Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture (JRMDC)

http://jrmdc.com

Volume: 2
Issue: 1

Published online: June 2013

Community and Social Interaction in Digital Religious Discourse in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon

Dr. Innocent Chiluwa
Covenant University, Ota (Nigeria)

Keywords: Internet, Facebook, Twitter, religion, Christian, online community, social interaction

Abstract

Since the advent of the Internet, religion has maintained a very strong online presence. This study examines how African Christianity is negotiated and practised on the Internet. The main objectives are to investigate to what extent online worshippers in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon constitute (online) communities and how interactive the social networks of the churches are. This study shows that some important criteria for community are met by African digital worshippers. However, interaction flow is more of one to many, thus members do not regularly interact with one another as they would in offline worship. Worshippers view the forums as a sacred space solely for spiritual matters and not for sharing social or individual feelings and problems. However, the introduction of social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and interactive forums is an interesting and promising new development in religious worship in Africa.

To cite this article: Innocent Chiluwa (2013):Community and Social Interaction in Digital Religious Discourse in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon, *Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture*, volume 2, issue 1, accessed from http://jrmdc.com

Introduction

Religion has been a sensitive issue in the contemporary globalised world. As the Internet becomes common and indispensable to individuals and social groups (Hoffman et al 2004), religion has maintained a very strong online presence. Most world religions are not only discussed and negotiated online, they are also practised and sustained digitally. According to Helland (2005), a Yahoo directory for “religion and spiritual beliefs” revealed that the category containing Christian websites increased by 234 sites within 24 hours in 2002 and more people used the Internet for religious purposes than they used it for commercial or business purposes (Larsen 2004). Gradually, the Internet has become “spiritualized” as worshippers employ common discourses for religious intents (Campbell 2005). The present study focuses on Christianity and adopts a sociolinguistic-based discourse analytical approach to examine how African-Christian activities are negotiated and practised on the Internet.

As of June 2012, Internet use in Africa stands at 15.3% of the world with 15.6% penetration and over 48 million on Facebook. Nigeria ranks first in Internet use with 29.0% penetration and over 45 million users; over 5 million Nigerians are on Facebook. Ghana has 8.4% penetration with over 2 million users as at December 2011; over one million Ghanaians are on Facebook as at June, 2012. About 783,956 Cameroons use the Internet with 4.0% penetration and about 493,680 on Facebook (see *www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm*). Like in other continents, the Internet is gradually replacing the traditional media as the main source of entertainment, communication and education, especially among the youth. Thus, online forums and communities have formed in addition to individual blogs as the new media platforms for interactions and debates on social and cultural matters that affect people’s lives. Religion, being a major topic of interest among individuals and social groups, has attracted widespread discussions and debates on the social media.

About 40% of the African population are Christians. Nigeria, for instance, is a leading religious nation with about 91% of the population attending offline religious services and 95% praying regularly (BBC 2004; Emenyonu 2007; Chiluwa 2008b; 2012c). According to *NationMaster.com,* in a recent survey Nigeria is ranked number one in the world with 89% church attendance rate. In Ghana, Christianity attracts about 69% of the entire population, suggesting that Ghana is Christian nation, although there is no official state religion (*News from Africa*). Similarly, 69% of the 20.4 million of the Cameroonian population is Christian, while 21% is Muslim, and 6% animist (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *July-December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, 13.09.2011,* http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/index.htm).

Significantly, Christianity has witnessed a tremendous growth in Africa with a relative decline in the practice of the traditional African religions. Among the fastest growing churches are the Pentecostals and Charismatic movements. As at 1995, there were about 552,000 congregations in 11,500 denominations throughout Africa that were not common in the Western World (see *The Dictionary of African Christian Biography*). This growth has been attributed to African-based evangelism rather than European missionary work. Predictions by religious experts currently envisage a shift of Christian authority from the West to Africa and Asia in modern times. For instance, Sanneh (2007) has argued that African Christianity was not just an exotic, curious phenomenon in an obscure part of the world, but that it might be the shape of things to come.

It will be difficult for a single research paper to adequately study all denominations in Christianity, especially with the type of study being carried out here. Besides, not all churches are currently on the Internet, or are sufficiently represented on social media platforms. Therefore, the present research focuses on twelve Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon. These countries have been selected for this research because they possess the largest Pentecostal Christian assemblies in the west and central Africa. For instance, the *Redeemed Christian Church of God* (Nigeria) is said to have a membership of over 75,000 in Lagos alone with thousands of branches in all the continents of the world. *The Word Miracle Church* (Ghana) also has a congregation of over 50,000 in Accra alone with over 75,000 branches both locally and internationally. *Lighthouse Chapel International*, also in Ghana, has 1,200 branches in 52 countries worldwide. Some annual events of some of these churches (e.g. Redeemed Church, Winners Chapel, Deeper Life Church and Christ Embassy, all in Nigeria) have attracted between 500,000 and three million participants in single services annually (Chiluwa 2012c). Four churches each from the three countries are selected for the study and the main criteria for the selection are basically size and online presence. The selected churches are:

Nigeria:

- The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (http://www.rccg.org)
- Deeper Life Bible Church (DLBC) (http://www.dclm.org)
- Living Faith Church Worldwide (LFCW) (aka Winners Chapel) (http://davidoyedepoministries.org)
- Christ Embassy (CEmb) (aka Love World) (http://www.christembassy.org)

Ghana:

- International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) (http://www.centralgospel.com)
- Lighthouse Chapel International (LCI) (http://www.lighthousechapel.org)
- Word Miracle Church International (WMCI) (http://www.wordmiracle.com)
- Victory Bible Church International(VBCI) (http://www.facebook.com/pages/Victory-Bible-Church-International)

Cameroon:

- African Church Planting Network (ACPN) (http://africanchurchplanting.org)
- Eternal Word Ministries (EWM) (http://www.facebook.com/pages/Word-Eternity-Ministries-International/ 121022331248088?v=info)
- Dominion Faith International (DFI) (http://www.dominionfaithinternational.org/ coda/index.html)
- Jonah Soul Winning Ministries (JSWM) (http://www.jonahsoulwinning.org/)

Table 1 below gives a summary of background information about the churches, showing their founding dates, location of their offline headquarters, and names of their pastors (i.e. the general overseers/founders). The sources of this information are the churches' websites, listed on the "home" or "about us" menus of the websites.

Table 1: An Overview of the Churches

Church	*Founded*	*Off-Line H/Qtrs.*	*Name of General Overseer*
RCCG	1952	Lagos	Enoch Adeboye
DLBC	1973	Lagos	William Kumuyi
LFCW	1982	Ota	David Oyedepo
CEmb	1993	Lagos	Chris Oyakhilome
ICGC	1984	Accra	Mensa Otabil
LCI	1987	Accra	Dag Heward-Mills
WMCI	1987	Accra	Charles Agyinasare
VBCI	1984	Accra	Nii Apiakai Tackie-Yarboi
ACPN	2003	Douala	Eva Natongo
EWM	2005	Bamenda	Edward Ikeomu
JSWM	2005	Douala	Jonah Okechukwu
DFI	1991	Duoala	Joseph Israel James

This study attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

(i) Do African digital worshippers constitute online communities?

(ii) What is the nature of social interaction on social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter?

(iii) What language forms or structures are common in the discourse of the worshippers?

Unfortunately, as at the time of this study, literature on online religion in West/Central Africa is either limited or non-existent.

Character of African "Newer Pentecostals"

Asamoah-Gyadu (2006) defines "Pentecostalism" as the stream of Christianity that emphasizes personal salvation in Christ as a transformative experience wrought by the Holy Spirit. Ukah (2007) identifies three types of African "pentecostalisms," namely the classical Pentecostalism, mission Pentecostal churches and the new Pentecostal/Charismatic. The twelve churches under study belong to the last group, the "new Pentecostal/Charismatic". "Charismatic" is viewed as a "historically younger Pentecostal" and refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Hence, speaking in tongues, prophecies, visions, healing, miracles, signs and wonders that are the hallmarks of the new Pentecostals, are closely associated with an active presence of God's Spirit. Like other Pentecostal Churches, the newer Pentecostals emphasize divine (faith) healing, prophecy, exorcism, spontaneous prayer, visions and dreams.

These "newer Pentecostals" , as Ukah (2007) puts it, are a product of a spiritual quest for salvation and solutions to socio-economic problems following the economic crisis of the mid-1980s in many parts of Africa. In Nigeria for example, this period coincided with the post-war austerity and economic crisis. Thus, social and economic problems drove people to seek spiritual solutions with a new class of religious elite with a university education, who are strongly amenable to foreign ideas and a new religious message spearheading the movement (Ojo 2009). The “prosperity gospel”, which has become the identity of these new Pentecostal/Charismatic movements in Africa, became the main selling point of this new religious revivalism (Ukah 2007). Ojo (2009) attributes the rise of the Charismatic approach to religion to the new awakening of religious experiences on the university campuses in the early 1970s. Most of the churches listed above began as “fellowships,” “prayer groups” or “Bible study classes” at university campuses, with their leaders as “breakaways” from either parent Pentecostal churches or orthodox churches. The Deeper Life Church (DLBC) for example started off as a Bible study group at the University of Lagos in 1973. Their charismatic founder, William Kumuyi, was a former Scripture Union official and an organist with the Apostolic Faith Church. Light Chapel International (LCI, Ghana) also began as a prayer group.

The founders of the new Pentecostal churches have their Western/American godfathers and mentors (see Chiluwa 2012c). This is perhaps the reason why it has been argued that although many aspects of the African Pentecostal practices reflect African life and culture (Kalu 2008), much of Pentecostal practices are Western (Ukah 2007). According to Kalu (2007, p.3), African “Pentecostal and Charismatic religiosity” is a vehicle for the transportation of ideas and material culture in order to overshadow local cultures and identities and to install a shared global culture. The prosperity gospel is still viewed as an American Pentecostal doctrine which has nothing to do with indigenous African cosmology (Gifford, 1990). For instance, many of the pastors of the churches under study (e.g. David Oyedepo of Winners Chapel) still feel indebted to their American mentors such as Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth & Mrs. Copeland and T.L. Osborn. Other American preachers have also had great influence on these new African preachers through direct training of their workers and distribution of their books, tapes, CDS and DVDs. Many of the African preachers are themselves graduates of some of the American Bible Schools.

The new Pentecostals stress being “born again”, which they believe transforms a person into special people of God. The born again person is regenerated or sanctified through inward cleansing of sin with the blood of Jesus Christ. Thus, to be born again becomes both a spiritual and social marker, since it sets one apart as God’s elected person (Anderson 2004, cited in Ukah 2007). Of special importance is the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which a born again person is said to receive by faith with the evidence of speaking in tongues. The born again worshipper is then entitled to a comprehensive and total solution to all their problems. In some of the churches, giving of offerings, tithes and other “kingdom investments” is stressed as a condition for receiving healing, success, promotion or material wealth. Hence, these churches are also referred to as “prosperity Christianity,” “health and wealth gospel,” “faith movement,” or the “name it and claim it” gospel (Ukah 2007).

Apart from prosperity message which forms the hallmark of the new Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, the emphasis on faith healing and deliverance is another important distinguishing characteristic. In Africa, religion and healing is inextricably linked (Ukah 2007); thus, healing holds a special appeal to African Christians who expect not just a temporary healing from sickness or disease but a total restoration of health from any form of physical disability, including childlessness and mental problems (Hunt 2000). The pastors of the churches under study believe that they are empowered by God to bring healing and health to their members. The CEmb for example operates a “Healing School” in most of its city centres where many people throng for healing, including people with HIV/AIDS. MFM specializes in prayer and casting out of all forms of demons/evil spirits. People who are said to be possessed by the spirit of witchcraft are also said to be healed, during their special programme known as “Power Must Change Hands”. Because of competition that exists among these Pentecostals, each church strives to carve out a niche for itself and thus specializes in a particular type of message. For instance, LFCW is known for faith and prosperity; MFM is known for prayer and exorcism, while CEmb specializes in healing and miracles. Anderson (2006) observes that healing and deliverance churches form a significant type of Pentecostalism that has endeared itself to a large section of the African population. This has now provided an alternative to the mission churches and accounts for an extensive conversion to Pentecostalism. According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2006), pastors of Pentecostal churches had often provided supernatural protection for politicians seeking to consolidate power by entrenching themselves in office. In Ghana for example, one Bishop Duncan-Williams was said to serve as the chaplain to the Rawlings government, thus providing both spiritual and political support.

The new Pentecostals are structured like formal organizations or firms and organized as business enterprises for the production, distribution and pricing of religious products, which according to Ukah (2007, p.15) is solely for “making satisfactory profit and maintaining a market share.” Ukah argues that the pastor (i.e. the founder) “alone holds a special privilege of interpreting the will of God to his followers. While resources such as money, time, and expertise are mobilized aggressively from followers and the general public...the control of these is wrested from the contributors and rested solely on the founder/owner of the church and his/her spouse” (*ibid*.). In Nigeria, RCCG, LFC and CEmb are the wealthiest churches. LFC is said to be one of the world’s richest churches. Because of their economic character, these modern pastors introduce commercial practices quite similar to the secular organization in the production and distribution of religious products like videos, CDs, DVDs, books, magazines, pamphlets and car stickers. They also sell handkerchiefs, olive oil and Holy Communion items for religious rituals or “anointing services.” The marketing activities of these churches invariably demand some religious advertising and communication. Thus, they employ different methods of secular advertising such as posters and handbills, billboards, branded vast, caps, pens and key-holders. The churches under study employ television and radio adverts using their own private media outfits and sometimes public ones. They also place adverts on newspapers and magazines when necessary especially announcing their annual conventions, conferences or retreats.

The new Pentecostals build and develop “camp grounds.” Particularly in Nigeria and Ghana these churches buy up large hectares of land and construct a range of facilities such as auditoria, secretariats, schools, guesthouses, hospitals/clinics, University campuses etc. All the Nigerian churches under study have built a university or in the process of building one. For example, the RCCG owns the Redeemers University; LFCW has established two universities (i.e. Covenant University and Landmark University) and is in the process of building a third. DLBC is planning to build the “Anchor University” (see Chiluwa 2012c). Religious camps serve as the venue for the yearly conventions of these churches. The LFCW for instance organizes a yearly international conference known as “Shiloh,” which is usually attended by over 50 nations of the world.

One last interesting feature of these new Pentecostal and Charismatic movements is the role of women in their activities. Women are allowed to preach, teach, lead and conduct the choir, prophesy and interpret dreams. Unlike in the mission churches, the pastor’s wife not only preaches from the pulpit, she also exercises significant degree of power and authority. Women are allowed to dress the western way (e.g. wear trousers and jewellery) and don’t have to cover their hair as demanded in some Pentecostal churches. Some of the church founders are women (see Chiluwa 2012c) or are widows of deceased founders. The spouses of church founders are automatically the second in command in the hierarchy of power. They protect the family’s estate and control most financial dealings of the church (Ukah 2007).

Some pastors have also taken advantage of the power of women to draw men to church, and given them pastoral duties.

Until the late 1990s, computer-mediated communication or the new media of the Internet was not common as a medium for the propagation of Christianity. According to Hackett (1986), Nigeria has one of the most developed mass media industries in Africa and the growth of Nigeria’s media institutions and industries spearheaded the expansion and diversification of the religious discipline. Subsequently, there was increase in competition between religious groups on the use of the media, which also resulted in conflicts. The churches under study had used the traditional electronic and print media to disseminate their message and to win followers. They had also used the media to advertise their programmes and conferences.

Online awareness among Nigerians began in 1991 with the activities of Nigerians in diaspora, particularly the USA with the creation of the first online community known as “Naijanet.” The participants merely forwarded emails on news relating to Nigeria being disseminated by Reuters and AFP to their friends (Bastian 1999; Ifukor 2011). This online practice later grew and the various online activities by Diaspora Nigerians through emails, listserv and the Usenet newsgroup became the premier efforts in the construction of a “virtual Nigeria” (Bastian 1999). New media networks then provided young Nigerians the opportunity to respond to news about Nigeria and exchange ideas on social, political and economic situations in the country. As greater interest in the social media increased, especially with divergent views and interests on social matters, new virtual communities were formed, mostly along ethnic lines. Religious institutions and Pentecostal churches who believed that the Internet was a fulfilment of prophecy as an instrument for the dissemination of the gospel in the last days began to take the advantage of the new media to propagate their activities (Chiluwa 2012c). RCCG hosted its first website in 1997, CEmb in 2000 and DLBC in 2001. The different activities and programmes of these churches are clearly described on their websites with some display menus like "home", "about us", "news/events", "contact us" etc. In some, special page icons such as "join us", "need help", "come to Christ", "blogs", "pay your tithes", etc. are displayed conspicuously (Chiluwa 2012c).

Christian offline worship and practices such as "feet washing," "healing ministrations," "anointing services," "communion services," "tithes and offering", etc., are easily and effectively performed online by the twelve churches under study. For instance, some members of these churches who worship online give their tithes and offerings through credit cards. Activities such as feet washing or communion services are broadcast live through videos/internet live streaming and worshippers follow along. They would generally be required to provide water in a basin and a towel (for feet washing), and bread and wine (for communion) and serve themselves as they are instructed by the officiating minister. Healing ministrations and anointing services follow the same procedure: online worshippers simply watch the videos and carry out instructions from the pastor. Live streams of conferences, retreats, conventions and Shilohs of these churches are followed on the Internet, discussed on Facebook and Twitter and watched on YouTube. There have also been reports of miracles, healings and "signs and wonders" arising from these online worships and programmes (Chiluwa 2012c). According to Chiluwa, Internet technology and online worship have further enhanced the spread of Christianity in Africa.

Online Religion and Religion Online

"Online Religion" is associated with active participation in online worship, characterized by prayer, rituals and meditation, while "Religion Online" is said to merely provide information about religion, such as doctrines, polity, organization, beliefs and religious publications. It also offers religious opportunities for service (Hadden & Cowan

2000; Helland 2000, 2007; Young 2004). Cowan (2004), however, argues that a vast majority of websites seek to bridge the gap between religion online and online religion. Chiluwa (2012c) shows that digital worship among Nigerian (or African) Christians combines features of both religion online and online religion going by the earlier definitions of these terms. The study also demonstrates that Nigerian churches design their websites in a way that provides information about their history, mission/vision, doctrines and church activities. Like in Nigeria, the churches in Ghana and Cameroon, in the current study, provide an opportunity for practical involvement and participation in online worship such as prayer, praise/worship, and teachings.

Online Christian worship in Africa has become more active and popular among worshippers, leading to the emergence of the “Internet Church,” (Chiluwa 2012c), where members worship in addition to their local offline churches. The Internet Church also serves the interest of worshippers who worship exclusively online (e.g. Diaspora Africans) due to lack of availability of their local churches in their present immediate environments. As highlighted above, members claim uncommon spiritual experiences including miracles, healings, and supernatural financial supplies as they participate in online church services right in their sitting rooms. These experiences are often attributed to online “anointing services,” “Holy Ghost services,” “Healing Schools,” “feet-washings” and “open heavens.” These activities generally promote virtual participation and help meet the spiritual needs of worshippers. Thus, online worship significantly supplements offline church membership and participation.

Apart from the Jonah Soul Winning Ministries (JSWN, Cameroon), all the churches in the current study are on Facebook while most of them are followed on Twitter and YouTube or GodTube. Members also join the churches’ mailing lists. These social media networks (SMNs) promote virtual connectivity and interactions among members and between members and their pastors. However, these forums appear to be undemocratic because they hardly support open debate situations, where individuals may discuss personal feelings, complain or question certain religious practices. This limitation to the interactivity of online religion is not unique to Africa. Fukamizu (2007), for instance, argues that only a few sites have the possibility of dialogic interaction which is why religious use of the Internet is very low in Japan compared to the United States. Kawabata & Tamura (2007) attribute this situation to demographic reasons rather than the interactive profiles of the websites. Japanese believers were said to be likely older than the American worshippers, thus may have low attitude towards the Internet. Watanabe (2007) argues that a monologue system might always exist and in fact be preferred. He compares the users of the Bulletin Board System (interactive) and those of the weblog system (monological), and concludes that there has been a sudden shift from the interactive and dialogical to the blog because those that subscribe to the Bulletin Board System encounter serious difficulties while trying to engage in religious dialogue online, where participants generally tend to be intolerant of other people's views in matters of spirituality, religious tradition and institution.

The fact that churches are beginning to take advantage of modern information technology/SMN is very interesting, offering insights into the kinds of interactive relationships that are likely to motivate more active social interactions in religious contexts in future. Churches on Facebook and Twitter promise the kind of interactions that did not exist under the old canonical order, where church leaders exercised absolute religious authority. Presently, church activities aided by SMN are most likely to promote a more democratic relationship and a better understanding between church leaders and their members.

Online (Religious) Community

The best theory of religion that captures the idea of community (or communality) is that of Emile Durkheim. In his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim had argued that religion was mere expression of social cohesion and contended that the totems which the aborigines of Australia worshipped were expressions of their own conceptions of the essence of society. He argued that religion was real not only for the aborigines, but also for all societies. In Durkheim's view we perceive, as individuals, a force greater than ourselves, which is our social life, and give that perception a supernatural face. We then express ourselves religiously in groups, which for Durkheim makes the symbolic power greater. Thus, religion becomes an expression of our collective consciousness, which is the fusion of all of our individual consciousnesses, and then creates a reality of its own (Kruger 2005). Durkheim's functional definition of religion identified a church comprised of a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things; beliefs and practices, which unite into one single "moral community" called a Church, comprising all those who adhere to them. This functional definition of religion explains that religion unites societies.

The Internet has so far been used to break geographical and racial barriers for people who share common interests and who must communicate with one another. According to Dawson (2004), being religious also implies being a member of a group "even if the affiliation is more symbolic and subjective than real," and "in the popular mind the notions of religion and community go hand- in-hand", in keeping with Durkheim's assertion that society is the soul of religion (Dawson 2004, p.75). A "community" is traditionally viewed as a people within geographical boundaries with some racial bond and common historical and socio-cultural identity. Hence, people in a community often speak the same language and sometimes exhibit cultural traits. A virtual (online) community, however, tends to be dispersed geographically, though some online communities are linked geographically and are known as community websites. Online communities resemble real life communities in the sense that they provide support, information and friendship for members (Wellman 1999).

In recent times, scholars have preferred the term “online community” to “virtual community” because the latter implies something “unreal” or “false” about online religious relationships (Campbell 2005). Online communities are increasingly accepted as “real” as they reflect traits of a traditional community and online worshippers find solace in the space provided by the Internet to connect with one another and make spiritual inputs where the offline local church had sometimes failed (Campbell 2005). In other words, online communities in modern times are as real as and function almost in the same ways as an offline community, and often provide an option for many whose expectations of offline community have been disappointed.

An online community may be described as the gathering of people in an online “space” where they communicate or interact, connect, and have the tendency to know each other better over time. According to Rheingold (1993), virtual communities form when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships. Androutsopoulos (2006) recommends that an online community should interact regularly around a shared interest or purpose with the development of definitely defined social roles, hierarchies and shared norms; these would anchor on a sense of common history and awareness of difference from other groups. Thus, a religious online community, like other “communities” on the Internet, provides collaboration, information sharing and social interactions, but does so along religious or faith lines.

According to Campbell (2005), being members of an email list, for example, does not mean that the group is a community, but some personal relationships that sometimes occur in online contexts can become more intimate and valued than those that occur in a local offline church. “When this takes place, individuals may see their Christian community as coming from the online context rather than where they physically locate themselves for worship each week" (p.xv). We can then say that religious (or Christian) communities have indeed formed online if we begin to accept that a community does not have to be a geographical space, such as a town or village. What is important is that the Internet facilitates the formation of new forms of communities that are free from ethnic stereotypes, class distinctions, gender differences and racial discriminations (Dawson 2004).

However, some scholars have entertained the fear that online communities are fast destroying "real" offline community and argue that the Internet is not capable of replicating the human geographical space known as "community." According to Stoll (1995, cited in Crispin et al. 2004, p.108), the Internet merely isolates us from one another rather than bringing us together. Individuals are learning to retreat into a "false reality", because only the illusion of community can be realized in cyberspace. Lockard (1997) also argues that online communities actually encourage people to evade offline "real life" social issues, with their difficulties and challenges. He further argues that online communities are a poor substitute for the "real" thing and that "to accept only communication in place of a community's manifold functions is to sell our common faith in community vastly short" (p.225; see Crispin et al. 2004, p.111).

An earlier assertion by Anderson (1983) had included all communities outside of the primordial village as imagined communities. However, like Baym (1998), Anderson agreed that virtual communities do indeed act as a meaningful and powerful influence on people's lives. Baym identifies some ways in which communities emerge through social processes: some forms of expression (people talking about their community); a sense of shared identity; relationship – people's connectivity and interaction with other members of the community; and shared norms and conventions that control people's lives (Crispin et al. 2004). Crispin et al. conclude that if at all anything is being lost of the traditional community, more is being gained from the online communities, especially as the latter connect people not of common location but of “common interest and feeling” (p.112).

Social Interaction on the Internet

Social interaction presupposes that people (in real life situations, using a language) communicate with one another in an assumed, informal way, either in groups or on a person-to-person basis. This kind of communication (often oral) is accompanied by non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions or body movements. While it is impossible to reproduce exact face-to-face interactional situations on the Internet, Herring (2001) argues that CMD constitute social practice in itself and demonstrates that people can effectively “do” interactional work in cyberspace. Synchronous (real time) interactions, for example, attempt to provide situations that are similar to face-to-face communication encounters. In an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) or chatroom for example, a user can log-on and join an on-going conversation in real time. Members of an online chat group can also log on at the same time and watch their contributions appear on the screen soon after they make them and are able to make prompt responses (Crystal 2006). Where contributors are on Skype, they are able to see each other’s facial expressions as well as other forms of non-verbal cues that enhance social interaction. Also, text-based asynchronous CMD (e.g. email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter etc.) include alternative strategies for social cues usually conveyed during face-to-face interaction. For example, *emoticons* (composed of ASCII characters) are generally used to indicate facial expressions reflecting happiness, anger, disappointment or frustration. Herring (1998c) has also shown that in addition to facial expressions, physical actions can be represented textually. For example, typed actions such as grin and yawn may serve as cues for playful or relaxed discourse frame. Herring also shows that “synchronous CMD such as MUDs and IRC further provides a special communication command which can be used to describe actions or states in the third person. This command is often used to expand dialogue into narrative performance" (2001, 625). According to Sproull & Kiesler (1991, cited in Herring 2001, p.624), text-only asynchronous interaction

> allows users to choose their words with greater care, and reveals less of their doubts and insecurities than does spontaneous speech. With these interactional resources, online interactants can do virtually anything that people do in offline social interaction such as converse, negotiate, criticize, joke, laugh, tease, fall in love, play games or even commit crimes. All of these reflect how technology is shaping (and is in turn being shaped) by society as people attempt to incorporate technology into their social interactions (Crispin, Lengel & Tomic 2004).

Methodology

According to Kruger (2005), an appropriate methodology for studying religion on the Internet should provide answers to what is on the Internet, who put it there and for what purpose, how many people use it and how often the use of the online resources has influenced religious worship. As pointed out above, this study relies mainly on asynchronous online resources on the websites and posts on the Facebook walls and Twitter pages of the churches under study. Herring (2004) recommends that a computer-based sociolinguistic discourse analysis (CMDA) should be concerned with the investigation of structures of meaning, interaction, and social behaviour in the "communities" of online worshippers. Herring further recommends that CMDA should account for online discourse behaviours characteristic of a virtual/online community such as language structure (e.g. styles, jargons and code switching that mark off a particular group), meaning and interaction (indicating reciprocity, extended threads and core participants). Hence, a sociolinguistic-CMD analysis adopted in this study attempts to show how "discourse" (i.e. text-based written language) on the websites and social feeds (mainly on Facebook and Twitter) of each of the churches reveals situations of the online community and social interaction. A table showing the regularity of interactions on Facebook and Twitter between worshippers and their pastors, and between members and members (worshippers) is provided in the analysis.

The contents of the quotes are analysed to show whether indeed the posts or comments on Facebook Walls/Twitter are interactive. The criteria for being “interactive” are the level of informality and freedom of the members to communicate personal matters, such as questions or arguments that affect their lives directly, and how often they get feedback, rather than the top-down mode usually characterized by preaching and giving orders by pastors. Interactive exchanges should involve participants interacting with each other on common subjects of interest in relation to the welfare of all community members and how this enhances their religious involvement and participation.

Data/Analysis

Data analysed here is taken from Facebook and Twitter and summarised in Table 2 below. Table 2 records interaction on the Facebook page and Twitter account of each church, using metrics published by Facebook and Twitter. For each Facebook page, Facebook displays the number of people who have "Liked" that page ("Likes"), and the number of people who have interacted with it in some way over the last seven days, including adding a comment, liking a post or mentioning the page in one of their own status updates ("Talking About This"). For each Twitter account, Twitter displays a number of "Followers" and "Following". "Followers" are people who have signed up to receive tweets from that account, while the "Following" metric measures the number of other users that the account itself is following. A few of the Facebook pages studied here belong to the church pastors (e.g. CEmb and LCI), and are used to represent their churches; the others belong to the churches themselves. For reasons of space, only a few posts from the Facebook walls of the churches are reproduced in the analysis below. Names of posters have been removed.

Table 2: **Interaction Indicators on *Facebook* and *Twitter* of the Churches**

	Facebook		**Twitter**		
Church	*Likes*	*Talking about this*	*Tweets*	*Followers*	*Following*
RCCG	51,734	423	15,569	100,011	33,564
DLBC	7,590	1,629	894	2,150	02
LFCW	52,867	17,794	171	49	16
CEmb	9,943	88	1,264	1,187,598	0
ICGC	20,456	1,786	-	-	-
LCI	418,274	1,688	1,183	10,012	12
WMCI	15,375	0	486	221	923
VBCI	1,110	88	2	3	14
ACPN	22	1	-	-	-
EWM	21	1	-	-	-
DFI	15	0	-	-	-
JSWM	-	-	-	-	-

From the above table, it is quite clear that some of these churches are more active on social media than others. Churches in Nigeria and Ghana that appear to have imbibed a more developed social media culture attract more activities than those of Cameroon. This is probably due to Christianity attracting more computer-literate adherents in Nigeria, for example, than in Cameroon.

Activities on RCCG's Facebook far exceed most of the other churches, but RCCG doesn't seem to be interested in "following" topics/messages from their very enthusiastic followers on Twitter. The opposite seems to be the case with DLBC where it appears the pastors who tweet many messages do not get so many followers. Interestingly, there is a "following," which suggests that DLBC may be more amenable to "follow" responses than the RCCG who lacked a single "following" in spite of 3,134 followers.

Surprisingly, the Ghanaian ICGC (as at the time of this study) was not yet on Twitter despite its vibrant Facebook representation and activities. Out of the four Ghanaian churches, three are on both Facebook and Twitter, while only one out of the four in Cameroon is on Facebook and Twitter. Two of the Cameroon churches are on Facebook but not yet on Twitter. This could suggest that the churches in Cameroon are either do not subscribe to Twitter as a viable medium for religious interaction or that the use of social media is not yet as popular in Cameroon as in Nigeria and Ghana. This is reflected in the number of topics and comments on their respective Facebook pages.

From the above table, it is clear that Nigeria leads in social media use in religious communication and interaction. Interestingly, the Nigerian churches appear not to be as responsive to their members and followers as those of Ghana especially on Twitter. For instance, all the Ghanaian churches are following large numbers of users unlike the Nigerian churches, which implies that social media are used more interactively in Ghana than in all the churches in the data. For example with only twenty-four followers from 151 tweets on

Twitter, the VBCI was following 222 other users. This is far more significant than in LFCW (Nigeria), where 6,052 users followed 157 tweets, but LFCW itself followed no one at all.

African Online Pentecostals as Communities

In his article "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community," Dawson (2004, p.76) asks: "will cyberspace give rise to a sufficiently adapted form of communal life capable of sustaining religious experience?" He argues that most so-called online communities are rather too specialized, largely ideational in content and too intermittent and transitory to evoke the sense of we-ness commonly associated with the word "community" (p.77). This is because community implies "more than mere social interaction" – so "not all virtual groups are communities" (*ibid.*). He further argues that the online absence of social cues which people use to judge the character and trustworthiness of others draws people into a dependence on stereotypes. Therefore "we need to know more about the qualitative character of online relationships and the actual performance of so-called virtual communities" (p.79). But even where there is evidence of offline community-type standards on the Internet (e.g. social interaction), I still argue in this paper that the character of social interaction on online Christian worship in African churches is far from being sufficient.

The websites of these churches provide ample information about church programmes available to worshippers and how to participate in such programmes, including "online giving," or "pay your tithe," "ask Pastor Chris," "open heavens", "missionary activities", "how to improve on your marriage," "watch live and archived services," "watch service on mobile," and "follow us on YouTube". This clearly meets the criteria for "religion online" proposed by Helland (2000; 2007). Members also have the opportunity to post their "testimonies" to the church website and receive counselling and prayers as may be required.

The criteria for online community – bringing people together, having social roles, shared norms and hierarchies, and carrying on public discussion long enough – are clearly met by the online Christianity. Members also have the opportunity to development personal relationships and share information with members. However, the kind of regular relationships and social interaction which social media networks promise are often stifled in online worship between church leaders and their members. Interactions are usually quite formal and communication flow is often the top down.

What are evident on their websites are conscious displays of church programmes and information about how worshippers may participate and benefit. Attention is more on miracles, healings and problem solving by God, with church leaders serving as intermediaries. Worshippers are merely required to meet certain conditions in order to enjoy these benefits. This is hardly a wholesome form of "community". A traditional community is a place or space where members share problems together, recognize their strengths and weakness, encounter conflicts and initiate conflict resolution strategies etc. These practices often happen in offline church situations but are hardly evident on the Internet in African churches.

Social Interaction in Online Religion

It is a major revolution in the conduct of modern Christian practice that religious worship is adaptable to the Internet – the fact that church services are watched and practised online. The availability of the church on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds, and specialized blogs contributes further to this revolutionary approach. Some church programs are also relayed through Skype. Some of the churches under study like the RCCG or DLBC may also be followed on YouTube or GodTube. Others like the Christ Embassy in

Nigeria have WebTV and video-supported interactive forums and “live blogs”. These are quite new in the history of the modern Pentecostal church.

I argue that social interaction is a major advantage of a strong online community. A virtual/online community ought to provide and sustain a viable and active social interaction base. The fact that online churches are now on Facebook and Twitter suggests that a type of social interaction exists among church members and their leaders. I now examine the nature and content of such interactions. Samples are obtained from the Facebook walls of the churches under study. Since the topics and responses (i.e. the date) on Facebook and Twitter are in thousands as shown in table 2, only a few samples from Facebook are reproduced in the analysis below. At least one example is taken from each of the churches.

Text-based discourse topics (or messages) posted on Facebook walls have some forms of subject matter (or theme) targeted at the worshippers who are the receivers/audience. Thus, a two-way communication flow is in principle established.

The general theme of faith reverberates in the posts of most of the churches. Other recurrent themes include success, victory, healing, prosperity and righteousness. Comments offer brief responses to the topic, which may be viewed as genuine feedback, but are too brief and isolated to be considered interactive. Many of the posts and threads on Facebook are verses lifted from the Bible or a prayer from the pastor, which of course leaves no room for the worshipper to contribute, rather than to simply say “amen”.

Below is an example from the RCCG Facebook wall. “P” is the original status update, and “R” stands for “responder.”

> **P1**. (from the Pastor): The world doesn’t reward your efforts or struggles only your success. Today i pray GOD will reward your efforts and struggles in JESUS name (23,896 likes).

R1. Amen sir.

P2. Faith is no Faith until it is tested. GOD will test your faith. Gen 22:1-18 (5,884 likes)

R2. Lord, I ask for the grace to pass the test of life in Jesus name

In the two examples above, the responders do not really interact with the pastor. R1 simply affirms the prayer, by saying "Amen," but she adds "sir," at the end, significantly showing the African mode of polite address that is normal for an elder, or a person in authority. But it also reflects distance, in terms of the relationship that exists between the addresser and the addressee. Here, the relationship is absolutely formal, between a master and a servant who probably had never met in person. R2 does not even respond to the pastor, rather to God directly as the post functions as a motivator to prayer. Interactions then appear to take place between man and God, rather than between man and man. This piece clearly reflects participant roles in discourse, where the pastor is viewed as the intermediary between God and man, presupposing that the relationship between the addresser and addressee is formal. In this case, an informal interactive atmosphere that occurs in an offline situation (even in offline religion situation) is absent online. A similar example is taken from the DLBC's Facebook wall:

P3. (from the Pastor): "Proverb 30.5. Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him (5 likes)

R3. Amen

R4. May the Lord give me the grace to trust and obey His word in JESUS name. Amen

Again, the above samples correlate with the earlier examples, showing almost exactly the same pattern of responses, in which responders do not really respond to the pastor. Interestingly, the two responders to the post in P3 (which is a Bible quotation) give the same response as the responders in RI and R2 to a piece of preaching. This suggests that responses are predictable, meaning that the pastors are likely to know in advance what the usual responses will be, and therefore prepare their messages to fit those expected responses. “Interaction” here misses the point of dynamism and appears mechanical.

Responses from the Facebook walls of LFC and CEMb are not too different from the examples below:

> **P4.** (from the Pastor): God says ignorance (the absence of knowledge) destroys. Hosea 4.6 (438 likes)
>
> **R5**. I hear sir. Thk u sir for the word of knowledge
>
> **R6**. Amen papa, il faudrait détruire l”ignorance
>
> **R7**. My mentor is good.
>
> **R8**. More grace, fresh anointing upon you papa, you are indeed…

The responses to P4 in R5 and R6 indicate the usual acceptance of and affirmation to the pastor’s post. Interestingly however, R5 applies the informal writing style usually associated with the Internet and mobile telephony: “Thank you” is abbreviated as “Thk u.” However, this doesn’t necessarily make the “dialogue” informal or interactive, because in all the cases, the pastor’s posts are not followed-up with responses to these comments. R5-8 generally reflect the kind of religious mentality and mode of address mostly common to all these churches, transferred to the social media platform. Like the above previous example, R5 simply accedes to the message. Notice the “sir” address format repeated here to show respect and distance. Some worshippers praise their pastors; some actually adore and brag about them in a form of hero-worship. This is clearly reflected in R6 and R7. The pastor is viewed both as a father and mentor and called “papa” by his church members. The addressee here becomes everyone who cares to listen to the social role the pastor is said to play. R8 goes on to pray for him.

Interestingly, R5 reflects the multilingual nature of the Internet. It is assumed that the writer understands English but she writes her comment in French: “Il faudrait détruire l’ignorance” (ignorance should be destroyed). This reflects a possible global participation of worshippers in religious practices through social media.

All the churches in Nigeria follow the same pattern of top-bottom interactional mode where the pastor is at the centre. Thus, the interactions lack the dynamism of the real offline conversation. However, one of the Ghanaian churches is somewhat different. While there are evidences of the frequent acceptance of the pastor message, there are also some forms of interactions that take place among members and worshippers. The following conversations take place among worshippers from the ICGC.

> **P5**. It’s the Breakthrough Conference! Greater Works 2010. I hear a sound of aboundace in dis year’s greater works n am going 2 have ecounter with my craeter.
>
> **R9**. dis show is really gonna be big
>
> **P6**. R10, were you at the church last year, is good but those guys belongs to the protocol department.
>
> **R10**. I couldn’t make it but i bought the CD and just as i expected the message was spot on that should repent any soul that hears it. Try and get it! Title "BETWEEN TWO SINNERS"

These brief dialogues between worshippers appear more like a social interaction. For instance, P5 announces a conference which in his opinion promises “aboundace” (abundance) and also excitedly announces his expectation. This warrants R9, which is a logical response to P5. Notice the word “craeter” (creator), which evidences the typical non-standard Ghanaian pronunciation. P6 and R10 appear more practical. P6 makes reference to “those guys” from the protocol department, which R10 is assumed to be aware off, so he didn’t have to comment on it. The brief conversation also reflects the worshippers rating of electronic alternatives to offline preaching. R10 was not in church but he was satisfied with the sermon on CD which gave him the same satisfaction as the real life offline church sermon. Another example from a Ghanaian church (i.e. VBCI), shows the worshippers not only praising the pastor, but also giving “testimonies” to the pastor’s contributions to their lives.

> **P7**. To God be the glory, many lives and destinies have been impacted upon for the past 25yrs. I can boldly say that am a full beneficiary of the selfless and dedicated ministry of this great man of God.Bishop.N.A Tackie Yarboi.
>
> **P8**. My life has bn impacted greatly by you nd u gave me the opportunity to unearth the gifts of God upon my life. Words are not enough to say all i have in my heart, but to say thank u for being obedient to the call…
>
> **P9**. That’s my church back home in Ghana.
>
> **P10.** I am so bless to be part of this vision oh God we thank thee

P8 is a form of appreciation note to the pastor, which of course the pastor did not respond to. The phrase “the past 25 years” suggests that the posts in this category are congratulatory messages to the pastor on the occasion of their Silver Jubilee Anniversary. Thus, the above texts are not part of an on-going conversations, rather are individual acknowledgments directed not just to the pastor but also to any reader of the Facebook interactions, expectedly members of the church. P9 on the other hand is merely a proud identification with the offline church. The post suggests that the writer was not in Ghana at the time he posted the message.

As already indicated on Table 2, Cameroonian churches were yet to apply social media to elaborate and meaningful Christian worship. The three posts on the Facebook wall of the EWM as shown below are from the pastor. Two of the posts are in French, one in English.

P11. *On est voit moi qu'avec le coeur, aimons nous les un et les autres du vraie de l"amour*

(one sees me with the heart, let's love one another with the heart).

P12. "We are called to bring men into the fullness of Christ."

P13. *Un succee sans successeur cella ne pas un succe* (a success without a successor is no success)

The above posts are clearly religious admonitions that do not anticipate any responses. This is perhaps the reason why there are none.

In summary, the information structure of the first type of posts shows that they are preachy. The posts are in form of admonitions, Bible quotes or teachings. This is basically non-interactive. The second form of information structure is partially interactive, where information flows from the top (the pastor) to the members/worshippers and the latter is expected to accept or affirm the message. Members may give "testimonies" to the pastor's good works or simply pray for the pastor. The third is fairly interactive where worshippers send posts to and get feedbacks from fellow worshippers. This is evident in only one church in Ghana. The three types of interaction models confirm that the churches lack strong interactive forums for a strong social interaction. This is attributed to the traditional administrative structure of the church, where members are usually at the receiving end. The pastor is said to receive instructions from God and dispenses same to members, who seldom ask questions. However, social interaction in the ICGC example does not pose any danger to religious authority as members neither question God’s word nor the pastor’s authority; rather members share and reflect on issues of faith as they affect them; some of them offering spiritual solutions to some seeming problems, without recourse to the pastor. This way, spiritual experiences are mutually shared and stronger emotional ties are sustained. Thus, interactive forums are better than where they do not exist.

Language Use and Structures

The language style of the Internet, which according to Crystal (2006, p.244) “falls uneasily between standard and non-standard English”, does not seem to place any constraints on the language of religion on the web. This means that they are not largely unorthodox in terms of spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and grammar. Because of its highly formalized context (i.e. of religion), the freedom to manipulate words, or the use of “nonsense vocabulary” (Crystal 2011, p.18) by worshippers is absolutely absent. The use of unconventional orthography to represent auditory information such as prosody, laughter and other non-language sounds are also absent; thus emoticons (e.g. smiley face) are hardly used even on Facebook. Herring (2001) has however, argued that only a relatively small percentage of non-standard linguistic features in CMD are unintentional. The majority are deliberate choices made by users in order to economize space, mimic spoken language features or express themselves creatively. According to Herring, variation in structural complexity in some online contents must be understood as reflecting social situational factors, which determine what level of formality, standardness and structural complexity is appropriate to the context.

In all the websites and pages of the churches under study, writings display formal features of British and American Standard varieties. This is evident in the spelling patterns that identify with British and American English. We can argue that Western influence on virtually all the pastors could have influenced the brand of English we see on their websites. It is true that the websites may have been designed by independent service providers who have introduced their own variety of English, but most of their contents consist of uploads to the websites. Below are samples from three of the churches under study that demonstrate the forms and variety of English on the churches' websites:

> **P14**. At Shiloh 2011, God has proved himself to be a God of greater Glory... The event saw to the live streaming of multiple international locations connecting to and fro Canaanland and there was a total hit of 123,997 within just few days on the website as people from almost everywhere on earth were connected to watch the service online. (LFC, Nigeria).

> **P15.** The International Central Gospel Church is an Evangelical, Charismatic Christian Church. It was officially inaugurated as a church on the 26th of February 1984, in Accra, Ghana. The first meeting was held in a small classroom with an initial membership of just about twenty people. In May 1986, the church settled in a rented scout hall – the Baden Powell Memorial Hall – which became its home for the next ten years... (ICGC, Ghana)

> **P16.** Greetings, Holy and Wonderful people of God...Our church building in Togo is in trouble. We bought the LAND and have not paid all the money, we are owing 12,000,000 (Twelve Million FCFA) which is $25,000 (Twenty-five thousand dollars). The Land owner requires that we pay him $12,500 dollars before the end of this year. We therefore solicit your help to payout this amount of money. (DFI, Cameroon)

P14 is a report, P15 is a history, while P16 is an appeal. Given the different persuasive contexts of the samples, one can conclude that the English of online religion in West Africa approximates British/American Standard English. Grammatical structures are similar to those of Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Cameroonian Standard English varieties. In terms of vocabulary, words are carefully chosen in all the samples and reflect the register of religion, as we would expect. It is clear that the English of the above samples is near perfect and aptly represents the kind of English in the formal Christian contexts in West Africa.

Conclusion

This research concludes that African digital worshippers have formed online communities; online worshippers of each of the churches constitute a community. However, while certain conditions such as information sharing, norms sharing and recognition of hierarchies are visible in online worship, situations that are typical of the offline community such as regular interactions, development of relationships, and conflict resolution mechanisms are more evident in offline worship than in online worship. On Facebook and Twitter, pastors see their pages and profiles as another opportunity to reach out to the members in form of teachings, prayers and announcements. Members merely respond in gratitude and share "testimonies" of the impact of the pastors on their lives. Social interactions where members interact with members are minimized probably because members view the forums as a sacred space solely for spiritual matters and not for sharing social or individual feelings. This is particularly evident in the Nigerian online churches although Nigeria appears to be the most developed, in terms of social media use for religious worship. Comparatively, this research has shown that the Ghanaian social networks are the more interactive than the rest and follows Nigeria in terms of the popularization of the new media in religious activities. The use of social media in religious worship is not yet widespread in Cameroon. In all, the introduction of social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs and interactive forums is an interesting new development in Christian worship which promises a more dynamic online worship in the near future.

Acknowledgement

A version of this paper was presented at the *International Conference on Digital Religion. Center for Media, Religion and Culture*. University of Colorado, Boulder, USA, 12-15 January, 2012. I thank the organizers.

References

Anderson, A. (2004) *Introduction to Pentecostalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Anderson, A. (2006) "Exorcism and Conversion to African Pentecostalism." *Exchange,* vol. 3(1), 133

Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Societies: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso

Asamoah-Gyadu (2006) "African Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity: An Overview." *http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/worldreports/464/08-2006?pg=all.* Retrieved 01.04.13

Adegbija, E. (1997). "The Identity, Survival and the Promotion of Minority Languages in Nigeria."*International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *125*, 5-27

Androutsopoulos, J. (2006) "Sociolinguistics and Computer-Mediated Communication." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 10(4), 419–438

Bastian, Misty. 1999. "Nationalism in a Virtual Space: Immigrant Nigerians on the Internet."

West Africa Review: 1, 1. http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?101.1.1.2.

Baym, N. (1998) “The Emergence of Online Community.” In: S. G. Jones (ed). *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p.35-68

Baym, N. (2003) “Communication in Online Communities.” In: *Encyclopedia of Community Vol. 3*. Christiansen K. & D. Levinson (eds.). California: Sage, 1015-1017

BBC (2004) “Nigeria Leads in Religious Belief,” *BBC World News*, 26 February

Campbel, H. (2005) *Exploring Community Online: We Are One in the Network*. New York: Peter Lang

Chiluwa, I. (2012c) “Online Religion in Nigeria: The Internet Church and Cyber Miracles.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. *Vol.47 (6), 734-749*

Chiluwa, I. (2012d) “Social Media Networks and the Discourse of Resistance: a Sociolinguistic CDA of *Biafra* Online Discourses. *Discourse & Society*, 23(3), 217-244

Chiluwa, I. (2008a) “Assessing the Nigerianness of SMS Text-Messages in English.” *English Today 93, Vol. 24(1), 51-56*

Chiluwa, I. (2008b) Religious Vehicle Stickers in Nigeria: A Discourse of Identity, Faith and Social Vision. *Discourse & Communication*, 2(4), 371-387

Cowan, D. (2004) “Contested Space: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda.” In: Dawson, L. & D. Cowan (eds). *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. London: Routledge, 255-272

Crispin, T., Lengel, L. & Tomic A. (2004) *Computer-Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet*. London: Sage

Crystal, D. (2006) *Language and the Internet* (2nd edition). Cambridge: CUP

Crystal, D. (2011) *Internet Linguistics*. London: Routledge

Danet, B. & Herring, S.C. (eds). (2007) *The Multilingual Internet: Language, Culture and Communication Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Dawson, L. (2004) “Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community.” In: Dawson, L. & D. Cowan (eds). *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. London: Routledge, 75-92

Durkheim, E. (2008 [1912]). *Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* Oxford Paperbacks.

Emenyonu, E. (2007). “The Accounting Profession, the Church and the Nigerian State: Potent Change Agents for National Rebirth.” Public Lecture given at Covenant University, Ota. June, 14.

Fukamizu, K. (2007). “Internet Use among Religious Followers: Religious Postmodernism in Japanese Buddhism.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*(3), article 11

Gifford, P. (1990) “Prosperity: A New and Foreign Element in African Christianity.” *Religion* 20, 373-388

Hadden, J. and D. Cowan (2000) “The Promised Land or Electronic Chaos: Towards Understanding Religion on the Internet.” In: *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. Hadden, J. and D. Cowan (eds.). London: JAI Press/Elsevier Science

Helland, C. (2000). Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas. In Hadden J. & D. Cowan (eds). *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. London: Elsevier, 205-223

Helland, C. (2005). Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet. *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1(1), 8-22

Helland, C. (2007). Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(3), article 10.

Herring, S. (1998c) "Virtual Gender Performances." Paper presented at Texas A&M University, September 25.

Herring, S. (2001). "Computer-Mediated Discourse." In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. Hamilton (eds.) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 612-634). Oxford: Blackwell

Herring, S. (2004) "Online Behaviour." In: *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*. In Barab, S. A., R. Kling and J.H. Gray (eds.). New York: Cambridge University Press, 338-376

Hoffman, D., T. Novak & A. Venkatesh (2004) "Has the Internet Become Indispensable?" *Communication of the ACM*. Vol. 47(7), 37-42

Hunt, S. (2000) "Dramatising the "Health and Wealth Gospel": Belief and Practice of a Neo-Pentecostal "Faith Ministry." Journal of Beliefs & Value, vol. 21(1), 73-86

Ifukor, P. (2011) Linguistic marketing in "… a marketplace of ideas": Language Choice and Intertextuality in a Nigerian Virtual Community. *Pragmatics and Society* 2(1): 110–147

Kalu, O. (2007) "A Discursive Interpretation of African Pentecostalism." *http://www.calvin. edu/nagel/resources/files/KaluASCH07.pdf*. Retrieved 01.04.13

Kalu, O. (2008) *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kawabata A. & Tamura, T. (2007) "Online Religion in Japan: Websites and Religious Counselling from a Comparative Cross-cultural Perspective." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(3), article 12

Kruger, O. (2005). "Methods and Theory for Studying Religion on the Internet: Introduction to the Special Issue on Theory and Methodology." *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* 1(1), 1-7

Larsen, E. (2004). Cyberfaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online. In Dawson, L. & D. Cowan (eds). *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. London: Routledge. 17-20

Lockard, J. (1997) "Progressive Politics, Electronic Individualism and the Myth of Virtual Community." In D. Porter (ed) *Internet Culture*. New York: Routeledge, p.219-232

News from Africa.org (2000) "Muslims Cry Foul over Population Figures." (February 12, Retrieved 23.10.12).

Ojo, M. (2009) *The End-time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community*. Massachusetts: MIT Press

Sanneh, L. (2007) "Historian Ahead of His Time." *Christian Today Magazine*, February 15

Sperlich, W. (2005) "Will Cyberforums Save Endangered Languages? A Niuean Case Study. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 172: 51-77

Sproull, L. & Kiesler, S. (1991) *Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Stoll, C. (1995) *Silicon Snake Oil*. New York: Anchor Books

Ukah, A. (2007) "African Christianities: Features, Promises and Problems." Department of Anthropology and African Studies. *Working Papers, Nr.9*. Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, Germany

Warschauer, M. (2002) "Languages.Com: The Internet and Linguistic Pluralism." In: *Silicon Literacies*. London: Routledge, p. 62-74

Watanabe, M. (2007) "Conflict and Intolerance in a Web Community: Effects of a System Integrating Dialogue and Monologues." *Journal of Computer-Mediated*

Communication, 13(2), article 13.

Wellman, B. (1999) “Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities. Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=vhu OBRPS-*pUC&oi=fnd&pg=PA331&dq=impact*

Young, G. (2004) “Reading and Praying Online: the Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity.” In *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. Dawson L. & Cowan (eds). New York: Routledge, 93-106

About the Author

Dr. I. Chiluwa is a Senior Lecturer and Head of Department of Languages, Covenant University, Ota (Nigeria). His research focus is discourse studies and pragmatics and has published scholarly articles in some leading international journals in this field such as *Discourse & Society*, *Discourse Studies*, *Discourse & Communication*, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *Journal of Language and Politics*, *Pragmatics and Society*, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *English Today*, *English World-Wide* etc. He is the author of *Labeling and Ideology in the Press: a corpus-based critical discourse study of the Niger Delta crisis* (Peter Lang, Frankfurt 2011); *Language in the News: mediating sociopolitical crises in Nigeria* (Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2012) and co-editor of *Computer-Mediated Discourse in Africa* (Nova Science Publishers, New York, 2012). He is a member of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) (Media, Religion and Culture sub-section).

Email: innocent.chiluwa@covenantuniversity.edu.ng