

Gender Bargains in a Pentecostal (Born-Again) Marriage: Divorce as a Socio-religious Discourse in the Glorious Vessels International Chat Group

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¹SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the Pentecostal movement in the last three decades is one of the most striking features in the global topography of contemporary religion. In Switzerland, the Pentecostal or charismatic movement is the most popular strand of migrant Christianity. This article is based on a three-year online ethnographic participant observation of different Nigerian-led online Pentecostal groups. The use of diverse interactive spaces seems to be of particular significance to both mega and non-mega Nigerian-led Pentecostal migrant churches in the country. By exploring the social practices of online communities such as the Glorious Vessels International WhatsApp chat group, the article shows how different forms of biblical patriarchy shape conversations that "recognise" or "repress" the rights and roles of women – their economic status and sexuality in born-again movements. The exchange of ideas that ensued on the issues of divorce among members of Glorious Vessels International shows how bargaining in the physical (real) world is transferred into the online environment. I analyse this phenomenon by understanding the ideal online religious community as an assemblage that promotes a certain gendered image of the prosperous family.

KEYWORDS

Pentecostalism; gender; conjugality; Internet; community; assemblage theory

Introduction

Before the advent of the Internet, the definition of "community" revolved around concepts of place and physical territory. Today, however, advanced technologies have enabled multitasking interactions, while the Internet has become "a place to construct identities, forge new connections, which ultimately enhances the creation of socially produced spaces."¹ E-mails and social media (such as Facebook, YouTube, and

¹ Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1; Walter C. Ihejirika, "In-Line Religion: Innovative Pastoral Applications of the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTS) by the Catholics of Nigeria," *Politics and Religion Journal* 2, no.2 (2008): 79-80; Yvette Taylor, Emily Falconer and Ria Snowdown, "Queer Youth, Facebook and Faith: Facebook Methodologies and Online Identities," *New Media & Society* 16, no.7 (2014): 138.

KingsChat)² have also made communication much easier. Altogether, these technological advancements have made it necessary to reconsider traditional conceptions of community, interaction, and networking. In this article, I will examine the significance of these transformations with regard to online religious communities and specifically how they are used by Nigerian-led Pentecostal churches. Although establishing an online church is cheaper than establishing a physical church, “place” still plays a role in the online space. This is why it is necessary to study online religious communities in the context of particular locations as this article does for Nigerian-led Pentecostal churches in the German-speaking Switzerland.

Launching into the World Wide Web requires a combination of spatial and non-spatial worlds in order for the Internet to mediate between the profane (physical) and the sacred (spiritual). Non-mega Pentecostal churches that do not have an affiliation to a parent church in the home country exhibit a unique relation between the spatial and non-spatial world, the sacred and the profane. Glorious Vessels International (GVI), as an example of a non-mega church, have recruited online followers by gathering different Internet evangelists into a single assemblage.³ These online members are part of the expressive and material components of the GVI chat community.⁴

At this point, it is sufficient to rely on Stephen Jacobs’ summation that online churches can act as supplements to physical churches.⁵ Steven Jones asks the question: “Who are we when we are online?”⁶ At a time when we can hardly imagine social space without mobile and online media,⁷ it is imperative for scholarship to address cases like the GVI chat

² KingsChat is a mobile messaging application created by Pastor Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy International. It is similar to WhatsApp and allows group and individual chats.

³ Members mainly exist online as they belong to other offline religious organisations.

⁴ Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage theory and Social Complexity* (Hampshire: Ashford Colour Press Ltd., 2006), 4.

⁵ Stephen Jacobs, “Virtually Sacred: The Performances of Asynchronous Cyber-Rituals in Online Spaces,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no.3 (2007): 1104.

⁶ Steven G. Jones, *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 15.

⁷ Miyase Christensen, André Jansson and Christian Christensen, *Online Territories: Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space* (Weil am Rhein: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), xii.

community. As a result, online platforms of Nigerian-led Pentecostal churches are not exceptional in how they take advantage of the Internet to enhance aspects of Pentecostalism in order to create an environment where members project a gendered image of a prosperous family.

Methodology

I began with a participant observation of the activities of the GVI church by attending church services and proposing my research intentions in Dietlikon, Zürich. I then consistently monitored the church's activities on WhatsApp. On 29 July 2015 I realised that I had been added to a Christian WhatsApp chat group created by Pastor Rook of GVI. I received daily posts on my mobile device about devotional prayers and other spiritual information about the church's activities. I observed the frequency of the posts for two years and then sought Pastor Rook's consent to engage in a group discussion with members. I posted questionnaires containing themes for group discussions on the chat platform. Then I exploited an opportunity presented by GVI for a seminar on "singles and married couples" in Zürich to discuss participants' motivation for joining the GVI chat, since many of them did not live in Switzerland. An interview with Pastor Rook and the group discussion revealed that the GVI WhatsApp chat community is an agenda to build an online church or community as a supplement to its local ministry. Critical discourse analysis was crucial to selecting discourses in the GVI chat community.

This article uses critical discourse analysis regarding discourse as a social practice, implying a dialectical relationship between a discursive event and the situation. Critical discourse analysis allows the selection of discourses and the exploration of social practices in online communities such as the GVI WhatsApp chat community.⁸ This process shows how different forms of biblical patriarchy have informed conversations that recognise or repress the rights and roles of women – their economic status and sexuality – in the born-again movement. The starred message icon helped to store important debates among mentees within the community for later analysis. I therefore arranged coded rhetoric similar to mission, rituals, evangelism, Internet, community, and tithe as major themes of understanding the concept of online community-building. By using a deductive approach and semi-structured interviews

⁸ Gilbert Weiss and Ruth Wodak (eds.), *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 11-2.

to my online ethnographic observation to identify relevant subjects for analysis, I questioned members about the most vital aspects of relationships, such as marriage. One of the advantages of the Internet community is that it allows the anonymity of members. During the course of my observations in the GVI chat community, members who were not restricted to a geographical enclave became more familiar with one another. However, WhatsApp is a semi-anonymous environment that allows members to identify themselves through profile pictures. In the case of GVI, the possibility of exerting confidence and trust in one another is due to the assurance derived from the method of selecting members by Pastor Rook.⁹

The Nexus between Assemblage Theory and Online Communities

The assemblage theory is relevant to this article because it explains how the online communities of Nigerian-led Pentecostal churches reterritorialise non-spatial environments in order to carry out aspects of their lived Pentecostalism. According to Manuel DeLanda, territorialisation implies an acute sharpening of boundaries, resulting in a homogenisation of cultures. As described in his book, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, territorialisation is the final stage of an assemblage.¹⁰ Homogenisation refers to sorting processes and the selection of members that exclude certain categories of people from a community or organisation, or to segregation processes that increase the ethnic or racial homogeneity of a neighbourhood.¹¹ Through this means, the online pastor of GVI was able to choose members from different parts of the world who subscribe to doctrines or the Pentecostal belief in the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is the belief in the Holy Spirit that homogenises the chat community.

DeLanda understands the processes that either destabilise spatial boundaries or increase the internal heterogeneity of a neighbourhood as deterritorialisation.¹² Communication technologies ranging from writing

⁹ This semi-anonymous environment is an online space where partial identity can be revealed, unlike other communities where identities are open, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Teachers Connect, SK-Gaming, or anonymous environments such as Popcorn messaging and Rumr.

¹⁰ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*.

¹¹ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 4-5.

¹² DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 4-5.

and a reliable postal service to telegraphs, telephones, and computers fit the definition of deterritorialisation, since they blur the spatial boundaries of social entities by eliminating the need for a physical presence. DeLanda shows that an assemblage is not just a collection of things or people;¹³ an assemblage is when things or entities have relationships with each other to such an extent that the relationship is more than the ability of people to interact and, more importantly, to express their innermost thoughts. For instance, when an individual is able to use a tool such as a telephone from a place with a circuit board that contains the online/offline brain, then these combinations become an assemblage. DeLanda's contribution to the assemblage theory explains how the capacities of structures and actors to interact separately as agents constitute one another dialectically. In this instance, I refer to interior relations among members such as those fostered by a participation in discourses on socio-religious practices on the GVI. Constituent parts of the (GVI) "whole" cease to be effective when their properties are reduced in contrast to when they were part of a seamless "whole." Therefore, an individual cannot log into the Internet to connect the assemblage of the GVI chat community without an electronic device such as a mobile phone or a computer. The potential for online communities is enhanced through the texts, videos, voice recordings, and images that members of imagined communities use to communicate.¹⁴ This includes how people gain access to the community, interact with one another, perform and creatively explore rituals, and are driven by the motor of communication and the interfaces of online platforms.

By carefully selecting different members for her WhatsApp community – members who physically met for the first time during the group discussion that I conducted in Dietlikon, Zürich – Pastor Rook furthered the homogenisation of the group. While scholars working with a secularisation model have often suggested that online environments promote individuality and so contribute to the "lost souls" and decline in church membership in Europe,¹⁵ members of the GVI are consistently

¹³ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 4.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006), 6-7.

¹⁵ Afe Adogame, "Reverse Mission: Europe a prodigal Continent," The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, Unpublished Study Material (2006), 1; Afe Adogame, *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora* (Leiden, London: Brill, 2019), 14. In this manuscript, Adogame refers to "Reverse Mission/Flow," which is often based on the compulsion

building relationships with other online religious communities. It is important to consider how online communities have influenced the practice of religion in Nigerian-led Pentecostal communities. The following excerpts (1, 2, and 3) from interviews are useful for understanding the GVI members' perceptions of the online "mission." Excerpt 1:

My perspective is based on my experience. The world is getting more broken and sinful as [I] would like to call it and have the experience of what it means to be in a broken relationship, a sinful relationship, to be single...I believe that God wants to use me. The Internet makes the church more effective; I call it church without walls. I engage daily with over 30,000 people on Facebook and I find that very dynamic because my messages and voice go to lands I will probably never be.¹⁶

The excerpts used in this article not only show the importance of digitalisation for Pentecostals, but also illustrate how religious concerns mandate that these communities preach online. This is how Pastor Rook justifies the online presence of religious communities in the above excerpt. Furthermore, embodiment is a critical aspect of corporeal representation and the formation of social life: in a non-spatial environment, one can either be present (embodied) or non-present (disembodied). Nevertheless, the representation of personalities on the Internet features gestures and expressions that evidence realness and a sense of being present in both the online and offline worlds. For instance, greetings, fasting, daily devotion, expressing opinions, and lurking are rituals in the online environment.¹⁷ Excerpt 2:

The important thing is that you reach people and...the best way to do it is to go on the Internet platform to preach online. The goal of that is that Jesus told us to go into the world and make disciples. That is what we do!¹⁸

imposed by the "divine commission" to spread the gospel in Europe. The rationale becomes tenable since Europe embraces secularisation, which appears to be the cause of lost souls and religious decline on the continent.

¹⁶ Peter A. Oderinde, "The Role of Internet in Migrants' Christianity: A Case Study of Nigerian-Led Pentecostal Churches in Switzerland" (PhD diss., University of Basel, Nov. 2019), 32.

¹⁷ T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environment*, ed. Ralph Schroeder, (London: Springer, 2002), 42.

¹⁸ Oderinde, "The role of Internet," 232.

Both Pastor Rook (in excerpt 1) and Brother Francois (in excerpt 2) display an existential need for communion and the territorialisation of online space, which they achieve by setting up a specific identity through gatekeeping for an online prayer community. One of the main points in the selected excerpts intersects with the example of assemblage as shown in excerpt 3:

This particular group is encouraging. For others, I mute the notifications when it is too much, but I can read them whenever I want. This is only when I go there and use whatever information I want. Coming into discussion sometimes is not just about people gathering. The goal is to reach people. If you reach people online, it goes even the places you can never imagine. It is taking God's work high. The technology thing is not bad; it is one of the most beautiful things. As we have seen, the word of God can still spread through these means.¹⁹

In this excerpt, Sister Glorious reveals how she unplugs herself from an online community by muting notifications. In this way, she assumes a disembodied role with the advantage of being able to observe comments and instructions from the community. As a result, territorialisation forms the essence of homogenisation among GVI members. Invitations into the assemblage operate as a homogenising strategy for non-spatial environments. In this way, Internet religion provides a backdrop for the study of the GVI as a form of online religious community. In other words, online communities serve as a point of departure for the formation of different assemblages. The synergy between online and offline environments is so strong that both environments require an embodiment to function as "actual environments." Aspects of online lived Pentecostalism show what types of communities are created in these non-spatial environments and how social structures promote daily practices. The GVI's motivation for an online presence provides examples of how these practices are lived in the actual world, that is in the fusion of both offline and online worlds.

Online Lived Pentecostalism: Gender Discourse in the GVI Chat Room

The GVI WhatsApp chat community provides exceptional insights into how online Pentecostalism is lived by members who belong to several other offline interdenominational churches. For the purposes of this article, I consider online lived Pentecostalism to involve individuals' daily

¹⁹ Oderinde, "The role of Internet," 232.

activities or actions within or directed at a spiritual or secular online community with goals that are essential to Christian vitality. I agree with Stephen Hunt that these online communities are “a medium of soliciting alternative meaning or therapy of life.”²⁰

The GVI chat community discusses relationships between themselves and with outsiders, whom they refer to as “non-believers.” Thus, the popular phrase of the Pentecostals, “we are in the world but not of the world,” underscores the underlining mission of these modern evangelical crusaders. For example, in 2 Corinthians 6:14 the Bible advises Christians to not be equally yoked with the unbelievers.

As a result, this article tries to understand how the ideal Pentecostal couple is constructed. In the following analysis, the GVI constructs relationship as if members of the community need each other. The GVI chat community bases its perspectives on the positive sides of life, love, and family. The GVI chat community promotes an ideal woman and man. The ideals correspond to the perfect husband, wife, and family. Their offline world has a gendered hierarchical structure, assigning specific roles to couples, anchored on biblical foundations. Specific cases of roles assigned to gendered typologies of male and female are provided below in figures 1 and 2.

On WhatsApp, the GVI promotes socioreligious issues, especially with regard to the role of women in the offline Pentecostal household. The conservative informed interactions of GVI members mean that mentees were able to post their views from personal experiences and biblical injunctions. Pastor Rook is clearly motivated by trying to give “hope for the hopeless” in how she selects her mentees on WhatsApp.²¹

The functionality of the GVI assemblage depends largely on socio-religious discourses that influence patterns of conversation about specific themes. For instance, Pastor Rook’s theological objective focuses on building healthy relationships between couples while mentoring singles and divorcees. The mentees that constitute the GVI community

²⁰ Stephen Hunt, “Managing the Démonic: Some Aspects of the Neo-Pentecostal Deliverance Ministry,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, no.2 (2008): 215.

²¹ Pastor Rook describes herself as a mentor, while the GVI community members are her mentees.

are singles, divorcees, and individuals who wish to improve their relationships with their spouses. Excerpt 4:

The Lord told me that there are people that will never or that may never make it to church, and they will need that last straw of hope and this will be their Hope Now. It focuses on relationship issues. It believes one of the pivotal things affecting humans is relationship; it does not matter to which relationship. It may be parent-child relationship, boss-worker relationship, boyfriend-girlfriend or husband-wife, as we are all product of social relations. I really get inspired talking about merged families and co-habitation. We address real life situations that are happening and allow people to talk about why they are in such a relationship or why they are in such situations. The divorced...feels rejected from the church because they are divorced.²²

This excerpt shows that Pastor Rook's previous life as a single mother is informed by her theological understanding of an ideal relationship. What is sinful and responsible is connected to the mentees' age. Age is therefore a key determinant for discussions on gender roles in a born-again relationship. In this part, I will discuss a set of rules and guidelines that often relies on the Bible to regulate gender relations, rules "to which genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may [not] be contested, redefined, and renegotiated."²³ Furthermore, a discourse on coping strategies for marriages in the offline world, especially when confronting quotidian responsibilities in the household, are discussed. The key to successful marriages, as perceived by members of the GVI, thus aligns with the prosperity gospel in the age of broken marriages between born-again Christians.²⁴ However, the discourse on the GVI chat community does not recognise other sexualities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, or transsexuals. The analysis below does not intend to show how the Bible is instrumentalised in the oppression of women. Instead, figures 1, 2, and 3 extrapolate socio-spiritual and economic values that members of the GVI community place on the role of women within the household.

While earlier movements achieved a phenomenal change in the late nineteenth century, the women's liberation movement and feminist-informed theologies first came into the limelight at the beginning of the

²² Oderinde, "The Role of Internet in Migrants' Christianity," 216.

²³ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2 no.3 (1988): 287.

²⁴ Paul Gifford, "The Prosperity Theology of David Oyedepo, Founder of Winners," in *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond*, ed. Andreas Heuser (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 84.

second half of the twentieth century.²⁵ Successive feminist-informed theologies were recognised for their efforts in pushing for equal rights in the Pentecostal ministry.²⁶ Pastor Rook's online initiative is an exemplary effort of asserting her vision to reform the mindset, and to especially reintegrate the divorcees, widows, and widowers into Christendom with adequate spiritual contents tailored to the needs of her mentees through her online platforms.²⁷

The GVI chat platform is an assemblage of individuals seeking spiritual information on marital issues. Yet the discussions of marriage on the GVI chat platform unpack interactive repertoires that reflect how gender roles are positioned and recognised.²⁸ The individuals in the community are conservative Christians who believe that the Bible is the sole arbiter of morality and that it stipulates how men and women should be taught to believe, act, behave, and position themselves in society. This part thus analyses conversations that took place in a space where both men and women discuss gender-based duties within the household.

Knowledge transfer is one of the most important features on the online platforms of Nigerian-led Pentecostals. Members of the GVI chat often rely on major Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria to shape and construct the ideal partner in a Pentecostal relationship. For instance, in a post from 8 January 2017, titled "Ancient wisdom for singles and married," the general overseer of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles, Dr Daniel Olu-koya, enumerates various ways of discerning good characteristics in a good husband or wife. He describes wedding as only a day while marriage is a lifetime and admonishes couples to follow God's expectations in marriage. In order to avoid "hell on earth," Christians are offered

²⁵ Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2009), 80-5. Women played a key role at the beginning of the movement. For instance, the first individual to have spoken in tongues was a woman and many served as evangelists, missionaries, teachers, and so on; Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Prophetic vs Priestly Religion: The Role of Women Clergy in Classical Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 22, no.1 (1960): 2.

²⁶ Caryn D. Riswold, "Conversations and Intersections: A Third-Wave Feminist Approach to Gender, Christianity and Theology," in *Sex, Gender and Christianity*, eds. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 80-2.

²⁷ Pastor Rook's vision is not only limited to WhatsApp, but her ministerial activities focusing on the "neglect" of these categories of individuals can be followed live on Facebook by fans, mentees, and friends.

²⁸ Riswold, "Conversations and Intersections," 80-2.

prescriptions in the GVI chat community for preventing a bad marriage through prayer and observation. Men are advised to look for a woman who fears God, and who has wisdom and discretion, while women are advised to avoid men who are hot tempered, womanisers, and drunks.

Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate the thoughts and discussions of GVI members on the role of women. Pastor Ladoo's post below in figure 1, dated 23 August 2016 and titled "My Wife, My Rib," spells out seven biblical instructions about the role of men within a Pentecostal household. Figures 1 and 2 allow us to compare the expected roles of women and men in a Pentecostal marriage.

My Wife, My Rib

- Do not shout at your wife, it really hurts her (Proverbs 15:1).
 - Do not speak evil of her with anyone. Your wife will become who you call her (Genesis 2:19).
 - Do not share her love or affection with another woman. It is called adultery (Mathew 5:28).
 - Do not allow her to beg for sex. She owns your body just as much you [own] her body (1 Corinthians 7:5).
 - Do not make a negative comment about her body. She is a living soul, not just flesh and blood [no biblical verse attached].
 - Not all women can cook the same way; appreciate your wife's food. It is not easy to cook three meals a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year for several years (Proverbs 31:14).
 - Grow to be like Christ, that is the only way you can become a good and godly husband. Amen (Romans 8:29).
- Amen.

Figure 1: My wife, my rib²⁹

²⁹ Oderinde, "The role of Internet," 216.

Hardcore Truth About Marriage! If You Agree, Tag Your “Spouse” and Share Ten Ways of Becoming a Warrior Wife

The warrior wife knows marriage is difficult, particularly if you do not put the time and effort into building a strong foundation. It gets easier with time, but during the process of growing into mature, selfless spouses, marriage requires the will to fight for the union...Marriage is for warriors. To be a warrior-wife you must be willing to go to war for your marriage. Here are ten ways wives can become warriors for their marriages and families.

First, A PRAYER WARRIOR: A wife who knows the power of prayer. She intercedes for her husband and children.

Second, A WORSHIP WARRIOR: A wife is not afraid to praise and worship God.

Third, A WORD WARRIOR: A wife who uses her words to speak life and wisdom of her husband and children.

Fourth, A MOTHER WARRIOR: A mother warrior believes her role as a mother is a divine responsibility that God will hold her accountable for how she rears her children.

Fifth, A FINANCIAL WARRIOR: A wife who can take a few francs and make a meal that tastes like a million bucks.

Sixth, A DISCERNMENT WARRIOR: A wife with a sixth sense to see and feel what is good and bad for the marriage.

Seventh, A HOUSEHOLD WARRIOR: A wife who protects the peace and sanctity of the home.

Eighth, A SEXUAL WARRIOR: A wife who is not afraid to enjoy physical intimacy with her husband. She initiates sex and enjoys pleasing her husband.

Ninth, A CONFIDENT WARRIOR: A wife who can make her husband feel like he can do anything he sets his mind to.

Tenth, A PURPOSE DRIVEN WARRIOR: A wife who knows God has a purpose for marriage.

Figure 2: Hardcore Truth About Marriage!³⁰

The following conversation took place regarding these ten ways:

Renii: We can also turn it the other way around and treat the husband likewise.

³⁰ Oderinde, “The Role of Internet,” 218.

Pastor Ladoo: God told the man to love, not the woman.

Pastor Rook: Truly submissive women eventually earn a place with most men. I know women liberation is not popular teaching but I always say learn to speak to a man like a king and you will become queen in his mind. God told women to submit because the only thing a man longs for from a woman is respect.

Sister Kuks: Same way women will account for the way they respected their man.

Pastor Ladoo: I need to buy her a gift, lace or flowers?

Sister Gloria: Naija [Nigeria] women.

Brother Mac: Most Naija women will want lace first.

Pastor Rook: Start with the unusual oo, followed by lace.

Pastor Ladoo: you don't know our women, they might say what is dis? Am I a goat that eats flowers?

Sister Glorious: For me I like the unusual like flowers and cute fluffy teddy, etc. Not all Naija women are rigid please. 😊😊😊

Pastor Rook: flowers first oo, start with the unusual; most [Nigeria] women want lace first.

Opinions in the above chat about the disagreement of whether to give flowers or lace display differing nuances of showing appreciation to women by the Pentecostal believers.

Figures 1 and 2 prescribe gender roles that acknowledge responsibilities within a Pentecostal home – becoming a “warrior wife” implies subservience to her husband. Following the ten guidelines will lead to a woman being treated with fairness and equity in her husband's home. This implies learning to speak to her husband “like a king and you will become queen.”

As shown in figure 1, Pentecostals rely heavily on the Bible for “conventions that not only guarantee the production, exchange, and consumption, but also reproduce the bonds of kinship itself, which require taboos and a punitive regulation of reproduction to effect that end.”³¹ Figure 1 also specifically emphasises the aesthetics of the female body, which has far-reaching effects in determining their status at home and in society. For instance, remarks such as “Do not make a negative comment about her body;” “Do not let her body determine her worth;”

³¹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theology,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988): 524.

“Invest in her spiritual growth;” “Do not allow her to beg for sex;” and “She is a living soul, not just flesh and blood” reinforce pre-existing cultural roles. Figure 2 furthermore assigns traditional financial responsibilities in the family. The GVI members’ conversations focused on these topics related to marriage for several weeks:

Pastor Ladoo: I think sex is still regarded as too religious in marriages. Is it sinful for a man of God to go online to please his wife or *vice versa*? How would you react if your wife starts reading Kamasutra books? I think some men prefer to please their mistress in bed more than they please their wives. I hope I haven’t crossed the red line here...Just dropping a line. Good night.

Pastor Rook: I will reply according to this tomorrow.

Brother Mac: Yes, this is a real discussion board.³²

The specific point referring to a wife reading the “Kamasutra books,” poses a dilemma for the Pentecostal woman who desires to please her husband by limiting the exploration of her sexuality to the confines of Pentecostal doctrines. Sister Glorious also noted this focus in a description of the group: “You should know that the group is not all about spiritual matters. People do post social issues. Spiritual and the physical are together”³³ (excerpt 5).

During the group discussion at Dietlikon, GVI chat members were reticent to speak openly about physical intimacy. However, in excerpt 6 below, Brother Renii distinguishes the GVI from other online Christian communities by the willingness of members to discuss the subject matter freely online. He mentions women (working as sex workers) in Zürich as an example of how sex is negotiated between two parties, alluding to the fact that women are also more vulnerable to being sexually exploited in Pentecostal conjugality. This is why Christian couples should have open discussions about sex: it will ensure a more fulfilling marriage as seen in the following excerpt:

Men go to Langstrasse because of what they want, and women give it because they want money. I mean it is a deal! My point is how we deal with that as a church. We cannot close our eyes and say let us be nice towards one another by not mentioning the points we do not like. It needs

³² Oderinde, “The role of Internet,” 220.

³³ Oderinde, “The role of Internet,” 219.

to be discussed and especially many churches do these mistakes. While claiming to be spiritual, many churches do not talk about sex, but we talk about it!³⁴

Figures 1 and 2 give the impression that marriage is difficult but rewarding. Marriage requires that the couple be thorough and spiritually prepared to face offline difficulties. As a consequence, marriage is described as a process and not as a state of being. For example, the female “warrior” in figure 2 indicates that women should want to fight for the survival of the marriage. The institution of marriage is described as a spiritual battle. Strong emphasis is placed on “time” and “effort,” which are key for a solid foundation in a Pentecostal household. The aggressive tone in the language of the post aligns with the doctrines of the Nigerian-led Pentecostals, which speak of believers battling spiritually and physically. On the other hand, the description of the ideal woman casts her as a mature, selfless, and perfect servant, who makes the best choices for her family.

Pastor Ladoo sought the opinion of other GVI members on how to appease his wife as a strategy for resolving conflicts in his family. The remarkable conversation that ensued as a result of figure 2 shows how some Pentecostal women engage with a biblically informed patriarchy. The perception of women is clear in Pastor Ladoo’s confusion about his limited choices of buying either roses or an expensive lace fabric, which is widely common as a traditional outfit in the South of Nigeria. When Pastor Ladoo states that “most women in Naija would want lace first” and that “they might say...what is dis [this]? Am I a goat that eats flowers?” he contrasts Western women, who attach a symbolic value to roses, with Nigerian women, who desire gifts with material value such as lace or money. The opinions expressed by GVI members, especially the female ones in this conversation, show different patterns of conflict resolutions within the Nigerian cultural milieu. The exchange of ideas that ensued among members of the GVI also shows how bargaining ideas shared in the online setting are transferred into offline realities.

The post on the “warrior” wife in figure 2 describes an ideal Pentecostal wife to the GVI members. Although the overarching trajectory implies that the family gains access to God through the wife, the wife requires a good relationship with her husband.

³⁴ Oderinde, “The role of Internet,” 220.

Men Who Give their Women ATM Cards and Pins Have a Special Corner in Heaven with Air Conditioners and Free Wifi Access... Amen



Figure 3: Men Who Give their Women ATM Cards

Figure 3 shows that prosperity is essential to the Pentecostal or born-again identity.³⁵ The rhetoric in the figure resonates well with the role of the “financial warrior” in figure 2. A wife is a financial warrior when she “can take a few [Swiss] francs and make a meal that tastes like a million bucks.” This role assumes that the husband is the breadwinner and that it is up to the wife to manage the money she is given prudently – though the husband’s heavenly aspirations are then also dependent on his financial warrior’s ability to organise the economy of the household well.

The symbiotic relationship allows women to take some emancipative stances, which are evidenced in figures 1, 2, and 3. Husbands are told to put their wives first as, to some extent, Pentecostal women are expected to be in control of the household. It strengthens the fact that, in the household, men could allow to be controlled by women in order not to lose the “treasure” of their wives to anger, which could sabotage the marriage. Calling the ideal woman a “warrior,” emphasises that she must be strong, but the appellation also confers a heavy burden on the wife in the areas of physical intimacy and financial management, in order not to lose her husband. Point eight (the sexual warrior) portrays a wife who is fearless of physical intimacy with her husband. The main concern in the text is that the wife must enjoy pleasing her husband. If, for instance, the term “warrior” is replaced with *labourer*, then the logic becomes apparent. If the wife says something negative (see point 6 about the warrior wife), then the family’s misfortune becomes her fault. That means that

³⁵ Cf. Andreas Heuser, “Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies,” *HTS Theological Studies* 72, no.3 (2016): 2-3.

the wife labours for both tangible and intangible gains in the household with a *sixth* sense, as mentioned in the post. This sixth sense (figure 2) derives from the wife's connection to God, grants her the power of discernment, and is necessary for a good, true marriage. Point six (the discernment warrior) and point three (the word warrior) are thus very important characteristics, indicating that she foresees danger. The aim of the author of the post was to show how powerful Pentecostal women are in the ways of channelling their powers. The text is an emancipative model for Pentecostal women and calls for self-regulation, not because they are "warrior-slaves," but because of their powerful tongues.

Pastor Ladoo introduced another discussion on marriage on 22 January 2017 with the post: "You don't have to be born-again to enjoy your marriage, yes or no?" Pastor Rook responded almost immediately:

😊 my answer is yes and no. E.g my neighbors. The wife only became a believer about 21 years ago. Her husband is not a believer, but they have been married almost 40 years now. I know other examples of unbelievers with very strong marriages simply because they unwittingly submit to the principles of the word of God, which is LOVE & RESPECT.³⁶

In the conversation that ensued, GVI members stated their belief that God ordains the marriage, but they also mentioned that it is a gift to non-believers as well, as long as the husband loves the wife and the wife respects her husband. In this instance, non-believers include not only people who do not follow Jesus Christ today, but also the members' own ancestors who never met Christ but enjoyed the company of their husbands. The members had differing opinions about whether being born-again ensures a happy home. In many cases of disagreement in the discussion, members consulted other communities or assemblages to which they belong for answers to entangled discussions.

The conversation of GVI members on WhatsApp legitimises Hope Now³⁷ as a platform for bringing hope to people with marital woes by learning from others who share their real experiences online. On the discourse following the post in figure 2, opinions of members split on the submis-

³⁶ Oderinde, "The role of Internet," 223.

³⁷ Glorious Vessels, "Hope Now," 2019, www.gloriousvessels.org/de/event/hope-now-live-tv-christian-counselling-6/.

sive woman, but all identified ignorance as the major cause of break-ups. In fact, there is also no clarity among members as to whether marriage is a spiritual or religious commitment, although Genesis 9:7 is explicit about God's commandment "to be fruitful and multiply...." Furthermore, members of the GVI decry the high divorce rate among fellow believers.

Similarly, both Western-oriented mainline churches in Africa – such as the Methodist and Anglican Churches in Nigeria – and African initiated churches allow for the constellation of both Western Christian practices and traditional African ones, including polygamy.³⁸ The doctrine of Pentecostalism, which preaches individualism and monogamy, has attracted millions of women in Africa and Latin America with its modernisation impulse. This pattern encourages the domestication of men, thereby changing their patriarchal role in polygamy with a more inclusive nuclear family setting. This is reflected in the statements from the chats cited in this article.³⁹ Although Pastor Rook identifies marital abuse as the key phenomenon wrecking the Christian marriage in this age, the conversations in the GVI chat platform show that, in spite of monogamy, the boundaries of the born-again man cannot be challenged. This is changing the traditional role of men, leading to the emotional breakdown of the African Pentecostal woman.⁴⁰

Being a born-again Christian normatively excludes the practice of polygamy, which limits women's autonomy and men's responsibilities in supporting their families. However, the discussion is not limited to born-again marriages alone as it includes relationships between non-believers or between a believer and a non-believer, demonstrating that a successful marriage is a product of spiritual grace. On the disadvantage side, members of the GVI describe Internet as an end-time sign, which affects the marriages of believers. In the protracted conversation, members believe that technology is particularly eroding spiritual values and endangering respect for leaders.

³⁸ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4; Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447-8.

³⁹ Bernice Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Malden, Oxford, Melbourne, Berlin: The Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 54.

⁴⁰ Rekopantswe Mate, "Wombs as God's Laboratories: Pentecostal Femininity in Zimbabwe," *Africa* 72, no.4 (2002): 557.

Conclusion

This article has shown that there is an element of realness in online religious communities, where Pentecostals share their innermost thoughts. I began by explaining how the changing concept of “community” in the contemporary era has affected modern religious institutions.

I also explained the research methods I employed for the GVI WhatsApp chat community. The GVI as an online religious community was created to cater for the needs of online spiritual inquirers or members who operate in the non-spatial territories such as the WhatsApp chat community. The latter part of the article focused on social practices, which I considered as online lived Pentecostalism in the GVI chat community. The discussion on the GVI platform shows that Pentecostals believe that the submission of a wife is necessary for gaining her husband’s goodwill. Through online communities such as the GVI WhatsApp chat community, the assemblage theory relates with the concept of an online community by explaining the relationship between online and offline worlds. Within the Pentecostal milieu, the GVI is a network of individuals that is not interested in physical membership but promotes transposable Pentecostal ideas that allocate limited rights and privileges to women within born-again marriages.

The GVI online chat platform gives women the opportunity to express their opinions on the fundamental aspects of marriage, including whether they support divorce. Furthermore, it was clear in the example of the “warrior wife” that the gift of the warrior is not immune to the challenges of divorce. A true warrior woman is perceived as the real Pentecostal Christian who is willing to make the priority of the family the centrepiece of her wellbeing. In the case of the GVI, WhatsApp spirituality as a social outreach provides insight into a practical approach as to how modern Pentecostalism is lived. Through WhatsApp communication, this article shows how specific rights are allocated to gendered typologies in a Pentecostal marriage.

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