Reviving Premodern Africa? The Anointed Objects and the Magical Economy in Un(der)developed Africa

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Abstract: African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) address the issue of economic powerlessness in un(der)developed regions of Africa by reviving elements of the premodern African magical economy. They use anointed objects, such as anointed water, for economic purposes, while African Traditional Religions (ATR) use magical charms in their economic life. Therefore, with their anointed objects, ANPPs revive the premodern ATR worldview of the economy. This research is guided by the following question: in what ways do ANPPs' anointed objects syncretise with the occult economy of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) in their responses to the prevailing economic powerlessness in African contexts? ANPPs perpetuate the magical economy practiced by premodern African societies who sought to alleviate their un(der)development by using magic to exert control over the spiritual world to acquire material wealth. Thus, ANPPs are challenged to adopt a scientifically informed response that empowers Africans to address structural elements that perpetuate un(der)development in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: Pentecostal prophets; syncretism; occult economy; magic; anointed objects; science; African traditional religion

1. Introduction

There is a notable syncretic incorporation of the African magical perspective on material wealth in the practices and teachings of African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs). These teachings emphasise the importance of anointed objects, such as water, oil, stones, waistbands, wristbands, and portraits of the prophets in overcoming personal economic powerlessness. “Syncretism” can be defined as the “practice of combining different systems of beliefs into one religious movement” (Kgatle 2023a, p. 1). ANPPs combine elements from African Traditional Religion (ATR) in their use of anointed objects. While some common objects, such as oil and water, align with ATR practices, ANPPs extend their usage to include a wide array of objects, blessing them to confer spiritual power to bring wealth to the user. ANPPs are a variant of African Pentecostalism, setting themselves apart through their prophetic practice of one-on-one prophecy, the performance of miracles, the commercialisation of anointed items, and often adopting a monarchical leadership style (Gunda and Machingura 2013; Kgatle 2022, 2023b). A major distinguishing mark of ANPPs is the prominent role they play in people’s search for material prosperity (Banda 2019, 2020a, 2022).

This article argues that ANPPs incorporate what Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, p. 279) describe as the “occult economy”, meaning “the deployment of real or imagined magical means for material ends” to overcome economic powerlessness in Africa. By economic powerlessness is meant a condition characterised by limitations or the inability to engage with economic dynamics in a creative and sustainable manner, primarily due to the prevailing state of un(der)development.

The preference for the term “un(der)development” instead of “poverty”, is motivated by the belief that Africa is economically powerless not because it has no resources to be
an economically powerful continent. Rather, Africa is economically powerless because, *among many other things*, it has undevolved and underdeveloped systems of using its abundant economic systems to create prosperous economies for its people. Thus, by un(der)development is meant the “inability to use . . . God-given resources” (Speckman 2007, p. xxiii) to build a meaningful economy that is different from traditional subsistence economies to sustainable economies. However, this critique of the African tendency to resort to spiritual solutions to address its un(der)development firmly acknowledges that a holistic solution to the continent’s economic powerlessness must also vigorously address the geopolitical forces that continually contribute to Africa’s impoverishment and current exploitation. Western colonial powers, and now Eastern economic powers like China, have and continue to actively undevelop and underdevelop Africa so that the continent remains a source of their raw materials and cheap human labour.

However, a serious problem continues to stunt Africa’s pathway to meaningful economic development. This problem is that during Africa’s ancient economic un(der)developed stages it relied on magical powers for economic survival, and now after being undeveloped and underdeveloped by exploitative and oppressive colonial geopolitical powers and the ineffective and corrupt governing systems of African leaders, ANPPs continue to prescribe the same magical approach to economic powerlessness through their anointed objects. In Africa, the state of economic powerlessness continues to be a fertile ground for the occult economy as indicated by the high emergence of spiritualists and prophets who provide spiritual and magical objects of attaining wealth. Economic powerlessness is an important factor in understanding the reliance on magic for economic purposes in Africa, because there is a notable correlation between the occult economy and economic un(der)development in Africa. This correlation leads people to “dwell too much on the role of spirits in controlling and shaping their lives” Biri and Manyonganise (2022, p. 6).

2. The Use of Anointed Objects to Overcome Economic Powerlessness

In the African context of un(der)development, anointed objects play a prominent role in addressing economic powerlessness. The ANPPs’ anointed objects serve as instruments for breaking through formidable socioeconomic obstacles that obstruct individuals from achieving material prosperity. The intention of this section is to briefly describe the use of anointed objects among ANPPs. The intention is not a detailed description of the practice of anointed objects, but to substantiate its principle among ANPPs. Therefore, a detailed description of the points of contact in the practice of anointed objects is beyond this article.

The common objects used for anointed objects are water and oil, which are sometimes in containers branded with the prophets’ name and portrait. This branding has led to questions about the commercialisation of religion. However, there is no limit to objects used by ANPPs for anointing purposes, as each prophet can use anything convenient and deemed fit to transmit God’s power to the believer at the particular moment. Other objects that are known to have been used as anointed objects include armbands, wristbands, waistbands, and clothes, key holders, writing pens, and the portraits of the prophets, or anything that bears the prophet’s name or insignia. Taru (2019, p. 118) describes how attendees to a prayer resort of a prophet in Zimbabwe collected pebbles, soil, and seeds from the prayer place which they believed “would act as a point of spiritual connection between their homes and the Prayer Resort”. The prophets bless these objects and give or sell them to their followers.

The ANPPs unequivocally assert the power in their anointed objects to create wealth for their users. Many poor people give testimonies of the material successes they have achieved through the use of these anointed objects (Biri 2012, p. 7; Taru 2019, p. 135). That is, “Supernatural or magical powers are attributed to such objects” (Biri 2012, p. 7). The Zimbabwean prophet, Emmanuel Makandiwa, proclaims that anointed objects “unlock all the doors of impossibilities in one’s life. It will lubricate your lives, and things will start moving smoothly” (Rupapa and Shumba 2014). In this statement, Makandiwa presents anointed
objects as necessary instruments for engaging a poor person’s economic powerlessness. Walter Magaya (2015) articulated this use of anointed objects as follows:

‘Anointing oil is a physical symbolism of God’s healing and deliverance power. It is a point of contact in spiritual warfare and is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It protects from deadly dangers and traps, and it does the cleansing and purification. It is the anointing of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit which is a powerful tool in spiritual warfare. The anointing oil destroys or breaks the bondage, burden and oppression caused by the devil because the enemy’s yoke connects and binds you with sin, poverty, disease and limitation. The anointing oil therefore breaks all the yokes the devil is using to steal the promise God made to us, that of having dominion over earth and being seated in the heavenly places.’

In short, Magaya is saying that anointed objects tip the economic ground in favour of the Christians by giving them the power to overcome all barriers standing in the way of their economic success.

Similarly, South African prophet Hamilton Q Nala (2022b) asserted the power of his anointed by objects by declaring that “God said he will use my name to heal people”. Nala (2022b) proceeded to declare the power of anointing carried by his own name by saying that if the water in the bottles branded with his name was emptied and replaced with water from the tape, it still has the power to heal, if the sticker with his name remains on the container.

While the use of anointed objects can be evaluated from a perspective of the commercialisation and abuse of religion (Kgatle and Qiki 2023), in this article, it is evaluated from a syncretisation of the African occult economy in responding to the prevailing context of un(der)development. Various African scholars have pointed out that many poor and powerless citizens rely on the miraculous systems of the ANPPs to overcome economic powerlessness resulting from structural inequalities hindering them from attaining economic prosperity (Banda 2020b; Kgatle 2023b; Maluleke 2019). Many ANPPs such as Nala are aware of the colonial and political structural factors in African poverty, but still prescribe spiritualistic response to overcoming these structural elements.

The use of anointed objects among ANPPs has some resemblance with the African use of magic for economic purposes. The following section will describe the use of magical powers for economic purposes in traditional Africa.

3. Occultism in Overcoming African Economic Powerlessness

The use of occultism in Africa to overcome economic powerlessness is varied. An evaluation of the use of anointed objects among ANPPs must also be informed with ATR occult economy.

3.1. The Customary Use of Magic to Access Economic Power in Africa

There is wide usage of magic for economic purposes in many African communities. As an African customary practice, people routinely employ magical charms to safeguard their sources of economic well-being, including crop fields, animal enclosures, and business premises (Beaton 2020, p. 26) These charms serve the purposes of enhancing fertility, safeguarding against diseases and predators, and warding off the malevolent influence of witchcraft.

To provide a deeper illustration of this phenomenon, Humbe (2018, p. 270) elucidates a practice in Shona traditional religion referred to as kuromba, which describes the acquisition of charms “to protect his or her family from danger, to protect his property and livestock from intruders”. According to Humbe (2018, p. 271), “In genuine African spirituality, kuromba is very positive and socially acceptable”. This practice, known as ukutshwama Zimbabwean isiNdebele, involves fortifying one’s economic potency with special magical charms. Nevertheless, while practices such as ukutshwama or kuromba are acceptable in African spirituality, the problem is that the matrix of magic in ATR is riddled with ambiguity, since good magic can also be harmful to other people. For example, some
individuals bolster themselves with stronger magical charms, inadvertently challenging and weakening the charms of others. Consequently, this dynamic can lead to spiritual conflicts among people.

One of the problems in the customary use of magic is that of fatalistic acceptance of poverty, as people accept that their economic conditions will never change until they acquire the right magic. Arising out of this is the belief that those who have material things have acquired them through magical means including witchcraft. This fatalistic perspective also exists among ANPPs, as people are made to believe that they are poor because they lack the necessary spiritual conditions and the appropriate anointed objects that open doors to wealth and success.

3.2. Occultism in Overcoming Structural Inequality

Beyond the customary use of magic is a specialised and more powerful magic that is sometimes in the form of familiars. Wood (2008) describes these familiars as “wealth-giving beings”. This involves concepts such as the Xhosa notion of ukuthwala, which, as explained by Wood (2008, p. 338), is the acquisition of a “dangerous, powerful procedure for long-term wealth, widely believed to involve the ownership of a wealth-giving being” (Wood 2008, p. 338). This is the use of creaturely beings such as snakes that are sent to gather money or strengthen one’s business. Various traditional and contemporary African communities have their own versions of beings that bestow wealth and magical charms designed to generate prosperity. These encompass a range of African versions of ukuthwala, which include the West African Mami Wata, the Zimbabwean Chikwambo, and the Malawian Njoka. Among the Shona people, there is the belief in an agrarian form of magic called divisi, which is employed to enhance one’s harvest. Included in this is the use of human sacrifices, such as the killing of a person to convert them into a wealth-bringing zombie. Unlike in the African customary use of magic, within which it is accepted that magic is central to human existence, the use of familiars belongs to the world of witchcraft. However, as will be explained below, ANPPs import the notion of familiars in some of their anointed objects which creates a perspective that there are evil and good familiars. The good familiars being the ones acquired from ANPPs.

Of importance to this article is that with the advent of the colonial money-based economy, occultism in the form of wealth-giving beings is related to African powerlessness in the segregated and foreign economy of Africa. Although the belief in wealth-giving beings existed in ancient pre-colonial African communities, in colonial times, wealth-giving beings took on a semblance of engaging colonial economic structural inequalities and the new money-based economy. Notably, Niehaus (2001, p. 56) demonstrates that in South Africa, beliefs in wealth-bringing beings (such as the human-like creature called tikoloshe and the mermaid-like creature called Mamlambo) emerged and spread to most of Africa from migrant labourers in the mines. To some extent, this was caused by the need to confront the unequal economic order they found themselves under, which they were powerless to participate in.

Wood (2008, p. 345) reinforces the viewpoint of anthropologist Barbara Frank, who contends that the belief in the potential for individual wealth through Mami Wata became more prevalent in West Africa as Western capitalist practices led to noticeable economic disparities between black and white people. There, people engaged in the occult in search of hidden sources of power that influence the course of human life. This is exemplified in the life of the Khotso Senthutsa, a South African Sotho medicine man renowned for his knowledge of “medicines for money and good luck, including the full-scale wealth-bestowing ukuthwala procedure, in order to exert some measure of control over their lives” (Wood 2008, p. 341).

Wood’s statement raises important contextual issues regarding the emergence and expansion of the occult economy in most of modern black Africa. Specifically, it highlights how economic powerlessness resulting from racial segregation compelled black communi-
ties to turn to the occult economy in search of supernatural power to help them overcome unjust structural barriers. With reference to Khotso, Wood (2008, p. 341) remarks that

‘Comparably, Khotso himself, an individual from remote, impoverished rural origins and a black inhabitant of a country under oppressive white minority rule, turned to the supernatural as a means of manipulating circumstances, and attaining power and wealth which would otherwise have been beyond his reach.’

In Wood’s portrayal of Khotso, economic powerlessness stemming from the racialised economy compelled him to seek supernatural means to combat a system beyond his control. Racial segregation effectively placed material wealth out of the reach of black people, and turning to occult powers emerged as the sole recourse to lay claim to what had been systematically denied to them. Further elaborating on the contextual aspects of the emergence and growth of Khotso’s medicines for miraculously accumulating wealth, Wood (2008, p. 341) adds

‘Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Khotso’s clientele came not only from economically embattled southern African communities. A substantial number of middleclass entrepreneurs, both white and black, visited Khotso, seeking to shape the economic trends in their own lives, rather than be at the mercy of market related forces beyond their control.’

In essence, it was to overcome oppressive socioeconomic structures and unfavourable market conditions that people turned to the occult economy. Occultism thrives on the “reassuring promise that even the harshest of economic circumstances can suddenly be overturned” (Wood 2008, p. 341).

Moreover, specific aspects of African occultic interests in the magical power of accumulating wealth share resemblances with the pursuit of uncovering the secrets behind the economic success of white individuals. This resemblance may provide an explanation for the features of a white woman found on familiars such as Mamlambo. Wood (2008, p. 343) explains that during her fieldwork conducted in 2001 and 2002, some African individuals mentioned that Mamlambo could be obtained from Indian or white shopkeepers in Durban or Johannesburg. The obtaining of Mamlambo from Indian and white businesspeople indicates that the contemporary African belief in wealth-bringing has drawn some of its important elements from other religions and cultures, revealing that contemporary African beliefs in wealth-bringing beings have incorporated some Indian and European elements. Wood (2008, p. 342) refers to Monica Wilson’s (1936, p. 287) early observation that some Africans attributed the prosperity and privileged position of Indian and white people to their access to relatively strong magic. The African belief that Indian and white people were rich because they had access to stronger wealth-generating magic can explain the origins of some aspects of Mamlambo from the white-owned mines as a means of harnessing the mystical power believed to underlie the economic power of white people. Wood (2008, p. 344) further highlights that Mamlambo arose “in part from a sense of disconnection to a traditional, communal way of life; inequalities and imbalances in the socio-economic order; and the lure of western materialism”.

Wood’s observation suggests that certain components of the modern African occult economy have their roots in the economic powerlessness experienced by Africans. In response to their economic limitations and marginalisation, Africans sought to access the mystical powers they believed enabled white people to achieve wealth. This pursuit led to the development of elements within the contemporary African occult economy.

In certain aspects, the adoption of Christianity by Africans can also be associated with a quest for economic empowerment. In defeating Africans with their superior military technology, establishing businesses, and having money, white people not only portrayed themselves as possessing a more powerful God than that of Africans, but also a wealthy God who held the keys to the vaults of material wealth. The existence of such is indicated by Sister Josephine Bullen, a Roman Catholic nun who worked as a missionary at Empandeni Mission near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, shortly after the British colonialists had conquered
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and subdued the Ndebele and Shona people. In her diary entry dated 7 May 1900, Sister Bullen recorded the following:

‘Some natives were heard talking about God the other day: He was stingy when He made them for he gave them no clothes and did not teach them how to make them. He gave them not money and did not tell them how to earn it. But He was generous when He made the white people for they have everything and can do everything’. (Bullen 2008, p. 56)

Sister Bullen’s diary entry indicates how some Africans felt about their economic powerlessness and economic limitations when they compared themselves to white people, and how they thought God had disproportionately distributed economic power to the people in the world. As Sister Bullen noted, some Africans harboured a strong belief that God had given great economic power to white people and less to Africans. This sentiment stemmed from visible disparities; while Africans had very little, white people possessed the knowledge and power to manufacture goods and obtain money. This observation not only helps clarify how economic and existential concerns may have influenced the early adoption of Christianity among Africans, but also provides insight into the presence of Western influences within the contemporary African occult economy, such as the inclusion of features like the white woman on Mamlambo, and snakes that ‘vomit’ money for their owners. However, the underlying factor in all this is African economic powerlessness wrought by both un(der)development and historical colonial marginalisation.

It can be argued that ANPPs, through their anointed objects, respond to African economic powerlessness and limitations. The ANPPs’ anointed objects follow the same pattern in ATR of giving economic power to Africans.

3.3. Occultism and the African Premodern Magical Approach to Economic Reality

A significant problem in occultism is the view of economic reality in spiritual terms that overlooks and undermines the scientific and technological factors of the economic life. This section does not ignore or underplay the systematic un(der)development of Africa by Western colonialism and other geopolitical forces such as China. Rather, this assessment is limited to the African magical approach to economic reality. Besides, as already noted above, there is a strong African belief that oppressed people can overcome their unjust economic structures by magical means. In both the customary use of magic and the use of wealth-bringing magical powers the economy is treated as a spiritual reality which primarily requires knowledge of magical powers to change it. However, to say Africans relied on magic for economic life, is not saying premodern Africans did not know about economic development, but that their worldview of development relied more on magic than other factors.

The use of magical charms became a prominent strategy adopted by premodern societies to manage their economic life during their scientifically and technologically un(der)veloped pre-scientific and primitive stages (Ngong 2010, p. 90). Wood (2008, pp. 340–41) quotes Isidore Okpewho (1983, pp. 179–80), who observes that in traditional African life, “magic therefore exists […] as a means of asserting the human will in a world which poses severe dangers to human existence”. Prior to the development of scientific technologies, premodern societies grappled with their economic powerlessness by focusing their attention on the hidden knowledge required to master the spiritual world, ensuring the fertility of the land and timely arrival of rainfall, thereby guaranteeing prosperous harvests.

Occultism was the natural way of approaching economic life during the un(der)developed, premodern era, characterised by non-literacy and a lack of scientific understanding. In Europe, occultism waned with developments in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). People began to focus on the development of technologies to construct and efficiently manage their economic lives, rather than seeking esoteric knowledge to control fertility gods and rain deities for bountiful harvests and overall life security and manageability (Ngong 2012, pp. 158–59). This does not mean
people in the West no longer practice occultism, but that it has ceased to be the major element of the worldview of economic life.

There is a notable direct correlation between the occult economy and economic un(der)development in Africa, as described in the Marxist view of religion as the opium of the poor. A state of un(der)development is fertile ground for religiosity because economic powerlessness forces people to turn to God in search of the power to manage their poverty. In the absence of well-developed scientific and industrial skills to navigate their existence, individuals often turn to spiritual powers to master the spiritual realm, in the hope of obtaining the material necessities they require. In Africa, this state of un(der)development is exemplified by the fact that since its initial interactions with the Western world, Africa has predominantly been viewed as a source of raw materials and cheap economic labour, rather than a source of scientific and technological knowledge. As Ngong (2010, p. 91) points out, “Africa has become more a consumer of knowledge than a producer of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge”.

Describing this condition of un(der)development, Kroesbergen (2019, p. 22) notes that “[f]or many people in Africa, everything in life is determined by the spirit world”. In alignment with this perspective, Lazarus (2019, p. 6) asserts that in ATR, “all aspects of life, wealth, health, death, and happiness have their roots in the spiritual realm, the authorities therein consisting of a Supreme Being, lesser divinities, ancestors, and spirits”. This means that “all aspects of life are reflective of the spiritual world and determined by it, the spiritual world is, therefore, the base of society, upon which sits the superstructure, comprised of all aspects of life such as material wealth” (Lazarus 2019, p. 6). Consequently, “if a person wants to get something done, he or she should try to influence the spirit world” (Kroesbergen 2019, p. 22).

As outlined by Ngong (2010, p. 90), building on Kwasi Wiredu’s elaboration, this non-scientific approach to life can be described as “superstitious”, in the sense of a “rationally unsupported belief in entities of any sort”. There is no rational basis for believing that one can only attain wealth by influencing the spiritual world, especially when there is ample evidence of non-religious people who possess substantial wealth. Therefore, while it is true that the prevalence of occultism in Africa may be driven by greed and the desire for wealth (Niehaus 2001, p. 56), this view should be considered in the context of un(der)development as a mitigating factor.

The ANPPs’ endorsement of anointed objects for economic purposes is deeply rooted in a historical reliance on magical instruments in Africa. Biri (2012, 2021) contends that ANPPs embrace the African worldview of relying on magic for economic purposes. She further points out that in the ANPP churches,

‘Most members […] believe the oil offers protection from evil forces and opens doors for their prosperity. The pressure for holy oil for protection is testimony of a strong awareness of spiritual forces that can negate progress in life. The use of the anointed oil supplements prayers offered and is very popular because it resonates with protective mechanisms or charms in the traditional religion and culture’. (Biri 2021, p. 26)

This statement suggests that through their use of anointed objects, ANPPs employ practices that resonate with many Africans who have a firm ATR background.

4. Anointed Objects’ Continuation of Premodern Responses to Un(der)development in Modern Africa

Considering the discussion above, in what ways do ANPPs’ anointed objects syncretise the ATR occult economy in their responses to African contexts of economic powerlessness? This question will be answered by only focusing on the extent to which the ANPPs’ anointed objects uphold and continue the narrow view of economic reality that characterised premodern societies’ responses to un(der)development. Indeed, some aspects of discontinuity may be noted in the ANPPs such as the transferring of faith from ancestors to Jesus Christ. It is argued that ANPPs, however, do not challenge the premodern
view of wealth as a testimony of the power of a person’s magic, but affirm it with their anointed objects.

By premodern is described the pre-scientific cosmology of the world as ruled by spirits which prompted people to see the answer to their economic wellbeing as gaining control over other these spirits through magical charms. ANPPs only challenge the source and nature of the magic, which they replace with their anointed objects. The ANPPs’ lack of challenging the ATR magical worldview of life is asserted by Ngong (2010, p. 36) as follows:

If in the past they consulted traditional diviners, now they consult Pentecostal pastors for the same things. The only difference now is the person to whom they go for consultation or the One who protects them. The overall spiritual cosmology remains the same. The fear of malevolent spirits continues unabated.

In other words, in the African context of occult economy where there is a high reliance on magic, ANPPs do not function in counter-cultural ways. They affirm the occult economy but give it a Christian structure. The unfortunate thing is that:

[...] much of the contemporary African Christianity, especially as seen in the proliferation of Pentecostalism, has not reconstructed the African imagination as far as the spiritualised cosmology is concerned; it has rather perpetuated the traditional cosmology. (Ngong 2010, p. 36)

This observation is buttressed by Biri (2012, p. 7) who points out that while the followers of ANPPs venerate the anointed objects for their role in the attainment of health and wealth, these objects “are equivalent to a charm or amulet, as a means of protection or fetish”. She further asserts that in the anointed objects the ANPPs re-define the traditional icons, which means that people are attracted to the anointed objects “because they are familiar with the symbolism of the icons and seem to understand and interpret them from their traditional Shona (African) perspective” (Biri 2012, p. 7). Therefore, the problem is that ANPPs do not provide a new way of imagining and approaching economic life in Africa.

A significant aspect of the continuity of ATR in the ANPPs’ anointed objects lies in the premodern African notion that people are unable to generate material wealth through their own human efforts, and therefore require the aid of the magical powers and wealth-bringing beings to attain prosperity. In un(der)developed premodern Africa, material wealth gained magical and spiritual characteristics by being something that people were incapable of producing with their own human efforts, without the assistance of the spiritual realm. This does not mean that premodern African people did not attain material prosperity, or that they did not create anything new or develop viable systems of acquiring and maintaining material wealth. Rather, what is meant is that their main view and approach to material wealth was essentially magical and spiritual. That is, the power and ingenuity to amass wealth and maintain it were viewed as something of spiritual origin and magical power, and not of mere human power (Bhebhe 2013, p. 55). In premodern communities, skilled people such as hunters, farmers, and artisans radiated a mystical aura because their skills were viewed as spiritually acquired and sustained. Hence, the anointed objects of ANPPs maintain the mystical view of material wealth held by ATR.

However, it must be affirmatively stated that the assertion of this article that ANPPs thrive on reviving premodern Africa does not mean that they are anti-progressive traditionalist elements. The opposite is true, for ANPPs are vistas of modern social and economic progress who reject traditional cultures for their backwardness and promotion of poverty in Africa. ANPPs play a leading role in challenging their members to embrace modernity. Biri (2018, p. 84) asserts the modern nature of ANPPs, saying “it is clear that Pentecostals devise methods of enabling believers to acquire wealth, even if it entails borrowing the methods from the secular world”. The irony is that the ANPPs promote modernity by retrieving a premodern African magical worldview. In this worldview, affluence and prosperity are not attributed to hard work, but to those who are perceived as masters of magic, individuals who have successfully deciphered the hidden code granting access to the celestial world wherein material blessings are believed to be found. By means of anointed objects, ANPPs
uphold and disseminate the belief that wealth exists beyond the scope of human control, and individuals desiring material prosperity must obtain access to specific codes capable of unlocking the celestial realm housing material possessions. As an example, the imagination and language used to describe miracle money (money that is mysteriously deposited in a believer’s bank account) resembles that of wealth-giving familiars like snakes who mysteriously bring money and wealth to their owners.

Moreover, anointed objects perpetuate the premodern approach to addressing poverty and economic powerlessness by relying on spiritual and magical methods rather than fostering the human capacity to generate wealth. This magical approach does not tackle the issue of inadequate human capability to create wealth, nor does it address the socioeconomic structures, unjust political systems, and inadequate schooling and education systems that hinder the empowerment and development of disadvantaged individuals, preventing their meaningful participation in economic activities. In the prophetic churches, the challenges of poverty, exploitation, and oppression are not confronted because of their spiritualistic approach, which centralise strategic prayers and warfare (Biri and Manyonganise 2022, p. 6).

As Van Rooy (1999, pp. 242–43) also indicates, the magical view of economic life promotes a culture of excuse for failure and even fatalism, because instead of examining one’s methods of approaching material wealth, the blame is passed to the spiritual factors believed to control material wealth. Fatalism is promoted by projecting the idea that the poor are poor because they deserve it, since they do not have the magic needed to acquire material wealth (Van Rooy 1999, p. 243). The prevailing structural inequalities that hinder the poor from developing this needed human capacity are ignored, while blame is passed on the poor for their poverty (Kgatle 2023b).

The foregoing position is made notwithstanding Taru’s (2020, p. 292) analysis that the prophetic churches are “incubators for nurturing small businesses owned by members”. Taru’s analysis emphasises that ANPPs do provide courses and seminars on entrepreneurship for their members, where people are taught basic business skills and encouraged to start their own ventures instead of relying on employment. While it is accurate that many Pentecostals who preach the Prosperity Gospel also encourage their members to become entrepreneurs (Frahm-Arp 2018; Togarasei 2014), the issue lies in the prevailing perspective on material wealth, which remains predominantly spiritual. This perspective ultimately fosters a sense of fatalistic resignation among the impoverished, as they believe they deserve poverty due to their perceived lack of the necessary spiritual conditions for wealth acquisition.

Additionally, numerous ANPPs undermine and sometimes even contradict the principles of human development they promote. They do so by teaching concepts like “miracle money”, which is the belief that God can miraculously deposit money into the bank accounts of faithful Christians. For instance, South Africa’s prophet, Hamilton Nala (2022a), undermines many of his teachings on the importance of entrepreneurship with statements such as

‘You have a divine force that forces poverty out of your life and forces wealth into your life. You have supernatural positive force that forces money into your account.’

The problem with Nala’s statement is that it perpetuates the “the magical allure of making money from nothing” (Andrews 1997), which is prominent in societies that believe in wealth-bringing magical charms. From a magical perspective, the magical allure of making money from nothing is heightened by the feeling that human effort does not produce better and quicker material gains than anointed objects. Essentially, the ANPPs affirm and perpetuate the view of wealth as a product of wealth-giving spiritual powers instead of human work. Thus, the anointed objects of the ANPPs perpetuate a spiritualistic and magical view of material wealth that deals with African economic powerlessness caused by un(der)development by investing in more powerful magic instead of seeking human development.
ANPPs perpetuate the ATR concept of limited cosmic good, wherein the wealthy are often suspected of obtaining their riches by manipulating the life force of others. This also extends the belief that the affluent possess greater spiritual strength or have employed more potent forms of witchcraft than others. The elements of social structures and human effort are undermined. The utilisation of anointed objects within ANPPs sustains the age-old thirst for potent magical powers. Despite being described as holy items, these objects still promote the premodern tradition of depending on occultic powers for human survival.

Critically, the use of anointed objects takes Africa back to premodern primitivism by hindering the development of contemporary scientific approaches addressing African economic powerlessness. As pointed out by Ngong (2010, p. 13),

‘Central to Pentecostal pneumatology is a rejection of modern scientific rationality and an embrace of the premodern worldview. Embracing the premodern cosmology in an Africa that is largely premodern does not help the continent to effectively engage the modern world.’

In this perspective, instead of seeking guidance from modern developmental experts who are informed by technology and science, the poor are advised to adopt a premodern approach that relies on traditional healers. The prophets replace the inyangas, and the same magical worldview remains intact. The one-on-one consultations offered by ANPPs closely resemble the consultations conducted by traditional spiritual practitioners specialising in activities related to wealth acquisition (Kgatle 2023a). The problem is that ANPPs do not challenge or transform the ATR occultic view of material wealth, but they embrace it, uphold it, and propagate it through their teachings on anointed obstacles and prophetic one-on-one consultations with people seeking the spiritual power to amass wealth.

5. The Value of Scientific Rationality in Discontinuing the Premodern Occultic Approach to Material Wealth in Africa

Ngong (2010, p. 130) appreciates African Pentecostalism for its emphasis on prosperity, highlighting its commitment to a God who performs miracles in today’s contemporary world where faith in God is waning. He accepts that Pentecostalism has played a vital role in reviving faith in God in the West, where scientific rationality has led to the rejection of God. However, Ngong calls for the need to realise that “the rise of scientific rationality [that] led to the development of technologies that enhance the wellbeing of people” (Ngong 2010, p. 130). Ngong’s point is that it is scientific rationality, and not magical rationality, that improved people’s quality of life. Indeed, in his call for the abandonment of the premodern worldview in favour of scientific rationality, Ngong (2010, p. 152) acknowledges that modern science has also significantly contributed to many atrocities and destructive events in the modern era. Examples include the sophisticated weaponry used in the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust, as well as the substantial contribution of modern technologies to environmental degradation and global warming. However, despite some of the destructive contributions from modern science, a scientific approach to material wealth is more progressive than a premodern primitivistic approach rooted in a superstitious view of the world. Therefore, in line with Ngong’s calling, this article challenges ANPPs to discontinue their premodern primitivistic approach to material well-being that relies on anointed objects.

By calling for scientific rational responses to African un(der)development, the call is not to adopt western rationalism that neglects faith, for “rationalism does not need to be antithetical faith” (Ngong 2010, p. 35). Furthermore, the call for scientific rationality is not a call for western capitalism, for sound scientific rationality can foster just economic societies where there are equal opportunities for human beings.

Conversely, the scientific and rational approach that needs to be embraced challenges Christians to align their critical thinking with their being in the image of God, which functions as the basis for God’s command to people to be fruitful, subdue the earth, and rule over it (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15) (Banda 2022, pp. 7–8). A detailed exegesis of Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:15 is beyond the focus of this article.
Furthermore, this article is limited to challenging ANPPs to reconsider their uncritical embrace of the ATR occult economy. Therefore, the task of crafting detailed vision of an African scientific rational approach to development is left to a different study. However, while theologians can provide a theological framework for a scientific approach to development, it should be interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary by incorporating professional technical experts, development practitioners, industrialists, economists and scientists. Even if they have undergone professional training in economics and development, pastors and theologians must realise their limitations and the need to involve other disciplines in their interventions to economic problems in Africa.

Indeed, some people have interpreted the Genesis passage as a licence for greed and selfishness in consuming the earth’s resources, resulting in uncontrolled overpopulation and unequal access to and unjust distribution of the earth’s resources among all the people in the world. However, a sound reading of the passage indicates that human beings fulfil the functions of filling the earth and subduing and ruling over it in their capacity as bearers of the image of God. Essentially, the people act on behalf of God as his stewards. Hoekema (1986, p. 79) points out God’s command to human beings who bear his image to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it was a command “to develop a God-glorifying culture”. This development of a God-glorifying culture is a responsibility to exercise creative rule over God’s creation that involves critical thinking and work instead of magical manipulation. Banda (2022, p. 7) notes that although the Bible does not specifically describe the nature of the image of God in human beings, if to be human is to be in the image of God, it is then helpful to think of the image along the lines of God’s communicable attributes such as personality or selfhood, which incorporate intelligence, will and emotions. The communicable attribute of intelligence suggests that like God, human beings are creative and critical thinking beings. Therefore, scientific rationality is part and parcel of being in the image of God, which human beings must use in ruling over the earth. In his reflection on Genesis 1:26–28, Wright (2006, p. 224) points out that since it is the essence of our human nature to rule over the earth, this therefore means that we “were created to be workers, like God, the worker”. This working nature of being in the image of God does not require magic or the use of wealth-bringing witchcraft familiars, but scientific critical and creative thinking. In “ruling over, ordering, classifying, reshaping, developing, and unfolding the potential which we have been given” (Lindsley 2013), we require the use of scientific creative skills. It can therefore be argued that God expects human beings to deal with their un(der)development by developing appropriate scientific and rational systems that bear sustainable economic systems.

South Africa’s leading proponent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Marwala (2020, p. 202), encourages Africa to abandon its unscientific approach [read: superstitious approach] to life that diverges from rational thinking, emphasising the importance of employing information and logic to reach efficient conclusions. Instead of a magical approach to material wealth, ANPPs need to prioritise “mak[ing] decisions based on evidence using scientific principles” (Marwala 2020, p. 202). For Marwala (2020, p. 202), moving from unscientific thinking to scientific thinking “is vital” if Africa is “to tackle the intractable problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality”.

The call for ANPPs to abandon their premodern magical approach to material wealth, reliant on anointed objects, in favour of an approach rooted in scientific principles is underpinned by the recognition that “scientific and technological rationalities are not outside the reign of God, even if some proponents of these forms of rationality sometimes reject God” (Ngong 2010, p. 130). In other words, a scientific and rational approach to material wealth is theologically valid, even though some scientists may assert the autonomy of human beings and deny the existence of God. The premodern approach must be discontinued, because it stifles human creative imagination by encouraging human beings to inordinately seek divine intervention without critically engaging their situation (Ngong 2010, pp. 128–30).
6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this article attempted to evaluate the syncretic incorporation of the African magical view of material wealth in the ANPPs’ teaching that people need anointed objects, such as anointed oil and water, to attain material prosperity. It is acknowledged that ANPPs play a significant role in empowering their members and even Christians outside their churches with a robust spiritual framework for engaging with the context of un(der)development in which they live. Anointed objects are a significant way through which ANPPs empower and challenge Africans to overcome their context of un(der)development. However, despite the positive role the ANPPs play by being agents of modernisation, the use of anointed objects is more commonly framed by the ATR worldview of magic. The centrality of the belief in the power of anointed objects as points of contact with God’s power and the continuous seeking of more powerful prophets for better and efficient anointed objects all resonates well with the use of magic in ATR and the unconventional use of the dreaded wealth-giving familiars. Thus, this article argues that ANPPs’ use of anointed objects is a revival of premodern Africa, in which magic played a central role in the people’s accumulation of wealth. Instead of reviving the premodern ATR magic-based response to poverty, ANPPs are challenged to adopt a more biblically informed response to un(der)development that focuses on empowering people with critical and creative power. Biblical passages such as Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15 strongly suggest the need for people to develop their God-given human creative power to build sustainable economic systems. A case can be made that while God does indeed perform miracles, and met people’s needs in miraculous ways (such as the endless provision of flour and oil to the widow of Zarephath, the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand), he expects people to develop scientifically and logically sound economic interventions in addressing their un(der)development. The article challenged ANPPs to discontinue upholding the premodern uncritical ATR worldview of material wealth, which relies on wealth-bringing beings and magical charms. Instead of a magical worldview of material wealth, ANPPs should adopt a scientific approach that is in line with God’s command to humanity to rule over the world. It is argued that God does not expect humanity to deal with its economic powerlessness through magical charms, but through God-given critical thinking.

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Note

1 Incidentally, Nala (2022b) added that selling faith products was means of income and that helped stop him from depending on the church for his income. This statement left Nala open to the charge that he had commercialized the religion.

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