GLOVES IN TIMES OF AIDS:
PENTECOSTALISM, HAIR AND SOCIAL DISTANCING
IN BOTSWANA

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Introduction

Pentecostalism, an increasingly popular form of Christianity in parts of Africa, is marked by the sense of spiritual superiority it fosters among its adherents through an ideological emphasis on ‘breaking’ (Meyer 1998, 2004, Van Dijk 1997, Robbins 2004, 2007, Engelke 2004). As this literature demonstrates, the creation of a rupture with the past, traditions, social relations and nation-state projects is at the heart of much of the Pentecostal ideology. It appears to inform Pentecostal religious practices as leaders and groups have quickly become popular through their proclaimed access to superior powers to heal and to provide deliverance from ancestral curses and demons. This inspires the pursuit of a ‘breakthrough’ in personal or social circumstances to gain progress and prosperity (Maxwell 1998, Meyer 2002, Akoko 2004, Gifford 2004, Hasu 2006). The healing practices of traditional healers, the worship of the mainstream and former missionary churches, or the cultural policies of African nation-states are declared as spiritually inferior, superstitious and backward in many Pentecostal public messages. With the arrival of HIV/AIDS, the Pentecostal project of demonstrating spiritual superiority in creating a rupture was in many cases continued by leaders claiming to be able to deal with, or even cure, the disease. Adherence to a born-again style of life is often promoted as the only effective protection (Garner 2000, Mate 2002, Pfeiffer 2004, Dilger 2007, Prince 2007).

The notion of Pentecostal spiritual superiority is linked to the moral project of ‘maturing in the faith’ as some Pentecostal leaders in Ghana would call it, or kukhwima, ‘ripening’, as the born again Pentecostals in Malawi say (see Van Dijk 1998). This is the process of attaining a different and superior moral status that conversion or being born again entails. The superiority achieved by conversion is one reason why in many Pentecostal circles young people can wield moral authority over
people even if the latter are more senior in age than the Pentecostal preacher or leader (see Van Dijk 1992).

As Joel Robbins (2007) has been arguing, the Pentecostal ideological emphasis on rupture, on a complete break with the person’s former life, is experienced by members as an important aspect of their identity. In his view, anthropology has a tendency to explain away this existential importance of rupture and break as it commonly stresses cultural continuities instead. While he argues for an anthropology that is engaged with understanding ruptures and break, the question remains unanswered as to how the Pentecostal pursuit of discontinuity is translated into actual praxis. To what extent can this spiritual and moral project embedded in Pentecostal thinking—‘being above the ordinary things’ as Ghanaian Pentecostals explained—be realised by Pentecostals in everyday situations?

This contribution aims to demonstrate that while rupturing and ‘breaking’ are part of the overall ideology, they are in practice translated in day-to-day situations in patterns of social distancing. Pentecostalism can be regarded as a ‘this-worldly’ religion (see Martin 1990), focused on the immanent aspects of life and concerned with progress and prosperity, while it simultaneously maintains a practical emphasis on keeping a certain distance from everyday life. This dialectic can be noticed in the way Pentecostals in Ghana deal with the issue of the gift. They commonly distrust and reject reciprocal relations outside Pentecostal circles as they find it hard to control the spiritual powers that gift-exchange may entail. At the same time, they encourage gift relations within their circles as signs of trustworthiness and spiritual control (Van Dijk 2002, 2005, Coleman 2004, Akoko 2004). There are many situations in which this dialectic of distancing, keeping relations at bay, controlling, supervising and rearranging exchanges take place. These include important moments in individual lives where births, marriages, funerals, sickness and misfortune are concerned. In all such situations there is the deliberate creation of a distance that allows for a critical reflection of how things should be done, as distinct from custom or social expectations and obligations. There is a sense of a higher spiritual and moral ground from which customary social arrangements can be perceived, evaluated, accepted or rejected.

This notion of social distancing is relevant in understanding the way Pentecostalism has become connected to class and is particularly significant for the way Pentecostalism relates to the creation of status, prestige, style and authority for the emerging urban, entrepreneurial