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Afe Adogame

“I am married to Jesus”!

The feminization of new African diasporic religiosity

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Afeosemine Adogame

“I am married to Jesus”!

The feminization of new African diasporic religiosity

Two recent field encounters in the course of my current religious ethnography on African Christian communities in Europe and North America starkly eulogize an inherent contemporaneity of the discourse on how gendered negotiations of power in space-time is evanescent in academic *jaw-jaw* on religion and gender itself; but more importantly on how and ways in which the discourse does play out in the gendered forms of lived religious experiences and expressions. These field encounters also mirror and cast translocal gazes and a certain memorialization of the complex dynamism, shifting contours, permutation and specificity of women’s religious lives in contradistinction to men in African geo-cultural spaces and the specific historical settings of the African diasporas. At the same time, it evokes the urgency for new narratives of identity and the sense of self; a rethinking of the gendered notions of empowerment and authority within the complex religious terrain of contemporary African societies; within transnational topography and the religious cosmos of the African diaspora. An unpacking of some recent field notes flavoured with critical hermeneutics and content analysis perhaps wet the ground for a re-interrogation of the variances inherent in shifting power relationships, complex religious worldviews, and the ambivalent socio-religious encounters that spin the recentering of women in Africa and the African diaspora on the one hand but also in transnational and global geoscapes.

In the summer of 2006, I was privy, as part of my ethnographic work, to two religious programmes themed “Conquerors School of Leadership” and “Ladies on Fire for Jesus” respectively, under the auspices of the WCCC International headquarters in Edinburgh, Scotland. The first meeting was held immediately after a Sunday morning worship service while the other activity followed on a Wednesday evening. While space would not permit a detailed description of these programmes, my unanticipated conversation with a middle-aged, single-parent female member and participant at both events seems to evoke pertinent questions that galvanize discourses of women’s resourceful appropriation of rhetoric, ideas, idioms and religious praxis. Furthermore, it wells up consideration of what meanings and interpretations women themselves make of their

religious lives as individuals, but also in relation to men and their immediate social and religious environments. During our casual conversation at the end of the earlier event, I asked how her family was fairing. To this, she responded “My daughter and I are blessed and highly favoured”, a characteristic response of WCCC members when exchanging pleasantries. The specificity of her response, referring to her daughter and herself, led me to probe further inquisitively. So I asked: “Does your husband not attend this church?” She replied with a bit of hesitation: “I am married to Jesus”. It took further cautious probing to unearth what this response meant in real terms. As I came to understand, this suggests at least two connotations. One, it literally expresses her religious commitment to her Christian faith, her church affiliation (the WCCC), her total reliance and dependence on Jesus Christ in the face of any predicament, adversity, disappointment and marital crisis. A more ingrained connotation was the foreclosure of her single parentage, but one that is not devoid of hopefulness and “divine intervention” for a new spouse. Realising how sensitive any further probing on this matter could be, I charted a new topic for further conversation. Nevertheless, it took my participant observation in consequent programmes to appropriately contextualize the phrase “I am married to Jesus” as a symbolic rhetoric of empowerment and an idiom of rekindled hope and encouragement for a sustainable, stable marital life, one that is prone to consummation. I shall return to this dynamics in a latter discussion on the use of empowerment rhetoric within the “Ladies on Fire for Jesus” group.

The second field encounter was at one of the new RCCG parishes named “Open Heavens”, located in Edinburgh city. While engaging participant observation during Sunday worship services for several weeks, I had observed a white Scottish couple in attendance on two occasions. After a couple of weeks I began to notice their absence, being as they were the only regular white European couple in attendance at this event. When I did inquire from one of the church leaders, she was quick to respond that the couple had stopped coming to church on grounds that it was opposed to a woman preaching in church. As she explained, the couple’s position on women’s role in the church was anchored on the conservative Pauline theology, which puts women on the “back bench” in church, a somewhat passive role that denies them of preaching or playing any visible leadership roles. This standpoint, which was borne out of the couple’s previous religious orientation and affiliation, was put to test during a special Sunday service at the RCCG parish in which a woman took on the pulpit and rendered the sermon. Irrespective of the tenacity of her message, the couple thought the mere fact of a woman preaching was an indictment of biblical principles. That was therefore also their last day of participating in the church programmes.

The ambivalence in Pauline injunctions regarding the role of women result in interpretations of a controversial nature. One strand as expressed in I Corinthians 11: 7-9 and 14: 34-35; I Timothy 2: 11-12; and Ephesians 5: 22-24 restrict

and discredit women’s leadership in church and in Christian culture. The notion of a hierarchy existing in gender terms in which women are subordinate to men is rife and can be located in the history of Christianity. The biblical passages were largely recognised as normative since they form part of the Christian canon of scripture. Thus, such prohibitions ensure that sexual hierarchy becomes an essential aspect of Christian theology. This also calls into serious questioning the viability of a woman assuming any significant role within the power hierarchy of ecclesiastical organization. The sexual hierarchy reflected in the New Testament was criticized as highly flavoured by Graeco-Roman cultures in the early process of generating scriptural foundations for a Christian attitude to womankind. While an elaboration of this debate goes beyond our purview here, suffice it to mention that Christians who object to prescriptions of the earlier strand often sought solace in other biblical (Pauline) injunctions that are considered less polemical. The second strand as exemplified in Galatians 3: 26-28; I Corinthians 12: 13 was often perceived as a liberalization of gender roles, one in which the hierarchization of sex functions in ecclesiastical office and within the Christian family is non-stereotypical and less biased against women.

This second variable posits equality of opportunities that allows for the development and inclusion of both genders, as well as the democratisation of gender roles with regards to leadership or preaching in and out of the church precincts. However, these dual, multiple representations of women’s roles in Pauline narrative appear to have polarized gender discourse in the various Christian traditions. Thus, some church traditions identify with and emphasize one principle at the expense and utter neglect of the other provisions. The over-emphasis on the first strand by missionary Christianity in Africa had the effect of eroding the ritual power and role of women in the churches they established. We would contend that women exercised crucial ritual functions and occupied significant religious roles within many indigenous religious worlds prior to the debut of missionary Christianity. Missionary Christianity hijacked these roles and stripped women of most of their ritual functions by privileging the strand of Pauline injunctions that was disadvantageous to women. Thus, the leadership and ritual role reversal witnessed in some new forms of African Christianity within the continent and beyond needs to be historically and contextually understood. A brief sketch of the historiography of women, gender and religion in Africa, the African diaspora and in the context of international migration will be illuminating here.

Engendering gendered discourses of religion, migration and diaspora

Female migration is evidently a key constituent of global migration. While a gendered understanding and contextualization of migration and diaspora is quintessential, only recently have efforts been exerted to incorporate gender into theories of international migration and discourses of diaspora. Grieco & Boyd’s,

Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory (2003) represent an excellent attempt at developing a gender sensitive approach to the study of international migration. They have employed a three-stage analytical framework in exploring how gender is intricately involved in the entire migration process and to demonstrate how gender relations, roles and hierarchies differently shape the migratory behaviour and experiences of men and women. Elsewhere, few scholars—such as for example Boyd (1989, 1995), Castles & Miller (1993), Chant & Radcliffe (1992), Gabaccia (1992), Lim (1995), Morokvasic (1983), Simon & Brettell (1986), Tienda & Booth (1991), Zlotnik (1995) and a handful of others—have focused on female immigrants and the fact that their migration experience may be largely different from that of men. These relatively few works lend credence to the fact that migration and diaspora theories are increasingly becoming gender-sensitive, thus marking a shift from perception of female immigrants simply as “dependants”, “wives” and “children” of male immigrants to incorporating explanations of the unique experiences of women migrants themselves.

There are a few notable historical, sociological and anthropological works such as by Terborg-Penn *et al.* (1996), Higginbotham (1993), Rushing (1996), Weisenfeld & Newman (1996), Weisenfeld (1998), Gilkes (2000), Dodson (2002), Frederick (2003), and Rouse (2004) that engage women and gender in the historical African diaspora. The recent volume, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora* (Griffith & Savage, 2006), represents a significant scholarly breakthrough in the field, with its transnational scope, cross-disciplinary focus, and interrogation of inter-related themes and paradigms in rich, diverse ways that suggest emergent models for studying women, religions, and diasporic shifts across space and time. The volume, which was borne out of a collaborative project on “Women and Religion in the African diaspora” illuminates “some ways in which diverse women of African descent have practiced religion as part of the work of their ordinary and sometimes extraordinary lives” (*idem*, 2006: x). Drawing its case studies from North America, the Caribbean, Brazil, and Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the book explores “emerging patterns as women, religion, and diaspora intersect, influence, and reshape one another in particular locations, thus mapping fresh approaches to this emergent field of inquiry”.

This phenomenal work throws up a challenge to scholars of African migration and diaspora to begin to focus special attention on the gendering of these processes; the recentering of women; and the complexity of their religious lives in distinct settings. Gunning, Hunter and Mitchell (2003: 398) underscore this urgency as they noted: “the use of gender as a category of analysis remains something of a challenge for African Diaspora Studies”. I would add that this is particularly so with the specific context and lived experiences within the contemporary African diaspora where issues of religion and gender have rarely being

interrogated. Scholars should not take for granted the fact that the African Diaspora is far from being a homogenous entity. Although the rhetoric bears semblances and shares certain commonalities, the mere fact that the historical African diaspora and the new African diaspora occurred within two different historical epochs and in a multiplicity of contexts is suggestive of the rationale for paying close attention to the contextual factors that shape migratory processes and diasporic formations in each respective geo-cultural context. Women's religious experiences and expressions in their everyday lives will undoubtedly vary when located in time and space. Griffith and Savage (2006: xiv) best encapsulate this complexity as they assert: "Diverse places of origin, different experiences of displacement, and disparate living conditions are connected in women's religious lives to equally distinctive modes of spiritual expression and ritual action, dynamics of adaptation and innovation, and strategies that maneuver within and across religious and social settings. Just as Africanness is not a single point of origin and diaspora is not a single geographic or ontological destination, so black womanhood in this transnational context signifies patterns of divergences and convergencies". Against this backdrop therefore, our especial focus will be on the dynamics of women, gender and religion within the threshold of recent African immigration and what is now popularly described as the new, second African diaspora.

Gender is a social, spatial construction perceived as "a matrix of identities, behaviours, and power relationships that are constructed by the culture of a society in accordance with sex" (Boyd, 2003). As Castles and Miller (2003: 9) note, "gender variables have always been significant in global migration history, but awareness of the specificity of women in contemporary migrations has grown". The anatomy of migration was teased out on certain assumptions of the near invisibility of women as migrants, their presumed passivity in the process, and their traditional place in the home. These assumptions that shape migration discourse as a male-dominated venture are not unconnected with canvassed economic variables as in the perceived negligibility of women's participation in international labour migration and flows. Any theorizing of international migration needs to take cognisance of remote and immediate factors that coalesce to create different gendered experiences along the spectrum. A gendered perspective of migration is fundamental to understanding the motives for migration. The conceptualization and hermeneutics of these varying forces and outcomes will enhance the theoretical grounding of individual experiences of men and women in international migration processes.

The complex dynamism of contemporary migration within and beyond Africa is partly reflected in the increasing feminization of migration. Current migratory trends within the continent and from Africa to Europe and North America in particular, largely challenge traditionally perceived migration patterns in that they are noticeably becoming feminized. African women, along with

men, are now increasingly engaged in migration partly as a family survival strategy or a way of furthering the climb on the socio-economic ladder in their respective societies. Women have not only accompanied or joined their husbands abroad through family reunification; professional women are sometimes leaving their spouses temporarily to care for their children while they take advantage of greener pastures or fall prey to the brain drain syndrome. The access to a variety of educational and employment opportunities acts as a magnet for women wishing to be economic and social actors in their own right. In such cases, their husbands and children have subsequently reunified with them. Others have plugged into transnational, organized sexual labour and trafficking. The demography of female migrants has been further swelled by refugees, asylum seekers and other local-global circumstances born out of wars, natural disasters, economic collapse, as well as religious and political crises. This geo-mobility is neither constrained by nor confined to rural, urban, national and continental borders.

By 2000, it was estimated that 46.7% of the sixteen million international migrants in Africa were female, up from 42% in 1960 when the number of international migrants in the continent stood at nine million (UN, 2002; Zlotnik, 2003). In 1960, Africa had the lowest proportion female among international migrants in comparison to other contexts such as Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. The steady rise in the share of female African migrants among all international migrants is consistent with an increasing feminization of migration. In the face of migration-related challenges, women in the African diaspora are appearing less fixed in the gendered roles of dependant, wife and mother. In many cases, men are assuming more responsibilities for domestic duties, cooking meals for the children while the woman is at work; and undertaking childcare as babysitters and “nannies” in a new social context where working class men are also entitled to “paternity leave” from their jobs, if they so wish, to stay home with children while the wives take turn at work.

Gender relations, roles and hierarchies impact on the migration process and produce differential outcomes for women and men through the distinctive stages of pre-migration, transition across state boundaries, and the particular experiences of migrants in the host context (Grieco & Boyd, 2003). Migration may also alter the status, attitudes and gender relations of men and women. New economic roles and new responsibilities affect spousal relationships, in some instances leading to considerable negotiations and resistance to change by both men and women. Migration represents a challenge in women’s economic and familial roles, as well as in their usual pattern of relations with husbands and children. For some women, migration means an increase in social mobility, economic independence and relative autonomy. For others, getting better-paid employment is only a complementary medium improving the family’s economic base. The impact of moving from one form of gender stratification system to another can be understood through the interaction between societal and family contexts.

While all the stages of the migration process are important for considering the influence of gender, we shall however focus here more on the post-migration stage dealing with factors that occur within the host society or diasporic context that shape the adaptation and integration of women and men into the receiving society. Migration can have a positive, negative or neutral impact; it could enhance or erode the status of women as the case may be. How are the dynamics of power and interpersonal relationship between husband and wife, men and women played out, altered or reconstituted in post-migration circumstances? As “breadwinners” female migrants put pressure on gender roles within the traditional African family structure. The division of family labour poses a significant challenge to gender roles in Africa and the African diaspora, just as the feminization of migration represents a means towards socio-economic and religious (spiritual) empowerment. Women are assuming increasing roles as resource managers, decision makers and captains of industries. Some have become church founders, leaders and visible religious functionaries on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing upon a decade of religious ethnography among new African Christian communities in diaspora–Europe and North America–, this paper explores the increasing feminization of African immigrant religiosity; and demonstrates with specific examples of female leadership dynamics (i.e. the “Ladies on Fire for Jesus”) and the appropriation of empowerment rhetoric in the World Conquerors Christian Centre and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (United Kingdom) how the polity and demography are increasingly becoming feminized. The empowerment discourse revolves around issues of marriage and the family, singles fellowship, fertility, female dignity, social and financial empowerment.

World Conquerors Christian Centre (WCCC)

In October 2000 a Kenyan couple, Climate and Jennifer Irungu, founded the World Conquerors Christian Centre (WCCC), a Pentecostal/charismatic church with international headquarters in Leith area of Edinburgh, Scotland. The nucleus group comprised three families and met at their home for Bible Study every Tuesday. After three weeks, the group expanded with new members and thus relocated to a larger venue, the Leith Academy. In December 2000 the Church acquired the abandoned premises of the former St. Paul’s Parish Church–Lorne Street in Leith, a facility now referred as the WCCC Centre and which serves as its international headquarters. The foundation history of the WCCC is woven around Bishop Climate and Dr. Jennifer–“First Lady” as they are now fondly referred by their members. The couple claim to have been “sent by God from London to Edinburgh to preach the Gospel of God and begin a new thing that the Lord is about to do in Edinburgh. After six months of fasting and praying, we (Climate Irungu and his family) moved to Edinburgh”.¹ However,

1. Personal conversation with Bishop Climate Irungu and Pastor Dr. Jennifer Irungu on 23 November 2006. For a brief history of WCCC, see the official website available at: http://music.wccc-scotland.org/Pastor_note.htm

this happened only following a traumatic spiritual experience which took place during Climate Irungu's incarceration in London. In what is likened as his "dark history", he was reported as a former "vicious crack-dealer", a remand prisoner in a London jail, awaiting trial on criminal charges of attempted rape and possession of a firearm.² As the *Standard* newspaper reported inter alia:

Eight years ago, Climate Irungu Mwangi was a remand prisoner in a London jail awaiting trial. He and two other Kenyans had been charged with attempted rape and possessing a firearm. He was bracing for a long jail term if found guilty. When the trial began at The Old Bailey—Central Criminal Courts, the equivalent of Kenya's High Court—, Mwangi (*a name that was later dropped*) and his co-accused had a lucky escape. Crown Prosecution Service, the public prosecuting body in UK, failed to prove its case against the three on the charge of possessing a firearm and the charges were dropped. On the charge of attempted rape, they were found guilty but were released because they had served half of their sentences while on remand. This was the turning point for Mwangi, formerly known as "Man-Man", a hard talking East London gangster, who used to sport dreadlocks. He converted to Christianity and became a preacher.³

During sermons, Bishop Climate sometimes make passing references to a chequered "dark history" and recounts his "miraculous" turn around in spiritual terms, although he cautiously spares his congregation of the gory details of his ordeal. Moreover, Climate and members of his church have consequently interpreted this experience as a "divine intervention". The WCCC official website carefully represented this ordeal in such a way that further legitimizes his "divine call to ministry" in the following way:

From the Street of East London U.K. as a lost young man, after a Damascus experience God miraculously delivered Bishop Climate from alcohol and drug addiction, street fights and gang life and death and put a hunger of His word and thirsty of His presence and anointed Him with Holy Spirit and power to go and do great things. Today we all witness the Anointing upon our Bishop, During those time after the Damascus experience that as he went about on God's business preaching the Gospel through East Anglia that he met is future wife our First lady Dr Jennifer Powerful woman of God...⁴

Climate Irungu's life history weaved partially around his post-migration experiences in London is significant in two respects. First, it is indicative of how post-migration experiences could result in a dramatic turn in which life experiences in the new context may either heighten, stultify or erode a migrant's

2. See details of two story captions: Gitau wa Njenga, "Former gangster ordained youngest bishop in UK" in *The Standard*, Saturday May 14, 2005. Online version available at: <http://www.eastandard.net/archives/cl/news.php?articleid=2033#55> (accessed 20th March 2006); and Jamie Livingstone, "I Confess: Born-again bishop admits his blood-soaked gangster past of guns, drug-deals and hookers", *Sunday Mail*, 22 May 2005. Online version available at: http://www.sundaymail.co.uk/news/tm_objectid=15543709 (accessed 24th March 2006).

3. *Ibid.*

4. See full details available at: <http://www.wccc-scotland.org/bishopclimate.html> (accessed 14 July 2007).

religious commitment. Much more significantly, such narratives tend to draw scholarly attention to post-migration religious experiences and expressions, thus opening new research vistas on religion, religious and spiritual activities within prisons, the refugee camps or asylum homes.

The WCCC, with increasing total membership running into the hundreds, have expanded with branches established in the UK (London, Newcastle and Middlesborough) and also in Africa (Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe). In virtually all branches, women dominate the membership. With a slightly multi-ethnic membership, visibly populated by East and South African immigrants, though with minority membership of West Africans, Jamaicans, Europeans and other nationalities; the WCCC lay claim to “many prophecies spoken about revival Scotland in which, the light will flow from North (Scotland), then down to South (other parts of the UK) and then to rest of Europe”.⁵ Following Irungu’s consecration as Bishop on May 7, 2005 under the umbrella of the Trans-Atlantic Pacific Alliance of Churches (TAPAC),⁶ he now lays claim to being the youngest Bishop in the UK. This self-representation no doubt has far-reaching political and ideological dimensions when located within the UK contemporary religious landscape. His ordination by Bishop J. P. Hackman is also indicative of the politics of religious networking within transnational and transcontinental settings. The WCCC appropriate new media technologies as a way of self-representation and in the dissemination of their religious messages. The church established its own official internet website and subscribed to Sky Television where they screen their programmes channels such as Wonderful Channel 762, Gospel Channel 770, Revelation Channel 765, Dove Vision; and in sub-Saharan Africa on TKC Television Multi Choice Channel 4 at different airing days and times.

“The Ladies on Fire for Jesus International”

The Ladies on Fire for Jesus International represents the women caucus of WCCC. The group was founded and led by Dr. Jennifer Irungu, the church’s co-founder, who is fondly referred to as the “First Lady”, a title that is itself symbolizing empowerment. “First Lady” is reminiscent of how Presidents and governors’ wives in several countries carve out a public niche for themselves within their respective political apparatus. This development largely critiques and responds to earlier perceptions that women were totally passive and voiceless in leadership structures. The appropriation of “First Lady” in the WCCC was undoubtedly a re-enactment of this practice albeit in religious terms. The Founder-Leader locates the group’s emergence in 2004 to a divine revelation as she

5. *Ibid.*

6. TAPAC is a member body of the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and is based in London.

claimed: “Last three years God spoke in spirit to start ladies on fire for Jesus”.⁷ A personalised letter from the First Lady addressed specifically to female members and women at large is rich with gender rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment. Its extensive replication here underscores the preponderance and rapidity of such rhetoric employed in the Ladies on Fire for Jesus. It reads:

Dear Powerful Lady,

The bible says that after creation, God looked and saw that everything he made was very good... That's includes you WOMAN. As far as God is concerned, there is no ugly woman and I agree with him. The creator looked at you woman, whom he had fashioned, declared, announced, proclaimed, and introduced you as very good. I believe that anything good is beautiful. Beauty does not really depend on your shape or your physical looks... SO BEAUTY IS ON INSIDE OF YOU. God has something special something treasure inside you. That treasure is sealed up and is waiting for the opportunity to manifest and radiate its beauty and attraction to all. As you allow yourself to be the woman God has called you to be ...we can change the whole universe. Women we are influential instrument God can use us to change men, boys, fathers, relatives, friends etc. We are women with zeal, passion, enthusiasm, and power. For generations women have been greatly abused. The women have been shattered, hated, battered and rejected. BUT now we rise with one VOICE to say to the devil « Enough Is Enough »! The battle we face is NOT with our men (husband, brothers, and fathers), the society, religion, traditions, or customs of our time. No No, No, No the battle is the DEVIL HIMSELF. Last three years God spoke in spirit to start ladies on fire for Jesus. What a powerful name, makes one explosive. I believe it's a call for all women in Scotland that we are no longer JUST ordinary but women with EXTRA.

“LADIES ON FIRE FOR JESUS” vision is to reach to all those women who want a touch from Jesus, and get inspired to acquire fire for Jesus and change the nation... No matter how wet, soaked or soggy your life is, you can become a woman with fire for Jesus... Woman of God you have a very expensive hidden treasure inside of you. Open your heart to God even right now as you read this article, it does not matter where you are either in your kitchen, bedroom, comfortable chair, inside your car, on sitting in the park, wherever you are, God is seeing you. God is waiting for you to breakthrough those walls that hinder you to be effective to your nation, or your city, or your neighbourhood, or your family or even your church. Women we are called to make a difference in our generation. BUT HOW? Pastor Jennifer? By willing to surrender your life to Jesus Christ and he will enable you to be free from pride, bitterness, unforgiveness, anger, envy, lust, compromise, hypocrisy, selfless... So I challenge every lady out there CATCH THIS FIRE AND KEEP IT BURNING. AMEN.⁸

While space does not permit a detailed analysis here, suffice it to mention that the text draws upon several power genres and evoke gender discourses of a complex nature. The rhetoric centres on the dignity and vulnerability of a woman, self-worth and esteem. It focuses on the innate power of women to effect change at familial and societal levels, the history of discrimination, abuse and injustices to which women were exposed within the larger society. Quite

7. See full text on “Ladies on Fire for Jesus” official website available at: <http://www.wccc-scotland.org/ladiesoffire.html>

8. *Ibid.*

figuratively, the malevolent forces (the devil) rather than men are held accountable for this state of affairs that confronts them. The text is replete with admonitions of hope, perseverance, encouragement and empowerment in a way that captures the reader's imagination towards an imagined gender identity. As membership is open to all females, irrespective of age—married, unmarried (single), single parent, divorcee, widows, and female youths—the empowerment discourse also revolves around issues of marriage and the family, singles fellowship, fertility, female dignity, social and financial empowerment. Ritual time is also structured to tackle these existential issues. For instance, the wee-hours (6.15-7.30am) of every Tuesday are set aside for marital and future needs “for those believing God for the fruit of the womb or children, for an ideal partner (husband), for the broken hearted”; while Thursday morning is the day for marriage and family prayer, where intensive prayer rituals are enacted for “salvation, healing, unity, love and intimacy in the family and in marriage, praying God for intervention in divorce, separation, rejection, unforgiveness”.⁹ Members are encouraged to bring photographs, clothes, names of family members and other concrete objects for intensive prayer rituals to break generational curses. The allegorical reference to the church as “the place where dreams become reality” explains the importance of the sacred space for family conflict resolution and a context where members seek panacea to their manifold existential problems.

If women's demography in the church was an advantage to their visibility and mobility, the church polity appears also structured in a way that favours women. Apart from the Bishop—the overall head, and the church manager who are both males, the hierarchical structure comprises over eighty-five percent women who serve in various leadership capacities as pastors, lay-pastors, zone pastors, cell group leaders, choir leader, church secretary and other functions. Thus, women through various activities and functions were carving a distinctive identity for themselves. This perhaps posed a challenge to the men who later in 2006 formed a parallel men's caucus named “Men of Power” (MOP or simply MPs as they are called). Both groups formed along women/men gender divide engage in diverse activities, sometimes jointly, in such a way that they are mutually challenging and reinforcing. In the Singles Fellowship, unmarried individuals and youths are encouraged to seek out their prospective partners for marriage. Exhortations, teachings with attractive themes such as: “*Prayer that gets results! How to catch a man! Winners never quit, quitters never win!*”, that address specific marital matters are transferred into audio-visual paraphernalia and circulated among members. In one of her teachings about maintaining a happy marital life, the First Lady introduced the concept “MAMA” which she interprets as: “never Maximize, Advertise, Minimize but Analyse your marital problems”. The preoccupation with marital discourses is suggestive of how the group negotiates modernity. Although, the First Lady challenges the women to

9. See for instance, WCCC *Sunday Bulletin*, 25 June, 2006, pp. 6-7.

rediscover their self-esteem and innate potentials, she nevertheless asserts sex hierarchy, perhaps unintentionally, in which the man “remains the head of the home/family”. While she encourages women to keep and nurture their marital lives, at the same time she critiques illicit sexual behaviour between women and men. The church vicinity serves as a space for socialization for its members. Jobs, accommodation, gossip from home, business ideas and information are exchanged and negotiated. In practical terms, the First Lady owns and manages a job (public) placement agency that provides job opportunities to some of the women. In a sense, the quest for empowerment in the women’s group moves beyond mere rhetoric to a concrete, practical sense of empowerment.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God–Open Heavens Edinburgh Parish

The RCCG Open Heavens Edinburgh, registered as UK Registered Charity No. 1084577, is a parish of the RCCG Worldwide Mission.¹⁰ The RCCG is a typical example of an African Pentecostal-charismatic church, which its self-claim of global expansion from Nigeria to over ninety countries with several million members, scattered within Africa, America, Europe, Asia, Australia, the Middle East and other parts of the world. Following a divine call to a special mission, Pa Josiah Akindayomi founded RCCG in Lagos (Nigeria) in 1952. He became popular for his charismatic qualities and healing activities, although the church he founded did not witness any large scale spread under his tutelage. The leadership succession by Enoch Adejare Adebayo, a former University Professor of Applied Mathematics–Hydrodynamics, as the General Overseer in 1980 transformed the stature of RCCG and launched her into global religious maps. Through Adebayo’s charismatic qualities, healing activities coupled with modernization processes, the church has sustained considerable organizational and numerical growth, and geo-ethnic spread within Nigeria and beyond.¹¹ It is believed to be the fastest growing and one of the most popular African Pentecostal churches in and outside Nigeria today with a conservative estimate of over 5,000 parishes. In 2007, the RCCG lays claim to over 350 parishes spread in virtually all of the European Union, although a huge number of parishes are located in the United Kingdom.

The “Open Heavens” parish is the pioneer RCCG branch in Edinburgh, which currently hosts five parishes. The earliest group started as a House Fellowship with some immigrant families residing in Wester Hailes area of Edinburgh.

10. See RCCG Open Heavens Edinburgh official website available at: <http://uk.geocities.com/rccgohe@btinternet.com/index.htm>

11. For a concise history of the RCCG, see Adogame (2004). See also the RCCG official website, available at: <http://home.rccg.org>

Soon its membership started to grow, leading to its commissioning as a parish on the 14th Sept 2003. As they are yet to acquire their own building or worship space, services are held in rented hall spaces with the Odeon Cinema facilities. Its pioneering Pastor, a female, Christiana Longe is described by a member as a “she-man, a no-nonsense leader with a clear vision of leadership”. She is well respected by members of the parish, a membership that rose to over 350 in 2007. Four new parishes have been established following the RCCG corporate strategy of planting new branches. Membership is largely West African—visibly Nigerian, but with a few Europeans and other non-Africans. Women form a larger share of the membership. Their calendar of religious events include the regular Sunday morning worship and weekly programmes; but also special events such as Women’s Day, Men’s Day, Family Seminar. The Open Heavens Edinburgh parish represents one of the growing RCCG worldwide branches that are led by women. What is particularly important here is how men respond to a female leader or what gender attitudes are generated under such circumstances. Evidently, majority of male members are quite favourably disposed towards the female leadership. They believe that Pastor Longe possesses leadership qualities and capabilities that male members should emulate. Elsewhere, Bateye (2001) aptly explores female leadership and gender perceptions in the context of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. She observes what amounts to a paradigmatic shift in significant attitudes of the Pentecostal churches from the stereotypic notions of “*imported missions*” teaching that promotes patriarchal domination. The implication of the acceptance of female leadership as she opines is that, by questioning the mission churches stance on women leadership roles, African Christians dare to question the hitherto unassailable Western ideological prejudices (sexism) imposed on them through colonialism. Her observation about men’s positive attitudes towards their female leaders is in consonance with our field observation at the RCCG Edinburgh parish. As we have argued, female religious power and leadership mobility straddles both the home and diasporic contexts. While the diasporic setting is shaped by contextual, local factors, which may be peculiar to it, we can better understand religious developments in diaspora partly as a reflection of dynamic, local changes in immigrant’s original home contexts. To this dynamics we shall now turn.

The gendering of religious experience and expression in Africa

From the exploration of the dynamic roles, viability and visibility of women in African diasporic churches above, it could be imagined that this is a novel development occurring mainly in a milieu where democratic values and the liberalization of gender roles are assumed to be rife. There is a popular perception within the new African diaspora context that women and children’s legal rights and liberties are largely disproportionate, biased and discriminatory in contradistinction to men. As many men would argue, evidence abounds which confirms

that most legal verdicts regarding marital conflicts are most likely in favour of women. This is perhaps another stimulus towards women's empowerment, although it also effaces inherent contradictions and problems, some of which the diasporic churches and groups claim to be grappling with. A differing, contrary tone was however sounded by a female member, mother of two. As she claims:

"The major war we mothers are fighting in the UK is to rescue our children from being lost here. We do not want to lose our children to this society. It seems that our rights as mothers (parents) were long eroded, taken away from us and given to children in this society. How can I be afraid to scold my child? We are just begging to pamper them and they seem to know it. Here, if you do not mind the way you discipline or even talk to your child, the Welfare Council will snatch him/her away from you... You see, is this not a spiritual battle we are engaged in? With the help of our God we shall win..."

In pragmatic terms, many parents within the churches allude to the identity crisis and ambiguities they face in the new social context of Europe. Most of what they perceive as social contradiction is often given a religious twist in a way that justifies the quest for spiritual solace and empowerment.

We would contend in this concluding section that there is no total disconnect between women's religious experiences and expressions in the new African diaspora and on the continent itself. Transnational linkages and networks, faster modes of travel and technological (media) revolution have rendered the connecting nexus between the "original" homeland (Africa) and the "new" home context (Europe), as well as between different host contexts somewhat fluid and unbounded. The intricate relationship that agglutinates processes of religious transnationalism forecloses and critiques the view that immigrants cut ties with the homeland after conscious integration and assimilation into the host society. Several works with concrete case studies on the complex transnational ties that exist in multiple contexts does shatter this assumption. In fact, we argue in this paper that religious developments in the African diaspora reflect religious currents in Africa. A brief historiography of perspectives of gender and religion in Africa is expedient here.

The discourse of women, gender and religion in African societies is relatively new. While scholars such as Sudarkasa (1999), Amadiume (1987), Barber (1991), Awe (1992), Matory (1994), and Oyewumi (1999) have written generally about gendered power relations in Africa; others including Drewal and Drewal (1983), Gleason (1987), Kaplan (1997), King (1995) and Jules-Rosette (1979, 1981) explore perspectives of women and gender in relation to religion especially through their exposition of indigenous cosmological myths, female figures in the pantheon of gods/divinities, women as ritual specialists (prophetesses) and also in the indigenous political organization, where in some societies, dual parallel system of male/female chieftaincy is paramount. Peach's (2002) *Women and World Religion* is a more general contribution to the discourse of

women and religion, using a comparative approach to world religions with primary focus on "actual" women as opposed to goddesses or other images and symbols of females and the feminine found in religious myths, art and scriptures.

Among the most recent, detailed works that explore women, religion and gender, especially within the context of African Christianity, few of them, such as those by Oduyoye (1992, 1995), Crumbley (1985, 1989, 1992), Hoeller-Fatton (1996), Bateye (2001, 2002), Olajubu (2003), Sackey (2006) and Mukonyora (2007) stand out. In this respect, this growing field appears till now to be the exclusive preserve of women. Women themselves have written virtually all the recent works. Some deserve brief mention here. Olajubu's book (2003) was an excellent exploration of the interplay of gender and power relations in the Yoruba religious sphere and the implication of this interplay for women's roles in Yoruba indigenous and Christian traditions. She aptly concludes that gender and power relations among the Yoruba are attended by multiplicity and fluidity, necessitating a process of constant negotiation (p. 129). Sackey (2006) examines the changing gender relations in Ghanaian African Independent Churches and other African religious movements such as Pentecostal/charismatic groups, and how women have managed to make a breakthrough in the religious sphere in spite of problems created by gender. She demonstrates "how women are gaining strong social popularity and pervasive influence in Ghana and West Africa generally through their role as church founders, religious leaders, healers, mothers, social workers, politicians, custodians and partners in development, ??? culture" (2006: 6). She also emphasizes ways in which women are reclaiming leadership in spite of problems of gender. By "reclaim" she meant that women are not new to leadership in some West African societies. She cites among several examples, Grace Tani who founded the Church of the Twelve Apostles, the first Ghanaian Spiritual Church in 1914.

Roles are not fixed and static but susceptible to change in space and time. Gender roles in Africa are flexible, as even ascribed male and female roles may change under certain circumstances (Sackey, 2006: 51). Flexible gender systems in some African societies encouraged the institutions of female husband and male daughter, for example, among the Igbo, which allowed women to occupy roles and positions usually monopolized by men, and thereby exercise considerable authority over both men and women (Amadiume, 1987: 21-40). Gender inequalities are partly attributable to Western influences, particularly deriving from colonial policies. Mission churches were largely under the tutelage of missionaries, who themselves had patriarchal orientations. As we noted above, by highlighting a strand of Pauline injunctions to the detriment of other biblical provisions, women were stripped of their ritual power in the churches they founded.

In consideration of the extent to which women founders of charismatic churches have been able to maintain their leadership positions, Sackey examines

some of their new initiatives, and the arrangements they have created for women to sustain spiritual and legal arrangement. The rationale for these arrangements are not far-fetched, they are crucial to forestalling leadership crises that almost invariably accompany the death of the original founder and generally result in the usurpation of female leadership (2006: 163). Women play leadership roles not simply in terms of heading or founding the religious institution. There is a certain tendency of assertiveness in virtually all sections they are faced with. Also as we have shown in the above case examples, their visibility in all church programmes and activities is a sure sign of this. Sackey aptly summarizes this pro-activity as: “women are leading men to lead” (2006: 164). In this way she considers female support mechanisms and the gender arrangements existing in several African societies. One noticeable change in gender relationship is discernible in the ordination of pastors’ wives to become church co-leaders. Sackey describes this development as forerunner of the dual leadership system in local charismatic churches today (p. 163). As Höeller-Fatton (1996: 105-6) remarks on Roho religion in Kenya, “sometimes both women and men were ordained as teachers or catechists, healers and pastors”.

In discourses on gender relations especially with regards to women and men, we often miss the point when our consideration hinges upon equality in terms of power relations and in unearthing the ratio of women to men in leadership positions. The question of which sex is dominant should not actually be a bone of contention. It is pertinent that we transcend paradigms of equality and parity, beyond the appropriation of higher-ranking positions of authority over others as this always turns into an enigmatic exercise. The sharing of spiritual management by a woman and man is pervasive in several African societies. Olajubu (2003: 9) aptly argues that “the existence of gender construct among the Yoruba (*Africans generally*) does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men, because it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations, which is rooted in the people’s cosmic experience”. Sudarkasa corroborates this assertion that a neutral complementarity rather than subordination more accurately describes the relationship between male and female roles in various pre-colonial African societies (Terborg-Penn *et al.*, 1996: 82). This representation of neutral complementarity suggesting cooperation rather than competition seems to be the case, especially within religious contexts, in both postcolonial African societies as well as in the African diaspora.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated the dynamism of contemporary international migration, the evolving of a new African diaspora and its ongoing feminization. The texture of immigration is rapidly changing in local-global contexts but also interpersonal relationships between women and men, discourses of gender empowerment and identity politics around it. Using examples of African diasporic

churches, we have attempted to explore the increasing feminization of new African diasporic religiosity under the rubrics of female leadership dynamics and the appropriation of empowerment rhetoric. The paper has also highlighted how the polity and demography are increasingly becoming feminized. We contend, however, that the resurgence and public visibility of female leaders and ritual roles within African religiosity in the new diaspora and on the continent must be located in historical, socio-cultural precedents. Female religious actors, particularly within the African Instituted Churches and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, are partly staging a "come-back" to assuming hitherto "traditional" roles and ritual functions, for which they were largely stripped by colonialism and mission Christianity. As Olupona aptly remarks in his "Foreword" to Olajubu's book (2003: x): "By democratizing certain roles and responsibilities, women are being increasingly incorporated into ecclesial administrative and liturgical structures in ways that mission churches before them failed to do..." We conclude that this growing feminization is also indicative of how such religious repertoires are situated within processes of African modernity.

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Résumé

La dynamique complexe des migrations contemporaines à l'intérieur et hors de l'Afrique, se révèle en partie dans sa féminisation croissante. Les femmes assument de plus en plus des rôles de gestion, de décision ou de direction d'industrie. Certaines fondent des Églises, sont dirigeantes ou employées religieuses officielles sur les deux rives de l'Atlantique. Comment les dynamiques de pouvoir, les relations entre hommes et femmes s'épuisent-elles, se transforment-elles ou se reconstituent-elles en situation post-migratoire ? S'appuyant sur la nouvelle ethnographie religieuse des communautés africaines chrétiennes en diaspora, européennes ou nord-américaines, cet article étudie la féminisation croissante de la religiosité des migrants africains et démontre, par des exemples précis de leadership féminin, comment la politique et la démographie se féminisent rapidement. La visibilité des leaders féminins et des rôles rituels dans la religiosité africaine en diaspora et sur le continent prend sa source dans des antécédents historiques et socio-culturels. Cette féminisation croissante suggère également que ces registres religieux sont intégrés dans les processus de la modernité africaine.

Mots-clés : Migrations, féminisation des rôles, communautés africaines en Europe, modernité.

Abstract

The complex dynamism of contemporary migration within and beyond Africa is partly reflected in its increasing feminization. Women are assuming increasing roles as resource managers, decision makers and captains of industries. Some have become church founders, leaders and visible religious functionaries on both sides of the Atlantic. How are the dynamics of power and interpersonal relationships between husband and wife; men and women played out, altered or reconstituted in post-migration circumstances? Drawing upon recent religious ethnography among new African Christian communities in diaspora-Europe and North America, the paper explores the increasing feminization of African immigrant religiosity; and demonstrates with specific examples of female leadership dynamics, how the polity and demography are increasingly becoming feminized. We contend that the resurgence and public visibility of female leaders and ritual roles within African religiosity in the new diaspora and on the continent must be located in historical, socio-cultural precedents. Suffice to say that this growing feminization also suggests how such religious repertoires are situated within processes of African modernity.

Key words: Migrations, functions feminization, African communities in Europe, modernity.

Resumen

La dinámica compleja de las migraciones contemporáneas dentro y fuera de África se revela en parte en su feminización creciente. Las mujeres asumen progresivamente roles de gestión, de decisión o de dirección. Algunas fundan iglesias, son dirigentes o empleadas religiosas oficiales en las dos costas del Atlántico. ¿De qué maneras las dinámicas de poder, las relaciones entre hombres y mujeres se agotan, se transforman o se reconstruyen en situación post-migratoria? Apoyándose en la nueva etnografía religiosa de las comunidades africanas cristianas en diáspora, europeas o norteamericanas, este artículo estudia la feminización creciente de la religiosidad de los migrantes africanos y demuestra, a través de ejemplos precisos, de liderazgos femeninos, cómo la política y la demografía se feminizan rápidamente. La visibilidad de las líderes femeninas y de los roles rituales en la religiosidad africana en diáspora y en el continente reconoce su fuente en los antecedentes históricos y socio-culturales. Esta feminización creciente sugiere igualmente que estos registros religiosos están integrados en el proceso de la modernidad africana.

Palabras clave: Migraciones, feminización de funciones, comunidades africanas en Europa, modernidad.

