

Unusual Liturgical Ritual Practices by Present-day Prophets in South Africa

A Practical Theological Analysis

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1 Introduction

The study aimed to critically analyze the unusual liturgical ritual practices of some prophets in South Africa to extrapolate the rationale behind their power to attract crowds – why present-day prophets employ potentially harmful liturgical ritual healing practices and why people throng to these churches. The name ‘present-day’ refers to the current Pentecostal African churches. These particular prophets have deviated from Pentecostal theology toward a somewhat unusual or unorthodox theology, hence the indication ‘present-day’ – relating to unfortunate current happenings. The research is based on the cognizance of the desperation for divine healing and miracles that have driven communities to engage in harmful religious practices. Even some people from the upper economic class fall prey to this trend. News and commentary about South African prophets and their unusual liturgical ritual practices has been prevalent on social media globally: the ingestion of antiseptic liquid and petrol, or the spraying of insecticide fumigant, as well as the oral consumption of grass to heal, are among the ‘bad practices’ of these churches.

In this study I conducted qualitative media research, applying exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory methods to three cases, namely: Case A – Mount Zion Genera Assembly; Case B – Spiritual Christian Church; and Case C – Rabboni Centre Ministries. The study aimed to investigate the current form of healing practice and probe whether transformative development and maintenance of good liturgy can be achieved, whether it is possible to work towards normative standards applicable to scriptural traditions and theological concepts and to contribute to reshaping current practice. The research findings are intended to benefit the church leadership and the community. Furthermore, to elucidate the phenomenon of unusual liturgical practices, the researcher had to investigate the demeanor of church liturgy, inculturation, rituals of healing, and the worldview and attributes of prophets and adherents.

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2 Unusual healing practices

The first chapter offers a brief background on these unusual healing practices by prophets. Various liturgical applications and performances of salvation, worship, and healing rituals were viewed within particular contexts in particular African communities, which often have distinct theological and social expectations. A critical area of operation in the present-day movement is prophecy, healing, and deliverance, offering answers to people's prayers. The present-day churches' theology is characterized as 'hyper,' meaning taking healing rituals to extremes. Church A administered insecticides on adherents' faces and body parts to address sicknesses. Moreover, grass was consumed on the church grounds by church B to encourage faith in God, and at church C drinking antiseptic liquid was used to cure a woman's infertility in a firmly held view that poison 'will not kill you' if you believe. The varied forms of ritual healing practice, coupled with charisma and flexibility, are a feature that attracts the masses.

The researcher explored social media archives on the activities and practices by personalities and organizations that constitute a societal problem. Data were sourced from leading media outlets in South Africa, for example News24, Daily Sun, and City Press, to name a few. The study followed the ethical clearance received from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria.

3 Prophets

This section explored the attitude held by prophets, expressed in their titles and their significance. For example, In Mount Zion General Assembly, the prophet bears the title of detective – a high-ranking officer with investigative duties (investigating and solving the origin of the problem). In Rabboni Center Ministries, the prophet is titled the professor – a faculty member of the highest academic rank (the highest seat in the spiritual realm). In the Spiritual Christian church, the prophet bears the name of advocate – a professional pleader in a court of justice (he pleads cases in the courts of heaven). Moreover, this section discusses the three perceived fundamental qualifications of prophets – the ability of a spiritual general who invokes spiritual power for protection, and the capacities to provide material wealth and thirdly to mediate between the spiritual realm and the material world. The churches' logo and adverts give an impression of the church's vision and mission, for example, alternating in using the symbols of the globe (connoting global communication), the lion (as the king of the jungle), and the eagle (connoting soaring high).

This section also explores the cult of personality, i.e. exaggerated devotion. Miracle-seekers idolize prophets and pastors, and some perceive them as heroes, almost as a worshipful image. He is the star of the show.

4 Healing practices

This section describes the background of the prophets. It outlines specific actions and functions involved in the prophetic churches' healing practices that tip the scale from conventional to unconventional healing methods. Miracles, healing, and deliverance service that represent unorthodox or theologically unsound doctrines are elucidated.

Social media posts concerning the church's contents, such as videos and texts, are used to increase the visibility of their church. Prophets upload church activities to Facebook or YouTube, showcasing their mirabilia. Facing fierce competition, prophets are aware of how a pragmatic religious disposition can help them to gain and keep followers. Alongside healing and deliverance, prophecy – a prediction of the future – is another significant feature inherent in the ideology of particular communities.

Ritual healing procedures carried out by the churches in question included the following: *Church A*. On the 27th of November 2016, the prophet demonstrated the power of God by first spraying the insecticide on himself, then on his congregants to heal cancer, HIV, or any other illness, as well as drive out demons. He was later charged in the court of law by 'tiger brands', the company that produces the pesticide. It was also alleged that the prophet called on the usher to bring big stones into the church; then, with the church members lying down on the floor at his feet, he dropped the heavy stones onto them. The stones were supposed to heal their sins; he told the congregation God instructed him to do it. *Church B*. In church B, the prophet desired to display God's protective power by having the congregation eating grass and guzzling petrol. The prophet first tested the petrol in front of the congregation to demonstrate that it was flammable, and then claimed to turn petrol into pineapple juice. Photos came from the church's Facebook. *Church C*. The prophet drank 'Dettol' – an antiseptic liquid – in front of the congregation before giving it to them to drink. He also gave them antifreeze to drink, saying it would chase Satan's spirit from his church and stop alcoholics from drinking beer. Furthermore, he used *Jik* – a bleach – to heal. The prophet told the congregation that it was *Jik* but claimed that after the prayer of declaration, it was changed into the blood of Jesus Christ, meaning that it would not harm anyone who consumes it.

5 Liturgical actions and functions of church worship

This chapter describes the liturgical actions and functions of church worship. Liturgy is an essential function of the church to proclaim the principles of faith and provide church services to the people. Present-day churches appear relevant to the traditional African philosophy because they offer a holistic liturgical service. Adherents are attracted to liturgical events that promise good health, prosperity, marriage, and the fruit of the womb, to mention but a few. Therefore, prophets are perceived as problem-solvers who hold authoritative spiritual power to overcome opposing spiritual forces. Canonical

services may last five to six hours. The following are types of liturgies or different church events that take place in prophetic churches.

5.1 Singing

Every church service commences with a song. The songs performed have the following characteristics: a testimony, an exhortation, a lament for God's grace, the journey to heaven, victory over Satan, thanksgiving, and warfare songs, for example:

We will conquer due to the Lord of hosts leading the battle; we are victors because the battle belongs to the Lord, the Lord strong and mighty.

After singing, adherents are invited to the front to share their testimonies. Genres of testimonies include, for example, miracles, healings, deliverances, breakthroughs, blessings, employment, or childbirth, to name a few. The purpose of testimonies is to generate an atmosphere of faith. Worship follows testimonies, taking the form of exuberance, deep emotion, highly participatory dance, raising hands, crying, noisy hollering, and very noisy instruments, clapping hands, kneeling, lying on the ground, speaking in tongues, and laughing, while the praise team leads worship. Worship as a religious rite expresses reverence and adoration for God and prepares individuals' hearts to be receptive to the preaching of the word of God.

5.2 Preaching

Preaching of the word is expected to bring the text described into reality. The preaching is mainly sourced from the New Testament. The prophet may use 'hype' and emotionalism to get people to respond to the altar call. The impression is that these prophets are the 'sole-carriers' of God's power. The nature of prophecy in prophetic churches is diagnostic. They identify the source of affliction, then pray for people or conduct a deliverance. In present-day churches, individuals are given prophecies such as the adherent's location, including street name; the description of their house; their cell phone number; the names of children or parents; the names of co-workers, future events, date of birth; and ID and passport numbers. This type of information is usually sourced from the application forms given.

5.3 Praying

Prayer involves communicating with God, and a prayer is a communication tool that aids the believer in making affirmations. Prophetic church prayers take different forms within the church, including the prayer line, collective prayer, and prayer on a mountain top. During prayer, the power of God flows through the hands of the 'prayee' to the recipient. Furthermore, the recipient testifies to actually feeling the manifestation of the supernatural power of God. Usually, the hands are laid on the recipient's

head/forehead, chest, and palms, or place of concern. The impact or force associated with this liturgical ritual action occasionally causes the recipient to fall, usually backward (under the power).

Furthermore, the whole church partakes in prayer declarations issued in the form of an intransigent command, for instance:

In the name of Jesus, You demon of infirmity, leave my body now! I am healed! I command health in this body! Now! By the blood of Jesus! I am made whole, from head to toe! In the name of Jesus! You ancestral covenants be broken now! You curse of bareness be broken! Be reversed! You deaf and dumb spirit, I command you out! Never come back! You spirit of poverty, I uproot you! Go! In Jesus' name!

These prayers have become tools in the hands of the believers. Scripture texts that negate tribulations or maladies are declared. The perception is that the power of declarations carries the authority in a way similar to that of a divine court order. Furthermore, 'prayer mountain' involves intercessory groups that retreat to the mountain to fast and pray to circumvent misfortune. Mountains seem important to the narrative of present-day faith, though they are also alluring to a wide variety of religious pilgrims.

5.4 Deliverance

Deliverance is considered an avenue and a practice that employs pneumatological liturgical activities to respond to human existential needs. The purpose of deliverance in present-day church liturgy is based on the traditional cultural background: to be set free from evil manifestations. It is alleged that deliverance should first occur in the heart to ensure that it is freed and transformed before the body can receive deliverance. Transformation is a process, and divine healing is a gift from God. The church's perception is that healing may be imparted or transferred through laying of hands, prayer, declarations based on scriptures, and fasting.

5.5 Fasting

Fasting, abstaining from food, is a significant liturgical ritual practice undertaken by present-day churches regularly to lead them into divine intimacy with God. The perception is that in this way they attain great power for divine manifestations in their ministries. The churches observe the following fasts: one-day fast or half-day fasts, intermittent fasting for a week, bi-weekly, three days and three nights each month, or the Daniel fast, i.e. eating fruit and vegetables.

6 Inculturation

This section explored the inculturation of present-day prophetic churches. Prophetic churches evangelize or draw people by prophesying, healing, and deliverance liturgies. This study found that African churches utilize these spiritual gifts as a practical approach in attracting crowds. Prophecy as part of the evangelical toolset in prophetic churches stems from the tradition of local communities asking traditional witch doctors about family matters, good or bad. Additionally, divine healing in particular was found to be an indispensable tool in spreading the gospel in all cultures, especially African cultures. In these liturgies, the belief is that the Holy Spirit has the power to heal the sick and ward off evil spirits and sorcery.

The deliverance phenomenon has been influenced by T.B. Joshua of ‘SCOAN’ – Synagogue Church of all Nations in Nigeria – and others in West Africa. South African prophets are considered to be drawing on and extending West African liturgy. Additionally, in exploring the topic of deliverance, this study found deliverance to be the central practice in the liturgy of African Pentecostalism, employing spiritual gifts in liturgical activities to respond to human existential needs. The deployment of divine power and authority in the name of Jesus is perceived in pneumatological terms as the Holy Spirit’s intervention to provide a release for the demon-possessed, demon-oppressed, broken, disturbed, and troubled persons. The deliverance movement is fast becoming one of the most significant expressions of Christianity in African communities. Furthermore, the enormous and unparalleled contribution by present-day prophets has reshaped the face of religion in South Africa.

7 Ritual functions

This chapter examined ritual functions and their nature in the practice of liturgical healing in South Africa. In this regard, transitional ceremonies include different rites and rituals performed in church, amongst others: laying on of hands, anointing with oil, anointing with water, decrees and declarations (scriptural directives), fasting, and deliverance rituals. These rituals are multidimensional, and the rite of passage may occur in the healing process or in the perception that healing is transformational. An individual is moved from one status to another. Healing rituals address every level of recovery concerning the whole person, i.e., spiritual, emotional, psychological, physical, and environmental.

Health is narrated causatively among African communities as due to supernatural forces, black magic, or the use of spells and occultic activities that require spiritual or supernatural intervention. Other maladies demand a higher degree of God’s interposition – the miraculous. This view is essential to understanding the phenomenon of unusual healing ritual practices by prophetic churches. Healing miracles have been attested throughout history. Furthermore, miraculous events sometimes function as provisional instruments for essential provisional needs and comfort. The power of these rituals lies in their subjective symbolic meaning and their ability to invoke a mystical realm that transcends their

domain, presenting the claim of multiple realities. Verbal scriptural utterances, testimonies, a euphoric atmosphere, loud music, and a hyped-up prophet eager to pray for the masses feels plausible as an analgesia. Prophetic churches take spiritual ontology very seriously; they believe in devils, magic, the supernatural (paranormal), and often indistinguishable boundaries between the real and the unreal.

8 African worldview

The chapter discussed the worldview of prophets and their followers, namely their social behavior and belief systems. Most African societies possess particular perspectives and interpretations of life. The elucidation of these churches' belief systems and practices will aid in unravelling the phenomenon of unusual prophetic churches in South Africa. The African belief system ranks God as the highest supreme being, high above the veneration of the forefathers. African culture takes family to extend beyond the basic social unit to include grandparents and other relatives. However, ancestors bless and also inflict harm whenever fixed laws are breached.

Furthermore, concerning spirits, there are good ones and evil ones. The perception is that, since spirits do not have bodies, they wander in search of something or someone to possess. Other spirits are regarded as sadistic spirits or evil apparitions. Concerning African religion, one reality exists, and part of it is transcendental. Furthermore, witchcraft is also regarded as transcendental and harmful. Witches are regarded as active agents of malicious activity that can cause harm to people, leading to misfortune. The perception is that witches employ the help of evil forces to inflict harm on their enemies by invoking them to operate in other people's lives.

Prophets are expected to know the causes and cures of these harmful situations. Deliverance and healing are essential aspects of the Christian life, bringing together people affected by the same evil in proximity with one another to be touched by the supernatural force that intervenes and alters human destinies for good or ill. In this regard, people throng to prophetic churches to avoid manifestations of looming evil. The conviction is that people's physical welfare ultimately depends upon the spiritual realm of God and the departed.

Moreover, liturgies have a spiritual significance. God resides in a non-physical world, beyond physical laws, high up in the heavens beyond other deities, and must be revered. Furthermore, the operation of the Holy Spirit in the African context is pertinent to the African psyche in terms of this salvific work. Healing is a holistic affair. The whole person is supposed to be free from sickness and protected from enemies, afflicting spirits, poverty, hardship, failure, unemployment, and setbacks. Affliction involves the individual, the individual's family, the group, and the community, therefore integrating the individual's entire life. In this view, all gateways leading to bloodline covenants, ancestral cords, generational curses, and curses imposed by household enemies must be closed off. People who go to seek deliverance complain of harassment by some of the wickedness mentioned above. Moreover, in traditional religion people also pray for wealth, success, and prosperity.

9 Prophecy

This section elucidates the functions of prophets and the prophetic office. There is a clear history of fallible prophets throughout history that sought to please and support kings, motivated or driven by their self-seeking motives without any prompting from God. However, there were also infallible prophets moved by conviction and motivated by the will of God. Cultic worshippers are now misusing the prophetic office. The interest in prophecy seems to be one of the qualities that escalate the popularity of ‘prophetic churches.’ Africans show curiosity and concern about the future or future events. Followers of this trend demand specific guidance for every specific problem. They have graduated from traditional or cultural tendencies of consulting spiritualists to consulting prophets. Some spiritualists or *n’anga* (witch doctor) will gladly take a chance at guessing for a price. Prophecy, however, is not guessing, nor is it speculation. Prophecy is a divine disclosure of upcoming events predestined by God. The orientation towards a magical world in Africa has moved seamlessly from the world of spirits to the domain of the Holy Spirit.

Presently worshipers are unable to differentiate between manifestations of the Holy Spirit and the activities of spirit mediums. The line between the two realms appears to be blurred. The conflicting positions leave the believer in a compromised and gullible state. Both sides, i.e. the Holy Spirit and spirit mediums, manifest gifts of speaking in tongues, prophecy, deliverance, and healing, to name a few. Besides working with miracles, signs, and wonders, the Holy Spirit and spirit mediums produce dreams and visions and interpret them. Every prophet in present-day churches yearns to possess the dynamic power of altering states. Most prophets claim to operate through the power of the Holy Spirit. However, some prophets are suspected of employing contrary powers from spirits.

9.1 Competition amongst prophetic churches

There is much competition amongst prophetic church leaders and the titles they carry. Titles bestow honor and status on the prophet. In addition to their titles, the prophets also present themselves well: the polished male-model image, including fashionable and tight-fitting suits, and a neat army haircut. Aspiring supporters desire to be like the prophet or man of God. The idea of becoming superstars motivates young prophets. The young radical and upcoming prophets prominently display vitality with their ability to establish churches founded by one person under the sole control of one person. Tapping into the spiritual dimensions and acquiring power and wealth are idealized and legitimized. These aspiring radical young prophets seem to have found the pastoral career more attractive than pursuing a civil servant career or finding employment within the private sector. They aspire to be famous flamboyant mega-stars of large churches. Although most young prophets have not reached the mega-church status yet, they emulate their paragons by dressing snappy and presenting an attractive appearance. Prophetic churches tend to be human-centered or anthropocentric as opposed to God-centered or theocentric churches. The concept of human-centeredness, whereby the congregants

elevate the prophet instead of Christ (Christ centrality), is erroneous. The prophet steals the show (the glory) that is due to God. Prophets mesmerize the crowds by performing unusual miracles, and this causes an increase in congregational adoration for the prophet. Prophets are given stewardship of that which is divine, and they should direct the congregation to know God on a personal basis – to have a relationship with God.

Furthermore, the problem of winning crowds through signs and wonders or prophetic utterances is that the moment it all ceases, so does the attendance. As a result, most present-day prophets are compelled to carry on with the show in a frantic effort to keep their flock by all means (with or without God's power). Young contemporary pastors can easily navigate their way through digital media on a broader social scale. They interact easily within network spaces, and they are not immune to the danger of subverting established Christian teachings, doctrines, and values in order to impress. The church's Facebook page enables large-scale connectivity to people from different backgrounds, cultures, and faiths.

10 Conclusions

This chapter concerns the interpretation, reflection and analysis of the functioning of unusual liturgical healing rituals of present-day prophets. The research examined normative standards applicable to scriptures and theological standards. Restoring the churches to sound theological and biblical doctrine will involve a process of reflective dialogue, prophetic discernment, and influencing and guiding the congregation. Pastors, leaders, and organizations must take a critical and watchful stance to bar 'bad practice' to inculcate 'good practice.' In this view the healing methods offered have proven to be a source of concern.

The current unusual practices possess harmful effects that contribute to social decay. A theological reflection always starts with existing practice, then traverses through critical reflection towards a more faithful form of practice – in a process in which an assumed ultimate objective is bound up within the action itself. The basic framework is to explore, analyze, and reflect on how to discern different elements that constitute the problem of unusual liturgical ritual healing.

Specific behavioral patterns have been noticed in how prophets manipulate the congregation and influence mindsets to comply with their schemes. Prophets influence adherents to partake in harmful healing rituals such as eating grass and drinking petrol, antiseptic liquid, and bleach as a solution, which is bad and harmful practice. This study has explored the phenomenon utilizing biblical and theological standards in order describe, explain, interpret, and reflect upon the problem through the lens of a progression towards good practice.

However, at the moment present-day religion is regarded as a solution by many. Some large prophetic churches have managed to position themselves socially, economically, and politically around the country and are backed by the state – the game plan of the government is to sway churches to

win elections. Moreover, officials receive prayers to evade corruption, which poses a challenge to the regulation of these religious organizations, and no-one is held accountable for these actions.

10.1 Recommendations for further research

There is a need for further research through the lens of theological and biblical perspectives and other disciplines to unearth the forces underlying this phenomenon. It is necessary to critically analyze the unusual healing practices and the pursuit of power by present-day prophets, which has become a national concern. Further research is needed to resolve the problem and investigate the source of power employed in rituals. There is a deficit in empirical studies in this context. Despite the variety of research styles within the social sciences, there is a consensus that further contributions on this new trend are needed and in particular that a contribution to the study is needed from the practical theological field.

The study recommends that workshops for young pastors assist in articulating specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior associated with theological competency. Other recommendations include ecumenical outreach, accreditations, and continual interaction and collaboration between the churches and critical facilitators. Furthermore, the public needs to be informed about sound religious healing practices. Learners should be informed through life skills of the dangers of abuse.

10.2 Final conclusions

Diviners used to play a crucial role in Africans' life questions. Modern society has encountered the savory promises of wholeness through the new trend of spiritual churches. People abandoned their beliefs and upbringing (African traditional practice) and converted to Christianity. The conversion means doing away with diviners and attaching oneself to Christianity. However, when pressure mounts, the prophet's position is juxtaposed or compromised. He goes back to consulting diviners to avoid partisan migration and religious dualism (two supreme opposed powers). The departure from the established traditional theological resources and biblical insights has culminated in the current unusual liturgical healing ritual practice. The traditional African outlook has managed to institute itself in the Christian liturgy over the years. The notion of ancestors, bad luck, and witchcraft frequently surface during deliverance sessions. The quest to overcome evil forces that are perceived to be wicked and are responsible for bringing ill-health, poverty, adversity, ill fate, hardship, and premature death is the reason why people pursue amelioration from these present-day churches.