



Religious Charlatans and Why Christians Fall for Them

By Damaris Parsitau



The country has just gone through a population census conducted by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) that was conducted in the last week of August 2019. The results of that census are yet to be analysed, but in 2009, the census found that more than 80 per cent of Kenyans identified themselves as Christians. The same proportion of Kenyans also indicated that faith was a central cog in their everyday life, that faith and prayers, not only ruled their daily lives, but also influenced their decisions and shaped their moral values.

In Kenya, as indeed is the case elsewhere in Africa, religious leaders enjoy high levels of public trust and respect, more than politicians, government bureaucrats, judges, magistrates, and even corporate leaders. This is not the case in the developed countries of the West especially (except in America) where religion is considered a private affair.

In the 1970s, through to the 1980s, till the beginning of this millennium, a crop of religious leaders in Kenya identified themselves as the “conscience of the nation” and the “moral voice of the voiceless”. They were regarded by the public as the “epitome of integrity”. Dubbed as “firebrands”, religious leaders, such as Bishop John Henry Okullu, at one time the provost of All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi, Bishop Alexander Muge, the soldier-turned-cleric, Archbishop David Gitari, all from the Anglican Church, plus Timothy Njoya of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and

Archbishop Ndingi Mwana 'a Zeki of the Catholic Church, who served for long as the archbishop in Nakuru diocese, not only spoke truth to power, but also held to account former dictator President Daniel arap Moi and the ruling Kanu party hawks.

These architects of social justice condemned rampant institutional state corruption, abuse of human rights, the instigators of ethnic land clashes and faced Moi and Kanu's monolithic one-party rule head-on, without fear. The constant harassment and death of some of these icons of democracy and pillars of social justice coincided with the explosion of evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity in the country. This type of Christianity prides itself in the democratisation of charisma, in which any charlatan, without any theological education or training whatsoever, simply emerges, starts a one-man church, ordains himself and thereafter, creates a business empire run solely by his family members.

This calibre of evangelical/Pentecostal leaders usually frown upon theological training and are impervious to any institutional systems of control because they would like to remain accountable only to themselves. This is not to state that there is indeed evangelical/Pentecostal clergy that is composed of men and women of integrity.

Social scientists theorise that this kind of behaviour by some of these religious charlatans is encouraged by the moral decadence of the political class and a corrupt state. The Kenyan state, as currently constituted, is characterised by wanton corruption, theft of public coffers, exclusion of minorities and certain regions of the country, rampant tribalism in the government, all of which have impoverished the masses and left them extremely vulnerable to these religious charlatans who have spawned a multi-million shilling industry.

Kenyan politicians are some of the highest paid public servants in the world, whose sole concern, it seems, is self-aggrandisement and primitive accumulation of riches. It is no wonder that religious leaders seem to gain trust in situations where the population is highly susceptible to political and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This, today, is the stark reality of many Kenyans. Unemployment is rife among the youth, the healthcare facilities across the country are wanting and cancer, among other life-threatening diseases, are claiming scores of Kenyans, while the government has yet to come up with effective policies that can mitigate these problems.

In situations like this, people become desperate and look to supernatural powers to find meaning and solace, hoping for divine answers to their pain and frustrations. Research in the global South points to similar scenarios, especially in Latin America where evangelical creed has been spreading like the Amazon forest fires that have been wreaking havoc in Brazil and Bolivia in the past several weeks.

SAPs and the proliferation of Pentecostal Christianity

The infamous structural adjustments programmes (SAPs) of the late 1970s and 1980s led to the collapse of social infrastructure, particularly in the education and health sectors, which put tremendous strain on public service delivery. The impact of SAPs was felt across the African continent. It also, in a manner of speaking, heralded the proliferation of evangelical/Pentecostal and charismatic churches that many politico-economy observers have directly linked to the SAPs crisis. Impoverished by the debilitating effects of SAPs, many Kenyans and Africans in general turned to the deliverance and faith healing ministries to cater for their daily existential problems and to dull their socio-economic sufferings.

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Since then, Pentecostalism has become a thriving business and the shortest route to wealth accumulation and influence in a continent teeming with a population explosion, environmental degradation, climate change, ethnic conflicts and internecine wars, disease, massive unemployment and grinding poverty.

Evangelical pastors turned to employing all manner of tricks and techniques to exhort money from their gullible flock. They built costly magnificent churches, bought luxurious cars and houses, and generally continue to live opulent lives while their church members languish and wallow in grim poverty, misery and squalor.

The pastors tell the faithful to give money to God so that God can bless them in return. They dupe the flock by telling them that divine favours come to those who pay their tithes and offerings regularly. Often, they use the biblical injunctions such as “givers never lack” to squeeze money out of people. Pentecostal pastors also claim to have healing powers that can make the deaf hear, the blind see and the lame walk. Self-styled archbishop Gilbert Deya (of the babies’ disappearance scam saga) has been one such pastor.

In a continent with crippled medical facilities, often plagued by lack of medicine and medical equipment, claims of divine healing and miracles by some of the duplicitous evangelical/Pentecostal ministers have abounded, with disastrous effects. These pastors have always preyed on the impoverished masses that cannot afford proper medical care. They take advantage of the broken healthcare system and the helplessness of poor people. They offer ineffective prayers and supposed healing crusades to enrich themselves. The healthcare crisis in Africa has bred desperation and fomented the desire for miracles, faith healing and deliverance sessions in the hope of getting cured.

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The presumed healing prayers of the pastors are not free, and many desperate people spend a fortune paying for those prayers. These prayers continue to be administered, even as the believers’ conditions worsen and some eventually die. Desperation, stigma, family rejection and fear of witchcraft drives people into a never-ending search for miracles and cure from healing crusades and prayer rallies.

Moral failure of leadership

The growing rise of political influence and power among the Pentecostals has made them almost untouchable. Many have weaved their way into politics, becoming political influencers who shape debates and drive policy. Hence, anybody critical of the Pentecostal pastors is faced with their wrath, resistance, and condemnation from their enthusiastic members who are in government and politics.

When the former Attorney General Prof Githu Mugai published a proposed regulatory framework to control rogue clergy and religious organisations in Kenya, certain politicians, both from the ruling Jubilee party and the opposition, claimed that the government wanted to muzzle freedom of worship. The Religious Societies Rule published by the Attorney General Office in 2016 required, among other things, religious bodies to have a constitution that explicitly showed their doctrinal belief. It

also required these bodies to be registered by the government, to be open to scrutiny, and above all, that pastors to have as a minimum a theology certificate from a credible and recognised institution of higher learning. Yet, the truth of the matter is that many Kenyans are still opposed and reluctant to see religious bodies regulated by the government, their public outcry about the pastors' waywardness notwithstanding.

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The question of the day then has always been: are our Christians that gullible or are they just desperate? There is no doubt that many Christians are searching for a moral vocabulary when grappling with social and economic hard times. This is what makes them gullible. For many, church is a space to be in community with one another – a space for healing – both emotional and physically. It is a space for spiritual fellowship, for easing pain and negotiating identities and relationships. Peoples' involvement in these type of churches cannot be exactly pinned on any particular issues. Instead, it is a function of a complexity of issues that are not just spiritual, but that are also personal and communal. During times of crisis, people turn to the church to be in community.

In many parts of Africa, the majority of the people are perpetually living in moments of one crisis after another. They feel lost, alone and in need of moral guidance. They look up to their clergy to provide a moral universe and leadership and space for healing. Indubitably, some rogue clergy have taken advantage of this perilous situation to speak the language that the gullible Christian wants to hear.

It is a challenge that many African governments grapple with every day. In 2004, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) banned the broadcasting of "miracles" on national television. Faith healing happens to be the greatest threat to scientific medical advancement and healthcare delivery in Africa. President Paul Kagame of Rwanda deregistered nearly 8,000 churches and demanded that the clergy get theological education before they open a church.

The greatest threat of Pentecostalism is its unregulated clergy and the moral failure of its leadership. Although other Christian denominations also suffer from this moral crisis, Pentecostalism seems to have been affected the most. Deeply embedded within the Pentecostalism's ethos is a personality cult. Evangelical charismatic leaders are often virtually worshipped by many of their followers. Averse to proper theological education, they instead claim to have the power of the Holy Spirit as their sole teacher. Oftentimes, supported by their fanatical followers, these leaders, become small gods who cannot be questioned. In a "Christian" country like Kenya, these type of church leaders become very powerful and attractive to influential political elites.

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It is this power and godlike behaviour that leads many of the Pentecostal pastors to deal with the churches' coffers as their personal money and church properties as their family business. While there are Pentecostal churches, such as Christ Is The Answer Ministries (CITAM), that have instituted structures and policies to handle cases of financial and pastoral misconduct, ineptitude

and impropriety, many of these “personalised” evangelical churches find it hard to work within systems.

In Kenya, evangelical/Pentecostal and charismatic churches are under the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK), but it is not clear whether they have a system of checks and balances to regulate their churches. To the best of my knowledge, there is no body that regulates the so-called independent churches in Kenya and their ministers. A favourite Bible verse favoured by these pastors that says, “touch not my anointed” (Psalms 105:15) is always flashed by these ministers to fend off and stifle criticism of any kind.

Pastors Kanyari and Ng’ang’a are a power unto themselves. Many well-meaning Christians have decried such rogue religious leaders in Kenya, prompting observers to ask if religion is indeed the bane of Kenyan society. This is because of their recklessness, waywardness, lack of moral rectitude and their nefarious activities, not to mention the source of their wealth, which they always flaunt with abandon.

Kenya and Nigeria, comprise some of the most highly religious societies in Africa, but they are at the same time two of the most corrupt countries in Africa, if not in the world, according to Transparency International (TI)’s Corruption Perceptions Index. Since it was launched in 1995, Kenya has always been ranked in the bottom half of the countries surveyed – a paradox but one that we have to contend with.

The same is the case with South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. An authentic church leadership has been always critical in fighting political and socio-economic ills in society. Yet, once it is co-opted by the state, it ceases to identify itself with the people and their societal struggles and finds itself silent in the face of wanton corruption perpetrated by the state’s aficionados.

The making of cult leaders

Ever since he burst into the public limelight in 2004, Prophet Owuor of the Repentance and Holiness ministry travels like the President of Kenya, his “presidential-like” motorcade complete with sirens, chase cars and top-of-the-range fuel guzzlers. Meanwhile, his fanatical followers clean the roads he is passing on with soap and detergent. Never mind that his members have never engaged in a public drive to clean the environment, even as a religious corporate responsibility.

In fact, Owuor’s rallies leave heaps of garbage at crusade venues, where tree branches are cut in celebration of purported miracles performed by the “Lord of the mightiest...mightiest of prophets,” of Yehovah, as Owuor is referred to by his followers. He is always received on a red carpet and his podium is decorated like that of a president, complete with a “presidential chair” called the “Lord’s Chair” that is always carried around wherever he goes. Prophet Owuor is clearly a man obsessed with temporal powers, even as he apparently flaunts his supposedly spiritual powers.

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His retinue of security people (some of whom are believed to be from the disciplined forces) provide him with state-like security. A body count of his security detail revealed up to 24 armed men. Prophet Owuor’s religious high-handedness has led observers to wonder about the “securitisation of religion” and “religionisation of the state” in Kenya. His motorcade often causes a stir as ordinary motorists are forced off the road to make room for Kenya’s spiritual president.

The reasons for such overt displays of extravagance, opulence and power by these religious charlatans are ostensibly to pump up their egos and prove to ordinary mortals that they are extraordinary. This show of imagined “spiritual” power is obviously manufactured by people suffering from megalomania and a false sense of deep personal importance and self-love that implicitly suggests that they would like to be treated as demigods.

The tragedy of this crude display of raw power and ostentatious wealth is that it is all derived from manipulation, and very often through excessive and unsustainable debt. Followers who question the profligate lifestyle of Prophet Owuor have been known to be intimidated and threatened with the curse of catching terminal ailments such as cancer and being involved in freak fatal car accidents.

The other cultish manifestation is the tendency towards the supernatural and the spectacular. The signs and wonders of “miracles” include healing, raising people from the dead, prophesying, and sharing of visions. Never mind that the majority of these miracles are frequently stage-managed using actors and actresses, psychological tools or modern technologies. Owuor has often circulated tens of images of him being transfigured, doubled and tripled. Similarly, he has circulated images of the sun clapping at him, the glory shining on him and other such theatrics. All these serve to attract and keep his members intact, and to maintain the hierarchical power structure. There is no mistaking that Owuor considers himself as the only “true” prophet.

His ministry was recently been embroiled in a sex scandal, in which his most trusted lieutenant and right-hand man was accused by several church women of cunningly sleeping with them. The women described Owuor’s acolyte and bishop of Kasarani area as a deceitful man who lured female worshippers to his house in Nairobi, oftentimes in the ungodly dark hours, to have carnal knowledge with them. The excuse he would use to entrap them was always prayers to cast out the demons that were hiding in their bodies. Why those demons needed to be chased away in the dead of the night and when the women were completely nude, only the bishop can explain. Until, the exposé in the last week of August 2019, the issue of sex pests within Owuor’s closely-knit inner circle was the worst kept secret.

The adoration and veneration of these so-called “men of God” is another distinguishing characteristic of cultism. The “Apostle,” “prophet” and “messiah”, is imaged as the chosen one, God’s messenger, the dispenser of blessings and curses, grace, health and even wealth. In the case of Owuor, he is the beholder of the golden keys to heaven, and he alone has the powers to bless people to eternity or lock them out completely. These spiritual elites also supposedly have one-to-one conversations with God, not once, but sometimes several times in a day. For Owuor, Jesus Christ actually comes down from his throne to lie and sleep on his feet.



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In seeking to display their cult-like tendencies, these type of leaders catastrophically end up dividing and isolating church members from their family, friends and even their community. Some of the Prophet Owuor's followers that I spoke to recounted harrowing experiences and heart-wrenching stories of isolation of members who were portrayed as evil and sinful. Stringent control of church women on what they should wear, how they should wear it and even how to comport themselves are some of the control measures that afflict Owuor's followers. One time as he held his crusade in Nakuru, I asked one of his adherents why some men and women were wrapped in curtains and he told me, "They are not to engage in sexual intercourse before and during the crusade. The Prophet demands that they abstain from connubial activities until he is done with the crusade." Some of Prophet Owuor's members have resorted to not shaking hands with non-church members.

Owuor's ministry has a long list of do's and don'ts for his followers, which include among other things, what to wear, how to speak and who to speak to. This exclusionism of members in his church has generated tremendous interest from a bewildered public. Testimonies of families breaking up are common in the church.

Another tell-tale sign of a cultist movement is the craze about possessing high-sounding titles. Owuor has more titles than any other religious charlatan I know of. Yet, followers of such leaders, educated or not, are always awed by such grandiose titles. They always seem to be intrigued by religious power and sometimes some just want to have a new religious experience.

Prophet Owuor has attracted a significant number of academics, civil servants and professionals who legitimise his cult-like image. Apparently, they are attracted by their leader's lofty education status. It is through such obeisance of deep faith and trust, a great need to belong, sincerity, spiritual manipulation and vulnerability and isolation that gives rise to this kind of spiritual abuse.

Rogue clergy and religious charlatans are increasingly becoming a national crisis in Kenya. There has been pressure from the public for the government to tame this wayward "Christian industry" by introducing stiff regulations. Yet, the question of the people's apparent gullibility cannot be wished away.

Why is it that they do not seem to learn from past experiences of busted rogue pastors? The Kenya government is, therefore, caught in between protecting freedoms of expression and putting a stop to religious malevolence. The government regulating the religious organisations is one thing, it is another for these faith-based organisations to also put their houses in order and regulate themselves as well if they hope to reclaim their integrity and respect.

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