

**THE POSTMODERN THEOLOGIANS AND HERMEN
KROESBERGEN ON THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT
WORLD IN AFRICA**

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Abstract

In this paper, I critically assess Hermen Kroesbergen's claim on the southern Africans' use of language regarding the spirit world. Kroesbergen divulges that a careful examination of southern Africa's references to the spirit world is a response to the world or what remains mysterious and beyond expression. While Kroesbergen assesses the critical realist and postmodern theologians concerning reference to the spirit world, I pitch my tent with the postmodern theologians within the context of the language of the spirit world among Pentecostal West Africans. Even when I admire Kroesbergen's reliance on Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic approach to religion as a theoretical framework, I build on the discourse on mysticism and consciousness by William James to defend the postmodern theologians. To strengthen my principal thesis that the Pentecostal West African response to the world is neither metaphorical nor a response to the unexplainable, I use Ifá divination system as a paradigm to show that Pentecostal West Africans and their belief in the spirit world undergirds the urgency to explain, control and predict the spirit world.

Keywords: Ifá Divination, Language, Postmodern Theology, Spirit World.

Introduction

In this paper, I aim to critically engage Hermen Kroesbergen's (2019) arguments concerning how Africans refer to and relate to the spirit world. I argue that his research finding concerning how Pentecostal southern Africans refer to the spirit world and what is passed as mysterious differs from the ways West African Pentecostals do. For the Pentecostal West African, reference to the spirit world is real, as the postmodernists on the language of faith in Africa maintain. This, for me, is tied or connected to the strong influence of African traditional beliefs over Pentecostal Christians in the region. Hence, for West Africans, there are concrete efforts at influencing, explaining and controlling actions in the spirit world. So, when these peoples encounter Christianity, with the foundational outlook that the "Blood of Jesus" and the "Fire of the Holy Ghost," for instance, are *superior* to local deities, they expect the God expressed in the Gospel to perform much better than African divinities. This strikes me as the core motivation of Pentecostal Christians in West Africa, which is that it is possible to influence the spirit world.

To attain the aforementioned aim, I divide this paper into two sections. In the first section, I briefly discuss Kroesbergen's position on how Pentecostal Africans refer to the spirit world. His disagreement with the critical realists and postmodernists over the discourse on the language of faith is disclosed too. In the second section, I present my methodology – conversational thinking to the argument of Kroesbergen. I point out some of the problems presented by his thesis and how they do not fit with the realities of Pentecostal Christians in West Africa. As a character of the conversational method, I anticipate some objections from Kroesbergen and respond to same. To make my point clear, I disclose how Pentecostal West Africa conceives the spirit world. This section explores the experiences of some 'Pentecostal mystics'¹ in West Africa and how traditional techniques such as divination disclose the attempt to

¹My use of this term is technical and not in any way derogatory. Most Christians may not call it mystical but insights from the Holy Spirit. However, I leave the readers to deduce their judgments when I provide details of some of these experiences later in this paper.

control and influence the spirit world. I use the argument of William James on consciousness to reinforce some of my assertions.

Kroesbergen and Reference to the Spirit World in Pentecostal Southern Africa

In this section, I am concerned with Kroesbergen's claim regarding how the spirit world is linguistically construed among Pentecostal Christians in southern Africa. To achieve the aim of this section, I commence with an exposition of his conclusions and then focus on the accounts that led him to them.

Using Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy as his theoretical framework for assessing the language of faith among Pentecostal Christians in southern Africa, Kroesbergen (2019) concludes that the peoples' reference and response to the world is nothing but mysterious. He, however, insists that such usage or ascription by the people should neither be considered backward nor primitive. He makes this remark because some Euro-American Christians may find it bizarre how Africans talk and refer to the spirit world. On this note, he seems to take a middle position between the postmodernists and the critical realists.

Kroesbergen arrives at the foregoing position from the exploration of "the descriptive parts of African theology, anthropology, and [his] personal experiences in Zambia as source material, and applying to it a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language which pays special attention to the meaning of a language of faith as it is constituted in peoples' day-to-day lives" (KROESBERGEN 2019, v). From this theoretical background, he can discern that when proper attention to how language is used among these peoples, it is possible to deduce that their description of the spirit world reflects how they respond to it.

Kroesbergen considers how beliefs and practices in witchcraft and the non-physical world inform how Africans live. These beliefs have proved helpful in the assimilation of Christianity. This is why Dena Freeman conceives Pentecostalism as a species of "Christianity that fits well with African sensibilities and which acknowledges the validity of traditional African beliefs such as witches, spirits, ancestors, while at the same time providing a way to break from them"

(FREEMAN 2012, 12). This outlook is reinforced by Kwame Asamoah-Gyadu thus; “[M]any aspects of the [worldviews] underlying the practice of healing and deliverance, especially the belief in mystical causality, resonates with African philosophical thought and inform Pentecostal theology” (ASAMOAHA-GYADU 2010, 63). Therefore, it is not surprising that Paul Gifford (2004) sees the embrace of Pentecostalism as the most significant ideological reformation in Africa.

Kroesbergen concedes to the foregoing contentions but then inquires whether or not the beliefs in witches, spirits, etc., can be substantiated. He argues that when African Pentecostals use or refer to concepts associated with spirits and witchcraft beliefs, they assume that they can explain, control and predict these phenomena. Upon a critical exploration of these claims and those who hold them in southern Africa, Kroesbergen (2019, 47) relays; “[S]o references to spiritual or mystical forces are responses to what remains mysterious.” Regarding the belief in witchcraft and the belief in the spirit world among southern Africans, Kroesbergen concludes that “[c]laiming something to be witchcraft is the default response when no practical explanation is available” (KROESBERGEN 2019, 47). On this note, he announces that efforts such as using divination to explain, control and predict the spirit world disclose instances where justification is lacking.

Despite these, Kroesbergen does not believe that Africans’ use of words and concepts is inferior and backward. This is where his concern for the plight of African Pentecostalism may be deduced. Perhaps this is why Emmanuel Ofuasia, while passing commentary over Kroesbergen’s publication, finds that Kroesbergen’s work displays a laudable and sympathetic effort advancing that:

Pentecostal Christians in southern Africa use language to describe their experiences of the spirit world, witchcraft, community, and personal relationships with one another. He believes this is original to them and should be allowed to continue thus, without being professed as backward and superstitious. (OFUASIA 2020, 367)

It is on this showing that Kroesbergen goes against the critical realists and the postmodernists. The former is of the view that when reference is made to the spirit world, they are to be taken as metaphors. Speaking on the realists, Kroesbergen says:

According to critical realists, Christians in the Netherlands experience the Holy Spirit but, actually, that is a metaphor for something like a force field in the natural sciences. Pastors in Zambia pray for their soccer team to win but, actually that is a metaphor for raising a kind of mental power to psychologically support them. (KROESBERGEN 2019, 6)

What critical realists maintain is that the linguistic reference of Pentecostal Christians concerning spirits and witchcraft, for instance, are metaphorical and should not be taken as the utterers take them to be. From this exposition, critical realists seem to interpret the language of faith away from the meaning ascribed to them by the utterers when the propositions contradict scientific propositions. They maintain that reference to the spirit world and the use of the language of faith are nothing but approximate expressions of an elusive reality. The other party to the discourse is the postmodernist, whose core contention is that religious statements should be taken as they are uttered. In other words, for the postmodernists:

Christians in the Netherlands experience the Holy Spirit, for them it is simply reality – there is nothing miraculous about it, it is their world. Pastors in Zambia pray for their soccer team to win because in their metanarrative God straightforwardly intervenes in world affairs, causing one or the other team to win. (KROESBERGEN 2019, 6)

The implication of the foregoing is that for the postmodernists, individuals possess the capacity to infuse their assumptions and beliefs into their metanarratives of reality. As Kroesbergen is dissatisfied with the proposals of each of the critical realists and the postmodernists, he explains the importance of making a shift from the metaphorical and the literal, as critical realists and postmodernists

respectively maintain, to a much deeper approach to assessing the language of faith in Pentecostal Africans.

Critical realists and postmodernists, in a nutshell, for Kroesbergen, misunderstand the use of the language of faith in the region of his research – southern Africa. This is based on their assumptions that “language *must* be a description of something out there...” (KROESBERGEN 2019, 331). He says that “both schools restrict the meaning of language to how it mirrors the world” (KROESBERGEN 2019, 325). For Kroesbergen, these schools focus on the spirit world as some tangible reality. On this note, from his Wittgensteinian theoretical framework, he calls for the need to pay attention to the spirit behind words. In other words, he says that “instead of focusing on the phrases, images and formulae someone uses, one should pay attention to the spirit behind someone’s words” (KROESBERGEN 2019, 332). Whereas I am willing to grant Kroesbergen that critical realists are mistaken that reference to the spirit world is metaphorical, I make the bold claim, contra Kroesbergen, that postmodernists are correct for the position that reference to the spirit world is literal.

Critical Assessments of Kroesbergen’s Claim

Following the discussion thus far, I will reduce Kroesbergen’s claim to three propositions, which I will consider in this section. These three propositions are as follows:

- (1) Kroesbergen invokes the use theory of language by Wittgenstein to diminish the views of critical realists and postmodernists over how African Pentecostal Christians use language for depicting reality as it appears to them;
- (2) Whereas I admit that Wittgenstein’s use theory, as employed by Kroesbergen is appropriate, I can only grant that critical realists are wrong. I counter Kroesbergen’s claim by stating that postmodernists are correct that references to the spirit world are literal and particular; and
- (3) I contest against Kroesbergen’s position and argue that in West Africa there are attempts to predict, control and even manoeuvre the spirit world for physical benefits.

The entire gamut of this paper has been committed to (1). However, (2) and (3) have yet to be defended or strongly advocated for in any way before now. Kroesbergen unwillingness to admit postmodernists as a valid interpretation of reality is based on their assumption that language mirrors the world. I do not, however, agree that postmodernists, as expressed in the work of Kroesbergen will be seen as expressing a linguistic framework that mirrors the world. They are even closer to Wittgenstein's use theory of meaning, which Kroesbergen uses to reinforce his interpretation.

An important point to understand in making a case for (2) is that among West Africans and perhaps other parts of Africa, south of the Sahara, the influence wielded by Pentecostalism may be traced to the beliefs in traditional African religious themes such as witchcraft, evil eye, spiritual cause for material effects and a host of other similar assumptions. For instance, let us take a look at a hypothetical scenario where a devout Pentecostal Christian, from a Muslim background is instructed to proceed to an Ifá priest and worship his ori, through a prayer warrior who was entranced and overtaken by the 'Holy Spirit' during a prayer session, *after* a series of prayers.

Now, on first showing, other Pentecostal denominations and even church members may doubt the revelation – for how is it possible that the Judeo-Christian God will ask that a Christian seek divination from an Ifá priest? Let me add one more condition to the discourse – this particular prayer warrior has been able to see visions and make predictions that have come to be true or nearly true for others. The next question would be – is it possible that this prayer warrior had been using non-Christian power while proclaiming visions in the name of Jesus? Whereas these posers may never be answered satisfactorily, allow me to add another condition – Rashid worships his ori, and things soon turn out well for him as he had hoped. The end justifies the means!

Cases like Rashid's are endemic among West African Pentecostals. However, very few of them are bold enough to say that their healing actually emanated from places other than the church. The point being made here is that critical realists will be wrong to assert that these experiences are metaphorical. The encounter with the spirit

world with the revelation, taken literally, was able to assist the plight of Rashid. There is no need to pay attention to the spirit behind the words. On this basis (2) is validated. I will consider another spirit world reality by some 'Pentecostal mystics' before I proceed to defend proposition (3).

In the case of the Nigerian Pentecostal pastor Iyke Nathan Uzorma, there is no reason to go behind the spirit behind someone's utterance before comprehending what they are saying. In November 1971, he claimed to have had a spiritual experience before turning to Christ:

In that experience, I had something like electric shock all over my body while I was still awake on the bed. Immediately after this shock, I found myself standing outside my body. Thereafter, I began to run inside a big tunnel filled with darkness. This was astral projection in its first stage. (UZORMA 2007, 71)

Here is an individual claiming to undergo astral projection prior to his Christian conversion, hence my branding him a 'Pentecostal mystic' since this is an experience that the Bible does not endorse. There are several pages in the said work that depict him conversing with spirit beings he called "Sa Gopintha" and "Sat Yuri" prior to his conversion to Pentecostal Christianity. Today, he has been using these experiences to share the Gospel. However, there is no need to go looking for the spirit behind the words, as Kroesbergen suggests. These are experiences that are taken literally and undergirded by the assumption and sensibilities of West Africans to matters related to the spirit world. It is the pragmatic consequences of these propositions that matter to the people. It is normal for people (especially Pentecostal Christians), as postmodernist theologians maintain, to infuse their experiences, cognitions of the external world and their assumptions into their expression of reality. This approach to how the spirit world is experienced reminds one of Sextus Empiricus, who relays:

For each person is aware of his own private *pathos* [affections], but whether this *pathos* occurs in him and his neighbour from a white object neither can he himself tell, since he is not submitting to the *pathos* of his neighbour... And since no *pathos* is common to us all, it is hasty to declare that what appears to me of a certain kind appears of this same kind to my neighbour as well. (EMPIRICUS 2000, 195-8)

If the spirit world is conscious to a person in one way, the person couches the experience in words or in a language, and he means for people who listen to him to comprehend as he describes it. One must also not fail to take cognisance of the limitations of language in expressing these realities. Nevertheless, the limitations of language do not immediately imply that the words used ought not to be taken literally, but metaphorically.

Experiences of the spirit world are tied to the consciousness of every individual but not to some linguistic rules. Rules and language games are contextual. However, a consciousness of the spirit world is not. It is literal. This may have also allowed William James to say that:

Our waking consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, different types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. (JAMES 2002, 300-1)

Pentecostal Christians in West Africa not only understand this point marshalled by William James, but they also go beyond to try to manipulate and control the spirit world to their advantage. Hence, when they encounter any misfortune or when expected answers are not forthcoming from their Pentecostal pastors, they do not hesitate to visit the local shrine for succour. It was documented by Alabi that

among the Arogbo-Ijaw of southern Nigeria, there are 21 Pentecostal and other church denominations within the region. However, “it was found that they (the people) seem to relate more with Egbesu [an indigenous deity] than with the almighty God” (ALABI 1998, 29). The reason cannot be divorced from pragmatic relevance since, as one Chief explains, the “Egbesu (the local deity) responds more quickly to their needs than the Almighty God. Thus, although they believe in God, they take their immediate problems to Egbesu” (ALABI 1998, 29).

Thus far, I have tried to argue for proposition (2) as I contest with Kroesbergen’s assertion that postmodern theologians on the language of faith in southern Africa are mistaken for assuming a literal stance to reference to the spirit world. I have shown that there is no problem with this view and that it has evolved into one of the most effective ways of gaining some supposed knowledge of the spirit world. I have invoked the cases of Rashid and Iyke Nathan Uzorma to not only strengthen my argument but to counter Kroesbergen that the use theory of meaning² is not applicable in all cases, hence the literal capacity to provide insights of an experience of the spirit world. I now proceed to defend proposition (3) and argue contra Kroesbergen that for Pentecostal Christians in West Africa, realities such as witchcraft are not default positions based on the unavailability of explanations. More so, divinations are purposeful and can predict accurate and justifiable realities. Since I have already argued hitherto that Pentecostalism thrives on African sensibilities of the spirit world as enshrined in their traditional religious cultures, these African beliefs allow Pentecostal Christians to take some realities as real. Hence, for the case of Rashid, divination is able to explain, control and predict. Is it possible to know the future? Can it be predicted? Are witches real and do they have the power to cause havoc? These are the questions I now turn to in order to argue for proposition (3).

To be able to answer these posers satisfactorily, I turn to portions of the Ifá literary corpus and the process of Ifá to establish how the belief in witches, contra Kroesbergen is not a default response

² The use theory of meaning is one of the major theories of meaning. It suggests that the meaning of a word is derived from its use in a context. It is usually ascribed to Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigation*, 1953.

for the lack of explanation. In a verse in Odù Òtúúrùpòn of the Ifá literary corpus, original to the Yorùbá of South-West Nigeria, the existence of witches as malevolent forces who have sworn to destroy humankind unless properly propitiated is disclosed thus:

Divination was held for eníyán (witches/malevolent forces)
 Same for èniyàn (humans)
 As both descended from heaven to earth
 Both of them were asked to offer sacrifice
 Eníyán (witches/malevolent forces) swore that on reaching
 the earth,
 She would be destroying the lots of èniyàn (humans),
 Èniyàn (Humans), too, vowed that, on reaching the earth,
 She will be do as she pleases
 Both refused to offer sacrifice.
 The two reached the earth and,
 Whenever èniyàn (humans) gave birth to a child,
 Eníyán (witches/malevolent forces) would kill it
 All the things that èniyàn (humans) laboured for
 Were all destroyed by the eníyán (witches/malevolent
 forces)... (ABIMBOLA 1976, 166)

The above verse clearly shows how witches/malevolent forces have made themselves available to the frustration of human deeds in the actual world. It is however pivotal to make a distinction between ‘Eníyán’ and ‘Èniyàn’ as used in the verse. Just like many English words have the same spelling but different pronunciations, the foregoing odù portrays similarity in Yorùbá vocabulary as it is in English vocabulary. ‘Eníyán’ is the euphemistic term for witches and evil spirits. They are the malevolent forces. ‘Èniyàn’, on the other hand, depicts humanity. In reference to witches, the word Ìyá mi (Mothers) or àjè, is more appropriate.

The relevance of the foregoing Ifá verse to the present discourse is that it has served as one of the underlying motivations for why Christian converts in Nigeria and other West African countries like Benin Republic and Togo, take seriously, the belief in witchcraft and their capacity to influence the world. The beliefs in witches

expressed in the language of faith among, at least, Yoruba Christians have a foundation in the pre-Christian or traditional religions of African cultures. References to them among Pentecostal converts are expected to be taken literally, as postmodernist theologians endorse.

It is also instructive to add that these malevolent forces also have the capacity to be invoked to influence the world in ways favourable to the invoker. On this note, Oludamini Ogunnaike (2015, 251-2) explains that “[i]n short, àjẹ are people of exceptional spiritual power who have the ability to curse or bless those around them and can be propitiated by certain sacrificial rituals.” At this juncture, it is also important to venture into the real belief that divination, too, can be used to make one’s fortunes a lot better through accurate prediction and control of suggestions from the spirit world.

Divination among the Yorùbá and those who practice the Ifá divination system is based on the capacity that the future can be known and may even be controlled. For Ifá divination to be cast, there are three parties: the client/petitioner, the Ifá priest/priestess and Orúnmilà, the deity of divination and knowledge. The Ifá priest/priestess does not at any point demand that the petitioner becomes an initiate throughout the encounter (TAIWO 2004). The main motivation for divination is the salient conviction that divination can reveal solutions to some life problems humans face (see OFUASIA 2019). The process of divination can be summed thus:

When the client enters the house of the Ifá priest, he salutes him and expresses a wish to “talk with the divinity”. The Ifá priest then takes out his divining chain and lays it on a mat or a raffia tray in front of the client. The client whispers his problem to a coin or a cowry shell and drops it on the Ifá instruments. Alternatively, the client could pick up the divining chain or the ìbò and whisper his problem to it directly. In either case, it is believed that the wishes of the client’s Orí (God of predestination who knows what is good for every person) have been communicated to Ifá who will then produce the appropriate answer through the first Odù which the Ifá priest will cast when he manipulates his divining chain. (BASCOM 1969, 3)

It needs to be amplified that the inquirer does not reveal his concerns and/or reasons for his consultation directly to the diviner but to the divinity via gadgets of divination (ABIMBOLA 1977). Incidentally, the outcome of divination can be accurate in some cases. They can inform a person what to do and how to make their lives much better.

It is a carry-over of this kind of indigenous mode of communication with the deities that Pentecostal Christians in West Africa apply to the Gospel. In this case, the pastor or cleric takes the position of the Ifá priest/priestess, whereas the Holy Spirit replaces Orúnmilá. The client is a perplexed Christian convert who now thinks that traditional African religion is diabolic and that the Christian God ought to be superior to the local deities. Clearly, the pragmatic relevance and gains are the motivations for seeing an Ifá priest/priestess, in pristine times and a pastor in this Pentecostal era. An Ifá priest/priestess who is able to accurately solve the mysteries brought to them is not lacking in patronage in the same way that a pastor who can display signs and wonders is able to amass a large flock. These are results from the underlying belief that the spirit world is not just out there to be depicted in language. It is perceived as that part of reality that can be apprehended by some numinous methods and controlled for good omens in the physical dimension. On this note, I have shown that proposition (3) can be defended since it is possible to employ the spirit world among Pentecostals in West Africa to make their physical living better.

Conclusion

In this piece, I have made two contentions against Kroesbergen's claim. The first concern is his conviction of the futility of critical realists and postmodern theologians on the reference frame of Pentecostal believers. The second focuses on his outlook on practices of divination and witchcraft, which, for him, are realities that persist in instances where justification is lacking. I assess the first by conceding to Kroesbergen that critical realists are wrong to say linguistic references to the spirit world among African Pentecostals are metaphors. However, I deny that postmodern theologians who take such references as literal are mistaken. While Kroesbergen thinks that

his Wittgensteinian approach, which demands that we pay attention to the spirit behind assertions other than the literal and metaphorical portrayals, I employ some instances among Pentecostal Christians in West Africa whose experience of the spirit world were taken literally and believed to be effective. This does not, however, vitiate, in any way, his Wittgensteinian analyses, which I find useful too. Concerning the second, I showed how divination in West Africa and the belief system of traditional African religion could be a replica of some practices among Pentecostals in West Africa. For this, I relied on the Yorùbá Ifá divination system and a portion of the Ifá corpus as a way of showing my conviction that belief and references to witchcraft and the efficacy of divination cannot be tied to lack of justification or explanation. I show that these are purposeful ventures that Pentecostal Christians in West Africa hold dearly and provide justification for their conviction that it is possible to influence the physical world via the spiritual.

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