

3 “Touch Not Mine Anointed”: #MeToo, #ChurchToo, and the Power of “See Finish”

When, in 2013, four years before the global #MeToo movement, a young woman named Ese Walter made a damning revelation – in a blog post about having had sex with a pastor – she perhaps did not envisage how far her willingness to damn the social censure that was sure to follow would go in shaking up the patriarchal structures of power that defined Nigeria. A parishioner at one of Nigeria’s mega-churches, Commonwealth of Zion Assembly (COZA, aka The Wealthy Place), Walter alleged that the married Senior Pastor, Biodun Fatoyinbo, had groomed her over two years with personalized attention and favor-seeking, culminating in a week-long sexual affair in London. She wrote that after much private trauma and vain attempts to make it right with her conscience, she decided to publicly tell her story to free herself of the guilt and shame of the incident. It was not typical for a woman to make such a public confession of sex with a married man in a society like Nigeria where issues of sex galvanizes puritan instincts. The fact that the male involved was a well-known pastor made it an even more salacious scandal. When the pastor in question responded to the allegations, he merely promised that he would give a “robust reply” to the accusations in due course. That response never came. Finding no means to either get his side of the story or make him accountable, people eventually moved on. Walter’s story, though an account of abuse of trust, power, and privilege by a man of God she had held to higher standards, never moved beyond the level of jokes and gossip about pastors’ hypocrisy.

By the time *The New York Times* 2017 exposé on Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein propelled women all over the world to share their stories of sexual abuse and violence on Twitter with the hashtag “MeToo,” a lot more had changed in public attitudes toward how allegations of sexual abuse against men in power were received. In different countries, women told stories of sexual assaults. By doing so en masse, they gave one another the moral cover needed to deflect the

shame of individuals admitting assault. As those stories cracked the walls of silence, more women in different countries felt freer to speak up. In Nigeria, six years after Walter first spoke up and two years after #MeToo exploded, a celebrity photographer, Busola Dakolo, launched allegations of rape against the same Pastor Fatoyinbo. Now thirty-four years old, she alleged he raped her twice when she was seventeen and living in Ilorin, Kwara State, the town where COZA church started before moving the headquarters to the nation's capital. Shortly afterward, another woman also came forward to make a similar claim of rape against the pastor. She said the family had hired her to be their children's nanny abroad, but she ended up sexually assaulted by the pastor.¹

By the time this batch of revelations came, the women were stepping into a coursing stream whose sands had been ruffled by Walter and the #MeToo campaign. Just like Walter's case, these fresh accusations too were – as far as anyone could recall – almost unprecedented in Nigeria where issues of sex and abuse are typically hushed for fear of being subject to public ridicule.² Dakolo's allegation led to mass outrage on social media, and right away, people began to organize mass protests at the church headquarters in their Abuja and the Lagos branches. The Sunday after the video of the Dakolo allegations was published online, protesters stormed the church demanding the pastor stepped down. These church protests took place during Sunday services. They were attended by both Christians and non-Christians (including a Muslim woman who stood out starkly because of her hijab). The #MeToo protest at the church in Nigeria was thus an important development of making church organizations confront their responsibility to address sexual assaults. The controversy of the Dakolo allegation resulted in pastor Fatoyinbo canceling upcoming church programs and stepping down from his position temporarily.

While the protests took place at the church, something similar happened simultaneously in virtual spaces where many people carried on

¹ The woman who made the accusation requested anonymity from the media organization she told her story to, and although her identity was uncovered by a journalist, I omit her name here.

² An instance of such a story that did not get hushed was the case of a Canada-based woman, Stephanie Otobo, who sued Kaduna pastor Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries. She claimed she had an affair with the pastor, he promised to marry her, and then renegeed.

commentary on the intractability of the Nigerian rape culture, and why it had come to a head. They – those on the ground and those online – not only correlated the problem of rape with the various power structures in the society that enforced the mechanism of social control, they also implicated the church (and even more broadly, organized religion) in the cycles of abuse endemic in the country. Looking through the various placards the demonstrators carried that read #METOO; #CHURCHTOO; YOUR PASTOR IS NOT YOUR GOD; NO TO RAPE IN THE CHURCH; GOD CAN FORGIVE YOU BEHIND BARS; THIS IS NOT ABOUT RELIGION, THIS IS ABOUT HUMANITY; THOU SHALL NOT RAPE; DON'T USE GOD'S NAME TO SHELTER A RAPIST; AND WE ARE ALL THE LORD'S ANOINTED, the protests felt like a collectively shared angst and simmering resentment against religious authorities who have remained untouched by accusations of transgressions. The reference on the placard to the “Lord’s Anointed” is an allusion to an immunity clause that pastors and their defenders have typically referred to deflect accountability for moral infractions. Based on a verse from Psalm 105, the text refers to the migration of the Israelites through different lands and God’s protection of them from potential attack. Verses 14 and 15 say God reproved kings for their sake and said, “Touch not mine anointed and do my prophets no harm.” However, those who prooftext this verse typically extract the first few words and use them to give even an errant pastor a moral canopy to hide from the shame of their actions.

To read the uniqueness of the event – protesters ripping apart the myth of the Lord’s anointed servant as “untouchable” and demanding he stepped down – as a reproduction or a consequence of the global influence of the #MeToo movement is all too easy. Not all social actions that erupt in countries outside the USA are owed to similar movements in metropolitan places of the world, even when they borrow the vocabulary and dramatics of such movements. While the global #MeToo moment might have boosted the relative weight now given to women’s stories of sexual abuse, there were other nuances from that moment that demonstrated how people process the power identity of religious figures. From some of the text on the protest placards and the simultaneous dialogues that occurred on social media while the protests were happening on the church grounds, there was a sense that the issues that rankled people went much further

than just the immediate accusations of rape. The allegation was the trigger, but there was an already existing dissatisfaction with the institutionalization of the untouchability of pastors who had attained a certain level of social influence. In this chapter, I am going to read that moment as one of "see finish," a moment where the performance of power had made him knowable to the point that the intelligibility facilitated censurability.

The protests, underlined by festering displeasure and the desire to reconfigure the authority and immense power that pastors have wielded almost unchallenged, had to happen. The global #MeToo campaign might have been one of those times an advocacy campaign ignited in the USA becomes a transnational affair and even provides a framework for which others fashion their own advocacy,³ but classifying it as a knockoff also misses important nuances. In Ogbu Kalu's historical analysis of Pentecostal development through the years, he noted that the influential position that Pentecostal pastors occupy did not occur till around the 1980s when "fascination with media technology and the hypnotic allure of prosperity gospel quietly reshaped the Pentecostal attitude toward status, elitism, and the big man syndrome." The pastor, considered to be divinely anointed, became the "powerful man of God." He took over "the local image and idiom of the big man, no longer to be suspected but seen in its traditional sense."⁴ The contemporary pastor's image as the modern "big man" that replaced the traditional "big man" owed to the fact of his anointing. He became a powerful leader of the people and "as God was praised, so was his visible viceroy on earth."⁵ This earthly representative who is taken as a "superhero," Kalu noted, derived from indigenous traditions that perceive an authority figure such as a witchdoctor as chosen by the gods. In essence, the anointed pastor is the modern figuration of that local witch doctor who used to exist in traditional societies.⁶

If the perception of the anointing over a pastor's life is what gives the pastor his moral weight, the protesters' contention that everyone is equally anointed by the same God banalizes the uniqueness of such authority and power. Stating that there is nothing sufficiently exceptional about the anointing of God to put a pastor in a protected class – within a realm where he cannot be touched by social censure – is

³ Adelakun, "Black Lives Matter! Nigerian Lives Matter!"

⁴ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 114. ⁵ *Ibid.* ⁶ *Ibid.*

also making a case for a new ethical agenda that grants equal privilege to everyone regardless of their social or spiritual status. From a theological point of view, this contention is a call for the reinstatement of the moral order that the death of Jesus Christ once established. The Bible records that right after the death of Jesus, the veil of the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom.⁷ The veil was the curtain that separated the place – the holy of holies – which only the priest accessed in order to mediate between God and man; and it was a space from which ordinary congregants were barred admission. The ripping of the temple cloth, the physical and symbolic barrier between God and humans, was thus a significant event in the history of the relationship between humankind and God. It granted humans direct access to God. When these protesters argued against the singularity of the anointing, they were enacting a similar demystification of the special honors pastor have into the velvet-roped circles of power.

This radical move to democratize the anointing is a crucial one. By virtue of being born again, Christians are God's anointed. Divine anointing produces the power that helps one overcome all negative situations in life,⁸ and it also affirms one's humanity and sense of self-determination. However, in a culture where both social and supernatural relationships are denominated by power, pastor-congregation relationships too quickly mimic the hierarchical structures prevalent in the secular order such that even within the body of Christ, the equity of Christian brotherhood yields to power – the urge to use it, and the will to dominate. Just as modern technology of the 1970s was integral to the construction of the pastoral figure and his empowerment through the anointing,⁹ so has also new media technology been to the ongoing *de-construction* of the exceptionality of that anointing. I regard the stripping down of the inimitability of the anointing as part of the fallout of "see finish," which in the Nigerian pidgin vernacular means the contempt that arises out of the hyper-exposure of one's body and everything that mystifies it to the gaze of the public.

My reading of the #ChurchToo #MeToo event was that it could also have happened because the characters involved were familiar to all, not just as public figures but also because of their self-narration through images. In the case of the accuser, Busola, she was not only

⁷ Matthew 27: 50–51a. ⁸ Akintunde, "Holy Dilemma," 154.

⁹ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*.

a photographer, a career that entailed putting one’s reflection out there for public eyes, she also fit into the mold of social respectability. She was the wife of a well-known singer; she was a mother – all publicly available information which she also shares on her social media through photos and commentary. With those social credentials prefacing her accusations, many people took her seriously because they reasoned that a woman who had so much going for her was highly unlikely to stake all she had to make a frivolous accusation. Even in the press release where the pastor himself denied the accusation of rape, he too noted the relevance of her social position to the charge she made: “Looking at her status and that of her husband, I am dumbfounded by why she would say such a thing.”¹⁰

On the other hand, the pastor too was quite familiar to many people, but not necessarily through his sermons or spiritual activities. A prosperity gospel preacher and an avid user of social media, he had put up images of himself with luxury goods that went viral many times. He must have understood that anyone who can control images would also control the body politic, and such control in the age of social media involved dumping a series of photos that featured him performing economic power into the public domain. Every now and then, a blogger would pick up several of his pictures from his social media pages to profile him as “best-dressed pastor” or to note that he is “rocking a Gucci supreme tote bag” that costs this much, or to compare him with another pastor to find out which of them is classier, or to generally describe his flamboyant lifestyle.¹¹ He was frequently described as “Gucci pastor,” and the gossip about him was usually accompanied by images of him as a conspicuous consumer.

With the glut of technological devices and internet connection facilities linking previously discrete worlds, we carry our faith and even our pastors around with us at all times more than ever. The ability to see

¹⁰ <https://punchng.com/coza-pastor-fatoyinbo-denies-rape-allegation-threatens-to-sue/>

¹¹ www.gistmania.com/talk/topic,365651.0.html; <https://echonaija.com.ng/bio/din-fatoyinbo-coza-rocks-n1m-gucci-supreme-tote-bag/>; https://ke.opera.news/ke/en/entertainment/3c3f4eaba5a781ec65b2e32e2df63d61?news_entry_id=t7d61232a200627en_ke; <http://bluenews.com.ng/god-mercy-coza-pastor-goes-worldly-flaunts-bag-worth-1-million-naira>; www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tori.ng%2Fnews%2F126197%2Fphotos-of-the-flamboyant-lifestyle-of-pastor-biodu.html&psig=A0vVaw08ZmEijgXP43LExy_J-8nB&ust=1595616221007000&source=images&ccd=vfe&ved=0CA0Qjh xqFwoTCMDR3ueD5OoCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAY

their images over and over through the looking glass of our phone screens, to carry them around in our digital devices like our private possessions, turn them off or tune them out when our phone screens go into a lock mode, and even talk to them at a close range, can result in a depth of familiarity that makes viewers consider themselves eminent judges of their character. The viewer, having known them enough through their self-narration on social media, can associate certain virtues or vices to them even while having never met them physically. The point is not whether such an evaluation of their character is true or fair, but the shaping of reality through the power of perception. By the time such person accused of a crime or someone testifies about their good conduct, it resonates deeply with the audience who thinks they already know them because they have watched them perform aspects of their lives on social media.

Even before the advent of social media, Pentecostal pastors have iconized their images by repeatedly placing their photos on a range of church publicity items from electronic billboards to devotional objects.¹² In Nigerian urban space particularly, imposing billboards carrying blown-up photos of pastors (and their wives) dominate the public spaces, sometimes swallowing up other urban markers.¹³ Pastors have always known that it was not enough to embody power as God’s anointed. They also needed to be hypervisible and subsume their enlarged presence into the signs and symbols that define urban habitus. If political hegemony in modern times has depended on the ability to control images,¹⁴ then religious authority also recognized the need to assert power by making and circulating images of leadership figures as a fetish. For instance, pastors testify – and churches have encouraged congregations to do the same – that their photographs in their congregants’ homes have healed the sick, and even chased away armed robbers and kidnappers.¹⁵ This veneration of their own images is a strategic means of imbuing their disembodied self with auric power, or to put an embodied self in a selfie. Visual symbols are a veritable

¹² Ukah, “Roadside Pentecostalism.” ¹³ Ajibade, ““Lady No Be So.””

¹⁴ Conze, Prehn & Wildt, “Photography and Dictatorships in the Twentieth Century.”

¹⁵ www.lindaikojisblog.com/2019/12/bishop-oyedepo-shares-testimony-of-his-photo-speaking-in-tongues-and-saving-kidnap-victims-uti-nwachukwu-beverly-osu-and-daddy-freeze-react-video-2.html

instrument in the art of constructing power and transmitting it into everyday life,¹⁶ and adding mythos of what even pastors' illustrations can achieve with supernatural power helps maintain their position within the large web of social relations. By saturating public space with their images, either massively enlarged unto life-size electronic billboards or even printed on small souvenirs, they try to impose multiple simulations of their disembodied selves into the public sphere as means of making themselves part of the ethical ordering of the body politic. Through symbolizations of their anointing compulsively imaged before the public, memories and structures of our worlds are articulated through the frame of social references they provide. Their images become part of the instruments of facilitating cohesion to the plural meanings that are endemic to modern society and urban heterogeneity. All of these have existed before the age of social media where images began to go viral, and people could see a person until they get to the point of "see finish."

In forthcoming sections, I will explore how Pentecostal pastoral power was typically performed on church altars as a stage, and how epochs of media technological advancement caused those altars to be repatriated to social media networks where the performance of the digital self now required even catchier visual symbolizations. To implant themselves in public consciousness, powerful people in political culture have always depended on the aesthetics of power. Throughout history, these have been effected with accoutrements and props relevant to the public at that point in time and therefore resonate strongly with them. For instance, from military uniforms laden with shiny medals to animal skins draped on imperious shoulders, autocratic leaders construct ideas of power and might in the images they supply to the public sphere.¹⁷ On the power of "controlling images," Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins describes how images can be symbolically used to maintain the power structures that subjugate a marginal population.¹⁸ The key word here is "control," because just as images can be used to manipulate a population into compliance, influential figures also use their personal reflections to affirm their power and influence. Religious leaders too, representing a constituency that wants to be socially dominant, have used the same imaging techniques to

¹⁶ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 5. ¹⁷ York, *Dictator Style*.

¹⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

achieve and maintain the perception of their power as the Lord’s anointed. The public already understands the idea of the anointing because it is preached to them in church and also enacted with actual olive oil during ordination services or ritualized liturgical practices.¹⁹ In the case of this pastor, Fatoyinbo, however, in addition to the perception of non-physical anointing as a pastor, he also added to his public image the visible trappings of late capitalism and consumerism – designer labels, sports cars, tailored suits, shiny objects, and so on. These images, taken from his social media page and circulated across various social media networks, made him go viral many times.

Just like military regalia helped dictators construct an image of power, prosperity gospel preachers too understood the importance of modeling power through their sartorial choices and other material goods. While there were spiritual and physical threats of violence militating against the children of God, poverty was also an existential issue they battled with daily. In a social context like Nigeria where poverty was rife and carried over across generations, the prosperity gospel knew to speak to the social situation that imperiled daily life by demonizing poverty. By that, I mean that the instinctively understood operations of demonic forces were commuted into metaphors and were used to explain people’s social condition. Rather than poverty being a consequence of larger structural and political forces, it took on the idioms of spiritualism – the spirit of poverty, the spirit of lack and want, the spirit of unemployment, the spirit of generational poverty, the spirit of hunger and deprivation, etc. By turning poverty into a horror that could be overcome by personal spiritual striving, poor people were blamed for their own poverty.²⁰ Ultimately, demonized poverty induces fear in people; the fear of being despised and denigrated as that abject monstrous figure that is unworthy of occupying certain places with other humans and should be legitimately exorcised.

In demonizing poverty, prosperity gospel preachers reiterate that Christ had already been done the spiritual work necessary to free people from the clutches of poverty and sickness on the cross, and anyone still trapped in those conditions of deprivations was there out of choice. People take such blame from their pastors seriously, and they

¹⁹ Asamoah-Gyadu, “Anointing through the Screen”; Asaju, “Noise, Fire and Flame,” 95.

²⁰ Vengeyi, ““Zimbabwean Poverty Is Man-Made!””

begin to see themselves and their social condition as blotches on God's perfection. One woman in a prosperity gospel preaching church shared a testimony of how fervently she prayed for a financial breakthrough, saying she would look at her material condition in relation to the wealth the pastor preached and which even other wealthy congregants had, and then pray to God that she would not be turned into an object of insult against the God of her church's pastor.²¹ The unsettling image of being poor, or being possessed by the spirit of poverty, while at the same time being surrounded by lavish promises of divine prosperity pushes people to be more resolute in confronting their social condition. The demonization of poverty places responsibility on their own efforts such that their resolve to overcome poverty by any means necessary is shored up. They are driven to pray even more fiercely and more urgently. Where their human ability to transcend poverty runs up against incapacitating structural factors, the demonization of poverty also helps people create a moral justification to sidestep their religious values and do whatever helps to make them rich.

As demonized poverty breeds urgency in people to see an estranged version of themselves through a magisterial lens that also casts them as a problem, it also further correlates with other production forces such as late capitalism and neoliberalism. From the earlier period when the idea of wealth and consumption dogged Pentecostal organizations,²² people now mostly see money as about the only remaining visible symbol of spirituality. Money is "the supreme good" and those that possess it are considered good and godly persons too.²³ Those whose lives do not typify financial power are treated as living antithetically to the truth of divine blessing. Within a neoliberal order that takes its rationalizing logic from religious culture, those of lower social class are treated like Satan who chose to rebel against God and whose casting into hellfire is therefore justified. Framed in such legalistic terms, the message of prosperity gospel preachers does not blame larger systemic forces for the precarity of human lives, but rather makes it principally about individual righteousness. Those who fall by the wayside, like Satan himself, are simply living lives that are consequent of their wayward or imprudent choices.²⁴ Those who manage to claw out of

²¹ This came from testimony I listened to while attending church service.

²² Meyer, "Pentecostalism and Neo-liberal Capitalism."

²³ www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm

²⁴ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*.

those conditions are those who made the right choices to be free from the spirit of lack and want, and who are now free to consume voraciously to assert the side of the divide to which they belong.

Prosperity gospel also helps the creation and condemnation of devils by shaping a sacralized "self" that will symbolize the good/light/God with the power – the immense wealth, that is – to vanquish poverty-causing devils. God, of course, does not appear materially but His viceroys on earth, the pastor, could take His place and have us look at them as if we were looking *up* to God. Looking itself is part of our religious formation process, and the practice of it is an expression of belief.²⁵ Pastors spectacularize themselves and make their embodied self the visual focal point and point of contact to divine power. Thus, the duty of the anointed pastor of prosperity gospel as a model on the runway of social culture performing the highest ideal of what people's lives should look like – rich, comfortable, happy, relaxed, happily married, healthy bodies – is legitimized for the church audience. That is how the pastor as a Pentecostal subject uses those markers to attain and sustain power identity. It is to this idealized image that congregants sow their seeds – tithes and other special offerings – as a point of contact toward escaping from demonic poverty, the hellfires of their perilous social conditions, and establishment of their own power identity. It was this image that had virally circulated on social media, the one people had seen and "see finish," before the pastor was hit with accusations of moral turpitude.

Pastoral Performances and the Power of Looking

As a consecrated space, altars were traditionally the stage where ritualized religious activities took place. They are typically distinct from the rest of the church, and the architectural style and ornamentation intensify the belief that the space is endowed with holiness and power. There is a mostly elevated dais where the officiating priest, clothed in religious regalia, solemnly carries out their officiating function before the audience sitting some distance across from the altar. The architecture of church altars varies across historical eras and church denominations, but they were mainly attached to the wall while the areas bordering them consisted of various relics, elaborate art pieces, and sacramental

²⁵ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 3.

items, all of which converge to infuse the space with a sense of sacredness. Like the proscenium theatre stage, they offered close to maximum visibility for the man of God from all parts of the church.

However, with the Pentecostal mode of worship came a reconstitution of the altar space to suit the character of church rites. From the classic notion of a shrine laden with sacred relics that bestows sacred authority on the priest, Pentecostalism invented a modern space aesthesized with artifacts of modernity and the artistry of trained set designers. Their worship space got rid of the traditional architecture such as stone pillars around the altar space, artifacts, and even opaque and fixed pulpits. In their place – particularly in the megachurches – came booming speakers, large projector screens and flatscreen TV, moveable glass pulpits (or less opaque ones), artificial flowers (used for decoration), colorful drapes, and twinkle lights. Much of the sense of the sacred that the orthodox churches used to effect through the items they place on the altar gave way, but that sense of sacred power endowing the altar has remained quite strong in the Pentecostal church through other means. The profundity of the messages and the ability of religious messages to make meaning no longer relied on relics and sculpture but on the presence of the Lord, the pastor's anointing, his pulpit-craft (that is, his charisma as a performer), and the excitable responses of the audience. The idea of sacred in this re-figuration of the altar no longer derived from museum sculpture pieces laid out on the altar but the human figure in whose living and moving body all the symbolic articles of the sacred now converge. In Pentecostal hierarchy, this was the pastor.

With the altar now mostly free of constraints, pastors got more demonstrative in their preaching. Like the altars and space in orthodox churches, the spatial arrangement of Pentecostal churches is also designed around maximum viewership of pastors as they walk to and fro along the length of the altar, preaching and praying. The thrills of their energetic preaching and vocal pyrotechnics stimulate the earnestness of worship among the congregants who actively engage with the sight of their pastor on stage. Those pastors who have an extended altar space in their big churches also run across its entire length. They jump. They gesticulate. They also shout. When they speak, they modulate their tones as required. They mimic other voices. They crack jokes. They move from the altar directly into the congregation space. They look people in the eyes. They sing and dance more freely. In place of the pastor's natural voice permeating the church, there are now cordless

and lavalier microphones to carry their voices through in the church as they strut around. Also, because most pastors wear suits, they also move much more freely without their expressivity constrained by elaborate costumes. For those whose spiritual gifts include deliverance, they exorcize demons around the altar. Some lay hands on people around the altar space. For churches with well-known pastors and who receive special guests – such as politicians and captains of industry – part of the expansive altar (or some close distance to it) also serves as a seating place for these guests. The reconstitution of the altar space where the Pentecostal pastor performs has been helpful to establish power in the supernatural, moral, and even political senses, because watching the pastor perform at the altar has greatly contributed to the understanding of those forms of power. The church in itself is a place of power because it is the house of God, the place where His spirit descends to fellowship with His children. For churches where politicians fellowship with the congregation, seeing pastors being solicited by the political class converges the moral and supernatural power embodied by the pastor with political power. As active spectators, the congregation discerns through looking, how the activities taking place on the altar establish the connections between these forms of power.

Now surrounded by the accoutrements of modernity, when the pastor is at the altar, he is twice seen: first, as a real-life person and second, as a hyper-magnified image projected through super-sized screens. The sizes vary according to the wealth and size of the church, and some churches now have an entire wall of the altar space backgrounded by a screen that enormously magnifies the pastor’s image to tower before the congregation. As televangelism made closer scrutiny possible, pastors realized they must not only speak the word, but they must look the part as well. Close-up shots on their magnified appearance meant their proclamation of the goodness of God had to be made self-evident. When people see their bodies projected on those massive screens, they must look as flawless as possible. Their appearance must be compelling and true to the gospel they preach. More than the screens that enhance the pastoral figure visualization, the spatial arrangement of cavernous auditoriums typically mimics that of theatre houses, where the audience sits in the dark looking up at the lighted and elevated stage opposite them. At some point, the lights might be turned on inside those churches. With the blinding illumination, all the

shadows are exorcised and worshippers are exposed to the glare of divine revelation.

Even when there is no ongoing action on stage, or between one session of the program to another, the audience is continually stimulated through enormous screens and projectors. They feature a kaleidoscope of virtual psychedelia that teasingly lightens the church arena. The hypnotizing art onscreen alternates with warm multicolored disco lights turned on and off at calculated points during the service, and combine to intensify the church experience. And even though the church service can already be visually overwhelming, this is combined with audio effect thunderous enough to make the church's very grounds vibrate under the feet of thousands of worshippers. Although the visual and aural stimuli are already intense, fog machines emit colored smoke when the church rapturously shouts, "Halleluyah!" The combined immersive experience of immediacy, liveness, haptic technologies, and a maniac charge that feels no different from standard theatre and its instrumentation of the sensuous.

The altar is that affective space where deft combination of graphics and design itself invites a critical study in the subfield of scenography – the creation of the visuality in the space the stage occupies – in theatre and performance studies.²⁶ The altar is an aesthetically fashioned space that, by virtue of its consecration, becomes ritualized by believers, "who ... motivated by the belief that the Altar is a locus of divine power, stake their claim on a better life"²⁷ and whose excitable practices can turn it into "sites of superfluous emotionalism."²⁸ For Pentecostal worshippers, the altar space soaks in the divine power that descends during the worship service. It is not unusual for believers to make a frantic rush to the altar at the close of the service to "tap" into the anointing that had permeated the space. According to theatre artist Chukwuma Okoye,

The space surrounding (the altar) is particularly saturated, thereby making it once-removed from the general church geography and twice-removed from the everyday. This holiest space is the stage which holds the altar, and is effectively more circumscribed than the conventional theatre stage:

²⁶ Collins & Nisbet, *Theatre and Performance Design*, xxiii.

²⁷ Osinulu, "The Road to Redemption," 7. ²⁸ Crawley, "Let's Get It On!"

geographically, it is usually elevated, aesthetically, it is more decorated, spiritually, it hosts a more concentrated presence of the Holy Ghost, strategically, it constitutes the visual focus for everyone who is not on it, and manually, it is policed by security personnel in dark suits who forcefully discourage unwarranted invasion.²⁹

In some churches, when the congregation is touched by the message and its ministration, even while the service is ongoing, they drop money, jewelry, or other treasured items in the altar's offering baskets or on the altar itself.³⁰ They plant their offerings as seeds to manifest in their lives the truth and the power of the message they were hearing from the altar.

The evolution of the altar as a space for the pastor to display his charisma and artistic virtuosity owes its success to the development of technologies that made those devices possible. The changes are also a function of the focus on prosperity gospel teachings that demanded that the church space and worship services reflect the promises of transformation that the sermons of abundance and happiness guarantees to the congregation. Generally, any physical changes to the church's design, ideas of ornamentation, and furnishing styles are "intimately connected to religious, social, and cultural transformations,"³¹ taking place within the society. At the same time, those physical changes also reflect an evolution in both theology and liturgy, the church's attempts at enhancement of congregational participation in the sermons, and the innovativeness necessary to compete with other churches. For Pentecostalism to have fully accommodated prosperity gospel, churches also had to gradually change their worship modes from somber affairs of mostly prayer and sermons that reflected the strict holiness and asceticism of the early stages of the Pentecostal revival to more sensational forms that thrill as much as they convince with their spectacles. Other additions to church style also came in the form of popular dances and songs, live drama, and even stand-up comedy performances.

As the prosperity gospel got popular and drove people to church, the festive atmosphere needed for it to be credible with their congregation required more tweaking.³² The church, in preaching the gospel in

²⁹ Okoye, "Technologies of Faith Performance."

³⁰ I witnessed this during services at a church I attended as a member for years.

³¹ Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre*.

³² Bowler & Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder."

which God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above people's imagination, also replicates the exuberance and spectacle of excess in the expression of joyful worship. Prosperity gospel celebrates capitalist consumerism, and thus its liturgy too had to accommodate a celebratory atmosphere complete with a dazzling choreography of acoustics, visual displays, and a sensation(alism) that turned the average Pentecostal church into a sensorium where people could luxuriate in the excess of happiness and pleasure they were trusting God to make happen in their personal lives. Pastoral appearance too had to correspond with the message of abundance. It was not enough to look healthy and wealthy at a basic level; they had to look superlatively glamorous and convincingly play the part of the kingdom businessman whose duty was to convince people that God was indeed good and could give them a better life. The pastor's body, oiled to perfection, emitted symbols of prosperity and wellness, a testimony to the self-evidential truth of their gospel. The altar space and the pastor's acting skills were aestheticized too, choreographed to be telegenic, that is, to fit into the visual character of the television medium or the various projection screens that dot the altar. All worked together as an advertisement of the transforming power of faith.

While the altar is the stage where the pastor exhibits his artistic virtuosity, the stage is also occasionally shared with the audience. New converts occupy the altar during the "altar call" where they give their lives to Jesus Christ, and the conversion journey begins. Also, newcomers are sometimes invited to the altar to get a handshake with the pastor who welcomes them to the fold. Other activities also take place in the altar space, such as testimony time – that time during church service when congregation members also get a chance to perform through their personal stories of conquest that they have crafted and rehearsed to deliver before the congregation – though in some churches, the practice of people coming physically to the altar to share their testimonies has evolved to projecting just their images. For instance, I noticed that in some churches, the photograph of the testifier smiling brightly is projected on the massive screen onstage and captioned with a brief summary of their narration. Although a pastor also reads out the testimony, all attention is focused on the image that looms on the massive screen.³³

³³ This is also a technique to cut down time as some church members spend a significant amount of time relating their well-rehearsed testimonies, often

Despite active congregational participation and the congregation's responsiveness throughout the service, the pastor is still the star of every church service. He is the bearer of the message of prosperity and abundant life for all. His duty to "sell" the redeeming hope in God to the congregation relies on demonstration as much as it does on the inspiration of the message. With trained vocalists who effortlessly move from chanting God's praise in indigenous oral forms to the Bible, music jazzed up to high amplitude and played by a choir trained to deftly combine African talking drums with electric guitars, the congregation sings and dances in joyful celebration before God. As the Pentecostal worship service is a combination of catharsis, recreation, devotion, display, piety, and play, people immerse themselves in the activities that precede the sermon.³⁴ When they have been well-primed, the pastor gets on the altar and begins to relay his message with words and gestures. The foreknowledge of the anointing of God on him, the passion with which he addresses the church, the techniques he deploys to get the congregation to participate, and the precarious social conditions that drove them to church all combine to affectively move them. The transforming power they came to solicit God for is produced in the minds of the congregation during worship services. At the end of the sermon, when asked to pray, they do so with ardor – a potent blend of kinetics, emotions, and symbolic expressions.³⁵ It does not stop there.

Beyond moving people to pray or worship animatedly, the joyful excitement stimulated during church activities makes the phantasm of power and the power of phantasm isomorphic. The pastor's body, already a locus of various forms of power can – especially in those intense moments of spiritual laboring – generate erotic charges. Such development is not merely incidental, but a consequence of a conscious structuring of church experience to be sensational and sensuous enough to induce the erotic.³⁶ As sociologist Ebenzer Obadare noted in his study of Pentecostal pastors, the virtuosity of pastoral performance under the influence of the spirit while being watched by

going beyond the allotted time. Alternatively, this could have been devised to prevent people from saying things that could embarrass the church; that often happens.

³⁴ Wariboko, "West African Pentecostalism."

³⁵ Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*; Wariboko, "African Pentecostalism."

³⁶ Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion."

a multitude can also be powerful and hypnotizing. The power does not just come from the immediacy of that experience but is also a function of a social atmosphere already saturated with talks about sex and the pastor himself who is, “nonetheless drawn into a drama of self-fashioning in which dressing, mode of preaching, aesthetics, personal ‘tone’, automobile . . . a vast personal entire repertory, is sexually charged.”³⁷ Like Obadare, religious studies scholar Kevin O’Neill’s research on Christian eroticism in postwar Guatemala locates the eroticism in politics. O’Neill explores the conscious ways that Pentecostal churches deploy eroticism to speak to a younger generation whose conversion trajectory – unlike that of an older generation that tells stories of rupture – can be politicized through the erotic. While both Obadare and O’Neill’s arguments on Pentecostal eroticism move on the spectrum of depoliticization and repoliticization of the body, I see the efforts as far more introverted. That feeling of ecstasy that people experience while worshipping is not only useful for politics of the public sphere, but to intimately bond the congregation with their pastors.

The erotic sensation in the context of religious worship is also a consequence of the openness with which the liturgy event is approached. Spiritual activities require a full opening up of the self to invalidate the supposed borders between the supernatural and the natural realms, and the worshipper comes ready to indulge the entire gamut of their senses while at worship. In those moments of passionate worship within the bounded space of the church when people observed their pastors at a close range, the pastor’s performance on the altar fosters intimacy with the congregation because they are sharing themselves with the church both physically and spiritually. When the pastor stands on the altar in church from a god-like height where the expectant congregation looks up to him with their denuding gaze on his body, the phantasmal engineering of the human imagination transmutes the image of the God the Father onto the male pastor, His earthly viceroy. The biopsychic activation of the divine, especially in moments of religious worship, is simultaneously erotic. The sensual stimulation of the religious comes from the same libidinal sources that power sexual acts.³⁸ The church administrators, well understanding how such

³⁷ Obadare, “The Charismatic Porn-Star.” ³⁸ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

moments of triggered passions can be transgressive, try to impose some level of order and control on worship activities because,

Together, worship and worshippers' bodies become a site for the production of ecstasy, jouissance, and bliss. For some believers, the pleasures come from the excitement of the body and its senses; and for others, they are from pure contemplation of the divine or possible encounter with the Holy Spirit. *The former pleasure, though it is given space in worship, is also surveilled so that it does not exceed its limits.*³⁹

The last sentence (emphasis mine) hits on something quite important: the notion of control in Pentecostal activities. Despite the boisterousness of worship and the emphasis of visual stimulation by pastors who needed to make the exuberance of prosperity gospel a visceral experience, there is some measure of control to the whole architecture of worship from where pastors also derive their moral power. They control the symbols and also regulate the range of feelings.⁴⁰ In the next section, I demonstrate how the variables that have helped pastors to put their bodies on the altar before the gaze of an audience while still moderating the symbols went out of the bounds of their surveillance when staged on the social media. Unlike the church altar where the congregation could look at their bodies in live performance on the altar but could not "see finish," social media multiplied the pastor's digital body so often that people could begin to see through the pastor's mystique.

³⁹ Wariboko, *West African Pentecostalism*, 6.

⁴⁰ Despite all the appearance of glam, the splendid bombardment of stimulation, and the suggestion of the expansiveness of the altar as an arena where the play and imagination of the sacred would not be constrained, the discipline and control of the economy of pleasure during the service is also effected with a rather mundane item that in itself emblemizes modernity's control of the infiniteness of time: a clock (see John David North). In one of the church sites that I studied, the intricate metal beams that form the church ceiling, far above the head of the congregation had been rigged a computer monitor with a digital clock that counted down for everyone on the stage who ministered. As I observed, when the time set for each performer was up, no matter what they were doing and how much the audience was enjoying their act, the clock hushed them off the stage with clear instructions that come up on the screen. The only time the clock enforcement of time regulation was suspended was when the pastor was preaching. He could go over time, but the clock did not count against him.

Pastoral Performances in the Age of Instagram

During my fieldwork with social media departments of some Pentecostal churches, one of my observations was how churches not only used social networks as an electronic extension of the church but also strategically as a digital altar to exhibit the pastor as an objectified figure discharging embodied supernatural power. Churches have learned that by going on social media networks, they would invariably attract a “mixed multitude.”⁴¹ That is, a congregation of people who are not necessarily on their pages for purposes of worship and might not even be Christian. Now they have had to face up to the reality that with the technology of social media, all kinds of crowds, even the “mixed multitude” should be welcome because they keep the church’s social media handle animated. In the age of the Internet, the reality is that “the body of Christ exceeds the limits of Christian membership. In the era of globalization and the emergence of the global commons, the worldwide body of Christ has become one immense, cosmopolitan city or *world city*.”⁴² The church’s media personnel, through their work, extended how pastors performed power to people who could now congregate on the Internet. The seat of pastoral authority, performance, and influence from the altar were simulated on social media networks using glossy images as a creative resource to engineer and reinforce ideas of the pastor as the big man of the big God. To this end, churches center their pastor in their display of church-making activities. Most of them now have a social media handle, and the pastor has one named after him as well (and for some of the churches, the pastor’s handle has more followers than the church organization itself).⁴³ With those digital altars, the followers of Jesus Christ have seamlessly morphed into the pastor’s Twitter/Instagram followers and to type “amen” to pastor’s images and the accompanying caption of prayer

⁴¹ This term came from Exodus 12:38. The Bible mentioned that when the Israelites left the enslavement of Egypt, some Egyptians went with them. As foreigners, they were the “mixed multitude,” the polluting outsider to God’s nation.

⁴² Wariboko, *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion*, 169.

⁴³ As Rosalind Hackett observed in *The New Virtual (Inter) Face of African Pentecostalism*, pastors are the lead characters in their church’s narrative on its website. Church websites are built around them such that they are both a “portal” providing access to the scope of their organization, and an “endpoint,” and this is because “all roads lead to him as the centre of operations.”

is now a form of active spiritual participation in itself. This evolution did not happen providentially. Within a digital milieu where the vitality of the church correlates with its social media presence, religious leaders have reshaped ideas of access, interaction, participation, and religious creativity to meet up with the swirling demands of many contexts generated by interfaces of humans and algorithms.⁴⁴ Churches work hard to insert themselves into digital spheres where their messages, most now commuted into images and accompanied with minimal text, sail on the vast sea of other free-floating images. With that insertion and institutionalization of themselves into cyber-world structures also came a deluge of public interactions with churches through their social media pages that necessitated the setting up of a social media department with a workforce that managed the virtual church. Those social media workers therefore not only work to sustain the domain of the church from a physical space to the borderless possibilities of the cyber sphere, they also have to respond to reactions to pastors' messages, and they sometimes have had to push back against criticisms and attacks on their churches and pastors.

For their various social media pages, these churches have retained official professional photographers for their church services. The photographers take many photos during service, which they quickly sieve through sometimes even while the church service is still ongoing. The officials of the church's media department select the most animated of the images, mostly those that show the pastors in moments of spiritual labor where they were either preaching, praying, or even snagging moments of intimate pleasure such as dancing during praise/worship sessions. The choices of pastors' bodies on the pulpit stage, crisscrossing the material and transcendental realms while they minister before the church, are invaluable for demonstrating the pastor's spiritual charisma and artistic virtuosity. The church staff also selects images of the pastor's wife too either when she is ministering, or even sitting down and watching service proceedings with a look of deep concentration etched on her face. If they had a guest preacher, the same yardsticks of choosing images that illustrate attentiveness and response are mostly applied. The selection criteria also apply to the regular church members. The social media department chooses their images for the most vibrant expressions of responsiveness. They opt for those poses

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Drescher, *Tweet if You [Heart] Jesus*.

where the church members are either enthusiastically responding to the pastor's messages or praying or have their hands lifted to the heavens or even dancing. Those high-resolution photos of the pastors and congregation are primarily selected for how much they flatter those captured within them as they perform worship and how they can convince viewers on those social media pages about the potency of the message emanating from the man of God.

When the choice images of pastors and congregation are contrivedly linked together in a series uploaded on their social media pages, it comes across as a linear connection between two sides – the performer and audience, the pastor and the congregation. Although the nature of photographic images ostensibly mute or freeze their subjects as mere visual objects, the images of pastors shared on these sites must “capture” them in the act of performing spiritual power – generating and distributing it. They must be “in action” to retain the perception of their power in the minds of onlookers who see them as a projection of spiritual power that is produced during acts of worship. The images of the congregation too must depict (mostly) individual responses to the images of the pastor performing on the altar, to strengthen ideas about his performative power and the hold of his charisma on them. The selection of individuals who are worshipping in the church, sometimes with their eyes closed and their hands raised to the heavens or even shedding tears or with exultant looks on their faces as they sang and danced, gives more credibility to the message the social media department want to project. A photo series of singular individuals feel more personal and authentic than photos of a mass of people unless in the instances where people have formed a dance circle during the services. When these officials share images of a crowd, it is to show that their church is either large or growing. They want to show that they have the numbers, they are becoming popular, and that this is happening because the pastor's message is true and attracting followers. So, on one hand, they share images of the pastor in their spiritual labor and, on the other hand, those of the congregation in moments of receptivity. These carefully selected images – pastors and the congregation conjoined within a call-and-response format – become a handcrafted encounter between the pastor and congregation. After the social media department has uploaded the images during or after the services, they track the public reaction. They note which photos compel viewers' fingers to the “like” and “love” buttons and then double down on

sharing more of those types of images. Throughout the week, they also share more of the pastors’ photos to which they have appended excerpts from sermons on their various social media handles across the networks – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on.⁴⁵ They also make them into publicity materials to announce coming services.

All of these are, of course, possible because of the ubiquity of the technological devices enabling access to social networks. Social media presented pastors with new digital altars and they try to simulate the erotic economy of worship they had mastered on physical altars for a broader audience presently reaching them across wireless connections. If God has always revealed Himself to humans through visions, the social media further enabled pastors to spruce up the imaging of God’s working power through the photos they share as complements to the gospel message. Modern communication technology expanded the range of narrative/textual possibilities and brought the opportunity for them to expand the sphere of their acts in mediated formats that use still images and short videos.⁴⁶ For pastors, it also means they can use their self-representation to visualize the image of God, restructure modes of relating to Him as worshippers, and simulate new aesthetics of persuasion.

Still, thanks to this same digital technology that has allowed anointed men of God to wield images and visual symbols in the production of power, the ownership and control of images are now far more democratized. Unlike live performances, we can now see pastors at a much closer range than from the separating distance of raised altars in the church. Unlike during the days of TV broadcasts where we saw their images fleetingly, we see it more closely, for longer, and we even touch it intimately. They encourage people to touch the TV screens portraying their images to receive healings, anointing, and blessings. Also, unlike the era of paper photography, their images are now more portable. We can call up images at will on our smartphones. With social media and networking sites such as Instagram and the proliferation of

⁴⁵ Where necessary, this team also defends the pastors. They create profiles through which they respond to issues concerning pastors during social media conversations or arguments.

⁴⁶ Baruh, “Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television”; Codone, “Megachurch Pastor Twitter Activity”; Hutchings, “The Dis/Embodied Church: Worship, New Media and the Body”; White, Tella, & Ampofo. “A Missional Study of the Use of Social Media (Facebook) by Some Ghanaian Pentecostal Pastors.”

mobile phones, the endless human fascination with its own double finally finds an outlet. Each one of us, allowed a Narcissus's mirror, creates portable souvenirs of our own selves and reproduces them on other people's timelines. The techno-cultural changes engendered by the social media created a revolving door between the showmanship on the stage of the altar and on social networks, with one major addition now though: the diverse audience could also respond in real time and from remote locations. With such endless possibilities, pastors now face the reality of a world where the new wave of interactivity that allows them to assert their presence also, by the hyper-exposure the social media promotes, corrodes the world where myths obscured their human foibles and flaws.

After Ese Walter's accusations had fizzled out without an official response from the pastor, people moved on. However, the pastor, Fatoyinbo, continued to float on social media, even along with his choice of words, "robust response" which became an insider joke among Nigerians. The term "robust response" now emblemizes a promise of public accountability not intended to be kept. Apart from bloggers who frequently wrote about the pastor's sense of style and love for expensive stuff, he also actively promoted himself with images showing off his designer gear, sport cars, power bikes, gold-plated décor, and other signifiers of wealth. For a preacher whose church was also called "The Wealthy Place," he took care to look the part. His well-posed images with the luxury items went viral, cutting through the noise and endless uproarious chatter that characterize the Internet. He and his posh stuff grabbed the public eye, summoning a wide voyeuristic audience who wanted to ogle the lush green pastures of their pastors' personal lives on Instagram. Several images of him with his Porsche (with plate number GRACE 1-1) parked inside the church compound would be used as church publicity material. The flyer would show the image of a pastor standing tall inside the church compound. The Porsche would be visible in the background, and on the lower part of the poster would be written the church website address. The logo would be displayed, while another section would feature an announcement of the artiste who would give a church concert.⁴⁷ That flyer itself would say a lot already, but bloggers would pick the image

⁴⁷ The choir name is "Avalanche," a description that has ironic undertones for a church that premises excessiveness in all its public appearances.

and announce how they had run the model through the manufacturer's website and had found the price.

As one of his profile images – which several articles used to promote their news stories and gossip about him – he shared a picture of himself posing and checking himself out in what looked like a mirror, his frame tilted outwards to the viewer at about a 45 degrees angle. The pose and the angle show a man taking a picture that he is aware is destined for social media; hence he was already conscious of us watching him watch us. The image, feeding our voyeuristic instincts with an objectified version of himself, urges us to imbibe on the visage of the man of God. While the viewer cannot see the pastor's double in the mirror he seemed to be looking into, we see the photo on Instagram through the lenses of our mobile devices anyway. Sensing that he must be looking into a mirror as we look at him, we also conjure a visual echo of him in that looking glass. This doubling of the double means that the more we stare at the man of God, the more his image and likeness is multiplied in our eyes and in our minds. In the background of that same photo were various indoor décor items that let off a golden sheen, both accessorizing him and conveying his love for dazzling displays. He has at least one other photograph taken in that same spot and using the same pose too. With carefully selected spots in his private spaces and his church, he would frequently put his accessorized and aestheticized body on display, making multiple viewers crane their necks and gaze at the totems of upward mobility he had put on that body.⁴⁸ While sweltering in the heat of the #ChurchToo campaign, the media reported him to have thanked the church members for their support of him, "their best-dressed pastor in town."⁴⁹ Spontaneously coming in a moment of his vulnerability, this admission confirmed that his peacocking was a purposeful strategy to attract viewership to his body. However, staring at those viral pictures of him in flashy apparel could also be denuding because people could see him so often and at close range

⁴⁸ The pastor is one of the very few Africans who has been profiled on Instagram accounts such as *preachersnsneakers* and *prophetsnatches*. These accounts post photographs of celebrity church leaders wearing a pricy clothing item such as shoes and watches. They find the price online, and place it right next to the preacher's photo. Fatoyinbo is one of those featured who wears very expensive items.

⁴⁹ www.thecable.ng/extra-im-the-best-dressed-pastor-in-town-says-fatoyinbo

that their admiring gaze could graduate to scrutiny or a deconstruction.⁵⁰

The fate of art in the age of mechanical reproduction is that a circulated and viral image of a pastor would be too banal to conjure the erotic sensations that happen within the confines of a church worship service. The images from the digital altar might be shared and admired. It might even be accompanied by Bible verses and even depict men of God at prayer while a congregation listens or fervently prays along with them, but it does not compel the thrilling erotic charges that occur in live worship where actual bodies mingle. The viral circulation of images of powerful religious figures overshadows the mystique of their body, and the authenticating force of eroticism that people feel in live worship is replaced by the “digital disincarnation” of the pastoral body.⁵¹ As I noted earlier, pastors too try to mystify their photos such that the image does not become cheapened by overcirculation. For instance, during the 2019 annual convention of Winners’ Chapel, *Shiloh*, Bishop Oyedepo told the story of a woman who had been kidnapped and held in a forest along with some others who were “tied down like slaves.” The Bishop narrated that as the kidnappers were coming to take the woman’s baby from her, she reacted by flinging her bag at them. A Shiloh publicity flyer that had his photo on it inside her bag fell out and he – the Bishop, that is – began to speak in tongues from the flyer. He said the kidnappers all fell down, paralyzed by the power of God. The woman and her fellow captives escaped from their den. Of course, the story was severely ridiculed by social media denizens, but it is still important to note pastors tell these stories about their photos to assert their power and control even outside the bounds of their church. With their photos mushroomed on all kinds of banal materials and sequestered from the contexts that imbue it with cult value, they deliberately stir libidinous urges by telling stories with visualizable details (for instance, saying people were “tied down like slaves”). The Bishop even advanced the plot of his narration by evoking shared understanding of a mother’s protective urges that was so strong it compelled divine power. By introducing their photos – the simulacra

⁵⁰ As Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel noted in their study of the “deconstructed church,” to deconstruct is to resist institutionalization by regular questioning of practices and beliefs.

⁵¹ Challies, *The Next Story*, 100.

of themselves that transcended space and time – into those sites of contestation between good and evil, pastors become superheroes.

Within the church space, their spiritual laboring could foster intimacy to fuse the congregation, myths, and sensibilities enough for them to build relationships and even maintain control over them. Outside that space, the odds could not be as easily coordinated. For some people, the images of Porsche that advertised the pastor and his church might seem as rather too tacky and antithetical to the humility expected of Christians, but the people for whom the poverty had been demonized saw the financial prosperity he illustrated as aspirational. In a culture where people are either quite poor or where their middle-class status is planked on economic and political vagaries, wealth – particularly one sacralized with the name of Jesus – is a universal solvent. The images might lack the aura and intimacy that joint worship fosters, but the social media display was still a realistic exaggeration of their private imagination of their most idealized self. They would be drawn to his church while hoping the bestowed blessing of the gospel he celebrated before their eyes would be tautological. To this set of people, his worldly goods represented the triumph of God over the spirit of poverty. The rape accusations, to them, were a satanic attack against divine conquest and they were more driven to protect him against what they saw as persecution.

At the time the issues of Busola Dakolo’s allegations raged, I viewed one of the church’s online promotional videos that narrated their history from their lowly days to now occupying prime estate in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. They showed off the church exterior, a well-designed architectural piece that stood out among rather tepid architecture in many Nigerian urban spaces. The video has been posted four years earlier but with the new development of the rape accusations, people searched out the church and those online archival materials attracted more views and comments. One of the commenters, Seyi Olatunji wrote, “Haaaha, keep going. The devil is finished, Jesus won. More grace to you sir.” Another person, Chris Israel, added “Wow!!! This man of God carries grace. No wonder there is a demand for his life and soul in hell. The Lord will see him through. May mercy and the blood prevail over guilt and judgement! Pastor Biodun, grace and mercy will speak for u!” Someone else named lovelyceleb Okoye wondered what the truth was. She asked, “I lack words, I don’t know which is true? Could this man doing this much for God at

the same time be destroying the lives of young ladies???" J mime Ministry responded to her, "Who does that? ... Who invest this much in the things of God and destroys it ... The devil is only against the church of God."⁵² To these people, personal virtue might well be discernible from images. The sexual assault scandals the pastor faced only made him a more compelling Christian subject. His wealth as a child of God made him fit into the biblical tropes of the persecuted who deserved protection from an unrelenting world.

For others who went out to protest at the church and asked the pastor to step down, insisting that everyone was equally anointed, seeing a pastor whose fetish was consumer goods rankled. One photo after the other, they had seen enough of him to get to the point of see finish, the endpoint where the oversharing and overviewing wore off the mystique of the images. Social relations now somewhat leveled, they questioned the concept of the anointing as it was traditionally understood. His glaring obsession with being seen as the wealthy pastor of the wealthy made him so familiar with people that they thought they could see through him; oversharing himself had structured new visual literacies of his power performance. When people reach the disenchanting point of see finish, they also make synesthetic connections between seemingly disparate stimuli. Familiar things begin to disclose themselves through a flash of insight. In those moments, we creatively intuit new meanings into old and existing symbols. For those who had seen the pastor exhibit himself and his love for clothes, cars, designer gear, and expensive goods, the various accusations against him conflated the lasciviousness of his material consumption habit with his perceived sexual appetites. Once considered exclusive, the anointing was now seen to have served the tawdry habit of conspicuous consumption and the celebrity culture of Instagram. If even anointed men of God on social media have to force a redirection of eyes toward themselves to snag the lean spaces of popularity like regular Instagram celebrities, then what magic is there to the anointing? Without an attendant ennobling humility and a distinctive behavior, the anointing felt like something anyone could claim regardless of their social or spiritual status. It was like the moment people saw through the holy of holies at the death of Jesus on the cross, and the priestly class lost all their claim to elite social privileges. If the anointing that has always

⁵² www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTcSy8iSx2o

been taken to be an exclusive preserve of men called of God could be oriented toward the compulsive consumerism of the Instagram Age, then why cannot everyone claim it? Why should people who demonstrate worldly taste have it both ways by living like social media celebrities and yet avoid a similar level of scrutiny? With that questioning attitude, protesters marched to the church with several of their placards reading, “We are all the Lord’s Anointed.”

Crowd-Sourcing Justice in the Court of Public Opinion

At the time of this writing, the rape saga with Busola Dakolo and the pastor has more or less reached an impasse. The #MeToo #ChurchToo protests that led the pastor to step down from his position turned out to be the easy part. The case was officially reported to the police but the Nigerian Police generally lacks the institutional autonomy and resources necessary for an adequate rape investigation, especially one involving high profile figures. Some months after her allegation became a hullabaloo, Busola Dakolo cried out that she was being intimidated by the police who were supposed to investigate the case.⁵³ When the story of police intimidation of her family was reported in the media, the nation’s first lady, Mrs. Aisha Buhari, intervened on her behalf by tweeting on her personal page, “ATTENTION: INSPECTOR GENERAL OF POLICE #SayNoToRape #JusticeForRapeVictims #SayNoToIntimidation.”⁵⁴ The police, embarrassed at the negative attention, pulled back and stated that all they wanted from the couple was to serve them official invitation letters to appear at the police station to aid investigations.⁵⁵ Church union organizations such as Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and Christian Association of Nigeria distanced themselves from the issue.⁵⁶ When Pastor Adeboye, the patriarch of Nigerian Pentecostalism, was pressured to intervene, he did not issue a formal statement. Instead, he gave a sermon where he said,

⁵³ See story here: www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/aug/06/nigeria-metoo-moment-accuser-busola-dakolo

⁵⁴ <http://saharareporters.com/2019/07/20/%E2%80%98saynotointimidation%E2%80%99-aisha-buhari-responds-saharareporters-story-police-invasion-dakolo>

⁵⁵ <https://punchng.com/why-we-invited-dakolo-wife-after-aisha-buharis-tweet-police/>

⁵⁶ www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/337880-coza-can-speaks-on-rape-allegation-against-fatoyinbo.html

I feel compelled to say some things to those that are young and up and coming ministers. What I want to say is from the Bible: There is nothing hid that shall not come to the open or made manifest. Mark 4:22. Sooner or later, your sins will find you out if you continue in sin under the guise of grace. Numbers 32:23. Abstain from every appearance of evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:22. When you find yourself facing youthful lust, flee; don't say you're highly anointed or something, ask Samson. You may say I'm old fashioned, I agree. I'll never have a private secretary who's a woman. When a woman accuses you of something, nobody will listen to you whether you're right or wrong; be wise! I'm old fashioned, but I'm still surviving since I was ordained; it's better to be old fashioned & live than modern and die.⁵⁷

His intervention was greeted with groans by people who thought he had reduced complex issues into vague sermonization and barely veiled victim-blaming. Without strong support from either juridical or the paternal figures of moral institutions, the symbolic victory of a pastor stepping down from the pulpit after he was accused was soon followed by normative reality. The pastor himself returned to the altar after a month and preached a message titled "Sudden Victories." Part of the crowd that had gathered to demand his resignation was disillusioned by the turn of events. Some others had moved on, lured away from the story of assault into the endless loops of breaking news cycles that characterize social media. There was another buzz when the pastor was arrested, but it was momentary. He was later released on bail.⁵⁸

Part of the fieldwork for this book took place during the #ChurchToo campaign. In my survey with people on the issue, the questions that frequently came up were: Since the objective truth of these accusations is unknowable and the prospect of recompense is nearly impossible, what do these women want by risking everything to tell the stories of abuse by pastors? Why do they insist on rupturing the social and moral order, damage their social status, bring the Christian faith into disrepute, and all of these without a guarantee of any reasonable outcome? These concerns are not out of sync with the Nigerian social and political realities. Unlike the USA where the #MeToo movement led to a few investigations that made some privileged men like Harvey Weinstein lose their powerful positions and go to jail, the

⁵⁷ www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/339180-adeboye-speaks-on-rape-scandal-gives-advice-to-pastors.html

⁵⁸ <https://punchng.com/coza-rape-allegation-fatoyinbo-remains-in-police-custody-as-he-seeks-bail-perfection/>

Nigerian #MeToo #ChurchToo campaigners soon found that the institutional forces that should hold sexual abusers accountable are far too deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. They share an identity of power, and creating the conditions that would make it possible to challenge moral corruption in the issues of sex could also lead to holding those politicians accountable for their stewardship. Similar to how tribal identity politics allows a politician’s infraction to be overlooked in the political sphere because such people hold power in trust for their community, religious leaders are forgiven because they represent constituencies of gender and religion. The power they personify, culturally and morally, in a fragmented society with many fault lines as Nigeria, is seen as far too much for society to throw away because of sexual abuse.

For Busola Dakolo, months after she filed a civil suit against the pastor, her case was dismissed by a judge whose verdict did not stop at noting that the statute of limitations on the case had passed. The judge also added that the case even amounts to an act of injustice. Justice Oathman Musa was reported in the media to have said that the case was “an abuse of judicial process . . . empty and purely sentimental . . . the matter amounts to injustice and was aimed more at cruelty than obtaining justice.” The judge claimed Busola Dakola wasted the court’s time, awarded a N1 m fine against her, and said the fine should even have been ten times more.⁵⁹ What, to me, should have been an opportunity for the judge to speak to the intractability of the Nigerian legal system and the ways its structures impede justice for rape victims was turned into an avenue for further ridiculing an alleged victim. Rather than the judge speaking about the issue so flippantly and handing out punishment, it would have been far more helpful if the judge weighed the bigger moral implications of the case for the country and challenged the legal system on ways to tackle rape allegations. While the past might be an imperfect tense, the tensions of the present still need perfecting for the sake of the future. A year after she first made the allegations, Busola Dakolo gave the public an update. She said the police concluded their investigation, “handed over its report to the Ministry of Justice in Abuja for onward prosecution of Biodun Fatoyinbo. He clearly has a case to answer. But there has been silence

⁵⁹ <https://punchng.com/court-fines-busola-dakolo-n1m-dismisses-case-against-fatoyinbo/>

from the ministry. Silence. A loud silence! We have written a letter but for over a month we have no response.”⁶⁰ At the time of updating this in year 2020, the case was still stuck with everyone waiting for the Ministry of Justice to at least respond to her claims but nothing has come out of it yet, not even an official statement.

Ideally, what should have followed the #MeToo #ChurchToo moment in Nigeria is an intervention that transmutes the campaign from a social movement to a legal one. In the absence of that desirable turn of events, the court of public opinion remains the only option for those who have an allegation that the law courts cannot accommodate. It is an extra-legal recourse for those who claim sexual assault but whose cases do not (and cannot) find their feet on the grounds established by existing formal jurisprudential procedures. The law, supposedly a neutral adjudicator, typically offers a “sovereign judgment, predictable procedures, and dependence of tradition.”⁶¹ While they promise a dispassionate mediation in issues of sexual abuse, these factors can also impede justice with their formalisms. Trials are conducted based on admissible evidence, usually tangible, and considered relevant to the case. However, in real life, not many accusations can meet such lofty standards. Reality is far more complicated, and there are serious issues of gender, class, and social ethics that prevent people from collecting the evidence necessary to pursue a case in court. In such circumstances where people are not guaranteed a right to a fair hearing by the courts, they sidestep judicial processes by taking their case to a shadow forum like social media where the public holds court. With social media networks, they at least force a reckoning.

The ad hoc court of public opinion, emblemized by the Latin phrase *vox populi, vox Dei* – that is, the voice of the people is the voice of God – is one space where all evidence is admissible, and its self-appointed adjudicators have endless room to intervene in the ongoing case. In the court of public opinion, people with varying amounts of knowledge and expertise attack sensational issues with a hastiness that can overly simplify complexities and nuances because they want an answer right away. Although their senatorial attitudes can complicate problems, the court of public opinion is also the sphere where public

⁶⁰ www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-shares-update-on-case-against-coza-pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo/qtsezlc

⁶¹ Burgess, “Between the Desire for Law and the Law of Desire.”

debates are first launched and which eventually impact collective ethics and rewrite formal legal systems. Taking the notion of “God,” not as a remote divine being with sole oversight over the affairs of men but as the overriding moral force that determines collective societal ethics, the voice of the people could transmute into the will of the divine if their emotions are consciously streamlined into an ethical agenda. In that case, accusations like that of Busola Dakolo and even Ese Walter are not a waste of either their social status or the energies of the public. What they do is to pull the trigger. Over time, the body of old traditions and oppressive behavior will drop.

The voice of the people is the voice of God, not because God descends from heaven to help humans reshape their behavior but because people build up their social consciousness to cohere with an ideal that is so good that it can be considered godly. It is the people who instigate the actions that rupture ongoing societal traditions and lay the socio-ethical foundations in tandem with the progressive spirit of the times. Part of the success of the #MeToo movement in the USA in enforcing some degree of reckoning was the force of public sentiment and organized economic actions. Having received the case in the court of public opinion, proponents generated a critical mass that was threatened political and economic organizations and forced them to make decisions about sexual abuses. The Nigerian social structures, however, does not accommodate such economic boycotts on a massive scale. For one, relatively fewer Nigerians have sufficient disposable income for people to vote with their pockets and thumbs – that is, to bring economic pressure on corporate organizations and political parties so they could use their institutional power to take some actions against alleged sexual predators. The country also does not have sufficient social, political, and economic coordination to organize a successful boycott of any goods and services as a form of moral advocacy. However, the force could be built up through constant pushing and pushbacks, enough to generate the ethical awareness necessary for reforms to happen. As Busola Dakolo herself said, “Awareness is victory. But we are pushing to another even great(er) victory: Justice.”⁶²

⁶² www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/busola-dakolo-shares-update-on-case-against-coza-pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo/qtsezlc

In developing countries, the intricacies of power and abuse can be foggy and still need a lot more intellectual untangling before certain issues even get a start. For Nigeria, after the initial frenzy of the #MeToo #ChurchToo campaign died down, some campaigners, though realizing the enormity of the challenge of managing the momentum they had generated, remain undaunted. The feminist and social justice imperatives that drove them to campaign also had to acknowledge that the various underlying structural issues of the Nigerian legal system could not be addressed by a mere intonation of a globally generated chant. The voices of women accusing powerful men of sexual abuse might, at present, be unable to withstand the noisome pestilence of embedded patriarchy. Still, society's ethical ears can be primed to listen to alleged victims and respond meaningfully.

Despite the dismissal of the civil suit filed by Busola Dakolo and the sense of rage and despair felt by a lot of people who wanted to see the story through, neither the #MeToo #ChurchToo protests nor the momentum they generated were futile. It might seem that without at least one case pursued to a rational conclusion, the possibility of ever holding powerful people to account is too remote. However, the fact that the women spoke up and found support in sections of society also indexes some progress. While they were expectedly ridiculed by many people who considered them as seducers and Jezebel spirits who wanted to pull down the pillars of God's house, they also found massive support among people who saw them differently. The women were not victims the public was too mentally distant to relate with; what the supporters saw were actual people with a life that mirrored theirs. They were familiar with Busola Dakolo, particularly because they had seen her up close through her images and self-accounts on her social media pages. As I noted when Ese Walter made the first allegation and as it happened when Busola Dakolo made hers too, people turned to the women's respective social media accounts in their quest for the truth. They would drag out their pictures from their profile and try to discern their character through those images. Images of the women in clothes considered revealing became the basis of judging their character. The social media judges did the same thing for the pastor too. They judged him based on photos through which he had curated his public image over the years. A photograph of him in silk shirt and sitting in a chair with an ornately designed backrest, his glasses on his smiling face while looking away

from the camera (as if he was looking around him in amused puzzlement) provoked hard-hitting commentary that a social media intellectual made of him. In that photo, his hands were stretched as if to say, “what is the fuss all about?” and it was an apt choice for a commentary on the obliviousness of patriarchal power.⁶³ There was also a particular photograph of him on the church altar, preaching. On the virtual screen that covered the entire wall behind him had been projected the text of the Bible which read, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, (NKJV) Galatians 5:19.”⁶⁴ Outside the context of his preaching in the church and in the newly created context of the rape allegations, the pastor’s photo preaching against the evident works of the flesh provoked knowing laughter in both those who circulated the image and those who received it. Those photographs, even though remixed to match recent events, became the basis for discerning virtues. Even those already familiar with them go back repeatedly to look until they see through the parties. People’s reflections became the oracle with which the public cried an elusive truth.

The women’s accounts may have titillated the public with a narration of alleged sexual encounters with pastors, but they also summon the court of public opinion to dialogue on the broader social issues of sexual abuse and the concomitant lack of legal structures to deal with it. The accusers’ accounts are – and literally too – fleshed-out narrations staged before the public. Nuance might have been sacrificed to the outrage, but the accusations and arguments are useful to build ethical precedence. In talking about it, people stimulate empathy in the audience and instigate social and transformational changes by finding a (re)training ground for the collective moral imagination. The exchange and interaction compel rethinking social norms, commit emotions and intellect to question how larger factors weigh on individual choice, and, overall, make it possible to generate the conditions in which actual changes can be enacted.

⁶³ See that photo on this news media site: www.sunnewsonline.com/alleged-rape-pastor-fatoyinbo-responds-says-i-never-raped-even-as-unbeliever/

⁶⁴ Find that photo here: www.stelladimokokorkus.com/2019/07/pastor-biodun-fatoyinbo-takes-leave-of.html

Visuality and Power Identity

It is significant that the Pentecostal hierarchy was undercut by women who breached society's silencing norms to make accusations of sexual impropriety. To confront a pastor whose public appearance has been about constructing a notion of power through visuality was no mean task. That the campaign gained traction at all and even had the buy-in of a segment of the society that went as far as to protest at the church testifies to changes in the cultural perception of those who had serially performed power and now embodied it. This contestation of their moral authority met with severe pushback from conservative members of the faith movement who consider the dis-assembly of the power identity of the people who make up the face of the movement would come back to them as followers. Yet, the back and forth has been good for the society because it brought out issues that would have otherwise remained hidden.

On the rare occasions that women alleged sexual assault and abuse against a powerful male in the country, they found very mixed responses. However, these collective responses have not been the same, but a comparison would at least show positive development for two reasons: One is that a woman has broken through conformity and enforced silence and might thereby inspire another woman to do so too. Two, because it also means the society's ethics are changing. When the anointed men of God, also the men of power in the society, are confronted with accusations, the spate of events that follow reveals the various flaws inbuilt into the social and juridical systems. Because the protests that followed Bukola Dakolo's allegations invoked the language of the #MeToo movement, it too easily suggests that force with which the movement that started in the USA blew across various cultural spheres and through global media channels impacted Nigerians. While the global #MeToo movement was undoubtedly impactful, local motivation also propelled the event and this might still have occurred even if the #MeToo movement had not been ignited in the USA.

In this case, underlying factors were derived from how the pastor (and the woman) used images to narrate themselves prior to the latest allegations. By the time the allegations came, both were quite familiar to the public and this was the basis for the mental processing of the accusations. One's image in the public sphere is quite

a powerful tool for shaping social narratives. However, for a prosperity gospel preacher, photos demonstrative of that gospel are important to imprint on the public consciousness more powerfully. Already, within the churches, worship practices and church design have been modified to make the pastor the star attraction. Printed and virtual images, I have noted, have been vital to churches achieving their goal of making pastors look powerful. With the prosperity gospel, pastors' use of images to celebrate consumerism in the name of Jesus got more advanced. The semiotic organization of the texts and photos make pastors the advertiser, the product, and even the means of production. Through clothing choices, the background of the photos, and even poses in the photos, prosperity gospel uses pastors to sell the truth of the possibilities of redemption to beleaguered people through capitalist and neoliberal consumption. People look and look at the images of the pastor on his digital altar until they think they see all there is to him. When they have reached the point of “see finish,” they begin scrutinizing his habits, tastes, conduct, virtue, and even anointing. While some others might remain enraptured by the images of pastor in Gucci-labeled outfit and sports cars, others see it as a banalization of the anointing. In insisting that everyone is anointed, they are ripping the temple cloth from top to bottom and resisting the institutionalization of moral covering for powerful men of God before they are duly investigated.

As much as it desirable that cases such as rape allegations against a pastor would be reasonably concluded, that could not have been at the first push. Like earlier instances – such as where a social campaign Black Lives Matter launched in the USA had given resonance to a local one – there is a limit to what can be instantly achieved because issues fall on the hard ground of cultural sentiments, religious sensibilities, and legal systems, all of which combine to make a meaningful resolution difficult. While #MeToo in the USA undoubtedly impacted how accusations of sexual violence were received by those who believed the accuser and those who believed the accused, there is still a long way for society to go before achieving a level of ethical awareness that make reform possible. Consequently, the court of public opinion becomes that arena where the debates necessary to make such advances are thrashed out. While those debates and contestations do not produce true justice (and can even lead to a witch hunt or mob justice, or even

subvert judicial processes by poisoning the public mind with prejudice), yet they are also useful for a society to see itself reflected back.

Much of the criticism of the court of public opinion is that they turn an accused into a victim of the mob. The hysterics of an outrage-driven social media mob, it is rightfully pointed out, can suspend every judgment and people magisterially assume that they know enough of a person's character because they have seen thousands of his/her social media images. With the jury pool infinitely expanded, many commentators want to vie for visibility in the crowded market of public opinion and earn a "top fan" badge on social media when they can summon a following. While some assume the position of a symposiarch or an intellectual, others become unduly provocative and contrarian, all the while insisting they will not yield to the tyranny of empathy. This messiness makes subjecting issues to the court of the public opinion a transitional form of justice with unquantifiable gains. Yet, in several ways, by merely making the accusations, these women altered the etiquette of sexual behavior in Nigeria's conservative culture. The pent-up frustration that would have come from watching the impasse of the Busola Dakolo allegations will find an outlet in the desire to see future cases handled better. For example, while the draft of this chapter was being completed, some journalists led by Kiki Mordi working with BBC Africa carried out a sting operation on lecturers who allegedly abuse their students in Nigerian and Ghanaian universities. Titled, *Sex for Grades*, the documentary featured several lecturers, including one who was also a pastor of his church. The mass outrage from that case at least generated a far more positive outcome: both the university and the church he worked for suspended him from his position immediately.