

DOES COMPETITION RESULT IN RELIGIOUS INNOVATION? SOME REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIANITY IN KENYA AND BEYOND

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Introduction

What happens when a neo-Pentecostal church opens its doors in the neighborhood of an existing mainline church? How do we interpret the message of a street preacher that is very similar to the posters advertising the services of a diviner (*mganga wa kienyeji*) or witch that are strewn across Nairobi City streets? What happens to the faith of a student raised in a Christian home who ends up with a major in anthropology and evolutionary biology? These questions, which form the gist of this presentation, are drawn from real life experiences that when answered bring out competing frames of knowledge, assumptions, and even perspectives on life and faith. Where do answers to these questions fit in Philosopher John Mbiti's 1969 assertion that "Africans are notoriously religious"? Could they reflect Pope John Paul II's 1995 *Ecclesia in Africa* that warns of a looming danger of secularization in Africa? Pope John Paul argues that such secularization will be caused by "challenges linked to the phenomena of family uprooting, urbanization, unemployment (and) materialistic seductions of all kinds." Are Christians and their respective churches innovating to respond to these challenges and changes?

In this presentation I explore some answers to these questions by focusing on work I have carried out to understand the practice of Christianity both as an ethnographer and as an advisor in multiple research projects undertaken by theology and religious studies scholars in Africa. I explore examples of the competing modes of knowing and belief that practitioners may adopt when confronted with new interpretations of life and faith and the possible outcomes to expect in the future.

When preparing my presentation I have attempted to stay within the theme of “Creativity, Innovation, and Imagination in African Religions” that has framed this conference. How much I have succeeded in doing that though is for you to decide. I have chosen to focus on Christianity as part of a phenomenon that fits with the phenomenon of religious competition. The concept of competition is central to my presentation because I am convinced it engenders imagination, creativity, and innovation. I think of competition in terms of two entities offering the same product or service that needs to draw their clients in. Competition is the opposite of a monopoly where clients can only receive a service or product from only one provider. When talking of Christianity and the product or service offered one can imagine a scenario where either a church or denomination competes with another or where a faith becomes a way of life competing with another way of life. As a proselytizing faith Christianity enters into this religious competition platform when its offerings are pitted against other expectations, offerings, and even practices engendered and expected by adherents. To understand this, I particularly look at proselytizing, the action which many within the Christian faith call “winning souls” or “bringing people to Christ,” as an activity loaded with certain expectations. Those expectations take many forms, but which I know are today shaped by the current realities of a neoliberal market agenda. A neoliberal market agenda while mostly associated with economics, has infiltrate many aspects of everyday life including Christian practice. It asks the simple question of what am I gaining from this? Neoliberalism structures society around the market limiting the work of government and emphasizing individual liberty and choice. Finally, neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It is this condition of competition molded by neoliberalism that has prepared individuals to expect options. As Nyamnjoh and Carpenter note of religious competition and innovation in Africa,

“free enterprise now marks the religious scene every bit as much as free-wheeling commerce does the new African economies.”¹

Proselytizing, just like salesmanship, thus fits within this realm of options available to the target population because it is about value proposition. It answers the question, what will make a person choose Christianity? Along with answering this question Christianity finds itself being part of multiple options brought about by changes in society through global economic, political, and social evolutions and revolutions. Adherents, for instance, want Christianity not only to offer them assurance of a better future eschatologically speaking, but also to offer solutions or answers to their everyday material needs. Such needs include health, employment, healthy relationships, bountiful harvests, etc. Given neoliberals’ assumption that “people are motivated to work towards their individual well-being rather than think about society overall,” one can see why Christianity is influenced by neoliberal market sensibilities. There are certain values that are offered in exchange for making a decision to be a Christian. In this way the message of Christianity that some offer is very much part of a larger narrative shaped by the material needs of the audience members in the same ways that other messages geared towards responding to people’s material needs are relayed. I have noticed in my studies of Christianity the need for the faith to respond to the material needs of adherents. Interestingly the needs of adherents are not just being addressed by Christianity. There are other players offering solutions to people’s material needs. Let me share three examples of how I see competition within the Christian faith and some thoughts on how we can make sense of it. These I provide for the most part as

¹ Francis B. Nyamnjoh & Joel A. Carpenter (2018): Introduction religious innovation and competition in Contemporary African Christianity, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, pp. 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2018.1492096>; p. 5

ethnographic vignettes. If you have read some of my publications where these stories are captured please consider this a second dose of good medicine.

CASE 1

As I sat in the Matatu waiting for it to fill up to go to Mlolongo, I saw a gentleman dressed in a light brown suit walk around the vehicle and say something to the driver before boarding the vehicle. I assumed he was saying hello to the driver and that the two knew each other. It was only after the Matatu started moving that I realized the gentleman was a preacher. He moved to the front of the vehicle and introduced himself as Apostle Paul, greeted the passengers in Kiswahili, and then started preaching. I assumed that when he had earlier gone around to talk to the driver, he was asking for the driver's permission to preach because as soon as Apostle Paul started talking the driver turned off the music that had all along been playing inside the Matatu it was filling up with passengers. My previous experiences in Matatus in Nairobi had made me aware of posted signs warning against preaching or hawking, practices that are common at stops or even inside public service vehicles in many cities in Kenya. With the high rates of unemployment in Kenya, any chance to sell products or services is quickly utilized. Moreover, public service vehicles provide a potential and often captive customer base for such services. It is hard, however, to know who to allow access to this captive audience of customers in a Matatu or bus. Many of these vehicles prohibit hawking, which may explain why Apostle Paul had to seek the permission of the driver to preach in the matatu. As a seasoned researcher the preaching provided for me an opportunity to undertake some fieldwork given that I am always curious about the ways religion is propagated, mobilized, and used in different contexts. I believe that any phenomenon is best articulated in performance. I pulled out my notebook and started jotting

down a few key words and phrases that I would later use to generate accounts of what I heard and observed. Apostle Paul preached from the book of Isaiah focusing on chapter 65 verse 23 that says:

They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.²

He kept repeating the same lines about prosperity and the “promises” that God has in store for the people. The power of the message, in my assessment, was not in the analytical depth but in choice of words, emphasis, and repetition accompanied by varied voice rendition. Apostle Paul had selected the passage carefully because there are other verses in the same chapter that do not provide such a positive promise. Isaiah 65:13, for instance, says:

Therefore this is what the sovereign Lord says:

My servants will eat, but you will go hungry

My servants will drink, but you will go thirsty

My servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame

Focusing on Isaiah 65:23 allowed Apostle Paul to offer a message of hope to the passengers in the Matatu, a message that is appropriate to a people in need of hope and assurance. It is an assurance of better things than their present circumstances.

After about three minutes of preaching, he asked the commuters to join him in prayer before giving another short message from the same passage. He prayed about three other times.

Unfortunately, I was in the front part of the vehicle and Apostle Paul was preaching from the same location but standing and facing the seated passengers. I was so tempted to turn around and

² This passage is from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

see how many passengers had joined him in the prayer or who had closed their eyes, but I thought it would be rude and decided against the idea. The preaching and praying were both rendered in a style that I have come to associate with Pentecostalism—the presenter starts in a low voice that gradually gets high and finally turns into what closely borders shouting. My assumption is that such a rendition is carefully calculated to elicit certain emotional reactions from the listeners. In all his prayers, however, Apostle Paul kept repeating the same lines which I summarized as follows:

King Jesus I pray for those listening to me right now in your mighty name;

May their business prosper in Jesus name;

May those seeking visas get them mighty king of glory;

Grant my sister my brother a green card to go to the US father God almighty;

Let those sick receive healing King Jesus;

Save broken marriages Jehovah God:

Promote those seeking promotions at work oh God almighty;

I come against the spirit of broken marriages;

I pray for all the needs of these your children father;

Grant them their wish in Jesus name;

Grant them their wish oh King of glory;

Grant them their wish oh father, in the mighty name of Jesus!

After about fifteen minutes in the Matatu followed by three similar prayers, Apostle Paul took an offering, and then alighted at one of the bus stops along Mombasa Road. It seemed like he had had many similar preaching sessions in a moving vehicle before because he seemed quite

comfortable and composed throughout the exercise. Just like televangelists and street preachers that are part of a growing community of modern-day Christian messengers, Apostle Paul's prayers were addressing specific areas of life common among many urban Kenyans who deal daily with economic and political uncertainties. Undoubtedly those prayers calm down anxieties by providing participants the possibility of changed circumstances and a hope for the future (Gifford 2004), while also addressing key areas of life that people really worry about. The focus on immediately relevant areas of need also points to the belief in the efficacy of prayer.

CASE 2

I walked from the city center along Kenyatta Avenue through Valley Road towards Kileleshwa. As I walked along that road, I was drawn to numerous posters advertising services that were being offered by traditional healers. The posters were glued to lampposts and perimeter fences along Valley Road in Nairobi. Two of the healers (Sheikh Ismail and Dr. Wazanga) claimed to assist with prospering businesses, finding love, solutions to marital problems, finding work, and restoring virility. On each poster were cell phone numbers for interested clients to reach these healers.

CASE 3

A while ago there was a legitimate Prank that did rounds on Kenya's social media platforms. I call it legitimate because I wished it were true. It was a claim that Machakos University had introduced a programme on witchcraft. The post, which appeared online on December 18, 2020 on Posta Mate (Home of Satire and sarcasm) had the title "Machakos University launches a Bachelor's Degree in Witchcraft." The prank drew a lot of comments online leading the

university to issue a clarification distancing itself from any such a programme. Upon a little scrutiny it emerged that the University did offer a unit on “Religion, Witchcraft, Magic, and Science,” as part of an MA programme.

Witchcraft, the belief in it along with its practice has a strong presence in Kenya and plays a key role in the existential imagination of what causes or explains phenomena in daily life. How I wish our institutions of higher learning would take witchcraft seriously as a field of inquiry and devote academic resources to it and offer descriptive, analytical and theoretical guidance for students, scholars, clergy, and the general population.

What stood out for me in the prank was the way the content had been generated to carefully make it plausible and even believable. Machakos University is located in Machakos County which has historically been home of the Kamba people famed for powerful witchcraft. It is not surprising, therefore, that the topic of witchcraft would be the focus of a university located within a county associated with witchcraft. Allow me to read part of the prank to demonstrate the ingenuity of whoever crafted it:

Speaking during the launch, the Vice Chancellor said that the course had already attracted tens of applicants and the University was aiming at exploiting local resources to make the course a success.

“We have a lot of indigenous knowledge in the wider Machakos County which can be harnessed for the good of the society and this is the first step towards mainstreaming this knowledge. We hope that young people and new generation will take advantage of this course so that important historical and cultural information is not lost.”

The four-year course which is expected to launch in April 2021 will be housed under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and is subject to approval by the Commission for University Education.

The course will involve different approaches with lecturers drawn from Kenya and other places such as Zanzibar, Haiti and Mexico. It will be residential course because no aspiring Witch can be scared of Covid-19, with several classes being taught at night.

Although the University did not release details of the units in the course, insiders told us that the course will have 2 attachments where students will be attached to active and practicing witches in the Eastern African region. Graduates from the course will be required to set up their own private practice and help deal with advanced problems away from the usual ‘nguvu za kiume, biashara, kazi, mke kutoroka na kushika mwizi.’

The announcement drew mixed reactions from people, some terming it as a joke with some thinking there are similar courses offered in the University similar to witchcraft, such as Organic Chemistry.

The Higher Education Loans Board has also declined to fund the new course saying that graduates from the course cannot be trusted to repay their loan, owing to the immense powers that they have.³

Notice that the piece articulates some of the maladies that other options can cure including virility, business success, finding work, wife leaving the marriage, and catching a thief. Clearly this prank has a finger on the pulse of the beliefs and thinking of the target audience. The issues raised are part of the lived experiences of many people served by the Christian church in Kenya . So, the question that emerges then is “how and where are such issues addressed?” Do

³ <https://postamate.com/2020/12/machakos-university-witchcraft-degree/>

they need to be named and addressed? Are they in competition with a Christian perspective on life? How does discipleship, catechism, mentorship, counselling and other Christian activities get developed and implemented within such a cultural context?

I have shared these three examples or cases here to invite some thinking on how to understand Christianity and project on its practice based on competing ideologies as well as expanded belief systems. I was struck by the close similarity between the prayer items that Apostle Paul focused on in his preaching in the matatu and the areas that the traditional healers were targeting for healing/solving. Were these two sets of individuals just representing the lived realities of the people they interact with daily or were they reflecting a conflation of the sacred and profane in this society? Is Christianity a tool through which adherents access material rewards or solve their material problems? One way to respond to such a question is to adopt a view of religion as playing a functional role where it is seen as predominantly serving the need of explaining, controlling, and predicting reality.⁴ Another way of responding is to see it as competition in a market place of many offerings of answers and solutions to social challenges.

If we were to take seriously John Mbiti's claim that Africans are notoriously religious and that all spheres of life are interconnected,⁵ then it need not be surprising that a Christian preacher, a "traditional" healer and a prank on a programme on witchcraft would all focus on similar socioeconomic topics as the targeted elements of intervention and redress. They all target an audience that not only lives in the same social and spiritual world, but also one that sees their solutions as accessible to all irrespective of their personal convictions and/or beliefs. In this

⁴ Wenner Kahl, "Prosperity-Preaching in West-Africa: An Evaluation of a Contemporary Ideology from a New Testament Perspective," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, Vol. 2: 21-42.

⁵ John S. Mbiti, 1969, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann.

scenario Christianity competes with other socioeconomic “remedies” offered by “traditional healers” such as Sheikh Ismael and Dr. Wazanga. This competition means that if the target audience is to be enticed to choose one option over the other then the offerings must be highly attractive. What happens in a context of such multiple options? When religious practice becomes an option among many that are competing for the attention of and even consumption by a people what would entice them to follow or pick one over the other? This gets even more complicated in a context where the majority of the population believes in the power of the occult. I have argued elsewhere that

“The twentieth century notion of development, framed in the discourse of modernity that would assure its recipients of technological advancements such as modern transportation and communication, democracy, nuclear families, capitalism, urbanization, and a secular world view shaped by enlightenment collide with an African reality dominated by growing poverty, inequality, disease, and degradation, most Africans resort to the occult.”⁶

The occult becomes an alternative solution to the realities of everyday challenges. This does not negate the mechanisms or strategies that preachers use to show their own power of solving problems. Nyamnjoh and Carpenter argue that

“... studies on religion and health highlight how religion is interwoven and overlaid and undergirded with other belief systems, particularly relating to health, fate and wellbeing. They reveal ways in which plurality, pragmatism and fluidity are produced and practised and how they influence belief. It is hardly enough to preach salvation as an attribute of a life hereafter, when people are often desperately seeking to make ends meet at the

⁶ Ntarangwi, Mwenda, 2016, *The Street is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya*.

margins, and lives are wasting away under the burning challenges of bare existence. Who is to blame when hard work, usually prescribed as the way out of one's hardships, is not good enough to redeem oneself?"⁷

In 2014, for instance, Victor Kanyari, a self-proclaimed prophet and pastor in Nairobi, was reported to have used potassium permanganate when praying for some of his congregants as a way of showing them that he had the power to remove evil spirits from their bodies. As proof of his powers, he displayed some red substance that results from potassium permanganate's reaction when put in water. He sought to convince those in attendance that he could remove the evil spirits and when that happened they would physically witness it. He claimed that the blood that was coming out of their limbs was evidence of demons or evil spirits leaving their bodies. Victor Kanyari was later exposed through investigative reporting for coaching people to stage-manage those miracles in order to attract membership to his church. Why go to such lengths to prove one's ability to deal with everyday needs and challenges of their congregations? As Agyeman's study of a Pentecostal church in Ghana shows

“Pentecostal religiosity engenders self-determination, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship as depicted and taught in prosperity doctrines. In a context where failure is often associated with the work of the devil and of evil forces, Pentecostalism provides spiritual support to its members through exorcism from and protection against evil forces, victimhood and superstitious beliefs, in the interest of entrepreneurial success.”⁸

⁷ Nyamnjoh and Carpenter, 2018:8

⁸ Nyamnjoh and Carpenter, 2018:7

But this is not limited to Kenya. In neighboring Tanzania, anthropologist Martin Lindhardt notes similar relations between Faith Gospel and occult economies especially in open-air revival meetings. He says that preachers at these meetings, “take great pains to present the power (*nguvu*) of Jesus as an alternative to medicines provided by healers” (2009:46). I find Lindhardt’s consideration of medicines provided by healers as “alternatives,” quite intriguing because he places them on the same plane as prayers, seeing them as options available to the people who are wrestling with their daily life’s challenges. Being Christian in this case does not completely erase one’s belief or reliance on traditional approaches to engaging with one’s challenges. If anything, it is inevitable that practicing one’s faith, not just Christianity, is mediated through one’s sociocultural orientation. For these Kenyan Christians, as do their counterparts in Tanzania, Christian practices and beliefs are mobilized through local/African beliefs by seeing religion or their Christian faith as a means to solving every day challenges. They are as the late Ali Mazrui argued products of a “triple heritage” of indigenous African, Islamic/Middle Eastern, and European.

Concluding Observations

The June 23 2023 issue of the Wall Street Journal states that “The Competition for Believers in Africa is Transforming Christianity and Islam,”⁹ adding that “on a continent whose population presents enormous opportunities for Christianity and Islam, both faiths are adapting to charismatic modes of worship and indigenous traditions.” This is not a new phenomenon. In 1980 Lamin Sanneh wrote about the domestication of Christianity and Islam in Africa.¹⁰ Sanneh

⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-competition-for-believers-in-africas-religion-market-66e5255d>

¹⁰ Sanneh, Lamin, 1980, “The Domestication of Islam and Christianity in African Societies: A Methodological Exploration,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 11:1-12.

argues that unlike claims made about Africa's traditional religious practices being outpaced by the entry of Christianity and Islam, Africans ended up make both traditions their own. They gave them an African identity. What do I understand by African identity? Let me share an example: St. Paul's Church (a Methodist church located near Meru town, where my wife attended services as a child until her young adult life and also where our wedding ceremony took place) provides a partial answer of how competition led to some change in its order of business. There used to be one Sunday service at St. Paul's that was planned and run by the older members of the congregation. Many youth attended the service either because they had to or because it was the church their parents attended. It later became apparent that many youth while regularly having attended services were displeased with the church because as soon as a new Pentecostal church, the Deliverance Church, opened up across the ridge, a majority of the St. Paul's youth left and joined it. This departure by the youth forced elders at St. Paul's Church to rethink their strategies for keeping the youth in the church. They needed to have continuity and having youth in the church would bring about that desired continuity.

What was it though that either pushed the youth from St. Paul's or pulled them to neighboring Deliverance Church? There were a number of things that the Deliverance Church had going for it that were attractive to the youth from St. Paul's Church. The Deliverance Church had vibrant worship music that included instruments such as drums, guitars, and the keyboard that outpaced the single piano used at St. Paul's Church; it had opportunities for youth to take up leadership roles in the church such as planning and taking part in outreach programs and all night prayer meetings; it focused on singing praise and worship songs instead of hymns that dominated services at St. Paul's Church; and had young professionals in the church that served as leaders and role models for the youth. Quite aware of the appeal that their music had on those located

away from the church premises, the Deliverance Church strategically placed its sound system in a way that enabled their high-energy music to be heard from miles away. After much struggle to relinquish control of the church service to the youth, St. Paul's Church leaders agreed to institute a second service that focused more on the youth. However, it was not until the leadership of this second service was taken up by fellow youth that new members started attending.

The service, now called "Early Service," is managed and populated, for the most part, by youth. This approach to music and youth involvement in worship and leadership in the church is prevalent across the country.

At St. Peters Methodist Church where I attended services when growing up something similar had happened. I remember that congregational participation in the part of worship dedicated to music involved hymn singing to the beat of one small drum with limited clapping and no dancing at all. There was also clear observance of divided use of space by gender with men and women sitting in separate pews and rows in the church. When I visited the same church in 2006 after being away for a long while, I found things had changed: there was an electric organ (powered by a generator) loaded with pre-programmed fast-paced beats that the worship leader used as accompaniment to congregational singing of popular Kenyan worship songs. Men and women not only sat close to each other in the pews, but they danced together in mixed gender groups during some elements of the service just before the preacher of the day delivered the message. Members of the congregation also danced and swayed their bodies and clapped their hands to the high-energy music that was led by the youth. There were song performances by a women's group, a men's group, and a youth group. There was much more congregational participation in the music and other parts of the worship than I had ever witnessed. A lot has changed in these two locations that can now be seen reflected in just a slice of what it takes to be Christian or to

perform a regular Christian ritual of what is commonly termed Sunday service. Some of these changes are a result of competition and others are a natural process of cultural evolution, but they all tell us something about humanity and the inevitability of change.

For purposes of this presentation they indicate that Christianity is part of a set of market options available to Christians seeking prosperity and spiritual assistance in everyday affairs. With a population that is highly religious and seeking for direct answers to their earthly needs there is room for competition and innovation among providers. Innovation connotes some process of doing things in a new or different way in response to an external or internal stimulus. Innovation that follows from competition while being a response to an external stimulus can help us anticipate internal stimuli especially those ones that are related to the changing nature of internal adherents. What happens to Christianity when it has to respond to a congregation that is itself changing drastically and fast as has been occasioned by new ways of thinking about reality? As I have mentioned above the neoliberal ethic of individualism and market-directed sensibilities has directly affected human relations and interactions. I wish to add also that scientific work and thinking has its own effect and influence on society as seen in the case of pastor Kanyari above. All these influences are reshaping the ways congregations and Christian faith adherents hear, interpret, and live out the message offered by their pastors or through their own interpretations of the Holy Book.

Several years ago I had a conversation with a scholar who had gone to observe a student training to be a teacher lead a Sunday school class of 10–12-year-olds. The trainee teacher had selected the parable of Jesus feeding the five thousand as the anchor story to her lesson only to be surprised by a chorus of voices disputing the possibility of the miracle happening. What kind

of preparation does such a teacher need to respond to these youngsters who need more than just information read to them from the Bible?

Let me end by suggesting one approach that can be considered and one that a number of African scholars involved in a research project titled *Engaging African Realities* have grappled with. It is the close study of congregations, adherents, Church leaders, etc. to understand every day practices that define what it is to be a person of faith in a particular location at a specific time period. Insights derived from these studies can help Christians plan for the future through what Katindi Sivi calls strategic foresight or futures thinking which considers “human capacity and process of thinking about what lies ahead” in order not to be caught by surprise. If, for instance, we find that many congregants prefer blended church services, is there need for heavy investment on imposing church buildings? What kind of preparation for the future needs to be put in place for the next generation of Christians when we know today that many youth are seeking close relationships with adults who can offer modeling and mentoring of faith but are often too busy to pay such attention to them? Or will we end up with non-religious youth whose identities are, according to Ndereba, a result of “divergent philosophical views concerning reality, broadened religious identities, moral failures of religious leaders, the rise of scientism, and its combative posture toward religions and the absence of “open spaces” that would allow young people to safely critique their own perspectives”?¹¹ I am currently having regular meetings with a few archaeology and anthropology students who are wrestling with questions of Christian faith in the context of their growing understanding of the scientific perspectives cultivated within archaeology and evolutionary biology. How much help can they get from the churches they attend that can help reconcile what seemingly are two competing ideologies of

¹¹ Ndereba, Kevin Murithi, 2022, “FAITH, SCIENCE, AND NONRELIGIOUS IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG MALE KENYAN YOUTH,” *Zygon*, Volume 58 (1):45-63. P.48

their lived and imagined realities that can summed up as science and faith? Who is the referee and mentor that can help them when these perspectives compete? Will that competition result in innovation, in new knowledge, new preaching, counselling, mentoring, and discipleship of the next generation of believers?

THANK YOU.