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Pentecostal Intimacies: Women and Intimate Citizenship in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness in Kenya

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Abstract

This article explores the intersections of gender, sexuality and citizenship in the context of one prominent neo-Pentecostal movement in Kenya, the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) led by the charismatic Prophet David Owuor. Employing the concept of intimate citizenship, the article analyses, first, how MRH engages in a contestation of intimate citizenship in the contemporary Kenyan public sphere, especially in relation to women's bodies. Second, it examines how MRH simultaneously configures, through a range of highly intimate beliefs, practices and techniques, an alternative form of intimate citizenship defined by moral purity and concerned with a political project of moral regeneration. Coining the notion of 'Pentecostal intimacies', the article provides insight into the reasons why so many people, especially women, are attracted to MRH, and hence it interrogates the liberal frame in which intimate citizenship is usually conceptualised.

Key-words: Pentecostalism, Christianity, intimate citizenship, sexual citizenship, women, Kenya

This article adopts the concept of intimate citizenship to examine and discuss the intersections of gender, sexuality and citizenship in African Pentecostalism, specifically focusing on a Pentecostal movement in Kenya. According to sociologist Ken Plummer, who popularised the concept, intimate citizenship as a term 'must learn from the outset to denote *a plurality of multiple public voices and positions*' (Plummer 2003, 71; italics original). In other words, intimate citizenship is contested, and publicly so, as there is a multiplicity of conflicting ideas about the set of practices, identities, moralities and rights it refers to. As we will demonstrate in this article, the recognition of the multiplicity of, and contestation over, intimate citizenship is as relevant to the context of Kenya, and the African continent more generally, as to the contexts of Europe and North America Plummer writes about. For Plummer, the concept of intimate citizenship builds upon two other, and slightly older,

concepts: feminist citizenship, which is concerned with gender, and sexual citizenship, which is concerned with sexuality. Both these concepts, as well as the idea of intimate citizenship, foreground the ways in which citizenship – in the tradition of liberal political theory usually conceived of as a strictly public affair – has considerable implications for, and effects on, the ways in which people lead their private and indeed intimate lives, and is intricately connected to socio-cultural norms and structures pertaining to gender, sexuality, embodiment, relationships, and family life. As Plummer puts it,

“Intimate citizenship” – as designating *public discourse on the personal life* – makes for a certain tension: it appears to be an oxymoron. Citizenship usually speaks to the public sphere and intimacy to the private. But ... this very juxtapositioning sensitizes us to the important fact that the public and the private are no longer separate, autonomous spheres, if indeed they ever were. (Plummer 2003, 68)

In this article we follow Plummer’s preference for the concept of intimate citizenship, over the concepts of feminist and sexual citizenship, because it allows for a ‘wider, more inclusive understanding’ of the various relevant issues. Although the exact issues may be different in Kenya compared to Europe and North America, fact is that a whole range of issues relating to the personal and intimate life have become deeply contested in the contemporary Kenyan public sphere, and that these contestations are related to, and bear upon particular conceptions of citizenship. As much as such debates *currently* take place and manifest themselves in new ways in contemporary Kenya and other African countries, in fact they are part of a long history – at least dating back to the colonial period. As Neville Hoad argues in his book *African Intimacies*, ‘attention to questions of desire, affect, and experience *suggests* the contested and palimpsestic nature of Africa under the time-spaces of colonialism, decolonization, postcoloniality, and now globalization’ (Hoad 2007, xv). Thus, Hoad suggests that such questions pertaining to the intimate and personal life are at the heart of fundamental debates about ‘the nature of Africa’, that is, about “Africanness” or African identity. Both in the colonial and postcolonial period, such debates directly linked to narratives of nationhood and thus to conceptions of citizenship in African societies.

Basile Ndjio has argued that the “civilizing mission” of the colonial administration and Christian missionaries, which ‘entailed among other things transforming the sexualities of the African natives, by taming what they viewed as licentious behaviour and immoral sexual practices’ was continued after independence by post-colonial governments whose leaders had assimilated ‘the modern framework of respectability and civilization disseminated during the colonial period’ (Ndjio 2013, 127).

[I]t is through the ‘nationalization’ of the sexuality of its citizens that, in many African countries, the post-colonial state has managed to draw boundaries between Africans and Westerners, insiders and outsiders, citizens and strangers, authentic and deracinated Africans, good and bad citizens, loyal and disloyal subjects. (Ndjio 2013, 128)

This dynamic of what Ndjio calls nationalizing sexuality, and using sexuality and intimate matters more generally as a primary field for the definition of citizenship, in recent years has particularly manifested itself in controversies about homosexuality, same-sex relationships and “gay rights” in a range of African countries (Awondo 2010; van Klinken and Chitando 2016; Nyeck and Epprecht 2013). However, the public and political campaigns against same-sex sexualities are part of a broader set of mobilisations around issues associated with intimate citizenship. In Uganda, for example, the much-debated Anti-Homosexuality Bill

passed through Parliament alongside another bill that received much less international attention, the Anti-Pornography Bill, which was referred to as the anti-miniskirts ban by opponents. Both bills, in the words of Barbara Bompani, are ‘intrinsic to public moralisation and religiously driven moral action’ (Bompani 2016, 20). Likewise, in the 2010 referendum on the new Kenyan constitution, opponents in vain campaigned against it because the draft constitution would allow for both homosexuality and abortion (as well as for Islamic courts) (Deacon and Lynch 2013, 126). Thus, questions of homosexuality, women’s reproductive rights, and sexuality, gender and intimate matters more generally have all emerged, again, as part of a campaign of what has been dubbed the ‘moral regeneration of the African state’ – a campaign that has been energised considerably by the emergence of Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity in recent decades (Bompani and Valois 2018).

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is actively involved, and in fact has revitalised, the politics of intimate citizenship in contemporary Africa (van Klinken 2018; Parsitau 2009; Ukah 2016; Chitando 2007). As Birgit Meyer captures it,

One intriguing aspect of current Pentecostal modes of public appearance is that personal, intimate, or secret matters move center stage, becoming prime matters to be made public. ... In becoming a public force, Pentecostalism turns the personal into a matter of public concern. (Meyer 2011, 158)

The point is not just that Pentecostals do publicly express their moral concern with a range of matters that would previously be considered as private. They also transform the language about such personal matters, as Pentecostal churches – especially through their extensive counselling on marital life, sexuality and intimacy, create ‘a particular language of love and commitments that runs counter to customary and cultural conventions’ (van Dijk 2010, 289). According to van Dijk, the idea behind this counselling is,

not so much that these young people develop into ‘super-Christians’ who are only interested in maintaining certain moral standards about sexuality and relationships, but that there is a real sense of how these new practices are important to progress and prosperity in life. (van Dijk 2012, 94–95)

In other words, the politics of intimacy is not only inspired by moral-religious but also by socio-economic motivations. Both sets of motivations do not just play out at an individual level but are believed to have collective effects, as individual transformation is the cornerstone of the Pentecostal political project of bringing about national redemption – both in the sense of moral regeneration and prosperity. In the words of Ruth Marshall, Pentecostalism reconceptualises the moral and political order, ‘representing a vision of citizenship in which the moral government of the self is linked to the power to influence the conduct of others’ (Marshall 2009, 125).

However, there is more to Pentecostal intimate citizenship than a concern with moral discipline and regeneration. The term ‘Pentecostal intimacies’ in the title of this article also relates to the way in which Pentecostal Christianity – through its key beliefs, practices and techniques – shapes religious subjectivities in highly intimate ways. Pentecostal religiosity centres around ‘the personal relationship with God, intimacy with the transcendental, empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and protection in the blood of Jesus’ (Kalu 2008, 192). The relationship with God and the experience of the Holy Spirit are mediated through ecstatic Pentecostal worship practices requiring ‘full bodily and sensational participation’ (Meyer 2012, 27), and participation in such worship can very well be seen as ‘motivated by pleasure’

(Wariboko 2016, 5). One key question to ask, then, is: what are the productive effects of these forms of Pentecostal religious intimacy on Pentecostal notions of intimate citizenship?

The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness

As a case study of these dynamics, in this article we examine the politics of intimate citizenship in the context of one prominent (neo-)Pentecostal movement in Kenya, the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH), which is under the leadership of the charismatic self-proclaimed prophet, David Owuor. Established in 2004 when Owuor gave up his successful career as a scientist in the US and responded to God's call to return to Kenya and bring moral and spiritual renewal to the country, MRH has grown into a mass movement and Owuor has emerged as one of the most prominent figures on the Kenyan religious scene (Parsitau 2016). He became particularly popular since 2008, when he claimed to have predicted the violent eruption following the contested presidential elections in December 2007. His suggestion was that these violent clashes could have been prevented if only people had heeded his prophetic message. Since then, Owuor has launched himself on the national religio-political stage as a man of God who could bring healing to a divided and wounded nation. Initially closely related to Raila Odinga who was baptised by Owuor during the time he was prime minister (2008-2013), Owuor has proven to be flexible in his political allegiances, having been close to the Jubilee Coalition of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto that governs Kenya since the 2013 elections. As Gregory Deacon points out, Owuor was at the heart of the emergence of the narrative of Kenya as a born again nation, especially during the period heading towards the 2013 general election. He became the most prominent religious figure in the campaign, not only because his prophetic message captured 'the most visible neo-Pentecostal narrative, imagery, and discourse [centred around] repentance, forgiveness, and peace leading to God's favour and prosperity – both national and personal', but also because he organised a public National Prayer and Repentance event in Uhuru Park, Nairobi (Deacon 2015a, 207). Here, he made all the attending presidential candidates publicly pledge their commitment to peace and their respect for the outcome of the election, which in turn allowed Owuor to establish himself as a leading Christian figure contributing to national reconciliation and peace. The rise of Owuor, then, illustrates the general truth that 'in times of uncertainty and insecurity, spiritual and other prophet figures emerge to explain the new issues, rules and principles to observe in order to cope' (Maupeu 2014, 33). The prophetic register that Owuor represents further fits in a longer history in Kenya and the East African region more generally, with its rich cultures of prophecy (Anderson and Johnson 1995).

A peculiar feature of Owuor's MRH is that it does not seek to establish churches but instead creates 'national altars'. Usually held in the open air such as in parks and stadiums, 'these are not churches but any space that is claimed, cleansed and used for worship, fasting, repentance and prayer meetings' (Parsitau 2015, 193–94). Hundreds of such altars can now be found all over the country. This is where the followers of Owuor meet, not seldom dressed in sackcloth or other sober dresses as an expression of repentance and of their readiness for the second coming of Christ. Especially when the prophet himself is visiting for a crusade, large numbers of people gather with high expectations of the powerful prophecies and miracles that he will deliver. Another distinguishing feature is Owuor's strong criticism of prosperity preachers and their faith or health-and-wealth gospel, and his alternative emphasis on repentance and holiness. This allows him to distinguish himself from other prominent neo-Pentecostal figures in Kenya and to carve out a unique space. At the same time, the personality cult around him corresponds with the neo-Pentecostal emphasis on the pastor or prophet as a uniquely anointed and divinely gifted figure. Not only that, this cult also exemplifies the latest trend in Pentecostalism, where the pastor, in the words of Ebenezer

Obadare, has become 'a sexual object' (Obadare 2017). As mentioned above, Owuor has further actively contributed to the invention of a neo-Pentecostal political narrative of Kenya as a nation born-again (Deacon 2015b).

Moral and Spiritual Regeneration of the Church and the Nation

Owuor's prophetic message centres on the key words of repentance and holiness, as reflected in the name of his ministry. He applies this message both to the religious and to the socio-political realm in Kenya, presenting himself as the one who is called by God to warn against moral and spiritual decay in Kenyan society and in the Kenyan church, and to call upon people to repent from sin and dedicate themselves to the path of holiness.

When Owuor first burst onto the Kenyan social and religious scene, he attempted to carve his own space by launching scathing attacks on Kenya's clergy from all denominations, although specifically focusing on Pentecostal-Charismatic churches. In particular, he presented a sharp public criticism of churches and clergy inclined towards the prosperity gospel (also known as the faith or health-and-wealth gospel) that is widespread in contemporary African Pentecostalism. Owuor accused prosperity preachers of greed and of misleading their followers, and he castigated their lavish lifestyle. As he stated in one of his sermons: 'The church has deliberately chosen to worship the idol gods of earthly prosperity. ... Pastors began to preach an inflated corrupt gospel of prosperity which exalts money and earthly wealth over and above the most important holiness of the Lord.'¹ This message resonated well with a section of Christians who admired his boldness to speak up against the proponents of the prosperity gospel and who considered the prophet's apparent commitment to a sober, righteous and holy lifestyle as a sign that he truly is a 'man of God' (seemingly without questioning the sources of Owuor's own ostensible wealth).

In addition to the prosperity gospel, another form of 'corruption' that Owuor appears to be highly concerned with is in the area of sexuality. In his opinion, the church has become a site of all kinds of 'sexual sin':

Sin began to gradually creep into the church of Christ. Holiness took the backbench as defilement paraded the front rows and pulpit. ... Defilement entered the worship teams and the congregation in the forms of homosexuality, prostitution, tight trousers that show their anatomy, miniskirts, tight skirts with long slits, masturbations, open gay lesbianism, deception, slutty dressing, and fleshy immoral dancing during worship services.²

Owuor even goes as far as suggesting that the overnight prayer vigils (also known as *keshas*) that have become such a typical feature of Kenyan Pentecostal religious culture, are turning into sex parties with 'many condoms litter[ing] the Church compound in the morning'.³

Extending his prophetic critique from the sphere of the church to Kenyan society more generally, Owuor preaches that 'Kenya has descended into greater sin and wickedness, with all forms of impunity. It is as though sin has now become institutionalized in the nation of Kenya.'⁴ Further elaborating on this, he again appears to be particularly concerned with issues broadly related to sexuality:

Look! God is angry with Kenya because of defiling the altar of the Lord. Abortions have become a norm in Kenya, encompassing high school children, universities and campuses. The collection of fetuses by the roadside in Nairobi and other parts of the country side is going to attract the wrath of God. The immoral dressing that has now characterized the attire of Kenyan women did not augur well with the holiness requirements of the Lord of Israel, who created Kenya.⁵

The closing words of this quotation – that it is God who created Kenya – are rather peculiar, given that historically speaking, Kenya as a nation state and society only came into being during the colonial period and is a British colonial construction. Yet Owuor's comment of course should be read as a politico-theological declaration that Kenya belongs to God and therefore, principally, should be following God's commandments or it risks the wrath of God. In other words, Owuor presents a theocratic notion in which Christian citizenship becomes the norm and model for Kenyan citizenship.

A closer reading of his sermons makes clear that Owuor's notion of Christian citizenship is strongly influenced by an eschatological line of thought. His prophetic messages make clear that he perceives the world as an evil and wicked place full of 'sins of immorality', especially 'sexual sins', and other scandals that anger God, a God that is imagined as wrathful and vengeful. Therefore repentance and holy living are edged and seen as the only remedy for all the problems and challenges facing Kenya (as well as other parts of Africa and the world).⁶ Only repentance and holiness can prevent God's wrath manifesting itself through apocalyptic signs such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, drought, disease, terrorism, election-related violence, and war, road and air accidents. Clearly, MRH is one of those Pentecostal churches that 'provide new eschatological, spiritual and moral narratives to re-interpret and predict world events' (Quiroz 2016, 2). Moreover, it is believed that only through repentance, becoming born-again, and committing oneself to a life of holiness one will be prepared for the immanent second coming of Jesus Christ. MRH's teaching is pre-millennialist and centres on the idea of rapture, meaning that the ministry believes that Jesus Christ, upon his return, will take all those living in holiness with him into heaven.⁷ Thus, earthly citizenship against this background is a preparation for, and anticipation at heavenly citizenship. The born-again Christian's true citizenship is in heaven (cf. O'Neill 2009), but this reflects back on, and shapes the way citizenship is conceived of in the here-and-now. As Owuor preaches:

The end-time church is expected to uphold the culture of holy thoughts and communing as a lifestyle. Any nation in which the church followed this path would therefore seek the Lord Jesus, strengthen her mind, elevate and character, and be refined in holiness. This kind of end time church would be Holy Ghost filled, and maturing in stature that she may enter into the wedding of the Lamb of God. Without a doubt the sins of this land must have caught attention of the Lord Almighty. Kenya needs restoration, especially in these days in order to exude forth the mighty last revival.⁸

What is crucial to notice, given the focus of this article, is that Owuor's emphasis on the 'restoration' or moral and spiritual regeneration of Kenya, is specifically and immediately applied by him to people's intimate spheres of life: how they dress, who they sleep with, what sexual acts they are involved in, etc. In other words: he is actively involved in the policing of intimate citizenship in Kenya, mobilising against abortion, homosexuality, masturbation, sex before and outside marriage, as well as 'immoral dressing' and 'immoral dancing', as demonstrated in the quotations above.

The question why Owuor and his ministry are so actively engaged in the politics of intimate citizenship, and why this has made them highly successful in terms of appeal, following and influence, cannot be understood without acknowledging the specific debates about intimate citizenship in the Kenyan public sphere. In August 2010, Kenya after a nation-wide referendum adopted a new constitution which is widely seen as one of the most progressive ones on the continent. This is not only because of its decentralisation of power

but also because of its comprehensive and liberal bill of rights that recognises and protects the rights of women, youth, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable groups in society. According to Godwin Murunga (2014, 159),

The bill of rights was obviously a major victory for the progressive forces. It contributes greatly to the possibility of making Kenya a democratic state by recognising the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Kenyans. More importantly, it confers and defends the rights of a diversity of Kenyans in a way that was not possible in the previous constitutions.

During the referendum campaign, many churches and other conservative bodies mobilised against the proposed constitution, insinuating that it would allow for abortion, homosexuality and other “moral vices”. Although Owuor did not so much directly interfere in the referendum campaign – playing the card of a supposedly “a-political” stance –, his moral crusade against abortion and homosexuality, as well as his emphasis on Kenya as a Christian nation and a related notion of Christian citizenship, was an alternative way of intervening and taking a stance. Thus, Owuor did directly contribute to the contestation over intimate citizenship, especially as it relates to women and sexual minorities, which was opened up by the intense public and political debates about the new constitution. In the years after the adoption of the new constitution, intimate citizenship has continued to be highly politicised and deeply contested in Kenya, as is illustrated by a number of controversial and widely debated petitions about issues such as abortion, transgender rights, and the decriminalisation of same-sex practices that have been submitted to the High Court. Beyond the strictly legal sphere, Kenyan society witnesses the emergence of relatively strong women’s rights and LGBT rights movements, but also the emergence of strong conservative, often religiously-driven, counter-mobilisations (e.g. Macharia 2013; Sanya and Lutomia 2016; van Klinken 2016). Obviously, Owuor is part of the latter, and his prophetic rants against a range of moral vices can be seen as a conservative religious response to certain progressive developments and tendencies in Kenyan society and public culture. Importantly, the state plays an ambivalent role in these dynamics, as prominent Kenyan politicians and government bodies have not always actively supported and defended the new constitution (to say the least) and have not always unequivocally endorsed the liberal bill of rights, especially not in areas related to intimate citizenship. This provides movements such as MRH with a space for political influence, which Owuor gratefully makes use of. In particular, the narrative adopted by the ruling Jubilee Coalition of Kenya as a born again nation has given him a platform and basis to continuously insert his religio-political vision of Christian citizenship, and its moral implications, into the public sphere.

Women’s Bodies and the Body of the Nation

A gender-critical analysis of Owuor’s prophetic messages and sermons, as well as of MRH discourses more generally, reveals that the concern with (im)morality and (im)purity is specifically applied to women. This works in two directions.

First, women’s bodies are depicted as locus for sin and temptation. Women are frequently depicted as temptresses and prostitutes, and as the cause of men’s sexual sins and lack of sexual control. As an example, it suffices to look at one sermon, entitled ‘Overcoming Sexual Sin’, in which Owuor evoked the biblical narratives of Samson and Delilah, and of David and Bathsheba. Both Samson and David are referred to as ‘mighty servants of the Lord’ who, however, fell because they could not resist the temptations of desire and lust represented by Delilah and Bathsheba respectively. According to Owuor,

Sexual sin will always be punished by Jehovah. King David fell into sexual immorality and God deserted him. Same with the mighty Samson! He was befell [sic] by sexual sin with a prostitute called Delilah. Sexual sin leads to physical and spiritual death.⁹

Having evoked these two biblical narratives, Owuor continues by reciting, paraphrasing and applying another biblical text (from the book of Proverbs, chapter 6: 24-26):

Keep yourself away from the immoral woman and from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife. Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread and the adulteress preys upon your very life. The Bible says that based on the way a woman is dressed she can be called a prostitute. Based on the way you dress, the Bible calls you a prostitute. I am a Christian, I put on mini-skirts, tumbo cuts and exposing your legs and your breasts – the Bible calls you a prostitute. People begin to wonder what kind of image is this! ... The Lord is warning you against sexual lust, somebody! For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread and the adulterous woman preys upon your very life. Sexual sin is going to reduce you into a loaf of bread that rots in a short time, a mere perishable. This is how God looks at sexual sin.

Clearly, Owuor's preaching makes fluent transitions from the biblical text to the contemporary context and back again, reinforcing negative images of women as prostitutes, and adulterers, and as dangerous and even potentially deadly sources of temptation. Women's bodies are portrayed as bringing sin in the nation, and they are considered as ultimately responsible for men's failure to enter the anticipated Kingdom of God.

Second, in contrast to these very negative depictions of women, Owuor also cultivates an alternative image, of women who are morally and spiritually pure. During one of the MRH pastor's conferences held in 2016 in Nakuru, Kenya, he argued that when women dress modestly and "holy" they earn societal respect and dignity. He explicitly referred to an example of one woman in his ministry who dressed holy and inspired many others to dress like her, and he publicly affirmed her, stating: 'Look! Because of Nancy, the sisters in the church started to dress holy.'¹⁰ Within MRH there are strict dress codes for women, prescribing long flowing and loose dresses, ostensibly to embody holiness, but of course also not to lead men into sexual temptation. For the same reason the dress code explicitly forbids the wearing of sleeveless tops, hemlines at or above the knee, slit skirts that expose the knees and thighs, open shoes, bare legs and uncovered heads. Women are further urged to adopt certain manners and practices that are deemed appropriate for a holy religious life. Speaking about women's bodies and dressing, Owuor often quotes biblical verses, such as Hebrews 12:14, "Make efforts to be holy, for without holiness, no one will see the Lord!", and 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?". Applying these verses to his women followers while speaking at a prayer rally, Owuor stated: 'When you cover your body, you are saying: I respect and honour my body which is the temple of the Lord. So make sure you do not defile the house of the Holy Spirit by dressing indecently.'¹¹ It is such kinds of teachings that influence how women dress in MRH. Holiness is promoted as the means through which Kenya will truly be a Christian nation devoted to God and obeying God's commandments. The burden appears to be primarily on women to achieve this moral and spiritual ideal.

Of course, from a gender-critical perspective, it is easy to see in MRH's teachings the workings of patriarchy, with women's bodies being made sites of surveillance, regulation, control and power. Indeed, Owuor's project of moral regeneration echoes wider patterns in

colonial and postcolonial Africa, in which women's bodies in particular have become symbolic sites of contestation over purity, authenticity, and decency. As Desiree Lewis captures these dynamics:

The centrality of patriarchy in the control of women's bodies is evident in the policing of women's gender roles in nations – as wives, mothers, sisters and as daughters. Being a respected and respectable woman citizen (a supportive mother-of-the-nation, a loyal-sister-in-the-struggle, a dutiful daughter-of-the-nation) requires a highly visible and explicit performance of prescribed gendered behaviour. (Lewis 2008, 107)

In the context of MRH, the image of the respected and respectable woman citizen is configured through a discourse that imagines born-again women as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, which is why their purity and modesty are essential virtues. Of course, the ideal of respectable born-again womanhood that MRH promotes very much echoes earlier colonial and missionary Christian ideals of womanhood in which 'sexual modesty defined female virtue' (Thomas 2003, 133).

In the context of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, Rekopantswe Mate (2002) has written about women's wombs as 'God's laboratories'. Something similar can be observed in MRH, where women's wombs are considered as laboratory sites to regenerate the nation morally, spiritually and socially. As much as Owuor presents a current discourse in a neo-Pentecostal guise about these matters, he is only the latest chapter in a long history of what Lynn Thomas has called 'politics of the womb' in Kenya, where women's bodies – especially their reproductive organs – have been policed and politicised throughout the colonial and postcolonial period. As Thomas (2003, 4) argues, 'reproduction, perhaps more so than any other realm of social life, demonstrates how the most intimate actions and desires are connected to debates and interventions that flow from community, colonial, and international regimes'. This is apparent from Owuor and MRH, as their efforts at intervening in the politics of intimate citizenship in Kenya is directly related to deeply rooted social and cultural concerns with female respectability, on the one hand, and with transnational Pentecostal Christian discourses of sexual citizenship, on the other hand.

Pentecostal Women's Intimacies

The interesting, and maybe puzzling, question is why in the context of MRH women themselves *en masse* subject themselves to the policing of their bodies and their intimate lives. From observing Owuor's rallies and the MRH 'altars' throughout the country, it is clear that the majority of followers are female. They do not critically question the ministry's moral codes and dress regulations, and instead women followers can be found joining the prophet in objectifying and stigmatising non-conforming women outside of the ministry. Women congregants of MRH believe that women who do not dress like them, those who wear trousers and miniskirts or tight and fashionable clothing, do not respect their bodies and cause men to lust after them. They compare and contrast themselves to such women, presenting themselves as morally mature and spiritually pure. As one respondent put it:

If I truly claim to be born again, then it must show in my dressing, in how I carry myself, how I speak and how I guard my body. The Bible tells me that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can only dwell in a clean and holy body that should also be dressed holy.¹²

One possible explanation why this respondent and other female MRH followers uncritically adopt and identify with the teaching of the ministry might have to do with the way in which

they have internalised patriarchy. Yet such an explanation suggests that they are meek and powerless victims of a patriarchal anti-sex prophet and his religious movement, which is problematic as it runs the risk of denying these women agency. What alternative explanations could make sense of women's seeming adherence to, and adoption of, an ostensibly repressive notion of sexuality and intimate citizenship? Could it be that part of the reason why women are attracted to MRH has to do, precisely, with the ways in which the ministry does regulate women's bodies and intimate lives? Could it be that part of the attraction is in the religious forms of intimacy, and of intimate citizenship, that the movement offers to women?

We would like to propose three possible explanations of women's attraction to MRH and to the notions of intimate citizenship that the ministry purports. First, following Thomas' above mentioned argument about the 'politics of the womb', there exists a longstanding concern in Kenya with women's respectability, specifically understood in terms of sexual modesty. In contemporary Kenyan society, especially in the urban contexts where MRH is particularly popular, there is an unfolding sexual modernity that, as Rachel Spronk (2012) demonstrates, renders women's sexuality an 'ambiguous pleasure', as women have to negotiate a delicate balance between higher levels of sexual autonomy and freedom, on the one hand, and continuing socio-cultural expectations of decency and respectability, on the other hand. In this complex moral field, MRH appears to offer women a very clear, and therefore potentially appealing, path: it allows them fashioning a modern Pentecostal female subjectivity that makes them respectable women in society. This might explain why MRH attracts a considerable number of female members from the middle classes, including women working in academia, the civil service, and business.

Second, it appears that women are attracted to MRH because the ministry's notions of sexual purity and holiness offer them emotional and psychological relief from marital anxieties. In her study of HIV and intimate relationships in Tanzania, Melissa Browning (2014) speaks about 'risky marriage', referring to a situation where marital and other intimate relationships put women at severe risk and in serious danger of contracting HIV as well as of suffering from domestic and sexual violence. In the context of HIV and AIDS, according to Browning, the body is a site of both pain and promise. It is where the daily struggle for human flourishing and wellbeing takes place. Women in sub-Saharan Africa bear the burdens of HIV and AIDS and many women turn to faith to find resources for human flourishing and survival. In the Kenyan context, as elsewhere in Africa, women appear to feel safer being single and born again because church and faith are safe spaces for them (Parsitau 2009). As one single mother, who is also member of MRH, explained during an informal conversation about the proliferation of single motherhood in Kenya:

I love being single because I am in control of my life. I don't have to go to bed worried that my husband or boyfriend cheated on me last night. I don't go to bed thinking that I don't know where he slept last night and who he slept with. I am not worried that someone will bring death into my bed, HIV to me is death and many women have been infected with HIV and other diseases on their marital beds. I don't have to worry about that. Let me worry about money issues but not death on my bed. I pity married women. They suffer in silence. And when they get a cough or skin rashes, they go, "Oh my God! Death has been brought to me." For me being lonely is better than being married and scared to death about my HIV status.¹³

This account not only illustrates women's anxieties and fears about HIV and AIDS, but also explains why messages of holiness, sexual purity and marital fidelity resonate with many women, and why the promoter of such teachings attracts a large following. Moreover, Owuor

has claimed to have healed several women from HIV, and these women are often publicly paraded on crusades as testimonies of how God has used the prophet to bring healing. The MRH Magazine once published a full page with names and pictures of women, alongside their medical certificates ostensibly showing their HIV status before and after the prophet's prayers.¹⁴ A very much publicized story is that of a lecturer at Egerton University who is claimed to be healed through the prayers of the prophet.¹⁵ While this has created enormous controversy in Kenya and beyond, such stories have the ability to make women feel attracted to the ministry with its promise of healing, not just from HIV but also from the anxieties around it.

Third, and related to the situation of 'risky marriages', it could very well be that Owuor himself epitomizes, for his female followers, the ideal marital partner who is both God-fearing and sexually faithful to his spouse: espousing ideals of a monogamous loving relationship that many of his female followers' lack. The fact that Owuor himself is publicly known to be unmarried is not necessarily a problem here, but may in fact reinforce women's idealisation of him as a virtuous dream partner. As Obadare has argued with reference to West African Pentecostalism, the pastor has become 'a sexual object':

His power and influence project over a wider range of social life, including the most intimate. He is a widely sought after existential micromanager: a blend of spiritual guide, financial coach, marriage counselor, fashion icon, travel advisor, all-purpose celebrity, and last but not least, and as we are beginning to see from a stream of media reports from across the continent, centre of an erotic economy. ... [T]he pastor [is] an object of erotic fascination, part sexual healer, part sex symbol, the throbbing centre of an intense Pentecostal sexual economy. (Obadare 2017)

A similar dynamic can be observed in MRH, where Owuor is idealised and idolised by his female followers. As the 'mighty man of God' he becomes an object of attraction and fascination, both spiritually and erotically, as demonstrated by the excitement with which his followers welcome him wherever he travels, and the dedication with which women serve him.

Weddings as Raptures: Women, bodies and Raptures in MRH

Prophet Owuor remains an object of fascination and adoration to many women who uncritically allow him to have a say over how they live their intimate lives. In our ethnographic study on sex and intimacy in the MRH, we found that Owuor has influence on how young people meet, date and marry. Notions of purity and virginity are common speak here. The Gospel story of the ten virgins, five foolish ones and five wise ones, is central in this church. According to this parable, which has clear eschatological themes, only the five wise virgins will be able to enter the Kingdom of God, while the foolish ones will be left out by the groom – seen as symbolising Jesus Christ – when he arrives. Invoking this story, young female members in MRH are encouraged to stay pure by remaining virgins until marriage. The parable is used to reinforce messages of sexual purity which resonates with patriarchal notions of sexual purity for young girls, and for women more generally. The five foolish virgins in the parable, according to Owuor, stand for 'Christians living in sexual sin' and they ultimately run the risk 'to miss the rapture'.¹⁶ Preventing such risk, MRH pastors and counsellors are at the start of every courtship as dating is not allowed in the ministry lest the aspiring couple falls into sexual sin before marriage.

How weddings are conducted and carried out in MRH and its link to notions of eschatology is particularly fascinating. Owuor teaches his followers that earthly weddings must be carried out in a manner that reflects the second coming of Jesus Christ. As such marriage

should be like 'a shadow of the Wedding of the Lamb'. This means, to start with, that all MRH weddings must take place in a designated Altar (the sacred open spaces used by the ministry) and must be presided over by a licenced clergy. The groom, the bride and bride maids must dress holy. The wedding gown must be made in such a way that the bride must be covered with no body parts exposed. It is the practice that the bride arrives first in the church before the groom. The significance is that the bride signifies the church waiting in anticipation of the arrival of the groom, representing Jesus Christ. Christ is believed to come to take the church home during the rapture. Thus the bride signifies the church while the groom signifies Christ who will come to rescue the church out of this sinful world. Every wedding, therefore, should serve as a reminder that Jesus Christ is coming again to rapture the church. Such an occasion must therefore signify holiness and purity so that it is ready to be raptured. The wedding night is supposed to be the first time the couple has sex, holy sex for that matter: the woman's virginity should be raptured on the wedding night just as Christ would come to rapture the church from a sinful world.

In a series of sermons, based on what are claimed to be divine revelations that the prophet received through visions and visitations of the Lord, Owuor speaks about the rapture in great detail. He shares a vision that he received, of two golden wedding rings that appeared in the sky, symbolising the wedding of the church and Christ.¹⁷ Elaborating on this, he teaches that the Church as the spiritual bride of Christ in this upcoming and highly anticipated glorious heavenly wedding must remain holy, uncorrupted, without contamination or defilement of any kind and in complete holiness. As is common in millennialist religious movements (Wilcox 2011), there is an implicit yet obvious gender dimension in this rather intimate discourse about the eschatological wedding: the Church being imagined as the bride suggests that holiness and purity are specifically feminine virtues. Female embodiment and sexuality, in particular, appear to be framed in an eschatological narrative about 'the wedding of the Lamb', and subsequently women's sexuality is closely guarded. In other words, women in particular are entrusted, or burdened, with the task of being morally and spiritually prepared for the upcoming heavenly wedding with Christ. This has profound implications for Pentecostal women's intimate citizenship: to paraphrase a biblical text, in MRH principally women's intimate citizenship is not located in this world, but in heaven (Philippians 3:20). The virtues of purity and holiness that women are required to embody are a preparation for, and anticipation of, the heavenly wedding of the coming Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

We began this article by invoking Plummer's concept of intimate citizenship. This concept, Plummer acknowledges himself, is oxymoronic as it refers to a public discourse on highly personal and private matters. Obviously, such a discourse can be observed in the Ministry of Holiness and Repentance of Prophet David Owuor in Kenya, which inserts into the public sphere a religio-political discourse strictly regulating the bodies and desires of its followers, especially women. This discourse is accompanied by a range of beliefs, practices and techniques through which the subjectivity of MRH followers is being shaped. The idea is that in this process, these followers come to embody a heavenly citizenship, defined by the virtues of holiness and purity. Where many contemporary (neo-)Pentecostal movements are observed to become more "this worldly", MRH derives its popularity by offering an other-worldly alternative, which appears to be particularly attractive to women who struggle to navigate the complexities and ambiguities of sexual and gender modernity in Kenya, as well as the anxieties and pressures of marital and otherwise intimate relationships, both in relation to the challenges posed by the HIV epidemic and otherwise. As much as this form of Pentecostal citizenship is "heavenly", it has direct and visible consequences for the way in which gendered and sexual citizenship is shaped in the here and now. It is key to bringing about a moral and spiritual

regeneration of the nation, with women's bodies serving as key symbolic sites for this project of Pentecostal nation building. This means that Pentecostal intimate citizenship, as construed in MRH, is not only oxymoronic in the way that it bridges the public and the private, but also in the way it bridges the earthly and the heavenly, the Republic of Kenya and the Kingdom of God. As much as Owuor and his ministry are a highly contemporary phenomenon, addressing the moral, spiritual and political uncertainties and instabilities of Kenya following the 2007-2008 post-election violence and the dynamics around the 2010 constitution, the concern with women's respectability and sexual modesty fits in a long colonial and postcolonial history of the "politics of the womb" in Kenya. Finally, our case study of MRH presents one important narrative of Pentecostal intimate citizenship, centred around an "other-worldly" orientation based on the belief in an eschatological intimate wedding with Christ. As much as this narrative has become highly salient in the Kenyan public sphere in recent years, it is important to remember that it is not the only notion of Pentecostal intimacy, and of Pentecostal intimate citizenship, that can be found in Kenya and other contemporary African contexts. Pentecostalism is a highly diverse phenomenon, and further comparative research on contesting and conflicting notions of gender, sexuality, intimacy and citizenship in African Pentecostalism is needed.

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¹ <http://www.highwayofholiness.us/his-sons-no-more/>

² <http://www.highwayofholiness.us/his-sons-no-more/>

³ David Owuor, 'The Wedding of the Lamb', *Repentance and Holiness Magazine* 4:1 (2007).

⁴ David Owuor, 'Sack Cloths and Ashes and the Wailing Women', *Repentance and Holiness Magazine* 6 (2009), 2.

⁵ 'The Man Who Baptized Raila Odinga. Exclusive Interview with David Owuor', in *Arise Africa Magazine* 2009.

⁶ The MRH website is full of prophecies relating to countries all over the continent and the world.

⁷ E.g. see <http://www.highwayofholiness.us/special-announcement-the-lord-shows-his-prophet-the-holy-church-entering-heaven-prophet-dr-owuor/>.

⁸ David Owuor, 'The Wedding of the Lamb', *Repentance and Holiness Magazine* 4 (2007).

⁹ David Owuor, 'Overcoming Sexual Sins', <https://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=WLZW77NX> (accessed 19 January 2018).

¹⁰ Fieldwork notes Damaris Parsitau, 2016.

¹¹ Fieldwork notes Damaris Parsitau, 2016.

¹² Fieldwork notes Damaris Parsitau, 2015.

¹³ Informal conversation with Catherine (pseudonym) in June 2017 in Nakuru.

¹⁴ *Repentance and Holiness Magazine* 7 (2010), 31.

¹⁵ <https://www.nation.co.ke/Features/DN2/Faith-healer-or-prophet-of-doom/-/957860/1690928/-/1m3pwez/-/index.html>

¹⁶ “The Rapture of the Church: The Mighty Vision the Lord God Gave Dr Owuor”, *Repentance and Holiness Magazine*, vol. 1 (2006), 13. <https://www.slideshare.net/franciscogurreanozaleda9/vol-1repentance-magazine-the-rapture-by-prophet-d-owuor> (accessed 19 January 2018).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 22.