



Bridging cultural categories of consumption through indeterminacy: A consumer culture perspective on the rise of African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity

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Abstract

Postmodern discourse challenges dichotomous cultural categories such as male/female, past/present and consumer/producer; it rather venerates the complexity, fusion, and diffusion of cultural categories. This ideology suggests that indeterminate or fluid cultural categories liberate consumer culture discourse availing it to varying consumer needs. African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity advances such a postmodernist discourse that recognizes and bridges indeterminate physical, temporal, moral, and symbolic cultural categories of consumption. This is achieved through two processes: convergence and divergence. Fluid and capable of meandering rigid cultural categories and structures, African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity theology is attractive to a broader audience of consumers because it appeals to a wider array of consumers' demands/desires. This article thus advances that African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity continues to grow due its ability to fluidly adapt its postmodern theology to the variegated consumption needs and identity projects of the postcolonial African consumer.

Keywords

Indeterminacy, consumer culture, cultural categories, African Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, postcolonial identity

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The dramatic global rise of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (PCC) has been called “the largest global shift in the religious marketplace in the last forty years” (Martin, 2001: xvii). Pew (2011) estimates that PCC members constitute over 500 million people worldwide, a remarkable growth from its estimated 63 million members in 1970; this number is estimated to reach 800 million by 2025 (Anderson, 2013). PCC growth has been reported in the United States (Poloma and Green, 2010), Asia (Kim, 2012), Latin America (Freston, 1998), and Africa (Kalu, 2008). Some researchers have argued that the spread of PCC on every continent of the world is one of the strongest examples of the success of cultural globalization (Kim, 2012; Robbins, 2004). We draw on the body of scholarship that has emerged to understand the rise of PCC; we focus on the (Sub-Saharan) African context which is the primary site of global PCC growth (Haynes, 2012).

Many reasons have been identified for the growth of PCC, particularly in Africa. These include the materialistic appeal of the PCC prosperity gospel to the many who are impoverished, the movement’s cultural syncretism, and its orientation to neoliberal capitalism and globalization (Anderson, 2013; Bonsu and Belk, 2010; Gifford, 2004). Little, however, has been said about how African PCC has found success in its influence on consumption, consumption styles and structures, and postcolonial consumer identity. We find that African PCC theology is a postmodern discourse that impacts consumption by recognizing and bridging indeterminate cultural categories of consumption. Specifically, through two bridging processes of *convergence* and *divergence*, African PCC theology continuously bridges five indeterminate cultural categories of consumption: (1) global and local, (2) rural and urban, (3) past and present, (4) consumption and anti-consumption, and (5) magical and mundane. Indeterminacy creates the porous boundaries of cultural categories that permit an endless semiotic regurgitation in consumer culture. Because African PCC theology presents an indeterminate discourse using the indeterminacy of these cultural categories, it appeals to a wide array of consumer needs and desires, and enables the African consumer to navigate a postcolonial identity in the face of intrusive neoliberal globalization, mass poverty and political instability. Contextually, we argue that this provides an important explanation for the rapid growth of PCC in Africa.

We begin with a theoretical overview on postmodern consumer culture discourse and the role of indeterminacy in its continuity and dynamism. Using these theoretical insights, we present the case of African PCC and how their theological discourse fosters their ability to recognize and transcend indeterminate cultural categories to perpetuate their relevance and influence on consumption.

Theoretical background

Postmodernism and indeterminacy

Postmodernism advances a critique of modernism. Particularly, postmodernists reject modernism’s commitment to producing rigid cultural categories such as

past/present, consumer/producer, structure/subject, signifier/signified, and so on (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Different cultures construct their own categories of place, time, persons, objects, and the natural environment to permit the formation and continuity of meanings apropos to their worldview (Applbaum and Jordt, 1996; McCracken, 1986). Postmodernism advances that meanings attached to cultural categories and discourse “are ambiguous, always at stake and dependent on the re-negotiation, re-interpretation and subversions of various groups” (Canniford and Karababa, 2013: 140). Thus, cultural categories of what it means to be a man or woman, young or old are never constant, are not necessarily apposite to each other, and are subject to continuous, rather than finite meaning making (McCracken, 1986). In other words, cultural categories are indeterminate (De Certeau, 1984).

Indeterminacy or the lack of determinacy is the absence of clarity on the nature and meanings of a word, concept, or practice. Philosophers like Kant, Nietzsche (Clark, 1990), and Foucault (1972) have advanced important contributions on the role of indeterminacy in shaping cultural discourse. The poststructural concept of deconstruction similarly posits that textual, social, structural, and discursive categories are indeterminate (Derrida, 1981; Rorty, 1979). Cultural discourse abounds with indeterminacy as every definition builds on the definition of other words which also builds on the definition of other words, creating an endless and infinite trail of meanings that deconstructionists call a “hermeneutical circle” (Fuchs and Ward, 1994). Bauman’s (2005, 2013) work on the liquid nature of consumption, objects, relations, values, and consumer culture is also an illustrious contribution to our understanding of the porous boundaries of cultural categories of consumption.

It is precisely this indeterminacy of cultural categories that frees cultural discourse, granting it a dynamic wand that enables it to, almost magically, transform and bend to contextual demands. By posing questions of its own answers, postmodern consumer culture invites interrogation and contestation that can only shape the meanings of the boundaries it produces. Indeterminacy is then both a cause and consequence of the dynamism of postmodern consumer culture. Next, we present two processes, *convergence and divergence*, through which postmodern consumer culture bridges the meanings of indeterminate cultural categories of consumption.

Convergence. Indeterminacy permits the convergence of cultural categories of consumption in certain contexts. The process of convergence concerns the merger of distinct and sometimes opposing constructed meanings into singularity, such that one assumes the meanings of the other. For instance, Belk et al.’s (1989) characterization of the sacralization of the secular and the secularization of the sacred illustrate such convergence of seemingly opposing meanings. In the case of a brand and its disparaging “other” doppelgänger, research shows that they can hold the same emotional outcome on consumers, and on brand image (Thompson et al., 2006). Within the consumption context of convergence, opposing cultural categories hold the same practical effect on consumption. The result is that the

“otherness” of the opposing category becomes embodied as familial and boundaries are therefore eroded. The sacred and the secular (Belk et al., 1989), possessions and possessor (Belk, 1988), and consumers and producers (Cova and Cova, 2012) morph into one and the same. The collapse of meanings here follows the same mechanism as Baudrillard’s (1983) concept of implosion, but not in the same apocalyptic and critical intent of the “end of the social” that he applies it. In this context, we rather focus on how the collapse of meanings through convergence enables consumers to negotiate cultural structures and discourses that are themselves indeterminate.

Divergence. Divergence refers to bridging indeterminate cultural categories through the mirrored discrimination of their meanings. One cultural category is understood through the contrast of the other. For instance, consumer researchers have constructed the relationship between the market economy and gift economy through comparative differentiation of their separate meanings and cultural symbolisms (e.g. Belk, 2010; Kozinets, 2002; Marcoux, 2009; Sherry, 1983). Kozinets’ (2002) presentation of consumers at the Burning Man Festival seeking to escape the market to the gift economy, contrasted with Marcoux’s (2009) account of consumers escaping the gift economy to the market economy, demonstrates this practice in consumer culture. Divergence embodies the deconstructionist idea that there is no absolute or literal meaning that is self-evident. Rather, meanings emerge from the contrast of signs; one sign is understood only through its comparative relation with another (Derrida, 1981; Fuchs and Ward, 1994). The meaning of either sign or cultural category on their own remains indeterminate. One indeterminate cultural category must therefore be contrasted with another category to produce their distinctive understandings.

Categories that converge in meanings can also diverge in meanings. For instance, although meanings of what is sacred and what is secular merge in some consumption contexts, what is sacred may only be understood in juxtaposition to what is secular (Belk et al., 1989). Similarly, categories that diverge in meanings can also hold convergent meanings, like the blurring of lines between market and gift exchange (Kozinets, 2002). In postmodern thought, both convergence and divergence share the assumption that no cultural category is absolute; they are indeterminate; their meanings are constantly deferred and are shaped by context. We next introduce our context of African PCC, which is a postmodern religious movement that is marked by high degrees of indeterminacy.

PCC

PCC is a Christian movement characterized by beliefs in experiencing God through the Holy Spirit and the practice of the gifts of the Spirits such as the ability to speak in tongues, perform miracles and prophecies (Anderson, 2013; Gifford, 2004; Meyer, 2004a). Pentecostalism has been traced to the Azusa Street Revival in 1906 in Los Angeles where an African-American preacher, William Seymour,

led an evangelical renewal of the primacy of the Day of Pentecost – the day on which the Holy Spirit first indwelt the early believers in the book of Acts in the Bible (Brodwin, 2003).

Pentecostalism therefore teaches that since the Day of Pentecost, any believer upon conversion receives the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, and is mandated to spread this gospel.¹ This latter reason has been offered as one of the key reasons for Pentecostalism becoming one of the world's fastest growing religious movements (Anderson, 2013; Haynes, 2012). According to research by the *Pew Research Forum* (2011), more than a quarter of the world's Christians are Pentecostal-Charismatics. In the absence of a territorial or centralized administrative control – like the Catholic or Anglican Church – Pentecostalism has spread globally with unbridled ease.

It is this wave of unbridled spread of PCC that brought the movement to the shores of Africa. The arrival of PCC in Africa was made possible by a long history of Christianity on the continent. Christianity was introduced to Africa from the early days of the religion and was established on the continent by the end of the 2nd century (Ngong, 2012). Notably, in North Africa, many scholars of Christianity – including Clement and St. Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, and St. Augustine of Hippo – contributed to the theology of the religion (Isichei, 1995). Early missionaries further advanced the spread of the religion through modern-day Nigeria, Benin, and Congo (Ngong, 2012).

However, it was colonialism that fostered the most successful spread of Christianity in Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where today most of the populations are Christians (Adogame et al., 2012; Meyer, 2004a). When Pentecostalism arrived in Africa during colonialism, the Christian God was no longer alien and so they easily built on these earlier foundations to grow (Meyer, 2004a). Today, more than 40% of the world's Pentecostals are in Sub-Saharan Africa (Pew Research Forum, 2011), attesting to the success of PCC on the continent. By suggesting that any believer has “freedom in the Spirit” to spread the gospel, PCC has a theology that is inherently syncretic and allows uncontrolled adaptation of their content to local situations (Anderson, 2000). Thus, African PCC took on a life of their own, producing a theology that is a convenient amalgamation between the globally imported PCC theology and locally produced cultural needs and religious history (Robbins, 2003).

To say there is an African PCC theology, or a PCC theology for that matter, may be a little presumptuous because the movement is fragmented into many diffused localized practices and institutions (Kalu, 2008). But to say there is not an African PCC theology is also dismissive. At best, its theology, in a classical sense, is a work-in-progress. Nonetheless, this work-in-progress still presents distinctly recognizable Christian religious ideologies and doctrines on the divine that has been widely presented in the literature as a PCC theology (e.g. Macchia, 2006; Robbins, 2004; Smith, 2010). The advocacy for an African Christian theology is well rooted in the literature (Bediako, 1992, 1995), and following the growth of PCC on the continent, researchers have posited an African PCC theology

(Gifford, 2001; Meyer, 2004a). Being in a liminal state, it is fluid in its meaning making and we seek to underscore how the indeterminacy of a liminal African PCC theology is shaping local consumer cultural discourse. We argue here that this is what enables the movement to paper over cultural territorialities and categorizations. Next, we show how African PCC theology bridges meanings in five categories of consumption through the process of convergence and divergence.

PCC theology and the bridging of cultural categories of consumption

African PCC theology bridges (1) spatial categories of consumption (global and local, urban and rural), (2) temporal categories of consumption (past, present and future), (3) moral categories of consumption (consumption and anti-consumption), and (4) symbolic categories of consumption (magical and mundane). These categories are indeterminate and thus through the processes of *convergence and divergence*, PCC theology continuously redefines their meanings toward consumption ends that appeal to a wide array of consumer needs. Table 1 outlines the process and the cultural categories that are bridged through varied PCC theology and practice.

Bridging spatial categories of consumption

Spatial categories of consumption here refer to cultural categories of geosocial space. African PCC theology bridges two geosocial spatial categories of consumption, the local and the global, and the rural and urban, using both the processes of convergence and divergence.

Bridging local and global spaces of consumption. The meanings of “global” and “local” as categories of space remain unclear in cultural discourse. The concept of “globalization” suggests a sense of global cultural homogeneity and yet researchers have consistently pointed out local appropriations and re-imagination of what is perceived to be global culture (Appadurai, 1996; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard, 2006; Ritzer, 2007). As cultural meanings cross borders, what is understood to be non-local (or global) culture assumes local meanings, and local meanings begin to manifest non-local (or global) meanings (Ritzer, 2007). The concept of “glocalization” or “glocal” has been used to describe this convergence of local and global cultural meanings and practices, reflecting the indeterminate construction of either as a cultural category of geosocial space (Ritzer, 2007; Robertson, 1992).

On geosocial dimensions, PCC is global because it can be found on every continent but its success lies in its unsurpassed ability to “incarnate” to local situations, successfully creating a religion that is global in perspective and local in practice. The Pentecostalism that is practiced in Africa shares the global PCC primacy of experience with the Holy Spirit but is practiced in a manner that can only be called “African.” This reflects what Ritzer (2007) referred to as the

Table 1. Bridging cultural categories of consumption through the indeterminacy of African PCC theology.

Cultural categories bridged		Bridging process	Bridging practices	Consumption spheres affected
Physical	Local	Global	Convergence Merger of local and global religious practices	Postcolonial identity Neoliberal globalization
	Rural	Urban	Divergence Conjoint contrast of rural and urban	Consumption of space Social relations Rural-urban migration Urbanization
Temporal	Past	Present	Divergence Conjoint contrast of past and present	Postcolonial identity Cultural appropriation Collective memory work
Moral	Consumption	Anti-consumption	Convergence Semiotic harmony of consumption and anti-consumption	Possessions and materialism Consumer desire Media and entertainment Marketing communication and branding
Symbolic	Magical (Sacred)	Mundane (Secular)	Convergence Semiotic harmony of magical (sacred) and mundane (secular)	Consumptions of objects Gift and market exchange Possessions and materialism

glocalization of something because we see an integration of a distinct non-local religion and indigenous religions being applied to local problems. This glocalization however can be best understood by situating it at the nexus of indigenous culture, colonization, and the history of Christianity on the continent.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity on the African continent, many African indigenous religions were mostly fragmented pockets of tribal deity-worship. The religions were mostly polytheist, and varied among families, clans, tribes, and villages (Groves, 1948; Meyer, 1998b; Rattray, 1927). Christianity spread on the continent, in no small part due to colonialism, and with its monotheism, rounded converts under one deity (Bediako, 1995). Suddenly then, people who formerly held different local deities now shared the same foreign deity. Not only that, but they shared that deity with million other people around the world. The spread of Christianity therefore laid the foundations for transforming local and tribal African religiosity onto the global platform (Bediako, 1992).

However, this transformation of indigenous African religiosity toward a global faith was not roundly embraced. Christianity was associated with colonialism, and the rise of anti-colonial sentiments against the White man's rule produced a similar resistance of the White man's religion (Bediako, 1995; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1986; Nkrumah, 1962). In the wake of anti-colonial nationalism, there was a more conscious effort to Africanize the now widespread missionary Christianity. This ushered in an era of African *Protestantism* (or protestation) leading to the rise of what has been variously called African *Indigenous Churches* (Appiah-Kubi, 1981), African *Initiated Churches* (Ranger, 2007), or African *Independent Churches* (Anderson, 2011), all abbreviated as AICs. AICs blended notable aspects of indigenous African religions – like the belief in the role of evil spirits, elaborate and enchanted worship rituals and chants, exorcism and animal sacrifice – with Christian liturgy and rituals (Ranger, 2007). The outcome was an Africanized version of Christianity that was both local and global. AICs therefore achieved the first real “glocalization” of African religion through convergence. More than the glocalized consumption of religion, this convergence by AICs was instrumental in providing the African consumer with the tools to navigate the transition from a colonial identity toward a postcolonial identity (Bediako, 1995).

Post-independence, the 1960s and 1970s were marred by widespread political instability in many countries in postcolonial Africa. Series of coup d'états in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso, Uganda, Burundi, and Congo led to economic recessions, causing mass poverty and political insecurity. But this was also a period of globalization and neoliberal Western influence in postcolonial Africa. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, lent heavily to corrupt military regimes during this period creating debts that beleaguers the continent today (Graeber, 2011). Increasingly, Africa's place in the global space was shaping local markets and consumption but remained murky.

It was during this period of neoliberal globalization amidst political instability and mass poverty that African PCC really took shape promising material wealth and eschatological security through the prosperity gospel doctrine, in ways

unmatched by existing Christian movements. Like American Evangelical Protestantism which birthed American Pentecostalism during the post-Reconstruction period of radical change, so did the African Protestantism of AICs give way to African Pentecostalism during Africa's postcolonial quagmire (Anderson, 2013; Blumhofer, 1993; Robeck, 2006). In both contexts of institutional change, PCC was ardently localized in its engagement but with a perspective that positioned its relevance to understanding non-local issues and ties. In Africa, the relevance of PCC's message during the postcolonial period of economic and political instability amplified their appeal and propelled their growth to become a major religious movement on the continent (Gifford, 2004). For Olupona (2014), the rise of African PCC and their prosperity doctrine symbolized the birth of global capitalism on the continent.

In summary, the history of African Christianity from missionary Christianity to AICs, and now PCC, has been marked by an encultured amalgamation between local religious practices and a global Christian character. Today, African PCC theology like most postmodern cultural discourse is neither/both local nor/global. But more than the glocalization of places, people, things, and services, that Ritzer and Ryan (2002) identified, African PCC also presents a glocalization of identities, beliefs, sentiments, practices, and discourses.

Bridging rural and urban spaces of consumption. African PCC theology has transformed perceptions of geographical space; it has "urbanized God and demonized rural areas... to live in the city is to be inside divine territory" (Heuser, 2009: 76). African PCC is mostly located in urban areas including large cities and towns, and not in rural areas (Ukah, 2004). On the other hand, many rural areas have significant number of people who still practice traditional African religions, and have shrines of traditional African priests (priestesses) (Parish, 2003; Ukah, 2004). Therefore, rural places are suggested to harbor witches and evil spirits, whereas urban places house the elite and civilized people (Heuser, 2009; Ukah, 2004). The urban is now contrasted in a different lens of meaning through juxtaposition with a redefined meaning of the rural space.

For this reason, for some African Pentecostals, visiting their rural villages is often approached with caution, in fear of being attacked by the witches who inhabit that space (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Parish, 2003). Visits to rural villages, especially where the person's ancestral roots are traced, are occasional or not at all. Those who visit may even seek spiritual fortification through prayers from their urban church before visiting their village (Meyer, 1998b). Once in the rural village, food and drinks are consumed with suspicion as possible carriers of witchcraft magic that can harm the person (Meyer, 1998b; Newell, 2007). Care is also taken not to share one's success or flaunt their material possessions to avoid jealous people with witchcraft causing harm to them (Parish, 2003). Urban spaces are therefore consumed as havens from the evil of the rural spaces.

The outcome is a powerful but unaccounted effect on the consumption of space in two key manifestations: rural-urban migration and the urbanization of the rural.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest growth of urbanization – defined as ratio of urban to total population – in the world, with rural-urban migration accounting for more than half of urban population growth (Barrios et al., 2006). There are many other reasons for this but the role of African PCC discourse cannot be underestimated here (Gifford, 2004; Piot, 2010). A PCC pastor told Piot (2010), “West Africa is underdeveloped. . .because Satan inhabits the villages. Extirpate the Devil and all his manifestations (the worship of spirits and ancestors), and West Africa will develop quickly” (p. 57). For some, this means escaping the rural spaces to urban spaces, and for others like this pastor, this means rapidly urbanizing the rural spaces by introducing them to the PCC God who brings development. In both cases, African PCC theology transforms the consumption of space by equating urbanization to development. For the African Pentecostal, the consumption of urban spaces equals the anti-consumption of rural spaces.

Bridging temporal categories of consumption

Temporal categories of consumption here refer to distinctions of past, present, and future (McCracken, 1986). Temporal boundaries, if any, are porous: the present is the future of the past as it is the past of the future. Traditions, practices, and values attributed to the past influence today’s practices and possibilize the future (Giddens, 1990). Fashion, art, architecture, politics, consumer objects – like heirlooms and other symbolic possessions – and food are reinvented through time, with “old” designs and tastes given throwback renditions that defy boundedness to any temporal space (De Certeau, 1984; Karababa and Ger, 2011; Türe and Ger, 2016). Similarly, postmodern consumer culture discourse papers over temporal boundaries. Even “the stories consumers tell about their everyday experiences create temporal trajectories in which a past event is relived in relation to present concerns and projected toward an envisioned future” (Thompson, 1997: 442). Postmodern cultural discourse holds temporal space as a trajectory, an unbounded space for cultural expression. Temporal categories therefore constitute vacuums of continuity and change that permit cultural discourse to assume dynamic modes of action and direction.

African PCC’s relevance also lies in its ability to instance a bridging of temporal categories through divergence by admonishing a “break from the past” (Engelke, 2010; Meyer, 1998b). The “past” here refers to traditions that are aligned with African traditional religions and culture, which are perceived to be primitive and occultic (Meyer, 1998b). African PCC advances that indulging in such past traditions makes the Pentecostal susceptible to ancestral curses and witchcraft that bring poverty, diseases, and death (Maxwell, 1998; Meyer, 1998b). But that “past” also includes “mainline” churches like the Catholic and Protestant missions as well as AICs which are considered remnants of the colonial period (Meyer, 2004a). With them also, African PCC brooks no compromise and does not consider them to be Christian. This discourse on breaking from the “past” is the key objective of African PCC spiritual warfare (Engelke, 2010). This involves

counseling sessions – interviews to determine “past” ties – prayers, and elaborate ritual practices to enact rupture from the “past” known as *deliverance* (Meyer, 1998b; Onyinah, 2001). *Deliverance* requires that the believer renounce their ancestors and their past traditions, village and extended family, and ties to AICs, Catholic and Protestant churches.

The indeterminacy of temporal categories, however, means that breaking with the “past” becomes an “exercise in boundary making – in being able to say what counts as Christian or traditional and on what grounds” (Engelke, 2010: 184). What we find in many churches is a selective appropriation of relics from the “past.” Those elements that are relevant for dealing with present local problems – such as exorcism, healing, and use of fetish objects like charms and amulets for protection – are appropriated with modernized rituals and objects – like use of olive oil and wristbands – and absorbed into PCC church practice. Those that are considered irrelevant – animal sacrifice, festivals, rites of passage, burning incense, fetish statues, and use of herbs – are discarded as evil and targeted for spiritual warfare. For Piot (2010), *deliverance* equally constitutes a rejection of past political structures, traditions, and relations that have become surplus or sometimes burdening for the postmodern consumer in the postcolonial period.

In both its appropriation and outright rejection of the “past,” African PCC perpetually links an unspecified “past” to an unspecified “present” (and future), resulting in a dynamic and continuous discourse. Thus, by engaging these “past” religious structures in a dialectical relationship, African PCC attains relevance by positioning its theology in the temporal trajectory of African religions and postcolonial polity and social order. This constitutes a continuous memory work of remembering the past in order to forget it, and gives African PCC a place in the postcolonial consumer thought (Marcoux, 2016; Meyer, 1998b). As Jacques Derrida (Derrida and Caputo, 1997) affirmatively noted, “If an institution is to be an institution, it must to some extent break with the past, keep the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new” (p. 5). Through divergence of the past and the present, African PCC succeed in reconstructing postcolonial “sensibilities and attachments away from older forms of authority and familiar modes of thought to produce a fresh vision of the political and of a world not yet born” (Piot, 2010: 54).

Bridging moral categories of consumption

African PCC theology has largely shaped what is moral to be consumed and what is not, thereby shifting the boundaries of consumption and anti-consumption. PCC prosperity gospel promise its members a share of the possessions of the market as rewards for their monetary donations and devotion (Bonsu and Belk, 2010; Kim, 2012). The pursuit of individual wealth, profits, possessions, job promotions, marriage, childbirth, and travel abroad are all morally justified as relics of God’s blessings (Lindhardt, 2009; Premawardhana, 2012). The prosperity gospel’s consumerist agenda thus encourages class mobility because it promises the poor that

they too can and should be rich. Additionally, it confronts class distinctions by castigating poverty as sinful, creating a sense of entitlement to higher socio-economic status, even if few realize it.

The prosperity gospel also encourages conspicuous consumption, unlike the modesty and piety advanced by Catholic and Protestant missionary Christians. Catholicism and even Protestantism considered such pursuit of material possessions immoral, while glorifying poverty (Geremek, 1997; Graeber, 2011). They took a stance of anti-consumption, considering the market and its commodification as the medium of immoral purveyance where selfish desires are used to trump the communal good (Miller, 2005). From their perspective, the pursuit of individual wealth contradicted Christian ideology (Graeber, 2011).

Conversely, African PCC preachers have accused missionary Christianity of advancing a gospel of poverty, which they argue is inconsistent with Biblical promises of earthly wealth to the believer (Van Dijk, 1999). Poverty is presented as an outcome of sin and ancestral curses attached to the “past” (Maxwell, 1998). Instead, the accumulation and display of wealth and possessions, led by its preachers, are encouraged as manifestations of God’s promised material prosperity for the Pentecostal (Maxwell, 1998). According to Forbes, African PCC preachers are among the richest people on the continent (Nsehe, 2011). Like their global counterparts, they own private jets, many expensive cars, mansions, and large bank accounts. The market and its commodities are therefore not seen as opponents of Pentecostalism, but rather its medium of theological manifestation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Kim, 2012). PCC is therefore an avid participant in the market, adopting the use of mass media, entertainment, and popular culture to advance its theology and global expansion “with the marketing acumen of Madison Avenue” (Grassie, 2010: 67; Gifford, 2004; Kim, 2012; Meyer, 2004b).

Corporate brands sponsor PCC events and media activities like crusade, radio broadcasts, and tele-evangelism. It is not uncommon to see billboards of some African PCC churches sitting side by side with those of corporate brands on roads and highways, or sometimes both sharing the same billboard to advertise their products like the one captured in Figure 1 below. This single billboard is advertising a church and a school. It contains no visible Christian symbol – like a cross – rather, a colorful image of Mickey Mouse. This shared advertising space, of God and pedagogy, colorfully illustrates African PCC’s ability to transcend and redefine the market and consumption.

This has led Berger (2009) to even argue that Pentecostalism is a force in global economic development. Through a process of convergence, the moral strips of the market and religion are merged. Similarly, the underlying distinction between consumption as a key feature of the market and anti-consumption as a pillar of Christianity is blended. Although some aspects of the market – like the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, sex, and gambling – are variously contested, for PCC theology, the market *in toto* and its commodities are not immoral at all, as earlier depicted by Catholicism and Protestantism. Even the aspects that are contested



Figure 1. Billboard advertising PCC church and school in Ghana.

only perpetuate the continuous contestation of meanings that has enabled this convergence of the moral categories of consumption and anti-consumption.

Bridging symbolic categories of consumption

African PCC also blurs the symbolic cultural categories of what is a magical (or sacred) and what is a mundane (or secular) object in consumption. Through the process of *convergence*, the magical and mundane are transposed in meanings and symbolism of consumption objects (Belk et al., 1989). At the peak of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in August 2014, Nigeria's Prophet T. B. Joshua claimed he had "holy water" that could cure the virus. He sent 4000 bottles of the said "holy water" on a private jet to Sierra Leone and it is reported that the exported "holy water" was received and distributed by the Sierra Leone government officials (Griffin, 2014). The analogy is that mundane water, contaminated through prayer and other rituals, was now magically transformed to deal with the deadly epidemic. For many African Pentecostals – and apparently the Sierra Leonean government – this claim of transformation of mundane objects to magical effect is not surprising.

Mundane objects like oil, water, salt, wristbands, handkerchief, and books, contaminated through prayer rituals, are sold to members who believe these items are now magically transformed to cure sickness, get a job, increase sales

and profit from trading, bear children, find a marital partner, get a Visa to travel to Europe or America, or prevent mishaps like motor accidents and death (Gifford, 2004; Maxwell, 1998). The symbolic categorization of objects as mundane is easily transformed into the magical through convergence as the mundane becomes magical and the magical becomes embodied in mundane objects, through faith.

Some may consider this convergence as mirroring the marketization of religion in Western societies that has led to the detraditionalization of religious institutions and created a market for the commercialization of the sacred (Bauman, 2013; Carrette and King, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2014). This is far from the case because to the African consumer, the world has always been enchanted: spirits and non-human agents co-exist with human agents and are able to interfere in the market and consumption through objects (Appiah-Kubi, 1981). We must note that Africa does not share the same history of disenchantment and secularization in Western societies that weakened the power of institutional religion and created this milieu (Carrette and King, 2005). Religion in its institutional power in Africa has only changed hands from traditional religions to missionary Christianity and now PCC but it has never diminished in its authority to shape social thought and actions. Today's African consumer turns to the PCC God for a profit on his or her trading just as his or her ancestors turned to their ancestral gods for a plentiful farming harvest. In the same way, the African PCC pastor offers mundane objects like wristbands to protect the consumer from harm and death just as the precolonial traditional priest provided charms and amulets to those who called on him for the same purpose. Here, it is religion that colonizes the market and not the other way round. The convergence of the mundane and magical in African PCC practice and use of objects thus simply reflect the enduring African belief of enchantment, reimagined in African PCC imagination.

The utility of this convergence lies not just in its continuity of an enduring African belief but it also empowers the consumer to navigate mysterious aspects of the market and consumption. For instance, Meyer (1998a) found that Pentecostals in Ghana who buy second-hand clothing from the market believe that the clothes may be contaminated with evil magic, and use prayer rituals to remove the evil magic and revert it to its mundane form before using it. Here, the ambiguity surrounding the second-hand clothes – origination of clothes, previous owners, past usage, divestment rituals, curation, repackaging, and market handling – clads the clothes in mystery and gives it a magical status. Prayer as a ritual of decontamination only reflects the enduring belief of the convergence of the mundane and the magical in consumption. African PCC practices affirm it in this regard.

In summary, we have argued that the indeterminacy of cultural categories in postmodern discourse permits African PCC theology to blur their boundaries, and through syncretism has merged local religious beliefs into a global religion, and vice versa in a manner that is anything but definite. Similarly, it has fostered the contestation of meanings of rural and urban spaces, through their divergence. Through such divergence, the meanings of the past and the present (and future) are

contrasted and redefined. Moral categories of consumption are converged, as PCC theology embraces market ideologies and possessions, recasting the morality of consumption and anti-consumption. The mundane and magical symbolism of objects is also continuously redefined through convergence.

By disregarding ordered meanings of cultural categories, African PCC themselves advance a theology that is anything but determinate. By holding itself to indeterminacy and malleability, African PCC gains wide appeal, positioning its theology in a scope of relevance, capable of answering all questions, and still leaving open ends to engage its consumers. In this context, cultural categories are not applied as fixed dichotomies but as indefinite continuums of cultural interrogation that become amenable to every person and to every new problem and cultural situation. With a theology that permits syncretism, re-appropriation, redefinition, reapplication, and re-institutionalization, PCC embodies the postmodern ideology of a liberatory consumer culture discourse (Robbins, 2003). Next, we conclude with a brief discussion on the implications of African PCC's liquid theology on consumer – member and pastor/leader – agency.

Discussion

Postcolonial Africa is an ironic landscape of economic growth and mass poverty; it possesses an inescapable cultural heritage that has been colored by colonization; and it is embedded in a postmodern era of intrusive neoliberal globalization. African PCC theology succeeds here by providing an all-purpose manual that enables African consumers to fluidly navigate this variegated landscape. We contend that this is one of the key reasons why African PCC is gaining widespread acceptance and is the fastest growing Christian movement on the continent. After all, the value of religion lies in its ability to speak to local cultural problems (Bediako, 1992). But the role of consumer agency in the growth of PCC, particularly in Africa, is a deeply polarizing subject.

On one hand, some researchers have argued that African PCC with its prosperity gospel and postcolonial identity project fills a cultural void left by the failures of the state, political structures, and the market (Gifford, 2004; McCauley, 2012; Piot, 2010). Indeed, for the postcolonial African consumer, this postmodern liberatory discourse represents a collective agency toward fashioning an authentic postcolonial consumer identity (Piot, 2010). Within this collective agency is also a complex network of individual consumption choices and practices. For example, as we discussed, African PCC theology affords individuals the discursive tools to negotiate their individual status and position in their families and ancestry, and in an increasingly globalized and mysterious marketplace. For the many poor who subscribe to the prosperity gospel, giving to the church is empowering because it places them in a benefactor position, and establishes a sense of gift relationship with the divine and the church community (Premawardhana, 2012; Van Dijk, 1999).

On the other hand, some researchers have chastised African PCC's attack on traditional structures and relations, and particularly its neoliberal sway of the poor,

questioning the veracity of the prosperity gospel's promised wealth (Bonsu and Belk, 2010; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). These criticisms often cast African PCC consumers as an unwitting segment whose religious fervor is being used to disadvantage them. Such criticisms are not without basis as there have been many examples of some African PCC pastors making news headlines for all the wrong reasons – money laundering, rape, fraud, scams, and so on (see, for example, Acolatse, 2014; Gifford, 2004). There is hardly any Pentecostal who will not admit that there are some charlatans or “false prophets” passing off as “true men of God,” who pursue personal profits at the expense of others' faith (Haynes, 2012). Few will deny that African PCC is an entrepreneurial venture for those – mostly young men – who start and operate the churches (Kalu, 2008; Premawardhana, 2012).

But both the empathetic and critical theses on African PCC agree that it is a powerful social force in the life of the African consumer; neither school of thought discounts the movement's sway on the collective imagination that shapes individual approach to consumption. It is a polarizing movement because it is neither anchored to any cultural position and tradition nor succumb to any specific moral camp. Being untethered from tradition or structure, in terms of agency, it gives its adherents – members and leaders – a blank check to expend as their “faith” dictates. Thus, agency is constantly assigned but in no particular order; nothing is attributed to chance or luck. For example, any positive life event – as mundane as waking up daily to extraordinary as surviving a motor accident – can be interpreted by a PCC consumer as God's blessings which have resulted from their monetary donations (Lindhardt, 2009). When a person suffers a negative life event, it is blamed on witchcraft or evil forces that were only successful because the person let down their guard – either through sin or not being prayerful (Newell, 2007). In terms of church membership, anyone can start a PCC church and anyone can join and leave a church at will. Unlike Catholicism where membership is mainly grown through family socialization, people actually choose membership in PCC churches, sometimes after quitting another church (Anderson, 2013; Brodwin, 2003). It is not uncommon to find one consumer shopping around churches or attending multiple churches per week: one for communal relations, one for prayer service, and one for healing and miracle service. In these services, the same scriptures of the Bible are subject to varying interpretations depending on the pastor's agenda, the type of service, congregation, state of the national and global economy, the national and global political mood, and what major stories are making headlines in the news (Gifford, 2004). African PCC theology is thus flexible to every person, and every situation.

Our goal in this article is to recognize African PCC as a postmodern force and highlight its indeterminacy that disregards the existing boundaries of cultural categories, including those that are imposed on it. In this regard, African PCC is neither decidedly positive nor negative, but capable of being either and both. The only certainty about this liquid religion is that it will continue to flood and soak every space of the global south and its consumer culture. We extend this

article as an earnest invitation to the field of consumer culture to take an interest in what has already become a revolutionary movement for the consumption of religion. Because while we await the death of religion in Washington, it slouches toward Nairobi to be reborn.

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Note

1. The Charismatic movement prescribes those from traditional Christian churches – like the Catholic Church – who although subscribing to Pentecostalism wanted to distinguish themselves from the evangelical roots and over-emphasis on speaking in tongues of Pentecostalism (Robbins, 2004). In practice, both share similar theology and are often categorized as same.

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