



For the Love of Money: Kenya's False Prophets and Their Wicked and Bizarre Deeds

By Damaris Parsitau



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In the last couple of weeks, several bizarre [YouTube videos](#) of the self-proclaimed "Apostle" James Maina Ng'ang'a of the Neno Evangelism Ministry, located at the junction of Nairobi's Haile Selassie Avenue and Uhuru Highway, have been doing odious rounds in cyberspace. In these videos, Ng'ang'a has been captured haranguing his congregation in the most despicable and vilest of language a man of God can possibly utter.

In most of [these videos](#), shot during a Friday night *kesha* (Kiswahili for vigil) service (*kesha*), Ng'ang'a - a convict-turned-televangelist who runs one of the largest deliverance and healing ministries in Kenya - is shown abusing everybody, from his partner pastors (who he refers to as bishops) to the men and women who fanatically and religiously attend his church, in the foulest of language.

In one of the [videos](#), he virulently rails against his own bishops, accusing them of ingratitude, ostensibly after making them important and rich. Like a man possessed of the Lucifer himself, he swore he would finish them by October 2019 after closing their "kiosks" [churches]), that is, three months after he allegedly accused them of apparently being gleeful for his police problems and of

“disrespecting” his wife (a euphemism for flirting with his wife, according to some members of his church). As the “chief commander” of the Neno Evangelical Ministry and all the other appendages of his ministry spread across the country, he hollered at the congregation, demanding of them the unconditional respect due to him from them, failure to which, anybody who disrespected him would face dire consequences.

Angered by the behaviour of certain men in his church, he lectured the congregation for 20 minutes before threatening those men with castration. “After I’ve castrated you...you’ll be left just admiring your wives impotently,” he said. He called the men “these cows” as he walked back to the pulpit. Bizarrely, the congregation applauded his abuse and insults.

In another of these [disturbing videos](#), he dares a woman follower to fight him while placing his hands on her breasts and telling her that there was nothing she could do to him. In this violent well-choreographed video, Ng’ang’a slaps the woman several times while pinning her to the floor ostensibly to exorcise demons that invariably have been sent to kill him. The woman finally calms down, gets up and mumbles in mumbo jumbo about her demon-possessed life. The video attracted mass outrage, where the public questioned Ng’ang’a’s sanity.

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The chief commander has not only threatened his followers, he has also threatened journalists and whomever else he deems is against him. In all the while that Ng’ang’a has abused, humiliated, objectified, patronised, slapped, threatened, and vilified his enemies (within and without his church), his fanatical followers have seemingly stood firm with him. “The servant of the Lord can get angry – just like the prophets of yore – and when he’s angry, he’s bound to ruffle feathers with his utterances, but trust me, the spirit of the Lord is always with him,” one of his devoted supporters said to me. “You know the devil is always working overtime to bring the true servant of the Lord down, we can’t allow him to do that.”

Why do Christians all over the world fall for religious charlatans? Kenyans, like millions of Christians in Africa and elsewhere, are irredeemably susceptible to religious abuse. Over the last couple of years, social media has been abuzz with a litany of shocking acts committed by fraudulent pastors largely from of the evangelical/Pentecostal movement. This is a question that we shall come back to in a jiffy.

Fake pastors and their gullible followers

Born in 1954 to a poor family that was not able to give him a stable upbringing or a proper education, Ng’ang’a, 67, moved to Nairobi in 1970 in search of a livelihood. He found a job as a house servant. In no time, he joined criminal gangs, a move that soon led to alcohol and drug abuse, a spiral of criminal escapades and many arrests and jail terms.

Over time, Ng’ang’a mutated into a hard core criminal and served time at Kamiti, Naivasha and Shimo-la-Tewa maximum prisons. In total, he stayed in prison for 21 years. At Shimo-la-Tewa, Ng’ang’a, met the Lord Jesus Christ and was converted to the evangelical/Pentecostal Christian faith.

Soon after he was released from jail, he founded Neno Evangelism Ministry in 1992. In 1997, he opened his Neno Evangelism Centre, strategically located in Nairobi’s central business district. A

strong proponent of the health and wealth prosperity gospel, he has grown immensely wealthy and is estimated to be worth hundreds of millions of Kenyan shillings. He has, over time, also become arrogant, careless, flashy, proud, uncouth, and vulgar. He likes to court controversy. His lavish lifestyle reveals a story of a man who has grown from grass to grace, rags to riches, thanks to a gullible congregation and the growth of the expanding evangelical Christian industry.

In September 2015, his wife, in court papers, [alleged](#) that Ng'ang'a was not only a drunk, but also a serial adulterer, and abusive husband and father. It is believed they later reconciled after Ng'ang'a heaped blame on the devil for wanting to ruin his family. The "Apostle" who, on several occasions, has retreated into the "wilderness" dressed in rags like a shepherd of the Lord to fast and commune with God, incidentally, walks around with a gun and has been photographed drunk and rowdy.

In July 2015, Ng'ang'a was driving presumably drunk on the Nakuru-Nairobi highway when he caused a fatal accident at Manguo, near Limuru town that killed a middle-aged woman and seriously injured her husband. Ng'ang'a apparently quickly jumped into a vehicle that was driving behind him and left the scene immediately after a young man appeared and claimed that he was the one driving the red SUV Range Rover Sport.

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The pastor, through his lawyer, denied that he was drunk on the day of the accident. But the exposé circulated on social media led to a public outcry that ultimately saw him arrested and charged in a court of law. In May, 2018, the court acquitted Pastor Ng'ang'a, but after another outcry from the public, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Noordin Haji, revived the case after an appeal by the Kiambu Law Courts. Nonetheless, Ng'ang'a. continues to preach in his church every Sunday, and his followers still patronise his church in search of miracles and deliverance.

But Ng'ang'a is not the only evangelical pastor known to manipulate his followers. There is the self-proclaimed Bishop Victor Kanyari of potassium permanganate fame. In November 2014, Kanyari, a televangelist and pastor at the Salvation Healing Ministry and the son of disgraced Prophetess Lucy Nduta, was exposed on Kenya Television Network's (KTN) *Jicho Pevu*, an investigative television series, for performing dubious miracles, faking healing, and coaching his staff to tender phony testimonies of, among others, healing- and prayer-induced prosperity.

The series exposed Kanyari as selling fake miracles and duping believers into giving money and other gifts to the church with the promise that God would look into their issues. Kanyari was, allegedly, further revealed to be a con artist who preyed on his trusting followers for financial gains. This harrowing video exposé laced with shocking confessions from part of his team revealed how Kanyari deceptively obtained money from worshippers on the pretext that they would receive miracles.

The exposé, dubbed *Makri ya Injili* (Prayer Predators), contemporaneously showed the deceptive methods that the Salvation Healing Ministry used to lure and exploit the gullible and trusting followers over a period of 15 years in order for Kanyari to enrich himself. The exposé included witness testimonies given by paid members of the church who falsely testified that they had been miraculously healed of AIDS through Pastor Kanyari's prayers.

Kanyari also washed the feet of his followers with water laced with potassium permanganate. When he stirred the chemical (just like one would do in a chemistry lab), the water turned into a deep red.

In a bizarre incident, straight out of a children's folktale, he told his adherents that this was blood oozing out from their feet as a result of healing miracles from his prayers. The tragedy of this "healing" performance is that his followers seemed to believe in his "miracle" abracadabra.

In yet another exposé, Kanyari paid women, mostly sex workers, to come forth for faith healing services with twisted mouths and faces, which would miraculously be realigned during prayer services that were telecast on KTN. Kanyari was exposed not only as a con man who used paid sex workers to perform for him, but also as a drunk who routinely cheated on his gospel musician wife.

A story aired on KTN's prime time showed footage in which Kanyari appeared to be falsifying phone calls on his radio programmes recorded from his house. Audiences were urged to send as much as Sh500,000 (US\$5,000) after a single prayer episode. Church members and anybody else who needed prayers had to send him a mandatory Sh310 (US\$3). This charge was a clever manipulation of Malachi Chapter 3, Verse 10, in the Scriptures, which talks about the importance of tithing and God's abundant blessing.

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After the exposé, an unrepentant Kanyari bragged that he had become an instant celebrity since he was the subject of discussion in Kenya's public and private discourses. He further bragged of his rise from a mere secondary school drop-out and a former manual farm labourer to a prophet who was the talk of the town.

His mother, Prophetess Lucy Nduta, also of Salvation Healing Ministry and host of a weekly TV programme, was arrested in mid-2006 for extorting money from the faithful, including requiring HIV/AIDS patients to plant a seed of between Sh200,000 (US\$2,000) and Sh400,000 (US\$4,000) for her to cure them through powerful prayers. Upon receipt of the payment, church elders would allegedly take the AIDS patients to a local AIDS clinic where they would be issued with false medical certificates giving them a clean bill of health. The prophetess claimed that she had cured 200 HIV/AIDS cases.

Evidently, some of the patients sold their properties or borrowed money from friends and family to raise the seed money. According to Paul Gifford, emeritus professor of religion at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and author of *Christianity, Political and Public Life in Kenya*, one woman gave a car worth Sh300,000 (US\$3,000), to the prophetess so that she could pray for her ailing daughter. Another gave Sh1 million (US\$100,000) for prayers to conceive. Yet another Sh21,000 (US\$210) to obtain a visa to the Netherlands. Another follower gave Sh20,000 (US\$200) for a prayer to become rich.

The prophetess tried to have the case against her dismissed, arguing that matters of faith and spirit did not fall within the court's competence. But her plea was rejected and she was jailed for two years in 2008. It seems that the son learnt well from his mother and took over the church's reigns while his mother was cooling her heels at Langata Women's Prison.

The stories of Ng'ang'a and Kanyari have caused much public outrage, with many people calling for their arrest and prosecution, even as they plead with the government to rein in the rogue pastors. Expressing their angst on varied social media platforms, some of the Kenyans have been appalled that their kith and kin can be so gullible as to fall for religious manipulation and trickery.

However, these scandals have not stopped the flow of the followers from drying out; on the contrary, their respective flocks always blame Satan and the dark forces of evil, which manifest themselves in the ungodly media that is always ready to be used to bring down the fishers of men.

The self-proclaimed Prophet Owuor

Enter the self-proclaimed “Prophet” David Edward Ujji Owuor, whose record-breaking titles are legendary. He is considered to be the master of spiritual and emotional manipulation. “The Two Mightiest, Mightiest Prophets of the Lord,” “Beholder of the Golden Keys,” “The Two Ferocious Witnesses,” are among some of his grandiloquent titles.

Never in the history of Christianity in Kenya has there been a man as controversial as Owuor. The “prophet”, a schooled man by all standards, is an end-of-time preacher man who apparently is obsessed with the coming Armageddon. He never ceases to preach repentance and holiness, as well as rapture, whenever and wherever he holds his melodramatic crusades.

In June 2017, Owuor allegedly faked a widely circulated purported “resurrection” of Mama Rosa, a frail, poor, and sickly rural woman, which led to nationwide celebrations by his thousands of fanatical followers. Mama Rosa, as she was known, became “a resurrection trophy” who was showcased at every humungous crusade that Owuor held. Her frail frame pierced the conscience of every right-thinking Kenyan, as she was paraded and forced to endure long hours in the crusades for people to see the miracles and powers of Prophet Owuor. Three years later, on 22 January 2019, Mama Rosa died and was buried at Talau, village in West Pokot.

In March, 2019, Owuor and his Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) was embroiled in a [scandal](#) involving a lady lawyer, Jane Muthoni Njagi, a dedicated follower and real estate tycoon. The presumably rich lawyer, who supposedly owns high-end real estate in Nairobi’s leafy suburbs, and who apparently bankrolled many of the MRH’s activities, was allegedly not only treated shabbily by Owuor and his bishops, but also financially exploited and spiritually manipulated. According to some MRH followers, she was also isolated from friends and family. At some point, she looked weak and uncoordinated.

Her family members revealed how she was constantly abused, denied food and appeared dazed and drugged. She was also allegedly moved from managing her real estate properties, and put up in a smaller apartment while an MRH female worker took charge of her properties. With the help of the police, her family were able to “rescue” her from the cult-like grip she seemed to have been trapped in. This story, highlighted by local media houses, explicitly brought to light the apparent abuse, intrigues and manipulation of MRH followers. Yet the disturbing and shocking thing is that she came out to defend Owuor and to claim that her own family members were thoroughly misinformed about her plight.

Speaking to scores of members and ex-members of MRH in the last nearly five years, during which I have been researching this church, what emerges is a grim picture of extreme emotional and psychological abuse and financial exploitation. The MRH’s theology on women’s bodies and the sexualisation of the female form remains the most disturbing to me. The ministry’s sermons and teachings about sexual purity have, for example, ostensibly led to family tensions and break-ups.

Tens of people I interviewed spoke of myriads of families that have been broken by this church. I found out that some family members spent so much time following the prophet wherever he held his crusades that they literally abandoned their family and work. Some employers have been known to complain about work absenteeism among members of the church, while scores of high school and university students have abandoned their schools and played truancy, all in the name of the prophet.

In a bizarre move, some students have reportedly burned their educational certificates and documents, because, anyway, according to the prophet, rapture is soon coming.

The phenomenon of bizarre pastors is not a preserve of Kenya; elsewhere in Africa, we have witnessed macabre behaviours of the “men of God”. In February 2019, a [video](#) of Pastor Alph Lukau from South Africa showing him resurrecting a “dead” man went viral. In another video that also went viral, a flamboyant Zimbabwean preacher man, Paul Sanyangore, is seen talking to “God” on his mobile phone.

British sociologist Eileen Barker, author of *The Making of the Moonies: Choice or Brainwashing?* has grappled with the disturbing issue of gullible and vulnerable flock. Why is it that reasonable men and women of sound mind always fall prey to religious charlatans? How is it that some of the most gullible men and women also happen to be the most educated academically and professionally? What possible credible explanation can one give to explain the fact that mature men and women will sacrifice their all – career, family, friends, civil liberties, property and personal responsibility – to follow a charlatan who has no family of his own? How is it that right-thinking beings are easily persuaded to abrogate their individual rights of personal choice of what career to pursue, who to marry, when to have or not to have sex, when and how to be intimate with your spouse?

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Like Barker, I have also grappled with the depressing issues of religious bondage and phantasmagoria. How is it that some of the most learned Kenyans of exceptional academic prowess accept Owuor’s extreme quiescent religious beliefs? How is it that some of his adamant and stringent followers and supporters are these “men and women of the books?” How is it that they seem to be “brainwashed” into believing that Prophet Owuor’s “truth” is the only truth?

How is it that they are prepared to follow his every command, his every utterance, and are eager and ready to sacrifice everything – materially or otherwise – for him, while they themselves struggle daily with the basic necessities of life? How is it that women will expose their children to the vagaries of freezing temperatures, exposing their young ones to cold nights, sleeping in open air crusades, while Owuor and his bishops snuggle their nights away in deluxe hotels? How is that medical professionals accept to validate non-existing miracles, totally oblivious of the ethics that undergird their vocation? All in the name of legitimising and validating the miscreant behaviours of a pampered and pumped-up ego? How is it that physicians allow patients to be plucked out of hospital beds to later die after being prayed for at mass crusades?

In the [second part of this article](#), I seek to answer these worrisome questions.

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