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Life at the End of Time

A Note on Comparison, 'Pentecost' and the Trobriands

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This book, and the fundamentally experimental basis of the project from whence it emerged, has gradually managed to convey – or, rather, conjure – 'Pentecost'. And once conveyed, conjured and stabilized, 'Pentecost' endures and provides an optics, a hermeneutical layer that is infective and that, as a disease or as a prophetic vision, accords a novel vista onto human settlements across the globe. As someone that has been a (sometime) fellow traveller with the *équipe* of this book, this optics of 'Pentecost' recently aided me in a very literal sense when embarking in 2016 on exploratory fieldwork in Accra, Ghana: here, I was struck by the saturation of the urban domain of what one could call the semiotics of 'Pentecost' as, among others, Birgit Meyer (e.g. 2004a) has so eloquently shown. Accraan images ranged from posters of the medical doctor in Oxford Street, who claimed, 'I medicate but God cures' to the bank on which it is written – in 10-meter-high letters – 'To God alone the glory' (see also Quayson 2014). In addition, I have also been to 'Pentecost' in rural and peri-urban Mozambique, where pastors and churches mushroom, thrive and then die and by doing so reinscribe the social with semiotics of 'Pentecost' (see also Bertelsen 2016; Kamp 2016; Premawardhana 2018). And informed precisely by my recently acquired 'Pentecost' specs, I would like to draw attention to two aspects of possibility in this commentary; one very brief on comparison and one specific regarding life in/of 'Pentecost' as most explicitly elaborated in Chapter 2 but also in other sections of the book.

Comparison

As should be apparent for the reader, the figure of 'Pentecost' may be approached as a non-institutional space or place, terrain or territory – as a working holism. And it is precisely its slippery character and ability to evade the sometimes intellectually stifling theological definitions that, first, accords it with anthropological and comparative value and, second, as a concept emulates ethnographically observable features as 'Pentecost' mutates, morphs, moves, shapeshifts, migrates, doubles and oscillates within and across domains. This mobility and agility is what makes 'Pentecost' apt as open to anthropological experimentation with holism, as well as non-place-based anthropological theoretization (see also Englund and Yarrow 2013; Otto and Bubandt 2010). After all, when anthropologists deploy their intellectual curiosity to the infinite possibilities of the ethnographic, novel concepts such as 'Pentecost' arise akin to figures and objects from *Tehom* – that deep, primordial, Christian realm of possibility – to unsettle stable categories of, for instance, religion and gender (see also Helmreich 2017).

Now, comparison can be conceived in myriad ways – most simply by letting the characteristics or format of single or multiple entities stand out when juxtaposed with single or multiple other entities. This is, of course the vision of comparison that blindsides the necessary triangulation of comparison – i.e. that which presupposes a third component, namely the gaze of the comparer. A gaze from a singular methodological, disciplinarily, definitional or theoretical point effectuates an ontological flattening of the landscape in its purview. This gaze produces non-messy figurations and assemblages of certain entities that may, in neat fashion, be juxtaposed while other features recede into the haze or ground. For this very reason, such a form of comparison may be quite rewarding, as it produces (seemingly) crystal-clear units of comparison. However, we all know that vision – even purportedly singular ones as in this example – is paradoxically and problematically both *im*partial *and* partial. In fact, flattening visions in the form of radiant definitional or disciplinary beams that level the ontological ground, save for predefined features, are highly problematic given their biases towards certain epistemologies, modes of representation or ontological presuppositions (see, e.g., Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2016; Viveiros de Castro 2015).

I take precisely this problem – that of the radiant, flattening beam – to be what this experiment-as-book aims to move away from. Instead, it seeks – in a playful and somewhat productively messy fashion – to

resituate or, perhaps better, decentre the authority of that which is compared to ethnography. It does so, however, *not* following the calls for a new naturalism or neo-positivism that has often comprised the response to, for instance, experimentation in anthropological comparison inherent to what has been called the ontological turn. Rather, 'Pentecost' arises from the depths of *Tehom* and travels, like a ghost, between various registers that are compared, between various spatialized domains of its (mythical) land and, lastly, between 'Pentecost' and the discipline of anthropology. Travel has always served anthropological comparison well, and the multidimensional journeys undertaken to perpetually discover and relocate 'Pentecost' is no exception to this.

Life

Now, let me, after this brief and general comment on comparison, delve into one of the actual neighbourhoods of Pentecost that is consistently explored in the project, the Trobriands. Being based largely on Kiriwina material, Chapter 2 addresses the reconfiguration of life and death and tackles dominant ideas of 'Pentecost' as being integral to, shaped by or comprising a corollary of neoliberal capitalism – also in the guise of health and wealth gospel. The chapter does an excellent job at critically probing such approaches (including the Comaroffs' well-known readings) as well as showing how such tendencies may be identified in Papua New Guinea, particularly through various fast-money schemes. Crucially, an argument is made that such a redirection towards capitalist values of wealth and an orientation around Ponzi schemes and frauds have eclipsed the many generative processes that emerge in the wake of 'Pentecost'. The chapter highlights a few of these generative processes, starting with a very interesting point on temporality, where it is claimed that 'Pentecost' involves a distinct transformation of visions of life and death – from a predominance of cyclical time towards a more binary notion. Moreover, in this neighbourhood of 'Pentecost' this increased significance of the binary seems also to introduce a hierarchization where new import is given to life to the detriment of death. This reorientation also manifests itself, as demonstrated in the chapter, in new 'production' and 'produce'-oriented notions of reciprocal returns from tithes and offerings: '…focusing on living a good life and directing resources for the wellbeing of one's family in the here and now, rather than orienting production and exchange towards the deceased'. Several points can be made here.

For one, I believe this argument about life can be taken much further, and, in a sense, one might say that in 'Pentecost' one is *not* only moving from cyclicity to a (hierarchized) life-death binary: Instead, death recedes more permanently into the background and becomes impotent, unimportant, more of a non-event than a crucial point in energizing cyclical and reproductive cosmologies. Put differently, life trumps death to such a large degree that the notion of a life-death binary is misleading. The glow of life also has a temporal dimension, as its radiance and towering presence seems to generate an eclipse of the past and a privileging of the present and, perhaps, also of a certain vision of the future. Struck by this sense of immediacy of the present/life over the past/death, I see it as an expression of what one could call *Pentecostal vitalism* – a stubborn assertion of boundless human possibility. But there is, of course, a paradox here: life is to be cultivated, cherished purified and used to the full, as life is short and will end – even though death's importance seems diminished and despite contexts arguably defined by poverty and marginalization (see also Wilhelm-Solomon 2017). Further, life *itself* contains within it the possibilities of everything: riches, happiness and love. Thus, as there is no constitutive outside to a life that is infused with God, the Holy Spirit or Jesus – as a totalizing force – life *transgresses* and *transcends* the needs for strict self-cultivation and/or economizing with time. 'Pentecost' has, in some sense, cosmogenetic and vitagenetic properties and points to possibilities for (perpetual) rejuvenation and, hence, the obviation or stopping of time. Furthermore, and Chapter 2 shows us this, life is collective and not merely individual. In the coexistence of these two visions, however, there seems to be a tension that is not wholly articulated in Chapter 2 nor in other sections of the book: that between life as boundless and post-temporal or atemporal – pure and immanent possibility – and life as an entity that needs to be contained, disciplined, controlled and put to productive use. This difference could also be framed as that between an open horizon of possibility and the strictures of sequence, production and causality on the other. In redeploying the figure of 'Pentecost' elsewhere – analytically, theoretically as well as ethnographically – this tension between life's boundlessness and the strictures imposed by production can be pursued to flesh out life in/of 'Pentecost' more clearly.

Second, and at another level, as it is treated in Chapter 2 and also alluded to in the introduction, life in *the global south* is somehow portrayed as teeming with life and generative of its novel configurations. And, indeed, as we know, the global south has been the object of massive experimentation with life in the form of the combined violences of colonialism, imperialism and, in many ways, development schemes – as well

as its many possible futures (see also Goldstone and Obarrio 2017; Sarr 2016). Arguably integral to the capitalist transformation and its perpetual incursion – briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 in relation to revaluation of productivity, time and wealth – nonetheless what I find particularly intriguing is that in 'Pentecost', as conjured for us here, such past and ongoing imperialist and capitalist experimentation with life is thrown open: vast domains of the social order, ritual and, even, cosmological domains related to cyclicity, generativity and, indeed, life itself are challenged, undercutting reductionist conclusions as to the (allegedly) unidirectional and detrimental workings of empire, capital or state.

Third, 'Pentecost' seems to be populated by an exuberant and instable figure of the human that one can only glimpse the contours of in Chapter 2 and in other parts of the book, and I will only allude further to the salience of this for 'Pentecost' here. Crucial to such exuberance is the *feature the grotesque*: as exemplified beautifully in Achille Mbembe's work (e.g. 1992), the postcolonial subject in his view, of course, does not only submit to power and make available his or her body and self to such power. Instead, the ludic subject wilfully connives and toys with various forms of power and potentiality and, indeed, seeks to access, appropriate and reconfigure its very force and direction. In a sense this is a figure of life that is antagonistic to the beautiful and serene being saved and purified by the Holy Spirit but rather one that is grotesque and inflated – that is, disfigured yet powerful. When visiting 'Pentecost' – in this book, in Accra, in Mozambique – I see the contours of such grotesques, as well. And it is particularly clear, perhaps, also in the semiotics of growth, wealth and prosperity represented visually in posters in cities and online – and in narratives of exuberant growth and wealth in a present rid of the past or cyclicity, as Chapter 2: life is here distorted and inflated, transgresses boundaries, while death is nowhere to be found.

Another *context for such human exuberance* in 'Pentecost' that I see emerging is, and here I am very much informed, of course, by my own work on urban situations – in particular, Mozambique – the figure of the poor subject as an entity to be contained, formatted and kept in check. Informed by the strictures imposed by what I see as the politics of the Anthropocene – including questioning human expansive development – this translates in development settings to the poor *needing* to become and consume less and be restrained in their growth and resources. In other words, the figure of human life shaped by such anthropocenic politics in many development settings is now the lesser human being; the human that does not expand, the subject that is resilient, pliable and poor. This is an idea where growth and wellbeing has been abandoned, given a future that is, in a sense, always already collapsed precluding

any (universal) possibility of expansion. Against this bleak configuration of post-development politics, 'Pentecost' seems to offer another vision of life *rejecting* such strictures in insisting on growth that celebrates exuberance and non-containment. Potentially, 'Pentecostal' life, then, provides an argument against resilience, smartness and the containment of the poor – a liberationist script of expansion, growth and life's unboundedness.

Creation, Generativity, Opposition

The above comments on, particularly, life but also on comparison invite the question: what cosmological or religious edifice powers 'Pentecost' and what domains are integral to it? As suggested in the book's introduction, religion – and by default Pentecostalism – has to be approached both as non-territorial *and* as non-separate from other spheres, such as the social. Thus, if we cannot approach it as a religion in a classical sense, should we then – and here I am drawing on extending my comments above about the opulence, exuberance and unruliness characterizing this Pentecostal vitalism – extend this argument to reframe it as an *alter-globalization movement* or *alternative cosmopolitan orientation* generating novel forms of subjectivity and personhood?

The book project seems (helpfully) conflicted on this issue: on the one hand, in Chapter 4 one finds, among a host of other fine analyses, an argument relating *abjective individualism* to Deleuzian notions of *control society* (Deleuze 1992) as part of a comment on powerful and important contributions to understanding relations between individualism and Pentecostalism (e.g. Meyer 2004b; Robbins 2004). On the other, Chapter 2 does *not* convey a subject that is dividualized – a subject that has been violently forged into an open source assemblage to be mined, capitalized on and, indeed, abjected. Instead, I perceive – and perhaps as a response to such processes and the spectre of control society – a dynamic that undermines the logic of control society: it erects boundaries, sure; it generates institutions and stricture, certainly; it emulates the logic of capitalism though imposing notions of productivity, generativitiy and wealth, no doubt. But simultaneously 'Pentecost' comprises a composite and cosmologically mutating site of perpetual creation and destruction, generativity and opposition, conformity and transgression undercutting abjection, dividuation and control. In a sense, my emphasis on life and 'Pentecost's' sometimes grotesque and celebrative exuberance and transgressive character is, of course, a caricature. But it is one that seems pertinent to make, as it has been too

facile to be caught in the idea of 'Pentecost' as radiating cancerous beams disfiguring the social, as a form of virus deadening and flattening cosmologies, as a para-state or proto-state instituting stricture, discipline and obedience, or as the theological apparatus of neoliberal capital. The figure of 'Pentecost' alerted me to instead appreciate the creative, generative and oppositional traits – unevenly realized or lurking as mere potential – and its global relevance.

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