

Speech by Julie Archambault, jury member of the Gerti Hesseling Prize, on 28 June 2013 at the ECAS Conference in Lisbon

In “A Church in a Cinema Hall?”, Prof. Olufunke Adeboye offers an original analysis of Pentecostal appropriation of space in Nigeria. Framed by a theoretical discussion on the public sphere, the article provides an historical overview of Pentecostalism in which the author traces the movement’s transnational links and untangles its significance in the Nigerian context. The main focus of the article is, however, on Pentecostal spatial practices and the wider politics of space in contemporary Lagos. Based on careful archival and ethnographic field research, the article gives a fascinating account of the competing meanings read into, but also inscribed onto, different spaces. Adeboye shows how, pressed to accommodate a growing membership, churches have succeeded not only in negotiating access to various spaces but also in transforming, as sinful places, from a Pentecostal perspective, into suitable places of worship. While churches had already started using secular public spaces such as beaches and riverbeds for worship, the appropriation of venues that doubled as hotels, cinema halls, and night clubs seemed particularly daring, if not fundamentally wrong. Thanks to Adeboye’s lucid insights into these processes, the article shows how flexible and open-minded Pentecostals have proven in their appropriation of public space. By focusing on the politics of space, the article makes a useful contribution to the field of Pentecostal studies. As Adeline Masquelier states in her letter of support: Adeboye’s “insightful account of how public spaces were transformed into religious places [...] challenges conventional notions of a unified public while also widening the scope of scholarly debates on Pentecostalism in Africa.” Moreover, the article speaks to issues that are no doubt also at play in other cities throughout the continent, namely the pressures on urban space and the ways in which businesses and institutions are redefining themselves to diversify revenues. As a result, A church in a cinema hall will appeal to a wide readership interested in Nigeria, Pentecostalism and urban studies more generally. Indeed, it makes a valuable contribution to African Studies and, on behalf of the selection committee, I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to Dr. Olufunke Adeboye.

Professor Olufunke Adeboye is affiliated to the Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos.