



African spirituality and the spirituality of relevance among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in Tanzania



René Sølvesten Nissen

PhD – student at VID Specialized University - Stavanger

rsn@dbi.edu

Resumé

The article explores how Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (PCC)¹ in Tanzania relates to critical elements of African spirituality and explains how this has influenced PCC's significant growth by introducing a spirituality of relevance for Tanzanian Christians.

Keywords:

Pentecostalism – charismatic Christianity – Prosperity gospel – African spirituality – Tanzania

¹ See definition below



Introduction

At the expense of declining Christianity in the West, the axis of Christianity has shifted to the Southern hemisphere. Here PCC has experienced significant growth and is changing the Christian landscape (Barret et al. 2008).

Explanations of PCC's growth in Africa are multifaceted and have attracted substantial scholarly interest (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015, 100). Here, globalisation and increasing rationalism of mainline churches are mentioned as causes (Birgit Meyer 1999) (Paul Gifford 2001). Among others, Gifford stressed the importance of looking for local “cultural” reasons in the Pentecostal Churches' appeal to the African people (Gifford 2015, 155) and explicated how PCC addresses the enchanted African worldview and meets the needs neglected by the mainline churches. (Ibid, 18-20).

In this context, developments in Tanzania have been sparsely addressed. Until a few decades ago, researchers primarily viewed developments in light of socio-economic changes (Hasu 2007) (Katabaro 2013). Nevertheless, in recent times, researchers such as (Dilger 2007) (Lugazia 2010) (Lindhardt 2017 2019) began to research how Tanzanian PCC relates to African spirituality² to gain a comprehensive understanding of its growth. Little is written on specific links between African spirituality and the spiritual relevance of Tanzanian PCC. Faith Lugazia (2010) might be an exception, primarily focusing on African spirituality in general (Lugazia 2010, 27-62). Still, she did not thoroughly analyse deeper layers of African spirituality and its links with PCC in Tanzania.

Aim & Method

The article explores how PCC relates to key elements of African spirituality and explains how this has influenced PCC's significant growth in Tanzania. Optimally, the study would draw on archive studies and qualitative interviews sources. Due to restrained travel possibilities, the study draws its sources from books, articles, and unpublished theses. Before we proceed, we should begin with a definition of PCC in Tanzania.

Definition

PCC is widespread and continuously under change because of its ability to reinvigorate itself, making it challenging to define (Anderson 2010, 15). Based on studies of Pentecostalism in Ghana, Asamoah-Gyadu found that African Pentecostalism has revitalised in three waves. The African Independent Churches (AIC) belong to the first wave followed by a second wave of different types of charismatic movements within the historic mission denominations, and lately, the Neo-Pentecostal Churches

² Since Africa is a large continent, the risk of generalising is prevailing; As Magesa demonstrated, however, it turns out that: “there exists an underlying basic similarity or sameness of spirit and intention in the different cultural-religious expressions in Africa...” (Magesa 2013, 4). Therefore, in African spirituality, we found that reality consists of two interconnected worlds, a visible and an invisible, distinct but not separated (Ibid, 24) (Mbiti 1969, 5). The link between the worlds is about communication and the flow of powers, characterised by spiritual agents' influence on the visible world (Magesa 2013, 33). Power thus permeates both the invisible and the visible world. Furthermore, African spirituality is relational and aims to maintain good relations with agents of both worlds. The purpose is to enhance life quality. Therefore, Africans acquire “information to further their material welfare and interest” (Ter Haar 2009, 76).



(NPC) have joined. The characteristics of NPC become explicit in a charismatic perception of Christianity rooted in classical Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement. The charismatic perception of Christianity becomes evident in the democratisation of ministry, and a lived experimental presence of the Holy Spirit, which manifests itself in healing, prophecies, visions, and other pneumatological phenomena like deliverance and Glossolalia (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 27). Following Gyadu, the NPCs are not denominations but rather a bricolage of different Pentecostal Revival Movements, non-denominational networks, prayer groups, and diverse charismatic ministries (Ibid, 26-9). However, the definition needs a few adjustments in clarifying the first wave. Due to the AIC's limited prevalence in Tanzania (Katabaro 2013, 15), we should instead label the first wave of the Pentecostal renewal of protestant Christianity in the form of Pentecostal missions. Our primary focus will be the recent wave of PCC in Tanzania, which Asamoah-Gyadu labelled Neo-Pentecostalism.

Neo-Pentecostalism in Tanzania

In Tanzania, developments within the context of Neo-Pentecostalism have experienced an increased curiosity from researchers. In their work, both Katabaro (2013) and Dilger (2007) highlighted the Full Gospel Bible Fellowship Church in Tanzania (FGBFC) as a solid example of a fast-growing Tanzanian Neo-Pentecostal church. In 2022, according to themselves, the FGBFC had more than 1000 branches spread all-over Tanzania.³ Given the extensive spread of the FGBFC in Tanzania, it makes sense to use the FGBFC as a starting point for describing the characteristics of Neo-Pentecostalism in a Tanzanian context.

Characteristics

Urban phenomenon

As was the case in Kenya (Mugambi 2020, 147), Neo-Pentecostalism in Tanzania is predominantly an urban phenomenon attracting a broad range of churchgoers, particularly young people stimulated by new worship styles of “pop and reggae music”. Apart from taking place in churches, NPC worship also found its way into cinemas, halls, and large conference rooms (Katabaro 2013, 24).

Utilising electronic media

Extensive use of media and modern technologies in administration, worship, and in propagating the Christian message is likewise a recognised aspect of Neo-Pentecostalism in Tanzania and one of the ways it influences churches and society (Lindhardt 2014, 21). Several researchers such as Meyer, Droogers, and Robbins noted that the widespread use of electronic media constitutes a part of a much more extensive discussion of African Pentecostalism and globalisation (Meyer 2010, 113). Here, modern technology is only a means of propagating PCC. In this context, religion is no longer restrained to the private sphere but marketed to the public through electronic media.

Marketing religion in the public space challenges a stereotypical perception of modernity from a western secular perspective. Instead of modernity, Meyer speaks of multiple modernities leaving

³ (https://vk.com/wall310089473_47 retrieved on 02.02.2022)



room for a different “third world” narrative than a western and Weberian teleological narrative (Ibid). Instead of secularisation and disenchantment, this “third world” narrative leaves room for a re-enchantment of the world along with the use of modern technology. Here, the world's re-enchantment is expressed in an increased pneumatic dimension of the NPC in Tanzania.

Increased pneumatic dimension

An increased pneumatic dimension should be understood in relation to older Pentecostal churches that embraced a theology that primarily rested on the belief in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit manifesting in different spiritual aspects of life, such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia) that signifies the baptism in the Holy Spirit, reverence of the Word of God, the Bible, cross-centred preaching, free and exuberant worship, living a holy life, and a consuming evangelistic zeal (Zimmermann 1975, 8-11). In contrast, NPC, as we will see below, incorporated both physical and pneumatic aspects in their spirituality to a higher degree. However, more is into it, which becomes explicit in “Healing and Deliverance” theology (HDT) and the prosperity gospel (PG), and which contributes with new dimensions and perceptions of salvation in an African context and illustrates its increased spiritual relevance. Before addressing these aspects, we should briefly look at salvation in a Neo-Pentecostal context and its links to African spirituality.

In his seminal work on African charismatics, Asamoah-Gyadu explored the main characteristics of Neo-Pentecostalism in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Here, he found that one of the reasons for its success is due to its “aims to restore the world a renewed emphasis on the message and nature of the Christian salvation that is *central* to the gospel but which, like the experimental emphasis on the Spirit, lies neglected in established Christianity” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 134). Furthermore, as a continuation of his discovery, Asamoah-Gyadu found that the perception of salvation in African Neo-Pentecostalism shared close ties with the basics of African spirituality. Henceforth, he argued: “...renewal comes on the form of salvation from sin and, in true African understanding, from one’s spiritual enemies, that is the devil, evil spirits, witchcraft, and other such inimical forces, who are only out to “steal, kill and destroy” the children of God (John 10:10)” (Ibid). Thus, according to Asamoah-Gyadu, central to Neo-Pentecostalism is a re-interpretation of former Pentecostal soteriological claims, introducing a holistic perception of salvation while sharing close ties with African spirituality, which leads to the spirituality of relevance. The following sections will demonstrate how it becomes explicit in a Tanzanian context.

Healing & Deliverance

Following Dilger, in FGBFC, salvation is not related to a single moment of conversion, but in the words of Corten and Marshall-Fratani, “an ongoing existential project” (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001, 7). In FGBFC, salvation is a state where the believer escapes Satan's control, which had his claims on the believer from his day of birth. As a prerequisite of salvation and membership of the FGBFC, the believer enters a process of becoming aware of Satan’s control over the believer. The process is replaced by a state of revival and experience of the forgiveness of sins that culminates in the escape of Satan’s control (Dilger 2007, 65). The perception of salvation thus originates from an apocalyptic worldview, which requires a sustained commitment:



“...the understanding that the contemporary world is tightly in the grip of Satan who is spreading immorality, corruption, and suffering. The FGBFC’s main concern is consequently to take up the fight against Satan and his diabolic henchmen and to save humanity not only on a local, but also on a global level” (Dilger 2007, 65).

However, the escape from Satan did not cause a complete rupture of satanic influences. Dilger’s research illuminated that in FGBFC, believers were still struggling “in their everyday lives” with diabolic forces, which “Gifford (Gifford 1994, 255pp) defines as “typically African”” (Dilger 2007, 67). In FGBFC, these “typically African” forces were interpreted the following way:

“Thus, the saved church members can be plagued by curses (*laana*) that have been sent by mischievous relatives or by their respective ethnic groups. Other malevolent beings include witches (*mchawi*, pl. *wachawi*) and spirits who can cause all kinds of misfortune including marital problems, trouble at work, infertility, and even AIDS” (Ibid, 67).

During the intercession of Church personnel, destructive forces were removed from the believers’ bodies through healing and deliverance sessions (Ibid, 68). The section above makes it clear that salvation in a Neo-Pentecostal context cannot be reduced to a single event but should be understood as a progressive process, making room for, and combining an apocalyptic and African worldview. In this context, the perception of salvation appears far more holistic than classical Pentecostal Christianity because it influences the challenges of everyday life and becomes increasingly relevant. Closely related to the inner logic of HDT, we find the so-called “Prosperity Gospel”. The phenomenon is another characteristic of Neo-Pentecostalism in Tanzania with evident soteriological claims.

Prosperity Gospel

Here, we do not have the space to account for its origins; therefore, we would exclusively concentrate on expressions of the PG in Tanzanian Neo-Pentecostalism. In our exploration, we follow the definition presented by Paul Gifford:

“According to the faith [prosperity] gospel, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty. A believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith” (Gifford 2004, 48).

Here, Gifford frames the term in a soteriological context, which is in alignment with the observations Asamoah-Gyadu brought above: that African Neo-Pentecostalism “aims to restore the world a renewed emphasis on the message and nature of the Christian salvation that is *central* to the gospel...” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, 134). It seems, though, that Gifford lacks a cosmological dimension in his definition, which needs further elaboration to become applicable to an African context. Gifford mentioned that “Christians should share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness, and poverty” (Gifford 2004, 48). From a Tanzanian perspective, the victory of Christ includes a greater emphasis on the cosmological victory over death, the Devil, and evil spirits (Katabaro 2013, 47-49), which reflects essential elements of African spirituality. We find this element confirmed in a speech delivered by



Bishop Zacharia Kakobe, the founder and leader of FGBFC, who argued that through believing in Christ:

“a person has potentially created the basis for his/her salvation, that in his existence he/she can lead a successful and healthy life, and that the revival makes him/her largely immune against the attacks of Satan, who makes the life of people unfortunate and painful” (Kakobe cited in Katabaro 2013, 49-59).

In Katabaro’s work, we found how the combination of African spirituality and a renewed bias on soteriology illustrates how the PG has become spiritually relevant to African Christians, thus contributing to the significant spread and impact of Tanzanian Neo-Pentecostalism. The intriguing question of why the PG has become spiritually relevant remains.

Several researchers, such as (Dilger 2007) (Hasu 2007) (Katabaro 2013), noted that one of the fundamental factors to the spiritual relevance of the PG in Tanzania must be found in the context of postcolonial socio-economic changes that hit Tanzania in the late 80s and early 90s. In this time of crisis, NPCs offered the PG as a relevant spiritual mode of crisis interpretation and resolution. Above, we have already shown that the difficulties which Christians experienced were often identified with calamities rooted in a cosmological worldview as diabolic forces (Dilger 2007, 67). In this way, the PG identifies and interprets the everyday challenges of Tanzanian Christians with spiritual relevance. On the other hand, it also points to the resolution of the crisis. Therefore, the way to escape the calamities is to surrender to God and share the victory of Christ. Thus, following the definition above, the PG offers a belief system, where “God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness, and poverty. A believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ” (Gifford 2004, 48). In this sense, the PG portrays God as a God who meets the spiritual requirements and answers the questions of poor and hope-seeking Christians for a better life.

To recapitulate, we have shown how the PG became spiritually relevant to Tanzanian Christians in the light of socio-economic changes. Nevertheless, we should not overlook resemblances with African spirituality, particularly not the notion of “life abundantly”, which we will argue is deeply rooted in African Spirituality and may have contributed to the spirituality of relevance.

To understand the notion of “abundance of life” and its affinities with critical elements of the PG, it is essential to draw attention to ancestors' role in African spirituality. The very concept of “abundance of life” is namely closely linked to the phenomenon of ancestor veneration. In this context, Magesa argued diligently that the perception of “abundance of life” rests on the thinking that in order for people to experience “abundance of life”, they must maintain a positive relationship with the ancestors who are believed to be the guardian of people’s norms and values. Breaking with the norm and values of the tribe implied the wrath and repercussions of the ancestors (Magesa 1997, 81). Of this follow, calamities of life should be understood as linked to the relational disorder with the ancestors in all scales from individual to societal levels, meaning that the relation to the ancestors, who uphold norms and values, has not been maintained. On the other hand, if the whole society experiences prosperity levels, it is connected to networks of relationships as well:



“The ancestors are happy, the vital force is strong, and there is harmony in the land and creation. Such abundance of life is a clear indication that the population is upright with regard to the ancestors. Abundance of life indicates in clear terms that the norms essential for its preservation have not been disregarded or broken” (Ibid)

In light of the soteriological aspects of the PG, the notion of abundance of life becomes of great importance because Neo-Pentecostals perceive the suffering and death of Jesus as a victory over calamities like sin, sickness, accidents, and death that hinder the abundance of life. So, when the believer gets a share in the victory of Christ, they get a share in the abundance of life, thereby entering a new “status equilibrium” without so-called “alamities” having any significant negative influence on “the wholeness of human life and creation”. Thus, there is a clear overlap between African spirituality and the PG. The manner of which the spirituality of relevance is being provided, clearly illuminates the reason of NPC's emergence and popularity in Tanzania.

Interestingly, the spiritual relevance of PCC's pneumatical orientation and its affinities with the cosmological worldview of African spirituality is not exclusively expressed in the PG and HDT. Researchers such as (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004) (Kalu 2008, 3) (Lindhardt, 2009, 2017) (Magesa 2013) have in other places shown how the perception of the power of the Holy Spirit in an African context is also significantly relevant and illustrates how easily PCC adapts to African religiosity and as a result of this contributes to a spirituality of relevance.

Summary

In the article, we have explored how increased pneumatic dimensions of key theological elements of Tanzanian PCC address everyday life challenges and become increasingly relevant by relating to critical elements of African spirituality. We found that by combining an apocalyptic and African worldview, salvation in the HDT should be understood as a progressive process, where the believers in their everyday lives are under pressure from interfering malevolent spirits, which must be driven out through deliverance sessions. Furthermore, Tanzanian PCC holds that God meets the believer's spiritual requirements in the PG. By sharing the victory of Christ, the believer has become largely immune to Satan's attacks, wherefore he will lead a successful and healthy life. However, in order to comprehend the success of the PG, we demonstrated how aspects of African spirituality such as “abundance of life” illuminates the overlap between PCC and African spirituality, which might have contributed to the popularity of the PG and PCC's significant growth in Tanzania by providing a spirituality of relevance.

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