



Religion in a Time of HIV and Austerity: The Curious Case of Prophet Owuor

By Owaahh



In the midst of the 2008 US presidential election, both sides of the campaign faced a pastor problem. For Barack Obama, it was Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the man who had officiated his wedding with Michelle Robinson, and baptised both their daughters. The future president had to distance himself from Rev. Wright when clips of the pastor saying “anti-white, anti-American” things became the subject of national conversation.

For the John McCain campaign, it was Bishop Thomas Muthee, a Kenyan pastor who had prayed for McCain’s running mate, Sarah Palin, in 2005. Muthee came up in the campaign after Palin started reviving Obama’s connection to Wright, which had come up in February that year.

There were two videos. In one, from 2005, the Kenyan pastor prays for Sarah Palin, who was then the Mayor of Wasilla. He “anoints” her political ambitions, and “rebukes every form of witchcraft”. Two days later, Palin announced her candidacy for the governorship of Alaska, which she ultimately won. In the second video, shot in mid-2008, Palin recalled the 2005 encounter and attributed her political successes to the anointing.

In the typical fervent opposition research of American presidential contests, details of Muthee’s work and claims over the years came up in different publications. Most of them centered around a

foundational claim of his ministry - that he had chased away a witch in Kiambu, bringing down the crime rate, alcoholism, and boosting the economy. He had made the claim many times before, and it had been covered extensively [as early as 1999](#).

This story caught my attention not just because we were all invested in the Obama campaign, but also because I spent a significant part of my childhood in Muthee's church. I'd heard the story of the witch numerous times, repeated as fact. The characters in the story, including the alleged witch, Mama Jane, but excluding the pet python (this comes up somewhere in the many retellings), were a familiar aspect of my short-lived experiment with faith. Mama Jane lived somewhere on the outskirts of the town in what looked like a walled commune for Akorinos.

As a child, it was easy to miss all the nuances that drove the success of the narrative of the witch-hunt. The events described supposedly took place in the late 80s and early 90s, a time when the world was in flux. Kenya was an economic mess grappling with structural adjustment programme (SAP)-triggered reforms, a new multiparty era, and just about every possible disruption imaginable.

As if that wasn't enough, the last surviving safe space of the tired citizen - sex - was no more. HIV/AIDs had taken that away, bringing fear and panic to one of the most basic of human activities. What society needed, and what many churches were built on from the mid-80s, was a source of all answers. A simple solution for complex questions.

The Owuor brand

A few months ago, [an opinion piece](#) by Njoki Chege on Dr. David E. Owuor, one of several in recent times, triggered [a monumental backlash, at least online](#), mainly in defence of the bearded tunic-donning preacher. It even included a [response from Daily Nation's public editor](#) essentially saying that the opinion piece should not have been based on opinion.

Owuor has been the subject of media attention for the last decade or so. Recently there was a [37-minute investigative documentary](#) by Mark Bichachi that aired in December last year. At the heart of the interest (and controversies) are Owuor's prophecies and supposed miraculous powers, which include doomsday predictions and (a) resurrection. Buried a layer beneath are questions about his source of wealth and seemingly insurmountable hold not just on his followers, but also on politicians and businessmen. It is a question of the role of religion in modern life, and why, despite our seemingly high literacy levels, we still seem beholden to what amount to fantasy and spectacle.

But nothing Owuor does is essentially new in the religio-political sphere of Kenyan life. Others before him have built similar movements on almost similar frames of thought, with a specific focus on going beyond psychological comfort and belonging. They've offered families beyond a bloodline meaning, where marriage is, for example, a carefully curated experience that drives both recruitment and loyalty.

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The attention and publicity of such religious figures and groupings tends to focus on their dogmatic quirks, ignoring the socio-economic roles they play. Religion also fulfills an economic role as employer or reference, a social one as friend and family, and a political one as a place to explain the meaning of divine authority and other complexities. To get here though, it needs to first distinguish itself from others pushing essentially the same message. It is not enough to fight Satan as a concept,

but also his supposed personification in human and social form.

For early Christians in Kenya, it was the concepts and practices of traditional religions. Then it moved to witches, poverty, and demonic possession, which were also common pivots in the wave of new evangelical churches of the 1980s. They didn't leave established churches behind, as the composition of the infamous Devil Worship Commission proves. But they went a step further in seeking new platforms, abandoning the traditional pulpit, at least initially, for new ways of reaching audiences. These included open-air crusades, evangelical missions in public spaces, such as markets and buses, and eventually televangelism.

Unlike traditional clergy, they shunned ceremonial robes and chose smart, professional attire instead. They also added even more spectacle to the rituals that older churches had stopped doing frequently - baptism in a river or a pool, for example. If an early Christian time-travelled to our modern age, a lot of what these new churches are doing would look very familiar, including the total immersion baptism.

In the tumultuous 90s, in both urban and rural areas, they explained away social ills as manifestations of a dark force. Anything from crime waves to drug addiction and political corruption could be explained away simply on this basis. The case of the Kiambu pastor is interesting because it was not just dressed as warfare for spiritual health, but for social good - reduced traffic accidents and crime. It also spoke about "powerful people" who had been visiting the witch, implying a direct connection between the socio-economic carnage and politics. Even more importantly, it was geographical pivot for the church itself, and its subsequent growth in Kiambu, its links with international ones, and the centering of this new breed of church as a "meaning maker" replacing the public intellectual in society.

Other churches designed their messaging in a similar way, focusing on issues affecting their primary audience and tailoring spiritual solutions for them. The model encouraged personal testimony led by religious leaders who spoke frequently about their own transformation and "calling". Many of these churches would try to create a niche for themselves while trying to maintain a respectable perspective of others in the business. It was essentially an oligopolistic market where open conflict was discouraged. The familiar threads also encouraged a form of cross-pollination that hadn't been possible with the stricter distinctions within older forms of Christianity.

As the economy improved and things eased a bit, the messaging in the most successful churches shifted more towards a liberal theology, emphasising prosperity and purpose-driven lives, with clergy men and women exemplifying such success. Their suits got sharper, their cars got bigger, their homes got grander, and the competition for souls exploded.

By 2007, there were 8, 520 registered churches, 6, 740 pending applications, and 60 new applications being filed every month.

Owuor unsettles this uneasy calm that has existed among different Christian denominations. To drive recruitment and differentiate himself, he routinely riles against sin, specifically sexual sin. In 2015, Owuor was in the midst of an open-media war with Margaret Wanjiru, the epitome of the wave of preachers who emerged in the 80s and the 90s. Wanjiru exemplifies everything that has helped Owuor distinguish himself by fighting rich, preacher-politician identity with a self-confessed "witch" past. She also exemplifies the established clergy that Owuor says shunned him when he begun preaching in 2004/5, although there's no evidence the two ever crossed paths. This period is important because, as Dauti Kahura rightly observes, it marked the beginning of the end of the common (wrong) view that the church was a neutral arbiter. Within no time, the church would be in the thick of the referendum debate, a short-term battle it won without realising it was losing a much

larger one.

Despite this open declaration of war, Owuor's brand is still rooted in established religious practices. He preaches nothing new and similar movements and doomsday cults are a dime a dozen even today. The difference between him and others is that he has capitalised on the disillusionment of his would-be followers. He keeps his message simple, as exemplified by the name of his organisation - The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness. His primary enemy is not necessarily the concept of Satan, but his fellow preachers and other churches. He uses the same pivots that they did, but disagrees, at least in his sermons, with the direction they took their faith and lives. In the things he still does (that they also do), he goes for spectacle. Whether it's the motorcades or the open-air crusades or even the things he says.

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But even beyond this is his ability to create and push a personality cult, one rooted in Christianity but spirited in a way most other denominations haven't been since the 90s. It is more the spirit and spectacle of the man than the actual content that makes him who he is today. He is a modern brand that has become more familiar in the age of Donald Trump; one built not on substance, but on opposition and display. Owuor's brand also demands exclusivity from its followers, and then works like a niche, complete with a sub-economy as well as socio-political networks.

Owuor initially rooted his churches in open-air, accessible locations. He himself, however, mostly drives his message and influence through well-choreographed, much-publicised public rallies. In this way he works like a politician in fervent campaign mode. The rallies are not novel, like many things about the Owuor brand, but they are different in the way they are marketed and executed. They are often preceded by weeks, at times months, of marketing in every conceivable social space (even pushed by [police officers in uniform](#)), and then aired live for maximum effect. Even this isn't new, as it was introduced in Kenya by foreign preachers in the Moi era who got similar publicity, police protection, and political networking.

Fresh sermons are given at rallies, with his churches (known within as "altars"), and media houses airing his sermons. Owuor's organisation also runs a website, a magazine and a radio station. All three run his content almost exclusively, with a heavy bent on his rallies, prophecies, and "miracles." He has become what scholars see as a "religio-political figure", a "[multi-disciplinary phenomenon](#)."

Other than this Digital Age aspect of his brand's growth and protection, Owuor is really an Elijah Masinde or an Onyango Dunde, or a Mary Akatsa for the modern age. His brand combines both the mythical influence of traditional beliefs with the modern opportunities of technology and access. He occupies the helm of his fringe movement as a spiritual figure rooted in Christian beliefs, but with the added advantage of being a living, breathing, intelligent man. In his work he combines social, spiritual, political and moral narratives with which his followers can reinterpret world events.

Whether this is a good thing is as controversial as the man. Different schools of thought, even from random comments on Twitter, show a general discomfort with the power he wields.

Weaponising intimate citizenship

While intimate citizenship – a concept that seeks to explain the conflicts of personal decisions – is an aspect of most religions, there’s something more pronounced about how fringe movements use and weaponise them. Religious leaders and the movements they build tend to seek power over who and when people meet, date and marry. The centrality of this core aspect of the individual is an extension of the family, and used over a period of time – a brilliant way of shoring up numbers and maintaining an in-group.

Intimate citizenship became particularly important after the mid-1980s as HIV/AIDS ravaged society and the political class refused to respond effectively. Politicians and clergymen, faced with a problem for which there was no direct answer or cure as there had been for sexually-transmitted diseases before, at first shied away from the topic. At one point, President Daniel arap Moi even asked why people couldn’t abstain from sex for two years, and Cardinal Maurice Otunga burnt piles of condoms at Uhuru Park. The vacuum that the destruction of social structures had created widened, and there were no easy, obvious answers.

At the Jerusalem Church of Christ (JCC), led by Mary Akatsa, congregants were encouraged to marry outside the church, with approval of course. The design here is that Akatsa christened herself “Mummy” and her followers became “Children of Mummy”. Intermarriage between them would therefore be equal to incest, a crime which she once used to launch a hostile takeover of the leadership at her previous church.

In contrast, in Owuor’s church, members are encouraged to marry fellow believers. Owuor has also switched some of the inherited norms of the church marriage, for example, by making the bride arrive at the church before the groom.

To standardise the ranks even more, such fringe sects also insist on uniforms. Such uniforms and other church materials provide for a sub-economy since they can only be bought directly from the organisation or from ordained tailors. The tailors who dress Owuor’s congregation, for example, cannot dress any outsider. Owuor’s church, like Akatsa’s, bans miniskirts, high heels, trousers, shorts, make-up, and a litany of other things.

One of the most misunderstood aspects of adulthood is the idea that we are all, past a certain age, independent, free-thinking beings, that we desire choice in every aspect of life, and always know we can decline. But basic sociology on the power of in-groups in the life of an individual, defined by codes, uniforms and familiar rituals, shows it’s not that easy.

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In Akatsa’s church, lateness is punished on the spot. Lewdness in any form, even implied, is a no-no. She also regularly humiliates her congregants by insulting them, [slapping them, making them kneel](#), and punishing them for indiscretions.

The question then is, is it dangerous?

There have so far been few signs that what Owuor preaches is outrightly dangerous to anything or anyone except perhaps other versions of charismatic Christianity. One sign is that the hold Owuor

has on his followers, and the amount of weight he places on his persona and mortality, make his demise a dangerous prospect.

Like many others before him, he routinely refers to his own mortality, casting aspersions that others would/will kill him for his message. By doing so, Owuor inadvertently sets his followers on the warpath with anyone who challenges his legitimacy, whether from a religious or non-religious angle. At times, he directly leads these crusades. In 2016, for example, he held [“repentance prayers” for “evil media”](#), borrowing from a government-led onslaught on the media (and civil society) that began with Jubilee’s election in 2013. That year, his followers also wrote [an open letter](#) to *The Wall Street Journal*. In 2015, a [man was sued for hacking Owuor’s email](#) and in 2018, his subordinates [sued two bloggers for defamation](#).

All these attacks come at a time when Owuor, and by extension his followers, have been receiving unprecedented coverage for [use of state resources](#), [fraud](#), [drama](#), [exile](#), an [attempted suicide](#) and a [warning against environmental degradation](#).

Another more pressing danger is just how much damage his faith-healing crusade can do not just to his congregation, but to the societies they live and work in. The rise of charismatic faith-healers in the 80s is linked, although not entirely, to the carnage that HIV/AIDS caused in almost all aspects of social life, beginning with intimate citizenship. Having a cure for the virus, whether in the form of spiritual or medical cures, such as Prof. Arthur Obel’s series of failed cures, meant speaking to something that knew no socio-economic distinction.

Owuor understands modern medicine more than anyone else by virtue of his past as a molecular geneticist. He has also among his ranks a retinue of trained doctors and scientists who routinely “confirm” his miracles. Doctors and [police officers](#) use their credibility to defend his miracles. His second-in-command, Dr. Paul Onjoro, is a lecturer at Egerton University’s Department of Animal Science.

One social fear is that the church has the building blocks to mutate into something more potent, and perhaps even dangerous to its followers and those they interact with. East Africa still carries the trauma of the mass murders of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments, a Ugandan doomsday sect formed in the 80s. In February and March 2000 the church leadership systematically murdered between 500 and 1,000 people in a secret campaign that culminated in a church inferno. It was the second worst mass carnage of its kind after the infamous Jonestown mass suicides of 1978 where 914 people died in Guyana.

What in the world is happening?

The democratisation of the media (and the economy) has reduced the monopoly that political leaders once had on national spectacle. Preachers know that, to paraphrase Howard French, “Africans love a spectacle”. The spectacle offered by politicians is infrequent or repetitive, as any cursory glance of a week’s headlines shows, while preachers can satisfy it in some way every week, and cap it off with a major display every once in a while. The best part is that they don’t have to reinvent the wheel; the raw materials are already in place.

But there’s something else at the heart of this rise in spectacle – boredom. [Research shows](#) that boredom renders people more positive to their in-groups and more negative toward out-groups. Human beings built social groups out of a need for common survival when it was mostly to satisfy the needs of nourishment, security, and procreation. In a world where democracy is on the decline, economies are struggling, and everything feels like its about to explode, all these needs are under threat. And just like it happened in the 1980s, human beings are seeking the safety and belonging of

in-groups, and religion has more experience than anything else in how to build and shape them.

These trends are all over the world, and personalities like Owuor are a dime a dozen in many societies. What's even truer is that they count among their followers even people you would assume would not be easily swayed by charismatic individuals. Former Malawian President Joyce Banda made seven trips in 20 months to TB Joshua's church in Nigeria, which she has since equated to a pilgrimage. Joshua's hold also includes Tanzanian President John Magufuli, whose son was supposedly healed of asthma in 2011. And Frederick Chiluba, the former President of Zambia, said in 2009 that he watched Emmanuel TV-TB Joshua's television channel daily.

It is a precarious time to underestimate the power of religious groups, particularly evangelicals. They voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in the US, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Traditional centres of power, especially religio-political ones, are on a fast decline as others rise to take their place. But that previous statement is only true for developed, aging societies. The Catholic church [grew](#) by 238 percent in Africa between 1980 and 2015, and only by 57 percent across the world. Africa and Asia now export priests.

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While politicians like Trump and Bolsonaro, among many others, have benefitted from Christian support, there are some who are seeking to upend it. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte has made a habit of pissing off the Catholic church. More than 80 per cent of Filipinos are Roman Catholic, making the Philippines the most predominantly Christian country in Asia. In any other context, Duterte's attacks on the church would be suicidal. Yet despite calling priests "sons of bitches", threatening to behead one, calling the Christian God "stupid" and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity "silly", he remains immensely popular.

The reasons are multiple. First, the Roman Catholic Church is facing its biggest threat to its millennia of success with multiple clerical sexual abuse scandals across the world. Duterte is a victim of such abuse, which he openly talked about as he campaigned for the presidency in 2015. He brought it up again several times, and in 2018, confessed that as a teenager, he tried to molest a maid as she slept.

Second, his primary war on drugs and upending of traditional centres of power is a relief to a population that is dealing with many problems. "At a time when democracy is in retreat in many parts of the world, this case illustrates how popular harsh punishment can be in states that have failed to meet their citizens' hopes for freedom, economic growth, and security," two University of Hawaii scholars [wrote](#) late last year.

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Fear is perhaps the most deeply wired reaction we living things possess. It is not just that it evolved as a survival mechanism, but that it is so emotionally consuming and confusing. If we feel the safety we so deeply desire, and deserve, then the same things that fear triggers in us become a heightened arousal state. If our fundamental fears are solved by someone else, like the zoo owner who builds a

cage for a lion, then instead of being afraid we feel other strong good things, like curiosity and risk-taking.

The independence generation, which is in power today in politics, religion and almost every other aspect of organised life, understands this quite well. Collective fear is a thing to be deployed strategically, to keep a young population in check, to bring them out to vote, to keep them from the streets. Instead of the witches, miracle healing, and other foundational stories that built careers in the 80s, we now have too many things to be afraid of, including ourselves. The solutions though, do not lie in finding a firm hand to guide us in our adulthood, whether it is an autocrat or the rituals of religion.

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