

# THE PRIMAL PENTECOSTAL IMAGINATION VARIANTS, ORIGINS AND IMPORTANCE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper addresses the religious world-view that is characteristic of a great many of the Pentecostal Churches currently flourishing in Africa. In the opinion of the author, this world-view, which sees spiritual forces active in everyday events, is the greatest single reason for their success. This world-view comes in different but related forms, and three different forms currently found in Kenya are outlined here. These forms have obvious links to local religious thinking, but are also dependent for their expression on certain Western thinking. Finally it is claimed that this world-view, though in most studies of Pentecostalism virtually ignored, has important socio-political effects and merits serious discussion.  
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Keywords: Pentecostalism, Africa, world-view, socio-political effects

In this paper, I will take for granted that the greatest single reason for the rapid growth of Pentecostalism is the 'primal religious imagination' which sees pervasive spiritual forces at work everywhere; the mainline churches ignore this worldview whereas Pentecostals celebrate it. ('Primal' refers to the 'enchanted' world view which sees spiritual forces operative in physical events; everything happening in the natural world could have been caused by spirits, demons, spells or witchcraft. See the use in Bediako 1995: 93–96.) Here I want briefly to illustrate different forms of this religious imagination currently found in Kenya, say something about their origins, and raise a question about their importance.

### *Three variants*

First, the examples: Apostle James Ng'ang'a, born in 1954, operates Neno Evangelism Centre at one of Nairobi's best locations, on a central crossroads; he attracts to his 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Sunday service about 5,000 obviously rather poor followers, possibly 10,000 to his monthly Uhuru Park crusades, substantial numbers to his thrice-daily services at City Hall, and far more to his special deliverance services every Wednesday and Friday. He has only one church in Nairobi, but about 30 around the country.

For Ng'ang'a, all the problems of his supplicants come explicitly through evil spirits, and victory in life comes primarily through his gift to destroy blocking spirits. Consider a service in December 2005. He called out those having difficulty sleeping (he identified the spiritual causes); one 32 year old woman did not want men physically; she was, he explained,

“married to a spirit”, and after being delivered she shouted, “I’m going to get married”. Another man wanted to praise God, but an evil spirit always stepped in and he cursed instead. Many were diagnosed as suffering from generational curses (curses passed down from parents or grandparents, as suggested by texts like Exodus 34:7 “Punishing [...] to the third and fourth generation”). He repeatedly stressed hereditary curses, witchcraft demons, enemies, and warned that children are particularly vulnerable. While exorcising, Ng’ang’a shouted: “Fire! Fire! Fire!” or “Touch! Touch!” Those being exorcised rolled around, flailing wildly, as he moved among them anointing them or dowsing them with water. He often broke off to talk about encounters with spirits—even spirits sent to kill him, and more than once he identified women who had tried to bewitch or curse him, calling on them to testify (the lesson, he stated explicitly: “Don’t mess with me!”). He has a poor background himself. He talked openly about his twenty-one times in gaol (‘I went in a prisoner, and came out an international preacher!’). He frequently involved the congregation (involvement was almost unavoidable), showering them with promised blessings (“Receive it!” “Take! Take! Take!”), which involved his sweeping his right arm as though scattering widely, the congregation catching and pulling the blessing into themselves. Other groups were called to the front (after a few hours the platform was covered with writhing bodies, women decorously covered with wraps around their legs, and a team of minders ensuring that none injured herself). He repeatedly denounced spirits, as in: “Spirit of AIDS, you have no right...” He called up individual women to slap them. He could hear spirits calling to him, waiting to be released. He reached forward to touch people; they rushed forward to be touched. And so it went on...

In his crusades and services, he primarily combats witchcraft. Witchcraft can cause every kind of ill: divorce, sickness, poverty, failure, confusion, lusts, accidents, fights and conflicts. At an Uhuru Park crusade in 2006 he delivered a Ugandan woman with fifteen different coloured chains round her waist, given her by her grandmother, an avowed witch, to help her in her demonic mission of killing people. When she killed someone, a chain disappeared and she knew that the mission was accomplished. At the crusade, she had five chains remaining, so she had killed ten people. “At night she travels to three different countries in East Africa and the mission there is to breast-feed 900 babies in each country, so per day she breast-feeds 2,700 babies and the activity takes place in the deep sea.” She had been doing this for 13 years. (Ng’ang’a n.d.: 3)

One of his major concerns is spiritual marriage (alluded to above in the service of December 2005), which he diagnoses and breaks frequently. He has dealt with this more extensively in booklets he has written. He builds from Genesis 1:1–12: demons saw women on earth and admired them, and female demons too married men.

Some people who are spiritually married cannot relate sexually to a normal human being. This is because the spiritual sex satisfies better than the carnal sex (...) Women who are spiritually married cannot give birth to normal children. They give birth to demon children and the children will torment them the rest of their lives for they are agents of the devil to the family. Demon children can cause diseases in the family, poverty. Dreams in the Bible is a form of communication, and if you dream of having sex with people you do not know, be aware that you are spiritually having sex with demons, and it is real in the spiritual realm and conception will take place. Some women dream [of] breast-feeding babies and in reality babies somewhere are infected with diseases direct from hell. (Ng’ang’a n.d.: 12)

Another key element of his crusades and services is the focus on children (in my experience, only girls). I have seen him exorcise a girl bewitched by a spirit entering her in the form of a cockroach.<sup>2</sup> A fourteen-year-old had been a satanic agent for twelve years (so parents have to be careful even of very small children). She had demonic tools for performing her satanic mission; she could burn a cowrie shell and recite the name of a person to be killed seven times; that person would then die. She also had a key for opening the king's room in his palace under the sea. Rituals took place there twice every night, which she could attend in the spirit. She had a powder she could put into food without a victim's knowledge and after consuming it he or she would die within three months. Another cowrie shell could bring affliction to others. The apostle prayed over this girl and she was delivered, and the following day brought all her charms for the apostle to burn (Ng'ang'a n.d.: 4).

His services and crusades see him diagnosing and casting out spiritual forces that cause every kind of affliction. He is the "destiny connector", the one who can counter every "destiny diversion" (namely witchcraft) (Ng'ang'a n.d.: 22). Enemies are a major preoccupation (Ng'ang'a 2005: 44–46). His Christianity is still about success and victory. Ng'ang'a's focus is on combating the spiritual forces blocking this:

I dismantle every hindrance, obstacle and blockage put in my way of progress in the name of Jesus. Let all satanic manipulations aimed at changing my destiny be frustrated. Let all curses upon my money be destroyed in Jesus' name. I command all demonic forces directed to hinder my progress to be destroyed, in the name of Jesus. (Ng'ang'a n.d.: 42)

As a second example, consider the 'Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Cult of Devil Worship in Kenya', established by President Moi, which submitted its report in 1995. Although (like so many other official reports in Kenya) it has never been publicly released, in August 1999 it was released to religious leaders, from whom parts of it quickly found their way into Kenya's newspapers.<sup>3</sup> In the bulk of the report, the commissioners survey the evidence submitted to them, noting recurrent themes: signs and symbols, initiation rites, riches, nakedness, human sacrifice, eating of human flesh, drinking of human blood, astral travel (often to India), the ability to transform oneself into cats or snakes and to cause natural disasters like ferry and train accidents.

The first of their case studies gives the flavour. A Nyeri schoolgirl was recruited into devil worship when spirits and ghosts took her to their home. The demons made demands on her: that she sacrifice a member of her family, especially the last born (when she refused, the child fell sick); that she have sex with demons (she succumbed to this demand). They also cut her body before rubbing in some substance which gave her mystical powers. These enabled her "to transform herself into anything" and to cause accidents, in some of which fellow students and staff were injured. She was able to turn herself into a man and enter Masonic temples where she took part in activities. She could also "communicate with other creatures such as birds, travel to distant places in spirit form and appear/disappear mysteriously". During seven years of devil worship, she ate human flesh, drank human blood and possessed satanic paraphernalia which included blood in powder form, bangles, rings and a knife. The girl was rescued from the cult when she was 'saved' in 1994, whereupon she entered a Bible school.

That thinking is widespread in the report. Demons are at work everywhere, and are the reason for so much evil—and Kenya particularly in the mid-1990s was experiencing more than its share of ills.

This thinking and action is identified with the national head of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Moderator David Githii. He is our third example. He finds demonic symbols everywhere, and attributes to them Kenya's many problems. In his 2006 address to the church's 18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, he argued this. Let me quote this at some length, but introduce it by explaining that the word '*Harambee*', understood to mean something like 'Let us all pull together' is Kenya's motto, on its coat of arms.

The nation is held captive by (...) the many satanic altars including the symbols in Parliament such as snakes, frogs, crocodiles, charging bull and charging rhino, witchdoctors (including the horn of a witchdoctor) (...) All these are satanic powers suffocating the country and even making Parliament a house of Babel. The goddess Harambee is another destructive force eating up this country. Has it ever occurred to you that any time you mentioned the word Harambee you have hailed a Hindu goddess? Har means to hail, lift or exalt. Ambe is a goddess who says she is the mother of the universe enthroned above all gods and goddesses who are actually spirits thrown out of Heaven by God. How then did the goddess come to dominate Kenya? The story goes back to a hundred years ago when the Indians were brought to Kenya to build the railway by the British. When the coolies lifted heavy loads, they chanted Har Ambee as Harambee.

Gradually, our African brothers who worked alongside the Indians adopted this slogan. It is said that when Jomo Kenyatta took over from the British, he innocently came up with what sounded as a good national motivating slogan Harambee, which called upon people to 'pull together' as a united nation. Little did he realise that he was imposing a foreign god on the Kenyans. Worse still, this foreign god was placed in the country's coat of arms, not knowing the spiritual consequences that would result upon enthroning harambee on this symbol of Kenyan power, the coat of arms. She was also made to possess the main government buildings, like Harambee House and Harambee Avenue. Thus this goddess controls the city, the army, police and even the Parliament. Innocently, we have given the complete reign and rule to this Hindu goddess over our beloved land of Kenya (...) Soon darkness began to surround our nation as this goddess is known for her destructive powers (...) No wonder our country's economy is in the hands of the Indians whose god appears and controls our currency. How contrary to the American dollar where instead of proclaiming another god in their currency, they have on their notes "In God we Trust".

Like the Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness, God is revealing the truth to Kenyans after 40 years of Independence so that the nation can move out of the foreign dominated spiritual powers into our promised land.

We must now as a nation come together and repent and renounce this goddess and dethrone her from the seat of reign and power over Kenya. Only then shall we be released to move into our wonderful destiny in the areas of economy, education and be freed from all the evils that enslave our nation including corruption, tribalism, nepotism, tribal clashes, devil worship and also be birthed in accountability and transparency. (Githii 2006)

Githii preaches his message relentlessly (Githii 2007). In his Christianity, his notion of causality is exclusively spiritual. Kenya's plight is caused by spiritual forces. The country is under satanic control, through symbols and ancestral covenants. Satan controls the economy (the national crest inscribed with '*harambee*' on the banknotes has ensured that the economy has been handed over to the Indians). Satan controls legislators through the symbols that make up the decorations around the parliament walls; the snake makes politicians twist the truth; the tortoise makes them lazy; the frog makes them croak meaninglessly; the crocodile leads them to attack each other; the rhino makes them sexually promiscuous;

witchcraft drawings makes 60–70 per cent of them pursue witchcraft.<sup>4</sup> These symbols were put there deliberately by the colonial authorities (the colonial powers were determined to keep Kenya enslaved and prevent development). Every aspect of national life is affected; for example, a hospital will display the sign of caduceus, which is satanic and acts to prevent healing. He understands this causality in a hard sense; St Andrew's Church, the PCEA's flagship church in Nairobi, where Githii had the stained glass windows smashed because they contained such symbols, changed immediately after the symbols were removed.

### *Origins*

I have briefly sketched three variations of this enchanted world view that focuses on spiritual forces, and understands the role of Christianity as precisely to combat those forces. Some new churches are distinguished for this emphasis almost exclusively—Neno Evangelism Centre of the Apostle Ng'ang'a is a perfect example. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that this Christianity is restricted to the poor and uneducated who, as I noted, comprise most of Ng'ang'a's followers. The same worldview is evident in the report of Moi's Devil Worship Commission. This commission comprised the Catholic Archbishop Nicodemus Kirima of Nyeri as chairman, and an Anglican bishop, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, the pastor of a large Nairobi church, a professor of religious studies at one of Kenya's universities, a chaplain of a national school, a prominent lawyer and a senior police officer. It is not the case, then, that spiritual causality, as opposed to social science explanations, is found only among the poor. We also saw that the Presbyterian Moderator is attempting to make over the entire PCEA according to this vision, not unopposed but with considerable support. It is obvious then that many Kenyans, of all classes, don't find exclusively social science explanations totally satisfactory. They require a different way of conceptualising evil, a more spiritual explanation, expressed in terms of spiritual forces. As they readily ascribe blessings to God, they seek to relate evils to demonic influences.

I suggest also that although these are three examples of 'spirit Christianity', they are not identical. Ng'ang'a's is an example of a Christianity that is nearest a local idiom of spirits, witchcraft, sorcery, witch-finding.<sup>5</sup> Yet even here it is more complicated. In his services he most resembles a healer/diviner, but his focus on Satan is something new, coming from missionary Christianity but useful in consolidating older conceptions of evil. In his literature one can sense other influences, like that of Derek Prince (1990), for example, on generational curses.<sup>6</sup> The Moi report, though, has moved on considerably. The form of spiritual explanation developed in this report is not that traditionally associated with African religious sensibilities, formulated in terms of witchcraft, sorcery, spirit possession, witch-finding. The African idea that sacrifice brings wealth has been Christianised in linking Satan with this enrichment.<sup>7</sup> Moreover this report seems to conflate two worlds: that of the traditional spirit world of Africa and a form of Christian dualism, throwing in Western cultism (exemplified in the Church of Satan set up in California in 1967, which the report makes much of). Some key ideas in this report—doorways of satanic entry, rock music as satanic, intrinsically satanic symbols—seem to come from sections (even quite marginal sections) of US Pentecostalism. The sources cursorily cited in this report would support this impression.<sup>8</sup> This mix is commonly found, and in the mid-1990s particularly, was

widespread across Africa. The consistency of testimony that so impressed the commission as evidence for the truth of submissions is better explained as arising from a general acceptance of a pervasive literary form. Indeed, the Moi commission actually cites two of its best-known exponents, the Nigerian Emmanuel Eni and the Zairean Mukendi.<sup>9</sup> There is no need to say more about them here; their flavour is perfectly caught in the case study I summarised from the Moi report. The wide diffusion of this thinking testifies to the need to find convincing and culturally satisfying explanations for the occurrence of evil.

Githii's spiritual discernment, while it has numerous similarities to the Report of the Moi Commission (its concern with Freemasons, symbols as causes) has nevertheless introduced something new: the idea of Kenya's being under the sway of its own demonic force—in his view, the Hindu goddess Ambe, which ensures among other things that Kenya's economy is dominated by Indians. The interesting thing is that this understanding of spiritual forces is not particularly African either. Githii studied in North America at Dubuque, Iowa, and then at Fuller Theological Seminary in the early 1990s, in the heyday of Peter Wagner, the guru of this spiritual warfare thinking (see Wagner 1991). Githii has admitted that while at Fuller, "I concentrated a lot on studying spiritual warfare. Through that, I came to learn a lot about idolatry and how it affects people, and indeed, a nation" (in Wamari 2007: 2–3). In his book the influence of Wagner is palpable, as also that of Derek Prince. This takes us even further from the traditional 'enchanted religious imagination'. I wonder today whether, although the degree of influence varies enormously, it is possible to remain totally uninfluenced by Western views.

### *Significance*

Finally, I would like to raise the issue of the significance of this enchanted worldview. Scholars of African religion sometimes claim that it is immaterial whether such spiritual forces exist or not. Obviously, speaking purely theologically there is little problem, since Christianity has often been articulated in such terms; indeed, Peter Brown has argued that Christianity's triumph in its early centuries was due to its superiority in precisely this area. Christianity succeeded because it banished the fear of such forces, "revealing the bankruptcy of men's invisible enemies, the demons" (Brown 1971: 55).

In anthropology there is a split. Evans-Pritchard might have said that such spirits did not exist, but in recent years many adopt a much more relativist position, arguing that a scientific mode of explanation is merely one among many (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 18; see West 2007: 22). Robin Horton has an interesting observation about this relativism, seeing it as a reaction to colonialism. Horton, in an essay entitled "Back to Frazer?" claims that it is driven by "a deep sense of guilt and anxiety about the arrogantly invidious comparisons made by their predecessors between the thought of the West and that of the non-West" (Horton 1993: 135). He argues:

Most symbolists accept that non-Western world-views, *if* considered as systems for explanation, prediction and control, and *if* measured as such against the yardstick of modern Western science, emerge as markedly inferior to the latter. By denying that explanation, prediction and control are the *real* aims of non-Western religious discourse, symbolists are able to satisfy their liberal scruples. (Horton 1993:7)

Political scientists seem divided, too. Obviously Birgit Meyer has problems, or did ten years ago:

How can one write about politics and sorcery in Africa without evoking an image of the continent as hopelessly backward, fundamentally different and exotic? This question kept haunting me during my struggle to write this essay and I am still not sure what my answer is. But for me, not writing about the relationship at all was out the question. (Meyer 1998: 32)

I suggest such embarrassment is the reason that commentators so seldom address this issue. Yet Ellis and ter Haar do, explicitly adopting the relativist stance of many anthropologists: “[African] epistemologies have validity, meaning that not only do all people have a right to think about the world in whatever way they choose, but that modes of perception unfamiliar to Western observers may—in theory at least—be of universal application” (Ellis and ter Haar 2007: 287). Perhaps they have gone even further than the anthropologists, suggesting that this mode of explanation is not only valid for Africans, but contains much that the West could learn from.

Many political scientists or those in development suggest the worldview does matter, for various reasons. For example, West (quite relativist himself) suggests that this spiritual causality can militate against development. It can even lead to the attitude: ‘We don’t want development here’, because it can attribute economic advancement to witchcraft. West notes the passivity the spirit worldview can engender, as it “accentuated limitations to [their] abilities to remake the world in a modern form”; it emphasises “limited abilities to (re)make their world” (West 2007: 67–70). Those given to this thought “generally conceived of themselves (...) as passive victims, rather than active perpetrators” of effective change (West 2005: 265–266). It hardly develops social capital; as West notes, it can lead to a very uncivil society (West 2005: 251). Bayart has famously remarked: “There is in Africa little revolutionary potential” (Bayart 1986: 113). Is this linked to this religious worldview? In an enchanted world evils are admittedly rendered explicable, at least on one level.<sup>10</sup> But does this militate against other explanations and solutions on other levels? Bruce has remarked: “Science is not easy for cultures that believe that the world is pervaded by unpredictable spirits and divinities” (Bruce 2000: 23). A remarkable report, *Africa 20025: What Possible Futures for Sub-Saharan Africa?* put together by more than a thousand Africans, in forty-six countries, women and men, Anglophone and francophone and from very different backgrounds, argued that the biggest need determining Africa’s future is scientific rationality. To this end, a shift must be made towards scientific and technical training; it cites Rene Maheu, a former Director General of UNESCO: “Development [occurs] when science becomes culture” (Sall 2003: 114). It seems to me, that report is calling for causality to be addressed on a totally different level. I am aware that some would say that talk of demons is addressing realities on that level; it is ‘implicit politics’, they say. I can only remark I have never been convinced of that (see Gifford 2004: 169–172).

Let me give the last word to Ghana’s Abraham Akrong, flatly contradicting the view that it is pointless asking whether such forces exist. Akrong sees charismatic Christianity as “nothing but the repackaging of traditional witchcraft mentality in Christian categories”. He concludes:

## PUBLIC LECTURE

By far the most serious challenge this mentality poses to our society is the enthronement of a magical world-view with its dualistic subtleties that lures us to passivity, dependence, surrender of the power to make choices and accept responsibilities. Painfully, these are the very ingredients that destroy identity and personal initiative in a highly competitive world where we have to make important choices every day. Tragically, the magical worldview which this mentality reinforces is hardly the kind of mentality that will help us as a society to participate fully in the modern world where the operating paradigm is rationality and scientific thinking—the basic requirements for proper functioning in the global village. (Akrong 2000: 11)

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the “Spirits and African Christianity” public seminar 10.2.2009, University of Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> He warns against wearing second hand clothes from Europe which can let in special Western demons.

<sup>3</sup> A pirated version contains much of the report (Omino 2000).

<sup>4</sup> One commentator praises Githii’s raising the “archaic, dangerous, harmful and retrogressive beliefs” of witchcraft, without realising that at least from one perspective Githii’s spiritual causality is perpetuating that mindset (Kitau 2006: 13).

<sup>5</sup> Not exclusively; for cases much like those found in the Government of Kenya report, see Ng’ang’a n.d.: 16, 18, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ng’ang’a complicates things further by reprinting in his *Neno Herald* articles (sometimes unacknowledged) from authors who illustrate a rather different Christianity: from Rod Parsley, Joyce Meyer, John Hagee, Randy Morrison, T.D. Jakes, Morris Cerullo, Mensa Otabil and Benny Hinn (Hinn at his most shamelessly self-serving), adding pages on ‘dream covenants’ (dreams which reveal your covenants), the need for sexual adjustment after marriage (including how to plan a honeymoon, seemingly very North American and of limited application to the people he attracts), even a question and answer column. Moreover Ng’ang’a readily uses Western cartoons of witches with pointed hats on broomsticks with cats, and caricatures Satan with horns, tail and pitchfork.

<sup>7</sup> Note that some comment on the Kenyan report in neighbouring Uganda argued that in Uganda, by contrast, child sacrifice (of which over 20 cases were reported in the first eight months of 1999 alone) is still linked to witchcraft, not organised Satanism (*Sunday Vision*, 22 Aug 1999: 13).

<sup>8</sup> The bibliography is a mixture of new age, Freemasonry, the Bhagavadgita, the occult, Time-Life books, the *Book of Mormon* and Shirley MacLaine.

<sup>9</sup> Government of Kenya 1995: 54; Eni, 1987; Kaniaki and Mukendi, 1991. Kenyan variants of the same literary form are Onyango, 1979, and the first five chapters of Omino, 2000. This literature is not as pervasive a decade later as it was in the mid-1990s.

<sup>10</sup> For the classic expression of the ‘intellectualist theory’ of African religion (in terms of its ability to “explain, predict and control space time events”), see Horton, 1993.

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PUBLIC LECTURE

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