

# Innovation or Competition? A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Divine Healing Practices of Pentecostal Africans in Africa and the Diaspora

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## Abstract

This article examines current practices of divine healing of Pentecostal Africans. It provides insights into current developments by using the explanatory concepts of innovation, competition, and agency. The article draws on data obtained through an interdisciplinary, transnational, and multisite investigation of eight Pentecostal churches in Kampala, Nairobi, Cape Town, and London. Methods used included ethnographic observation, visual ethnography, and semistructured interviews. Pentecostal Africans in Africa and the diaspora, this article argues, are simultaneously reenacting centuries-old faith-informed healing practices and creatively reinventing aspects of these practices to assert their relevance in a postmodern world characterized by religious plurality, competition, and secularism.

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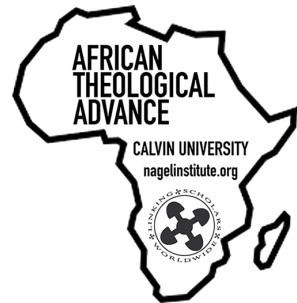
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**Keywords**

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Pentecostal history in Africa, argues Kalu, is “characterized by variety, flexibility and an expanding continuum of adaptive social inventions.”<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, African Pentecostalism appropriates the Christian gospel within a framework of revivalism and inculturation.<sup>2</sup> This revivalism does not follow an imperialist model but is rooted within local African ontologies and employs the creative processes of appropriation and contextualization, through which it has been rendered meaningful and relevant to Africans. The ability of Pentecostalism to insert itself into the worldview and sensibilities of Africans, Wariboko argues, has made it “the spiritual and cultural switching node and heart of African Christianity.” Wariboko identifies a paradox, however, in noting that African Pentecostals “draw heavily from Africa’s religious, cultural, and social past” while simultaneously rejecting many aspects of African culture.<sup>3</sup> Wariboko’s point is relevant to some of the arguments in this article.

As the world has metamorphosed into a “global village,” African Christians—especially Pentecostals—have taken their faith to other regions and created vibrant and influential African Christian diasporas. Analysts argue that Pentecostalism’s ability to travel and adapt is one of its greatest attributes and a major explanation for its rapid global spread.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging that Pentecostal beliefs and activism have impacted significantly the settlement and acculturation of African Christians and immigrants in various Western countries, we argue for a critical assessment of the complexities and intricacies of adopting and adapting African Pentecostal ideas in secular and sometimes hostile immigration contexts. Taking divine healing as a key doctrine, we explore the innovative practices of Pentecostal Africans in London regarding health and healing rituals and the interpretation and appropriation of relevant Bible texts. We also consider the extent to which these practices are innovatively adopted and adapted by selected Pentecostal groups in Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa. We also critically assess the extent to which the adoption and adaptation of specific Pentecostal orthodoxies in a diaspora context both enrich and complicate epistemological analysis of African-led Pentecostalism.

**Divine healing among Pentecostals**

Healing in Pentecostal churches is premised on Bible passages that convey God’s direct intervention to rescue faithful worshipers from physical and emotional difficulties. In the 1900s Pentecostalism came into the African religious arena with healing as a significant marker of spirituality.<sup>5</sup> The biblical ideals on healing support an African epistemological perception of disease and infirmities that holds that all diseases have spiritual causes associated with demonic attacks, ancestral curses, and witchcraft.<sup>6</sup> This convergence led

African Pentecostal churches to give “open invitation to the Africans to bring their fears and anxieties about witches, sorcerers, bad luck, poverty, illness and all kinds of misfortune to the church leadership.”<sup>7</sup> This position was relevant because African Pentecostal churches “proclaimed a message of deliverance from sickness and from the oppression of evil spirits, and the message of receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, which enabled people to survive in a predominantly hostile traditional spiritual world.”<sup>8</sup> Such an embedded notion of witchcraft in Pentecostal hermeneutic and divine healing appears to have propelled Pentecostal churches into prominence, given that the search for divine healing also encompasses the search for protection and security.<sup>9</sup> Following Wariboko’s critique of Pentecostals’ paradoxical rejection of African ontologies,<sup>10</sup> yet drawing from them to exercise deliverance, we argue that such a didactic stance is an implicit recognition of the serious competition that arises between Pentecostalism and African spiritual healing practices if the latter is not discouraged as evil.

## Methodology

The data forming the basis of this article were derived from a study of six selected Pentecostal churches in Cape Town, Kampala, Nairobi, and London. Including African Pentecostals in London has no doubt enriched this analysis because “the study of diasporas and their modes of adaptation can give us insights into general patterns of religious transformation.” By examining the transformation and creative remaking of divine healing practices among African Pentecostals in London, this study can verify that African transnational religion is “a faith which is largely influenced by context.”<sup>11</sup> The churches selected for the study self-identify as Pentecostals, and they preach and practice divine healing in its various permutations. The investigation of the churches was enriched by methodological triangulation that drew insights from religious studies in anthropology and sociology.

In Kampala and Nairobi the empirical investigation focused respectively on Revival Church and Pentecostal Church Universal (PCU). Seven interviews that included two pastors and five members were conducted in these two churches. The data from Ugandan churches were gathered by means of ethnographic observation. The researcher and his assistants attended church services, daytime healing sessions, and overnight prayer sessions where deliverance was performed.

In Cape Town empirical data gathering focused on the Heaven on Earth International Ministries (HEIM) and Omega Fire Ministries (OFM). Seventeen people were interviewed, including the pastors of both churches, elders or ministers, and members. In addition to traditional ethnographic methods, the Cape Town research relied heavily on visual material. The researcher used images to construct stories and conducted interviews around photos taken by the researcher and by the informants. Using informants’ photos was insightful, for it provided an immediate level of familiarity and cooperation and shifted the focus from the researcher to the participants. Most significantly, the visual analysis gave the informants the authority of an interpreter, enabling them to interpret their worlds from multiple vantage points that they had not previously considered or articulated.

In the United Kingdom, data were generated through interviews with officials and members of the Central Harvest Church (CHC) and the Gospel Harvest Church (GHC), located respectively in Beckton, in East London, and in Stratham, in South London. Both churches are formed and led by immigrants from Ghana. The leaders of the two churches are academics. Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted with officials and members of the two churches, including the two pastors and their wives. There were five male interviewees and seven females. Ethnographic observation of church services was also conducted.

## **Innovations in healing practices in Kampala, Nairobi, Cape Town, and London**

Besides the conceptual tools of competition and agency, innovation best explains the various practices of healing that this research reports. As defined by Bainbridge, innovation is “a new religious culture” that spreads to other people through various processes such as diffusion, migration, missionary movements, and conversion.<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson and Althouse reinforce the importance of innovation, arguing that it is a highly insightful concept for understanding Pentecostalism as a new religious culture that has spread across North America and throughout the world.<sup>13</sup> Our studies discuss practices of divine healing under the rubric of innovation, with each church seeking to brand and rebrand itself in ways that appeal to those who constantly seek novel forms of worship that speak to their needs and desires.

Empirical evidence from Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and the UK attests to innovative practices of African Pentecostals who practice healing. For example, while fire is an attribute of Pentecostal healing theology, its use in healing and deliverance sessions in the PCU church in Kenya is especially dramatic. At PCU, deliverance also takes place at the home of the bishop at the Kibera slum, as described here by Kuloba Wabyanga:

In one of the deliverance rituals done at the bishop’s home in Kibera slum, which the researcher witnessed, the patient had been requested to bring some measures/portions of meat, charcoal, and salt. She was asked to light the charcoal stove by herself, which she quickly did. The meat was chopped in small pieces and was mixed with salt and other spices. The patient was asked to kneel beside the fire she had lit. Her head was covered with a white piece of cloth. The bishop read from 1 Kings 18, verses 23, 33, and 36–37, and he instructed that when he read verse 33, she should get the cut pieces of meat and throw them in the fire. Verse 33 was read repeatedly until all the meat pieces were on fire. The bishop continued with the deliverance prayer as the fat burned and smoke filled the room. In that prayer mood, the bishop read a chapter in Psalms. This was done repeatedly about seven times. The patient was then asked to pray on her own while holding an exercise book in which she had been instructed to write all her problems.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of PCU, the aspect of fire and burning meat simulated African sacrificial rituals. Fire and smoke carry significant importance in African philosophies.<sup>15</sup> Among the Bantu people of East Africa, fire in a religious sense symbolizes the presence of

spirits. Fire also calls to mind the biblical story of the prophets of Baal and the prophet Elijah in a contest to see which God will answer or manifest himself in fire (1 Kgs. 18:24). Baal failed to show himself, and only Elijah's God did. In the context of this study, this healing innovation shares similar traits with theological materials of African spirituality and biblical texts, indicating an indigenized version of Christian faith.<sup>16</sup>

Studies on the use of salt in religious and cultural practices of African traditions abound.<sup>17</sup> In the biblical tradition, salt is commanded to be part of ritual sacrifices (Lev. 2:13 and Ezek. 43:24, also Exod. 30:35 and Ezra 6:9). This sacrificial use of salt underlies the PCU use of salt in healing and deliverance ceremonies, which gives PCU leadership a competitive edge not only against other Christian churches but more so against traditional healers, whose activities and services are common in the Kibera slums. The innovation in PCU supports the ideology that, on one hand, denigrates traditional healers, whose activities are thought to be satanic, and, on the other, offers a familiar template through which an African actively participates in the process of his or her deliverance and healing. Healing in PCU exemplifies the creative indigenization of Pentecostalism and its conforming to African cosmology.

The use of the Eucharist for healing fulfills a similar function among African Pentecostals in Cape Town, as the following account demonstrates. At HEIM a communion service takes place every three months. For Pentecostals, the observance of communion draws from mainline churches like Catholics and Anglicans. However, Pentecostals have adapted and innovatively reinvented the ritual to include divine healing. A woman identified as Kelly gave the following testimony:

The communion service is very important, especially if you have faith in the power of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. . . . I suffered for years from extended monthly periods, which medicines had failed to treat. But when I came to this church and participated in a communion service, . . . that was the last time I had an irregular period and terrible stomach cramps. When I took bread and wine after a prayer, I felt my body becoming light, as if I had just lost weight. This is what I mean by the power of healing in the body and blood of Jesus. I experienced it.<sup>18</sup>

This communion service was creatively called a healing encounter with the body and blood of Christ. Interestingly, the prayers before the sharing of the communion were taken verbatim from the Catholic and Anglican eucharistic prayers. Drawing on existing religious rituals for healing efficacy is clearly an innovative approach at HEIM that distinguishes it from other churches in South Africa's competitive religious landscape.

## **Believer self-agency among African Pentecostals in London and Cape Town**

While the use of material objects remains prominent in Pentecostal healing, some churches are deliberately moving toward a word-based impartation of knowledge that empowers individual Christians to heal themselves. "Self-healing" refers to Christians

applying a word of knowledge to their own lives to attain healing without the intervention of the pastor. Such teaching privileges the agency of migrants or of any individual Christians with the ability to effect positive changes in their own lives. Pentecostals base the power to self-heal in the scriptural passage of God having created man in his own image (Gen. 1:26–27) and in the teaching that man is an “heir” of God (Rom. 8:16–17). Such passages point to the power that God has vested in human beings, including the ability to self-heal. They also premise their healing practice on the atoning death of Jesus, as well as on one’s faith, prayer, and a mastery of the Bible to know which Scriptures to draw on to accomplish healing. The agency of the Christian believer is becoming an important factor in procuring self-healing. In no other place has the concept of self-healing been more propagated than among Pentecostal Africans in London, as the following account demonstrates.

The concept of Christian agency is one that the pastor of CHC in London has frequently appropriated to instill in members the confidence that they can be their own conduit of divine healing if they rely on the provision of the ransom provided by Jesus Christ. In his words: “I normally tell them to stay where they are and pray for themselves, as I will also be praying with them from the pulpit. But my focus now is to build their faith to the point where, when someone comes to the church and needs divine healing, they will have faith to help the person.”<sup>19</sup>

A similar interview, by a member of GHC, also recounted how he exercised agency by taking charge of his own healing: “I think six years ago I was feeling a burning sensation in my leg, and I didn’t know what to treat it with. All the tests came back negative. So one day at a prayer meeting I just believed that ‘Today I must be healed!’ We were doing the communion service, and I said, ‘Any burning sensation in my body must be healed!’ I took the anointing oil, and I didn’t feel anything at that moment, no feeling that I was healed. But the following morning I didn’t feel the pain anymore—and haven’t since!”<sup>20</sup>

Another member of GHC, a female, makes the point persuasively:

Pastors do not answer prayers; they are there to lead us, to give us the Word of God. Act between you and God. We don’t come to church and pray to the pastor. At the end of the day when we go home, the pastor doesn’t know what we do behind closed doors, but you know what you’ve done. We’ve all got strengths and weaknesses. So when you cry, “Abba, Father,” it should be between you and God. With a Catholic faith you have a confession time, and you’re going to be open to the Father [priest] about everything, and then you go away. And then when you go to a Methodist [church], they don’t do confession time. When it comes to charismatics, it is between you and God. You can shout, you can scream, you can just let go, you know. It all goes back to faith and how we worship God.<sup>21</sup>

Laying on of hands is considered the hallmark of Pentecostal healing.<sup>22</sup> But in a seemingly hostile environment where praying for sick people in such a manner is outlawed, Pentecostals have developed the art of self-healing.

As an innovative way to encourage Christians to develop the habit of self-healing, the pastor at HEIM creates acronyms as a reminder to practice healing. For instance,

to get healing, Christians must verify the “shape” of their faith,<sup>23</sup> examining the following five areas.

S—Spirituality: What are you feeding your spirit with?

H—Heart: How ready is your heart to get healing?

A—Ability, gifts: Every Christian has a gift; to what extent have you discovered your gift?

P—Power: What power under your control could you use to invoke God to heal?

E—Experience: How do you experience God in your life?

## Innovative divine healing

In the increasingly secular and even antifaith environment in Great Britain, Pentecostal Africans face challenges in practicing divine healing outside of the privacy of their homes. In this struggle, many have found innovative ways to practice their beliefs and simultaneously to resist and respect the secular laws of the larger society.

The experience of a female interviewee, a member of CHC who works as a nurse in a government-funded hospital, illustrates this innovation. The nurse shared her experience of carving out a moment in which she could practice her faith in this environment:

I have been in that hospital for about eleven years, but only one patient ever asked me to pray for her. In this country, their law is so different, if you are doing something that will affect the next person, they can charge you. She had her Bible, and she called me and said, “Sister, are you a Christian? Can you pray for me before I go into the surgery?” We drew the curtains [around her bed] and prayed. I prayed for her and told her, “The Lord will take you in and bring you back.” Yeah, he did. She was discharged.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

In these findings, African Pentecostalism reflects a nuanced practice of divine healing. It stems in large part from the mixture of African traditional beliefs about sickness and health with biblical doctrines. Although divine healing and deliverance give Pentecostalism its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other churches, some Pentecostals have sought to distinguish their church and carve a niche for themselves through their approach to divine healing. Moving beyond “classic” forms of healing such as laying on of hands or a heavy reliance on material objects, churches such as OFM and HEIM in South Africa and CHC and GHC in the United Kingdom are adopting innovative forms of healing that privilege self-healing, which challenges Christians to carry out healing on themselves. This flexibility and adaptability underscore how Pentecostals contextualize their teaching to fit local and changing contexts. Innovativeness and adaptableness have no doubt enabled Pentecostal Africans to carve out a space to practice divine healing in the secular and largely antifaith environment in the United Kingdom. This remaking of divine healing in a precarious context of immigration provides useful insights into the transformation of Pentecostalism generally but especially in the diaspora.

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20. Interview with Maria, London, July 21, 2019.
21. Interview with Jane, London, July 21, 2019.
22. Williams, *Spirit Cure*.



23. This acronym was given during a sermon at OFM on May 12, 2019. This acronym is also popularly used by US pastor Rick Warren (with *S* = “Spiritual gifts” and *P* = “Personality”), pastor of Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, CA, in his best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, with many reprints), see Days 30–31. See also Erik Rees, *S.H.A.P.E.: Finding and Fulfilling Your Unique Purpose for Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).
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(Left to right) Robert Kuloba Wabyanga, Henrietta Nyamnjoh, Abel Ugba.

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