WEALTH AND WORTH:
PASTORSHIP AND NEO-PENTECOSTALISM IN KUMASI

Karen Lauterbach
Roskilde University

Abstract

The concern of this article is how neo-Pentecostal pastors build up wealth and status in Kumasi, Ghana. The argument is that neo-Pentecostal ideas of wealth appeal to pastors as well as church membership, because it enables a certain form of entrepreneurship on the one hand and relate to more established ideas of social mobility and status in Asante on the other. I also point out that the way wealth has been perceived in scholarship on neo-Pentecostalism is narrow in the sense that is merely looks upon wealth in terms of money and commodities. I argue that wealth in the case of pastors should be seen in a broader context to include aspects such as time and presence of people and social relations. By analysing specific cases and events I propose that pastors and church members invest in social relations and networking to attain wealth.

Introduction

When I first arrived in Kumasi in December 2004 I was struck by two things. The first was the enthusiasm and vigour of some young pastors I met and the second was the ubiquity of neo-

1 This article was first presented at the Ph.D. workshop: ‘Religion and Public Moral Debate in Africa’ in Copenhagen, 27-29 February 2008. I am indebted to my Ghanaian colleagues and the people I met during my stay in Ghana for sharing their time, stories and experiences with me. Moreover, I would like to thank Ben Jones, T.C. McCaskie, Bodil Folke Frederiksen, Lene Bull Christiansen, Christian Lund, and Camilla Strandsbjerg for commenting on earlier versions of the paper. My fieldwork was funded by the Danish Research Council for Development Research and the Nordic Africa Institute.

Pentecostal/charismatic churches and their pastors in the cityscape of Kumasi. A group of young pastors were setting up a branch of a Ghanaian-founded church in Copenhagen. They did not have much money or mobile phones, which meant they could not get in touch with the pastor who led the church. Their congregation comprised only a few friends and some family members of the leading pastor in Copenhagen, and they did not have a church building. What they did have, however, in terms of church objects were eight blue plastic chairs, a few instruments, and a banner. In terms of affiliation they had contact with a senior pastor in Denmark. They conducted the Sunday service in a class-room in a school in Kwadasi, Kumasi, as did many other little new churches. One could hardly hear the words of the sermon, because of the noise of drumming from next door. The image of a church factory came to my mind.

When I next went to Kumasi in February 2005, I was even more puzzled by the development of this little church. It had moved away from the school into a little dark store room. One Sunday morning, I came to join the Sunday service. On my arrival the room was locked and there was no sign of life. A little later one of the young pastors came, opened the door and sat at the back of the room, behind a wooden pulpit with his head bowed and prayed. My Ghanaian colleague and I sat down and waited. After some time a few people arrived and the service started. The question in my mind was why four young men would be so eager to set up a church which had almost nothing: no money and no congregation.

These depictions of young and up-coming pastors, establishing their own churches in storerooms and garages, stand in contrast to the picture of the flamboyant mega-star pastors of some of the more established and successful neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches\(^2\) in southern Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. However

\(^2\) Different terms are employed in the literature on Pentecostalism in Ghana. There is a distinction between Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. The former is the so-called classical churches, introduced by foreign missionaries, such as the Church of Pentecost and the Assemblies of God Church. The latter group represents the more recently established Pentecostal churches. These
small and insignificant these young pastors might seem to be, they represent a larger group of younger pastors who are serving under bigger pastors, are attending Bible schools or are trying to set up their own churches. Their actions and behaviour express an eagerness to succeed, to become someone, to become a 'man of God,' and they draw on both socio-political and religious criteria to achieve success. Seeing and talking with these pastors motivated me to explore and understand the processes by which one becomes a pastor and move on to become a 'big man.'

What I try to do in this article is to analyse how ideas of wealth and status are configured in Ghanaian neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches and how pastornship can be seen as a way to achieve, display and distribute wealth. I deal in particular with how neo-Pentecostal doctrine relates to wealth and success and how doctrine is related to certain economic, political, and social processes. This article argues that neo-Pentecostal ideas of wealth appeal to pastors as well as church membership. This creates a dual driving force. Such ideas are conducive to a certain form of entrepreneurship and relate to more established ideas of social mobility and status in Asante. I also point out that the way wealth has hitherto been perceived in scholarship on Pentecostalism is too narrow in the sense that it merely looks upon wealth in terms of money and commodities. I argue that wealth, in the case of pastors, should be seen in a broader way and include such aspects as time, presence of people and social relations. The

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churches are the offspring of the older Pentecostal and Protestant churches, or are independent churches. The term charismatic is used more broadly to include charismatic groups outside the Pentecostal churches, such as the Catholic Church. Some use the term Charismatic Ministries (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005), or simply charismatic (Gifford 2004). Here I employ the term neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches, as it best encompasses the varieties represented in the group of churches I am interested in. Moreover, it underscores the sometimes blurred boundaries between the various denominations and churches. I am mainly interested in the newer independent churches and fellowships, and do not deal with the churches belonging to the group of classical Pentecostal churches. See Robbins (2004) and Maxwell (2006) for the history and global character of the movement.
church can be seen as an arena in which to negotiate claims to wealth, to amass wealth and to display wealth.

The article draws on my larger work on the configurations and dynamics of pastorship in neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches in Southern Ghana. That work explores how Ghanaian pastors build up their careers and how becoming and being a pastor is a process by which one contests for status, wealth and power and becomes a 'big man'. It also examines the social processes that evolve around the craft and politics of pastorship, and the power structures and struggles involved in building up and maintaining a strong position as a 'man of God' (*Onyame nnipa*).

The pastors of these new churches are gaining prominence, and are emerging as public figures and figures of authority. They have been described as being 'self promoting, flamboyant and icons of success and power' (Gifford 2007). Within these churches there is a widely noticeable attention on the pastor, who is in many ways the pivot around which the church moves. Tellingly, these churches are popularly known as 'one-man churches', meaning the church of one person, belonging to one person, and in the control of one person. The prominence of pastors is according to some, one of the more dominant features of the growing number of neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches on the African continent (Gifford 1998; Maxwell 2006: 9; Meyer 2001, 2005; Marshall-Fratani 2001).

These pastors are called *asafio* (pl. *asafio*) in Twi. *Asafio* means a priest, one who officiates in the service of God or a Fetish, or one who performs a religious ceremony. The word was in use before the introduction of Christianity, but has since been appropriated by it. Therefore, the term *asafio* does represent an insulated vocabulary specific to neo-Pentecostalism in Asante. It is part of a terminology that has a history beyond both the classical Pentecostal churches and the neo-Pentecostal churches, and which is rooted in Asante experience. The term *asafio*, and its history in Asante, is important.

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4 T.C. McCaskie, personal communication.
to bear in mind when looking at how one becomes a pastor (See also Sackey 2000).  

There are various ways to become a neo-Pentecostal pastor. Many begin by working and training under a senior pastor, after they have received God’s calling (Nyame fre). The training consists of entering into an apprentice-mentor relationship with the senior pastor. The senior pastor provides legitimacy to younger pastors. Becoming a pastor also often entails going to Bible School a couple of years. Although, this is not a formal requirement, it adds to a young pastor’s status. It is common to leave one’s senior pastor (or spiritual father) and establish an independent church. This is a step to become a ‘big’ pastor. Pastors become pastors not merely by making careers within the church, but also through relations to e.g. family and kinship. Moreover, in order to build up and legitimise a position as a pastor, the pastor has to show that he has access to the spiritual realm, hence spiritual power. This is done for example through display of wealth and abilities to heal and perform miracles. The idea is that the pastor is a mediator between the spiritual world and people and thus holds specific gifts and powers, which gives him an a priori privileged position. Being a mediator also implies controlling access and having the ability to make things change (e.g. like a gate-keeper or broker). Claiming access to the spiritual has a specific meaning not only in the church and among church members. It is also recognised and meaningful within other social fields. The importance of being a mediator between the physical world and the spiritual world is to be understood as part of a cognitive matrix that has a broader resonance in Asante society (Akyeampong & Obeng 1995; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005).

Building up a church and a pastoral career is about creating a community, gathering a flock and providing both material and spiritual services. There are strong elements of authority building and community building to this process. Pastors are religious innovators and promote themselves as bringing about change in people’s lives. They employ the religious idiom of ‘making a break’, which is part of a process of personal transformation.
(Maxwell 2006; Meyer 1998). Moreover, by invoking spiritual power, they enable themselves to transgress certain types of power hierarchies (based on class, age, and gender). At the same time, pastors draw on cultural symbols and criteria for success in their endeavours. Becoming a pastor is, from this perspective, a way of achieving social mobility and status, which builds on already existing ideas of success and of how one becomes and behaves as a ‘big man’.

**Analysing the Concept of Pastorship: Some Premises**

I discuss pastorship with the aim of uncovering the social, political and economic significance of a religious office. I am interested in this not because I want to show that pastors are rational beings, but as an attempt of viewing religion and belief as “routine common sense, [which implies that] we would try to see how the supernatural was embedded in mundane social relations” (Fields 1985: 20; see also Beidelman 1998: xviii). I examine the extent to which belief and religious ideas and practices are part of ‘routine common sense’ in the Ghanaian context, how these unfold, and what their political significance is. At this level I see my work as a contribution to studies of religion in Africa, which is based on an approach that views religion not within a cultural/religious–political dichotomy, but one that sees religion as part and parcel of the mundane (Fields 1985; Lambek 2002; Middleton 1999). This approach also implies viewing religious institutions and actors as linked up with other institutions and actors, and not as self-contained places. Pastorship is therefore perceived as a social process. Moreover, studying the social processes of pastorship gives insight to these new figures of success that are playing an important role in Ghanaian society, not only in terms of religious leadership, but more widely in how they represent new trajectories of ascension (Banégas & Warnier 2001). At a more general level, and following on from the above, studying neo-Pentecostalism and pastors provides a lens to study social change in a West African (Ghanaian) context that may allow us to
think differently about processes of becoming someone. In the present article it opens up space for an analysis of how the practice and ideas around status, wealth and power are changing and being redefined.

There is persistence to the logics, structures and practices of religion in Africa and how it is linked with politics, which has been emphasised in the works of Peel (2000) and Maxwell (2006), among others. The ways in which pastors establish careers build on and integrate notions of power, status and wealth which have a long history in Asante. In order for new churches and pastors to become legitimate, there has to be resonance with former practices and experiences. New institutions need a stabilising principle and there “needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement” (Douglas 1986: 48). However, the rise of the neo-Pentecostal movement in Africa has mainly been interpreted as a major change of Christianity in Africa, with focus on new ways of structuring and practicing religion as well as in terms of innovations in religious ideas and belief (Gifford 1998, 2004). One of the premises of this article is that these institutions and ideas are socially and historically embedded, to a much larger extent than the literature on Pentecostalism in Ghana and Africa has acknowledged, despite the often foreign origins and inspirations of this sort of religious movements.5

Another premise is that the rise of new religious movements is not necessarily a reaction or a response to modernity, or an expression of ‘social malaise’. The following quotation from Baétta (1962) is a reaction to the argument that the rise of African Independent Churches (in Ghana known as spiritual churches—

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5 This embeddedness is to be understood as more than building on traditional religious thought (see discussion of this in Gifford 2004 and Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). It is to be understood as building on for instance ideas around status, wealth and power.
Sunsumsoré) were a response to the anxieties brought about by colonial impact, modernity and Western influence.

“It appears to me that in recent studies of new cults and other movements of a religious nature among African peoples, the presumed background element of psychological upheaval, tensions and conflicts, anxieties, etc., due to ‘acculturation, technology and the Western impact’ has tended to be rather overdrawn. [...] Whether there is more anxiety in Ghana now than at any time previously, or than in most other countries of the world at present, must probably remain a matter of opinion. After all, people have seen some very rough times here, e.g. slaving era, and the ‘Western impact’ has been with us already for the best part of half a millennium [...]” (Baêta 1962: 6).

This ‘social malaise’ argument is still prevalent in explanations of the rise of religious movements in Africa. The fundamental assumption is that these religious movements and their popularity is a reaction to change (modernity) in society, a change that brings fragmentation, anxiety and chaos as well as hopes and aspirations (see Meyer 1998c: 759). Religious mobilisation in this frame of understanding is either a response in terms of providing security, or in permitting people to contest new and suppressing powers. The causality is often not questioned, but taken for granted, and religion is seen merely as a reaction or a response.6

We need to question the taken for granted assumption of connections between certain developments of time and religious movements, and instead “we need to treat them as problematic, as needing explanation, just as all other kinds of social and political implications of religious movements need explanation” (Ranger 1986: 51). That said, and even if rejecting the causality of the

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6 This idea is of course not limited to studies of religion in Africa, but part of classical theoretical thinking within the discipline of sociology of religion, where religion is seen as a response to a certain development of society. The idea is vivid (however contested) in today’s debates on the link between radicalism, terrorism and religion.
'social malaise' argument, the understanding in this article is that religious institutions and ideas have an affinity with social, political and economic interests (Weber 1995; Gerth & Wright Mills 1991: 63). The point is that we can not set up a causal line of argumentation, but rather that it is the interplay and affinities between these fields that must be explored.

The Rise of the New Pastors

In Ghana a new group of pastors has emerged with the proliferation of neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches since the 1980s (Gifford 2004; Meyer 2005: 282). Asamoah-Gyadu asserts that “Pentecostalism at the moment represents the most cogent, powerful and visible evidence of religious renewal and influence in Ghana” (2005: 14). According to Gifford’s most recent study focusing on the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic mega-churches in Accra, he estimates that the top five churches attract somewhere between 1,600 and 13,000 people to their Sunday services (Gifford 2004: 24-26).

The early Pentecostal movement emerged in Ghana in the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Larbi (2001: 32) the forerunners of the movement were prophets like Wade Harris, Sampson Oppong and John Swatson, who attracted many members to the already established churches (e.g. Catholic, Methodist, and Anglican churches) (see also Sackey 1991). Another prophet operating in the 1930s was Peter Anim, who established a church on his own (Faith Tabernacle Church, later Apostolic Church, Gold Coast). In 1931, the Assemblies of God arrived in the Northern Territories, and in 1937 the missionary, James McKeown, arrived from the Apostolic Church in the UK. He founded what was later to become The Church of Pentecost, Ghana’s largest Protestant church which had approximately one

The recent wave of Pentecostal churches—the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic movement—started in the 1960s and in the early days mainly took place in parachurch evangelical associations. The most significant rise of the movement occurred from the 1980s and onwards and was marked especially by an increasing number of new and independent churches, as well as a number of mega-churches that operate in the form of international business corporations.

The charismatic movement in Kumasi started in the 1950s with the proliferation of Scripture Union within educational institutions (Adubofuor 1994). Later on in the 1960s, Town Fellowships and other parachurch movements emerged. Initially well-educated people joined the fellowships, but the ‘educationally underprivileged and non-professional literates’ also took part in the Town Fellowships (1994: 81). Foreign influences came from international evangelists such as Benson Idahoa from Nigeria and Morris Cerullo from the USA (1994: 318). During the 1960s and 1970s, Kumasi witnessed an increase and transformation of the charismatic movement; “Kumasi emerged as a “spiritual Capital”—the epicentre of charismatic activity in Ghana” (1994: 318-319), and in the 1980s, the number of crusades, conventions, and other events grew significantly. The first of the neo-Pentecostal churches in Kumasi were founded in the 1980s and were in many cases offspring of the classical Pentecostal churches such as the Church of Pentecost and the Assemblies of God.8

An example of such a church is the Family Chapel International, which has its head quarters in Kumasi. The church was founded in 1992 by Victor Osei, a former Assemblies of God

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7 According to van Dijk (2001: 220), The Church of Pentecost had 260,000 members. The year is not specified.
8 Sackey (1991) notes that the spiritual churches started operating in Kumasi from the 1920s. However, most of the spiritual churches were founded between 1967 and 1986, at the time where also the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches began to grow.
pastor. Because of rivalry in the leadership of the Assemblies of God church he belonged to, he founded the church, initially with less than 20 members. The church he broke away from is today the Calvary Charismatic Centre, led by Ransford Obeng, which used to be the English speaking branch of the Assemblies of God. Today Family Chapel International has grown to become one of Kumasi’s biggest neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches with a large church structure at Susanso. It gathers about 1,000 people to its Sunday service, which is also broadcast on radio. The church has branches around Kumasi, in Accra, Cape Coast and the UK. The church can be said to be a largely prosperity oriented church, and offers classes on how to set up a business to its members.

There is a notable difference between the Kumasi founded neo-Pentecostal churches and those planted from head quarters in Accra. The former group of churches is seemingly the more successful in terms of attracting members and constructing large church buildings. The pastors from the Kumasi based churches are well known locally and have local influence. According to Adubofuor the success of the locally founded churches should be seen in the light of earlier pastoral networks within for example the ‘Faith Convention’. The ‘Faith Convention’ was founded in Kumasi in 1981 with the aim of coordinating the many activities of the new charismatic fellowships and ministries (345-348). This created a platform where the churches could promote themselves, organise joint events and where their leaders exercised influence. The movement was managed by a group of people including Gregory Ola Akin of Harvesters Evangelistic Ministry, Alfred Nyamekye of House of Faith, and Ransford Obeng of the Calvary Charismatic Centre, all of whom are today important and influential neo-Pentecostal church leaders in Kumasi (347). This means that the churches in Kumasi represent a different layer of

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9 Victor Osei is from an elite family in Kumasi. His father was a well known business man and the first development counsellor (Nyasphene) to the Asantehene. He moreover has a wide web of international pastoral relations.
churches than those normally focused upon in the literature. The movement in Kumasi is not a mere subdivision of the Accra-based churches, but is a separate category. This movement has its own history. Some of their founders are from the Kumasi elite, whereas others are from others regions of Ghana.

**Wealth and Neo-Pentecostalism in Public Debate**

In Ghana there is a vivid public debate on the message and practices of neo-Pentecostal/charismatic pastors (Sackey 2006: 66). The below quotation is in example of the common public criticisms levelled against these pastors and their churches. The criticism is aimed, particularly at the churches’ fixation on and display of money and wealth, as well as at their religious foundation, authenticity and lack of order and regulation. A newspaper article reported:

“'Charismatic churches exploiting the poor – Dickson'. A renowned Methodist Minister and one time Chairman of the Christian Ghanaian Council of Ghana, the Rt. Rev. Prof. Emeritus Kwesi A. Dickson, has expressed grave concern about the manner some charismatic and upcoming churches in the country are overly exploiting a cross-section of Ghanaians purported to be members of their congregations. He said these so-called churches are causing serious harm and doing the nation a complete disservice by keeping their members all day long in prayer camps, denying them the opportunity to pursue vital productive economic activities and services that could enhance their livelihood. He noted that these pastors who manage to lure these members from the orthodox churches because of the 'miracle and prosperity gospel' they preach to extract a lot of money from the poor without providing any kind of social services to benefit these members in return […] Prof. Dickson indicated that most of these churches, whose pastors are self-ordained and proclaimed, veer off the normal and true cause of evangelism as they have no laid down regulations to practically guide their conduct and their religious approach to worship [...] He describes them as a machinery for
money making; the pastors are barely cheats and a liability to our society”. The Daily Dispatch (7 September 2005)

The Methodist minister quoted here summarises the controversy surrounding the so-called ‘one-man’ churches by attacking their focus on prosperity and by describing the pastors as self-ordained, thus with no authority and legitimacy behind them. In a booklet called ‘Genuine or Counterfeit – Pastor/prophet’, written by two Kumasi-based neo-Pentecostal/charismatic pastors, they respond to the criticism, or the negative representation in the media, by distinguishing between true and false pastors. They write: “We are living in days when the church has experienced a rise in carnality and spiritual disease. There have been highly dramatic, highly publicized moral features among a number of very prominent leaders of churches. Their fall have been amplified by the mass media [...] This brings the work of God’s Minister into disrepute. And many think all pastors are the same, they all fail and fall short of expectation and there is no need to waste time in Church and listen to these blind leaders. However, in reality, all Pastors are not the same. Some are good and some are fake” (Owusu-Ansah 1999: 2).

Interestingly they also establish a link between being ‘counterfeit’ and focusing too much on achieving wealth: “There are many reasons why people enter into the ministry. Some rush into it because of financial gains, they think the work is now very lucrative, so it is good to enter for you will get money quick. [...]

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11 I bought the booklet in a supermarket in Kumasi. The authors are the founders of a Kumasi-based church called ‘Great Expectations Ministries International’ that has branches in Ghana and Great Britain. The authors’ merits as pastors are listed at the back of the book: “They are seasoned international preachers. They have travelled extensively in the United States of America and have ministered in many cities there. They were used tremendously of God in Savannah Georgia to meet spiritual needs of both whites and blacks [...] They also preach in Conferences, Seminars, and Churches throughout Ghana, Nigeria, Great Britain and other places. They broadcast on two F.M. Stations Kapital Radio 97.1 and Garden City Radio 92.1 in Kumasi, Ghana”. The booklet contains 100 pages and deals with various aspects of pastorship.
[They] work to please themselves and move heaven and earth to achieve their canal objectives, to get wealth fast. They are counterfeit ministers..." (Owusu-Ansah 1999: 7). At the same time, and in accordance with neo-Pentecostal doctrine, they see wealth as a reward from God, which is achieved by praying: "Pray to have financial freedom by giving to God. Many men of God are poor because they don't give to God ... Financial freedom begins with scriptural giving. Luke 6:38 says, "give", and if we increase our tithe, He will increase our financial reward, it shall be given unto you ... Don't rob God ... If you give, you allow God to create employment or secure your job" (32-33). As will be discussed below, this is the essence of the prosperity gospel, which is one of the characteristics of neo-Pentecostal ideology; wealth is a sign of God's blessing and one receives wealth by giving abundantly.

Generally, there are two positions in the public debate on religion and wealth. One position hails money and wealth, and perceives it as a sign of God's blessings and of spiritual power and authority. The other position believes that the role of religion/Christianity is to provide a moral code of behaviour, and to contribute to the welfare of society and provide social services. Many of the critics of neo-Pentecostalism, many of whom belong to mainline churches, claim that adherence to a neo-Pentecostal/charismatic church renders people individualistic and make them neglect their familiar obligations. Meanwhile, the message of the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches is construed around a strong focus on the individual—the possibility of personal transformation and individual success, that however also contains an urge to members to contribute to the church community both in terms of time and money.

The tendency to become more individualistic cannot solely be ascribed to neo-Pentecostalism. The contradiction between individual and community is constant in Asante experience, however changing expression and form over time. It reflects a more general dilemma in Asante society about whether accumulated wealth is for the individual or the community
(McCaskie 1995: 78). Historically ‘big men’ (*abirempɔn*)¹² in Asante were responsible for the maintenance and continuity of society. Moreover, there were social restrictions on the use of their accumulated wealth, which was seen as belonging to the community. In the first part of the twentieth century, a new group of social entrepreneurs (*akonkofɔɔ*)¹³ emerged; these were new and progressive Asantes, who defended the “individual’s right to accumulate and to dispose capital” (McCaskie 1986: 7).

It can be argued that contemporary public debates on neo-Pentecostalism and wealth reflect this dilemma. Neo-Pentecostal pastors somehow seek to strike a balance between promoting the individual (not least themselves), and contributing to the well-being of society. An example of this arose at a convention organised by Pastor Joshua Kas-Vorsah in Daban, Kumasi. The theme of the convention was fighting armed robbery, corruption and road accidents through prayer, all issues which were perceived as impediments to the well-being of society. There are many other examples where pastors promote themselves as helpers of the community e.g. by setting up vocational schools or the like. Also, McCaskie writes about a neo-traditionalist priest in Kumasi (*akɔmfoɔ*) who is highly critical of the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches, for the reasons mentioned above. The priest concurrently stresses and proves his own commitment to the development of the community he operates in by funding small self-help projects (McCaskie 2008). This debate on accumulation and the distribution of wealth and the changing positions within it can be

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¹² *abirempɔn* (pl. *abirempɔŋ*): means a ‘big man’; it also implies rule, power and wealth. According to McCaskie “It was a hereditary title held by the heads of territorial chiefdoms, and also conferred upon the very wealthiest accumulators” (McCaskie 1995: 275).

traced in the development of the broader Pentecostal movement in Southern Ghana.

Wealth and Worth

Originally Pentecostalism was based on ideas of personal salvation, baptism in the Holy Spirit and belief in divine healing (Maxwell 2006: 7-8). Other crucial features are the personal experience of being born-again, evangelism and a strict reading of the Bible. Within the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic strand, there is moreover focus on prosperity and an active involvement in society, which was decried in the classical Pentecostal churches. Below, I outline the content of the neo-Pentecostal message on prosperity, and go on to discuss how this is reflected in what pastors do and how they relate to others within and without the church. The ambition is to analyse ideology in relation to social practice in order to capture the constitutive relation between the two. For example, how do pastors talk about wealth, how is that put into practice in terms of their work and how is that reflected in the ways in which they build up wealth?

The doctrine on wealth in neo-Pentecostalism (prosperity gospel) is, put simply, about seeing wealth and richness as a sign of God’s blessings (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 211-212; Gifford 2001: 62-65; Meyer 1998c). In Gifford’s words: “A believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith” (1998: 39). A common way of explaining the appeal of neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches is that people come to church to seek success in life such as in business, marriage, education, to get a visa and travel and to “switch from low status to high status religious groups [...] establish social and economic connections as well as meet people of similar moral or religious conviction [...] [that] brings along certain degree of religious distinctiveness”

14 The origins of the faith gospel are ascribed to American evangelists such as Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts and T. S. Osborn (Gifford 2001: 62-63).
(Ukah 2005: 268). The focus on success and prosperity is, in other words, what makes neo-Pentecostalism attractive to many (Meyer 1998c: 762; van Dijk 1999: 81).

Studies of wealth and Pentecostalism have mainly focused on the part of the message that touches upon money and commodities (monetary and material wealth, gift giving and the symbolic function of wealth in the sense that money is not actually being distributed, but that money serves as a symbol of success) (Gifford 2004; Meyer 1998b, 1998c; van Dijk 1999). This is a narrow perception of wealth in that it does not take into account other less material aspects of wealth. I attempt to broaden the understanding of wealth to also include people, institutions and relations. This way of approaching wealth draws from the work of Guyer (1995), McCaskie (1983, 1986, 1995) and Berry (1995), among others, to suggest that wealth is more than things and money. In this perspective, the church and religious ideology is understood as an arena for negotiating claims to wealth as well as displaying wealth, and one’s success as a pastor depends on mobilising supporters and establishing a congregation (Berry 1995: 307). In other words, wealth is also in people, in social relations and has cultural meaning, that changes over time. Wealth is closely linked to social identity and to the making of social relations since wealth is also about displaying it, claiming it, and recognising it.¹⁵ Besides, it is particularly interesting to study wealth in the specific historical context of Asante in relation to how wealth is being interpreted and presented in the neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel. At first glance, one could say that the two fit well. However, we should not forget

¹⁵ This is not a definitional exercise as such, but an attempt to include aspects other than material and monetary aspects of wealth. Another way of approaching the importance of access to social relations and other resources could be through the concept of social capital. Pentecostal church members and pastors can be understood as investing in and getting access to social capital through their membership of a Pentecostal church. This membership provides resources (for example when migrating) through the contacts in the Pentecostal network. It is not networks themselves that are interesting, but rather the creation, access and use of them and thus the production of social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996: 84, 105).
that prosperity gospel as it is understood and practiced in Kumasi, is a local interpretation of a more global religious ideology. It is through this interpretation that wealth in the neo-Pentecostal sense has resonance in an Asante context.

**The Pentecostal Message on Prosperity**

Two central ideas in the neo-Pentecostal message on prosperity are the ideas of 'giving and receiving' (sowing and reaping) and the refusal of poverty ('you don't need to be poor').

**The Principle of Giving and Receiving**

The principle of giving and receiving is referred to again and again by pastors as the underlying rationale behind receiving the blessings of God: the more one gives in church, the more one receives from God (on the theological background of this principle see Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Pastors teach church members how to learn to give easily and spontaneously. One pastor said: “God gives in the first place and we give back and it comes back multiplied. Then it becomes easy to give... We surrender things to God, submit our entire life and possessions to the Lord and it comes back to us multiplied. People who spend more time with the Lord, they get more time back to work”.\(^{16}\) This principle builds on the unique relation between human beings and God. All that members give in church is seen as something they give to God, which means that giving to the church or the pastor is the same as giving to God. This relation is what Ukah terms “an economic transaction between believers and God” (Ukah 2005: 261), mediated by the religious leadership.

Church members were not only asked by pastors to give money to God and the church. They were also asked to give their time and to give their loyalty. As one pastor instructed: We have to

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\(^{16}\) Evening service, Harvest Chapel International, 7 December 2004, head branch.
give “our life, our time, our talents and abilities, our possessions: monies, clothes, cars, houses”.17 Francis, a young pastor in Kumasi said the following about giving: “Noah offered. What have you given to this church? Since we started this building, how much have you given? Noah gave an offering, and God was moved. God took away curse...” ... “Its time you spend time with God. Give time; give money, give, give, give, give. Who gave food to the pastor at Christmas? The pastor’s gift is to understand the principles of giving and receiving. .... You are not travelling because you have not sown financially. You have died spiritually because you haven’t spent time with God .... Give, give, give, give your time, money, sika, and resources. Be blessed and lifted up. He is about to favour you. Who wants to buy cement for the church? It’s an opportunity to be blessed”.18

After the sermon people got up, stood in the front of the church and pledged how many cement bags they would give. They were then prayed for and blessed by the pastor. This event cannot only be understood as a pastor collecting for himself and the church. In this case, Francis was not preaching in his own church, but was making a so-called programme in a branch of Family Chapel International. I suggest that the incentive for him to get people to give is not so much about him getting richer in a material sense, but rather to show that by invoking the word and the power of God he was able to make people give. By proving his ability to collect, he also shows that he is a powerful preacher, he can control people, and that is how he builds up a position as a powerful ‘man of God’.

Time and presence can be seen as something to give, as resources in the same way as money and other commodities. Clearly money plays a significant role, both in terms of a strong symbol of wealth19 and as necessary to run a church. The focus on

17 Evening service, Harvest Chapel International, 7 December 2004, head branch.
19 For instance at a Sunday service at Family Chapel International (21 August 2005) money was given to the musicians by church members, who put notes on
money cannot only be ascribed to faith gospel or prosperity as preached in neo-Pentecostal churches, but represents a longer historical trend in the capitalisation and monetisation of Ghanaian society, where cash is required for consumption (McCaskie 2000: 132-133). That said, control over people and over institutions also seem to play a role in the ways in which pastors build up and display wealth.

McCaskie (1995) argues that the political economy of pre-colonial Asante should not only be understood in economic terms, as wealth and the accumulation of wealth are also based on socio-political and ideological factors. Wealth, particularly measured in gold, people, land and food, were part of Asante experience and knowledge on how to obtain success and progress, “hence, the accumulation of wealth as imperative and as yardstick, and the deeply resonant meaning of wealth as symbol and as mnemonic, were abiding and central figures of Asante life, history and self-knowledge” (1995: 37). The possession of subjects and land validated and represented influence, attainment, status and rank (1995: 56). Possessing wealth was not only a matter of securing power in a political sense, but also “spilled over into cultural ethics and religious belief” (McCaskie 1983: 29). In terms of processes of becoming and social mobility, accumulation and display of wealth played a central role. Status was achieved through becoming office holders and eventually and possibly through promotion by being awarded the title of ṣibirempon (‘big man’), which was a sign of recognition (McCaskie 1983, 1995).

With colonial rule, the socio-economic context changed and so did ideas and consensus around accumulation and wealth (McCaskie 1983: 38-40; McCaskie 1986: 4; McCaskie 1995: 65, 68). The new ideas were characterised by entrepreneurial individualism. One of the new social groups was the akonkofoɔ that formed as a group between 1896 and 1930. The akonkofoɔ

the musicians’ foreheads or in a basket. At the end of their performance, the head pastor rose from his big chair at the side of the stage and threw a bunch of cedis notes at the musicians.
became a distinct social group in the colonial period, many after having fled Asante during the civil wars of the 1880s. Upon their return to Asante, they introduced and practiced new ideas of accumulation and wealth (McCaskie 1986: 7). McCaskie argues that they were the new and progressive Asantes, in that they had broken with the past in the sense that they had escaped the moral constraints embedded in ideas of wealth and accumulation. At the same time though, they still drew on the social norms of the nineteenth century and behaved like ‘big men’, *abirempon*. They represented a new development within Asante society, and “[c]entral to the view of the *akonkofuo* was the absolute non-negotiability of the individual’s right to accumulate and to dispose of wealth” (McCaskie, 1986: 9). This group of men represented a “very confused ‘individualism’; an embedding in Asante society of a sense of capitalist enterprise, and of a ‘business’ or *petit-bourgeois* element” (1986: 9). Individuality and individual accumulation of wealth was becoming the norm: “Money, and there could never be enough of it at the cognitive level, was the key to individual success” (1986: 15).

*Refusal of Poverty*

The idea of ‘refusal of poverty’ is that one is not destined to be poor, but by being with the right people and ‘claiming what belongs to you’ one can escape poverty (see also Gifford 2001). Victor Osei, founder and leader of Family Chapel International in Kumasi, said at a church programme titled ‘Break in, Break free, break through’: “To break in, is to take everything that belongs to you. You need to take it; you need to do something actively”. On another occasion he talked about the problem of having the wrong ‘spirit’. He shouted: ‘I can do all things, I can do all things, I can do all things, I can do all things. I can do, because you are ‘I can do’ person. The problem with many Christians is that they depend on lack. Most people are programmed to fail in life. You are

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programmed to fail and your friends, they will cause you more failure. Walk with ‘I can do’ people. Move from area of lack and change to possibility. Change your mentality. People work for it … If you sit there you will die. People work hard for money. Success is like a beautiful woman. If you tell her, it won’t change her. You have to convince money to be at your side. Success brings forth success. Richer gets richer and poorer gets poorer. Make friends with money. Seek it. If you are stupid your money will be taken from you”.  

This quote shows how getting rich is not only about going to church, but also about one’s mentality and not least being with the right people. The pastor provides instructions on how to get rich (moreover church members can attend classes on how to set up a business). Additionally, being rich is not a sin, and can be thought of as a sign of spiritual power. There is a strong relation between wealth and the spiritual capabilities of pastors in the sense that showing one’s wealth is a way to prove one’s spiritual capabilities and thereby building up a strong position as pastor.

Another aspect of the ‘refusal of poverty’ is the importance of networks and social relations. A pastor in Kumasi talked about the value of relationships in this way: “I always try to keep relationships because money is a weapon, so is also a relationship, a godly relationship is also a weapon. God can reveal it to one person, who will stand and pray for me”.  

A relation in this way functions as a way to legitimise a pastor’s position. Also international relations are seen as crucial when founding a church and when building up a position as a pastor. Another point is that people are not only engaged in exchange within the church but, as Berry has argued in a different context “people join social clubs, churches or Muslim brotherhoods, cooperatives and political parties, and concurrently maintain ties to kin, affines or members of their ancestral communities” (Berry 1995: 309). People (members and pastors) are not only members of a Pentecostal

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22 Interview with Francis Afrifa, Kumasi, 13 September 2005.
church, but they are involved in multiple networks at the same time.

Discussion

As the above analysis suggests, wealth in neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches is more than money; it is richness in relation to both money and people. It is not merely wealth in relation to control over people as such, but also in relation to social relations, and having access to international relations etc. Furthermore, wealth can be understood in terms of wealth of association, in the sense that one is more likely to obtain wealth by being associated with a wealthy pastor. Meyer argues that in terms of wealth and prosperity, the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches merely play a symbolic role; for example, she asserts that the churches' financial assistance to members is of a symbolic character. She therefore concludes that "[i]n the sphere of accumulation and distribution the pentecostalist churches also play an important role, although again symbolic, role. By offering protection for a person's individual business and by cutting symbolically the blood ties connecting a person with his or her family, pentecostalist churches promote economic individualism [...] Pentecostalism provides an imaginary space in which people may address their longing for a modern, individual and prosperous way of life" (Meyer 1998c: 763). However, if we approach the analysis of Pentecostalism and wealth differently, and not only look upon how churches and pastors assist church members, we get a different and somewhat broader understanding of how the concept of wealth is defined, how wealth is built up within neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches, and what relations are involved.

In approaching wealth and Pentecostalism one has to look at how ideas on wealth are attractive and meaningful to both church members and pastors. Members are part of the process, as they provide wealth and make pastors wealthy, not only by contributing financially, but by their mere presence and time. Leading a church that has many members is a sign of wealth and gives the pastor some form of control over people. Another aspect is the
relationships between pastors; they also make each other achieve wealth by inviting one another to participate in programmes and by promoting each other. This is exemplified by the case described above, where Francis got people to buy cement for a church. I argued that it was not about collecting for himself, but about proving that he was able to make people give. Moreover, I would argue that it was also about building up a strong network. If Francis makes the church he visited a strong church, he also becomes a strong and powerful pastor himself. In other words, he invests in social relations and networks by encouraging church members to contribute bags of cement to construct the church.

Ideas about wealth in the neo-Pentecostal/charismatic churches, which I studied, are not only about flamboyant lifestyles or abundant richness. It is also about founding churches, controlling people, or having access to international relations etc. It is not only about what is promised in church or the lifestyle of the pastor and some rich church members. It is also about the social relations that are invested in and that are negotiated. It is about the relations between the pastor and the congregation, as well as the pastor’s relation to others outside the church. It is about the possibility of mobility and “opportunities for acquiring wealth through participation in institutions” (Jones 2005: 41). In the churches, wealth can be measured in money, extravagant goods (cars, clothes), international connections, control over people, and controlling churches and pastors. In the local Pentecostal institutional context, these are the public indicators of upward and downward mobility. In my opinion, putting these indicators into a historical frame shows us that wealth has a broader meaning in this particular context than it might have in other contexts. The neo-Pentecostal doctrine on wealth and prosperity has affinities to the historical context in Asante and to the development of a society with increased focus on money and circulation of capital.

This article has showed that, on the one hand, there is resonance with the perceptions of wealth and power on Asante. We have seen how a broad conception of wealth is in play in neo-Pentecostal discourse, and also how accumulation and
redistribution of wealth, and its public display, are central for the ways in which neo-Pentecostal pastors raise and build themselves up. Displaying wealth publically is of paramount importance, as was also the case of the pre-colonial 'big men' (abirempom). However, displaying your wealth is not merely about showing richness in terms of money, but also about having a large church building and a large and loyal congregation. Wealth is displayed and performed publicly, but is also a constant target for public debate and criticism in newspapers and everyday parlance. On the other hand, the neo-Pentecostal focus on wealth and prosperity can be seen in conjuncture with more recent changes with regard to the relation between wealth and the individual. There is thus conjuncture between the focus on individual responsibility and possibilities of progress as part and parcel of a broader neo-liberal moral regime. As shown in the article, these values are expressed in such ideas as 'refusal of poverty' and 'I can do people'. There is a strong explicit focus on the ability of the individual to escape poverty, to become rich and successful.

So there is both affinity and resonance with former and more recent ideas on wealth. Moreover, there is accordance between the doctrine and the interests of both pastors and church members. Becoming a pastor can be seen as a way to fulfil social and economic aspirations; pastors are engaged in processes of becoming someone and preferably someone important. Therefore, the idea that pastors are mediating the power of God and also that their wealth is a sign of God’s blessings fits well with their aspirations. At the same time, for church members the doctrine on prosperity combined with ideas of 'refusal of poverty' and 'I can do it people’ concur with their aspirations of being successful in for instance their education, business, political career and family life. Moreover, the broad understanding of wealth (wealth also a time and presence), as well as wealth by association, put people in a different position than if only money mattered. Being a good Christian and being associated with the pastor, not only depends on the capital resources members can afford to bring in. They can also invest their time and presence. This makes a broad understanding
of wealth particularly meaningful in a context where people’s economic resource might be scarce, but where people possesses other resources such as time, presence and talent.

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