

Esoteric Languages in Yoruba Traditional Religion and African Pentecostal Christianity in Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Language occupies a central place in African religious experience, functioning not merely as a medium of communication but as an action that create reality through speech (performative) and spiritually efficacious act. Within Yoruba traditional religious practices, esoteric languages expresses through play of words (ogede) and or through incantations (òfò), ritual chants, (aasan) divinatory speech (odu Ifá), and praise poetry (oríkì). All these serve as key instruments for mediating spiritual power, authority, and identity. These forms of sacred speech are embedded in a cosmology that understands words as capable of shaping reality.

This article examines the continuity, transformation, and theological reconfiguration of esoteric language as Yoruba religious traditions encounter African Pentecostal Christianity in West Africa. While early missionary Christianity largely rejected indigenous sacred speech as incompatible with Christian faith, African Pentecostalism has developed ritualized linguistic practices in their domain such as prophetic declarations; glossolalia, prayer formulas, and performative naming that resonate strongly with indigenous epistemologies of sacred speech. Drawing on African Pentecostal studies and contextual theology, the article argues that Pentecostal Christianity represents not a rejection but a selective re-appropriation and Christological reorientation of Yoruba theories of sacred language. By foregrounding the work of the Holy Spirit as the source of linguistic efficacy, African Pentecostalism affirms African intuitions about the power of speech while redefining their theological grounding.

KEYWORDS: Sacred speech; esoteric language; Yoruba religion; African Pentecostalism; inculturation; prophecy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Pentecostals and or the Charismatic Christianity¹ are frequently characterized by its vibrant oral spirituality, emphasizing on the scriptural word by faith, intense prayer, prophetic utterance, glossolalia, and declarative speech. These linguistic practices are

¹John Koenig, *Charismata: God's Gift for God's People* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 14, describes Pentecostals as Christians who trace their theological linkage, and usually their denominational origin as well, back to an extraordinary revival that took place in Los Angeles at the Azusa Street Church during the year 1906. Also Arnold Bittlinger, refers to these groups of Christians as the classic or free Pentecostal movement that began in U.S.A. in 1901, he says, "they are organized, and produced their own theology mostly with an evangelical view." *The Church is Charismatic* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 10. See Amos Young, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 18. Also, *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement* identifies three types of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century; they are the classical Pentecostals connected to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906-1909, the charismatic renewal movement in the mainline Churches beginning in the 1960s and the Neo-Charismatic "catch-all category" that comprises 18,810 independent indigenous, post denominational groups that cannot be classified as either Pentecostal or charismatic but which shares a common emphasis on the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, Pentecostal-like experiences, speaking in tongues, signs and wonders and power encounters most of the Nigerian charismatic churches fall into this category. In today's world, the mainline churches are turning fast to becoming charismatic in their worship experience. They also fall into this third group. Most of the traits of the Pentecostals are found in them. In African continent the largest groups of the

not incidental; they are central to Pentecostal theology and experience.² Among Yoruba Christians in particular, Pentecostal modes of speech emerge within a broader cultural history in which language is understood as spiritually potent. In Yoruba cosmology, words (òrò) are believed to carry intrinsic power capable of activating spiritual forces, sustaining moral order, and mediating between the visible and invisible realms.³

The encounter between Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion thus raises critical questions about language, power, and continuity. Early missionary Christianity privileged propositional truth, rational discourse, and textual authority, often dismissing indigenous ritual speech as fetishistic or demonic.⁴ Yet the rapid growth of African Pentecostalism suggests that African Christians have reimagined Christian faith through culturally resonant modes of sacred speech. This article asks: How does African Pentecostalism reinterpret Yoruba esoteric language within a Christian theological framework? And to what extent do Pentecostal speech practices represent continuity or rupture with indigenous religious linguistics?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SACRED SPEECH AND PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY

Pentecostal theology places strong emphasis on the spoken word as a site of divine encounter. Speech acts such as prayer, prophecy, and testimony are understood not merely as expressions of faith but as means through which the Holy Spirit actively intervenes in human affairs. Scholars of Pentecostal studies have described this as a form of "oral sacramentality," in which spoken words mediate divine power.⁵

From a linguistic perspective, J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterance provides a useful analytical tool, though African religious contexts extend beyond its philosophical assumptions.⁶ In Yoruba religious thought, speech is not simply socially performative but cosmologically efficacious. As Jacob Olupona observes, African religious language is believed to do something in the spiritual realm rather than merely signify meaning.⁷

Pentecostal Christianity in Africa, therefore, operates at the intersection of biblical pneumatology and indigenous metaphysics of language.⁸ The Holy Spirit becomes the source of authority that legitimizes performative speech, even as the structure and function of such speech echo pre-Christian religious forms.

3. ESOTERIC LANGUAGES IN YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

3.1 Òfò, Ogede, Asan are Incantatory Speech in Yoruba Mythology

According to Dopamu "Ofo, the Yoruba incantatory poetry, is a verbal aspect of African magic, used to procure non-therapeutic needs of man"⁹

To the Yoruba people Ofo is a spoken word that is believed to produce magical or spiritual effects on the person being spoken to. Ofo can be used to control the world around him. It can be used to render an enemy impotent, it can be used to disarm a gun man with the intention to kill or can be used to render an opponent useless for example if someone want to attack a person that knows the ofo, he will say *agbero ni ku ngbowo*, *agbeti ni sigidi ko gbe duro bayen* (death makes hand to stiff, Sigidi cannot be carried I speak to you to stop) usually an ofo is used for protection and for prosperity. Examples of good incantations are the incantation for attracting clients (*afaro*), for escaping from calamity or misfortune (*afore*), for poison antedotes (*opore*), for activating memory (*isoye*), for (*aporo*) self-defense (*madaarikan*), for good luck/fortune (*awure*) are used to procure the total well-being of a man. The bad or the malevolent aspect of an ofo is known as *ogede* and *Aasan*, *ogede* and *Aasan* are used to kill, harm or cause misfortune to people in the society. Essentially, Ofo is used for security purposes that is why the night guard or the hunter has to be trained in it. Today the local vigilante groups and local police like the Amotekun use this method a lot so that they can secure the region they are

Pentecostals are found in Nigeria and Ghana. See Azonkeh Ukah *African Christianities: Features, Promises and Problems* <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de>, accessed 7th September, 2010.

²See Deji Ayegboyin and Ademola Ishola in *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Ikeja, Lagos: Greater Height Publishers, 1992), 24ff.

³Awolalu, J. O. *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Essex: Longman Press. 1979), 45ff.

⁴Bewaji, John A. "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil". African Quarterly e-library, 2009.

⁵Matthews Ojo "Of Saint and Sinners Pentecostalism and the Paradox of Social Transformation" *Inaugural Lecture* held on June 8 at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2010. See Deji Ayegboyin and Emiola Nihinlola "The Impact of Pentecostalism on Nigerian Baptist Convention Churches: The Way Forward" Proceeding of a seminar organized by *Baptist Institution Forum*, held at Baptist College, Iwo, 1999.

⁶Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 112–15.

⁷Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 87.

⁸J. A. Ayooade "The Concept of Inner Essence in Yoruba Medicine," www.popline.org/docs/html, retrieved on November 18, 2009

⁹"Yoruba Magic and Medicine and their Relevance for Today." *Orita Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (June and December).1977

watching over. It can also be used in almost every sphere of human activities social, economic, political and medical. It is a potent verbal formulas employed in ritual contexts to invoke, command, or restrain spiritual forces. Such incantations are transmitted through initiation and apprenticeship, emphasizing secrecy, precision, and moral authority. Their efficacy depends not only on correct wording but also on the ritual status of the speaker.

3.2 Oriki and the Activation of Identity

Oriki functions as praise poetry and sacred identity speech. By invoking lineage, destiny (orí), and historical memory, oriki activates latent spiritual potential within individuals and communities. Spoken oriki is thus both descriptive and creative, shaping personal and communal destiny.

3.3 Ifá Divination and Sacred Knowledge

The divinatory corpus of Ifá represents one of the most complex esoteric linguistic systems in Yoruba religion. The poetic verses (odù) encode cosmology, ethics, and ritual prescriptions. Mastery of Ifá language signifies both spiritual authority and intellectual depth, reinforcing the link between language and power.

4. MISSIONARY CHRISTIANITY AND LINGUISTIC RUPTURE

Missionary Christianity in Yoruba land largely adopted a theology of rupture. Indigenous sacred languages were condemned as pagan survivals incompatible with Christian faith. Although Bible translation into Yoruba facilitated vernacular Christianity, it often stripped indigenous terms of their metaphysical depth. As Lamin Sanneh has argued, translation both empowers local expression and constrains indigenous epistemologies.¹⁰

This missionary suspicion of ritual speech contributed to a lasting tension between African religious experience and Western theological categories. The rise of Pentecostalism can be interpreted as a grassroots response to this tension.

5. PENTECOSTAL RECONFIGURATION OF SACRED SPEECH

5.1 Prayer and Declarative Speech

Pentecostal prayer frequently employs repetitive, formulaic, and declarative patterns such as “I decree,” “I declare,” and “It is settled.” These utterances function performatively, closely resembling Yoruba incantatory logic while being explicitly grounded in biblical authority. In traditional Yoruba prayer the repetitive formula are common and similar to the Pentecostal mode of prayer where the speaker is found to be praying as if he or she is conjuring the deity or divinity to act. They declare *mo wi be ko se be ase gun* meaning I say it and it is so and I place authority on it. This kind of declaration is popular and common among the African Indigenous church and the Yoruba Christ Apostolic Church. The prayer works well on the reality of the Yoruba person who believes in the existence of witches and power of darkness, thus when they go to church they expect the prayer to address their fears.

5.2 Prophecy and Spirit-Inspired Utterance

Prophetic speech occupies a central place in African Pentecostalism. Prophets speak with perceived divine authority, diagnosing spiritual conditions and declaring future outcomes. While Pentecostals attribute this authority to the Holy Spirit, the social function of prophecy parallels that of indigenous divination.

5.3 Glossolalia as Esoteric Christian Speech

Glossolalia represents a distinctly Pentecostal form of esoteric language. Accessible only through Spirit baptism, tongues function as a marker of initiation, spiritual intimacy, and divine empowerment. In African contexts, glossolalia resonates strongly with indigenous understandings of sacred, non-ordinary speech.

5.4 Naming, Anointing, and Ritual Language

Pentecostal practices such as prophetic naming, anointing declarations, and symbolic actions further demonstrate the persistence of ritualized language. These practices affirm that words, when Spirit-inspired, mediate divine power.

6. CONTINUITY, DISCONTINUITY, AND THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

The relationship between Yoruba esoteric language and African Pentecostal speech practices is best understood as selective continuity rather than syncretism. Pentecostalism rejects ancestral mediation and non-Christian cosmologies but retains a performative theology of speech re-centered on Christ and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 51–55.

African Pentecostalism thus challenges Western theological suspicion of ritual speech and invites a broader theology of language that takes African epistemologies seriously. The tension between inculturation and doctrinal fidelity remains, but it is precisely within this tension that African Pentecostal theology is being forged.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that African Pentecostal Christianity represents a significant theological reconfiguration of Yoruba theories of sacred speech rather than their wholesale rejection. By relocating the source of linguistic power in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostal Christianity affirms the African intuition that words are efficacious and that speech mediates divine presence, while simultaneously re-centering this conviction within a Christological and biblical framework.

The findings of this study contribute to African Pentecostal theology by challenging Western suspicions of ritualized speech and highlighting the importance of indigenous epistemologies in shaping lived Christian faith. For West African contexts such as Nigeria and Ghana, where Pentecostalism continues to flourish, a nuanced theology of sacred speech provides a valuable lens for understanding religious continuity, innovation, and identity formation. Further research may explore comparative Pentecostal speech practices across African cultures and their implications for global Pentecostal theology.

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