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‘The Altars Are Holding the Nation in Captivity’: Zambian Pentecostalism, Nationality, and African Religio-Political Heritage

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Abstract: The study draws on ontocracy political theory to investigate Zambian Pentecostal interpretations of politics as a sacred realm of contestations between forces of good and evil. It argues that Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality is a continuation of traditional African religio-cultural ethnonational heritage. It demonstrates how Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality is based on socio-historically constructed conceptions that drew their foundation from traditional myths, symbols and cultures. It concludes that Zambian Pentecostalism has failed to make distinctions among various types of human authorities, thereby promoting a theology of nationality that mystifies the source of the political authority of the presidents of the nation, who are perceived as absorbing both secular and spiritual responsibilities.

Keywords: altars; ethnonationality; Zambian Pentecostalism; religio-political heritage; ontocracy political theory

1. Introduction

Culture is an inter-generational repository and heritage or set of values, and an active shaping repertoire of meanings and images, embodied in values, myths and symbols that serve to unite a group of people with shared experiences and memories, and differentiate them from outsiders (Smith 1998, p. 187).

In this statement, Anthony Smith, taking an ethno-symbolic approach, presents an argument that explains the persistence of ethnonationalities. He argues that ethnonationality involves the co-existence of fluidity and resilience. It is dynamic and at the same time, a continuation of ancient ancestries and commonalities that transcends the present and thus is not reducible to its present manifestations. Smith’s ethno-symbolism is middle ground among the three approaches to nations and nationalism: modernism, neo-perennialism and postmodern constructivism. The modernist view holds that nations and nationalism are a product of modernization, resulting from an amalgamation of forces of urbanization, industrialization and secular education. They are thus the work of an elite culture, which also deliberately delineates and controls them. The neo-perennialists reject modernism, contending that some nations have existed long before the inception of the processes of modernity. Postmodern constructivists hold that nations are “ultimately a fiction engineered by elites using ‘invented traditions’ for purposes of social control” (Smith 2009, p. 11). The strength of ethno-symbolism is in the ability to perceive value in the three schools of thought. This approach highlights the significance of ethnic groups, with their symbolic and cultural practices, as intricately linked with the formation of nations as human heritage (Smith 2009, p. 87; Kaufman 2011, pp. 208–9). Ethnonationalities are embodied in the myths, symbols and religio-cultural heritage (Hutchinson

2001, p. 76). Anderson (Anderson 2006/1983, pp. 5–6) asserts that the “nation” (not “state”) is an “imagined political community—and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.” Llywelyn (2010, p. 57) premises her argument on that of Anderson, advancing nationality as a reality that is both fictive and objective; imagined and invented; and “the experience of feeling national identity remains partly ineffable, extending beyond the reach of human language and analysis.” Llywelyn (2010, p. 281) underlines that “nationality is one of those [methods] by which human beings construe meaning and purpose for their lives.” If this assertion is true, many so-called African nations are political states¹ housing multi-ethno-nations, each centered on traditional leadership in line with customary law and practices as the physical manifestation of a religio-cultural national heritage. In other words, nationality is contextual in nature, that is to say, it arises and is shaped by specific historical exigencies, experiences, cultural imaginations and social contexts. It also means that models of nationality vary from ethnic group to ethnic group.

The forgoing raises a question of the relationship between religion, ethnonationalism, and state as an area of important theological and social-scientific interest for scholars of global Pentecostalism. This study examines how this relationship has unfolded within Zambian Pentecostalism. It investigates how African Pentecostal movements adopt, embody, and transform ethnonational imaginations via the particular case of Zambian Pentecostalism. In seeking to respond to these questions, the article utilizes an ontocratic political theory to analyze Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality as a specific religious phenomenon.

2. Theory and Method: The Challenge of Ontocracy

The article is based on a wider project that sought to capture Zambian Pentecostal culture and identity that embodies its understanding of God’s mission in the context of national politics (Kaunda 2017a). The data was gathered from 350 Pentecostal ministers, leaders, and ordinary people through a qualitative multidirectional approach that included face-to-face interviews, group discussions, surveys, emails, and blogs in Lusaka and Ndola from March 2016 to October 2017 (see Kaunda 2017a).² The findings show that there are contestations within Pentecostal interpretations and engagements with nationality. On the one hand, there are some conservative Pentecostals, especially the elites who have rejected separation of the throne from the altar thereby promoting a political theology that uncritically integrates politics and religion in what Arend Theodoor Van Leeuwen (1964, p. 165) classifies as “ontocracy.” On the other hand, there are also voices of dissent arguing for a critical approach to politics by appreciating critical principles of a democratic society including advancing social justice and economic equality.

This article employs ontocracy theory to analyse Pentecostal theology of nationality (Bediako 1993, 1995). It argues that the phenomenon of nationality has empirical implications because it is embedded within the faith communities’ ongoing participation in religiously informed political contexts in Africa. Ontocracy as political theory seeks to understand how religious communities use a religious frame of reference based on their particular faith tradition to interpret and legitimate political spheres as extensions of divine rule. It argues that religious traditions have well formulated notions of nationalities which are based on their beliefs and practices that are used to promote social control through specific values, norms, and ethics. The challenge is that such religious approaches do not separate between the religion and political realms but rather perceive them as an integrated system. Bediako (2004, p. 102) stresses that “by the close association of religious (sacred) authority and political power in the person of the traditional ruler, African traditional societies [are] ‘ontocracies’, sacralizing authority and power with the effectual integration of altar and throne” as demonstrated in the next

¹ In this article, the State is defined as legal and political entity with a territorial sovereignty, which is conferred on the people living inside the borders in order to regulate their movements (Gallaher et al. 2009).

² Following accepted social scientific and humanities practice, pseudonyms have been used for all participants represented in this manuscript.

section. Walls (1976, p. 187) believes that “Africa has avoided Christian ontocracies.” He wrote, “Most African states that were ontocratic before the arrival of Christianity and Western Europe influences; and, however when one assesses the impact of Christianity on African society, it can be argued that Christianity often provided a new worldview just when traditional worldviews were breaking down” (Walls 1976, p. 187). Perhaps, this observation makes sense within mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in Africa. As highlighted below, most of the Pentecostal churches seem to have not adequately navigated ontocracies, but rather have evolved new ontocracies. These ontocracies have been developed through uncritical synthesis of Western informed Christian faith and African religio-cultural national heritage.

Since nationality is an aspect of politics, scholars suggest empirical theology as a methodological approach. Jongeneel (1995) and Faix (2007) affirm that empirical research is a methodological foundation for desacralisation thinking as well. This approach focuses on how Pentecostalism interprets the phenomenon of nationality rather than on the views of specific congregations (Osmer 2008). This means, if theology is critical reflection on religious praxis of the church and is contextual in character, and if historical and cultural context is a factor in experiencing and articulating the Christian faith, then, to understand the religious foundation of Zambian Pentecostal notions of nationality, we have to turn to the religio-cultural heritage that formed their notions of nationality. African religio-cultural heritage can reveal clues to help us understand the cultural psychology that is at work within Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality.

3. African Concept of Nationality

I have classified the traditional notion of community as an ethnonational entity. This is in keeping with the matrilineal imagination of the Bemba-speaking people of Zambia, who regard themselves as belonging to Chitimukulu’s (The Big Tree/the title of the paramount king) kingdom (Bembaland). In contemporary Zambia, Bemba people are scattered across various provinces, but are mainly from the Northern, Muchinga and Luapula provinces. The Bemba notion of *icalo* (singular—nation) relates to understandings of nationality, nation, nationhood, national identity, nationalism, ethnicity and ethnic identity. *Icalo* is a geopolitical-spiritual unit with fixed borders, and the name dates from antiquity (Richards 1940, p. 91). In the local language, *icalo* is differentiated from *umushi* (community). *Icalo* is comprised of *ifyalo* (plural) or self-sustaining geopolitical-spiritual units, which are a replication of the *icalo*. *Ifyalo* are decentralized governments, each governed by an *infumu* (king). This form of governance could be described as an “implicit monarchy”—a kingdom in which other kings and kingdoms exist. These fractional kings and kingdoms derive their powers from both their localized ancestors and the paramount King. These diffused kings are almost an end in themselves, within their specific geopolitical-spiritual contexts. The paramount King has his own *icalo*, called Lubemba, in addition to being the overall King of the Bemba nation (Meebelo 1971). *Ifyalo* are comprised of *imishi* (communities) under the governance of *mwine mushi* (a steward of the community). *Ifyalo* are unionized in Chitimukulu, who sits on the original *infuba* (shrine or altar) of the first ancestors who established *icalo*. *Infuba* is the ultimate spiritual power of the king. *Icalo*, *ifyalo* and *imishi* are all centered around the sacred relic shrines (*babanye*)—hereditary relics of the past kings, their stools, spears, specific body parts (teeth, eyes, tongue, private parts, and nails) which are removed after their death and preserved at the *ing’anda ya babanye* (the house of relics/altar). As the Bemba people would say, *infuba elubemba lwine* (the altar is really the Bemba nation). The altar gives the Bemba people what could be classified as a national spiritual sovereignty. The nation is not neutral. It is spiritual in character and protected not so much by the natural as the spiritual realm.

Hence, the *Ukusefya pa Ng’wena* (celebrating on the crocodile) annual ceremony is the most sacred of Bemba ceremonies, in which Chitimukulu plays a dominant spiritual role. Not merely a celebration of the formation of the Bemba people and their nation, it is a period of renewal of the ancient covenant with the ancestors, including acts of sacrifice at *kunfuba* (sacred places) both within and outside the palace. These ceremonies are shrouded in secret rituals of consecration, purification and *ukushilika*

icalo ne nfulumu (fortification of the nation and the king). The prosperity and wellbeing of the nation and its people lie not in their abilities or hard work, but as it were in the mystical spheres of life. If the ancestors are not pleased, the people's abilities and hard work might yield nothing. Ukusefya pa Ng'wena is viewed as restoring eco-relational balance, a symbolic way to advance towards the fullness of life for icalo. Thus, Ukusefya pa Ng'wena is also a ritual of repentance for the wrongs committed on the land over the previous year, and a quest to repair the breach in various segments of eco-relationality—between humanity and God (including, ancestors); humanity and environment; humanity and humanity.

The altar is significant in the Bemba worldview, with each ethnonation, each community, and each household (inhabited by a legitimately married couple) having its own altar. These altars could be regarded as diffused, because they are all subject to the ultimate altar of Chitimukulu—the ultimate source of life for the entire ethnonation. The altar is a court of law, and the seat of spiritual powers, political administration, policy formulation, and so on. It is the unionizing space of the whole community. It is at the altar where grievances between the king and the people, and among the people themselves, are all brought for the ancestors to arbitrate (Wilson 1959, p. 12). National calamities and all forms of misfortune are brought before the altar, which is the soul of the kingdom. It is the breath and life force of the whole nation. They believe that if anything goes wrong with the altar, the whole nation suffers.

The king cannot function without the altar. The two are essentially intertwined. The king is an embodiment of the ancestors, whose presence is symbolized by the altar. The act of sitting on the ancestral stool (“seat of power”) brings the king into a mystical union with the ancestors (Geurts 2002). It unites him/her with the ancestors in a mysterious way; such that the source of power of the ancestors is in his/her own body and personality, which he/she passes on to the people, their herds and fields, and the whole territory (Wilson 1971; Oberg 1940). Olupona (2014, p. 38) observes, “Kings are said to possess mystical, life-sustaining powers, with their own well-being intimately entwined with the well-being of their people, lands, and institutions.” Olupona adds, “For this reason, African kings are often the subject of extremely strict taboos that address how their person can be treated, predicated on indexical relationship between the body of the king and the body of the kingdom.” The welfare and prosperity of the body of the kingdom are intricately locked to the life-giving functioning of the body of the king. The king is a direct link to a spiritual source of life through the ancestors, and any calamities and natural disasters are mostly linked to his failure to please them. The people believe that the authority and power of the ancestors is embodied in the king, who acts as the unionization of religion and political power in his body and personality. The king is not like any other person; by his person and being, he is the kingdom in a mystical sense. As Mbiti (1969, p. 178) argues, rulers

... are not simply political heads: they are the mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The individual as such may not have outstanding talents or abilities, but their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. They are therefore divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. People regard them as God's earthly viceroys.

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, p. 16) note,

An African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. He is the axis of their political relations, the symbol of their unity and exclusiveness, and embodiment of their essential values. He is more than a secular ruler ... his credentials are mystical and are derived from antiquity. Where there is no chief, the balanced segments which compose the political structure are vouched for by tradition and myth and their interrelations are guided by values expressed in mystical symbols.

Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, p. 18) further argue, “the social system is, as it were, removed to a mystical plane, where it figures as a system of sacred values beyond criticism and revision.” While

it is true that traditional authority was “removed to a mystical plane,” however, the system was not “beyond criticism and revision” as demonstrated in the next paragraph. Indeed, people could not criticize or revise the mystical powers of the ancestors, as embodied in the king. For in the person and body of king, the altar and the throne are mystically integrated. The king functioned as priest-prophet at the altar of the ancestors. He performed religious ceremonies and divination on behalf of the nation (Olupona 2014; Gluckman 1940). In this regard, Willoughby (1928, p. 214) observes that such rites “were designed as a ritual of intercession with spirits of the old chiefs, the tutelary gods of their tribes. Hence, the surviving successor of any given line of chiefs, who was born to share their divine prestige, is the only possible officiant.”

Yet, the myths that surround the origin and person of the rulers (such as taboos, superstitions, and prohibitions) suggest that Africans understand that “much danger is attributed to the exercise of power” (Mathuray 2009, p. 68). As Mathuray (2009, p. 68) argues, it is “both a symbolic way of preventing abuse of power and a reflection of the humanistic bias of the religious order.” The king’s exercise of power is constrained with ancestral checks and balances within the religious moral system. In Bemba religious systems of thought, morality originates and flows from *Lesa* (God, the ground of all beings and moral order) through the ancestors into the community and ecological order. “God is the initiator of the people’s way of life, its tradition” (Magesa 1997, p. 35). The ancestors are custodians of morality, the reason for its establishment and its ultimate purpose. Thus, as Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, p. 19) argue, the ritual functions of rulers are not merely a means to sanction political authority, but rather “serve, also, as a sanction against the abuse of political power and as a means of constraining political functionaries to perform their administrative obligations as well as their religious duties, lest the common good suffer injury.”

4. Pentecostal Ontocracies: The Material Legacies of African Religio-Political Past

How does the foregoing discussion relate to Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality? It is important to highlight that African religions are not only religious imaginations but also worldviews. Harvey Sindima (1989, p. 537) defines the African worldview by stating, “The way people construe their world informs their self-understanding, relation to others, nature and God. In other words, a model of living arises out of a particular cosmological framework. The framework shapes the mind or informs knowledge and understanding.” As a way of life, the African religio-cultural worldviews lay the foundation for a collective African consciousness that continues (albeit in a modified form) to shape the understandings, interpretations and conceptions of reality. Thus, the worldview is “a construct about the makeup of life as it struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics and history. It is a construct that provides a point of departure, a sense of direction, a locus of destination, and a strategy of unity for human thought, life and action” (Fowler 2009, p. 8). In contemporary African Christianity, the African religious imaginations function in the interstices between continuity and discontinuity with the notion of the spiritual and the physical reality as many scholars have observed (Maxwell 1999, 2002, 2006; Meyer 1999; Gifford 1998, 2004, 2009; Gordon 2012). We may describe the African religio-cultural worldviews as “the central control box” of cultures, as Kraft (2005, p. 44) argues, “a basic model of reality” that generates and determines the value systems of African people. This implies that many Africans are a product of African religio-cultures. While many have converted to new religious traditions, their worldviews remain unconverted (Mbiti 1993). In other words, the key elements of a traditional African spirituality and worldviews are traceable in most African Christian imaginations (Dickson 1975; Kibicho 1978; Bediako 2004).

Several other scholars have noted how African religio-cultural systems remain salient and resilient in shaping morality and politics in the modern public spaces (Kalu 2008; Oduyoye 1993; Dickson 1965; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Clark 2011). It must, however, be acknowledged that the notions of African religio-cultural worldviews cannot easily be assigned to the entire Pentecostal movement. Rather, it is possible to identify general characteristics that influence and shape Pentecostal political theological perspectives (Taylor 2006). One of the key motivations for the political engagement of

Zambian Pentecostals is grounded in their theology of nationality, which appears to have an affinity with traditional African notions of nationality (as discussed above).

5. Zambian Pentecostal Theology of Nationalism: Findings and Discussions

In what follows, I discuss the findings, giving attention to the critical contours of the Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality.

5.1. *Integration of the Sacred and the Secular*

The findings of the interviews show that Zambian Pentecostals conceive nations not as neutral geopolitical spaces, but rather as having spiritual destinies, which evil forces seek to distort. In an interview with Rev. Mushala (3 July 2016), a Pentecostal theologian and lawyer, argues,

Zambian Pentecostal worldview is heavily predicated on indigenous worldviews that do not create a distinction between the sacred and the secular or between faith and politics. In much of [the] Zambian traditional worldview, God lives in the state and the state exists for God or gods. The advent of Christianity did not change this predisposition among [Zambians].

Mushala highlights that nationality is a sacred social construction that emerges in the way religious people construe their place in the world in relation to themselves, others, nature, and God. For him, the Zambian Pentecostal theology of nationality is not a reaction to traditional African religious nationality, but rather an organic inculturation of this worldview. Pentecostals see the old systems as divisive, obsolete, and, at worst, as “demonic altars” which need to find new interpretations that could help transcend any single ethnonational community, to synchronize with the One Ultimate Altar erected to Jesus at the Zambian national level. They argue that to enthrone Jesus as King of Kings at the national altar is critical, because “many of our cities and nations are under the control of the evil one. Almost all geographical areas have principalities in charge” (Bunda 2006, p. XIII). Apostle Bwinda (9 April 2016) agrees, “nations are ruled by principalities, these are the ones using the president, to declare the nation what it is.” Satan, the prince of darkness, has set up a rule over the various nations, cities, ethnic groups, families and individuals under the governance of demons, principalities and powers. The Zambian Pentecostal form of sacralization of political realms has an affinity with traditional African worldview as explained above. This becomes even clearer in the way they interpret the State House as seat of spiritual power.

5.2. *State House—Seat of Authority—National Altar*

The symbol of national political power, in the Pentecostal imagination, is State House. State House is defined much in the same way as the traditional African ancestral stool or *infuba* (shrine, gate, altar or foundation) is defined in African religio-political thought, as a symbol of heritage and authority—a “seat of power/ Authority” (Nwaka 2007, p. 74; see also Geurts 2002, p. 87). According to Zambian Pentecostals, the State House is “a national gate” between the spiritual and physical realm (Nwaka 2010, pp. 7–8). State House is interpreted symbolically as a source of all political and spiritual power that controls the national resources, prosperity and wellbeing. As Kachikoti (2015c, p. 6) explains, “Altars lay foundations, which decide the nature and strength of every building. Demonic commitments destroy foundations, and once that happens, even the righteous can do nothing.” Kachikoti (2015c, p. 6) stresses, “Zambia has a rich biblical heritage with difficult tribal (sic) foundations, both of which are decisive factors in our frequent progress with frequent retrogression.” He believes the explanation for “[t]he unbelievable levels of poverty in the midst of plenteous natural resources arise from demonic foundations laid at our national, ethnic, family and personal beginnings.” As an altar, the State House “commands a great authority and influence over every sphere of life” (Nwaka 2007, p. 10). The altar is the foundation of everything that could be advanced in the nation. It takes an altar to lay the foundation for anything. Apostle Alunda (6 April 2016) explains that

at the national level, the altar is different, because every church . . . is an altar, raised to the living God. Every church that calls the name of the Lord in truth and in spirit; it's an altar to God and prayer is part of an offering that we give to God . . . Now this altar which is been erected unto God the father is national . . . this altar speaks for the nation of Zambia. It will speak against poverty, it will speak against disunity, it will speak against occultism, it will demolish the demonic altars that [were] raised by our founding fathers in this nation. When that is erected [it] is a greater altar, because God's altar, who can raise a fist against God and win? No one, so [. . .] demonic altars are scared of it. Those who understand spiritual things in the demonic world and . . . in the spiritual sense they know it, they know that the national one is going to smash [. . .] [the] kingdom of darkness.

The altar is the source of national spiritual power, from which the president draws power and authority for political governance. [Nwaka \(2007, p. 73\)](#) argues that "every throne, whether in the kingdom of God or from the kingdom of darkness . . . operate[s] with an altar. The altar is one of the foundational components that make up the throne of rulership." You cannot separate the throne from the altar. The Zambian Pentecostal ontocratic tendencies that have resulted from uncritical inculturation of African religio-political worldviews points to an important area that needs further study in both social science and religious studies. It remains unclear whether this process is unrecognized or as merely occurred in an uncritical, unexamined way.

Zambian Pentecostals argue that the president of the nation can never become powerful without the altar. They believe that the altar gives power to the institution of presidency. Pastor Sunday [Sinyangwe \(2017\)](#), of Shalom Embassy Ministries International affirms: "You want to sit on the throne called State House . . . you can't sit on that throne, you can't rule on that throne if you are not connected to the righteous God. Otherwise, the seat will reject you. The seat will say 'no to you'." During the tenure of President Kenneth Kaunda, the first President of the Republic of Zambia, it is argued that the State House drew power from the prince of humanism. There is no nation that is spiritually neutral—every nation bows to something. This also means that the spiritual power to which State House is dedicated determines the nation's character ([Kachikoti 2015c](#), p. 6). The theology of State House plays a significant role in the Zambian Pentecostal theology of nations, because Pentecostals believe it gives character to the nation. As already demonstrated above, there is a clear connection between the State House and the traditional ancestral stool, as both are perceived to have both religious and political dimensions. In other words, both signify the soul of the nations. As [Kachikoti \(2015a\)](#) argues: "Nations too have a soul and a conscience." This argument is expressed succinctly in Sri Aurobindo's spiritual psychology. [Aurobindo \(1997, p. 97\)](#) argues,

The nation or society, like the individual, has a body, an organic life, a moral and aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and a soul, behind all these signs and powers for the sake of which they exist. One may say that, like the individual, it essentially is a soul rather than has one.

The process of consecrating State House after Chiluba won the presidential elections in 1991 was meant to consecrate the national altar from the demonic forces to which President Kaunda, had dedicated the altar. One of the key aspects of the Pentecostal theology of nationality is a belief that the demonic altars established by ethnonational communities and by the modern founding fathers of the present Zambia have not been dealt with, and as such have been fighting against the national altar established to honor Jesus. Thus, when Kaunda prayed a prayer of release, many Pentecostals believed some key altars were dealt with in spirit. Kaunda (cited in [Kachikoti 2015b](#), p. 5) declared,

I Kenneth David Kaunda first President and founding father of the Republic of Zambia wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to God Almighty, the President and the people of Zambia for honouring me as the founding father of this Nation.

I hereby pronounce today a blessing of peace, prosperity and stability upon our Nation of Zambia, the Presidency and the people of Zambia.

I bless and therefore release the nation, its people and the Presidency from every negative force made against this nation. I submit the souls now living and posterity . . . and its Presidency to the salvation and Lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Father.

I further declare that Zambia shall forever enjoy tranquility and shall remain a united and peaceful people under the motto: One Zambia, one nation.

The Lord bless Zambia, and keep Zambia.

God bless you all. I thank you.

This prayer is significant to Pentecostals as Kaunda was accused of opening national spiritual doors to the forces of darkness through his introduction of humanism and subsequent establishment of the David Universal Temple at the State House. The temple, named after Kaunda's father, David, taught Eastern mysticism (such as transcendental meditation, the heaven that is on earth, humanism, and reincarnation).³ Thus, Kaunda's so-called "spiritual release [of] the nation" is perceived to have had positively address evil forces, which he had allowed to enter the nation. Most Pentecostals saw the prayer as a public acknowledgement and renunciation of the cultic covenant, which Kaunda was allegedly entered. These Pentecostals believe that through this cultic covenant he made with forces of darkness, Kaunda opened spiritual gates of the nation, thereby exposing the national altar to these demonic forces that manipulated the nation politically and economically. Thus, [Kachikoti \(2015b, p. 6\)](#) rallied fellow Pentecostals to spiritual warfare. He demanded,

Thirty days after Kenneth Kaunda pronounced a spiritual 'release' upon the nation, [the] time is now for the soldiers of the Cross of Jesus Christ to seek out and practically uproot every altar that speaks and works evil towards the present and future of this country. If Zambia were not a Christian Nation, this discussion would be unnecessary. It is all about the powers that the first president spoke of when he 'released' Zambia from all 'negative forces' at State House on 25 May. Because of his privileged position as the founding father of the republic, he is well placed to be aware of key altars and shrines which are the source of 'negative forces,' that were set up at different locations for the purpose of securing the ruling UNIP [United Independence Party] then, and to fortify his rule. It is time for him to work with those children of the Living God who are divinely endowed and assigned to demolish any remaining major altars and shrines that have ultimately impounded the national and familial economies of the land. The children of God have since the Christian Nation Declaration in 1991 been praying and visiting territorial landmarks that are entry points for demonic influence, uprooting altars that hold power over tribes and families. After pronouncing his blessing on the nation, KK can expedite the completion of this process.

There is a general belief among some Zambian Pentecostals that in his quest for power, Kaunda had strayed from the Christian path and joined cultic religious traditions that became the foundation and source of his political authority. [Lilanda \(30 May 2016\)](#) underlines this:

Zambia actually started off very well in a Christian background, but over time, evil came in and evil altars were raised . . . we have several evil altars in this country that were raised during that time and you see, you need to understand that power, when people are in power they are either with God or with the devil.

The argument is that political power is never neutral, and there is no vacuum in the spirit: politicians drawing their power either from God or from Satan ([Nwaka 2010, p. 73](#)). In her critique of the traditional African religious altar, [Lilanda \(30 May 2016\)](#) argues that:

³ Elsewhere, I have discussed on details Pentecostal view of Kaunda's humanism and its relationship to Pentecostal theology of nations ([Kaunda 2017b](#)).

you cannot discard your culture . . . that's what makes us, our culture is what makes us, what you just need to realize . . . you see in the spiritual world we have what we call altars; you have godly altars and evil altars, it's a battle between altars. The traditional ceremonies, usually it's a time for them to sacrifice, it's a time for them to feed to their altars rather. Before all that happens that you see on TV, they have done things, not all of them, for most of them, for most of those ceremonies . . . they have to submit to one authority. So there are those of us who submit to the authority of God and those who submit to the authority of the devil, and they have their rituals the way we have our rituals in our churches, Holy Communion, we have tithe, they also have rituals. For us we have the one sacrifice, Jesus Christ, he died once his blood was shed, that's it. They still have to kill that is why you hear [about] ritual killings, they need blood, human blood for their power to continue, you understand. So those ceremony[ies], they used them for those things to get power to do whatever is it they need to do, to service their altars, because those altars they need to be serviced. So it's not as easy as it looks, on the top it might look like it's politics, this one I know, this one no . . . no it's very deep, it's very spiritual. You know to govern, to rule, you have to fight with principalities because they also don't want to let go.

It appears that Lilanda is accusing some African politicians of using human sacrifice to secure political positions. Some of these accusations are based on what is described as ritual murders in which the person is murdered as a human sacrifice to secure or consolidate political power from a specific supernatural deity. Pentecostalism perceive politics as an arena of supernatural activities. They believe that nations are ruled by supernatural forces, from which some politicians get their powers to win elections and stay in power (see also [Nwaka 2010](#), p. 73; [Bunda 2006](#), p. 13). The public visibility of Pentecostalism is also tied to the need to combat negative spiritual forces in the political life of modern Zambia in order for the nation to experience prosperity. For Rev. Mulimba (9 June 2016),

the core element in Pentecostal praying that has impacted the nation, has reached a spiritual warfare and when you are dealing with spiritual warfare you begin to engage traditional spiritual systems. And so it has [an] effect on all level[s] but in regards to the chief it has brought awareness to the nature of those ancestral spirits. To which they are ancestors their predecessor hold allegiance, it's a very fundamental thing, practically in every traditional chieftaincy you can't be a chief without going through a ritual that connects you to the old dead chief. Yeah, you can't and to break away from that one requires enlightenment and the true nature of those altars that have been raised. The next thing you need to do is to know, to have access to spiritual power that can counter those processes.

This reflects the traditional African beliefs that the altar is a source of spiritual power and that nations are spiritual in character. This means that Zambian Pentecostals' religio-political worldview affirms that traditional religions "revolve [. . .] around the quest for power—how to acquire and retain power for protection and prevention against forces of evil." Thus, Zambian Pentecostals believe that s/he who occupies this altar has the power to control the destiny of the nation. There is, therefore, a need for good people to have access to good power, which can be used to counteract the powers of evil forces ([Mbiti 1975](#), pp. 42, 165). This view of State House has implications on Pentecostal theology of the President in modern political context.

5.3. *The Presidency as Spiritual Institution*

Since Pentecostals argue for integration of the altar and the throne, it remains that the one who sits on the national throne unionizes within her or himself religion and politics. In essence, the individual ambiguously takes on the spiritual functions of a priest and prophet. Zambian Pentecostals rarely separate, even in thought, presidential office from religious functions. They believe traditional leaders and even the president cannot be powerful without the altars, as the path to the spiritual realm is through the altar. Many respondents argue that altars (whether demonic or good) are established

and sustained by priests. The altar and the priesthood are indivisible. In the case of State House, the president, by virtue of assuming the presidency, is conceived as occupying a priest-kingly position, and is sometimes referred to as a prophet or man of God. For instance, Bible Gospel Church in Africa overseer, Bishop Peter Ndhlovu, distinguishes between the president and the presidency as an institution. He argues that the presidency as an institution deserves respect, even in the midst of disagreements with the one holding office at any given time. He emphasizes that “people must learn to respect the Presidency because the Presidency is an institution and if you don’t respect that office, who will you respect?” (Cited in [Lusakatimes.com 2017](#)). Bishop Ndhlovu and many other Pentecostals regard the office of the president in terms of an African religio-political view as having being instituted by God. This argument affirms African religious imaginations (as argued above), which view the king as sitting on the seat of the ancestors. The president must be respected, and never spoken of badly or confronted. S/he must be rendered acts of reverence and loyalty because, in essence, s/he represents the rule of God. It does not matter whether s/he has the skills required for the job—his or her office is a representation of spiritual government. This approach to the presidency has a sacral dimension, as the president is perceived as the shadow or reflection of God’s rule over the nation ([Mbiti 1969](#), pp. 177–78).

For instance, Rev. Godfridah Sumaili ([Sumaili 2016](#)), assistant pastor at Bread of Life International and minister of National Guidance and Religious Affairs (MNGRA), notes: “He [President Edgar Lungu] is a man of God, he hears God, he has been obedient to God to create the Ministry [MNGRA].” The president is not perceived as a mere human, but a spiritual and political head of the nation. The Pentecostals stress, “[a]ll leadership is spiritual. Physical leadership is a representation of a spiritual authority . . . [W]hen a leader comes to power, there is a spiritual authority to which he submits his position. It is from this authority that he will draw power to rule and make decisions. He must dedicate his throne to that spiritual power” ([Nwaka 2007](#), p. 74, italics added for emphasis). [Nwaka \(2007, p. 74, italics added for emphasis\)](#) stresses,

The Bible tells us that all authority is from God. The devil also tries to usurp this authority and give his own authority to men [sic] in order that they may rule. Therefore, it does not matter which spirit—whether God’s or a spirit from the devil—men [sic] will rule because they receive power to do so, from a spiritual source . . . if he comes in by witchcraft, he will dedicate the throne to the evil spirit. If he comes in by any means but God, then that *seat of authority* is connected to [an] evil source from the kingdom of darkness.

[Nwaka \(2007, p. 74\)](#) believes it is only by the same spiritual force that gave them power to rule, that politicians can sustain their position:

When people begin to [lose] control or need [some] interpretation of inexplicable occurrences in their lives or territories, they go back to the source of power and inquire from it. If it is an evil spirit then they are required to make sacrifices and promises of relinquishing their territory in a deeper way to the source of their power. If they enquire from the Lord, the Holy Spirit will give them guidance.

The argument from Nwaka suggests that the president’s office is not a combination of separate offices, but rather a single office, “and its various duties and activities, and its rights, prerogatives, and privileges, make up a single unified whole” ([Radcliffe-Brown 1940](#), p. XXI). Bishop Ndhlovu argues that a Christian president “has a mandate from God which no devil or man can destroy” (cited in [Patriotic Front—PF 2016](#)). Ndhlovu (cited in [Patriotic Front—PF 2016](#)) continues: “We are asking God to bless President Lungu so that he can deliver development in this country. If the hands of God are with President Lungu, he will accomplish what God has planned for him to deliver to Zambians.” Similarly, State House chaplain, Rev. Atlas Samukuma (cited in [Patriotic Front—PF 2016](#)), emphasizes that since the government is Christian, it should “be guided by the Spirit of God, otherwise the nation could go astray.” Nwaka highlights that only a throne dedicated to the Spirit of God can overcome

demonic altars. He noted, “many leaders, especially in Africa, who did not dedicate their positions to the God of heaven, but to the kingdom of darkness, have plunged our nation into anarchy, confusion, lack of development and failure *because that is the ultimate agenda of Satan—to steal, kill and destroy* (John 10:10a). **The kingdom of darkness will do things on earth as it is in hell**” (Nwaka 2007, p. 75, italics and bold in the original). He further argues: “those who dedicate their throne to Satan, through any other power, rather than God, do so to the detriment of their societies. Africa is a vivid example” (Nwaka 2007, p. 75). The emphasis here is that African leadership is religious, and its source of power is mystical.

However, Pentecostal sacralization, priestization and monarchianization of the presidency means that the president holds divine powers to make declarations over the nation. This understanding means that beyond the sacralizing of the president, the whole realm of politics is sacralized and democracy is at a risk of failing. It is now in the power of the president to follow his own intuition, as a king who was elected to become president. The president is perceived much like traditional kings, who drew their authority from the spiritual realm. For instance, Apostle Bwina (25 April 2016) stresses, “Whatever the president declares has implications in the spiritual realm either negatively or positively . . . When the head of state declares something, he is dethroning, disarming principalities and powers.” The president is depicted as a mediator or an intercessor, as one who wrestles against evil forces on behalf of the nation. The president has spiritual authority to determine the destiny of the nation, merely by the words coming from his mouth (Nwaka 2010). In other words, the president as a unionization of the altar and the throne, in his being, shapes the economy of the nation (Nwaka 2010, p. 89). In a way, the president is “a divine symbol of the nation’s health and welfare” (Mbiti 1969, p. 178).

The anointing service for presidents such as Dr. Frederick J. T. Chiluba, the second Republican President of Zambia, which was to be inspired by the anointing of King David in the Old Testament, function as tools to consolidate the process of monarchianization. Chiluba was no longer a democratically elected president but the chosen and anointed servant of the Lord. Gifford (1998, p. 197) writes that Chiluba was charged to “[b]e strong and show yourself a man, keep the charge of the Lord your God, walk in his ways, keep his statutes, his commandments, his precepts, and his testimonies as it is written in the first and second testaments.” Henceforth, his religious commitment would supersede political decisions (Phiri 2003, p. 406; Cheyeka 2008b, p. 161). Scholars observe that some in Pentecostal circles believe since Chiluba was anointed, he should not be touched or questioned. They argue that whoever contradicted Chiluba risked bringing divine curses on themselves, for Chiluba was the anointed of God (Phiri 2003; Cheyeka 2008b; Komakoma 2008). Chiluba positioned himself as prophetic-king. Some Pentecostals argued for Chiluba’s ordination as pastor (Cheyeka 2008a, p. 115). With such beliefs, the consolidation of the priestization and monarchianization, Chiluba’s political power was relocated within the realm of human capriciousness, in which abuse of the office could easily be justified.

The current president regards himself as a man of faith. President Edgar Chagwa Lungu (cited in *Zambian Eye* 2016) argues, “Zambians know the kind of leader that I am, and that I am a man of faith that walks with God.” He has followed Chiluba’s presidential trajectory and made declarations to confirm Zambia as a Christian nation. The implications of this ethical system are that the president can make a covenant on behalf of the nation. This is in keeping with the African religio-political ethical system, in which the covenant plays an important role in the formation of the ethnonational community. In the traditional African political system, all life is entrenched in covenantal imaginations.

However, some Pentecostals have not adopted the “theology of nation” perspective. Some participants during the fieldwork questioned the value of spiritualization of the institution of the presidency. They asked,

Where does God come in because it is the people who decided via a ‘vote’ and many times the voters are not voting with a free will but because they have been bribed, bought, threatened and promised heaven on earth, which promises are usually not fulfilled anyhow? God cannot be brought into this ‘mess’ that we create ourselves? (Mulembwe, 21 June 2017).

For many of these Pentecostals, the act of election is merely aimed at meeting the righteous demands of modern democracy. In fact, the very process of holding elections has been coopted into Pentecostal theology, since God can use any means to fulfil his purpose in the world. This means elections only confirm the individual whom God has chosen. Unfortunately, as a respondent argued,

What some church leaders do is flower/sugarcoat the result of such an election with randomly selected quotes from the Bible to try to sanitize or launder the result and make it God given. In the meantime opponents are whipped, intimidated, refused decent free campaigns; violence is rampant, media clampdown, etc. How can a true Christian, with a free conscience, pure heart, celebrate such a win and call it God anointed? (Mulembwe, 21 June 2017).

This shows that there is a struggle within Pentecostalism between politically conservative and progressive movements. On the one hand, the conservative advance Pentecostal-sanctioned notions of theology of the nation through political activism. On the other hand, the progressive with ecumenical orientation are seeking transformation through engagement with political structures in accordance with the mission of God in the world.

5.4. *Covenanting the Nation—“Declaration” of the Christian Nation*

One of the key features of Zambian Pentecostal ontological theology is covenantal spirituality. It is argued that any nation can claim to be Christian by virtue of having a large population of Christians. Conversely, Pentecostals argue that Zambia is a Christian nation not by demographic population but through the Declarations, which is in keeping with both the African religio-political worldview and Old Testament theology. In Pentecostal theology, the president is an embodiment of the power of the Spirit of God, and whatever he declares at the altar is established.

Declarations and decrees play a key role in the establishment of a covenant within Pentecostal theology. At the national level, the Pentecostal demand to establish the covenant is based on the belief that structures of evil are destroyed when believers raise an altar to Jesus Christ. Only an altar raised to Jesus can deal with national challenges. Thus, the covenant seeks to displace what Pentecostals perceive as wrong covenants upon which the nation and ethnonational communities are established. They argue that the ungodly covenants that were raised by the ancestors have brought nothing but national disgrace and misery. Nwaka contends, “In Africa, many of our fore-fathers made covenants with demons (sic) for prosperity, security, poverty, lack, sickness and other negative consequences.” Some Pentecostals have taken for granted that African ancestors made agreements with demons. They reject the African religious past on account that it does not fit in with Western Christian categories. For them, President Chiluba made a covenant in the order of Abraham’s covenant with God, in an attempt to redress the wrong covenants, realign the nation’s original ontological union with God, and reestablish the primal harmony of life and the nation (Shenk 1983, p. 73). The significant aspect of the notion of a Christian nation lies in the concept of “Declaration” and the overall national priestly role of the president. Pentecostals believe in the power of the tongue and the power of the word, which are brought into effect through the power of the Declaration. They argue that God created all things through the power of the word. He spoke things into existence. Mushala (7 March 2016) maintains that God has given believers the same power to speak words of life. Mushala (7 March 2016) stresses,

He viewed himself as a messenger of God because in Pentecostal theology God can speak through him. Chiluba also saw himself as a tool God would use to kick out Satan out of Zambia ... Chiluba took the Pentecostal ideals of “word of faith” to declare spiritual blessings, he believed that once he makes a Declaration, God will bring blessings upon Zambia.

This argument is not merely biblical; it finds its impetus in the African religio-political ethical imagination. As the African ethicist Bujo (2001, p. 46) argues, “one must recall the function of word

in black Africa. The word possesses such tremendous power that it can either create or destroy the community. This means that the word signifies life or death—it is medicine or poison.” The word is never perceived as neutral in the African religious worldview but is the locus of the power of life and death. Hence, in the traditional worldview, leaders were skilled in the art of handling words with prudence and discretion, because whatever they decreed was regarded as final, as a word from the ancestors on whose stool the leader sits. In keeping with this worldview, Mushala (7 March 2016) argues, “Chiluba ... looked at himself not as a mere president, but a godly prophet and king who could from the pillars of State House bring about spiritual changes in the nation.”

The Declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation is a covenant that cannot be dissociated from the words of Chiluba, or dissolved easily, as that might indicate that the nation has failed to follow the path of God. In other words, as Proverbs 6: 2 states, “[the nation has] been trapped by the words of [Chiluba’s] lips—ensnared by the words of [his] mouth.” Chilanda (13 March 2017) argues,

Chiluba played the role of priest and king. As priest, he sought to surrender the nation to God by entering into covenant with God on behalf of the nation. By so doing he entered into [an] unconditional covenant with God. His personal failure therefore could not affect the covenant. His main role was to surrender the nation to God. This was achieved by declaring Zambia a Christian Nation. However, as king he sought to rule the country according to the values reflected in the word of God.

In other words, his failure—given his shortcoming as a president (king)—did not invalidate the covenant. But others argue that Chiluba’s Declaration of Zambia as Christian nation was based on Josiah’s model, in which Josiah made a promise to be a different kind of king in Judah (2 Kings 23: 1–3). In this case, it was the responsibility of the king to keep the covenant and his failure would have resulted in the nullification of the promise. For example, Kachilambe (2 March 2017) argues,

The Declaration was a personal promise to God and an ideal introduced to the national population . . . In the wording of the Declaration, President Chiluba pledged to honor the Living God and to lead a government based on biblical principles.

However, Kachilambe (2 March 2017) attributes Chiluba’s failure to overcome his vices to many factors that he believes are still at work in Zambian politics:

- i. He was not psychologically and spiritually prepared for that high office with its privileges and pitfalls.
- ii. He was neither tutored nor groomed for leadership at that level; and to date presidential entrants have no such schooling or mentoring.
- iii. He lacked the requisite Christian support group. There were believers around him, but they exploited him rather than reinforcing him spiritually.
- iv. Being a young believer at the time of taking power, he did not disconnect himself from old associations that in the end ensnared him by stoking the fires of appetites he had turned away from on committing to Christ.

Then Kachilambe (2 March 2017) asks, “Did his moral failures nullify the Declaration?” He replied to himself categorically: “No, but they certainly crippled and diluted its essence.” However, he considers that the intentions of God for the nation cannot be invalidated by the actions of an individual. In other words, the Holy Spirit used Chiluba to declare Zambia a Christian nation.

6. Concluding Analysis—Pentecostal Ontocratic Political Theology

The strong public presence of Pentecostalism in Zambia, with its ontocratic tendencies as mystical values that are attached to the presidential office, raises salient challenges for the promotion of democracy and democratization. The Zambian Pentecostal approach to politics makes the president very powerful, as his being and office are spiritualized through entwining the political with spiritual

powers. In this way, the Pentecostal adaptation of the Africa religio-political ethical system has made the Zambian democracy and democratization process vulnerable to authoritarian annexation, as it allows political leaders to claim their credentials and legitimacy from mystical spheres rather than from the people who vote for them.

The process of making politicians spiritual brothers and sisters has resulted in politicians' perceiving themselves as spiritual leaders who are beyond criticism and who could demand an authoritarian or a monarchical form of respect afforded to traditional leaders. One of the challenges of Pentecostal ontocracies is that they tend to demonize dissenting voices, especially those of opposition political parties. [Bediako \(2005, p. 136\)](#) argues that "the struggle for African democracy is also at least about the struggle for the legitimacy of dissent in African politics." The theology of demonization of political dissent promotes the elimination of dissenting voices in politics—in essence, the prophetic tool that sharpens modern democratic systems. Those who resist the policies of the reign of government are perceived as enemies who must be silence or eliminated.

While in African religio-political systems of thought the fear of ancestors constrained the use of religio-political power, the Pentecostal notion of the Holy Spirit is not formulated with checks and balances which could bring a level of constraint to the use of political powers. The Pentecostals in Zambia have reinterpreted the ancestors in the frame of the Holy Spirit. This has resulted in what could be described as ancestro-pneumatology—a pneumatology that, at least at the political level, functions in much the same way as ancestors did in the traditional system. The Holy Spirit is conceived of as the source of political (God's) power, which embodies the political leader in order to rule the nation. It is evident that the thought of fortification, struggle against evil forces and demons, is prominent in ancestro-pneumatology.

To overcome ontocracies, there is a need for desacralisation of politics without de-spiritualization, as [Bediako \(1993, 1995\)](#) insistently argues. He is not proposing a normative desacralisation theory in which religious imaginations are removed from or reduced in their influence in political realms. Rather, he advocates a process of reconfiguration of powers in which various powers that have direct effect on human communities, including supernatural powers, are relocated within the realm that promotes full accountability to humanity. Thus, Bediako's desacralisation affirms the continuation of the African world as a spiritually animated reality but functioning with configured powers in which all the various forms of human leadership have a more direct accountability to the people they affect. For Bediako, desacralisation is based on the incarnation of Jesus, which reflects a decisive encounter between God and creation in which radical accountability resulted in justice and equality for all involved parties. Therefore, desacralisation of the political realm is critical for subverting dictatorial and absolutist claims that seem to be inherent in contemporary African politics and religious institutions ([Bediako 1995, p. 2004](#)).

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