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'Deliver us from Evil': Pentecostal Christianity, Queer Sexualities and the Language of Deliverance in Nigerian Literature

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Abstract

Exploring the relationship between religion and queerness in Africa, this chapter discusses three Nigerian queer-themed novels – Elnathan John and Àlàbá Ònájìn's *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder*, and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*. Each of these texts offer a literary representation of Pentecostal Christianity, its demonization of queer sexuality, and its culture of deliverance of the queer body. The chapter argues that deliverance is a central, critical and productive theme in contemporary queer Nigerian literature used with a twofold purpose: first, to critique a dominant religious culture that demonizes queer subjects; second, to suggest that Pentecostalism may need deliverance itself from its obsession with demons, in order for queer African bodies to flourish. The chapter distinguishes three different strategies – exposing religious hypocrisy, reclaiming indigenous religion, and reinterpreting Christianity – that offer alternative modalities of African queer religious worldmaking. It argues that such worldmaking can be conceptualized as post-queer in the sense that the novels move beyond, and present alternatives to, a Eurocentric secular frame of understanding sexual and gendered embodiment.

Introduction

Deliverance prominently features as a central theme in the emerging body of queer Nigerian literary writing. For instance, Jude Dibia's *Walking with Shadows*, which has been hailed as the first Nigerian gay novel[1], includes a dramatic scene where the protagonist undergoes a physically violent deliverance ritual by a Pentecostal pastor, where he is beaten with a whip on his bare back until he loses consciousness, while the pastor shouts at him: 'Banish the devil from your heart … and accept God in your life' (Dibia 2011: 175). In another acclaimed novel, *Speak No Evil*, by Uzodinma Iweala, the young gay protagonist who grows up in the diaspora in the USA is taken by his father back to Nigeria in order to be delivered by a Pentecostal preacher. The latter's diagnosis is that 'this demon of homosexuality has become so entrenched in America that you can't really fight it there. … You are right to bring him here, this is a place where the faith is strong and hasn't been infiltrated by the devil' (Iweala 2018: 72). Other texts centring around what has been described as 'the emergent queer' in Nigerian fiction (Greem-Simms 2018) include similar scenes which, as discussed below, can be conceptualized as post-queer.

As we will argue in this chapter, deliverance is a critical and productive theme in contemporary queer Nigerian literature as a thriving sub-section of queer African writing. It is critical, because through narratives about deliverance, Nigerian queer literary texts critique the dominant religious culture that is opposed to, and indeed demonizes, queer subjects. It is also productive, because through these narratives, literary texts stimulate a creative social and religious

imagination, with the implicit suggestion being that perhaps it is not the queer body that needs to be delivered from the 'evil' of its non-conforming desires, but that it is society that needs to be delivered from religious views and practices that demonize and dehumanize a segment of the population, and that such views and practices need to be transformed for religion to affirm the dignity and worth of all human beings. However, before we develop this argument with reference to three recent Nigerian queer-themed texts – Elnathan John and Àlàbá Ònájìn's *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder*, and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* –, let us first introduce the notion of deliverance, the religious culture of Pentecostal Christianity in which it is embedded, and the way in which it is linked to queer sexuality in contemporary Nigeria. Following that, we will briefly outline the methodology that guides our reading of the selected novels. The selection of the novels itself was informed by three considerations: first, they feature the key themes at the heart of our discussion – queer sexuality, deliverance, and Pentecostal Christianity; second, they provide literary insight into different forms of queerness – male homosexuality, female homosexuality, and intersexuality; third, they present different narrative strategies – of exposing religious hypocrisy, reclaiming indigenous religion, and reinterpreting Christianity – that can be seen as offering alternative modalities of Nigerian queer, and in some respect post-queer, religious worldmaking. These points will be explored in the main body of this chapter, through a detailed reading of the three novels.

Deliverance, Pentecostalism, and Queer Sexuality

In the Christian tradition, as those familiar with the Lord's Prayer[2] will already have remembered, the notion of deliverance is closely associated with the notion of evil. Yet, Christianity comes in different versions, and the meaning of these words – 'deliverance' as well as 'evil' –, varies across denominations, and translates into different religious practices. The type of Christianity that has become enormously popular across sub-Saharan Africa in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is known by the shorthand 'Pentecostalism'. Nigeria in particular is considered as an epicentre of African and global Pentecostalism (Wariboko 2014), and the Nigerian state has even been described as a 'Pentecostal republic' given the close connections between religious and political actors (Obadare 2018). One typical feature of Pentecostal Christianity, and perhaps specifically Nigerian Pentecostalism (Adelakun 2021), is its prominent practice of deliverance which reflects a particular understanding of, and concern with, evil. The writer Elnathan John, in his satirical commentary titled *Be(com)ing Nigerian*, has a chapter about 'how to worship the Nigerian God', which reads:

> The Nigerian God performs signs and wonders. … As a worshipper you must let him deliver you because every case of sickness is caused by evil demons and not infections. Every case of infertility for example is caused by witches and demons and not things like endometriosis or low sperm motility. So instead of hospital, visit agents of the Nigerian God.
>
> PS. The Nigerian God does not cure corruption. Do not attempt to mock him. (John 2019: 12)

As much as satire tends to involve exaggeration, it is intended to reveal a truth about society. In this case, John satirically exposes and critiques popular religious practice in Nigeria for its preoccupation with evil, its obsession with demons, and its relentless belief in the 'agents of the Nigerian God' and their power to protect one against, and deliver one from, any negative spiritual forces affecting one's life. Among these divine agents are, most notably, charismatic Christian pastors and prophets, but also Islamic sheikhs and marabouts, and indigenous *babaaláwos* or diviners – after all, Nigeria is known as a competitive religious marketplace where various religious entrepreneurs try their luck, and where religious consumers or shoppers, when they believe to be in need of deliverance, 'cannot

afford to be picky' (Janson 2021: 5). In the same breath, John also draws critical attention to the corrupt economy that dominates not only Nigerian politics but also its thriving religious sector.

The phrase of 'signs and wonders' that John uses is particularly reminiscent of Nigerian Pentecostal Christian culture, where self-declared men (and sometimes, women) of God boast about their God-given spiritual powers to miraculously perform healing and deliverance, advertising their services on billboards along highways, via social media, and in several cases via their own TV channels. These signs and wonders centre around the 'spell of the invisible' which, according to Nimi Wariboko (2014), is at the heart of the religious culture and economy of Nigerian Pentecostalism. Although in continuity with indigenous worldviews where spiritual forces are believed to hold real power in the material world and to affect human bodies, in Pentecostalism these forces and the spell of their power are understood in a dualistic Christian framework of God versus the devil (Anderson 2018). Thus, Pentecostal deliverance practices are ritual performances of power, where 'anointed' pastors or prophets invoke the name of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and/or God, in order to exorcize and cast out evil spirits, often in rather forceful and violent ways. As Wariboko comments:

> In some Pentecostal circles in Nigeria, deliverance involves ministers (exorcists) flagellating the bodies of those supposedly possessed by evil spirits. The punishment of the physical body is believed to drive out the nonphysical spirit lodged inside the person. The punishment of the visible cleanses the invisible, settles the debts (sins) that gave Satan permission to enter into the body. (Wariboko 2014: 120-121)

Spirits, in this religious culture, are often sexualized, and vice versa, sex and sexuality are spiritualized (van Klinken 2023). Forms of sexuality considered to be immoral – such as homosexuality – are not just seen as sinful but are widely linked to evil spirits (Homewood 2020) and associated with a Satanic plan to bring about the end of the world (Ukah 2018; van Klinken 2013). This is reflected in an increasingly popular discourse, in Nigeria and beyond, about 'the spirit of homosexuality' or 'the demon of gayism and lesbianism', and in subsequent deliverance practices that aim to drive out such spirits from the bodies believed to be possessed by them (Richman 2021). As Pastor Matthew, in the earlier cited novel *Walking with Shadows*, advises the gay protagonist, Adrian: 'Sometimes we let the devil come into our lives and rule our hearts. … It is the devil that tempts you my brother' (Dibia 2011: 174). Thus, the intense politicization of homosexuality in Nigeria and other parts of Africa in recent decades is partly driven by a 'spiritual panic' (Ukah 2016: 25) which has generated a Pentecostal culture, if not an industry, specifically concerned with deliverance of the queer body from the 'demon of homosexuality', which of course doubles as a deliverance of society from the 'evil of queerness'. Thus, in a sense, Nigerian Pentecostalism presents a post-queer conceptualization of sexual embodiment, as it goes beyond and against 'Eurocentric understandings of sexual and gender difference' (Jackson 2001, 7) which, after all, are fundamentally secular and based on a liberal concept of human rights, and which do not allow for spiritually enchanted perceptions of the body, sex and sexuality. Yet, obviously, such a post-queer conceptualization of sexuality is not necessarily a liberatory one.

A slowly emerging body of Nigerian LGBTQ+ life-stories offers autobiographical insight into the traumatizing effects of this religious culture on queer people: first, queer individuals are made to believe that their sexuality and/or gender identity is caused by an evil spirit and links them to the devil; second, they are (often repeatedly) subjected to aggressive deliverance rituals which can be harmful both physically, psychologically and spiritually. Such stories can be found in the volume *Blessed Body* that was edited by Unoma Azuah. For instance, the following autobiographical account of Kehinde Bademosi about his first same-sex experience reflects an internalized demonization: 'I

silently prayed that a higher spiritual power would win the battle that raged within and keep me from going any further. I prayed that I would stop enjoying the intimacy. I prayed that my penis would soften, and that my nipples would behave themselves' (Bademosi 2016: 191). Azuah herself narrates an experience of being whipped at boarding school after her homosexuality was discovered, with one of her born-again classmates afterwards offering to start prayers of deliverance for her, because 'the spirit of lesbianism is stubborn' (Azuah 2016: 197). Another collection of Nigerian queer life stories, *She Called Me Woman*, also includes autobiographical stories about deliverance, such as by a lesbian-identifying woman who is made to believe that she is possessed by an evil spirit, and who is taken for deliverance sessions that last days: 'They would wash me. They would anoint me with oil. They would pray and pray and pray and bind and cast out every demon. … I believed I was possessed. I felt less than human. I felt I was better off dead' (BM 2018: 218). These stories demonstrate that as much as the literary texts discussed in the next sections are fiction, they reflect and engage with lived experiences that are real for many Nigerian LGBTQ+ folks. As Chris Dunton (2023: 7) points out with reference to the autobiographical stories in *Blessed Body* and their engagement with themes relating to religion and faith, '[t]he relevant narratives form an important non-fictional base from which to read creative texts.'

Reading *for* Deliverance

The previous sentences are not to suggest that we simply consider the literary texts under discussion as factual mirrors of social reality. Instead, with Ato Quayson (2003) we consider them as calibrations of the social, which acknowledges the critical, creative and imaginative representation of, and engagements with, social reality. Quayson proposes his concept of postcolonial literature as calibration to advocate a method of 'reading *for* the social', which embraces 'the ideological notion of using the literary as a means towards social enlightenment' (Quayson 2003: 4). Tweaking this, we propose a method of 'reading *for* deliverance'. Deliverance is not only a topic centrally featured in the selected queer Nigerian literary texts ('reading *about* deliverance'), but the texts themselves can be read as seeking to bring about a deliverance – not a deliverance of the 'demon of homosexuality', but a queer deliverance of what Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina once described as 'Pentecostal demon hunters' (KTN 2014) who in their obsession with fighting the 'demon of homosexuality' make life for queer persons in many parts of Africa unbearable. Deliverance is a term that, in the words of Biko Mandela Gray (2020: 321), 'invokes freedom, capacity, renewal, and possibility', and the texts under discussion enact a queer deliverance in a twofold way: they simultaneously critique the oppression and harm that Pentecostal deliverance practices do to queer bodies, and open up alternative imaginations of how queer life is, or can become, liveable within and beyond the constraints of a homophobic and heteronormative world.[3] Importantly, however, as much as these texts critique the Pentecostal demonization of the queer body, they do not necessarily have an issue with the spiritualization of sexual embodiment. They reimagine this spiritualization in a way that is affirming of the queer body, instead of reinscribing a Eurocentric and secular LGBT identities framework. As such, the deliverance enacted in these texts can be conceptualized as post-queer.

The three texts we are reading in this chapter are part of a rapidly emerging body of queer African writing, which itself has become subject of a steadily growing body of scholarship. Where Chris Dunton, in his 1989 overview of representations of homosexuality in African literature observed a 'sustained outburst of silence' around the topic of same-sex practices (Dunton 1989: 445), Lindsey Green-Simms (2016: 141) in a more recent review argues that 'slowly this silence among African writers is not only eroding, but turning into a polyphony'. Green-Simms and other scholars (Courtois 2022; Munro 2016; Manzo 2018; Oloruntoba-Oju 2021) particularly highlight the role of a younger generation of Nigerian writers in tackling the hitherto taboo topic of queer sexuality in African literature. Indeed, this polyphony has further expanded the scope of queerness,

as Nigerian writers over the past few years have not only engaged with male but also female same-sex desire, as well as with trans and intersex themes, such as in Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) and Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder* (2021), respectively. Our contribution to this body of scholarship on queer Nigerian and African literature is our specific focus on the theme of deliverance which, as we will argue, draws attention to the complex ways in which religion is engaged as 'central to ideological formations in Africa' (Dunton 2023, 11). There is a tendency, in queer studies at large, to mostly associate religion with conservativeness and anti-queerness, yet 'thinking queerness from Africa foregrounds religion – broadly defined – as a productive site and category' (Otu and Van Klinken 2023: 519). Indeed, in African queer social formations and cultural production, religion appears to be multifaceted – as much as it is subjected to critique, it also is creatively and constructively engaged to explore its potential for queer worldmaking (e.g. Ncube and Van Klinken 2023; Robertson 2021; Van Klinken and Chitando 2021). Even Pentecostal Christianity, often seen as particularly invested in anti-LGBTQ+ politics in Africa, might be open to queer-affirming interpretations and possibilities. The three novels discussed in the subsequent sections each have their own take on, and approach to, religion. We will demonstrate that, in their engagement with Pentecostalism, specifically the practice of deliverance, they respectively seek to expose religious hypocrisy, reclaim indigenous religion, and reinterpret Christianity. Ethnographic studies have highlighted 'the particular role that language plays in the discourse of demon possession and deliverance within Pentecostal/evangelical/charismatic churches' (Rowan 2016: 248). We will take this into account in our reading of the selected literary texts, examining the linguistic and discursive registers that literary writers draw upon in their engagement with deliverance in relation to queer bodies.

Exposing Religious Hypocrisy in *On Ajayi Crowther Street*

Earlier in this chapter, we referred to Elnathan John's satirical take on worship of 'the Nigerian God'. He further elaborates on this religious satire in his 2019 book, *On Ajayi Crowther Street*, which as a graphic novel – illustrated by Àlàbá Ònájìn – makes a unique contribution to queer Nigerian literature. Notably, this is also the only of the three texts under discussion that was actually published in Nigeria, by Cassava Republic, whose mission it is 'to change the way we all think about African writing'.[4] The novel centres around the family of Reverend Akpoborie, who is the lead pastor of a Pentecostal church, called The Reformed End-Time Ministries. The setting is Lagos, a city which is 'generally regarded as the Pentecostal capital of the world on account of the strong presence of megachurches and the crowds they pull together each week' (Ukah 2020: 454). John and Ònájìn do not give a very sympathetic account of Rev. Akpoborie and his church. Instead, their novel is a literary version of the 'popular tales of pastors, luxury, frauds and corruption' that surround Nigerian Pentecostalism (Casciano 2021). The pastor, in this story, is a crook who runs his church as a money-making enterprise with scam miracles, and a moral hypocrite who preaches family values while forcing himself onto the housemaid and firing her when she protests against his advances.

One of the threads running through the novel is a 'miracle service' that Rev. Akpoborie is planning to hold in his church. Acknowledging his own inability to heal people and perform miracles, he plans to hire the services of a gang of 'scoundrels' to perform fake miracles, and even has some biblical justification of this scam (22-23). His junior pastor is sent to negotiate with the gang about the price which turns out to be a hard bargain because, as the gang leader claims: 'Good miracles cost money' (36). The agreed price doubles after Rev. Akpoborie comes up with the idea that the deliverance service should specifically focus on homosexuality, seeking to deliver 'these sick people' 106). His idea is inspired by the passing of an anti-gay law (the story here alludes to the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, 2013). The novel suggests that the passing of the law has put the issue of same-sex sexuality into the public spotlight, recording a conversation between clients in a

hair salon who refer to gay people as 'animals', instruments of the devil, sinners, and carriers of disease (62). It further suggests that for Rev. Akpoborie, this moral panic is a business opportunity to market his church. In that sense, there is no difference between him and the gangsters he is hiring who are happy to stage any kind of miracle as long as they gain financially.

The miracle service is promoted via a billboard, referring to Rev. Akpoborie as 'the anointed man of God' and as 'the godly destroyer' (126). These words stand in shrill contrast to the earlier acknowledgement by the pastor himself that he actually 'can't really heal people' (23). The discrepancy is John and Ònájìn's way of suggesting that Pentecostal marketing is a swindle. The language of destroying is repeated as the billboard advertises the event as 'operation point and kill: night of divine demolition' where 'all enemies must die in Jesus' name' (126). Obviously, the enemies to be destroyed are demonic spirits. During the service, Rev. Akpoborie casts out spirits causing barrenness, illness, and other infections and inflictions, constantly invoking 'the mighty name of Jesus' (126-27). It culminates in the pastor introducing a young man – arranged by the criminals – as being possessed by the spirit of homosexuality. The graphics depict the drama that deliverance in a Pentecostal context is, with the pastor laying his hand on the young man and pushing him hard till he falls on the floor, while shouting at him, 'In da mighty name of Jesus, be loosed! … Be loosed! Be loosed! Loosed I say!' (131). The invocation of 'the mighty name of Jesus' is significant, as it illustrates how, for Pentecostals, Jesus Christ is a source of 'ultimate spiritual power' that can be mobilized to combat any perceived evil (Wariboko 2014: 63). The repetition of the phrase 'be loosed' is part of the speech act of deliverance, serving to add force to the instruction of the devil to leave. The young man's rolling over the floor is the sign that the evil spirit has left him, which the pastor verifies by asking whether he still likes men, to which the young man responds: 'Men? No o! God forbid! Why would I like men' (132). The dramatic deliverance from the spirit of homosexuality has been successfully staged, and the congregation shouts in excitement, 'Praise da Lord!!!' (133).

In the meantime, there is a separate storyline in which Akpoborie's son, with the telling name Godstime, has become increasingly intimate with his friend, Onyeka. When his father finds out, he sees it as a threat to his reputation and ministry, telling his son: 'I will not allow the devil to use you to ruin me' (116). He then subjects Godstime and Onyeka to a private deliverance ritual, spraying them with 'anointing oil' while praying loudly: 'In the mighty name of Jesus, I command every demon of Sodom to get out of these children' (120). The phrase 'demon of Sodom' is striking here, as it illustrates how in 'the performative path of deliverance' the first step often is identifying the evil spirit (Rowan 2016: 249). The phrase itself refers to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah which, in popular Christian usage, is associated with homosexuality (Ukah 2020). Onyeka plays along during the deliverance, responding to the ritual by 'shaking and speaking in tongues' (123); apparently, he has internalized the demonization of his sexuality. Following the deliverance session, Rev. Akpoborie instructs Godstime and Onyeka to stop seeing each other, and that Onyeka should stop coming to church, leaving Godstime broken-hearted. In a tragic turn of events, immediately after the successful miracle service where Akpoborie cast out the demon of homosexuality, the pastor receives a phone call from Onyeka's mother, who tells him that her son has committed suicide. Godstime blames his father for the tragedy, saying: 'It's all your fault! Jesus didn't drive people away!' (144). He further suggests that his parents, different from Jesus, only care about their reputation, not about other human beings. The truth of this is demonstrated later in the story, after online media break the news about Rev. Akpoborie's son being gay. The pastor tells his congregation the next Sunday that this false rumour proves that he is, in fact, an anointed man of God, as otherwise the devil would not be trying to break his ministry. Godstime is sent to Germany for studies but ends up in a severe depression; however, the Nigerian pastor – a friend of his father – who serves as his host, presents an accepting version of Christian faith fundamentally different from

Rev. Akpoborie's, and helps Godstime to come to terms with his sexuality. According to Wariboko (2014: 77), 'anointing, holiness, and prosperity are the trinity of the Pentecostal experience and keys to understanding the Nigerian Pentecostal movement.' Yet, John and Ònájìn's satirical novel suggests that this trinity is at serious risk of becoming a false pretention. Rev. Akpoborie might claim to be anointed by God, but this is religious marketing language with no substance to it – it is a fake anointing. Likewise, his concern with holiness turns out to be a concern about his own reputation as a 'man of God', which he has carefully cultivated to hide his immoral character as a crook pastor, unfaithful husband, and sexual harasser. He has built his wealth and prosperity on this reputation, but at the end of the novel he has lost all of it. Even though one of the characters in the novel says that 'God will not come down and give justice' (197), the novel's ending suggests that justice is done as the crook pastor is served rightly. To conclude, *On Ajayi Crowther Street* offers a sharp critique of Pentecostalism as a hypocritical religious culture, and of deliverance practices as a scam exploiting people's fears and anxieties to enrich self-proclaimed 'men of God'. The main objective of the novel is to subject Pentecostalism, and specifically the Pentecostal preoccupation with homosexuality, to a satirical critique and to expose its moral and spiritual bankruptcy. This fits in with John's broader project of telling the story of Nigeria by 'telling the story of religion' and how it affects the country's social environment and political culture (Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma 2017: 93). Yet, in a subtle way, the novel can also be seen as engaging in constructive religious thought. First, the name Godstime for the central gay character is very well chosen, as it can be read as a suggestion that the time has come to accept all human persons, regardless of their sexuality, as created in the image of God. Indeed, it suggests that recognizing the dignity and rights of queer people is a divine imperative. Second, the way in which the character of Rev. Akpoborie is contrasted to that of Jesus is illuminating, as it invokes a model of religious ministry that instead of driving people away accepts them for who they are.

Reclaiming Indigenous Religion in *An Ordinary Wonder*

The novel *An Ordinary Wonder* by Buki Papillon (2021) is unique in Nigerian and possibly African queer literature for centring around an intersex protagonist. It presents the coming-of-age story of Otolorin (Oto), who grows up with his twin sister Wura. Upon birth, Oto's genitalia were found to be ambiguous; he is gendered as a boy, yet when growing up he becomes more attuned towards being a girl. Seeing the ambiguous genitals of the newly born baby, the midwife (who also was a prophetess) screams and prophesizes to Oto's mother that 'your true son from heaven was stolen from your womb by worshippers of Satan and replaced with an *emere* demon' (44).[5] The novel captures the stigma associated with Oto's condition immediately on the first page, which opens by saying, 'My name is Otolorin. I've been called "monster"', and which proceeds by making a comparison of Oto to Wura: 'Wura is everything to our mother, who will never have any other children because she is the woman who birthed the unspeakable, and my father has no desire to sire any other monsters' (5). In fact, as the story unfolds, it emerges that Oto's birth was the reason why his father left his wife – something Oto's mother never got over and which she blames her son for.

The stigma of being different results in Oto being bullied at school, such as by Bayo who forcibly strips Oto naked and then ridicules him: 'Hahaha … oh my God! *Hahahaha*! What is this tiny thing? How will you ever satisfy a woman? … You're really strange, Oto, do you know that? You look like an *iwin*. A mamiwater' (67). *Iwin* is the Yoruba word for a spirit of the forest, while 'mamiwater' refers to the well-known water spirit (also known as Mami Wata) who features in many West African traditions. Bayo's linking of Oto's ambiguously sexed body to these spirits is an illustration of the ways in which spirits in many African cultures are associated with gender ambiguity and fluidity. Although for Bayo this clearly is a negative association, at least potentially this spiritualization of the queer body can also be constructive. As Stella Nyanzi (2014: 67) has argued, 'cultural and indigenous

understandings of gendered spirits of ancestors who may possess individuals offer socially appropriate notions of handling fluid, transient gender identities.' As we will discuss shortly, *An Ordinary Wonder* is concerned with exploring this queer potential of spirits. Yet, it does so against a background of popular beliefs in Christianized Nigeria today, that indigenous gendered spirits belong to the realm of the devil. One of the effects of missionary Christianity in many parts of Africa is that the spirits of indigenous religions were understood in a dualist Christian framework of good versus evil, God versus the devil. This is reflected in the way in which Oto's deeply Christian mother understands her child's condition. In a conversation with her cousin, she again compares Wura to Oto when saying: 'Wura is the joy of my life! Unfortunately she just won't accept that her brother's aim is her destruction. That he is being controlled by evil forces beyond her understanding. I do all I can to protect her from him, but it is never enough' (46).

Mother's understanding of Oto's condition is influenced by other people in her environment, in particular her own mother and the prophet of their church. Oto's grandmother, Mama Ondo, uses the explanatory framework of witchcraft to explain why Oto is 'abnormal down there' (44). A fervent member of a Pentecostal-type church, called Seraphic Temple of Holy Fire, Mama Ondo has successfully insisted that Mother leaves the Baptist church she used to attend and joins the Temple to seek spiritual protection against the spell put on her family. The difference between the two churches is profound: at Ezra Baptist Church 'people wore their Sunday best and sang softly from hymnals' (103), while at the Temple the four-hour long services feature intense preaching, prophecies and deliverances performed by charismatic leaders, referred to with the Yoruba word *woli*, meaning prophet.[6] The senior prophet, Woli Omolaja, makes Mother believe that Oto's condition is caused by the devil. Twice, the prophet – with Mother's consent – subjects Oto to a deliverance ritual, narrated in the novel in great detail to convey its traumatizing effect. After the first violent act of deliverance was performed, Woli Omolaja guarantees Mother 'that the removal of the demon inhabiting this body and the restoration of your true son is only the beginning of Jehovah's miracles' (116). Mother's mind is put at ease, and Oto enjoys several months of peace at home, until another incident makes Mother doubt whether the demon has truly gone. She drags Oto to the Temple again, for a second deliverance session with the prophet – in private and at night this time. This attempt is more forceful than the first one, complete with whipping Oto's back and a 'baptism' (in fact, a drowning) in a water stream to 'wash the filth of darkness from this sinner' (148). Seeing the burning eyes of the prophet cast upon him, Oto realizes that he 'wasn't meant to survive this. Not intact' (148).

What is significant in the deliverance narratives in the novel, is that in both cases, Oto experiences another spiritual presence that protects and saves his life. This female mermaid-type spirit first appears early in the novel, after Mother has beaten twelve-year old Oto into hospital for putting on a dress of his sister: '*Call me Yeyemi*, she said without words. *You are safe. Here between worlds, at the parting of the veil, you may rest*' (11). Throughout the novel, Yeyemi – Yoruba for 'my mother' – is a symbol of maternal divinity appearing at the most critical moments when Oto is in trouble, such as when Bayo bullies him, and when his life is in danger. During the first deliverance, Oto has a vision of her while the prophet is spitting in his eyes: 'She caught me in her outstretched arms, looking eery inch a goddess in a shawl of green and gold seaweed that floated around her as if it was alive. It wrapped itself around us. In that embrace, I breathed easy' (115). During the second deliverance attempt, when the prophet is drowning Oto in the water, Oto screams for her – 'Yeyemi, save me!' (148) – and she comes again to his rescue, biting Woli Omolaja who is then forced to let Oto go. In the novel's closing chapter, when Oto – who by then has adopted the name Lori – is about to board a plane to America, heading towards freedom, Yeyemi appears again, with a word of encouragement and affirmation: '*I am the strength and fire in you, I am everything that is and was and ever will be*' (312).

The figure of Yeyemi is one way in which the novel suggests that indigenous religious beliefs can be life-affirming for queer people. Yet, the novel has yet another complementary way of making the same suggestion. Although Oto's father left the family soon after he was born, he does insist that Mother – to her horror – takes the young Oto for regular visits to a *Babalawo*, which is a priest in the *Ifa* divination system (Ogundele 2007). It appears that when Oto and Wura were born, their parents brought them to the Babalawo for a naming ceremony intended to divine a child's *ori*, or destiny. For Oto, 'the results were ambiguous', although the priest discerned that 'his head is not cursed' (27). After Oto has turned twelve, the Babalawo repeats the divination ceremony, this time with crystal clear insight: 'We have here a daughter whose *ori* made a most unusual selection in heaven before descending into the marketplace of life. … The form which best favours her destiny in this lifetime is female' (30). To explain Oto's condition, the priest shares a piece of Yoruba mythology, about how at the time of creation, the gods made a small oversight resulting in a body 'that looked neither fully male nor female', but that was adopted by the goddess Yemoja as falling under her female *ori* and receiving her protection and guidance (30). Oto is initially bewildered but also feels affirmed – 'the gods had pronounced me a girl!' – and is reassured by the Babalawo of being 'both normal and special' (31). The validation here is a declaration that Oto's embodiment inhabits sacred meaning – far from demon possessed, Oto is, indeed, 'an ordinary wonder' (5).

By including this scene, which is crucial to Oto's coming of age narrative, *An Ordinary Wonder* offers a literary illustration of the point that 'traditional societies in Africa possess myths that help them navigate daily social and political existence when it comes to gender and sexuality issues. … Gender and sexuality myths in Africa correspond to the lived realities of the peoples' (Olali 2022: 324). Thus, the novel suggests that indigenous religious traditions offer wisdom to understand and affirm gender ambiguity, while Christianity tends to demonize anything outside or in between the binary construction of male and female. The only nuance to the latter is a scene where a Catholic nun from England, who is a teacher at Oto's school, reassures him, like the Babalawo earlier, that there is nothing wrong with him. Sister Angelica uses language that merges Christianity and biomedical science when she tells Oto: 'You're just a child. God created us all in his image and the devil does not create but destroy. This likely has to do with your hormones' (73).

It has been argued that 'cultural, and originally Christian, insistence on a binary opposition of maleness and femaleness is at the root of Western antipathy toward intersexuality' (Hiebert and Hiebert 2015: 31). *An Ordinary Wonder* pushes this further by suggesting that in the current Nigerian context, Pentecostalism in particular delegitimizes the lived and embodied experiences of people like Oto. Turning the Pentecostal demonization of the queer body around, Oto suggests that instead of him being demon possessed, 'it was the people who whipped me till I fainted that were evil' (147). In other words, it are the church prophets that need to be delivered from the evil of rigid cisgender heteronormativity and the subsequent violence against intersex and other queer bodies.

Reinterpreting Christianity in *Under the Udala Trees*

Hailed as the first 'Nigerian lesbian novel' (Manzo 2018, 151), *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta (2015) stands out from the previous texts in a few ways. First, obviously it features a female protagonist (although, notably, the word 'lesbian' is never used in the novel, which is interesting given the ongoing debates about the limitations of Western LGBTQ+ identity categories in Africa). Second, not just religion as a social phenomenon, but faith as a personal matter, is a central theme, as already indicated by the epigraph, which is a quotation from the Bible (Hebrews 11:1). Indeed, this bildungsroman can be read as a literary account of queering faith within Christianity through a process of biblical and theological reinterpretation that is woven through the narrative (Van Klinken and Chitando 2021: 165-180). The novel explicitly sets out to deliver Christianity from its investment into homophobic politics. It does so in the aftermath of the passing

of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in 2013 in Nigeria, with fervent support from the religious sector, which according to an author's note at the end of the novel was the direct occasion for writing this text. Third, this also makes the novel explicit in its political intentions, as it responds to an anti-gay bill and aims to 'give Nigeria's marginalized LGBTQ citizens a more powerful voice, and a place in our nation's history' (Okparanta 2015: 325). To recognize the place of LGBTQ people in Nigerian history, Okparanta chooses a significant historical context, as the story is set in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, or the Biafra War (1967-1970). The protagonist – named Ifeoma – is Igbo and loses her father in the war, with her mother ('Mama') being left traumatized and seeking comfort in her conservative faith. Fourth, different from the previous two texts, the scene of deliverance narrated in *Under the Udala Trees* is not set in the church but in a domestic space, and it is not a pastor but Ifeoma's mother who performs this drama onto her daughter. Thus, the novel also opens a conversation about parenthood of queer children.

When Mama finds out about Ifeoma's blossoming relationship with another teenage girl (a Hausa Muslim girl, for that matter), she subjects her daughter to a rigid programme of religious discipline because 'there's nothing more important now than for us to begin working on cleansing your soul' (65). This programme consists of daily bible study lessons, where Mama and Ifeoma work through the whole Bible. Immediately from the first session, Mama uses the opportunity to explain that homosexuality, according to the Bible, is an abomination. Discussing the creation story of Genesis 1, she tells her daughter that clearly, God created man and woman to live as husband and wife, because 'if God wanted it to be otherwise, would He not have included it that other way in the Bible?' (68). So it continues, to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the laws in Leviticus, and other so-called clobber verses which for Mama all centre around 'this issue of abomination' (80). Yet, Ijeoma is reminded of what her father once told her, about traditional folktales being allegorical, figurative commentaries on certain life situations; she wonders why the same might not be the case for biblical stories. Mama dismisses the suggestion, saying 'The Bible is the Bible and not to be questioned' (81), thus reinforcing the idea of a literalist interpretation of Scripture. Ijeoma, however, has an independent mind and is not satisfied; she keeps questioning her mother's take on the Bible and comes up with alternative interpretations. For instance, regarding the story of Adam and Eve, she muses: 'Just because the story happened to focus on a certain Adam and Eve did not mean that all other possibilities were forbidden. … What if Adam and Eve were merely symbols of companionship?' (82-83).

For Mama, Ifeoma's sexuality is caused by the devil, and she prays for God's protection of her daughter: 'Protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away. … Protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell. Lead her not into temptation' (72). Yet, when the bible lessons do not appear to show much effect – Ijeoma confesses that she is still thinking of the girl she fell in love with –, Mama realizes that something stronger than a prayer for protection is needed: the devil, who clearly has entered her daughter's body and mind, needs to be cast out. In a dramatic scene, Mama performs a deliverance, praying over Ijeoma who is on her knees in front of her while sprinkling her with anointed water, and ordering the demon to come out and leave: 'Her voice was progressively louder each time she repeated it, but still controlled: "In the name of the Almighty God, I order you to leave my child alone"' (88). The repeated language and the volume of her voice are typical of the Pentecostal drama of deliverance, which is a performance of spiritual power. At the end her mother loses her self-control, crying for the devil to leave, with a piercing voice that causes shivers on Ijeoma's back. In the silence that follows this drama, Ijeoma realizes that the only way to get out of the situation is by giving in to her mother's prayers. Her response, saying 'I will be cured by the glory and power of God' (89), can be seen as a typical Pentecostal speech act of positive confession, where deliverance and healing are enacted by proclaiming it in faith (Adelakun 2021: 58).

Yet, Ijeoma is neither delivered nor cured, as she gradually comes to understand that her sexuality is neither an illness nor demonic but is a natural part of herself. As she puts it: 'By this time, a large part of me did not believe I had committed any type of abomination' (159). Instead of being delivered from an evil spirit, she is being liberated by giving in to a newly found love. While dancing together with her girlfriend Ndidi, Ijeoma 'felt a sense of liberation that I had not until then known' (193). Yet, this queer liberation is a process with setbacks. Still living with and influenced by her mother, Ijeoma keeps having doubts about whether she is doing the right thing, and even wonders whether she might be a 'witch under the influence of the devil' (196). Seeking consolation in a quiet church and asking God for a sign to help her recognize the evil in her heart, the sign comes in the form of her mother walking into the church space, from which Ijeoma concludes: 'If this was God's sign, then Mama was the evil in my heart' (197). It is a turning moment in this coming-of-age story, as Ijeoma learns to break away – be delivered – from her mother's watchful eyes and from her mother's homophobia that she has internalized. Yet, even this is not a straightforward process: after a violent and traumatizing attack on the community of queer women that Ijeoma, via her girlfriend, has become part of, she gives in to her mother's pressure to marry a childhood friend and lead a 'normal life' without fear of being found out (220). The marriage fails, and at the end of the novel Ijeoma returns to Ndidi. By then, even Mama finally, albeit reluctantly, accepts her daughter the way she is when she mutters: 'God, who created you, must have known what He did' (323).

Ijeoma herself, in this difficult journey of freeing herself from her mother and coming to terms with her sexuality, has not lost her faith, although she has had to reimagine it. Not only does she have to change her view of the Bible, recognizing the multiple ways in which it can be interpreted; she also grows in her understanding of God, moving away from the rigid image of a stern God that her mother taught her, and instead adopting a notion of God as an artist who is creatively and actively involved with the world, transforming it for the better:

> If the Old and New Testaments are any indication, then change is in fact a major part of His aesthetic, a major part of His vision for the world. … Maybe God is still speaking and will continue to do so for always. Maybe He is still creating new covenants, only we are too deaf, too headstrong, too set in old ways to hear. (322)

These theological musings are a direct critique of a conservative form of Christianity which believes that God's laws as presented in the Bible are unchangeable. Yet, they also open up an alternative, progressive understanding of Christian faith in line with a humanistic vision of human diversity and freedom. This way, *Under the Udala Trees* creates 'a space for the Christian legitimacy of female same-sex love' (Frateur 2019) and helps to imagine a Christian social and political practice that is radically different from popular Pentecostal culture.

Conclusion

The Nigerian queer novels discussed in this chapter nuance, complicate and enrich the understanding of the relationship between queerness and religion in an African social and cultural context, and they gesture towards a post-queer, spiritualized understanding of sexual and gendered embodiment, be it indigenous, Christian, or a combination of these two. By critically narrating the experience of deliverance of the queer body through violent religious ritual and discursive practices, they offer a unique African literary queer critique of religion, specifically in its Pentecostal Christian form, highlighting the intrusive and harmful nature of Pentecostal deliverance practices. Yet, importantly, none of these novels break with religion altogether.

Elnathan John and Àlàbá Ònájìn's *On Ajayi Crowther Street* is the most explicit and wide-ranging in its critique of Pentecostalism, not just centring on the Pentecostal demonization of queer

bodies but also its broader moral hypocrisy and religious hollowness. Yet, as we have seen, in a more subtle way, the novel can also be seen as engaging in constructive religious thought. The name of the main gay character, Godstime, can actually be read as a suggestion that his coming out occurs at God's time.

Buki Papillon's *An Ordinary Wonder* offers perhaps the most gripping narrative account of deliverance of the queer body in any Nigerian literary text so far. In this novel, the intersex protagonist, Oto, comes to terms with his condition after narrowly surviving a traumatic and intense attempt at deliverance by a Pentecostal prophet – a survival which he owes to the fact that the water spirit, Yeyemi, comes to his rescue. Papillon's narrative suggests that Yoruba religion has a rich mythology that helps to make sense and affirm Oto's condition, and thus is much more conducive of queerness than Pentecostal Christianity which can only demonize the queer body. Thus, this novel presents a literary example of reclaiming indigenous religion as a strategy of African (post-)queer worldmaking.

Different from *An Ordinary Wonder*, Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* demonstrates that such worldmaking can also occur within the space of Christian symbols and meanings, yet the novel makes an effort to indigenize Christianity in the Nigerian Igbo context, suggesting that homophobia and heteronormativity are not intrinsic to Christianity but are linked to its colonial European kernel.

Through different strategies – exposing religious hypocrisy, reclaiming indigenous religion, and reinterpreting Christianity – these three novels offer alternative modalities of African (post-)queer worldmaking. Importantly, in each of these modalities, (post-)queer worldmaking is not about breaking away from, but occurs within the realm of the religious, although it involves profound religious negotiations and transformations. In various ways, these novels subscribe to a frame in which sexuality is spiritualized but reimagine this spiritualization in a way that is affirming of queer bodies. Resisting a Eurocentric secular LGBT identities and rights framework, they explore the religious and spiritual resources that are relevant and meaningful in the Nigerian context and that can help to affirm queer existence. Doing so, they also contribute to post-queer theorizing. The queering (or post-queering, if you like) of queer Africa, to use Stella Nyanzi's (2014) phrase, is not about a wholesale liberation from religion as an oppressive force. Instead, it is about the continent being delivered from the evil of particular forms of religiosity that are harmful and destructive, in order for queer African bodies to flourish and be affirmed by the spirits and God(s) that gave them life.

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[1] *Walking with Shadows* is not the first Nigerian literary text with a gay character, yet it is the first that offers a characterization that 'is not only insightful but also deeply sympathetic' (Dunton 2011: 208) and that renders visible 'the very possibility of a Nigerian homosexuality' (Zabus 2013: 95).

[2] The Lord's Prayer is taught by Jesus in the gospels of the New Testament, and is commonly prayed by Christians across denominations. Its last petition reads, 'Deliver us from evil.'

[3] Our reading *for* deliverance is inspired by Gray's creative and thoughtful unpacking of deliverance as a methodological, ethical and theological category with queer potential.

[4] Cassava Republic, 'About Us', https://cassavarepublic.biz/about-us-4/ (accessed 8 July 2023).

[5] *Emere* is a Yoruba term for a spirit-child believed to travel between the spiritual and visible world.

[6] *Woli* is commonly used in Nigeria to describe prophets in indigenous Pentecostal-type churches.