

## Article

# Consultations in New Prophetic Churches and African Traditional Religions: A Case Study of Divine Healing in Assessing Syncretistic Practices in the South African Context

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**Abstract:** New prophetic churches have a different approach to classical Pentecostalism when it comes to the practice of divine healing. Unlike classical Pentecostalism, new prophetic churches embrace the practice of consulting prophets in divine healing in the same way as that in which a traditional healer would be consulted in traditional African religions. During the consultation, the prophet charges a fee and prescribes sacred products that are similar to those of traditional African religious practices. This article uses a case study to illustrate the similarities between new prophetic churches and traditional African religions. Although there are similarities between the two movements, there is a need to also demonstrate their differences. The similarities are framed as continuities, and differences as discontinuities. When diagnosing the problem, a traditional healer throws traditional bones, but a prophet relies on the Holy Spirit to utter a prophetic word. When exorcising a demon causing sickness and diseases, a traditional healer uses rituals to invoke the spirits, but new prophetic churches, with all their weaknesses, would still use the name of Jesus to cast out the evil spirits. The findings in this article have some implications within the theoretical framework of syncretism. The similarities demonstrate syncretistic practices, and the discontinuities demonstrate the nonsyncretistic nature of new prophetic churches in South Africa.

**Keywords:** new prophetic churches; Pentecostalism; traditional African religions; case study; healing; syncretism; spirit world; traditional healing



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## 1. Introduction

The growth of Christianity is shifting from the global north to the global south, with Africa playing a major role in this shift (Bediako 1995, p. 190). One of the major contributors to this shift within the Christian tradition is Pentecostalism. While some mainline and missionary churches have shown a downward spiral, Pentecostal churches in Africa have been growing to great numbers in the last 20 years. According to Wariboko (2017, p. 5), “In 2015 the population of Pentecostals (renewalists) in Africa was estimated at 202.92 million, constituting 35.32 percent of the continent’s Christian population of 574.52 million and 17.11 percent of total continent’s population of 1.19 billion”. Studies indicate that this number could double if not triple by 2025 (Sanneh 2013; Anderson 2013; Johnson et al. 2017). There could be more of these churches that are unaccounted for, since some of them are not even registered with formal institutions in their countries for proper statistics. In South Africa, there are a myriad independent churches that can be classified within the broader scope of Pentecostalism. In the last 10 years, South Africa has seen the emergence of new prophetic churches, which are part of Neo-Pentecostalism.

New prophetic churches have become popular in the religious landscape in South Africa, and are also found in countries such as Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Ghana. These churches are a different form of Pentecostalism, as their practices differ from those of conventional Pentecostal movements such as classical Pentecostal churches (Chitando and Biri 2016; Manyonganise 2016). New prophetic churches draw their Pentecostal theology

from Neo-Pentecostalism, but emphasize more the prophetic dimension of that theology (White and Pondani 2022, p. 3; Ramantswana 2018, p. 4; Tsekpoe 2019; Banda 2021). Hence, the movement is popular for prophetic deliverance, titles, problem diagnosis, products, and consultations (Kgatle 2019, p. 3; Kgatle and Anderson 2020; Kgatle 2022a, 2022b). The concept of consulting a prophet to access divine healing is common among new prophetic churches. There are activities that happen during these consultations that are consistent with African religious practices. This article argues that, although continuities with African religious practices exist, there is a need to also explore discontinuities. This is achieved by using a theory of syncretism to demonstrate syncretistic and nonsyncretistic practices in new prophetic churches in South Africa.

A case study method was used to show what a prophet healer and traditional healer would do in a given situation. This method is used to show the similarities and differences between new prophetic churches and traditional African religions during healing. A case study approach is used to understand the activities of a specific phenomenon in a real-life situation (Crowe et al. 2011). The life situation in this article is the case of consulting a prophet healer and a traditional healer in seeking divine healing. The traditional African religious worldview is outlined to understand its background of healing and deliverance. The concept of consulting about healing and deliverance in the traditional African religious landscape is studied to compare with new prophetic churches. Thus, this study shows the similarities and differences that exist between African traditional religions and new prophetic churches when it comes to consultations to access divine healing.

## 2. Syncretism in the Context of Pentecostalism: Theoretical Framework

In general terms, syncretism is the practice of combining different systems of beliefs into one religious movement. Umoh (2013, p. 32) explained, "Syncretism normally refers to merging beliefs of two or more religious systems in order to come up with a new one". In Pentecostalism, syncretism is used to study the practice of believing in more than one views, ideologies, or even doctrines to create a new worldview or doctrine (Mwiti et al. 2015). Syncretism is also used to study the combination of traditional and Christian beliefs by some Pentecostal subtraditions. It is also used to assess the inconsistencies with biblical and Christian doctrine by Pentecostal churches in the pursuit of mixed beliefs (Mwiti et al. 2015). This approach was used to study syncretistic practices within the Pentecostal movement in comparison with traditional religions and even African-initiated churches (Engelke 2010; Anderson 1995; Anderson 2001; Anderson 2003).

However, Anderson (1999, p. 220) warned that there should be careful consideration in order to not confuse indigenization or even contextualization with syncretism. Pentecostal scholars, particularly from the global north, should not make the mistake of thinking that everything African Pentecostal is syncretistic. With new prophetic churches, scholars can reach the uninformed conclusion that everything associated with these churches is syncretistic. Hence, the syncretistic approach is used in this article to show the similarities and discontinuities between with traditional African religions and new prophetic churches. This approach is used to argue that new prophetic churches are not always syncretistic in their practices; hence, it is important to examine some of the differences they have with African traditional religions. This is achieved by using the case of divine healing in both the traditional African religion and the new prophetic churches. The article focuses on activities that happen in both movements when a traditional healer or prophet healer is consulted for divine healing.

## 3. Traditional African Religion Worldview

Traditional African religions are popular among the different people in Africa; they are the religions of the continent that have been practised since ancient times, even before other religions (Mligo 2013; Mugambi 2015, p. 45). Traditional African religions are concerned with the indigenous way of relating with the supreme being by using traditional and cultural practices in different regions of the continent (Mbiti 1990, p. x; Mligo 2013,

p. 1). According to [Mligo \(2013, p. 3\)](#), culture is inclusive of “people’s traditional religions, customs, traditions, rites, ceremonies, symbols, art, wisdom and institutions”. Hence, traditional African religions are an oral tradition, and not a written tradition with well-defined conceptual framework and doctrines.

Given the above, a direct relationship exists between cultural and religious practices in the traditional religions of different African contexts. This relationship makes it dangerous to alienate people from their religious practices as Western missionaries did. This might mean an alienation of people’s culture in some instances. Therefore, the best approach to traditional African religions is not the alienation of the cultural practices, but an understanding of their worldview. Hence, this article seeks to understand the practice of consulting a traditional healer during divine healing to compare it with new prophetic churches within the broader Pentecostal movement. The concept of traditional healing is common in the traditional African religious worldview because most Africans link some sicknesses and diseases to the spirit world. [Asante and Mazama \(2009, p. 495\)](#) explained that, “in most African cosmologies, sickness, diseases, and other misfortunes are largely linked to supersensible origins such as the wrath of divinities and neglected ancestral spirits, malevolent spiritual entities, witches, and wizards and sorcerers”. Therefore, instead of seeking Western medicine, they believe that they can be healed through traditional medicine by a traditional healer. This notion renders the concept of consulting with a traditional healer for healing and deliverance popular in the African context. In the next section, this article discusses the consultation of traditional healers during divine healing in traditional African religions.

#### **4. Consultation during Divine Healing in Traditional African Religions**

Given the link to sickness and diseases in the spirit world, some Africans tend to consult traditional healers to receive healing as opposed to utilizing Western medicine ([De Jong 1991](#)). [Feerman and Janzen \(1992, p. 374\)](#) explained that the idea of first consulting a traditional practitioner is informed by the belief that they carry more power to identify the root of the problem if they are not able to refer to a more powerful or appropriate traditional healer that can deal with the problem. Even in instances of accidents on the road, Africans still consult a traditional healer or priest to investigate the cause. Therefore, the contribution of traditional healing cannot be underestimated or overlooked, particularly in an African context where so many people do not have access to medical treatment and care ([Jones 2005, p. 28](#)). Hence, traditional healers have continued to exist in the midst of government hospitals and healthcare in many African contexts ([Aderibigbe and Falola 2022, p. 202](#)).

#### **5. New Prophetic Churches in the Context of Pentecostalism**

New prophetic churches are part of the Pentecostal movement (particularly Neo-Pentecostalism), but embrace prophetic practices more than other Pentecostal churches do ([Anderson 1991](#); [Omenyo 2011, p. 30](#); [Quayesi-Amakye 2015, p. 162](#)). These churches are found in different regions in Africa, such as South, East, and West Africa. In South Africa, and as highlighted in the introduction, churches embrace prophetic titles, deliverance, consultations, problem diagnosis, and prophetic products, such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, and the Alleluia Ministries of Pastor Alph Lukau ([Kgatle 2021](#)). In these churches, “pastor” is not the only common title, but there are other titles such as “Major 1” and “Seer 1” ([Kgatle 2021, p. 6](#)). This is different from conventional Pentecostalism, where a pastor is known as “reverend” or just “pastor”. In addition, instead of conducting normal deliverance sessions, the prophet rather asks their congregants to consult with them, where a certain fee is charged, and a certain sacred product is prescribed for the healing and deliverance of the patient ([Kgatle 2022a](#)). These practices separate these churches from classical Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the Assemblies of God, and the Full Gospel Church. In this

article, these churches' characteristics are relevant for a discussion on the consultation of a prophet during healing and deliverance.

In new prophetic churches, the prophet is more important than the participation of all believers. There is much emphasis on the prophet, which results in much dependence on them. Banda (2022, p. 3) explained, "The prophetic standing of the prophets is the most significant feature and source of their growth". In addition, prophets often guide the people to themselves rather than directing them to Christ (Magezi and Banda 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, instead of emphasising that all believers can receive and speak a word, they emphasise that the main prophet is the one carrying the special word from God. Banda (2022, p. 3) further explained: "Whereas in conservative classical Pentecostalism, the gift of prophecy belongs to all the believers, creating a notion of the prophethood of all believers, in the New Prophetic Churches, the gift of prophecy exclusively belongs to special individuals often called 'Man of God' or 'Woman of God'."

Therefore, the participation of all believers is not common in these churches, particularly when it comes to the prophetic office. It is for this reason that the consultation of the prophet by members of these churches is common in Africa. In the next section, the article discusses this aspect of new prophetic churches to indicate their similarities and differences with traditional African religions.

## 6. Consultation during Divine Healing in New Prophetic Churches

The concept of consulting a prophet is common among new prophetic churches. The concept is informed by dependence on the prophet, as discussed in the preceding section. From a Ghanaian perspective, Quayesi-Amakye (2015, p. 165) wrote: "many who make it a practice of embarking on nothing until they consult the prophet for a 'divine word and advice'. Thus, it is not uncommon to find 'committed regular' clients who 'rush' to the prophets, on almost every issue, stretching from perceived spiritual problems to ordinary mundane matters."

Classical Pentecostal churches perform a normal altar call to prayer for people to receive healing; however, prophets in new prophetic churches go beyond the altar call. They ask their members to book appointments with them to receive special prayers and prophecies that are relevant to their healing. This is sometimes during all-night prayers, when prophets leave the rest of the congregants to pray while some of the members consult the prophet for healing (Omenyo and Arthur 2013, p. 68). In addition, access to the prophet is very limited in a normal service, which alone creates a vacuum for one-on-one prophetic sessions. Therefore, people go to these churches not only for worship, but also to see the prophet on a special appointment, which is not common in classical Pentecostalism.

## 7. Similarities between Traditional African Religions and New Prophetic Churches

In a situation where an African visits both the traditional healer and the prophet healer, there are some similarities. First, a traditional healer in traditional African religions charges such a patient a certain fee for a consultation with them. According to Crawford and Lipsedge (2004, p. 143), such a payment depends on the time of treatment the patient is seeking and whether it is diagnostic or prescriptive. Payment is mostly demanded prior to the consultation, as lack of payment after treatment can result in serious consequences. For example, a traditional healer can become angry with a patient who does not pay during the consultation and punish them (Dagher and Ross 2004, p. 465). However, not every traditional healer charges for their services. Whatever payment is required from the clients visiting a traditional healer is nothing close to what they pay when visiting the prophets, as discussed below.

Prophets in new prophetic churches are not consulted for free, but charge a certain fee when their members and outsiders want to consult with them for healing. If the same patient who visited a traditional healer visits the prophet healer, they are charged a fee in the prophetic room, which is similar to the traditional room. Therefore, a one-on-one consultation with the prophet is expensive for members of this type of church in Africa.

Kgatle (2021, p. 123) indicated that the prices that such a patient is charged vary from one prophet to another. These prices, according to Kgatle, can range from ZAR 5000 to 7000 per session in the South African context. This is very different from conventional collections of tithes and offerings that are normally taken during a church service and are accounted for in many classical Pentecostal churches. This raises the great challenge of the commercialisation and commodification of the gospel because exorbitant prices are charged to access prayer for healing (Kgatle 2022a). Charging these prices to a sick person is consistent with the practices of traditional African religions as discussed above.

Second, the same patient consulting a traditional healer receives a prescription for certain medications and certain rituals that need to be bought for their healing. Hewson (1998, p. 1031) explained: "Traditional healers prepare and prescribe therapeutic medicines, believing that every disorder has a corresponding plant or animal product that neutralizes its effects". Prescriptions in the form of herbs and rituals serve two primary purposes. According to Dagher and Ross (2004, p. 465), prescriptions deal with evil spirits confronting the patient and serve as a form of protection for the patient. The prescription of herbs and different traditional ceremonies are linked with the sacred products prescribed by new prophetic churches.

The same patient consulting prophets in new prophetic churches receives a prescription of certain sacred products, such as anointing oil, anointed water, wristbands, photographs of prophets, and t-shirts bearing the name of the prophet. Among these products, the most common is anointing oil, which is perceived to be carrying special powers to deal with the challenges that believers in these churches face in their lives. Quayesi-Amakye (2015, p. 167) mentioned that, in Ghana, "anointing oil is believed to neutralize devilish works and cause promotional and preventive effects for believers". In South Africa, churches such as the Enlightened Christian Gathering of Shepherd Bushiri prescribe an oil called "the lion of Judah", which they claim has the potential to deal with challenges and bring healing (Kgatle 2021, p. 122; Kgatle 2019, p. 4). According to Deke (2015, p. 17) the use of these different products in the church is what has brought confusion in the Christian church, and has led to people drawing similarities between the church and traditional African religions. Although sacred products are used in other Christian traditions, prices are well-regulated, such that the consumer is not charged an exorbitant price to access such products. They do not promote a specific personality, as is the case in new prophetic churches in Africa.

## 8. Discontinuities in Traditional African Religious Practices

In the same case of a patient seeking healing from both a traditional healer and a prophet healer, there are some differences. First, to identify the root cause of the problem of the patients, a traditional healer engages in the practice of "throwing the bones", including speaking to the ancestors. Hewson (1998, p. 1031) said: "The bones are usually thrown like dice on a woven grass mat or on dried animal skin, and clues to the patient's problems can be interpreted from the configuration of the items". Spiritually speaking, these bones are believed to speak to the traditional healer about the problems faced by the patients. Once the traditional healer can receive clear communication, they communicate back to the patient. Thus, the practice of throwing bones serves as a mechanism to access the ancestors in the spirit realm for them to communicate back to the traditional healer about the patient (Dagher and Ross 2004, p. 462). The bones are more of a diagnostic mechanism, as they can trace the root of the problem faced by the patient to bring a solution. De Andrade and Ross (2005, p. 493) spoke to 13 traditional healers in South Africa and confirmed that bones are a diagnostic mechanism. Each thrown bone has a particular message to the traditional healer about the patient.

However, when the same patient visits the prophet healer, diagnosis is performed through different means. New prophetic churches claim to be hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit in identifying the root cause of the problem of their members or outsiders. Therefore, the prophet healer normally prays to and asks the Holy Spirit to reveal the cause of the

problem. The prophets, according to [Omenyo \(2011, p. 42\)](#), claim that they can reveal the personal details of their members, including their addresses, through the work of the Holy Spirit. [Omenyo \(2011, p. 43\)](#) also said that it is for this reason that “they put much emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit which is manifested in healing”. In addition, ministering under the influence of the Holy Spirit should be separated from ministering under the influence of other spirits in traditional African religions. Therefore, prophets such as Makandiwa in Zimbabwe claim to be led by the Holy Spirit and do not follow in the footsteps of traditional priests as some scholars suggest (see [Chiwara and Shoko 2013, p. 220](#)). [Anderson \(2018, p. 8\)](#) explained that this kind of manifestation is not “pagan”. The Holy Spirit gives signs of God’s presence that relate to people’s religious context. Thus, there should be a distinction between the manifestations of the spirits in the traditional African religions and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in new prophetic churches.

Second, a traditional healer in the same consultation calls for the performance of different rituals to bring remedy to the patient. These rituals, according to [Crawford and Lipsedge \(2004, p. 135\)](#), involve “making sacrifices of animals such as goats, cows, and chickens. Different animals are preferred depending on the type of problem encountered and the wealth of the family”. The rituals should be observed correctly or they could bring a certain punishment to the family involved ([Ross 2010, p. 44](#)). Hence, it is the role of the traditional healer to determine if the problem comes directly from evil spirits or it is because of punishment. [Mkabile and Swartz \(2022, p. 269\)](#) explained that “customs and traditional ceremonies introduce, keep one connected and rooted to one’s ancestors. When one is known by their ancestors then they get protection from the evil spirits and misfortunes”. However, rituals are not only performed to deal with the problem, but also when thanking the ancestors for blessings. It is again the role of the traditional healer to lead such ceremonies, which are conducted in celebration of the ancestors ([Hewson 1998, p. 1031](#)).

If the same person pursuing healing were to visit a prophet healer, they normally use the name of Jesus to deliver the person who is bound by certain demons. It is for this reason that new prophetic churches do not speak of exorcism but the deliverance of those who are bound by certain demons. [Quayesi-Amakye \(2015, p. 170\)](#) explained that the name of Jesus is presented as all-powerful, superseding other names, and as able to confront problems that are caused by the spirit world. [Omenyo and Arthur \(2013, p. 59\)](#) added: “Neoprophetic hermeneutics, therefore, has among its cardinal goals to prove that Jesus Christ is the only powerful and dependable one in the fight against evil”. Therefore, healing is not only performed through sacred products and by charging certain fees, but also in the name of Jesus Christ ([Mangena and Mhizha 2013, p. 133](#)). The challenge for new prophetic churches, as [Magezi and Banda \(2017, p. 5\)](#) put it, is that, even though they present Jesus as powerful, they simultaneously inflict fear upon their followers to lead them to being dependent on the prophets. This renders Christology much different from the conventional one in classical Pentecostal churches.

## 9. Syncretistic and Nonsyncretistic Practices in New Prophetic Churches

The practice of consulting a traditional healer and prophet healer for divine healing in traditional African religions and new prophetic churches, respectively, demonstrates that there are similarities between the two movements, such as the fact that both movements charge a fee for a consultation. Charging fees is too commercialized among new prophetic churches, but believers pay because they believe that they need to deal with problems that exist in the spirit world. The second similarity is that both movements prescribe a certain artifact as a way of dealing with a challenge faced by the patient or the person consulting both the traditional and prophet healers. Similarly, the various products that are prescribed as healing products come at exorbitant prices in new prophetic churches. These two similarities demonstrate syncretistic practices in new prophetic churches in South Africa because these practices are consistent with the practices of traditional African religious practices. This means that new prophetic churches use more than one systems of belief in divine healing, as per the definition of syncretism.

However, new prophetic churches have nonsyncretistic practices in the case of divine healing.

When looking at the root cause of the problem, traditional African religions tend to depend on the guidance of ancestral spirits. However, prophets in new prophetic churches tend to depend on the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Although some prophets are secretly linked with traditional African religious practices such as divination, they still acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit when praying in a church setting. The other nonsyncretistic practice exists in how traditional African religions perform rituals and invoke the spirits of the ancestors to exorcise a demon, and new prophetic churches cast out the demon in the name of Jesus. Therefore, these nonsyncretistic practices should be considered, so that syncretism is not discussed in isolation from inconsistent practices with traditional African religious worldviews and cosmologies within the context of new prophetic churches.

## 10. Conclusions

The concept of consultation, also known as prophetic consultation among new prophetic churches, was studied using the theory of syncretism and the case study of divine healing. The article identified three similarities that exist between traditional African religions and new prophetic churches when it comes to consultation during healing. Both movements have a propensity of charging fees during consultations regardless of the economic status or condition of the person who needs help. Second, both movements also prescribe certain sacred products that should be utilized for the one in need of help to receive healing. These similarities illustrate syncretistic practices with traditional African practices in new prophetic churches. However, in the study of syncretism, scholars should not only look at the similarities, but also highlight differences. When diagnosing a problem, a traditional healer throws the traditional bones, but a prophet relies on the Holy Spirit to utter prophetic words. When exorcising a demon causing sickness and diseases, a traditional healer performs certain rituals to invoke the spirits, but new prophetic churches, with all their weaknesses, still use the name of Jesus to cast out the evil spirits. Therefore, there is a need to look at both the similarities and differences, that is, syncretistic and nonsyncretistic practices, when exploring syncretism in new prophetic churches in particular and the Pentecostal movement in general. Future studies should look at both angles in the study of syncretism, rather than only looking at syncretistic practices and reaching uninformed conclusions.

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