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Social Seeds:

On the Potential and Problems of Pentecostal Exchange

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While there are multiple reasons for the runaway success of Pentecostal Christianity across the globe, it is clear that a central component of this religion's expansion, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, has been the prosperity gospel. This Christian movement is by this point familiar to many in anthropology. The central tenet of the prosperity gospel, also known as the "faith gospel" or "health and wealth gospel," is that God wants all believers to be rich, healthy, and successful (Hunt 2000). All that is required to access these divine blessings is faith in God's power, faith that Pentecostals are urged to demonstrate through the giving of gifts (Wiegele 2005: 21). These offerings are sometimes referred to as "seeds" or "seed offerings" – small contributions that, when given in faith, will result in a dramatically increased "harvest" for those who "sow" them.

In this article I examine the relationship between the prosperity gospel and the economy, and more specifically between Pentecostalism and capitalism on the one hand and non-market exchange on the other. These various interpretive intersections are not by themselves new in the study of the prosperity gospel; indeed, as we will see, this movement has routinely been approached in economic terms, whether those of the capitalist market or of a gift economy. My aim in revisiting the economics of Pentecostal prosperity here is

first to put the different frameworks within which the prosperity gospel has been interpreted into dialogue with one another in order to tease apart the multiple axes of exchange operating among Pentecostal followers of the prosperity gospel on the Zambian Copperbelt.

The primary goal of this analysis, however, is not simply to produce another study of prosperity gospel exchange. Rather, this discussion represents part of a larger ethnographic project that explores how Pentecostal believers draw on their religion to create social relationships and structures amidst what Bernice Martin, following Lash and Urry (1994), calls the “institutional deficient” of the global neoliberal order (Martin 1998: 117-118). What I want to highlight, in other words, is Pentecostalism’s role in the “deliberate labor” involved in “making life possible” in contemporary Africa, and elsewhere in the Global South (Mbembe in Shipley 2010: 657, 659). In part, what this analysis produces is a response to criticisms of the Anthropology of Christianity that accuse it of being overly focused on religious ideas at the expense of other historical or political economic concerns (e.g. Comaroff 2010). Such critiques assert that a focus on religious ideas ignores the issue of power while at the same time claiming that religion and power are inextricably linked. While it should not be difficult to see that the dichotomy between religion and social life or political economy is a false one, a careful examination of Pentecostal practice will make it clear that these three are bound up together in believers’ social efforts. On the Copperbelt, these are primarily aimed at creating hierarchical relationships.

My analysis begins with a discussion of the various economic frameworks within which social scientists have interpreted the prosperity gospel. I then go on to discuss how believers on the Copperbelt have retooled the message of Pentecostal prosperity to reflect the social values of urban Zambia. These values have also shaped the way they give seed offerings, which on the Copperbelt represent both religious sacrifices to God and socially productive gifts to church leaders. After describing each of these forms of exchange, I conclude by showing how they work together to create and protect the kinds of social ties that people in urban Zambia consider most important. In this way, I offer not only an analysis of the prosperity gospel as it is practiced in a particular African context, but also an example of how Pentecostalism is mobilized to make life possible for believers.

My argument in this article is informed by twenty months of fieldwork on the Copperbelt, nearly all of it in a community that I call Nsofu. Nsofu is a township with a population of approximately 25 thousand people located on the outskirts of the city of Kitwe, the commercial and transportation hub of the Copperbelt province. Many Nsofu residents are employed in formal-sector jobs, whether in education or commerce, or in the Nkana copper mine and the many industries that support it. Also among my neighbors in the township were individuals involved in what is locally glossed as “business”: trade, often informal, in commodities as varied as dried fish from Zambia’s Northern Province and stylish clothing from South Africa. Finally, there are those in Nsofu who have no regular income, but rely instead on piecework, the good graces of others, or some combination of the two. In short, Nsofu is an economically diverse community, a fact that will become important when we examine local structures of exchange and sociality in the township.

In 1991, alongside a transition to multi-party democracy, the Zambian government issued a constitutional declaration that the country would be a “Christian nation.”<sup>i</sup> The presence of Christianity in Zambia antedates this event, which my informants call “the declaration,” by nearly a century (see van Binsbergen 1981; Taylor and Lehmann 1961), and missionary-established denominations, as well as African Independent Churches, have long played an important role in the religious life of the country (e.g. Hinfelaar 1994; Jules-Rosette 1975). Over the course of the last 25 years, however, Pentecostalism has become an increasingly visible part of the Zambian religious landscape (Cheyeka 2006). Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit through practices such as glossolalia and prophecy (Dayton 1987: 15-33). There are several large, international Pentecostal denominations present in Zambia, but far more common in my estimation (at least in urban areas) are locally initiated congregations with fewer than one hundred members. Although by themselves few Pentecostal churches can rival the size of their missionary-established counterparts, taken together members of these congregations account for a significant portion of Zambia’s overall Christian population (Agha et al. 2006: 552-553).

The dynamics of Zambian religious life sketched here are evident in Nsofu. Like most neighborhoods on the Copperbelt, this township is home to dozens of churches, including a Catholic parish, a United Church of Zambia, and a large Seventh Day Adventist congregation. In addition to these churches, there are at least two dozen Pentecostal groups in Nsofu. Of these congregations, only four belong to transnational denominations;

the remaining churches are independent, although their leaders seek to cultivate relationships with Pentecostals both in and outside of Zambia. All of these groups have been influenced by the prosperity gospel, and I will begin my discussion of this movement with an outline of the various economic frameworks within which it has been analyzed.

### **The Economics of Pentecostal Prosperity**

In the light of the fact that seed offerings are sometimes referred to as “investments” (see Ukah 2005: 263), it is no surprise that many social scientific analyses have positioned the prosperity gospel within a larger interpretive framework that connects Pentecostal practice with capitalist expansion. These arguments have taken several forms. Prominent here is Jean and John Comaroff’s discussion of “occult economies,” in which the prosperity gospel emerges as one of many contemporary responses to the global rise of “spectral capital” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 290). In a very different way, Pentecostalism more generally has also been linked to late capitalism at the level of practice. As Bernice Martin has noted, the self-discipline and spontaneity inculcated through Pentecostal adherence serve believers well in the flexible labor conditions of the post-Fordist economy (Martin 1995). Indeed, there are those that have found in the prosperity gospel not only a Weberian training ground for neoliberal market participation, but also a site of intentional engagement with that market “on its own terms” (van Dijk 2009: 111) through, for example, a church’s encouragement of entrepreneurship among its members (van de Kamp 2011).

In contrast to these discussions of Pentecostalism as responding to or working within a capitalist logic, others have described the prosperity gospel in non-market terms, and more specifically as a kind of gift economy. The primary reason for such interpretations is that seed offerings are believed to maintain a spiritual connection to their givers while moving through a Pentecostal community. In part, what the inalienability of Pentecostal gifts sometimes produces is social relationships between laypeople and the religious leaders that act as recipients of a seed offering on God's behalf (e.g. Lindhardt 2009). As we will see, this is certainly the case among Copperbelt believers. The inalienability of the Pentecostal gift is important not only in the light of its link to the original giver, however, but also with regard to its connection to other, more powerful members of the network of Pentecostal exchange. For followers of the prosperity gospel in Uppsala, Sweden, for example, the expectation that seed offerings will produce a return gift follows from the fact that these contributions are incorporated into a religious economy that includes charismatic leaders (Coleman 2004, 2006). In this case, the power of figures like Swedish pastor Ulf Ekman enlivens the gifts presented by ordinary believers, and it is because of this power that followers of the prosperity gospel expect that these contributions will eventually produce a harvest.<sup>ii</sup>

Arguably, even more important to the Pentecostal return gift than the role of charismatic leaders is the fact that seed offerings are ultimately gifts to God. Through these contributions, believers "[indebt] God to them" in a "reciprocal relationship" (Wiegele 2005: 9), thereby "[compelling] God to do more than what He wanted to do for them" (Ukah 2005: 262). Put in terms of Hubert and Mauss' classic work on sacrifice, seed

offerings serve to “bind the god by a contract” (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 66); indeed, much of the research on the prosperity gospel has focused on sacrifice. Simon Coleman, in a much more detailed survey of economics and prosperity than that I have provided here (Coleman 2011), notes that sacrifice is a productive interpretive framework that provides us with a clear example of risk, intention, and agency among believers (also see Harding 2000: 103-124; Premawardhana 2012). Here I would emphasize that sacrifice rounds out a discussion of Pentecostal exchange precisely because it reveals something about the social underpinnings of prosperity gospel adherence; for, to invoke Hubert and Mauss again, “[the] sacred things in relation to which sacrifice functions, are social things” (1964: 101).

What I would like to draw from this short discussion of Pentecostal exchange is the idea that seed offerings are imbued with power at two points. The first of these is the one that believers on the Copperbelt consider most important: their sacrificial exchange with God. However, as we will see, my informants were also concerned with the human recipients of their seed offerings, and especially with the possibility that their gifts might create relationships with particular pastors or prophets. By examining what we might refer to as two different “levels” of Pentecostal exchange – as sacrificial offerings and socially productive gifts – my ultimate aim is to speak to the first economic framework outlined above, namely the relationship between capitalism and the prosperity gospel. I argue that it is through an analysis of the non-market exchanges present in Copperbelt Pentecostal practice that we are able to understand how this form of Christianity is connected to the political economy of Zambia. To wit, the various axes of exchange identifiable among

Copperbelt believers reveal their efforts to produce a particular kind of social world, a social world that in turn reflects the recent economic history of liberalization and crisis. In order to demonstrate how this is the case, let me begin by outlining the relationship between Pentecostal prosperity on the one hand and social life and political economy in urban Zambia on the other.

### **Prosperity, Ambition, and Obligation**

Although the message of the prosperity gospel has been well received in Zambia, believers have modified it through a local process of theological nuancing paralleled in other parts of Africa (e.g. Maxwell 1998; van Dijk 2009). One aspect of these changes has been an increased amount of care with regard to seed offerings. For many believers, this means emphasizing personal holiness, and not just giving money, as a prerequisite to prosperity. Along these same lines, while Pentecostals on the Copperbelt do make seed offerings, the analysis that follows will show that they are very selective in who they choose to serve as recipients of these gifts.

In addition to the limits they have placed on seed offerings, believers on the Copperbelt have redefined prosperity itself. In urban Zambia, the promises of extravagant wealth that figure in the teaching of Pentecostal televangelists – “billions of currency in any country” (qtd. in Gifford 2004: 151) – have been exchanged for a vision of prosperity that some of my informants described using the English<sup>iii</sup> word “holistic.” For Pentecostals in Nsofu, prosperity is about many things, including spiritual development and strong family ties. To

be sure, it is also about wealth; however, most of believers' concern in this regard is focused on having the resources to be able to live their social lives well.<sup>iv</sup> Making sense of the prosperity gospel as it is practiced in urban Zambia therefore requires us to understand the kinds of social relationships that people in Nsofu consider most important.

As I have argued elsewhere (Haynes 2012), the social ideal on the Copperbelt is characterized by exchange relationships established across a gradient of economic achievement in a process similar to what Karen Hansen (1985), working in Lusaka, has called "cross-class" exchange. In this framework, economic hierarchy is a central component of relational life. For, when people are spread out along a staggered continuum of material wealth, everyone is able to participate in the types of relationships that they value most. One such relational form is found in what I refer to as ties of ambition, ties that reach "up" to those who possess greater economic resources. In Nsofu, ambition is axiomatic in most social and economic decisions, and everyone is and feels they should be ambitious, provided this does not completely preclude the other primary relational form on the Copperbelt: ties of obligation. Through relationships of obligation people reach "down" to assist and support those of lower economic status, especially kin, but also friends and neighbors. Like ambition, obligation is a taken for granted component of Copperbelt social life, a central part of the way that resources are used and decisions are made.<sup>v</sup>

To this brief outline of the Copperbelt relational world it is necessary to add one further point. The most important thing to keep in mind when discussing social life in Nsofu is that what people want is a balance between ambition and obligation. That is, they want to be

able to have both kinds of relationships. By itself, neither one of these social orientations is acceptable. Ambition without obligation is dangerous, a sure sign of occult participation, whether witchcraft or Satanism. Conversely, obligation without ambition is oppressive. One does not need to look far among studies of contemporary urban Africa to find discussions of what happens when obligation becomes unbearable – this is what fuels anxiety about the elderly (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), for example, and about orphans (e.g. de Boeck and Plissart 2004).

The problem of overwhelming obligation leads us to the difficulties that the recent economic history of the Copperbelt has presented to social life. In the series of economic upheavals and political changes that Zambia has experienced during the neoliberal period, it is increasingly difficult for people to live out an ideal balance between ambition and obligation (see Ferguson 1999). This is because shocks to the market, such as the global financial crisis that struck during my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, cause the economic gradient that undergirds social life on the Copperbelt to become unbalanced; more specifically, this gradient becomes bottom-heavy. When workers at the mine are laid off in large numbers or the value of the Kwacha depreciates and makes trans-border trade less profitable, fewer and fewer people are left in an economic position to make relationships of ambition possible for those below them. By the same token, those who remain secure in their position find themselves faced with an ever-greater burden of obligation.

In the case of people like Mr. Zulu, a boilermaker at the mine and an elder at his Pentecostal church, access to steady wage labor meant that obligation eclipsed virtually any possibility

of ambition. During one of my first conversations with Mr. Zulu, he told me that he felt that salaries on the Copperbelt were never sufficient to meet all of the demands that he and others with formal-sector employment faced. Mr. Zulu then contrasted this situation with the experience of miners in his father's and grandfather's generations, who were able to support a large network of dependents with their wages. While Mr. Zulu's remarks likely reflected an idealized image of the past, it is clear that his own experience was one of unending obligation to care for relatives and friends. As a result, ambition was difficult to pursue. By the time he paid his rent, household bills, school fees for his own children and the two nieces who lived in his house, and whatever emergency expenses his extended family incurred – from funerals to hospital fees – Mr. Zulu rarely had money left over to put toward building a house on the plot of land he owned, or replacing the stereo system he had sold to help pay for a relative's burial. It is this type of relational struggle that Pentecostals on the Copperbelt hope will be resolved as a result of prosperity gospel adherence in general and giving seed offerings in particular, and it is to examples of the latter that we now turn.

### **Sowing in Good Soil**

Most Pentecostal congregations on the Copperbelt do not have the resources to construct a church building, and believers therefore gather either in private homes or, more commonly, in government schoolrooms. One of the first things that Pentecostal groups do when their numbers swell enough to provide the funds is buy a few furnishings to soften the institutional quality of a rented space. This was something that the members of

Freedom Bible Church had not yet been able to do when I first began to visit this congregation's services. While believers made sure that the classroom they used for worship was clean and neatly arranged, the fact that they gathered in a school was obvious in the blackboard and desks that were the first thing people saw upon coming for worship. This changed, however, one Sunday in August of 2008. That morning I arrived to find a sheet of green, checkered linoleum spread across the floor at the front of the room where the choir would soon start singing. The chalkboard was covered with a matching green curtain. On the opposite wall of the classroom hung a new clock, positioned so that whoever occupied the wooden pulpit would be able to see the time.

After a period of prayer, singing, and testimonies, Pastor Kabre made his way to the front of the room to preach. He began his sermon by stating that Christians ought to be what he called, "problem solvers," rather than people who were constantly mired in difficulty. If, he continued, those in the congregation repeatedly found themselves in trouble, it might be because they were not demonstrating their faith in the way that they should – that is, by giving. Having appealed to this familiar prosperity gospel principle, Pastor Kabre used most of the rest of the sermon to describe the different ways that people could give to God. Among these were gifts to the poor, to one's kin, or to orphans and widows. The topic to which Pastor Kabre devoted most of his time, however, was giving to "Levites," a term he said referred to those full-time Christian workers whose ministry obligations left them unable to pursue other forms of employment.<sup>vi</sup> In this sermon, church leaders emerged as the most important recipients of seed offerings, as people who were among the best equipped to accept these contributions on God's behalf.

The main point of Pastor Kabre's message was that gifts to God must be given to other people, but not to just anyone. When my informants described the process through which they determined who ought to receive their seed offerings, they sometimes continued the agricultural metaphor by emphasizing the need to sow in "good soil." My neighbor Bana Ilunga<sup>vii</sup> explained to me that there were several criteria through which she would determine whether or not someone fit into this category. Bana Ilunga is a pastor, one of the first women in Zambia to be ordained by the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. Throughout my time in Nsofu she was one of my best informants. When I asked her how she could tell if someone was "good soil," Bana Ilunga first told me that one could discern this simply based on whether or not a blessing followed the gift of a seed offering to a particular person. If time passed and she had not received anything, Bana Ilunga might first solicit the help of others in praying that any satanic powers that stood in the way of her blessing would be removed. Should the blessing fail to materialize after these spiritual interventions, she would know that the person who had received her gift was not good soil.

Bana Ilunga then explained that one of the primary signs that someone was not good soil was if he or she failed to live by Christian ethical standards. Here, she drew on her own experience of having given a seed offering to a Congolese pastor who, by the time I arrived in Nsofu, had developed quite an infamous reputation. Soon after he came to the township this pastor was facilitating well attended meetings in a private home. A number of my informants reported having given him seed offerings, including large sums of money and a television set, all offered in expectation of divine blessings. Because so many Pentecostals

had given to this pastor, a scandal erupted when it was revealed that he had proposed marriage to a woman in Nsofu despite having left a wife and family in Congo. His former followers threatened to turn him over to the police with accusations of fraud, and the man promptly left town. Bana Ilunga told me that by the time all of this came to light she had already begun to suspect that this pastor's character was flawed, as the seed offering she had given him had not produced any kind of harvest.

Beyond the need to give to a pastor who had good character, Bana Ilunga added that she preferred to give her seed offerings to those who were materially poor. When an offering was given to someone who already possessed ample resources, she explained, that person would soon forget both the gift and the giver. In contrast, when the same gift went to someone who really needed it, its impact would be much more profound. A materially poor recipient would therefore be more likely to remember the gift and in turn to pray for the one who had given it. Because of the increased prayers they would offer on her behalf, Bana Ilunga felt that the poorer members of her community were more likely to be good soil than their wealthier neighbors.

Through these conversations Bana Ilunga explained the role of recipients of seed offerings as religious intermediaries. In describing the priestly function of Pentecostal pastors, one of my informants referred to church leaders as "keys" through which believers could access spiritual blessing. This, she added, was why it was important for them to be "righteous people" (*balungami*). Here, as in Bana Ilunga's discussion of good soil, pastors' capacity as ritual experts is indexed in the importance of their lack of sin, in their having cultivated an

appropriate spiritual state before receiving Pentecostal offerings on God's behalf (see Hubert and Mauss 1964: 20-23). In the light of their role as religious intermediaries, the emphasis that Pastor Kabre placed on giving seed offerings to church leaders emerges as more than mere fundraising (Harding 2000: 109) – though, as we will see, this preacher was certainly acting in the financial interests of his fellow Pentecostal pastors. By focusing on morally upright church leaders as recipients of seed offerings, Pastor Kabre and Bana Ilunga connected the notion of pastors as good soil to a larger process of religious differentiation in which certain members of the Pentecostal community emerge as spiritually superior.

In Nsofu, the pastors or preachers who were most sought after were those whose prayers were reported to be answered more quickly than those of ordinary believers, whose prophecies were said to be accurate and exorcisms effective. When believers spoke of these leaders, they described them as men or women who prayed<sup>viii</sup> fervently or tirelessly (*balapepesha, balapepa sana*). After a Pentecostal gathering at which one of these individuals had preached or prophesied, believers would say that they had felt the presence of “Holy Ghost fire” or, in Bemba, of “the Spirit” (*Umupashi*) during the meeting. These descriptions index a process of charismatic distinction among Pentecostal believers grounded in shared ritual practice (Csordas 1997). Although in principle the Holy Spirit is available to all believers in equal measure, it is clear in the way believers described these powerful pastors (*ablekwata amaka*) that the women and men who become church leaders are those who have been given special access to God.

For the purposes of this article, the key thing to understand about the way that charismatic distinction operates among Nsofu believers is that it structures the most important relationship in Pentecostal congregations – namely, that between leaders and laypeople.<sup>ix</sup> That this is the central social tie in Copperbelt Pentecostal churches should come as no surprise, given what we know about the importance of hierarchy in social life on the Copperbelt more generally. What this means for seed offerings is that, while believers are certainly concerned with making offerings to God in an effort to gain a divine blessing, they are also interested in building relationships with the church leaders that serve as recipients of these gifts. Indeed, for Nsofu Pentecostals, seed offerings are every bit as much gifts to men as they are gifts to God (Gregory 1980). This is clear in Bana Ilunga’s preference for giving to those more likely to feel the impact of a material offering; it was also evident in the remainder of Pastor Kabre’s sermon at Freedom Bible Church.

### **“What Can We Give the Man?”**

As he had done when describing the other ways that believers could give to God, Pastor Kabre drew on the biblical text to demonstrate the importance of giving to church leaders. He chose an episode in the life of King Saul in which the king and one of his servants prepare to inquire of a prophet. Before setting off, King Saul anxiously asks, “If we go, what can we give the man? The food in our sacks is gone.” His servant replies that he has a bit of silver, which will suffice as an offering. Only after they have secured an appropriate gift do they proceed to the home of the “man of God.”<sup>x</sup>

After one of the church elders read this passage aloud, Pastor Kabre began to discuss the relationship between giving to preachers and prosperity:

So, let's you and me learn about visiting... the man of God. Let's not go empty-handed (*fye na iminwe*), because sometimes you go to the man of God, you get there and he prays for you quite all right. But you may find that he's dying of hunger (*bali na ukufwa ulushile*). A pastor in Lusaka once told me, Look, in church there is no partiality, but sometimes you might not be able to make it (*kuti wafilwa ifyakucita*). You're sitting at home and then someone comes with a problem... That person comes with rice, she has maize meal or something. Then someone else comes empty-handed. You will pray for that person quite all right and the first one quite all right. But there is a difference in that when you go into the kitchen you will find maize meal and you will remember the person who brought it... you will look over here and see some cooking oil and remember and go and kneel down and pray.... You look at this curtain you remember, you look at the floor... right now I'm praying as I'm looking at that clock (transcript of a sermon recorded by the author 18 August 2008).

The pattern that emerges from Pastor Kabre's sermon was one I often heard articulated in Nsofu. One of the main reasons that believers felt they could count on their contributions to yield a harvest of prosperity was because these gifts stood in the homes of those who received them as inalienable reminders of their givers. Contributions of money or food would therefore continually call pastors to pray that the one who made that offering would receive what she asked for, and the ongoing prayers of a charismatic leader would in turn increase the likelihood that a believer's request would be granted. The message implicit in the remainder of Pastor Kabre's sermon, then, was that by giving seed offerings and other contributions to Pentecostal pastors, believers would produce a longer-term religious obligation in their recipients.<sup>xi</sup>

The Pentecostal pastors I knew in Nsofu took the obligation to pray for those who gave to them quite seriously. During my fieldwork I lived in the home of Pastor and Mrs. Mwanza,

who served together as the leaders of Key of David, another Pentecostal church in Nsofu. One morning Mrs. Mwanza and I took advantage of a day off from her job as a primary school teacher to linger together in the sitting room in our *citenge* wrap skirts, sipping instant coffee and chatting. When I asked her about the gifts that laypeople brought to Key of David, Mrs. Mwanza told me that she and her husband kept a careful record of these contributions, and encouraged the members of their church to help them in this task by giving their offerings in special envelopes labeled with each person's name. Mrs. Mwanza explained that she used this record as a guide for prayer, and specifically that she made sure to pray that those who gave regularly would receive the blessings they were hoping for.

Pentecostal leaders in Nsofu would sometimes even render spiritual services in response to a gift that was not made with religious intentions. For example, after concluding a round of household consumption surveys I wanted to show my appreciation to the participants by giving each of them a bottle of cooking oil and a bag of sugar. One of the people who received these items was Bana Ilunga. I did not realize the spiritual implications of my contribution until a conversation I had with her a few weeks after she had received the gift. Seated together on the low stoop of her house, Bana Ilunga explained to me that every time she used a bit of the sugar or oil I had given her she made a point to pray for me. Even though I had not asked her for spiritual help, it was clear in the eyes of this Pentecostal pastor that the appropriate response to a gift was prayer for the giver.

So, while Pentecostal contributions are undoubtedly offerings made to God through religious intermediaries, it is clear that they are also gifts that create an obligation in church leaders even as they compel God to act. As such, they represent a key aspect of the social productivity of Pentecostalism in urban Zambia. By giving to their pastors, believers work to build and strengthen social ties characterized not only by obligation, but also, as we have seen, by charismatic hierarchy. In other words, by giving seed offerings, believers are creating and reinforcing relationships that look remarkably similar to the ties of obligation that people on the Copperbelt consider so important. Indeed, I would argue that this formal similarity is a central component of what makes Pentecostalism especially compelling for my informants.

We have already established that the ebb and flow of the structurally adjusted economy has made social relationships on the Copperbelt difficult because these shifts move more and more people toward the lower end of the material hierarchy that undergirds urban Zambian relational life. Under circumstances like the global financial crisis, obligation threatens to overtake ambition, so much so that the latter becomes nearly impossible to pursue. What Pentecostalism offers in this context is a new form of hierarchy, and with it the possibility of new types of obligation and ambition as well. Crucially, while hierarchy on the Copperbelt more generally is primarily the result of economic differentiation, in Pentecostal groups it is first and foremost a question of charisma. Pentecostal hierarchy is therefore not dependent on the capricious forces of the market. As such, it represents an attractively stable source of social organization, a framework within which familiar

relational forms can develop without the fear of being undermined by the unreliable economy of the Copperbelt.

If prosperity, as understood by Nsofu Pentecostals, is primarily about a certain kind of sociality, then it is not difficult to understand why some of my informants described gifts brought directly to one's pastor as the very definition of seed offerings that would produce a harvest. A devout Pentecostal believer named Bana Junior explained this process to me during a conversation I had with her and several other women after all of us had heard Pastor Kabre's sermon. In contrast to anonymous gifts placed in an offering basket, which were not likely to result in a social relationship, Bana Junior explained that eponymous contributions brought to the pastor at home or after a meeting were productive seeds. Again, these gifts index charismatic hierarchy and provoke religious obligation, and in so doing yield a harvest of culturally valued social ties. For believers in Nsofu, this means they create prosperity.

Having determined that gifts to Pentecostal leaders are socially productive, we may very well ask why seed offerings are made to serve as gifts to God at all. Since contributions to church leaders strengthen the highly valued hierarchical ties that form in Pentecostal churches, and since these relationships are one of the things that make this form of Christianity so attractive, why don't believers simply pursue human exchanges and eschew what I have been calling the sacrificial aspect of their seed offerings? Certainly, it is possible that Pentecostals are merely trying to make their exchanges as profitable as possible. Sacrifices to God carry the promise of prosperity yet to come, and gifts to pastors

foster relationships that are prosperity realized. By making each contribution do double-duty, Pentecostals may simply be hoping to obtain both immediate and future returns. However, I would like to suggest that the dual logic of Pentecostal offerings has less to do with believers' attempts to maximize a return and more to do with protecting the social bonds that their religious practice produces. In order to demonstrate how this is the case, I must briefly discuss the relationship between different levels of exchange in a religious context far removed from the Copperbelt.

### **The Poison in the (Pentecostal) Gift**

In trying to understand Pentecostal seed offerings I have found it helpful to turn to ethnographic studies of the South Asian *dan*, the so-called "Indian gift," that transmits impurity from the giver because it bears with it a part of her person (Parry 1986). The particular danger of the *dan* varies with the actors who receive it. Jain renouncers, for instance (see Laidlaw 1995, 2000), are threatened by the corrupting potential of the food they receive from lay Jain families; even if it has been meticulously prepared according to the rigorous requirements of Jainism, the violence of cooking is enough to make a renouncer impure. What's more, the dependence implied in these donations presents a further risk to the Jain ideal of unencumbered asceticism. Through a carefully ritualized conversation in which renouncers adamantly refuse the daily alms lay families offer them, while the latter simultaneously insist they accept these offerings, this dangerous exchange is rendered pure for renouncers (Laidlaw 2000). At the same time, as far as Jain laypeople are concerned, the *dan* is not a pure gift but is rather part of a reciprocal exchange through

which they receive religious instruction and karmic merit, and which may even produce an enduring bond with a particular renouncer (Laidlaw 1995: 324-329). In the Jain context, then, the *dan* is a dangerous gift simultaneously governed by two logics that together enable ritual specialists to remain free of the taint of social relationships while still allowing social relationships to develop and religious goods to accrue to donors. What this example demonstrates is that ritual exchange may carry several levels of meaning, some of which threaten relational life or religious life, while others reinforce and protect it.<sup>xii</sup>

Returning to the Copperbelt material, we must momentarily lay aside the fact that seed offerings are gifts to God and focus solely on their capacity as gifts to Pentecostal pastors. Here we can identify at least two different registers at play, one of which endangers the important bond between leaders and laypeople. When I asked my informants about how this central relationship ought to develop, they were emphatic on two points. First, these ties ought to be hierarchical, like the ties between children and their parents (*bafiyashi*). Second, pastors ought not to let differences in material status influence how they treated the various members of their churches. When making choices about which believers to visit or who to appoint to leadership posts in the congregation, Pentecostals in Nsofu insisted that the only thing pastors ought to take into account was spiritual status. By following these rules, the charismatic distinction that separated pastors from laypeople would serve as the only metric by which their relationships were organized.

While both pastors and ordinary believers would agree that a hierarchy of charisma represents the Pentecostal social ideal, the same economic factors that make this model

such an attractive way of organizing relational life also make it very difficult for leaders to live within its parameters. Recall Pastor Kabre's careful definition of those he called "Levites:" full-time church workers who rely on the contributions of those they serve to meet their material needs. By highlighting pastors' economic dependence on their parishioners while also describing the church leader in his anecdote as "dying of hunger," Pastor Kabre used a bit of hyperbole to foreground the very real difficulty many Pentecostal leaders have in making ends meet. It is in the light of these circumstances that he spoke so frankly to his congregation, stating that although officially there was no "partiality" in church, preferential treatment was often given to those who provided the pastor with material assistance. Most church leaders on the Copperbelt share the sentiments expressed in Pastor Kabre's sermon. Although they are careful to emphasize that they will provide spiritual services for anyone who asks, they will also admit that faced with a choice between traveling to pray for the sick child of someone who is able to provide a gift and visiting someone with a similar problem who cannot make a material contribution they will usually choose the former. In this way, the material needs of Pentecostal pastors make it difficult for them to conform to the relational ideals of their religious community.

When pastors pursue relationships with those laypeople that are most likely to help keep their rent paid or their children in school, it is hard for believers to tell whether the ties that form are those in which pastors are acting only on the basis of their charismatic superiority. Instead, what often develops is a set of relationships in which less-wealthy pastors have engaged the support of wealthier laypeople. Not only does this situation

invert the hierarchy between pastors and ordinary believers, it appears to have abandoned charisma as the ordering mechanism behind Pentecostal relationships, replacing it with an all too familiar framework of material wealth. Seen from this angle, it is very difficult for believers in Nsofu to tell whether the social life of their congregation or fellowship is really insulated from the market.

Let me be clear here that the problem is not the presence of material contributions as such. As we have seen, Pentecostals have no qualms with giving to church leaders that they believe to be morally upright, and indeed, adherence to the prosperity gospel requires them to do so. What makes members of Pentecostal congregations nervous, then, is not the fact that certain people are giving to their pastors, but rather the possibility that leaders and some laypeople may have traded charisma for material wealth as the means of organizing their relationships. Were this to happen, believers would find themselves right back where they started – back, in other words, in the unstable relational world that exists outside of the church.

Like the *dan*, then, seed offerings are marked by “moral ambiguity” (Parry 1989: 77). The similarity between these two gifts does not end there, however. Just as Parry’s account of the *dan* among Benares priests connects its danger to the layers of ritual that surround it, so too the religious aspects – and especially the sacrificial aspects – of Copperbelt seed offerings provide protection for their givers. Simply put, insofar as Pentecostal gifts are gifts to God, those who receive these offerings do so first and foremost because their spiritual superiority allows them to serve as religious intermediaries. Understood this way,

the relationship between church leaders and laypeople is unambiguously one of charismatic, rather than material, hierarchy. Further discussion of this point will make it clearer.

As we have seen, the relationships that form around gifts to church leaders are not always easy to interpret as part of a hierarchy of charisma. In contrast, when a believer brings a seed offering to a pastor as a means of presenting it to God, charisma emerges as the defining difference between the two human parties. The Pentecostal layperson has chosen to bring the seed offering to this pastor because she believes him to be good soil, a spiritually pure intermediary capable of receiving the gift on God's behalf and interceding effectively on hers. By framing seed offerings in these terms, believers foreground the fact that the primary mode of distinction between pastors and parishioners is charisma, and that this is the impetus for their relationship and for the gift they have given. Material wealth may figure here, of course, but it does not structure the hierarchies of Pentecostal churches. In this way, the danger of the gift – that it trades charisma for material status as the ordering force behind Pentecostal relationships – is overcome. Pentecostal ritual therefore takes a morally ambiguous gift and works to restore order at precisely the point where it is needed most. In so doing, it helps to create the kind of social world that believers desire, setting them free to pursue exchange with the confidence that it will not undermine the hierarchy of charisma that anchors their relationships.

**Conclusion: Prosperity and Political Economy, or Why Seed Offerings Matter**

In this article, I have used an analysis of seed offerings to show how Pentecostalism figures in the everyday work of making life possible on the Zambian Copperbelt. By presenting an alternate mode of sociality, one that appears more stable than those traditional forms that depend on the structurally adjusted market, Pentecostalism provides people in Nsofu with a framework within which to respond to the relational difficulties that have marked the neoliberal period. This framework is certainly not without internal contradictions and tensions, nor is it completely insulated from the market forces that challenge social life on the Copperbelt more generally. Many of the ritual resources available to Pentecostals, including the seed offerings discussed here, have been shaped in such a way as to help resolve those tensions, preventing the influence of the market from undermining the social world created through religious practice. To be sure, Nsofu believers are not always successful in these efforts. A discussion of the shortcomings of Pentecostal sociality is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that the most complex and fraught aspects of ritual life on the Copperbelt are positioned at those points where church hierarchies of charisma are in the greatest danger of being replaced by a hierarchy of material success.

The main argument of this article has turned on the various economic frameworks at play in Copperbelt Pentecostalism. Insofar as non-market exchange is concerned, I have highlighted the subtle interplay of sacrificial gifts to God and socially productive gifts to men as means of both creating and protecting prosperity. That the social ties formed through Pentecostal practice are a central component of what believers are hoping to receive as a result of their seed offerings has in turn revealed how this form of Christianity

is connected to the political economy of the Copperbelt. What this means is that to the list of ways that Pentecostalism interacts with late capitalism – whether as a response to the inscrutability of neoliberalism or a training ground for market participation – we must add the active production of social relationships, of exchange networks, and even of institutional structures (see Robbins 2009).

Indeed, one wonders whether this list ought be reconsidered, rather than simply appended. For, if Pentecostalism is a key component of making life possible, then it may not be appropriate after all to describe it – or at least describe it *only* – as a means of making sense of or entering into the late capitalist market. Instead, what the example of Nsofu demonstrates is that Pentecostal adherence is about more than explanation or roundabout participation. People in urban Zambia have found in this religion a mechanism for creating social structures similar to those that have been eroded by the circumstances surrounding neoliberalism, for reclaiming relational terrain that economic uncertainty has made it very difficult to inhabit. Pentecostalism, and even the prosperity gospel – where “Pentecostalism meets neoliberal enterprise” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 314) – is therefore part of the local repertoire of practices through which Copperbelt believers engage with and push back against the relationally and institutionally corrosive forces of the market. That is, Pentecostalism is part of the set of ontological, social, and epistemological resources that people in urban Zambia draw on to create lives and livelihoods in the face of social and economic uncertainty. It is here that we find what may be the real promise, and, I would argue, at least one of the central problems, of the prosperity gospel.

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#### Notes:

<sup>i</sup> In 1996 the preamble to the newly amended Zambian constitution declared that “the Republic [will be] a Christian nation while upholding the right of every person to enjoy that person's freedom of conscience or religion.”

<sup>ii</sup> The massive Filipino prosperity gospel movement known as “El Shaddai” is similarly oriented around the leadership of Mike Velarde, a charismatic man known to his followers as “Brother Mike” (Wiegele 2005), who believers expect will personally pray for their requests when seed offerings are received. Here again, the charismatic power of a prosperity gospel leader is understood to be central to the blessings that follow seed offerings.

<sup>iii</sup> The lingua franca of the Copperbelt is Town Bemba, an urban variety of iciBemba with a large lexical input from English, as well as other regional Bantu languages (Spitulnik and Kashoki 2001). During Pentecostal meetings, believers move back and forth between English and Town Bemba, sometimes favoring one language over the other. In particular, the Bible is usually read in English, often followed by an oral translation into Bemba. Other words that are central to Pentecostal theology and practice – e.g. “evangelize,” “prosperity,” and “praise and worship” – are often used in English.

<sup>iv</sup> Apart from what believers call a “financial breakthrough,” the most common prayer request among Pentecostals, most of who are women, is a child. While this desire is only indirectly related to a believer’s financial status – a baby can cement a marriage, and with it a woman’s financial security – it certainly represents part of the broader definition of prosperity employed by Copperbelt Pentecostals.

<sup>v</sup> While ambition and obligation are my terms, these relational orientations are evident throughout the Copperbelt ethnographic record, as well as in studies of urban Zambia more generally (e.g. Wilson 1941; Epstein 1961; Cliggett 2003). In particular, ambition and obligation as I have defined them echo James Ferguon’s (1999) description of two Copperbelt “styles” that he calls “cosmopolitan” and “localist.”

<sup>vi</sup> This is rather an important distinction for pastors on the Copperbelt. Most small churches are unable to generate enough money to pay a full-time pastor. The families of some preachers are able to get around this difficulty because the pastor’s spouse is employed. Other pastors pursue one or several business ventures in addition to their religious activities as a way to support their families while they try to bring enough people into the church to meet the weekly expenses of the congregation and eventually begin paying him or her.

<sup>vii</sup> In Zambia, as in most of southern Africa, teknonymy is routine; here Bana Ilunga is Ilunga’s mother

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viii The Bemba verb *ukupepa*, or “to pray,” is used on the Copperbelt to refer to prayer, but also to denote religious affiliation and participation more generally. So, for example, when asking someone where he attends church, one asks where he prays (*mupepa kwi?*).

ix Here, Zambian believers resemble apostolic Christians in Botswana, as membership in Copperbelt Pentecostal groups is largely based on individual perceptions of a pastor’s charisma as demonstrated through others’ testimonies and one’s own experiences of answered prayers and deliverance from demons (see Werbner 2011).

x 1 Samuel 9: 6-10

xi Spiritual services, particularly ongoing prayer, are the primary thing that believers expect to receive from their pastors in return for seed offerings. Visits from the pastor, which usually include prayer and encouragement, are also included here. However, particularly in times of crisis, believers may also hope for some material assistance from their Pentecostal congregation in a manner similar to the food, firewood, and transportation that mainline congregations help to provide for those members of their church who have funerals in their families. Such gifts are not always forthcoming from Pentecostal groups, often because whatever money is donated to a congregation is given to pay the rent on the space they use for meeting and to cover a pastor’s (often irregular) salary. Moreover, gifts brought directly to a pastor in his home, such as those described by Pastor Kabre, are usually considered part of his own personal income, rather than that of the church, and believers do not generally expect a material return gift to follow from these offerings.

xii While I would argue that this example does an especially good job of teasing apart the various levels present in ritual exchange, as well as the risks that exchange often entails, I should point out that this type of analysis can be found in studies of Christian communities as well. To take two examples from North America, Jon Bialecki (2008) has shown that members of Southern California Vineyard churches move back and forth among what he identifies as different spheres of exchange as they negotiate the use and sacrifice of their material resources. Similarly, my point in this article dovetails well with Omri Elisha’s (2011) recent study of conservative Protestants in Tennessee, who simultaneously employ what they refer to as “compassion” and “accountability” in their efforts at social engagement. Elisha argues that each of these concepts carries with it a model of exchange that is in turn grounded in a theological paradox, which ultimately leaves believers trying to pursue both a free gift and a reciprocal relationship at the same time.

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