The British black Pentecostal 'revival': identity and belief in the 'new' Nigerian churches

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Abstract

Black Pentecostalism in Britain has proved itself to be a distinctive version of Christianity. Extant academic surveys have tended to interpret it as primarily the means by which black ethnic communities are able to adapt and respond to marginalization and widespread social discrimination. This article seeks to examine the composition and function of what might be designated the ‘New Black Pentecostal Churches’. Spreading rapidly on a global scale from West Africa, these churches are of a different genre with a distinctive set of doctrines, practices and ethos which in many respects mark them out from the well-established black Pentecostal churches. With reference to the largest church of its type in Britain, the article suggests that previous theories fail to provide an adequate framework by which to comprehend this new religious movement. Rather, situational responses to British conditions must largely be seen as a reflection of lifestyles adopted to structural restraints within the country of origin.

Keywords: Black churches; black Christianity; Pentecostalism; Nigeria; ethnic identity; boundary maintenance.

Introduction

The popular media of the contemporary Pentecostal movement has made much of the apparent fresh ‘revival’ in Britain, in terms of mass converts and rapid congregational growth, among West African, mostly Nigerian, churches. Frequently, claims to revival in these quarters are related to a prophesied national upturn in church-going. In reality, the ‘revival’ is largely limited to this one sector of Pentecostalism and its growth reducible to a number of wider socio-cultural considerations. Religious propaganda aside, the fact remains that it is nonetheless difficult to over-exaggerate the proliferation of these newly established West African congregations. At a time when the ‘classical’ Pentecostal
churches (including those of the older Caribbean and African tradition) and the predominantly white middle-class independent and denominational churches have generally stagnated or declined, these emerging churches offer a measure of optimism for the future of the wider Pentecostal movement.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God [RCCG] typifies such developments. It is the largest and most successful in terms of membership growth. In 1985 the RCCG ‘planted’ its earliest church in Britain with just four people at the first service. It now has some fifty churches of varying sizes and a membership somewhere in the region of 200,000, mostly in London and the Midlands, but also with sizeable representation in a number of Britain’s larger urban areas.

By way of belief, practice and cultural orientation, these proliferating West African churches are, in many regards, very different from the black Pentecostal congregations that have been present in Britain for well over fifty years. Indeed, this stark contrast, not only in terms of theological preferences, but social composition, marks them out in such a way as to challenge long-accepted sociological frameworks regarding the origins and functions of these churches. Moreover, while work has been conducted into their growth in West Africa (Ojo 1980, 1988; Hackett 1990; Marshall 1991, 1993), much research has still to be carried out into how one of the fastest growing Christian movements in the world translates into local global environments in the West.

However, the observation of our study is that the evidence suggests that there is much to concur with Jules-Rosette’s assertion that Third World countries are creating ideologies which bring a synthesis of indigenous and Western religious beliefs as part of the growth of New Religious Movements. Often such movements, typified by developments in Africa, represent the interests and life experiences of distinct and sometimes emerging social groups. These theological constructs may then be subject to the process of globalization and thereby appeal to localized communities (Jules-Rosette 1994).

Traditional Pentecostal churches

Although a generalization scarcely does justice to the complexities of the earlier research findings, the most enduring observation in the main studies has been that for several generations in Britain many of the exclusively black churches embraced the dogma and practices of Pentecostalism. This variety of Christianity, with its emphasis on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the display of the charismata (glossolalia, prophecy, etc) brought an effective compensatory religious status for black minority groups (Calley 1962, 1965; Hill 1971a, b, c; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Kalilombe 1997), and provided the moral code and community environment which supported them in alien surroundings
(Nelson and Nelson 1975; Bruce 1996). In addition, a distinct form of Pentecostalism appeared attractive since there was evidence that the early immigrants were treated less than warmly by native congregations of the established denominations and were alienated by more reserved forms of ‘British’ worship (Gerloff 1992, pp. 11–12). This led to a greater identity of the black community with churches which were more likely to express their interests and sentiments. Those such as the Assemblies of God, the Elim denomination, and the New Testament Church of God traditionally offered a home for Africans and Afro-Carribbeans, while a vast range of exclusively black independent churches arose which provided for the needs of those on the margins of British white society (Calley 1962; Gerloff 1992).

In terms of theology there has always been a tendency for black Pentecostal churches to be sectarian in nature and to provide compensatory aspects of religions in that the principal emphasis was in offering a futuristic kingdom of God. This theological orientation tended to conceptualize both a present and future hope of deliverance from the conditions of this world (Aldred 1999). Rather than confront white dominated society, the theology, in the words of Cope, tended to embrace an ‘other worldly, idealistic mode of operation’ (Cope 1984, p. 13). However, while the focus on black Pentecostalism as providing a response to structural conditions in Britain established some useful insights into its function of providing a sub-community and culture for the black community, the picture was often incomplete.

The observation made by Nicole Toulis of the link between Pentecostal beliefs and social identity among first-generation Jamaican women in England marked a significant development. Toulis pointed to the over-simplified view of early accounts and their failure to recognize the importance of experiences in the country of origin as well as those encountered in Britain. For instance, discrimination might be felt in Britain, but it was also long experienced in their previous countries. Furthermore, the manner in which the social order is conceived by black peoples, and how their place in that order may be conceptualized and expressed through religious belief is also structured differently in the two societies (Toulis 1993, p. 73). Hence, Toulis points out that identity is formed at extremely complex levels by race, class and status, as well as religiosity. In some instances these social structures may be tightly or loosely integrated, and they may also be weighed and ranked hierarchically – allowing a variety of identity patterns and accompanying complex religious expressions (Toulis 1993, pp. 73–4).

In exploring the link between religion and black identity, Toulis develops Robert Bellah’s work which identifies religion as primarily providing human beings with an interpretation of the world as they experience their place in it. As part of ‘small (social) units’, individuals may appropriate the religious symbols of their social and cultural environment
and adapt them to deal with their own religious problem of meaning, identity and motivation (Bellah 1970, pp. 11–12). By utilizing this framework Toulis is able to state that Afro-Caribbean Pentecostalism in Britain is at one and the same time a part of society, while remaining also apart from society (Toulis 1993, p. 220). This allows Toulis to speak of the ‘plurality of black identities which are constructed and manipulated in contemporary Britain’ (Toulis 1993, p. 228).

Toulis’s empirical work provides a constructive tool by which to understand the growth of the new wave of West African churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Britain. The evidence suggests that they are a product of both developments in West Africa, especially Nigeria (which contains near on one-sixth of the population of the African continent) and an adaptation to Western society. Indeed, there is, to some extent at least, a relationship between these two variables, albeit at different and elaborate levels. Put succinctly, these churches have proliferated rapidly in Nigeria against a background of acute economic and political difficulties since the early 1980s.

The doctrines and practices of such churches reflect means of coping with, and responding to, adverse circumstances while at the same time, translated into the British setting, they subsequently assist their immigrant black membership in adapting to a secondary range of social conditions. This means that in many respects these emerging churches are distinct from the early ‘classical’ variety. The core doctrines of the RCCG locate it within the broad Pentecostal family. Numerous mission statements emphasize the ‘born-again’ element, the baptism in the Spirit, the significance of the charismata with a great deal of stress placed on miracles and faith healing, which identifies their uncritical and conservative approach to the Bible. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that these churches are of a new ilk in producing a theology and world view that not only express the experiences of Nigerians in their country of origin, but are in many respects world-accommodating and embrace a theology that is inclined to follow the contours of Western culture. Just as importantly, the RCCG challenges the popular and sociological stereotypes of black Pentecostals as always being ‘marginal’ or ‘disadvantaged’ people.

The Nigerian context

Pentecostalism is undoubtedly the dominant Christian constituency in Africa and has enjoyed rapid growth over the last two decades. The movement on the continent today, however, is not the same as the one that impacted in the 1920s, and that had enjoyed greater momentum from the 1950s to 1970s through the missionary endeavours of such North American and European denominations as the Assemblies of God primarily in the east of the country. Indeed, Pentecostalism has continued to
undergo far-reaching transformations. This is a result not only of dynamics within the movement itself across Africa, but broader social changes observable throughout the black African nations since the early 1980s.

The earlier African Pentecostal churches were distinguished by their teachings which promoted doctrines not that dissimilar from their cousins in the West. Stress was put on strict personal ethics, on a retreat from the world and its material possessions and practices, and they tended to be strongly Adventist in orientation. For this reason they became known as ‘holiness’ or ‘righteousness’ churches. Together with increased involvement by Nigerian students, ministries from the West helped to provide expansion to the denominational ‘holiness’ churches. In turn, this created an impetus for the revitalization of Pentecostalism in the 1980s which, in numerous ways, was distinct from that of previous decades in terms of theology, structure and ethos.

In many respects the emerging movement was genuinely home-spun. As Marshall notes, while the American ministries were particularly influential, Nigeria has produced its own variety of churches in line with its history and tradition which reflects the experience of its peoples in the context of their daily lives and immediate needs (Marshall 1993, p. 214). These churches took various forms. Many constituted syncretic variations typified by the ‘Aladura’ churches of western Nigeria which followed the examples set by those such as the Faith Tabernacle and the Apostolic Church (Peel 1980) that appeared to embrace more overtly traditional African beliefs and practices. Another trend was the emergence of independent churches, sometimes dubbed ‘Charismatic’ to distinguish them from the earlier denominational Pentecostal churches.

The latter is typified by the Redeemed Christian Church of God which, along with those such as the Deeper Life Church, is one of the largest churches. Beginning mostly in the interdenominational student groups of the newly-formed Nigerian universities, the RCCG, like other independent churches, originally spread through the creation of small fellowships (Marshall 1993, p. 217). From the early 1980s thousands of new churches and ministries grew up in the cities and urban areas in the overwhelmingly Christian south of the country. Although its origins can be traced back to the 1950s, the RCCG’s most spectacular growth has occurred since the early 1980s during turbulent times for Nigeria. Of distinct organizational style, the parishes proved to be the locus for church ‘plants’ and evangelism and have been largely responsible for the rapid progress of the RCCG. Since 1981, some 2,000 parishes have been established in Nigeria and, approximately, a further 1,000 worldwide under its current leader, Enoch Adeboye.¹

The growth of such independent churches as the RCCG can be attributed to a unique range of social and economic changes. Hence, as Marshall describes (1991; 1993), they mark, above all, a popular response...
to the state policies of military dictatorship which ruled (until June 1999) over the nation’s acute economic shortcomings from the early 1980s. These churches provide new strategies of survival and the restructuring of personal and collective relationships against a backdrop of severe economic decline. Hence, they frequently offer symbolic and material resources to a number of distinct social groups in Nigeria, and at a practical level establish innovating forms of social organization. In simple terms, they mark a reaction to the ever-changing difficulties, demands and constraints of everyday existence – not only those engendered by the political state but the broader economic and social conditions.

The 1970s was a period of rapid albeit uneven economic expansion in Nigeria based on oil revenues. Yet, this was also a time of massive misappropriation of government funds at practically every level. These years of relative prosperity came to a halt in 1981 with the collapse of oil prices. Unemployment, rampant inflation and scarcity followed. The income per head in 1993 was only a tenth of what it was eight years earlier (The Economist, 21 August 1993, p. 14). The Nigerian state’s Structural Adjustment Programme [SAP], introduced in 1986, further precipitated hardship in the cities with massive economic retrenchment and devastating price increases. Against this backdrop of economic and moral decline, the new churches, including the RCCG, brought a sense of community, work motivation and a philosophy of self-help. They have also engendered distinct teachings related to purity and prosperity which have been replicated in the RCCG churches in Britain, although channelled through a distinct social stratum of educated Nigerians.

This study: The ‘new’ black Pentecostal churches

The wish to evangelize what is perceived by the Nigerian churches as the ‘dark continent’ of Europe, has led to the ‘planting’ of numerous congregations out of Nigeria by individual parishes in Lagos or other large urban areas in Nigeria. The RCCG has proved to be especially zealous in its evangelism. This can be measured in terms of its rapid global spread. In January 1997 the RCCG could boast 300,000 affiliated members. In November 1997, this had risen to around 420,000, and in December 1997 to 500,000. Membership of the church has now increased at such a rate that it is difficult to provide an estimation although, at least according to its own estimates, the RCCG now has close on one million members globally.

In no uncertain way, the RCCG has interpreted its entry into Europe as an act of God and a call to evangelize largely secularized societies. Hence, the religion, which was exported to the African continent with colonialism, is being returned with the new edge of fundamentalist-orientated Pentecostalism. The reality, however, is that these churches in Britain have largely failed to win over white converts and remain the
focus of identity and the source of inspiration for primarily Nigerian immigrants, and fairly affluent ones at that. In terms of their social functioning, then, these churches are double coded in that they reflect developments in Nigeria, and function in a constructive way for West Africans in what is, in many respects, an alien environment.

These conclusions have been drawn from a survey of the Redeemed Christian Church of God’s largest congregation, which boasts a membership of some 1,200 members. ‘Jesus House’, as this particular church refers to itself, was established in 1994. Situated in West London, the Jesus House church is to be found on an industrial estate in a warehouse which formerly belonged to the costume department of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Although it is not meant to have any particular status, the church is undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of the RCCG. Not yet fully furnished, it nevertheless sports a large auditorium which seats around a thousand people. It has its own bookshop, catering facilities, an office complex, a crèche, and so forth.

Given its size and locality in London (where two-thirds of RCCG churches are situated), Jesus House appears to be the most promising congregation to survey by way of understanding the RCCG’s rapid growth and appeal. The research methods used to study the church were based on qualitative and quantitative methods. A simple two-page questionnaire was employed that focused, firstly, on aspects of church life and, secondly, on the demographic features of its membership. The former gained information concerning church and belief orientation, mechanisms for joining the church, and the attractions of belonging to the RCCG. The latter sought to discover the profile of the church in terms of occupation, education, gender, marital status and age. The questionnaire was distributed at church meetings over a two-week period and had to be returned by post. In addition, thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted from a random sample of volunteers. This was supplemented by participant observation of church meetings and midweek house groups (over a period of six months) and a content analysis of literature and audio cassettes produced by Jesus House.²

Church structure

It is evident that churches such as Jesus House can wield their membership into a collective which embraces a keen sense of community. This supplements the increasing tendency towards individualism in Nigerian society, and the prevailing ethos of self-advancement which permeates the theology of the RCCG. Again, typical of similar churches, it is apparent that in the RCCG there is an attempt to blur the often stark social distinctions of its membership. Tribal affiliation is the most obvious. To a degree this echoes the fact that racial and tribal discrimination has undoubtedly proved the gravest threat to Nigerian unity and
successive governments have denounced it tirelessly. In many RCCG fellowships an unhealthy loyalty to the tribe, whether Igbo, Yoruba or other smaller tribal groupings, is strongly preached against. Similarly, the distinctions of social status according to economic and occupational positions are played down (this is contrary to the traditional pronounced respect for social status found particularly among the Yoruba people). Hence, there is an egalitarianism which is symbolized by a frequent designation of members as ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ to a greater degree than might be expected in the typical Pentecostal congregation. Just as significantly, in terms of breaking with past loyalties, there is the matter of social distinction according to age. There is frequent talk in Jesus House of the need to break with some traditional codes of behaviour. This includes too much deference and perceived misguided respect for the elderly and their traditional authority.

This egalitarian ethos is, to some extent at least, extended to females. Traditional Pentecostalism has tended to promote a doctrine which advocates the submission of women to men, and their confinement to the domestic sphere. The ‘holiness’ churches in Nigeria also had very strict edicts about women’s dress and usually confined women to the lower levels of church administration. The new Nigerian churches do not have these clear restrictions even if pastors are almost exclusively male. Although stress is put on the family as being the woman’s primary responsibility, the typical endorsement of the withdrawal of women from the work place that one finds in traditional Pentecostal churches, is not so evident. This fairly liberal attitude towards women may explain why two-thirds of the membership of Jesus House are female.

Cutting across this egalitarian orientation is the tendency for many churches such as the RCCG to be highly structured, well-organized and to have a strongly hierarchical edifice. While each church is semi-autonomous from the parent organization, close networks exist between all member churches and this pattern is reproduced in Britain. Many of these churches are pastored by respected authoritarian and charismatic leaders. A sizeable number are successful professional people, frequently ex-university teachers. Since these professionals traditionally hold a greater social status in Africa than practically anywhere else in the world, their authority among the congregations is considerable. However, despite the emphasis upon strong leadership there are significant opportunities to rise to prominent church positions. At Jesus House the criteria for ascending through the levels of the church hierarchy depend largely on the demonstration of purity, loyalty to the church and local fellowship, and possession of the charismata and other indications of God’s blessing, rather than of age or wealth which were the traditional status markers in Nigerian society.

There are also aspects of lay participation in the running of the church. In the RCCG congregations, a sizeable amount of church administration
and pastoral care is deemed to be the responsibility of part-time, voluntary lay men and women. Many, like Jesus House, set up nurseries and kindergartens, and while not providing practical medical services as do the churches in Nigeria, they offer ‘faith (healing) clinics’ and counselling services. Members of Jesus House also hold neighbourhood prayer groups, not only to encourage each other in faith, but to give guidance on financial and other problems. Individual churches also engage in sponsoring members in a variety of educational and business endeavours, related most often to the running and propagation of the church and its assets: transport, publishing, crafts and trades. Marshall sees these self-help activities in the Nigerian context as indicating not only the ability of these church communities to develop institutional alternatives to social services lacking by the state, but as an increasing attempt at self-assertion (Marshall 1993, p. 39). It is the latter which is especially significant in the British situation and must be appreciated with reference to the distinct membership which comprises Jesus House and other RCCG churches.

Social composition

Across the front of Jesus House is the proclamation in large lettering; ‘Jesus House. A Church for All Nations’. However, despite the endeavour to win converts of different nationalities and ethnic groups, there is no mistaking the fact that this is a Nigerian church with a predominantly Nigerian congregation. Ethnicity and nationality appear to be the most obvious demographic considerations. In terms of ethnicity, 96 per cent of respondents in the survey refer to themselves as ‘African’. By way of nationality, 90 per cent designate themselves as ‘Nigerian’. A further 7 per cent are constituted by a number of other black African nationalities including those from Zambia, Ghana, Cameroon and Tanzania. Ethnicity and nationality, however, are not the only striking demographic variables. Age, occupation and social class are also significant.

That such churches as Jesus House should constitute a large percentage of a youngish and fairly prosperous constituency is noteworthy. In many ways the membership composition of the RCCG in Nigeria is not that dissimilar from other new independent churches. The older ‘holiness’ churches traditionally drew their support largely from the illiterate or semi-literate poor. While the independent churches also draw a sizeable membership from these socio-economic groups, they have come to attract the more affluent and socially mobile urban groups derived from government administration and the professional classes. It is the latter which are over-represented at Jesus House and constitute a temporary migrant population of affluent fairly young people in search of an education and career advancement.

Jesus House can claim a vibrant young membership. About 10 per cent are under twenty years old, over 50 per cent under the age of thirty, and
some 93 per cent under forty years old. This age profile is in clear contrast to most churches in Britain, those of the Pentecostal variety among them, where the congregations are largely middle-age and elderly (Brierley 1989, pp. 79–105). As far as occupation is concerned, the membership of the church is solidly middle class. Of those working, over 38 per cent are in the higher professional occupations, and over 41 per cent are made up of lower professionals. This is in marked contrast to earlier findings of black Pentecostal congregations which showed that such churches were constituted by poor, lower-class manual groups (Bloch-Hoell 1964; Tinney 1971; Anderson 1980; Ramdin 1987).

Approximately a third of the membership of Jesus House is not in paid employment. Around 80 per cent of these are students. Along with those in employment, they largely originate from wealthy backgrounds in Nigeria. The general profile, then, is of fairly affluent young people, a sizeable segment of which includes students, or those who have not long graduated and who are developing their careers in Britain. Certain occupation categories are over-represented among the membership: information technology, medicine, engineering, accountancy, banking and business. The general educational standard of members is also significantly high; nearly 60 per cent have degrees and/or professional qualifications. A further 17 per cent have some kind of work related diploma or certificate. Less than 2 per cent have no educational qualification at all. Somewhere in the region of 90 per cent have fathers who themselves have professional backgrounds: engineers, accountants, businessmen, doctors, civil servants and lawyers being the most dominant occupational groups. Finally, 61 per cent of the church’s membership are single, and less than 30 per cent have children – indicating that the majority do not have an established family life in Britain.

Among the emerging middle classes in Africa, a university education is a principal component of a desired social status (Mazrui 1978, pp. 270–1). The situation of academic institutions in Nigeria, however, in terms of standards and prestige, has been drastically undermined by the political and economic conditions over the last two decades. Indeed, although a higher percentage of poorer students now attend Nigerian universities, it has been suggested that the degeneration of the education system in the country has led to standards becoming intolerable for the middle classes (Jumare 1997). Thus, as Hackett explains, the latter have increasingly sought university education in the West, and those who have gained a degree and/or professional credentials tend to return to Nigeria with the educational qualifications that are signifiers of status within their country (Hackett 1993, pp. 389–90).

Interviews confirmed that many of the Jesus House members came from upper middle-class families who could afford to send their children abroad to universities and colleges in the West. Hence, it is almost certain that these Nigerian migrants are prudently striving to keep ahead.
of their fellow Nigerians, since education is held with such high prestige in their society. Congruent with Kershen’s findings of West African sojourners (Kershen 1997, p. 2), many of these Nigerians, students or otherwise, had also been attracted to Britain in order to acquire sufficient capital to allow them to return home. The church members interviewed were asked how long they planned to stay in Britain. Often the answer was uncertain. Many believed that they would finish their education and then work for a while, maintaining a frugal lifestyle in order to ‘get money together’ and eventually return to Nigeria. Others indicated that they would ‘play the field’, that is, scout the opportunities in Britain and elsewhere or, alternatively, return to Nigeria at an early date. Most claimed that they would return to their country of origin at some later time. Interviews confirmed this instrumental orientation.

As Oto, a twenty-year-old female explained:

I am planning to build up my career. I came here three years ago. My dad is a diplomat and I have spent time all over the world. I’m going to stay here until I’ve finished my degree, then I’m thinking of going to Canada to work for a while before settling back in Nigeria.

Similarly, Olu, a thirty-year-old male claimed:

I plan to leave Britain in time after I have established my career. I would then like to travel eventually to the USA, before going back to Nigeria . . . I think that this church is a mixture between those who plan to stay permanently and work in this country, and those who are travelling around.

Sola, a twenty-eight-year old female church administrator explained:

Most members of this congregation have come to this country to work or study for a period of time, perhaps in order to raise money. They may go home some ten to twenty years later but most of those who were in the church five years ago are still in it. I’m not yet sure what my own long-term plans are. Because of being a woman, and wanting to eventually get married, it may depend on my future husband’s plans. It also depends upon where God wants me to be.

The evidence of such findings is not to suggest that the new Pentecostal churches are entirely homogeneous by way of being solely comprised of young, middle-class, entrepreneurial-minded individuals. Less wealthy members do belong, and there is a surprisingly large number of unmarried mothers which suggests that the church also functions in terms of practical support for members of a more established, and far from successful section of the Nigerian community in Britain. However,
such individuals constitute a rather peripheral section of the church, even if the doctrines espoused and the sense of community have a similar appeal as they do for their more affluent brothers and sisters. On the other hand, it is clear that congregational growth among churches like the RCCG, has been contingent upon the resurgence of a spiritual revival linked to distinct social changes and economic factors experienced by the professional classes in Nigeria.

Identity: strangers in a strange land

Much of the early work on black Pentecostal churches centred on their purpose of providing places of welcome and community. This was especially so for the first waves of Afro-Caribbean and West African immigrants into Britain who experienced a feeling of unfamiliarity and hostility (Becher 1995, p. 6; Fulton 1996; Holmes 1997). Much was exemplified by Calley’s (1962) work which showed that the West Indian Pentecostal sect represented a deliberate attempt to create an ethnic enclave, to engender group solidarity, and to construct a refuge from the wider society. These considerations are still relevant when considering the growth of RCCG, although their cultural trajectory has changed.

For the most part, members of Jesus House have joined the church as a result of networking through established lines of ‘significant others’. This refers not only to family relations, but to informal networks of friends and work associates. Nearly 75 per cent of church members had initial contact with Jesus House through this channel. In addition, two-thirds of church members had nuclear and/or extended family members in their congregation which increased the ethnic integration at both religious and social levels. An additional indication of the appeal of Jesus House as a centre of identity and community was the distance travelled to the Sunday service. Seventy-two per cent of members travelled five or more miles to church, for 62 per cent the journey was over twelve miles. There is evidence of some individuals frequently travelling more than fifty miles, even up to 200 miles to attend. The church has also attempted to offer affiliation beyond its immediate membership. Hence, it is possible to apply for the status of ‘Partners of Jesus House’, allowing individuals (almost certainly based elsewhere in Britain) to be part of the life of the church if they live too far away to attend every week.

Jesus House is well known in the London area to be composed mainly of Nigerians. In one interview a member described an incident where he invited a friend (also of African origin) to visit Jesus House, and she declined with the explanation that it is ‘full of Nigerians’. Members of the congregation admitted that people from other ethnic backgrounds who ‘try the church out’ tend not to stay because they feel conspicuous. Many expressed their regret for this fact. Nonetheless, the attraction of attending a church of those of the same ethnicity and nationality is clear.
Settling in Britain can be hard. Interviewees put forward the view that it is a restful experience to come away from the mixed environment of work or college, where it can be a struggle to fit in, and return to a group composed almost entirely of co-culturals. In this respect the church can be seen as a place of welcome and refuge. One girl remarked in an interview:

I don’t know what you think it’s like coming over here but it’s not always easy. There were times when I was tired and couldn’t find a place to live or any work, I knew that I could come here [Jesus House] and feel at home.

Despite its claims to be ‘a church for all nations’, the ethos and culture, practices and beliefs of Jesus House are West African and predominantly Nigerian-orientated. At Sunday services adherents to traditional dress mingle comfortably with those in Western styles. The emphasis on the worship, which is led in various styles, is characteristically rhythmic in its orientation, with strong-sweet African accompanying vocals and harmonies. The church notice board and magazines feature advertisements for African and Caribbean wedding paraphernalia, African food, money transfers to Nigeria, African fashions, and dry-cleaning companies specializing in African attire.

The evidence derived from the sample at Jesus House indicated that, in Britain, association with the RCCG also allows young Nigerians to establish their identity as an age cohort. This often means distancing themselves from some of the perceived failings of traditional Nigerian society. The younger members especially are, to varying extents, becoming Westernized. In questionnaires and interviews, the young people in particular compared Jesus House favourably with the churches in Nigeria because of the greater personal freedom that they have in Britain. Many felt more at liberty to ‘be themselves’, while still feeling ‘safe’ in a Christian context. There exists a very active youth wing that arranges numerous social occasions. There are special events mixing traditional gospel music with Western-style African music: Reggae, Raggae, Jungle, R & B, and ‘hip hop’. When asked what they liked about the church, or why they felt that young people generally are attracted to it, answers typically included;

There are many branches of RCCG, some have older pastors and attract older people more used to stodgy religion. A young pastor has a lot to give to young people. As long as you do what’s right it doesn’t matter what you wear or how you do your hair.

Because there is liberty. There are no strict rules like no trousers for girls or no make up. You can be yourself. Human beings don’t like to be restrained and told what to do.
It is not unnecessarily restrictive. It is scriptural but does not conform to the old way of doing things.

Back home you have to be careful how you talk to older people. Here it is more open. You can just walk up to the pastor and say “Hi”, and not worry about it.

**Principal teachings**

As suggested above, the recent developments within Nigerian Pentecostalism involve theology and teachings, as well as organizational arrangements, which address issues related to the profound economic and political difficulties encountered by Nigeria for nearly two decades. Hence many of the major doctrines are associated with the integrity of the family, sexuality, health, wealth and justice, as well as the economy, and the negative consequences of the entrenchment of powerful social and political élites. If a generalization can be made, it is that the range of teachings espouse an apparently materialist and work-orientated ethic, thinly dressed in theological dogma, which dovetails, sometimes awkwardly, with teachings of purity. These teachings are replicated in the British setting and have particular resonance for a predominantly affluent membership.

An emphasis on purity was always central to the older Pentecostal Nigerian churches. Such modern variants as the RCCG have adopted this teaching but given it a unique twist. For the RCCG, the display of strict personal morals is the central evidence of a ‘new life in Christ’. Besides the significance of the inerrant ‘Word’, Bible reading, and the importance and efficacy of prayer and praise, every aspect of daily life must exclude all lying, cheating, stealing, quarrelling, gossiping, bribing, consuming alcoholic, smoking, fornicking, and any unwillingness to help those in need. Again, this may be comprehended as a reaction to developments in Nigeria where economic decline and governmental corruption have created a society accused of being ‘vulgar, dirty, ostentatious, dishonest, inefficient, undisciplined, and harbouring a “cargo cult mentality”’ (Achebe 1983). It is hard to imagine this as being the background for the Jesus House congregation which is generally educated, ambitious and hospitable.

The significance of purity, however, must also be seen in terms of boundary maintenance. It is not only by education and migration that the membership of Jesus House can be differentiated from their other, less salubrious peers. The new wave of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, has long been symbolically separating its members from the moral chaos of outer society by a strong emphasis on purity of lifestyle, strengthened and reinforced by mutually supportive communities. With regard to the Nigerian context, the new Pentecostal churches appear to be practically and symbolically distancing members of their congregation from their
surrounding society. When incorporated within this closely-knit congregation, the encouragement of purity, clean and ambitious living is extremely effective. This affirms Gifford’s observations concerning the way that the new churches are linked to the elevation of social status and the forging of a distinct lifestyle in Nigeria. In the church communities members find shelter, psychological security and solidarity. In this innovating association they create a new world, a new existence for themselves, away from the harsh and brutalizing realities of the economic climate. They can forge a new notion of self, becoming free agents, responsible beings. They develop a sense of their own importance.... They shed their passivity, and entertain goals and ambitions.... Moreover, in their group they develop a whole support mechanism to reinforce them in their new values and their new self understanding (Gifford 1994, p. 531).

Research at Jesus House strongly demonstrated the existence of these purity boundaries. *Impact*, the church magazine, contains many articles on the subject of lifestyle instruction. Issues such as the maintenance of strict personal hygiene and the need to refrain from violence, cruelty and infidelity in relationships, are dealt with in a practical and matter-of-fact way. These are striking in the sense that they are not subjects that would be tackled commonly by Christian magazines, even those more popular in the white dominated Charismatic movement. Their presence also implies a greater fear of moral incursion by the external influence of British society into which they are by no means integrated, as well as a stronger need to be seen to excel and reject the slurs of corruption and squalor that have beleaguered Nigerian society.

Respondents were asked in interviews how important they thought the teaching on purity issues was. Typical answers included:

- Very. Because if you live your life according to the Bible then there will not be any corruption. There will not be any spirit of fear.

- We have a role to be a light to our society. The first thing that people see about you is your lifestyle.

- We really need to teach young children what’s wrong and right. Then they will not be able to hide behind not knowing.

Purity is only one core component of the theology and ethos of the RCCG. ‘Divine prosperity’ is another. As in many other new churches, material success is not shunned, but is often seen as a mark of God’s favour. This emphasis upon prosperity may appear, at least at first sight, to indicate the influence of the so-called ‘Faith teachings’ of ‘health and
wealth’ which originated in the USA. Such doctrines insist that guaranteed wealth and health are part of the package of salvation and may be appropriated merely by faith. In parts of Africa the American Faith ministries have achieved a spectacular advance. Indeed, the growth of churches based upon ‘Faith teachings’ has frequently overtaken the Pentecostal renewal movement in some countries.

Teachings of prosperity are important to such churches as the RCCG. To an extent this marks the early student involvement in the growth of the independent churches and their influence by the increased activity of the American Faith movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Thereafter, rather than advocating a retreat from the world, the pastors of the new Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa came gradually to adopt prosperity doctrines (Gifford 1998).

Publications by the leading exponents of this gospel, such as Kenneth Copeland, are sold on the bookstall of Jesus House and the larger RCCG churches, while some church pastors and leaders frequently visit the conventions of the more prominent Faith ministries. However, prosperity and health through faith are not particularly reflected in the theology of the RCCG. While the health and wealth element is there, the emphasis is derived as much from internal cultural dynamics and recent social and economic developments as from the influence of the USA-style Faith gospel.

In the RCCG, finance and prosperity are to the fore, but they are far more likely to be advanced in terms of financial management. Hence, seminars and practical advice tend to be directed more towards helping members to deal with debt and the control of finances, than stringent faith and prosperity teachings. While it is certainly taught by the RCCG that God will materially bless the believer, considerable stress is also placed on the effort that individuals make to their own careers and advancement. The implications of prosperity teaching, Nigerian-style, thus comes into clear relief. Economic decline has precipitated the growth of such doctrines in that they may reflect the increasing need to be frugal and provide an ethic of accumulation against the economic ravages since the early 1980s. Much of this ethos is clear in this extract from a Jesus House teaching cassette:

Getting out of circumstances means learning how to fight effectively . . . the fight, the war, the weapons we are using, and the battle is primarily against those things warring in our soul, our mind. What gets us into trouble is our minds. . . . It takes a tough mental attitude . . . you need to be a fighter.

Such a statement is typical of the tone of religious language which is frequently cast with reference to the spiritual battle, to triumph over evil, to victory over adversity. Here a distinctly African doctrinal component
is discernible in that it articulates a profound theological dualism that appears in many ways to reflect more primal forms of religion.

In the case of the RCCG in Britain, there is more to the equation. Those such as Jesus House have obviously attracted wealthier and more mobile social groups and this has led to a perceptible concern for this world as much as the next. This has particularly been the case in times of economic hardship for these more prosperous sections of Nigerian society. Hence, the teachings of self-help and entrepreneurial effort must be seen as a reaction to the ‘squandering’ ethos that has become almost synonymous with Nigerian life over the last two decades. Church members are taught to earn well and live prudently.

Members of Jesus House are frequently taught to be ‘the best they can be’. The church leadership emphasizes the importance of achievement in all areas of life: career, relationships and finance, as well as spiritual improvement. When respondents were asked what they liked best about their church common replies allude to this particular aspect of teachings and were typified in such questionnaire responses as;

Seeing others in the church who are successful and highly educated has convinced me that it’s possible to be a Christian and also achieve these things.

Young people are ready to respond to visionary, motivational sermons from the pastor. They need a bit of encouragement in their life.

I like the teachings on fulfilling potential. Everyone has at least one gift or talent, and if we all applied them then everybody would be a success.

The theology of the RCCG reflects this tendency as evident in the Jesus House’s principal publication, *Impact*.

To survive, one needs an action plan of career goals, training and needs analysis, and a period of review at least every three months. You cannot go through life trusting that the best will happen. You need a vision. Consider three path finders; “What am I good at?”, “What am I interested in?” or “What can I do to obtain a comfortable lifestyle?” Write down the vision. Pray about it. Once you are convinced it is for you, act on it. There is a famous saying, there is many a genius who died unsung, many a business person who died unfulfilled (‘Career. The 7 Essentials’, *Impact*, issue 3).

For the RCCG, the teachings of prosperity are played out in relation to the concept of ‘covenant’. This idea of covenant is significant in that all the needs of the church, at both collective and individual levels would
be met if the members were pure, faithful and obedient to God. Implicit in this teaching is the insistence that the spiritual and material fortunes of a believer are dependent on how much they give, spiritually and materially, to God and His church. For the RCCG’s leader Adeboye, there is a link between holiness and health and prosperity and described by him in his book *Holiness* in this way:

When you are holy you will become like God so you will not need to pray for healing. God can never fall ill so you can never fall ill. The root cause of all illness is sin. If you live holy you will not need to pray for prosperity . . . when your soul is prospering, your health and wealth will also prosper. This is the will of God, above all things for you.

**Conclusion**

The importance of the ‘new’ black African churches within the framework of globalization is not merely with reference to a unique expression of African Christianity. Rather, they are noteworthy in that they constitute international ministries which have implications on a worldwide scale. As part of an increasing phenomenon of what might be termed ‘reversed proselytization’, these new West African churches have systematically set out to evangelize the world. In the case of the RCCG this has meant establishing churches in as far-flung places as India, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, the USA and Europe. The impact and significance of the exportation of a fiercely evangelical Nigerian church such as the RCCG, driven by a vision of winning converts, is that it offers a unique opportunity to analyse its impact at a local level, in this case the Western context.

It is evident that the RCCG has engendered a ‘revival’ in Britain, but not among the white indigenous congregation as envisaged by the church in Lagos. The social picture that has emerged from the study of Jesus House is of a cluster of fast growing congregations constituted by an isolated ethnic group. It may well be that as the largest RCCG church in London it is perhaps even more affluent and cosmopolitan than others in Britain. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus House caters for the needs of a distinct clientele. Differentiated from other Nigerians through elevated class and wealth, and therefore education, a vibrant form of Pentecostalism also separates the membership again as a community sets up lifestyle ideals and purity boundaries, which are profoundly significant when we consider Nigeria’s high rates of crime, violence and corruption. At the same time, the new churches provide a sense of ethnic identity and enrich a feeling of solidarity in British society. Although they are to an extent integrated at work and college with various other ethnicities and nationalities, Nigerian nationals are clustered together when it comes to religious gathering, finding solidarity and cultural
relevance within a church of co-culturals, taking refuge from surroundings which may be hostile and demanding.

The relationship between distinctive forms of religiosity in constituting ethnic identity has long been recognized (Jacobson 1997). There is a tendency for this to be magnified in the case of minority migrant groups seeking a ‘positive identity’ (Tajfel 1970; 1974). However, in the case of the Nigerian constituency of the RCCG, people are inclined to consider their identity to be primarily ‘Christian’, which, despite the African qualities of their church, does not mark them out in the same way, for example, as Muslims who are differentiated by their religion in a Christian country. Certainly in Jesus House there is a reaction against the ‘sinful’ aspects of the modern world, yet there is no significant trace of any stance against the culture in which they are living, either passive or aggressive. Rather their ethnic drawing together is a practical one where individuals may seek support from each other, and also find a religious setting which is relevant to their mutual backgrounds.

Other wealthy Nigerians will probably continue to come to Britain to take their place in the academic system and the employment market. While they do so, the RCCG is a welcome home from home, one which encourages them to succeed in all aspects of their lives. If their stay is short term, then the lack of deep integration becomes relatively unimportant. When they return to Nigeria their isolated status will continue within the Pentecostal communities and within the high ranking jobs to which they aspire. However, time may bring changes. Not all Jesus House members are young students, and even a percentage of those who are, plan to stay permanently. A solid base, even a small one, will probably eventually be established, and then priorities may change. Their children will be born British. It may well be that these churches will then become a more permanent feature of British church life.

Acknowledgement

The study upon which this article was based was only made possible by a grant awarded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Notes

1. Principal channels for this growth are the monthly all-night Holy Ghost Festival revival meetings which very often attract around 300,000 people. The annual equivalent, a truly national event, is held at Lekki Beach, a site midway between Lagos and Ibadan. Frequently half a million people attend, although the 1998 festival attracted nearly 6.5 million people. For the leadership this was an indication of God’s plan for Nigeria and in Adeboye’s words ‘God is removing reproach from Nigeria as He uses the nation for end-time revival by making this country the greatest in the world’ (RCCG, web pages, March 1999).

2. Seven hundred two-page questionnaires were administered with a response rate of
50.7 per cent. Around half of the interviews were administered in the church itself, the remainder being carried out at the interviewee’s home address. Half the interviews involved two or more interviewees at a time.

3. The insecurity of life under military rule and abject poverty brought the mass migration of Nigerian university academics. There has been a significant exodus of academics, scholars and lecturers. As many as 23,000 per year are emigrating to the West. Jumare even puts forward the idea of a plot by the World Bank and the developed countries to drain the cream of academia from the African continent in order to keep it disempowered (Jumare 1997).

4. London is of particular significance since the RCCG leadership sees it as having a significant role in the expected forthcoming revival in Europe.

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