No Longer the Same:
Pentecostal Mission in Cities of Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Several studies suggest the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in Africa is largely aided by its shared view of the Spirit-world with the typical traditional African worldview. Consequently, African Pentecostalism is known to provide both continuity and discontinuity with the typical traditional African beliefs, a factor that is believed to facilitate Pentecostal contextualization. However, with a new youth culture in cities of sub-Saharan Africa, this epistemological connection is threatened. Using a case study in Dar es Salaam, this article evaluates missiological implications of the changing culture in cities of sub-Saharan Africa and proposes alternative strategies for contextual engagement in Pentecostal mission.

Key Words: African Pentecostalism, contextualization, Dar es Salaam, the Ocean, urban youth

Introduction

The Pentecostal movement has experienced significant growth in Africa, and its influence has penetrated all forms of Christianity in the continent (Anderson 2018, 26; Sallu 2021, 175–176). Among other factors, this growth is a result of the movement's contextual flexibility and its consequent ability to address the needs of African people (Anderson 2017, 35). In addition, there is a resemblance between Pentecostal spirituality and the typical traditional African experience of the spirit world (Asamoah-Gyadu 2006, 6). This similarity facilitates creation of a contextual theology that is truly African, making Pentecostalism relevant in people's daily life (Nkurunziza 2013, 60–68).

While Pentecostalism still enjoys its status, some recent cultural and demographic changes in Africa threaten its strength. Various studies, for example, show that a new youth culture is growing in Africa, one that diverges from traditional African cultures and is more aligned with Western cultures (Sallu 2021, 136–152). As a result, the contextualized theology in African Pentecostalism does not make sense to some modern youths, causing them to lose connection with churches in their traditional forms. Youth forms most of the African population, their number continues to grow, they lead in a movement towards urban life, and they are generally more exposed to westernization forces (Sallu 2021, 117–120). Consequently, this article argues for the need of alternative strategies to reach youth in African cities. In making this argument, the article reviews factors that facilitate contextualization in African Pentecostalism, analyzes cultural changes in the continent, shows how these changes impact traditional Pentecostal outreach methods, and—as a case study—evaluates strategies used by the Ocean International Community Church (henceforth "the Ocean") in reaching modern youth in Dar es Salaam.

The Gospel in African Pentecostalism

In its traditional form, the typical worldview of sub-Saharan Africa sees no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual world and is dominated by ancestral worship. Also, this worldview has a strong belief that evil spirits interfere with human life and can cause misfortunes. Consequently, the power of spiritual forces dominates people's thinking and drives most of their behaviors. Additionally, traditional African communities "are, to a large extent, health-orientated communities and in their traditional religions, rituals for healing and protection are prominent" (Nkurunziza 2013, 69). Traditional Africans expect their priests and

charismatic leaders to be mediators of supernatural power and, consequently, administer healing and give prophecy. These two activities are believed to be the most important functions of priests/charismatic leaders in the typical traditional African worldview (Asamoah-Gyadu 2012, 44). For this reason, traditional African communities easily associate with Pentecostal healing practice and prophetic ministries that are common in African Pentecostalism.

With its contextual flexibility, Pentecostalism meets the above needs of traditional Africans as it maintains both continuity and discontinuity with the traditional African sensibilities of the spirit world. In continuity with the typical traditional African sensibilities of the spirit world, Pentecostalism affirms traditional Africans' belief about the reality of the spirit world, including the existence of ancestors' spirits and the work of evil forces. However, unlike traditional African beliefs and religious practices, Pentecostalism offers biblical solutions for spiritual problems (Sallu 2021, 188–91). In the process, a contextualized theology has emerged in African Pentecostalism that has a heightened focus on deliverance ministry characterized by healing and exorcism. In addition, a theology of empowerment has arisen which, among other implications, results in the propagation of the prosperity gospel. In both cases, the power of the gospel is presented to defeat evil forces that bring diseases and hinder material prosperity.

The above contextualized theology has attracted many Africans into the Pentecostal movement. With this theology, healing crusades, street evangelism, and deliverance services became popular strategies for reaching masses with the gospel of Christ. However, cultural and demographic changes described in this article threaten the epistemological connection between Africans and African Pentecostalism.

A Changed Cultural Environment

There is in modern days "a burgeoning recognition among Christians around the globe that in order for the Christian message to be meaningful to people it must come to them in language and categories that make sense within their particular culture and life situation. It must be contextualized" (Flemming 2005, 13). While in Africa such a recognition has resulted in the contextualization of the gospel in African cultures, the problem is that culture in any local context is never static. For this reason, a fresh contextualization is needed because cultural changes in sub-Saharan Africa have given rise to a distinct youth subculture. A related problem is that cultural changes are normally not so obvious when they occur within a geographical boarder. As a result, the new youth culture in sub-Saharan Africa is overlooked by many adults and, in the context of the church, its values that differ from those of traditional cultures are generally viewed by older generations as sinful practices (Sallu 2021, 329).

While some people still view Africa in its traditional cultural stance, several recent studies by anthropologists, historiographers, sociologists, development economists, architects, and music and art artistes indicate significant dominance of Western cultural values in cities of sub-Saharan Africa (Sallu 2021). Cultural changes in these cities, according to most studies, are irreversible and progressive, and they are more evident among youth. With these changes, the gospel as contextualized in African Pentecostalism does not provide all the answers to youth's questions and issues, it does not cope with new social norms, and it does not meet all needs of modern youth in cities of sub-Saharan Africa. This situation reflects the observation that "church leaders who were saved from animistic backgrounds find that the same truths of scripture that changed their worldview have little impact on their grandchildren who are tuning into MTV via satellite TV" (Ott et al. 2013, 268).

A recent region-wide survey in sub-Saharan Africa by the Pew Research Center reveals a significant shift away from traditional African beliefs and religious practices. Among other findings, the survey indicates the region has a low percentage of people who believe in the

protective power of sacrifices to spirits and ancestors. In Rwanda, for instance, the survey shows that only 5% of the general population holds this belief (Pew Research Center 2010, 4). This means 95% of the general population in Rwanda does not believe in the protective power of ancestors and other spirits and, consequently, does not see the necessity of making sacrifices to ancestral spirits. Also, in ten out of the 19 countries surveyed, only 27% or less of the general population believe in the protective power of sacrifices to spirits and ancestors (Pew Research Center 2010, 4). This means 73% or more of these countries' general populations do not believe in the protective power of spirits and ancestors. This situation reflects a substantial shift from one of the key beliefs and religious practices in typical traditional African cultures.

In addition to the above analysis, the Pew Research Center's survey analyzes the current level of adherence to traditional African religions by looking at seven common beliefs in these religions (the protective power of certain spiritual people, the power of juju and other sacred objects, "the evil eye," witchcraft, evil spirits, the protective power of sacrificial offerings to ancestors, and reincarnation), and four religious practices in traditional African religions (visiting traditional healers, owning sacred objects, participating in ceremonies to honor ancestors, and participating in traditional puberty rituals). The survey puts all 11 of these indicators in a single scale to obtain a picture of the level of persistence of the typical traditional African worldview (Pew Research Center 2010, 34).

Like in the case of traditional African beliefs, cultural analysis using the above single scale indicates a substantial shift from the typical traditional African worldview. For example, the analysis shows that only 3% of the Rwanda population is involved in traditional African practices, and the median country in the study, DR Congo, has 25% of its general population involved in these practices (Pew Research Center 2010, 34). This means 97% of the general population in Rwanda and 75% of the general population in the median country do not subscribe to the typical traditional African worldview.

Cultural Environment in Dar es Salaam

Observations of the Pew Research Centre echo the cultural situation in Dar es Salaam. Dar es Salaam represents modern reformulation of the Swahili city (Brennan and Burton 2007, 13). Although the city still has a notable influence of Swahili culture, it is highly westernized and experienced multiculturalism from the early days of its existence (Sallu 2021, 227–233). The city lacks a dominant founding culture and saw an influx of people from different tribes and countries early in its life (Brennan and Burton 2007, 13–35). This situation gave room to a rapid westernization at the expense of African cultural values (Sallu 2021, 233–234). Because of this cultural setting, and due to various developments in the post-colonial Tanganyika, Western cultural values have become dominant in the city, especially among youth and in an area that is predominantly inhabited by expatriates (Sallu 2021, 226–277). In this cultural environment, Tanzania Assemblies of God (TAG) established the Ocean to serve the expatriate community. As a result, the Ocean was designed to accommodate Western cultural values and was allowed to organize itself differently from other TAG churches. As the church developed, this cultural and organizational freedom attracted many Tanzanian youths to the Ocean (Sallu 2021, 242).

The Ocean was established by a U.S.-American missionary, but it is currently under the leadership of young Tanzanian pastors. These pastors and four other leaders form what the church calls an Executive Leadership Team (ELT) which, among other things, is responsible for establishing and executing the church's mission strategy. Before evaluating strategies that the Ocean employs to reach youth in the city, ELT's cultural orientation was measured in two ways. First, ELT's worldview was assessed using the aforementioned religious beliefs and

practices common in the typical traditional African worldview (Pew Research Center 2010, 34). In this regard, none of the seven leaders identified with any of the 11 religious beliefs and practices that characterize the typical traditional African worldview. In addition, none of them has met anyone with a first-hand experience of worshipping ancestors—and one of them even lacks any knowledge of the nature and role of ancestors (Sallu 2021, 249–252).

Second, leaders' values were assessed using 20 values that differentiate between Western and African cultures (O'Donovan 2000, 21). In this assessment, all leaders were noted to have far more Western values than African values (Sallu 2021, 254). Further, only one Western value, little interest in the spirit world, was not associated with any leader and, conversely, only one African value, much interest in the spirit world, was linked to almost all leaders. One should, however, note that this interest may just be a result of leaders' Pentecostal belief rather than their alignment to African cultures. All Pentecostals, whether in Africa or elsewhere, are known for taking the spirit world seriously.

Looking at results of the above two measures, one realizes that the Ocean leaders' Western cultural orientation is not superficial, as it manifests at both the worldview and value levels.

In addition to their Western cultural orientation, leaders suggest most youth in Dar es Salaam are westernized, and they believe that Western cultures dominate at the Ocean and at Oysterbay, an area where the Ocean is located. Leaders further believe that Swahili culture is only visible in the city's outskirts and in a few predominantly Muslim areas. As for the reason for their own Western cultural orientation, all leaders say they were born and raised in cities with some of them having little or no interaction with rural Tanzania. Furthermore, some leaders point to the urban life and education as factors contributing to the westernization of youth in the city, including themselves, and others attribute their own Western worldview to a length stay in Western countries (Sallu 2021, 255–265). These observations resemble findings of other studies elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Sallu 2021, 113–136).

The Ocean's Outreach Strategy

As they observe cultural changes in Dar es Salaam, the Ocean leaders believe the usual felt needs among traditional Africans—for power, healing, protection, and deliverance—are not a priority among youth in the city. Instead, the leaders see the need for acceptance and a sense of belonging to be the most pressing needs among modern youth in Dar es Salaam. Western cultural values also mean youth's social norms are different. For example, all leaders prefer individual identity and lifestyle as opposed to communal identity and lifestyle, they believe time consciousness is now the norm of life for most people in the city, they see youth in general are more likely to use western medicine as opposed to visiting traditional healers, and they believe most people in the city live individualistic lifestyle. All these changes adversely affect effectiveness of some traditional Pentecostal outreach methods. In other words, such methods as healing campaigns, gospel crusades, deliverance camps, and street evangelism are not as effective in reaching youth in the city as they used to be a few decades ago (Sallu 2021, 248–273).

From the beginning, the Ocean employed outreach methods that are not typical in traditional Pentecostal churches, and it holds all services using English. Outreach at the Ocean is geared toward reaching people in their ordinary lives rather than through organized evangelistic campaigns. When the church holds events, they are structured around people's social interests. For example, every December the church presents a theatre production known as "Christmas Spectacular," which is designed to create awareness of the church among city residents and to provide an opportunity for witnessing at the end of the show. Similarly, the church holds several "LoveDar" events, which are designed to spread the love of Christ while

creating awareness of the church and providing an opportunity for one-to-one evangelism. When church members go to the streets they hold social events, such as barbeques in open spaces of famous hotels, and invite onlookers to join the party. These events give church members an opportunity to speak to people who join them, invite them to church, and witness to them as circumstances allow.

In recognition of the youth's need for unconditional acceptance and belonging, the Ocean has purposely created a welcoming environment at church, has put an emphasis on relationship building among its members, and encourages regular fellowship meetings with meals. For example, a program called "3Ps" (Praise, Prayer, and Pilau) is hailed for drawing youth into the church's life. The Lausanne Committee observes similar needs among global youth who, as the Committee reckons, need identity, unconditional acceptance, and unconditional love. As a strategy to address these needs, the Committee suggests "it is important to have time to build close relationships and time flexibility" and to develop "love for young people who are so desperately searching for somebody who really cares for them and accepts them as they are; and lots of food!" (Lausanne Movement 2004). For this reason, the Ocean's strategy is in line with the Committee's proposal.

The Ocean leaders believe that the welcoming environment has a major impact in bringing youth to the church. Among other factors, this environment allows youth freely to express their Western culture and create relationships among themselves. While youth build relationship within the church, they use their outside relationships to bring others into the church's life. This relational approach to outreach plays a major role in bringing youth to the Ocean. Once youth get connected into the church's life, the Ocean runs several discipleship programs to see them through various stages of spiritual growth. The Ocean puts a great deal of emphasis on training and discipleship. Because the welcoming environment draws many to the church, a heightened focus on discipleship ensures even casual visitors do eventually come to know Christ and accept him as their Lord and Savior. Core classical Pentecostal doctrines, such as baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues, are emphasized. Thus, some youths who may initially be skeptical of gifts of the Holy Spirit, healing, and speaking in tongues, eventually embrace and practice them (Sallu 2021, 289–316).

Reflection on The Ocean's Strategy

The first important step for an effective contextual engagement with modern youth in Africa is the realization that not all young Africans in Africa are culturally African—at least in a traditional sense. In this circumstance, thorough cultural research in any local context is necessary (Cassey 2020). TAG seems to have realized this necessity and afforded the Ocean freedom to be a church that is culturally relevant in the time and place it is located. With this cultural freedom, the Ocean has been able to organize itself differently, employ different cultural forms in its daily life, and create culturally relevant programs that attract westernized youth in the city. Churches with large networks should emulate this example and realize that not all churches within a network of churches must be culturally the same. This approach, among other traits, requires an understanding that there is no culture that is intrinsically bad or good.

It is widely accepted that languages are closely linked to cultures. Contrary to some missionaries' view that English is not appropriate for the contextualization of the gospel in cities of sub-Saharan Africa, the Ocean's experience shows the use of English in church services is one of the reasons that attract youth to the church (Sallu 2021, 313). The Ocean leaders observe a growing number of youths prefer to use English in both formal and informal settings. This preference is evident at the Ocean and its environs, and, among other realities, it

reflects cultural changes in the city (Sallu 2021, 262). The leaders' observation in this regard resonates with findings of other studies of African youth (Negash 2011; Plonski et al. 2013; Prempeh 2020). Furthermore, one study observes this preference even among youth who lack a good command of English language (Negash 2011). Since youth prefer the use of English, even though some of them lack English proficiency, English church services and targeted English courses can be effectively used to reach youth and engage them in the church life.

With today's emphasis on contextualization, missionaries have been skeptical of planting churches that appear to be clones of Western churches. Given cultural changes noted above, missionaries need to rethink their contextualization strategies. For example, the culture at the Ocean is observably Western, and everything at the church, including its architecture, is Western. While it might have been a mistake to plant clones of Western churches during the colonial period, conditions are no longer the same. Western-looking churches may be the type of church experience that some urban youths are looking for. Also, as has been the case with one Ocean leader who comes from a Muslim background, this cultural experience, together with a relational outreach approach, may prove useful in reaching Muslim youth in African cities. Further, through its LoveDar events, the Ocean conveys the gospel to different groups of people in the city. This particularized approach is an aspect of its mission that the Ocean and other Pentecostal churches may need to employ more.

Conclusion

The cultural context of sub-Saharan Africa has significantly changed from its pre-colonial and pre-Christian milieu. As such, sub-Saharan Africa is no longer uniformly traditional, and Western cultural influence is strong, especially among urban youth. With this cultural transition, not all young Africans in Africa are culturally African. As youth are increasingly becoming culturally Western, the advantage that Pentecostalism has in Africa is threatened because it loses the shared view of the spirit world it had with African cultures. Modern youth, as argued in this article, no longer possess most of the felt needs in traditional Africa that gave Pentecostalism its widespread connection and appeal. As demonstrated by the Ocean, the first important step for an effective contextual engagement with urban youth is an appreciation of their new culture and creation of an environment, church programs, and a leadership style that relate to their culture and address their most felt needs—to belong and experience unconditional acceptance.

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