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BENEATH THE SACRED MIND: A PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN SELECTED PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the psychoanalytic dimensions of religious practices observed in selected Pentecostal churches in Ogun State, Nigeria. Using a qualitative interpretive framework grounded in Freudian and neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the research examines worship rituals, prophetic declarations, deliverance sessions, speaking in tongues, and healing ceremonies as psychological phenomena emerging from the unconscious mind. Data were gathered through ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions conducted across six prominent Pentecostal churches: The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Deeper Life Bible Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Daystar Christian Centre, Foursquare Gospel Church, and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), all located within Ogun State. The study argues that many religious practices in these churches serve as mechanisms of projection, sublimation, transference, and ego defense that help individuals manage

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anxiety, unconscious desires, and existential fears. The findings reveal that Pentecostal rituals operate as structured expressions of unconscious psychological processes, fulfilling emotional and social needs that secular institutions often fail to address. This paper contributes to the growing literature on psychology of religion in Nigeria and Africa by offering a culturally sensitive psychoanalytic lens that neither dismisses nor uncritically endorses these sacred practices.

Keywords: *Psychoanalysis, Pentecostalism, Unconscious Mind, Ego Defense, Religious Rituals, Ogun State, Nigeria*

Introduction

Religion remains one of the most enduring and pervasive aspects of human civilization. In Nigeria, and specifically in Ogun State, Pentecostal Christianity has grown exponentially over the past four decades, shaping the social, moral, and psychological landscape of millions of people. Churches such as The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Deeper Life Bible Church, Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Daystar Christian Centre, and the Foursquare Gospel Church have not only become spiritual homes but also centers of psychological activity where deep-seated human needs are expressed, negotiated, and temporarily resolved (Ojo, 2019; Ukah, 2020). Despite the richness of Pentecostal religious life in southwestern Nigeria, academic inquiry into the psychological underpinnings of these practices remains limited. Much of the existing literature has approached Pentecostalism from sociological, anthropological, or theological angles, with relatively little attention paid to the psychoanalytic dimensions of what transpires in worship services, deliverance sessions, prayer vigils, and prophetic encounters (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2021; Adogame, 2023). This gap is significant because psychoanalysis offers a powerful framework for understanding why people engage in certain ritual behaviors, what emotional needs those behaviors serve, and how unconscious mental processes find symbolic expression in sacred spaces.

Sigmund Freud (1927) famously described religion as a collective neurosis rooted in the helplessness of infancy and the longing for a protective father figure. While Freud's reductionist view has been widely critiqued, later psychoanalytic thinkers such as Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Ana-Maria Rizzuto, and Donald Winnicott developed more nuanced

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understandings of religion as a transitional space, a repository of archetypal symbols, and a vehicle for self-transformation (Rizzuto, 2019; Winnicott, 2018). These expanded frameworks allow scholars to examine religious behavior not as mere illusion but as meaningful psychological activity.

This article focuses on Ogun State because it represents a microcosm of Nigerian Pentecostalism. The state hosts numerous mega-churches and thousands of smaller congregations, cutting across urban centers like Abeokuta, Sagamu, Ilaro, and Ijebu-Ode, as well as rural communities. Ogun State's population is predominantly Yoruba, a group with a rich tradition of indigenous spiritual practices that have been creatively integrated into Pentecostal Christianity (Gbadegesin, 2020; Olupona, 2022). This blending of indigenous psychology and Pentecostal theology makes Ogun State particularly suitable for psychoanalytic investigation.

The central argument of this paper is that Pentecostal religious practices in these churches serve as culturally sanctioned expressions of unconscious psychological processes. Through rituals, the unconscious speaks. Through prophecy, unconscious desires find authorized voice. Through deliverance sessions, repressed material is symbolically expelled. Through speaking in tongues, the boundaries of the rational ego are temporarily dissolved. Understanding these processes psychoanalytically neither reduces religion to pathology nor dismisses its social and existential value. Rather, it illuminates the deep psychological work that religion performs in the lives of its adherents (Ikenna, 2021; Eze, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in classical and contemporary psychoanalytic theory. Freud's structural model of the mind, comprising the id, ego, and superego, provides a basic architecture for understanding how religious practices manage psychic conflict. The id, representing primal drives and unconscious desires, constantly seeks gratification. The superego, internalized as moral law, prohibits certain drives. The ego mediates between these forces and reality. Religion, in this framework, provides socially acceptable channels through which id impulses can be expressed and superego demands honored (Freud, 1930; Ojo, 2021).

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Jung's analytical psychology adds significant depth to this framework. His concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes suggest that religious symbols, rituals, and figures resonate with universal psychological structures shared across humanity (Jung, 2019). In Pentecostal contexts, the figure of the Holy Spirit, the archetype of the healer, and the narrative of death and resurrection correspond to deep psychological templates. These archetypal encounters during worship can trigger profound emotional transformations that secular therapy rarely achieves (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2021).

Object relations theory, particularly the work of Winnicott (2018) and Rizzuto (2019), frames God as a transitional object, a psychological construction built from early parental experiences that helps individuals manage anxiety and ambiguity. In many Pentecostal churches in Ogun State, the intimacy of worship, the imagery of God as father and friend, and the emotional intensity of prayer all reflect the dynamics of early attachment relationships. The congregation itself can function as a transitional space where individuals rework their foundational relational experiences.

Ego defense mechanisms form another critical theoretical pillar. Freud's daughter Anna Freud (1937) catalogued defenses such as repression, projection, reaction formation, sublimation, and rationalization. In Pentecostal settings, these defenses operate visibly. Projection occurs when believers attribute internal anxieties to external demonic forces. Sublimation transforms sexual or aggressive energy into passionate worship. Rationalization explains misfortune as divine testing. These mechanisms are not necessarily pathological; they may represent adaptive strategies for managing stress in environments of economic hardship and social precarity (Eze, 2023; Nwoye, 2022).

Contemporary African psychoanalytic scholarship has also contributed to this framework by insisting on the importance of cultural specificity. Scholars like Nwoye (2022), Odejide (2020), and Mkhize (2021) argue that Western psychoanalytic concepts must be applied with sensitivity to African epistemologies, kinship structures, and cosmologies. Pentecostalism in Ogun State cannot be fully understood without appreciating its engagement with Yoruba concepts of the person, destiny (ori), and spirit forces (ajogun). The psychoanalytic lens deployed in this study is therefore a decolonized one, attentive to African subjectivity while drawing on universal psychodynamic principles.

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Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist philosophy. The choice of qualitative methodology was driven by the need to capture the lived experiences, subjective meanings, and complex emotional dynamics of religious participation, which quantitative approaches cannot adequately address (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2020).

The research was conducted in six Pentecostal churches purposively selected based on their size, denominational diversity, and geographical spread across Ogun State: The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Lighthouse Parish, Abeokuta; Deeper Life Bible Church, Sagamu Central Parish; Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Ijebu-Ode District Headquarters; Daystar Christian Centre, Abeokuta Campus; Foursquare Gospel Church, Ilaro District; and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Iperu-Remo Parish. These churches represent both older classical Pentecostal denominations and newer charismatic expressions.

Data collection involved three primary methods. First, ethnographic observation was conducted over a period of two months, attending regular Sunday services, mid-week prayer meetings, deliverance sessions, and special programs. Field notes captured ritual sequences, emotional expressions, spatial arrangements, and participant behaviors. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with 48 purposively selected participants, including pastors, church elders, worship leaders, and ordinary congregants. Interviews explored participants' motivations, emotional experiences, and personal meanings attached to religious practices. Third, six focus group discussions, each comprising 8 to 10 participants, explored collective interpretations of specific rituals such as speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and prophetic declarations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework, combined with psychoanalytic hermeneutics. This involved identifying latent psychological meanings beneath surface-level religious discourse, drawing on concepts of displacement, condensation, symbolization, and secondary revision derived from Freud's dream theory as applied to ritual behavior. Ethical approval was obtained from the Olabisi

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Onabanjo University Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was maintained throughout.

Results and Discussion

Speaking in Tongues as Dissolution of the Ego

One of the most psychologically striking practices observed across all six churches was speaking in tongues, known theologically as glossolalia. During worship services and prayer meetings, participants entered altered states of consciousness in which they vocalized streams of unintelligible utterances accompanied by intense emotional arousal, physical trembling, weeping, and euphoria. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this phenomenon represents a temporary dissolution of the ego, what Freud described as the oceanic feeling, a regression to a pre-differentiated state of oneness with the world (Freud, 1930; Okoye, 2020).

Interviewees at RCCG Lighthouse Parish described the experience as being taken over by God, losing themselves entirely in divine presence. One worship leader stated: When I speak in tongues, I do not know what I am saying. My mind is blank, and only God is speaking.' Psychoanalytically, this suspension of rational cognitive control allows pre-verbal, unconscious material to surface. The *glossolaliac* utterance bypasses the ego's censorship, giving voice to emotions and impulses that ordinary language cannot contain (Ikenna, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022).

Jung's concept of the transcendent function is also illuminating here. When the ego's one-sided rational orientation is temporarily suspended, unconscious contents emerge and can be integrated into a more whole personality. In this sense, speaking in tongues can function as a psychic release valve that restores inner equilibrium. The communal dimension amplifies this effect; when an entire congregation enters *glossolaliac* states simultaneously, the experience of collective unconscious activation is intensified, creating powerful bonds of shared emotional experience (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2021; Gbadegesin, 2020).

Deliverance Sessions and the Projection of Inner Conflict

Deliverance sessions were observed most intensively at MFM Ijebu-Ode and Deeper Life Bible Church Sagamu. These sessions involve identifying and expelling demonic forces believed to be responsible for illness, misfortune, academic failure, marital problems, and

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financial stagnation. The ritual typically involves prayer warriors laying hands on individuals, commanding demons to reveal themselves and depart, and interpreting bodily symptoms such as vomiting, falling, screaming, and trembling as evidence of demonic departure.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the concept of the demonic functions as an externalized projection of the individual's internal conflicts, repressed memories, and unacceptable drives. Freud's concept of projection, attributing one's own unwanted qualities to external others, helps explain why the experience of casting out demons is psychologically cathartic. The individual is relieved of the shame and guilt associated with forbidden impulses by relocating them outside the self in the figure of a demonic agent (Eze, 2023; Okonkwo, 2021).

In focus group discussions at MFM, participants consistently reported profound relief, improved mood, and a sense of lightness following deliverance. One woman described recurring nightmares that she attributed to an ancestral curse, which, after a deliverance session, ceased entirely. While a secular psychologist might interpret this as the resolution of a post-traumatic stress symptom through a structured cathartic ritual, the psychoanalytic dimension is even richer: the ritual enacts a symbolic working-through of unconscious material using the available cultural vocabulary of spirits and demons (Nwoye, 2022; Odejide, 2020).

The role of the pastor as ritual authority is psychoanalytically equivalent to the transference relationship in therapy. Participants invested enormous trust and emotional dependency in pastors, attributing to them special spiritual authority and healing power. This mirrors the transference dynamic in which the patient projects onto the therapist characteristics of significant early figures, typically parents. In several interviews, congregants at CAC Iperu-Remo referred to their general overseer in terms strikingly similar to parental descriptions: protective, all-knowing, capable of seeing through one's disguises (Rizzuto, 2019; Adogame, 2023).

Prophetic Declarations and the Management of Uncertainty

Prophecy was a central feature of worship at Daystar Christian Centre and RCCG Lighthouse Parish. Prophetic declarations involve pastors or designated prophets speaking

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directly to individuals about their futures, hidden problems, and divine destinies. These declarations are received with intense emotional investment: tears, gratitude, recommitment, and a tangible sense of being known and valued by God.

Furthermore, prophetic declarations frequently mirror back to individuals' content that they have unconsciously communicated through their appearance, body language, and congregational behavior. The prophet, whether consciously or not, functions as an unusually attuned observer who synthesizes available social information into a personalized message that resonates with the recipient's inner life. This process is not dishonest; it reflects the remarkable capacity of trained religious leaders to read human distress and respond with meaningful symbolic reassurance (Mkhize, 2021; Yohannes & Girma, 2022).

Among women at Daystar Abeokuta Campus, prophecies frequently addressed concerns about marriage, fertility, and children, the most anxiety-laden domains in the lives of many Nigerian women navigating patriarchal expectations. The prevalence of such prophecies reflects not only divine responsiveness, in the believer's framework, but also the church's acute awareness of the psychological needs of its predominantly female membership. The prophecy becomes a container for unspoken collective anxiety, giving it structure, divine legitimacy, and the promise of resolution (Ukah, 2020; Adeyemi, 2022).

Healing and the Placebo of Faith

Faith healing was observed across all six churches and constituted a major draw for new members. At Foursquare Gospel Church Ilaro, entire services were organized around healing ministrations, with individuals testifying to cures of conditions ranging from hypertension and diabetes to infertility and cancer. Whether these healings are physiologically verifiable is outside the scope of this study; what is psychoanalytically significant is the psychological process through which healing is sought and experienced.

The ritual of anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and prayer activates powerful placebo dynamics that are increasingly recognized in psychosomatic medicine as neurobiologically real (Nwoye, 2022; Okafor, 2023). Beyond the placebo, however, psychoanalytic theory suggests that many conditions brought to healing services have significant psychosomatic components — physical symptoms that represent unconscious emotional distress converted

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into bodily language. Freud's early work on conversion disorder, developed through his collaboration with Breuer, demonstrated that repressed psychological conflict could find somatic expression (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2020).

In the healing context, the congregation functions as a holding environment in Winnicott's sense, a reliable, non-judgmental space that allows individuals to regress to states of vulnerability and dependency without shame. This holding environment enables profound emotional release that can resolve somatic symptoms by addressing their underlying psychological roots. Many healing testimonies at MFM and CAC described relief from symptoms that had been exacerbated by stress, grief, and interpersonal conflict, precisely the conditions most amenable to psychosomatic intervention through structured ritual (Mkhize, 2021; Ikenna, 2021).

Worship and the Sublimation of Erotic and Aggressive Energy

Extended worship sessions, particularly at RCCG and Deeper Life churches, involve hours of singing, dancing, weeping, shouting, and physical prostration. The sheer physical intensity of these sessions raises psychoanalytic questions about the nature of the drives being expressed. Freud's concept of sublimation, the redirection of sexual or aggressive energy toward culturally valued, non-sexual goals, is particularly relevant here.

In worship, the erotic dimensions of longing, devotion, surrender, and union are channeled toward a transcendent object: God. The intimate language of many contemporary worship songs, speaking of being consumed, surrendered, and wholly loved by God, deploys the full vocabulary of erotic attachment in a sacred register. This is not hypocrisy or self-deception; it is sublimation operating at the highest cultural level, transforming sexual longing into mystical aspiration (Eze, 2023; Okonkwo, 2021).

Similarly, the intense, combative prayer style observed particularly at MFM, involving shouting, stamping, commanding, and spiritual warfare imagery, provides a structured outlet for aggressive drives. Members pray with their fists, shout at spiritual enemies, and enact scenes of spiritual combat. Rather than directing aggression toward actual persons in their social world, worshippers discharge aggressive energy in a ritualized space where it is transformed into spiritual power. This sublimation serves important social functions: it reduces interpersonal violence, channels frustration away from social institutions, and

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provides a sense of efficacy and agency to people who feel marginalized in secular life (Adogame, 2023; Olupona, 2022).

Church Community as a Family System

A recurring theme across all six churches was the family language used to describe the congregation. Members referred to fellow worshippers as brothers and sisters, to pastors as fathers and mothers, and to the church as a home. This kinship language is not merely metaphorical from a psychoanalytic perspective; it reflects the genuine reworking of family dynamics within the church setting.

Object relations theory and family systems theory both illuminate how congregational life reactivates early family experiences. The pastor occupies the parental role, providing guidance,

Psychoanalytically, prophecy performs several functions simultaneously. It addresses the fundamental human anxiety about the future, what Freud called the economic problem of anxiety, by reframing uncertainty within a providential narrative in which the believer is protected and guided by a benevolent divine power (Freud, 1926; Ojo, 2021). This narrative restructuring has measurable psychological benefits, providing the ego with an adaptive story that transforms threat into opportunity and suffering into divine pedagogy.

discipline, love, and authority. Fellow members occupy sibling roles, providing companionship, rivalry, and solidarity. For individuals from dysfunctional families — which, given Nigeria's elevated rates of domestic violence, parental absence, and economic stress, includes a substantial proportion of churchgoers, the church offers a reparative relational environment (Gbadegesin, 2020; Okafor, 2023).

In several interviews at CAC and Daystar, participants explicitly described the church as providing the family they never had. Young men from broken homes found father figures in their pastors. Widows found community and support networks in their women's fellowships. First-generation urban migrants found belonging and social identity in their congregations. The psychological work performed by these relational structures is profound, addressing attachment wounds that might otherwise require professional therapeutic intervention (Odejide, 2020; Yohannes & Girma, 2022).

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Implications for Psychology, Religion, and Mental Health in Nigeria

The findings of this study carry significant implications for mental health practice, religious studies, and public policy in Nigeria. First, they suggest that Pentecostal churches function as de facto mental health institutions in communities where professional psychological services are severely underfunded, stigmatized, and geographically inaccessible. In Ogun State, as in most of Nigeria, there are fewer than two psychiatrists per 100,000 people (Federal Ministry of Health, 2021). Churches fill this vacuum by providing structured environments for emotional regulation, social support, grief processing, and meaning-making.

Rather than dismissing this reality, mental health professionals could engage constructively with Pentecostal pastoral structures. Training programs that equip pastors and church counselors with basic psychological competencies, in trauma recognition, suicide risk assessment, and referral pathways, could significantly improve mental health outcomes in underserved communities (Nwoye, 2022; Adeyemi, 2022). Such collaboration requires mutual respect and the recognition that pastoral care and professional therapy are not competitors but potentially complementary systems of healing.

Second, this study contributes to the decolonization of psychology in Africa. By applying psychoanalytic concepts without assuming the pathology of religious belief, and by attending to the specific cultural matrix of Yoruba-inflected Pentecostalism, it models a form of culturally grounded psychological scholarship that moves beyond uncritical imports of Western categories. African psychologists are increasingly called to develop theories and interventions that speak to African realities, and religion, given its centrality in African life, must be a key site of this theorization (Mkhize, 2021; Odejide, 2020).

Third, the study raises important questions about the potential psychological risks of certain Pentecostal practices. Deliverance sessions that are conducted without psychological training can retraumatize survivors of abuse. Prophetic declarations that are wrong or manipulative can shatter faith and cause severe psychological harm. Healing ministrations that discourage medical treatment can have fatal consequences. A psychoanalytically informed pastoral ethics would require churches to develop safeguards

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against these harms, distinguishing between rituals that genuinely facilitate psychological healing and those that exploit vulnerability (Okonkwo, 2021; Eze, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that religious practices in selected Pentecostal churches in Ogun State are not merely theological performances but deeply psychological events in which unconscious mental processes find structured, culturally meaningful expression. Speaking in tongues dissolves ego boundaries and releases pre-verbal unconscious material. Deliverance sessions project and externalize internal conflict, providing cathartic relief. Prophetic declarations structure anxiety-laden uncertainty within a providential narrative. Healing rituals activate placebo dynamics and provide somatic relief to psychosomatic conditions. Worship sessions sublimate erotic and aggressive drives. Church communities create reparative family systems for attachment-wounded individuals.

These findings do not reduce religion to psychology, nor do they suggest that religious experiences are nothing more than psychological events. Rather, they illuminate the rich psychological work that religion performs, work that is real, valuable, and worthy of serious scholarly attention. At the same time, this psychoanalytic lens enables a critical perspective on practices that may, under certain conditions, exploit or harm vulnerable individuals.

Future research should extend this analysis to other geopolitical zones of Nigeria and to other religious traditions, including Islam and African Traditional Religion, to build a more comprehensive African psychology of religion. Longitudinal studies that track the psychological trajectories of church members over time would also be invaluable. Ultimately, the sacred and the psychological are not enemies but partners in the profound human project of making meaning in the face of suffering, uncertainty, and death.

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