

# Spiritual Infrastructures

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In his recent, posthumously published book *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*, renowned anthropologist Marshall Sahlins states that “the condition of humanity for the greater part of its history and the majority of its society” has been one in which people are “surrounded by a host of spiritual beings [...] (which) are immanent in human existence,” determining almost every aspect their fate.<sup>1</sup> He calls on scholars to explore how these “immanentist societies are actually organized and function in their own cultural terms, their own concepts of what there is, and not as matters ‘really are’ in our native scheme of things.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the fields of inquiry where this perspective has hitherto been notably absent is the study of infrastructure. One can only speculate why this is so. It may be that the technically oriented Modernism associated with much of what ‘classical’ infrastructure research is focused on—such as roads, railways, and telecommunication systems—as well as the ‘dogmatically secularistic’ outlook of those pursuing it, has engendered this specific blind spot.<sup>3</sup> Infrastructure scholars are not alone with the latter. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously argued, historians “will grant the supernatural a place in somebody’s belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be to go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past”.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, according to him, “the historian, as historian [...], cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event”.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Marshall Sahlins, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 2.
  - 2 Sahlins, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe*, 3.
  - 3 For the notion of “dogmatic secularism,” see Luke Clossey et al., “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge,” *History Compass* 14 (2016): 594–602.
  - 4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 104.
  - 5 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 106.

By contrast, starting with Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*,<sup>6</sup> anthropology has long been interested in investigating the ways in which local understandings of the agency of spiritual beings inform people's practices in the world, giving rise to concepts such as "socio-spiritual communities," that is, "religious communities constituted by human beings and their interactions with spiritual entities."<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I take inspiration from Sahlins' plea to study immanentist societies in their own cultural terms so as to rethink infrastructures from a decisively non-secular vantage point. More particularly, I take the case of Pentecostalism to argue that what is required is to go beyond the focus on *religious* infrastructures, that is, the idea of human-made (secular) infrastructures that serve people's religious aspirations, such as pilgrimage infrastructures. Instead, I aim at developing some preliminary thoughts on what I call *spiritual* infrastructures, which means perceiving the agency of spiritual entities *as* infrastructures.

I do so with a view to Pentecostalism as practiced in a specific region of Africa (Zambia). It remains to be seen whether my findings are also valid for Pentecostals in other parts of the world and/or other religious traditions that build on the immanent agency of spiritual entities. Nonetheless, this article hopes to draw attention to the existence of an infrastructural sphere of life that commonly goes unnoticed in academia yet is pertinent to how religious practitioners throughout the world forge relationships among themselves and with the spiritual domain. In the concluding section, I will contemplate possible wider conclusions from this observation.

## Counting the Holy Spirit In

In 1985, the then-president of the African Spiritual Churches Association, Nbumiso Ngada, published a booklet entitled *Speaking for Ourselves* in which he notes, with regard to African-initiated churches: "Anthropologists, sociologists and theologians from foreign churches have been studying us for many years and they have published a whole library of books and articles about us [...] The view from outside [...] tends to distort the picture and to prevent the outsider from seeing the real point about what we believe and what we are doing."<sup>8</sup> But most importantly, Ngada gives his argument a special twist in also pointing out that "there is one enormous omission

6 Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937).

7 Thomas C. Kirsch, "Intangible Motion: Notes on the Morphology and Mobility of the Holy Spirit," in *The Social Life of Spirits*, eds. Ruy L. Blanes and Diana E. Santo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 33–51, 34.

8 Nbumiso Ngada, *Speaking for Ourselves* (Braamfontein: Institute for Contextual Theology, 1985), 5.

throughout the whole history that has been written by outsiders. The work of the Holy Spirit throughout our history has simply been left out. The events of our history have been recorded as if everything could be accounted for simply by sociology and anthropology [...] We would like to write our own history from the point of view of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

Written from an agnostic point of view, this article is more modest than Ngada’s manifest of a postcolonial-cum-spiritual theology. I ask what happens to conventional scholarly views on religious infrastructures in Pentecostalism when we bring the religious practitioners’ perceptions of and (embodied) experiences with the Holy Spirit into the equation. To do so, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork in Zambia (1993–2023), where I was given the following account of the events leading to a co-production of road infrastructure and religious sociality.

In the early 1950s, when Bishop Rabson of the Spirit Apostolic Church (SAC), a small church of the Pentecostal-Charismatic type, was a child, he and his parents lived in the rugged hills of the escarpment between the Central African Plateau and the Gwembe Valley. At that time, access to the Valley and the thinly populated hills was difficult. Some minor footpaths led through the escarpment, which were used by the Gwembe Tonga in bartering with the Tonga on the Plateau, small-scale trading, and seeking labor in the towns and commercial farms adjacent to the railway line connecting Lusaka with Livingstone and with the mines of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, and the Copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). Most of the scattered villages on the escarpment and in the Gwembe Valley were only accessible using such paths.

While the Gwembe Valley had long been one of the remotest parts in this region of south-central Africa, this situation altered drastically when the Kariba Dam was built in the mid-1950s. Constructing the dam, which created what at that time was the largest man-made lake in the world, necessitated the resettlement of about 57,000 people—Rabson’s family among them—and led to rapid infrastructural developments. An accelerated influx from the outside world, the increased incorporation of the area into systems of market economy, and the initial stages of urbanization were all aspects of this rapid change, which also caused the disintegration of many customary ways of living. Rabson grew up during this time of marked socio-cultural, economic, and religious transformation.

In the 1960s, Rabson became a member and eventually pastor of the Full Gospel Church of Central Africa (FGCCA), an African-initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic church founded by a Tonga migrant who had returned from working in the mines of Southern Rhodesia. At around the same time, he joined the crew of a construction company in the township of Batoka on the Plateau near the escarpment. This company was building a tarmac road from Batoka to Maamba in the Gwembe

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9 Ngada, *Speaking for Ourselves*, 16.

Valley, where open-cast coalmining had recently begun. While being employed as a construction worker and moving along with the road as it was gradually extended, Rabson learned how to drive and obtained a driving license, subsequently finding employment as a driver with a number of different companies. Wherever he went as a construction worker or driver, Rabson tried to establish new Christian communities. From the 1960s onwards, he thus succeeded in setting up twenty-eight branches of the FGCCA, several of whom followed Rabson when he decided to set up his own church, the SAC, in the early 1990s.

How can we frame our analytical understanding of fascinating empirical cases like these where religious community building went hand in hand with the construction of tarmac roads? Answers to this question depend on how the practice of ‘spreading Christianity’ is conceptualized. In the history of Christianity, some organizations, such as Bible societies, aim at diffusing the Christian message which is then hoped to stimulate the recipients’ faith.<sup>10</sup> For other Christian organizations, such as the FGCCA, the emphasis on propositional content is not sufficient. For them, spreading Christianity implies disseminating some spiritual quality. These organizations, many subsumed under the category of Pentecostalism, consider it their duty to bring people into contact with the Holy Spirit and to make them experience, even embody, its divine power.

There are different views among Pentecostals on how the latter can be accomplished. According to several Gwembe Tonga I spoke with, Rabson had ‘physically’ brought the Holy Spirit to different locations in the Valley for the spirit to do its divine work there, which, in turn, motivated the newly enrolled local neophytes to construct new religious infrastructures, such as altars and church buildings. Others emphasized that the Holy Spirit had motivated Rabson to become a driver and to contribute to constructing a road infrastructure which it (i.e., the Holy Spirit) could subsequently use for its evangelizing mission. Indeed, the latter was the version of the story the majority of Rabson’s followers recounted about his biography. But if this is an instance of how practitioners of Pentecostalism describe their world, how can we conceptualize Pentecostal relationships between infrastructures and spiritual beings?

## Spirits as Infrastructures

I have suggested in a previous publication that, when embarking on a study of Pentecostalism, it is important to take account of the multifarious ways in which spiritual

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10 Matthew Engelke, *God’s Agents: Biblical Publicity in Contemporary England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

entities are manifesting themselves in the world and are experienced by religious practitioners to locate themselves in and move through space.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, as noted above, a possible Pentecostal way of answering the question above would be to say that the Holy Spirit instigates humans to engage in infrastructuring activities, setting them in motion, energizing them, channelling their activities in particular directions, thus literally making them pave the way for the spirit's diffusion and immanence in the world. The importation of spiritual powers from the 'outside' to the social 'inside' and the interpersonal transmission of these powers from religious experts to members of the laity constitute what I have called the "logistics of the spirit."<sup>12</sup> However, in cases like Rabson's, the latter does not implicate transporting the Holy Spirit as an entity but rather transporting the human channel for it. In other words, in this type of spirit mobility, the spatial radius of the Holy Spirit's mobility is relative to the readiness of religious practitioners to seek spiritual power by setting themselves in motion or by allowing themselves to be affected by others who have moved previously. People's movement thus precedes and premises spiritual movement; wherever humans have failed to go, the Spirit does not go. Spiritual infrastructures are dependent on—and most importantly, basically co-extensive with—certain types of human-made (material) infrastructures.

But there are two other ways how the Holy Spirit manifests itself in the Gwembe Valley, which tell a different story of how infrastructures and spirits can be related to each other. The first is 'spiritual self-multiplication.' In all the Pentecostal-Charismatic church services I attended, the Holy Spirit made its initial appearance by inspiring one of the church elders while he or she was praying, singing, or dancing. In most cases, following this initial appearance of the Holy Spirit other church elders also exhibit such symptoms, occasionally giving rise to an atmosphere of collective effervescence with impassioned dancing and a cacophony of glossolalic voices filling the church building. It is at this point that the Holy Spirit starts manifesting itself among members of the laity. All in all, if the rituals are realized in felicitous ways, the Holy Spirit can thus be said to self-multiply in the course of the ritual, starting out from one of the church elders, then bringing its influence to bear on some of the other co-present elders and eventually on selected members of the laity attending the service. In this process, the Holy Spirit manifests itself not in a contiguous spatial area but in distributed form—that is, here and there throughout the ritual space, with the interstitial spaces remaining unaffected by its spiritual powers.

What is important for us here is that the self-multiplied Holy Spirit is forging spiritual connections between people who otherwise might have no prior social con-

11 Kirsch, *Intangible Motion*.

12 Thomas G. Kirsch, "Religious Logistics: African Christians, Spirituality and Transportation," in *On the Margins of Religion*, eds. Joao Pina-Cabral and Francis Pine (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008): 61–80, 62.

nectivity, that is, who might otherwise be strangers to each other. These connections are invisible to the human eye but can eventually evolve and give rise to people's socio-religious interactions and institutionalizations in which the Holy Spirit assumes the role and function of a *spiritual infrastructure* that may run parallel to, but may partly also deviate from, human-made infrastructures.

Similarly, collective efforts by churchgoers can lead to a situation where the Holy Spirit is felt to be present in such an extraordinary intensity that everyone entering the ritual scene is automatically affected by its power. On such occasions, the Holy Spirit also makes its initial appearance by inspiring one of the church elders while he or she is praying, singing, or dancing. Yet, in contrast to spirit mobility by self-multiplication, this initial inspiration does not affect only selected individuals positioned at a spatial distance from each other but leads to a self-expansion of the Holy Spirit, so that its beingness pervades the entirety of the ritual space and sometimes even stretches beyond it. On the other hand, in case the churchgoers' collective efforts to appease the Holy Spirit lose strength, this spiritual entity decreases its 'size' by self-contraction and sometimes even retracts in its entirety from the ritual space. Taken together, while undoubtedly involving a perceptible change of position in space, this type of spirit mobility does not take the form of a movement from A to B. Instead, it represents a spatial pulsation between microscale and macroscale that is accomplished by a self-induced upscaling and downscaling of the *gestalt* of the Holy Spirit and results in a spiritual permeation of space on different (local, regional, transregional) scales that serves as an essential infrastructure of religious practice.

## Thoughts in Conclusion

In comparison, the two types of spirit mobility described above give rise to different types of spiritual infrastructures. In the case of self-multiplication, it takes the form of a network; in the case of spiritual scaling, the infrastructure is a socio-spatially bound platform or enclave. What both have in common, however, is that human-made infrastructures (e.g., roads, church buildings, distribution networks of religious texts) are *not* considered sufficient for the Pentecostalist practice to evolve in a divinely ordained way. There also ought to be an infrastructure of the *spiritual* kind.

You find my anthropological interest in the Holy Spirit exotic? Well, with its roughly 650 million adherents worldwide, Pentecostalism is an immensely influential religious movement whose membership base lies predominantly, but of course not exclusively, in the Global South. So, at least in terms of numbers, it is definitely not a minority perspective.

You think that my analytical focus on the agency of the Holy Spirit is misplaced because it appears to grant Beingness to something which (non-Christians would

say) does not exist? Please note that, depending on one's point of view, something similar can be said about certain Western notions, such as the 'psyche.' My interlocutors in rural Zambia were at a loss when I tried to explicate to them what a 'psyche' is, and they were thoroughly amused by the suggestion that they themselves should be endowed with one. As a consequence, my account of how, in European common sense, *psychological* dynamics are informing people's social lives did not make sense to them.

The point I am trying to make as a concluding thought is the following: Throughout the world, people have different ideas of what exists in the world. Some presume the existence of entities or phenomena which others maintain are inexistent. Nevertheless, for those who base their social practices on the assumption of these entities' or phenomena's agency, the latter can function as infrastructures for the former, and should be studied as such.

