

Patriarchy reinvented? ‘Spiritual parenting’ within African Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe



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How do we explain the emergence of the ‘spiritual parenting’ concept within African Pentecostal churches especially in urban Zimbabwe? From ethnographic studies conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe, these seem to usurp the traditional roles associated with mother, father, or Auntie within the household of counselling, instructing, protecting, guiding and other functions associated with parenthood. This study explains the emergence of spiritual parenting as a development plausibly explainable through social variables such as (1) the disintegration of traditional patriarchal values because of growing urbanisation and (2) socio-economic insecurities that seem to produce alternative kinship ties. Using a constructive postmodern approach, the concept of spiritual parenting may be understood as providing alternative ‘fatherhood’ spaces, thus implicitly reinventing traditional hegemonic models under the pretext of Christian spiritualities.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Using social scientific approaches, the study explains the emergence of particular spiritualities in modern African Christianity, viewing such spiritualities as influenced by particular explanatory social variables. It argues that new spiritualities and practices within African Pentecostalism may be plausibly explained *vis-à-vis* from particular cultural realities.

Introduction

A new phenomenon is rising within African Pentecostalism – the idea of ‘spiritual parenting’. How do we explain the proliferation of the practice of ‘spiritual parenting’ and its concomitant advantages and disadvantages mostly within urban Zimbabwe? The question is: What explanatory variables may explain such a development? As Abgu Kalu and Paul Gifford suggest, African Pentecostal church is a form of Christianity whose teaching includes African traditional religion and African Indigenous Churches (AICs) teachings and worldviews. Aspects such as prophecy, conferring of spiritual blessings, exorcism and healing characterise its public expression (Gifford 2015:38; Kalu 2003:84). Noticeable differences such as conferring blessing, exorcism and healing distinguish it from its predecessor – classical Pentecostalism. Because African Pentecostism incorporates African worldview, it is plausible to describe the movements as Africa’s own religion (Gifford 2015:38; Kalu 2003:84). The dogmas within African Pentecostal religion appeal to both rural and urban dwellers. Mostly due to emphasis on faith and healing and blessing which relates to the material context of scarcity, it makes it even more appealing to urban dwellers (Dube 2016:1). What factors explain the rise of ‘spiritual parenting’ practice? I suggest that explanatory variables should be harnessed from particular social economic realities in urban Zimbabwe.

What is parenthood?

To give the topic a broader base, understanding of parenthood and function is necessary. In Zimbabwe like many other African contexts, parenthood has both a broad and narrow definition. From a broader definition, parenthood is summarised through the phrase that says ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. Basically, a child is not one household’s responsibility. As such, any elderly person is qualified to give moral instructions concerning any issue such as morally acceptable ways of talking, association, dressing or any general public behaviour. The people believe that an individual represents the community and family and that preservation of one’s clan or family dignity is important. The success of a child in life, or otherwise, is a shared village outcome. In fact, regardless of who the child belongs to, community elders encourage giving unsolicited advice freely for the community’s good.

The narrower and second understanding of parenthood is biological or bloodline. In Zimbabwe, a father is a very important household figure; he is the progenitor and a spiritual practitioner (Shoko 2007:82). Western-oriented approaches have misconstrued the father as embodiment of hegemonic masculinity –

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a view that should be denounced. In African culture, especially in Zimbabwe, to present the household father as embodiment of hegemonic masculinity misses the point that a father is a channel through which the ancestors talk to the family. By saying so, I am not exonerating toxic forms of fatherhood, yet equally, would not want to denounce everything associated with African notions of fatherhood. Thus the father as a spiritual practitioner, links the living to the dead, acting as steward on behalf of the ancestors. He bears children on behalf of the ancestors and makes daily mediation between the household and the ancestors. The father on behalf of the family makes timeous propitiation to the ancestors ensuring peaceful interaction between the living and the dead (Shoko 2007:82). Periodically, he initiates rituals asking the ancestors for good health, food and defence against witches (Mwandayi 2011:122). The father, to ensure their permission, protection and goodwill, in the event that a household member is travelling to another region, or in the event of marriage, informs the ancestors of such important developments. The ancestors are alive through their offspring. Many of the rituals that the father officiates relate to the rites of passage, birth, puberty, marriage and death. The father in the event of the birth of a male child honours the ancestors by naming the child after one of them. Girl children are normally named after their Aunties while male sons after their male ancestors. From pregnancy to the birth of a child, the ancestors must be updated and involved. The security and well-being of the household depends on the diligence of the father in keeping the relationship with the ancestors. Negligence and complacency may result in sharp reminders from the dead who may remove their spiritual protection over the family, resulting in the entire household being in danger of sudden illness or facing unexpected misfortunes or even deaths (Mwandayi 2011:122). The father, besides daily rituals, presides over seasonal rituals such as the brewing of beer to thank the ancestors.

The role of mother or Auntie whose role is recast by the 'spiritual mother' within the African Pentecostal churches is equally important. The role of the Auntie or Grandmother is to give advice and offer counselling to her brother's family, especially towards the girls. The Auntie, in most families, carries more authority than the father. The mother's role should be distinguished from that of the Auntie because she occupies an ambivalent role – she is an insider but also an outsider by carrying blood from another clan. If any misfortune happens to her, such as death, her family should be informed first. The mother, in the unfortunate event of death, cannot be buried without the permission or knowledge of her family. To do so would evoke serious consequences from her ancestors. However, the mother within her brother's household, plays the role of Auntie at her clan within her brother's household. Notable parallels exist between the 'spiritual mother' and the role of Auntie.

Like the traditional parents, the spiritual parent assumes the role of being mentor and guardian. For example, if spiritual parents have a house in town, they would provide physical protection and shelter to their spiritual children. The idea of spiritual parenting could be seen as analogous to modern-day ideas of adoption, but the only difference is that the former is not legal and permanent. If the spiritual child is

staying away from the spiritual parents, the spiritual parents visit to check the welfare of their 'child', The 'spiritual parents' regard themselves as 'real' parents, providing upkeep to the 'child' – food, clothes and shelter. However, such bonds are not based on blood relations. Detailed discussion regarding the relationship between the 'child' and the 'parent' are elaborated below. This study has the following tasks:

- to proffer possible explanatory variables that give rise to such practice
- to describe the practice in view of social realities of urbanisation and economic challenges in Zimbabwe
- to explain the possible conflict *vis-à-vis* traditional practices of parenthood within traditional households.

Methodologically, ethnographic methods in the form of in-depth interviews were conducted mainly to the adherence of three African Pentecostal churches – United Christian Fellowship of Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa – one of the largest African Pentecostal churches. Interviews were also conducted with members of Spirit Embassy led by Eubert Angels and Apostle Pride Sibiyi Glory Ministry. People, though identifying themselves with particular churches, can join other fellowships of the same spiritual orientation. People depending on the 'season' or topic being preached are free to switch churches. African Pentecostal churches advertise themselves as similar to marketing companies. While travelling in the streets, colourful posts with inscriptions such as 'instant healing', 'instant wealth' or 'instant prosperity' greet the eyes. Behind these posts in addition to winning souls to God, is also money and fame. Therefore, to win more church members, preachers devised strategies of luring religious shoppers with catchy phrases on poster such as 'spiritual deliverance', 'sickness', 'getting rich quicker', 'marriage' or 'prosperity'. Indeed, the market is large, and people are spoiled for choice.

Theoretical perspective – Constructive postmodern

A knowledge gap exists within current literature regarding the issue of spiritual parenting. Currently two perspectives, inspired by gender studies, exist. The first perspective by Adriaan van Klinken (2011:215) says that African Pentecostalism parades alternative masculinity *vis-à-vis* hegemonic patriarchal models. Alternative masculinities contrary to traditional masculinities, according to van Klinken, express themselves through caring, kindness and complementarity female gender roles. The question to be posed is: are there such noticeable differences between forms of masculinity emerging from African traditional culture and those in church? An argument can be made that, to assume that African Pentecostalism provides counter-masculinity, as Van Klinken suggests, misses the open traffic of ideas between Pentecostalism and society. Given that the people who frequent African Pentecostal churches do not regard themselves as providing a countercultural identity, the mutual borrowing between African culture and Pentecostalism cannot be dismissed or minimised.

Martin Lindhardt (2015:20) and Miriam Burchardt (2017:14) give a second perspective which rivals that of van Klinken. They suggest that African Pentecostalism reproduces African patterns of masculinities. They accuse van Klinken of being too simplistic by putting much focus on comparing forms of masculinity between African Pentecostalism and traditional African societies. From ethnographic research conducted in Tanzania, Martin Lindhardt (2015:20) says that African Pentecostalism puts 'emphasis on success, victory and spiritual empowerment, and an aggressive aesthetic insertion into public space also facilitates the construction and negotiation of public masculine identities'. Therefore, Lindhardt sees congruity characteristics in Pentecostalism and ideas found in patriarchal masculinities. In an article, 'Men of God: Neo-Pentecostalism and masculinity in urban Tanzania', Miriam Burchardt (2017) supports Lindhardt saying that:

Pentecostalism operates within a field of power relations, which continues to put premiums on performances of 'traditional masculinity. As a consequence, Pentecostal masculinity may in other instances be transformed in a more Christian version of the former. While Pentecostal men insist on the fundamental difference of their concept of masculinity from both liberal and traditional versions, Pentecostal masculinity thus remains an essentially unstable configuration of gendered practices, imaginaries and performances. (p. 14)

African Pentecostalism, according to Burchardt, recycles African patriarchal forms of masculinity. From Lindhardt's and Burchardt's view, 'spiritual parenting' is informed by ideas of patriarchy encroaching in church. Burchardt's insight builds a major milestone for this paper's argument. It makes us ask: what contextual variables necessitate the recasting of African models in Church? The answer in my view cannot be simply brushed aside by suggesting that African Pentecostalism exists within a patriarchal context – there should be other plausible explanatory variables to the phenomenon.

I take a constructive postmodernism approach which focuses on socio-political changes and adaptations to change at a micro and macro level. This approach pays attention to alternatives emerging alongside the social dominant narratives (Dube 2016:1; Hebdige 1979:10). This approach concerning this study raises the following questions: what are the social and economic changes to traditional family patterns that happen in urban settings? Because of changing family patterns and economic opportunities, what strategies are employed by the African Pentecostal churches in urban settings to provide alternative survival mechanisms? Building on this approach, I start from the premise that African Pentecostalism is traceable from particular sociological questions that coincided with socio-political events in Zimbabwe since 2000. African Pentecostal churches have sprouted in most corners of Harare from 2000 – a time that coincides with the unfortunate and unsuccessful land reform programme. Many factories shut down or relocated to other countries where there was better investor confidence. During that time Zimbabwe witnessed unprecedented political and economic turmoil, which resulted in its local currency losing value. Unemployment figures skyrocketed, which resulted in

many people seeking economic fortune across the country's borders. Many youths left the country searching for better economic opportunities in neighbouring countries. As the crisis engulfed the towns, it spread to rural areas, resulting in youths migrating to towns or fleeing the country. What emerged in Zimbabwe is a form of 'microwave' spirituality – a spirituality that promises, through prayer, a quick fix to anything. Plausibly, I locate the rise of spiritual parenting at the interstition of these realities. Arguably the growth and spread of African Pentecostal churches happened at a time when people's hopes were dashed. The only source of hope was blind faith. The church besides being a spiritual space became an alternative economic space where new kinship strategies of survival were generated. Arguably I locate my explanatory variables for the rise of spiritual parenting within the space of changing traditional household patterns and challenges for survival in urban Zimbabwe.

Spiritual fatherhood within African Pentecostalism

What are the dynamics of 'spiritual parenting' in African Pentecostal churches? The senior Church Pastor, known by various names – prophet, man of God or Bishop – regards himself as the 'spiritual father' to all church members. Because of her close proximity to the pastor, the pastor's wife plays the role of spiritual mother which recasts the role of the traditional Auntie to women and girls. Together her role and that of the Pastor imitate that of the Auntie and Father within the traditional households, respectively. A spiritual parent within African Pentecostalism is regarded as more important than biological parents. The belief that the present life is under constant attack from evil spirits undergirds the practice of spiritual parenting. The spiritual father or mother, to be on guard and avert possible calamity from the devil, plays a similar role to that of the traditional father. African Pentecostalism similar to African culture where inheritance can be transferred upon death, believes in spiritual mentorship. Biblical passages such as that of Elisha, who, upon Elijah's departure, received double spiritual blessings (2 Kings 2:9) provides the scriptural base. Furthermore Joshua who took over from Moses is another example. In the New Testament, the 12 disciples who took over from Jesus, and Barnabas, Titus and Timothy became 'spiritual sons' of Paul and are additional examples. Charles Chipere (2015:1) elaborates saying, 'there is much to be benefitted in having a spiritual parent because you get spiritual protection'. Depending on the church, there is no one way to ensure spiritual protection. The common way is to pray. However, others have devised other means such as giving charms such as bottled water, stones and white pieces of cloth, mediums through which one can receive spiritual blessings. Some church ministers have resorted to selling many of such items to their church members.

How does one get a 'spiritual father or mother'? Tafadzwa Kunze (telephone interview, 17 May 2017), a member of United Family International Church, with both a spiritual father and mother, explains saying 'spiritual fathers can be appointed by the church pastor to assist a particular youth.

However, some enthusiastic church elders can approach any youth and suggest the idea'. Musoni (telephone interview, 06 April 2017) adds that, 'due to issues of morality in urban settings, sometimes an elder guided by the spirit assumes the role of parent'. Many of the youths from rural areas go to towns to study or looking for employment and, upon arrival, face the challenge of housing and lack extended family support. If opportunities delay to come, this may result in desperate measures of some using drugs or doing prostitution. Musoni's explanation makes it plausible to argue that spiritual parents fill the void by acting as guardians or extended family members.

Functions of a 'spiritual parent'

Firstly, spiritual parents, operating within an enchanted worldview, provide spiritual defence against demonic attacks. The spiritual parent, similar to the household father who engages in spiritual warfare, ensures that the spiritual sons and daughters are shielded from demonic attacks which are conceived as imminent and dangerously lurking. Sibiya (2014:1), citing Malachi 4:5-7 and Psalms 109:9, warns saying, 'to stay without a spiritual father is opening oneself to the world of curses.' His warning is similar to one received from the biological father who makes constant propitiation to ancestors on behalf of the household. Reuben Sithole (telephone interview, 02 May 2007) confirms saying that, 'before embarking in anything – study, examination, or interview or job, consult spiritual parent for blessings. No instrument could measure the efficacy of the blessings, but it seems psychologically spiritual parents inspire confidence and spaces to explain challenges faced in life.' Sithole further explains, 'faith is crucial; you have to believe whatever the spiritual parent says'. One way to interpret this is by saying, if the blessings fail to materialise, then the person would blame himself or herself for lack of faith. The strategy of demanding faith from the patient is also used by traditional healers. Because the 'spiritual parent' is believed to be closer to God, failure and non-efficacy of his or her rituals is attributed to lack of faith by the believers.

Secondly, 'spiritual parent' engages in interpretation of visions and dreams on behalf of the 'child'. All physical events have spiritual connection. Thus, prophecy and interpretation of dreams and visions are central. In many Pentecostal church sessions, prophecy and foretelling of the future is central. Prophecy is given in disconnected sentences or reference to objects. For example, the prophet might say that he is seeing 'a house', 'a car', 'a building' or 'an aeroplane'. Furthermore, the prophet may reveal first a name or location related to the person. The items may be interpreted to mean that the receiver of prophecy shall buy a car or own a house. Sometimes details regarding the persons future are told, but such occurrences are few. Each time such events happen, people question whether such detail was not known beforehand. Prophetic sessions happen during church services in view of everyone or in private to a particular 'child'. Sometimes vague indicators

are given and if the description fits you, then you approach the prophet to hear the revelation. Prophecies differ: some relate to health, pending jobs or advice on a particular issue (Makandiwa 2015:1). The spiritual parent, to be considered a good parent, prophecies or visions should be coming true.

Finally, 'spiritual parents' function as advisor, a role model who transfers his wisdom and spiritual insights to specific individuals for the purposes of grooming them for a specific task or responsibility. Concerning this category, all believers are encouraged to have 'spiritual parents' who can provide spiritual guidance. Sibiya (2014:1) explains saying that the role of the 'spiritual parent' is to teach the son or daughter to be spiritually mature, helping the son or daughter to overcome the devil and ensure spiritual victory. She or he advises on prayer, finances, marriage and life in general. According to him, the 'spiritual parent' provides mentorship or 'spiritual DNA' thought grooming the 'child' into the things of God. The 'spiritual parent' gives 'generational links' by connecting the believer to other kinship ties based on faith.

Dangers

However, pitfalls in the process of spiritual parenting exist. Sibiya warns that some people, sensing material benefit in the relationship, prefer mentoring the youths who are economically promising, especially those who are at universities or employed (Sibiya 2014:1). Kunze (telephone interview, 17 May 2017) adds that 'some *spiritual* parents favour mentoring daughter or sons who are working and with financial means than those who are poor'. Such daughters and sons, upon completion of their studies or upon earning a salary, would be bound to return the favour in the form of money, gifts and constant visits to the 'spiritual parent'. The belief that 'spiritual parents' are one's conduit of blessings is the chain that binds this relationship. Peter Chirwa explains that 'if you do not visit your "spiritual parent" regularly, you may lose the spiritual connection and blessings that come through the mentor'. Thus, material gifts in the form of sugar, soap, cooking oil and other items cement the relationship. Each time the 'spiritual parent' uses the gifts from the 'child' he or she would be reminded of the need to pray for the mentee.

Furthermore spiritual parenting recasts the role of biological parents. By being regarded as more important than biological parents, the practice competes with the household. Angel (2016:1), the leader of Spirit Embassy church, explained 'a father is not a biological position, but an anointing'. He elaborates saying, 'the spiritual kinship is meant to make the sons or daughters spiritual victors, and blessed'. Most Zimbabweans are raised within the worldview where the spiritual and the natural interact. Generally, common in many African societies, is fear of spiritual attacks and curses that might come from the spiritual world. Spiritual parents by being able to block spiritual curse and opening spiritual blessings, appear more superior compared to the biological

parents. Several examples were cited where 'spiritual parents' took over important roles which are normally assigned to biological parents. Kunze, for example, narrates that during the graduation of her brother, spiritual parents were given more seats of honour while the biological parents were mere onlookers.

Spiritual parenting as strategy towards strengthening traditional family values

The remainder of the study, perhaps the most important part, attempts explanatory variables to this practice. What variables explain the rise of spiritual parenting? Social events have traceable contexts that help explain their emergency. As alluded above, in the case of Zimbabwe, the year 2000 is crucial. By 2000, the economy of Zimbabwe took a downward spiral. The youths began to move to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. Equally because of the economic meltdown, several retrenchments that affected millions of people occurred. The changes in economic outlook had direct effect towards family setup. Within towns, youths were likely to be tempted into the pitfalls of drugs, prostitution and many other vices. The idea of spiritual parenting, understood from the perspective of changing economic fortunes and family setup in towns and rural areas, provides space for alternative family practices.

Firstly, African Pentecostalism reconstitutes cultural values where a 'child' respects the parent and is under the parent's moral guidance until he or she is mature. Patriarchal societies thrive on the unquestionable authority of the parents. The idea of spiritual parenting within the urban context where young adults are likely to be tempted into drugs and other crimes replaces the traditional household by being a centre of moral instruction and mentorship. Thus, similar to traditional households, the task of the 'spiritual parents' is instructing and teaching good morality by deriving authority from the Bible and reminding the child that their future depends on their obedience. African Pentecostal preachers and teachers have a literal approach to the Bible which easily finds resonance and support from many biblical texts (Chitando 2010:112).

Secondly and connected to the above, the idea of spiritual parenting recodifies the traditional household view concerning spiritual protection and inheritance. If a 'child' listens to the instruction of the 'parent', he or she will be spiritually protected and blessed. Within context where traditional family setup has been eroded and the absence of biological father figure, this is important. Spiritual parent takes the task appeasing the spiritual world on behalf of the child. The Zimbabweans like many Africans believe in constant interaction or keeping the equilibrium with the spiritual world. Spiritual parents by being able to keep demonic forces at bay, play a crucial role of providing spiritual protection. That blessings are a tug-of-war between forces of darkness and good is the central belief.

Similar to a biological father, spiritual parents position themselves as conduits of blessings. African Pentecostalism given changes in traditional family setup because of urbanisation and migration, repackages the collective nostalgia of traditional households, especially concerning the role of the biological father as moral advisor and spiritual practitioner.

Spiritual parenting as kinship and economic survival mechanism

The current socio-economic uncertainties in Zimbabwe, which produce strategic alternative survival mechanisms, is the second explanatory variable. In Zimbabwe since 1990, because of lack of production base as a result of aborted land reform and subsequent political instability, the economy melted. A regional report compiled by Monyau and Bandara (2015:1) of Africa Economic Outlook reveals that Zimbabwe, because of weak domestic demand and the use of the strong US dollar, lacks liquidity and has less export because people and retailers prefer cheaper imports. This in turn negatively affects the competitiveness of the local industries and commodities. Industrial capacity utilisation is at a 36% low, whereas the gross domestic product (GDP) is at 3.2%. The gloomy economic outlook has negative effects on households that struggle to buy basic items such as sugar, cooking oil, soap and toiletries.

I argue that African Pentecostalism builds networks of survival though creating new kinship ties and channels to borrow or lend money. Everyone is regarded as 'sister', 'brother', 'mother' or 'father' – titles which make the entire church a household. Church services which are punctuated by long sessions of choral music, dance and testimonies, are longer. If one decides to attend one of the African Pentecostal churches, it is imperative to bring along lunch and snacks, because the service may start at 09:00 and end at 15:00. The long church services may be a disadvantage, yet they also create space to connect to a wide web of kinship networks within the church. These spiritual kinships and networks function as survival networks. Haynes (2015:273) did similar studies in Zambia and concludes that African Pentecostal churches create spaces for mutual borrowing and support. During times of scarcity, church members are able to borrow from each other basic items such as a bar of soap or lending few dollars. Haynes (2015) observes that:

by giving seed offerings, believers are creating and reinforcing relationships that look remarkably similar to the ties of obligation that people on the Copperbelt consider so important ... gifts index charismatic hierarchy and provoke religious obligation, and in so doing, yield a harvest of culturally valued social ties. For believers in Nsofu, this means they create prosperity. (p. 273)

The strength or level of fulfilment from the social ties within the church determines whether the individual stays for a longer period as church member or moves to another church. Pastors who encourage their members to increase kinship ties through employment, gifts and invitations to small occasions such as birthdays and graduations, increase church membership and durable social ties (Mariz 1994:93; Owen 2015:107). However, as

I indicate, not all is rosy; reports of abuse are rumoured. Some members only cultivate social ties which benefit them materially. The poor, though in church, find themselves with fewer friends and less spiritual networks, which raises the question whether 'spiritual parenting', as practice, is inclusive or exclusive.

Conclusion

The study traces the emergence of 'spiritual parenting' within African Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe and notes that the practice is asymmetric but also cultivates horizontal kinship relations. Spiritual parenting in view of contextual variables such as uncertainties due to rising costs of living, offers other benefits. Spiritual parenting, as a practice, provides spaces for kinship networks which resemble the traditional rural kinship networks. African Pentecostalism instead of suffering in solitude, surpasses its rivalries – catholic and protestant – by providing spaces by building alternative relationships geared towards survival. However, danger lurks when ties are based on status and income. Thus, the practice is vulnerable to abuse by elders and mothers who may enter into the spiritual mentoring process for material gain. Furthermore, the practice conflicts with the roles of biological parents who may see their role and material benefits from their children hijacked by foxy 'spiritual parents'. African Pentecostalism in spite of the challenges, for people who experience economic and social challenges associated with urbanisation, provides alternative kinship ties and economic networks.

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Competing interests

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