Chapter 6
Experiencing Power: Possession by the Holy Spirit

Although the ritual texts of prayers and visions communicate the concept of spiritual power, it is not words alone that convince the members of C&S of the reality of the Spirit and of its multiple meanings. It is when the power of the Holy Spirit possesses the bodies of the spiritualists that these understandings are underscored by personal experience. Although much has been written on spirit possession in small-scale societies, this has rarely been related to the study of the Spirit in AICs or Pentecostal churches. The case of Aladura, emerging from a Yoruba ritual tradition into Christian monotheism, invites comparisons. It also suggests connections between developments in the conception of the possessing power, and of individuals’ experience of their changing society.

The Watchnight Service
Six o’clock on a Saturday evening. The pews in the Earlham Grove Church Hall have been pushed back, leaving an empty expanse of lino for the free movement of the Spirit. All services, all prayers, provide an opportunity for a spiritualist (elemi) to experience possession by the Holy Spirit—but tonight is a Watchnight, a service set apart from the mundane activities of daylight hours and devoted to the descent of spiritual power and revelation from God.¹

Singing, we process somewhat raggedly into the hall, the sisters arranging themselves in lines on the left-hand side, the brothers on the right. So far there are only 60 members present, but more will arrive during the next hour until there are some 50 women and 55 men in the congregation. The senior elders—three apostles, three prophets,
and three evangelists—bring up the rear, to stand in front of the altar platform. Lastly come two elder brothers, the first carrying a large wooden cross. He is followed by the leader of the service, Elder Bayo Oterunbi, a stocky man in his mid-thirties, now completing the final stage of his accountancy course. Watchnight service leaders are not invariably spiritualists themselves, any more than are senior elders—two of the apostles and one of the evangelists do not become possessed. But Oterunbi’s father is a C&S apostle in Nigeria, so he himself has been a member “right from home,” where he first experienced the Spirit; now he is a prominent visioner in the church. He faces the altar and recites Psalm 24 three times. We all join in the third time round:

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

(Vv. 7–8)

The man responsible for conducting the service, in which the all-powerful “King of Glory” will enter into the receptive bodies of spiritualists, needs strengthening himself: Oterunbi kneels as three of the senior elders pray for him. He then stands and turns to face the congregation to pray with Psalm 101, verse 7, for all the “visioners and dreamers.” The former are few, perhaps a tenth of the congregation, even though two or three times that number will show signs of possession. But any active member can credibly claim the power of dreams (ala), and all kneel as they are warned against concocting false revelations:

He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight.

Oterunbi takes the cross, mounts the platform, and lights the seven candles on the altar, while an elder calls out the lines of the next hymn. “Clap your hands,” shouts the Spiritual Leader, Apostle Abidoye. “Clap! This is very essential for falling in Spirit!” Lady Leader Tomori turns to face the women, clapping enthusiastically, with particular encouragement to the “spiritual” ladies. The clapping intensifies; bare feet slap the floor as the white-robed members stamp and jump. There is no organ or drumming in Watchnights, but Evangelist Somefun, a young and popular visioner, beats out the rhythm with the clapper of the handbell. Elder Olusanya, a small,