



# Violent Theologies, Women's Bodies, and Church 'Business' in Kenya

By Damaris Parsitau



"Get out, let her loose in Jesus name," Pastor James Maina Ng'ang'a of Neno Evangelism [yelled repeatedly](#) in one of his many violent "deliverance orgies" that have sadly become a common feature of the many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches' services in Kenya and beyond. In fact, deliverance ministries have not only proliferated in Africa in the last four decades, they have now also been commercialised and turned into big business in some of the evangelical churches.

As deliverance theologies become increasingly popular, they are also increasingly becoming violent. People are raising concerns about the disastrous and violent consequences of such theologies. Deliverance beliefs, teachings and practices are based on the assumptions that both mental and physical illnesses are the result of demon possession and, as such, ought to be treated through a violent expulsion of the demon.

In the recent past, for example, scores of [disturbing YouTube videos](#) have been widely shared on social media platforms where the notorious Pastor Ng'ang'a, acting as the leading "exorcist" in the country, frequently carries out bizarre deliverance services in his church. In nearly all of his church services, Ng'ang'a conducts deliverance services that are often streamed on national TV and social media. In these streams, he violently slaps and pins people, mostly women, to the ground. In a few instances, he has been seen [behaving obscenely](#) towards the women, like fondling their breasts or

objectifying their bodies. In the act of casting out the demons, Ng'ang'a slaps and assaults his "victims" to rid them of the demonic attacks in a performance that is stage-managed and well-choreographed. In one episode, he violently slaps and knocks down an old diabetic man with kidney failure to the ground ostensibly to slap out the demon of diabetes.

In one particularly disturbing video that went viral, Ng'ang'a literary [beats up and slaps](#) a young man violently and several times, knocking him off the ground. In normal circumstances, this type of assault would have called for police action. This video attracted both local and international outrage, prompting the US celebrity rapper Snoop Doggy Dog to tweet, "*When you are late on the offering money, the Rev needs his money.*"

That YouTube video attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers before it was deleted. Odiously, it led to a debate on the pros and cons of deliverance theology. Meanwhile, Ng'ang'a [response](#) to the rap musician was to suggest that Snoop Dog "sniffs a lot of stuff".

As the video caught the attention of both local and international audiences, and generated opprobrium, neither Ng'ang'a nor his congregations thought it was a big deal at all. Instead, his followers continue to cheer and watch in amazement as the supposedly "demon-possessed people" roll on the ground until the "demons" are forced to flee and the possessed calm down. The deliverance practice is characterised by the violent throwing of people to the ground, ostensibly to immobilise the possessed so that the exorcism can ably take place as the "exorcist" Ng'ang'a coaxes out dark forces. This act points to the immense (spiritual) powers of the exorcist and the bestowed power he commands over his hapless and helpless victims.

Violent deliverance practices are commonplace in Ng'ang'a's ministry. That has been so, and has been a defining feature of Neno Evangelical Centre since its inception in the early 1990s. This, no doubt, is a ploy to attract huge crowds to his church.

The focus of deliverance ministries is to shift the agency from the "victims" in a way that keeps them constantly dependant on the pastors to make important decisions on their behalf. This manufactured power is the stuff of legends and in the case of many Pentecostal pastors, such as Ng'ang'a, is always well-crafted for manipulation purposes. Ng'ang'a has presumably convinced his followers that he engages the supposed demons in conversation, commanding them to depart forthwith from the person.

According to the "exorcist-in-chief" himself, many of the demons that enter his followers are meant for him and supposedly have been sent to destroy Pastor Ng'ang'a, the man of God himself. Why? Ostensibly because demonic forces don't like him because he is the arch-enemy of the kingdom of darkness and a "general" of God's Kingdom. Neither the pastor, nor the congregation or even the so-called demon-possessed persons, see anything wrong in these violent deliverance orgies.

A core part of Ng'ang'a's sermons include weekly deliverance sessions that are often aired on national TV on Sundays. Their main focus is demon exorcism of believers, who are paraded in front of the church and who often appear to be "possessed". According to Ng'ang'a, his deliverance sermons are rooted in the book of Mark 6:13 that says: *They drove demons out and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.* Never mind that there is no anointing of the sick with oil. Jesus Christ simply commanded the demons.

From the nebulous Ng'ang'a, what we see is an intense, loud, malodorous, violent melodrama, in which, as if he himself is demon-possessed, yelling into the microphone "fire, fire, fire" as he "assaults" the demon-possessed flock.

## Health, wealth and the prosperity gospel

The deliverance theologies must be understood within the larger context of the health and wealth prosperity gospel prevalent in all of Africa, as well as the collapse of healthcare systems. There was an explosion of hundreds of deliverance churches and ministries in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s that were first popularised by the proponents of the health and wealth gospel from North America but which were later localised. Both the health and wealth gospel represent a rather controversial strand of global Christianity that is now popular in many parts of Africa, especially in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, among many others.

While both Christian men and women seek deliverance, many of the possessed are often women, which in itself is unsurprising, given the fact that the majority of Pentecostal and charismatic church followers are women. It is also a fact that women of varied educational, demographic and socio-economic backgrounds seek deliverance services. In November 2018, in a [video widely circulated](#), Apostle Ng'ang'a is purportedly shown casting out demons from the famous Tanzanian gospel singer Rose Muhando at his Nairobi church. In that video, demons in Muhando's body and mind are allegedly "heard" bragging that they were the cause of her misfortunes and that they had placed an ominous object on her that intended to completely kill her musical career.

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After the violent deliverance orgy, in which she is seen spinning out of control and reeling on the floor screaming before she is pinned down by Ng'ang'a, Muhando "thanked God" for coming to her rescue and delivering her from the powerful demons that have tormented her for a long time. She claimed that all her wealth, fame and talents had gone, leaving her extremely poor and vulnerable, thanks to the destructive demons. Before this deliverance orgy, friends and colleagues in the gospel music industry had raised the alarm that all was not well for the popular gospel songbird, pointing out that she had been broke, depressed, sickly and in need of medical and spiritual help.

In yet another [video](#), Rose Muhando is seen being "delivered from the clutches of the demon" by Nairobi's flashiest self-proclaimed prophetess, Lucy Natasha of the Prophetic Latter Glory Ministries International, an indication that one deliverance session is probably not enough, or that one pastor is not as powerful as another, or, as a patient would do in the medical world, followers are simply seeking a second opinion.

This "Muhando experience" lends credence to the fact that deliverance ministries are always in competition to attract followers to their healing services, hence creating stiff competition between various churches. This competition has necessitated the creation of niche ministries where a particular pastor or pastoreess will emphasise certain special powers to woo members. So, some will teach deliverance, others will teach money and prosperity, while others focus on sexual purity and end-time theologies.

In the case of Ng'ang'a, he teaches an extreme form of deliverance, as well as the health and wealth gospel. To keep his followers glued to his ministry, he has to practise deliverance as a way of displaying his "spiritual prowess". Ng'ang'a has always distinguished himself as an exorcist par excellence since he established his Neno ministry and may have been influenced by the 1980s proponents of the deliverance theologies, such as the Nigerian Emanuel Eni and others.

Many people were baffled to see Rose Muhando spinning out of control and rolling on the floor in

the most undignified manner as Apostle Ng'ang'a purportedly, stubbornly, drove out the demons in her. Christians and non-Christians posed many questions, not just about the meaning of deliverance, but also about the easy resort of African Christians to "prayers for deliverance", even for non-spiritual everyday mundane things that do not require spiritual interventions.

### **"Spirit husbands" and sexual anxieties**

Why do people subject themselves to the indignity of such violent acts that include falling, reeling, spinning uncontrollably, foaming in the mouth and sprawling wildly on the ground to receive deliverance? Why do Christians see the devil and demons in everyday, mundane day-to-day matters that could easily be resolved through non-spiritual means? Why is demonic exorcism conducted in a violent manner? Why are more women than men prone to demonic attacks? Why are women's bodies portrayed as the locales for demons and evil spirits and witches? How come women seem not to have no value for their dignity and bodily integrity? Are not women and their bodies also children of God, made in the image and likeness of God? Does not the idea that women's bodies are locales for demonic spirit and temples of the devil and satanic practices negate God's love for women and deny them God's grace and love? Why are women's bodies the homes of bad spirits, sins, impurity, death and everything that is bad? Do Kenyan women have no regard for their bodies as beautiful and clean and pure and instruments that bring life to the world? Why do women view themselves as temples of demons and not the Holy Spirit? Are there not other available means that Christians could use to seek deliverance? What kind of desperation drives people to open themselves to this kind of indignity, violence and abuse by charlatans like Ng'ang'a? How should Christians offer solutions to people in need of answers to their existential problems? Why do women allow the self-declared "men and women of God" pastors to have power over their lives, bodies and minds?

These questions always run through my mind every time I see these violent practices. While Pentecostal churches generally stress that the world is a place of spiritual warfare between God and evil forces, for many women frequenting such churches, this strange but now accepted and normalised spiritual practice is increasingly becoming violent and borders on the absurd.

Many women have also sadly come to uncritically accept that everything that is wrong in their lives – whether it is absentee husbands and fading spouses, marital anxieties or infertility, business failure or stagnation, financial insecurity, stress, sickness, job insecurity and poverty, wayward children, fear of witchcraft, among many other social and moral panics – is as a result of demonic possession.

Several interviews with born-again Christian women revealed that many have internalised the belief that their bodies and spirits are spaces where demons reside and are the cause of the many spiritual issues they grapple with. A number of women I spoke to suggested that many women believe they are possessed by demonic spirits, including "spirit husbands". Two women told me that they believed that demons and evil spirits would visit them at night and have sex with them. These women talked of the torment, the shame and the helplessness they feel when these "spirit husbands" or "night husbands" come to claim their conjugal rights. They told me that they frequently have sex with demons whose physical presence cannot be seen, and do not have human form. When I asked them to describe these experiences, they painted pictures of handsome but mean men, who appear like in the movies to just rape them and then vanish.

I corroborated these claims in an episode in which Ng'ang'awas apparently conducting deliverance sessions for women who allegedly have sex with demons at night. This scary and unimaginable phenomenon has also been documented by social scientists in other parts of Africa.

Some theologians have suggested that some of these disturbing experiences could potentially personify women's "sexual anxieties and fantasies", as well as exemplifying their sexual ambiguities.

They could also be hallucinations. But they could also be suggestive of extreme emotional, psychological and mental health struggles that these women are grappling with. Yet narratives of these women leave no doubt that they seriously and honestly believe that they actually have sex with demons at night and are helpless about their situation. Some women seem to truly believe that they are possessed by the spirit also known as “night husbands” and “spirit husbands” forces.

To that extent, women who have accepted this fact turn to spiritual exorcism and deliverance orgies perpetuated by the likes of Ng’ang’a and his ilk. While deliverance theology is an indication of people and specifically women’s anxieties around sex, relationships, marriage, children, security, money, fear of witchcraft and other social tensions, such as bodily integrity, rejection by spouses, marital infidelity, depression and mental health issues, spirit spouses are an indication of the entanglement of reproductive issues, such as sexuality, marriage, procreation, in-laws and spousal violence.

Rose Muhando, for instance, it has been suggested, had long been grappling with bad business, financial challenges, drugs, relationship issues, fears of witchcraft and mental health issues before she sought deliverance from Ng’ang’a. When women speak about their lack of sexual pleasure, sexual violence, complex relationships, irresponsible fathers, infertility, tensions with in-laws, spirit husbands and others, they are essentially and indirectly speaking about social anxieties and their personal security. This is not difficult to see given that Kenyan society is faced with huge challenges, including violence against women, which has become a defining feature of life. This explains why even seemingly upward mobile women such as Rose Muhando are also experiencing tensions around their lives.

### **SAPs and African cosmologies**

Scholars and researchers have theorised that desperation stress, family break-ups, financial constraints, poverty, and unemployment, are some of the drivers of the deliverance industry. This is important given that the emergence of Pentecostal churches is directly linked to the impact of the 1980s Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in Africa. Other factors that have contributed to the spread and popularity of deliverance ministries and beliefs include trauma, despair, and health-related anxieties brought about by the collapsed healthcare facilities in African countries. But deliverance theologies also find explanation in African cosmologies where sickness or disease is often thought to have been caused by witchcraft or the “evil eye” or other unseen forces.

Nevertheless, the whole phenomenon of deliverance theologies can be understood as an attempt to make meaning to the social and health challenges that people grapple with, a sort of theology of survival. However, charlatans like Ng’ang’a have seized this to make a name and money and to plant himself as a leading exorcist.

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In his recent [article](#), Prof Makau Mutua argues that African people are fatalistic because they have endured so much trauma brought about by three important historical epochs: slavery, colonialism, and the Cold War. He says that these three evils deeply traumatised Africans and spurred despair and deep spirituality. As such Africans often resort to religion and spirituality to explain away their trauma and despair. In this sense, he posits that religion could be used as a clutch to lean on or a

comforting intervention to minimise pain and to “live one day at a time”, a common phrase used by Christians when they think about an insecure future. The promise of a better tomorrow in the hereafter can allow one to endure a brutish existence on earth in anticipation of a better tomorrow. Therefore, religion can be an opiate that eases and dulls the pain of everyday existence characterised by poverty, sickness, and many vagaries brought about by a predatory state.

The easy resort to prayer and the spiritualisation of everything stifles pragmatic interventions, such as, seeking medical attention, including socio-psychological support and care. But it also raises questions about churches that are increasingly becoming spaces of violence instead of spiritual and earthly liberation.

Should churches not develop and expand educational programmes that assist the identification of natural causes for different phenomena so as to deter people from believing in witchcraft and demons? Deliverance beliefs and practices are based on the assumption that both mental and physical illnesses result from possession of the sufferer by demons and that the sufferer should, therefore, be treated through expulsion of these demons. Deliverance theologies enslave people to the delusional belief that it is only through the casting out of demons that they can be healed. Hence, deliverance ministries shift blame for sin, addiction and other human struggles to the demonic world and not to the government that fails to provide sufficient healthcare to its citizens. Similarly, deliverance theologies prevent people from demanding better from their governments; the charlatans of the deliverance industry take the government's place. They not only take agency from the individual to the pastor, but create and foster paranoia.

Yet deliverance theologies also raise critical questions about abuse, bondage, peoples' vulnerabilities, exploitation, freedom, liberation, moral and ethical issues, personal responsibility and violence. They also raise questions about power dynamics and deliverance as a business tool for the Pentecostal clergy.

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More importantly, they raise questions about regulation of churches, as well as church taxation. Churches in Kenya are exempt from taxation because there is the assumption that they do social and public good. My research on Pentecostal and charismatic churches tells me that fewer Pentecostal churches venture outside of strictly spiritual issues to preach a social gospel grounded in social justice and human dignity. What we have are religious outfits led by the proponents of the deliverance and wealth ministries that are focused on creating opulent lives for the men and women of God and their immediate families, and propping up a cadre of an opulent clergy, who then become a law unto themselves.

Yet, the blame also rests squarely on the Government of Kenya that has left its citizens to the mercies of spiritual charlatans who impoverish and manipulate vulnerable Christians in the guise of providing spiritual blessings and healing to the oftentimes dazed folk. The government has failed its people, the majority of whom are Christians, because it cannot offer them sustained public healthcare, a core mandate of a responsible state. It has failed because it has shirked from its responsibilities of regulating these spiritual charlatans.

But even as we think of church regulation, there should be, at the very least, minimal requirements set for the operation of such churches, both new and established, including having pastors properly trained in a recognised theological institution.

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