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Decolonising the Theologico-Political Problem

Reading African Neo/Pentecostalism through Mbembe's Improvisation

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Abstract

The theologico-political problem, traditionally concerned with the question of the seat of authority or sovereignty in the West (rendered through the metaphor of Jerusalem vs Athens or Revelation vs Reason), has been brought to the fore of late in a number of nation-states in Africa. To the end of rethinking the theologico-political problem or decolonising it, this article draws on Achille Mbembe's notion of improvisation as an important avenue through which the decolonisation of the theologico-political problem can be situated meaningfully in the African context. Its core argument is that such a decolonisation of the theologico-political problem is not only useful for centering African experiences in political theology broadly, but also for further problematizing the decontextualized ways in which notions such as the theologico-political problem elide a history of "others" in their continued access primarily or even solely through Western experiences of state formation.

Keywords

African Pentecostalism – Decolonisation – Improvisation – Mbembe – Theologico-political

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When the question was asked, during the heyday of colonialism, whether self-government was possible, it was never to engage the general question of being and time – in other words, of life – but rather

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> *to facilitate native people's struggle to take over the apparatus of the state.*
>
> ACHILLE MBEMBE, 'African Modes of Self-Writing'

1 Introduction

The focus of this article is an examination of what I regard as an important but neglected concept in contemporary African political theory and African religion studies, the theologico-political problem. The theologico-political problem, traditionally viewed as concerned with the question of the seat of authority or sovereignty in the west (rendered through the metaphor of Jerusalem vs Athens or Revelation vs Reason), has recently been brought to the fore in a number of nation-states in Africa. As the article argues, the specificity of the nature of the theologico-political problem in Africa is not articulated so much through the binaries of reason versus revelation or philosophy versus religion, as is the case in some of Western modernity's framing of the problem, Leo Strauss being the best example of such an approach. Rather, the generalized African experience of the theologico-political problem represents a shift away from stultified notions of sovereignty that emphasize a separation of spheres approach to religion and politics, including understanding sovereignty through the figure of the potentate, to an understanding that focuses on the relation of self-governance and the governance of others through a particularly Neo/Pentecostal political theology.[1]

Moreover, while sovereignty may continue to be understood through the politics of enmity, there is a shift away from a purely state-centred understanding of such enmity or reorientation of the theological through the political state to one that centres on multiple levels of registers from the individual to the societal to the state and the spirit realm. As such, the failure of the standard analyses of the theologico-political problem to engage meaningfully with the African context – through appeals to a limited understanding of the secular, the binary understanding of private-religion and public-politics, or the inescapability of decisionism as the postcolonial juridical order par excellence, for example – demands that we rethink the problem in African contextual terms. Consequently, we reconsider the relationship between religion and politics in Africa broadly.

To the end of rethinking the theologico-political problem or decolonising it, in what follows I first outline the general sense in which current scholarship speaks of the theologico-political problem, but I do not provide an extensive review of the concept since this has been extensively done in a large amount of scholarship. Rather, I describe my contextual use of the term in order to make a case for why and how this concept is important in the African context, especially in this moment of the long Pentecostal revolution on the continent dating from the early twentieth century onward. I then explicate what I mean by decolonising, including how the process should be applied to the theologico-political problem. In particular, here I draw not only on the tradition of Latin American decolonial thought but also focus specifically on Achille Mbembe's notion of improvisation as an important avenue through which we can decolonise the theologico-political problem and situate it meaningfully in the African context.

My argument can be summed up as follows: the decolonisation of the theologico-political problem is not only useful for centering African experiences in political theology broadly, but also for further problematizing the decontextualized ways in which prevalent notions of the theologico-political problem elide a history of others in their continuing to be accessed primarily or even solely through Western experiences of state formation. My hope is that such problematisation will contribute further to the already extensive work that is concerned with examining religion and politics in Africa. Moreover, at the theoretical level, by engaging in a contextualised and decolonised analysis of the theologico-political problem I hope to highlight this category as an important one for studies of religions in Africa and studies that take African religious epistemologies seriously.

2 The Theologico-political Problem

A number of scholars writing in English have highlighted the resurgence of interest not only in political theology generally, but the theologico-political problem in particular (Labelle 2006; Gray 2007; Geréby 2008; Invernizzi Accetti 2010; Vega 2017). What these scholars share is an interest in reviving the theologico-political debate with respect to the question of democracy in Europe, specifically the crisis of modern political liberalism. To this end, some of these scholars make particular reference to a few thinkers whom they regard as indispensable to the canon of the theologico-political problem. These include Hannah Arendt, Jurgen Habermas, Claude Lefort, Carl Schmitt,

and Leo Strauss. However, some also delve deeper into a canon that draws on Saint Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, Ernst Kantorowicz, Martin Luther, Niccolò Machiavelli, Erik Peterson, and Baruch Spinoza, among many other familiar names. All of this is in pursuit of answering the simple question of whether the theologico-political problem can be resolved. However, another question arises here: what exactly is the theologico-political problem?

The canon referred to above already points to a complex answer to this question that resists any singular definition. Nonetheless, for the context of my article I follow Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's definition that political theology is 'the attempt to ground political legitimacy on a transcendent source' (2010, 254). The value of this definition is that it captures the three different ways in which political theology has been engaged with in contemporary scholarship. According to Facundo Vega, these are: 'as a politics of theology that pursues a hierocracy; as a reflection on the theological core of politics and the philosophico-political meaning of theology; and as a "theology of politics" or "civil theology"' (2017, 703). Whether understood as an enterprise of Christian religious leaders to found theocracy, as a social concept that explains the persistence of Christian theology in modern state conceptualization, or as a reconfiguration of religious belief in the face of secularization, broadly conceived, the concern of political theology is about legitimacy.

As Phillip Gray puts it, 'Political theology has at least two, sometimes overlapping meanings. One is the sense of Schmitt that politics begins to appropriate notions from theology as societies secularize, thus making politics a matter of theology; the other is the ideological use of theology to mask political motivations' (2007, 176–177). Put differently, the question of political theology arises out of a context of a crisis in answering the question about the foundation on which the common life is or should be grounded. As Vega notes, drawing on Lefort and Arendt, this crisis is peculiar to the 'modern condition' and its concern with the place of the absolute in relation to the absence of incontestable principles on which to 'justify life-in-common' (2017, 697).

If one sticks with this particular canon it may seem that the crisis of modernity is something that assails only 'Christian Europe' and no one else. However, this narrative of a singular modernity has been the subject of much critique through notions such as 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000), 'entangled modernitites' (Therborn 2003), and 'provincializing Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000). Specifically, the elision of Christianity's global reach in this particular rendition of the theologico-political problem, including the corollary assumption that Western secularization translates elsewhere in similar fashion (another proposition that has been subject to much critique), means that the theologico-political problem has been colonized through a particular

set of assumptions. These assumptions include the universalism of Western Christianity and the modern state – i.e., a direct translation of Western secularization issues onto other global contexts; a teleological reading of politics from religious subjection to political freedom through a particular reading of democracy as the end goal of the life in common; as well as the elision of the colonial experience as refracting the first two assumptions rather differently for colonized subjects. For the African in particular, the crisis of modernity is not simply faith based, but also identity based since an African Christian is also an indigene who is the subject of colonial and imperial enterprises. As such, the question of political legitimacy in this context does not simply concern a distinction between religion and reason but also civilized and uncivilized, as well as human and other.

3 Method and Theory

In bringing together the lines of inquiry outlined above, I draw specifically on Mbembe's concept of improvisation as a primary mode of understanding political subjectivity in the postcolony (1992a, 1992b, 1995, 2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2010). I believe that the notion of improvisation may help balance the elision of African modes of engagement in the current scholarship on the theologico-political problem. In particular, I am interested in his argument that subjects of African states negotiate their existence through such improvisation, including how we might read improvisation positively through the Neo/Pentecostal notion of techniques of the self. Specifically, this aspect of the article highlights the theoretical implications of Mbembe's concept of improvisation for the theologico-political problem in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, African political studies, political theology, and religious studies scholarship. In drawing on Mbembe the article further highlights the specific ways in which the Eurocentric nature of the theologico-political problem has been dealt with in scholarship on political theology broadly so far.

As I have argued elsewhere in relation to decolonising political studies/science (Dube 2021b), the call for decolonisation here is a call for the reconceptualisation of the discourse's (political theology's) being itself. The understanding of the project of decolonisation as concerned with the ethical dimensions of the being of the discourse draws from Latin American scholars of decoloniality who have especially taken on the task of troubling the foundationalist understanding of being. This can further help elucidate a useful understanding of how to decolonise political theology. Part of what scholars of decoloniality highlight, and which I am arguing is visible in the current discourse of political

theology, is how deeply embedded this scholarship is in a particular colonial construction of being that assumes universal applicability without taking into account the violent context of its construction.

According to Sylvia Wynter, for example, the social sciences suffer from an overrepresentation of the 'coloniality of being' that presents a singular ethnoclass's perception of the human (2003, 260). In highlighting the embeddedness of our current knowledge systems, of which I am arguing political theology forms a part, to the coloniality of being, Wynter writes, 'The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves' (2003, 260). That is, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues, it is the coloniality of being that has framed our articulation of a political theology of overrepresentation as Wynter describes above. It is also this same coloniality of being that must be interrupted through a reading that foregrounds a focus on how the being of political theology is undergirded by the violence of the domination of other ontologies or ways of being.

In building on this argument, I hearken back to one of Mbembe's concerns: 'When the question was asked, during the heyday of colonialism, whether self-government was possible, it was never to engage the general question of being and time – in other words, of life' (2002a, 263). Rather, as Mbembe notes, it was to facilitate the takeover of state apparatuses or, to put it differently, to inhabit established Western notions of governance stemming from the colonial state. As we are well aware now, scholars such as Diop (1978), Mudimbe (1988, 1990), and Oyěwùmí (1997), among many others, have demonstrated the continued implications of this colonial takeover within the context of the social sciences and the study of Africa. Drawing on the notion of improvisation as important is to argue for how the discourse on religion and politics in Africa also contributes to the lack of African modes of self-writing. This is a privation that Mbembe laments as needing further theorisation in the African context, especially when compared to the transcendental orientations that have enabled German and Jewish thought to integrate radical negation into a singular theoretical and philosophical outlook (2002a; Quayson 2002). In a way, in pushing Mbembe himself, I propose that the improvisational nature of African political theology from a Neo/Pentecostal political theology provides us with a discourse of radical negation that is particular and broadly applicable to the African context.

In turning our attention to a decolonial ontology of political theology we can begin to get away from the accepted nominalism of the discourse, which takes the categories in existence for granted, by foregrounding how thinking others into existence as a discourse should form a key part of the decolonisation process. This is because, as Maldonado-Torres further argues, decoloniality 'introduces questions about the effects of colonization in modern subjectivities and modern forms of life as well as contributions of racialized and colonized subjectivities to the production of knowledge and critical thinking' (2007, 261–262). Consequently it is only by unsettling the coloniality of being (Wynter 2003), reinscribing the ontological with the transontological (Maldonado-Torres 2007), or disrupting the coloniality of being (Richardson 2012) of the discipline of political theology that we can begin to move toward an ethical political theology that aligns with African modes of religious being. This is the aspiration, 'at the very minimum to restore or create a reality where [Africans as] racialized subjects [can] give and receive freely' (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 260). In this context receiving and giving freely refers to how African political theology does not only receive preconceived knowledge, but also challenges and gives of its own accord and understanding different knowledge that helps us better understand political theology within a milieu of contemporary glocal politics.

Understood this way, the question of democracy in Africa, for example, cannot then simply be about an assumedly universal life-in-common since such a stance would presume an equality of all the people. Instead, a pertinent question should frame the understanding of democracy as a useful conceptual tool of the political in Africa. When democracy is already stained with colonial asymmetry, how are we to understand its pursuit in the African context as part of the theologico-political problem? Even if one were to grant a Lefortian reading of the logic intrinsic to modern democracy as an 'empty place' (Lefort 1986, 265), thus giving the sense that 'all social relations are always open to being constantly renegotiated and re-defined' (Invernizzi Accetti 2010, 263), an asymmetry persists. That is, the question 'whether it is possible for the people to effectively govern themselves or whether there must always be another entity exercising power in their place' (Invernizzi Accetti 2010, 254) has a very different meaning for the colony and the postcolony versus the metropole. My argument here is that the theologico-political problem has thus far primarily been presented through the prism of the metropole. However, this is not to say that the theologico-political problem is the preserve of its Western Christian origins, but that attention needs to be paid to how its features may change in the context of Africa, where it is imbued with additional differential power relations. While my focus in this article is on the contemporary context,

work on the precolonial era would also certainly throw further useful light on the matter.

4 The Theologico-political Problem and the African Context

The fact of Africa's colonialism, twinned as it were with the religious missionary efforts of both Christianity and Islam, already places the question of political legitimacy squarely within the realms of anticolonialism and postcolonialism. In revisiting the question of legitimacy in the 'democratic' era, a number of recent cases in sub-Saharan Africa have made apparent the ubiquity of the intersection of questions of political legitimacy with those of the moral authority of such legitimacy being brought to bear through religion. These cases particularly highlight the significant role that Neo/Pentecostal Christianity has come to play on the question of such legitimacy and morality. They include but are not limited to the rise of the number of National Days of Prayer on the continent (Dube 2021a), where political leaders draw on Christian prayer to shore up national politics as well as their own political power in places such as Liberia, Zambia, and South Sudan. Cases of diplomatic contestations based on the collision of religious leaders and political leaders on a pan-African scale also abound. These include Prophet Bushiri fleeing South Africa to Malawi while under investigation for various criminal charges, and T.B. Joshua refusing to be prosecuted by non-Nigerian states, in particular South Africa, for the deaths of congregants when his synagogue roof collapsed in Lagos in September 2014, under claims of answering to a different authority.

There is also a general proliferation of publicly religiously motivated leaders or endorsement of such political leaders by Pentecostal church leaders, for example, the surge of Trump support among Pentecostal Christians in Kenya and Nigeria despite Trump's dismissal of African countries as shitholes, or the case of South Africa, where there is an increase in the number of Christian religious political parties currently contesting not only national and provincial elections, but also local government elections under the banner of moral rightness. In these few examples we can already observe not only the intersection of the politics of patronage – political leaders patronizing religious leaders and vice versa – with the response of ordinary citizens to such politics through protests that highlight disillusionment with politicians in general. We can also observe the hope offered through the Christian message of salvation, specifically with more and more citizens turning to Neo/Pentecostal Churches on the continent not only for spiritual guidance but also educational, entrepreneurial, moral, and political guidance.

As one of the leading African Pentecostalism scholars, Nimi Wariboko observes that from the 1990s to the present, Pentecostal churches have emerged

> as the most important source of religious and cultural creativity on the continent. They have become channels for harnessing spiritual and social resources for their members' aspirations to modernity, even as they draw heavily from practices of effective religious actions from African traditional religions. Pentecostal churches now count members of the upper class, military officers, top civil servants, and political and business leaders among their fold. The major denominations among them have complex bureaucracies, celebrity pastors, and often function as (or at least claim to be) agents of national development and sociopolitical redemption. They are increasingly emboldened by their successes to view themselves as divinely sanctioned change-leaders ushering in a new Africa.
>
> WARIBOKO 2017

As Wariboko further notes: 'For African Pentecostals, the future (whether for individuals, groups, or nations) is not something that Christians should passively await. Born-again Christians must help shape their future lives to be life-(abundance)-affirming rather than death-(poverty)-bringing; they must pray that abundant life will happen in the here and now' (2017). African Pentecostals 'have increasingly become involved in the politics of their nations through a remarkable range of experiments in politics, national discourses on governance, diversity of political practices, politicized theologies, and actual policymaking' (Wariboko 2017).

A line of inquiry seeking to rethink the theologico-political problem in African contextual terms should thus not simply restate the obvious point that has been rightly highlighted by many scholars of religion and politics in Africa, that religion is central to African conceptualisations of wholeness and the political (Ellis and ter Haar 2004, 2007). Rather, it should follow a burgeoning scholarship that is taking the Pentecostal revolution in Africa seriously and asking what kind of political subjectivity is instituted through the convergence of personal salvation with national salvation. Rather than start at the position of Pentecostalism as an aberration, a decolonised understanding of the theologico-political problem in Africa starts from taking such an epistemology seriously as part of the African fabric of modernity rather than simply as American or foreign. The reference to America here is specifically aimed at the argument, now long debunked, that viewed the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa as solely the result of white American Evangelical penetration. In fact, Wariboko, among other scholars, convincingly argues that, 'the Pentecostal

movement (including independents and charismatics) has taken Christianity deeper into the African psyche, culture, space, and worldview. It has proven to be better at inserting itself into the culture, worldview, and sensibilities of Africans' (2017).

To this end, the work of Ruth Marshal (2009; 2010) already broaches this topic of a Pentecostal political theology, including the work of Ebenezer Obadare (2018). Both these scholars, among others (Afolayan et al. 2018), take seriously the idea that Pentecostalism in postcolonial Africa is not a passing phase or something that is to be separated from the rational (politics). Rather, as part of self-making (Marshall) and state-making in Nigeria (Obadare), Pentecostalism has become part of the fabric of contemporary Nigerian politics. That Africans in general have embraced Pentecostalism so fervently is not simply about the imbibing of foreign or colonial identities, but also about improvisation as political subjects caught between a deferred hope of the democratic project and the necropolitics (Mbembe) dished out by postcolonial life.

Although both Marshall and Obadare focus on Nigeria as the Pentecostal republic par excellence, it is possible to extend their argument beyond this particular nation-state given the proliferation of the particularly Charismatic brand of Neo/Pentecostalism on the continent. Therefore, by pushing the reach of these scholars' arguments further into debates in political theology broadly, we can expand the meanings of religiously motivated political subjectivity for modern politics. This article achieves this move by bringing these authors into greater conversation with the question of the theologico-political in the line proposed by Mbembe's notion of improvisation.

5 Mbembe and the Improvisational Nature of the Postcolony

In engaging with Mbembe's concept of improvisation, which is developed and articulated over a series of articles that broadly touch on the intersection of religion and politics, I want to briefly highlight his own engagement with the theologico-political problem. It is important to stress that the theologico-political problem is not something that Mbembe writes about directly, but is a concern that arises out of conversations with other scholars. Specifically, two conversations are of import here: the first with Gayatri Spivak in 2006 in 'Religion, Politics, Theology: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe', published in 2007, and the second with Jean Comaroff in 2010, 'Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe'. In both these conversations Mbembe's introduction of the theologico-political is presented

as a resurgent category and a challenge to contemporary politics (Mbembe, quoted in Spivak 2007).

Specifically, for Mbembe 'radical politics is no longer based on what for many, appears to be the discredited humanist, social relativist ethics. It now rests on subjective conviction, the unending and renewed assertion of a revealed truth that requires one to act imperatively' (Mbembe, quoted in Spivak 2007, 169). Here acting imperatively can be understood as interrogating 'the old category of the theologico-political – in such a way as to render politically fruitful the critique of religion, while taking ever-more seriously religion itself as a critique of the political' (Mbembe, quoted in Spivak 2007, 150). The supposed disenchantment of the world through modernity can finally be put to rest and the focus be placed instead on the meanings of the truth content of religions and what they are doing politically. One can read Mbembe's argument here as a form of rationalizing religion, but I argue that what he is doing instead is arguing for the re-enchantment of the rational, a process that challenges the assumption that religion is the problem.

In making this argument Mbembe implicitly challenges an argument that Jean Comaroff articulates in a conversation three years later, in which Comaroff argues that 'languages of faith are less conducive to elaborating ideologies, in the secular modernist sense, than to framing convictions – which are not the same thing' (quoted in Shipley 2010, 678). The obvious response to Comaroff's claim is to ask whether ideologies are not convictions by another name. More to the point, Mbembe already provides an interesting response to this view in conversation with Spivak when he notes, 'It seems to me that if there is one thing the religious points to, it is the category of possibility – the belief that things are not condemned to always be the same. So, in order to account for the force that is faith in our world today, we have to follow people's own discourses from within, and in terms of the figures they themselves deploy' (Mbembe, quoted in Spivak 2007, 163). In following how people account for their own salvation we are better able to demonstrate how, in Mbembe's terms, 'the impetus for critique has migrated into a renewed concern with juridical and ethical questions – the question of violence and the law for instance, a renewed critique of religion as a critique of the political' (Mbembe, quoted in Shipley 2010, 672).

Contemporary politics in Africa demonstrate in very strong terms that people are not ideologically stunted or simply religiously duped, but are using both politics and religion to ask for greater accountability in terms of the conditions that constitute African politics today, or the political. What we see, especially in the ways in which Neo/Pentecostal Christianity is being engaged on the

continent, reflects a shift in the response to the conditions of the postcolony. These conditions, to which Mbembe's writing has been dedicated to articulating in great theoretical detail, can be summed up in his arguments that the postcolony is first, chaotically coherent despite its pluralisms, and second, that the postcolony is governed by a specific form of institutionalised violence that is articulated through both administrative/bureaucratic processes and meaning-making/common-sense making processes (Mbembe 1992a, 1992b). Consequently, if we are to understand this not-so-binary world of the postcolony, traditional conceptual tools of opposition do not suffice.

What is required instead is the 'need to examine the way the word of meanings thus produced is ordered, the types of institutions, the knowledges, norms, and practices that structure this new "common sense"' (Mbembe 1992b, 4). That is, in order to be able to explain how subjects of postcolonial Africa seem to participate in their own subjection in ways that go against the grain of 'resistance politics', understood only in oppositional terms, we have to give up the colonial tool of epistemic imposition and settle instead for a less-certain approach that foregrounds context and takes it very seriously. In doing so, according to Mbembe, we may begin to see how a more useful conceptual framework for understanding postcolonial relations of power is that of improvisation.

In particular, according to such a register of postcolonial relations, the concept of obedience as something that can be improvised is also important. As Mbembe notes, 'It is only through such a shift in perspective that we can come to understand that the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of full collaboration, but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension between the commandment and its "targets"' (1992a, 5). Mbembe's call, here, is a critique of the ways in which critical thought on Africa misrepresents its politics by analogising it in relation to specifically Western contexts and concepts. However, and despite being critical of such analogising, Mbembe's own conceptualisation of improvisation leads only to another stultification as it oversignifies improvisation as primarily another tool of domination by the commandment. That is to say, despite claiming that 'it is practically impossible to enclose its [the postcolony's] system of signs, images, and traces in fixity and inertia', as well as positing that the chaotic plurality of the postcolony means that improvisation is open to both the rulers and the ruled 'in the refabulization of power' (Mbembe 1992a, 11), it is clear that, by Mbembe's own account, the rulers have the sovereignty on violence. Notwithstanding the claims of contradiction and 'altering the place and time' of ratification, the public 'ratify, *de facto*, the status of fetish that state power so forcefully claims as its right' (Mbembe 1992b, 26). Consequently

one wonders what value vulgarity, obscenity, and the grotesque have beyond the symbolic. Therefore, although arguing for an expanded notion of postcolonial relations, Mbembe's own account of the postcolony leaves us with a sense that even improvisation in this context is negatively reinscribed, whether in the name of the commandment or those who vulgarise it.

In arguing that 'the violence of the crisis emerges as much from the dissolution and dispersion of authority as from the possibilities that follow from conducting arrangements from within official sites themselves' (Mbembe 1995, 347), Mbembe highlights the need to move beyond oppositional language but also restricts such a move through only offering a negative political language in response to the postcolonial crisis. By foregrounding how 'acting efficaciously requires that one carefully cultivate an extraordinary capacity to be simultaneously inside and outside, for and against, and to constantly introduce changes in the reading and usage of things … amputating and almost emptying them of their formal and designated functions so one can better restore them with those that correspond best to desired goals and expected gains' (Mbembe 1995, 340), he reduces improvisation to a tool of manipulation, albeit not only of the commandment of its subjects but also the other way around. In so doing, Mbembe empties improvisation of its capacity to found or inform a politics grounded on positive obedience and legitimacy.

What remains instead are the 'destructing "effects" of the crisis' observable in 'the routinization of a *register of improvisations* lived as such by people' (Mbembe 1995, 326, italics in original), or what Mbembe refers to in the same article as the 'pragmatics of subjection' fuelled by the African subject's 'splitting of identities' (1995, 325). Granted that Mbembe's concern in this early literature was to articulate a specific way in which the banality of power is central to postcolonial relations, one cannot escape the realpolitik implications of such an analysis, a politics that leaves postcolonial Africa seemingly outside the realm of the theologico-political. By reducing everything to banality the postcolony has no legitimate source of authority outside of the violence of pragmatism as a response to its crisis. For scholars of religion in Africa such a reading renders moot the issue of religion. This is because on the one hand religion's supposed transcendent orientation does not belong in the realm of such a 'pragmatics of subjection', yet on the other hand taking African epistemologies seriously means that we have to account for how religion informs, participates, and is invoked in the postcolony precisely as a response to the postcolony's banality of power.

My own view is that if Mbembe's concept of improvisation is pushed a bit further to incorporate Pentecostal Christian responses to the postcolony, it can provide a useful way of understanding how contemporary African religious

subjectivity has taken up improvisation as an important conceptual tool for addressing the issues of obedience and legitimacy, and more importantly, how it has done so in ways that challenge the legitimacy of the commandment while also affirming a positive sense of being by ascribing legitimacy to a transcendent authority as a direct response to the immanent violence of the postcolonial state. Improvisation here is not only negatively co-optable, but also possibly a site of resistance for articulating a different discourse of political subjectivity. Admittedly, this is a point to which Mbembe perhaps tacitly agrees in a later publication (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). Nonetheless, given the urgency with which he speaks of the theologico-political problem, I am surprised that this emancipatory avenue in his work on improvisation has not been extensively explored.[2]

My reading of the potential emancipatory capacity of improvisation that speaks beyond a negative reinscription dictated by a concern with the modalities of *refabulization* and the pragmatics of subjection is teased out of Mbembe's article 'African Modes of Self-Writing' (2002a). In this article Mbembe argues that the project of African selfhood has stalled primarily due to the limitations posed by the discourses of Afro-radicalism (concerned with legitimizing an authentic African discourse in relation to the histories of colonialism) and nativism (promoting the idea of a unique African identity), both of which are instrumentalist in their orientation (2002a). In response to these limitations, Mbembe argues that 'current imaginations of the self are born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not only to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but also open the way for *self-styling*' (2002a, 242, emphasis original). What Mbembe refers to as current imaginations are concerned precisely with the theologico-political in their articulation of the question of being in response to the dilemma of African identity (Mbembe 2002a). In particular, 'attention must be given to the contemporary everyday practices through which Africans manage to recognize and maintain with the world an unprecedented familiarity – practices through which they invent something that is their own and beckons to the world its generality' (2002a, 258). Moreover, in arguing that 'interrogating the imprisoning model of a history that is already shaped that one can only undergo or repeat', Mbembe's own conceptualisation of improvisation can be questioned as contributing to the very model that he critiques.

In fact, Nira Wickramasinghe (2001) makes the same critique based on the reading of an earlier version of Mbembe's article 'African Modes of Self-Writing'. In particular, he notes,

> Mbembe's excellent essay leaves us wanting for more and sad for Africa. Although it lauds the anthropological method as the only way of

> addressing an identity in formation it does not give us enough concrete and detailed examples of violence or new religious rituals as examples of new practices of the African self. More importantly Mbembe's vision of Africa is bleak at the least, a dionysian nightmare of violence and pain. He offers neither hope nor remedy nor political project. He does not for instance underscore the affirmative political possibilities of identity based movements.
>
> WICKRAMASINGHE 2001, 44–45

Although laudable 'for deconstructing tradition and … problematizing African identity as an identity in formation' (Wickramasinghe 2001, 44), we are left wanting more in terms of understanding some of the ground from which positive self-affirmation that lies outside the pragmatics of subjection is founded at this present moment on the continent.

For me, African Neo/Pentecostalism provides an important space of African current imaginations that is important for scholars of religions in Africa to consider as a key part of the ground of positive identity making. Indeed, in attesting to this same point, Mbembe writes, 'The most significant development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the unprecedented growth of Pentecostal Christianity among popular and elite urban sectors in Africa' (2002a, 269). However, I would not proscribe this significance to the urban context (see, for example, Freeman 2013, Manglos 2010, Maxwell 2006, Premawardhana 2018). The important point is that Neo/Pentecostalism contributes to what Mbembe refers to as a process of African subjects transforming their own subjectivity and producing something new, 'something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all cost be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented' (Mbembe 2002a, 269). We have to take seriously how Neo-Pentecostal Africans have responded to the crisis of authority brought on by the failure of postcolonial political practice. They have done so not only by exposing moral and political corruption, but also by proposing that Pentecostal citizens take back the power from 'evil' leaders.

As Mbembe attests in a response to a compilation of critical reviews of 'African Modes of Self-Writing', 'far from leading to the erasure of the self as feared by some African theologians, Christianity, without being divested of its *principium rationis*, was turned inside out, deconstructed, and then recovered in the ancestral masks and bric-a-brac' (1992b, 638). Mbembe's positive critical appraisal of Christianity needs to be understood within the rubric of improvisation as foundational to the new project of identity making on the continent. Moreover, Mbembe is not alone in making this argument; scholars such as Wariboko have put it more bluntly:

> African Pentecostals, like the rest of African Christians, have appropriated the gospel; adapted the faith to their cultural sensibilities, concerns, and agendas; nudged its worldview to properly align with their indigenous maps of the universe; and contextualized its practices. Christianity is a translated religion in Africa. Pentecostals in Africa are reading, interpreting, and understanding the scriptures in their own cultural contexts and engendering domesticated theologies.
>
> WARIBOKO 2017

This is an argument further attested to by Ghanaian Christian theologian Kwame Bediako (1997) when arguing that Pentecostalism has helped to make Christianity an African religion. There is a strong case to be made for Mbembe's further argument that 'there can be no discourse on identity formation in contemporary Africa that fails to take into account the "heretical spirit" at the heart of the encounter between Africa and the world' (2002b, 639). For Mbembe, it is this heretical spirit that accounts for the contemporary African subject's improvisational character, a character that I am arguing is important not only as 'an artistic gesture and an aesthetic project' (Mbembe 2002b, 639), but also to the political project of reconfiguring the theologico-political problem of legitimacy.

As I have argued, this shift in focus means a move away from foregrounding the question of the theologico-political through the traditional separation of spheres ideology between 'the king' and 'God', for example, since in the African Neo/Pentecostal context the king is God. Moreover, the shift of focus to the Holy Spirit as the medium through which salvation comes to all does away with the king's two bodies. In its stead is instituted a demos (equal people) who, through the Holy Spirit, provides direct political subjectivity from 'the Father'. In this way we can see this move as a reaffirmation of the traditional concept of Protestant Christianity regarding a horizontal structure in the priesthood of all believers. If political subjectivity is understood as the ability to claim, provide, and share with others the good life in the community of humanity, then the African Pentecostal subject can claim such an identity. This can be done not only through discourses of rights and authenticity, but also through an appeal to the language of election (Wariboko 2014), which African subjects have seen used against them in the colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts in negative terms, but can be improvised and re-inscribed with affirmative meaning. This claim for God's favour or election are demonstrable in things such as material abundance, an abundance previously limited to the elite through such means as prebendalism.

Such an emancipatory oriented reading of Neo/Pentecostalism – one that foregrounds the rise of Neo/Pentecostalism through the language of political

subjectivity – demands that we take seriously this religious tradition as an articulation of an important form of the political in the African postcolony. Despite having some reservations regarding some of the entrepreneurial aspects of Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa, I am especially intrigued by the entrepreneurial focus of Neo/Pentecostals on building schools and training colleges, as well as providing social services that the state has reneged on and previously state-supported religious institutions. What Neo/Pentecostals are doing is not simply concerned with a limited understanding of spirituality that ends at the level of abstraction, but, to invoke Marx, are concerned with changing the conditions that have led to what they perceive as a crisis of the legitimacy and authority of contemporary African governments.

Despite the problematic aspects of Neo/Pentecostal prosperity and healing teaching that many scholars have recently critiqued, I wonder whether the judgment of a seemingly duped people has come too quickly. As Mbembe counsels above regarding a vocabulary that is still to be invented, should we not instead be open to the possibility that, in turning to the language of prosperity and healing, what Neo-Pentecostals in Africa are doing is improvising? They are not doing so under the banner of the pragmatics of subjection, but on the premise of exercising political agency that is affirmatively oriented toward a sovereign worthy of their allegiance, in opposition to the political leaders who have failed to command the loyalty of the people.

6 Conclusion

In sum, if we take seriously the notion of improvisation as a distinctly modern African mode of self-writing, the limits of reading African Neo/Pentecostalism through the grammar of traditional political theology are clear. In particular, and as I have demonstrated above, if one also takes seriously the Pentecostal revolution on the continent, the reliance on a set of stultified definitions of sovereignty, subjectivity, the political, and the theologico-political reaches theoretical limits in accounting for African experiences. For political theology in particular, this means a shift away from foregrounding the question of the theologico-political through a traditional separation of spheres between the king and God and their respective subjects, or that of reading the state as secularised theology. Rather, taking seriously theological categories such as the Holy Spirit seriously as political conceptual tools of African politics does away with the king's two bodies and, in its stead, institutes a demos who, through the Holy Spirit, have direct political subjectivity from 'the Father'.

African Neo/Pentecostal subjectivity is part of a variegated religious response to the theologico-political problem, and its significance in the

African context is best framed through Mbembe's grammar of improvisation. If religion is generally understood as constituted through improvisation then such an understanding in the context of African Neo/Pentecostalism gives force to the argument that this religious tradition provides for a positive subject formation process that foregrounds agentic self-making. To that end, and making reference to a positive sense of indigeneity, we can move beyond nativism and toward a political theology that takes seriously difference, diversity, multiplicity, and plurality as core aspects of an African political theology. The kind of cobbling we see in African Independent Churches, of which Neo/Pentecostalism is a part in my view, can serve as an illustration of improvisation and also decolonising traditional political theology's oversignification of sovereignty, of which Mbembe's work also partakes in to some degree.

What the grammar of improvisation provides is not only the reinforcement of the importance of context in understanding the formation of norms, whether they be religious or political. In addition, what the vocabulary of improvisation also provides through the foregrounding of Neo/Pentecostal political subjectivity is the observation that African Neo/Pentecostalism is not an aberration but a reflection of the changing nature of the political in Africa, as well as the terrains of political theology and the study of African religions. This nonaberration reading of Neo/Pentecostalism further provides us with a wide array of possibilities in thinking about the changing nature of political practices that need to be accounted for in the postcolony and, in particular, ones that see religiosity as an important aspect of the political in postcolonial Africa. This is why I believe that Mbembe's notion of improvisation is important as a heuristic tool since its use and focus highlight a key concern of his work, namely how to speak of Africa in both (as in simultaneously) a global and local language.

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Notes

1 While a number of scholars make a distinction between Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals (referred to together as Neo/Pentecostals in the rest of the article), I concur with Mookgo Kgatle (2017) that 'Neo-Pentecostalism is essentially a revival movement within the confessional and traditional churches'. In fact, arguing in the context of Ghana, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu notes in support of this view that 'the third wave of Pentecostal Christianity currently enjoying enormous growth and influence in Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, is the neo-Pentecostal movement. The expression "neo-Pentecostal" is used here as an umbrella term to encompass Pentecostal renewal phenomena associated with trans-denominational fellowships, prayer groups, ministries and independent churches, which came into existence or prominence from about the last three decades of the twentieth century' (2005, 26). While some scholars tend to read the two movements as separate and the Neo-Pentecostal as an aberration of Pentecostalism, such a reading misses out on the continuity inherent within this religious tradition.

2 In this vein, see literary studies and art work such as Flores 2011, Hofmeyer 2004, Makombe 2020, and Pope 2020, all of whom outline a more ambiguous reading of improvisation drawing on a critique of Mbembe.