justification to sidestep their religious values and do whatever makes them rich" (111). Ifemelu's mother, however, does not see it as circumventing any value, rather it is an answer to a spiritual invocation.

Religion is, therefore, not only used to justify fraud but also to legitimise it in response to the signs of a collapsing state. Churches become not only an aspect of underground economy as seen in the activities of Pastor but also a validation for corruption and abuse of power. As jobs diminish and the economy is unable to engage able and willing hands, fraudulent ways of getting employment are being justified by the new teachings. It is a manifest response to a weak economy which Mbembe (2001) attributes to "the sharp deflation of the public and quasi-public sector" (56) during the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme. Mbembe's observation aligns with the setting of Adichie's novel which spans from Ibrahim Babangida's regime when the

Structural Adjustment Programme was introduced in Nigeria. The collapse of public sector did not only lead to loss of jobs and reduction in wages but also made nepotism and abuse of procedures official processes of employment. This is what is clearly reflected in Aunty Uju's employment process that has become attributive of the miraculous.

The unabashed celebration of men of questionable character like Chief Omenka, one of the major benefactors of the church, by the church further lends credence to the pecuniary obsession of modern Christian churches in the novel. Ifemelu observes that "Chief Omenka is a 419 and everybody knows it,' she insists that 'This church is full of 419 men" (66). The number, 419, refers to section 419 of the Nigerian criminal code which has become synonymous with fraud/fraudster in Nigeria. Adichie reflects the moral dilemma seen in the flagrant celebration of ill-gotten wealth and the ethical responsibilities of the church. What appears to matter most in the church is the member's upward social mobility by any means whatsoever. Adichie seems to exemplify Adelakun's observation of the modern church as a neoliberal order that takes its rationalizing logic from a religious culture which maintains that 'Money is the 'supreme good' and those that possess it are considered good and godly persons too' (111). Undoubtedly, Guiding Assembly embodies the mercantile outlook of modern Christian practices in Nigeria and highlights the weak institutions of the state and how integrity and high moral values are upended.

The over-spiritualizing of mundane desires as seen in these characters further complicates the challenges of postcolonial Nigeria. While Pentecostals appear to relieve themselves of strict regulations, the "philosophical theology and the gymnastics of high and low critical methods" Kalu (2008:249) of the missionary churches, Adichie appears to represent a certain kind of abuse possible among the new churches.

Similarly, Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* explores a wide range of diverse religious affiliations. Placing side by side the African Traditional Religion and Christianity, Ndibe appears not only to expound a tolerant religious spirit, devoid of rancor and resentment, but also to bring all these religious practices into public assessment. The story also recounts the developments and the changing trends in Christian evangelism over the years. The discussion between Ikechukwu Ezendu (Ike), the protagonist, and his uncle, Osuakwu, brings this to the fore. Upon his return from the United States, Ike, visits his uncle who, narrates: "Even after your father joined the church of Father and I answered the call to serve Ngene, we remained close" (193). Osuakwu narrates how he and

his younger brother, Ike's father, maintained a close relationship despite belonging to different faiths. In spite of his brother's failed attempts to make Osuakwu abandon his African Traditional Religion for the Catholic faith, the bond between the two remained strong until the death of Ike's father. Despite Osuakwu's expressed pain and all his efforts to take care of his brother's widowed wife, Nwanyi Eke, the relationship is severely threatened by the coming of a pastor in Utonki village. By this instance, Ndibe establishes a clear departure in a theological understanding that had existed prior to the newly found church. It follows the same pattern that shifts from the missionary churches to African evangelised churches. It reflects how Nigerians are able to transform or manage the vestiges of colonial encounter, a movement from what Kalu refers to as "colonial Christianity" to an indigenous one.

Osuakwu's observation , "…that a man had come to Utonki and set up a mad church. And I learnt that Nwanyi Eke had left the church of Father and thrown herself, body and mind into the madness" (195) explains his discontent with the new brand of Christianity. Ndibe juxtaposes the missionary's evasion into the village with the new church that Osuakwu refers to as a mad one with their attendant impacts on the village. While the missionaries used firearms as the major weapon to coerce the villagers into conversion, the new church deploys fear among the congregants to achieve the same goal. In the case of the new church, Pastor Uka does not use brutal force, rather he deploys lies, false allegation and treachery making the congregants live in perpetual fear of the enemies which, in most parts, are the close relatives of the congregants. In what Adelakun refers to as "politics of demonization", where the specters of demons are cast on a group in order to diabolise them often for political ends, Ndibe goes beyond national or regional politicking to reenacts this instance at the family level. "Demonic specters," according to Adelakun, "are a teleo-affective use of language and imagery that fuels bipolar narratives and enforce borders…" (72-73). The "prophesy", that, Nne, Ike's grandmother, and Osuakwu are responsible for the death of Ike's father is one of such efforts to disrupt a cohesive family relationship by the new pastor.

What it means is that Nne killed her own son, that Osuakwu killed his own brother and that the two of them have also sworn to kill Ike and his sister. It is obvious that the pastor has instilled fear in Ike's mother making her perpetually dependent on the church for her safety and that of her children. While the Pastor is unable to convince Ike that Osuakwu and Nne inflicted his father with diabetes, Ike's mother lacks the basic

knowledge to bring such unscientific explanation into question. Using the fear of witchcraft and magic, everyone becomes a suspect of magical machination. The outcome of this is a disruption of a long-standing filial affiliation. This further demonstrates how poor knowledge and lack of good medical care in Utonki bestows on the pastor both medical and spiritual expertise.

While families rage in conflicts and chaos, Pastor Uka's major preoccupation is the financial end to his religious enterprise, depicting the church, once more as an enabler of underground economy as earlier seen in Adichie's text. The encounter between Pastor Uka and the notorious drug pusher, Emeka Egoigwe, depicts the mercantilist predisposition of Pentecostalism in Ndibe's Nigeria. Emeka Egoigwe is the ostentatious drug pusher who relied heavily on the spiritual protection from Pastor Uka. To assure the smugglers of the potency of his power, Pastor Uka exudes the confidence that deifies him before his congregants, sustains their faith in him and also makes them his easy prey. Uka cuts the iconic image of what Kalu refers to as the "big man of God" (112). While Kalu uses the big men of God to refer to flamboyant pastors, Pastor Uka is only a localized version, symbolic of the mega pastors. They strive to the same end – to appear larger than life. According to Kalu, "Where Paul called himself a bondservant, the new pastor engages in a personality cult, and flaunts his person, wealth, and status" (112). In this case, Pastor Uka's major obsession is money and the major way to keep his congregants is self-veneration, translating from men of God to what is now referred to as "god of men", in some local parlance. Self-adulation becomes a ploy for mercantile Christianity. While crime and criminality breeds in the church, the proceeds are attributed to answered prayer. The increased rate of organized crime in the place of worship does not only show the weakness of the security structure of the state but also the degeneration of both the spiritual and moral strength of the postcolony.

Ndibe further dramatises the exploitative tendency of the Pastor in his encounter with Ike. The Pastor's insistence that Ike's financial upheaval in the United States is his failure to give money to the church through "seed sowing" demonstrates the transactional dimension of blessing in the new church. Uka's (2007) observation that "Pentecostal consumers are also subtly reengineered to see themselves as clients/customers who patronise churches for their services and goods, much in the same way as patronising a hotel or a convenient store" (627) is exemplified in this instance. Ndibe demonstrate a reconstructed

Christian orientation where material currency gains for its holder spiritual currency when exchanged in what Ukah calls "an econospiritual transaction in the religious market" (628). This transaction, however, combines both intimidation, blackmail, self-mystification and outright threat as the Pastor often adopts an imperative tone, "… you must obey the word of God" (161). This is similar to Kalu's observation that "The theology points to faith as the route to prosperity" (255), a situation where one's faith determines one's financial success. This places prosperity as one of the major attractions of modern Pentecostalism while the mainstream Christianity is reproached for encouraging poverty in the body of Christ. Nevertheless, even the mainstream religious organisations appear to be also yielding to the pressure of prosperity preaching. It is a response to a dwindling economic fortune of the masses in the face of economic instability and lack of government support. While the economy remains unpredictable, the people somehow believe that a certain kind of divine solution should be the alternative possibility.

While prosperity has taken diverse dimensions in many churches, including churches giving loans and financial support to their members or equip them with vocational skills in order to mitigate the economic hardship of their members, Pastor Uka's approach is self-centered. While the members of his church are passing through oppressive poverty as seen in the wretchedness of Ike's mother and the misery of Regina (whose husband was the pastor's major benefactor) the pastor cares less. Rather, he circumvents the underlying Christian principle of love and care for the poor. In contrast to this pool of penury, Pastor Uka lives in opulence in the remote village of Utonki. Ndibe seems to highlight these internal contradictions in the church to show the entrepreneurial and neo-capitalist dimension palpable in modern Christianity in Nigeria. The sole aim of religious leaders like Pastor Uka is to satisfy the mundane appeals of power and affluence. It is an intense drive for economic survival and social mobility. There appears to be a clear distance from the pristine religious values that produced austere religious leaders of earlier Christianity. While the members of the congregation are subjected to intense self-denial to be able to generate funds for the church, we see the pastor in loud affluence as seen in Pastor's lavishly decorated sitting room. The sitting room only becomes a symbolic site that contrasts with the manifest penury of the members of the church evident in the decrepit house of Ike's mother and Regina's destitution. With almost a non-existent support for the Nigerian poor households from the

government or corporate organizations, they become the easy victims of these religious entrepreneurs as depicted in this text.

If Ndibe's adroit interweaving of the Pentecostal experiences in Nigeria into an important subplot in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* appears marginal to the central story of migration, Ifedigbo's *Believers and Hustlers* (2020) gives a full-swoop depiction of a modern Pentecostal church situated in Lagos, Nigeria. The title of the novel is a projection of the desperate effort to survive by any means possible. Hustling has become a contemporary iteration of the instinctual drive to break even in modern Nigeria. The title therefore juxtaposes the spiritual act of belief within the same realm of existential effort to eke out a living. The novel is a detailed portrayal of the activities of Pastor Nicholas Adejuwon (Pastor Nick) and his wife Pastor Nkechi Adejuwon in their Rivers of Joy Church. Replete with the intrigues and manipulations, *Believers and Hustlers* centralizes the mundane ambitions of both the church leaders and the congregants. The story aggregates characters who conjure transcendental powers, or hide under such invocation, to meet daily socioeconomic desires.

In the first instance, Pastor Nick's decision to open a church is a well-thought-out plan to make a more visible economic progress. Pastor Nick becomes excited about this idea after listening to the American televangelist Bishop T. D. Jakes. He presents the idea as passionately as he can to his wife. "He told her that he had a vision and that God inspired him to build a place where His people would not feel their conscience were constantly under judgment, where worshipers will not feel guilty…. Most people, he said, just wanted to sleep at night and did not want to be told about a God that condemned them" Ifedigbo (2020:31). Ifedigbo clearly depicts a new moral formation that is being propagated by prosperity preachers in Nigeria. Adelakun recognizes this facts when she observes that, "Prosperity gospel provided a conscious moral paradigm through which people can engage in consumption of modern goods without feeling of guilt or worry about sliding into sin" (2022: 58). The message propagated here is the type that will constantly soothe the secular appetite of the members and still assures them of being in good terms with God. It shifts the theological orientation that keeps reminding one about sins and their consequences to the one that rather appeals to the emotions of the church member. Even though this reveals a new trend of Christianity, this is not the main motivation behind Pastor Nick's ambition, it is only a strategy. The Pastor's direct confession that the church will make them rich, "I mean like bastardly rich, I promise you, and I will buy you yacht and take you to the world"

Ifedigbo (2020:31) underscores his materialist desperation woven under the cloak of religiosity. The plan to titillate the congregants is akin to what business men do with their customers in order to keep them and then appropriate the yields therefrom. Such mercantile disposition raises question on the suppositions about "religious groups as non-profit organisations whose raison d'être is the furtherance of 'public good' through spiritual means and inculcation of moral conduct" Ukah (2007: 622). Pastor Nick seems to represent the kind of pastors said to have been called by "the needs of their bellies" or as Ukah succinctly puts it, "Pentecostalism of the belly" (625) which directly reflects a failing state where people engage in all forms of activities just for financial gains.

Whereas Ifedigbo's novel replicates some of the instances earlier seen in the first two stories where religious leaders manipulate the poor and the ignorant and stoke crises in both nuclear and extended families, the use of the church by powerful public figures for illicit financial dealings in *Believers and Hustlers* creates a deeper effect. These individuals have nothing to do with Christianity and its ethos. For instance, Chief Arisekola Gbadamosi, one of the influential men, is a Muslim who neither shows any commitment to the Islamic faith nor any regard to Christian ethics. By his own admission, the only reason he is affiliated "with the (Islamic) faith was because it permitted him to marry up to four wives" (255). Chief Gbadamosi and others like General Gumi, Senator Ehinare, Sir Nnamchi all have one thing in common: "…they were all part of the military era. The new democratic government set the Financial Crime Agency (FCA) to recover stolen government funds, so the men had to find a way to hide the money and keep themselves from the law" (336). Similar to what is obtainable in other two stories, the church has become a safe haven for unlawful financial transactions, a machinery for organised crime. While the individuals involved in the earlier stories are private citizens, the men in Pastor Nick's church are public individuals once entrusted with the fate of the postcolonial state. Whereas this instance reflects the deep-seated corruption bedeviling the Postcolony, it also reveals how institutions of faith set for moral rectitude have been implicated in societal rot. The Financial Crime Agency (FCA) used in this scenario appears to be a fictional reference to Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), an agency of Nigerian government set to fight corruption in the country. Ifedigbo seems to reflect several cases in Nigeria where corrupt public and private individuals readily lodge huge amounts of money to the church's vault to evade arrest leading to Ukah's position that churches in Nigeria lack "the

moral courage and rectitude to condemn, sanction or critique the political culture of their societies and practices relating to the (ab)use and (mis)management of public funds by government officials because they are not publicly perceived to be transparent and accountable" (625-626). Such depiction pulls the church from its supposed high pedestal of ascetic morality to the degenerative forces of societal ruins. The church, in this instance, reflects Di John's position that "the invasion of ever-wider spheres of economic activity by informal political networks leads to the criminalisation of the state" (5). Here both politics and faith seem to collude in weakening the institutions and structures of the postcolony.

It is evident that Ifedigbo's *Believers and Hustlers* (2020) is another deep reflection on the condition of the postcolonial Nigeria with reference to the changing dynamics of modern Christianity. The setting of the story in Lagos appears apt as Lagos is the headquarters of many of the mega-churches in Nigeria, its detailed portrayal of the church reveals how the religious leaders take the advantage of the weak institutions of the state. It also dramatizes the increasing slide from high moral obligations of the church to dissolute indulgences.

Conclusion

It is clear that the modern Nigerian novel still reenacts a raging crisis of faith. The texts depict a clear shift from the quest for otherworldliness to a desperate search for material needs. In search of meaningful source of livelihood, which the state fails to provide, people turn to the church. While some of the characters studied in the texts turn to the church for solution to both real and fathomed problems, a few characters take the advantage of the vulnerable to enrich themselves. The pastors in the three texts - Pastor Gideon in *Americanah*, Pastor Uka in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* Prophet Nick in *Believers and Hustlers* – demonstrate an unconscionable resolve to exploit the vulnerable. It is clear that the victims of the con men of God are largely the economically depressed and the greedy fraudsters. While Ndibe shows the gross physical and financial exploitation of the dispossessed, Adichie and Ifedigbo depict the house of God as a hiding place for swindlers. In all the texts, the religious charlatans who have no known training in Christian theology nor answerable to any hierarchy of authority take advantage of the economic crisis in the postcolony, ignorance and naivety of the masses, pervasive corruption, economic instability and the frustration of the populace to create a source of livelihood for themselves.

Indeed, religious discourse becomes a convoluted place of contestation not only because the leaders sometimes impose their personal wills on the congregants but also that religion, often, demands the suspension of the logic of the common sense from its adherents. What is glaring in this exploration, however, is that the religious leaders in the texts abandon the basic tenets of their proclaimed religion in pursuit of wealth and its vulgarities. The characters constitute inherent contradictions as they abandon the Christian normative values of chastity, love, honesty, humility, impartiality and ascetic lifestyle only to embrace their opposites. The various instances where these standards are misplaced in the texts are attributable to the loopholes of weak state institutions.

References

Adelakun, A. Abimbola. 2022. Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Power and Pentecostalism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2013. Americanah. Lagos: Parafina.

Asamoah-Gyadu, Kwabena J. 2010. 'The Evil You Have Done Can Ruin the Whole Clan': African Cosmology, Community, and Christianity in Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Studies in World Christianity 16.1: 46-62.

Brobbey, Gideon. 2022. Sacrilege as Commerce: Materialism, Modernity and the Changing Igbo Metaphysics in Okey Ndibe's Foreign God, Inc. Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symbosium. 7: 1.

Di John, Jonathan. 2011. 'Failed States' in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Literature. Real Instituto El Cano (ARI). 1-10.

Dorff, R. (2000), 'Addressing the Challenges of Failed States', paper presented at the Failed States Conference, Florence, Italy, April.

Gifford, Paul. 2008. Trajectories in African Christianity. International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church. 8.4: 275-289.

Gikandi, Simon. 2009. Ed. 'Christianity and Christian Missions'. The Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature. London: Routledge.

Haynes, Naomi. 2012. Pentecostalism and Morality of Money: Prosperity, Inequality, and Religious Sociality on the Zambian Copperbelt.' Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. 18.1: 123-139.

Irele, F. A. 2009. Ed. Introduction: perspectives on the African novel. The Cambridge Companion to the African novel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.

Kalu, Ogbu. 2008. African Pentecostalism: An Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kamau-Goro, N. 2010. African Culture and the Language of Nationalist Imagination: The Reconfiguration of Christianity in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's The River Between and Weep not Child. Studies in World Christianity, 16.1: 6 - 26.

Mathuray, Mark. 2009. On the Sacred in African Literature Old Gods and New Worlds. New York. Macmillan Palgrave.

Maxwell, David. 1998. 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe. Journal of Religion in Africa. 28.3: 350-373.

Maxwell, David. 2006. African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement. Oxford: Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

Mazrui, A. 1995. 'The Blood of Experience: The Failed State and Political Collapse in Africa'. World Policy Journal. 12.1: 28-34.

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. On the Postcolony. Berkeley: University of California Press.

McMann, Mindi. 2018. "You're Black": Transnational Perceptions of Race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Andrea Levy's Small Island. Studies in Contemporary Fiction. 59.2: 200-212.

Meyer, Birgit. 2004: Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal Charismatic Churches. The Annual Review of Anthropology. 33:447-474

Ndibe, Okey. 2017. Foreign Gods, Inc. Ibadan: Bookcraft.

Obadere, Ebenezer. 2016. '"Raising Righteous Billionaires": The Prosperity Gospel Reconsidered'. HTS Theological Studies: 72. 4: 1-8.

Ottaway, M. and Mair, S. 2004. 'States at Risk and Failed States: Putting Security First'. German Institute for International and Security Affairs Policy Outlook. 1-10.

Pahl, Miriam. 2016. 'Afropolitanism as Critical Consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Teju Cole's Internet Presence.' Journal of African Cultural Studies. 28.1: 73-87.

Paustian C. Megan. 2014. 'A Real Heaven on Their Own Earth': Religious Missions, African Writers, and the Anticolonial Imagination. Research in African Literatures. 45. 2: 1-25.

Peel, John. D. Y. 2000. Religious Encounters and the Making of the Yoruba. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rotberg, R. I. 2003. State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press.

Torres, M. and Anderson, M. (2004), 'Fragile States: Defining Difficult Environments for Poverty Reduction'. Policy Division, Department for International Development (DFID); London.

Uka, Asonzeh. 2007. Piety and Profit: Accounting for Money in West African Pentecostalism (Part1) Stellenbonsch Theological Journal 48. 3-4: 633-632.

Van Klinken Andriaan . 2020. Religion in African Literature: Representation, Critique and Imagination Article in Religion Compass • 5-12.

Wariboko, Nimi. 2014. Pentecostalism in Nigeria. New York: University of Rochester.

Hallemeier, K. 2019. Cosmopolitanism and Orality in Okey Ndibe's Foreign Gods, Inc. The Limits of Cosmopolitanism: Globalization and its Discontents. Ed. Aleksandar Stević and Philip Tsang. 141-158. New York: Routledge.