



Towards an Understanding of the Pentecostalist Concept of A “Spirit-Filled Church” and Agwu Spirit Possession: Different Strokes for Different Folks

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15213560

Submission Date: 21 Nov. 2024 | Published Date: 31 Dec. 2024

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Abstract

One of the most prevalent expressions within the Nigerian religious landscape, particularly within Pentecostalism, is the concept of a "spirit-filled church." This term is used to describe churches (and spiritual leaders) perceived as powerful due to the outpouring of the "Holy Spirit" within the congregation, who is believed to possess or incarnate the leaders, enabling them to perform miraculous acts such as healing, prophesying, and speaking in tongues. In the context of the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, there exists a parallel belief in the Agwu Spirit, considered the mouthpiece of the gods. The Agwu Spirit is believed to have the ability to bestow special gifts upon individuals or possess them, allowing for acts such as healing and prophecy. Against this backdrop, this paper poses the following critical questions: Does spirit possession in Pentecostalism and traditional Igbo society hold the same meaning? Is there a distinction between the concept of a "spirit-filled church" in Pentecostalism and Agwu spirit possession in traditional Igbo society? To address these questions, this paper adopts a critical analytical approach, arguing that spirit possession in both Pentecostalism and Igbo traditional religion, particularly with reference to the Agwu spirit, is essentially two expressions of the same phenomenon. Moreover, it contends that the notions of a "spirit-filled church" and Agwu spirit possession are fundamentally identical. The research primarily draws upon secondary sources, including books, archival materials, online articles, and journals, to substantiate these arguments.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Spirit-Filled Church, Agwu Spirit, Spirit Possession.

Introduction:

Spirit possession is commonly understood as the incarnation of a non-material entity within a material being. In this process, the non-material entity inhabits the material being, subduing it under its influence, imparting specific characteristics or dispositions, and ultimately becoming the primary driving force behind the individual's actions (Bourguignon, 1976). It is within this framework that an individual is said to be possessed by a spirit. The concept of spirit possession is pervasive across various cultures and religions, with its influence extending throughout history. Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, belief in spirit possession is particularly associated with Agwu, the spirit of creativity and innovation, as well as the divine messenger within the Igbo pantheon. Agwu conveys the will of the gods to humanity and possesses individuals, such as diviners, herbalists, or other chosen persons, enabling them to reveal the gods' intentions or perform specific tasks (Aguwa, 1993). Those possessed by Agwu often display both normal and abnormal behavioral traits, resulting in dual and multiple dispositions (Ulogu, 2022).

In contrast, Christian communities hold beliefs not only in demonic possession but also in the possession of the Holy Spirit, who is regarded as the source of spiritual gifts such as prophecy and speaking in tongues. Individuals who manifest these gifts are considered to be possessed by the Holy Spirit. This particular form of possession is most notably embodied within Pentecostalism, a movement rooted in the biblical narrative of the Holy Spirit descending upon the apostles in the form of tongues of flame (Acts 2:4). It is from this event that the notion of a 'Spirit-filled' church has taken

shape within Pentecostal communities in Nigeria. This term suggests that such churches are directly inhabited by the Holy Spirit, functioning under His influence. Consequently, in Pentecostalism, the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of possession.

In both contexts, the presence of an extraterrestrial being, influencing the actions and behaviors of individuals, is evident. Against this backdrop, this paper raises the following questions: Do spirit possession in Pentecostalism and Igbo traditional society share the same meaning? Is there a distinction between the concept of a "spirit-filled church" in Pentecostalism and Agwu spirit possession in traditional Igbo society? To explore these questions, this paper is divided into four sections: The first section provides a brief historical overview of Pentecostalism and its introduction into Nigeria's religious sphere. The second section examines the concept of a spirit-filled church, alongside the signs that characterize such a church. The third section delves into the concept of the Agwu spirit in Igbo traditional religion, analyzing its *modus operandi* as a spirit of possession. The final section offers a critical analysis of spirit possession in both Pentecostalism and Igbo traditional religion.

This study adopts a critical analytical method, asserting that spirit possession in Pentecostalism and Igbo traditional religion, particularly in relation to the Agwu spirit, can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Thus, it argues that the concept of a spirit-filled church in Pentecostalism and Agwu spirit possession in Igbo traditional society are essentially a case of different strokes for different folks. To substantiate these claims, the study draws extensively on secondary sources, including books, archives, online articles, and journals.

Conceptualizing Spirit Possession

The phenomenon of spirit possession is inherently fluid and complex, with its interpretations varying significantly across different global contexts. These varying interpretations are often shaped by the particular discursive frameworks through which spirit possession is analyzed. Numerous studies (e.g., Schmidt, 2010; Cohen, 2008; Cline, 2010; Lewis, 1971; Hoenigman, 2012; Norton, 2006; Endres, 2015; Boddy, 1994) have demonstrated that beliefs in spirits and spirit possession are not isolated or uncommon; rather, they are enduring aspects of human experience, encountered across diverse cultures and societies throughout history.

Western perspectives, particularly those grounded in biomedical and psychological discourses, often interpret claims of spirit possession as symptoms of underlying psychopathological conditions. In contrast, anthropologists typically approach possession as a culturally significant phenomenon, framing it as a medium for conveying important religious and cultural knowledge, empowering marginalized voices, or serving as a mechanism through which communities can express and address internal conflicts. Similarly, scholars of religion recognize the diverse and enduring role of possession within religious belief systems and practices. They perceive possession either as a meaningful ritual with spiritual value or as a manifestation of religious affliction, often accompanied by profound social stigma for those affected (Blyth, 2021).

Communities develop intricate and culturally specific frameworks for understanding spirit possession, influenced by the interplay of societal, cultural, political, and religious contexts. These perspectives are further shaped by individual identity markers, including gender, class, social status, and sexuality. For many practitioners, possession holds profound ritual significance, serving as a medium for communication with ancestors or deities and often functioning as a source of spiritual insight and healing (Seligman, 2005; Huskinson, 2010; Cox, 2011). However, in other cultural and religious contexts, possession may be viewed more negatively, perceived as an unwelcome manifestation tied to demonic or malevolent forces and often associated with illness, misfortune, or other harmful consequences (Braaten, 2008; Bourguignon, 2004).

Erika Bourguignon, a leading anthropologist in the study of spirit possession, offers a comprehensive cross-cultural analysis of possession beliefs and behaviors in her seminal work, *Possession*. To capture the fundamental elements of possession, she categorizes the phenomenon into two distinct types: possession trance and possession. This classification is grounded in the idea that an individual is fundamentally altered by the presence of a spirit entity or power distinct from their personality, soul, or self (Bourguignon, 1976). Possession trance is primarily marked by psychological manifestations, notably altered states of consciousness, while possession, in contrast, does not involve such trance states. Bourguignon explains that "one form of possession causes a change in bodily functioning; the other form of possession alters consciousness, awareness, the personality or will of the individual" (p. 3). Cohen (2008) notes that Bourguignon's typology draws upon prevailing possession beliefs from the time of Jesus, as evidenced by the examples she uses. Among the Jews of that period, possession by "unclean spirits" was understood in two main ways: spirits could either inhabit a person's body or speak through them to reveal their identity, or they could be causally linked to physical afflictions, such as deafness or paralysis, attributed to the spirit's presence within the individual.

Cohen (2008) further refines Bourguignon's framework by introducing two additional categories: executive possession and pathogenic possession. Executive possession refers to the presence of a non-corporeal, intentional agent within or upon a person's body, temporarily disrupting or mediating the individual's agency and control over their behavior. During such episodes, the actions of the host are partially or entirely attributed to the intentions, beliefs, desires, and dispositions of the possessing agent. In contrast, pathogenic possession involves the presence of an agent that either produces no noticeable effects or leads to a range of physical, psychological, or existential disturbances. These disturbances may include illnesses, diseases, depression, hallucinations, or broader misfortunes such as financial hardship. Unlike executive possession, pathogenic possession does not entail the displacement of the person's identity and may persist indefinitely until the agent is identified and removed (Cohen, 2008). These distinctions provide valuable insights into categorizing possession based on its potential causal features, demonstrating that the term "possession" encompasses a wide spectrum of human experiences. It is employed not only to describe specific conditions of spirit possession but also more broadly as a label for illness or misfortune (Craffert, 2015).

Despite the fluidity surrounding the concept of spirit possession, the term inherently suggests the presence of a non-material entity inhabiting or taking control of a material being. This phenomenon involves a spirit or entity entering a person's body, supplanting the host's agency—whether mind, soul, or spirit—and thereby altering their identity (Cohen, 2008). For the purposes of this study, spirit possession is conceptualized within the framework of executive and pathogenic possession, as these definitions align closely with the forms of possession explored in this paper. This framework sets the stage for an examination of spirit possession in Pentecostalism.

Towards a General Understanding of Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism, a renewal movement within Christianity, places a strong emphasis on personal, direct experiences with God through the Holy Spirit. The movement sees itself as embodying the same power and teachings that were present during the Apostolic Age of the early church. Characterized by its focus on spiritual gifts, Pentecostalism is categorized within Charismatic Christianity (Nmah & Obienusi, 2024). Central to Pentecostal belief is the concept of the 'baptism of the Spirit,' which is often evidenced by speaking in tongues, as described in Acts 2:4 when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. The New Testament Pentecost, which took place fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus and ten days after His ascension, is considered a seminal event in Christian history, marking a moment never before witnessed by the world (Macchia, 2006 in Nmah & Obienusi, 2024). Pentecostal practices, including prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing, are deeply rooted in the traditions of the early church. Those who exhibit these spiritual gifts are frequently described as being possessed by the Holy Spirit, a concept that is prominently discussed in the books of Acts and First Corinthians (Nmah & Obienusi, 2024).

Robeck (2006) traces the origins of the modern Pentecostal movement to 1901 in Topeka, Kansas, where Charles Parham, a former Methodist minister and holiness teacher, led a group of students focused on the Pentecostal experience of Spirit baptism and glossolalia (speaking in tongues), as outlined in Acts 2. On January 1, 1901, Agnes Ozman became the first student to speak in tongues, marking a significant milestone for the movement. Parham went on to establish the "Apostolic Faith" church and embarked on a revival tour across the American Midwest to propagate this new spiritual experience. However, Pentecostalism gained global attention in 1906 through the "Azusa Street Revival" in Los Angeles, California. Led by African-American preacher William Joseph Seymour, who had learned about Spirit baptism from Parham, the revival began in April 1906 at a former African Methodist Episcopal church on 312 Azusa Street in downtown Los Angeles.

For over three years, the Azusa Street "Apostolic Faith Mission" held services three times daily, seven days a week. During these meetings, thousands of individuals received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of speaking in tongues (Nmah & Obienusi, 2024). The gatherings, which extended from morning to late night, were spontaneous and emotionally charged, with no formal programs or scheduled speakers. Common manifestations included speaking in tongues and individuals collapsing under the power of the Holy Spirit, a phenomenon known as being "slain in the Spirit." As the spiritual leader of the movement, Seymour directed one of Pentecostalism's most influential centers and promoted it through his periodical, *The Apostolic Faith* (Umuteme, n.d.). The Azusa Street Revival has drawn significant interest from church historians due to the diverse groups it attracted—Hispanics, African Americans, Caucasians, and international visitors—all drawn by the prospect of physical healing, ecstatic worship, and the gift of tongues. This event played a pivotal role in breaking racial barriers within the church (Umuteme, n.d.).

From the humble beginnings of Christians seeking a deeper connection with God, several prominent Christian denominations arose, including the Church of God in Christ, founded by Charles H. Mason (1866–1961) primarily for Black worshippers, and the Assemblies of God, established in 1914 with a predominantly White congregation (Hyatt, 2006). At the heart of Pentecostalism is the belief that the "early rain" poured out on the early church will be mirrored in the "latter rain" at the end of history. As such, Pentecostals actively seek to preserve the dynamic, spirit-filled, and spirit-

led nature of the first-century church, particularly as seen on Pentecost Day and within the Corinthian church (Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12) (Nmah & Obienusi, 2024).

Pentecostals also emphasize the five-fold ministry outlined in Ephesians 4:11-12, which states that God has endowed individuals in the church with distinct gifts for the perfection of the saints, the work of ministry, and the edification of the body of Christ. According to Haman (1991), the five-fold ministers—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—are not directly considered gifts of the Holy Spirit but are viewed as extensions of Christ’s headship ministry to the church. Their primary role is to teach, train, activate, and equip believers for God’s work while nurturing the Christian community (Ephesians 4:12) (Nmah & Obienusi, 2024). Robert (1991) asserts that these ministers function under the apostolic and prophetic spirit of the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the “Holy Spirit,” along with practices such as being ‘slain in the Spirit’ and the concept of a “Spirit-filled” church, has become the hallmark of Pentecostalism, particularly in Nigeria, where these ideas underscore the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit within both the church and its members.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria, spirit-filled church, and spirit possession.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria mirrors the foundational elements of Western Pentecostalism, while also adapting to the local cultural and social context. The Nigerian Pentecostal landscape encompasses various strands, including Mainstream Pentecostalism, Ethnocentric Pentecostalism, Prosperity-Centered Pentecostalism, Prophetic Pentecostalism, and hybrid forms that blend multiple doctrinal elements (Umuteme, n.d.). The growth of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria began in the 1970s, with charismatic university students establishing their own worship spaces. These early groups drew influence from the American Pentecostal movement and indigenous African churches, thus localizing Pentecostal practices (Umuteme, n.d.).

The rapid expansion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria can be attributed to the widespread perception that traditional mainline churches, such as the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches, lacked the fervor and ecstatic presence of the Holy Spirit that many believers sought (Magbadelo, 2004). Pentecostal worship, with its emphasis on dynamic preaching and cultural adaptability, resonated deeply with Nigerian society, incorporating cultural elements that were familiar and meaningful (McLeod, 2008). This shift in religious practice may be linked to the globally disseminated accounts of the Azusa Street revival, which significantly influenced the period. The emphasis on speaking in tongues and performing miracles became key markers of spiritual authenticity. In this context, the concept of a “Spirit-filled” church arose, one that is fully inhabited and energized by the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, the widespread belief in spirit possession, which has been deeply ingrained in African cultures, particularly in Nigeria, provided a fertile foundation for the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism. The core doctrines of Pentecostalism resonated strongly with pre-existing cultural beliefs, making the movement highly appealing. As Umuteme (n.d.) references Prince (1998), the Pentecostal doctrine—that individuals who have been saved, baptized in the Holy Spirit, and speak in tongues are liberated from demonic influence—found significant appeal among Nigerians. This doctrine aligned with the widespread belief in demonic attacks and the pervasive superstitions prevalent across Nigeria and many other African nations (p. 3).

Additionally, research has shown that individuals suffering from depression often turn to the spiritual realm for solace (Koenig & Huguelet, 2009), which may explain why many Nigerians are drawn to Pentecostalism in search of solutions to local poverty and a sense of empowerment. The promises of miracles, signs, and wonders within Pentecostal circles were presented as tangible evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and God’s power. However, the authenticity of these claims was often questioned, especially when individuals who reported experiencing healing later confessed that their ailments had returned. In response, pastors frequently attributed these relapses to the lack of faith on the part of the individuals, asserting that they failed to maintain sinlessness after their healing. This rationale echoes the admonition of Jesus in John 5:14, where He warns a healed individual, saying, “Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee” (Umuteme, n.d., p. 3).

As previously noted, the Pentecostal landscape in Nigeria encompasses several subcategories, including Mainstream Pentecostalism, Ethnocentric Pentecostalism, Prosperity-Centered Pentecostalism, and Prophetic Pentecostalism, as well as hybrid forms combining elements of these doctrines. Of particular relevance to the focus of this paper is Prophetic Pentecostalism, which closely aligns with the concept of spirit possession. In this context, the idea of the ‘baptism of fire’—a spiritual experience that grants individuals the ability to see visions and perform miracles—comes into prominence. Ministers who engage in prophecy are believed to possess this gift through the Holy Spirit, and thus, when they prophesy, it is understood that they are acting not by their own volition but under the direct influence and anointing of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, pastors who are regarded as ‘spirit-filled’ and believed to have healing powers can only heal through the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than through personal agency. This understanding frames Pentecostalism as a form of spirit possession, wherein the Holy Spirit’s influence is central to the minister’s actions and abilities.

The words of O. B. E. Josiah Amata, as cited in Ukpang (2006), encapsulate the essence of the previous discussion. He states: "The founding fathers of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria had in mind a common objective, which was to unite under one umbrella Holy Spirit-filled Christian Churches and organizations that believe in and practice the full gospel message of Acts 2, in an independent and autonomous Christian fellowship" (p. 22). The reference to Acts 2 is significant, as it refers to the Biblical Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles in the form of tongues of fire. The passage reads: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1-4). This passage serves as a foundational moment for Pentecostalism, symbolizing the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment of believers to speak in tongues and prophesy.

In Nigeria, the phenomena of speaking in tongues, healing, and performing miracles are central to the concept of a "spirit-filled church" in the local context. Terms like "spirit-filled man of God" or "spirit-filled church" are often used to distinguish powerful individuals or congregations from those perceived as less spiritually potent. These "powerful men of God" are believed to be endowed with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to speak in tongues, cast out demons, and perform miracles. The frequency with which individuals speak in tongues, fall under the anointing (often manifesting as sudden collapses, convulsions, hallucinations, and trances), or the number of miracles attributed to a Pentecostal minister is seen as directly reflective of the level of the Holy Spirit's presence and potency in that individual. Given the significant emphasis Pentecostalism places on the Holy Spirit as the primary force driving actions through human vessels, it can be reasonably understood as a form of spirit possession. This understanding of spirit possession in Pentecostalism provides an interesting lens for examining similar phenomena in traditional African religious contexts. In particular, it invites an exploration of the Agwu Spirit in Igbo traditional religion, which shares several characteristics with the Pentecostal conception of spirit possession.

Towards Understanding Agwu as a Form of Spirit Possession in Igbo Traditional Religion.

3.1. Conceptualization of Agwu

In the Igbo cultural context, the term *Agwu* encompasses a variety of meanings and beliefs that are deeply intertwined with traditional religious and spiritual practices. At its core, *Agwu* is recognized as a spirit or deity within Igbo cosmology, possessing the power to influence or possess individuals, guiding them to carry out its will. *Agwu* is understood to embody both positive and negative spiritual forces, influencing an individual's gifts, talents, and ultimately their destiny (Onwuatuegwu & Osigwe, 2024). Given the diverse interpretations of *Agwu* across different cultural settings and the specific focus of this study, attention is directed to three primary conceptualizations that illuminate its essence. These dimensions are explored through the lenses of *Etymology*, *Behavior*, and *Symbol*, each offering distinct insights into the nature and impact of *Agwu* within Igbo spirituality.

3.1.1. Etymological Conceptualization:

The term *Agwu* can be understood through its dual expressions as *Agwu-isi* (or *Agwu-ishi*) and *Agwu-nsi*, each revealing different facets of its nature within Igbo cosmology. These interpretations underscore the deity's significance in spiritual, psychological, and ritual contexts, offering a comprehensive view of its influence. *Agwu-isi* is particularly significant from three key perspectives. First, it highlights Agwu's vital role in the spirit world as a messenger for other deities. As noted by Onwuejeogwu (1981), "All alusi manifest their will through the alusi called Agwu that determine the fall of the diviner's beads in afa divination" (p. 36). Through Agwu, the spiritual realm communicates with the human world, offering solutions to unsettled or displeased spirits (Aguwa, 1993). Second, *Agwu-isi* is associated with *Ara Agwu*, a psychotic disorder believed to afflict individuals who refuse their calling to serve as votaries in the Agwu cult. This disorder is metaphorically connected to the head, symbolizing *Agwu-isi* (Agwu in the head). Third, the Agwu festival, observed in the fifth lunar month—the traditional beginning of the Igbo calendar year—further emphasizes the deity's prominence. This festival, as the first ritual of the Igbo liturgical calendar, represents the belief that Agwu is often the first supernatural influence on human lives, embodying the concept of "*ihe mbu n'eme tupu ndi ozo ewere bia*", or the event that precedes all others.

In contrast, *Agwu-nsi* (Agwu, the poison) reflects the destructive potential of Agwu, drawing attention to the deity's ability to inflict harm, akin to poison. This term underscores the dual nature of Agwu, indicating its capacity to bring both blessings and destruction. In summary, *Agwu-isi* and *Agwu-nsi* are not separate entities but rather variations of the same concept. While these terms may be more prevalent in certain communities, they do not differ significantly in etymology. The simpler, more widely recognized term *Agwu* encompasses the full scope of the deity's essence. The suffixes *isi* (head/first) and *nsi* (poison) serve to highlight specific relationships, characteristics, and effects attributed to the spirit (Aguwa, 1993).

3.1.2. Behavioural Conceptualization

Agwu is understood in dialectical terms, embodying both positive and negative aspects. This duality is captured in expressions such as *aka nri Agwu* (good/positive) and *aka ikpa Agwu* (evil/negative), as well as *ikenga Agwu* (support) and *uruala Agwu* (subversion). These expressions emphasize Agwu's ability to influence outcomes in contrasting ways, depending on the situation. Unlike many spirits and deities, Agwu is not inherently predisposed toward favoring one outcome—good or evil—over the other. As the guardian spirit of herbal medicine and divination, Agwu plays a pivotal role in aiding humans to attain health and resolve personal difficulties. In this capacity, Agwu is believed to grant blessings such as wealth, prosperity, and fertility. However, Agwu also has the power to inflict harm, causing illness, physical deformities, infertility, misfortunes, and even moral corruption. Therefore, any nuanced understanding of Agwu must recognize its capacity for both positive and negative influences. While Agwu can inspire beneficial outcomes, it equally carries the potential for destruction, reflecting the complexity of its nature in Igbo thought (Aguwa, 1993).

3.1.3. Symbolic Conceptualization

The variations of Agwu in different Igbo communities are associated with specific roles or symbols, each representing distinct aspects of life. These include *Agwu ulo* (of the home), *Agwu ohia* (of the wilds), *Agwu nyama* (who possesses only women), *Agwu afa* (of the diviner), *Agwu dibia* (of the diviner-cum-healer), *Agwu omumu* (of fertility), *Agwu eriri* (of plenty), *Agwu di ji* (of the farmer), *Agwu nna uwa* (of reincarnation), *Agwu ukwu* (the great), *Agwu nta* (the little), *Agwu oma* (favourably disposed/good), *Agwu ojoo* (ill-disposed/evil), *ekwensu* (spirit of violence), and *agbara aka ekpa* (deceitful spirit). Each of these designations highlights different facets of Agwu's nature, reflecting its diverse influence across various aspects of life and belief. These conceptualizations contribute to a rich symbolic language surrounding Agwu, which is integral to Igbo cultural and spiritual practices (Aguwa, 1993).

In traditional religious cultures, animals and plants often acquire ritual significance due to their perceived connection with specific spirits or deities. Ogirisi, an Igbo ritual plant, stands as a quintessential symbol of Agwu. The association is so pronounced that *umunne*, short for *Agwu umunne* (Agwu of the maternal home), is often used synonymously with ogirisi. It is believed that Agwu inhabits this plant, making it a powerful symbol within Igbo spiritual practices. These anthropo-social conceptions have led to a wide range of symbolic representations of Agwu, encompassing both human and animal forms. The diversity of these symbols reflects the deep influence of Agwu beliefs on both individual and communal experiences. More than any other spirit, Agwu plays a profound role in shaping the social, organizational, and religious practices of the Igbo people (Aguwa, 1993).

3.2. Agwu in Igbo Cosmology

The African worldview seamlessly integrates both the spiritual and physical realms, which, though distinct, are deeply interconnected (Kanu, 2015). In Igbo philosophy, there is a profound belief in the divine, offering explanations for human existence that emphasize the interconnectedness of humans with the broader cosmos. The Igbo worldview acknowledges that humans interact with unseen entities, with many of their thoughts and actions influenced by these spirits (Ulogu, 2022). Igbo cosmology categorizes various spirits that shape human behavior and motivations, in turn influencing individual dispositions. This understanding is rooted in traditional Igbo religious beliefs about earth gods, goddesses, and numerous deities. Among these spirits is Agwu, a powerful force associated with both manipulation and motivation. Those possessed by Agwu often exhibit a blend of normal and abnormal behaviors, leading to the development of dual or multiple personalities (Ulogu, 2022).

In the Igbo belief system, it is widely held that Agwu belongs to a group of spirits created by Chukwu-Okike, the supreme Creator God, alongside other prominent deities such as Igwe, Anyanwu, Amadioha, and Ala. These deities are associated with natural symbols like the sky, the sun, thunder, and the earth. Unlike other spiritual forces, Agwu is believed to possess intellectual and volitional faculties, exerting significant influence over human affairs. Agwu is regarded as the patron spirit of the *dibia* (diviner and healer) and is seen as the source of inspiration for individuals with exceptional talents (Aguwa, 1993). Moreover, Agwu plays a crucial role in guiding human pursuits for fulfillment within society, as it is believed to govern various aspects of life. The sick often attribute their misfortunes to Agwu, while individuals with creative gifts believe their talents are bestowed by his benevolent influence. Similarly, diviners are believed to be possessed by Agwu, which provides them with the ability to see beyond the ordinary world and into the realm of the spirits.

Agunwa (1993) conceptualizes Agwu as a category of spirit that incarnates within individuals, serving as a source of both constructive and destructive motivations. According to Agunwa, Agwu plays a pivotal role among the pantheon of Igbo deities in shaping an individual's psychological orientation and behavioural tendencies (p. 279). Within the framework of Igbo religion and mythology, such beliefs are essential to the comprehension of human conduct and motivation. Agwu is traditionally associated with medicine, divination, and the endowment of exceptional gifts and talents (Metuh, 1999). It is commonly regarded as the origin of extraordinary abilities and creative destinies, possessing the capacity to influence and determine an individual's innate potential (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

Moreover, Agwu is acknowledged as a deity intricately linked to healing, divinatory practices, and spiritual potency, functioning as a vital intermediary between the human and spiritual domains. The designation "Agwu" also encompasses spiritual practitioners known as *dibia* or *dibia Agwu*, who mediate between earthly existence and the metaphysical world. These individuals undergo extensive spiritual training, often acquired through apprenticeship and divine inspiration, to attain the esoteric knowledge necessary for their roles (Onwuatuegwu & Osigwe, 2024). Beyond its religious and medicinal functions, Agwu embodies a critical component of Igbo cultural identity and social solidarity (Nwankwo, 2020). It is revered as a powerful spiritual force with profound insight into both the visible and invisible realms (Aguwa, 1995). Furthermore, Agwu is believed to facilitate communication with ancestral spirits and other divine entities (Umeh, 1997), thereby acting as a channel for the emergence of unique talents and exceptional capabilities in individuals (Onwuatuegwu & Osigwe, 2024).

3.3. Agwu and Divine Influence

In Igbo cosmology, it is widely held that each individual is endowed with unique gifts, talents, and destinies that are integral to the collective well-being of the community. Central to this belief is the deity Agwu, who is revered as the principal source of such endowments. Agwu's influence on creative destiny is manifested across diverse cultural expressions within Igbo society, including the visual and performing arts, music, storytelling, and craftsmanship. Within the framework of Igbo traditional religion, individuals who demonstrate extraordinary skill or creativity in these domains are frequently perceived as being possessed or inspired by Agwu, particularly during acts of performance. In this context, Agwu functions as a divine source of inspiration and creativity, actively shaping the destinies of individuals endowed with exceptional abilities (Onwuatuegwu & Osigwe, 2024). Several distinctive gifts are traditionally attributed to Agwu's spiritual influence:

Prophetic Utterances: This refers to the spontaneous articulation of profound insights or foresight that surpasses ordinary human comprehension. Such utterances, often regarded as prophetic, are believed to occur under the direct influence of Agwu, enabling individuals to speak with uncommon wisdom or to foretell future events (Onwuatuegwu, 2022). Prophecy is thus considered one of the spiritual gifts imparted by Agwu.

Mbari Art: Mbari is a ceremonial art form within Igbo culture characterized by the construction of elaborate architectural structures embellished with sculptural and pictorial representations. Artists who excel in this intricate tradition are believed to have received their creative inspiration and artistic prowess through the agency of Agwu. The complexity and vibrancy of Mbari artworks are viewed as material expressions of Agwu's creative power (Okoye, 1990).

Nka Di Nkata: This Igbo expression, denoting exceptional artistic skill, is used to describe individuals whose talents are perceived as surpassing the ordinary. Such individuals are regarded as having received their abilities as divine gifts from Agwu. Their works are considered to bear spiritual significance, reflecting the divine essence imbued in their creative output (Ejizu, 2010).

Storytelling and Oratory: The arts of storytelling and public speaking occupy a revered place in Igbo culture, functioning as vital means of preserving communal memory and transmitting moral and philosophical knowledge. Practitioners of these arts—often known as *ndi oka akò*, *ndi oka okwu*, or *olu oma*—are seen as having been divinely gifted by Agwu. Through their eloquence and narrative skill, they serve as custodians of cultural heritage (Esedebe, 2000).

Ekwe (Wooden Slit Drum): The craftsmanship and musical expertise involved in the making and playing of the *ekwe*, a traditional Igbo slit drum, are also linked to Agwu's influence. Drummers who demonstrate exceptional rhythmic dexterity are considered spiritually gifted. Their performances are interpreted as forms of spiritual communication with Agwu, and the precision of their drumming is seen as a sign of divine possession (Uchendu, 1973).

Uli Body Art: Uli is a traditional form of body decoration involving the application of symbolic motifs using natural dyes. Artists who exhibit mastery in Uli are believed to have been endowed with their creative insight by Agwu. This artistic practice is considered not merely decorative but spiritually significant, as the patterns are thought to convey sacred messages and invoke divine blessings (Uchendu, 2012).

Despite its association with creativity and healing, Agwu is also recognized in Igbo belief as an ambivalent spirit, capable of exerting disruptive influence when its guidance is ignored or misused. This malevolent aspect, known as *Agwu Okpanghasi*—often translated as the "Agwu of confusion"—is understood as a destructive force that can distort thought, behavior, and perception. Individuals afflicted by this manifestation may exhibit erratic, irrational, or harmful behavior (Achebe, 2013), leading to personal or communal distress. In such cases, the spiritual gifts once attributed to Agwu may become corrupted or suppressed, transforming sources of strength into liabilities. For example, a healer influenced by *Agwu Okpanghasi* may lose their curative abilities or unintentionally cause harm while attempting to heal (Onwuatuegwu & Osigwe, 2024).

While these manifestations represent what Cohen (2008) terms the “pathogenic” form of spirit possession—marked by passive or disruptive influences—it is crucial, within the framework of this study, to more explicitly conceptualize Agwu possession through the lens of *executive possession*. This form is characterized by a more active, purposeful, and directive presence of the spirit, whereby Agwu exerts deliberate control over the individual’s behavior, decisions, and capabilities. In such instances, possession does not merely distort but strategically orchestrates the individual’s actions in alignment with a higher spiritual directive.

3.4. Agwu as a form of Spirit Possession

The relationship between humans and Agwu unfolds through multiple stages and intensities, reflecting a complex process of spiritual engagement and transformation. The initial encounter with Agwu—whether it occurs in childhood or later in life—can be interpreted in two principal ways. One perspective posits that the individual is spiritually indebted to Agwu, compelling the deity to seek repayment. Alternatively, the encounter may signify that Agwu has divinely selected the individual for spiritual inspiration or the vocation of a *dibia*—a diviner or healer (Aguwa, 1993). Among those called to this sacred role, the *dibia* is considered the primary vessel of possession, as their relationship with Agwu is marked by continuous spiritual influence and dominion.

This spiritual relationship is ritually formalized through initiation, a transformative process that culminates in full possession by Agwu. The initiation into the Agwu cult is essential, as it facilitates a *soma-psychic* transformation in which the initiate undergoes both bodily and psychological reconfiguration to accommodate the spirit’s presence. Through this rite, the individual becomes capable of embodying Agwu’s essence, thereby enabling the manifestation of spiritual gifts and healing capabilities.

In addition to general stages of initiation, the transition from an ordinary state to a liminal and ultimately transformed spiritual identity is marked by a sequence of specific rites. These include *isa aka* (ritual hand-washing), *itu ogwu* (the administration of sacred medicine), and *igbusi ahu* (ritual purification). Completion of these rituals signifies the initiate’s full incorporation into the spiritual framework of Agwu, at which point the individual becomes recognized as a *dibia*. Following this transition, the *dibia*’s innate abilities are magnified, allowing them to perform acts beyond the realm of natural human capability. In this possessed state, the *dibia* forges a profound and intimate bond with Agwu, who assumes a guiding, empowering, and at times dominating role. The spiritual synergy between Agwu and the *dibia* enhances the latter’s proficiency in divination and healing, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and power to carry out their sacred duties.

This possession is often metaphorically represented through conjugal imagery, described as *ilu Agwu*—being “married to Agwu.” However, the conjugal metaphor should not be interpreted as implying mutuality or equality. Rather, the relationship is deeply hierarchical, with Agwu exerting authoritative influence over the *dibia*. Nonetheless, this dynamic enables a unique mode of communication, often mediated through altered states of consciousness such as dreams, trances, clairvoyance, and clairaudience. These heightened perceptual states afford the *dibia* what is frequently referred to as “second sight”—an enhanced capacity for extrasensory perception through which they access mystical knowledge and power.

In these states, the *dibia* is believed to receive divinely inspired insights regarding healing methods, curative herbs, and the spiritual conditions of individuals seeking guidance. These insights frequently transcend conventional diagnostic techniques. The power of possession becomes most evident during the practice of divination, where the *dibia*’s faculties are fully activated. For instance, during a divinatory session, the *dibia* may peer into sacred divinatory beads, invoking ritual formulas that unveil hidden truths about the spiritual or physical conditions of their clients. Such moments reflect the peak of Agwu’s spiritual influence, wherein the *dibia* becomes an active conduit of divine knowledge and healing.

The application of conjugal metaphors to describe the relationship between the human and the spirit in Igbo cosmology is especially significant, as it emphasizes the active agency of the human participant in the process of possession. Unlike traditions that may portray spirit possession as a passive state, the nature of Agwu possession demands the conscious engagement of the intellect and will. In both divinatory and healing contexts, attributes such as intelligence, experiential knowledge, and practical resourcefulness are indispensable. These qualities not only differentiate one spiritual specialist from another but also underscore the extent to which human faculties are integral to the interpretative process. Indeed, while the revelations and inspirations originate from Agwu, the effectiveness and precision of their interpretation rely on the *dibia*’s critical faculties. The interpretative task involves a dynamic interplay between divine inspiration and human discernment, highlighting the cooperative nature of Agwu possession.

Crucially, these divinatory or medicinal revelations are only accessible while the practitioner is under the immediate influence of Agwu, reaffirming the centrality of the spirit in the acquisition and application of spiritual knowledge. In this context, Obielosi (2016) draws a compelling parallel between Agwu in African Traditional Religion and the Holy Spirit

in Christianity. This analogy is further supported by Adibe (2009), who observes that in their attempts to articulate the role of the Holy Spirit within Igbo theological discourse, indigenous theologians found no more suitable term than *Agwu* to convey the mysterious and empowering force at the heart of their religious and cultural practices (p. 257).

Similarly, Umeh (1999) refers to *Agwu* as the "Igbo Holy Spirit," emphasizing its central role in guiding *dibia* and herbalists. According to this view, *Agwu* imparts divine knowledge concerning the identification, preparation, and application of herbs, thereby endowing the traditional healer with curative powers. Within the Igbo worldview, *Agwu* embodies the active manifestation of divine power. The spiritual efficacy of a *dibia* or prophet is thus directly correlated with their alignment to *Agwu*; the deeper the practitioner's attunement to the spirit, the greater their spiritual potency. Consequently, possession by *Agwu* is not merely a mystical experience but constitutes a vocational call—an invitation to service that spans both priestly functions and broader societal roles (Obielosi, 2016). In this framework, the *dibia* is not simply a passive recipient of spiritual gifts but an active collaborator in the expression of divine purpose, embodying a unique fusion of spiritual endowment and human agency.

A Critical Analysis of the Pentecostalist Concept of A "Spirit-Filled Church" And *Agwu* Spirit Possession: Different Strokes for Different Folks.

The notion of possession inherently implies the presence, control, or influence of an external, often immaterial, entity that temporarily or permanently overrides the autonomy of an individual. Bourguignon (1976) provides a foundational definition, describing possession as a process through which "a person is changed in some way through the presence in him or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his personality, soul, self or the like" (p. 8). In this conceptualization, spirit possession denotes the inhabitation or domination of a corporeal being by an incorporeal force, effectively subjecting the human host to the will and agency of that spiritual entity. Building upon this, Cohen (2008) distinguishes between executive and pathogenic forms of possession, defining the phenomenon as the intrusion of an intentional, incorporeal agent that temporarily suspends or modifies the individual's self-governance. During such episodes, the affected person's behavior is guided or overtaken by the beliefs, desires, and volition of the possessing entity, such that the host's actions become expressions of the possessing spirit rather than of their own autonomous will.

Viewed through this analytical lens, it becomes apparent that both Igbo traditional religion and Pentecostal Christianity are marked by manifestations of spirit possession. In the Igbo context, the *dibia*—a diviner or herbalist—functions under the spiritual influence of *Agwu*. The possession by *Agwu* empowers the *dibia* to access esoteric knowledge, interpret divine will, and identify specific curative herbs. The *dibia*'s operative capacity is intrinsically linked to this possession, as *Agwu* speaks and acts through the practitioner, effectively rendering him an instrument of the spirit. Likewise, Pentecostal Christianity features a comparable spiritual dynamic through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal pastors, prophets, and other religious functionaries are believed to act under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit, whose indwelling presence enables them to perform divine acts such as healing, speaking in tongues, discerning spiritual truths, and delivering prophetic messages. As in the case of the *dibia*, these practitioners do not act solely on the basis of personal volition or knowledge but as vessels animated and empowered by a transcendent spiritual force.

Thus, both religious traditions—despite their distinct theological orientations—share a central reliance on the phenomenon of spirit possession. Whether it is *Agwu* in the Igbo cosmological system or the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism, the dynamic remains consistent: the human agent is transformed into a conduit for divine expression. This parallel underscores the universality of spirit possession as a core religious experience across divergent cultural and doctrinal landscapes, illuminating the deep interconnection between spirituality, embodiment, and agency.

Prophetism serves as a hallmark of a "spirit-filled" pastor within Nigerian Pentecostalism, signifying the capacity to deliver prophetic utterances, foresee future occurrences, or transmit messages of divine origin on behalf of others. This prophetic dimension is not exclusive to Pentecostal Christianity; it is equally prominent in Igbo traditional religion, where individuals possessed by *Agwu* assume similar mediatory functions. In both religious contexts, spirit possession enables the transmission of divine knowledge, positioning the possessed as mouthpieces of the supernatural.

Obielosi (2016) underscores the striking parallels between *Agwu* possession in indigenous Igbo cosmology and Holy Spirit possession in Pentecostalism, arguing that the phenomenon of prophetic inspiration predates the biblical era. He notes that across numerous cultures, individuals endowed with charisma—including seers, healers, priests, and diviners—have long functioned as mediators between the spiritual and physical realms. These figures were revered for their capacity to convey divine insight, provide healing, and interpret spiritual realities. Obielosi draws compelling analogies between biblical prophets and individuals under *Agwu* possession, particularly emphasizing the ecstatic or frenzied manifestations that often accompany their spiritual experiences. In both traditions, these manifestations are interpreted as signs of genuine spiritual encounter and possession. Crucially, both systems assign to their spiritually inspired agents the role of intermediaries—those who bridge the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible. These roles include functions such as divination, visioning, healing, and counseling. Whether it is the *dibia* influenced by

Agwu or the Pentecostal prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit, both serve as oracular conduits whose utterances are believed to carry spiritual authority.

Within the Igbo religious framework, Agwu is more than a divinatory spirit; it is a god of creativity, responsible for endowing individuals with extraordinary talents across various domains of life. Those who display exceptional abilities in storytelling, music, dance, healing, or traditional medicine are often regarded as being under the influence of Agwu. In a parallel manner, the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal theology is the dispenser of spiritual gifts such as prophecy, healing, word of knowledge, speaking in tongues, and pastoral guidance. Those who excel in these spiritual capacities are deemed to be filled with the Spirit and divinely empowered for service.

The operative efficacy of both the *dibia* and the Pentecostal pastor is intimately tied to their spiritual alignment with the possessing entity. In Igbo cosmology, the power of the *dibia* is proportional to the closeness and fidelity they maintain with Agwu. The more closely attuned the *dibia* is to Agwu's will, the more potent their spiritual abilities. Similarly, in Pentecostal thought, intimacy with the Holy Spirit—achieved through righteous living and spiritual discipline—determines the measure of divine empowerment one receives. Notably, both traditions warn of the consequences of disobedience or moral failure: just as the Holy Spirit may withdraw from individuals who live in sin, Agwu, too, can be offended by resistance, irreverence, or neglect of ritual obligations (Obielosi, 2016). Through this comparative lens, it becomes evident that both Agwu possession and Holy Spirit inspiration serve similar theological and functional roles within their respective traditions, each offering a culturally rooted model of prophetic empowerment and spiritual mediation.

In Nigerian Pentecostalism, the notion of being "under anointing" is closely associated with the condition of being "spirit-filled." This state denotes a perceived direct influence or control by the Holy Spirit, often manifesting in ecstatic expressions and altered consciousness. Individuals under anointing frequently display behaviors such as glossolalia (the utterance of incomprehensible words), visionary or hallucinatory experiences, and dramatic physical reactions, including convulsive movements or sudden collapses. These manifestations bear a striking resemblance to those observed during Agwu possession in Igbo traditional religion, particularly when the possession takes on a disruptive or erratic form—commonly referred to as *Ajo Agwu* (negative Agwu). In both contexts, possession entails an overwhelming spiritual force taking control of the individual, resulting in behaviors and utterances that are attributed to the possessing entity.

Additionally, the Pentecostal concept of the "baptism of fire" signifies a profound spiritual immersion in, or embodiment by, the Holy Spirit—a transformative experience that reconfigures the individual's identity and spiritual capacity. This experience closely parallels the ritual induction of an individual into the *dibia* institution or the unsolicited spiritual selection by Agwu in Igbo cosmology. Both events signal a metaphysical transformation that may be aptly described as a form of spiritual baptism. While Pentecostals describe it as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, in Igbo traditional thought, it corresponds to what might be termed the baptism of Agwu. These transformative experiences align with Cohen's (2008) framework of executive and pathogenic possession, wherein an individual's agency becomes mediated or eclipsed by an external spiritual force. Fundamentally, the agency of the possessed is not contingent upon volitional consent in either tradition. Agwu, as conceived in Igbo spirituality, does not seek permission to possess; it imposes itself upon the chosen individual and confers its spiritual gifts at will. Similarly, in Pentecostal theology, the Holy Spirit is believed to operate autonomously—"blowing where He wills"—without prior consultation or consent. This theological assertion underscores the sovereignty of divine agency in both systems.

In sum, the embodiment of spiritual forces within human vessels and their subsequent operation through those individuals substantiates the central thesis of this study: that both Agwu in Igbo traditional religion and the Holy Spirit in Nigerian Pentecostalism represent culturally situated but functionally analogous forms of spirit possession.

Conclusion

In this study, we set out to answer two core questions: Does spirit possession in Pentecostalism and Igbo traditional society mean the same thing? Is there any difference between the concept of "spirit-filled church" in Pentecostalism and Agwu spirit possession in traditional Igbo society? So far in the study we have succeeded in establishing that the commonplace lingua of "a spirit filled church" in Nigeria's Pentecostalism, which refers to the incarnation of the Holy Spirit on a believer and the concept of Agwu Spirit as seen in Igbo traditional religion, is primarily a case of different strokes for different folks. While the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism empowers adherents, making them potent in their spiritual gifts, similarly, the Agwu Spirit in the Igbo traditional religion bestows divine revelation, granting knowledge of herbs and healing practices for the benefit of humanity, thereby enhancing the potency of the native doctor. This implies that spirit possession in both religious circles shares a strong similarity.

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CITATION

Ratzinger E. E. N. (2024). Towards an Understanding of the Pentecostalist Concept of A "Spirit-Filled Church" and Agwu Spirit Possession: Different Strokes for Different Folks. In *Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies* (Vol. 4, Number 6, pp. 135–146). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15213560>