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The Rationality of Spirits and Demons

Extending the Study of Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa

Barbara Bompani

Abstract

Late modernity (neo-)liberal states—into which we also inscribe most contemporary African countries—are democracies or semi-authoritarian regimes, not theocracies. Demons and spiritual warfare are not terms that readily belong to this contemporary political lexicon, other than in specific contexts or studies. The study of Pentecostalism in Africa offers an advantageous starting point to the study of demons and spiritual warfare, as there is no need to first reconcile demons and spirits with modernity. The modern/unmodern tension in this field began to be addressed at the beginning of the 21st century, while other areas of enquiry (for example, Pentecostalism and Politics in the United States) remain tied up with questions concerning modernization. However, while spirits and warfare are fully recognized as part of the African political imagination, they are still to be fully integrated into political lexicon and understood in their operational logic, especially with regards to their work in national political spaces. With the rise of Pentecostal politics in the African state, there is still a need to elaborate the necessary lexicon and tools to explain in political terms how demons motivate and shape public action and how they operate within the national political space.

Key words

Pentecostalism; politics; demons; warfare; logics

On the Logic of the Spirit

'Do you know that demons do not exist?', said my husband during a late summer afternoon while sitting on the front steps of an ancient church in an Italian city. Ironically, it was a majestic cathedral covered in precious pink marble with demons carved onto the highest spires, a reminder to medieval Europeans that evil forces were tangible and vigilant. His remark was not connected to the religious Italian art and its symbolism that surrounded us in that moment, but to a conversation I was having with him about African Pentecostalism and warfare, a field that interests me especially from the point of view of the powerful and material impact that this religious expression increasingly exerts on the quotidian life and choices of many Africans. Anyone who works in the field of Evangelical Christianity and tries to share reflections on

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warfare, spirits, deliverance, or speaking in tongues must at some point deal with the disbelief and puzzled expressions of audiences who are not fully—or even marginally—acquainted with Pentecostalism. The kind of religious expression that Paul Gifford (1998, 2015), in Weberian tones (Weber 1930, first English version), defined as a form of 'enchanted Christianity'[1] in which demons and spiritual forces are deemed responsible for almost everything in the mundane, everyday lives of their followers. Dealing with disbelief is even harder when your interlocutor is from a secular, or semi-secular, global north context, as is my husband.

This is not an essay about my husband and his secular upbringing on the east coast of Scotland at the end of the 20th century but instead is a reflection on existing difficulties and limitations in articulating Pentecostal political action and motivations at a national scale, with a particular focus on the African public. While Pentecostalism in Africa grew significantly in terms of followers and influence in the public sphere since the beginning of the 21st century, it is clear that there is still a need to reconcile conceptually and terminologically two separate ways of interpreting and doing politics: a dominant one that is rooted within a specific (secular) way of understanding the running of the *polis*, the political community, and the other, which belongs to specific religious communities that see the political space as dominated by spirits and demons. After all, the field of political science and the methods, concepts, tools, and language associated with this discipline emerged in the context of the end of the 19th century in the global north under the dominance of (at the time) uncontested theories of secularization.[2]

In recent years, there has been a wealth of scholarship on African Pentecostalism and politics (see, for example, Marshall's *Political Spiritualities*, 2009; Afolayan et al. 2018), and there is a much broader literature about religion and politics which has posed important questions (see, for example, Ellis and Ter Haar's *Worlds of Power*, 2004). Yet, it seems to me that more work needs to be done to grasp the rationality and logical *modus operandi* of spirits and demons in the public sphere, especially in the space of national politics (politics with a capital P), a space contemporary African Pentecostalism eagerly attempts to occupy (Haynes 2023). What is the contemporary Pentecostal political imagination, and what tools and methods are deployed for achieving this? How can we analyse the understanding of spirits and demons in shaping the political sphere? How are demons and enemies of the nation identified, and how are they battled? How can Pentecostal political behaviour be assessed, evaluated, and even anticipated? How are Pentecostal choices made, and strategies elaborated within Politics? Why is there an urge to occupy certain spaces in this moment in time? With the rise of Christian nationalism in Africa (and beyond) and concomitant Pentecostal national aspirations, there is an emergent need to question old political categorizations and develop new methods of analysis that will shape new lenses to explore different systems[3] and different political possibilities in the African state.

Pentecostal Political Ecology

Pentecostalism is a religion of absolutes, as the Pentecostal worldview is comprised of oppositional forces and actions, holy and evil, light and dark, purity and pollution, belonging and rejection. In sharp contrast to the liberal democratic approach forged on inclusivity and the incorporation of minorities, in the Manichean Pentecostal vision (Wariboko 2017), what counts is what sits at the extremes, that absolute good is to be preserved and absolute evil is to be eradicated while working towards the coming of the Kingdom of God. Within this dichotomized worldview, Pentecostal subjects are motivated by specific moral values. This set of moral

[1] In opposition to mainline or missionary Christian churches that historically became, in their expressions and aesthetics, less concerned with the spiritual world and more in line with the secular Global North public sphere.

[2] For the birth of the discipline in the last decades of the 19th century and for its historical tradition, see, for example, Adcock 2003.

[3] This may be different in relation to other faith traditions beyond Christianity.

principles comes with a hierarchy, forming an ecology with the will of God as the dominant value, interpreted as the need to work incessantly towards the coming of God's Kingdom as a priority to which all other values must relate and be subjugated to. Far from the secular—or non-Pentecostal Christian—moral community, which can be understood as horizontal, based on explicit agreements negotiated between moral agents, the Pentecostal moral community holds a very hierarchical cosmological worldview with a prevailing and absolute moral duty (Stout 2004). In this unnegotiable hierarchical worldview, individuals in positions of power may become tools towards reaching the ultimate goal, regardless of their personal and public conduct or their personal qualities (becoming part of Pentecostal eschatology through the acquisition of a higher moral value). Through this logic, political leaders and people in positions of power become powerful agents for implementing Pentecostal world-making, for becoming closer to God's Kingdom. This is not an illogical proceeding, but on the contrary, a very rational one operating within a political space that is intended as a terrain, phenomenon, or object through which to fulfil God's will (following Wariboko's analysis of Pentecostal political consciousness, 2018, 392). Within this interpretative ecology, what is considered *moral* is not the ethically unchallengeable and (materially) uncorrupted political leader, but the individual who protects and enacts the Pentecostal worldview and its imagination.

This has been the case for several politicians in the global north (see, for example, the US election with Donald Trump) as well as in Africa, for example, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda (Bompani 2022) and Jacob Zuma in South Africa. In the case of the latter, for example, if we move away from Pentecostal political sensitivities, it may appear 'illogical' to display such vigorous support to a political candidate who was polygamous and charged with multiple cases of corruption, fraud, and racketeering until he was pushed to resign by his own party on 14 February 2018. However, during the run-up to the African National Congress (ANC) leadership contest in 2007, and during his presidency between May 2009 and February 2018, Jacob Zuma emerged as the political leader for the South African Pentecostal community, as his numerous appearances in churches testified (West 2010). This support remained very strong during his court cases and the hardest moments of his political mandate (SABC News 2018). Zuma, during his presidential days, famously made statements such as 'When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven' (Mail & Guardian 2011) or 'the ANC will rule until Jesus comes' (Mail & Guardian 2016), which directly challenged the principle of secularity by an elected head of state in the post-Apartheid context (see Bompani 2019).

Pentecostals found a way to express their voice during the Zuma presidency through the short-lived interfaith structure, the National Interfaith Leadership Council (NILC). This body was formed in 2009 under the leadership of Pastor Ray McCauley of the Pentecostal Rhema Bible Church and Dr. Mathole Motshekga, head of the ANC Religious Affairs Commission and ANC chief whip at the time, with the intent to shape politics through moral and spiritual guidance (Bompani 2019). Zuma's relationship with these religious groups continued in more recent times with his return to politics and the founding of the new uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, registered in December 2023. MK competed in the May 2024 national elections, where it gained 14.6 per cent of the vote nationally (and 45 per cent in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial election), marking, by far, the best performance in the country for a new political party. No longer a minority in the country and with the opportunity to influence political leaders (Frahm-Arp 2015), Pentecostal-charismatic churches distinctly emerged as political actors under the Zuma leadership with the intention of promoting their values, sometimes at odds with the liberal and progressive South African Constitution. Indeed, the liberal post-Apartheid Constitution became something to be opposed in the eyes of many South African Pentecostal groups. While attending a service at a Pentecostal church, Rivers of Living Waters, Jacob Zuma vowed to change the country's Constitution if his newly formed party, the MK, assumes power (Business Day 2024), and he later elaborated this vow as one of the party's agenda points.

The Pentecostal support for Zuma can be explained through different lenses, including Zuma's Machiavellian use of language, symbols, and actions dear to this community to gain their electoral support in a fractious political context (Bompani 2019), and his closeness to the Pentecostal aesthetic that recognizes him as a successful (if we think about his reckless spending behaviour) and invincible (he re-emerges from the dark and comes back victorious from very difficult situations) 'blessed' man (Van Wyk 2019). Although these are pertinent observations, what is still missing for me is a deeper exploration and unpacking of the Pentecostal political consciousness operating in terms of national politics in a way that would allow us to grasp the logical use and choice of specific human and material devices and strategies for the shaping and Pentecostalization of the African state.

Pentecostals in Africa are demonstrating that they are themselves part of the transformation of the current moment (Comaroff 2024), organizing and shaping the future of nations (see, for example, Haynes 2023), especially in terms of setting national political moral agendas and policies, as the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, the Family Bill in Kenya, and the 2024 Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill in Ghana confirm. But their political consciousness and organization go beyond that, as we may observe in many African contexts, including South Africa.[4] In order to engage with Pentecostal political action and understand how it organizes and impacts the nation state, we need to have a clear picture of what, in the Pentecostal view, are the oppositional forces that battle the nation, who and where in the political space the enemies, the demons of the nation, are, and how Pentecostals mobilize and organize their warfare to defeat them. Perhaps the old political methods and categorizations for political investigation are not sufficient for this endeavour.

Demons and Politics

Late modernity (neo-)liberal states—a category into which we include most contemporary African countries—are democracies or semi-authoritarian regimes (for example, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, and Zimbabwe), *not* theocracies. Demons and spiritual warfare are not terms that belong to the broader contemporary political lexicon, but only in specific contexts or within academic subfields. The study of Pentecostalism in Africa offers an advantageous starting point in the study of spiritual warfare, as there is no need to reconcile demons and spirits with modernity. The modern/unmodern tension in our field began to be addressed at the turn of the 21st century (see, for example, the works of Meyer 1999; Hackett 2003; Haustein 2011), leaving space for more recent analyses to shift from and beyond questions concerning modernization and globalization (Richman 2020). With the spiritual being fully inscribed into the modern political project (spirits are, after all, modern), the study of politics and Pentecostalism in Africa does not require the groundwork that other fields of research may need (see, for example, recent studies on Pentecostalism in the United States, O'Donnell 2023). However, while spirits and warfare are fully recognized as part of the modern and late modern African political imagination, they are still to be fully elaborated and integrated into the political lexicon. Therefore, there is still a scholarly need to elaborate the language and tools necessary to explain in political terms how demons motivate and shape public action and how they operate within the political space, bypassing the dichotomy between rational and irrational, with a full and serious recognition of the *Politics of the Spirit* within the running of the state.

Pentecostals are, no doubt, more and more interested in the future of African nations, as they are troubled by, as they see it, the hostile spiritual and material forces that ultimately oppose the changes necessary for the coming of the Kingdom of God. To let *good* prevail, it is

[4] This interpretation is moving away from Afolayan et al.'s (2018, 224) interpretation of Pentecostal political action as only a re-action to the political space, as it is proposing the idea of Pentecostalism as the creator of new political imaginaries.

not sufficient to *save* citizens through conversion but to appropriate the entire nation, as recent studies on Pentecostal African nationalism testify (Haynes 2023; Bompani 2023), as the political space is the ultimate terrain where spiritual forces do battle (O'Donnell 2021, 2). Indeed, through Pentecostal lenses, the political terrain is not a 'secular' space but a spiritual one where the Battle (with a capital B) between evil and holy forces will be carried out for control of the entire nation. Within this collective imaginary, political warfare becomes both a worldview and a means to shape the future of the African state.

Collective warfare and demons are contextual, given that demons' targets to be defeated and the devices that allow so may differ accordingly to the place and historical context, as Pentecostal political action differs accordingly. What constituted political priorities for Pentecostals at the end of the 20th century may differ from the present day. At the same time, demons may be historically connected. For example, in East Africa, where moments of social crises and transformation have often been understood in terms of moral judgement and a preoccupation with reproduction and sexuality (as Sadgrove et al. 2012 pointed out), politics has always been interpreted in moral terms, even in pre- and colonial times[5], with the public sphere always being a sort of 'arena of moral judgment' (Peterson 2012, 283). Along these lines, the national battle against the 'demon' of sexual immorality in the political space does not come as a surprise. In South Africa, where the post-Apartheid Constitution (1998) is increasingly associated with 'dangerous' liberal (and secular) forces that pollute pre-existing spiritual orders, the Pentecostal collective is organizing to battle this demon. In this warfare, the importance of political devices to battle the national demons cannot be understated, as they are essential to the Pentecostal eschatology, as well as the political values of other Pentecostal technologies such as vigils and prayers in influencing political material decisions and actions.

In this light, citizens are called to become spiritual warriors working for the good of the nation, not just for their own lives or for their religious community, compelled to identify in political spaces diabolic rulers and forces to be eradicated in accordance with God's plan. Spiritual warfare prayers have already been studied as devices in relation to science and secular authority (see, for example, Adelakun 2023) as well as in relation to the Pentecostal body and its performance (for example, Richman 2020); but more needs to be done in relation to the collective and the good of the polis. In this view, Politics is a terrain of battles 'against the spiritual forces of evil' (Ephesians 6:12) that affect the entire nation and limit the flourishing of the late modern African state. In the 'immobility' of the post-colonial late-modern state cursed with structural poverty and lack of possibilities for change, Pentecostalism offers a rhetoric of salvation and transformation, an imagination that challenges the immobility of the African state and, above all, challenges their 'rational' logic (Comaroff 2024). Considering the failings of the contemporary African state, it is the Spirit that must be invoked as the *only* (in Pentecostal terms) possibility to materially reshape the present dysfunctional collective.

This view is a step away from interpreting Pentecostal political action as mainly a way to manage the post-colonial disorder in the African state (Marshall 2009),[6] as a 'reaction', a force of resistance and protection against the failing of African politics consumed by global neoliberal forces and internal dysfunctions. More than that, it seems to me that Pentecostalism is increasingly becoming a way of imagining change (isn't politics, after all, about bringing change?); and in some cases, perhaps *the only* possible way of imagining the transformation of the collective in a so far disappointing and failing *secular* reality and imagination. Thereafter,

[5] See, for example, Summers 2005, 'with her analysis of Bataka movement and their moral interpretations of Ganda politics at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is also interesting to look at the 'moral rehabilitation' focus in post Idi Amin's Uganda; see Willis 2021.

[6] According to Marshall, 'a social imaginary of disorder is politically and socially productive in the postcolony, and that government becomes a question of managing disorder: variously creating, controlling, inciting, exploiting both disorder and insecurity' (Marshall 2009, 42).

Pentecostalism in many contemporary African contexts must be regarded as a constitutive political force and should be placed at the centre of political analyses instead of being left at the margins or only partially explored. If we want to better understand Pentecostal 'collective regeneration', we need to develop new political categories and insights to unpack the Pentecostal political logic, putting in conversation old and new interpretative and coexisting lenses in the African public.

Looking Ahead

Considering the growing influence of African Pentecostals on public affairs, there is heuristic value in giving serious and sustained attention to the role played by Pentecostal theology, thought, and action in the world-making process in the contemporary African political sphere. However, until we fully grasp the ways that Pentecostal political ecology works and we understand its logics, we will not be able to properly inscribe analyses of Pentecostal public action into political analyses and the spaces traditionally formulated and interpreted through the lens of 'secular rationalities'. Comprehending the Pentecostal way of *doing* politics can only open new interpretative opportunities to fully grasp the ever more complex realities of the evolving, 'messy', and often disappointing late-modern world.

These are urgent themes and critical questions to be addressed in the field of religion and politics in Africa. They underline the need to develop new analytical lenses to better understand and articulate the complex political worldview and actions of this religious expression, especially in the public African contexts where its impact is rapidly growing. Those methods, tools, devices, and languages will also need to find ways to be fully and comprehensively integrated into more 'secular' or 'traditional' political analyses that may bypass existing tensions. How can we conceptualize and incorporate spiritual forces into political analyses and terminologies strongly influenced by secular systems of knowledge? How can we give full recognition to demons, spirits, and warfare as agents that condition political choices, influence political action, and are an integral part of the world-making process in many African contexts? How can we interpret Pentecostals' public needs and public priorities within the late-modern non-theocratic African state? How can we bridge the distance between an academic and practical discipline (political sciences and politics) and a religious expression and praxis guided by spirits?

Unfortunately, there is no room in this essay to respond in full to those pressing concerns, but this is a fertile moment in the field of religion and politics in Africa for pushing barriers and outrunning old logics of thinking and conceptualizing the meaning and praxis of politics in the everyday.

Barbara Bompani: Professor of African History and Institutions (Fascia II), University of Parma, Italy. She is an honorary fellow at the Centre of African Studies, the University of Edinburgh, and a research associate at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research looks at the intersection between religion, politics, and development in Africa with a particular focus on Christianity in the contemporary African public sphere. Email: barbara.bompani@unipr.it, ORCID: 0000-0001-8086-1887.

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