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# SENSATIONAL PIETY

Practices of mediation in Christ Embassy and NASFAT

Sensationele vroomheid

Praktijken van bemiddeling in Christ Embassy en NASFAT

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

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door

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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	
LIST OF FIGURES .....	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Prelude .....	1
Positionality .....	4
Religious Coexistence and Comparative Approach .....	5
Methodology of the Research .....	13
Pentecostalism and Islamic Reformists .....	14
Pentecostalism .....	15
Islamic Reformists in Nigeria.....	26
NASFAT .....	32
A Material and Aesthetic Approach .....	34
Organisation of the Study .....	40
2. RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE NEW CAPITAL CITY OF ABUJA.....	43
Introduction .....	43
Abuja: the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) .....	45

Abuja as the City of Dreams .....	48
Sites of Divine Encounter: Religious Buildings of the City .....	53
The Diverse Religious Landscape of the City .....	61
Managing Religious Diversity: State Level .....	65
Managing Religious Diversity: Local Level.....	68
Pluralistic Religious Soundscape of the City .....	72
Visual Markers of Religion in the City .....	77
Religion and Social Capital in the City .....	81
Conclusion.....	85
3. CHRIST EMBASSY .....	88
Introduction .....	88
Brief Historical Background of the Church.....	90
Organisational Structure.....	93
Members and Membership .....	98
Cell Ministry.....	104
Engaging with the ‘Other’ in Christ Embassy .....	107
Muslims: Competitors or Potential Convert? .....	107
Demonisation of Indigenous Religion .....	109
Women: the Internal Other? .....	110
Politics: a Dirty Game? .....	111
Fund Raising .....	112
Heaven Cell: The Practice of Sacred Investment .....	117
Sacred Temporality: the Spiritual Significance of Time in Christ Embassy.....	123

Time of Divine Encounter: Sunday Worship Service and Holy Communion Services.....	127
Miraculous Healing Performance of Pastor Chris .....	129
Conclusion.....	138
4. NASFAT .....	141
Introduction .....	141
Historical Background of NASFAT .....	143
Organisational Structure and Membership .....	148
Aims and Objectives of NASFAT .....	153
Engaging with the ‘Other’ in NASFAT .....	155
People of the Book: Fellow Citizens or Competitors .....	156
Other Muslim Organisations: Partners in Promoting Islam?.....	159
African Traditional Religion: The Evil Other?.....	162
Women: the Internal Other? .....	163
Politics: the Evil Game? .....	166
Youth, Wings and the Caliphate System .....	167
Sources of Funds and Social Projects.....	173
Times of Divine Encounter: Asalatu, Tahajjud and Lailatul Qadr .....	176
Conclusion.....	188
5. COMMUNION WITH THE DIVINE: PRAYER AS PERFORMANCE OF MEDIATION IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT .....	190
Introduction .....	190
Theorising Prayer .....	193

Genre of Prayer in Christ Embassy and NASFAT .....	195
Prayer of Adoration: The Practices of Sacred Emotion.....	200
Glossolalia and Zikr: Prayers of Aesthetic Speech.....	210
Glossolalia .....	210
Zikr .....	215
‘I Claim it in the Name of Jesus:’ Instrumental Prayer in Christ Embassy.....	217
In Prayers there is Power: The Practice of Instrumental Prayers in NASFAT .....	223
Semiotic Ideologies, Sensational Forms, and the Functions of Instrumental Prayers .....	227
Material Sacrifices: Keys to the Portals of Prayers .....	231
When a Prayer Failed to Materialise .....	234
Conclusion.....	237
6. ORAL TRANSMISSION OF THE SACRED: PREACHING IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT.....	240
Introduction .....	240
Preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT within the Larger Religious Landscape.....	241
Preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT.....	246
Themes .....	246
Religious Authority and Listening .....	258
Styles of Preaching.....	262
Preaching as Performance of Mediation.....	270

Preaching as Instrument of Self-Cultivation .....	273
Conclusion.....	276
<b>7. MOBILE SPIRITUALITY: TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT .....</b>	<b>279</b>
Introduction .....	279
Digital Religiosity in Christ Embassy and NASFAT .....	283
Digital Sound practices.....	288
Sacred Liquid Texts in the Digital Space .....	295
The Emergence of Digital Religious Culture .....	305
Religious Performance and Participation in Virtual Sacred Space .....	311
Digital Religious Images and the Experience of Haptic Vision .....	320
Mobility of the Mobile Phone and its Consequent Instability .....	325
Images in Christ Embassy .....	328
Conclusion.....	330
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>333</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>358</b>
Worldwide Branches of NASFAT .....	358
Christ Embassy's Statement of Faith .....	361
<b>SAMENVATTING IN HET NEDERLANDS .....</b>	<b>362</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE .....</b>	<b>367</b>

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## LIST OF FIGURES

Unless otherwise noted, photographs were taken by Murtala Ibrahim

Fig. 2.1 Map of Abuja .....	48
Fig. 2.2 Central Bank of Nigeria one of the many high rise buildings in the city .....	52
Fig. 2.3 Abuja cityscape .....	53
Fig. 2.4 National Mosque Abuja .....	56
Fig. 2.5 National Mosque Abuja .....	56
Fig. 2.6 One of the main roads at Wuse Zone One Abuja.....	58
Fig. 2.7 Pentecostal posters in Abuja .....	78
Fig. 2.8 Banner advertising NASFAT's youth programme.....	79
Fig. 2.9 Banner advertising NASFAT's youth programme.....	86
Fig. 3.1 Interior of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja.....	95
Fig. 3.2 Exterior of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja .....	96
Fig. 3.3 Bookshop of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja.....	97

Fig. 3.4 Christ Embassy Church Karu Branch Abuja.....	98
Fig. 3.5 Sunday service at Christ Embassy Area One Abuja in August 2014 .....	100
Fig. 3.6 Bookshop and Foundation School Classes in Karu Branch Premises.....	103
Fig. 3.7 A big banner announcing the soul winning day of the church at Nyanya Branch Abuja .....	107
Fig. 4.1 Lagos State Secretariat Mosque one of the major worship centre of NASFAT .....	145
Fig. 4.2 NASFAT Islamic Centre, Utako Abuja .....	147
Fig. 4.3 Interior of NASFAT Islamic Centre Mosque Utako, Abuja .....	148
Fig. 4.4 NASFAT logo, one of the widest spread and well known religious trademark in Nigeria.....	150
Fig. 4.5 Author and some youths during Regional Youth Camp Abuja 2015 .....	170
Fig. 4.6 Females and Males participant of Regional Youth Camp 2015 .....	170/171
Fig. 4.7 Mosque premises during Sunday worship in become a mini market for Islamic religious Paraphernalia.....	178
Fig. 4.8 Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar commissioning NASFAT Islamic Centre Abuja in April 2015.....	179
Fig. 5.1 A photographed copy of Rhapsody of Reality .....	197
Fig. 5.2 A photographed copy of NASFAT Prayer Book .....	199
Fig. 5.3 NASFAT's imams during the Ramadan <i>Lailatul qadr</i> (2014) prayer at the Central Branch Utako, Abuja .....	204
Fig. 5.4 Recitation of NASFAT prayer book at Central Branch Utako, Abuja .....	206

Fig. 6.1 Sunday sermon in Christ Embassy Karu Branch, Abuja.....	244
Fig. 6.2 Ramadan Preaching in NASFAT Central Branch Abuja .....	253
Fig. 6.3 NASFAT’s congregation listening to preaching during Ramadan 2014.....	266
Fig. 6.4 Members listening to preaching at Karu Branch Abuja.....	268
Fig. 7.1 A worshipper in Christ Embassy holding his phone during Sunday service.....	297
Fig. 7.2 Members of NASFAT using their mobile phone for Qur’anic recitation during Sunday prayer at Abuja Central Branch.....	300
Fig. 7.3 Demonstration of how to use Yookos app via screen Christ Embassy Karu Branch Abuja.....	304
Fig. 7.4 Samples of Juma’at SMSs I collected from members of NASFAT in 2014 .....	308
Fig. 7.5 Pastor Chris performing Holy Communion Service telecasting via live internet streaming to all the branches of the church worldwide.....	313
Fig. 7.6 A sample of screen shot of virtual church reminder I have been receiving weekly from Christ Embassy.....	316
Fig. 7.7 Samples of digital Islamic calligraphies I collected from NASFAT members in 2014.....	322
Fig. 7.8 Printed versions of Islamic calligraphies on sale during Sunday service at Central Branch Abuja.....	324
Fig. 7.9 Pictures of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome I collected from the mobile phones of interlocutors during my fieldwork in 2014 .....	329

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### PRELUDE

Murtala: What is your perception about Muslims?

Chidi: Hey! Muslims love to perform their daily prayers. Whether in the market or during office hours, Muslims suspend their routine activities and pray. Even during long journey travelling such as from Jos to Kano, Muslims stop and pray beside the road. The calls to prayer from mosques are ubiquitous and fill the atmosphere in Muslim areas. I think this is the reason why a long time ago Muslims were referred to in Hausa language as *Masallata* or prayer people. I admire their devotion to God, but sometimes I became upset and irritated if they blocked the road during Friday prayer or a driver stopped for prayer during long journey travelling or if their loudspeakers are too loud.

Murtala: What other things do you know about Muslims apart from prayer?

Chidi: I heard that they want to reach God through Muhammad; I think they see Muhammad as their Messiah.

Murtala: What is your perception about Pentecostals?

Usman: While growing up in the 1980s, I had many Christian friends and what I know about Christianity is that Christians believe God is three in one and Jesus is the son of God. Presently a new form of Christianity appeared which is called Pentecostal. Everything about Pentecostals is loud: loud preaching, loud prayers and loud music. They put me under serious stress when I was residing at Court Road in Karu, close to a big Pentecostal church. When I relocated to Nyanya, I felt relief. When I watch Pentecostals' television programmes, seeing them become excited and falling to the ground, I feel disturbed. In fact, they are too emotional in their worship. Can God be reached through high emotional extravaganza?

These conversations are part of my interviews in Abuja with Chidi, a 33-year-old male Christian and a member of Christ Embassy, and Usman, a 40-year-old male Muslim who is member of Ansar-Ud-Deen Islamic Society, concerning their perceptions of each other's religion. These remarks suggest that on many occasions, it is through practices that Muslims and Christians define one another, encroach on the life of one another, and admire one another. The remarks spotlight a general feature which I encountered over and over again through my research: that Muslims and Christians have much awareness about each other's religious practices, such as prayers or media use, but do not necessarily have a deeper understanding of each other's theology or worldview. Religious practices, especially those conducted in (semi-) public settings, make people from different religious persuasions feel the weight of the presence of the religious 'other'. Even though Muslims and Christians meet each other and interact daily in public spaces and neighbourhoods, it is the encounter with each other's religious practices that brings to the fore the reality of their co-presence. This thesis will take practices as a starting point for comparing and exploring the relation between Islam and Christianity.

The two religious groups selected for the purpose of this research are Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Christ Embassy and NASFAT are major players among the myriad religious groups flourishing in the Nigerian capital

city. Three important practices of mediation in the two groups have been chosen—prayers, preaching, and technologically mediated religious practices—for comparative analysis. The aim of the comparative approach taken in this thesis is to reveal a complex inter-religious dynamic that goes beyond the predominant focus on conflicts in many academic works (Frederiks 2010).

Since this thesis aims at comparative study of Muslim and Christian groups, NASFAT has been selected because it has systematically responded to the challenges of Pentecostalism more than any other Muslim organisation. Peel (2016:187) writes, “NASFAT.... is probably the most effective response to the born-again phenomenon, from which it has consciously adopted many practices and strategies”. As a result, NASFAT is a suitable candidate for comparison with Pentecostal churches. Given that it is the Pentecostal Christianity in general that poses a challenge to Muslim communities through the domination of the public spheres, most of the major Pentecostal churches in the country, such as Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCGG) and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, could be compared with NASFAT with almost an equal result. This is so because most of the Pentecostal churches in the country share similar worldviews, theologies, and practices, notwithstanding their differences. Moreover, it is the basic practices of Pentecostalism such as highly emotional mode of religiosity and emphasis on prayers that appeal to many urbanites, including Muslims.

Among the many possible Pentecostal churches to study, Christ Embassy has been selected because it is one of the major Pentecostal churches which has not been studied by academic scholars despite its extensive outreach and influence on Nigerian society. As will be shown in the body of the thesis, many practices in Christ Embassy -- both religious and extra-ritual activities -- have their comparable counterparts in NASFAT. Moreover, Christ Embassy and NASFAT both project themselves as modern, progressive urban religious movements that attempt to address the aspirations of young upwardly mobile

professional class in the Nigerian urban environment. The two groups have been selected for comparison in order to highlight an inter-religious dynamic of relations between Muslims and Christians based on mutual influences afforded by a shared habitat.

### POSITIONALITY

Regarding my own positionality, I hail from the central Nigerian city of Jos, from ethnic Hausa Muslim parents with roots in the northern city of Kano. Most of the members of NASFAT (see Adetona 2002) are Yoruba Muslims from southern Nigeria, who, in their perceptions and practices of Islam, differ from their northern Muslim counterparts. Hausa and Yoruba Muslims accuse each other of syncretism and a lack of authenticity in their Islamic practices. Most members of Christ Embassy in turn regard all Hausa people as conservative Muslims. As a result, many expressed surprise that a Muslim man was doing research among Christians. As a result of this ethnic and religious difference, I was perceived as a stranger in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT and also felt as such.

Access to NASFAT was easy for me because I was given contact of the assistant national secretary of the organisation, Mustapha Bello, who in turn connected me with the imam of the Abuja branch. As a result, I did not encounter difficulties in the process of my fieldwork among NASFAT members. In fact, I found them open-minded people who were happy that somebody is going to produce a book about their organisation. However, people in Christ Embassy were suspicious in the beginning particularly because of my Muslim name. In order to get access and cooperation I had to involve a friend of mine who is a pastor with the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA). When he intervened and convinced the leaders of the Abuja branch of Christ Embassy that I was an academic researcher, they agreed and allowed me to conduct interviews and participant observation among them. During my research, I participated in some activities such as foundation classes for

newcomers. During this process, I tried as much as possible to create a relative distance in my mind in order not to be carried away and compromise my status as a researcher. Some of the young pastors in the church became eager to convert me to Christianity. I had to politely reject their overture time and again.

## RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE AND COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Religious coexistence in Nigeria has undergone multiple challenges over the years as a result of the government's inability to manage religious diversity effectively. This challenge is accentuated in the aftermath of returning to civilian rule in May 1999 after decades of military dictatorship in the country. The longstanding mutual suspicion and mistrust between Muslims and Christians degenerated into ethno-religious riots that devastated different parts of northern Nigeria. The recurrent religious conflicts undermine peaceful coexistence and hampered amicable Christian-Muslim relations in the country. Problematic Christian-Muslim relations are not limited to Nigeria but occur in different parts of Africa. Martha Frederiks (2010) examines in detail the evolving Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and maintains that presently the relationship between the two groups has deteriorated as a result of the surfacing of fundamentalist religiosity that is characterised with exclusivist and antagonistic tendencies. Frederiks affirms that the wave of terrorist attacks in different parts of the world also contributes in straining Muslims' relation with Christians where Islam is viewed as a violent religion that threatens world peace. Other developments which further increased polarisation between the two religious groups are Christians' concern about a perceived Islamic resurgence which manifests in polemical preaching that targets Christians and demands the implementation of *shari'ah* in some parts of Africa. According to Frederiks, Islamic resurgence coincided with the rise of Pentecostalism, which has a negative attitude toward the religious 'other'. Frederiks (2010: 271)

asserts that these developments “reflect the ambiguity that is part of the 21st century reality of interfaith relationships in sub-Saharan Africa”.

Hassan Mwakimako (2007) noted similar developments in Kenya which undermine Christian-Muslim relations. Mwakimako maintains that Muslim-Christian relations in Kenya are riddled with distrust and antagonism as a result of Muslims’ demand for the establishment of Islamic courts and terrorist bombing in the country. According to Mwakimako, another factor that undermined good relationships between the adherents of the two religions is Muslims’ marginalisation and discrimination by the majority Christian civil servants in the country. Mwakimako also outlines a series of events, such as closure of Muslim NGOs and disputes over dietary issues and veiling of Muslim girls in schools, as factors that further polarise the two religious groups in Kenya.

It is important to not be overwhelmed by the negative picture of relations between Christians and Muslims painted above. There is another dynamic going on despite the tensions and distrust between the two religious groups. This other dynamic is characterised by conviviality, interfaith joint action programmes, mutual influences, and even borrowing the forms of each other’s religious practices. It is for this reason that some scholars deem it imperative to explore Christians and Muslims under a single analytical framework, rather than focusing merely on one or the other. Modern society is becoming ever more pluralistic and multicultural and people from different cultural and religious backgrounds are living together, sometimes in the same neighbourhood and interacting with each other at different levels of social engagement. This situation prompts some scholars, such as Meyer and Larkin (2006), Dilger and Schultz (2013), Peel (2016), and Nolte (2015), to adopt a comparative and relational approach in the study of religion in Africa.

However, previous researchers rarely engaged in the enterprise of producing a single anthropology of Islam and Christianity. As anthropology tends to focus more on the peculiarity of each religious tradition, the issue of

bringing two distinct traditions within a single research enterprise barely arose. In the discipline of comparative religion, by contrast, the focus is on bringing together different religious traditions in a comparative framework. In this field, however, there is little interest in ethnographic study, as it focuses more on the systematic comparison of the doctrines and creeds of world's religions and aims at deeper understanding of the fundamental philosophical concerns of religion such as ethics, metaphysics, and the nature and form of salvation (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2006).

Nigeria is a religiously highly diverse nation and Muslims and Christians have been living side by side for a long period of time. Many ethnic groups in the country have both Muslims and Christians (albeit in different proportions) among them. It is common in some parts of the country to find both Muslims and Christians in the same family; in some cases even brothers and sisters may practice different religions. Muslims and Christians are living as neighbours, friends, business partners, colleagues in offices, school mates, and as spouses in inter-religious marriages as well as in many other forms of social interactions. These interactions bring the two parties very close to each other, either in harmonious or tense relationships. Benjamin Soares (2006:3) asserts that “it is a mistake to treat Muslims and Christians as monolithic communities that interact as block... [T]he boundaries between Muslims and Christians have not always been rigid, fixed or unchanging”. The fluid boundaries that exist between the two groups engendered mutual exchange of some practices between members of the two religions. A Christian preacher in the northern Nigeria can preach while wearing a Muslim cleric’s dress and using many Arabic words, or start his talks with, “*In the name of Allah the beneficent the merciful*”, which is a typical Muslim practice. In some parts of the country, especially in the south west and north central, people easily migrate from one religion to another or visit other religious services. For

instance, a Muslim youth may convert to Christianity with minimal opposition in his family and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

Considering this mutual sharing it would be lopsided to focus only on the conflicts that keep occurring between Muslims and Christians in some places. Frederiks (2010:263) maintains that Muslims and Christians in Africa have a multifaceted relationship that transcends the simple coexistence-conflict model advocated by many scholars. This means that there is much more in encounters between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria than only conflict. Soares (2006) asserts that even though there are many separate works on both historical and anthropological literature on Islam and Christianity, there are few research works on the encounter or relationship between the two religions. Marleen de Witte (2008:10) also highlights the need for a comparative approach:

I suggest that the anthropology of Pentecostalism should not remain limited to studying Pentecostal churches and movements, and people who consider themselves Pentecostal. It should equally take into account the ways in which through the media Pentecostal and charismatic ideas and forms have their repercussions outside Pentecostalism, on non-Pentecostal and non-Christian religions, on broader popular cultural forms, and on what counts as 'religion' or 'being religious.'

Peter van der Veer (2016) tasks anthropologists to adopt a comparative approach as prime way to understanding human societies. In the words of van der Veer (2016:11), "Anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes". According to van der Veer, this unique quality of anthropology stands in stark contrast with mainstream social sciences whose quantitative techniques often result in over generalisation and promote Western cultural presuppositions and euro-centrism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Insa Nolte (2015).

Some scholars undertake this comparative framework with compelling results. For instance, Larkin and Meyer (2006) presented a study on thriving Pentecostal and Islamic reform movements in West Africa with a particular focus on Nigeria and Ghana. They concede that the two movements are drastically different from one another in many ways. The two groups are rooted in different religious traditions with clearly distinct theologies, creeds and dogmas, and even histories. While reformist Islam attempts to get rid of innovations and some cultural traditions, Pentecostalism strives to achieve personal renewal and transformation through baptism with the Holy Spirit. The authors maintain that the two movements are bitter enemies of each other and perceive themselves as rivals and competitors. This rivalry is being played out in Nigeria with concomitant widening of the social fault lines. Larkin and Meyer argue that, despite these apparent significant differences between the two groups, by looking deeper similarities would begin to emerge. First, both movements seem to grow out of the breakdown of African economies and the failure of African states to reverse the situation and provide social and economic securities to its people. These groups become the means through which Africans strive to cope with the hardship of daily life in an insecure and precarious environment that is defined by uncertainty. The two movements have similar activities and goals, as in the case of their opposition to certain cultural traditions which they perceive as dangerous to the true faith. They also bitterly oppose occult practices such as witchcraft, sorcery, and divination. In addition, they criticise established religions in their environments, such as Catholicism and Sufism, as having deviated from the true path. Larkin and Meyer argue that both Pentecostalism and reformist Islam have a theology that attempts to encompass the entire life of the individual, often to minute detail. These intense theologies often result in confrontation between the groups and their neighbours. The two groups are strongly influenced by globalisation and international networks.

Hansjörg Dilger (2014) also places Muslims and Christians under a single framework of study in urban and peri-urban Dar es Salaam. Dilger explores and compares making and remaking of urban space through health care interventions by Muslim revivalist movements and Pentecostalism in the city. Dilger examines the longstanding entanglement between religious organisations and provision of health care in Tanzania and shows how modern religious actors and movements attempt to acquire visibility in urban space through establishing health care interventions. Dilger (2014:64) argues that “the comparison of revivalist neo-Pentecostal and Muslim organisations may show how these various, mutually reinforcing struggles for social and political visibility are embedded in longstanding histories of religious diversity and competition in urban settings”.

The mutual influences in the religious sphere have been visually demonstrated by Janson and Akinleye (2015) in their photo essay on the Lagos-Ibadan express way, which they dubbed the spiritual super high way. The authors maintain that the road has been appropriated by religious movements from Lagos and transformed into prayer camps or prayer cities that provide varieties of religious services and infrastructure which stand in contrast to the perceived sinful life and violent crime of Lagos. The authors show how NASFAT, which is a new Muslim religious organisation, copied the spatial practices of the Pentecostal church Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM) through establishing its own prayer camp on the express way which stretches to 1,000 acres of land and accommodates up to 500,000 worshippers. According to the authors, NASFAT borrows Pentecostal terminologies such as ‘crusade’ and ‘night vigil’ to refer, respectively, to its Sunday prayer meeting and all night prayers (which attract tens of thousands of people, including Christians). Janson and Akinleye highlight a remarkable similarity between NASFAT and the MFM in epitomising the centrality of human body in the religious practices. Janson and Akinleye (2015:558) affirm that “while Pentecostalism and revivalist Islam compete to win souls and public space, the

very fact of competition has led both groups to borrow from each other to a significant extent. The merging of religious elements makes the expressway a true cross road”. The Janson and Akinleye study resonates well with the findings of Dilger (2014) in Dar es Salaam, where Muslim revivalists and Neo-Pentecostal churches compete to inscribe their presence in the cityscape through health care intervention.

In chapter nine of his book, *A Century of Interplay Between Islam and Christianity*, John Peel (2016) traces the development of Christian-Muslim encounters among the Yoruba (and Nigeria in general) and the changing mutual influences between the two religious groups. Peel maintains that there is soft, or non-aggressive, competition between Muslims and Christians within the ambient culture of the Yoruba. Peel argues that in the early period of encounter Muslims exacted more influence on Christians than vice versa. On the contrary, in recent times Muslims have been borrowing more from the Christians, particularly from Aladura churches and Pentecostalism. Peel cites the examples of various Muslims charismatics whose visions led them to initiate religious movements that exhibit excessive Pentecostal influence. Peel notes that among the Pentecostal-influenced Muslim groups, the most formidable one and also the most successful is NASFAT. Peel further suggests that even though NASFAT is rooted in Islamic orthodoxy, it has also adopted managerial language that is also appropriated by Pentecostalism. Moreover, Peel (2016:189) finds remarkable similarities between NASFAT and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), particularly in their extra-ritual activities which involve provision of welfare and development services to their members, and in this respect, “NASFAT follows a trail that RCCG has blazed”.

Moreover, Peel (2016) disagrees with Meyer and Larkin on the issue of similarities between Pentecostalism and Islamic reformists. Peel suggests that Islamic reformists have a trenchant political agenda that aims at shari’ah implementation contrary to Pentecostalism which is an apolitical movement that thrives outside a state. According to Peel (2016:195) prosperity and

politics which underscore the orientation between the two movements “can be seen as contrasting ways in which believers are prompted to realize themselves and so to shape their worlds.”

However, in my view Peel’s (2016) argument that Islamic reformists such as salafi downplay the importance of health overlooks the fact that currently salafi reinstate the centrality of wellbeing through propagating prophetic medicine and other Islamic forms of healing claimed to be based on the *sunnah* of the Prophet<sup>2</sup>. Salafi also dabble into exorcism (*ruqiyya*) and fighting demonic afflictions with Qur’anic verses. In addition, even though salafi *ulama* (religious leaders or scholars) do not preach prosperity in the same way as Pentecostals, their life style is far from frugal living affirmed by Peel. The relationship between the salafi ulama and the politicians afford them opportunities to live a lavish and flamboyant living. When NASFAT is taken into consideration the similarities with Pentecostalism become even more conspicuous. This is because NASFAT categorically promote prosperity and wellbeing and does not show interest in changing political order through the implementation of shari’ah. For these reasons, when practices and form become the focal point for comparison as advocated by Meyer and Larkin many points of convergence between Muslim and Christian groups begin to emerge. It is in line with this point of view that this thesis adopted a comparative approach based on religious practices, form and lived religion.

This thesis aims to contribute to and expand on this trend of conducting comparative anthropological research on Christians and Muslims in Africa. The study attempts to expand on the comparative approach developed by the leading scholars. It will do so by selecting and comparing a set of important practices, such as different genres of prayers, preaching, and engaging with new media in Christ Embassy and NASFAT, in an ethnographic manner. In this thesis I do not intend to compare religious beliefs, doctrines, creeds, or

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<sup>2</sup> Prophetic medicine shops or *sunnah* pharmacies established by salafi scholars are spreading rapidly in all corners Nigerian urban spaces.

worldviews of Christ Embassy and NASFAT per se. Instead, I am going to focus on the lived religion and practices of the two movements that occur regularly and spill over into the public space. This is because lived religion is more dynamic and tends to be more exposed to external influences than doctrines and creeds. Similarly, the study will not compare or analyse the contents of the sacred texts of the two groups, but instead will focus on textual practices such as recitation, reading, or listening to the Holy Scriptures.

### METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Ethnographic research methodology has been employed in this study; semi-structured interviews and participant observation were adopted as primary tools of data collection. Moreover, document analysis was employed because there are many written materials such as books written by the leaders of the two groups that include transcripts of sermons, constitutions, and hymn books. General information about the two groups (such as origin and development, founders, teachings, worldviews, organisational structures, nature of membership, relationship with political power, and social welfare) has been acquired through interviewing leaders from each movement and literature written by scholars and leaders of the two groups.

About 20 members from each movement were interviewed and stratified random sampling has been adopted. The interlocutors have been categorised based on age and gender. Furthermore, I engaged in balanced participant observation (which implies partial participation in group activities) during weekly attendance of services. The weekly services included are NASFAT's Sunday Asalatu, Friday prayers, monthly night vigils, special prayer classes, seminars, and conferences. For Christ Embassy, the weekly visits covered were Sunday worship, Monday and Wednesday evening fellowship, monthly night vigils, crusades, night of bliss, and other special activities. In participating in these activities I collected a significant amount of

data concerning the three foci of the research: prayers, preaching, and engagement with new media technologies. In addition, I engaged some members in informal conversations about their experiences in the organisations.

The fieldwork was conducted in eleven months in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. Abuja was chosen as a location for the research because Christ Embassy and NASFAT have considerable number of memberships in the city and materials related to the research are available. Due to the middle class nature of the city, there are many influential members in the city. In addition, most of the national activities of the two movements in the north take place in Abuja. Moreover, regarding confidentiality of my interview subjects, I had an agreement with them to ensure their anonymity. Thus, all the names of the interlocutors mention in the body of the work are pseudonyms except the names of the founders and leaders of the two groups.

## PENTECOSTALISM AND ISLAMIC REFORMISTS

Since Christ Embassy is a major Pentecostal church in Nigeria, it is essential to look into the development of Pentecostalism in order to contextualise the church within the broader framework of the Pentecostal spectrum. Understanding the development of Pentecostalism in Nigeria will shed light on the rise of Christ Embassy. In addition, NASFAT cannot be defined as Islamic reformist as is the case with Izala and the Salafi; however, it is one of the religious groups flourishing alongside the Islamic reformists. In this section, Pentecostalism and Islam in Africa as well as NASFAT are placed within the major literature on Christianity and Islam in Africa. However, I did not encounter a single academic work on Christ Embassy; therefore, I relate the church to some scholarly works on Pentecostalism in Nigeria (and Africa). In addition, works that attempt to restore the roles of human senses, emotion, and materiality have been analysed in relation to the data of the thesis.

### *PENTECOSTALISM*

From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been an explosion of growth in Pentecostal movements throughout the world. The Pew Forum Report states that “in direct and indirect ways, Pentecostal beliefs and practices are remaking the face of world Christianity” (2007:1).<sup>3</sup> Many scholars agree that Pentecostalism is the most rapidly growing religion of the present era. Anderson et al. (2010:2) assert that “in the past thirty years Pentecostal membership grew by about 700 per cent, which represent about a quarter of the world’s Christian population and two-thirds of all Protestants”. The origin of Pentecostalism has been usually traced to the so-called Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. One of the factors that facilitate the growth of Pentecostalism around the world is globalisation. Pentecostal churches effectively utilise some aspects of globalisation such as information and communication technology (ICTs), which include satellite television and the internet, ease of traveling, migrant communities, and modern marketing

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<sup>3</sup> Christianity was first introduced in the southern part of the country by Portuguese traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but it quickly declined and the area was reclaimed by traditional religions (Ukpong 2012). Because of their experience at home the Portuguese missionaries adopted a top down approach of spreading Christianity by targeting local chiefs, thinking that people would automatically renounce their traditional religion and adopt the new faith of their leaders (Ukah 2007). According to Page (1909) the second half of the nineteenth century saw the influx of varieties of Christian missions from Europe and North America in the regions that are now part of the southern of Nigeria. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was the first to establish a mission station in the country led by Henry Townsend who sowed the seed of Anglicanism when he landed in Badagry from Freetown Sierra Leone in 1842. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century African Independent Churches (AICs) began to emerge to cater to African spiritual aspirations that were not met by older historical missionary churches. According to Ukah (2007:4), Africans felt the need to establish their churches because they were excluded from leadership positions in historic mission churches. One of the most important strands of African Independent churches are *Aladura* movements. According to Kofi Johnson (2011), *Aladura* churches began as prayer movements within older Nigerian churches. Adebayo (2004) asserts that the notable example of *Aladura* movements includes the Cherubim and Seraphim churches founded around 1925 and the Church of the Lord established in 1929.

strategies to extend their outreach around the globe. This process gives rise to mega-churches that have branches in different parts of the world with members who cut across ethnic, national, and racial boundaries. Meyer (2010:113) highlights the fact that even the names of these mega-churches, which on many occasions contain words such as ‘international’ or ‘global’, are an indication of their engagement with globalisation.

The exponential growth of Pentecostalism is happening largely in the global south. Adogame (2011) points out that the worldwide growth toward over 523 million Pentecostals happens outside the geographical area of the West in areas such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2006:10) quotes Hastings saying that “for a time when chapel buildings in many parts of Western Europe are being converted into pubs, clubs, restaurants, warehouses, cinemas, museums, residential facilities, these same secular facilities are being refurbished for the use of churches in sub-Saharan Africa”. The Pentecostal movement is increasingly affirming the shifting of the gravity centre of Christianity to the south, with Africa having a fair share of global Pentecostal outreach.

The nature of present Pentecostalism makes it difficult for scholars to agree on one universally accepted definition or even accepted classification. However, Asamoah-Gyadu (2005:12) defines it as follows:

Pentecostalism refers to Christian groups which emphasise salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit and in which pneumatic phenomena including ‘speaking in tongues’, prophecies, visions, healing and miracles in general, perceived as standing in historic continuity with the experiences of the early church as found especially in the Acts of the Apostles, are sought, accepted, valued, and consciously encouraged among members as signifying the presence of God and experiences of his Spirit.

From this definition it would be right to say that emphasis of the experience of the Holy Spirit and pneumatic gifts is the unifying factor among

different Pentecostal strands across the world. A broad definition as proposed by Asamoah-Gyadu is necessary due to the varieties of Pentecostal expressions and lack of central authority among the Pentecostal Churches. In addition, behind the label Pentecostalism we find a striking multiplicity of movements, and it is a highly fluid and fickle phenomenon. A certain organisational diversity is part of Pentecostals' capacity to adapt to local demands and show their ability in marketing strategies and entrepreneurial capacity. The larger churches mark their public presence by the large auditoriums that have been built. The term Pentecostalism, according to Adogame (2011), embraces what many scholars describe as classical Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals, charismatic, neo-charismatic, and denominational Pentecostals.

In Nigeria Pentecostalism achieved an outstanding expansion since the 1970s and it is one of the most rapidly growing religious movements in the country. According to the Pew Forum (2007:86), "In Nigeria roughly six-in-ten Protestants are either Pentecostal or charismatic, and three-in-ten Catholics surveyed can be classified as charismatic". Pentecostal Churches are being established on a daily basis and they are acquiring and converting hitherto unthinkable places such as cinemas, night clubs, and stores into churches everywhere in the country. Radio and television broadcasting are saturated with Pentecostal programmes and advertisements. Ayuk A. Ayuk (2005:117) affirms that "Pentecostals brought the church back to life with its insistence on missions and evangelism". Ruth Marshall (2009:2) elaborates on this issue:

Nigeria has been the site of Pentecostalism's greatest explosion on the African continent, and the movement's extraordinary growth shows no signs of slowing. A marginal current within Nigerian Christianity in the early 1970s, by the turn of the millennium Pentecostal or Born-Again Christianity had become its overwhelmingly dominant form, counting tens of millions of adherents, and powerfully influencing Christian practice and doctrine across all denominations.

There is no doubt that this explosion has challenged traditional and mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church in the country. Some of the traditional churches have begun to adopt Pentecostal practices in order to retain their members who are continually drifting away to Pentecostal churches. Lado (2009) asserts that by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century elements of Pentecostal experiences, such as the baptism by the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and laying of hands, began to penetrate into the practices of historic churches including the Roman Catholic Church, which resulted in the birth of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. The influence of Nigerian Pentecostal Christianity extends to different parts of the world. These churches have numerous foreign branches and their pastors travel around the globe for healing crusades, conferences, and other activities. So, Nigerian Pentecostalism contributes significantly in the ever expanding globalisation of this form of Christianity.

Matthews Ojo (2006) is one of the pioneers in the study of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. In order to trace the historical development of Pentecostalism, he points out the important role played by the Inter-Varsity Christian Student Union movement in the emergence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. This movement emphasises the baptism of the Holy Spirit and holiness, which was a new development among Christian student activists in the 1970s. Ojo carefully examines the evolution of charismatic churches in Yoruba land and focuses on its creeds, liturgy, worldview, ethics, and political stance. Moreover, Ojo explores the socio-economic factors behind the rise of the movement. Ojo also utilises economic theory of religion to describe the success of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. He affirms that Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has succeeded as a result of a neo-liberal and free market for religion which fosters competition, innovation, and creativity among religious entrepreneurs. Another factor which may account for the expansion of Pentecostalism is the lopsided emphasis on material success, which proves to be very attractive to the vast impoverished population. In Ojo's view, the

convergence of Pentecostal and African indigenous cosmologies also made the movement spread easily among Nigerians, particularly Yoruba of the south west.

Kalu (2008) argues that Pentecostalism and Charismatic movements have an indigenous African basis despite the contrary assertion by some scholars. Writing from the insider point of view, church historian Kalu rejects the idea that the origin of Pentecostalism lies in socio-economic transformations and that the explanation of the success of born again movements is grounded in experience of social insecurity. Kalu's book basically offers a critique of Western scholars' explanations of the African Pentecostal explosion. He tries to reject the emphasis placed on the role of outside forces in the development of African Pentecostalism.

Kalu (2008) highlights a caveat that the actual size of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is difficult to ascertain. This is due to the fragility and transiency of the movements that make them susceptible to schism and splintering over doctrine, theological rifts, moral lapses, personality clashes, competing ambition, and financial crises. Kalu maintains that the continuity of a group may depend on the capacity to maintain a moral code that disciplines the body, speech, and sexuality of both leaders and followers. Kalu argues that within the atmosphere of rapid growth, there is a tendency for the observers to lose sight of the fact that many Pentecostal groups disappear as quickly as they appear, decimated by schism, power struggles, or funding constraints. So, it is important not to mistake the constant appearance of new Pentecostal groups as a sign of absolute growth. Furthermore, Kalu asserts that the Pentecostal movement is not immune to the fate of routinisation of charisma; therefore, some Pentecostal groups age quickly and their charisma becomes routinised as the institutions become bureaucratized.

Ojo (2006) would certainly disagree with Kalu on the development of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Ojo's view privileges the role of the socio-economic backdrop in the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. If we are to

judge some Pentecostals such as Christ Embassy by their own words, certainly privileging the economic aspect of life cannot be overemphasised. However, an economic model cannot fully explain the Pentecostal phenomenon, because the spiritual dimension of their religiosity, an integral part of their experience, must be recognised.

In her analysis of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Ruth Marshall (2009) takes on the issue of radical transformation of conversion, which social scientists usually downplay. Marshall does not see the Pentecostal growth explosion as a continuation of the past pre-Christian practices, as argued by some scholars. This is due to the nature of Pentecostalism that emphasises a radical break with the past. She also critiques the idea of co-relating Pentecostal phenomena with the rise of neo-liberal capitalism of the contemporary world. She bases her argument on the fact that Africans had already experienced several tumultuous times in their past that did not generate this kind of religious response. She applies Foucault's idea of technology of the self in studying Nigerian Pentecostals' political project through individual techniques of purifying the self that would gradually cleanse and transform the society as a whole. In order to explain the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism, Marshall tries to understand how Pentecostalism expresses the experience of being born again as an opportunity for Nigerians to realise the promises of political and religious salvation made during the colonial and postcolonial eras.

According to Marshall (2009) one of the most important goals of Pentecostalism is individual as well as collective renewal through baptism with Holy Spirit. Marshall maintains that the massive corruption and widespread social malaise and decay that bedeviled Nigerian society, along with the failure of secular authority to reform and sanitise the system, make some turn to a spiritual avenue in addressing the problems. According to Marshall, the born again project is not restricted to a search for salvation alone but also includes spiritual cleansing of people's hearts. This project also involves what Marshall

calls new modes of government of the self, which are practices and disciplines that attempt to subdue the flesh, hone the self, and orient it toward righteousness, purity, rectitude, and interiority. It is assumed that individual transformation and renewal can also gradually transform the entire society and regenerate it from its moral bankruptcy. This idea, together with the idiom of being born again, certainly fostered hope in a hopeless situation and created the possibility to make a break with the morally depraved present and turn it into the past by ushering in a new life. Ruth Marshall's rejection of neo-liberal explanation in the rise of Pentecostals resonates with the plea of Kalu in taking seriously the religious dimension of Pentecostalism. However, the prescriptive rather than descriptive nature of Kalu's work renders him vulnerable to criticism from social scientists.

Christ Embassy does not fully integrate into Marshall's analysis of Pentecostalism due to its radical individualism that results in lack of a coherent socio-political vision. The fervent obsession with individual material success and prosperity, irrespective of economic and political conditions in the country, makes its mode of religiosity very individualistic. However, the church praxis resonates with Marshall's view regarding the techniques of the self Pentecostals deploy in reforming an individual and re-orienting his or her state of consciousness for achieving spiritual goals and its intended or unintended material consequences.

According to Olufonke Adebayo (2004:142) there have been three phases of Pentecostal growth in Nigeria. The first phase could be dated from the 1930s and was characterised by interactions between indigenous Pentecostal forms called the *Aladura* churches and foreign denominational Pentecostal churches from the USA (e.g., the Faith Tabernacle) and Britain (e.g., the Apostolic Church). Adebayo continues that many practices of *Aladura* churches have striking resonance with the foreign Pentecostal movements as in the case of fervent prayers, spirit possession, and public evangelism. *Aladura* churches' encounter with foreign Pentecostals yielded

mutual interactions that entailed the development of Pentecostal expressions that emphasised experience of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, effective prayer, visionary guidance, and a less formalised African style of music and worship.

Adebayo (2004) maintains that in the second phase (70s and 80s) the churches emphasised holiness and the experience of the Holy Spirit, expressed through speaking in tongues, conversion or being born again, spiritual warfare, and evangelical fervour. This period saw the rise of inter-denominational campus fellowships and a strong emphasis on biblical inerrancy. The leaders of the Pentecostal movements in this period formed a new elite of graduates whose identification with the movement seemed to have enhanced its social rating. Most of the Pentecostal churches that emerged in this period express disapproval to the Aladura groups for accommodating elements of traditional African religions into the Christian religion.

The third wave of the Pentecostal explosion in Nigeria began in 1990s and the churches in this spectrum are dubbed by some scholars as neo-Pentecostal movements. The churches in these new movements emphasise, among other things, financial breakthrough, material success, healing, and the gift of prophecy (Folarin 2010). However, Adebayo (2004:137) explains that, whether classical or neo-Pentecostalism, a common thread that runs through Pentecostal Christianity is the experience of a new life articulated in personal narratives of conversion, and the transition from an 'old' life to a 'new' one. The emphasis is now on the prosperity gospel and faith. Some churches also emphasise deliverance and healing. Examples of neo-Pentecostal churches are Mountain of Fire and Miracles (1989), Sword of the Spirit Ministries (1989), Fountain of Life Church (1992), House on the Rock (1994), and Daystar Christian Centre (1995). These churches are led by young, upwardly mobile, educated professionals who appropriated modern marketing techniques in their evangelism. With its emphasis on prosperity, health, and wealth, Christ Embassy is one of the neo-Pentecostal groups.

Marloes Janson (2011) in her study of Chrislam discusses the flowering of religious revivals and creativity among all the African religions within the context of political liberalisation and neo-liberal economy of the early 1990s. She argues that the rise of Chrislam reveals the close encounter between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. The Chrislam movement was founded by Samsiddeen Saka and it is called *OkeTude* (mountain of losing bondage). The founder preaches the unity of Islam and Christianity and members pray in the names of both Jesus and Muhammad, recognise Bible and the Qur'an as holy texts, and sing for the two religious figures. Chrislam has a ritual of spiritual running, which is a physical jogging that mimics some events in Islam and Biblical history. The movement has a healing school where members learn how to cope with the worldly problems and achieve sublime peace in their lives. According to Janson, the appeal of movements like Chrislam may be due to economic collapse of Nigeria, the extreme hardships that entangle the poor, and the numerous social problems facing the country. This kind of movement may provide their members with solace and tools for coping with uncertainties that become the order of the day in a megalopolis such as Lagos. Janson's argument of correlating the rise of religious movements and socio-economic factors highlights the tension between insiders and the scholars. Insiders such as Ogbu Kalu, who believe in extra-empirical factors, disagree with the idea of socio-economic determination of their faiths.

Regarding the issue of prosperity gospel Paul Gifford's (2004) compelling research on Pentecostals in Ghana shows the importance of material reward in Pentecostal religiosity. Gifford argues that these new churches that are flourishing in Ghana are scarcely identical with each other despite the sharing of basic doctrines. Gifford further asserts that while many historical churches such as Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist emphasise salvation in the afterlife; Pentecostal churches favour wealth and success in the here and now. Gifford directs his searchlight on the most famous Pentecostal pastors and their mega-churches in Ghana. These pastors include

Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel, Mensah Otabil of the Central Gospel Church, Dag Heward Mills of the Worldwide Lighthouse International ‘Mega-Church’, Salifu of the Jesus Is Alive Evangelistic Ministry. These celebrity preachers preach the prosperity gospel to their mass audience and promise them blessings in the form of new jobs, cars, houses, and protection from the ‘curses of Satan’--misfortune, unemployment, poverty, and other impediments to success. These blessings can be acquired through faith and bountiful donations to the church (2004:48). Gifford asserts that these men of God, as they are often called, rarely mention the Sermon on the Mount in their preaching or some of the fundamental Christians doctrines as atonement for sin and afterlife salvation. Gifford maintains that this teaching appealed to people who are suffering for many years of economic hardship.

Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (2006) is one of the most prolific writers on contemporary African Pentecostalism. Asamoah-Gyadu examines characteristics, practices, and worldviews of varieties of Pentecostal expression in West Africa. He discusses in detail themes such as Spirit-filled Christianity, worship as experience, prayer strategies, ecclesiology, and the democratisation of charisma that produces a new vision of church, giving and tithing, and the concept and practice of anointing, Holy Communion, and the Bible, worship and experience of Holy Spirit. Asamoah-Gyadu touches upon many practices of Pentecostalism that also appear in Christ Embassy. One such practice is speaking in tongues or glossolalia. Asamoah-Gyadu sees glossolalia as a re-invigorating factor in the practices of Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Africa which deserves great attention. Asamoah-Gyadu regards prayer in the African context as a matter of struggle against the ‘powers of darkness’. Therefore, praying in tongues is a prayer of power, of confident assertion of superiority of the power of God over the powers of darkness. In this vein, glossolalia is not a distinctive doctrine but a distinguishing practice. In this study I analyse glossolalia as a practice of mediation in Christ Embassy.

Asamoah-Gyadu agrees with Matthews Ojo on the connection between these African Pentecostal teachings on prosperity and spiritual empowerment and the precariousness of life in a world of poverty and political instability. He sees the emphasis on success, healing, blessing, and prosperity as a new and Christian expression of the role of African religion as strategies for survival. The author states that the Pentecostals succeeded because they address issues that were neglected or downplayed by the established mission churches. These issues may be the relation between salvation and material well-being; the problems of evil spirits, curses, and magic; and the relation between the present generation and the ancestors. However, as a theologian Asamoah-Gyadu also criticises the Pentecostals for relegating the theology of the cross and putting too much emphasis on the material reward expected from God.

Nigerian Pentecostals are not different from their Ghanaian counterparts in terms of prosperity teaching. Pastor Chris always emphasises the fact that people are struggling to make money almost seven days a week; therefore, the church cannot overlook the importance of money in people's life. What I will add to the study of Gifford and Asamoah-Gyadu are the interesting techniques provided by Pastor Chris in acquiring the wealth and health. Pastor Chris's methods of prosperity making are not restricted to faith alone but involve a complex usage of human mind and human speech.

Marleen de Witte's (2008) study takes into account large scale media representations and religious mediation in Ghana. She affirms that religion manifests everywhere in Ghanaian urban landscapes, both in the soundscape and image-scape. She conducted research in a charismatic Pentecostal church called International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), founded and led by Mensa Otabil, and on African Traditional Religion as practiced by the Afrikania Mission (Afrikania). She argues that both engage in different acts of divine or spiritual mediation using different religious media. She further states, "Charismatic Christian belief and practice revolves around, 'Power in His Presence.' Believers profess the immediate presence of God through the Holy

Spirit and seek to connect to this presence through embodiment, spoken words, music, (biblical) texts, and others, including electronic forms of mediation” (27). According to de Witte, it is not only Pentecostals that are interested in the presence of power and its mediation; Afrikania also preaches about presence of power. However, members of Afrikania focus on accessing the powers of ancestors, territorial, and other spirit powers. Members connect and communicate with these powers through embodiment, libation, divination, objects, and music (28).

The domination of the public sphere by Pentecostals elicits major reactions in Nigeria, which in the case of NASFAT results in negotiated borrowing of Pentecostal practices. This trend is very visible in Nigeria where many non-Pentecostal churches such as Roman Catholics and Anglicans have seen their members drifting away to the new Pentecostal churches. As a result, the old historical churches decided to accommodate some Pentecostal practices in order to retain their membership. So, NASFAT is certainly not alone in utilising the successful Pentecostal forms and methods as a strategy for retaining membership. Pentecostal churches have become a dominant force in shaping new religiosity in the sense that other mission churches (and even some Muslim groups) are following their trend, particularly their modes of worship and engagement with the media.

### *ISLAMIC REFORMISTS IN NIGERIA*

The traditional religious landscape among the Muslims of Nigeria was characterised by Sufi movements such as Tijjaniya and Qadiriyya.<sup>4</sup> In the

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<sup>4</sup> In the 11<sup>th</sup> century Islam, which became one of the major religions in modern Nigeria, was introduced to Borno. According to Danmole (1996), Ibn Khaldun mentions friendly relations at that time between the ruler of Borno and Berber rulers of Tunisia and the Tripolitania. Islam was brought to Hausa land by Wangarawa Muslim traders and scholars mainly from western Sudan; by the 15<sup>th</sup> century this clerical class spread the religion throughout northern Nigeria. The religion continued to spread, reaching Kano in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until the reign of Muhammad Rimfa (1403-1499) that Islam became widespread. Danmole (1996) maintains that the Islamic penetration

northern part of the country the 1960s and 1970s saw the appearance of many religious movements and organisations. The most notable among them is *Jama'atu Nasrul Islam* (JNI), which is a Muslim umbrella organisation, under the leadership of the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, and founded by former premier of northern Nigeria Sir Ahmadu Bello with the aim of unifying Muslims and serving the cause of Islam.

*Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'ah Wa'ikhamatul Sunnah* (Society for the eradication of innovations and establishment of *sunna*), or Izala in short, is the first radical Islamic reform movement in northern Nigeria. The movement was founded by Sheikh Isma'ila Idris in 1978 with the sole agenda of purifying Islam from innovations, un-Islamic cultural practices, and what he described as a deviant Sufi practices. The movement also denounces some folk Islamic practices such as using amulets, drinking washed scriptural verses written on slate, exorcism, and sorcery. According to Loimeier (2012), the renowned Sheikh Abubakar Gumi had prepared ground for the emergence of Izala. He was one of the first scholars to oppose Sufi practices in northern Nigeria. He utilised both print and electronic media such as newspaper and radio to propagate his anti-Sufi and anti-innovation teachings from 1960s until his death in the early 1992 (see also Larkin 2009, in *Aesthetic Formations*). Since its formation Izala has experienced rapid growth. By now it is one of the largest religious organisations in the country, with millions of members throughout

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into northern Nigeria was slow, gradual, and peaceful, this process extended over several centuries. By the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Habe* rulers of Hausa land were Muslim, although Islam was not practiced according to the principles and ideals of the religion. In Yorubaland the arrival of Islam preceded Christianity for hundred years. According to Eade (1980), Yoruba people came in contact with Islam around the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries during the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa of Mali Empire. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a mosque in Oyo which was used by Muslim foreign traders who visited the city frequently. Gradually, Islam began to spread to the different strata of Yoruba society and mosques began to appear in places such as Iwo town in 1655; followed by Iseyin, in 1760; Lagos, 1774; Saki, 1790; and Osogbo, 1889. In time, Islam spread to other towns, such as Oyo Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ikirun and Ede, even before Sokoto jihad.

Nigeria and neighbouring countries. The organisation has established thousands of schools with hundreds of thousands of students throughout Nigeria and other West African countries. Unlike some radical groups who distance themselves from the government, Izala leadership is close to government and politicians and actively encourages Muslims to cooperate with political authorities. In their effort to increase their chances of winning elections, politicians solicit the support of Izala through gifts and donations. The recent movement that appears on the scene and is close to Izala is *Salafism*, whose ideology has been propagated by Nigerian students who studied in Saudi Arabia. The ideology of the *salafi* is based on the notion of restoring the pristine form of Islam as it was practiced by the Prophet and his companions.

The Muslim Brothers movement was initiated by Sheikh Ibrahim el Zakzaki in 1979 when he was a student in Ahmadu Bello University. This is also an Islamic reform movement, but its vision is radically different from that of Izala. Zakzaki was highly influenced by the Iranian Islamic revolution and he is calling for the same type of Islamic revolution in Nigeria to replace the present secular system with an Islamic theocracy. To Zakzaki, Nigeria is a secular state because its constitution is not written according to Islamic principles. He is contesting the section of the constitution that says the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion. He is of the view that the Islamic government is necessary in order to establish new moral order and social justice. Even though Zakzaki's movement attracted a number of youthful followers, including some students, still the membership remained relatively small and failed to achieve the same growth as Izala and *salafi* movements. In the early 1990s when the movement metamorphosed into Shi'ism, several members broke away and established a splinter group called *Jama'attajdid Islam*, which means 'society for Islamic renewal', in Kano city. This group, according to Loimeier (2012), organised

itself in line with the Islamic Brotherhood of Egypt and become an ardent supporter of the recent shari'ah project in northern Nigeria.

The most recent movement, which happened to be the most radical among all Muslims reform movements in Nigeria, is Boko Haram, which struggles for Islamic revolution through violent terrorist campaigns in the country (Hill 2010).<sup>5</sup> Boko Haram was initiated in 2002 by Muhammad Yusuf, a young radical preacher from Yobe state in north-eastern Nigeria. Yusuf preached that modern education is forbidden in Islam because it is not based on an Islamic worldview and lacks moral values. Young followers of Yusuf in north-eastern Nigeria dropped out of school or resigned from civil service. Some notable Muslim scholars in the region, such as Sheikh Jafar Mahmud and Isah Fantami, had earnestly tried to convince Yusuf to renounce his ideology, but he remained notoriously adamant on his cause. In July of 2009 Boko Haram militants launched a Jihad in the north-eastern cities of Maiduguri, Bauchi, and Damaturu. They attacked government offices, police stations and barracks, and other government facilities. The Nigerian army were called to crush the rebellion. The military caught Mallam Yusuf and handed him over to the police who extra-judicially executed him. Thousands of people perished as a result of this rebellion and many were wounded or maimed and valuable properties destroyed.

After their severe defeat in this confrontational war with the military, Boko Haram went into a period of silence for almost a year. It is now clear that throughout this period of silence its members were preparing for a form of warfare that is absolutely new in Nigeria; it is a war which Nigerian security forces are not prepared to tackle. Abubakar Shekau, who was second in command, took over the leadership of the movement and announced the new name of the movement as *Jamā'a Ahl al-sunnah li-da'wawa al-jihād*. They emerged from this period as an underground guerrilla warfare militancy. From

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<sup>5</sup> Boko Haram which in Hausa language translate as modern education is forbidden, is a name given to them by non-members.

2010 to the present, Boko Haram carried out hundreds of suicide bombings throughout northern Nigeria and assassinated a great number of individuals they perceived as traitors. Their suicide attacks target police stations, government offices, mosques, churches, Muslims traditional rulers and clerics who oppose their activities, military check point, banks, communications instalations, and schools.

The Muslim encroachment into the political arena led by the reformist Islamists attracts serious opposition from Christians, especially the Pentecostals. Controversial issues such as the demand for the creation of *shari'ah* Supreme Court, the admission of Nigeria into the Organisation for Islamic Countries (OIC) by General Ibrahim Babangida, the introduction of *shari'ah* by 12 northern states, and recently the introduction of Islamic Banking by the Central Bank<sup>6</sup> Governor Sunusi Lamido Sunusi, together create serious tensions that threaten the unity of the country. These kinds of events heighten competition and rivalry, demand and counter demand between Muslims and Christians that on many occasions create social tensions and conflicts. The introduction of Islamic Banking by the Central Bank created a bitter altercation between the then President of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, who happens to be Pentecostal, and the Muslims elites in the north. Oritsejafor accused Islamists of a hidden agenda to Islamicise Nigeria and he stated that Christians will never agree.

Pentecostal groups which initially were highly apolitical are becoming highly politicised movements in the country. The interest of Pentecostals in politics is not only a reaction toward Muslims' demands, but also expresses a desire to sanitise the Nigerian polity that they see as being permeated by massive corruption and bad governance through religious revivals. Pentecostals are calling for born again Christians to join politics because according to them, godly people should not fold their arms while watching morally bankrupt

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<sup>6</sup> Islamic banking is a non-interest system of banking that conforms to the Islamic *shari'ah*.

people ruin the country. In the same vein a famous Pentecostal pastor, Chris Okotie, formed his own political party, the 'Fresh Party', and contested for the presidential elections in both 2003 and 2007 under its banner.

Roman Loimeier (1997) paints a clear picture of the rise of Islamic reformism vis-à-vis a long history of political and social development in northern Nigeria. He traces the history of the Sufi brotherhoods of Tijjaniyya and Qadiriyya from the pre-colonial period and their changing relationship with the political powers in the region. The social dominance of the two Sufi orders was challenged by late Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, who opposes their ideologies as evil innovation that contradicts the teaching of an authentic Islam. The brotherhoods unite and put to rest their own differences and conflicts in order to face the common enemy.

Loimeier argues that the development of Islamic reformism in the north has turned Islam into a powerful political ideology and a vehicle for political identity. As a result, many Muslim religious leaders assumed soft political power through commanding their millions of followers to vote or not vote for a certain candidate and political party. Loimeier's research was very thorough and he captured the complex role of religious movements in northern Nigeria. However, the work does not do much to explain the complex issue of the uneasy alliance between the Sufis and reformists during elections and religious conflicts in Nigeria. Izala has reiterated the heresy of the Sufis repeatedly, but usually found themselves in the dilemma of an alliance of necessity with them in times of conflicts with non-Muslims and perceived political threat from the Christians.

In the south among Yoruba, Muslims Islamic organisations and movements have a long history.<sup>7</sup> The most famous ones are Ansar-Ud-Deen

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<sup>7</sup> Insa Nolte (2015) discusses the role of the customary in relation to an encounter between Islam and Christianity in Yorubaland. Nolte sketches the historical development of the institutions of Obas in Yoruba towns from the late 18th century through colonial and post-colonial periods and highlights their struggle with conversion

Society, Ansarul Islam Society, Nawaruddeen Society, Akhbaruddeen Society, and Ahmadiyya movement. Most of these organisations were established in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and arose partly in reaction to the activities and challenges of Christian missionaries. They established schools in order to avoid the proselytising of Muslim children in missionary schools. Apart from these older Islamic societies there are prayer groups (such as *As-Salatu* group) which devote a substantial part of their time to special group prayers in order to receive blessings from God. The prayers take place on designated days either in the mosque or in the house of a particular member. Some notable examples of these groups are Lagos Central Mosque *As-Salatu*, Nurudeen Asalatu, and *Asalatu Agbaye* group, among others (Adetona, 2012, 103). NASFAT is part of these prayer groups, but it added some elements in order to respond to the challenges of Pentecostalism.

#### *NASFAT*

Lateef Mobolaji Adetona (2012) argues that NASFAT's success lies in its strategy to democratise and distribute spiritual leadership among young people who are beaming with energy and enthusiasm. In fact, the absence of centralised authority in regard to the spiritual functionaries of the society ensures that any member of the imam's group could officiate the Sunday service in the absence of the chief imam. Thus, the leadership is not centred on

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to monotheistic religions. The problem of being a monotheist and the imperative of being faithful to tradition is explained by Nolte as the politics of customary, which emerged during the colonial era, even though it has strong links with the pre-colonial past. Customary, according to Nolte, is "associated with local and historical practices of the community: (2005:1). According to Nolte, the customary sphere flourished around the office of Obas who act as custodians of the institutions. Nolte argues that even when Obas converted to Islam, they resisted the Islamisation of the institutions; traditional practices still remain paramount in the palaces. Nolte highlights the disquiet experienced by Yoruba Muslims as a result of the dominance of the public sphere by Pentecostalism. With the failure of Islamic reformists to take root in Yorubaland, some movements emerged to resist the threat of growing Pentecostalism. Nolte notes that the most popular among these was the Nasrul-Lahi-Fatih Society (NASFAT).

an individual, but on many spiritual leaders. Adetona argues that NASFAT makes available to its lay members possession of mysterious powers by giving them special prayer formulas. Adetona states that in NASFAT once devotees can recite or perform the prescribed recipes or litanies, they become their own therapist. So, the legitimate procedure for the individual to access spiritual power is achieved not through the tenacity of the master-disciple relationship as found in Sufi organisations, but through a guided leadership of a missionary authority. NASFAT as well as other new prayer groups are providing Muslims with the possibility of responding to Pentecostal healing and evangelical techniques of the Christian Missionary groups, especially the neo-Pentecostal churches. In this thesis, I demonstrate how NASFAT teaches prayers that are assumed to confer spiritual power. The thesis also highlights how NASFAT responds to Pentecostalism through sensational religious practices which are emotionally appealing.

Benjamin Soares (2006) argues that many scholars of Muslim societies focus on political Islam and radicalisation of Muslim youths. Soares shifts away from these dominant themes and focuses on NASFAT. According to Soares, NASFAT's founders launched an Islamic organisation that has become dynamically influential and perhaps one of the largest in contemporary Nigeria. The founders, according to Soares, intended NASFAT to be both non-sectarian and non-political, but over time the movement focused on questions of piety and ethics and became deeply engrossed in social and economic activities. Soares argues that NASFAT's involvement in business activities, which it has sought to link explicitly with Islam, has been rather distinctive, helping to define it as an Islamic social movement that challenges some conventional terms and categories of analysis of Islam. In this sense NASFAT resembles Christ Embassy, which also engages in a variety of business enterprises. Soares is right to place NASFAT within the category of Muslim social movements, especially given NASFAT's involvement in social activities such as charity, provision of scholarship to Muslims students and start-up capital to the

unemployed. What my project aims to add in respect to Soares' argument is to emphasise other dimensions of NASFAT religiosity, which engages thoroughly with the human body for the purpose of mediating with the divine. My study also engages in comparative analysis of NASFAT's sensational practices with those of Christ Embassy.

## A MATERIAL AND AESTHETIC APPROACH

Meyer (2012), one of the foremost exponents of a material and aesthetic approach to studying religion, suggests that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices, and their use of things, and that it is part of power structures. She sees religion as “a practice of mediation through which a distance between the immanent and what lies ‘beyond’ it is posited and held to be bridged, albeit temporarily” (2012:23). Here Meyer takes a middle path between two extreme views of religion, one that places exclusive faith in a ‘Holy Other’, and one that views faith as pure fiction. She asserts that it is appropriate to locate religion in a set of practices through which the sense of the divine is generated and experienced. This implies that religion employs material forms and the human body in its attempt to mediate or reach out beyond the ordinary. Meyer employs the term media not in its ordinary or traditional manner, but rather to refer to something that serves as transmitter across gaps or limits (2012: 2). Any material object can be made to serve as religious media, ranging from figurines, paintings, the human body, text, images, incantations, pictures, language, icons, etc. (2012: 24). She argues that anything can be configured to function as religious media as long as it has been authorised and authenticated in a longstanding religious tradition (2012: 26).

Meyer introduces the notion of ‘sensational form’, which she describes as a “configuration of religious media, acts, imaginations, and bodily sensations in the context of religious tradition or group” (2012: 26). These

configurations might be in the form of routine performances or formats that are authorised and authenticated, thereby invoking personal and group identity and generating experiences of divine presence. Sensational forms shape and restructure religious mediation through performances that engage the human body and senses. Sensational forms, Meyers argues, are formal procedures that are followed in a religious setting and usually deploy the use of material media for the purpose of contacting or negotiating the invisible. Sensational forms can be described as techniques of the body that hone the human senses through routine practices in order to produce certain kinds of feeling or generate intense emotions.

Meyer moves ahead to develop the concept of aesthetics, which she describes not in the traditional understanding of aesthetics as set of standards that focus on the nature and appreciation of beauty, usually in form of arts. Rather, Meyer understands aesthetics in the sense of the Aristotelian *aisthesis*, which means “sensorial engagement with the world” (2012:27). This understanding defines aesthetics as a way of harnessing stimuli, perception, and the senses in order to produce a particular mood or impression. Most religions develop certain practices that invoke, shape, and orient the human sensorium for the purpose of experiencing the absolute reality. Meyer cites different varieties of *aesthetic* practices that range from yoga meditation, Islamic prayer, and Bible reading. The foci of my project –prayer performances, preachings and engagement with new media -- are analysed using these concepts propounded by Meyer.

David Morgan (2012) focuses on the embodiment of human vision and the vital role it plays in socio-religious setting and practices. Morgan describes and illustrates the fact that vision and embodiment are inseparable. Therefore, seeing is part and parcel of other forms of human sensation and some ephemeral experiences as visions, imagination, and dreams. He suggests that seeing is produced in the human body; therefore, to see is to look from the perspective of the body. In short, the body is the medium of vision. Morgan

describes the term ‘sacred gaze’ as a particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that informs a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing an image, a view, or an act of viewing is imbued with spiritual significance. Morgan’s primary concern is with the role of different kinds of images. He also acknowledges the significance of the social and cultural context for the way particular images are perceived. Morgan calls for the examination of socially and culturally specific visual practices. Members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT use and interact with varieties of digital religious images on mobile phones. Morgan’s idea on mediation of images will highlight the prominent role of images, particular among the members of NASFAT.

Charles Hirschkind (2006) conducted an interesting anthropological study on sermon via the media of cassette in Egypt. The sermon has a transforming effect on urban public life of Egypt and the rest of the Middle East. The cassette media has become omnipresent in the region and its word can be heard in public places, mosques, private cars, public transports, and private homes. In fact, aural media has become a new soundscape in the urban environment. Hirschkind argues that the power of aural media is not limited to its capacity to shape and instil moral or religious ideologies, but includes its effect on the human sensorium, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audiences. He affirms that this soundscape empowered the recent trend of Islamic revival movement that engulfed the Middle East and became the undercurrent of energy that sustains and animate it. The sermons became very significant factors in the growth of Islamic argumentation and deliberation among Egyptian Muslims and produced an ‘Islamic counter-public.’

Hirschkind posits that listening to sermon takes the dimension of what Foucault called techniques of the self, which means a set of procedures by means of which individuals can work on their souls and bodies to achieve a distinct ethical or aesthetic form. Sermon listeners attempt to cultivate ethical

dispositions that would foster a relationship with the divine. The *khatib* here serve as mediators that provide the listeners with a necessary bodily and mental apparatus that prepares them to properly receive the word of God; therefore, their role is mediatory and they have no responsibility for creating moral subjects or enforcing normative morality. The touching power of sermon is not limited to emotional dispositions of the listener; sermon audition produces bodily effects in multiple ways. The sermon can be seen as technique for energising and vivifying the body in order to create bodily experience that is conducive to spiritual experience.

This analysis of Hirschkind highlights how sound media are deployed in cultivating individual self-transformation. It has also shown that the proliferation of religious materials through modern sound media can shape and influence public sensitivity. The uses of mobile phones for listening to sermons are taking an increasingly prominent role among the members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT and Hirschkind's findings help me to interpret and explain my findings. His research also helps me to assess how soundscapes shape the habitat of Abuja city.

Manuel Vásquez (2011) made an important attempt at a fresh reinterpretation of varieties of theories in the field of religion studies. In agreement with many scholars such as Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, and Webb Keane, he argues in favour of a material turn in the study of religion. He also criticises the lopsided attention to a mentalistic dimension of religion such as dogmas and creeds at the expense of embodied practices. He encourages refocusing toward the body: mobile, disciplined, biologically constrained and enabled, vulnerable, beautiful; the point being not an atomized body but rather a body-in-the-world. Vásquez argues that it is important for the study of religions to account for all aspects of a religion, including those material elements such as socio-cultural and geographic locations which significantly affect practitioners.

He skilfully utilises many theories propounded by scholars such as Heidegger, Foucault, Mauss, Bourdieu, and Tweed in order to re-envision the field of religious studies as a balanced approach. Moreover, Vásquez is disturbed by the problem of reductionism and methodological agnosticism. These problems appear in many previous theoretical and methodological debates in religious studies. However, Vásquez's version of materialism "is non-reductive and its highlights complexity, inter-level connectivity, emergence, situated knowledge, and relative in determinacy and openness against mono-causal, unidirectional, and totalizing explanatory schemes" (5). In agreement with Vásquez this thesis emphasises the value of the body and senses in religious performances of Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Embodied practices of prayers, preaching, and technology mediated religious practices are the centre of this study.

In his famous work *Christian Modern*, Webb Keane (2008) propounds a theoretical analysis on semiotic ideology based on his ethnographic research in Indonesia. The ethnographic material was based on an encounter between Dutch Calvinist missionaries and native Marapu rituals in the Indonesian island of Sumba in nineteenth century. Keane sees semiotic ideology as a culture's modes—or perceived ideal modes—of communication through language and objects (16-18). Keane maintains that semiotic ideologies include both linguistic and non-linguistic signifiers—"music, visual imagery, food, architecture, gesture, and anything else that enters into actual semiotic practice"—in which particular moral and political interests are endowed (21). According to Keane, this form of ideologies most commonly operates below the subject's level of self-conscious awareness, appearing as normal processes of life.

According to Keane, Western semiotics posits a radical disjuncture between signs and their referents. In this Western model, signs have meanings that are supposed to be decoded; words and things are to be rationally manipulated as tools of communication without containing inherent power or

agency. To their chagrin, Calvinist missionaries in Indonesia found their semiotic ideology challenged and at loggerheads with that of the 'natives'. Calvinist missionaries found that *marapu* ritualists imputed much power to many things around them from trees, rivers, spirits, and sacrificial meats. Words are also imbued with material qualities, as in the case of magical formulas or incantations. Calvinists called this material semiotics 'fetish', which they regarded as irrational behaviour. Calvinism's semiotic ideology interrogates the agency of *marapu* people as they engaged in their ritualistic practices, which were deemed to be highly unsettling to the objective, material locus of agency in that belief system with the autonomous, subjective conception of agency in the moral narrative of modernity. Through historical analysis Keane attempts to bring to light the Western denigration of materiality and fervent objectification of the world. Keane wants to break away from this tradition and to restore the salient importance of materiality to its semiotic subordination.

The analyses of Keane and Vásquez certainly are in line with what I encountered among members NASFAT and Christ Embassy. The religious practices of the two groups involve materialistic semiotics in the sense of imputing power and agency to words and certain embodied religious performances. For instance, in Christ Embassy speaking in tongues and invoking the name of Jesus have strong power to induce material causation. NASFAT leaders also distribute many prayer formulas that are believed to be very efficacious in bringing desired changes.

This research aims to undertake a thorough study of sensational religious practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT in a comparative framework. The central focus of the research is on the salient and outspoken aesthetic and material expressive forms of NASFAT and Christ Embassy: prayers, preaching, and engagement with new media technologies (digital texts, sounds, online religious performances and images). In a nutshell, this thesis has the objective of producing a single anthropology of Islam and Christianity

while at the same time contributing to the recent body of research works on religion that focuses on materiality and human body.

## ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

The thesis is organised into seven chapters. After chapter one, (the introduction) chapter two studies the setting or location of the research, which is the city of Abuja. The chapter also explores the complex religious diversity of the city and how state and various religious actors struggle to manage the diversity in order to preserve peace and avoid the destructive ethno-religious riots that devastated some neighbouring cities. Moreover, the chapter looks into how Abuja as a Federal Capital shapes religious activities and relationship between political elites and religious leaders. It also examines how religions shape the Abuja cityscape and soundscape; or how the public sphere of the city becomes a stage that mediates various kinds of religious expressions from buildings, to sounds and images. Finally, the chapter argues that religious diversity in northern Nigeria may not necessarily result in conflict but can give rise to some interesting social interactions that involve co-operation in order to achieve a common goal.

Chapter three offers a thematic study of Christ Embassy. It begins with themes such as origin and development of the church, organisational structure, membership, perception of the others, cell activities, fund raising, and worship services. The chapter explores how members finance the church through sowing the seed (financial donation) and expect to reap financial harvest in the future which often remains elusive. The chapter also investigates the church's miraculous healing activities and place it within the purview of symbolic healing advocated by some anthropologists. The chapter also looks at the rhythm of time developed by the church and the spiritual significance ascribed to it.

Chapter four analyses various themes related to NASFAT. The chapter traces a brief history of the organisation, organisational structure, perception of the others, fund raising, and youth activities. The chapter argues that the pre-eminence of NASFAT among varieties of Islamic expressions hinges on its ability of consciously negotiated borrowing of the forms (though not contents) of Pentecostal practices. NASFAT provides sensational religious practices and socio-economic services that respond to the emotional and social needs of urban Muslims.

Chapter five compares practices of prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Three genres of prayers have been compared in the chapter: prayers of adoration, prayers of aesthetic speech, and prayers instrumentality. The chapter argues that prayers of adoration and prayers of aesthetic speech in Christ Embassy and NASFAT facilitate the process of mediation by orchestrating bodily experiences of affect, which members recognised as a 'divine touch' or 'the presence of God.' It also argues that the instrumental prayers in the two groups attempt to establish communication with the Divine and achieve the desired goals through the performative power and semiotic systems ascribed to the language of the prayers. The concept of semiotic ideologies (Keane), sensational forms (Meyer) and speech act theory (Austin 1962) have been used to analyse the three genres of prayers.

Chapter six compares preaching practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. It explores different aspects of preaching such as themes, styles, religious authority, and ethics of listening to preaching. The chapter argues that preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is a practice of mediation that is enhanced by several factors such as eloquence, authority of the preachers, as well as preaching paraphernalia such as dress, background music, and preaching assistants. These factors establish preaching as an aesthetic style due to the preachers' ability to mobilise human senses and thereby make preaching performances a highly emotional experience. The chapter also argues that in

both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, preaching is a potent mechanism for producing and moulding religious subjects.

Chapter seven compares technology mediated religious practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT, focusing on the mobile phone technology as a new religious medium. The chapter argues that mobile phone technology in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is used as a religious medium that facilitates religious mediation through hosting varieties of religious resources, such as sermons, Qur'anic recitation, religious music, text, online religious performances and images, among members of NASFAT and Christ Embassy.

Finally, by comparing embodied religious practices of Christian and Muslim groups, this thesis spotlights new inter-religious dynamics that are centred on mutual influences between the two religious groups.

# 2

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN THE NEW CAPITAL CITY OF ABUJA

### INTRODUCTION

Cities are human settlements in environments characterised by high population density, complex social institutions, and massive human-built structures. According to James (2013), cities normally have complex systems for transportation, housing, utilities, and the concentration of development that greatly facilitates interaction between people and businesses, benefiting both parties in the process. Religion, as one of the important social institutions, shaped life in the city and vice versa. Recently, urbanisation has exploded in Nigeria<sup>8</sup> and provides a labouratory for different forms of social experimentations and innovations. Religion plays a substantial role in this regard with contributions that range from offering creative means of handling

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<sup>8</sup> John Onaiyekan (1992:48) quoted Archbishop Teissier of Algiers describing Nigeria as “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world”.He means here that there is no other nation where so many Christians and Muslims live side-by-side.

urban challenges to being a catalyst in social contestations that sometimes aggravate social fault-lines and result in tension and conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

Many scholars who investigate the interconnection of relationships between religion and Nigerian cityscapes focus on explosive Pentecostal activities in southern Nigeria cities, particularly Lagos. For instance, Osinulu (2013) draws a connection between the spatial practices in Lagos and the existence of the spectacular Pentecostal prayer campuses along the Lagos—Ibadan Express Way. Taking the Canaanland of Winners Chapel as the case study, he demonstrates how the site is organised into miraculous infrastructure as well as the place of access to divine power and performance of mastery over the forces shaping African societies. In her research in the city of Lagos, Ruth Marshall (2015) explores ways in which the Pentecostal engagement with spiritual practices engenders new social and ethico-political topographies and novel ways of thinking about community and citizenship in the city. Butticci (2010) studies the impact of the visual and material world of Pentecostalism in urban spaces that led to the transformation and re-articulation of Lagos into a city of “spiritual warfare” and how Nigerian Diasporas transfer these sensorial regimes to Italy. Despite the importance of Abuja as federal capital coupled with its dynamic religious activities and diversity, so far the city received little attention from scholars.

This chapter examines how religions shape the Abuja cityscape and soundscape; or how the public sphere of the city becomes a stage that mediates various kinds of religious expressions from buildings, to sounds and images. The chapter also explores the complex religious diversity of the city and how state and various religious actors struggle to manage the diversity in order to preserve peace and avoid the destructive ethno-religious riots that devastated

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9 See Iwuchukwu, Marinus C., and Brian Stiltner (2013) for comprehensive exploration of religious conflict in northern Nigeria and dialogues initiated by government as well as religious leaders.

some neighbouring cities. Moreover, the chapter also looks into how Abuja as a federal capital shapes religious activities and the relationship between political elites and religious leaders. Before going further into these issues, the chapter sketches the historical background of the city. Finally, the chapter argues that religious diversity in northern Nigeria may not necessarily result in conflict but can give rise to an interesting social interaction that involves co-operation in order to achieve a common goal.

In addition, the fact of religious diversity in Abuja points to the existence of people from different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds sharing the same living space in the city. This situation engenders mutual influences that produce both similarities and differences in the form of religious practices among Muslim and Christian communities. Religious diversity is the central focus of this chapter because the thesis is based on the comparative study between a Pentecostal group (Christ Embassy) and a Muslim group (NASFAT). The chapter will attempt to shed light on the environment within which Christ Embassy and NASFAT thrive and the social forces that shaped their worldviews and practices.

#### ABUJA: THE FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY (FCT)

Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), is the capital of Nigeria and located in the centre of the country. It is a planned city, built mainly in the 1980s, that officially became Nigeria's capital on 12 December 1991. At the 2006 census, the city of Abuja had a population of 776,298, making it one of the ten most populous cities in Nigeria (Demographia 2015). Abuja has witnessed a massive influx of people. This growth has led to the emergence of many satellite towns, which include Zuba, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Bwari, Kubwa, Nyanya, and Abaji. The unofficial metropolitan area of Abuja has a population of well over three million and comprises the fourth largest urban area in

Nigeria (PLAC 2006). According to Nnamdi Elleh (2001), the development of a master plan for the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was awarded to the International Planning Associates (IPA), a consortium of three American firms: Planning Research Corporation; Wallace McHarg, Roberts and Todd; and Archisystems, a division of the Hughes Organisation. The FCT has borders on the north with Kaduna State, on south-east with Nasarawa State, on the south-west by Kogi State and the west by Niger state.

Abuja was chosen as the new capital of Nigeria when it was apparent that overcrowded population pressure in Lagos demanded relocation to a more convenient environment. On 4 February, 1976, a decree was signed establishing the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja and setting up the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA), the organisation charged with the task of developing the new capital. The geographical location of Abuja is considered as a neutral ground both ethnically and religiously by many Nigerians. Abuja city and its surrounding territories have been experiencing immense population growth for long period of time. One of my interlocutors pointed to me a sprawling neighbourhood in Karu, a district close to the city centre that is bustling with people and activities, telling me that seven years ago all this settlement did not exist; it was just a vast farmland. There has been a prolific development of squatter settlements and shanty towns within the city limits. Abuja has six Area Councils in the Federal Capital Territory, each subdivided into wards headed by local councils. The Minister of the Federal Capital Territory is the overall leader and is appointed by the President. Abuja is the headquarters of the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS. The city also has the regional headquarters of the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

The first people to arrive in Abuja when the construction of the city commenced in the early 1980s were employees of the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA). However, large-scale migrations occurred after 1992 when the Federal Government relocated to the city. As the federal

ministries began to relocate from Lagos to the new capital, their employees moved to the city and its satellite towns. Now the majority of the inhabitants are working either with the government or other private institutions such as financial firms and hotels. Professionals such as doctors and lawyers and different of types of business people also migrated to the city. New business plazas and shopping malls are springing up in the city and its outskirts. The latest malls to open are Sahad, Shoprite, and NEX. I noticed that sale of building materials is thriving in the city, followed by electronics and furniture. Petty trading by migrant residents dominates the streets and markets of the satellite towns. Young boys compete in trying to sell all sorts of goods amidst the tedious traffic jams in the nearby satellite towns. Moreover, the unequal distribution of wealth is conspicuous in the city and many residents complain about the situation. Abuja is home to the Nigeria's so-called big men and people usually attribute the wealth of these people to corrupt practices and alliance with the government.

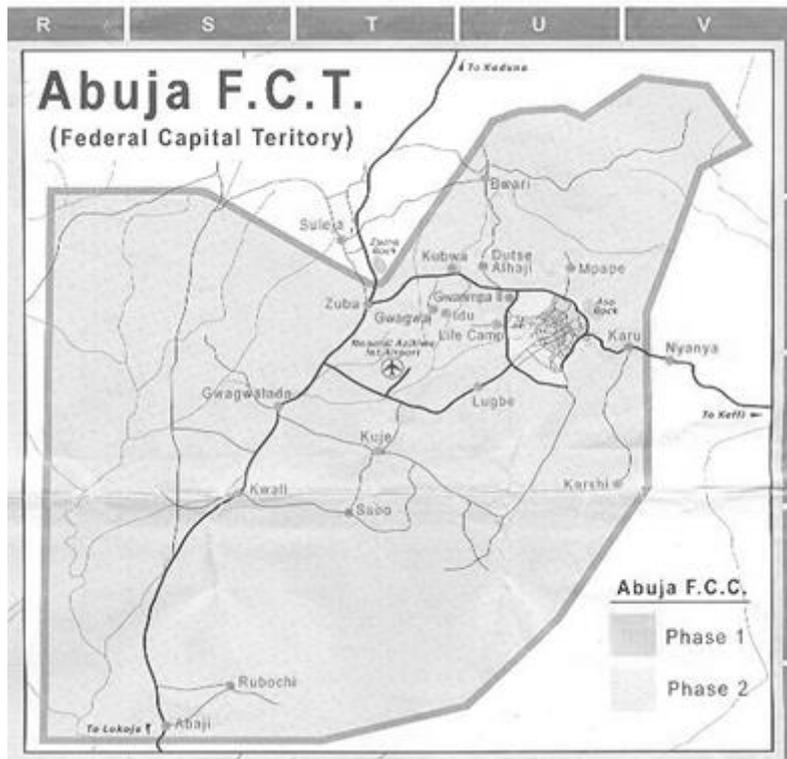


Fig 2.1 Map of Abuja

## ABUJA AS THE CITY OF DREAMS

Abuja is a microcosm of Nigeria in the sense that ethno-religiously diverse groups co-exist in the city.<sup>10</sup> Both Christianity and Islam have a strong

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<sup>10</sup> Abuja is a city that differs from other major urban centres in Nigeria in the sense that it was built recently and has loose social ties and high costs of residential properties. As a result, many people decide to leave their families in their hometowns when taking up employment in the city. In the course of my fieldwork, I noticed high religious participation and affective community bonding among all the religious groups I interacted with, including the members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Religious involvement and the sense of communal bonding are stronger in Abuja than what I observed, for instance, in Jos, Lagos, Kogi and other cities that I have visited in the past four years. For example, among all the branches in the country, it is the Abuja branch that adopted a Pentecostal practice of dividing its members into smaller units for fellowship and extra religious activities. Consequently, it can be argued that there

visibility in Abuja's cityscape. Since the middle of the 1990s, Abuja has grown exponentially, with new buildings rising and gradually changing the landscape into a mega metropolis. Construction cranes have become part of the structures of the city. The roads have been widened, and in some places ten lanes have been laid to accommodate the ever-growing amount of traffic. Several flyover bridges have been built to ameliorate the traffic congestion.

The passing luxury cars further adorn the new rising structures of steel and glass. The buildings of government ministries and other institutions pervade the city centre. Some of the buildings in the city are intended to showcase the prestige and power of the state. One such building is the Ministry of Defence, which was designed in the form of a gigantic naval ship. It is in this vein that Bekker and Therborn (2012:1) write that "the nation-state projects its power through the urban landscape and spatial layout of the capital city. This power is manifested in the capital's architecture, in its public monuments and the names of its streets and public spaces." According to Adebani (2012:2), in many countries of the world, "capital cities are supposed to make statements. They often represent the best face of their countries, in both symbolic and concrete terms." This is precisely the case with Abuja, where the presence of the state manifests itself in the spatial configuration of the city.

Residents of and visitors to Abuja are often stunned by the radically new city plan, with its aesthetically designed architecture. This experience invokes dream-like, phantasmagoric imageries of the city that induce specific affective sensations. According to Pile (2005:20) Walter Benjamin uses the term 'phantasmagoria' to suggest that many surface appearances of the city

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is a link between active religious participation and the need for a sense of belonging in the city of Abuja. Many people claimed to have found personal fulfilment through bonding with their religious brethren and active participation in religious activities. This personal fulfilment complements their disrupted sense of identity, engendered by the severing of their ties with their immediate family and original places of origin.

gave it a dream-like or ghost-like quality. Pile further affirms that “the feel of big city was different and this was visible in its street life. Cities were different moreover, because they were constantly throwing people into contact with new experiences, new situations and new people (17: 2005).” One of my Christian interlocutors, who worked with a satellite installation company in the city, expressed his view:

I have lived in Abuja for seven years now, but still I am not able to shake off the powerful appeal I feel toward the aesthetic landscape of the city. The city still shouts back at me. There is a strong appealing force the city has, which I would call Abujaness. This can be likened to a beautiful seductive lady who uses make-up with expensive cosmetics and charming beauty to seduce people. If you are rich and powerful you can date this lady, if you are poor, you can only dream of having her. (Interview, 2.3.2014)

This statement mirrored the imagination of many Nigerians that for them Abuja is only a pleasant and glittering dream: the city is ‘real’ only for the rich and powerful. The statement also highlights an extreme form of spatial exclusion and alienation that defines the city of Abuja. Rabindra Kanungo (1982:10) writes “an individual in a state of separation from an object was assumed to experience a certain affect toward the object”. The affect, according to Kanungo, usually involves hostility, aversion and despair. Those with low incomes, both among government employees and the self-employed, are pushed to the settlements far outside the city and forced to suffer a gruelling daily commute into the city due to the exasperating traffic jams. This daily ritual in and out of the city, which gives people a taste of something they cannot possess, generates both desire and anger among the excluded lower classes. One interlocutor stated: “Every time I travel to Abuja, my impression is that I am in a movie. Finding myself in the midst of strange buildings and vehicles, and even some white people passing by, I feel lost in this non-real movie like scenery” (Interview, 27.3.2014). Another interlocutor stated: “Having grown up in a small impoverished city in Plateau State, I felt

disoriented in Abuja. The city looks out of place to me, it is not authentic; it is too artificial to me. Even the lifestyle of the people is artificial” (Interview, 25.3.2014).

By dissociating Abuja from authenticity and realness, or likening it to movie scenery, it has come to be labelled a city of dreams, its unique structures prompting wishful thinking and enthralling imagination. As a city built from scratch and still in the process of development, Abuja constantly mesmerises its inhabitants with new structures and new spatial layouts, hence evoking desires and aspiration. Abuja is an expression of dreams of the future initiated as part of the modernisation project conceived by the nation’s ruling elites. To many people, living in Abuja implies stepping into a dream of the future that is difficult to realise for the country’s population as a whole.

This imaginary of Abuja as a dream city is captured, enhanced and disseminated by the northern home video movie industry. The centres of the northern film industry are Kano and in a small scale also Jos and Kaduna. But these centres lack modern and fanciful infrastructures that are abundant in Abuja. As a result the majority of the film producers begin to shoot their movies in



Fig. 2.2 Central Bank of Nigeria one of the many high rise buildings in the city.

Abuja even though they are mostly based in Kano. The obvious reasons to shoot in Abuja and focus on the imposing structures of the city such as the flyover bridges, multi-stories glass and steel buildings, elegant interior decoration of sitting rooms, and exquisite gardens are to entice the imagination and taste of the audience for the modern lifestyle and its refine material culture. This is precisely what Birgit Meyer discovers and describes in her book on the imaginary of the city in the Ghanaian movie industry. According to Meyer (2015), Ghanaian filmmakers focus on the most beautiful sides of Accra and

block the messy and dilapidated areas of the city. Meyer (2015:84) argues that, “these movies may best be regarded as both mirrors of and windows unto a popular imaginary of urban modernity, with its particular material culture, lifestyle, and notions of personhood and belonging”. Similar to Ghanaian movies, northern Nigerian films also mediate the city of Abuja and expand its popular imaginary into a modern, neo-liberal utopian city of dreams. As Meyer notes, the films become mirrors and windows through which people access the vision of the city as it is reconfigured and represented on the screen through editing, selected shots, and other techniques of film craft.



Fig. 2.3 An aspect of Abuja cityscape.

#### SITES OF DIVINE ENCOUNTER: RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS OF THE CITY

Some of the great landmark buildings of the city are Abuja Central Mosque and the National Christian Centre. The Abuja National Mosque, also known as the Nigerian National Central Mosque, was built in 1984 (ArchNet 2002). The mosque is located in the central area and is situated on Independence Avenue, across the National Christian Centre. This national

monument consists of a huge aluminium dome that is covered with anodised gold. The mosque also has a small dome and four splendid minarets that dominate the skyline of the city. Residential quarters of the Chief Imam and Muezzin are located adjacent to the mosque. The land on which the mosque is located is low, so the building was erected on a high concrete structure so as to make the mosque visible and dominate the sky land of the area.

The National Christian Centre of Nigeria, previously called National Ecumenical Centre, was built as the prime Christian place of worship in the capital city. It is an inter-denominational church that comprises multiple Nigerian denominations. The building of the National Christian Centre commenced in 1989 but lay dormant for several years until 2004, when the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) organised a committee to ensure its speedy completion in October 2005. The Church is built in a neo-Gothic style and has several pivoted arches with a wide nave leading to the altar. The Church features stained glass windows adorned with the conspicuous mix of yellow, green, and red colours that can be seen all around the building (Adeyimi 2011).

These two buildings dominate the centre of the cityscape, attracting the attention of the passersby. It is apparent that the intense competition that defined relations between Muslims and Christians in the political sphere has manifested in the realm of architecture. After the completion of the central mosque, the National Christian Centre lay incomplete for an extended period. This became a serious issue within the Christian community, with many blaming disunity in Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) for failure to complete the building. They always pointed to the National Mosque, complaining that if Muslims completed theirs, there is no reason why the Christians could not do the same. The quibbles around the two monuments underlined the rivalry of visibility in the centre of the capital city. Competition

between Muslims and Christians is not limited to verbal rhetoric, but extends to claims over physical space.<sup>11</sup> Suvakovic (2014:10) writes:

Architecture is essentially a political and ideological practice that uses its techno-aesthetic and techno-artistic strategies to participate in the organisation of individual and collective human life, as well in representing the symbolic and imaginary field of visibility of a society for itself and others.

In this sense, the Central Mosque and the Christian Centre formalise and express the central role religion plays in the Nigerian polity. The two landmark buildings communicate the symbolic importance of Islam and Christianity in the life of Nigerians through staking imposing structures in the centre of the capital city. The buildings are clearly architectural political statements that reflect the competing struggle for public presence between Muslims and Christians. The magnificent structures of the two buildings portray dynamism and power wielded by Islam and Christianity in the country.

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11 See Dilger (2014) for comparative study of revivalist Muslims and a neo-Pentecostal attempt at place making through establishing health intervention institutions in Tanzania.



Fig 2.4 National Mosque Abuja



Fig 2.5 National Christian Centre Abuja

Another famous icon of the city is not a man-made structure, but a tremendous work of nature called Zuma Rock. Zuma Rock rises spectacularly immediately north of the city along the main road to Kaduna and is sometimes referred to as the Gateway to Abuja. Zuma Rock is 725 meters (2,379 ft.) above its surroundings (Akin2008).<sup>12</sup> The indigenous people of the area believed that the rock is the abode of gods and spirits, and it was revered as a sacred site. If the Central Mosque and the Christian Centre are symbols of an entrenching presence of Islam and Christianity, Zuma Rock tells the story of the implicit presence of African traditional religion that refused to die completely and continues to influence some practices of mainline religions. This subtle influence continues despite the overwhelming attack from Pentecostals and Islamic reformists on the minimal presence of some elements of traditional religions and practices.

The major Pentecostal churches in Abuja established branches in different parts of the city, including its most expensive areas. The Mountain of Fire and Miracle's Abuja headquarters is a massive two-storey rectangular structure located in a business district along Jabi Road. The ash-coloured marbles that cover the building make it sparkle and conspicuous. This building, like most of the other Pentecostal churches in the city, such as Lord Chosen, Dunamis and Redeem, break with traditional church architecture and experiment with varieties of modern design.<sup>13</sup>

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12 In the early 2000s some mountaineers from Germany came to Abuja and conquered Zuma for the first time.

13 Land in Abuja is very expensive and as a result only churches that have huge financial clout can afford to buy land to build religious space within the city. Smaller churches have to go to the outskirts of the city where land is cheap.



Fig.: 2.6 One of the main roads at Wuse Zone One Abuja

Many religious organisations nowadays are engaged in building immense structures in Abuja and its surroundings. Some Pentecostal churches and Muslim organisations have initiated enormous religious campuses along the Masaka-Abuja highway. Living Faith Church has acquired huge areas of land in Masaka along the highway, where it has built a gigantic church, a university, and a massive estate called Goshen City. Passers-by are greeted with a large billboard on which is written, “Welcome to Goshen City”. The Redeemed Christian Church of God has bought another large stretch of land close to that of Living Faith, where hundreds of thousands of people gather during their annual Holy Ghost Congress. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Society has

followed suit by building an enormous mosque on the same highway. As massive places of worship have emerged on the highway, the area is gradually becoming into what Janson and Akinleye (2014) call a “spiritual superhighway” in describing a similar situation along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, which was also transformed into a gigantic religious site. This appears to be a new trend of recently established mega churches and mosques having to go outside the city to build huge religious structures that can accommodate the crowds that attend their mass religious services.<sup>14</sup>

Christ Embassy is one of the dominant churches within the Pentecostal spectrum that exists in the city of Abuja. Instead of building one enormous church that can accommodate tens of thousands, as in the case of its headquarters in Lagos, Christ Embassy built numerous churches in different parts of the capital city. The central church is the regional headquarters of the church and is located at Durumi, Area One. It is a huge and impressive structure designed like a modern secular building, possibly able to accommodate up to five thousand people in my estimate. The stage is designed and decorated with small geometrical objects like cylindrical forms, pyramids, and polygons coupled with colourful flower arrangements. The stage’s main colour is blue, with a combination of other matching colours, such as gold and white. The entire stage is also illuminated by different colours of light.

Similar to Christ Embassy, NASFAT has about six branches in the Federal Capital Territory in places such as Karu, Nyanya, Dutsen Alhaji, Kubwa, Gwagwalada, and Utako. The Utako mosque is its zonal headquarters in Abuja and is located in the city centre. The building is decorated with white marble inside and out. Numerous rows of white pillars inside the mosque enhance its aesthetic appeal. The mosque stands on three floors, with a gross floor area of 4,272 square metres, and has sitting capacity for about 5,000 worshippers. The ground floor was designed to accommodate the male

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14 See Dilger (2014) for the analysis of a similar phenomenon in urban Tanzania.

congregation; the first floor is reserved for women, while the upper floor is the conference hall, with a capacity to accommodate 1,500 people.

As places of worship and retreat, religious buildings offer a spiritual experience to the wider community, where the clamour of urban life can melt away in a space designed to be used collectively and individually for an encounter with the divine. Nevertheless, many of the religious buildings in the city of Abuja serve simultaneously as public spaces for the overall life of the community. Religious buildings in Abuja highlight the multiple ways in which people connect with and gather in public, ultimately showing how communities collectively share experiences and emotions. One of my Christian interlocutors put this as follows:

I feel God is there. I feel God's presence that makes my mind to see anything. Whenever I visit my church, I open my heart to receive spiritual blessing from God because I feel his presence there and anything can happen. I also feel there is nothing impossible especially when people are in the presence of God. (Interview, 12.1.2014)

Another interlocutor, who is a member of NASFAT, stated:

I regard the mosque as the house of God. In Islam it is more meritorious to pray in the mosque than at home. Even though God is everywhere, his presence is more accessible in the mosque than other places. Therefore, the mosque is a sacred ground that is permeated with God's presence. Mosques give me a sense of peace and security. Even when I travel to strange and unfamiliar places, when I enter the mosque I feel secure. I feel I am in a safer hand because I feel closer to God than at any other place. (Interview, 17.1.2014)

These two quotations highlight the affective perceptions people have toward places of worship. The sensation of feeling attached to their respective places of worship was commonly expressed by both Christian and Muslim men and women in Abuja. As suggested by the statement above, this sensation is tied to the fact that places of worship are sites where people sense an emotional

connection with the divine. Reckwitz (2012: 254) argues that “every complex social practice—as far as it is always spatialising and necessarily contains perceptive-affective relations—implies a form of affective space. In modern societies, this spatialising often results in built, architectural spaces which are made for and correspond with specific practices”. People certainly engage in sensational practices and create routine in places of worship in Abuja. Most Pentecostal churches, including Christ Embassy, hold services three times week. Some members go to the church and pray almost every day. NASFAT and groups such as Al-Habibiyya hold special services on Fridays and Sunday apart from daily prayers.

#### THE DIVERSE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF THE CITY

The mass migration that ensued with the establishment of Abuja as the Federal Capital has created a rich religious diversity. Christianity and Islam are the predominant religions, but there are also a relatively modest number of New Religious Movements<sup>15</sup> such as Hare Krishna and Eckankar, which added to the complexity of the religious landscape of the city. Intra-religious diversity is even more pronounced than the plurality of distinctive religious faiths. Churches have followed the migration of a vast number of Christians to Abuja from all parts of the country since 1992. Now churches<sup>16</sup> are expanding, and

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15 Among the new religions, Eckankar has the largest followers with branches in most of the main districts of the city, and they are more visible in public space and airwaves. Eckankar holds an annual seminar in Abuja, which is a big spectacle event with people coming from all over the country. These minor religions are relatively tolerated in the sense that they are free to establish their places of worship and organise proselytizing activities. Nevertheless, they still experience slight social discrimination as on the issue of political appointment or rejection by some employers. They are also called with derogatory names such as cult or secret societies.

16 Christian groups and individuals initiated many faith-based organisations that engage in relief activities. Some of the most influential organisations are the Christian

new ones are constantly emerging in the city. The mainline churches such as Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist have large numbers of followers and their big churches spread in the population centres. However, the most dominant churches are obviously Pentecostals. These churches run the gamut from smaller ones with few members to the ones whose members count in thousands. Some of the largest Pentecostal churches in the city include Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Lords Chosen, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, Living Faith, and Christ Embassy.

Muslims in the FCT are predominantly Sunni in the Maliki School, as in the case of the majority of Nigerian Muslims. Some of them are members of Sufi brotherhoods, a form of religious order based on more personal or mystical relations with the supernatural. The two main brotherhoods, the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya, have played a significant role in the spread of Islam in the rural communities in the Federal Capital. The most active Muslim groups in the public sphere of the city include the Izala movement, which preaches against what its followers perceive as innovative practices, and advocates a return to the *Sunna* of the Prophet. Salafis are also visible in the city, and many of the prominent religious leaders in the city belong to this category. Moreover, some minorities of other Islamic groups exist in Abuja such as Ahmadiyya, Jama at Tabligh, and Shi'ite.

Unlike many cities in Nigeria, almost all Abuja neighbourhoods have ethno-religious diversity. However, some groups or faiths tend to be predominant in particular areas. This is the case in both the lower class neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the city and the affluent gated communities in the city. This situation occurs probably because Abuja developed rapidly in

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Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Aid in Nigeria, Christian Aid Mission, Aglow International, Bill Glass Ministry, and Christian Financial Concept, Christians in Recovery, Christian Stewardship Ministries, Christian Business Man Committee, and Gateway to Joy, Prison Fellowship Ministries, and Rest Ministries.

the last two decades with people coming from all parts of the country almost at the same time.

The neighbourhood in which I stayed is populated mostly by Igbo people from South-Eastern Nigeria who are predominantly Christian. My landlady was a devout Catholic, but her children have strayed away from Catholicism and joined the trendy Pentecostalism. One Sunday morning I overheard her with her youngest son quarrelling because he said that he is going to the Living Faith Church. Unlike her three children, she is the only one that remained in the Catholic Church. This incident indicates the trend of how Nigerian historical churches lose membership to the fast growing Pentecostal movements.<sup>17</sup>

Another group is formed by a small number of Muslims in the neighbourhood who are mostly tailors and shop keepers. They have a small mosque with strong loudspeakers which they use for prayer calling and playing cassette of preaching for *da'awa*. Most of the people who patronize the small business of these Muslims are their Christians neighbours, and I noticed a cordial relationship between the two religious communities. Abuja has not experienced ethno-religious conflicts that bedevil the surrounding states of Plateau and Kaduna. Therefore, religious identity residential segregation that developed in the aftermath of religious riots in many northern states hardly occur in the city. The dominant Christian denomination in the neighbourhood is Pentecostal. I had seen posters of Pentecostal house fellowship everywhere in the street. And on many occasions, I witnessed these house fellowships, which are almost the same with Sunday worship service. They used to stay almost the entire night praying and singing with loudspeakers and music.

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17 See Victor Counted (2012), who explores the phenomenon of youth migration to Pentecostal churches. He argues that Pentecostals provide attractive youth programmes that respond to the various needs of youths.

Abuja has many gated communities (or estates as they are called by the residents) that are unusually expensive. For instance, monthly rent of an apartment in Lakeview Estate is one million naira (about 4000 euro). My interlocutor Alhaji Idris, who works with a department in the Presidency, took me to one of the richest estates located at the core of the city along Shehu Shagari way. It is a gated community that is exclusively for rich people. Unlike in many of the poor neighbourhoods, electricity, internet, and water supply are uninterrupted. Muslims and Christians live as neighbours in this community, and they seem to have a peaceful and cordial relationship. We visited the house of the director general of the Nigerian Security Printing and Minting Company, who is a Muslim from Zaria, and we found him chatting with his Christian friends. From my observation, their cordial relationship is reinforced by the sense of belonging to the same high class and living in their unique, exclusive environment that set them apart from the rest of the neighbourhoods.

Abuja is unique among many northern Nigerian cities that are plagued by protracted ethno-religious conflicts.<sup>18</sup> In both the wealthy and poor neighbourhoods the fault-lines in diversity did not transmute into a conflict that may disturb the peace in the city. In fact, people of all religious persuasions engage in social interaction without serious problems. I witnessed how Christians use the services of Muslims technicians, mechanics, electricians, and vice versa. One technician told me that he is a Christian but he has many Muslims clients, and he relates well with them to the extent that they sent a gift to him during Christmas or Eid festivities. He said all his apprentice boys are Muslims. In the offices, the interactions between the two religious groups tend to move smoothly because people discuss their grudges and accusations of the different faiths only among their religious circles. Despite the frequent bomb attacks in the city by Boko Haram still the relationship between Christian and Muslim is not seriously affected.

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<sup>18</sup> See Philip Ostien (2009) for detail study of how indigene and settler problems transformed into protracted religious conflicts in Jos.

One of the most ubiquitous fault-lines that engender tension and bitterness in the Christians and Muslims relations in the city is the problem of closure of public roads during religious services by both Christians and Muslims.<sup>19</sup> This practice affects the flow of movements in the city and causes a traffic jam by forcing people to divert from the regular and sometimes easier route to their destinations. For example, the famous Jabi road in Abuja is always closed on Sundays by the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Church during church service hours, and I heard many people - both Muslims and Christians - complain about this disruption to their daily routines. Friday prayers also cause disruption and traffic jams at the Marraba highway. These situations with all their attendant problems happen in different parts of the city. These practices affect everybody irrespective of religious adherences, and it is creating grudges by people who are affected. These grudges happen in either direction; I have witnessed on many occasions that some individual Christians or Muslims be grudge people of their own faith.

#### MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: STATE LEVEL

The responsibility for regulating religion and fostering harmony in the multi-religious landscape of Nigeria which includes Abuja lies with the Advisory Council on Religious Affairs.<sup>20</sup> This department is under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the head office is located in the Federal Secretariat in Abuja. The Council consists of 24 members appointed by the President of the country that represent the Christian and Muslim population evenly. Some of the

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<sup>19</sup> Recently (in December 2015) a road closure by Shi'ite group in the city of Zaria degenerated into clash between them and the military that resulted in the death of hundreds of people.

<sup>20</sup> This council has legal status similar to all the federal government's institutions.

functions of the Council are to develop avenues for articulating cordial relationships amongst the various religious groups and between them and the Federal Government.<sup>21</sup> The Council is expected to devise means of consolidating national unity and the promotion of political cohesion and stability in the pluralistic Nigerian society. The council also has the responsibility of assisting the Federal and State Governments by stressing and accentuating the position and roles religion should play in national development.<sup>22</sup>

The Council coordinates with the established religious organisations in Abuja for organising programmes that aim to promote peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Most of the programmes of the Council focus on organising interfaith dialogues, workshops and seminars on achieving sustainable peaceful co-existence. Despite the fact that the Council has engaged in various means of pursuing these goals since its formation in 1987 by the administration of General Ibrahim Babangida, the success of its programmes has been eroded by the incessant religious riots in many parts of the country. Nevertheless, the Council has contributed its fair share in effective management of religious diversity in the Federal Capital. However, despite the tension caused by the religious noise and road closure or disruption of traffic by some religious groups, the Council did not solicit the city authority to regulate these activities. The city authority has legal power to initiate rules to regulate religious activities but so far they have not done so. Moreover, the

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21 In northern Nigerian cities, including Abuja, African Traditional Religions are almost entirely invisible. As a result they become irrelevant in urban religious discourse. Indigenous religions are often found in remote villages in the north. However, practitioners of ATR are protected by law since Nigerian constitution affirmed the freedom of religion.

22 See Enyinna S. Nwauche (2008) for a detailed study of the relationship between law, religion, and human rights in Nigeria and how Islam and Christianity almost become unacknowledged de facto state religions, and the resulting neglect of other religions.

Nigerian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits all sorts of discriminations based on religious belief. It is apparent that this constitutional provision usually clashes with the attempt to regulate some religious activities. Religious groups often perceive regulation by state authority as infringement of their rights. Recently there was uproar in Kaduna state when the governor attempted to regulate preaching and noise from the loudspeakers of Mosques and Churches. Many Christian leaders accused the governor of violating their constitutional right to preach the gospel.

In Nigeria a tacit perception has developed that historical churches initiated by the European missionaries before or during the colonial era are regarded as established. But Pentecostal churches are regarded as new, even those that developed in the 1970s or 80s. However, seeing Pentecostal churches as new does not imply lack of recognition by the federal government. The former President of CAN who left office in July 2016, Ayo Oritsejafor, was a Pentecostal pastor. All registered churches, whether those regarded as established or Pentecostals, have equal rights before the law and they are protected by the Constitution. Section 38 (1) of the 1999 constitution and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states: “every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, Christian missionaries are operating in the Muslim states, even those who declared *shari’ah* law. In the villages of northern Muslim states such as Kano and Katsina there are still minority populations of Hausa ‘pagans,’ called *Maguzawa*, and both Muslim and Christian missionaries are presently competing in proselytising them to either Islam or Christianity. It is only

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23 Read more at <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/weekly/index.php/opinion/10693-freedom-of-religion-democracy-and-nigerian-constitution#I3QLHuU8guOHD9mp.99>

recently that some states (Lagos and Kaduna) have begun attempting to limit religious expression in relation to regulating noise pollution and preaching.

### MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: LOCAL LEVEL

On the local level, the mainline religious leaders from the Roman Catholic church, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, and other historical churches and Jama 'at Nasrul Islam (JNI) are constantly working on various initiatives to optimize peace in the city. As they watched other neighbouring cities ravaged by ethno-religious riots, some started making concerted efforts for consolidating good inter-religious relationships. These initiatives are spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church and the JNI, rather than Pentecostals and Islamic reformists. Pentecostals and Islamic reformists have a lukewarm attitude toward dialogue and they often refused to participate.<sup>24</sup> These established religious bodies consistently organise interfaith dialogues to boost mutual understanding and mitigate the tension between Muslims and Christians.

The recommendations of a workshop organised by the Muslim Community Centre of Abuja highlight their perspectives and vision of their leaders on the issue of peaceful co-existence in the city. The workshop aimed at capacity building for Imams and Islamic scholars of Abuja on the promotion of peace. During the workshop, which was held from 20-22 October 2014, six papers were presented, discussed, and deliberated upon for the purpose of finding ways of achieving peaceful co-existence.

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24 A Roman Catholic reverend father told me that some Pentecostals disapproved their religious dialogue with Muslims. He said on many occasions Pentecostals accuse Roman Catholics of sitting and talking with the enemies.

The communiqué of the workshop emphasises that Islam is a religion of peace which teaches peaceful living within the family and neighbourhood, in the community and with non-Muslims. According to the communiqué, all forms of violence are forbidden by Islam, such as violence against family members, against the community, against institutions and against non-Muslims. The communiqué urges Islamic religious leaders to be polite in their teachings, sermons, and speech, Islamic scholars should be tactful and diplomatic, and they should avoid offensive remarks or commenting on issues they do not fully understand. The communiqué also suggests that special attention should be given to the youth, especially boys because they are directly involved in violence, crimes, and other deviant forms of behaviour. Moreover, the communiqué concludes that concerted efforts should be made by Islamic scholars to bring to light the teachings of Islam on how Muslims should relate well and peacefully to non-Muslims. Specific verses of the Qur'an and Hadith should be widely publicised.

One of my interlocutors in Abuja, who participated in the imam's workshop, was the former of deputy imam of Fouad Lababidi Mosque in Wuse Area of the city. He said the medium of the English language made it possible for southern and northern Muslims, such as Yorubas, Hausas, Igalas and Igbiras, to cooperate and engage in religious activities together. The deputy imam of Lababidi Mosque is a Hausa man from the north, and the imam is a Yoruba from the south. This kind of arrangement is unique to Abuja. The deputy imam told me he led the daily prayers, including Friday prayers, in the absence of the imam (Sheikh Tajuddeen Bello). He said that their Friday *khutba* (sermon) focuses on piety, current issues, and promoting peace among Muslims and their Christians neighbours.

He said he likes the cordial and harmonious relationship that exists among Muslims in the city despite their ethnic and regional differences. According to him, there is an absence of sectarian criticism and antagonism among Muslims in Abuja as opposed to other parts of the north. According to

him, preachers in the north, particularly from Izala and Salafi, condemn those they perceived as their rivals, branding them as heretics rather than preaching fear of God and good works. He criticises Izala and some of their *ulamas* for their excess in negative preaching and condemning others who do not agree with them. He said that Muslims of Abuja have put sectarianism aside and work toward inspiring Muslims to live up to the Islamic ideals of reforming society. Even Izala in Abuja has mellowed down harsh language against opponents and conduct their activities in politer ways.

The Deputy Imam further said that he participates in most religious activities in the city, including giving lectures in Islamic seminars and the media. He is actively participating in the Abuja Association of Friday Mosques Imams, and he is also regularly invited by the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN) from various secondary schools and higher institutions, including the University of Abuja, to give Islamic lectures. I once accompanied him to one of these events organised by MSSN of Federal Government College Kubwa. The senior Muslim students were celebrating their graduation and handing over the administrative activities of the group to new upcoming senior students. To my surprise, I saw many Christian students - both males and females - in the event. This is highly atypical in other northern cities.

Among the Christians groups, Roman Catholics are the most ardent advocates of interfaith dialogue in Abuja and the country in general. The Catholic Archbishop of Abuja Cardinal John Onaiyekan leads this advocacy peace effort. Archbishop Onaiyekan has been the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja since 1994, and he co-chairs the African Council of Religious Leaders–Religions for Peace (ACRL–RfP). In his press interview with Christopher O'Connor (2010) Onaiyekan explained reasons for his involvement in interfaith dialogues, when he was asked about his involvement in building bridges between the Christian and Muslim communities:

The defining factor in whether a religious leader in Nigeria is a peacemaker, a promoter of interreligious dialogue and tolerance, is personal orientation. I have always been committed personally. My convictions have always pushed me towards building bridges, removing unnecessary divisions, avoiding conflict, resolving it where possible, discovering friendship, and building a more peaceful environment. Additionally, it is part and parcel of my function as a Bishop in the Catholic Church, as a priest, as a Catholic Bishop, one who has a position of leadership in the Christian community, to lead by both words and deeds, to lead everyone to adopt a positive attitude towards all religions, an attitude of tolerance. If one takes this approach, he can accomplish quite a lot, and that has been my experience. Everything can be approached in multiple ways. Religious texts can be interpreted to spread fear, or to spread peace. (1)

In another question about his strategies for peace building, he responded as follows:

Since I have primarily been involved with interreligious dialogue and peace building through my association with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), let me use CAN as a point of reference.... Despite these limitations, I promoted tolerance and cooperation, largely through CAN's participation in the Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC) the council I referred earlier, which CAN had spearheaded before my presidency. Collectively, the members of CAN decided that it was necessary to speak with Muslims, and it initiated an interreligious dialogue, which the Muslim community embraced with open arms. The government has also supported this effort. CAN continued this dialogue under my leadership, and it will continue under future presidents. (3)

Archbishop Onaiyekan has diligently advocated for peace, justice, and interreligious dialogue. It is for this reason that a Roman Catholic peace movement, Pax Christi International Peace, honoured Archbishop Onaiyekan with its 2012 Peace Award for his efforts in promoting understanding between people of different faiths through interfaith dialogue. Other historical churches such as Anglican and Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) join the Roman Catholics in the effort of peace building. Pentecostals, however, hardly join this

movement, probably because of their individualistic orientation, despite the fact that they are always invited to such programmes and initiatives. This united effort by Muslim and Christian leaders to promote peaceful relationships through dialogue contributes in preserving the nascent cordial relationships between the diverse religious groups in the city.

## PLURALISTIC RELIGIOUS SOUNDSCAPE OF THE CITY

Varieties of religious sounds that emanate from different kinds of sources which range from churches, mosques, and shops in the public space have created a rich and complicated acoustic ecology of the city of Abuja. In many parts of the city these religious sounds rise over the everyday cacophony of the city's environment, such as the noise of traffic, the wail of sirens, and the clamour of construction, stadium noise, and voices of hawkers and vendors of various kinds. Itinerant Christian preachers also use loudspeakers early in the morning to preach to neighbours about the importance of repentance. On several occasions in Abuja, I was awakened by these male and female preachers, who preach loudly using strong language to declare that people should repent because Jesus is coming. These loud voices in the early morning hours evoke what Isaac Weiner (2014:4) describes as "aural aggression". According to Brian Larkin (2014), the use of loudspeakers in religious settings is not only a means of evangelism or *da'awa* but also a performance of presence making. This announcement of presence through sound is precisely what causes competition between different religious groups in the same environment. Larkin (2014:5) quotes Jacques Attali that "the imposition of one's noise is also a means of silencing others." In the same vein, Stout (2006:66) asserts that "sound is the physical signature of our dynamic surroundings." This assertion helps us to understand the competition to drown out one another through loudspeakers between Islamic reformists such as Izala and Sufi groups in other northern Nigerian cities. Apart from announcing the

presence, religious sounds that emanate from loudspeakers and other sources can be seen as an act of place-making. One can easily recognise the religious identity of a particular area of the city by the nature of sound ambience of the environment. Marry (2010:9) states:

The feeling of 'home' is strongly mediated by the soundscape of a region, and that the unique experience of a lifestyle, of a city's or countryside's atmosphere, is fundamentally determined in each instance by the acoustic space. One's conception of what a landscape is can today no longer be restricted to what one sees and that city planning can no longer be content with noise control and abatement, but must pay attention to the character of the acoustic atmospheres of squares, pedestrian zones, of whole cities.

Most neighbourhoods in the city have mosques and churches that use loudspeakers to amplify their religious services. It is a common practice for a wealthy man in a Muslim neighbourhood to build a mosque inside his compound and employ an imam who leads prayer, teaches, and preaches to the neighbours who attend the mosque. Household worship among Christians is also rapidly increasing nowadays. Sounds that emanate from these religious practices help identify the religious character of the environment. Wrightson (2000:10) writes, "the idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals, and sound marks) can—like local architecture, customs, and dress—express a community's identity to the extent that settlements can be recognised and characterized by their soundscapes". In this sense, sonic ambience can be seen as intrinsically connected to space (Marry 2010).

As many young pastors establish their smaller churches, they use loudspeakers to reach the public. These new, smaller Pentecostal churches seem to lack the resources of bigger churches, hence their inability to broadcast themselves on commercial radio and television. As a result, a loudspeaker is the only means through which their preaching goes beyond the enclave of their church buildings. Apart from the sound that emanates from loudspeakers of the smaller churches, another sound arises from household worship. Most of the

big Pentecostal Churches have household fellowship meetings organised by members living in the close neighbourhood. This is a church service in small groups where people living close to each other perform a service in their houses that is accompanied by the heavy sound of worship and preaching. Some neighbours often complain and perceive this as noise that disrupts their rest. Isaac Weiner (2014:2) observed a similar situation in New York:

[E]ach of these auditory outbursts has generated controversy and elicited complaint at various moments in U.S. history. As they emanated outwards from the more traditional spaces to which modern religion has been confined, these sonic expressions have reached multiple, heterogeneous audiences—both intended, and unintended, willing and unwilling—who have heard and responded to them in very different ways.

The controversy generated by religious sounds caused Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency (LASEPA) to intervene and enact anti-noise laws to curb noise pollution in the city (Okonkwo2015). The law asks all mosques and churches to lower their loudspeakers and to reduce their volume drastically. According to the new regulation, any place of worship that violates this law will be shut down. Oge Okonkwo (2015) reports that to date about thirty places of worship have been closed down in Lagos for their refusal to comply with anti-noise law. The major ones affected are the Rain of Power, Miracle Church and Christ Apostolic Church in Lekki, and Oluren Kemi Mosque in Ketu. In Abuja where noise is not regulated, many people quietly continue to complain about it. In my conversations with both Christians and Muslims in Abuja about this issue, they disclosed to me that they bitterly oppose religious noise but that they are afraid to voice their grievances for fear of being labelled as irreligious or unbelievers.

However, some people appreciate loudspeaker-mediated religious sounds and listen to them attentively. Weiner (2014:4) quotes Hillel Schwartz, who aptly affirms in a similar vein that “noise is never so much a question of

the intensity of sound as of the intensity of the relationship”. It is, therefore, this relationship that defined sound as a sacred sonic expression that deserves attention or unwanted aural disturbance. For instance, most Izala members approved of preaching cassettes play by Izala mosques with loudspeakers around four o’clock in the morning, even though it is one of the most controversial sounds. However, most Sufi Muslims perceived this sound of preaching as noise that violates their right to sleep while, at the same time they appreciate loudspeaker sound during *Maulud* (Prophet Muhammad’s birthday), which vibrates throughout the night.

However, even this issue of appreciating the sound due to the sympathy or religious affiliation with the source of the sound cannot be generalised. I encountered many people who complain about sound that emanates from their own religious groups. In my conversations with both Christians and Muslims about this issue, they disclosed to me that they bitterly oppose any noise that disturbs people and creates discomfort. Sani Musa is a Muslim who is working for a furniture company and resides in a house that is close to a Sufi mosque in Nyanya Abuja. He said he is highly disturbed by the sound of loudspeakers broadcasting daily from the mosque. Conversely, he tolerates the regular call to prayer because it is compulsory, but the other extra activities such as preaching and recitations of praise songs to the prophet or *zikr* (melodious invocation of God) that arise from the loudspeaker extremely disrupt his ability to rest and sleep at night. Sani said he wanted to relocate to a place far away from any loudspeaker but has not been able to do so due to his limited financial resources. Another interlocutor stated that in his view using loudspeakers apart from normal prayer calling was ethically wrong. He continued that there should be a religious ruling by Islamic jurists to prohibit such practices. According to him, denying someone’s ability to sleep is tantamount to invading his/her personal freedom that God himself cannot approve. He suggested that all other activities, even long prayers during fasting in the month of Ramadan, should be performed without loudspeakers.

Moreover, some Christians I interviewed disapproved of the excessive use of loudspeakers even from churches. One interlocutor who lives in Nyanya Abuja told me that every day he comes back from work, it is hard for him to rest due to the sound coming from a church close to his house. He said even though he is a Christian and believes in God, in his view, the church should switch off the loudspeaker during service, since not everyone is interested in listening to the service. When I asked him why people like him are not complaining publicly or taking their case to the authority to express their dissatisfaction, his response was that he does not want people to see him complaining about religious activities. Another person, a 34-year-old electrician in the city, told me that most of his Christian clients in Wuse area have relocated to another parts of the city. And many of them cited the discomfort they experienced as a result prevalent number of mosques that use loudspeakers in the area.

Larkin (2014) argues that one of the means by which Nigerians cope with the regular presence of noise emanating from the loudspeakers is shifting their attention away from the sound -- a situation he called "techniques of inattention". I want to disagree with Larkin here because most people that I interviewed and observed perceived the sound of loud speakers as a noise that can be tolerated only with pain out of necessity. Many people complained that it is impossible for them to remove their attention from the irritating and unpleasant loud noise that makes them highly uncomfortable. When people have control over the sound, for instance on radio, they choose the channels that suit their taste. I have witnessed many occasions where people quickly changed stations either on radio or television immediately when the programme of another religion comes on air. People select where to direct their attention if they have a choice, and if they do not have a choice they tolerate the unwanted noise. Nevertheless, I still witnessed when some people narrated stories of what they heard from the loudspeakers of other religious groups and expressed their opinion whether in agreement, disagreement, or even ridicule.

## VISUAL MARKERS OF RELIGION IN THE CITY

Public spaces in Abuja are saturated with religious posters on virtually every nook and cranny of the city. From a distance, they look like commercial adverts of consumer products, but at a close look, they appear to be adverts of different kinds. Almost all of them advertise Pentecostal crusades, revivals, and other mass gatherings. They usually come with very dramatic captions such as the following: God of Miracle, Engaging the Supernatural Power of Faith, Grand Connect with Grace for Exploit, Break the Yoke of Barrenness, God of Miracle, Prophetic Blast, Abuja Prophetic, Fire Conference, National Turn Around Crusade, This Mockery Must End, Unlocking the Ancient Harvest by the Spirit, Unstoppable Progress Summit, We Serve a Very Big God, It's Breakthrough Season, That Shrine Must Catch Fire.

The main visual displays of the posters almost without exception are pictures of the pastor whose church organises the event. In many cases, the pastor appears with his wife beside him and sometimes with his associates. The verbal element of the posters consists of the dramatic and emotionally appealing captions I mentioned above. These two elements constitute the visual prominence on the posters. Pictures of the men of God in the posters have realistic details with shining faces, immaculate outfits (usually suits), and neat haircuts. The captions have very strong, conspicuous, and attractive typesetting designs.

These posters that cover the structures of the city show the vibrant religious activities that are going on there and the desire to capture public attention. Their pictures being the most prominent element of the posters, it is clear that the men of God are not only advertising spiritual products, but also their faces. The captions indicate that the main products advertised are protection, wealth, miracle for healing, security, and power to overcome worldly problems. This implies that spirituality, particularly through the

prosperity gospel, is used as a tool for effecting changes in the mundane world. Pentecostals are using bold and conspicuous images in these posters and other visual media as a strategy to capture attention of the public.



Fig. 2.7 Pentecostal posters in Abuja.



Fig. 2.8 Banner advertising NASFAT's youth programme.

Religious stickers are widely used on vehicles and in the offices, houses, and even on items such as bags, and computers. Many churches and Muslim groups produce stickers and distribute them to their members as forms of public relations. The conspicuous typescript and graphics of stickers as well as encoded messages make them highly attractive visual objects. This makes them an easy medium for advertising a religious organisation or denomination. One of the most ubiquitous stickers that pervade the city of Abuja is that of the Living Faith (aka Winners Church), which contains the written caption, "I am a Winner". Similar to Pentecostal churches, NASFAT's members embraced the use of stickers on their vehicles, bags, computers, and houses. Different types of stickers that display NASFAT logos are sold in the mosque during Sunday

worship prayers.<sup>25</sup> The present chairman of NASFAT central branch in Abuja told me that he came to know about NASFAT through a bumper sticker which he was seeing daily on passing vehicles. He said initially he was wondering whether NASFAT was a company that sells cars because of the many cars he had been seeing with NASFAT's stickers. This led him to begin enquiries about NASFAT and eventually he became a member of the movement. Stickers serve as visual markers of religious identity; they are communicating to the public the denomination or religious group to which the person displaying the stickers belongs.



Fig. 2.9 NASFAT stickers on members' vehicles in the premises of NASFAT Islamic Centre Abuja Central Branch.

One controversial sticker that some Muslims paste on their bags or cars reads: "If your God is crucified why not try Allah, he is ever living". This causes grudges in some Christian circles while many ignore it without a comment. Some Muslims discuss the message of the sticker with amusement and spread the news about it. Religious images through posters, billboards and stickers permeate the structures of the city. However, because the authorities have not yet attempted to regulate religious activities and put in place an

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<sup>25</sup> The first time I encountered the name 'NASFAT' was from a sticker pasted on a hand bag of a lady in Jos around 2006. From that time I began to notice the stickers in different places, particularly bumper stickers on cars in Jos.

avenue of complaint, the posters, billboard, stickers, and other visual markers of religion continue to spread throughout the city.

## RELIGION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE CITY

This section attempts to show that the religious landscape of Abuja is a ground where many people engage in the constant struggle of building social capital. Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman popularized the notion of social capital. The concept has captured the interest of many social scientists who extended and applied it to different circumstances. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:119) define social capital as “the network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. According to Sander and sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by possessing a strong Lowney (2006:3), social capital focuses on the social networks that exist between us (literally who knows whom) and the character of those networks, the strength of the ties, and the extent to which those networks foster trust and reciprocity. Places of worship in Abuja are a fertile ground for building social capital because scores of state officials and other influential people visit such places. This feature of Abuja makes it attractive to religious leaders and induces many of them to relocate their headquarters to the city.

As I was approaching Abuja from Jos for the purpose of starting my fieldwork, I was dazzled by the myriad of posters and billboards advertising Pentecostal activities in the city. Among them, I saw many posters of Pastor Joshua Telena who founded Shepherd House of God in Jos but who had now apparently relocated to Abuja. Joshua Telena is very famous for propagating the prosperity gospel and for his unusual techniques of taking money from members of his congregation. That evening, I went to the house of a friend of mine who had relocated from Jos to Abuja. As we were watching television, I saw one famous Muslim cleric, Sheikh Nura Khalid, preaching in the national

assembly mosque in the English language. My host told me that Sheikh Nura had relocated to Abuja a long time ago, and now he had acquired huge amount of wealth and was driving expensive cars. He came to Abuja when he was expelled from Izala after a personal and theological dispute with the then leader of Izala, Sheikh Samaila Idris. As a result of his expulsion, he lost his position as the principal of one of Izala secondary schools.

After talking with some people and observing the religious terrain in the city, I discovered that the cases of Joshua Talena and Nura Khalid are just tips of the iceberg. Many religious leaders are relocating to Abuja because there is a huge material benefit to be accrued as a result of networking with state officials. It is noteworthy that rich people and politicians in Nigeria give or donate a considerable amount of money to religious leaders and organisations. For example, *Premium Times* reported a story that the Coordinator of the Conference of Islamic Organisations (CIO), Abdullahi Shuaib, revealed that two Islamic organisations were offered \$3 million around February 2014 by the past administration to secure their support in the re-election bid of ex-President Goodluck Jonathan (Kayode-Adedeji 2015). There is also similar report by the *Daily Post* that the former President Goodluck Jonathan in early 2015 offered about 10 billion naira to some famous Pentecostal pastors led by Pastor David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church to support his re-election campaign (Enenche 2015). Similar incidents happen all over the country but are more pronounced in Abuja. Religious organisations, both Muslim and Christian, organise fundraising in the city and invite ministers, National Assembly members, and businessmen. For instance, in one capital raising of Izala that I attended, one politician donated 20 million naira, and the former Speaker of the National House of Representative, Alhaji Aminu Tambuwal, donated twenty cars for running the organisation.

Religious leaders in Abuja have more access to material benefits than their counterparts in other parts of the north. According to one of my interlocutors, many pastors have become wealthy and acquired houses and land

due to their connection with state officials in the city. As a result, some pastors, particularly of Pentecostal strands, become powerful and influential people. My interlocutor told me that one pastor of Living Faith Church of God, who presides over one of the big branches of the church in the city centre, was transferred to another church in another state. However, the pastor resisted the transfer and clearly told his superiors that he could not afford to lose the material benefits available to him in the city. When the church headquarters in Lagos insisted on the transfer, the pastor disaffiliated with the church and established his ministry in another part of the city. Lin (1991:31) affirms that “the premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward investment in social relations with expected returns. Individuals engage in interactions and networking to produce profits”. In this vein, it is arguable that some religious leaders are reaping a benefit through their social network in the city.

It is not only religious leaders alone who are struggling to build social capital, but many people who attend places of worship in Abuja also do so with the extra intent of establishing a network with top state officials either directly or through religious leaders. It is a widespread perception in Nigeria that access to government services is difficult unless one knows officials in charge of such services. People always repeat the familiar adage that “merit does not count, it is whom you know that counts”. Incidentally, some people are drawn to religious places of worship for the purpose of networking to gain or enhance social capital, which became a motor behind religious affiliation. The larger the numbers of influential people, the bigger the congregation.

According to my interlocutors, persons who are looking for a job or government contract purposely go to churches where there are officers who may likely help them achieve their goals. My interlocutor is a University graduate and has been looking for a job for more than four years without success. When he told one of his friends about his problems, she instantly advised him to start attending her church because the then Secretary to the

Government of the Federation (SGF), Anyim Pius Anyim, was worshipping there. She promised that she would help him get a duty in the church such as ushering that will make him visible so that he will be noticed by the State Secretary or other government officers that would help him find employment. He said almost at the same time another friend of his told him to start going to the legislative quarter's church where former Senate President David Mark worships. His friend said that if he became active in the church, the senior pastor might secure a job for him through the pastor's connection with the Senate President and other top government officials.

I discussed this situation with one of the pastors of ECWA Church located along Airport Road. He told me that in Abuja smaller churches have difficult times because most people prefer to worship in bigger churches that have wealthy and influential members. He said his small church is continually becoming depopulated as a result of people migrating to more prominent churches. He knows many individuals who are residing in the area close to his church but prefer to go to the far distanced Maitama branch of ECWA in the city centre because that is where they have the possibility of networking with influential people.

To follow up this trend in the Muslim community, I visited the Central Mosque in December 2013 to see the Chief Imam Sheikh Musa Muhammad (who passed away in 2015). Even though I could not interview him due to his busy schedule, I talked to some people who were waiting to see him outside the mosque. There were up to twenty people that morning waiting to have an audience with the Imam. I initiated a conversation with one of them. He said the Imam is a very influential person in the country and due to his position as the national Imam he wielded influence over people of high authority in government, both Muslims and Christians. If the Imam asked any favour from them on behalf of anybody, his demand is quickly considered. When I asked him what he wanted from the Imam, he said that he was working with a government ministry as a driver. However, he lost his job and wanted the Imam

to intervene and talk to his superiors in the ministry to restore to his job. I asked him whether he was sure that the Imam knows the people in that ministry. He said it is not necessary whether the Imam knows them or not, his position as a senior religious leader is enough to compel them to reinstate him back to his job. Another person told me that he wanted to see the Imam to help him get back his plot of land that was seized by land grabbers in the Masaka district next to Abuja. On many occasions, religious membership is determined by the goal of gaining access to profitable social networks in places of worship. Sander and Lowney (2006:5) maintain that bridging relationships were particularly important to creating a sense of unity across race, class, or religion, to "importing clout" into communities that lack clout, and to breaking down stereotypes. Bridging is the type of social capital that predominates in the religious scene of Abuja because religion has become a medium that bridges the gap between lower class people and high ranking state officials that help them access services which otherwise would be difficult for them to enjoy.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to describe the social ramifications of religious diversity in Abuja. As the federal capital located in the centre of the country, Abuja has attracted people from all corners and became religiously pluralistic city. It is the fact of this diversity and also the diversity of the nation as a whole that prompted the authorities to promote Abuja as a centre of unity. In my early days in Abuja in November 2013, I came across the Unity Fountain, which is a roundabout located in the heart of the city. The fountain contains the names of all the 36 states of the Federation written on different angles of its structure. The fountain was apparently built to celebrate the symbolic role of Abuja in the Nigerian federation as a centre of unity. Moreover, the vehicle license plate number for the FCT reads 'Centre of Unity.' The idea of unity always appears in the cityscape, particularly on the

mass media. The authorities hoped that this idea of unity would enhance harmonious co-existence among the diverse ethno-religious groups. People from different religious backgrounds are unified under a single political, economic and legal system in the city. These people are bound to share and cohabit the same neighbourhoods and interact at different levels of social engagement. Unlike many other major cities in the federation, Abuja has successfully managed to preserve relative peace and unity through relentless effort of many religious actors and government institutions. Despite the existence of grudges and sound pollution, the relative peace has been sustained without degenerating into destructive conflicts.

It has been noted in this chapter that religious spaces are growing rapidly in Abuja and become intertwined with the fabric of the city. It is arguable that religious structures have added another layer on to the dream-like Abuja landscape, which has become entangled with the lures and enchantments of an 'aspiring city'. Some places of worship, such as the National Mosque and the National Christian Centre, are landmark structures and aesthetically designed to make an impression on the onlookers. Moreover, the dominance of religious cacophonies in the city has generated mixed reactions which sometimes depend on the listeners' relationship to the sources of the sounds. Sounds broadcast from religious places have enriched the texture and soul of Abuja cityscape. However, these religious sounds that permeate the city often become sources of discomfort and distress to many people in both Muslim and Christian communities. The chapter argues that instead of removing their attention from these sounds, people of Abuja tolerate them out of necessity. Similar to sounds, religious images also permeate the city and even become mobile in the case of bumper stickers on motor vehicles that move around the city. Automobiles carry religious stickers with them to all different corners of the city. This mobility increases the visibility of the stickers.

The manifestation of religion in the city is not restricted to sights and sound but extends to social relationships. A complex nexus of relationships

exists among people of authority, religious leaders, and members of religious organisations that affect religious participation in the city. Social forces in Abuja have made religious places of worship more than places where people meet for prayer, solace, repentance, or ritual performance. The social structure of the city has generated a system of religious economy where religious leaders and their followers received material benefits from people of authority. Moreover, the system obliged them to reciprocate, as, for instance, in backing policies or voting during elections or rendering varieties of spiritual services such as prayer. As a result, a symbiotic relationship developed between these two classes of society.

Although Christianity and Islam belong to different religious traditions, they produce similar pattern of responses to social situations, as in the case of an effort to establish social capital in places of worship and the use of loudspeakers and reactions they engendered in the city of Abuja. These similar patterns point to the fact that Muslims and Christians are not independent impervious entities that exist in their exclusive universes. These similarities can be explained by the fact of cohabiting the same environment and exposure to the same external social forces acting on the society. Sharing living space also fosters mutual influences and similar responses to social challenges. The next three chapters will explore these mutual influences on religious practices between Christ Embassy and NASFAT.

# 3

## CHRIST EMBASSY

### INTRODUCTION

The book of 2nd Corinthians 5:20 says that we are ambassadors for Christ. Like any other ambassador here on earth posted to another country. We are also ambassadors {representatives} of Christ to reconcile the world back to Him. We are posted into the world though we are not of the world. We are to win the world to Christ. Zion is our home country because we are on official assignment. In doing this, we give people's lives a meaning, i.e., salvation, healing, and peace. (Interview 10.1.2014)

These were the words of the instructor of the foundation class when he was telling me about the background of Christ Embassy and the origin of the name. Christ Embassy is among the successful Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, its branches spread throughout the urban landscape of the country. Seeing themselves as ambassadors of Christ in the world, members of Christ Embassy believe that they have the mandate to spread the gospel to the world and teach people techniques of maximising health and wealth, which they believe are encapsulated in the gift of salvation.

Christ Embassy creates a self-image of a modern church that comprises members who are mostly upwardly mobile professionals. The expression of

modernity in Christ Embassy can be seen in its sophisticated organisation and the efficiency of its bureaucracy that is based on principles of motivation which involve a comprehensive system of reward for an optimum performance. According to the teaching of Christ Embassy, a born again believer has some special rights in Christ. These rights include success, health, and wealth and victory over the enemies. The means through which one could achieve these rights involve series of practices and techniques that aim to radically transform the individuals. However, this chapter argues that even though some people find the methods of Christ Embassy appealing, many end up disillusioned, without achieving the vision they set out to achieve, despite the optimistic promises by the church leadership. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the church through discussing some selected themes, such as brief historical background, organisational structure, membership, cell ministry, perception of the others, fund raising, significance of time, and worship services.

When talking about Christ Embassy, I will constantly make references to Pastor Chris because, as is the case with newer Pentecostal church founders, he dominates all operations of the church. In fact, he owns the church. His domination is not restricted to administration but encompasses the teachings and theology of the church. In Nigeria, many people refer to Christ Embassy as Oyakhilome's church. Ukah (2007:15) writes about founders of newer Pentecostal churches, including Pastor Chris, as “bank of grace, repository of charismata, and a special bridge between his followers and God. He controls both charisma and cash; his word is law. He is an oracular instrument and initiator of doctrines and orientation. He alone holds a special privilege of interpreting the will of God to his people”. It is for this reason that one cannot do research in any of Christ Embassy's branches without substantial references to Pastor Chris. The larger than life pictures of Oyakhilome are displayed in all the branches of the church. The pastors almost repeat his preachings verbatim and consistently make references to him. His programmes are broadcast every Sunday, and his written materials are sold on the premises of all the branches.

Members refer to him simply as Pastor Chris, and in this thesis I am going to use the same name.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CHURCH

Pastor Chris Oyakhilome<sup>26</sup> is often addressed as pastor, teacher, man of God or healing minister, but his followers mainly refer to him as Pastor Chris. Pastor Chris is a celebrity pastor in Nigeria, and one of the most famous televangelists and best-selling authors in the country. He was born on 7 December 1961, into a family with deep spiritual tradition that played a vital role in the formation of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. His grandfather was among the founders of the classical Pentecostal church, Assemblies of God of Nigeria. Pastor Chris is the eldest son of the family of Elder T. Oyakhilome, who was a renowned missionary in Benin during the colonial period. Elder T. Oyakhilome was a former member of the Church of God Mission International, which was founded by the late Benson Idahosa in Benin City. Idahosa was the pioneer of neo-Pentecostalism in the country, and he was often called the father of prosperity gospel who achieved international fame. Due to the influence of his family, young Chris grew up as a member of the Church of God Mission International and as a devoted follower of Benson Idahosa.

After his primary education Chris attended the prestigious Edo College, one of the famous secondary schools in Benin City. He started preaching from his youth, holding large miracle meetings during his secondary school days. During the college holidays, he worked as part-time staff at the Church of God Mission in Benin City. This became an opportunity for him to interact with and appropriate the teachings of Benson Idahosa. Chris

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<sup>26</sup> Members of Christ Embassy are hostile to interviews and even if they agreed to be interviewed, they are highly economical in their words. They do not seem to know details about the life of Pastor Chris. This is the limited information that I gathered from some interlocutors piece by piece.

Oyakhilome initiated Believers Loveworld Ministry when he was a student of Architecture at Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma in Edo State in 1981. It was known as the 'Youth for Christ'. The name later changed to 'Believers' Love World Campus Fellowship.' On graduating from campus, the young Chris Oyakhilome established Christ Embassy (the first Church) in Benin and later handed it over to his disciple and assistant Rev. Tom Amenkhienan and moved to Lagos. In Lagos, Christ Embassy began in Adeniyi Jones in Ikeja, from where the church moved to Alausa and finally to Oregun Road.

From the time of its inception in the campus, Christ Embassy expanded gradually into most parts of Nigeria. Eventually the church spread beyond the borders of Nigeria into many African countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa. Moreover, the church expanded into Europe, Asia, and North and South America. Pastor Chris now holds large meetings in the United States and has healing school sessions in Canada and the United Kingdom. Due to his charismatic ministrations, he has won many followers from the corporate and upwardly mobile young men and women who are working hard to keep the church going. Despite the fact that there are numerous other pastors in Christ Embassy, members regard Pastor Christ as their first pastor and spiritual leader. They listen to his preaching and read his booklets. Other pastors serve only as supporting personnel for Pastor Chris.<sup>27</sup>

Anita Ebhodaghe was born in Benin to a wealthy Nigerian father, Mr. John U. Ebhodaghe, who was a former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of Nigerian Deposit Insurance Corporation (NDIC). Her mother was from Switzerland. As a result, Anita holds a dual citizenship. Anita is the first daughter in a family of five. Anita Ebhodaghe was among the first students to joined Pastor Chris in his newly established campus fellowship, Believer's

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27 With a gigantic empire, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy is arguably among the top five richest clergy in Nigeria. According to the Encomium Magazine, Pastor Chris is worth over N300 billion.

Love World Fellowship, when she was studying the English Language at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma in Edo State. It was through her active membership in the ministry during her student years that she later started courtship with Chris Oyakhilome and got married to him in Lagos in 1991. She has two teenage daughters with the pastor, Sharon and Charlyn.

Anita was a former member of Central Executive Council, which is the principal governing body of the church. She was the Director of Christ Embassy International Office and one of the members Board of Trustees. Anita was the former head of Christ Embassy church in the United Kingdom and neighbouring regions. Presently Anita led her new ministry in London which consists of many members of Christ Embassy who sided with her after she divorced Pastor Chris.

In April 2014, Anita filed a divorce suit against Pastor Chris at London Central Family Court to end their 20-year-old marriage. She accused her husband of misconduct and unreasonable behaviour. Pastor Chris has denied the allegations and spoke on the divorce suit, on the evening of Sunday, 7 September 2014, during the monthly global communion service of the church. He said it is not biblical to divorce, but if his wife insists on it, he could consider it as an option. Presently the marriage has been dissolved and Anita has been removed from the website and publications of the church.

Anita Ebhodaghe co-authored Christ Embassy's daily devotional booklet, *Rhapsody of Realities*, which has been translated into over 250 languages all over the world. However, since the filing of her divorce case in London, Pastor Anita disappeared from the *Rhapsody of Realities* devotional and website of the church. She has authored numerous Christian books with her ex-husband such as *Unending Springs of Joy*, *Don't Pack Your Bags Yet*, *Confession for Living*, *a Handbook For Successful Living*, and many others.

## ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Christ Embassy is organised into regions which include several countries in a particular continent; zones comprise several states or provinces within a region; parishes or branches constitute a zone; central pastoral units and cells are the smallest units of the church which do not have enough members to form a parish. The leadership hierarchy of the church includes the president/founder, the vice president, the board of trustees, the central executive council, the international pastors conference, regional directors/pastors, zonal directors/pastors, group pastors, parish pastors, church pastors, and coordinators. The national headquarters of Christ Embassy is located in Lagos along the Kudirat Abiola Way, Oregun, Ikeja, close to the Lagos State government house. The building is a mega-structure with an impressive architectural design which, according to one of my interlocutors, cost about two billion naira. The main auditorium of the building has the capacity to seat about forty thousand worshippers. The building also contains offices of pastors, administrators, and chains of businesses.

The leadership of the church ensures strict discipline and total commitment in their various duties. Deep loyalty and respect define the relationship between members and leaders. The most powerful and influential organ of Christ Embassy is the central executive council, which has about eight members, including Pastor Chris. Pastor Ken, his younger brother, is also a member of the CEC, and he is the head pastor of Christ Embassy in Houston, Texas, USA. Another influential member of the CEC is Pastor Tom Aniekhanan, who is a cousin of Pastor Chris; before moving to South Africa he headed many Christ Embassy branches in Nigerian cities such as Benin, Kano, and Lagos. Pastor Tom is the Director of Church Ministry and Organisation (CMO), the central administrative and co-coordinating office of all Christ Embassy churches worldwide. Other members of the CEC include Pastor Tom Obiazi, Pastor Tuoyo Edun, and Pastor Ambrose Isesele. (Anita was the only

female among the members of CEC).The General Executive Council (GEC) is made up of all the Pastors in the ministry. This comprises of the Pastors of Christ Embassy Churches (CEC), Satellite Church Pastors, Campus Pastors and other ordained Pastors in the ministry. They meet at the Pastoral Conference, which is held annually in November.

The Abuja branch is one of the most important ones in the northern part of the country. Abuja serves as the zonal headquarters of the north central region. Pastor Chidi Okwonko is the senior pastor of the zone, and he oversees all six branches of Christ Embassy in Federal Capital Territory. Like all the pastors of Christ Embassy, Pastor Chidi also emulates Pastor Chris in both style and themes of preaching. The zonal headquarters in Abuja is a two-story building that is close to the main church at Durumi in the Area One section of the city. When I visited the place for the first time, the atmosphere felt like a modern business environment. People who look like chief executive officers of business firms, dressed in black suits, were moving around the building going from one office to another. The offices are well furnished with exquisite furniture.



Fig. 3.1 Interior of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja

According to one of the instructors of the foundation school, Peter Tseka, Christ Embassy has various organs. There is a Campus Ministry, which plays an important role in spreading the message of Pastor Chris among youth. The ministry, as stated earlier, started from campus and Pastor Chris has a unique ministry for the youth, which is the reason that the church places great emphasis on working within universities. Today, the church has fellowships in most of the Nigerian Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, and Schools of Administration. The name of the Campus Fellowship is Believers' Loveworld (BLW) Campus Fellowship. Peter Tseka told me that Christ Embassy established a training school called Loveworld Ministerial College (LMC). LMC is not a Bible school but a training ground for leaders since every member of the church is a potential leader. Tseka stated that LMC affords the leaders the opportunity to be trained on the doctrines of Christianity as

interpreted and understood by the church and the school offers courses from General Studies (GS), church administration, Lay Pastoring and Pastoral courses.



Fig. 3.2 Exterior of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja



Fig. 3.3 Bookshop of the headquarters of Christ Embassy at Durumi, Area One Abuja

Another training programme in Christ Embassy is the Loveworld Correspondence Bible Course. This is also a training course open to all. It is done by correspondence without a classroom environment. It is comprised of daily study, an audiocassette by Pastor Chris, and a course manual. Tseka told me that the church organises an annual International Pastors and Partners<sup>28</sup> Conference (IPPC). Pastors of all branches of the church are encouraged to attend this programme. The various churches and campus fellowship tender reports and prizes are awarded.

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<sup>28</sup> Partners here are people who sponsor some major programmes of the church.



Fig. 3.4 Christ Embassy Church Karu Branch Abuja

## MEMBERS AND MEMBERSHIP

Before the conclusion of an enthusiastic church service on Sunday, 1<sup>st</sup>, December 2013, at the Christ Embassy Church Karu branch Abuja, the senior pastor proclaimed, “Anybody who comes here for the first time should stand up”. I and other four people stood up. Immediately as we stood up, the entire congregation began to sing for us.

“Welcome to Christ Embassy”

This is the place

Where you give your life a meaning

This is the place

Where the word of God does transform

You’re at the right place, at the right time

You’re blessed because you came (X2)

Welcome to Christ Embassy!

After the song was finished people came and shook our hands and embraced us with welcoming smiles and expressions of joy and love. The scene looks like an emotional homecoming for a family reunion. The pastor said, “You should now follow the usher to the next room because we have a special package for you”. The ushers came and led us to another big room with plenty of plastic chairs. I saw different groups of people sitting at different angles of the room receiving a lesson from their instructors. We also sat at one angle and two people came and introduced themselves to us as Adewale and Tseka. Adewale stated:

You are welcome to Christ Embassy. You are not here by accident; you are here because you are led by the Holy Spirit. Before you become part of this church you are required to participate in a foundation school that comprises of six module courses. After the completion of the course you will write an examination and a long essay. You should not worry. The examination is very simple. It is based on what we are going to teach you. For the long essay we will ask you to go and win a soul and bring him [her] to the church and write your experiences. When you finished the long essay we will ask you to join a cell and become an active member of the church. We promise you great things in this church. You will know so many new things about the word of God. I promise that your life will never be the same as from today. Another important thing I want to ask is that if anyone of you is not baptised previously, after the course we can baptise the person. We usually go to swimming pool for the baptism because we believe in full immersion.<sup>29</sup>

Adewale brought out small forms and distributed them to us. The spaces to be filled in the form include name, address, occupation, and phone number. The form also includes the question, “are you born again?” Another question is, “do you want us to visit you?” We filled the forms and submitted them to Adewale. Even though I participated fully in some of their activities I

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29 I recorded this statement immediately after I went home.

still kept a distance in my mind. Nevertheless, there are some activities in which I refused to participate. Adewale explained the nature of the classes to us. He said the lesson is not a formal teaching where a teacher would go to the front of the class to teach. He continued that the school is like a private lesson because each participant is given a private tutorial by the instructor. And each participant is going at his own pace. Some finish the course in six weeks and some take more than that. One can arrange with the instructor to organise the classes to suit his/her time and schedule. He said one should buy an exercise book for taking notes during the lesson.



Fig. 3.5 Sunday service at Christ Embassy Area One Abuja in August 2014.

Adewale introduced the content of the modules to us. He said the contents of the first module includes spiritual renewal through becoming a born again believer. The module also includes the theme of salvation, dominion in life, and forgiveness. The second module deals with the nature of the Holy Spirit and procedures for invoking its presence. Module three deals with the different doctrines of Christianity as understood and interpreted by Christ Embassy. The major doctrines discussed in the module are the doctrine of Christ, resurrection of the dead, and baptism. Module four discusses evangelism, soul-winning, the importance of prayer and the techniques of effective prayers, and the great commission. Module five addresses the importance of growing a Christian character through Bible study and the Rhapsody of Reality, as well as attending extra-church services within the week and active participation in cell fellowship. Module six describes the concept of the church and the structure of Christ Embassy and its various ministry units.

After the introduction and a few questions and answers, the session closed with prayer. We arranged the next classes and departed. In order to have a deeper understanding of the church, I took the lessons with Adewale for six weeks. Usually Adewale would wait for me after the service in the youth hall. We sat facing each other with my notebook and he would be reading from the foundation school manual. When we finished all the modules he asked me to write an examination. He set simple questions based on what he taught me during the tutorial. I wrote the examination and passed but I politely refused to write the long essay because it involves evangelising people and convincing them to become members of Christ Embassy.

Through the time of my fieldwork I realised that the foundation school is a means of retaining newcomers and guiding them in understanding the doctrines and practices of the church. In a short period people are taught several things which otherwise it would take them a long time to learn. The

emotional welcoming of newcomers with songs and hugging is another clever strategy of establishing emotional tie with them so that they may have the impression of becoming new members in a loving and caring religious community. One newcomer (about 25 years old) told me, “I was overwhelmed with the reception, and the brotherly love these people showed to me, it is beyond my comprehension. After some time in the church I felt that I am part of the family” (Interview, 3.08.2014, Abuja). However, through my interaction with various people I noticed that not all people who joined the foundation school stay to the end of the classes. Many left at different stages and some never even came back after the introduction. This is because not everybody who comes to the church for the first time has the intention of becoming permanent member. Some attend the church out of curiosity while others go with an open mind but find some beliefs and practices unacceptable to their taste and understanding and eventually left. However, for those who stay to the end, the school serves as form of initiation. Victor Emanuel narrated his experience of finishing the class to me.

I came to Christ Embassy because I was frequently watching Pastor Chris on television and I became impressed with his teaching and his eloquence. That was the reason I left my former church, Lord Chosen, and came to Christ Embassy. After several weeks of foundation class and passing my examination, I became so anxious about writing the long essay. It took me almost two weeks to win over a soul who was a nominal Christian and whose parents attend a traditional northern church. I convinced him to change his way of life and give [his] life to Christ. He agreed and after a long struggle he followed me to the church. When I wrote my long essay and submitted and finally was assigned a cell, I felt like a new person. I felt like a fresh graduate from the university whose excellent job was awaiting him immediately after graduation. (Interview, 14.2.2014)

For people like Emanuel, the foundation school acts like a preparatory process for initiation into a new life in new religious community. I noticed that most of the people who came for the first time and joined the foundation school

were members of smaller Pentecostal churches and a few Catholics. I met a Muslim convert only once. When I asked him about his reason for converting to Christianity, he said Islam is very difficult for him because the rituals are cumbersome, and that was why he opted for Christianity.



Fig. 3.6 Bookshop and Foundation School Classes in Karu Branch Premises

## CELL MINISTRY

The cell is the smallest unit of organisation within Christ Embassy. The term is derived from the biological cell which is the smallest structural unit of an organism that is capable of independent functioning. The sole purpose of cell units in Christ Embassy is evangelism or soul winning, as it is often called in the church. Another purpose of the cell is to give members an opportunity to participate in the church activities. For instance, a person can be part of a choir or lead prayers in the cell if he/she is not comfortable doing so in the large congregation. The cell also gives a sense of belonging to the members. The cell provides opportunities for members to cultivate acquaintances and friendship in small group. Cell members know each other, they pay visits to each other's homes and places of work. There is cell evangelism in Christ Embassy which they call 'cell outreach'. Members of a particular cell go into the city to preach the gospel in public places such as markets squares and parks. Every member of the church must belong to one cell. The logic of assembling people from similar background and profession is based on the view that these people could help one another through advice and sharing of experiences.

Cells in Christ Embassy are created and organised based on varieties of criteria such as residential proximity, vocational proximity, gender, and specialised professions. Some of the cells in the central branch of Christ Embassy Abuja include Avant-garde, Charisma, Citadel, Citizens, Cornerstone, Diamond, Favour, Glory, Dunamis, Eagle, Footballers, Joy, Lighthouse, Rhema, Oasis, Ruby, Sapphire, Agape, and Foundation. The cell leader determines a convenient venue for the cell meeting, which could be restaurants, cafes, conference centres, or the house of a member, among others. Cells in Christ Embassy do not have a minimum number of members, but the maximum

is fifty. Once a cell reaches fifty members, the rule of the church requires that it should be split into two.

The cell leader pioneers a new cell with a vision of winning and training souls. A leader of a cell has responsibilities to guide and direct the members toward achieving the vision of his/her cell. A leader is required to cultivate a meaningful relationship with his/her members and motivate them through good behaviour and an impeccable moral character. Moreover, the leader keeps records of all the activities of the cell, such as the membership list, attendance at cell and other meetings, testimonies, programmes, financial dealings, correspondences, goals, and objectives. These records are submitted quarterly to the coordinator of the church for evaluation and monitoring.

During my fieldwork in Christ Embassy, I attended meetings of two cells, one with the group of information and communication technologies (ICTs) experts, called professional cell, and the other with a group of bank employees. The banker's cell is called 'Zenith Cell' and the leader is Olu Johnson. The cell holds its meeting in a café called Fountain in the outskirts of the city. The meeting commenced with the opening prayer, followed by worship songs, Bible study, and preaching by the cell leader. The leader then introduced the newcomers and asked them about personal questions or need for prayer. After these activities, a general discussion is held about another issue concerning the group. During my first meeting on 8 February 2014, the group discussed the issue of organising dinner for the church leaders. They talked about the cost of the dinner, the venue, and the time. They also spoke of the next evangelical outreach and the next location of the next outing. Finally, the cell leader asked me whether I want them to pray for me or pay me a visit, which I politely refused.<sup>30</sup> The cell leader replied it is alright since "you are

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30 Even though these people know that I am a researcher, they want me to participate in all their activities so that I may appreciate them and convert to Christianity.

here for a research purpose; you are not bound by our rules”. Nowhere is the principle of motivation in Christ Embassy more ostensibly manifest than in the Cell Ministry Award Day, which is held monthly. The award is designed to motivate members to work hard and achieve the objectives given to them by the leadership of the church. There is a long desk beside the entrance of the church building with about five young women leading the registration. Each person entering the church has to tick on the form the cell to which he/she belongs. At the end of the month, the officials in charge would determine the cell that has the maximum percentage church attendance. From the register of the cell leaders, the individual who achieved hundred percent attendance would receive an award during the award day. Moreover, a cell that reached maximum fundraising and one that won the largest number of souls would also receive an award. The full award categories are: Soul winner of the month, Outstanding mother, Outstanding father, Exceptional cell leader, Exceptional cell member, Financial Commendation, Cell of the month (adherence to instructions, number of souls won, achieved financial target, attendance of church service, submission of report promptly), Super cell of the month (ninety percent participation and maximum number of first timer that the cell members brought to the church).

During the award day, which commences after the regular Sunday services, the church becomes like a football field. For each award announced the entire congregation would burst into yelling, clapping, and jubilation. This practice encourages competition between the cells and serves as the prime motivational factor that propels the members into working extra hard for the attainment of the goals set for them by the church. The deployment of elements of competition in running some of the activities of the church boost efficiency in the administration of Christ Embassy and make it more competitive among myriads of Pentecostal churches in the country. It is partly for this reason that Ukah (2007:17), in his categorisation of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, places Christ Embassy under the category of “firm-like structural organisation”. It is

arguable that the exponential growth of Christ Embassy hinged on these practices that induce the members to work as efficiently as possible for the growth of the church.



Fig. 3.7 A big banner announcing the Soul Day of the church at Nyanya Branch Abuja

#### ENGAGING WITH THE 'OTHER' IN CHRIST EMBASSY

##### *MUSLIMS: COMPETITORS OR POTENTIAL CONVERTS?*

Unlike NASFAT, Christ Embassy does not exhibit a consistent policy and initiative toward Muslims. Pastor Chris and his associate pastors rarely

mentioned Islam or Muslims in their sermons. Sometimes pastors of Christ Embassy in Abuja briefly highlight the conspiracy of Muslims to dominate the country or even the entire world and ask the congregation to pray for God's protection against the perceived Muslim threat. As is the case with most of the Pentecostals in the country, Christ Embassy does not show interest in inter-religious dialogue, which is attended to mainly by Catholics and other historical mission churches. The individualistic tendency of the church limits its social engagement, including interfaith activities. However, despite the individualistic tendency the church regularly uses the term 'winning territory for Christ,' which refers to evangelism that may extend the domain of Christianity. The evangelical fervour is not limited to converting nominal Christians but also proselytising Muslims into born again Christians. A 29-year-old male member of the church stated:

It is always difficult to target Muslims in soul winning evangelism. The evangelism usually tends to degenerate into hot arguments about the doctrine of trinity and the divinity of Christ. These two doctrines infuriate Muslims and they do not want to hear about them. It is easier when a Muslim comes to our church voluntarily seeking for truth as a result of doubt he developed about the veracity of Islam. (interview, 11.2.2014, Abuja)

As the above remarks indicate, my Muslims interlocutors become upset when targeted by Pentecostals for evangelism either in the hospitals or on the buses. A Muslim convert to Christianity I encountered in Christ Embassy went on his own and not due to the evangelistic activities of the church members. As a result, soul winning among Muslims had little success and often results in friction. Christ Embassy views other Protestant Christians as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. However, Roman Catholics are viewed as unsaved Christians due to their perceived idolatrous practices. According to the view of the church, Roman Catholics need evangelism as much as Muslims in order to free them from what the church regards as the clutches of idolatry.

### *DEMONISATION OF INDIGENOUS RELIGION*

Like most Pentecostals, in Christ Embassy indigenous religions belong to the dark world of evil forces. One of the pastors of Christ Embassy, a 49-year-old deacon in Karu branch, told me that the gods of indigenous religions are actually demons and agents of Satan that inhabit the spirit realm. In his view, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not a false religion constructed in the imagination of Africans, but rather refers to forces which are real yet invisible entities. When I posed a question to the pastor about the reason for condemning the ATR if its cosmology is based on ontological reality, the pastor replied as follows:

Yes, African gods are real and they possessed real powers which can be invoked by their priest to inflict harm or effect changes on the lives of the people. But you should know that their real existence does not make it right to follow them, because the source of their power is the Devil, not God. Therefore, following them is following the Devil, their master. (Interview, 10.2.2014, Abuja)

In this view ATR is not a false religion but a wrong religion. It is wrong because it uses satanic and demonic powers. In Christ Embassy, patronising *babalawos* is a serious sin since they are believed to be drawing their powers from the forces of indigenous religions. Christ Embassy believes that there is a power of Jesus which is positive and legitimate power available for the born again believers, which they can draw on to address their mundane problems and counter the negative powers of the evil forces. Despite the demonising of indigenous religion and patronising *babalawos*, rumours abound about some members who secretly visit such people if their prayers failed to yield results.

*WOMEN: THE INTERNAL OTHER?*

Despite the exhibition of progressive religiosity in Christ Embassy, the founder's attitude toward gender equality is criticised by Nigerian feminists, and Pastor Chris is seen as one of the most chauvinistic among Nigerian pastors. This became an issue in the aftermath of Pastor Chris's divorce when he delivered a sermon that became a media sensation. Many columnists in the newspapers quoted the sermon and criticised the pastor's view on women. Sahara Reporters (September 2016) quoted some passages of the sermon as follows:

Husband does not mean the male partner in a marriage, husband means master. The reason for most problems in Christian marriages is the fact that women . . . believe they are equal partners. In marriage, you have the man who is the head of that union and because he's the head of that union, it is important to understand him. The Bible says, the man is the head of the woman, so when you marry him you come under his authority; you are not authority-sharers even though you are both heirs to the kingdom of God. When you decide not to subject yourself to that authority, you are a rebel and God is not going to accept what you are doing because you are not functioning correctly. Making woman was not God's original plan because after God created Adam and before He made Eve, He said in Genesis 1:31, "Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good." God made woman because of man, so the woman was not His original idea. This is the reality.

The most contentious issue in Pastor Chris's sermon was the statement that creating the woman was not God's original idea and the woman was created only for man and he holds superiority over woman in marriage. This statement generated a torrent of attacks from Nigerians on different media outlets. Nigerians were shocked to hear these statements from the pastor who parade himself as the most modern in the country. Despite the outrage in the

media, Pastor Chris did not respond or attempt to defend himself. Even the members of the church refused to comment or answer questions regarding this issue. The conservative stance of Pastor Chris regarding the issue of gender is probably the reason why in Christ Embassy women's leadership role does not go beyond the administrative level with the exception of Pastor Anita Ebhodaghe.

Anita Ebhodaghe was the Deputy President of the church before her divorce with Pastor Chris, and she headed the Christ Embassy parishes in the United Kingdom. However, throughout my visit to different branches of Christ Embassy, I have not come across woman preaching as a pastor. The position of women in most of the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is very ambivalent. While women held administrative positions in these churches they are rarely elevated to the pastoral positions. Most of the women who rose to the level of preaching are wives of the founders of the churches, as was the case with Anita in Christ Embassy. Of course, there are some famous women pastors who headed churches in Nigeria; however, the majority of these women inherited the churches from their late husbands. Some of the prominent among them are Pastor Nkechi Anayo Iloputaife, wife of the founder of Faith Revival Ministries World Outreach Lagos, Late Bishop Harford Iloputaife, and Bishop Margret Idahosa, who was wife of the late Bishop Benson Idahosa, the founder of the Church of God Mission International. Now that Anita has disaffiliated with Christ Embassy there is no woman left in the church that serves as pastor to the extent of engaging in preaching or leading major religious activities. And Pastor Chris has not yet married again.

### *POLITICS: A DIRTY GAME?*

Politicians in Nigeria developed an alliance with religious leaders in order to get the support of their followers. Influential Pentecostal pastors are in the forefront of this alliance and they engage in the practice of legitimising the regimes of their clients through prophecies and prayers. Ebenezer Obadare

(2006) called the circle of these Pentecostal pastors a “theocratic class.” Another goal of such partnership, according to Obadare (2006:671), is “the tendency for politicians to seek spiritual power, and for spiritual leaders to develop substantial material power.” Even though Pastor Chris led one of the largest churches in the country, he does not openly participate in the circle of the theocratic class, as is the case with Enoch Adeboye, Chris Okotie or David Oyedepo. Christ Embassy’s stance on politics is similar to that of NASFAT, where members are permitted to participate in the political process at individual level according to their personal taste. Unlike churches such as Living Faith, Christ Embassy’s political engagement is considerably minimal. Despite this minimal engagement, Pastor Chris still gave legitimacy to some Nigerian regimes through prayers, particularly during Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan eras.

## FUND RAISING

There are three primary methods of fundraising<sup>31</sup> in Christ Embassy; they are tithes, partnership, and free will seed offering. In every Sunday service

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31 Christ Embassy members and leadership do not want to talk about money and business ventures of their church. Most of the information in this section comes from outside observers and Encomium Magazine. According to the Encomium (2014) businesses from Christ Embassy span from publishing to broadcasting, entertainment, hospitality, as well as banking. Other significant enterprises are Superscreen TV and National Standard magazine. The church also has a free-to-air channel in South Africa which produces and airs Christian movies and TV series. The satellite televisions have an average of one million subscribers across the world.

According to Encomium (2014), one of the most significant business ventures of the church is the digital printing press called GlobalPlus, located on Ikosi Road, Oregon, Lagos. The printing press makes a profit of more than 2 billion naira per annum. This is the company that publishes the Rhapsody of Reality devotional booklet using state of the art machines that churn out hundreds of thousands of copies per day. This daily devotional that is published monthly and in many languages generates a lot of money for the church and Pastor Chris and his former wife, Anita. Rhapsody of Reality now is one of the famous devotional booklets in Nigeria, and it can be seen in many places such as hotels, hospitals, offices, and even prison yards. The book is distributed to most of the African countries, Europe, Asia, North and South America.

ushers distribute envelopes for people who want to pay tithes and other fees. The payees go towards the front of the altar, kneel down, pray, and drop the envelope there. A tithe is a mandatory giving of one tenth of one's income to the church. Pentecostals view tithes as a form of transaction with the divine, for the purpose of reaping reward. Tithes, offerings, gifts to men and women of God, often cast as sowing and reaping, have become a virtual subculture within contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa. This practice resonates well with the concept of a successful ritual in African religion which is perceived as a form of gift to the gods that may be rewarded at the appropriate time (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013:80). According to the teaching of Christ Embassy as taught in the courses of foundation class, the one-tenth of income belongs to God. Therefore, it is compulsory for members to pay their tithes. Every time one gets an increase in one's income, one tenth must be set aside to be given as tithe. However, the church does not enforce the payment with any disciplinary measure, but members are warned that refusal to pay incurred opening their doors to the Devourer (Satan), who is going to wreck their finances. Pastor Chris, in one of his preaching broadcasts during the Sunday worship service,

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When Rhapsody was first published in 2005, it cost 300 naira, but due to mass printing the price is down to 150 naira. Members are encouraged to buy it and other products of the church in bulk and distribute them freely to friends and family members and organisations.

Another vital enterprise is LoveWorld Records Limited which was incorporated in 2008, as a private limited liability company to carry on with the business of music, entertainment and gospel merchandise. It is credited with producing many artists, who are mainly members of the church. It is the only label in Nigeria that focuses primarily on publishing, producing, marketing, and distributing gospel music and the promotion of artists. Their music videos and CDs are in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, South Africa, and Ghana. The studio holds the franchise of record labels of Believers Love World Incorporated (Encomium 2014). However, due to the sensitivity of the issue of money in the church, information regarding how the businesses are run, decision making processes, sharing of profit, and ownership of the businesses in a legal sense all remain secret. The church does not share this information with outsiders.

preached on the dangerous consequences of refusal of payment of tithe. He stated:

The Devourer comes in so many ways; he comes in like a thief, or sometimes you keep your money and the exchange rate goes up, or you saved money in a bank, and the interest rate goes up, you are losing. But when God kicked the Devourer out [through payment of tithe] you keep on progressing, you will be full of blessing. Let me tell you a story (because of paying tithes) I never suffered. I only have one story in my life; it is like this continually. I never been poor and I do not know what it is to be poor. I could not be poor. (26.8.2016)

Pastor Chris here gives an example of the benefit of paying tithes. He attributed his prosperity to the tithes that he had been paying to his church before he established Christ Embassy. However, there is a problem with paying tithes, which might cause a contradiction in the teaching of the church. This is because the tithes were part of the law of the Old Testament and Christ Embassy is vehemently de-emphasising Jewish practices of the Old Testament period. Since Pastor Chris needs the money that comes from the payment of tithes, he attempted to resolve the contradiction that tithes posed to his teaching. Pastor Chris solves this problem by initiating new theology which proposed that “practices in the Old Testament performed by men of faith such as Abraham, Jacob and Isaac, who came before the Jewish law, apply to the Christians. Men of faith in the Old Testament and Christians are linked by the principle of faith, not law. Since tithe was first practiced by Abraham who was the original man of faith; therefore, tithe is compulsory in the present dispensation of faith and grace” (26.8.2016). By this argument, Pastor Chris reduces the dissonance that arises through his rejection of Jewish practices that may affect the church emphasis on tithe giving and thereby institutes it as one of the primary sources of funds for Christ Embassy.

‘Partnership in Christ Embassy’ is a pledge that a member could make to be paying a certain amount of money monthly for sponsoring church programmes, such as the publication of Rhapsody of Reality, upkeep or

construction of church buildings, TV and radio productions and broadcasting, as well as a host of other activities of the church that demand regular financing. A member can name the programme that he/she wants to sponsor and continue to pay consistently without failing. 'First fruit' offering is also a percentage that one can remove from extra money apart from regular earnings such as salary. First fruit differs from tithes because it is not regular; it depends on the money one obtained through sources such as a bonus from work, inheritance, or gift. The purpose of first fruit is blessing the rest of the money and showing gratitude to God.

A 'seed offering' is money given to the church by the members according to the dictate of their free will. The teacher of the foundation class told me that a seed offering is almost as important as paying tithes. According to the teaching of the church, the term 'seed' is a metaphor used to indicate that giving money to the church is like sowing a seed of any kind in the ground. Just like the seed grows to become a crop or giant tree, the money given to God will come back in bigger or multiple folds. Seeds could also be sown 'on the pastors of the church,' particularly Pastor Chris. Sowing seed on the pastors means giving money as a gift to the pastor personally instead of donating to the church as an institution. This practice is highly encouraged especially during the meeting of small groups such as cells. During one of the meetings in the Zenith cell the leader told us that one day he gave 200 thousand naira as a seed to the senior pastor of the church. And within two weeks God gave him twice that amount. When the members of the cell were organising an outreach in the meeting in which I participated, the leader advised that they should be contributing money, and when it reached a substantial amount, they should send it as a seed to Pastor Chris so that God may bless the cell. Another function of seed offering is to solve protracted problems such as loss of fortune or sickness. During my lesson, the teacher stated, "If you are facing any problem in life, pray and pay a seed to God, that problem will automatically

vanish” (2.3.2014). He told me the following story about one member of his cell:

A brother has a shop in the market, but his business was not doing well for a couple of months. He witnessed his customers gradually dwindling and move to his competitors. He told me that he prayed fervently but still customers were not showing up. He asked me what to do about the situation. I said that the solution to his problem was seed sowing. He complied and paid a good amount of money to the church as a seed for his shrinking business. But for some days, there was no improvement. He called me and informed me; I told him to have faith in God and believe in what our man of God taught us. Suddenly I received a call from him telling me that one old customer came and bought goods worth 500 thousand naira from him. I said that this is only the beginning. (2.3.2014)

Seed sowing is tacitly projected as an investment that people can make so as to incur a significant profit. The stories and testimonies of people who invested and got a reward for what they had invested serve as one of the potent motivational and inspirational factors in seed sowing. The story of Bulus Michael would show the power of motivation in the investment nature of seed planting. His story goes as follows:

Some years back, I had a successful transport business with many trucks. Then suddenly events began to turn upside down, and I found myself mired in debt until I became completely bankrupt. I had about ten trucks, but now all of them have gone. In fact, I owed banks a lot of money, and the interest is increasing day by day. One day my friend involved me to become a middle man in a multi-million naira trucks transaction. After the completion of the deal, I got a commission of about 500 thousand naira (2500 euro). I decided to give the entire money to my church as a seed offering for my bankruptcy. I believed that God will look at my sacrifice to remedy my difficult financial situation.

From my discussion with this interlocutor, I found that he was apparently not interested in donating for the purpose of promoting the gospel. He was driven by the investment nature of seed offering. Since the money that

he earned was not enough to solve his financial predicament, he decided to invest the money in the church so that God will reward him with enough to solve his insolvent situation. It can be argued that sowing seed in a desperate situation is sending a strong statement of faith to God. The believer is demonstrating to God the power of his/her faith through the act of tremendous sacrifice and self-denial that might attract God's attention and compel him to intervene in the life of the believer. In another sense seed offering is a distress call to God that is useful in finding supernatural means of solving financial problems. This is one of the reasons many members of Christ Embassy resort to seed offering in times of financial difficulties. However, Michael has not yet reaped the fruit of his seed offering, he is still waiting, believing that it will come at any moment.

#### HEAVEN CELL: THE PRACTICE OF SACRED INVESTMENT

The Heaven cell --also called Kingdom Finance -- is one of the important cells in Christ Embassy. The cell is created for the sole purpose of financing the church activities and sowing seed on the life of the pastors, particularly Pastor Chris. The Heaven cell is formed in each branch of Christ Embassy to spearhead the financial donations in the church, and they are major partners with the Rhapsody of Reality and Loveworld Satellite television channels. Heaven cell members are selected from the rich people in the church. The leader of the cell is called a governor, and he/she is selected based on financial clout. All the governors of branches/parishes are under the leadership of the zonal governor, and all the zonal governors are under the authority of the regional governor. The overall leader of the Heaven Cell is called President of Heaven, and he/she governs from the international headquarters of the church in Lagos. The governor is expected to attract new members to his/her cell and train them about loyalty and how to give money freely to the church and man of God Pastor Chris without feeling anxiety.

After the first appointment of the governor of the branch, the following year the zonal office has to evaluate the performance of governor and decide whether he/she deserves to continue. The Governor must keep a record of all his/her activities and submit it to the zone for evaluation. The governor's performance is evaluated based on achievements in financial donation to the church and new members recruited and trained. If the zonal governor is satisfied with the achievements of the governor, then he/she will be allowed to continue otherwise being disqualified and new governor selected. The zonal governor is also appraised by the regional leader and regional leader by the President of Heaven. This evaluation practice boosts high performances and commitment by all the Heaven members, thereby ensuring a steady flow of cash into the coffer of the church and bank account of the pastors.

I attended the conference of the Zonal Heaven cell in Abuja on 8 October 2014, which was led by the President of Heaven. The meeting, which is also called training, was about teaching members about kingdom finance or the process of acquiring wealth through the application of principles prepared by Pastor Chris. In his address to the group of governors of various branches and members of the cell, the President said that in the ranking of the church, the governor is equivalent to the pastor. He further remarked:

The significance of heaven lies in the fact that they engage in a very difficult task. Among all the spiritual activities, giving big money to God is one of the most challenging. Satan will keep on trying to dissuade you from giving and put a lot of negative thought in your mind before you give. That is why we are training you to fight Satan. You are the chosen ones in the church, selected to move the kingdom of God forward with your money. But I want to remind you whatever you give today God will multiply it to you in three weeks. (10.8.2014)

Here the governor was motivating them to give more than the other members because they have higher responsibility. He also reminded them of their financial and social status by saying:

Many people look at the appearance. That is the reason why we [members of Heaven Cell] dress well in the church. We live in good houses, drive expensive cars and fly in first class. Jesus said, “Seek the kingdom of God first and every other thing shall be added unto you”. It is because we apply the principles of the kingdom that God blesses us. As far back as the year 2000, I have been receiving gifts of a brand new Mercedes-Benz and other expensive cars. (10.8.2014)

His speech is replete with references to the expensive lifestyle he is living and a huge amount of money he is donating to the church. He also emphasised to the governors of other branches the importance of training their members and ensuring strict loyalty and discipline in their circle. He reminded them about the importance of loyalty and obedience to the leader, and gave the example of some members who bought for him mobile phone recharge card of 10,000 naira by mere telling them to help him buy 500 naira one.

On the principle of attracting money, he affirmed that the first step is for members to remember that “poverty is an illegal in Heaven Cell” (10.8.2014).<sup>32</sup> Thus, members should observe the principle of violent and resolute rejection of poverty with all their mental resources. According to this principle, poverty is an illegal transaction with the body. Satan would send a negative thought to a believer about lack and poverty. The moment one holds on to the negative thought and accepts it as his or her own, the transaction is concluded and the grinding wheel of penury would begin to tear the life of the believer apart. Based on this principle, the body is a temple of God, a medium through which believers worship God; therefore, it is not proper to allow the

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32 Regarding the Pentecostal drive for prosperity, Paul Gifford’s (2004) compelling research on Pentecostals in Ghana shows the importance of material reward in Pentecostal religiosity. After deep, immersive field research in Ghana, Gifford provides a rich analysis of Pentecostal Christianity in his book *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*. Gifford maintains that the new churches that are flourishing in Ghana are scarcely identical with each other despite the sharing of basic doctrines. Gifford further asserts that while many historical churches such as Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist emphasize salvation in the afterlife, for Pentecostals wealth and success in the here and now.

body to be wrecked by poverty and sickness. The governor narrated the story of his fight with an illness as an example or template of how one could apply the same method to fight poverty. He began the story as follows:

The last time I took drugs or visited hospital was in 1999. But that does not mean that sickness would not attack the body, it will, but I do not accept it. A few months back, I was taking a bath in my bathroom when I felt a sharp pain in my back, and suddenly I fell to the ground. I had to crawl to my bedroom. The next day I still could not walk and remained on the bed. I decided to fast and speak in tongues from 8pm to 12pm to cast out the sickness. When I began to speak in tongues at 8pm, I felt I did not want to stop. I kept on doing it; my body was shivering and shaking, but I continued. I did not stop till 9am in the morning. The pain continued, but I never gave in to the devil. I was in that condition for three days. I kept on speaking in tongues, telling the sickness to go. By Saturday, it began to relax. On Sunday, I went to the church and conducted the service. From that day, the sickness vanished. That is how you conquer poverty and sickness, do not accept them, become implacable in spirit and tell them to go in Jesus' name. I have three children 17, 14, and 10 years old, but none of them has ever seen a doctor because every morning I make them utter and affirm words to reject poverty and sickness. (10.8.2014)

On the final day of the meeting, the president emphasised the need for discipline in the cell and avoidance of quibbles among the members. Finally, he stated, "God commanded me to tell you that within two months from now some of you will get between 10 and 50 million naira [30,000 to 50,000 euro]" (10.08.2014). He reached the climax of his talk with the following statement:

I command you to collect a small sheet of paper from the ushers to write the amount you are going to sow in the life of our man of God Pastor Chris. The amount should be between 500 thousand to 1.5 million naira (1000 to 5000 euro). I will collect these papers and hand them over to Pastor Chris personally. But in order not to put you in stress, you are allowed to pay the amount in instalments within two months. You can give the instalment payment to your governor and

each amount you give to the governor you should write the amount and send it to this email address projected on the screen (10.8.2014).<sup>33</sup>

Immediately a heavy music was started, and everybody was singing with high emotion (“We worship your name”) as they were writing the seed money to Pastor Chris. After about ten minutes of singing and dancing the pastor said, “You should remember that these funds you have sown on our man of God, you gave it to God and within three weeks it will come back to you in multiple folds”.<sup>34</sup>

When the president said that God has told him that he would bless certain people with a huge amount of money, he hinted that God gives only to those who are giving to him. And he ended the programme with the saying that the seed sowing on Pastor Chris is giving to God. Thus, the last incident is

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<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact that people are trooping to Pentecostal churches, still there are people who silently leave such churches for various reasons. One of my interlocutors who is working in Abuja told me that he has met several people who left Christ Embassy and other Pentecostal Churches and moved to their former mission churches due to many reasons including what they perceived as financial exploitation. These people felt overburdened by persistent financial demand from the church. Even though historical churches do not employ the system of tithes, other forms of financial demand are as numerous as among Pentecostals such as Christ Embassy.

<sup>34</sup> Christ Embassy has been involved in many financial scandals related to donations. The first major allegation involving Christ Embassy was in 2002 when a N9 million Naira fraud at Sheraton Hotels and Towers, Ikeja, Lagos, involving Lawrence Agada, a staff person of the hotel who is also a member of Christ Embassy Church. Agada told the police after he was arrested that he used a substantial part of the stolen money to purchase a generator and some chairs which he donated to the church, and also to sponsor some programmes of the church. In 2003, another member of the Christ Embassy called Gbenga Kehinde was also involved in a financial crime. Kehinde, then an assistant manager in Eko International Bank branch in Lagos, allegedly defrauded his bank to the tune of about N40 million. A quarter of the money he allegedly stole from the bank was reported to have been donated to the church. Six years after, in 2009, another member of the church was arrested by the EFCC for internet fraud to the tune of about \$96,607. Okoro Osagie, a.k.a. Jerry Finger, the internet fraudster, was alleged to have also given a large percentage of the fraud to Christ Embassy Church. In spite of the linkage of the dirty deals to his church, Oyakhilome has never been prosecuted in court. (Semaris 2012: 1)

something like a lottery. His early statement that God has promised to select some people among the attendants to lavish them with a largess of up to 50 million naira is indirectly tied to the soft coercion of paying 1.5 million to Pastor Chris. Indirectly the president is trying to motivate people to sow seed on Pastor Chris so that they could be among the receivers of God's blessing that run up to 50 million naira. The heavy, emotional music played while people were writing their seed amount is probably meant to soften the anxiety or second thought as people are asked to part with a substantial sum of money.

I have met few people who rejected the prosperity gospel after failure to achieve a breakthrough. Silas Okwonko, a 50-year-old male vehicle spare parts business man, related to me his view as follow:

I think the entire idea of prosperity gospel is spurious. I spent 15 years in Christ Embassy believing in such a teaching but nothing happened to me as far as riches are concerned. I prayed daily, I spoke in tongues and violently rejected poverty in both my thought and my speech and invested a huge amount of money as seed sowing for years but, my finances were steadily spiraling downward. Anytime I asked the Pastor he would tell me that my faith is not strong enough that I should keep on developing my faith and I would soon have a breakthrough but nothing happened. At the end of the day I realised that it is even wrong to seek riches through religion. I come to understand that prosperity teaching would make one to forget about the real essence of Christianity, which is salvation. So, I quietly stopped attending Christ Embassy and moved to Baptist Church. (Interview, 12.03.2014)

Writers such as Ojo (2006) and Bonsu and Belk (2010:1) view this kind of practice as economic imperialism that promotes materialism and emasculates economic conditions of members. Linda van Kamp (2010) understands this kind of extreme financial sacrifice in Pentecostal churches as an expression of economic individualism and individual autonomy from the family ties promoted by the church and a break from the old order. (See also Meyer 1989.) However, the new order or life promised by the church usually remained in the realm of dream, vision and unfulfilled aspiration. I noticed that

often there is no concrete economic improvement in the lives of the members despite the enormous financial sacrifice they made to the church. Many individuals end up blaming themselves and their faith when they failed to experience economic breakthrough promised by the pastors. The endless donation and seed sowing often becomes a means of enriching the pastors and crippling the finances of the members.<sup>35</sup> Gifford (2015) cites similar examples to critique some scholars who see close correlation between Pentecostalism and development. He argues that the enchanted religious imagination among the Pentecostals impedes development by encouraging fear and mistrust, and diminishing human responsibility and agency. Gifford is of the view that the prosperity gospel of ‘covenant wealth from tithes and offerings’ is the antithesis of Weber’s Protestant ethic, and usually ends up serving the interest of the pastor and magnifying his personality.

#### SACRED TEMPORALITY: THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TIME IN CHRIST EMBASSY

After an extended period of praise and worship song in Christ Embassy, the senior pastor, who was already on stage, remarked, “You should remember that 2015 is the year of triumph, therefore, endeavour to emerge triumphant in all your activities this year. God has already permeated the spirit of triumph in this period, it is in the atmosphere, all you need to do is to focus your attention and capture it” (27.09.2015).

This happened during the last segment of my fieldwork in Abuja between September and October 2015. This short remark by the pastor is a routine in Christ Embassy to remind the members about the intention of God

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<sup>35</sup>There is no transparency on where the money is going and how it is being spent. Members of Christ Embassy are not allowed to discuss issues of money with outsiders. However, amidst this secrecy Pastor Christ has emerged as one of the richest pastors in Nigeria.

for them in that particular year and month. This is because time in Christ Embassy is more than a cognitive formula for managing and reckoning mundane human activities. Postill (2002:1) states that calendars regulate (directly and indirectly) the daily lives of people. However, the calendar in Christ Embassy creates rhythms of aspirations that change monthly and annually. It can be argued that Christ Embassy adds spiritual meaning to Gregorian calendar. Lesnard (2014:46) quoted Hubert as saying:

The institution of the calendar is intended solely, and probably not even primarily, to measure time as quantity. It does not derive from the idea of a purely quantitative time, but rather the idea of qualitative [time] that is made of discontinuous and heterogeneous parts and that invariably turns on itself. Calendars crystallize and stabilize collective rhythm and activities. Unit of time is units of measurement but of a rhythm where oscillation between alternatives periodically leads back to the similar.

In a similar vein, the spiritual significance of the calendar in Christ Embassy creates rhythms of mental activities that oscillate and change with each unit of time. In another sense, units of time such as year and month have been marked and invested with a spiritual purpose that regulates mental and physical activities of the members. There is a belief in Christ Embassy that the Holy Spirit reveals to Pastor Chris the intention and plan of God toward his people in the beginning of each year. They also believe that the Holy Spirit reveals to Pastor Chris numerous blessings he decided to shower on believers. For instance, on 31 December 2013, during the crossover service which was broadcast live in all branches of Christ Embassy worldwide, Pastor Chris declared the year 2014 as the year of 'greatness.' During the declaration, Pastor Chris stated the following while people were in a state of elation, shouting and jumping in the church.

I have this message for you from God. This day which begins this year, and therefore, this year 2014, the Lord will begin to magnify you in the sight of others, and they will look at you and wonder, who are these people? They will say, these are they that are filled with the Holy

Ghost, these are they that are working in the light of God, and manifesting the victory of Christ...these are the chosen generation the royal priesthood, the peculiar people. Finally, God has said 2014 is the year of 'greatness.'

Then the shouting increased tremendously and immediately the pastor declared the spiritual theme of the year. The year of greatness required believers to change their mindset and think big in whatever they do. They should aim for great things and do great things and hold the mental picture of great dreams. In church services throughout 2014, pastors encourage members to repeat the words 'I am great' silently in their heart throughout the year and see greatness in all the people they encounter. This is because it was the intention of God to make people achieve great things in 2014. Furthermore, in the first Sunday of each month during the celebration of the Holy Communion, Pastor Chris reveals what he claims to be a message from the Holy Spirit regarding the spiritual theme of the month. Pastor Chris claims that God designates each month with a particular priority that he wants believers to focus their attention on, similar to the New Year. Below are the complete spiritual designations of the months of 2014 as declared by Pastor Chris during the Holy Communion services.

January: month of greatness

February: month of consolation

March: month of placement

April: month of laughter

May: month of open doors

June: month of prayers

July: month of visions

August: month of grace

September: more grace

October: month of supernatural help

November: month of strengthening

December: month of thanks giving

In each worship service of the church, pastors remind the congregation about the intention of God for that particular month and year. On 1 December 2013, during my first visit to Christ Embassy, I saw a big screen above the altar of the church, and it contained the caption ‘December Month of Special Grace.’ Before the pastor commenced preaching, he stated, “Remember that this is the month of special grace. Take this extraordinary opportunity provided by the Holy Spirit. I urge you to immerse yourselves in special grace, hold it, run with it, and live with it throughout the month”. This practice creates a peculiar kind of rhythm in the lives of the members. Each year and each month people struggle to materialise a different set of purposes which they believed permeate the atmosphere of that particular period.

The perception of time in Christ Embassy integrates the spiritual and material worlds. This view diverges from the concept of time proposed by Durkheim as developed through his analysis of Aboriginal societies. Lesnard (2014:45) quoted Durkheim suggesting that “time in these societies is a religious symbol that bifurcates sacred from profane, forming two homogeneous, alternating periods that punctuate the aboriginal calendar”. Rather than split sacred and profane, time in Christ Embassy unites the two realms of existence, in the sense that people are required to perceive and work toward achieving spiritual purposes encapsulated in time in all their secular activities. Furthermore, members of Christ Embassy perceive time as a sacred entity that flows with a different spiritual rhythm, which provides them with particular goals that reorient their activities in order to materialise the substance of each rhythm in their lives. One of my interlocutors told me his experience as follows:

In April 2013, which is the month of laughter, I received healing from my chronic depression. Immediately our man of God declared the month of laughter I began to laugh. I practiced laughter, and I laugh at every funny incident and joke. I also learned how to make people laugh. I focus my mind on things and situation that give me laughter.

As a result, many good things happened to me, and the greatest of all my depression disappeared altogether. (13.6.2014)

This person has claimed to achieve what God intended and invested in the month of April. Through a concerted effort, he reaped the fruit of the month and recovered from severe depression that defied conventional therapy. Time in Christ Embassy is perceived to be a resource but not in the sense of its optimum utilization as captured in the famous saying—time is money-- but in the ontological sense. These resources are believed to be inherently embedded in the ontology of time that can be obtained with mental re-programming.

#### TIME OF DIVINE ENCOUNTER: SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICE AND HOLY COMMUNION SERVICES

“I am from a place where I had an intimate meeting with my Lord.”

These are the words of my acquaintance Constance, a 28 year old accountant employed by a company in Abuja. It was a Sunday afternoon when I accompanied a friend of mine to Court Road when I came across Constance. Constance is a member of Christ Embassy, and she referred to Sunday worship service as “meeting with my Lord” when I asked her where she was coming from. Sunday worship service serves different functions in the lives of the members of the church. It is a time of an intimate encounter with God through prayer and praise and worship songs as well as study of scriptures. Sunday worship also provides members with the opportunity for learning through listening to preaching in the church. In Abuja, there are similar services in the evening of Wednesday and Friday, but Sunday service remains the primary congregation of the church.

In most of the branches in Abuja, the service begins at 9am and ends at noon, but in some branches where the church buildings are not large enough to

contain the crowd, the service is split into two. The first runs from 7am to 9am and the other from 9.15am to noon. Some people go to church very early; they come one hour before the service and pray in tongues fervently. The Sunday service begins with an opening prayer and then continues with praise and worship songs that last for about 30 minutes. Next is the reading of the Rhapsody of Reality. One of the junior pastors reads the Rhapsody of the day and asks the congregation to recite the prayer with him/her. This is followed by a broadcast of the Atmosphere of Miracle programme or a short sermon by Pastor Chris. Then another junior pastor comes on stage to make announcements, usually about upcoming events such as seminars, conferences, and meetings. The second session of worship songs commences and at the same time people who are supposed to pay their tithes go to the front to drop the envelope that contains the money. They usually kneel down and pray at the altar before they drop the money. After singing about three songs, the pastor comes on stage together with the person who carries his tablet computer. The pastor would lead the next songs for about 15 minutes, then he stops and preaches for about 40 minutes. After the preaching, he welcomes the newcomers and asks them to follow the ushers who take them to the Head of Department for the Foundation School. There is also a session for giving testimony where some members come on stage to testify about a miracle or blessing they claimed to have received from God.<sup>36</sup> Then the choir comes to the

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36 The practice of testimony is one of the most important religious activities of Christ Embassy. Testimony is an account given by members of the congregation to portray the intervention of God in their lives. There is special session close to the end of the service where people are called to come forward and recount their testimonies. A Member who is interested in giving the testimony would inform the pastor before the service begins and submit his/her name. The stories usually involve elements of surprise, inexplicable incidents that required supernatural explanation and other forms of extraordinary events. Testimonies bring the reality of the supernatural to the congregation and validate the existence of the supernatural and illustrate how it interacts with the material. Pluss (1988:55) writes, "Testimony is understood as a discourse in which means of symbolic tradition fuses event and meaning. This symbolic tradition mediates a relation between meaning and event, and thus

stage again for the final songs. The service ends with sharing the grace prayer which is uttered as follows: *May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and ever more. Amen.*

The Holy Communion<sup>37</sup> (also called Eucharist or Lord's Supper) is a ritual practice to celebrate and re-enact the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus instituted this practice when he told his disciples to eat the broken bread and drink the wine he gave them in his memory. He referred to the bread as his body and wine as his blood. During the Holy Communion celebration, Christ Embassy celebrates and remembers the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. I attended one of the Holy Communion services of Christ Embassy. Like all the major events and rituals of Christ Embassy, the Holy Communion is celebrated worldwide with Pastor Chris leading the event in the church headquarters in Lagos. All branches of Christ Embassy transmit the service via live streaming in their virtual church service. Members also start fasting a night before the day of the communion and break the fast with eating of the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

After almost two hours of devotional worship songs Pastor Chris appeared and joined the singing. Then he began to preach for nearly an hour

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manifests an interpretation. Testimony is a mediator between secular and the sacred, between the meaning of life and the events that shape it." The worldview of the church is used as an instrument for assigning meaning unto the significant life experience that is interpreted as testimony. As highlighted by Pluss, testimonies provide vivid imageries of how supernatural forces encounter the ordinary in the lives of believers. Predominant numbers of testimonies involve supernatural intervention in the area of healing and financial reward. Torr (2013: 206) describes testimonies as "accounts of powerful Peacock (1984:41) states that "the testimony brings the private experience to the public rite a transition crucial for those who seek to be healed by faith. To be healed, one must 'claim' it. Telling a story assists individuals to engage in sense-making about their experiences, to order events in a coherent fashion, relate an event to other events and attribute causality" (Singleton 2001:121-122).

37 See Caroline W. Bynum (2012) where she argues that the most important material manifestation of the holy in the western European Middle Ages was the Eucharist.

about the importance of worship and identity of Jesus Christ. He recited many verses that reaffirmed the divine nature of Christ. He also cited many Old Testament verses that talked about the coming Messiah. When the time of the communion came, he went to the backstage and re-appeared in priestly attire similar to a Roman Catholic liturgical vestment with two crosses on the breast. When he took the bread, he said that this communion can be taken only by born again people. If anyone knows that he or she is not born again, he or she should immediately drop the bread. He continues that the reason he said this is that Holy Communion is reaffirmation of one's acceptance of faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. He commanded all the people who joined the service to repeat the prayer he recited before they ate the bread. After eating and drinking of bread and wine, he announced the end of the Holy Communion. He finished the service with the announcement of the revelation he claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit about the promises of God in the coming period and the spiritual theme of the month. According to my interlocutor, eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Holy Communion connects people with the death of Christ. He said when disciples of Jesus broke and ate the bread and drank the wine, they represent all humanity and fulfilled the significance of Jesus' atonement death. However, I did not take the Eucharist and no one seemed to bother.

### MIRACULOUS HEALING PERFORMANCE

Miraculous healing plays a crucial role in Christ Embassy. A substantial segment of the church's theology is related to the issue of miraculous healing. According to Pastor Chris, a miracle is an inexplicable intervention by a supernatural power in the natural affairs of man. A miracle is something beyond the ordinary course of events. Usually, miracles are current events or happenings because they produce happy and fulfilling results.

Miracle interrupts the normal sequence of events or regular habits of man (Daily Champion 2005:1).

One of the most distinctive features of Christ Embassy is the performances of miraculous healing. Pastor Chris built his pastoral career as a miracle worker. Many people are attracted to Christ Embassy in search of a miracle. And many claimed to have been healed by Pastor Chris. Scholars interpret charismatic Pentecostal healing in different ways. Jörg Stolz (2011:4) summarizes how some anthropologists, such as Dow (1986), Csordas (1988, 2002), Geertz (1993), and Laurent (2001), interpret alternative healing, which includes Pentecostal miracle performances. According to Stolz, these anthropologists see alternative healing as a means of curing the 'selves' through 'symbolic manipulation'. This means illness in the framework of a given symbol system. Through some forms of rituals, the healers convince patients to change the meaning of their illness. As a result, meaningless pain is metamorphosed into a manageable burden. The ritual performances also empowered the patients and helped them feel capable of overcoming their malady. The patients may further become integrated into the religious groups of the healer, a process that might equip them with social capital. These procedures may help the patients feel relieved or eliminate their sickness. Furthermore, Stolz (2011:1) argued that some 'social techniques' (e.g., suggestion, rhythm, music), context-factors (e.g., audience size and beliefs) and causal mechanisms (e.g., probability-, latency- and selection-effects) are combined in an ingenious way to produce miracles and healings. In this section, both these two approaches to the understanding of Pentecostal miracle healing will be applied in analysis of the healing performances of Christ Embassy.

There are three ways through which Pastor Chris performs healing miracles. Christ Embassy operates a healing programme called Healing School Ministry. The school events are held in Lagos, Johannesburg, Charlotte, Essex, and Toronto. If a believer has a sickness that defies conventional medicine,

he/she can apply and register online to attend the Healing School. The programme runs for two weeks and within this period, the patients are drilled on the Christ Embassy's principles of faith healing. On the final day of the exercise, a church service is organised where the miracle seekers line up in the front of the church carrying a placard that described their health condition. Then Pastor Chris appears and begins to blow breath in their faces, and immediately they fall to the ground. The blast of breath signifies life given breath of God. Many report healing during the last sessions. Pastor Chris (2001:8) claims that through the Healing School “blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dumb speak, and all manner of sicknesses, diseases and infirmities are destroyed”. Pastor Chris claims to heal all types of illness, including HIV and Aids. This claim of miraculous healing of HIV/Aids causes lot of uproars in the media. Many people criticized the pastor and urge him to desist from this claim. Some call for government intervention on miracle workers who claimed to heal HIV.

Each Healing School service is recorded and broadcast in the satellite television programme of the church title *Atmosphere of Miracle*.<sup>38</sup> In the programme, the host interviews healing seekers before they enroll in the Healing School. He asks them to describe the illness that makes them seek miracle healing from Pastor Chris. The clip of the programme shows the same person during the healing service. The next interview is after the person received healing and offering thanks to Pastor Chris for receiving miraculous healing through him. This programme is played during Sunday worship in Christ Embassy in all the branches of the church worldwide. The worshipers

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38 The Healing School service is also broadcast on various media of Christ Embassy under different titles such as 'Enter the Healing School with Pastor Chris', 'Healing to the Nations' and 'Healing School Live'. There is also highly interactive and user-friendly Healing School website, where one can access the activities of healing school and testimonies of people who received healing at any time. The website contains videos of several miracles and podcasts with the title the 'Divine Health Realities'.

yell and clap to Pastor Chris when the miracle seekers yell and jump to express gratitude for the healing.

Another important miracle healing performance of Christ Embassy occurs during the Night of Bliss crusade. Night of Bliss is an annual spectacular religious service organised by the church. It is different from normal or regular church service because it is a public spectacle event that is attended by thousands of people. People from all over the country, both members and non-members of Christ Embassy, attend the Night of Bliss crusade. Night of Bliss consists of three episodes of hyper-emotionally charged religious performances. These are worship songs performances by the crowd, followed by fiery preaching and miracle healing by Pastor Chris. The event is rotated between cities in different countries. I have met many members in Abuja who attended Night of Bliss in different cities at different times. One of my interlocutors related to me his experience of miracle healing of Pastor Chris as follows:

I am 35 years old driver with a private company in Abuja. I believe in the miraculous power of Jesus because I have seen its concrete manifestation. My mother was very sick two years ago. She was bedridden with diabetes. When I heard that the man of God Pastor Chris was having a crusade at the national stadium, I took her to the event. Toward the end of the programme man of God asked all the sick people to come forward. I took her the front, and the man of God prayed for their healing. My mother instantly felt relieved. From that day the illness drastically reduced. Even the level of sugar in her blood became almost normal. (17.1.2014)

It is common to see people throwing away their wheelchairs and crutches during Pastor Chris' miracle performances. Many people claimed that Jesus healed them through Pastor Chris. It can be suggested that the first step in understanding the healing practices of Pastor Chris is to look at his theological understanding of disease. It is through his theology of disease that Pastor Chris' reinterpretation of the meaning of sickness comes to light.

According to Pastor Chris, in the book of Exodus 23:25 God made a promise to the people of Old Testament that if they obey his commandments and worship him, he would not afflict them with any disease. Pastor Chris (2001:17) argues, “People of the Old Testament were given the gift of health based on certain practices of worship and obedience, but Christians receive health on the condition of faith alone”. In this viewpoint, a Christian is not supposed to be sick. If sickness attacks one, it means there is a problem with one’s faith. Pastor Chris teaches that diseases do not come from God because only good and perfect gifts come from God. God could not cripple and destroy his beloved children through sickness. But the question is, where does the disease come from? According to Pastor Chris, sickness descended into the world through the fall of man in the Garden of Eden as a consequence of deception by Satan. The fall of man caused spiritual death and severed man’s fellowship with God. Spiritual death came with its companion, which is sickness. Moreover, Pastor Chris suggests that Satan is also behind the danger of pathogenic microorganisms --such as viruses, bacteria, insects and animals-- that harm or kill human beings. He elaborates as follows:

God made all insects to suck nectar, and bacteria and viruses were not made to bring sickness to anybody. But after the fall of man, when the devil stole man's dominion, he infused them with death-- which is his life. That is the reason they harm those that are under his power till today. (2001:17)

In this theology, Satan is behind all afflictions since he engineered the downfall of Adam and Eve that precipitates the advent of disease and went ahead to genetically re-engineer some creatures and infuse them with poison that is fatal to human beings. The last sentence of Pastor Chris implies that victims of a virus attack or even snake-bites are living under the dominion of the devil. Their faith is weak. That is the reason for becoming victims of an attack by dangerous creatures.

Pastor Chris redefined the concept of disease by attributing sickness to the action of the devil. Since the devil inflicts diseases on human beings, Pastor Chris provides a teaching that empowers believers with tools of managing the devil himself. Pastor Chris proposes that the death of Jesus on the cross has vanquished the devil, who introduced sin and sickness into the world. Jesus has restored fellowship with God and people's dominion over all creatures in the world, including disease. Jesus has reinstated life, which was lost through the sin of Adam and Eve, which paved the way for incipient death. Moreover, incipient death is the cause of all kinds of disease (2001:149). Here the disease has become more manageable when the devil is tamed through faith in Christ. Equipped with these ideas it is easy for patients who participate in the healing school or miracle crusade to feel relieved from their afflictions during the healing session. This is even easier since as man of God Pastor Chris is perceived as possessing more power to handle the devil.

Moreover, the social techniques highlighted by Stolz further facilitate the healing process. The miracle performance of Christ Embassy is set in a huge gathering. Millions of people thronged in the Night of Bliss spectacle. The final process in the Healing School, during which the miracle takes place, is also organised as huge church service with a large number of participants. The huge crowd and loud music that engulf the site generate the significant affect and emotion that overwhelmed the pain experienced by the patients. During the healing session Pastor Chris repeats, "You are healed, miracle is taking place here". Patients accept these remarks and convince themselves that the miracle is taking place in their bodies. Most people who attend healing services already go with the mindset that they would receive healing from God through the medium of Pastor Chris. Christ Embassy's stance toward biomedicine is ambivalent. The church does not reject it openly but they are always reiterating that if one has faith, one does not need biomedicine. So, it is a tacit rejection. Failure of faith healing is always explained as lack of sufficient faith on the side of those receiving.

Despite the highly publicised miraculous power of Pastor Chris and voices of the people who were healed from the media of Christ Embassy, there still exist the silent voices of individuals who did not receive the miracle healing. I met Winifred Elaigwu, who recounted to me her story:

I was working as an accountant with an NGO that deals with the issues of good government, conflict, and economic empowerment. One day I woke up with a pain in my hips. Gradually the pain increased until I found it difficult to walk without help. I was taken to a clinic and admitted for two weeks, but without any improvement. I was constantly in pain, and it had become unbearable. A friend of mine told me that Pastor Chris is coming for healing crusade. I asked my aunt to take me to the crusade which was organised in a stadium. My aunt and my colleague from the NGO where I work took me to the crusade. I was brought to the front, and Pastor Chris prayed for us. He kept on telling the devil of sickness to vacate our bodies, but nothing happened to me. To cut the story short my problem became worse because I was trampled and squeezed in the huge crowd of people. (Interview, 5.1.2014, Abuja)

A friend of Winifred, Constance Enaifoge, told me that Winifred was taken to a healing home run by a traditional healer in Nasarawa State. But her condition deteriorated after some weeks and she passed away at the healing home. The church did not care to follow up on the health conditions of people who seek healing from them or even those who claimed to be healed. There are many people like Winifred, but they do not go and give testimony on the stage. Only the persons who claimed to receive healing are allowed on stage. I even met a young woman whose leg was damaged as a result of an accident, and when she was taken to the healing crusade, the officials and ushers refused to allow her going to the front. The rejection of people with visible health problems such as injury poses a question mark on the healing power of Pastor Chris.

The 'Atmosphere of Miracle' is a carefully recorded film with state-of-the-art equipment. The programme is also carefully edited to give the impression that Pastor Chris healed everybody he touches. For maximum effect

the programme is saturated with loud background music and sophisticated editing. The editing removed any instance of failure, such as the case of the lady I mentioned above. However, due to the secrecy and suspiciousness of outsiders, the technical crews of the church do not want to reveal the details of how they construct the programme. A former member of the church told me that he took his father, who had a serious injury as a result of car accident, to the healing crusade in Abuja, but the officials refused him access to the stage. The absence of such people on the programme means that those who are intended to be visible are carefully selected.

There are people who are riddled with doubt and other forms of discontent, but the church does not provide avenues for such people to articulate their disapproval. Such people express their discontent among their circles of friends and some of them leave the church if they fail to resolve their doubt or discontentment. This is what had happened to Victor Olu, a 30 year-old -employee with a telecom company in Abuja. Olu, who began to doubt the teaching of the church about sin, stated:

I became a member of Christ Embassy through influence of a colleague in my office. I enjoyed worshiping there and the people are very nice. But I found some of the teachings of the church disturbing, especially the doctrine of sin and forgiveness. Having grown up in the Anglican Church, I know that sin is one of the greatest problems of human beings. But Pastor Chris always says that sin is not a problem, that it has already been dealt with by the cross. I know even though Jesus died for our sin we must struggle against it. But Pastor Chris says no, we do not need to struggle. Since the time I was young we were taught that if we commit sin we have to ask God for forgiveness, but Pastor Chris says no, we do not need to ask for forgiveness. These kinds of teachings certainly disturbed me and whenever I asked for clarifications from the pastors, their answers are often un-convincing to me. After long time of theological dispute with my friends in the church as a result of many unscriptural practices and teachings, I decided to go back to my former Anglican church. My friends at the [Christ Embassy] church were angry with my decision, but I already made up my mind. It was a process that started long time ago and built up gradually, so I cannot go back. (Interview, 13.03.2014)

As the above example indicates, dissenting voices are not given avenue to express their view publicly in the church. Usually dissidents in Christ Embassy opted to quietly disaffiliate and move to another church. In addition, grudges, quibbles and rivalries between members, particularly office holders, also take place. These things exist but hardly are they allowed to come to the surface and destabilise the institutions of the church.

### CONCLUSION

During one of the foundation class sessions I witnessed an instructor who asked a young newcomer whether he wanted to be born again. When the young man replied in the affirmative, the instructor laid his hand on the newcomer's head and said, "Repeat this prayer after me." After the conclusion of the prayer, he said:

You are now a new creation. A again born Christian is a new creation. He or she is one who never existed or pre-existed, altogether a new man or woman, with a new kind of life and this life comes directly from God. Your past does not exist anymore. You are as pure as white paper before God. All the sins you have committed in the past has been forgiven.

This idea of 'new in Creation' which Pastor Chris justified from the Scripture is central to the church's theology and it is also behind the radical individualism in Christ Embassy. The concept of a 'new creation' comes in line with what Meyer (1998) describes as "making a complete brake with the past" in the discourse of Pentecostals in Ghana. Moreover, the self-image of modernity projected by Christ Embassy is embedded in this idea of new creation (breaking with the past) and individualism. New creation implies breaking with the perceived shackles of the traditional past that a believer left behind as well as previous limitations of the old personality. Christ Embassy

promises new life to the individual believer that is beyond the constraints of economic, cultural and political realities. There is a connection between the 'new' and the 'modern' in Christ Embassy. When a believer emerges as a 'new creation', he/she has been emancipated from the past and is ready to move into the future, which is clearly the prosperous life style of consumption promised by the neo-liberal economic imagination. The church conceived the newly born again believer as an independent, modern individual who is free from sin and disease and has full responsibility in his/her life. The flamboyant life style of Pastor Chris and his associate pastors reinforces and sustains the hope of their members in achieving the envisioned modern life they believe is their right in Christ.

However, in my observation the techniques of prayer and principles of faith and other practices encouraged by the church as the basis of realising the vision of perfect new life do not always yield results. The money that members often invest in the church as a seed offering, in order to reap in multiple fold in the future, does not necessarily improve the financial condition of believers, and the faith healing of the church, as I have shown earlier, is mostly symbolic. Some people left Christ Embassy when their expectation failed to materialise after an extended period of time and moved to another Pentecostal church. I also met some people who left Christ Embassy because they became dissatisfied with some of the teachings and practices, particularly methods of raising money. However, many people stay in the church and continue with the hope of realising the vision of the new life.

The sensational worship service and prayers of the church and the exhilarating preaching of Pastor Chris prove to be attractive to many urban youths in Abuja. Many members claim to have found truth and meaning in their lives in the church through participating in worship services and the prayers that provide immediate experience with the Holy Spirit. Like other Pentecostal churches in the country, varieties of youth programmes attract a considerable number of young people to the church. The programmes provide

the youths with social space to meet and interact in the extra-church activities that create bonding and opportunity for meeting life partners.

Members of Christ Embassy see themselves as ambassadors of Christ in this world. As ambassadors, they often say that their vision is to win souls, build them, and send them. And they also want to take the manifest presence of Jesus Christ to the people of the world with signs, wonders, and miracles via the agency of the Holy Spirit and the word of God. This drive to evangelise the world as well as the great ambition of Pastor Chris transformed Christ Embassy into a truly a global church with hundreds of international branches. The church employs modern digital media, including satellite broadcasting and the internet, to propel itself into the global arena. This confirms Afe Adogame's point (2011) that Pentecostalism is an integral part of the globalisation process, as well as a product or consequence of it. This global outreach of Christ Embassy could also be partly explained by how the church is run as an efficient business enterprise with motivational regimes that optimised productivity of the members who are part of the bureaucracy of the church. The success of Christ Embassy in achieving large scale national and international outreach and its effective use of new media certainly extend the influence of the church to the wider Nigerian public. Christ Embassy is a successful Pentecostal church but it has differentiated itself from others through some unique teachings<sup>39</sup> about fighting poverty and sickness and offering of unique programmes such as healing school and cell ministry. The influence of Christ Embassy and other successful Pentecostal churches on the Nigerian public sphere is not limited to non-Pentecostal Christians but also pertains to Muslim Communities. The next chapter will demonstrate how NASFAT responds to the domination of the public sphere by Pentecostalism in the country.

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39 Extended discussion about the unique teachings of Christ Embassy will appear in chapter six.

# 4

## NASFAT

### INTRODUCTION

In October 2013, I met the chief imam<sup>40</sup> of NASFAT Abuja central branch and after a long conversation with him, he told me that one of the pioneers of NASFAT and national chairman board of trustee, Alhaji Lateef Olasupo, is currently residing in Abuja. The chief imam connected me with Lateef Olasupo, who agreed to meet me in the evening of the next day at the Islamic centre. When I arrived at the centre in the evening, Lateef Olasupo gave me a warm reception and I noticed that he is a humble and easy going person. Alhaji told me that one of the most important reasons for the establishment of NASFAT was due to the challenges posed by Pentecostalism on Muslim communities in the south west. Alhaji continued:

In the circle of young Muslim professionals we noticed lukewarm attitude toward Islamic practices. While at the same time we have been seeing Pentecostals with aggressive energy and dynamism flourishing

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40 I got the contact of the chief imam through Mustapha Bello, the deputy national secretary of NASFAT, whom I got to know through Marloes Jansen.

throughout the country. To our most dismay we found out that many young Muslims are attracted by these Pentecostals. Many Muslims watch their activities on television, some attend their crusades and some even convert to Christianity. I and my friends we decided to launch an Islamic organisation that could revitalise Islam in the region and arrest the attraction of the young Muslims toward Pentecostalism. Within short a period, NASFAT has achieved great success. Our *Asalatu* programme [Sunday worship] has played a vital role in revitalising the spirit of Islam in the south west and other parts of the country. Many people now are experiencing spiritual rejuvenation through participating in NASFAT programmes. As a result the organisation is growing and expanding on daily basis. (Interview, 04.11.2013)

Given the words of Alhaji Olasupo, it is apparent that NASFAT has been established with the Pentecostals in mind. The activities of Pentecostals have repercussions on Muslim communities that elicited reactions which led to the rise of NASFAT and other similar groups. This is because the complex ecology of religious belonging in Nigerian urban spaces has generated mutual influences, borrowing, as well as clash and tension. This chapter argues that the pre-eminence of NASFAT among varieties of Islamic expressions hinges on its ability of consciously negotiated borrowing of the forms but not the contents of Pentecostal practices. As a result, NASFAT provides sensational religious practices and socio-economic services that respond to the emotional and social needs of urban Muslims. Where applicable the chapter will examine the influences of Pentecostals in some practices of NASFAT as well as similarities and differences in some activities between NASFAT and Christ Embassy. However, the comparison between Christ Embassy and NASFAT does not assume equal terms. This is because NASFAT, in order to avoid the loss of youths to the Pentecostals, accommodates Pentecostal forms to a much larger extent than Pentecostals adopt Islamic elements. In fact, there is a Pentecostal hegemony in the public sphere of the city of Abuja.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NASFAT

When I asked Lateef Olasupo about the origin of NASFAT<sup>41</sup> he stated that NASFAT is an acronym of Arabic phrase, Nasrul-Lahi-L- Fatihi, translated as ‘there is no help except from Allah’. He continued that in March 1995 he and seven of his colleagues decided to initiate a prayer fellowship<sup>42</sup> in his sitting room in Lagos. He said that other colleagues also became interested and joined the prayer. Gradually the number increased to the extent that his living room could not contain them. The number of those attending increased progressively over a short period. The group moved its prayer headquarters first to the old secretariat mosque of the Lagos State government, and later, due to the phenomenal increase in attendance, to the new secretariat mosque where it now meets every Sunday between 8am and noon. At a certain point, the leadership decided to expand the fellowship and the first branch of NASFAT outside Lagos was established in Offa, Kwara State. The reason for creating the Offa branch was that some of the founding members were working with the Polytechnic in Offa who had to commute to Lagos every Sunday for the prayer.

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41 Among the Yoruba Muslims in the southwest, Islamic organisations and movements have a long history. The influential Islamic groups such as Ansar-Ud-Deen Society, Nurudeen Society, and Nawaruddeen Society were established in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they arose partly in reaction to the activities and challenges of Christian missionaries.

42 Adetona (2012) also traces the origin of prayer groups in Yoruba land to the pre-colonial period, showing that modern prayer groups had their origin in many Sufi orders such as Tijjaniya and Quaddirriya. The offshoot of these orders is the Asalatu prayer group. Mainly, these groups were part of the *ratibi* mosques in Lagos and in some divisions; they all came together on Friday for special Asalatu prayers at Jumat mosques. A few of these groups operated beyond these two levels. Examples of such included the Asalatu of Jama’at-ul-Suadai, with headquarters at Kuti Mosque, Lagos. Muqaddam Adeniyi, a student of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani Awelenje Shaki, was the founder. All through the seventies and until the death of the Muqaddam, Lagos Muslims believed so much in the efficacy of prayers that were offered at this Asalatu group. The prayer used to be held between 8p, and 10pm every Friday at the Kuti Mosque. The mosque was always filled to capacity.

Due to the risk of traveling on Nigerian roads, these members were permitted to form the Offa branch. From one branch in Lagos in 1995, NASFAT by now has about 290 branches worldwide (Bello 2013:2).

However, Lateef Olasupo did not tell me about the roots of NASFAT in the Yusrullah prayer group in Ibadan. But, when I asked Mustapha Bello, the deputy national secretary of NASFAT, he told me that NASFAT founders were all members of Yusrullah before the year 1995. One of the reasons for the formation of NASFAT was the inconvenience of traveling to Ibadan every week for collective prayer. Adetona (2012) outlines this early beginning and he suggests that the desire to create a new Islamic identity among the elites and the agenda for salvation and prosperity led Alhaji Murtada Akangbe to initiate a prayer group for Muslim professionals in July 1984. The prayer was taking place in the house of sheikh Akangbe in Ibadan who at the time was working with Wema Bank in the city. This group became successful to the extent that it attracted a considerable number of people from places as far as neighbouring states such as Lagos, Ogun, and Osun. As the membership continued to grow the leadership decided to expand the branches to other cities so that people could pray at the centres close to where they live.

According to Adetona (2012), when Lagos-based members of Yusrullah formed NASFAT in 1995, the new society achieved phenomenal success beyond the expectation of the founders. In less than four years, its membership strength had surpassed one million, and it established branches beyond the South Western States of Nigeria. In Lagos alone, it has branches in all the Local Government Areas, and each of these branches also records a very high turnout, without affecting the activities of the central praying meeting at the New Secretariat Mosque. The first missionary and spiritual head of the group is Sheikh Mun'im Taiwo Tijani.



Fig. 4.1 Lagos State Secretariat Mosque one of the major worship centre of NASFAT.

Abuja zone<sup>43</sup> is one of the most important zones in the country due to its size and the calibre of its members. The zone has six branches that include the central branch in Utako in the city centre, Karu branch, Dutsen Alhaji branch, Nyanya branch, Kubwa branch and Gwagwalada branch. Based on the information I gathered from the Administrative Secretary and Alhaji Olasupo and the secretary of youth wing, NASFAT in Abuja started on 29 October 2000

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43 The new executive members are Barr. S.O.Q. Giwa (Chairman), Dr. Nasir Raji (Vice-Chairman), Alh. Ishaq Ajao (Secretary), Shakir Quadir-Adu (Asst. Sec), Kamarudeen Ogundele (Publicity Sec) and Abdurasaq Sulaiman (Empowerment Sec). Others include Alhaja Habeebat Babata-Sulaiman (Women's leader), Kazeem. D. Gbolagade (Business Sec.), Alhaja Simbiat Onize Lawal (Children Affairs), Munkaila Abdul-Raheem (Welfare), Suraju Abdulmumeen (Youth Sec.), and Akeem Aderogba (Finance Sec.), among others.

at plot 720 Panama Close, off IBB Road, at Maitama, the residence of the NASFAT Board of Trustees Chairman, Lateef Olasupo, with about seven members in attendance. Within a few months the venue was shifted to the residence of the chairman of Abuja NASFAT, Lanre Ipinmisho. The venue was relocated again to the Tofa House premises at the Central Business District. As a result of immense growth in membership, the Tofa House could not contain the worshippers and so the decision was reached to move to the National Mosque of Abuja.<sup>44</sup>The NASFAT Abuja zone was inaugurated on Saturday, 27 September 2001. The event marked the turning moment for NASFAT as Muslims from all ethnic groups trooped en masse to embrace the society.

In May 2007, NASFAT bought plot 313 in Utako District with a size measuring 7,153.02 square metres from the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA) in order to develop an Islamic Centre. NASFAT engaged some architects in the city to design the Centre. The drawings specified the mosque, an Islamic school, offices, an ablution area, a generator house, and a security post. The architectural design was submitted for approval to the Department of Development Control in October that year. Having secured the necessary approval from the Abuja Development Control, construction work on phase one, the main mosque building, commenced in 2008. The building has three floors, with gross a floor area of 4,272 square metres and a seating capacity of about 5000 worshippers. The ground floor was designed to accommodate the male congregation, the first floor for the female congregation, while the third floor is the conference hall with a capacity of 1,500 people. During the development of the mosque, construction workers

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44 Accepting NASFAT to conduct Sunday worship service in the central mosque is an indication of recognition of NASFAT in the north. In addition, northern Muslims also attend NASFAT mosques for Friday prayers in Abuja. Even though NASFAT does not attract membership from Hausa Muslim background, this has more to do with the language barrier than lack of recognition.

with high expertise were employed for the work, quality materials were used, and experienced professionals were engaged to supervise the project.



Fig. 4.2 NASFAT Islamic Centre, Utako Abuja

The Zonal Board formed a mosque completion committee that was headed by former NASFAT Chairman Tosho Y. Alabi. The committee then embarked on fundraising to commence the project. Several members of Abuja zone donated substantial amounts of money for the project. The Zonal Board also asked the committee to start collecting voluntary donations from members every week after the Asalatu prayer on Sundays for the mosque project. Since an enormous sum of money is required to build a two-storey building in Abuja, the committee sought funds from Muslim politicians in Abuja and beyond. Among the politicians that contributed significantly were the governor of Nasarawa State Umar Tanko Almakura, the governor of Osun State Rauf Aregbesola, who is an active member of NASFAT, and the former governor of Lagos Raji Fasola, who is the current Federal Minister of Power, Housing and Works. Despite their donations the mosque was not completed until 2016, when it was commissioned by the Sultan of Sokoto Muhammadu Sa'ad

Abubakar in a big ceremony. Currently, the project has engulfed one hundred and eighty million Naira (N180, 000,000).



Fig. 4.3 Interior of NASFAT Islamic Centre Mosque Utako, Abuja.

#### ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

On a warm Monday morning in early November 2013, I visited the office of administrative secretary of NASFAT. The office is located adjacent to the mosque inside the premises of the NASFAT Islamic centre. Prior to this visit I met the secretary on Sunday and asked for an audience with him. He said I should come on Monday in the morning. I entered the office, and the first room was a reception area where I saw two women working who told me that the secretary was waiting for me inside. I entered and met the secretary in his cosy and neat office. The office is well furnished with a desk, chairs, and file cabinet. I saw stack of files on his table and on top of the cabinet. The secretary told me that he runs most of the activities of the organisation under the supervision of the zonal chairman and zonal executive council. When I asked him about the objectives of NASFAT administration, he replied:

NASFAT want to create an efficient administrative system to run the organisation in such a way that it will become a model for other Muslim groups. The main reason for the efficiency of NASFAT administration is because the founders and present leadership are from professional backgrounds. There are many bankers and civil servants from executive and managerial cadres. NASFAT benefited from the knowledge, skill, and experiences of these people in building strong and efficient administrative system. We want to make NASFAT more efficient than Pentecostal churches. (Interview, 05.01.2014)

The end of the secretary's remarks indicates that NASFAT are keenly conscious of Pentecostals and their activities. This conscious awareness of Pentecostals was encapsulated in the expression of the desire to outsmart them in the game of efficiency. The secretary further indicated that since NASFAT has grown and expanded, there is need for better management coupled with dedication and hard work to make it run smoothly. He affirmed that bad management can affect the entire edifice of NASFAT and it may even affect the religious programmes which form the core of NASFAT activities. The secretary referred me to the NASFAT constitution for detail explanation on how NASFAT is organised and the distribution of powers within the organisation.

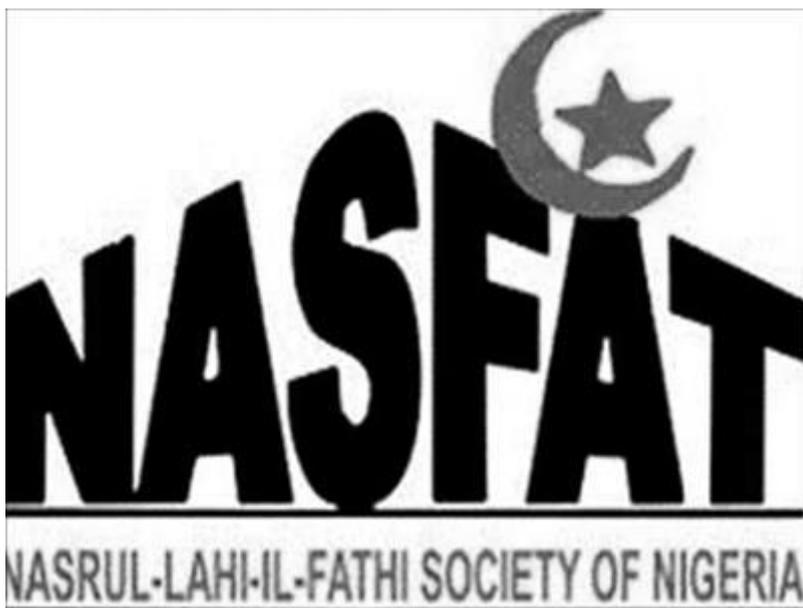


Fig. 4.4 NASFAT logo, one of the widest spread and well known religious trademark in Nigeria.

NASFAT is organised into four levels: international, national, zonal, and local branches. There are international branches in West Africa, Europe and North America. The structure of control of NASFAT includes the board of trustees, the management council, the spiritual<sup>45</sup> (religious) council, and the advisory council. NASFAT's constitution states that the Board of trustees (BOT) shall be the highest organ of the organisation. Some of the essential functions of BOT at each level of the organisation include acting as the custodian of the values, ethics, and philosophy of NASFAT (NASFAT Constitution 2007). According to the constitution, the management council of NASFAT includes the following organs: The national executive council (NEC), zonal executive council (ZEC), and the branch executive council (BEC). The advisory council of NASFAT consists of national council of elders (NCOE), and their counterparts in the zones and branches. The constitution emphasises that the mission board should work towards the realisation of the

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45 By spiritual NASFAT is referring to the religious duties.

aims and objectives of NASFAT and provide guidance on all religious matters as it relates to the organisation. The national mission board in collaboration with the education committee designs Islamic and Arabic education programmes for the general members of the organisation (NASFAT Constitution 2007).

The administrative secretary told me that active participation in NASFAT required formal membership. The organisation has laid down procedures for a membership application. The secretary said one can join religious programmes of the organisation without being a member, but one could not gain a membership card and could not enjoy certain benefits that are restricted to registered members. The benefits include special financial assistance or job opportunity where members are considered first. He continued that membership requires payment of monthly dues. He said NASFAT is open to all Muslims from all parts of the world that share the aims and objectives of the society and have agreed to be bound by the provisions of its constitution.<sup>46</sup> A prospective member is required to obtain a registration form after the payment of a prescribed fee. The applicant has to be sponsored by at least two active, registered members and must have attended at least five *asalatu* (worship service) sessions before his/her application is considered. The zonal chairman is in charge of making sure that members abide by the rules of the organisation, including membership.

It is apparent that educated professional elites such as medical doctors, lawyers, bankers, and top ranking civil servants form a significant portion of the NASFAT's membership, especially in Abuja branches. It is important to notice that NASFAT was founded by middle-class professionals who wanted to provide a forum where professionals could engage in Islamic fellowship. Musa Adeniyi (2012:326) describes a situation during the early period of NASFAT

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<sup>46</sup> International membership of the organisation is mostly restricted to the Nigerian diasporas, particularly Yoruba Muslims.

where the leadership deliberately made an attempt to attract Muslim professionals and the middle class. He stated that some members were given a target of numbers of bankers, academics, and medical doctors they were expected to attract to NASFAT. However, as the society grew and membership expanded to hundreds of thousands, it can be safely affirmed that people of lower class background constitute the majority. Most of the present leadership of the organisation is still dominated by upwardly mobile professional<sup>47</sup> class. The current national president of the organisation was an engineer and former Director General of the National Television Authority (NTA). The national education secretary of the organisation is a permanent secretary at Federal Ministry of Education. The zonal chairman of Abuja is S.O.Q. Giwa, an attorney, who runs an influential law chamber in Abuja.

Even though NASFAT has spread to most of the urban centres in Nigeria, membership in the group among the ethnic Hausa population is minimal. This lack of acceptability may be informed by different religious cultures between Yoruba and Hausa Muslims. Yoruba Muslims developed denomination-like organisations (such as Ansar-Ud-Deen, Nurudeen, and Nawaruddeen) that were formed in response to the Christian missionaries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many Yoruba Muslims identified with one of these groups, worship in their mosques, and participate in their social programmes. However, these organisations are non-sectarian and non-ideological in nature. NASFAT followed the example of these older Islamic groups but added some elements to respond to Pentecostalism. Lack of development of such denomination-like religious organisations among Hausa Muslims in the north, coupled with

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47 According to Mustapha Bello, NASFAT membership is open to all Muslim families, with the core of present membership comprising young professionals: engineers, doctors, lawyers, bankers, accountants, architects, academicians, educators, Islamic scholars, civil servants, Journalists, company directors, business executives, computer experts, members of police and armed forces, members of the judiciary, politicians, state commissioners, legislators, traders, artisans, and students.

linguistic and cultural barriers, restrict Hausa membership in Yoruba Muslims organisations, including NASFAT.

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF NASFAT

During the congregational services members are regularly reminded about the main aims and objectives of NASFAT. One of the most important goals, which NASFAT always emphasise, particularly during interviews with researchers like myself as well as in the media, is that they want to bridge the gap between the educated Muslim elites and the *ulama'a* through the creation of a seamless channel of communication to serve as a basis for effective interaction and exchange of ideas. It is for this reason that on many occasions NASFAT invites religious scholars from different Islamic organisations to deliver lectures in its programmes. This is particularly pronounced in Abuja where the official language of the organisation is English so as to speak to other ethnic groups. In Abuja as opposed to other places there are many members and even office holders who are non-Yoruba Muslims. NASFAT also makes a concerted effort to facilitate access to sound Islamic and modern education by establishing libraries and educational institutions as well as by promoting scholarship and academic research among Muslims. To achieve this NASFAT created Fountain University, which commenced academic activities in 2007. NASFAT has also established many secondary schools in different parts of the country.

NASFAT also seeks to foster and enhance the health, economic well-being, and welfare of members by building hospitals and establishing and promoting businesses. In my interview with the administrative secretary of Abuja central branch (11.11.2013), he showed me several applications for financial assistance and the payments made to many applicants. Among the applicants, there are also Christians. One woman among them received up to 200,000 naira (1000 euro) for a hospital bill. The secretary said when

processing the application the Executive Council gives priority to health problems followed by a serious need for a start-up capital. He also stated that the source of the funds comes from *zakat* donations by wealthy members. Unlike many religious organisations in the north that engage in intra-religious hostility, NASFAT aims to encourage beneficial relationships amongst its members in particular, and other Islamic organisations and wider society in general. During the celebration of the 20 year anniversary of NASFAT in Lagos, the president of the society, Abdullahi Yomi Bolarinwa, spoke to Nahimah Nurudeen (2015:1) on what the group has achieved on its vision and mission:

We have been able to achieve to a large extent about 75 percent of what the society set out to achieve. We have been able to form a family, which is the bedrock of Islam, bringing Muslims together on a weekly basis. We have made parents and their children come together to share knowledge about Islam, and the Almighty Allah and His Holy prophets. We have also been establishing secondary schools where we preach good morals, and where we teach people that Islam is peace, and there is no violence in its practice and language. We have been able to show people that they must respect other religions; that they can live with people but that the way they conduct themselves matters regarding their character, which will determine how people relate to them. We have also been able to teach people that there is no compulsion in religion; they do not have to force people to practice their religion because everybody has been given a free will by the Almighty Allah to practice any religion.

The President of NASFAT is highlighting the achievement of the organisation in many areas. It is important to notice that the President mentioned respecting other religions and dissociating the teachings of Islam with violence. These statements pointed to the protracted inter-religious hostility and violence that wrecked many places in northern Nigeria. As mentioned earlier, NASFAT aims at projecting a positive view of Islam through preaching and encouraging mutual respect between Muslims and Christians. NASFAT spread the message that Qur'an says there is no

compulsion in religion. Spreading this message is an attempt to convey the notion that Islam welcomes religious pluralism. The perspective of NASFAT leaders is that Islam allows freedom of religion to non-Muslims; therefore, it is compatible with modern pluralistic society. They often quote Qur'anic verse that says, "There is no compulsion in religion to justify their view".<sup>48</sup>

### ENGAGING WITH THE 'OTHER' IN NASFAT

This section deals with the perception of NASFAT toward Christians, other Islamic organisations, ATR, and issues of gender and politics. Contrary to some Islamic reformists such as Izala, NASFAT expresses a moderate attitude toward the perceived 'other' with the exception of indigenous religion and its vestiges, which is highly demonised by the leadership of the organisation.

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48 When the Central Bank Governor Sunusi Lamido (now Emir of Kano) gave license to a non-interest Islamic Bank called Ja'iz Bank to operate in the country, it became a contentious issue that threatened the stability of Nigerian polity. The issue has caused a serious rift between Muslims and Christians and simmering tension engulfed the entire nation. Many Christians perceived introduction of Islamic banking as another secret agenda of Islamizing Nigeria by Muslim elites. Christian leaders vigorously attacked the idea and its subsequent implementation. While some Muslim leaders' response to Christians exacerbated the tension, NASFAT's President's reaction to the issue was different, and he expressed his opinion on the controversy as follow: "Islam says in trade, there are limits to the interest or the profit you make so that it does not become a burden to the people you are trading with. So, what is wrong if you have a bank that does not charge you 20 percent when you borrow money when the cost of borrowing from them is less than 5 percent? We must make people understand because some just have a phobia about Islam. When we say Islamic banking, people must be educated because what it simply means is that you cannot have a profit margin than a particular limit; and that if you lend me money, and you have an interest in the business, if the business fails, you cannot ask me to return your money because you are part of it. Is there anything bad in that?" (Nurudeen 2015:2) Here the NASFAT leader attempted to reason with the Christians on the issue and to explain the logic of Islamic banking rather than providing Islamic theological explanations.

*PEOPLE OF THE BOOK: FELLOW CITIZENS OR COMPETITORS*

NASFAT expresses great concern about Muslim-Christian relationships and perceives Christians as closer to Muslims in theology and worldview than African Traditional Religions. NASFAT's chief imam during Sunday preaching stated, "Christians are not infidels; they are people of the book. Christians are close to Muslims because they believed in the past revealed Scriptures and prophets". This idea of Christians as people of the book elevates the status of Christians among the members of NASFAT. Moreover, NASFAT is making a concerted effort to improve Muslim-Christian relations in the country through interfaith programmes. As part of its numerous interfaith programmes for peaceful co-existence, NASFAT organised a joint action initiative called 'Walk for Religious Harmony' in 2015. Churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Foursquare Gospel Church, Christ Embassy and Newborn Apostolic Church and other churches are invited from time to time, particularly in Abuja and Lagos, to send their members to walk with Muslims for about one hour while having informal conversations. It is believed that this kind of activity would enhance mutual understanding among diverse religious communities. On fostering peaceful co-existence among followers of other faiths, NASFAT president, Bolarinwa said:

Peace is achieved through promoting understanding of one another. And if you are a true Muslim with proper understanding of the Holy Quran, you have no reason not to respect, for instance, Prophet Isa [Jesus] because he is a prophet of God, you must respect the Bible as a Muslim, and most importantly, our religion enjoins us to love our neighbours, to be at peace with our neighbours. And that we have successfully preached to our members, so, anywhere, our members are of best behaviour, because they live the saying of the Prophet [SAW] that the best among you is one with the best conduct. This concept is even reflected in the motto of the society, and that is why we are what we are. (The Guardian 2016)

NASFAT leaders always remind Muslims that Jesus Christ, who is the central figure in Christianity, is one of the great prophets of Islam. The leaders see this as a strategy to create a positive link between the two religious communities. The leaders hope that through respecting Jesus Christ Muslims would extend that respect to Christians. They remind Christians that Muslims respect their saviour; as a result, the leaders hope that Christians would respect Muslims in return. The positive responses from the Christians indicate that this initiative has achieved relative success. I talked to some young Christians who participated in the walk and they said that it had opened up their mind and drastically reduced their bias toward Muslims.

The assistant national secretary for the youth wing, who resides in Abuja, related to me (Interview, 10.9.2014) that the wing organises interfaith dialogue and programmes with the Christian youths in the city. He said that most religious conflicts in the country involved youths. Therefore, it is imperative to encourage understanding and cooperation between Muslim and Christian youths through dialogues. He continued that many sessions of such dialogues have taken place, and the success of the events in Abuja has drawn the attention of the national executive of the organisation. The executive now has decided to make youth interfaith dialogue a national programme to be carried out by all the branches of NASFAT in the country.

However, NASFAT faces the same dilemma as Christ Embassy, which is the desire to proselytise while at the same time attempting to maintain a good relationship. Attempts of *da'awah* become particularly problematic when Christians are targeted by self-acclaimed Muslim Bible preachers who want to validate Islam through biblical verses. The greatest point of contention is that these preachers use the Bible to challenge the basic Christian doctrines such as trinity and salvation through Christ.<sup>49</sup> NASFAT invites such preachers (a

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49 See Johnson, Mbillah (2004) on the issue of Muslim preachers of the Bible. 'Interfaith Relations and the Quest for Peace in Africa', in C. Hock (ed.), *The Interface*

notable example is Yusuf Adepaju) regularly to preach either on Sunday or during important events to draw the attention of Christians about the truth of Islam and to further enhance the faith of Muslims. The polemic preaching and debates of Yusuf Adepaju and Zakir Naik are reproduced and distributed in both the audio and video format on Sundays in the NASFAT Islamic centre. These preachers use what Martha Frederiks (2010:267) refers to as “vicious polemic” to argue their case against Christians. Frederiks also notes that these preachers are influenced by the famous South African Muslim polemicist Ahmed Deedat, who debated many Christian evangelists in the 1980s and 1990s. Many Christians who come across such a form of preaching perceive it as an attack against their faith. A 34-year-old male Christian who is self-employed in Abuja told me that such preachers particularly, Yusuf Adepaju and even Ahmed Deedat, do not have proper understanding of the Bible and the knowledge of biblical hermeneutics and exegesis.

The desire on the part of NASFAT for peaceful coexistence and *da'awah* practice, which is regarded as religious duty, create dilemma which NASFAT has been unable to resolve. This is because the polemical nature of the *da'awah* is often interpreted by Christians as distorting their Holy Scripture to fit the Muslims proselytising agenda. As a result, some Pentecostals, particularly members of Christ Embassy whom I interviewed, harboured suspicions about some NASFAT joint action initiatives as part of the hidden *da'awah* agenda. However, this dilemma of the intersection between evangelism and coexistence does not seem to matter much in Christ Embassy, due to their limited concern with inter-religious dialogue or joint action initiative.

*OTHER MUSLIM ORGANISATIONS: PARTNERS IN PROMOTING ISLAM?*

NASFAT differs from other Islamic movements in its goals, orientation, and practices. However, despite their differences, NASFAT leadership does not oppose or condemn other Islamic organisations. NASFAT differs from Sufi groups in the sense that it does not approve the religious hierarchy prevalent among the Sufis, hence its emphasis on equality among Muslims (Soares 2009). NASFAT diverged from Islamic reformists because its overall vision is not to reform Islam from impurities or innovations or even return Muslims to the pristine form of Islam that was practiced by the Prophet and his companions. Instead, the organisation focuses more on reinvigorating the practice of Islam, making it compatible with modern life and protecting Muslims from what they perceive as an external threat from Pentecostalism. Furthermore, leaders of NASFAT attempt to negotiate how to be a pious Muslim in a neoliberal urban setting. This situation is similar to the finding of Marloes Janson (2014) about the processes of re-negotiating Muslim identity among Tablighi Muslim youths in Gambia and their struggle to reconcile faith with a modern lifestyle.

It is part of the policy of NASFAT to foster a good relationship with other Islamic organisations. In the do's and don'ts of NASFAT and the shared values of the organisation, promotion of brotherhood and equality of all Muslims have utmost importance. The NASFAT president had this to say on this issue:

We are always in touch with [Islamic organisations], and there is something that was formed recently in the South-West – the Muslim Umma of South-Western Nigeria. It is just a group made up of all the Islamic groups in South Western Nigeria to bridge the gap between them and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs so that things will run smoothly and there will be no issues with the people of Northern Nigeria. Apart from that, anything any Islamic organisation wants to do, NASFAT will be there in so far as we are invited. We know, and they also know that as far as the South-West is concerned, if not

Nigeria today, you cannot just say you are talking about Islam without NASFAT. (Orikeye 2010:2)

It is for this reason that when NASFAT organises events such as seminars or conferences, Muslim scholars from other organisations, including northerners, are invited to deliver lectures. In the month of Ramadan, the NASFAT Abuja zone organises weekly lectures. Prominent Islamic scholars from all over the country are invited to deliver lectures on different aspects of Islamic topics in English.

Whenever NASFAT leaders find an opportunity to talk to the media, they always emphasise that Islam is a peaceful, tolerant religion that is compatible with modern life. It is apparent that NASFAT attempts to project an image of Islam as modern religion that can co-exist peacefully with others in the pluralist Nigerian urban environment. It is also in line with this agenda that NASFAT leaders engage in constant condemnation of terrorist activities of Boko Haram and reiterate that Islam prohibits violence against innocent, unarmed civilians. During a world press conference to mark the 21-years anniversary of the organisation, NASFAT President Abdulahi Yomi Bolarinwa lamented the adverse effect of Boko Haram on the image of Islam and failure of Muslims leaders to face the challenge of violence in the name of their religion:

Unfortunately, Muslim leaders have not risen as one to challenge this mindset and condemn terrorism perpetrated by groups of psychopaths who masquerade as Muslims. By their deafening silence and indifference, they unwittingly create the impression of support for these terrorists. It is time for Muslims to unite in the face of this changing world that aspires to change the creed of Islam and eliminate its core values and laws. And for us at NASFAT, our 21st anniversary provides a unique opportunity for new partnerships for public enlightenment and mass education of people on what Islam actually stands for. And we wish to challenge the mass media to take up the challenge. Clearly then, a religion that places such high premium on good, orderly behaviour will not and does not approve violence. This is common knowledge. Religion doesn't promote terrorism; neither do

race or ethnicity. It is people who perpetrate acts of terrorism. (Bolarinwa 2016:1).

NASFAT's leadership expressed disappointment with the mainstream Muslim reactions to Boko Haram violence in the country. According to NASFAT, to extricate Islam from terrorist activities, all Muslim leaders need to condemn Boko Haram publicly. The leadership is not satisfied with the current condemnation of Boko Haram by the Sultan and other Islamic religious figures. In their attempt to portray Islam as a peaceful religion and dissociate it from violence, the leaders call on media to refrain from calling Boko Haram an Islamic sect. In one of his sermons during Sunday worship I attended in Abuja, Ustaz Abdul Rashid Balogun stated that every Christian is a potential Muslim; therefore, killing Christians is denying them a future opportunity of converting to Islam.

Other Muslim organisations, particularly those that originated in the south west, see the rise of NASFAT as a wakeup call to reform and revitalise their activities. This is what the secretary of Nurudeen Islamic Society told me when I met him after Friday prayer in Karu Abuja. He said:

NASFAT has achieved a notable growth in a short time. What NASFAT achieved in this period we the older organisations could not achieve throughout our history. We really admire the success of NASFAT, we do not envy them but want to learn from them to learn their strategies and factors that make them attractive to people both in Nigeria and abroad.

The rapid growth of NASFAT and its conspicuous presence in the public sphere have attracted the attention of other Muslim organisations, as expressed by the secretary of Nurudeen. NASFAT certainly pose a challenge to the older Islamic organisations similar to the Pentecostal challenge to historical mission churches. These older organisations feel the need to reorganise in order to stay competitive. However, in the far north Izala and Salafi do not show excessive concern or fear of competition with NASFAT. Sani Yusuf, a 38 year

old official of Izala, told me that NASFAT is one of the most successful Yoruba Islamic organisations to engage in charity works. The northern Islamic groups admired the social engagement of NASFAT, from charity to education and media programmes that are visible in the Nigerian public sphere. Even though there are criticisms of NASFAT for what some believed to be blind imitation of Pentecostals from different angle, particularly in the north, most of the other Islamic groups view NASFAT positively.

### *AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE EVIL OTHER?*

According to John Peel (2011) there has been an increasing search for religious authenticity and attempts by some Muslim leaders to get rid of innovations from Yoruba Islam. These attempts are spearheaded by *Salafi* groups and even the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN). So, practices that aligned with Yoruba traditional religion are being reviled as anti-Islamic and allegedly need to be discarded. Even though NASFAT is not a *Salafi* movement, it has the attitude of demonising the practice of divination and charms associated with traditional religion. Many aspects of traditional religion are regarded as *shirk* or polytheism by NASFAT. Therefore, indulging in some practices associated with indigenous religion is considered a grave sin against Allah.<sup>50</sup> NASFAT as an organisation prohibits its members from dabbling with

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50 According to Nolte (2015) there is growing criticism of customary practices by Pentecostals and also by Muslims in recent times. These criticisms occur through redefining the customary as vestiges of traditional religion. According to Nolte, the critiques see traditional festivals, Obaship, and traditional chieftaincy as more based on traditional religion than as an aspect of culture, marking them as potentially idolatrous practices (12). As the criticism is ongoing, there is increasing influence of monotheistic religions on the institutions of Obas. This influence is ostensibly on the gradual demise of some practices that are perceived to be contrary to the teachings of Islam and Christianity. According to Nolte, the important transformation that is taking place and the increasing openness towards both Islam and Christianity suggest that the customary has retained many aspects of its function as a place of religious diversity and encounter (13).

the vestiges of traditional religion. The most visible form of vestiges of traditional religion are *babalawos* in Yorubaland and *bori* in the north among the Hausas. In one of the Sunday Asalatu I attended, the Chief Imam stated the following during the preaching session.

Attending to *babalawos* or *bori* practitioners is a serious sin in Islam. Therefore, in NASFAT it is a behaviour which cannot be tolerated. Any member who we find out that he or she is patronising such kind of people would be punished by the Board of Trustees of the organisation.

The issue of dabbling into the vestiges of traditional religion is not relegated to the level of private sin against God, but it is seen as an offence against the organisation. It is clearly written in the dos and don'ts of the organisation that member should not engage in the polytheistic practices. Despite this rule, NASFAT does not engage in policing the members concerning involvement with *babalawos*. The punishment for visiting *babalawos* is also not specified. Even though it is possible that there are members who might secretly visit such medicine men, I have not come across any evidence of this during my fieldwork period. In the view of NASFAT's leaders, traditional religion is an evil 'other' because it is based on polytheism, which is the most serious offence in Islam. They also believe that traditional religion incorporates magical practices or even deals with demons. As a result, similar to Pentecostalism, ATR and its remnant practices are reviled and demonised thoroughly in NASFAT.

#### *WOMEN: THE INTERNAL OTHER?*

The issue of gender is where NASFAT leadership attempts to portray their progressive ideas. This is particularly pronounced on the importance of educating women and their role in the development of Muslim society in general. On this issue the Zonal Chairman of Lagos Zone 1, Taofeeq Adeseun, argued that according to the teachings of Prophet Muhammed, when one

teaches one man, he/she has educated an individual, but when one teaches a woman, he/she educates the whole community. Adeseun affirmed that women are the cement that binds the blocks in the family. Also, when a woman gets it right in the house [properly takes care of the house], that entire household will be more in line with the tenets of Islam. (Adeyeri 2016)

NASFAT leaders believe that the quality and moral wellbeing of the Muslim society depend on the quality of education given to women. It is based on this view that girls' education is given paramount importance in NASFAT. Moreover, women are given more opportunities for active participation than in many Islamic organisations in the north and in Abuja. The active participation of women in NASFAT certainly matched those of many Pentecostal churches, including Christ Embassy. The only difference is that in NASFAT women are not allowed to assume the leadership of the mission board, which produces imams; therefore, women cannot become imams, which is similar to how in Pentecostal churches women rarely have an opportunity to lead the congregational services. (See chapter 3.)

Moreover, NASFAT introduced the Women Wing (for married women), which is responsible for organising the activities of the female members of NASFAT and pays attention to their needs and welfare. The wing holds several programmes for the female members, including adult literacy programmes, vocational training, charity visits, and assisting widows, and it encourages active participation of all female members in the activities of the organisation. The secretary of the wing told me about some of their charity visits to the camp of people who fled their homes as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east:

Recently we put lot of effort on helping the internally displaced persons [IDPs] who came to Abuja after their villages were destroyed by the Boko Haram insurgency. The living condition of the IDPs in Abuja is very appalling. NASFAT Women Wing decided to contribute their quarter in alleviating the suffering of the women and children in the IDPs camp. In the 2<sup>th</sup> of September, 2014 we visited the camp and

donated clothing for both adult and children from our members and foodstuffs such as rice, yams, cooking oil. (Interview, 7.9.2014, Abuja)

The wing has carried out several similar visits to many places in the city of Abuja. The leaders of the women wing intervene in familial problems of their members. If a member is having an issue with her husband or her in-laws and the problem becomes protracted to the extent that the couple could not amend their broken home, the leaders of the wing intervene for the purpose of reconciliation. One of the members of the wing related to me her story as follows:

My name is Hajiya Sikirat Abiola. I am 37 years old. I thank the head of women wing, because it was due to her intervention that my marriage was saved. It has almost collapsed last year. I was living in peace with my husband but last year I noticed changes in his behaviour, later on I discovered that he wanted to marry a second wife. When he finally told me about his intention, my world completely turned upside down. From that day problem started in the house. The marriage entered into series of crises on daily basis. Then he reported me to the leader of the women wing. I was summoned by the leader and got counseled for weeks until eventually I suspended my rebellion and allowed him to marry on the condition that we are not going to live in the same house with the new wife (Interview, 1.4.2014, Abuja).

On the issue of polygamy, women in most cases remain powerless to stop it. Despite the fact they do not like it, if the husband determines to do it they often do not succeed in preventing it. However, unlike Izala leaders, who publicly support polygamy and encourage their members to take second wives, NASFA leaders do not ask their members to take more wives. In fact, they do not have an official marriage policy. Polygamy is left to the discretion of the individual. However, when crises erupted in a family as a result of a husband's attempt to marry a second wife, the leaders usually support the men. Leaders often argue that since Islam permits polygamy, women should be patient and allow their spouses to exercise their religious right if they wish to do so. It is important to notice that the rate of polygamy among Yoruba Muslims is low

compared to Hausa Muslims in the north. As a result, these kinds of cases are extremely rare in NASFAT. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT there is not absolute gender equality despite active women participation in the activities of the two organisations. Both Christ Embassy and NASFAT admit women into the administrative cadres but limit their roles in assuming religious leadership such as the roles of imams and pastors.

### *POLITICS: THE EVIL GAME?*

Similar to Christ Embassy, NASFAT's position concerning politics and politicians is ambivalent. NASFAT leadership officially stated that members are not allowed to use the organisation as a platform for political purposes. One can engage in politics but not on behalf of the organisation. However, NASFAT leaders shower praise on the present administration and call on Nigerians to be patient with the government policies. One of the assistant imams of NASFAT told me that, 'politics is an evil game that is riddled with deception and corrupt practices' (Interview, 23.12.2013, Abuja). NASFAT leaders also seek funding and donations from political leaders while at the same the preachers regularly preach against protracted corruption that undermines meaningful development in Nigeria. But preaching against corruption while at the same soliciting for donations from politicians might create a contradiction. However, during my interviews with them, NASFAT leaders do not comment on or seem to bother with this possible contradiction. Moreover, unlike some radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, NASFAT does not delegitimise the secular authority, constitution, and democratic principles of the country. As a result, NASFAT does not show interest in full implementation of *shari'ah* law in the country as a whole.

## YOUTH, WINGS AND THE CALIPHATE SYSTEM

Youths have played a significant role in the dynamism and progress of NASFAT in recent years. As one of the most widespread Islamic religious group in the country, NASFAT has one of the largest youth members. According to the youth secretary, the youth wing in NASFAT was developed in the year 2004 at the national headquarters in Lagos, and all the zones and branches were asked to initiate the wing. The sole purpose of establishing a youth wing is *da'wah* or propagating the message of Islam and helping the youths to be responsible members of society.

The secretary of the youth wing in Abuja central branch told me (Interview, 14.7.14) that at the national level they organise an annual national youth conference. The conference is rotated among the zones nationwide. Each zone that intends to host the conference can apply, and the national youth secretariat assesses their capability and security of the place before issuing approval. Usually influential people are invited to the conference. For instance, at the conference that was held in Minna branch, dignitaries such as the Emir of Kano Alhaji Sunusi Lamido, Emir of Bida Alhaji Yahaya Abubakar, and former Military Head of State General Abdul Salam Abubakar were invited guests.

In July 2015 Lai Hussein, who assisted me during my fieldwork in NASFAT, told me about the youth camp programme and advised me to attend. He told me that the programme takes place in the months of September for zones and December for branches. The camp usually is held in secondary school during holidays, and it lasts for three days. The programmes of the camp range from preaching, teachings on Islamic tenets and doctrines, night vigil prayers, melodious recitation prayers, seminars, and skill acquisition programmes. Experts and technicians who specialise in different kinds of skills are invited to teach the participants both theoretical and practical aspects of the skill. I attended the camp as part of my fieldwork. I noticed that when people

registered, the officials gave them blue t-shirts with the NASFAT's logo and an inscription on the back that reads, 'NASFAT Youth Camp 2015 Zuba'. And women were given a white *hijab* with a blue NASFAT logo on it. Once one registered and had been assigned a bed, it was difficult to go out without strong reason. There were guards at the gate who made sure that the participants remained inside till the end of the programme. I observed that the officials were very strict about the observance of ritual prayer (*salat*), particularly the dawn prayer. The officials went to the hostel around 5 o'clock in the morning to wake people up. They usually shouted, "Wake up for prayer, if you are sleeping you are wrong". The programme ran for three days with intermittent periods for rest, recreation, and socialisation. I participated in a workshop on making perfume. Moreover, they also taught poultry and fish farming and different kinds of skills to help youths achieve self-reliance in their lives.

Another important programme item is the singles forum. All the participants converge in a hall and discuss the issues of life as a single, causes of late marriage, and polygamy. Two assistant imams of the central branch led the programme, and I witnessed heated debate when it came to the discussion about polygamy. Most of the male participants supported it, but the female members expressed disapproval. The officiators tried to convince them to stop opposing polygamy since it is permitted by *Shari'a* and also has many advantages. The women who opposed to the idea raised their hands and when given opportunity to talk, they expressed their opinions. One of the rationales behind this forum is to create opportunity for dating between the singles that would result in marriage. The secretary told me that this arrangement was very successful because it resulted in 33 marriages in Utako branch alone. There is a realisation among the youths that some singles came to NASFAT for the sole purpose of finding life partners. Sadiq Jimoh, a 26-year-old member of youth wing, stated:

I am very fortunate and grateful to NASFAT's youth wing because last year I met my wife among the sisters.<sup>51</sup> I first saw her during a meeting for organizing 'Youth Camp 2013' and I became interested in her after watching her elegant expressions. I felt that she is a mature girl with sound mind, deep knowledge, and clarity of thought. I decided to make a move; so I talked to the committee that presides over marriage arrangements. Without going into detail, we began dating and eventually married this year. All this happened due to the youth wing. (Interview, 8.9.2014, Abuja)

The youth wing secretary told me (Interview, 8.9.2014) that apart from organising conferences and camps, they contributed money and organised charity visits to prison yards, hospitals, orphanages, and the camps of internally displaced persons every six months. He said they had visited Kuje prison in September 2015 and donated food, fruits, clothes, and toiletries to the inmates. He continued that they helped some indebted inmates who were in prison as a result of failure to pay back debt. They identified about five people with such minor cases and paid the money for them. He said that the inmates were happy with the youth's concern about their present condition. They also visited the general hospital in the same month and made a donation of money and drugs to the poor patients, both Muslims Christians. They also prayed for them and reminded them to continue to have faith and trust in God and sustain hope for recovery. He stated that after some days they received testimonies from some of the patients that their prayers have worked because they had relief from their illnesses.

Similarly, youths in Christ Embassy visit hospitals and prisons for evangelism. The youths usually go to the hospitals on Sundays in the evening and go from one patient to another, telling them that God loves them despite

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51 The youths in NASFAT refer to the opposite gender as brothers and sisters, for instance, Sister Maryam or Sister Habiba instead of just Maryam and Habiba. Pentecostal youth also refer to themselves with the same titles. It is difficult for me to trace the origin of this practice or whether it developed simultaneously or one group copied from the other.

their suffering and they should receive Christ and be healed. However, the difference with NASFAT is that in Christ Embassy youths do not take gifts or drugs to the hospitals.



Fig. 4.5 Author and some youths during Regional Youth Camp Abuja 2015.





Fig. 4.6 Females and Males participant of Regional Youth Camp 2015.

The Youth Wing encompasses both male and female members of NASFAT below the age of forty, but sometimes females organise separate programmes that concern young women. The young women have the sisters' forum under the youth wing. The wing organises leadership training and skill acquisition to its members. They also train the youth on *da'wah* practices both to Muslims and non-Muslims. The wing educate the youth on different forms of *da'wah* that include electronic, print and face to face *da'wah*.

Among the youth wing of NASFAT Abuja, there is a section for drama and *zikr*. This group was previously called the Drama and Music Group but some people in NASFAT leadership see the term music as problematic. As a result, music was metamorphosed to *zikr*. The function of this group is the performance of Islamic-oriented drama and Islamic songs during events such as conferences and seminars. Members can invite the group to come and perform when they are having important events such as wedding and naming ceremonies. When performing the songs they do not use modern musical instruments such as piano or guitar, instead they use the *bandir*, which is a locally fabricated drum made from animal skin. The group entertains the crowd

using didactic themes that pass on Islamic messages through drama and songs.<sup>52</sup>

Another sub-group is the caliphate<sup>53</sup> system which is the smallest unit of organisation in the NASFAT of Abuja. All the members of the branch are assigned into different groups named after the companions of Prophet Muhammad. Each group has a coordinator, secretary, and treasurer. The group raises money through weekly contribution by the members. The coordinator has the comprehensive list of his members, their home addresses, and bio-data. The groups meet fortnightly and discuss issues related to fund raising, mutual assistance, individual problems, and many other matters regarding the groups. For instance, caliphate renders financial assistance to a member for marriage, naming ceremonies, bereavement, bankruptcy, and other life challenges. Group members pay courtesy visits to individuals. A member can also bring an invitation letter to his/her group during important events such as wedding or naming ceremony.

The caliphate system is similar to the Cells of Christ Embassy and other Pentecostal household fellowship. As is the case with other practices, it is possible that NASFAT has borrowed this practice from Pentecostals. Other Muslim organisations do not have this kind of system. Therefore, NASFAT did not get the idea from them. But since Muslims are exposed to Pentecostals activities and programmes and live side by side with Christians in the city as

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52 It is interesting that NASFAT rejected music with modern instruments despite their progressive outlook. But Sufi groups in the north have adopted modern musical instruments and abandoned the *bandir*. However, Izala and Salafi groups still remained vehement in their opposition to music in whatever form.

53 The name *caliphate* is strange and I asked many people why NASFAT chose the name to refer to smaller unit, but they said that it was the chief Imam who used the name. And I was unable to visit with him again to find the reason for chosen that name.

neighbours, it can be assumed that NASFAT has borrowed the idea of caliphate system from the Pentecostals.

The youth and the caliphate system bind the members together and create a cohesive religious community. These activities also exact pressure on the individual members to maintain their participation in the organisation. If an individual misses the service for one day, another member asks him/her reasons for not showing up. Intensive participation in smaller group units creates double obligation for the members to uphold their loyalty to their religious organisation. The first obligation is based on their personal religious commitment, beliefs, and conviction, and the second rests on the desire to fulfil the expectations of their group. Since the congregation is large it might create a strong sense of social bonding, as is the case with smaller groups.

These activities provide social networking among young men and women in NASFAT. The cell activities in Christ Embassy also serve a similar function of granting an opportunity for social networking among the youths of Christ Embassy. Similar to NASFAT, the cell activities in Christ Embassy also afford the young people opportunities for dating and marriage. Both the leaders of NASFAT and Christ Embassy constantly encourage the youths to marry among their own religious groups. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT the youth are deriving enormous benefits from this social networking. The group activities and interactions amplify youths' ability to share experiences and care for each other. Social networking among youths in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT gives them an opportunity to receive support from like-minded individuals, and to locate other avenues for assistance and for giving or receiving career or personal advice.

## SOURCES OF FUNDS AND SOCIAL PROJECTS

Running a big organisation like NASFAT requires a stable source of funds. As a result, NASFAT devises several means of getting funds for the

effective running of the organisation. The primary source of funds comes from monthly membership contributions. The organisation also receives aid, grants, donations, *Zakat*, and endowments by members and non-members. In January 2014, during Sunday service, the imam announced that a business woman made a donation of one million naira (5000 euro). Since NASFAT has initiated many business ventures, the organisation receives income, profit, and dividend from such initiatives. Another source of revenue is sending letters of financial request to prominent business people and politicians, many of whom respond positively. Through these kinds of requests it was announced during Sunday Service that the Governor of Nasarawa State in 2015 donated 10 million (50,000 euro) naira to the organisation.

NASFAT puts great emphasis on economic empowerment because the leadership believes that economic empowerment is imperative to spiritual development. They are of the view that ethical reform goes hand in hand with economic empowerment (Soares 2009:193). Highly sensational religious performances in NASFAT serve as a transforming force for individual members. However, NASFAT's piety is not a world rejecting mode of religiosity. Instead, it is highly world affirming. In fact, NASFAT's engagement with the world gives rise to numerous socio-economic programmes. Adetona (2012) outlines some of the programmes as follows:

- Economic Empowerment: the NASFAT secretariat of this programme seeks employment for unemployed Muslims from various companies using the connection of its members. Within this programme, it also gives soft loans to members who have been inducted on the floating of small scale industries. The Cooperative Society of the group also finances genuine Local Purchase Orders [LPOs] under this scheme.
- Scholarship Award: NASFAT has instituted scholarship awards to assist needy Muslim students in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions from its Zakat Fund.

- Thrift and Cooperative Society: The group is running a zero interest cooperative group and it has more than 55,000 depositors/members.
- Tafsan Community Bank: The above cooperative group was planned to transform into a community bank in the name of Tafsan Community Bank. The Bank will be based on Islamic Banking principles.
- After two successful Hajj operations in 2004 and 2005, the society registered a travel and tour company in 2006 to provide excellent services to members and other Muslims for the fulfillment of their Hajj (Holy Pilgrimage to Makkah and Madina) and Umrah (Lesser Hajj particularly in the month of Ramadan). The company (Tafsan Tours and Travels) has its name coined from writing NASFAT in a reverse manner and since its establishment has attained the reputation as one of the best private operators of Hajj and Umrah in the country.
- NASFAT has also successfully inaugurated a beverage company. The company has successfully commenced the marketing of a malt drink known as Nasmalt. NASFAT is already achieving the objective of creating more employment opportunity for Muslims and enhancing the finance of *da'awa* (preaching) activities by its formation through an initiative like this. The company has also introduced a fruit juice drink called 'Nasita.'
- At inception, one of the vibrant committees of the society was the Business Committee, whose responsibility was the merchandising of the society's prayer book, souvenirs, and other Islamic items to its teeming members and admirers. The organisation's sticker with its unique design became a status symbol among Muslims to such an extent that there is virtually no car or vehicle owned by a Muslim in Lagos and its environs that is not adorned with the sticker.

The combination of piety practices and socio-economic development initiatives makes NASFAT a formidable social force in many Nigerian urban

centres. However, Christ Embassy does not emphasise socio-economic development through pragmatic social programmes. Instead the church opts for providing mental techniques for individuals to help themselves. Even though members of Christ Embassy contribute significant money to the church, members of NASFAT benefit more from their financial donation than members of Christ Embassy. Christ Embassy's radical individualism betrays a lack of a coherent socio-political vision and socio-economic activities. The fervent obsession with individual material success and prosperity irrespective of the economic and political condition of the country makes its mode of religiosity individualistic.

Furthermore, NASFAT has given urban educated Muslims a social space to interact and acquire a new sense of belonging to a big family of spiritual community. In an environment where there is an absence of social welfare and any social safety net by the government, NASFAT provides different kinds of financial assistance to its members through the *zakat* funds. The assistance ranges from business start-up capital, scholarships, and even payment of hospital bills. For this reason Soares (2012) asserts that NASFAT is an Islamic social movement that challenges some conventional terms and categories of analysis of Islam.

#### TIMES OF DIVINE ENCOUNTER: ASALATU, TAHAJJUD AND LAILATUL QADR

Apart from socio-economic activities, NASFAT has introduced many structured Islamic devotional practices that are highly spiritually and emotionally appealing to urban Muslims. One of these practices is called *Asalatu* or Sunday worship service, the structure and form of which are very similar to Pentecostal Sunday worship. This service involves prayer, reading some portion of the Qur'an, Islamic teachings, preaching, prayer requests and testimonies, and announcement of job vacancies. According to Wale Olasupo

(14.12.2013), one of the purposes of Sunday worship service is to keep Muslim youths busy so that they will not accompany their Christian friends to church service and to give them a forum to pray and socialise.

To give a picture of typical Sunday *Asalatu* programme, here is a description of the one I attended on 24 November 2013: The 7,500 square metre mosque in Utako was full with worshippers and was vibrating with a loud voice of worshipers reciting the NASFAT prayer book. Similar to Christian worship, the congregants were highly excited, exhibiting a high sense of devotion as they recite the prayers. Whenever the name of Muhammad is mentioned in the prayer, their excitement would immediately heighten, and they would raise their arms in salute and respect to him. When they reached the last portion of the prayer, they repeat the name of Allah or *zikr* several times. The tempo of the sound suddenly increases, and the mosque is reverberating with the sound “Allah, Allah, Allah” continuously for an extended period.

One of the assistant imams came forward and gave a talk about the importance of the Hajj in Islam. He said some wealthy people are traveling from one place to another, but they do not bother to perform the pilgrimage. He warned these people that their struggle and money will be in vain if they refuse to go on pilgrimage. He recited many verses from Surah al-Lail that show the importance of Hajj in Islam. The next session after this short talk about the importance of the Hajj was the Qur'anic recitation. The Chief Imam led this session, and everyone opened his copy of the Qur'an, and as the Imam recited they repeated after him. The session went on for about 20 minutes.

Next was a preaching by the Chief Imam which was undertaken with a loud voice and agile body language. He taught about faith in Allah and holding up to it no matter the circumstances one found oneself in, whether good or bad. Two people were behind him who recited verses for him and reiterated a particular section of the verse which the Imam wanted to emphasize. He quoted a verse in the Qur'an which says: “those who have unwavering faith in Allah and remember Allah daily, Allah will give angels to protect them, and the

angels would always tell them not to be afraid and not to be fearful.” He continued that all the wealth of this world was vanity without faith in Allah. And everything in this world is transient, and it will go back to earth. Therefore, the only significant thing in this world is faith in Allah.



Fig. 4.7 Mosque premises during Sunday worship in become a mini market for Islamic religious paraphernalia.

After the preaching by the Chief Imam came the time of prayer request. One of the assistant imams moved to the podium and announced many prayer requests. He said a brother has been promoted to the level of permanent secretary by the president of the country, and he wanted the congregation to pray for him in order to succeed in his new position. The assistant imam asked the congregation to recite Surah *al kauthar* for him and led the recitation (*al kauthar* is short chapter in the Qur'an, usually recited for success). He said another member was also promoted in her workplace and sent a prayer request for success in the new responsibilities. He continued that another brother has experienced many failed promises by his colleagues and friends; he needs prayer for Allah to compel them to fulfil their promises to him. Another brother

required prayer about his current position at recently privatised Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) because many of his colleagues were laid off after privatisation. The next was the period of an announcement. The man in charge of this session announced various vacancies in the NASFAT national administration. He said there is a vacancy for executive secretary, and the requirement is a university degree with 15 years of working experience in a similar profession.



Fig. 4.8 Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar commissioning NASFAT Islamic Centre Abuja in April 2015.

The Chief Imam led a new session to welcome newcomers. He said: “Whoever comes here for the first time should stand up.” Then about four people stood up. Immediately the congregation welcomed them with *takbir* or

*Allahu Akbar* (God is great). The Imam asked the congregation to recite *surah* Qulya for them while at the same time pointing their fingers toward the newcomers. Qulya is a chapter of the Qur'an that is often used for protection against evil. The congregation was apparently praying for the newcomers' protection as a symbol of expressing care and concern about their lives. A newcomer told me:

NASFAT is a place to be. I am very happy with the reception I had when I prayed with them for the first time. The warm welcome I received and the prayer they offered for us made me feel special. From that day I decided to continue attending the prayer and eventually join as a full member. (Interview, 13.11.2014)

In Christ Embassy the congregation sings the welcoming anthem for the newcomer while in NASFAT the congregation recites the chapter of the Qur'an as prayer for them. However, both the song and the prayer serve the same purpose. As the above statement indicates, the purpose of collective welcoming of newcomers in the two groups is to make them feel special and cast a positive impression of the two groups on the newcomers. It is arguable that NASFAT borrowed this practice of welcoming new comers from Pentecostals. This practice is likely one of the examples of NASFAT's borrowing of Pentecostal practices.

The next session was about the mosque building project. The chairperson of the committee came forward and announced the current situation on the completion of the Islamic centre in Abuja. He said the project was initiated three years ago. Now, what remained were the finishing touches. He also said the reason why the project has been stopped is that the project manager travelled. He commended the members of the committee for the endurance and sacrifices they made for the mosque project. The chairperson asserted that all the achievements made so far were due to their devotion and passion for the success of NASFAT mission. He also thanked Allah for his help. The chief Imam said all recent returnees from Hajj should stand up and

come forward. He asked the congregation to pray for them. As a result, all of them donated money to the organisation. One Hajia Wasilat donated 50,000 naira (250 euro) and a gift of the copy of Qur'an to the Imam. After a long speech by the Imam in the Yoruba language, he asked everybody to stand up for the recitation of Surah Ya-sin. Immediately when the surah is concluded people start greeting each other while moving toward the door.

The Asalatu worship of NASFAT has notable similarities with the Sunday Service in Christ Embassy. It is noteworthy that all the sessions of Christ Embassy worship have their counterparts in the NASFAT Sunday service. They all commence with prayer, preaching, announcements, prayer request, testimonies, welcoming newcomers, and end with prayers. It is arguable that NASFAT takes the structure of Pentecostal worship as a template which they fill with Islamic contents. Larkin and Meyer (2006) explore a similar trend in Pentecostalism and Islamic reform movements in West Africa with particular focus on Nigeria and Ghana. Meyer and Larkin argue that, despite the almost diametrical differences between the two groups, by looking deeper one can see the two groups shared many similarities. Even though NASFAT does not fall into the category of Islamic reformist, it shared the same goals with Pentecostalism much more than the reformists. However, NASFAT borrowed more from the Pentecostals than vice versa.

Dressing in white during Sunday worship services by NASFAT members attracts curious attention from other Muslims. Some of my friends both in Abuja and Jos expressed their curiosity to me and wanted to know more about NASFAT when I told them about my research. They wanted to know why NASFAT members pray on Sundays and dress in white during prayer. This curiosity is more common among the Hausa Muslims in the north. As a result of these enquiries, some decided to join the movement. This is what had happened to Mustapha Akanbi, who said:

I am student at the University of Abuja. I used to see members of NASFAT gathering and praying for long time in their centre at Gwagwalada all clad in white attire. I was asking myself, “Who are these people? Why this people pray this way like members of Aladura churches? Are they normal Muslims? Are they new Islamic sect? Are they Islamic occult sect?” These series of questions come to my mind whenever I passed NASFAT mosque. One day I decided to stop by and make enquiry. And the responses I got from one of the youth leaders stuck my mind and I pondered about them for long time. Within a short period I began to attend the Sunday prayers. (Interview, 8.8.2014)

Apart from Mustapha, several other NASFAT members also told me that their journey into NASFAT began with curiosity. Even some Christians sometimes become puzzled about NASFAT Sunday worship and asked me questions about it. As NASFAT is becoming more proactive in its social engagement and its visibility, particularly in the media and charity works, other Muslims begin to become more accustomed to its practices and see it as mainstream Islamic organisation. Some new groups are appearing recently which emulate NASFAT practices and styles. In Abuja a new elite Muslim group called Al Habibiyya has been formed which introduced Sunday worship services and several practices that are apparently inspired by NASFAT.

Apart from the Sunday service, NASFAT holds *Tahajjud* prayers or night vigils during the night of every first and third Friday of the month. Most Muslim groups hold *Tahajjud* only during the last ten days of Ramadan and many, such as Sufi groups, do not even do it at all. For sustaining spiritual rejuvenation, NASFAT leaders decided to introduce monthly *Tahajjud*. Night vigil prayer begins around 10pm, and lasts till about 4am. The prayers consist of a long *nawafil* or supererogatory ritual prayer and varieties of melodious recitation led by the chief imam and his assistants. Many members testified to me that the night vigil prayers make them nearer to God and better Muslims. Members believe that their prayers of supplication are more efficacious during night vigil performances, and it is an important period to pray about some pressing needs and problems. Members who could not attend could send their

prayer requests in writing, accompanied by any amount of money they could afford to give.

Christ Embassy and many Pentecostal Churches practice night vigil prayers for the same reasons as NASFAT, which is spiritual rejuvenation and prayer of supplication. The question here is whether NASFAT borrowed the monthly night vigil from Pentecostals? The answer is probably positive. This is because Muslims do not have this tradition of collective prayers in the mosque as night vigils. There is no doubt that Islam has encouraged Muslims to wake up at night for supererogatory prayer because there are some Hadith of Prophet Muhammad that say God is closer to his creatures around 3am than at any time of the day. But this is only for private prayer, not corporate congregation prayer. It is apparent that the monthly night vigil is a NASFAT initiative inspired by Pentecostals' night vigils. Amidu Sanni (2006) maintains that provision of prayers which provide utilitarian values in healing and power accession is another means through which NASFAT and related prayer groups meet the challenges of Pentecostals.

Another significant spiritual practice in NASFAT is Lailatul Qadr. According to the teaching of NASFAT and Islam in general, Lailatul Qadr is the night of majesty. It is a special night in which God showers his blessing, mercy, and forgiveness on his people. The night occurs on any day during the last ten days of Ramadan, but it is more likely to occur on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month according to Hadith of the Prophet. NASFAT decided to hold the special night of prayer during the last days of the month of Ramadan, hoping that the prayer would coincide with the Lailatul Qadr. This special prayer is the pinnacle of NASFAT spiritual performance, and members hold it in high regard. Branches all over the country practice this prayer, but the largest gathering of such prayer is the one taking place at the NASFAT Village along Lagos-Ibadan expressway. Adetona (2012:104) had this say about this prayer:

NASFAT annual Lailatul Qadr, which is often held towards the end of the Muslim fasting period of Ramadan, has been a remarkable spectacle to be held in the last four years. When the main bowl of the National Stadium could not contain the participants at the all night event in the year 2000, the group moved to its open and undeveloped prayer land, NASFAT village, a vast expanse of land on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway.

Many members of NASFAT prefer to travel to Lagos to perform the Lailatul Qadr there. One of my interlocutors told me that he enjoys the Lailatul Qadr prayer in such a gigantic gathering because it often results in powerful religious experiences. He said that in 2013 they experienced a miracle during Lailatul Qadr; as the prayer was going on thousands of unusual white birds descended on the prayer ground from nowhere. He continued as follows:

The sight of thousands of people all dressed in white praying and invoking the name of Allah at the same time was a great transforming experience to me. Suddenly beautiful white birds began to descend on the prayer ground. I felt a strong sensation all over my body, coupled with the feeling of overwhelming joy, bliss, and ecstasy. I started to feel as if I was in a dreamland; God is present in that place. From that time every year, I perform my Lailatul Qadr in Lagos. (Interview, 22.2.2014)

NASFAT Lailatul Qadr has strong resonance with spectacular Pentecostal religious gatherings such as crusades or revivals. The major Pentecostal churches in the country hold an annual religious gathering at the end of the year. I already mentioned the Night of Bliss of Christ Embassy, which is led by Pastor Chris. Living Faith Church organises annual end of the year gathering called Shiloh, and it is taking place at the church's headquarters at Canaanland in Ota close to Lagos. Millions of people converge at Canaanland every year for the Shiloh event, the purpose of which is to give people the opportunity to experience the presence of God. The Redeemed Christian Church of God holds an annual Holy Ghost Congress with millions in attendance at the Redemption Camp, at Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. The 2015 Holy Ghost Congress was tagged “Floodgates of Heaven”. Through Lailatul

Qadr prayer, NASFAT has provided Muslims with something similar to Pentecostals' massive public religious performance where hyper-emotion is generated, and people claim to experience divine encounter. These huge emotional performances provide transcendent experience on a massive scale.

The practices of Sunday worship and night vigil prayer and melodious Qur'anic recitation are sensational religious performances that resonate with what Birgit Meyer (2012) called sensational form. These sensational practices have a notable affinity with a Pentecostal, emotionally charged mode of worship which is based on the bodily experience of the Holy Spirit. Meyer (2006:742) describes the place of experience of Holy Spirit among the Pentecostal as follows:

The all-pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit goes along with the valuation of the body as a vessel for divine power. The Holy Spirit is an experiential presence that invokes feelings. One of the most salient features of Pentecostal/charismatic churches is their sensational appeal; they often operate via music and powerful oratory, through which born-again Christians are enabled to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit with and in their bodies, wherever they are, and to act on such feelings.

This kind of sensational bodily experiences of the divine presence is appealing to many urban dwellers and plays a vital role in the success of Pentecostalism. During my fieldwork, I asked a young girl who moved from the Roman Catholic Church to Christ Embassy about her reason for this joining Pentecostal church. Her response was that the "Catholic mode of worship is too stale and formal, but Pentecostal worship is more attractive to me because it allows me to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit" (Interview, 21.2.2014, Abuja). There is no doubt that this experiential dimension also plays an important role in the remarkable spread of NASFAT in the Nigerian urban environment. Nolte (2015:12) highlights the disquiet experienced by Yoruba Muslims as a result of the domination of the urban public sphere by

Pentecostalism. With the failure of Islamic reformists<sup>54</sup> to take root in Yorubaland, some movements emerged to resist the threat of growing Pentecostalism. Nolte continues that the most popular among these was the Nasrul-Lahi-Fatih Society (NASFAT), which practices an intense emotional personal engagement with God.

The similarity between the forms of NASFAT and Pentecostal Sunday worship and NASFAT's use of the term 'born again' to describe their practices of spiritual transformation clearly reveal some level of Pentecostal influence on the organisation. NASFAT uses the doctrines of necessity in Islam to negotiate and justify some of their practices that are seemingly similar to Pentecostal practices. The doctrine of necessity or *dharura* in Islam is a law that permits unlawful things or actions, and it can be applied in a situation when observing the law becomes too challenging and unbearable. NASFAT leaders applied the doctrine on the ground of checkmating Muslim youths' attraction toward glittering Pentecostal activities. They argued that if Muslim youths are provided with something similar but rooted in Islam, they will not be attracted by Pentecostals. They maintain that the danger of losing Islamic faith far outweighs the discomfiture with some practices that resonate with Pentecostal activities. In one Asalatu I attended the Imam said: "Those who are complaining about our Sunday worship and said we are copying Christians are

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54 Roman Loimeier (1997) depicts a clear picture of the rise of Islamic reformism vis-à-vis a long history of political and social developments in northern Nigeria. He traces the history of the Sufi brotherhoods of *Tijjaniyya* and *Qadiriyya* from the pre-colonial period and their changing relationship with the political powers in the region. The social dominance of the two brotherhoods was challenged by late Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, who opposes their ideologies as evil innovation that contradicts the teaching of authentic Islam. The brotherhoods unite and put to rest their own differences and conflicts in order to face the common enemy. According to Loimeier, supporters of Gumi formed the Izala movement in order to challenge the perceived un-Islamic practices of Sufi brotherhoods and replace them with *sunna* of the prophet. Loimeier asserts that the vicious criticism of Izala by the Sufis has caused the former to lose many members and many people became emancipated from hitherto traditional and spiritual bondage that prescribed obligation on them towards certain strata of society.

sitting in their homes now watching Pentecostal programmes on television, which is more wrong, watching Pentecostal programmes at home or worshipping and praying in the mosque” (2.11.2013). It is probably because of these practices that some people called NASFAT ‘born again Muslims’ or ‘Muslim Pentecostals’ (Hasan 2015:46). Bello (2013:8) elaborates on this issue:

The decision to drive [NASFAT] into the minds of the Muslim professionals and youths through activities rather than engaging in the building of mosques and other religious institutions was a direct response to the yearnings of the Muslims at the time of its emergence. The Muslims of that era were under the siege of Pentecostal Christianity with its powerful ministry in form of praise worship, healing and deliverance services as well as counseling. The existing Muslim organisations such as Ansar-ud-Deen and Nawair-deen Society particularly in a cosmopolitan city of Lagos could not provide an alternative to what was considered an onslaught which was beginning to take its toll on the religion by the conversion of some Muslims to [a] Pentecostal brand of Christianity. NASFAT therefore, came to fill this vacuum of a platform for Muslims particularly on Sunday which was hitherto considered a Christian day of worship.

This attempt to negotiate borrowing the forms and not contents of Christianity was put to the test when some NASFAT imams celebrated the cross over night by observing all night prayer to welcome 2013 on the ground that if they did not do it, the Muslim youths would follow their Christian friends to the church. This infuriated the national leadership to the extent that they warned the rest of the leaders that there should be a limit on what to emulate from Pentecostals. As a result, they organised a meeting at the national headquarters to draw a line about new practices and to initiate programmes on training imams. There is evidence that NASFAT attempts to meet the challenges of Pentecostalism have succeeded by checkmating attraction of Muslim youths to Pentecostals and even reverting some who had converted to Pentecostalism back to Islam.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has suggested that the remarkable spread of NASFAT in the urban Nigerian landscape in general and Abuja in particular is based on the ability to provide effective social services and sensational religious performances that respond to the needs of urban dwellers. It is noticeable that NASFAT provides religious and socio-economic services on a scale that few if any other Muslim religious groups can match. NASFAT leaders are extremely concerned with the image of Islam. They hold the view that the image of Islam has been tarnished by decades of religious conflicts in the north and the destructive insurgency by the radical Boko Haram. The leaders set a mission for restoring that image through media campaign and preaching. Hardly would a NASFAT leader give a public talk without attempting to dissociate Islam from violence and emphasising its teaching about peaceful co-existence. Another way that NASFAT tries to portray the beauty of Islam is through public work or contribution in community development. NASFAT leaders always claim that through various social projects and charity which they extend to non-Muslims they have positively increased the visibility and understanding of true Islam. The extreme outreach of NASFAT is an indication of the appeal of its programmes to the Nigerian Muslims. Even though NASFAT has not yet penetrated the Hausa population in the far north of Nigeria, partly due to language barriers, other ethnic groups in the north such as Igalas and Igbiras have joined the movement, particularly in Abuja. The success of NASFAT also prompts other groups to imitate its programmes, especially in Lagos and Abuja.

Similar to Christ Embassy, NASFAT has a self-image of being a modern, sophisticated religious organisation led by upwardly mobile professional elites. Like Christ Embassy this desire to be modern is predicated on the attitude of breaking with the past. NASFAT not only distanced itself from the cultural past related to traditional religion but the leaders often reiterate that there is a gulf between the modern educated Muslim youths and

their elders who are traditionally oriented. And this chasm may hinder effective communication and understanding between the two generations. Hence the need for modern forward looking organisations like NASFAT to cater for the spiritual and material needs of the modern young Muslims and help them overcome a myriad of urban challenges.

# 5

## COMMUNION WITH THE DIVINE: PRAYER AS PERFORMANCE OF MEDIATION IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

### INTRODUCTION

During my fieldwork in Christ Embassy, I had a personal lesson in the foundation class about the subject of prayer with my instructor pastor Adewale. After the general Sunday worship service we went to the Children's Room<sup>55</sup> and sat opposite each other. He said, "As usual we are going to start the lesson with prayer, so let us close our eyes and pray." After the opening prayer, the foundation class instructor asked me this question: "What is prayer?" I replied, "Prayer is a form of request to God." He said, "No, prayer is a communion with God." Adewale continued: "Communion is an act of personal communication between a believer and God. God reveals himself with love to an individual through communion. This joyful and loving communication that occurs within the interior of the individual is what constitutes the essence of prayer." There is

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<sup>55</sup> The Children's Room is a big room where Sunday school takes place for the children. Some of the new comers take their lessons in that room if there is no space in the foundation classrooms.

similar understanding of prayer in NASFAT. One of the deputy imams in Abuja told me that “prayer is an act of appeal to God that requires the full conscious participation of all the mental faculties and body of the one praying. When a believer engages in prayer he [she] is in direct connection with God who hears and understand everything the supplicant says.” These notions of prayer as an act that involves “communication” or “connection” with the divine resonate with the view of Meyer (2009:11) that posits religion as a practice of mediation. Meyer (2009:11) also emphasises the role of media in the process of mediation and extends the notion of media to include varieties of things from modern media technologies to substances and even the human body. In line with this understanding, this chapter views prayer as religious media that mediate believers with the spiritual world.

Since affect and emotion are some of the central analytical concepts in this chapter, the definitions of these terms proposed by Brian Massumi and Eric Shouse have been adopted. Massumi (1987:16) describes affect as “prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act”. In his reading of Massumi, Shouse (2005:1) states that an affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity, a moment of unformed and unstructured potential. Affect cannot be fully realised in language because it is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness. According to Shouse, “Emotion is the projection/display of a feeling. In another sense emotion is an expression of internal state” (p.2). Different genres of prayers analysed in this chapter generate affect and emotion which underlie human-divine communication. Riis and Woodhead (2012) maintain that what makes emotion religious is the fact that it occurs within religious context and is an integral to its social and symbolic relations. In another sense, they argue that the religious emotions “are first and foremost, those that arise in the context of religious emotional regimes” (p.54).

There are different genres of prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT, but they are not clearly defined and categorised in the two groups. For the purpose of this study and comparison, the chapter selects and examines three different genres of prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. I categorise them as prayers of adoration, prayers of aesthetic speech, and prayers of instrumentality. Prayers of adoration, called ‘praise and worship’ in Christ Embassy, refer basically to collective prayers performed in congregational setting. These prayers comprise praises to God expressed in the form of songs and music. In NASFAT, prayers of adoration are performed in the congregational recitation of NASFAT’s prayer book. Most of my interlocutors across the two groups told me that they enjoy reciting these prayers in private, particularly during leisure times. The term prayers of adoration has been adopted because the word ‘adoration’, as defined by Oxford Dictionary as “deep love, respect, worship, veneration”, covers the nature and contents of these prayers.

The second genre of prayers discussed in this chapter are special prayers which I call prayers of aesthetic speech—glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and *zikr* (repetitive invocation of God’s name) in Christ Embassy and NASFAT, respectively. I call them aesthetic speech because in these prayers, the emphasis is on the sound of the prayers rather than complete sentences of ordinary language. These prayers are also practiced in both collective and private settings for the purpose of invoking or communicating with the divine through the medium of what is perceived as sacred sounds (glossolalia and the names of Allah).

The third and final genre of prayers discussed in the chapter are prayers of instrumentality, or instrumental prayers, which in Christ Embassy are known as affirmative prayers and in NASFAT simply as *du’a* (which means prayers.) This is because these prayers serve as instruments for actualising individual needs through their proclaimed unique spiritual potency and agency. I will analyse these three genres of prayers through the concepts derived from speech

act theory and semiotic ideologies, as well as the notion of sensational form so as to understand different potent powers and meta-level significations attributed to them and how they are understood to operate.

The chapter argues that prayers of adoration and prayers of aesthetic speech in Christ Embassy and NASFAT facilitate the process of mediation by orchestrating bodily experiences of affect which members recognised as a “divine touch” or “the presence of God”. Furthermore, the chapter also argues that prayers instrumentality in the two groups attempt to establish communication with the Divine and achieve the desired goals through the performative power and semiotic systems ascribed to the language of prayers.

### THEORIZING PRAYER

Edward Tylor is one of the earliest scholars to attempt to theorise prayer. However, his approach to prayer is rooted in the social evolutionism that characterised his entire study of religion. Tylor sees prayer as a desire that proceeds from the human spirit which is expressed verbally or non-verbally and directed toward the supernatural. In short, prayer is the address of personal spirit to personal spirit. Tylor suggests that this notion of prayer, which is found in “primitive culture”, has been modified in the process of civilisation into a more mechanical routine. He argues that “prayers, from being at first utterances as free and flexible as requests to a living patriarch or chief, stiffened into traditional formulas whose repetition required verbal accuracy, and whose nature practically assimilated more or less to that of charms” (Tylor 1873: 371). This social evolutionist perspective of Tylor could not be subjected to empirical observation as both aspects of prayers could still be found in the so-called higher modern religions. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, people practice prayers as a heartfelt desire or request toward God as well as structured or mechanical prayers that require verbal accuracy.

Marcel Mauss diverges from Edward Tylor's individualistic and psychological approach to prayer. Mauss conceived prayer as an aspect of social reality that performs functions similar to social institutions. According to Mauss, prayer is a considerable set of acts that shows the characteristics of a particular religious rite (2003:35). Mauss bases his argument on the ground that prayer is an efficacious act as well as an effort of physical and moral energy in order to produce certain effects. In another instance Mauss suggests that prayer is a means of acting on sacred beings, which are influenced and changed by prayer (2003:37). In line with the argument of Mauss, this chapter discusses certain kinds of prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT which are performed as regular religious rites that invoke the divine for the purpose of acquiring spiritual or material favour.

In her study of Navajo prayer Gladys Reichard (1988) proposes a symbolic and structural approach to the interpretation of prayer. She used alphanumeric designations to chart rhythmic word and phrase patterns in order to identify a structural division that corresponds to her interpretation of the Navajo prayer. As a result, Reichard made several distinctions in the form and content of the Navajo prayer. Reichard highlights distinctions such as invocation, benediction, and petition. At another point she identifies repetitive patterns such as address to the deity, the symbols of the deity, the behaviour of the deity, and the concern expressed by the deity. Finding repetitive patterns and structures in NASFAT and Christ Embassy will be helpful in revealing the similarities and differences in their performance of prayers.

Thomas Oberlies (2016) identifies prayer as an address, or appeal, to the gods or other supernatural beings, predicated on the possibility of direct human-god communication. This also implies a considerable overlap with hymns, ritual incantations, and devotional recitations. Oberlies further affirms that prayers may exhibit variable degrees of formality that apply both to written prayers that are highly formalised and conform to stylised and conventional patterns, and to prayers that involve action. According to Oberlies, prayer and

its language could be formulaic, repetitive, redundant, spontaneous, or non-spontaneous, and usually marked by meticulous precision. Many of the features of prayers, such as devotional recitations and repetitiveness mentioned by Oberlies, have appeared in the three genres of prayer discussed in this chapter.

## GENRES OF PRAYER IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

Prayer is at the centre of NASFAT's and Christ Embassy's religiosity and it forms the basis of most of their worship practices. The most important source of prayer in Christ Embassy is *Rhapsody of Reality*. *Rhapsody of Reality* is a daily devotional booklet written by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome that is published monthly. The booklet is available in 156 languages and distributed all over the world. It contains small chapters that centre on the principles of prosperity gospel<sup>56</sup> and the affirmative prayers for the day. It is expected that one read one chapter every day, preferably in the morning, and recite the prayer after reading. The book also contains a recommended Bible study for the day. Members of Christ Embassy believe that daily reading of the book and reciting the prayer nourish their spirit and help them remain steadfast as born again Christians. One member told me, "I see the *Rhapsody* as my little angel, because I don't miss reading it and reciting the prayers. Whenever I miss it for one day I will see the difference in my affairs of that day" (Interview, 24.2.2014, Abuja).

On the 3 November 2013, I attended the Sunday worship service at the central branch of Christ Embassy located at Durimi, Area 2, Abuja. In the middle of the service the pastor said it was time to read from the *Rhapsody of Reality*. A well-dressed woman went to the altar to read the chapter for the day and recite the prayer. But before she began the pastor said,

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<sup>56</sup> The concept of prosperity gospel will be discussed in the next chapter.

It seems to me that some people did not buy the Rhapsody for this month. Those who bought the Rhapsody should raise it up and let me see how many people have it. The number is not encouraging. Where are the ushers? Come and distribute to all those who do not have it. Remember daily reading of the Rhapsody is integral part of your spiritual growth. Even the author of the booklet, our man of God Pastor Chris, reads the Rhapsody daily. So, it is a must for members of this church to be buying and reading the Rhapsody.

One of the ushers, a young woman, handed me a copy of the book and asked me to pay 100 naira. The pastor was using subtle psychological coercion to impel people to buy the book. During my session at the foundation class pastor Adewale explained to me in detail the meaning and concept of prayer in Christ Embassy.<sup>57</sup> As he was talking he was partly reading from a booklet about prayer authored by Pastor Chris. He said prayer is not just a means of religious communication with God; it is a form of fellowship. He continued,

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57 Even though the practices and meaning of prayer in Christ Embassy are remarkably similar to those of other Pentecostals, slight differences still exist. For instance, the popular Lord's Prayer ("Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come..."), recited by most Christians, is not recognized by Christ Embassy. According to the teaching of Pastor Chris, this prayer belongs to the people of the Old Testament. Therefore it would not work today since the old contract has ended. According to Pastor Chris, at the time Jesus taught his disciples to pray this prayer the Kingdom had not yet come. So, he prayed, "Thy Kingdom come". But we are in his new kingdom now. When Jesus taught his disciples this prayer before his death, his name was never used. In the New Testament we are commanded to pray in his name. (Oyakhilome 2012:7)



Fig. 5.1 A photographed copy of Rhapsody of Reality.

Prayer is more than merely talking to God. Many people pray and yet many do not, but among the many that pray, a lot do not have answers to their prayers because they pray without understanding. We need to understand that when we pray we are making contact with the divine essence within us. This contact strengthens our relationship with God. Prayer is one sure way of getting oneself focused on God and getting an anointing in his presence. Jesus said in Luke 18:1 that we should pray always and not give up. Through prayers we can actually change things. We can change the course of our lives and our circumstances. We can change things in our homes, our jobs, our finances and our bodies. We can even change things in the lives of other people, things in our schools, our cities, our nation and the world. Prayer helps to season our spirits as a dependable receptacle for God's Spirit and power. Then we can connect to his ideas, visions and leadings more easily in order to change the world.

Two tropes about prayer could be discerned in these remarks. Prayer has been portrayed as a medium of making contact with God through unlocking of human spirit to receive the power or anointing of God. Adewale also conceived prayer as a medium of making changes in the life of believers. It can be argued that prayer draws the power of God through communion with him for the purpose of achieving pragmatic effects.

NASFAT's constitution clearly states that the "efficacy of prayer" is part of the shared values of the organisation. In fact the prime motive of the establishment of NASFAT is to provide forum where Muslims would gather and pray together. The NASFAT prayer book is the most important source of prayers in NASFAT Sunday worship service. The book was written by NASFAT chief Missioner Alhaji Akingbode. It contains prayer verses from the Qur'an, prayers taught by Prophet Muhammad, ninety-nine sacred names of Allah and different kinds of *salat* which are praises and prayers to the Prophet. The book contains Arabic text, transliteration, English and Yoruba translations. The first time I attended the Sunday service in NASFAT, I sat at the back watching the congregation melodiously reciting the prayer book. As I was sitting a man approached me. He held a number of books and said to me, "Where is your prayer book?" I responded, "I do not have one." He handed one of the books to me and said it cost only 200 naira. I gave him the money and he moved on, looking for congregants who did not yet possess the book.

Clearly in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT the leaders are taking extra measures to make sure that people buy the prayer books. The NASFAT prayer book is different from Rhapsody of Reality in the sense that the content remains the same for long time before a new edition is published with usually minor changes. But a new version of Rhapsody of Reality comes out monthly with a new set of lessons and prayers. The two books provide a canon of prayers and members are expected to recite them for spiritual benefits.

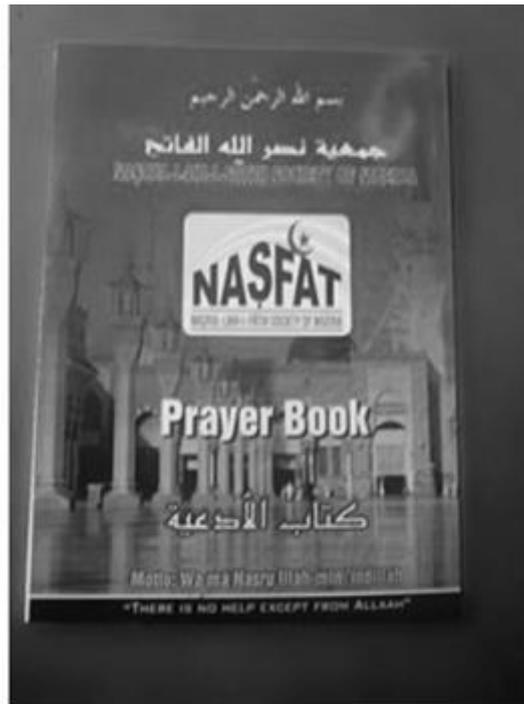


Fig. 5.2 A photographed copy of NASFAT Prayer Book.

In the Friday prayer *khutba* I attended on 7 February 2014, the imam discussed the subject of prayer. According to the imam, the term *du'a* is derived from the Arabic verb meaning 'to supplicate' or 'to call upon'. In the Islamic sense it means the act of remembering Allah and calling upon Him. Prayer is fundamentally an expression of submission and faith to God and of one's neediness. According to the imam, there are two broad categories of prayer in Islam. The first category is the prayer of worship or *du'a al-'ibadah* in Arabic. Every single act of worship in Islam consists of this type of prayer. The prime example of prayer of worship is the five daily ritual prayers.

The imam maintained that the ritual prayer (*salat*) is the essential constituent of Islamic worship. Ritual prayer is the second among the five pillars of Islam and it is compulsory for every mature Muslim. It is a ritual that incorporates bodily and mental faculties. *Salat* has many rules that guide its

performance and one of the most important is adherence to the prescribed times. More than that, the observance of the ritual prayer forms the framework of each Muslim's day, from the pre-dawn morning prayer to the night prayer that precedes sleep. In this ritual, the worshiper starts standing, bows, prostrates, and concludes while sitting on the ground. During each posture, the worshiper recites or reads certain verses, phrases, and prayers.

The imam continued that the second broad category is prayer of supplication, which is called *du'a al-mas'alah* in Arabic. In this type of prayer one asks for the fulfillment of a need, or removal of affliction. According to the Imam, Muslims are allowed to say a prayer of supplication in their own words using their own local language. In addition, there are numerous prayers of supplications recommended by Hadith of the Prophet and verses of the Holy Quran. He quoted a verse of the Quran, which says: "*When My servants ask about Me, I am indeed close to them. I listen to the prayer of every supplicant, when he calls on Me. Let them also, with a will, listen to My call, and believe in Me, so that they may walk in the right way*" (Qur'an 2:186). The imam further reiterated that *du'a* should be made with attentive heart and he quoted the Hadith of the prophet which says, "make *du'a* to Allah in a state that you are certain that your *du'a* will be responded to, and know that Allah does not respond to a *du'a* that originates from a negligent, inattentive heart". The imam maintained that this Hadith is teaching Muslims to be absolutely engrossed in their prayer of supplication and make sure that whatever they are saying is coming from the depth of their heart. He continued that Muslims should have total certainty that their prayers have been heard and answered by God.

#### PRAYER OF ADORATION: THE PRACTICES OF SACRED EMOTION

"Because God is a mighty being, whenever I feel his presence during worship songs, I feel intense emotion coupled with goose bumps all over my body" (Interview, 13.2.2014, Abuja). This is a statement from one of my interlocutors

Sade Patrick, a 29-year-old self-employed woman in Christ Embassy, expressing her feeling about the prayer of adoration. Prayers of adoration are performed as a form of worship to God and show veneration to religious figures such as Jesus and Muhammad. Adoration prayers exalt, esteem, bless, and honour God. They also describe his character as holiness, goodness, love, mercy, power, grace, and dominion in a melodious and poetic language. Praise and worship songs in Christ Embassy and melodious recitation of the NASFAT Prayer book constitute prayer of adoration in the two groups.

Prayers of adoration or praise and worship songs play a central role in the worship of Christ Embassy. The choir has its leaders who guide the group and instrumentalists such as drummers and pianists. Choir membership is free to all who have a forte for music. A choir member told me that as the choir is one of the most influential groups in the church, anyone who wants join has to be prepared for the responsibility of membership. She said this is the case because the devil pays particular attention to members of the choir and targets them because he was a member of the choir in heaven before his fall. Christ Embassy has about 80 different types of worship songs, and most of the old members memorise all the songs. Pastor Chris (2012:33) stated this about the worship songs:

When you worship God in spirit and in reality, there is union and drinking together of spirits. It is called the communion of the Holy Spirit. It is not just in our singing or in the words of our prayer, but in the communication and transportation that take place in the realm of the spirit. Worship transports you to lofty divine realms. This is why you feel enraptured as you worship sometimes; it is as though you are taken away from the earth realm into the warmth of God's spirit. You find yourself completely oblivious of everyone and everything around you as God's glorious presence envelopes you.

Worship services in Christ Embassy on Sundays and Wednesdays start with praise prayer songs that last for 30 minutes. During the singing people stand up, lift their hands up, and sing with a full show of emotion and devotion.

Many close their eyes and gesticulate with their arms and faces. Pastor Chris (2012:35) expresses the meaning of lifting of hands during worship songs:

When you lift up your hands, it is not just a sign of worship; it is the most beautiful thing to behold when God's people lift their hands to him in worship. As you speak forth words of praise to God and lift up your hands to heaven, you are sending incense of a sweet-smelling savor to him. The lifting of your hands has taken the place of the burnt sacrifice, and your prayers, the burning incense.

Lifting of hands in this explanation is a practice of symbolically carrying the substances of the worship to heaven. It is a symbolic means through which the essence of devotion will reach God. In this sense, lifting of hands during worship songs highlights that prayer is not restricted to the spoken words but also engages the human body in reaching out to the divine.

Some songs are sung with soft emotional music while others genres of songs are accompanied by disco music and people dance with jubilation in the church. They usually seem to be overwhelmed with the emotion of joy and euphoria. The songs contain praises to God and Jesus and expression of love and devotion. Below are the examples of the songs.

*Awesome God*

Holy are you, Lord

All creation call you God

Worthy is your name

We worship your majesty

Awesome God, how great thou art

You are God, mighty are your miracles

We stand in awe of your holy name

Lord we bow and worship You

King of kings, Lord of lords, everlasting king Saviour redeemer, soon coming  
king

King of kings, Lord of lords, everlasting king Saviour redeemer, soon coming  
king

Awesome, awesome, you are awesome

Awesome, awesome, you are awesome

Awesome is your name.

*Jesus I Love You*

Jesus, I love You

Shepherd of my Soul Jesus, I love You

Your presence makes me whole

Your presence is comforting

Is healing

Your embrace calms my heart

Your presence is power

Is peace of mind

Your joy fills my heart

There is no place

Like Your presence my Lord

I love you I Love you I love you

I love you I love you I love you

Jesus Jesus

In my interviews with several members of Christ Embassy, most of them asserted that the worship songs were the cornerstone of their spirituality. This is because they claimed that the songs keep them close to God and sustain

their faith and help them remain in touch with his presence. They often mention that when they are singing, they feel what the lyrics of the songs say and this invokes the ‘real presence’ of the Holy Spirit in their body. The songs also remind them of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sin of humankind and how fortunate they are to be saved from sin and eternal death by the atonement of Christ.



Fig. 5.3 NASFAT’s imams during the Ramadan *Lailatul qadr* (2014) prayer at the Central Branch Utako, Abuja.

The most important aspect of NASFAT Sunday worship is the recitation of the prayer book, which is led by the Imam. It takes about one hour to finish the book. Below is example of English translation extract from NASFAT prayer book; while the prayers are presented in English translation, they are recited in Arabic.

Oh! Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord that provides for those in heaven and earth, the Lord we worship both in heaven and earth. Let us be steadfast in Islam. We cherish the prophets are protected from all distress. The distress experienced by those who have not come into contact with Islam. We are conscious of living unholy life for fear of

not meeting up with the teachings of the Prophet of Islam Muhammad (PBUH). Oh, Allah! You are my Lord; there is no deity except You. What Allah wishes will be, and what He does not wish will not be. And there is neither authority nor power but with Allah, the Most High, the Supreme in Glory. (56)

The recitation of the prayer book plays a paramount role in the devotional lives of the members. They recite it loudly with vigour and intensity. I noticed that some members have memorised the entire book. There is an outpouring of devotion during the recitation: some close their eyes with their heads and hands up, some members become very jittery. There was a time during the youth camp when the tempo of the recitation was so intense that two young women fainted, and they had to be taken out of the mosque. Afterwards, I asked one of the youth leaders what happened to the young women. He said, “It is called *jazabu*, it was the spirit of the *zikr* or invocation of God that descended on them.” This was the first time I heard such a statement; I think he wanted to say that the women were overwhelmed by the presence of God. He continued that sometimes it happened to him during the recitation that he would feel a strange cold permeate his body, but he usually resisted fainting. This practice can be described in the words of Gottschalla (2004:2) as a “sacred sound performance” because the prayers and the Qur'anic verses are taken as the sacred words that have the capacity to transform both the internal and external lives of the performers.

Remarkable similarities exist in the performance of adoration prayer in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. The two kinds of adoration prayer are highly structured religious performances designed for the purpose of cultivating closeness with the divine. In NASFAT the congregation is required to wear white robes, often with a small white cap. The leaders emphasise that white is the official dress code for the service. Thousands of worshippers sit close to each other chanting and praying in synchronized ways. In addition, the members of the choir in Christ Embassy wear special uniforms aesthetically

designed with conspicuous colour combinations. As Scheer (2012:211) notes, “other people's bodies are implicated in practice because viewing them induces feeling. These effects are stored in the habitus, which provides socially anchored responses to others”. The arrangement of bodies in uniform dress, engaged in embodied religious performances, generates affective relations among the participants. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT these practices are recorded with video cameras. In the big churches of Christ Embassy, the service is projected onto a big white screen on top of the stage. The appearance of larger than life, live images of the stage on to the big screens and amplifying the sound with public address systems reinforce the emotional impact of the religious performance.



Fig. 5.4 Recitation of NASFAT prayer book at Central Branch Utako, Abuja.

In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT prayers of adoration takes place in places of worship. In both the groups, Church and Mosque are houses of God because they harboured his presence. As places of worship and retreat,

religious buildings offer a spiritual experience to the wider community, where the clamour of urban life can melt away in a space designed to be used collectively and individually for an encounter with the divine.

Prayers of adoration express affection and praise in the form of melodious recitation in NASFAT and songs and music in Christ Embassy. The melody and music enhance the emotional touch of the prayers. Poetic invocation and glorification of God rendered in melody and music with emotional undertones can create a sense of the divine presence. Many members of the two groups told me about these highly emotional experiences during group worship. One of my interlocutors, a 34 years old male civil servant in Abuja from Christ Embassy, said the following about his experience of the worship songs:

My spirit leaps up, I don't know where I am, and I will just be singing and chanting. This singing in the group raises my spirit high. When you sing a worship song, you know, you feel well satisfied inside, knowing that the presence of God has been invoked. Worship songs are ways of saying, "God, do it because we cannot," or "God hear, take all the glory, take all the honour because you deserve it." Or, saying, "God, I thank you because I cannot keep quiet because you have done so much to me. I am calling to give you all the thanks." (Interview, 7.1.2014, Abuja)

When I asked another interlocutor, a 37-year-old male engineer in Abuja, about the impact of worship songs in his life, he stated as follows:

Not only has it changed my life, but I also discovered that the secret of songs is that when you are building your spiritual life, the word of God is the block; the worship songs are like cement that stuck the blocks together. Without songs, the word of God will not hold to you. You can forget it tomorrow. But through worshipping God, those songs stay. (Interview, 7.1.2014, Abuja)

One of the members of NASFAT had this to say about his experiences with NASFAT prayer book:

Whenever we start the recitation of NASFAT prayer book, I feel joy in my life. When we invoke the name of Allah and praise him, I feel his presence all around me. This practice increases fear of God in my heart and keeps me in God's remembrance constantly in my life. Recitation of the Prayer also increases love and respect to the messenger of Allah Prophet Muhammad. (Interview, 9.1.2014, Abuja)

The articulation of devotion, petition, invocation, veneration, and benediction to God through melodious recitation and worship songs arouse affective or emotional presence of God as expressed by these individuals.<sup>58</sup>The entire practice of this form of prayer can be described in the words of John Corrigan (2004: 16) as a “performance of emotion”. This is because the purpose of the worship service in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT is to glorify God and to feel his presence. Feeling the presence of God, according to my interlocutors, always comes with strong emotions. Scheer (2012:209) had this to say about emotional practices:

Access to emotion-as-practice—the bodily act of experience and expression—in historical sources or ethnographic work is achieved through and in connection with other doings and sayings on which emotion-as-practice is dependent and intertwined, such as speaking, gesturing, remembering, manipulating objects, and perceiving sounds, smells and spaces.

To invoke Reichard (1988) and Oberlies (2016), repetitive terms can be discerned in the two samples of Christ Embassy and NASFAT mentioned above, with the appearance of the terms mighty, glory, majesty, awesome, and throne in the songs and prayer excerpts. Many of my interlocutors told me that they feel what they are saying in these performances of worship or prayer.

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58 Because of the intra-religious diversity it cannot be said that these similarities can be applied to all Muslims and Christians groups in the country. Christians Pentecostals engage much more in hyper-emotional practices than the historical churches. Among the Muslim groups in urban Nigeria, emotional prayers are spearheaded by prayer groups which Ebenezer Obadare called Charismatic Muslims.

They affirmed that they had these experiences as a result of addressing God in a poetic language with strong words coupled with the emotional melody. They feel the power and glory of God as they recite or sing the prayer.

The emotion generated in the practices of adoration prayer is reinforced in a situation similar to the group dynamics effect. This is because emotional practices in most cases are enshrined in a social setting. It is noteworthy that “other people's bodies are implicated in practice because viewing them induces feeling. These effects are stored in the habitus, which provides socially anchored responses to others” (Scheer 2012:211). It is apparent in prayers of adoration in Christ Embassy and NASFAT that emotion is distributed among the individuals. A dramatic exhibition of emotion is encouraged in the worship services of the two groups. Therefore, some people display intense emotions in the service to the extent of falling to the ground, particularly in Christ Embassy. This display of hyper-emotion becomes contagious and affects other members. It can be argued that these group performances and experiences, as well as the exhibition of emotions which accompany divine presence, cannot be separated. Prayers of adoration express affection and praise in the form of melodious recitation in NASFAT, on the one hand, and songs and music in Christ Embassy, on the other. The melody and music enhance the affective and emotional touch of the prayers. Poetic invocation and glorification of God rendered in melody and music with emotional undertones create the sense of a divine presence. It is apparent that music (in Christ Embassy) and melody (in NASFAT) help generate affect during worship. Shouse (2015: 1) argues that “music provides perhaps the clearest example of how the intensity of the impingement of sensations on the body can mean more to people than meaning itself”. It can therefore be argued that it is emotion that facilitates the role of the prayers of adoration as religious media that connect believers with the transcendental realm.

## GLOSSOLALIA AND ZIKR: PRAYERS OF AESTHETIC SPEECH

*GLOSSOLALIA*

Glossolalia, which is also called speaking in tongues, is a religious practice characterised by the fluid utterances of speech-like syllables that do not have any readily understandable meaning, which is believed to be a divine language unknown to the speaker (Martin 1995). Glossolalia occurs most often as an ecstatic utterance in religious groups, which provoke trance or religious ecstasies during their usual rituals (Koi 2005:1). Many linguists have become fascinated with the phenomenon of glossolalia and produce plenty of works on the subject. William J. Samarin (1972:82) argues that glossolalia consists of syllables made up of consonants and vowels taken from the speaker's native language or a foreign language known to him, with much repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. However, the syllable stream does not fall into words.

Praying in tongues is one of the markers of Pentecostal Christianity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:48).<sup>59</sup> Glossolalia, according to the teaching of Christ

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59 Most of the mainline churches in Nigeria disapprove of speaking in tongues as practiced by Pentecostal. Pastor Clement Haruna of ECWA Church Abuja criticizes speaking in tongues particularly as practiced in Christ Embassy. He said that most churches tell members to arise and begin to pray. But in Christ Embassy, the person ministering said, "Arise and begin to speak in tongues. This doctrinal issue or interpretation is quite different from other Pentecostal or Orthodox doctrines. Most Pentecostal churches believe that speaking in tongues is a gift. The Bible however, states that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are a promise including the gift of speaking in tongues to those who repent and receive Christ in faith. God had given some gifts of healing, teaching tongues, etc. not all have the gift of tongues, not all have the gift of healing. The doctrine that all should rise and in speak in tongues is a "church" doctrine peculiar to Christ Embassy and not a Biblical doctrine. Pastor Clement affirmed that it is a false doctrine to claim that everybody has a right to speak in tongues as evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, it is a wrong teaching to attempt to inspire people to speak in tongues or to make those who cannot speak to feel unworthy. It is the discretion of God to confer the gift of tongues to people he has chosen. Clement continued that in the ECWA church they do not ask people to speak in tongues or teach that baptism of the Holy Spirit must be followed by speaking in tongues. If an individual is given such a gift, it is his personal experience and he does not need to share it with the congregation.

Embassy, is a spiritual gift granted by the Holy Spirit to born again Christians. Moreover, it is regarded as the language of angels or simply unknown language. In every congregational service in Christ Embassy, there is a special session for speaking in tongues. On many occasions when someone is called on stage to lead prayer, he prays in tongues, and when the pastor is preaching, and it becomes very intense, he begins to speak in tongues. Pastor Chris (2012:31) had this to say about speaking in tongues:

We speak divine mysteries and alter destinies through this supernatural effusion. Even though man is a spirit he does not dwell physically in the realm of the spirit. He lives on earth and relates with the material world. Yet there are certain things we cannot communicate or express with the earthly languages we have learnt. This is the reason God imparted on us the ability to speak in other tongues so we can have the right language to communicate with God. You must realize that there are not enough words in human vocabulary to express ourselves to God. It does not matter how many earthly languages you can speak, you still won't have vocabulary to express yourself to him because in the realm of the spirit, there are things we cannot communicate with all of the languages of the world. This is why it is absolutely necessary for a Christian to speak in tongues.

While other Protestants view glossolalia as a spiritual gift that is given to the selected few, Christ Embassy sees it as a natural right of every born again believer. Remi Moses, one of the teachers of the foundation class, told me that speaking in tongues occurs when the Holy Spirit descends on the individual believer. He continued that it was a one of the most effective and superior forms of prayer. This is because while speaking in tongues the Holy Spirit identifies a pressing problem of the speaker and prays to God the Father on the person's behalf in the unknown language. A person who engages in speaking in tongues many not know the problem identified by the Holy Spirit and the problem would be solved without his/her knowledge.

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Is glossolalia a learned skill or something acquired intuitively through inexplicable circumstances? Many scholars who observe the phenomenon see it as a learned skill. According to Samarin (1972:73), glossolalia is a learned skill, “yet not learned as foreign languages are learned. The tongue speaker is the product of considerable instruction, whether or not glossolalia comes suddenly or gradually”. Peer pressure in Christ Embassy prompts many new members to learn how to speak in tongues. As a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and born again status, new members desire to have this concrete evidence of this novel spiritual status. In my interactions with members of Christ Embassy, I witnessed the struggle of some members to acquire the ability to speak in tongues. I noticed that the newcomers to the church attempt to learn glossolalia through mimicry and internalising set of sequences or patterns of randomly organised syllables. I observed how one member called Chidi Okafor learned his skill through practicing with a few syllables which he apparently imitated from Pastor Chris. But gradually he increased his syllables and achieved proficiency in a short period.

Newcomers to the church of Christ Embassy are inspired to speak in tongues in the foundation class after the lesson about the Holy Spirit. I witnessed the event after we concluded the second class. The two teachers asked the students to rise; they said that they will pray for them in tongues. If they become filled with the spirit they will touch the students and the student should utter whatever comes from their mouth if they succeeded they should continue but if they failed to take up, they should pray at home and ask the Holy Spirit to give them this ability. While praying, they should always try to utter something different from the known language. Instead of uttering anything that comes to their minds, new members try to imitate the tongues of the instructors. I observed that most members learned to speak in tongues through this kind of imitation.

Many new members that I observed in Christ Embassy experienced frustration when they failed to speak in tongues. When they finally overcome

the hurdles and achieve fluency, they become overwhelmed with happiness and a sense of release because they had tangible evidence that they are born again. Sarah Omale is a very dedicated member of the church. She said for months she had desired to speak in tongues, but it kept on eluding her. She reached the point where she was feeling spiritually inadequate because some people that came to the church before her were able to learn quickly. She told me that her frustration was due to the fact she believed she is a born again person and, therefore, wondered why she could not speak in tongues. Her frustration ended after she gradually acquired fluency through imitation of others. When she achieved full mastery of tongues, it became an exhilarating experience. She said her entire body responded; she was feeling an intense sensation flowing through her. Even though she could not understand what she was saying, she knew she was communicating with God. That experience was a turning point in her life; she became more committed and more devoted to God.

Stephen Oholi had a similar experience to Sarah, and he narrated to me his story of struggling to with speaking in tongues as follows.

I was raised as a member of Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) which is one of the historical as well the most institutionalised church [es] in the country. But when I finished secondary school I became very interested in Pentecostal movements due to the influence of friends. After I had read many books written by American revivalists, I felt strong yearning to experience the Holy Spirit and decided to join a Pentecostal Church. When I started attending the church, we were told that one of the concrete evidence of baptism with the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues. For a couple of weeks in the church, I could not speak in tongues, and I envied the people who could do it. I felt a strong desire to speak in tongues in order to communicate with God through the sacred language. I joined the prayer group that teaches people how to speak in tongues. We would hold each other's hands and the older members of the church fervently prayed in tongues and asked us to attempt speaking by uttering whatever comes from our mouth. Despite all this participation I could not speak in tongues until one day when I was praying in my room alone in the middle of the night. I was praying so intensely, and I put all my mind and effort into speaking in tongues that it came from

nowhere. I found myself voicing out unknown and unintelligible syllables and at the same time overwhelmed by the emotion of presence of God. Since that time, it becomes very easy for me to speak in tongues whenever I desire to do it. When I am in tongues, it is my highest being in connection with the God. (Interview,12.1.2014, Abuja)

Glossolalia is a religious ‘sound form’ with intonation and rhythm, produced as a special prayer performance. But glossolalia differs from other prayers in the sense that it lacks communicative or intelligible meaning of ordinary language. Glossolalia cannot be understood by the speaker or listener since it is angelic language that proceeds from human tongues through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Glossolalia is one of the prime examples of religious mediation. This is because the body of person praying in tongues is transformed into the medium of the divine spirit. Weiss (1989:118) expresses a similar view on the function of glossolalia:

Glossolalia is a language where the relation between sound and meaning break down; it is the realm of pure sound, the manifestation of language in the realm of its pure materiality. But this is not to say that glossolalic expressions are meaningless; rather, their meaning is a result of non-linguistic functions, of performative, dramatic contextual usage.

The expression of divine language through the medium of human tongues depends on the peculiar glossolalic use of speech utterances.<sup>60</sup>The

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60 Weiss (2012: 119) illustrates how the absence of subject and object and the absence of temporal reference lend themselves to a different mode of signification in Pentecostal circle. He frames his argument in the following way. “All ordinary language entails the determination of the speaking subject, by means of deictic, as a central feature of discourse (i.e. by using by using the linguistic shifters whose reference changes with every change of speaking subject; e.g. I, here, there, now, etc.). Glossolalic utterances, to the contrary, permit no differentiation between the subject of the utterance and the subject of the statement, no real determination of the subject. It is for this very reason such speech acts may be deemed of divine inspiration: if the subject cannot be located as a function of the enunciation, then the

performance of glossolalia involves the pre-discursive expression of affective experience. This is because both glossolalic expression and the affect it generates occur “prior to explicit language categorisation” (Knudsen and Stage 2014:19). Glossolalia itself remains at a pre-discursive state since it is a sound form that lacks the communicative or intelligible meaning of ordinary language. Members of Christ Embassy believe that the sound of glossolalia is evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the human body. The bodily sensation generated by the performance of glossolalia corresponds to Massumi’s (1987:16) description of affect as “pre-personal intensity”, since the experience is subjected fully to the influence or possession of the Holy Spirit.

### *ZIKR*

Comparing *zikr* and glossolalia is like comparing an apple and an orange. In this section I do not claim that *zikr* is comparable to glossolalia in the sense of sharing similarities in structure and meaning. I am only interested here in the act of devotion or prayer that does not involve linguistic communication, but rather depends on spiritual potency of the uttering sounds. Glossolalia here is compared with the type of *zikr* that involves repetition of one name of Allah where the rapid repetition causes the blurring of the proper sound of the word. *Zikr* in Arabic means remembrance (of Allah), it is a devotional practice in which a believer chants one of the 99 attributes of God or short phrases silently or aloud. A verse of the Qur’an says, “Verily, the Muslims (those who submit to Allah in Islam) ... and the men and the women who remember Allah much with their hearts and tongues. Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward” (33:35). *Zikr* can be performed melodiously in a group or privately by individuals in the form of chanting. In NASFAT, both group and

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origin of the enunciation cannot be linguistically determined. The speaker escapes the ‘circuit of discourse’ by giving voice to an absolute statement”.

individual chanting is accepted and performed. The NASFAT<sup>61</sup> prayer book contains different names of Allah that are melodiously chanted during worship services. On some occasions, when the Imam was leading the melodious recitation of the NASFAT prayer book and he came to the point where one of the names of Allah was mentioned, he would turn it into *zīkr* and chant it with the congregation melodiously for several minutes before he moved on. For instance, the congregation would keep on repeating the name of Allah melodiously: “AllahAllahAllahAllahAllahAllah”. The chanting usually became highly emotional and was mirrored in bodily gestures. One of my interlocutors stated that “calling the sacred names of Allah [purifies] the heart from spiritual disease and also increases *taqwa* [or fear of God], and moves one close to Allah” (Interview, 13.3.2014). This is the reason that group invocations of the name of God generate affect that is interpreted as religious experience in NASFAT.

Glossolalia and *zīkr* resonate with each other in the sense that they are both forms of sacred aesthetic sound. *Zīkr*, like glossolalia, does not contain a language structure that communicates meaning. Members of NASFAT believe that the spiritual significance of *zīkr* is encapsulated in the sound of the attributes of God. *Zīkr* is not a prayer that demands the satisfaction of needs from God, but rather the sound that is embedded with spiritual potencies to invoke the presence of God. *Zīkr* is an instrument for generating divine presence that is usually experienced as affect in the body. Most of the members of NASFAT with whom I interacted told me that they felt happiness, joy, and a sense of accomplishment when they experienced the presence of God through the performance of *zīkr*. Sharafuddeen Shola, a 35 years old resident of Abuja, stated:

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61 Performances of *zīkr* in NASFAT are slightly different with the Sufis.

The 99 names of Allah describe different attributes of God such as *Ar-Rahman* the All-Compassionate, *Ar-Rahim* the All-Merciful, *Al-Aziz* the Victorious. Each name carries within the sound the power of that attribute. In addition, each attribute of God is also assigned with angels that possess the nature of that attribute. The moment one begins to utter one attribute, one will be instantly surrounded by the angels of that attribute to give one protection, peace and maximum contact with God. Whenever, life turns upside down and I became low in spirit, I practice *zikir* for one or two hours. This practice usually elevates my spirit and helps me experience the special tranquility that comes from the remembrance of Allah. In addition, when I am in need I chant a name of Allah that relates to my problem. For instance, if I am broke I chant *al-Mughni* (The Enricher) for hours, every day till my financial need has been solved. (Interview, 29.11.2013, Abuja)

Religious performances of glossolalia and *zikir* are embodied practices because they heavily engage the human senses and bodily movement.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, glossolalia and *zikir* could be placed within the framework of the notion of sensational form because they are regular embodied performances that generate emotion, which is interpreted as the presence of the divine in human body.

#### ‘I CLAIM IT IN THE NAME OF JESUS:’ INSTRUMENTAL PRAYER IN CHRIST EMBASSY

Joseph Nanfa is a civil servant and longtime member of Christ Embassy. I first met him at the University of Jos and we met again when I visited Christ Embassy in Abuja. One day in February 2014, we stood beside the road after the Sunday service. He noticed that I was staring at an attractive

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<sup>62</sup> Csordas (1994) sees embodiment as perceptual experience and as a mode of presence and engagement in the world. Religious performances of glossolalia and *zikir* incorporate the three elements of embodiment.

car that passed by. He asked me, “Did you like it?” I said, “Yes, it looks good.” He said, “Well, you can claim it.” I said, “How?” He replied:

In this church we have a belief that whatever you like, you do not need to beseech God with a weak voice to give you. You should engage in loud affirmative voice claiming that, that thing is yours. If you persist with unshakable faith that it is yours, it will manifest in the physical realm and become yours. Right now I also want a car even though I do not have enough money to buy one. But I am claiming it every morning to the extent now some people are asking about my car, or if they see me close to a car, they asked me when did you buy a car? This is a sign that the car has already manifested in the spirit realm and spiritually sensitive people are already seeing it. It is just a matter of time for it to appear in the physical world.

Up to the time I left, Abuja Joseph’s car had not manifested itself, but that did not change his conviction that the car is coming.

Speech act theory or performativity was developed by J.L. Austin in the early 1960s and is concerned with how speech performs an action. According to Austin (1962), performativity highlights how the words we use to express ourselves in right circumstances become a means by which we enact ourselves (1962: 16). According to Austin, the striking example of words and authoritative statement perform events: ‘I name this ship,’ or ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’. Austin shows that all utterances perform actions, even apparently constative ones, and he presents a three-level framework--locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary--to explain the process.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> A locution act is the performance of an utterance, and hence of a speech act. The locutionary act also refers to the ostensible meaning of speech expressions related to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance (Austin 1962). The illocutionary force of an utterance is the speaker's intention in producing that utterance. An illocutionary act is an instance of a culturally-defined speech act type, characterized by a particular illocutionary force. Austin (1962) indicates that a perlocutionary act is a speech act, which is centred at the level of its psychological outcomes, such as enlightening, persuading, inspiring convincing, scaring, or otherwise getting someone to do something. A perlocutionary act is in some sense external to the performance, and it can be considered, in a sense, as the product of

An instrumental prayer which is also called affirmative prayer in Christ Embassy is a form of prayer that focuses on a positive outcome rather than a negative situation. This prayer dwells on the desired state of the desired intention as if it has already happened rather than identifying the problem and then asking God for help to eliminate it. In Christ Embassy there is a belief that one can change things through one's words.<sup>64</sup> One can experience victory after victory, success after success, if one learns to value and practice speaking in line with God's words. They believe that the proper use of words is the easiest way of guaranteeing success, prosperity, health, peace, and progress.<sup>65</sup>

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the illocutionary act via the locutionary act. For this reason, when investigating perlocutionary acts, the effect on the hearer or reader is emphasized (101).

64 See Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) for more information about the power of the spoken words in contemporary Pentecostalism.

65 Many mainstream Christians contest this view that human speech has power of creation. Over the years I have heard many pastors criticizing Pentecostals for elevating themselves into little gods by investing on themselves power of creation. American Pastor Christopher Gregory aptly summarized this criticism in website The Prophetic News as follows: "There is a simple fact that every believer must acknowledge in their walk with Christ, and that is this, you and I, are not God. Nor are we little gods. Nor do we have the same power or ability to think and act and create like God. Even more so, neither do our words have the same power as Gods words. The simple fact is, man is a creation of God, made a little above the angels itself, without the ability nor power to imitate God in action or in deeds, or in this case – words. The truth is, our words are not on the same level as God almighty and have virtually no power within themselves. In other words, when we speak nothing happens, but when God speaks everything happens, because he's God and we're not. Yet there is a teaching which has gained prominence within the Charismatic/Pentecostal circles by suggesting that not only are we little gods, not only can we duplicate what God can do, we can equally speak things as a god and see those words literally transform nothing into something. It is called Positive Affirmation, or what is generally referred to by some as *the power within the tongue*. The belief is very simple, and very dangerous, but it goes something like this; a believer has a special need (money, health, career change, relationship, etc.) and they desire this with great fervor, but they don't know how to bring it to pass. The answer? Simply speak it into existence. Sounds farfetched right? Yet if the truth be told, there are millions of Christians within the Charismatic/Pentecostal circles who have bought into this lie that says if one desires to change their circumstances in life, all one has to do is simply speak it into being and it will come. The problem is that it never works".

Pastors of Christ Embassy regularly teach that God reveals himself through his words. However, that revelation alone would not change circumstances of life; it is the *Rhema* which means spoken or creative word.<sup>66</sup> They urge that prayer should consist of declarative language because words have the potential to materialise in the world and believers should declare that it is impossible for them to be sick, broke, or afflicted. If things are not going well at home, it is certainly the work of Satan, and born again Christians have the power to exercise dominion over him through affirmative prayer. This idea of Christ Embassy that words perform actions on the material world resonates with the concept of performativity. The ways and manners in which the utterance is constructed play a role in the effectiveness of the intended consequences of the speech. The concept of performativity is useful to better understand how they understand prayer. The following samples of prayers culled from *Rhapsody of Reality* (September 2013 edition) reveal performativity of their language.

Dear Father, I boldly declare that I live in joy, prosperity, health and peace continually. The blessings of the new creation, as revealed in your word, are fulfilled in my life today. The transcendent life of God and the supernatural effect of His righteousness are working vitally in my spirit, soul, and body. I experience growth development, progress, deliverance, prosperity, and health because I am walking in the reality of who I am in Christ, taking full advantage of His grace and awesome presence in my life. Glory to God!! The anointing, which I received of the Lord, abides in me forever; and through that anointing I am energized for productivity, and positioned for effectiveness! I take

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<sup>66</sup> According to the website biblestudy.org, the word *Rhema* is Greek in origin and is defined as an utterance. In the Bible, *Rhema* is many times translated as the word "word". It can be used to refer to Jesus Himself, the messages he gave, or the message about him. Its first appearance in the New Testament comes as part of Jesus' response to the devil's temptation that he turns stones into bread (Matthew 4:4). The second place it is found is in Jesus' response in Matthew 12 to some self-righteous religious leaders who stated he cast out demons by the power of Satan himself.

advantage of that anointing today, to bless my world and do exploits to the glory and praise of His Name, Amen.

The language of these prayers is unambiguously performative as they involve declarative and command phrases. The locutionary acts of speeches of these prayers are series of utterances that express varieties of claims, declarations, as well as various expressions of commands. The illocutionary force of the utterances in the prayers is the assumption that what one has declared and commanded already materialised. When a performer of the prayer said, *Dear Father, I boldly declare that I live in joy, prosperity, and health*, he believed that his words perform an action of materialising joy, prosperity, and health. Therefore, this prayer is performative because it acts in the world. The perlocutionary act or psychological effect of the prayer act on the performer, and it resides in his/her feeling of firm conviction that the prayer has been answered, which creates the sense of the presence of the desired states.

According to Austin, (1962) effectiveness of performative speech depends on the authority of the speaker. For example, the fulfilment of the act of saying, 'I pronounce you husband and wife' required a licensed minister before two people who are prepared to wed. In Christ Embassy, the authority of an individual believer to declare his desired state in prayer comes from using the phrase 'in the name of Jesus'. Pastor Chris (2004:35) affirms that "...we have the power of attorney to use the name of Jesus; He gave us the legal right to stand in His stead and act on His behalf". He further asserts that "when we speak or make declarations in the name of Jesus we are taking His place or standing in His stead as master over all things" (40). It is important to notice here that the phrase 'in the name of Jesus' is not a magical phrase that performs a miracle; it is also not invoking the non-present spiritual agent like Jesus himself to act as a medium between the believer and God. What the phrase does is to transform and elevate the ontological status of the prayer performer into the superior position of Jesus himself during the time of prayer. As the

authoritative declaration of a minister concluded the bond of marriage between a couple, members of Christ Embassy believe that whatever they declared in their prayer is bound to materialise because they have assumed the authority of Jesus during the moment of prayer.<sup>67</sup>

Affirmative prayer diverges from the traditional way of praying in the mainline churches where believers feel small and insignificant in front of the divine. The most significant point of divergence is that here it is the performer of the prayer who engages in the creation of an object of his needs through his words as opposed to imploring God to gratify the needs through his powers. Members of Christ Embassy approach God in their prayer with self-confidence and a sense of authority. The believers do not humbly beseech God for any favour as in the regular prayer of supplication in the mainline churches. Most historical churches do not recognise this form of prayer and regard it as an infringement on the sovereignty of God.

Another important difference with traditional forms of praying is that affirmative prayers work in reverse as opposed to the prayer of supplications which request God to do something. Here it is assumed that the desired situations have already been gratified. For instance, *I thank you, dear heavenly Father, for granting me the spirit of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, which enables me to deal excellently in the affairs of life.* This prayer starts with thanking God for already granting the desired results of the request. One of the most important criteria for the efficacy of affirmative prayer in Christ Embassy is absolute conviction that the prayer has been answered. Thanking God is a way of expressing that conviction. In one of his preachings, Pastor Chris stated that one of the greatest problems among Christians is the

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67 In Christ Embassy, due to the power of human speech to manifest in the material world, negative words are not to be uttered by believers. But even when one said something negative mistakenly, one can use a formula "greater is he who is in me than he who is in the world" to erase the negative spiritual effect of the uttered word. I discuss this issue in more detail in the next chapter on preaching.

prevalence of unanswered prayers. He identified the source of the problem as the weak conviction on the part of the believers. He told the audience that as soon as they finished praying they should immediately burst into jubilation that their prayer has been answered. It is this conviction that makes the affirmative speech of the prayers more effective. What constitutes the structure and form of affirmative prayer is a declarative statement, emphasising the end result, coupled with absolute conviction on the gratification of the prayer. These three elements constitute the formula in which all wishes of the believers must be expressed.

#### IN PRAYERS THERE IS POWER: THE PRACTICE OF INSTRUMENTAL PRAYERS IN NASFAT

Each Sunday chief imam of Abuja central branch gives to the congregation a prayer for solution to different personal problems such as health, finance, or employment. On 30 September 2015, the Chief Imam of the branch gave a prayer for couples who could not bear children. He said whoever has this problem should recite Surah *Fatiha* and verse Q25:74 seven times after each morning and night prayer for seven days. After the seven days, the person should give *sadaqa* of 50 naira note to a baby carried by its mother in the street. The imam said youth should prepare because next week he would give special prayers for those who are looking for employment.

This form of prayer is seldom practiced by members of Izala and Salafi groups in northern Nigeria except if the prayer instructions come from Hadith. Sufis apply this kind of prayer in their daily life but their leaders rarely share them with the public. They take it as a secret property to be shared only to selected individuals. But NASFAT leaders, together with some authors, share these forms of prayers with the Muslim public, thereby removing the wall of secrecy which Sufis build around them.

Another source of instrumental prayers in NASFAT are a series of booklets distributed on Sundays that present varieties of instrumental prayers for solving problems or achieving good things in life. A 25 years old interlocutor in NASFAT named Shola Tunde showed me an instrumental prayer book written by Sheikh Muddathir Ajaliye. The book contains prayers for breaking the yoke of barrenness, finding a life partner, taming delinquent children, achieving success in examination, finding employment opportunities, gaining job security, having luck after job interview, offering prayer against transfer from safe to dangerous places for employees, and offering prayer for curing health conditions that defy medical solution. I had a conversation with one of the leaders, Yusuf Kabir, about his view on these genres of prayers. He told me that he has a firm conviction about the efficacy of Islamic prayers, and he practiced them regularly. He affirmed that he got tremendous knowledge of prayers from the books of Sheikh Muddathir Ajileye, who is one of the most prolific writers of prayer books in the southwest. He continued that this Sheikh teaches people about the evil of this world and the ways of countering them through prayers. According to Kabir, many people live in constant fear of the 'powers of darkness,' because they believe that these forces cause misery and destruction to human life. He said people nowadays have devised various means of overcoming evil forces by wearing an amulet, visiting spiritualists, or drinking a magical potion for protection against such invisible dark forces. Kabir continued:

Islam affirms the real existence of satanic and demonic forces and their powers. But at the same time, Islam has provided Muslims with means to protect themselves from evil forces. Through confidence and trust in Allah coupled with fervent prayers, the powers of darkness can be defeated. There is power in the name of Allah, and one must have faith in him wholeheartedly before one can experience his power and liberation. With his name every form of evil can be overcome. (Interview, 22.12.2013)

These words show a remarkable resonance with Pentecostal rhetoric about the invisible world with its evil denizens. If one supplants the name 'Allah' with 'Jesus', this discourse could be attributed to any Pentecostal pastor in Nigeria. Both Christianity and Islam have the notion of the dark forces of the invisible realm, but the style in which this idea is articulated here reveals a Pentecostal influence on the speaker. The statement that there is power in the name of Allah invokes the Pentecostal statement of 'power in the name of Jesus'. Even though Muslims revere the names of Allah and use them in different forms of prayer, they still seldom use the statement that there is 'power in the name of Allah'. According to Kabir, there are many special Islamic prayers that can be utilised for all kinds of problems.

Among the Qur'anic chapters, Surah Ya-Sin provides the most plentiful and powerful prayer.<sup>68</sup> Many Islamic scholars have recognized the super efficacy of Surah Ya-Sin. For anyone who knows the complete secret of the *surah*, the sky is his limit. The Prophet said that Ya-Sin was the heart of the Qur'an. Supplication to Allah with the *surah* is highly rewarding and meritorious. (Interview, 13.12.2013, Abuja)

Kabir described some of the applications of Ya-Sin, which he claimed to apply with practical results on so many occasions in his life.

For seeking good employment recite Surah Ya-Sin once and in each verse of the *surah* recite Surah Fatihah (Q1:1-7) once. This process should be repeated after each five daily obligatory prayers with fasting for seven days and with intention. Follow up with *sadaqa* after the seven days. For overcoming evil plans of the enemies, Surah Ya-Sin and at each seven *mubina* of the *surah* recite the following verse, Q4:45, once for seven days as follows: *Allah has full knowledge of your enemies: Allah is enough for a protector, and Allah is sufficient for [a] Helper*. After the seven days, one should make *sadaqa* with something sweet to young children. These are just a few examples of

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68 Surah Yasin is the 36th *surah* of the Quran. It has 83 verses. The theme of the *surah* dwells mainly on the sovereignty and the unlimited power of God.

numerous applications of Surah Ya-Sin. (Interview, 13.12.2013, Abuja)

Kabir concluded that that it is because of the importance of Surah Ya-sin that it is recited every Sunday as the final act in the NASFAT's worship service. He added that the Surah Ya-Sin is the only chapter that is written in the NASFAT prayer book in its entirety.

Some Muslims in northern Nigeria, particularly from Sufi orders, believe that Surah Yasin has magical potency that can be used to harm others. *Zan ja maka Yasin* is a common Hausa saying in northern Nigeria, meaning 'I will recite Yasin for you'. When somebody says this to his enemies, one means he is going to harm the enemy with the magical power of Surah Yasin. In northern Nigeria people of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, are famous for their knowledge of the semi-magical formulas of Surah Yasin. As a result believers in the magical power of Yasin fear their *mallams* who specialise in such formulas. And many go to the city to seek for solutions when they are facing serious problems that involve powerful opponents or seeming insurmountable challenges. A friend told me that people circulate messages on WhatsApp messenger that members of Shi'ite group are reciting Surah Yasin to the President Muhammadu Buhari to revenge the loss of lives they suffered in their clash with the Nigerian army and subsequent incarceration of their leaders in December 2015. As a result mainstream Sunni Muslims are encouraged to recite Surah Ahzab (Q25:5) to protect the President from the harm of Yasin. This application of Surah-Yasin is quite similar to the imprecatory prayer<sup>69</sup> of Pentecostals, which they use to shout fire to the enemies and forces of darkness.<sup>70</sup>

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69 See Asamoah-Gyadu(2013).

70 During my fieldwork period in Abuja I heard my landlady engaging in a serious imprecatory prayer against her business rivals who conspired for her downfall. She

## SEMIOTIC IDEOLOGIES, SENSATIONAL FORMS AND THE FUNCTIONS OF INSTRUMENTAL PRAYERS

The performativity of Christ Embassy's instrumental prayer speeches highlights how prayer is understood to perform actions in the material world. However, since the prayer is fundamentally directed at the spiritual world, we need to examine higher functions ascribed to the prayers of instrumentality speeches and their perceived effect on nonmaterial reality. Understanding the ascribed semiotic functions of the instrumental prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT requires examining their semiotic ideologies. Webb Keane (2003:11) writes:

By semiotic ideology I mean basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth. The distinction between natural and non-natural meanings does not apply in the same ways for all people because (among other things) different ontologies (what is 'natural'?) underwrite different sets of possible signs (what intentional agent might turn out to lie behind a 'non-natural sign'?).

Instrumental prayers in Christ Embassy are imputed with spiritual agency and different forms of significations. For instance, consider the semiotic analysis of prayer expression: *I boldly declare that I live in prosperity and health*. The speaker in this prayer is stating that he or she lives in a particular state or condition characterised by prosperity and health. These circumstances

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spent hours in the middle of the night calling for the death of her rivals. She was invoking the wrath and fire of God upon them.

are described by signifier of 'prosperity', which denotes a state of thriving and flourishing material abundance, especially in a financial respect. And the signifier 'health' denotes a general condition of the body or mind in relation to the absence of illnesses, injuries, or impairments. However, the relationship between signs (words) and their referents (desired objects) in Christ Embassy's affirmative prayers assumed a radically different mode of signification than the one describe above. The signifiers (words such as prosperity) in this respect are not restricted to referring or standing for particular denotation or state of prosperity or wellbeing; instead, the signifiers call their referents into existence from the spiritual world. For instance, uttering of 'prosperity' and 'health' goes beyond mere signifying certain conditions but rather creating those conditions. In this form of prayer, words have the power of creation because they are imputed with a spiritual agency which grants them a special ontological status that links them with the invisible realm. The process of creation begins in the invisible realm and remains in latent condition there until right time for materialisation in the physical plane. Pastor Chris (2005:7) explains the mechanics of this process:

When we pray, we make tremendous power available, dynamic in its working, causing changes in our favor. Certain prayer sessions are specially designed by the Lord to help straight [en] things out for us in the spirit-realm regarding our immediate or later future as individuals, families or ministries. How wonderful that we can change circumstances and alter destinies in His name through Prayer.

The implication of this explanation lies in the fact that the prayer speeches are inextricably connected with both the physical and the transcendent world. One of the most important findings by Webb Keane in his in-depth study of Calvinist missionaries and Sumba people of Indonesia is that ideas can never be separated from materiality and word forms. This is one of the reasons he states that "semiotic ideologies required material instantiation" (2007:80). Thus, it is arguable that semiotic ideologies encoded in affirmative prayers are

entangled with the materiality encapsulated in the desired results of the prayers. However, it is important to note that the efficacy of the affirmative prayer depends on the accuracy of the speech expression. This is because the wrong expression of the prayer language may result in adverse manifestation. For instance, in NASFAT if the formula of prayer required repeating a certain verse of the Qur'an or name of Allah 99 times, one has to do it exactly for the prayer to be efficacious. In Christ Embassy the language of the prayer must be performative and end with 'in the name of Jesus'. In NASFAT the Qur'anic verses selected to form the instrumental prayers are ascribed with semiotic functions, hence their ability to make changes in the empirical world. The relationship between the Arabic texts of the verses and the messages they refer to (commentaries and exegesis) are suspended and replaced with a semiotic system that has a unique set of referents.

It is important to notice that most common personal problems and needs have their instrumental prayers specifically designed to address them. In looking at these prayers, one can easily detect a connection between the problem or need and the literal interpretation of the Qur'anic verse that serves as the basis of the prayer formula. For instance, one of the deputy imams in NASFAT told me that prayer against opposition and protection requires one to recite the following verse, *Sufficient for us is Allah, and an Excellent Guardian is He* (Q3:173).<sup>71</sup> The verse should be repeated 450 times daily with the intention and 133,000 times for seven days if the situation is serious. In this example, the link between the need for protection against the machination of the enemies and the reliance on God who is stronger than the enemies and invoking his excellent guardianship is clearly established. Qur'anic verses in these prayers act as a sign system with the problems they refer to as their

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71 There about five deputy imams in each branch of NASFAT who they are called missionaries. NASFAT is influenced by churches which have the tradition of having several junior pastors in their branches.

referents. In NASFAT as opposed to Christ Embassy, ordinary human speech does not possess a unique ontological status that grants it an agentive capability, but the recitation of Qur'anic verses, as the sacred word of God, encompasses such agency.<sup>72</sup>

Another important feature of the instrumental prayer in NASFAT is the rhythmic repetitive recitation. These prayers require repeating certain verses or names of God several times, usually at night. Apparently, repeatability is part of the structure of the prayer formula. Repeatability plays a vital role in creating the intended pragmatic effect and facilitates its physical manifestation. The example of NASFAT prayer given above that requires 450 times of repetition --and 133,000 times if the problem is 'serious', such as an enemy wants to kill one through spiritual attack or witchcraft -- highlights the function of repetition in the performance of prayer. The sheer volume of repetition would overcome the seriousness of the situation.

Instrumental prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT can be analysed in the framework of the notion of sensational form which calls attention to the human senses in regular and structured performances that are believed to be a communion with the divine. Meyer (2011:29) asserts that "sensational forms are relatively fixed modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes". In Christ Embassy, bodily gestures are important aspects of affirmative prayer performance. The prayers are uttered in a loud voice with agile body movements. During prayer believers often move back and forth with their eyes closed with their hands moving up and down. This form of prayer engages the entire human body and senses of the believers in the act of praying. The

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72 However, in Islam there are specialists whose words carry power to manifest things, particularly negative things. If such people cast a curse on somebody, that person's life would seriously be affected. There are prayers provided specifically for protection against the tongues of such people.

instructor of the foundation class Adewale asserted that for prayer to be efficacious and effective one has to immerse oneself thoroughly in the act of prayer and do it with utmost confidence and relative aggressiveness. This practice will guarantee a quick materialisation of prayer.

On many occasions instrumental prayers in NASFAT require performance of *nafila*, which is a *salat* that is non-obligatory but performed either to please God or to accompany different types of non-ritual prayers of supplication. Ritual prayer (*salat*) is one of the essential constituents of Islamic worship. In Islam, it is believed that anyone who engaged in the ritual prayer is in direct connection with the Creator. Apart from *nafila*, instrumental prayers have fixed structures and follows strict rules which must be followed as a precondition for the efficacy of the prayers.

#### MATERIAL SACRIFICES: KEYS TO THE PORTALS OF PRAYERS

Material sacrifice is the final stage of performing prayers of instrumentality in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Material sacrifices called *sadaqa* in NASFAT and seed offerings in Christ Embassy are given to the needy after successful completion for the speedy gratification of the prayer request. These offerings can take the form of money or any material item that has value and is cherished by the giver. Some prayers of instrumentality in NASFAT required a specific type of item as *sadaqa*, and this may be a particular food or cloth. And sometimes even people who are supposed to receive *sadaqa* are specified and may include children, disabled, or old women. For instrumental prayers to be efficacious, the rule of the *sadaqa* must be followed to the letter. Christ Embassy does not usually specify a particular kind of offering, but it is emphasised that one should give something dear to one's heart. In Christ Embassy the offering is invalid if one gives out something that has no value to oneself.

In Christ Embassy, as in many other Pentecostal churches, all forms of prayer need to be backed up with the seed offering. During services in Christ Embassy stories of people who made a big offering and received a great reward are told and repeated over and over again. These stories play a vital role in encouraging people to give money to the church for the purpose of getting quick results from their prayers. One of my interlocutors told me a story of a pastor called Isa El-Buba who wanted to replace his small sedan car with a big trendy jeep. The pastor affirmed that he got the jeep in fervent affirmative prayer and gave out his car as seed offering to a poor man. Within a short period of time, God answered his prayer and a rich man gave him a gift of a brand new jeep.

Material sacrifices are understood as keys that open the portal to the invisible realm and facilitate the materialisation of the prayer. When I asked one of my interlocutors in NASFAT about the importance of *sadaqa*, he told me that whatever the power of the prayer, its result would remain latent and unmanifested. It is the *sadaqa* and its value that can open the door for it to manifest in the physical world. The larger and more valuable the *sadaqa* is, the bigger the result of the prayer. My teacher in the foundation school in Christ Embassy said something similar when he told me that whenever one prays, one should make sure to follow it up with a big offering for the purpose of getting a quick result.

It is arguable that *sadaqa* and seed offerings are not given to please the receiver; neither does the giver expect something in return from the receiver. Even though the material sacrifices are items of value given out to others, these valuables still are symbolically directed toward the transcendent realm. The believers who offer *sadaqa* or a seed offering expect reciprocations from the spiritual realm, not from the recipients of their offerings. It is through this symbolic sacrifice that seed offerings and *sadaqa* bridge the gap between the visible and invisible worlds. The two worlds are conjoined by the material

offerings which have the capacity to act in the invisible world and elicit dormant desired situations into the physical realm.<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes in both NASFAT and Christ Embassy there is a relationship between the specified material offerings and the objectives of prayer. For instance, the *sadaqa* of a 50 naira note required to give to a child carried by his mother that I mentioned earlier, has a causal relationship to the objective of the prayer, which is childbirth. The *sadaqa* symbolically connects what one wishes to get (a child) and the child that already exists in the material world. Moreover, it is noticeable that El-Buba gave out his car as seed offering when he desired a bigger car which was a jeep. This symbolic causal relationship is part of the function of material sacrifices, similar to a saying 'like attracts like'.

Moreover, my interlocutor Abubakar Musa told me that another function of *sadaqa* is helping the body adjust after immersion in instrumental prayers. He said some prayers have tremendous power, and they can exact immense pressure on the human body. He added that this pressure may result in pain, and it is *sadaqa* that removes the pain. He said he experienced this condition himself several times, particularly after performing powerful instrumental prayers of Surah Ya-Sin. This experience suggests that instrumental prayers are not merely abstract speech requests toward the Sovereign Deity. Instrumental prayers are understood to be a potent force that has a material dimension since they can interfere with the wellbeing of the physical human body.<sup>74</sup>

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73 This practice invokes Marcel Mauss' theory of gift exchange. But the cases of seed offering and *sadaqa* serve as kind of gift exchange between believer and the deity. I discuss Mauss' theory in more detail in chapter seven on the exchange of religious text messages.

74 Nevertheless, the toll on human body is understandable if one looks how some spent hours repeating certain words or phrases or a complete surah of the Qur'an hundreds or thousands of times. Bodily exhaustion will surely follow these extreme practices.

## WHEN A PRAYER FAILED TO MATERIALISE

Abdulwahab Rahim, a 36 years old secondary school teacher, is an active and dedicated member of NASFAT. We became close friends during my fieldwork period in Abuja and we happened to live in the same area. Rahim is a highly dedicated Muslim who takes religious duties seriously. Contrary to many members of NASFAT that I came across, his view of prayer is somehow non-pragmatic. He has a fervent belief that prayer can replace physical action in achieving pragmatic effects. He claimed to have a vast knowledge of instrumental prayers that he could deploy to solve all his problems and achieve his desires. One day he asked me to help him write a business proposal to a wealthy business man who has a mining company. He told me that he wanted the business man to sponsor traditional dancers to go to China to perform so that he would get a commission for organising. I told him that this is going to be difficult and the businessman may not invest his money on such a risky and costly undertaking. He said, “No matter the difficulty I have powerful prayers which if I performed, this idea would necessarily materialise. Just help me with the proposal and I will do the rest. I have 3000 naira which I will use to buy two roosters for the *sadaqa* after the prayer”. At the end of the day I helped him in drafting the proposal and he submitted it to the businessman after he performed the prayers, but the businessman rejected the proposal outright. And Rahim never raised the issue to me again. To Rahim instrumental prayers are symbolic capital that gives him hope in achieving his goals, but on many occasions the desired results remain elusive. It is in this sense that Oberlies (2017) maintains that sometimes during prayer the being addressed may even recede into the background, so that the communicative aspect of praying

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becomes less prominent; prayer then is more an exercise in self-expression, or rather an act of relief.

Instrumental prayers have two possible outcomes: either they work and produce the aspired result, or they fail to materialise. However, people do not think of failure because prayer is directed to the supernatural world or the realm of Absolute Reality. What I observed in my interactions with my interlocutors is that they work to achieve their goals and pray about it. When they succeed, they attribute their success to the efficacy of prayer and go to the church or mosque and give testimonies and thanks to God for gratifying their prayers. I attended a service in Christ Embassy in February 2014, when a young man went to the front of the church to give his testimony. He said he applied for a South African visa, but his application was rejected. He came home and started an affirmative prayer for hours every day and kept on trying different avenues of getting the visa. But as he intensified his affirmative prayers seeing himself in South Africa, he finally got the visa through intervention by a Sudanese diplomat who has a contact in the South African embassy. The congregation began to shout Hallelujah. I also witnessed similar testimonies in NASFAT Sunday worship service. In March 2014 a member came and gave a testimony that he wanted the congregation to join him in thanking God because his prayer has been answered; he got the new job that he had been praying for a long time. These kinds of testimonies reinforce the belief about the efficacy of prayer and people often circulate success stories of others as evidence that prayer works.<sup>75</sup>

If the prayer fails to yield the desired result and the situation is desperate, some try other means outside the purview of the church or mosque

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<sup>75</sup> Media contents of Christ Embassy are full of testimonies of success stories about the efficacy of prayer. The media of the church never portray instances of failure of prayer. Surely in Christ Embassy media has played a key role in reinforcing a fervent belief on the efficacy of prayer. However, NASFAT's use of media is highly restricted, hence its limited deployment of media techniques to circulate prayer testimonies.

to pursue their goals. Mary Jacobs, 35 years old, is a devoted member of Christ Embassy and works with a travel agency in Abuja. She came from a Roman Catholic background, but she converted to Pentecostalism and joined Christ Embassy. She told me that her greatest problem now is getting a husband because at more than thirty years old she needed the security of marriage. She said she is dating a military man, but he refused to propose to her. She stated that she had prayed tirelessly for years but without success. She became desperate about the issue because her parents and other members of her family put enormous pressure on her to marry. When she became exhausted with instrumental prayers, she decided to try another avenue. She asked her friend who is a member of an esoteric group, Eckankar, to teach her psychic or mind power techniques that she can use to solve her problem. These are para-psychological abilities which she thought all members of Eckankar possessed. But her friend told her they do not dabble into such activities and this is just an assumption by outsiders.

When I asked her whether it is proper as a Christian to go to that extent of seeking help outside the realm of Christianity, she responded that psychic powers are not magic. She said in her view what is wrong is going to the '*babalawos*' who conjure up demonic powers or a priest of traditional religion. She continued that the teachings of Pastor Chris made references to the power and ability of the human mind to act and effect changes in the material world. According to her, para-psychological abilities do not infringe on the doctrine of Christianity. I asked her whether she would like her Christian friends in the church to know that she sought the help of an esoteric group for her personal problem. She responded that if they knew, they would chastise her and condemn what she did even though some of them are secretly doing the same thing or, even worse, going to the '*babalawos*'.<sup>76</sup>

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76 In September 2015, I was in the Sunday worship service in NASFAT when the Imam made a big announcement. He said that he was angry about what was going on in the circle of some women members. He stated that he was told that some women bring

On many occasions no matter how hard one prayed, the intended outcome of prayer remained unanswered. Since there is a belief that God cannot fail his children or servants, an explanation must be found to rationalise why cherished goals do not materialise. Members of Christ Embassy who do not get results after praying exhaustively for a long period, pause and cross-examine their prayers. If the formulation of the prayer is correct, then the problem is probably with the erroneous thought and utterances of the person praying. This is because negative thoughts and utterances can spoil prayer and result in manifesting adverse circumstances, according to the teaching of the church.<sup>77</sup> The responses of NASFAT members on the issue of non-materialisation of prayer is based on the argument that God has answered the prayer, but withheld the result because it will not be good for the person at that time. The argument adds that God knows what is best for individuals. However, whether the prayer for particular desired goals is successful, people move forward with new prayers on new challenges. They dwell on the memory of the past success of prayers and ignore the failure through rationalisation or downplaying it all together.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at three genres of prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT and analysed them as practices of mediation that facilitate contact with the transcendent realm. Prayers of adoration (praise and worship and melodious recitation) and aesthetic speeches (glossolalia and *zikr*) generate

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magical charms into the mosque. He said this was a great transgression which cannot be tolerated. Any woman involved in these activities must repent and immediately desist from it. Among both Christ Embassy and NASFAT members, it is likely that some secretly resorted to other means such as modern esoteric or magical techniques in search of a solution to desperate situations in their lives.

<sup>77</sup> Detailed discussion of the effect of negative thought and speech on human life follows in chapter six.

emotion that creates perceptions and experiences of communion with the divine. Despite the differences in forms and structures of the instrumental prayers of the two religious groups, the semiotic ideologies attributed to them share significant similarities. The similar semiotic forms of instrumental prayers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT centre on the perception of these prayers as active agents that can enact pragmatic changes in both the physical and the transcendent worlds.

Instrumental prayers are semi-magical in nature because they are conceived to possess inherent energy and spiritual potency to manipulate events, albeit with the correct application of the rules governing their performances. Furthermore, to many members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT instrumental prayers are spiritual assets tantamount to cultural capital that give them hope and self-assurance. They cherish the awareness that they have something powerful and effective which they can resort to in times of need and crisis. Despite the fact that instrumental prayers do not always deliver results, members still sustain their faith about the efficacy of the prayers through rationalisation of the failures.

Prayers address not only emotional and socio-economic distress but also problems perceived as supernatural. The fear of evil, demonic forces and spiritual attacks from perceived enemies is deep rooted among both Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. There is no doubt that prayers in NASFAT and Christ Embassy foster confidence and a sense of immunity from these supernatural evils. Many members of the two religious groups told me that they do not feel the need to seek for protection against evil from the medicine men because they believe that they already have divine protection through their prayers.

The similarities of the forms of Christ Embassy and NASFAT prayers lie in the fact that the latter consciously organise their prayers to respond to the challenges of Pentecostals. However, it is important to note that NASFAT did not invent these prayers; the prayers already exist in the Islamic tradition. NASFAT ulama only re-organise the forms of some Islamic prayers to make

them more responsive to the psychological and socio-economic needs of urban Muslims, particularly youths, working class people, and professionals. The emphasis on prayers that respond to the needs of urbanites, for instance, in the areas of finance, employment, and even obtaining foreign visas, reveals influence of Pentecostals on NASFAT. In another sense, it can be argued that NASFAT has borrowed from Pentecostalism the practice of putting both devotional and instrumental prayers at the centre of their religiosity. Moreover, similarities of the forms of prayers of the two religious groups highlight that religious diversity may not always result in conflict and clash, but also gives rise to mutual influence and borrowing.

# 6

## ORAL TRANSMISSION OF THE SACRED: PREACHING IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

### INTRODUCTION

Preaching is an integral part of Islamic religion and it is one of our major activities in NASFAT. Preaching is not worship in the legal sense of Islamic *shari'ah* such as *salat* or Ramadan fasting, but it is of prime importance because it can inspire believers to be more pious and more committed in their faith. In NASFAT we place great emphasis on preaching because it reminds Muslims about their Creator and the fact that they are created to worship him alone. And preaching is one of the important means through which Islam spreads throughout the world. These are some of the reasons that we take preaching seriously and also organise preaching activities regularly in NASFAT.

These are the words of one of the assistant imams in NASFAT, Lamin Shola, during my interview with him in November 2013 after Friday prayer. He was telling me about the importance of preaching in NASFAT and Islam in general.<sup>78</sup> Three major tropes could be discerned in these short remarks—

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78 NASFAT do not allow women to preach. In northern Nigeria there is a growing number of female preachers who are even preaching on the media in a situation very similar to what Dorothea Schulz (2012) describes in Mali.

preaching as a reminder about the presence of God, preaching as a force for motivating people in the acts of piety and righteousness, and preaching as medium for preaching the word of God. These three tropes could also be found in the notion of preaching in Christ Embassy. Preaching is one of the most routine and regular activities in the worship services of Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Preaching takes place in most of their religious gatherings from the congregational Sunday preaching to large scale preaching gatherings such as the Night of Bliss spectacle in Christ Embassy and National Annual Lectures in NASFAT.

In line with the argument of the previous chapter on prayer, this chapter argues that preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is a practice of mediation that is enhanced by several factors such as eloquence, and authority of the preachers as well as preaching paraphernalia such as dressing, background music and preaching assistants. These factors establish preaching as an aesthetic style due to their ability to mobilise human senses and thereby make preaching performances a highly emotional experience. Moreover, it is during the moment of heightened emotion that believers are transported beyond the limit of the ordinary and experience Divine presence. The chapter also argues that preaching is one of the key instruments for producing and moulding religious subjects, according to the vision of the founders of the two religious groups. In addition, the chapter will compare the preaching performances and its ramifications between Christ Embassy and NASFAT, exploring their similarities and differences.

## PREACHING IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT WITHIN THE LARGER RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Many major Pentecostal churches, such as Living Faith and Redeemed Christian Church of God, strongly emphasise the principle of prosperity gospel in their sermons. Christ Embassy shares a similar view on prosperity with these

churches but slightly differs with regard to the means of realising the desired state of health and prosperity. Pastor Chris added the use of visualisation techniques to subdue diseases and poverty and attain health and prosperity as new elements. This technique entails focusing the entire mental resources on the state of riches or any desired goal until it is materialized. For instance, if one wants to initiate a business one should focus one's attention on the future flourishing results of the business rather than on the ways and methods of getting to that prosperous state. Moreover, one should not worry about the feasibility of the business because worry may cancel and destroy the desired outcome (sermon preached by Pastor Chris, 10.8.2015).

By contrast, other Pentecostal churches (such as the highly prominent Mountain of Fire and Miracle church), put great emphasis on the issue of deliverance from demonic forces and witchcraft attacks. Pastor Chris and his associate pastors in Christ Embassy instead focus on miraculous healing of diseases rather than placing emphasis on exorcism. Pastor Chris often emphasises that Satan, who is the leader of demons, has already been vanquished by the risen Christ, and is incapable of ruling over true believers. This is the reason why believers do not need deliverance from demons. Pastor Chris criticises Pentecostal preachers who practice deliverance in their preaching as being ignorant of the true meaning of Christianity. In one of his Sunday sermons he expressed this as follows:

In Africa, there are witchcraft spirits. Most of these [deliverance] preachers are sons of native doctors, or they are former native doctors, grandsons of former native doctors, cousins of native doctors. They came from this fetish background where witchcraft is the order of the day, and they carried it into Christianity. So, all they see is demons and deliverance. No Christian needs deliverance from the devil and this is a fact. But that is not to say that a Christian could not have an attack or influence from the Satan. But the fact is if you got to know that there is a devil messing with you, all you have to do is to say, 'Devil gets out in Jesus name'.<sup>79</sup>

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79 Sunday worship service broad live in Abuja central branch, 26 January 2014.

Pastor Chris is pointing out that Jesus Christ authorised believers to cast out demons in his name; hence they do not need to seek deliverance elsewhere. However, even though in Christ Embassy there is a belief about the dark forces, waging spiritual warfare against them is not emphasised. In fact, the struggle against evil in Christ Embassy is viewed as a detrimental practice because dark forces can only be vanquished by shifting one's consciousness away from them. Pastor Chris and other pastors of Christ Embassy preach that fear is a negative energy that draws the objects of fear into the life of believers. Thus, fearing dark forces is indirectly inviting them and making one susceptible to their attacks. The pastors preach that at the moment one becomes a born again person one is already immune from the attack by evil denizens of the spirit realm. Despite the fact that pastors of Christ Embassy preach that people can protect themselves from evil forces through faith and affirmative prayers, the most important means of protection are magical mental techniques of positive thinking and diligent study of the scriptures. Christ Embassy rejects the idea of ancestral curses that run through generations of the family as preached by many Pentecostal preachers. According to Christ Embassy, when one accepts Christ one is a new creation and every past affliction is broken instantly because Satan has no legal claim over born again persons.

Despite Pastor Chris's exhortation of deliverance, his practice of miraculous healing in his healing school and other religious spectacles such as the night of bliss could also be interpreted as the performance of deliverance. Deliverance is understood by many Pentecostal pastors that I interviewed as releasing an individual from bondage of physical or psychological afflictions caused by dark agents such as witches and demons. And this may include different types of sicknesses. However, Pastor Chris differentiates himself from other Pentecostal preachers by restricting the meaning of deliverance to the

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public practice of exorcising demons alone. Whether the miraculous healing crusade of Pastor Chris and his healing school programme is deliverance or not remain a problem of definition of deliverance.



Fig. 6.1 Sunday sermon in Christ Embassy Karu Branch, Abuja.

NASFAT preaching differs from the major Islamic groups in the city in both themes and styles. Islamic groups that are well known for their highly organised preaching in both religious and public spaces are Izala<sup>80</sup> and Salafi. The themes of Izala<sup>81</sup> and Salafi preaching diverge from that of NASFAT because they reflect their agenda of purifying Islam from innovations and

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80 Izala is an Islamic Society founded by Sheikh Ismaila Idriss in 1978 in Jos, Plateau State. Chapter one discussed the development of Izala in detail.

81 See Ramzi Ben Amara (2011)

going back to the fundamentals of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions. Izala and Salafi preachers also place great emphasis on the absolute unity of God in worship and actively preach against *shirk* or the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism. Through ubiquitous preaching in the urban environment, they intend to “promote religious and social reform strictly in line with the norms set by the Qur’an and the Hadith” (Sounaye 2014:22). While the NASFAT preaching agenda focuses on spiritual renewal, Izala preaching involves vicious attacks on other religious groups whom its protagonists perceive as deviating from the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (Paden 2008:28). However, NASFAT preachers rarely attack any group. In fact, the preachers repeat that NASFAT is a non-sectarian and non-ideological movement and does not engage in a theological dispute with people of different religious persuasions within Islam.

Another way in which NASFAT's preaching differs from other Islamic groups is the inclusion of party politics in their preaching practices. Even though NASFAT receives donations from some Muslims politicians, members are only allowed to get involved in politics on the personal level. Its constitution categorically prohibits using NASFAT as the platform for partisan politics. By contrast, Izala and Salafi groups encourage their followers to vote for specific individual candidates during elections. Preaching in Izala and Salafi and most of the major Pentecostal churches in election times is filled with political undertones. Religious leaders of Pentecostal and Islamic reformists often form beneficial symbiotic relationships with politicians (Obadare 2016:671). However, ulama in NASFAT and pastors of Christ Embassy emphasise that their organisation is apolitical and that they do not care about the members’ political persuasions.

## PREACHING IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

### *THEMES*

Even though the teaching of Christ Embassy is communicated through several means, including print and digital media, the predominant mode of transmitting the teaching is preaching. Preaching in Christ Embassy is based on the command of Jesus to his disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20). In Christ Embassy, preaching is conceived as a platform for teaching believers precepts of Christianity and revealing hidden truths and the meaning of the scriptures. Preaching is also seen as a means of evangelism or soul-winning. The term ‘soul-winning’ in Christ Embassy refers to the practice of trying to lead ‘lost sinners’ to Jesus Christ for the purpose of salvation. Pastors of Christ Embassy always reiterate that soul-winning is the most important activity of the church. In my interviews with members of Christ Embassy, they identified the preaching style of Christ Embassy as ‘expository.’ This is a style of preaching that exposes the truth about God in the scriptures by carefully drawing out the exact meaning of a biblical passage in its original context. In a nutshell, preaching serves the functions of soul-winning or evangelism, religious pedagogy, and spiritual and mental transformation of the members.

One of the unique and controversial teachings of Pastor Chris that has drawn criticism from some Nigerian pastors is his concept of sin. In one of his sermon broadcasts during Sunday service in the Abuja Karu branch, Pastor Chris taught that faithful Christians are free from sin because the Bible says they are justified, and the atonement death of Jesus has already conferred forgiveness onto them. Since forgiveness has already been given, there is no need for Christians to ask God to forgive their sins. Believers need only to confess their sins and consciously accept the forgiveness which God provided

through the sacrificial death of Christ. According to Pastor Chris, it is impossible for human beings to achieve righteousness themselves and this is the reason why God intervened in history to make believers righteous. If one accepts the forgiveness that is part of the package of salvation, then there is no need for repentance. Pastor Chris teaches that sin is a transgression of the law, and since Christians do not live under the law of the Old Testament, they could not transgress the law. What is required for believers is to shift their consciousness away from sin, because what dominates the mind is what controls the actions (sermon by Pastor Chris, 1.12.2013).<sup>82</sup>

Another radical teaching of Christ Embassy that distinguishes the church from other Nigerian churches is the view that the New Testament begins after the resurrection of Jesus in the chapter of John. The chapters of Matthew, Luke, Mark, and part of John are “under” the Old Testament. According to Pastor Chris, Jesus Christ was operating as the seed of Abraham under the authority of David throughout his life on earth. As a result, he was living under the dispensation of the Old Testament. But when he died on the cross, he was resurrected as heavenly king and before his ascent to heaven he gave all who believe in him authority to operate as kings. It is this power to function as kings that empowers believers to make a decree to change the circumstances of their lives (8.12.2013). Pastors of Christ Embassy see these teachings as specialized knowledge acquired by Pastor Chris through diligent study of the Scriptures and inspiration by the Holy Spirit. In one of his sermons Pastor Chris argues as follows:

These things that we are sharing are for the select few; they are communicated in an esoteric language. They are not for everybody, not

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<sup>82</sup> These are sermons of Pastor Chris broadcast on the screen during Sunday services I visited during my fieldwork. I took notes on the sermons and recorded them on my phone. I did the same with the NASFAT preaching sessions I visited.

for the general public. These are for the seniors, those who have crossed the line of thinking that Christianity is a religion. They know Christianity is a living thing. They know Christianity is not a religion; they passed that level. (29.12.2013)

Pastor Chris teaches his congregation that they are not practicing religion, that what they practice is a vital relationship with God. He argues that “Christianity is the pulsating life and power of God in the human body” (Sunday sermon, 8.12.2013). Apart from Christ Embassy, many Pentecostals share this view of going beyond the threshold of religion. This view came as a result of an increasingly negative connotation of the term religion, which is associated with rigid dogma, fanaticism, and stale rituals. The experiential nature of Pentecostalism and its claimed ability to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit makes some members of Christ Embassy feel that they have transcended the rigid dogmas of religion. In many of their sermons pastors of Christ Embassy refer to non-Pentecostal religions within and outside of the Christian spectrum as dead religions. The senior pastor of Karu branch in Abuja said in one of his sermons that “despite the conspiracy of Muslims to take over the world, Islam cannot give life. According to the pastor there is only one name that gives life which is the name of Jesus” (7.9.2014). However, the rhetoric of denouncing religion is an example of where the ideal contrasts with the reality prevalent in different religious groups. Despite the claim of going beyond religion, I noticed that members of Christ Embassy are acting and behaving like other religious people with a strong sense of Christian identity. Their informal conversations involve a ‘we vs. them’ mentality toward perceived others such as Muslims and Catholics.

In their preaching, pastors of Christ Embassy hardly touch topics that might cause dread to their audience, such as sin and hellfire, but instead focus on positive themes that offer delightful promises. In one of his sermons played during a Sunday worship service I attended, Pastor Chris said:

There are those who say Christianity isn't a bed of roses. Usually, I wondered in which Gospel such people believe. It may not have been their experience, but Christianity is a bed of roses, and you had better believe it because it's true. Why did Jesus come? What was the reason for his suffering? It's so we can have and enjoy life to the full. (1.12.2013)

The view of Christianity as a “bed of roses” is in conjunction with the principle of the prosperity gospel that dominates the preaching of Christ Embassy. According to Bradley Koch (2014:2), “The prosperity gospel is a doctrine that contains the notion that God wants people to be prosperous, especially financially. Adherents to the prosperity gospel believe that wealth is a sign of God's blessing and the poor are poor because of a lack of faith”. Most of the preaching I witnessed in Christ Embassy centred on the idea that God has already destined every born again Christian to be healthy and prosperous. This principle is based on the idea of an inherent right– “in Christ” -- of the born again person for prosperity, health, and freedom from disease. The Biblical underpinning of this theology is the vicarious atonement of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The logic of rendering this theology is that “Jesus was poor so that we can be rich and he suffered pain on the cross so that we can be well and healthy” (Sunday preaching, 5.1.2014). One of the pastors of Christ Embassy at Nyanya branch Abuja, Pastor Moses Arams, constantly says, “We don't do poverty in this church”. In his preaching he always urges members to apply the techniques given to them by Pastor Chris to make themselves rich.

Pastor Chris always quotes Biblical verses that promise something substantial to the believers, using the simple present tense ‘is’ to affirm that the promise is not in the future. During an International Pastors Conference that took place on July 19, 2015 in Lagos, Pastor Chris quoted the following verse to make this kind of performative speech: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalms 27:1). The verb ‘is’ in this verse expresses the present reality of the light, salvation, and strength of the Lord that lie in the believer.

The audience cherished such messages that tell them that their lofty ideals have already been fulfilled. Whenever he mentioned it, the audience burst into jubilation with yelling and jumping. Apparently, they believed that hearing something pleasant and getting solace changed their lives instantly. Many testified that they usually left the preaching feeling utterly transformed and refreshed with this new awareness.

Pastors of Christ Embassy preach that there is the natural world and the spiritual world. People live in these two worlds at the same time. The supernatural world is beyond time and space, and it is the realm of God and spirit. Words of God are imbued with spiritual potency, and they are alive. Therefore, one can live in the spirit realm through study and acting the words of God. And one can also raise one's consciousness into the realm of spirit by meditating on the word of God. Conscious living in the spirit realm while being in 'the physical' can transform a believer into a superior human being. This spiritual transformation could enable the believer to subdue the forces of nature, perform miracles, and thereby successfully make desires of his/her life come true.

In the teachings of the church, spiritual warfare is to be waged against negative thoughts and imaginings. These are more deadly than demons and witchcraft because they manifest in the material world and wreck the life of believers. Controlling thought and imagination required robust and constant vigilance that is tantamount to spiritual war. The preachers regularly ask members to cast out negative speech and thoughts that produce sickness and poverty. Thoughts and imaginings, like speech, have creative potency, and their contents can take shape in the spirit realm and eventually materialise in the natural world. These three entities—thought, imagination, and word—are concrete invisible forces with an intense energy to achieve a practical effect. This attitude suggests that the spiritual realm is enmeshed and interacts with the physical reality; the entities of the spiritual world are merely invisible replicas of the physical entities. In this view, the actions of people in the physical world

have greater consequences than the ordinary course of events because people are situated in a web of invisible forces that continually influence their lives.

Pastor Chris suggested another dimension of the function of human speech. In one of his sermons, titled *Sound Code*, Pastor Chris goes as far as providing the mechanics of the function of speech. He stated that whenever one speaks, one releases a measurable energy with the sound wave from one's mouth. And this will be acted upon by the power of the Holy Spirit to make an effect on the material world. He hypothesized that all subatomic particles contained sound codes that respond to human speech and mould matter in the matrix of the nature of the words spoken. He continued that if speech is energy and energy is matter, according to Albert Einstein's formula, then speech is a matter. Furthermore, speech can also release forces of destruction, and this is how cancer and other diseases are destroyed, by commanding them to disappear in the name of Jesus. The sound code uttered by a believer attacks the cancer cells and disperses their atoms. The pastor said that the most beautiful thing given by God to human beings is the power of speech. Even God himself used speech to create the universe (Sunday preaching, 16.2.2014). Here Pastor Chris has shifted from the religious-based narrative in constructing his imaginary of healing. He incorporated science-based ideas in this model that generates vivid imagery of the healing process. The form of healing in this model is presented to be totally holistic and effective because diseases are annihilated from the atomic level. Probably one of the reasons for incorporating scientific formula in the imaginary of disease is that the large number of young educated members may find this imagery appealing.

On rare occasions preachers of Christ Embassy, when talking about the importance commitment to faith, use Muslims as exemplary model for Christians. During one of the Sunday services I attended in the Karu branch of the church, the pastor said, "Even though Christians have the true faith, many are not committed in their faith. Look at how Muslims are serious and devoted to their religious obligations. When a Muslim converted to Christianity you

will find out that he is more serious than some who were born into the Christian faith” (Wednesday preaching, 5.2.2014). Islam and Muslims sometimes appear in the preaching of Christ Embassy where they are portrayed either as competitor to Christians or as model of inspiration regarding dedication to religious practices.

The notion of preaching in NASFAT is not different from the general conception of preaching in the main Islamic groups. Preaching is embedded in the series of Qur'anic verses that encourage Muslims to share the message of Islam with others. Some of the verses regularly mentioned by NASFAT preachers include the following: “But teach, for teaching benefits believers” (Q 51:55); “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair admonition, and argue with them in the kindest way. Your Lord knows best who is misguided from his way. And he knows best who are guided” (Q16: 125); and “Let there be a community among you who call to the good, and enjoin the right, and forbid the wrong. They are the ones who have success” (Q2:104).

Based on these verses, preaching is conceived by leaders of NASFAT as an act of *da'wah*. The Arabic word *da'wah* generally means a preacher or lay believers calling people towards Allah and his instructions. There are two forms of *da'wah*. One aims at proselytising non-Muslims by conveying to them the message of Islam either through preaching or informal one-to-one dialogue. The other form of *da'wah* involves organised preaching through which Muslims are reminded of their duties and responsibilities as commanded by Allah and his messenger. It is one of the utmost virtues in Islam to guide other Muslims into the proper understanding of their faith or to convert non-Muslims to Islam (Hirschkind 2004, Račius 2004). To highlight the virtue of preaching, NASFAT's Imam of Abuja recited the Hadith of the Prophet during one of the Friday *Khutba*.

Whoever calls others to guidance will have a reward like the rewards of those who follow him, without that detracting from their reward in any way. And whoever calls others to misguidance will have a burden

of sin like the burden of those who follow him, without that detracting from their burden in any way (Hadith Sahih Muslim).

The imam posited that *da'wah* is an important, meritorious religious act from an Islamic standpoint, which is beneficial for both the preacher and the listeners. If a preacher converts a non-Muslim to Islam or positively transforms the life of a Muslim, he has spiritual merit in every good act performed by the people guided.



Fig 6.2 Ramadan Preaching in NASFAT Central Branch Abuja.

The recurring themes in NASFAT's preaching are based on the portrayal of the beauty of Islam and its superiority over other religions, individual piety, and moral values. In fact, notions of beauty in Islam and morality are stated among the goals of NASFAT. NASFAT preachers speak about *taqwa* (which means fear of God), and they always exhort believers to obey Allah and his messenger and observe their religious duty. They seldom engage in inter-religious antagonistic rhetoric in their sermons, but instead preach peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. The preachers

always denounce protracted ethno-religious conflicts that have become a daily occurrence in northern Nigeria. In fact, NASFAT leaders in Abuja are some of the first major Muslim groups that categorically denounced the Boko Haram attacks on Christians and called on Muslims to protect churches. In their attempt to project a new image of Islam, they call media to refrain from calling Boko Haram an Islamic sect. In one of his sermons in Abuja's central branch, Ustaz Yusuf Shitu asserted that “every Christian is a potential Muslim; therefore, killing him or her denies them the future opportunity of converting to Islam” (Sunday preaching, 17.11.2013).

NASFAT preachers talk about social justice and the need for just and fair distribution of resources in the country. They criticize corruption and poor governance that engendered poverty and various kinds of social malaise. They encourage political leaders to be just and resist corruption. The preachers also promote quality parenting at home by proper training of children according to the Islamic ideals. They teach respect to children to make them self-confident and respect others. Islamic ethics are some of the topics that consistently appear in the preaching of NASFAT. Its preachers point out that Islam has a comprehensive ethical system that is absolute, not relative. They encourage Muslims to keep their promises, care for orphans, give charity, be honest and fair in their interactions, and refrain from committing adultery.

They preach to members to emulate the character of the Prophet with attitudes such as honesty, modesty, and compassion toward friends and enemies. The Prophet Muhammad is seen as an ultimate role model for Muslims due to his exemplary character. In their attempt to inculcate piety, NASFAT preachers promote pious Islamic activities such as absolute surrender to God in all circumstances of life; perseverance in doing good; avoidance of sin and constant seeking of forgiveness from God; daily recitation of the Qur'an and chanting of *zikr* (invocation of God's name); and seeking guidance from Allah.

One theme of preaching which NASFAT preachers emphasise much more than other Muslim groups is the importance of Hajj or Islamic pilgrimage, which is one of the pillars of Islam. During Sunday worship service the Imam said that “some people are travelling from one place to another and spend a large sum of money, but they do not bother to perform the pilgrimage. These people should know that their struggle and money will be in vain if they refused to go for pilgrimage” (24.11.2013). The imam recited many verses from the Qur’an that show the significance of pilgrimage in Islam. During preaching sometimes the imam asks those who performed Hajj or Umra in the past month to stand up and bless the congregation. This is because in Islam the prayer of those who visited holy places in Mecca and Medina is regarded as forty times more efficacious until forty days after the conclusion of their Hajj or Umra rituals. Despite the fact that Christ Embassy and NASFAT are from different religious traditions—Christianity and Islam—there are similarities between the themes of their preachings. For instance, in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, the ultimate point of reference in preaching is God. The purpose of many sermons is to connect the audience with God. Preachers in these two religious groups quote scriptural verses to make their statements authoritative. Preachers in Christ Embassy and NASFAT tell stories of the prophets and great men from the Scriptures to illustrate moral lessons. In the preaching of both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, the same religious figures such as Abraham, Moses, or David are mentioned occasionally, since these prophets appear in the Bible and the Qur’an.

Another important theme that always appears in the preaching of Christ Embassy and NASFAT is the importance of giving money to the cause of God. Pastors in Christ Embassy encourage their congregations to pay their tithes and give seed offerings and a special donation to the church. NASFAT preachers also remind members of the importance of financial donations and paying *zakat* (a compulsory alms giving of 2.5% of annual net income) to the organisation. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, members are reminded of the abundant

reward awaiting those who donate to the cause of God. Their financial support is an investment that will come back multiple times.

However, there are more differences than similarities in themes of Christ Embassy and NASFAT preaching. One of the prominent differences is the attitude toward God. In NASFAT God is the supreme cause and controller of everything; therefore, men and women must submit themselves to him with a sense of humility and inferiority.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, according to the preaching of Christ Embassy, all negative phenomena in life are caused by the devil, from sickness to death and misfortune. And born again believers do not need to bow down to God; they are already empowered in Christ to materialize what they want with their tongues. These two different attitudes manifested in the stance of the two groups during the Ebola scare that engulfed the country around September in 2014. In Christ Embassy, Ebola was considered a creation of the devil, which would not have any effect on the true believer who has unshakable faith. To NASFAT preachers, Ebola was a punishment from God for the sins of humankind, and God would never stop sending affliction to humans as long as they continue to neglect the injunctions of their creator. The solution is for people to repent and remain pious. However, neither NASFAT and Christ Embassy oppose the use of biomedicine in the treatment of diseases.

Christ Embassy and NASFAT preach different notions of sin. The NASFAT view of sin is more in line with the mainline churches than Christ Embassy. In Islam, the infringement of religious and moral obligations is a sin, and NASFAT preachers encourage their audiences to avoid falling into the temptation of sin. But as I mentioned earlier, in Christ Embassy there are no religious laws to be violated and no need to ask for forgiveness. However, in NASFAT seeking forgiveness is an important part of spiritual life. They encourage their followers to chant *astaghfirullah* (I ask forgiveness from God)

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83 This submission is at the core of Islamic religion. In fact, the meaning of Islam is the total submission to the will of God.

all the time. Forgiveness in NASFAT is not preordained, but depends on God's discretion whether or not to forgive. But in Christ Embassy forgiveness is held to be already given by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, and one need only to take the gift of forgiveness and move forward.

Furthermore, NASFAT does not preach the view that human speech, thought, and imagination have the supernatural powers to effect pragmatic changes in the material world. The preachers, particularly the Chief Imam of the central mosque, encourage members to use their mental resources to plan their goals and use the power of speech to persuade in the process of achieving their objectives in life. Thus, contrary to the teaching of Christ Embassy, mental resources and speech are applied to the practical situations to achieve pragmatics goals.

Also, leaders of Christ Embassy and NASFAT preach different views about prosperity. Preachers in NASFAT do not promise prosperity to their members as a result of their faith. In NASFAT wealth and health are a gift from God given to selected individuals to keep as a trust and on the Day of Judgment God will ask people how they handled these trusts, whether they used them in right or wrong ways. In another sense wealth and poverty are the trial from God to test the faith of his servants. In one session of preaching the Imam said:

The wealth of this world is vanity and transient. The most important thing in this world is faith in Allah. Nevertheless, this does not mean that a Muslim is not allowed to pursue worldly things. The crux of the issue is that one should not let worldly possessions distract one from the way of Allah. (Sunday preaching, 24.11.2013)

NASFAT preachers teach that human faith or good works may not guarantee prosperity and health. Furthermore, preachers in NASFAT do not teach that Islam is a bed of roses for the believers. Allah may test the faith of Muslims with hardship, extreme poverty, and ill health.

While pastors of Christ Embassy insist that they are not practicing religion but a relationship with God, NASFAT never rejects the term religion because they do not consider it as a term that encapsulates negative dogmatism, as is the case with Christ Embassy. A considerable portion of NASFAT preaching dwelled on expressing the beauty of Islam as a religion. The preachers do not attempt to privatise the practice of religion and reduce it to the private individual spirituality, as in the case with Christ Embassy. The preachers teach their audiences principles of Islamic dogmas, creeds, and rituals. In this sense NASFAT has remained committed to Islamic tradition but at the same time negotiates how to live in a modern pluralistic society as well as public sphere dominated by Pentecostalism. This attempt of NASFAT to negotiate challenges posed by modernity could well be understood through Asad's notion of Islam as discursive tradition. In this Asad's view, Islam as a discursive tradition is constantly being reshaped to fit with an ever-changing world (1986:14). It is through this understanding, which posits that Islam can be reshaped as time changes that NASFAT's leaders attempt to reorient their worldview and praxis of Muslims in a modern pluralistic setting within the overarching framework of Islamic tradition. However, Christ Embassy takes a special position within Pentecostalism, which is again a distinct movement in (Protestant) Christianity.

Abuja is a city that has a significant presence of wealthy Nigerians who exhibit their wealth through building large houses and driving expensive cars. It is also a city characterised by high cost of living. As a result, the prosperity preaching in Christ Embassy resonates with many members who aspire to enjoy the luxuries they see around them or overcome the difficulties of the high cost of living.

### *RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND LISTENING*

Effective preaching mostly depends on the acceptance and authority of the preacher. In Christ Embassy, people become preachers when they believe

that they are called into the ministry by God. When a person feels a strong desire to serve God through spiritual leadership, he/she interprets this desire as a call from God and then enrolls in a seminary to learn more about Christian theology.<sup>84</sup> This seminary, called Loveworld Ministerial College, is not as well institutionalized as some other Pentecostal schools, such as Anagkazo Bible and Ministry Training Centre in Ghana described by Bruno Reinhardt (2015:269). Loveworld Ministerial College was established by Christ Embassy due to the need for trained hands to handle the responsibility of nurturing new converts in the various ministries and the doctrine of Christ. LMC is not a bible school but a training ground for leaders. Every member of Christ Embassy is considered a potential leader. LMC is designed to afford the leaders the opportunity to be trained to understand the Scriptures and the vision of the ministry. This is the highest level of training in Christ Embassy. Courses are offered from GS (General Studies) to church administration, lay pastoring, and pastoral courses. In Christ Embassy, even if one studied in the Ministerial College, one has to ascend through various level of leadership in the church before assuming a full pastoral position.

However, religious authority does not entirely depend on theological knowledge but above all on the fact that one is called by God to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pastor Chris based his authority on this concept of unique calling as well as the gift of miraculous healing he received from God to heal people from different kinds of afflictions such as sickness and poverty. In one of his interviews with a journalist from *Daily Champion Newspaper* (2005:2), he said:

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84 Apart from Pastor Anita I have never come across a woman preaching in Christ Embassy. There are female deacons but their role is largely administrative services, not preaching. It can be argued that with the exception of Anita, Christ Embassy does not give women freedom to preach in the church. And she is out now. (See chapter 3.)

God has something to say, and I am his mouthpiece. So he does three things. Number one is to give me the message that He wants me to communicate; number two is for Him to draw the people that He wants to hear it; and number three is to confirm the message with miraculous signs. That is the way I look at it. It is up to him. I am not sure that I have personal control over that. I think it is just God's grace.

Here, Pastor Chris is claiming that he is representative of God, and hence not just an ordinary person but a person who is chosen by God to convey his message to the world.

One of my interlocutors, Ustaz Sadiq Ishola, told me that the selection of (Missioner) imams in NASFAT to lead religious activities of the organisation, including preaching, is based on three criteria: sound Islamic knowledge, including mastery of Arabic language; possession of a higher institution certificate; and impeccable moral character. A missioner or imam may continue to build his authority and gain reverence from the members by showing extreme piety, leadership skill, and eloquence in preaching.<sup>85</sup> A spiritual leader who promotes these qualities easily excites audiences during preaching. However, NASFAT does not have a concept of calling, even though some of its religious leaders are treated with respect because people regard them as people who are close to God. The absence of charismatic leadership in NASFAT may be due to the fact that spiritual leadership in the organisation has been highly decentralized and democratised. The chief national missioner of the society, Alhaji Akingbode, is not a charismatic figure or a prophet, but rather a respectable Islamic scholar. Moreover, there is an absence of the notion of the preachers embodying the divine spirit, as found in Christ Embassy. Invoking divine presence in preaching comes through the preacher's ability to convey God's word as eloquently as possible.

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85 There are no females among the NASFAT Mission Board, the body that produce imams. The Deputy National Secretary told me Islam does not allow women to lead prayers or spiritual leadership.

Listening is an integral aspect of the preaching performance. Members are constantly reminded of the merit of listening to the preaching. This is because preaching serves as a reminder of one's religious obligations and duties. Listening to preaching is a highly important religious duty. In one of the Sunday services I attended, the imam quoted the following Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad to show the importance of listening to sermons:

Whoever does *ghusl* [ablution], then comes to Jumu'ah [Friday], and prays what is decreed for him, then listens attentively until the *khutba* (sermon) is over, then prays with him (the imam), will be forgiven (his sins) between that and the next *Jumu'ah*, and three days more. (23.2.2014)

The imam elaborated that the merit and importance of listening is not restricted to Friday sermons alone, but extends to all Islamic preaching where people are reminded to fear and obey Allah and his messenger.<sup>86</sup>

Members of Christ Embassy have a similar idea about the importance of listening to preaching; paying attention to the words coming from the man of God is held to purify the heart of the listeners and to put them in constant touch with God. Pastors of Christ Embassy encourage their congregation to buy the tapes of Pastor Chris's preachings and listen to them regularly. It is through this listening that the word of God sticks to the minds of the believers. In one of the Sunday services of Durumi branch, the Senior Pastor Reuben Obinna stated "all our materials are anointed; therefore, engaging with them is a good way of being nourished by the anointing of the Holy Spirit" (Sunday preaching, 26.9.2015). Anointing, it is believed, can take the form of God's abiding presence that empowers a person to function in his or her gifts of grace (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013:135). The pastors consistently remind their congregation to immerse themselves in the listening of Pastor Chris's preachings in order to be nourished by the anointing through the voice of the

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<sup>86</sup> See Charles Hirschkind (2006).

man of God. Bruno Reinhardt (2014) expresses a similar idea with regard to the Anagkazo Bible and Ministry Training Centre where immersive listening or soaking in tapes serves as form of grace transmission, pedagogical apparatus, spiritual exercise, method of discipleship, as well as a technology of church government.

### *STYLES OF PREACHING*

This section attempts to understand the style of preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT under the scope of the concept performance. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2008:124) states that “by theorizing embodiment, event and agency in relation to live (and mediated) performance, performance studies can potentially offer something of a counterweight to the emphasis in cultural studies on literature, media and text as an extended metaphor for culture”. Herbert Sennett (2003: 17) recalls that “the preaching performance is repeatable weekly, it demands an expectant audience, it centres on a definitive text and requires rehearsal and preparation”. Preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is a regular and repeatable activity that makes it part of the rituals of the two groups. As Sennett (2003: 4) observes with regard to a Christian preaching,

The Christian preacher prepares for the message to be presented on Sunday (or Saturday in some traditions). Although the preparation varies with various traditions, the preacher is rehearsing for the performance on demand weekly. The message prepared is usually based upon a biblical truth or text from the Bible. That message becomes the script of the performance on demand. That message is then preached (or performed) at the appointed time and place (just like a play is presented at specific times and places).

In Christ Embassy, preaching is one of the most regular practices in the activities of the church. In the Abuja branches, this happens on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. Pastor Chris is the dominant figure in the preaching of Christ Embassy of Abuja branches. In every church service, there is a session

when a recorded sermon by Pastor Chris is played via big screens in front of the church. Pastor Chris is a very charismatic person in Christ Embassy with powerful oratory, good command of English language, and skilful use of body language. He is seen not as an ordinary person, but as a man ordained by God to spread the gospel of Christ. Pastor Chris is a great charismatic figure in Christ Embassy. Highly respected in the church, he is always referred to as the man of God. He redefined the meaning of the term 'man of God'. In one of his addresses to the leaders of the church, he said<sup>87</sup>: "There are two categories of ministers of God: a pastor and a man of God, a pastor can sin, but a man of God is carefully chosen by God to serve him, therefore, he is protected by God from temptation and sin".

Pastor Chris's preaching style is like a journey that starts slowly but increases in tempo and speed as time progresses in a crescendo effect. The preaching reaches its climax when Pastor Chris invokes the Holy Spirit through speaking in tongues and asks the congregation to do the same. This situation makes people become jittery, falling to the ground and rubbing themselves on the floor. In this state the entire structure of the preaching collapses and many claim afterwards that they had sublime religious experiences, got healed from different kinds of ailments, or acquired fresh insight on their personal problems.

Pastor Chris is a great charismatic figure in the church. Dorothea Schultz (2015:1) sees charisma "as a form of appeal that is mediated through aesthetic forms, and remediated and 'channelled' by virtue of particular media strategies and formats". As I mentioned earlier the paraphernalia of preaching in Christ Embassy combined to make preaching a potent aesthetic performance.

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87 This was a short video broadcast in the branches of Christ Embassy. The video showed Pastor Chris addressing leaders of Christ Embassy, apparently trying to extricate himself against the accusation of sexual misconduct when his wife filed a suit of divorce against him.

Even though there are many other pastors in Christ Embassy, Pastor Chris's sermon recordings are the only ones that are distributed and sold in the church bookshops and via the website. A male member of Christ Embassy in Abuja who is about 30 years old told me the following about Pastor Chris:

I regard him as someone who is sent by God to come and make an impact in this generation. More so from the vision of the ministry, it says that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of greatness and excellence prevailing in this generation and the next even expatriated in the word of God. I believe that Pastor Christ is sent by God because he is filled with the Holy Ghost. (Interview, 2.3.2014)

Preaching in Christ Embassy is not a spontaneous act but a rather carefully crafted and organised religious performance. This is very apparent from the arrangement of the platform, the dress of the pastor, and his manner of speech and body language. Preaching stages in Christ Embassy are large enough to give the preacher an enormous space to pace forth and back, enabling the preacher to use a variety of gestures and gaze at different sections of the audience. The stage is beautifully designed and decorated with small geometrical objects like cylinders, pyramids, and polygons coupled with a colourful arrangement of flowers. In most cases the predominant colour of the stage is usually blue with a combination of other matching colours such as gold and white. The entire stage is illuminated with different colours of light. The preaching platform is designed in such a way that the audience finds it easy and pleasant to look at.

Dressing with exquisite makeup is certainly part of Christ Embassy's preaching repertoires. Like most Pentecostal pastors, the widely shared dress of the preachers, including Pastor Chris himself, is an immaculate suit and necktie. Pastor Chris's make-up includes retouched hair (jerry curl) with a relaxer instead of a usual haircut. It is evident that dress is another medium of communication in preaching performances. Mary Roach-Higgins (1992:2) states that "dress functions as an effective means of communication during the

social interaction; it influences people's establishing identities of themselves and others, and individual's self-identities based on assigned and achieved positions within social structures."The slick suits worn by pastors of Christ Embassy communicate the spirit of the prosperity gospel and conformity of their teachings with modernity.

An aspect of the preaching style of Christ Embassy that resonates with the concept of performance is the deployment of background music during preaching. Background music amplifies the preaching performance and reinforces the tempo and the rhythm of the preacher's voice. Background music increases the effectiveness of preaching because music can invoke emotion and inspire the mind. This practice conforms to the rationale behind the use of background music in theatrical or cinematic performance.

Pastor Chris on many occasions uses the moment of his preaching to showcase his charismatic power through 'slaying people in spirit'. This happens when the pastor--saturated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit--begins to push people to the ground by a mere wave of hand without physically touching them. Sometimes in the middle of his preaching he would stop and say God has shown him someone in the congregation who has a particular health problem. He would ask the person to come forward to the stage and receive healing. This display of charismatic power during preaching is clearly meant to serve the purpose of showing the audience that the preacher or performer of the preaching is serving as a conduit for divine power. The preacher is acting as the instrument of divine spirit; hence, people in the congregation find themselves not listening to an ordinary talk but to a message emanating from the anointed tongue which speaks through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

NASFAT preaching occurs every Friday in the form of normal Muslims *Juma'at khutba*. There are other short preaching activities during Sunday worship service and a variety of programmes organised by different organs of the organisation. In Abuja's main branch of NASFAT, the Imam

Mustapha Shafiq is the chief missionary and the leading preacher as well as spiritual leader. Ustaz Ishaq Adepoju follows him. Imam Mustapha Shafiq leads prayer in the headquarters mosque at Utako and delivers the weekly Friday preaching.



Fig. 6.3 NASFAT's congregation listening to preaching during Ramadan 2014.

Most of NASFAT preaching takes place in the mosque, and in Islam a mosque is believed to be permeated with divine presence. NASFAT preachers use preaching assistants who stand behind them. One of the assistants has a role of melodiously reciting the Qur'anic verses which the preacher intends to quote. The other assistant repeats and amplifies the critical points of the preaching, creating jokes out of them or emphasizing the sentences of the preacher that express strong messages or a sense of fear of God. There is no doubt that

preaching assistants help in making preaching more effective and enhance its performance.

Ustaz Ishaq Adepoju is one of the most celebrated preachers in NASFAT headquarters of Abuja. He told me that since he was a student at the university, he actively engaged in the Muslim Students Association (MSS) as well as in the Tijaniyya Students Association at Olabisi Onabanjo University in Ogun State. He said that he has been engaged in preaching since that time among students, and when he joined NASFAT many years ago he quickly rose to the level of missionary or clergy. He combined his preaching activities with his present occupation in a financial firm in Abuja. Apart from preaching in NASFAT, he also delivers preaching on television in Abuja, including the Islamic satellite channel TV Ifriqi.

Probably because of his Sufi background, Ustaz Ishaq Adepoju's preaching usually focuses on spirituality. He regularly mentions that one can cultivate spiritual stamina through remembrance of Allah and practice of *zikr* or chanting the names of God. And this stamina would move one closer to God and offers protection against evil and spiritual attacks. Ishaq always makes his preaching more effective by melodiously reciting both Arabic and Yoruba poetry. NASFAT members admired his preaching and responded to it emotionally. One member told me that, "Whenever Ishaq was preaching the power of his preaching touched me, and I felt it in my spirit. Even though I am dreaming of becoming a preacher, I doubt whether it is possible for me to become like Ustaz Ishaq" (22.12.2013).



Fig. 6.4 Members listening to preaching at Karu Branch Abuja.

The manner of Ishaq's preaching, from his agile body language to some of his phrases, reveals influence of Pentecostals. On many occasions the imam begins his preaching with the phrase 'It is well with you' in a loud voice pointing his hands toward the audience. I have also witnessed the utterance of this phrase both in Christ Embassy and other Pentecostal churches. On 24 November 2013 during the Sunday service preaching, the imam even used the Christian phrase 'born again' to describe the Islamic spiritual rejuvenation. He was talking about the demonic affliction and psychic attack on Muslims. He said people who are spiritually weak are more vulnerable to an attack by the dark forces, therefore, Muslims have to be 'born again' --meaning spiritually strong -- through committed acts of piety and prayers. This style of preaching differs from other Muslim groups such as Izala and Salafi, whose mode of preaching did not incorporate Pentecostal elements. In addition, preaching of

Izala and Salafi seldom invoke the motif of dark forces. In fact, Izala categorically denied that demons have influence on human life.

Preaching performances in NASFAT sometimes become emotionally charged, and people often respond to this situation with shouting *Allahuakbar* (God is great). This kind of emotional response, that on many occasions go along with preaching performances, are very appealing to many members of NASFAT. Preaching performance in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT is not a one-sided affair but involves a relationship between the preacher and the congregation. While the preacher influences the congregation with speech, gesture, movement, and even appearance, the congregation also exerts influence on the preacher through paying attention, clapping hands, and loudly uttering satisfaction and approval. One may be tempted to think that the preacher has total control over the preaching performances, but this is not always the case. Peggy Phelan (1993:163) maintains that “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know”. When expressing approval and emotional response to preaching in NASFAT, the congregation shouts *Allahuakbar*, while in Christ Embassy the audience bursts into screaming, yelling Halleluja, and jumping in the church. The emotional expressions of approval by the audiences no doubt encourage and excite the preachers and sometimes make them exaggerate their points and gestures.

Preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is a carefully configured craft that encapsulates numerous factors, such as dress and body language of the preacher, stage design, and mode of amplification, all of which are combined to achieve a profound effect. The two groups engaged in different means of amplification to heighten the effect of their preaching. Christ Embassy employs background music, slick dressing, and glittering stage, while NASFAT uses preaching assistants and melodious recitation for amplification.

Another difference in style of preaching is in the deployment of technology in Christ Embassy. The moment a pastor called a verse, it would be immediately projected on the big screen above the altar. In large branches of the church, the services of the church, including the sermons, are simultaneously projected on the screen as they occur.

### PREACHING AS PERFORMANCE OF MEDIATION

Preaching in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT is not restricted to communicating religious ideas and exhortations but also serves as a means of connecting people with God. Christ Embassy emphasises the idea of anointing, which means embodiment by the Holy Spirit. In one of his sermons Pastor Chris stated that the altars of the Christ Embassy churches are permeated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. When a preacher steps on the altar he would speak under the influence of the Holy Spirit; therefore, listening to preaching is an act of communion with God (Interview3.8.2014). In another sense, a preacher could also pass the anointing of the spirit to the congregation. Pastor Chris elaborates on his position as a preacher who is covered with the anointing of the Holy Spirit as follows:

I have a message that certainly heals people. You cannot hear that message and remain sick, poor or dejected. It would bring you hope and life. So I do not emphasize miracles. I emphasize the living Christ, and when I do that, the divine power of the Holy Ghost follows the message, and of necessity, there will be healings and miracles. How can you believe in God without having miracles? God is a supernatural being, and if he is real, there must be supernatural acts and responses. So the miracles are there to prove his existence, his presence, and his message. In fact, we do not necessarily heal the sick to prove it. It is his presence that proves it.

The occurrence of miracles is taken as a sign of divine presence in Christ Embassy. All preachers in Christ Embassy are seen as carriers of the

anointing of God, and they can convey that anointing to people who listen. In this vein preaching in Christ Embassy allows members not only to listen to the word of God but also to feel God in their body by becoming receptive to the anointing that is proceeding from the mouth of the preacher. An interlocutor told me that “God is real. I heard that some philosophers denied the existence of God. But I know that he is real. This is because during worship service particularly during preaching session I feel his presence, I feel the presence of God in my physical body” (Interview, 22.6.2014). In another sense preaching is rendered as an instrument that transmits profoundly sensuous and material ways to make the divine tangible and tactile (Butticci 2016).

NASFAT preachers invoke the presence of God in their preaching through powerful oratory that conveys the power of God and his all overwhelming closeness to his servants. In one of the Asalatu (Sunday worship) I attended, the imam preached fervently on the importance of remembering Allah. He said, “The greatest error a Muslim can commit is to be carried away by the glittering of this world and forgot that Allah is watching him. Allah says in the Qur'an: ‘I am closer to you than your jugular veins.’ Therefore, I urged you believers whatever you do in life always remember that you cannot escape the gaze of Allah, and you cannot escape his judgment” (10.8.2014). The importance of remembering God and total surrender to his will consistently appear in the preaching of NASFAT. In fact, this topic is the favourite of the Chief Imam preaching in Abuja.

The message about the gaze of Allah on people and his judgment on the end of time touches the audience emotionally. One of my interlocutors related to me his experience during this kind of preaching as follows: “Sometimes this form of preaching makes me tremble and left me with the feeling of guilt and remorse. My heart becomes full of fear when I am reminded that Allah is with me and he is watching me” (Interview, 23.7.2014). Another interlocutor said, “It is easy for one to take the presence of Allah for

granted, but through preaching one can easily come to the reality of the continuous gaze of Allah” (Interview, 23.7.2014).

To invoke the notion of sensational form (discussed in chapter five), it can be suggested that preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT goes beyond mere religious lectures; it rather operates like a religious ritual that enables believers to experience the presence of God on a regular basis. Christ Embassy and NASFAT have different notions and ways of invoking the presence of God. For instance, there is the absence of anointing by the Holy Spirit in NASFAT and less emphasis on God's judgment in Christ Embassy. Nevertheless, despite these differences, preaching in the two groups produces similar emotional experiences in the sense that the affect generated by the performance is interpreted as evidence of the divine presence.

In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT, religious leaders play significant roles in the orchestration of emotions during services. Pastors of Christ Embassy regularly return to suggestive statements during sensational preaching sessions, employing phrases such as ‘Something is happening here’ and ‘God is present here, God is very close to you now’. They also employ other techniques such as excessive bodily gestures to express emotion in order to elicit the same in their congregations. It is in this vein that Riis and Woodhead (2012) reject emotion as private and personal subjective experience. They instead posit that religious emotion happens in the realm of constructed interplay between social agent and structure. Therefore, emotion can be located in between the opposing binaries of personal and relational; private and social; biological and social; active and passive. Preaching settings in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT create suitable environments for interplay between the preacher and audience and between the audience members themselves that elicit and distribute emotions. In NASFAT, the imams quote Qur’anic verses melodiously to excite emotion by repeating a particular verse and raising their hands up and down. The congregants follow suit by standing up, raising their voices, and repeating *Allahu akbar* with excitement and enthusiasm. This

emotion, which is experienced in the body during the high tempo of preaching, is interpreted as indicating the presence of the divine or divine touch in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Sometimes emotion generated in the preaching practices in both organisations is seen by members as evidence that the audience has been touched by the messages.

As I mentioned earlier, the capacity of preachers to arouse powerful emotions on the congregation depends on their authority and legitimacy. Charles Hirschkind (2006) aptly elaborates this process in the role of the preacher or *Khatib* in Cairo as he argues that “preachers serve as mediators that provide the listeners with a necessary bodily and mental apparatus that prepares them to receive the Word of God properly”. This assertion can as well be applied to preaching in Christ Embassy -- and other Pentecostal churches -- which is also regarded as a practice of delivering the word of God in a deeply experiential, embodied manner to the audience. Preaching can also be understood as a technique for energising and vivifying the body to create a physical experience that is conducive to spiritual experience. The touching power of preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT affects the emotional disposition of the listener and produces emotion that is interpreted as divine presence.<sup>88</sup>

#### PREACHING AS INSTRUMENT OF SELF-CULTIVATION

The major purpose of preaching in Christ Embassy is to change the way people see themselves and the world around them or to create a new mindset and self-image. People are required to change their way of speaking and their way of thinking. In fact, preaching is an instrument of cultivation of self. Some interlocutors stated:

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<sup>88</sup> See Annalisa Butticci (2016).

I constantly guard what I say or what I think. Ever since I learned about the creative power of thought and speech I have been making great effort to make sure that everything that comes out of me is positive. I realised that whenever I made a mistake and said I am sick within an hour I would fall ill. I am very grateful to Christ Embassy for making me understand that my destiny is in my head and mouth. (Interview, 8.1.2014).

By learning the operation of the spiritual through listening to our man of God Pastor Chris and other pastors of my church I consciously taught myself how to become aware of my thought and casual speech. I also learned how to instantly shut out negative thought and block negative speech as soon as they arise. As a result, my life has considerably improved now and much happier. (Interview, 23.2.2014)

Through listening to preaching I totally changed my inner world. I feel happy for becoming a new creature in Christ; I feel light in my spirit because I have absolute assurance of my salvation. As a born again person, I know that I am special person with great power. I can change circumstances in my life through changing my attitudes. The pastor has taught us that we should never say we have a headache or any sickness because 'have' is possession. And when one utters it will become a reality. That is the reason why I do not joke with a negative word. I only say what I mean, because I know words and thought have consequences. (Interview, 28.2.2014)

As these interlocutors point out, the preachers of Christ Embassy taught believers to see themselves in a different way because they have a new spiritual self when they become born again. Through regular exposure to preaching, many members internalised the new teachings and adopted a new attitude toward the world around them by becoming cautious of their thought and speech since these two phenomena are tools of creation and destruction. Certain norms developed among the members in which proclaiming some statements such as 'I am sick' or 'I am broke' reveal ignorance of the person. If one utters a similar negative statement about oneself or others in the circle of believers, one feels ashamed by exposing the lack of discipline to control speech. Members believe that they can achieve many things using power of

their mind and word. The physical struggle is secondary in realizing desired goals in life.

Instead of the transformation of self, NASFAT preaching attempts to promote spiritual practices and values that result in both individual and collective renewal. Preachers in NASFAT intend to produce a new urban Muslim, who is an educated, tolerant, moderate, pious, and morally sound person who can represent and project a new image of Islam in a multi-religious urban setting. Even though this idea exists also in Christ Embassy, it is proclaimed much more explicitly in NASFAT. NASFAT leaders are of the view that the success of its preaching agenda can raise the profile of Islam in an environment that is ridden with religious tensions. Some members of NASFAT told me about their experience with preaching as follows:

Preaching taught me how to be a good Muslim and to be an ambassador to Islam. I learned that all my actions were also a form of preaching they are *da'wah* in practice. To send a better message about Islam, to non-Muslims is a great meritorious act that reward from Allah. (Interview, 6.7.2014)

Listening to preaching helps me remain steadfast and committed to carrying out my religious duties. Before I joined NASFAT, I was not regular in my daily prayers. But since I joined NASFAT and became exposed to preaching I never miss a prayer. I also preach to other people about the importance of observing religious duties. I respect and love my fellow Muslims and also extend my respect to Christians. It is through respect and concern that we express the beauty of Islam to others. (Interview, 7.7.2014)

NASFAT preachers take a different outlook toward internal transformation by focusing on the performance of piety through a process of self-cultivation (Mahmood2004). Instead of struggling to transform the interiority of the self to change the outer circumstances of life, NASFAT members are encouraged to pursue Godly actions that inevitably change their interiority. This implies that strict observance of Islamic ritual prayer, fasting,

almsgiving, and other pious actions can transform the heart of a believer and make him a good member of society.

## CONCLUSION

Preachers in NASFAT encourage Muslims to be pious and imbibe tolerance and open mindedness so as to ensure peaceful co-existence with their Christians neighbours. They are of the view that these attitudes would improve the public image of Islam. Preachers of Christ Embassy promote prosperity, boldness, self-confidence, courage, and new prayer techniques as resources that help believers navigate the highly precarious Nigerian urban landscape. And they predominantly direct their preaching to individual believers and hardly to Christianity as an institutional entity, despite the emphasis on spreading the gospel. However, preaching in NASFAT mostly addresses Muslims *umma* (society) and the need for collective moral reform. The success of Christ Embassy and NASFAT, which both saw their branches spring up in all urban spaces across Nigeria, can at least partly be explained by the seeming effectiveness of their preaching that attract urban residents in significant numbers.

As I hope to have shown, the comparative approach has revealed a pattern of divergence and convergence in the performances of preaching between Christ Embassy and NASFAT. Preaching in both Christ Embassy and NASFAT can be described as the practice of motivation. Preachers in the two groups always attempt to motivate their audience to be more committed or they endeavour to motivate them to change their religious perspective in certain ways. Even though preaching in both religious groups involves similarities in the areas of pedagogy, exhortation, and spiritual rejuvenation, their fundamental goals diverge significantly. The purpose of preaching in Christ Embassy is to make believers realise that as spiritual beings they are beyond the limitations of socio-economic constraints and can thus overcome all the

challenges of life. By contrast, in NASFAT, the intention is to encourage practices that produce pious modern Muslims who can represent Islam in the pluralistic religious landscape. The mental techniques preached by Christ Embassy make members want to overstretch themselves in their effort to change their interiority without necessarily achieving the desired pragmatic results. However, preaching in NASFAT did not aim at eliminating individualistic tendencies and quest for private religious experience and neither do Christ Embassy discourage community centred religious activities. This approach also reveals Pentecostal influence on preaching of NASFAT. NASFAT preachers copy exaggerated body language of the Pentecostals as well as some phrases such as 'It is well with you' and even borrow the concept of 'born again'. This borrowing is one of the consequences of religious coexistence.

It has been mentioned earlier that NASFAT embedded itself in the Islamic tradition, which put emphasis on pious life achieve through orthopraxis. Emphasis on orthopraxis is more pronounced in Islam than in Protestant Christianity, where the focus on meaning is stronger and ritual is rejected. It seems that Pentecostalism enters into that void, and offers a more strongly accentuated body practice. The prayer performances of Christ Embassy, described in the previous chapter, are an example of embodied practices revitalised by Pentecostalism. It is arguable that preaching in Christ Embassy, which is an organised and regular religious performance with a capacity to induce emotion and bodily responses, is also an embodied practice. This is the reason preaching has become an important aspect of Pentecostal religiosity.

It is noticeable here that preaching is a religious practice that serves a considerable number of functions. Thijl Sunier and Mehmet Sahin (2015) in their study of preaching in the Gullen movement demonstrate how in some sessions of preaching, "religious knowledge production, authorisation and ritual practice are inextricably linked to one another and come together". In the

preaching of Christ Embassy and NASFAT, all the three elements mentioned by Sunier and Sahin combined to make preaching an authorised and authenticated form of religious activity in the two groups. Preaching in the two religious groups is organised as a performance that deploys varieties of paraphernalia that generate deep sensational experiences. While this chapter has focused on the oral mediation, the next chapter will look at how modern technologies, particularly mobile phones, are embedded in mediations of the divine.

# 7

## MOBILE SPIRITUALITY: TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

### INTRODUCTION

The world has changed, we now live in the digital age and we should better embrace it in our church. Technological innovations such as mobile phone and the internet have brought far reaching benefits to our lives. For instance, when I was in the boarding secondary school back in the 1970s my parents could not send money to me except through my brothers. But now I send money to my children through mobile banking who are studying far away from home in the comfort of my room and they receive the money instantly. This is the beauty of the digital technological revolution. I encourage you to use our digital materials. We have ample number of them in the digital store of our church websites (Preaching, 27.9.2015, Abuja).

Digital technology including mobile phone gadgets are not ideological tools that may clash with the Islamic precepts. Technology itself is neutral; but one can apply it either in a good or in a bad way. In NASFAT we have a positive view of technology. We only tell our members to use it within the framework of Islamic shari'ah. I think it is wrong for Muslims to reject the use of new technologies. Basically, technology is a practical application of wisdom and knowledge; Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says, 'Wisdom is a lost property of a believer, he takes it whenever he finds it.' This Hadith of the Prophet is telling Muslims to look at new technological innovations such as mobile phones as their own properties because they are product

of knowledge and wisdom that make human life easier (Interview, 13.12.2013, Abuja).

The first statement is from the senior pastor of Christ Embassy Karu branch, Abuja, during the Sunday worship service. The second statement was from Ishaq Adepoju, one of the spiritual leaders of NASFAT, during my interview with him. These leaders expressed the positive view of their movements on the new digital technologies, particularly smart phones and the internet. Recently, mobile phones and related digital technologies have assumed several religious functions which Christ Embassy and NASFAT have embraced and applied in different aspects of their religious lives.

The variety of ways in which mobile phone technology has been appropriated as a religious medium among both Christians and Muslims is rapidly expanding.<sup>89</sup> Mobile network operators, in their attempt to expand their sources of revenue, have profiled mobile phones as items in a massive digital spiritual market by creating and distributing religious services for subscription.<sup>90</sup> These companies offer religious services to their subscribers in

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89 The advent of Information and communication technologies (ICTs) has spurred dramatic changes in Nigerian Society. These revolutionary changes have been felt in all aspects of life from economy, politics, health, culture, etc. According to National Communication Commission (NCC) (2015) there are 150 million mobile phone subscribers and about 83 million internet connected smart phones in the country.

90 Globacom is another mobile operator network that introduces varieties of religious services such as Glo Faith Portal and Globacom Christianity Portal. The Glo Faith Portal is an exciting service offered for both Islamic and Christian faithful to be enjoyed on a daily basis and providing an avenue for a more intimate relationship with the creator. There are needs in our individual lives that only oneness with the Almighty can provide and this need is catered for with the Glo Faith Portal. Globacom Christianity Portal is an intelligent IVR based portal which not only satisfies user's religious needs but also tracks their behaviour and responds accordingly. It offers users Bible readings, Inspirational Gospels and uplifting Sermons. Portal also allows users to download or dedicate their favorite gospels and/or set them as their Ring back. Daily Islamic Digest (Ramadan & beyond) is an SMS alert subscription service that provides customers with daily alerts on Prayers for success in the world & hereafter, Verses of daily meditation and Quran/Hadith quotation on their phone.

highly creative and competitive ways. The services include gospel music, Qur'anic recitation, and sensational words of famous preachers as caller tunes and ringtones. They also include devotional prayers, daily quotes from scriptures, religious text messages and special religious packages during religious seasons such as Eid, Ramadan, Christmas, and Easter.

Most Nigerians use their mobile phones to access the internet. The use of a notebook computer is rare due to its high cost and the lack of stable power supply. Wi-Fi internet connectivity is almost non-existent in the country. Internet data services provided by mobile service operators are the main source of internet connection. Access to religious websites and other forms of technologically mediated religious practices and participations happen via the medium of the mobile phone. The intersection of religious practices and digital technologies is what Bell (2006:142) called "emergent techno-spiritual practices". These emergent practices are increasingly becoming accepted and routinised among religious groups in Nigeria.

Digital religion is defined by Heidi Campbell (2012:1) as a concept "which does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice". Christopher Helland (2005:1) proposes a theoretical distinction between "religion online and online religion". Online religion describes websites where people could act with a high level of interactivity. Religion online refers to religious websites which seemed to provide only religious information and no possibility to interact. Both online religion and religion online services are provided by religious organisations in Nigeria.

The availability of mobile phones and the appearance of Bluetooth that makes file sharing straightforward, rapidly ushered in the dawn of digital religious practices. The new digital technology increases the mobility of spiritual resources (sounds, texts, images) and enhances their accessibility. For instance, sermon now is no longer limited to a fixed indoor or outdoor space

but can be accessed by people on the move with an earpiece anywhere, anytime in public or in private spaces. Many people in Nigerian urban environments maintain intimacy with the religious sounds, texts, and images through listening, reading or viewing on their mobile phones while driving or walking in the street. In this sense the mobile phone has made private religious practices (listening, reading or viewing) part of the structure of urban life and woven these practices seamlessly into day-to-day living. Digital mobile technology has conferred on individual believers a great deal of control over which kind of religious material to access and offered the possibility for users to immerse themselves by choosing among a myriad of religious resources on the phones, thereby creating their own religious experience.

In the footsteps of the previous chapters, this chapter also takes the view of religion as practice of mediation that necessarily required media (Meyer 2009, de Witte 2009). De Witte (2009:186) states that “religion always needs media. Ranging from the bible to the body, from prophets to television, and from compact disc to cowry shells, such media enable people to conceive of and establish, maintain, and renew ties with the presence of spirit beings”. In the same manner, this chapter argues that mobile phone technology in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is used as a religious medium that mediates religious experience. The chapter looks into how digital technology, particularly smart phones, facilitate religious mediation through hosting varieties of religious resources such as sermons, Qur’anic recitation, religious music, text, online religious performances, and images among members of NASFAT and Christ Embassy.

Both Christ Embassy and NASFAT make use of the same technologies and negotiate them in the light of their religious ideas. In addition, the appropriation of this technology in the two religious groups also involves borrowing and inspiration which is however not mutual, as NASFAT copies more from Christ Embassy as the new successful format than vice versa. The fact of using the same technologies and borrowing in Christ Embassy and

NASFAT generates similarities in some of their techno-religious practices and experiences. Moreover, the technology mediated religious practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT also involve several differences since the two groups negotiate the practices through their distinct theologies.

The chapter is divided into five major sections. The first section examines digital religious practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. The rest of the sections dwell on the digital religious practices related to sound, text, emergent religious digital culture, and images in Christ Embassy and NASFAT respectively.

### DIGITAL RELIGIOSITY IN CHRIST EMBASSY AND NASFAT

Christ Embassy and NASFAT are some of the most technologically savvy religious groups in the country. Unlike some religious groups such as the Deeper Life and some Sufi groups who express scepticism of new technology, Christ Embassy and NASFAT embraced the new development and perceived it as a potent means to extend their outreach. The two religious groups have quickly appropriated the new digital technology and applied it in various ways that include cyber evangelism/*da'wah*, pedagogy, and online social activities.<sup>91</sup>

Christ Embassy has developed one of the most modern internet marketing strategies, with varieties of programmes on its website.<sup>92</sup> One of the cells in Christ Embassy is called 'professional cell' and it comprises experts

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91 For extensive discussion on Islamic online evangelism, see Hew WaiWeng, "Dakwah 2.0: Digital Dakwah, Street Dakwah and Cyber-Urban Activism among Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia."

92 Christ Embassy website contains numerous apps for download. Below are samples of the apps that can be downloaded in all formats. LoveWorld SAT Mobile App, LoveWorld Cyber Suite App, LoveWorld Music Store App, LoveWorld Books App, Loveworld TV 2.0 App, LoveWorld News App, The Pastor Chris Online App, Healing School App, The Pastor Chris Digital Library App, Ministry Apps, Rhapsody of Realities App, LoveWorld Internet Radio App LoveWorld Cloud Storage App, CeFlix Live TV App.

and students on information and communication technologies (ICTs). Members of this cell organise workshops for the general congregation on how to use new digital resources of the church. They are also assigned responsibility to develop apps for the use of the church members. There is an annual award which is equivalent to one thousand euro given to the IT expert or student who develops the best app for the church. The Christ Embassy Online Store is a rich online market for Christian materials, offering a wide variety of topical messages from Chris Oyakhilome in the formats of e-books, DVDs, mp4s, and mp3s. The messages in the digital formats include numerous teachings on Christian living, faith, health and wealth, love, success and prosperity, confessions, evangelism, and Christian character. One can subscribe to these materials using online payment such as PayPal, debit or credit card.

For the purpose of wider outreach and desire to go with the trendy technology, Christ Embassy enters into the digital religious market through cooperating with MTN, which is the largest mobile network operator in the country to sell its devotional prayers. The messages are written by Pastor Chris.<sup>93</sup> I subscribed to this service during my fieldwork in Abuja at the cost of 50 naira per month (equivalent to 25 eurocents). Examples of the text messages I received every morning are as follows:

1. *Noon or night the blessings of God will rest upon you. You are protected from every wind of evil, sickness, destruction and violence in the Name of Jesus.*
2. *You shall not be hindered today & every hindering force that steps in your path shall be crushed into pieces by the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Name.*

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<sup>93</sup> According to the online news agency Pulse.ng, the Nigeria Communication Commission (NCC) released data which, as of May 2015, MTN market share account for 43 percent of the mobile subscription market in Nigeria, which is about 62, 747 million subscribers.

3. *Circumstances, men and materials will fall into place for your good. Doors of opportunities are opening for you now in the name of Jesus.*

These messages remind the reader that there is a higher power that is concerned about his/her welfare. They can elevate the spirit and hope of the person in going through the rigour of life in the highly precarious Nigerian urban environment. A member of the church in Abuja told me that “these messages come to me at the right time, when I was in a state of distress and things become dark and doors of opportunities seem to be locked. The moment I received these text messages or open and read the existing ones, I immediately experienced light and hope in my life” (Interview, 20.7.2014). When the messages come at the time of material and psychological difficulties, people ideally interpret them as if they are messages from heaven to raise their faith. This kind of experience has been confirmed to me by many members of the church. Apparently subscribing to these messages is tantamount to buying hope that reminds people that God is in control of their lives. The messages also echo daily horoscopes that appear on daily newspapers that serve the same purpose of rendering hope to the readers who believe in them.<sup>94</sup> NASFAT leaders also promote the use of new technologies and view it positively.<sup>95</sup> The

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94 Even though these messages have similarity with astrological horoscope, Christ Embassy and most Pentecostals in Nigeria reject it and see it occult practices. In Christ Embassy the legitimate way of foreseeing the future is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that occurs usually in dreams and vision. However, one has to be careful to differentiate between Holy Spirit inspired dreams and visions from those that are inspired by the Devil and his agents.

95 Bart A. Barendregt (2015) in his article titled “Mobile religiosity in Indonesia: Mobilized Islam, Islamized Mobility and the Potential of Islamic Techno Nationalism” reads the appropriation of information and communication technology in the Islamic religious domain by youth as a new way of being modern. He argues young Southeast Asian Muslims “make themselves modern” in creatively adapting and appropriating mobile communication tools and practices in their everyday lives.

current president of NASFAT, Alhaji Bolarinwa, is an expert on information technology. NASFAT is far ahead of many Muslims organisations in the use of ICTs materials. It has a very rich website with varieties of textual and sound resources which members download and use in their smart phones. Similar to Christ Embassy, NASFAT has launched an initiative through liaising with the MTN to distribute short Islamic text messages to the public. The SMS include daily verses from the Qur'an, its meaning, and underlying spiritual messages. The SMS is called the NASFAT Daily Ayaat. The aim of the initiative, according to the NASFAT officials, is to develop an enlightened Muslim society nurtured by a true understanding of Islam for the spiritual and moral development of the community. Olakunle Hassan, the Executive Secretary of NASFAT, is quoted as follows by Balancing Act Magazine (2005:10) during the launching of the initiative:

Apart from the Friday and Sunday services which allow our Muslim brothers to gather and worship on the ground, we believe this will be an avenue for them to stay connected to the teachings of the Qur'an. Text messages are received everyday in the morning for 6 days, so if you wake up in the morning either before or after the morning prayers, you receive a word from the teachings of the great Prophet Mohammed (SAW). We believe this is a good innovation [through] which our members and other Muslims will gain encouragement and motivation for facing a hectic day.

The Daily Ayaat service, which is currently available to all MTN subscribers, allows individuals to receive the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed on their mobile phones every morning. MTN mobile phone users only need to dial 300 161 from their mobile phones and they will receive inspirational messages from the Hadith or Qur'an every morning for a period of 6 days for a cost of N100, which pays for the cost of text messages being sent

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and for management of the service.<sup>96</sup> The subscribers to the Daily Ayaat allow the messages of Islam to come to them around 8 o'clock in the morning every day. From my interaction with the subscribers I understood that many of them take these messages as daily ritual, which they reflect on them and carry on their conscience during their daily routines. In this way, the messages serve the purpose of connecting subscribers to the words of God.

The mobile phone here has become a medium that transmits religious inspiration and teachings on a daily basis. The medium of the mobile phone transforms Qur'anic verses and Hadiths into portable resources. Individuals move around the city with these materials in their pockets. An interlocutor stated, "Islam encourages sharing the word of Allah as reminder. This is because the human mind has a strong propensity to deviate and fall into temptation, this makes the Daily Ayaat SMS particularly important in setting the minds of Muslims straight" (Interview, 11.9.2015, Abuja). The sudden appearance of Qur'anic verses or words of the Prophet out of the air may create the feeling in the recipients that these words descend from the spiritual world right away--a pure message from God. This is captured by an interlocutor who stated, "The Qur'anic verses and Hadith from the Daily Ayaat sometimes speak to my problems or what I am thinking perfectly at the right time. In this situation I feel as if God send his words to me" (Interview, 19.9.2015, Abuja). In this sense the mobile phone has become a medium of religious mediation.

Moreover, the adoption of the Daily Ayaat by NASFAT reveals another important trend of borrowing and mutual influences among religious groups in Nigeria. Brian Larkin (2014:67) observes, "Religious movements are heteroglossic assemblages rather than homogeneous blocs contained in self-enclosed silos, mutually opposed to each other. They are dynamic, continually

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96 I was unable to determine precisely why NASFAT Daily Ayaat is more expensive than the daily subscription of Christ Embassy. But probably it is that Christ Embassy has its own ICT volunteer team that offer services free of charge to the church, while NASFAT has to pay for the same services.

responsive to other movements, and quick to incorporate elements from other movements that are useful to their own". Pentecostal digital practices in this regard apparently influenced NASFAT's decision to initiate the Daily Ayaat SMS with MTN.<sup>97</sup> It is a typical example of NASFAT copying the form but not the content of Pentecostalism.

## DIGITAL SOUND PRACTICES

The mobile phone has replaced cassette and VCDs as the main source of accessing and listening to religious auditory materials such as sermons, melodious recitation of the Quran, praise, and worship music.<sup>98</sup> Many of my interlocutors across Christ Embassy and NASFAT told me that they frequently use their mobile phones for listening to varieties of religious sounds. Martin Nass (1971:303) argues that "the quality of the auditory cognitive experience is of a different order [than visual cognition] in terms of its intensity and its ability to 'hold' its receiver. It narrows object distance and is more closely related developmentally to experiences of holding and experiences of touch". It is arguable that the qualities of sound Nass describes, such as intensity, holding attention, and creating haptic experiences of touch, make the mobile phone a potent medium for religious mediation.

Moreover, the practice of private listening to religious sounds via mobile phone can be seen in the framework of 'acousmatic sound'. As pointed out by Brian Kane (2014), the concept of acousmatic sound was used by Pierre

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97 However, not all NASFAT digital religious practices were due to the Pentecostal influence; certainly many of the practices proceeded from the logic of the new digital technologies.

98 The increasing shift from the old media toward the new media, particularly mobile phones, is not restricted to the religious sphere alone. It includes many other activities in the secular domain.

Schaeffer to describe sound one hears without seeing the original source or cause. Any sound is acousmatic if the source of the sound is unseen. Kane highlights that, in Schaeffer's view, acousmatic listening is an experience that reduces sounds to the field of hearing alone. This experience takes away the attention of the listeners from the physical object responsible for aural perception and toward the content of this perception. Schaeffer maintains that the acousmatic reduction is immediately produced when one listens to a playback of a sound recording. Kane (2014) maintains that *akousmatikoi* is an ancient Greek term associated with disciples of Pythagoras who were allegedly demanded to listen to their master behind a veil in order to concentrate on his words and avoid visual distractions caused by his physical presence. There is a parallel between this situation and the technologically mediated experience of listening to sounds through a figurative 'veil' of loudspeakers.

Religious acousmatic listening is a spiritual participation without engaging with physical repertoires associated with religious performance. For religious believers, listening to sound through an earpiece or headset allows digital technology to transmit vocal and sonic presence. Acousmatic listening helps listeners to concentrate their entire attention on the sound perception and creates what Judith Becker (2004) calls "deep listening". Becker sees the deep listener as one whose experiences of music appear to have cosmic import or convey a sense of something that transcends the self. Becker's ideas about deep listening to music can fruitfully be applied to the listening habits of many believers who engage with sounds, such as devotional music or melodious recitation of the Qur'an, via mobile phones. In this process the physical object of media technology dissolves and the listening is reduced to pure aural mediation.

Music in the form of worship songs plays a significant role in the spiritual lives of the members of Christ Embassy. The church has one of the largest music recording studios in Nigeria, with state of the art facilities called the Loveworld Music. Sinachi Kālu, who is one of the greatest gospel artists in

the country with over 300 written songs, is a member of Christ Embassy (Sean 2015:1). Christ Embassy offers a considerable number of digital music artists for subscription from its online digital store. The music can be downloaded on any operating system of a mobile phone. The digital store also provides music apps that make the access to music simpler. In the online digital store of the church, the music app is introduced as follow:

Get unlimited and instant access to the best Christian music collection from your Loveworld All Star Artists. This is the official Loveworld Music Ministry app, designed with easy access to all your favourite music albums. It's a digital music app that notifies you of the newest and hottest albums from your Loveworld music artists. You can listen to a preview of any track of your choice before purchase. It's a must have application!

As a result of this app, members of Christ Embassy do not need to go to the music shop to buy or see music albums of the church. Access to the digital music becomes widespread among the members because a majority of them possess Android phones. The availability of the digital gospel music in Christ Embassy increases the possibility of deep and acousmatic listening to the gospel music among the members of the church. A member of the church told me that listening to the worship songs via his mobile phone is the secret of his Spiritual growth. He further remarks:

Listening to worship songs completely transformed my spiritual life. Constant listening to worship songs impressed the word of God in my heart and allowed me to feel his presence continually. Regular listening through my phone help me remembered God even in my dream. This is because I always dream of singing and listening to worship songs. Through listening I build strong spiritual stamina. (Interview, 19.3.2014, Abuja)

Listening to gospel music is seen as a spiritual activity in Christ Embassy; it is in fact a silent form of worship. This silent worship is performed by mental faculties through contemplating and enjoying praises to God.

Members of Christ Embassy believe that regular and deep listening to gospel music helps them in focussing their minds on God and purifying their hearts. In addition, regular contemplation on God, which is induced by listening to the praise songs, is believed to uplift the mind spiritually and to sanctify the personality. Deep and acousmatic listening to gospel music also generates feelings of joy and pleasure. One interlocutor stated, “Sometimes I become so engrossed in listening to the gospel music to the extent that I become enraptured in a state of bliss and I feel warm sensation enveloped my entire body” (Interview. 29.2.2014, Abuja). Many of my interlocutors related similar experiences to me. And they usually interpret sensational affects as the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, mobile phone technology mediates the presence of God for believers.

Most of the members of NASFAT have melodious Qur’anic recitations in their mobile phones and many of them are regular listeners. Some of the reciters people listen to include Abdul Basit Abdul Samad, Saddiq al Manshawi, and Abdul Rahman Sudais. I visited the house of Nasir Musa, who scheduled an interview for me. Immediately as I approached his room I heard the sound of melodious Qur’anic recitation arising from the room. After he welcomed me and asked me to sit down, he turned off the recitation. I asked him why he turned off the player, because I enjoyed the voice of the reciter (Abdul Basit Abdul Samad). He replied that it is wrong for people to be talking while Qur’anic recitation was playing. He quoted the verse of the Qur’an that says: “So, when the Qur’an is recited, listen to it, and be silent that you may receive mercy” (Q 7:204). He continued that it is important to listen to the Qur’an attentively to receive the blessings that emanate from the word of Allah.

One university student of Mass Communication stated that “listening to music makes me think of worldly things, but listening to Qur’anic recitation, which I downloaded into my mobile phone from Google Play online store, makes me completely forget about mundane affairs. I feel very close to God

and my faith greatly increases” (Interview, 23.3.2014, Abuja). Another member of NASFAT, whose work involves a lot of travelling, told me that what he enjoys much is listening to melodious recitation of the NASFAT prayer book on his mobile phone as he is travelling from one part of the country to another. He said, “I can traverse long distances completely immersed in the melodious sound of the recitation. The sound touches my heart and elevates my spirit” (Interview, 22.3.2014, Abuja). Another member who studied health technology and was working in a hospital in Abuja told me that he feels overwhelmed by the NASFAT prayer book whenever he immerses himself in listening to it via his mobile phone. He quoted a section of the book which, he said, delves him into spiritual ecstasy. He recited the Arabic version of that particular passage; an English translation of the passage is as follows:

Oh Lord! I am your servant, son of your male servant, the son of your female servant, my forelock is in Your hand, Your order concerning me would be executed and just is Your judgment upon me. I ask You with all of Your names that You named Yourself, or revealed in Your Book, or taught any of Your creatures from Your hidden knowledge, to make the Holy Quran a soothing for my heart, the light for my chest, make it to overwhelm my grief, remove my agony and replace my sorrow with joy. (NASFAT Prayer Book, 78)

These experiences have shown the role of mobile phone technology as a religious medium that facilitates an experience of immediacy. Deep and acousmatic listening enables the listeners to absorb themselves into the emotionally touching melody of the religious sounds and their often strong language or lyrics. Pure aural mediation facilitated by mobile phone technology enables religious believers to inhabit both material and spiritual worlds at will by deciding to focus their attention on either religious melody or mundane affairs.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> The link between sound and the spiritual world has been recognized by Hackett (2012) and she cited many scholars who explore this link in various religious traditions, from shamanic practices to aboriginal societies.

Some members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT indicate that listening to religious tunes particularly with a headset helps them control or shutdown inner noise and thereby focus on the spiritual dimension of life. They contend that the inner noise or runaway thoughts that hinder concentration are more distracting in a person's attempt to focus on God than sound from the environment. Wrightson (2000:10) quotes Schafer describing this process as "an audio-analgesic." If community and environmental noise is the enemy without, the noise of unwanted thoughts and feelings represents the enemy within. The use of sound as an "audio-analgesic" sound wall to block the unceasing.... inner dialogue and the uncomfortable emotions the dialogue evinces—provides the illusion of mastery over emotion." Some of NASFAT members listen to Qur'an and other religious sounds for the purpose of concentrating the mind on the divine. Musa Yusuf related to me his experience.

Whenever I am alone my mind becomes like a monkey that hops from one tree to another. It is almost an impossible task for me to concentrate on something useful and constructive. Immediately I retire to bed at night and turn off the light it is like opening a big screen in my mind. A stream of bewildering images play endlessly in my mind that stimulates the unpleasant memories of shame, humiliation, guilt, and disappointment that I experienced in the past. I used to find it difficult to sleep because of these countless images and thoughts that invade and overpower my mind. The only thing that saves me is listening to the Qur'anic recitations, preaching, and Islamic music that I stored on my mobile phone. Listening to these materials transports my mind into the presence of Allah my creator. This usually cools me down and helps me relax and feel peace and tranquillity and eventually sleep. (Interview, 28.12. 2013, Abuja)

In this instance, listening to melodious Qur'anic recitation is used as a form of therapy for both relieving insomnia and holding in check runaway thoughts. Members of NASFAT believe that deep and acousmatic listening to the Qur'an concentrates the mind and focuses it on the word of Allah. This is similar to how in Christ Embassy focusing on God is understood as a spiritual

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act that purifies the mind. One person remarked, “There are many verses of the Holy Qur'an that emphasise the importance of remembering Allah. To me listening to *qira'a* or recitation of the Holy Qur'an from my mobile phone directs my attention toward remembrance of Allah” (Interview, 23.3.2014, Abuja). Through the lens of the notion of sensational form, it can be asserted that the aesthetic of deep listening to the melodious recitation of the Qur'an affects both the thinking faculty and sensation of the listener. As this member stated, listening to the Qur'an stimulates remembrance of God and reflection on his words.

Moreover, deep and acousmatic listening to the Qur'anic recitation generates special semiotic qualities. The first step to understand the semiotic of the Qur'anic recitation is to recognise that the voice of the reciter mediates the voice of God. In the case of listening to a recorded recitation, the body of the reciter is not present and hence cannot disturb or distract the listener. As a result, it is the voice that mediates the divine. However, even the voice could disappear as the mediator because Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal word of God. In deep listening one is listening to God through listening to his word. To borrow the idea of Jeremy Wallach (2003) on the indexicality of sound, it can be argued that the semiotic of deep listening to the recorded Qur'an could be described in the framework of indexical qualisign of Peircean semiotics. Wallach (2003:36) states that “as a succession of vibrations in air molecules emanating from a source, sound possesses the capacity to be used as an index of that source due to the ability of sound waves to collapse physical distance between objects and create an experience of co-presence”. Thus, sound waves of the melodious recitation can index God by transmitting his words. Thus, it can be suggested that listening to the Qur'anic recitation announces the presence of God via the sound of his words. These practices substantiate the notion that “media is intrinsic to religion” (Meyer 2009:1). And “what look media from an outsider's perspective may be fully embedded in religious practice...” (Meyer 2009:12).

## SACRED LIQUID TEXTS IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

Apart from auditory spiritual resources there are numerous digital textual contents on mobile phone devices, ranging from the digital Bible, Quran, Hadith, religious quotations, and varieties of texts that encourage piety and religious pedagogy. Members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT use mobile devices to study their Holy Scriptures and other religious texts. Traditionally, Christians go to church with their Bible and when the pastor quotes from the scripture, people flip through its pages to find the chapter and verse. Now this practice is changing with the advent of smart phones. Many people in Christ Embassy use the Bible app on their mobile phones in the church. There are different types of digital Bible apps available for download. Most of the print versions of the Bible have their free digital counterpart on Android, iOS, Windows and other platforms. According to Hutchings (2014:1), the developers of YouVersion Bible app state that “we believe we could see half a billion people or even a billion engaging with Scripture through the Bible App. What the printing press did for Bible engagement more than 400 years ago, YouVersion has the potential to do for Bible engagement in this digital age”. The developers of YouVersion expect that the digital Bible might create more engagement with scripture than the printed copy. In one of his sermons played during a Sunday worship service in Abuja central branch, Pastor Chris had this to say:

Do you have a Bible on your phones? Any phone which does not have a Bible is not a phone but a stone. It is not a phone and does not worth taken along with. Nowadays phones have become so personal that one goes anywhere with them. And nothing supposes to follow you anywhere than your Bible. (18.10.2015)

Many members of the audience responded to these remarks by shouting and raising up their phones to show that they have digital copy of the Bible.

This situation shows how mobile phones have become an integral part of people's religious life. In his remarks, Pastor Chris has authenticated the practice of studying the Bible through the mobile phones and even deligitimised the phones which did not contain the word of God. Meyer (2009:12) writes that "...the media intrinsic to religious mediation are exempted from the sphere of 'mere' technology. In so doing, media are authenticated as being part and parcel of the very transcendental that is the target of -- and from a more sceptical perspective: invoked by --mediation". In many branches of Christ Embassy that I visited, many members and the pastors themselves use their mobile phones to quote and read from the Bible. The question here is, what are the consequences of this gradual digital revolution on the printed copy of the Holy Scripture? Clare Clivas (2013:1) expresses this concern when she states that "the New Testament is becoming a very small booklet lost in the World Wide Web, losing more and more of its covers and becoming potentially a 'liquid book'". Quoting Rachel Wagner, Hutchings (2014:2) points out that "the Bible itself becomes fluid as a digital text, 'its fixed covers dissolving into a host of linked sites that describe competing biblical histories' available for the individual to select and combine as they wish". This apprehension is based on the fear that the digital Bible might give an excessive autonomy to individual Christians and thereby undermines religious authority.

Reading scripture in both print and digital form is an important aspect of spiritual practices in Christ Embassy. In fact, Christ Embassy calls itself a "word based church" to express its commitment to the letters of the Bible. It is in this vein that Thomas Kirsch (2008) illustrates how letters of the Bible animated the spirit world of African Christianity through preparing an encounter with the Holy Spirit. In Christ Embassy members believe that Scripture is invested with potent divine power; therefore, reading it is understood to be an interaction with the Holy Spirit. As more members of Christ Embassy begin to use digital Bibles, this encounter with the Holy Spirit and interacting with it may well happen via the medium of the smart phone.

Apart from the digital Bible, Christ Embassy has numerous digital textual apps which members can pay to subscribe to and download into their smart phone on all the major operating systems. These apps include numerous Pastor Chris books, booklets, and other written materials. There are also apps for Healing School programmes and Christ Embassy's international satellite channel Loveworld Plus. Interaction with these religious materials creates certain subjective experiences which members see as a relationship with the Holy Spirit.



Fig.7.1 A worshipper in Christ Embassy holding his phone during Sunday service.

Moreover, Pastor Chris launched a social networking website called Yookos in 2011 for the use of the members of Christ Embassy. Recently, the site has been opened to the general public and the number of subscribers has risen significantly. The subscribers have the ability to develop and post profiles, status updates, and blogs, upload a document or a picture or a video, start a discussion, or generate a poll. They can also connect with friends and

loved ones through private or group messages. Subscribers can access Yookos on their mobile phone and computers, which are available on Android, BlackBerry and iOS. The site can be accessed by visiting [m.yookos.com](http://m.yookos.com) on mobile phones.

Most of Chris Embassy's online activities on Yookos revolve around commentaries on Pastor Chris's blogging. Unlike NASFAT religious leaders, Pastor Chris asserts his religious authority on Yookos. He constantly posts micro-blogs (short discourses) which his followers perceive as sacred texts because the messages are inspired by the Holy Spirit. With this site Pastor Chris reaches a large audience that cuts across regional boundaries. Here is an example of Pastor Chris's micro sacred texts posted on 9 September 2015:

Your spirit was made to receive the Word of God, and if you'd get the Word into your spirit, it would automatically produce the faith you require to live an absolutely victorious life, and to change any situation. Become a student of the Word today! God bless you. A Christian is not a reworked, renewed or refurbished person, but a new creation in Christ, without a past. Take Advantage of God's Grace.

Grace is the beauty of God in your spirit, expressed in your life. It is the fullness of God in your spirit that brings favour, righteousness and all the glorious blessings of God in Christ. Every day, take advantage of the grace of God in your life, and live to your full potentials in Christ.

This is a typical message of Pastor Chris, which does not command people to do something but tells them about blessings that, he claims, God has already bestowed on them. Members of Christ Embassy find these messages appealing and inspiring. Many members become captivated by the short messages and develop a habit of studying them as daily rituals. "I read the micro blogging of the man of God everyday because his words enrich my spirit. I am convinced that the words are inspired by the Holy Spirit" (Interview, 30.6.2014, Abuja). This is how many members perceive these messages as divinely inspired. Since members believed the messages are

inspired by the Holy Spirit, reading them is conceived as being as spiritually uplifting as studying the Scriptures. Members also post comments after reading the messages to show gratitude to Pastor Chris and express how the applications of the messages transformed their lives. Some examples are, “Thank you DADDY LORD<sup>100</sup> for the entrance of your word brings understanding to the wise, Amen”, “Amen! Thank you Lord I worship you Lord Jesus, Glory to God”, and “Amen, thank you Lord for touching me”. This interactivity, in which believers respond to the message of their pastor, is one of the important features of online religiosity.<sup>101</sup>

During the Sunday worship in NASFAT service, there is a session for Qur’anic recitation that is led by the Imam. In one of the Sunday services the Imam talked briefly about the merit of reciting the Qur’an. He said the recitation is the most important activity in the Sunday service. He quoted a verse of the Qur’an and Hadith of the Prophet to buttress his point. “Had We sent down this Qur’an on a mountain, you would surely have seen it humbling itself and rending asunder by the fear of Allah. Such are the parables which We put forward to mankind that they may reflect” (Q59:21). “Verily the one who recites the Qur’an beautifully, smoothly and precisely, he will be in the company of the noble and obedient angels. And as for the one who recites with difficulty, stammering or stumbling through its verses, then he will have twice that reward (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).” During the recitation people bring out their copy of the Qur’an and recite after the Imam. I noticed that, as in Christ Embassy, some members used their smart phones to recite the Qur’an. This digital Qur’an is mobile and handy and it seems to be easier to navigate through than the printed version.

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100 Reference to God.

101 See Heidi Campbell (2005) for a detailed study of religious and social media.



Fig. 7.2 Members of NASFAT using their mobile phone for Qur'anic recitation during Sunday prayer at Abuja Central Branch.

NASFAT youths in Abuja and other cities initiated a Facebook forum for posting religious lessons, insights and religious experiences, verses of the Qur'an, and Hadiths and their commentaries. One can also ask questions pertaining to Islamic theology or ritual performance and get an answer instantly from other members of online community.<sup>102</sup> Most of the members, particularly youths, use this forum through their smart phones and find it more convenient to express themselves in the online community than in the offline religious

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102 Recently many Salafi scholars in the north initiate Facebook preaching and some of them, such as Aminu Daurawa and Isa Pantami, have gathered many followers. Some have gone to the extent of creating android apps for their recorded preaching and Islamic pedagogy.

congregation. A male member asked the following question in the online forum: “Shall I marry a Christian lady?”<sup>103</sup> He received the following answer.

As salaam, even though Islam permits interfaith marriage between a Muslim man and a chaste woman from the people of the book (Jews and Christians) according to Qur'an Chapter 5 verse 5, Scholars have however discouraged it due to the following reasons among others: (1) Implication on raising Islamically oriented children (Children are naturally closer to their mothers and are likely to be influenced in their choice of religion by her). (2) Confusion as to which way of life should be adopted by the couple/family. What is prohibited in one religion in terms of food, drink, values, attitudes etc. may not be prohibited in another religion, so there will always be conflict of religious ideals, values, culture etc. For example, if a marriage does not work out in Islam, the couple has an option of separating, but in another religion, it is not allowed. ‘To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).’ (3) Research has shown that the rate of divorce and marital breakdown is higher in interfaith marriage than in intra faith marriages. (4) What will be the faith of our numerous Muslim ladies who don't have the equal opportunity of marrying from people of other faiths? Any Christian who believes in his religious scripture will never marry a non-Christian (2 Corinthians 6:14). Conclusively, I advise the questioner to be more prayerful. There are so many virtuous, Islam-conscious and well bred Muslim ladies. May Allah provide for him, Allah knows best.

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103 This situation is similar to counselling services of Pentecostal organisations in Botswana describes by Rijk van Dijk. According to van Dijk this counselling emphasises the refashioning of relationships by mediating moral imperatives and by engaging with psychological knowledge on personal behaviour and on techniques of counseling in a changing context of sexuality. However, even though the questions and answers in NASFAT social media is similar to Pentecostal counselling it is different in the sense that it is attempting at refashioning of the life of an individual member according to the Islamic ideals. Another difference is that counselling is a private affair while online questions and answers are public; the information provided is meant to be shared by all the members of the online group.

Sharing this type of religious knowledge in the NASFAT's social media is an act of informal Islamic pedagogy. This question about interfaith marriage portrays the problems facing youths in the increasingly diverse urban environments. Religious diversity has brought people of different faiths together as neighbours and increases the level of interreligious dating and relationships. The answer also reveals the influence of religious coexistence in Nigerian urban spaces as the person who wrote the answer quoted Biblical verses to buttress his points. He is showing his awareness of Christian teaching and denying the interfaith marriage through reasoning with the questioner and articulating his disagreement in a logical, point by point manner. Both the question and the answer indicate that people who engage with NASFAT social media are urban educated youths who are attempting to face urban challenges within the framework of Islamic precepts. Other postings relate to the issue of piety and Islamic exhortations. One post titled *Encounter with God* reads as follows:

‘Did you think that We have created you in vain and that you would never be recalled to Us? (Q23:115).’ God Almighty is fair towards all men. He has equally blessed all human beings with the gift of life and given them senses and perception and intellectual faculties to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong. God has made promises and sent warnings; He has given some people good health and inflicted others with ailments; He made life a mixture of happiness and suffering; all of this in order to enrich the human experience and make people recognize the reality and value of God. People can choose either to be vigilant and prepare for their encounter with God, and invest for life in the hereafter, or they can choose to reject God and dismiss any accountability to Him. God will judge both with fairness and justice; but when it is too late, excuses will avail no one. (Muhammad al-Ghazali, “A Thematic Commentary on the Quran,” 373)

This message portrays the imagery of the power of God to the reader. It is clearly an attempt to inculcate consciousness of the divine in the mind of the readers. These religious sites, which many members access through their

mobile phones, are new spiritual social spaces that give believers alternative modes of religious participation. The issue of authority arises here. Does online sharing of religious knowledge erode religious authority in NASFAT by making members less dependent on the religious leaders? Campbell (2007:145) states that “the question of authority is often raised in relation to the internet, as authority is seen as a key area to be challenged by network communications”. Bryan Turner (2005:1) maintains that a “networked religious community poses considerable challenges to traditional authority by rapidly increasing the flow of religious knowledge and products. This situation means that control cannot be sustained for long and knowledge is democratically produced”. This situation is less relevant to NASFAT because there is no single charismatic leader whose religious authority can be challenged. In fact, NASFAT democratised spiritual leadership (Adetona 2012).

However, online activity in Christ Embassy is one of the means through which Pastor Chris reasserts his authority and legitimacy. It can be argued that the advent of the mobile phone, through which most digital and online activities of Christ Embassy occur, increased the religious authority of Pastor Chris. In this respect, the question of authority interconnects with the issue of power. This concern with power is probably the reason why Christ Embassy initiates its own social media (Yookos) and instant messenger (Kingschat) instead of using Facebook or WhatsApp. Hutchings (2014:155) argues that “in a network, power is located with those who own, structure and restricts the system of communication. This includes those who control the underlying technology, but also those users who can form the most valuable connections and encourage others to listen to and communicate their message”. By creating its own social media platforms with their independent server and technical crew, Christ Embassy ensures control over the technology and sharing of knowledge and excluding negative criticisms of the church’s

teachings and practices.<sup>104</sup> In addition, Pastor Chris has dominated the dissemination of information through his micro-blogging in order to protect and consolidate his power and authority in the online religious community. Christ Embassy employs the expertise of members who specialise in information and communications technologies (ICTs) to develop its programmes and tailor them according to the need of the church. Heidi Campbell (2010b:61) called this process of negotiating technology into the logic of religion the “religious shaping of technology”. Christ Embassy has achieved mastery in this regard and now the church is at the forefront in techno-spiritual practices.



Fig. 7.3 Demonstration of how to use Yookos app via screen Christ Embassy Karu Branch Abuja.

While in Christ Embassy online religious knowledge sharing is highly focused on the postings of Pastor Chris, NASFAT online postings are decentralised, in the sense that individuals freely post and share religious

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104 Christ Embassy’s Yookos and Kingschat are not dependent on the larger social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. They are independently developed and monitored by Christ Embassy’s own IT experts.

insights without relying on single religious figure. This free sharing of digital religious resources in NASFAT creates spaces of religious engagement and knowledge sharing with horizontal participation. Moreover, NASFAT did not establish its own social media. As I mentioned earlier, members of NASFAT use the common social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and therefore do not have total control and power over the shaping of technology, as is the case with the Christ Embassy. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT online religious interactions can be regarded as emerging online religious communities that are mediated by digital technology.

### THE EMERGENCE OF DIGITAL RELIGIOUS CULTURE

The rapid growth of techno-religious practices in Nigeria has given rise to the culture of circulating and exchanging religious text messages.<sup>105</sup> On Fridays and Sundays and during religious festivities such as Christmas, Easter, Eid, Maulud, or the prophet's birthday, people exchange text messages praying and invoking God's blessings on their loved ones. On many occasions these are short messages which encourage pious activities or invoke the fear of God. The messages are often expressed in short poetic language, sometimes accompanied with graphic images. Happy Juma'at (Friday) messages are the most common and frequently come with calligraphic images.<sup>106</sup> Here are some examples of

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105 Nowadays Muslim youths are increasingly initiating Islamic-based WhatsApp groups with a leading imam who posts short messages that range from *da'awa*, religious and moral lessons and prayers. Members also post their messages or comment on the messages of others. Sometimes hot theological debates ensue between members of particular group pertaining contentious religious issues. Membership of a particular group expands when members invite or include their friends or acquaintances into their groups.

106 See Rotimi Taiwo (2014) for deeper analysis of the Pentecostal use of SMS in the South West Nigeria.

these messages that I collected from the members Christ Embassy and NASFAT.

#### ISLAM IS THE WAY.

All what I'm thinking of is on that Day. Which Day? The Day I will be covered with a white piece of cloth. The Day that I will be isolated and separated from people. The Day that I will sleep in a room without door nor window, without bed nor pillow and at the same time in a quiet cemetery. The Day that I will be left alone in the grave with the deeds (Good or Bad) of my lifetime! What about you? Are you also thinking about this Day? If yes send it to people on your list to remind them. *Jum'at Mubarak!*

All praises & thanks be to ALLAH

Life is the only journey that ends where it started. From nothing to something, then back to nothing. Life is meaningful only when we make the best of it before our definite return to the starting point - NOTHING. May Allah guide us and bless our journey. Amin Thumma Amin. *Jum'atMubarak!*

Whenever you are in a position to help someone, just do it and be glad. Because God is answering someone's prayers through you!

Jummat Mubarak

I Hope This Sunday

Will Be A Great Start To Your Week.

I Hope That It Will Be Filled With Joy,

Peace And All The Treasures That You Seek.  
Wishing You A Happy Sunday Morning!

I Wish That You Start Your Day  
In The Right Tone And End It With The Same Note.  
Wish You A Very Good Sunday Morning  
And I Hope You Spend Each Moment Of This Day  
With A Lot Of Happiness

Many people in Christ Embassy and NASFAT developed the habit of sending these text messages to friends and family; they regard this as a duty that has spiritual merit. These messages are downloaded from the internet in special websites dedicated to creating and placing the messages.<sup>107</sup> One married woman in NASFAT who is around 29 years of age told me that the messages are an important part of her life; she often reads them over and over again in her leisure time because they increase her faith and devotion to God. She says even when changing her phone she made sure that she downloaded all the Juma'at messages into the new phone. If one receives the message from a friend or family member, he or she is obliged to reciprocate. Refusal to do so is perceived as rejection of good will. This is a digital culture of exchange that has become part of the religious celebrations as well as an expression of spiritual brotherhood.

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<sup>107</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the creators and controllers of these websites that post religious SMS. I have tried to find out but I could not be able to identify the people or organisations behind them.

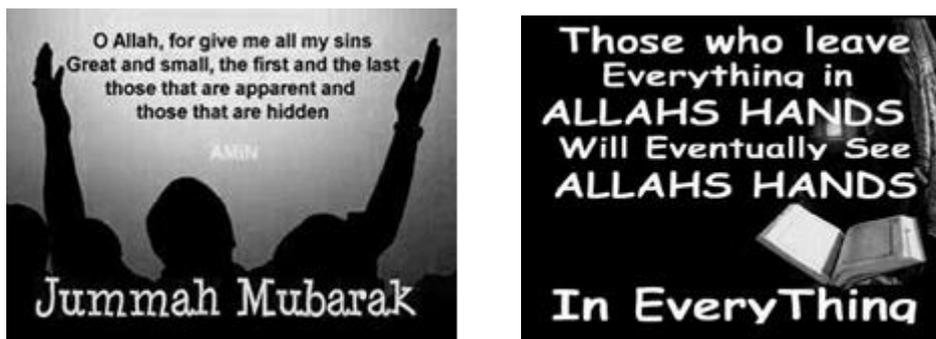


Fig. 7.4 Samples of Juma'at SMSs I collected from members of NASFAT in 2014.

The practices of exchanging religious messages resonate with the concept of gift exchange propounded by Marcel Mauss (1922). Mauss argues that gifts are never free because they always give rise to reciprocal exchange, or at least the expectation thereof. Mauss maintains that the power that resides in the object given, that causes its recipient to pay it back, has to do with the fact that a gift engages the honor of both the giver and receiver. According to Mauss, the act of giving implies an important social bond, obligating the receiver to reciprocate with a return gift, with failure to reciprocate resulting in loss of honor and status. Hassan Olatunde, a 50 year old university lecturer, stated:

I have been receiving Friday SMS from friends and family members and I enjoy reading them a lot. Because I am very busy person I used to find it difficult to reciprocate. However, I feel guilty for not responding, I know it is not proper. One day a friend of mine called and asked me why I am not responding to his messages or even replying with a simple remark of 'thank you.' He said that he was not happy with me and he is going to stop sending the messages to me since I did not show appreciation or interest in them. I asked him to forgive me and promised him that I would be reciprocating his messages. (Interview, 16.3.2014)

Abdulfatah Bashir, a forty-three-year-old businessman in Abuja, told me the following story about his nephew:

I am sponsoring the education of my nephew who is studying sciences at the university. I paid his school fees and I give him pocket money every month. Ever since I began to pay his school fees, my nephew has been sending Islamic SMS to me every Friday. Probably he is sending the messages to show his appreciation of what I have been doing to him and to keep our relationship warm.

There are remarkable similarities between NASFAT and Christ Embassy regarding exchanging of religious SMS. A 26-year-old male Christian told me,

Every Sunday immediately I return home from Church service I send 'happy Sunday' text messages to many friends and family members. Some respond by sending me their own messages and some reply by saying 'thank you.' I also send and receive these messages during Christmas, Easter and New Year. I am always feeling happy sending and receiving these messages. It makes me feel connection with my brothers and sisters in Christ. The kingdom of God is populated by people of faith. And today's technology makes it easier for members of Gods kingdom to share and celebrate the things of the kingdom.

A 23-year-old female university student told me the following regarding the religious SMSs.

Yes, I have lot of happy Sundays and other related messages on my phone. Almost every week one of my friends or family members would send the message to me. I am happy with these people because I feel they care about me and remember me by sending me these messages. As a result I developed the habit of sending them to my loved ones as a means of keeping our relationship alive and reminding them about the word of God through the messages.<sup>108</sup>

These remarks indicate that the messages function similar to gift exchange because they create strong expectations from the senders and a sense

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108 I collected this information on 26.2.2017 through phone interviews to complement the information I had already acquired from members of NASFAT.

of obligation on the side of the receivers to reciprocate. Moreover, the messages function as gifts because they enhance social bonds among members of religious communities who circulate them. They also keep the relationship between people alive through the fact that they are symbolic gifts that contain different sets of values. The central value of the messages hinges not on the SMS alone but on the act of sending them regularly. Even when friends and family members do not meet frequently they can show concern and caring to each other through exchanging weekly religious SMSs.

The aestheticisation of the messages with electronic or mobile arts reinforced the happy mood of the celebrated day.<sup>109</sup> Apparently, these practices are some of the ways new technologies are being adapted, or integrated into culture through religious systems. These texts sometimes are used in a multimodal form which combines different modes or symbols of communications such as texts and images for the purpose of amplifying the message, creating more complex meanings, or eliciting aesthetic appeal. Murray and Jody (2013) maintain that multimodal communication deployed textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources - or modes - to enhance the effectiveness of the composed messages. According to Claire (2013), the combination of more than one mode, or element, contributes to how multimodality affects different rhetorical situations, or opportunities for increasing an audience's reception of an idea or concept. In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT the multimodal nature of these messages increases their potency to communicate and mediate spiritual piety, and good will. "This practice is an instance of a way new media creating religious communities through 'modes of binding and bonding'" (Meyer 2009:12).

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109 The arts works associated with the religious SMS are part of the broader emerging field of mobile arts. Larissa Hjorth (2015) has written an extensive research paper on the subject of 'mobile arts'. Hjorth argues for an understanding of mobile art as a broader field of creative practice than just locative media practice or media arts.

## RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN VIRTUAL SACRED SPACE

Since the 1990s virtual online churches have emerged throughout the world (Macdonald 2008). Some of them combine both offline and online services at the same time while others, such as iChurch, St. Pixels, and the Cathedral of Second Life, are completely online (Hutchings 2014:2a).<sup>110</sup> Christ Embassy has introduced what they called a virtual church service in the sense that people can participate in the service online.<sup>111</sup> The app for virtual church service is available at the website of the church and it can be downloaded on Android, iOS, Windows, and BlackBerry operating systems. To access the service one has to register online and the information and reminder about the service are sent via email. The service is a live streaming of the Sunday worship of the church. There is a window<sup>112</sup> where one can send comments to the administrators of the site. The purpose of the virtual church is to provide opportunity for those who could not be present at the church service offline to benefit from the service by participating online. What is believed to make the participation effective is the registration. One can register and log in and send comments about the benefit he/she derives from the online participation. As Marleen de Witte (2009:193) affirms, “Watching a religious TV broadcast with an international body, ‘in mimetic sympathy’ with the attentive audience

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110 These are strictly online religious services build around the idea of the Second Life. People participate in the congregation using the avatar in a virtual church building. Recently a number of related online religious communities have flourished around the world, particularly in North America.

111 Christ Embassy called this online participation ‘Virtual Church Service.’

112 In the computer terminology which is defined by Encarta Encyclopedia as a rectangular frame on a computer screen in which images output by application programmes can be displayed, moved around, or resized.

onscreen and off-screen, may trigger the viewer's embodied sensory memory of live church events and thereby evoke an experience of spirit presence". From what I observed, live internet streaming via digital device also generates the feeling of live participation with the concomitant spiritual experiences.

During important events, such as New Year celebration and Holy Communion service, all branches of the church worldwide are expected to suspend their programmes and connect with the virtual church service via a big screen in front of their church. All the international branches participate in the event at the same time following the instruction of Pastor Chris. There is underlying belief that performing the service under the leadership and guidance of the charismatic Pastor Chris and the sheer number of participants that cut across transcontinental regions increased the efficacy of the service. Members of Christ Embassy believed that the anointing power of Pastor Chris could transcend time and space and become mediated by new digital technologies.

During the Holy Communion period two assistants of Pastor Chris receive and announce messages from people around the world who got healing as they participated in the online service. As people are throwing away their crutches and wheelchairs to express their new state of health during the Holy Communion service of 2015, Pastor Ray announced that a "brother from Zimbabwe sent a message that he was healed from spinal cord injury." He announced again that "there is another miracle from The Philippines: a brother was healed from mysterious illness in his neck". Pastor Ray kept on announcing varieties of healing from different parts of the world. This virtual church service is what Bell (2006) refers to as technologising of sacred spaces. It can be argued here that technology mediates the presence of sacred space. This is because the real space of the church has been virtually extended across time and space, enabling others in distant places to participate in spiritual services.



Fig. 7.5 Pastor Chris performing Holy Communion Service telecasting via live internet streaming to all the branches of the church worldwide.

Furthermore, Pastor Chris has initiated online global prayers in which all interested members are expected to log in to the prayer site on their social media site Yookos at exactly noon and 10pm (GMT) every Monday and Wednesday everywhere in the world for 15 minutes of prayer. Pastor Chris posted the following remarks for the preparation of one of the prayer sessions.

In both 15 minute sessions at 12noon and 10pm (GMT), we will pray mostly and fervidly in tongues, while also worshipping the Lord and thanking Him for more doors of opportunity granted us for the preaching of the gospel of Christ everywhere, with signs and wonders and great harvests of souls. Prayer especially for our brethren, pastors and leaders who are ministering in villages, towns, cities and nations under siege of terrorists, criminals or wicked and unreasonable men and women. 'Pray the Lord' grants them protection and delivers them from evil work and fills them with boldness to fulfil His will. The Word declares in 2Th. 3:3 '...the Lord is faithful, who shall establish you, and keep you from evil.' Halleluiah, God bless you.

All the participants are expected to pray in tongues, putting their request at the back of their minds. The coordinators of this programme claimed that millions of people log in to this global prayer all over the world. They encourage more members to join this prayer because of its efficacy and power to transform the individual. The reason for the effectiveness of this prayer is held to be the power of technology to harness the individual flow of the spirit through speaking in tongues and make it into a united powerful global force that is much more powerful and effective than mere atomized individual prayer. This practice implies that a technological device can serve as a conduit through which charismatic power flows to effect changes across long spatial distance.

This perspective is similar to the incident of claimed healing through watching or touching the screen when Pastor Chris is praying. A forty-year-old woman in Christ Embassy told me that she was having a mysterious pain in her waist. She said she prayed several times for two weeks, but to no avail. She even went to the pharmacy and was prescribed some medications but still the pain persisted. As she was watching a programme called 'Atmosphere of Miracle' on her mobile phone, seeing Pastor Chris performing a miracle, she claimed to have instantly received healing and the pain completely disappeared. There are numerous similar cases of people who claimed to receive healing by watching Pastor Chris performing a miracle that was transmitted via their technological device.

Mediating spiritual power that effects healing from physical illness illustrates how the mobile phone becomes not only a medium that connects people but also serves as a religious media that connects people with the spiritual realm. Members of Christ Embassy appropriate the potential of the material properties of this technology and reconstitute its functionality for the purpose of connecting with the transcendental world. The material media of technology in this sense certainly 'disappear' when practitioners immerse themselves in virtual religious participation or global prayer service. This is

highlighted by Patrick Eisenlohr (2011:46) when he observes that in some practices the process of mediating something media “is capable of drawing attention away from their own materiality and technicality in order to redirect attention to what is being mediated”. Moreover, a mobile device is a technological gadget with highly mundane functions; in this case it becomes a temporarily enchanted object when it is involved in the practice of divine mediation.<sup>113</sup> This is certainly not a new experience among Nigerians, because there is already a trend of enchanting new technological devices in the country. There have been rumours of demons calling people through mobile phones in order to kill or enrich them as well as informal conversation about some astrological formulas or secret name of God which manufacturers inserted in to the phones to make them work and perform wonderful functions.<sup>114</sup>

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113 Enchantment of mobile phone technology is widespread in Nigeria. From time to time rumours about demonic and witch invasion of the technology is erupts. The rumours are usually about a demonic phone number that calls people and whoever picks the phone then he/she would die instantly. Sometimes young ladies are warned not to pick any number because some men use sorcery to hypnotize them into falling in love with them if they pick the number magical number the men used to call them. One example of this trend is the following message circulated via WhatsApp Messenger: \*There is a number starting with +233 on WhatsApp, with the picture of a young guy with his friend in a partially dark place. Please do not respond to his msg but! block the number Asap. He is a satanic agent looking for blood through internet. His name is Nat Some people are dead already so don't be a victim. Share with everyone u know and' save souls +233 544971115: the number is taking over now, 11 people died this morning in Swedru after receiving a call from this number. +233 544971115 and please I beg you, send this number to all your family members leave then to all people you love or people you don't want to lose and tell them not to answer any call from this number. It's URGENT: Tell all contacts from your list. Beware it is very dangerous. They announced it today on the radio. Pass on to as many as you can.

114 During the announcement session in one of the Sunday services I attended in NASFAT, the announcer stated,  
I am asked to warn about what is happening now in the city. If any one of you sees black laptop or black berry phone on the corner of streets in the city he/she should not take it. These things belong to the secret cult society which they use as a bait to trap innocent people into their fold. They moment one takes these devices he/she would be instantly initiated into the cult with terrible consequences.

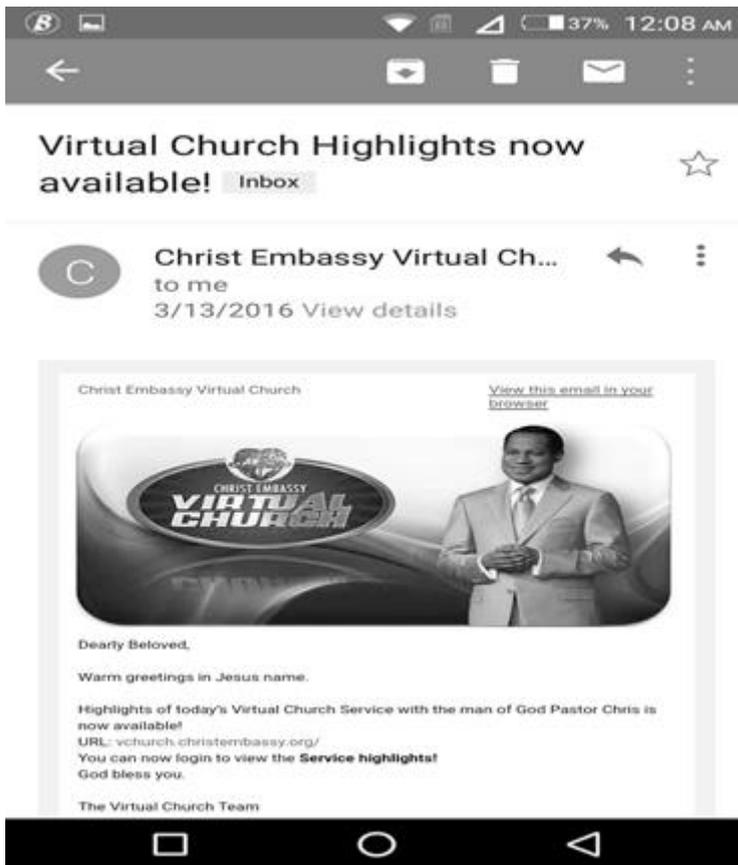


Fig. 7.6 A sample of screen shot of virtual church reminder I have been receiving weekly from Christ Embassy.

Christ Embassy has introduced the practice of online conversion. To receive Christ and become a born again in Christ Embassy requires a ritual of sitting close to the pastor who can facilitate the impartation of the Holy Spirit to the would-be born again believer. The pastor recites a prayer and confession and the aspirant repeats the prayer after him. Immediately after the aspirant finishes reciting the prayer and confession, he/she has become a born again person and becomes a new creature in the sight of God. Just recently, this ritual

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can occur in the cyberspace. Pastor Chris has personally written the prayer in the website of the church. The site contains the following questions:

Do you know Jesus? Do you want to rededicate your life to God? Do you want to experience peace in your life? You too can begin a NEW LIFE with JESUS CHRIST Today. We invite you to make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life by praying this prayer.

If one is ready to receive Christ he/she can recite the following prayer.

"O Lord God, I come to You in the Name of Jesus Christ. Your Word says, "...whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). I ask Jesus to come into my heart to be the Lord of my life. I receive eternal life into my spirit and according to Romans 10:9, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved," I declare that I am saved; I am born-again; I am a child of God! I now have Christ dwelling in me, and greater is He that is in me than he that is in the world! (1 John4:4). I now walk in the consciousness of my new life in Christ Jesus. Hallelujah!"

To conclude the process the website contains this information.

Congratulations! You are now a child of God. Kindly Fill The Form Below If You Said The Salvation Prayer And Also To Download A Free E-Copy book By Pastor Chris, Thank you. An email containing the book 'Now that you are born again' has been sent to your email address. God bless you.

A final year university student told me about his experience with online conversion.

I was raised a nominal Christian because my parents are not religious at all. We hardly go to Church and I am not regular in prayer. Through the influence of school friends I began to attend the services of Christ Embassy in the campus. I have become captivated with the teachings

of Pastor Christ and his personality. When I decided to finally become a born again in the church I desire to receive Christ from the great man of God Pastor Chris. When I come to know that Pastor Chris personally administers the online prayer for becoming born again I rushed to my smart phone, accessed the website, took the prayer and signed up my name. When I finished the process I became very happy that I received Christ from Pastor Chris. Thank God with the new technology since I have no opportunity to meet the pastor in real life now I met him online.

This online service is believed to be as effective as offline personal contact with the pastor, because the prayer carries the anointing of the man of God Pastor Chris. Members believed that the online conversion is authentic and special since it comes directly from the man of God. Modern technology is believed to allow the impartation of anointing from the man of God to touch people that agree to receive Jesus Christ online.

NASFAT has introduced similar but more limited virtual participation in its religious services with online streaming of the national Lailatul Qadr prayer in Lagos. If one registers and logs in to the live streaming of the prayer, one can partake in the spiritual benefit of the prayer. However, it is not allowed for members to join the prayer online. They can only participate through watching alone. This is because there is a longstanding *fatwa* by many Islamic scholars in Nigeria that prohibits joining and participating in *salat* ritual prayer through live television broadcasting. This *fatwa* is based on the ruling of Islamic jurists that limit the distance between the imam and the worshipper who follow the imam outside the mosque.<sup>115</sup>In both Christ Embassy and NASFAT the purpose of the service is the same: to extend the reach of the services and sacred grounds beyond the limitations of time and space. Moreover, new technology is also believed to extend the spiritual effect of

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115 In the Shafie and Maliki school, it is stated that if there is a worshiper following the imam leading salah from outside the masjid, there should not be a gap of more than three hundred *dhiraa'a* (arm's length distance), nor a closed door between them.

these religious services in the sense that people believed that they can access spiritual blessings online.

While the previous section of sharing religious knowledge raised the issue of authority, this section brings to the fore the question of authenticity. Some pastors of ECWA church and other Izala ulama criticised internet mediated religious participation based on the perceived in-authenticity of the services due to its disembodied nature. The critiques usually point out that the lack of presence of worshipers in the congregation undermines the spiritual effect of the religious performances. However, apparently the novelty of digital technology and its mundane nature does not render ritual performed through it inauthentic in Christ Embassy. Christ Embassy embraces digital technology as a welcome development that opens up myriad of doors of opportunity to them. By developing and controlling their own digital platforms (Yookos, Kingschat), Christ Embassy holds the medium in check and ensures that members do not turn away from Pastor Chris, so that he remains the authority necessary to authenticate digitally mediated experiences. Since engagement of NASFAT with technology mediated religious participation is limited, the leadership has not yet articulated a comprehensive view about religious performances mediated by technology.

## DIGITAL RELIGIOUS IMAGES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF HAPTIC VISION

There is widespread circulation of religious images through mobile phones among NASFAT and Christ Embassy members. The mobile phone recently has become a pervasive medium that contains varieties of images, sounds, and texts. People download and share images particularly through Bluetooth and messaging apps such as WhatsApp Messenger. This section has adopted a broad view of images that include digital Islamic calligraphy and pictures. Calligraphy is defined by Claude Mediaville (1996:17) as “the art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious, and skillful manner”. Islamic calligraphy or Arabic calligraphy, according to Titus Burckhardt (1987), is the artistic practice of handwriting based upon the Arabic language and alphabet in the lands sharing a common Islamic cultural heritage. It is known in Arabic as *khatt* which derived from the word 'line', 'design', or 'construction'. The calligraphic images used are mostly the word "Allah" and "Muhammad". Nowadays Islamic calligraphy has been increasingly rendered in digital forms through graphics software.

These electronic calligraphies come with exquisite design and appear in conspicuous colours and sometimes adorned with intricate arrangements of flowers and illuminated with light. The meaning of light in the images is apparently due to its symbolic significance in religious traditions. The ceremonial use of lights is found in the practice of many religions across the globe. Candles are extremely common and other forms of light, whether fire or other, are utilized to convey the sense of holiness. Therefore, light that adorns the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad signifies their sacredness or holiness similar to the halo that accompanies medieval catholic saints. Apart from beautifying the images, flowers are the symbols of love. Therefore, they create the impression that Allah and his Prophet are objects of love. In combining design, colours, light, and flowers, the creators of these images tend

to portray the visual aesthetic that expresses the perceived beauty and eternal qualities of God and lasting significance of his Prophet.

The use of calligraphic images among NASFAT members is not seen as contrary to Islamic injunctions. In Islam, prohibition on the use of images is restricted to the creation of images of sentient living beings. Protestant Christianity has a similar attitude toward images. This is the reason why Joseph Koerner (2003:151-152) argues that Iconoclastic Protestants radically “linguistified” the sacred, which was “formerly manifested objectively”. Koerner's argument can well be extended into the domain of Islam. This is understandable if we look at the importance of verbal and poetic renderings of the Qur'an and names of God in Islamic tradition. However, I would argue that the written language in Islam has taken form and become an image via calligraphy. Calligraphy is an image because of its artistic elements and the special way it is handled, which is based on calling attention in order to be seen and to be appreciated. Its artistic forms are designed to appeal to the human senses. Calligraphic rendering of the word Allah and Muhammad have gone deep into many Islamic cultures through a long period of repetition and circulation. Therefore the two words now take the forms of images that create a flash of recognition among members of that culture, whether literate or non-literate. Members of NASFAT implicitly agree that the calligraphic names of Allah and Muhammad are images or pictorial forms. One of my respondents, a 49-year-old teacher in Abuja stated:

I know that Islamic calligraphies are supposed to be respected and handle[d] with care but still I regard them as precious objects for decorating my sitting room, my computer screen and my handset. Instead of hanging pictures of people on the wall of my sitting room or place them on the screen of my mobile phone, I preferred to use the calligraphic name of Allah or Prophet Muhammad. Pictures of people could remind me worldly events but calligraphic name of Allah and his Prophet or some verses of the Qur'an could remind me spiritual side of life. (Interview, 12.2.2014)



Fig. 7.7 Samples of digital Islamic calligraphies I collected from NASFAT members in 2014.

I have witnessed similar remarks among members of NASFAT indicating that they have taken Islamic calligraphies as images even though they are not ready to go into complex academic discourse of what is an image and what is not. The view of my respondent grounded both soft and hard versions of Islamic calligraphies in the realm of images by seeing them as decorative objects that could be used in place of pictures, not as written signs that convey linguistic meaning. In my interview with him one of the youth leaders in NASFAT said, "I always like and revere these images. Whenever I see the name of Allah beautifully rendered in design I feel overwhelmed with

his presence and love” (Interview, 21.12.2013). Another member who is a 39 year old banker in Abuja stated the following:

I think there is something mysterious about the calligraphic names of Allah and Muhammad because coming into contact with them change[s] my feeling and mood. Whenever I feel the propensity to commit sin, the moment I look unto the screen of my phone and see the names of Allah and Muhammad I instantly feel guilty and withdraw from my bad intention. I am also feeling that I cannot be able to do something bad in a house where calligraphic name of Allah and Muhammad are displayed on the wall. It makes me feel as if they are watching me. I know there are people who do not feel this way, people who forget Allah and even commit sin when they have name of Allah in their houses or cell phones to remind them his presence. But my feeling is very different from such people. I see Islamic calligraphy as powerful reminder of the presence of Allah.

These assertions confirm David Morgan’s (2005) observation that enacting the presence of the sacred is one of the functions of a religious image. Morgan maintains that images can mediate and provide access through gazing, kissing, touching, veneration, or even worship. Moreover, Alison Ross (2016:22) argues that “what is distinctive about the image is that it possesses a communicative force that is surplus to its perceptible form. It is this force that differentiates the image from other kinds of perceptible form”. So, it is arguable here that in this respect the Islamic calligraphies are images or religious media that bring the transcendent closer to the believers and connect them with its presence, since the act of seeing them is accompanied with a feeling of divine presence coupled with reverence and veneration. Thielemans (2015:1) maintains that the experience of looking at artworks is multisensory and affective. He states that “the emotional impact of this experience becomes part of the process of interpretation, the viewer an embodied spectator rather than a disembodied eye”. The pre-verbal sensation of affect generated by the experience of looking at the calligraphic rendering of the names of Allah and Muhammad is always subsequently interpreted by members of NASFAT as

divine touch on the heart of believers. In another sense, coming into contact with the pictorial name of God induces divine remembrance that is felt as a special calmness in the mind. In light of the work of W.T.J. Mitchell (2005) the calligraphic rendering of the name of God can be regarded as an active agent that sets in motion processes in both the body and mind of the beholder. Furthermore, another function of these images has to do with the affirmation and expression of Muslim identity. Using these images as a screen wall paper or hanging the printed frame of the image on the wall in houses or offices announces the religious identity of the owner.



Fig. 7.8 Printed versions of Islamic calligraphies on sale during Sunday service at Central Branch Abuja.

## MOBILITY OF THE MOBILE PHONE AND ITS CONSEQUENT INSTABILITY

As mentioned above, mobile technology harboured religious contents. Mitchell (2005:198) remarks: “If images are life-forms, and objects are the bodies they animate, then media are the habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive.” To paraphrase Mitchell it can be stated that the mobile phone has become a habitat where varieties of images reside and come to life. Since calligraphic rendering of the names of Allah and the Prophet are regarded as holy symbols, they create certain restrictions on the use of the material media they now inhabit. This is because this medium, which provides efficient and convenient access to the digital religious resources, creates instability because of its very mobility. The mobile nature of the gadget creates the possibility of taking the gadget to environments some regard as polluted or profane. The instability caused by this problem has engendered hot arguments among Muslim scholars in the country. Some argue that it is completely wrong to put religious symbols such as the word of God into the highly mundane piece of technology.<sup>116</sup> This is where the issue of contestation of technology as religious media comes into play. While others argue that it is permissible for Muslims to upload religious texts, sound, and images on the mobile phone, the caveat is that the phone should not be taken to the profane environment, for instance, a toilet. When I asked the NASFAT leaders about this problem their response was that it is permissible to go to places such as toilet with the phone. However, it should remain off and it is not permissible to use it there. There are few people among NASFAT members who expressed different views

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116 See Larkin (2008) for a detailed explanation of northern Nigerian Muslims’ early apprehension of broadcasting religious programmes on the then new media of radio and television.

regarding this controversial issue. Ali Muyideen, a 27-year-old secondary school teacher in Abuja stated:

In my view the calligraphic name of Allah and Muhammad and Qur'anic verses that come in frames are better than the digital copies which people upload on their mobile phones. This is because the copies are fixed in one location and there is no tendency to take them to inappropriate places. However, I have mixed feelings about uploading names of Allah on the mobile phone. Personally, I could not go to toilet with my phone if it contains name of Allah or recitation of the Holy Qur'an. Even if the phone is turned off I still feel it carries the weight of the name of Allah and Prophet Muhammad. Despite the fact that some Islamic scholars allow people to upload Islamic arts and other related things, still I am not comfortable with that. (Interview, 11.2.2014, Abuja)

This comment has raised an important issue that the name of Allah, once it is created in whatever form, has weight or presence that can never be erased. The invisibility of the image through turning off the phone or switching to another file cannot collapse the holy presence until the name is deleted entirely from the phone. The comment also suggests that there is a contrast between the soft and hard versions of images (screen and paper images). As the comment implies, some people contest the use of electronic pictorial name of God because the digital screen images are not stable; they appear and disappear at the flip of an eye when the screen is turned on or turn off. As a result the images do not provide a fixed and stable presence of God as is the case with the calligraphic frames hung on the wall.

Another problem is the tendency by some young people to put religious materials such as the digital name of Allah on their cell phone and at the same download profane materials such as pornography into the phone. This raises the question whether it is acceptable in the Islamic *shari'ah* to place religious and profane files in one digital device. Ulama in NASFAT and the broader Muslim community condemn this practice and ask youths to desist

from it. They state that it is an act of sacrilege to place religious materials such as the verses of the Qur'an or name of Allah side by side with pornography. Despite this prohibition many youths do not find a contradiction in using both religious and profane contents on their phones. They can engage with any content as if the other does not exist. However, some handle their mobile phones with extra care if they contain religious materials, as indicated by Tunde Mustapha, a 23-year-old student in Abuja.

I have varieties of calligraphic names of Allah, Islamic preaching and Qur'anic recitation on my mobile phones. I have heard a lot of *fatwas* or ruling by Islamic scholars regarding the use of Islamic materials on the mobile phones. But I decided to take the easiest ruling that allows Muslims to upload and use Islamic materials on their phones as long as they would not use them in the inappropriate places. I am also careful not to store inappropriate files that create temptation on my phone. I think it is good for my spiritual life to have these digital materials on my phone so that they would constantly help [me] remember Allah and my religious duties as a Muslim. (Interview, 22.3.2014)

Questions such as the following arise here: Does what is considered as sacred, such as the text of the Qur'an, sacralise its material container? When the text of the Qur'an or name of Allah is open on the phone, does the phone instantly become a religious object like the printed copy of the Qur'an? The view of Islamic scholars that prohibits the use of the religious materials on the phone and the one that forbids taking the phone to defiled spaces imply that the sacred contents create surplus that permeates its container and thereby transforms the material component of the container into a religious object. The view of NASFAT's ulama, which holds that the phone which contains names of Allah should be turned off at unclean spaces, implies that religious materials in non-active digital form such as when the phone is off cannot be regarded as a sacred object until it is activated and becomes perceptible to human senses. In this view, to paraphrase Mitchell again, the images would only come to life and

animate the phone with their spiritual aura when it is turned on. However, the images die with the phone as it is turn off.

### IMAGES IN CHRIST EMBASSY

The use of religious images is highly restricted in Christ Embassy. In line with the general Protestant suspicion of images, the leadership of the church does not approve the use of images of Jesus or crucifixes.<sup>117</sup> Aversion toward the use of images among the members of both Christ Embassy and NASFAT is rooted in the fear of digression to idolatry. One of the members of the church, a 29 year-old civil servant in Abuja, stated the following:

God has categorically prohibited the use of images in the act of worship. In my view it is wrong to place the picture of Jesus either in the house or on the mobile phone screen. This is because constant interaction with such pictures can make one susceptible to the inducement of the devil to worship the picture. Or it might generate excessive veneration that may unknowingly slip up into idolatry. The pictures of Jesus popularised by the media are fakes because no one knows exactly how Jesus looked like since there was no camera when he walked upon this earth. (Interview, 12.1.2014)

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117 See Birgit Meyer's (2010) detailed analysis of mass produced pictures of Jesus in Ghana. Meyer highlights how Pentecostals express an ambivalent attitude toward the picture of Jesus where it is regarded as both a site for prayer and contemplation as well as a potential object where the devil can take over and cast an evil spell through a haptic gaze on the onlookers.



Fig. 7.9 Pictures of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome I collected from the mobile phones of interlocutors during my fieldwork in 2014.

However, despite the outright rejection of images in Christ Embassy, the pictures of Pastor Chris are displayed in the church and members use the pictures on their mobile phones. Members also circulate these images on their Yookos and Kingschat account profiles. I asked one of my interlocutors about the reasons for using the images and his response was that "we do not revere the image of Pastor Chris the way Roman Catholics revere the picture of Jesus" (Interview, 11.2.2014, Abuja). Another 22-year-old student remarked:

I have plenty of Christian related images on my mobile phones, including pictures of our church buildings and logo. I also have a lot of pictures of our man of God Pastor Chris on my phone but certainly not the picture of Jesus. This is because God has prohibited the use of his image in any way possible. (Interview, 11.2.2014, Abuja)

It appears that members of Christ Embassy use the image of Pastor Chris out of love and admiration, similar to the ways fans of celebrities use the images of their stars. Mass usage of images of Pastor Chris transformed them into icons of the church. The pictures symbolised Christ Embassy to members of the church and the Nigerian public.

Furthermore, the ubiquity of Pastor Chris images in the digital devices of members of Christ Embassy resembles the use of Islamic images among members of NASFAT. The difference is that in NASFAT images of the calligraphic rendering of the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad are venerated and handled with care. Even though the picture of Pastor Chris in Christ Embassy is given special respect, it does not command profound veneration. Other images used by members of Christ Embassy in their mobile devices are pictures of church buildings, church choirs in practice, or the church logo. These images serve a similar purpose of reaffirming religious identity or expression of loyalty to Pastor Chris by putting his picture on mobile phone screen.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to show that mobile phone technology has been appropriated by members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT and transformed into a potent religious medium that facilitates a link with the divine. The acceptance of digital technology by Christ Embassy and NASFAT as highlighted by the two quotations of their leaders in the opening remarks of the chapter precipitate technologically mediated religious practices among the members of the two religious groups. Comparing these practices as related to the religious digital sounds, texts, and images reveals similarities and differences between the two groups. Some practices of NASFAT such as Daily Ayaat are apparently an imitation of Christ Embassy. This suggests that co-existence across religious difference may engender mutual influences and borrowing, but also affirmations of difference. Moreover, the chapter has demonstrated that the impact of new digital technology on religious practices has raised issues regarding religious authority, authenticity, and

contestations.<sup>118</sup> These issues affect Christ Embassy and NASFAT in different ways. Techno spiritual practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT are an example of how religious practices shape, and are being shaped by, the use of new digital media. There is no indication that the rapid technologising of religious practices and resources among Christian and Muslim groups, such as those found among members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT, would radically change the face of Christianity and Islam beyond recognition. However, the emergent techno-spiritual practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT have redefined some religious practices in both organisations. Indeed, as Meyer (2009:2) argues, “The rearticulation of religion necessarily implies some kind of transformation, which entails shifts of its position in relation to the state and the market, as well as the shape of the religious message, structures of authority, and mode and moods of binding and belonging”.

Through technology spiritual practices spawn the development of a new religious community that is mediated through cyberspace with concomitant new ways of sharing religious experiences and insights, and of establishing networking among the faithful. It is noteworthy that the portability of digital technology has made religious resources highly mobile and more accessible. Despite the differences in the digital religious practices between the members of Christ Embassy and NASFAT, the common point of convergence is based on the fact that in both movements digital religious engagement generates similar religious experiences. On many occasions in Christ Embassy and NASFAT, religious sounds, texts, and images mediated by digital technology generate affect and emotion that members interpret as the presence of (or closeness with) the divine.

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118 See Pauline Hope Cheong (2012) for an in-depth analysis on how core religious understandings of identity, community and authority shape and be (re)shaped by the possibilities of communicative aspects of the digital technologies.

Even though Christ Embassy is a pace-setter in engaging with the new media, there is strong indication that NASFAT will continue to engage with new media technologies and even initiate their own similar to Christ Embassy. As both Christ Embassy and NASFAT embrace modernity, they perceive appropriation of new media technology as an aspect of being modern. As Gertrud Hüwelmeier (2016) explains, new media technologies are intrinsically entangled with modernity. Moreover, NASFAT's leadership sees open mindedness as another way of expression of modernity; this openness certainly would pave the way for new experiments and innovative practices with the ever-evolving new media.

## CONCLUSION

In chapter one, I stated that a growing number of scholars call for an anthropology of religion that studies Islam and Christianity under a single framework. This thesis has attempted to do that by treating Christ Embassy and NASFAT within a single comparative parameter of analysis. It would have been possible to take the study of each of these organisations into a different trajectory of research, for instance, embedding it into the anthropology of Christianity or Islam. However, opting for a single anthropology that focuses on comparing two distinct religious groups who share the same habitat but differ in theology and religious practice reveals some unique religious dynamics. The important question here is: what does the comparative approach show?

Chapter two explored religious coexistence and its implications in the city of Abuja. Religious pluralism in Abuja results in diverse confessional groups sharing the same neighbourhood and becoming exposed to each other's practices. This engenders intrusion on each other's privacy and space through amplification of sound and blockage of public roads. The chapter showed how various kinds of public religious manifestations--from buildings, to sounds and images--transform Abuja's cityscape. The comparison noted that elements of soft or non-aggressive intra- and inter-religious competitions underlie the inscription of religion in public spaces of the city. Furthermore, the comparative approach shows that despite the seemingly opposed worldviews and divergences between Muslims and Christians in the urban environment,

they face similar challenges and apply similar techniques for meeting the challenges of precarious Nigerian urban environments.

Chapter three and four introduced Christ Embassy and NASFAT and showed how they stand in critique to mainline Christianity and Islam. I also demonstrated how in certain respects they resemble each other more than Christ Embassy would resemble organisations in mainline Christianity and NASFAT in mainline Islam. In addition, the comparative approach noted similar ways of doing or living religion in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. The chapters suggested that the success of Christ Embassy may be embedded in the empowerment of the individual members with the mental resources to handle quotidian existence. And the popularity of NASFAT underscores its provision of sensational religious practices and socio-economic services that are borrowed from Pentecostalism.

Chapter five started the process of comparing selected practices of Christ Embassy and NASFAT in order to determine convergences and divergences as well as mutual influences between the two groups. The chapter examined three genres of prayers as a starting point for comparison. The genres of prayers compared in the chapter were prayers of adoration, prayers of aesthetic speech, and prayers of instrumentality. The comparative approach indicated that in the two movements, prayers of adoration and prayers of aesthetic speech generate a sense of contact with the divine by orchestrating bodily experiences of affect and emotion which members interpret as evidence of the presence of God. The comparative approach also revealed that instrumental prayers in both groups initiate communication with the Divine and gratify the desired goals through the performative power and semiotic systems ascribed to the language of the prayers. The different genres of prayers disclosed some similarities in practices, semiotic systems, and emotions produced by different religious performances. It has been shown in this chapter that NASFAT consciously reshaped the structure of Islamic prayers in order to

respond to the challenges of Pentecostalism and meet the special needs of urban Muslims.

Chapter six compared preaching practices in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. The comparative approach demonstrated that there are in the two groups some similarities in different aspects of preaching such as themes, styles, religious authority, and ethics of listening to preaching. The comparison also suggested that preaching in Christ Embassy and NASFAT is a practice of mediation that is enhanced by several factors such as the eloquence and authority of the preachers as well as preaching accoutrements such as dress, background music, and preaching assistants. These factors established preaching as an aesthetic style based on their ability to mobilise human senses and thereby make preaching performances a highly emotional experience.

Chapter seven compared technologically mediated practices and showed the importance of material media in Christ Embassy and NASFAT. The comparison pointed out how the mobile phone became a multivalent religious object (while also being an ordinary device people use to contact other people). As a result of the multi-layered applications of the mobile phone in the religious sphere, the leadership of both groups authenticated its use and accommodated it in their religious performances. Authenticating the use of mobile phones in a religious setting defined the role of new media as an integral part of religious practice. For instance, private listening to the sacred sonic materials via the mobile phone--particularly by earpiece--generates a sense of aural mediation. Engaging with the sacred digital text revolutionises the textual practices in the two groups and challenges the traditional engagement with the print version of religious texts. Circulating religious text messages has become a new digital religious culture of exchanging symbolic value. And religious performances and participation through the phone have transformed it (the phone) into a potent conduit that transmits charismatic power. In addition, distribution of digital religious images and interactions with them via the medium of the mobile phone serve as a reminder of the perpetual

Divine presence as well as an expression of religious identity in Christ Embassy and NASFAT.

In chapter one I stated that Meyer and Larkin (2006) stress similarities between Pentecostals and Islamic reformists. Their main argument is “that Pentecostalism and reformist Islam actually share a great deal of common ground and, while disagreeing on doctrine, overlap in several of the religious practices on which they depend and the social processes they set in motion” (2006:286). Conversely, Peel (2016) takes a different view and criticises Meyer and Larkin for over-emphasising similarities between Islamic reformists and Pentecostals. Peel maintains that there is a fundamental divergence between the two movements in the sense that Pentecostalism emphasises prosperity, healing, deliverance from evil spirits, and individual empowerment, while Islamic reformists discourage traditional Islamic healing practices and stress the importance of frugality instead of prosperity. In her response to Peel in a special section of *Africa*, Meyer (2016) argues that a comparative study of Islam and Christianity should take lived religion and practices as a starting point rather than insisting on intrinsic differences between the two traditions. According to Meyer, actual similarities between Muslims and Christians come into view through a focus on religious practices. Similarly, in his response Larkin (2016: 22) situates comparison between Pentecostalism and reformist Islam at the level of shared religious form, which he refers to as “stylistic elements that emerge within a particular tradition but are then severed from those origins and move into other domains”.

This thesis agrees with the call of Meyer and Larkin to adopt a comparative approach that looks for similarities between Christianity and Islam. This thesis established many similarities in the forms and practices of Christ Embassy and NASFAT. For instance, there is conspicuous similarity in the structures of Sunday worship services in the two groups. It is also telling how even the form of the individual activities of the Sunday service in the two groups, such as prayers, preaching, testimony, prayer request, announcing job

vacancies, and welcoming new comers, have many things in common. Furthermore, NASFAT and Christ Embassy use the same new media technology that serves to mediate religious practices. Applying the same technology as a medium in religious practices generates similar listening and reading habits as well as similar interactions with digital religious materials among the members of the two religious groups. Through borrowing form of practices from Pentecostalism, NASFAT offers a new way of doing Islam, which is still true to Islam as tradition (at least for the NASFAT members), despite copying some elements from outside Islam.

However, even though I agree with Meyer and Larkin's responses to Peel's critique, it is important to realise that borrowing takes place under unequal power relations. The comparative approach adopted in this thesis showed that the dynamic of borrowing is not balanced since NASFAT usually follows the trail set by Pentecostalism. In addition, the unbalanced inter-religious borrowing is not a random imitation of Pentecostals by NASFAT, but rather a negotiated form of borrowing contextualised within Islamic religious tradition. This can be seen in the ways NASFAT appropriated different genres of prayers from Islamic sources and restructured them in the form similar to Pentecostal prayers. Furthermore, it should be noted that in addition to certain similarities, certain differences also remain. For example, the themes of preaching in the two groups are significantly different from each other. NASFAT emphasises Islamic orthopraxis, piety, and individual and collective moral reforms. Christ Embassy stresses personal faith and puts overwhelming importance on the power of faith in confronting and solving challenges of life. The two groups also differ in the sense that NASFAT is not dominated by a powerful charismatic figure, as is the case with Pastor Chris in Christ Embassy. Pastor Chris uses his charismatic power to initiate some practices claimed to be based on inspiration from the Holy Spirit, such as the 'spiritual significance of time', discussed in chapter three. One of the marked differences in this regard is that there is an absence of such divinely inspired messages through a

charismatic leader in NASFAT. Finally, this thesis affirmed that comparing different religious traditions that share the same habitat through practices is effective in revealing similarities, mutual influences, and inter-religious borrowing, as well as differences.

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## APPENDIX

## WORLDWIDE BRANCHES OF NASFAT

S/N	South West (Nigeria)	Groups <sup>5</sup>	Branches <sup>6</sup>	Total
1	Lagos State (Zone I)	2	16	18
	Lagos State (Zone II)	13	21	34
2	Ogun State	29	13	42
3	Oyo State	26	7	33
4	Osun State	18	5	23
5	Ekiti State	2	2	4
6	Ondo State	3	2	5
	South South (Nigeria)	Groups	Branches	Total
7	Bayelsa State	-	-	-
8	Rivers State	-	1	1
9	Cross Rivers State	1	-	1
10	AkwaIbom State	-	-	-
11	Delta State	3	1	4
12	Edo State	2	1	3
	South East (Nigeria)	Groups	Branches	Total
13	Anambra State	1	-	1
14	Enugu State	-	1	1
15	Abia State	2		2
16	Imo State	-	-	-
17	Ebonyi State	-	-	-
	North West (Nigeria)	Groups	Branches	Total
18	Kano State	2	1	3
19	Katsina State	3	-	3
20	Kaduna State	3	1	4
21	Jigawa State	-	-	-
22	Sokoto State	2	1	3

23	Kebbi State	2	-	2
24	Zamfara State	-	1	1
	<b>North East (Nigeria)</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Branches</b>	<b>Total</b>
25	Adamawa State	1	-	1
26	Borno State	1	-	1
27	Yobe State	1	-	1
28	Bauchi State	1	-	1
29	Gombe State	1	-	1
30	Taraba State	1	-	1
	<b>North Central (Nigeria)</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Branches</b>	<b>Total</b>
31	Plateau State	1	-	1
32	Nasarawa State	2	-	2
33	Niger State	6	2	8
34	Benue State	3	-	3
35	Kwara State	21	12	43
36	Kogi State	3	2	5
	FCT, Abuja	3	3	6
<b>S/N</b>	<b>West Africa</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Branches</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	Ghana	3	1	4
2	Cote Dvoire	5	1	4
3	Togo	1		6
4	Bukina Faso	2		1
5	Benin Republic	2	2	2
6	Mali	1		1

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Europe and America</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Branches</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	UK and Ireland	3	3	6
2	USA	4	-	4

Source Bello (2013:2).

## CHRIST EMBASSY'S STATEMENT OF FAITH

The Christ Embassy's Statement of Faith: This is the statement of Bible doctrine as believed and taught by the Christ Embassy. This statement of faith has its source in the Bible and is in total agreement with the foundational principles of the doctrines of Christ.

1. We believe that the Bible contains the inspired and infallible Word of God. (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21)
2. We believe that there is only one God eternally existent in three (3) persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. (Eph 4:5-6, 2 Cor 8:16; Gen 1:26; Matt 3:16-17)
3. We believe in the deity of Christ (Jn 1:1-4; Jn 10:30; Heb 1:1-5)
  - (a) He was born of a virgin; (Matt 1:18-25; Lk 1:30-35)
  - (b) He was conceived of the Holy Spirit; (Matt 1:18-25; Lk 1:30-35)
  - (c) He died; (Jn 19:30-35)
  - (d) He rose again from the dead bodily; (Jn 20:25-29; Lk 24:36-40)
  - (e) He ascended into heaven bodily: (Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess 4:16)
4. We believe in the rapture of the church and the second coming of Christ. (1 Thess 4:16-17; Matt 24:29-30)
5. We believe that the only means of being cleansed from sin is repentance and faith in the precious blood of Jesus Christ. (Acts 3:19; Lk 24:47; Eph 1:7)
6. We believe that regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God is essential for personal salvation. (Titus 2:5; Jn 3:3-5; Eph 5:25-27)
7. We believe that the redemptive work of Christ on the cross provides divine healing for the body and salvation for the soul of everyone that believes. (1 Peter 2:24; Acts 3:16; Acts 9: 32-35)
8. We believe that when an individual receives the Holy Spirit, he receives divine enablement for Christian service and witness. (Acts 1:8; 2:4; 3:1-26; 4:5-12)
9. We believe in the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:16; 1 Cor 6:11)
10. We believe in the final resurrection of both the saved and the lost: the former to eternal life and the latter to eternal judgment. (Rev 20:11-15; 1 Cor 15:12-23)

## SAMENVATTING IN HET NEDERLANDS

### Sensationele Vroomheid

#### Praktijken van bemiddeling in Christ Embassy en NASFAT

Dit proefschrift bestudeert afdelingen van Christ Embassy en NASFAT in de stad Abuja binnen één vergelijkend kader. Christ Embassy is een van de grote pinksterkerken die een snelle groei doormaken in de Nigeriaanse stedelijke centra. NASFAT is in het midden van de jaren 1990 opgericht in Lagos als een reactie van moslims op de dominante rol van de pinksterkerken in de publieke ruimte en op de aantrekkingskracht van die kerken op moslimjongeren.

Hoofdstuk één introduceert de hoofdvraag, het theoretische kader en het onderzoek zelf. Het tweede hoofdstuk gaat in op de setting of locatie van het onderzoek, de stad Abuja. Dit hoofdstuk richt zich op de complexe religieuze diversiteit van de stad en laat zien hoe de staat en verschillende religieuze actoren worstelen om deze diversiteit in goede banen te leiden, teneinde de vrede te bewaren en destructieve etnisch-religieuze rellen (die in sommige naburige steden veel schade hebben aangericht) te vermijden. Daarnaast bespreekt het hoofdstuk hoe Abuja als federale hoofdstad vormgeeft aan zowel religieuze activiteiten als relaties tussen de politieke elite en religieuze leiders. Ook wordt onderzocht hoe religies de *cityscape* en *soundscape* van Abuja vormgeven; met andere woorden, hoe de publieke ruimte van de stad een podium biedt voor verschillende vormen van religieuze uitingen – van gebouwen tot geluid en afbeeldingen. Tenslotte stelt dit hoofdstuk dat religieuze diversiteit in het noorden van Nigeria niet noodzakelijk tot conflicten leidt, maar aanleiding geeft tot interessante sociale

interacties waarin door middel van samenwerking een gemeenschappelijk doel wordt bereikt.

De hoofdstukken die hierop volgen introduceren Christ Embassy (hoofdstuk drie) en NASFAT (hoofdstuk vier) en laten zien welke plek zij innemen ten opzichte van gevestigde vormen van christendom en islam. Er wordt nader ingegaan op thema's zoals de oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de twee organisaties, hun organisatiestructuur, lidmaatschap, de perceptie van buitenstaanders, kringbijeenkomsten, fondsenwerving en erediensten. Deze hoofdstukken laten ook zien hoe de twee groepen op elkaar lijken wat vorm betreft. Zoals uiteengezet in het derde hoofdstuk, leert Christ Embassy dat een herboren gelovige speciale voorrechten heeft in Christus. Onder deze voorrechten vallen geluk, gezondheid, welvaart en de overwinning op vijanden. Binnen deze leer kunnen deze voorrechten worden verkregen door middel van een aantal praktijken en technieken die erop gericht zijn om individuen radicaal te transformeren. Het hoofdstuk stelt dat, ondanks de aantrekkingskracht van de methoden van Christ Embassy op sommige mensen en ondanks de optimistische beloften van het leiderschap van de kerk, velen gedesillusioneerd raken omdat ze de doelen die ze voor ogen hadden niet bereiken. Het vierde hoofdstuk laat zien dat NASFAT een voorname positie inneemt binnen het veld van islamitische uitingen omdat deze beweging in staat is om bewust vormen (maar niet de inhoud) over te nemen van praktijken uit pinksterkerken. NASFAT biedt zintuiglijke, sensationele religieuze praktijken en socio-economische diensten die tegemoet komen aan de emotionele en sociale behoeften van stedelijke moslims.

Hoofdstuk vijf biedt een vergelijking van oefeningen van gebed in Christ Embassy en NASFAT. De nadruk ligt op drie genres: gebeden van eerbiediging, esthetisch uitgesproken gebeden en instrumentele gebeden. Het hoofdstuk stelt dat gebeden van eerbiediging en esthetisch uitgesproken gebeden in Christ Embassy en NASFAT het bemiddelingsproces mogelijk maken door lichamelijke, affectieve ervaringen te creëren. Leden herkennen die

ervaringen als ‘goddelijke aanraking’ of ‘de aanwezigheid van God’. Het doel van de instrumentele gebeden in de twee groepen is om communicatie met het goddelijke te bereiken. Dit gewenste doel wordt bereikt door de performatieve kracht en het semiotische systeem dat wordt toegeschreven aan de taal van de gebeden. De drie genres van gebeden worden geanalyseerd aan de hand van de concepten ‘semiotic ideologies’ (Keane), ‘sensational forms’ (Meyer) en de theorie van ‘speech acts’ (Austin).

In hoofdstuk zes worden de praktijken van prediking in Christ Embassy en NASFAT met elkaar vergeleken. Dit hoofdstuk gaat in op verschillende aspecten van preken, zoals thema’s, stijlen, religieuze autoriteit en de ethiek van het luisteren naar preken. Het hoofdstuk beargumenteert dat preken in Christ Embassy en NASFAT een bemiddelingspraktijk behelzen die wordt versterkt door verschillende factoren waaronder welbespraaktheid, autoriteit van de predikers, evenals ondersteunende middelen zoals kleding, achtergrondmuziek en het gebruik van assistenten. Deze factoren maken preken tot een esthetische stijl, aangezien de prediker hiermee in staat is de menselijke zintuigen te prikkelen en preken tot een sterk emotionele ervaring te maken. Het hoofdstuk stelt verder dat binnen zowel Christ Embassy als NASFAT preken een krachtig mechanisme behelzen om religieuze subjecten te generen en vorm te geven.

Het zevende hoofdstuk richt zich op een vergelijking van technologisch gemedieerde religieuze praktijken binnen Christ Embassy en NASFAT. De focus ligt op de technologie van mobiele telefoons als een nieuw religieus medium. Het hoofdstuk stelt dat deze technologie in Christ Embassy en NASFAT onder de leden wordt gebruikt als een religieus medium dat religieuze bemiddeling mogelijk maakt door het beschikbaar maken van verscheidende religieuze bronnen, waaronder preken, Koranrecitatie, religieuze muziek, teksten, evenals online religieuze uitingen en afbeeldingen.

Deze hoofdstukken (vijf, zes en zeven) laten overeenkomsten en verschillen zien met betrekking tot deze praktijken en werpen licht op de

dynamiek van onderlinge leenpraktijken. Hieruit wordt duidelijk dat deze leenpraktijken vorm krijgen in een context waarin pinksterkerken de toon zetten voor een nieuwe, opkomende religiositeit die opvallend individualistisch en emotioneel van aard is. Dit proefschrift beargumenteert dat de dynamiek van interreligieuze leenpraktijken plaatsvindt in een context van co-existentie die gekenmerkt wordt door een aanmerkelijke hegemonie van de pinksterbeweging. In deze context leent NASFAT meer van de pinksterbeweging dan andersom.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Murtala Ibrahim received a Masters degree in Sociology of Religion in the department of Religion and Philosophy, University of Jos, in 2012. In his Masters dissertation he studied the presence and challenges of new religious movements in Nigeria focusing on Hare Krishna and Eckankar.

In 2012 he started to pursue a PhD degree at Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMCS), Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. The PhD was funded thanks to an Anneliese Maier Research Award 2011 received by Prof Birgit Meyer from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In 2016 he transferred to the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Utrecht. For the doctoral project, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the members Christ Embassy and NASFAT in the Federal Capital of Nigeria, Abuja.

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