

Charismatic Pentecostal Churches in Kenya: Growth, Culture and Orality

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Abstract: *Charismatic Pentecostal churches in Kenya started in the cities and have now extended to the rural areas. The highest percentage of members in the charismatic Pentecostal churches in Kenya as this study established were formerly members of the mainstream churches. This implies, the charismatic churches offer what seems to lack in the mainstream churches. Worldwide, charismatic movements such as the Welsh Revival, Azusa Street Revival, Latter Rain Movement, the Third Wave and the Toronto Blessings began in the early 21st century with a motif to reach the entire globe with the Gospel. Speaking in tongues, singing praises to God, dancing for the Lord and healing among others became the identifying features for the movements. In East Africa, the movement arrived in 1960s and 70s through the ministry of evangelists such as Bill Graham and T.L. Osborne. In Kenya, Joe Kayo, David Kimani, Bethel Mission and Margret Wangari became the first proponents of the movement. This paper examines the growth, culture and orality of the charismatic Pentecostal churches in Kenya. Specifically the paper analyzes the start and development of charismatic Pentecostalism worldwide, distinctive features of the charismatic Pentecostal churches in Kenya and the interpretation of the theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Further, the paper investigates the nature and role of testimonies in the churches showing how women and marginalized groups claim to find 'home' in the charismatic Pentecostal churches. Data were collected through oral interviews and analysis of data from books, journals and documentaries on charismatic Pentecostalism. The oral informants included the priests, lay leaders and church members from 20 selected charismatic Pentecostal churches in Kenya. The paper singles out charismatic pentecostal churches as a threat to the mainstream churches in Kenya. The churches seem to offer inculturated Christianity which make most Kenyans to feel more spiritually administered unto.*

Key Words: *Charismatic, Mainstream, Pentecostalism, Movements, Inculturation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking in tongues, singing praises to God, dancing for the Lord and declaring the mighty acts of God are distinctive in Pentecostal churches around the world. Pentecostalism is the fastest expanding stream of Christianity to an extent that in this paper it is viewed as shaping Christianity in the 21st Century. Asamoah-Gyadu (2005) observes that Pentecostal churches emphasize salvation as a transformative experience brought about by the Holy Spirit. Charismatic Pentecostal church services are dominated by neumatic phenomena such as speaking in tongues, visions, healing prophecies miracles and signs. Charismatic expressions derive reference to St. Paul's *Charismata Pneumatic*, "the gifts of the spirit" in 1st Corinthians 12:4 where Apostle Paul says that "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. . ." This is also found in the Pentecostal experience of the disciples in Acts 2. Generally, shouting for the Lord in charismatic Pentecostal churches is claimed to manifest account of the worshiper's experience of the Holy Spirit.

Lawless (19991) describes Pentecostalism as a fundamentalist charismatic religion which draws on holiness tradition from the early Methodism. In early Methodism, religious injunctions concerning Christian behavior stressed the importance of spirit-led and spirit-filled religious dogma. In this sort of Christianity, personal service encounters with the Holy Spirit expressed in public exhibitions of speaking in tongues as endorsed of possession of the Spirit.

The key focus in charismatic Pentecostalism is the working of Holy Spirit who has a powerful force among believers. Acts 2-4 forms the core reference to Christian experiences termed as 'baptism of the spirit' upon the first Christians in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. This experience as Allan (2000) denotes was common in early Christianity which gave rise to the primitive Christianity movement. In the primitive Christianity, shouting in tongues unknown to the believer and speech in unknown language were common in worship places and to them, this served as the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was believed that those baptized by the spirit would receive other supernatural gifts that were in the early church such as prophesy, healing and *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues).

2. GENERAL SURVEY OF CHARISMATIC PENTECOSTALISM

Pentecostal charismatic movement as Allan (2004) and Cox (1995) inform began in early twenty-first century and now has one out of four Christians worldwide. Charismatic Pentecostalism over history has had zealous movements which have enabled it to spread to various parts of the world. The movements include the Welsh Revival (1903-1904), the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1913), Latter Rain Movement (1906s-1907s), the Third Wave (1980s) and the Toronto Blessing (1994) among others. These movements commonly struggled against the force of institutionalized and structured Christianity observed by missionary churches which in their view denied Christians innate expressions in their worship. The worship with emotional expressions, exemplified by vigorous singing and dancing, shouting and glossolalia was highly emphasized in this brand of Christianity with claims that it made Christians fully participate in worship. The movement was fundamentalist, operationally evangelistic and revivalist. This is what gave the proponents of the 21st century charismatic Pentecostalism the impetus of spreading the Gospel around the world.

Pentecostalism in Africa is a product of the Welsh Revival (1903-1904) where T. B. Barrat was among the pioneer proponents. Barrat arrived in Britain in 1907 and through him the Pentecostal sociological identity was developed which legitimized the descent of the Holy Spirit in the day of Pentecost. Based on the apostolic commission "Go ye therefore" (Mathew 28:18-22), Pentecostal preachers were sent to Africa through the revival movements especially from America to evangelize the African people.. Countries such as Nigeria, South Africa and Botswana were the first among others to receive the charismatic Pentecostal preachers. In the last three decades, charismatic Pentecostalism has had a big challenge to the missionary churches in Africa. Marshall (1992) states that, thousands of new churches and evangelical groups have cropped up in cities and towns, forming a broad-based religious movement which is rapidly becoming a powerful new social and religious force. This type of Christianity has been described as the new dimension of Christianity in Africa which is drastically reshaping the face of Christianity (Kalu, 2000). In Kenya, Pentecostal churches have gained prominence due to their vigorous evangelistic campaigns through the media, involvement in social and political transformation, and emphasis on a piestic and deliverance theology.

When Nigerian Pentecostal missionary enterprise started in Kenya in 1970s, it found a ground that had already been prepared by classical Pentecostal missionaries from America and Canada and East African Revival Movement. As early as the 1920s, revival had occurred in the friends African Mission (Quakers) in Kaimosi, in the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada mission in the Nyang'ori, Western Kenya, and in the Africa inland Mission at Kijabe in central Kenya. The revival stressed personal salvation and the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit as a sign of sanctification. Confession of sins and speaking in tongues were later stressed by the African converts as evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit. The emergence of the revival was an African reaction to Christianity that did not adequately address Africans spiritual needs. This Pentecostal experience resulted in the emergence of African Instituted Churches (AICs) of the spiritual/Zionist variety.

The East African Revival started in Rwanda and spread to Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The revival, commonly referred to as the *Balokole* (saved ones in Luganda), *Ahonoki* (saved ones in Gikuyu), or *Abatoreku* (saved ones in Ekegusii) evolved within missionary churches mainly the Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Winters (1963:69) defined the movement as "a revival in which nominal or 'backslidden' Christians are 'revived' in their commitment to the faith; it is not primarily a movement charismatization affecting non-Christians." The movement

was interdenominational, inter-racial, and inter-ethnic. It was also a response to the perceived lethargy of missionary Christianity and its having been compromised to worldliness. It emphasized the experience of personal salvation through the blood of Jesus, personal holiness, asceticism, confession of sins, hard work, and reliability. One of its characteristic was to hold fellowship meetings in churches once a week, in divisions once a month, and in districts every year. There were national conventions and East African conventions held regularly in each East African country. The fellowship meetings included Bible readings, expositions of Bible passages, personal testimonies, confession of sins and offers of repentance and response by those to be saved. The Balokole Movement empowered the laity, literate and illiterate, to testify for Jesus. This had an impact in the evolution of patterns of ministry that were different from those in mainline churches.

In the 1960s and 1970s, American Evangelists such as Billy Graham and T. L. Osborne visited Kenya, and this helped the revivalists to discover that revival was a worldwide phenomenon and entailed more than revival preaching. It entailed other charismatic gifts such as healing. In schools and colleges, revival work was carried out by the Kenya Students Christian Fellowship. University ministry had regular missions to the whole university every three years. A network of hall prayers and Bible study sessions were planned to enhance Christian nurture to the university student communities. In high schools and junior colleges, Christian Unions were organized to facilitate spiritual nurture through prayers and bible studied in each school or college. Camps were organized in key regional schools to train students on holistic spiritual growth. Leaders of the revival were generally lay men and women who had little theological formation, but they worked tirelessly to involve schools and colleges. Many lay people who were involved in the revival later became prominent personalities and even founded churches and para-church organizations, for example Joe Kayo, founder of the Deliverance Church; David Kimani, founder of Bethel Mission and Reverend Margaret Wangari, presiding bishop of the Church of the Lord. The churches they founded are dotted all over the country. The crystallization of the revival movement into churches is attributed not only to the charismatic nature of the preacher and their powerful and relevant messages that transcended barriers of gender, class and age, but also to the problem mainline churches found themselves in after Kenya's independence in 1963. They were most concerned with managing churches and developing their social ministries in education and health, and lacked adequate personnel for pastoral work in schools and other educational institutions. These were years of transition, and Nigeria, as Ojo reports, had similar experience of revival.

From 1980s to the present, Pentecostal fellowships, ministries, and churches have proliferated, some founded by indigenous Kenyans and others founded by international evangelists from Europe, Asia, America, and other parts of Africa. Itinerant televangelists such as Reinhardt Bonke, Benny Hinn, Morris Cerulo, Joyce Meyer, Cecil Stewart, Emmanuel Eni, and Simon Iheancho have graced the Kenyan capital of Nairobi and other major towns. As Mugambi (2003:21) observes, these personalities preside "over personal enterprises not directly related to any specific denominations.... They claim to have spiritual gifts and charismatic powers of preaching and faith-healing." The emphasis in these campaigns has been a "spiritual renewal" and numerical expansion of Christianity.

As with some other countries in the third world, Kenya has experienced the consequences of years of misrule and ineptitude, declining economy, corruption, environmental degradation, and the impact of Structural Adjustment Programs between 1988 and 2002. Gifford avers that the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa has arisen in the context of economic decline, rising poverty, bad governance and international indifference. It is into this social-religious background that Nigerian missionaries from Pentecostals churches have come. However, contacts between Kenya and Nigerian Pentecostals predate the 1990s. Since the 1980s, they have collaborated in ministry in para-church association such as Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship and Women Aglow and shared platforms in crusades in both Nigeria and Kenya. As early as 1980, Bishop Margaret Wangari underwent a theological training course in Benin, Bendel State, Nigeria. While there, she was under the tutelage and guidance of the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa, founder of the Church of God Mission. Idahosa's influence was later to reach Kenya through the Winner's Chapel of David Oyedepo, Idahosa's former "spiritual child." This is one of the prominent

Nigerian charismatic churches in Kenya. Emanuel Eni's literature, particularly his testimony in delivered from the Powers of Darkness and his subsequent visit to Kenya in 1990, exposed Kenyans to the theology of power and deliverance. A number of people trace their disenchantment with mainline Christianity to the forceful evangelism and teachings delivered to these "anointed men of God."

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHARISMATIC PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN KENYA

The Pentecostals in Kenya consider themselves as God's end-time people who by God's grace are saved, sanctified and baptized in the Holy Spirit. They are people whose identity is profoundly shaped by an eschatological intensity and uttermost identification with the full Gospel of the New Testament.

It is not what Pentecostals in Kenya believe that makes them attractive but also their practices. Kenyan Pentecostals have five distinctive characteristics: spiritual centered on experiences, worship that is celebrative, practicality in the way Christianity is lived, impulse towards social criticism of convoluted values beliefs and practices that impoverish people's lives and systematically support oppressive structures and evil practices and power to generate the ideals of inclusive Christian community. Basically Pentecostalism in Kenya is a movement of protest and social change since it is also open to new social practices.

Pentecostals in Kenya have beliefs and practices which make them revolutionaries of faith. They are believers who identify themselves with the poor, the marginalized, and those who suffer. Cox (1993:29-34) maintains that Pentecostalism is a movement with a solid set beliefs and diverse social movement with a profound sensitivity to the community. From a communication standpoint, Pentecostalism is people centered. That partially accounts for the successes of the Pentecostal messages in Kenya. This position does not ignore the Holy Spirit's work in Kenya but tries to offer a model of explaining Pentecostal growth in Kenya as well as pointing out issues that are relevant for the communication of the Pentecostal message in the 21st Century.

4. THEOLOGY OF THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT IN CHARISMATIC PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

Glossolalia in Pentecostal churches is based on the belief that the Holy Spirit's presence furnishes spiritual gifts to the believers in the course of the worship service. There are different endowments conferred on Christians. This probably means some of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit, which, being given to the believers might tend greatly to establish their faith in the Gospel of Christ. It is very likely that such gifts were only conferred by means of apostles. The presence of Paul for instance in the apostolic church made the Christians associate his presence with the Holy Spirit. In charismatic Pentecostalism, the presence of a clergy takes the example of Apostle Paul in the New Testament. This mostly makes the preachers in Pentecostal services command speaking in tongues.

Talents that Christ entrusts the church represent the gifts and blessings imparted by the Holy Spirit. "To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophesy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues; but all these that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will." 1 Cor. 12:8-11. All people do not receive the same gifts, but to every servant of Christ's church some gift of the Spirit is promised.

Before He left His disciples, Christ breathed on them, and saith unto them, receive ye the Holy Ghost... John 20:22. Again He said, Behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you Luke 24:49. But not until after the ascension was the gift received in its fullness. Not until through faith and prayer the disciples had surrendered themselves fully for His working was the outpouring of the Spirit received. The in a special sense the goods of heaven were committed to the followers of Christ. When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men Ephesians 4:8. "Unto every one of us is given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ," the Spirit "dividing to every man severally as He will." Eph 4:7; 1 Cor. 12:11. The gifts are already ours in Christ, but their actual possession depends upon our reception of the Spirit of God.

Pentecostals claim that the promise of the Spirit is not appreciated as it should be. The preachers argue that its fulfillment is not fully realized. It is the absence of the Spirit that makes the gospel ministry so powerless. Learning, talents, eloquence, every natural or acquired endowment, may be possessed but without the presence of the Holy Spirit, no heart will be touched, no sinner be won to Christ. On the other hand, if they are connected with Christ, if the gifts of the Spirit are theirs, the poorest and most ignorant of His disciples will have a power that will tell upon hearts. God makes them the channel for the outworking of the highest influence in the universe.

The special gifts of the Spirit are not the only talents to be used in the church and society. It includes all gifts and endowments, whether original or acquired, natural or spiritual. All are to be employed in Christ's service. In becoming Christ's disciples, Pentecostals posit that members must surrender themselves to Christ with all that they have. This makes giving offerings and testimonies the climax of the worship service in Pentecostal churches.

5. NATURE AND ROLE OF TESTIMONIES IN PENTECOSTALISM

Testimonies are shared stories of how God has acted in the life of an individual. Taylor (1995:693) defines testimonies as declarations, faith profession or public agreement and fundamentally evidences given to God's actions. Testimonies involve proclamations with words, works and sufferings for the course of God.

In Kenyan Pentecostal churches, testimonies have the most popular way of communicating to others how one becomes saved. Pentecostal churches in Kenya are fellowships where testimonies are given constantly in order to develop virtues, expectancy, attitudes and experiences of those testifying. Giving testimonies in the congregation involves praxis of theological reflection. In these reflections, narratives produce great uniformity and contextual relevance. McCall (1998:43) adds that testimonies of individual salvation, sanctification and baptism of the Holy Spirit become the norm in Pentecostal worship. In Kenya's Pentecostalism, testimonies become a vehicle of women's participation in ministry. This perhaps explains why in Kenyan Pentecostalism women constitute about 60% of the total Pentecostal membership.

Kenyan Pentecostals know about the transformation power in telling stories about what God has done and will do. Telling those stories involves the experiential nature of narrative.

Most songs in Pentecostal churches in Kenya sung in either English, Kiswahili or in local languages are in for giving testimonies. The songs are usually simple, short and with repetitive lines/stanzas. This makes the worshipers learn the songs with ease and participate in the church service. Further, they make people to recall experiences that can be testified.

Giving of testimonies in Pentecostal churches is taken to be a core value because it is believed to be the best way one expresses what God has done to an individual. Pentecostals take testimonies as the whole revelation of God, testifying to humanity what to believe, do and hope. Testimonies find basis on the two stone tables of the law were a visible 'testimony' or witness of God's covenant with His people; and hence the Ark of the Covenant was called sometimes the testimony, or the ark of the testimony (Exodus 25:22; 34:29). In this place God chose to give the most especial manifestations of himself, the Divine glory was to be seen and here Moses was to come in order to consult Jehovah, relative to the management of the people. This is a doctrine most implicitly taught by the apostles as the absolute necessity of having the heart made a habitation of God through the Spirit. It is also strongly and frequently advocated for in the New Testament. The Pentecostals as well embraced this doctrine because it is biblical though as Lawless (1983) says it is not given adequate interpretation to the members especially on the nature of testimonies to be given in church. He says that some of the testimonies given in churches are not meant to encourage the faith others believers especially when some people use them to show off.

6. WOMEN IN CHARISMATIC PENTECOSTALISM

Pentecostal churches are charismatic in nature. Giving testimonies, singing and dancing are major characteristic. Lawless (1983) observes that in Southern India, Christianity agitates for equality of male and female before God. This makes both men and women participate in Pentecostal

churches in India. In India's Pentecostal churches women expect to have chances of expressing their belief in God more than the indigenous Indian religions which are highly patriarchal similar to Africa. This makes Lawless to believe that women in Indian Pentecostal churches outnumber their male counterparts. He says, "...they are more likely to go into trance, fall down, speak in tongues, and go forward for special healing..." Women in Kenyan Pentecostal churches are more than men in membership. They mostly give testimonies, lead in praise and worship and perform other ecclesiastical duties though similar to missionary churches some duties are reserved for men.

Women find Pentecostal churches as avenues of bottling out their stress through sharing out in form of giving testimonies. Anderson (1999) says that giving testimonies is therapeutic because it makes someone to get relieved though "saying it out". In some cases women give testimonies amid sobs a sign of how much they are wounded within. This helps them at times to get relieved though this makes their men counterparts to view them as weak and unable to contain their emotions.

Cox (1993:45) states that authority makes men shy from giving of testimonies in church than their female counterparts. He adds that male authority and control in Pentecostal church has resulted to male dominance over women therefore denying women chances of participating fully in matters of faith and practice. In Kenya, the male dominance in some Pentecostal churches makes members to rely on male pastors. Men maintain positions of authority in Pentecostal churches of basis of biblical hierarchy which places women below men. Traditional and sex linked roles in Pentecostalism dictate behavior models and support only those performances that maintain and perpetuate male dominance.

7. CONCLUSION

Charismatic Pentecostal churches have attracted large numbers of Christians in Kenya as in the rest of Africa. Mainline churches have lost their members to charismatic Pentecostal churches through of their rigid traditions, beliefs and practices which limit worshipers some levels of participation in church. In the paper it is established that charismatic Pentecostal churches offer worshipers chances of expressing their faith through giving testimonies, speaking in tongues, singing praises to God and dancing for the Lord among others. Belief in the power of the Holy Spirit takes a center stage in charismatic Pentecostalism. It is believed that the Holy Spirit comes whenever invoked by the worshipers and the clergy to make the poor become rich, the sick become whole, and the rich become richer as well as providing protection to the people. However, in the paper, it has been noted that some people in charismatic Pentecostal churches use the church for personal gain. The clergy are accused of taking advantage of their perceived representation of God to acquire money and other favours from the worshipers. This causes the public to distrust some charismatic Pentecostal preachers although that has not made people to stop associating themselves with Pentecostalism.

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