

Is Pentecostalism an American religion?



The photograph above was taken during a hot afternoon of June 2010, at the temple of the Assemblies of God in Pobè, in Benin Republic. The temple was full. Rows of drowsy people sat on long benches trying to stay awake in the soporific atmosphere. Others stood and watched expectantly. The officiant pastor said: 'What God has joined together, let no one separate' (Mark 10:9), and asked the groom to kiss the bride. The groom timidly leaned towards the bride and gave her a quick peck kiss on her lips. The pastor asked the bride to kiss the groom. She enthusiastically leaned towards the groom and gave him a lingering kiss that lasted several seconds. The union was sealed, and the crowd cheered at unison.

A wedding like this might seem rather ordinary. However, church weddings are rare in Benin. Public expressions of affection, such as a groom kissing a bride, are uncommon and sometimes frowned upon. They are considered to potentially incite the jealousy of witches, who can thwart the fertility of the couple. In a context where having numerous children is important most people, including Pentecostals, formalise their unions only after a woman is pregnant. Thus, a public Pentecostal wedding defies the norm. It is a couple's statement of their conviction of the power of Jesus over witchcraft.

Since 2004, monogamy is the only form of union constitutionally recognised in Benin by the *Code des Personnes et de la Famille*. The *Code* contains the laws that regulate marriage and family life in Benin and establishes polygamy as a form of discrimination against women. Originally conceived in 1994, the *Code* was part of the legal reforms that followed the declaration of the National Constitution of 1990, which enabled Benin's democratic transition from a communist regime. These changes in legislation on matters of family life happened during the presidency of Mathieu Kérékou (1996-2005), a self-proclaimed born-again.

During the 1990s-2000s, US American evangelicalism, especially Pentecostalism, had a visible influence at governmental levels in Benin. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Mathieu Kérékou strategically re-aligned himself with the new geopolitical order by enabling a relatively peaceful democratic transition. He returned to power in 1996, after winning a campaign where his born-again identity distanced him from a 'sinful' past (Strandsbjerg 2005). Pentecostal influence in government continued during the presidency of his successor, Thomas Boni Yayi (2006-2016), who, along with many of his cabinet, were members of the Assemblies of God.

Monogamy has increasingly become the form of marriage to which young Beninois aspire. It is perceived as a 'modern' form of marriage. However, the reality of their lives is different. Polygamous unions continue to be prevalent. Alongside Pentecostal influence, the explosion of mass media and the use of smart phones have contributed to shifting perceptions and expectations of romantic love. Sex outside of marriage is legitimised, thus, contradicting the moral expectations of Pentecostalism. Moreover, the social pressure to procreate puts a strain on several marriages whenever a monogamous couple cannot conceive a child. What young people face is the coexistence of conflicting moral values and expectations.

Having been born and completed fieldwork in Mexico, I recognised the same experience of living under the influence of different, and often conflicting, religious and cultural values, traditions, and expectations. It is not surprising that there has been a parallel growth of Pentecostalism among many people across Latin America and Africa since the 1980s. Early studies of Pentecostalism in Latin America emphasized its success among marginal but socially mobile sectors of the population, who found in this religion ways of navigating the challenges of an emerging neoliberal economy (Martin 1990). In Africa, early studies also highlighted how Pentecostalism, with its 'break with the past', appealed to Africans wanting to break free from 'tradition' to pursue 'modern' aspirations. But the pull of the past was never left behind. Africans were described as caught 'in between' (Meyer 1998). These accounts capture a sense of fragmentation characteristic of the post-colonial condition.

This sense of fragmentation evokes the condition of 'psychological fragmentation' that Anzaldúa (2015) explores in her work *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*. Anzaldúa uses the notion of *Nepantla* to describe the ontological condition of people living in the borders and margins of the post-colony. *Nepantla* is a word from the Nahuatl language that means place/space 'in-between', '*lugar de enmedio*', '*lugar no-lugar*' (2015, 29). *Nepantla* can be understood as liminality but, in contrast to Turner's liminal space, it is a constant condition rather than transitional. Anzaldúa uses it to describe a space where matter and spirit; time and space converge. It is where different realities clash getting people caught in 'contradictory

forms of cognition, perspectives, world views, belief systems' (2015, 17). Nepantla, thus, holds and condenses antagonisms, contradiction, and paradox. But the tensions within create 'cracks or tears', which contain potential for transformation. Through these 'cracks', Nepantla offers access to a stream of deeper knowledge and insight (*conocimiento*), where healing and wholeness can be found. In Nepantla, new perspectives and new identities can be found.

Pentecostalism speaks to this postcolonial condition. It emerges in 'Nepantla' and carries some features of it. From its origins, Pentecostalism thrived through the participation and evangelism of African Americans and Latinxs living in the USA (Ramirez 2014, 114). Pentecostalism thrives among people who live 'in-between' spaces of society, the migrants and marginalised. But it also thrives among emergent middle-classes who find themselves displaced because of social mobility. Moreover, Pentecostalism contains the seeds of reinvention and transformation that is only possible in a state of Nepantla. It offers a new identity, the promise of healing and wholeness in Jesus. Yet, this transformation is never fully completely achieved. It requires a continuous commitment to self-renewal in an 'in-between' space. Pentecostalism holds the promise of a new citizenship beyond national and ethnic boundaries. It is a citizenship of 'heaven' that only those who are 'saved' can reach upon death. But while waiting, Pentecostals inhabit a world where they no longer see themselves as displaced, but as active participants of a wider historical narrative.

From this perspective, I suggest that Pentecostalism is quintessentially an American religion. But by America I do not mean the USA. America, the continent, was constituted in 1492 "as the first space/time of a new model of power of global vocation" (Quijano 2000, 533). As Quijano suggests, in this way and by it, America became the first identity of modernity (2000, 533). The 'discovery' of America enabled the consolidation of a colonial/modern matrix of power that placed Western civilization at the centre and apex of a social hierarchy organised along 'racial' difference. This hierarchy eventually incorporated the entire world in an unequal capitalist division of labour (Quijano 2000). America, therefore, is a space/time with global refractions, where different and conflicting traditions and identities converge: European, Indigenous, African and Asian. America is Nepantla.

Paradoxically, from this 'in between' emerge narratives that separate to dominate. For example, narratives of imperialism have appropriated the name of a continent to designate the dominant country, throwing the rest into a marginal place. Just as Anzaldúa describes what happens to the Chicana artist: "the dominant culture consumes, swallows whole, the ethnic artist, sucks out her/his vitality, and then spits out the hollow husk along with its [own] labels" (Anzaldúa 2015, 59). In Africa and Latin America, so-called populist governments have deployed Pentecostal discourses to impose their political interests and dominant narratives. But Pentecostalism, too, places its members in a binary division of the world, those who are saved and not saved.

Yet, with Nepantla, Anzaldúa invites us to decentre official narratives. She uses this notion as epistemological tool to challenge binary perspectives imposed by dominant cultures. Thus, we can choose to inhabit a condition of Nepantla to produce new analyses, narratives and knowledges. A perspective from Nepantla prompts the questioning of usual assumptions (Anzaldúa 2015, 82). It invites depolarisation by blurring the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. It is a paradigm that reinstates interconnectedness between humans, nature and the

spirit worlds that we co-habit. From this place, we can examine the long-term historical entanglements that shape contemporary forms of coloniality, the multiple ways in which people around the world position themselves within them and respond to them.

The Pentecostal wedding represented in this photograph constitutes an image of a Christian ritual that most of us are familiar with. We might even take it for granted, as a result of having internalised a dominant cultural narrative. This image of a Pentecostal church wedding presents a coherent narrative that those in the picture have chosen to inhabit, notwithstanding its actual cultural dislocations. In Benin, it represents the confluence of different and conflicting cultural and religious values, of histories and traditions that constitute so-called 'modernity' in the post-colony. A Nepantla perspective has shown us Pentecostalism as an 'American' religion that embodies multiple colonial entanglements. Just as with the example of the wedding, most of us inhabit multiple 'Nepantlas' that we might take for granted. But we can choose to recognise the Nepantlas that we inhabit. If we embrace them, perhaps, as Anzaldúa says, they can help us see through the cracks.

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