‘Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness’: 
Cursing Barrenness in Contemporary 
African Christianity

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Abstract
Childlessness is an issue of deep religious concern in Africa. Men, women and couples with problems of sexuality and childlessness make use not only of the resources of traditional African religions but also of the many Pentecostal/charismatic churches and movements that have burgeoned throughout sub-Saharan Africa in the last three decades. Initially this was the domain of the older African independent churches, as far as the Christian response to childlessness is concerned; the new Pentecostals have taken on the challenge too. Based on the same biblical and traditional worldviews that events have causes, these churches have mounted ritual contexts that wrestle with the issues of sexuality and childlessness. In pursuing this salvific endeavor, however, the needs of those who may never have children seem to have been neglected by the churches considered here and represented by the Pure Fire Miracle Ministries, a Ghana/Nigeria charismatic church located in Ghana. This partial approach to ‘healing’ childlessness has led to one-sided interpretations of what it means to be fruitful and prosperous and deepened the troubles of the childless.

Keywords
Pentecostal/charismatic, childlessness, Christianity, fruitfulness, primal, religion

Introduction
Research into Pentecostal/Charismatic religion and theology takes me to a number of churches belonging to that stream of Christianity and their special programs. The numbers of people, especially women, who visit the ‘break-through’ services and healing camps of these churches, hoping to have their own biological children, is striking. The search for childbirth within religious contexts is new to neither traditional African religions nor churches in Africa. During a wedding at the Mt Zion Methodist Church at Sakumono in Accra in December 2004, a family member was called upon to pray for the newly-weds. The prayer went as follows:
We prophesy over this marriage. We curse every evil eye and persons who do not want this marriage to succeed. O Lord, release your glory in childbirth. May your Spirit deal with all the negative powers around this marriage that... this union will stand as a testimony to the power of your holy name, which is above every name; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

In the Methodist Church itself, the first Sunday of every month is Mother's Thanksgiving Day. Women who have given birth within a certain period bring special offerings and are led through the thanksgiving liturgy as part of the main service. The new mothers are led to appropriate words from Psalm 116. The psalmist does not specifically mention pregnancy and childbirth. However the words seem to have been written in the context of certain struggles, perhaps illnesses and near-death experiences from which the healing, salvation and deliverance of God had been realized after agonizing prayer: ‘The snares of death encompassed me’, it says, ‘the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord:... For thou hast delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,...’ (vs. 3-4, 8). Indeed the very language employed in announcing the special offerings of new mothers in the Methodist Church, *okor sa na w'aba fie dwodwo*, ‘she has returned successfully from battle’, is very revealing of the mindset that childbirth involves a process akin to a physically tough fight. It is considered a spiritual matter that makes or breaks families. In spite of this historic mission church’s interest in the physical and spiritual risks of childbirth, there is no provision, at least not at the official church level, for religious rituals that actually seek to help those struggling with the difficulties of barrenness and sterility. That side of things has always been part of the Christianity of the African initiated/independent churches (AICs).

The ‘prayer gardens’ and ‘mercy grounds’ of the older independent churches have always been sacred spaces dedicated to ‘wrestles’ with God for such needs. Levitical taboos were often invoked to bar women in these Aladura or Spiritual churches from certain sacred duties but, for many of their founding prophetesses, it is the ability to pray for the gift of children that brought them to the attention of the public (Crumbley 1992). In Africa, as it is in Old Testament thought in particular, children are the crowning glory of marriages. The Pentecostal/charismatic churches that are the newest forms of African initiated Christianity have sustained many of the concerns of the older AICs in their religious orientation. One of these is the creation of ritual contexts within which God’s intervention may be sought for various issues including childbirth. The situation is the same with larger classical Pentecostal denominations, which run some of the biggest healing camps in Ghana. Thus, in my
thinking, Ghanaian theologian Mercy A. Oduyoye spoke for many African couples when, in telling of her own journey through childlessness, she wrote: ‘many are the traumas in the quest for a child of one’s own’ (Amba Ewudziwa 1999: 112). This article examines a contemporary African response to childlessness as a religious issue. It is inspired particularly by a program held in a Ghanaian Pentecostal/charismatic church in December 2006. Praying for existential and health needs are not unfamiliar to African initiated Christianity, as noted, but ‘specializing’ in a specific biological concern such as a medical doctor or herbalist would do is an innovative religious development that deserves some attention.

Advertising Charisma

In November 2006, Pastor Enoch Aminu, the Nigerian founder of Ghana-based Pure Fire Miracle Ministries (PFMM), posted a series of full-page advertisements in leading newspapers. The colorful advertisements appeared consistently in the Daily Graphic, Ghana’s oldest national newspaper. The main text read: ‘Operation 10,000 Babies’ and was accompanied by a picture of the pastor and three babies. The program was held from Friday 1 to Sunday 3 December. Such advertisements are not unfamiliar in Ghanaian news media and public spaces (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005a). ‘Prophetic meetings’, targeted at securing ‘fruits of the womb’ as children are called in Pentecostal/Charismatic discourses, rank next only to the search for physical health in these places. Pastor Aminu claims a special ‘anointing’ for that ministry. The high rate of proliferation and the constantly evolving menu of programs have increased the levels of competition and rivalry among the new churches. Advertisements are therefore needed to raise the profile of special interventionist services and the charismatic personalities behind them. What these prophetic meetings promise is in the sub-headings of the advertisements and this one read: ‘Come and Break the Bondage of Barrenness and Give Birth Next Year’.

The PFMM is one of the new Pentecostal/charismatic churches that have burgeoned in sub-Saharan Africa since the late 1970s (Claffey 2007; Soothill 2007; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005b; Gifford 2004; 1998). They have enjoyed exceptional growth and their presence is virtually threatening the relevance of historic mission Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. Their main features include: a special appeal for younger people and middle-class professionals; urban-centered congregations; an international orientation; an innovative appropriation of modern media technologies in the dissemination of the faith; and a theology of positives, possibilities and prosperity in this life. They may look outwardly different, but the new churches share the theological concerns
that made the AICs popular through the 1970s. Pentecostal/charismatic churches, by virtue of their experiential and interventionist theologies, take seriously the presence of spiritual forces as causal explanations for misfortune. Thus, Birgit Meyer refers to how, similarly to the AICs, Pentecostal/charismatic churches ‘stress the importance of the Holy Spirit above biblical doctrines and provide room for prophetism, dreams and visions, speaking in tongues, prayer healing, and deliverance from evil spirits’ (Meyer 2004: 452). The matter of childlessness as a spiritual issue and the search for answers in that realm therefore moved beyond the shrines with the emergence of the AICs and the Pentecostal/charismatic churches.

Etiologies: African Religion and Christian Independency

The issue raised by the PFMM advertisement relates to the understanding that biological infertility, sterility or barrenness is a spiritually caused condition. The critical aspect of the advertisement for our purposes is located in this underlying worldview, that is, the reference to human barrenness as synonymous with being in spiritual ‘bondage’. The intention of the Pentecostal/charismatic churches in the interpretation of God’s activity in childbirth is to be biblical. However, in problematizing biological infertility as a religious issue, the theology of African initiated Christianity, both old and new, sustains ideas that are also prevalent in traditional thought. Three of these religiocultural ideas are particularly instructive for our discussion. First is the belief in a world in which evil supernatural powers act as the causes of misfortune; secondly, the need to create appropriate ritual contexts and sacred spaces within which the world of benevolent powers could be invited to intervene in crises (Ray 1993); and thirdly, the belief in a sacramental universe in which physical things often act as vehicles for spiritual ones.

The process of deliverance and the supporting hermeneutics, as I will demonstrate through the ‘Operation 10,000 Babies’ program, are all built around the worldview that those who do not have progeny of their own are like the Israelites at various stages of their search for deliverance. Childless couples are either under ‘Egyptian’ bondage or are being terrorized by spiritual ‘Goliaths’ and need to be delivered from those curses. The biblical ‘Pharaoh’ and ‘Goliath’ are reinvented in Pentecostal/charismatic hermeneutics as witches, and human agents of supernatural evil, malevolent powers and demons. They are agents of the devil who prevent God’s people from enjoying the abundant life or salvation available through Jesus Christ (Meyer 1999). The reason for the popularity of these ideas in African Christianity thus goes beyond biblical paradigms as the pastors and members understand them. In African tradi-
stantial religious thought generally, as Margaret Field explains, shrine priests most commonly diagnosed witchcraft as the cause of childlessness:

The witches have stolen away the supplicant’s womb or penis—that is the spiritual counterpart of the organ—and have eaten it (in which case there is no hope) or broken it into pieces, or hidden it in a river. The supplicant is told to lay his need before the deity, make a sacrifice to the river in which the damaged organ is hidden, and the deity will do his best to repair and restore it (Field 1960: 121).

In sustaining African traditional ideas in the interpretation of misfortune, Pentecostal/charismatic hermeneutics do not pursue ‘unifactorial’ interpretations as David Westerlund would call them. Westerlund designates three ideal types of etiology as far as ‘African indigenous religions and disease causation’ is concerned. There are religious or supra-human causes; social/human or causes due to witchery and curses; and then natural causes of disease (Westerlund 2006: 6-7). The religious and the social here are usually grouped together under spiritual or mystical causes but when natural problems defy ordinary solutions then what is ordinary takes on an extraordinary character in the African imagination. Thus, when it comes to misfortune, whether in the African traditional or African Christian contexts, those distinctions could be tenuous. That etiological categories overlap in African thought systems is clear in Westerlund’s understanding:

Ideas or causes of illness, thus, tend to be multifactorial rather than unifactorial. In other words, religious and social disease explanations often overlap observations of natural causes. Moreover, it is common to think in terms of ‘ultimate’ causes beyond directly observable ones, especially in cases of incurable and serious illnesses or when a natural therapy proves ineffective. Then questions of ‘how’ are supplemented with the questions ‘why now’ and ‘why me’. The answers usually involve references to spiritual beings or other living humans (Westerlund 2006: 8).

In spite of the belief in natural causality, there is usually no room for personal choices not to have children in the religious economy of most of the churches that specialize in problem-solving. There is also no critical attention to the possibility that even in God’s scheme of things some couples may be destined never to have children of their own. Destiny is interpreted in a monolithic manner to mean that one must show evidence of what it means in the theology of these churches to prosper. Interventionist programs, whether they are directed towards unemployment, securing of visas, general well-being or fruits of the womb, as we have here, are driven by the worldview that misfortune is supernaturally caused. Where that explanation cannot be invoked, as when a woman is past childbearing age or for some other medical reason cannot give
birth, then God must still be understood as the God of impossibilities. For women in particular, their wombs function as ‘God’s laboratories’ as Rekop-antswe Mate, writing on a similar issue in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, aptly titled her work. She recalls parts of sermons preached by the wife of the founder of Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), herself a medical doctor:

Dr. Wutaunashie says that at this altar women offer their bodies (their wombs) for God’s work as God’s laboratory, out of which ‘miracles are reproduced’…. Dr Wutaunashie says childbirth is productivity, which the scriptures indicate to be glorifying God and antithetical to the devil’s work…. She cites biblical examples of women’s desire for children: Sarah, who conceived despite her being elderly and menopausal; Hannah, who conceived after prayer and enduring years of torment by her co-wife because of her barrenness; Rebecca, who overcame barrenness and conceived twins after her husband, Isaac prayed for her; Rachel, whose desperation led her to asking her husband to have children with her servant; and Elizabeth, whose barrenness was ended…by divine intervention because she and her husband were God-fearing people (Mate 2000: 559).

On this issue of childlessness, Mercy Oduyoye, whose words are quoted at the beginning of this article, recounts movingly her personal struggles as one without her own biological offspring. Her courage has been duly acknowledged (Amoah 2006). In the opening remarks, Amba Ewudziwa, as she prefers to designate herself in that article, provides apt insights into what childbirth means in traditional Africa, noting that ‘the seven signs of human well-being as viewed by the Akan of Ghana include the power of procreation’ (Oduyoye 1999: 105). Her powerful personal testimony establishes the point that, contrary to prevailing popular African traditional and African Christian world-views, it is possible to live a fulfilled life without necessarily having a child of one’s own. Whereas the Pentecostal/charismatic approach creates family and communal tension by demonizing human relations as the causes of childlessness, we have in her life story an alternative Christian response that gives practical expression to the proverbial ‘sense of community’ often identified as salient in traditional culture. Indeed she herself was comforted and encouraged after prayer and rising from that prayer like the biblical Hannah went forth and lived a life of fruitfulness and fulfillment:

I had prayed to join in obeying the command to increase and multiply, and God was saying a clear no to my offer. I felt free; I felt open and fertile, a new person for whom God has a purpose. It was like putting my life on the altar for God to consume what is not necessary for my journey. Rather than being consumed by childlessness, I rose like Hannah, as one who had experienced a secret conversation and a secret pact with
God. I was pregnant with expectation of great things to come to me from God. I have not been disappointed (Oduyoye 60).

‘Abundant life’, according to her account, is possible if God’s power and goodness are seen not only in terms of public and traditional expectations of what it means to be ‘fruitful’ in this life. Hannah is read differently by Amba Ewudziwa and by African Pentecostal/charismatic pastors. In this article, we point out that the latter’s hermeneutics follow a path that suggests that because Hannah’s prayer for a child was answered, every childless couple must have their own children. Fruits of the womb are therefore held as paradigmatic of God’s blessing, prosperity and Christian faithfulness. Amba Ewudziwa’s exposition, read against the backdrop of the advertisement from the PFMM, goes against this grain of Pentecostal/charismatic hermeneutics on barrenness and childbearing in Africa. I will uphold her line of thinking but more importantly her experience as a useful challenge to the contemporary Christian approach that uses the Bible to reinforce traditional worldviews of causality and will argue that they are pastorally deficient.

In Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, healing camps, prayer services and anointed prophets abound and they promise all kinds of breakthrough including the ability to help couples have their own children against all odds. The traumatic experiences that Amba Ewudziwa describes are not limited to women. Nevertheless, childbirth is a gendered issue and in African societies women tend to bear the brunt of the accusations when a marriage does not produce biological progeny. As an insider, I take a very sympathetic view of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity and acknowledge the enormous impact that it is making on contemporary Christian life in Africa. However, its approach to the very genuine and deeply felt problems of life, including childlessness, gives cause for concern. In some cases, especially in rural African societies, polygamy may be used as a means to help men have their own children. That option, it must be pointed out, has often created a competitive environment that increases the pressure on original wives to have children of their own. The childless woman has survived in the African imagination as a witch who ‘eats’ up her own children or as a victim of demons and evil powers. These ideas are prevalent in public discourse and in the many African home movies produced in Ghana and Nigeria. The approach of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity provides continuity with traditional ideas that alienate childless couples as faithless victims of supernatural evil.
‘Operation 10,000 Babies’

The ‘Operation 10,000 Babies’ program was not a one-off event. It is a periodic program held every so many months by Pastor Enoch Aminu. A charismatic pastor may be acknowledged as ‘operating’ within a particular ministry—prophet, Bible teacher, worship leader, preacher, healing evangelist—depending on how effective he has proven in the particular area. Pastor Aminu’s specialty, as we have noted, is praying for the fruits of the womb. That is the ‘charisma’ that draws people into his ministry. The December 2005 issue of the PFMM church magazine, for instance, advertised ‘Three Days’ ‘Total Deliverance’ services every week from Monday to Wednesday. Among the questions directed to people who wanted to take advantage of those meetings were the following, dealing directly with childlessness and the popular spiritual interpretations associated with it:

Are you under oppression in life? Are you faced with the problem of late marriage? Do you find it difficult to progress in life? Are you faced with a situation of barrenness or infertility? Are you experiencing any form of backwardness in life? Have discovered that you are under a curse? Do you always engage in sex acts in your dreams? Do you always have evil dreams?

Childlessness can lead to feelings of social and spiritual oppression, late marriages open women up to shame and ridicule and people give testimonies to the effect that miscarriages could occur following dreams of sexual activities with strange people. Thus the issues outlined here as the focus of the ‘Total

Example of banner from PFMM advertising special deliverance for women, Accra
Deliverance’ meetings are no different from those dealt with at the ‘Operation 10,000 Babies’ program. The program started each day with ‘praise and worship’ at 8 a.m. It then moved into the segment of mass extempore prayers. The two portions lasted about one and a half hours, after which Pastor Enoch Aminu took over for close to three hours. It was obvious from the way he started, in the first session on Friday 1 December, that this was a matter of spiritual warfare. In Mate’s article on childlessness in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism cited earlier we see that, when matters are spiritualized this way, even medical doctors become ‘liars’, if not agents of the devil. Pastor Aminu began from that angle:

The devil has given the doctors lies to tell you; the doctors have told you ‘you cannot give birth’ but I am here to tell you that it is all lies; the link between you and your husband is just a process; read Ecclesiastes 11: 5 and start to look unto God; take your eyes off those things that will not help you; barrenness must die in Jesus’ name; unfruitfulness must die in Jesus’ name. By the grace of God upon my life I bind every curse upon your life and set in motion the blessing of fruitfulness upon your life; in Jesus’ name; in Jesus’ name; in Jeeeeesus’ name!!!

The atmosphere at the PFMM during the three-day sessions was electrifying and emotional. Pastor Aminu himself spoke so passionately and aggressively that by the time he was halfway through each session his clothes were soaked in sweat. There could have been a total of about 7,000 to 8,000 people attending the meetings over the three-day period. Of the total number, about 70% were women between the ages of about 22 and 40 years. The rest were men who, by my reading of the situation, had followed their wives or partners to the program. Some may have come to the place with concerns over their own sterility. Childlessness puts pressure on everybody in the family. As Amba Ewudziwa mentions in relation to her particular experience, ‘there is usually frantic activity on the part of all to ensure that each member of the family, woman or man, joins in actually reproducing the human race’. ‘My case was no different’, she writes, ‘the whole community was in agony’ (Oduyoye 1999: 111). In keeping with the trend, I could count not a few elderly people at this program who claimed they were standing in for their children or in-laws during the event. In Pentecostal/charismatic parlance, they were there as ‘points of contact’.

Causes of Barrenness

Each day, Pastor Enoch Aminu spent a great deal of time working up the faith of worshippers through lengthy messages that made extensive references to
biblical stories. The favorite personalities were Sarah, Hannah, Rebecca and Elizabeth. He embellished their stories with testimonies of people he had previously prayed for and visions and revelations received while the service was ongoing. In the expositions, he seemed aware of some medical and practical reasons why conception had been difficult for some in the congregation. However, these natural causes of childlessness or medical and practical lines of thought were not sustained for too long. He veered quickly into the main reason for barrenness and sterility as he understood it: the spiritual dimension. The earlier references to scientific medicine and practical things to observe became insignificant when he tackled this area. Barrenness was caused by witches, envious relatives, demons and ‘Maame Wata’, the mermaid who lived under the sea, often took human form and had the ability to steal women’s wombs (Bastian 1997). ‘By the grace of God’, he shouted on one occasion, ‘I bind every curse upon your life; barrenness is not to be taken lightly; barrenness must die by fire in Jesus’ name!’ He then recalled the case of a woman whose mother-in-law had caused her to be barren. ‘This is Africa’, Pastor Aminu added, confirming widely held religio-cultural views that blamed suffering and failure on witches, familial spirits and evil powers. The woman came for prayer and ‘we prayed the barrenness off’. At this point, he draws attention to his anointing, telling the congregation: ‘forget everywhere you have been; this is your last stop’.

If there is a ‘last stop’, there must have been previous ‘stops’. Field pointed out some four decades ago how ‘barren women, childless couples and infertile men leave no stone unturned in their earnest search for the cause of their privation and often go from shrine to shrine offering extravagant gifts in exchange for a child’ (Field 1960: 121). The reference to ‘last stop’ also recalls Amba Ewudziwa’s talk of the frantic search for childbirth in Africa in terms of ‘schizophrenic and suicidal quests’ (Oduyoye 1999: 109). She speaks candidly about the several places recommended for her during her own desperate years as an African woman in search of a child. Her recollection of an experience with one herbalist is particularly poignant:

One traditional doctor, an expert in such cases, said to me, ‘I cannot believe that a woman of your physique is unable to have children’ And he asked a question so embarrassing that I could not answer with my father and mother sitting in on the consultation.… He simply gave me the herbs I was to brew and drink. All the bitterness that is expected to go with childlessness must have been ground into those barks and roots and leaves. My palate rejected the brew as my soul eschewed bitterness of any sort. Such are the indignities that women go through to fulfill religio-cultural expectations (Oduyoye 1999: 111).
At the PFMM those looking for children were given blessed olive oil to drink. At least that is not as bitter. Interventionist rituals in Pentecostal/charismatic settings for the fruits of the womb can be equally humiliating, sad to say. Patrick Claffey, for example, describes one incident in Benin in which a Nigerian pastor described as ‘a prophet’ who runs a ‘miracle factory’ invited a man who supposedly had a ‘low sperm count’ to come forward for prayer. When two men came forward the pastor allegedly pointed to one of them telling him to the hearing of the congregation, ‘you are going to pay 10,000 naira’ because ‘he refused to obey the Holy Ghost when he hesitated to come forward’ (Claffey 2007: 262). The other man was told: ‘anytime you want to meet your wife, witches pollute your sperm and it turns into water’. Subsequently the wife of this second respondent was also invited forward and praying over them the pastor said: ‘I send you and your husband to a bed with the Holy Spirit where a baby will come.’ Claffey’s own conclusion of this drama at a Pentecostal meeting resonates with Ama Ewudziwa’s experience at the court of the herbalist: ‘This was a remarkable scene’, he reflects, ‘it illustrates the importance of fecundity, if only in the fact that these two young men faced what was at best considerable embarrassment and, what appeared to a female research colleague and myself, humiliation in order to be cured’ (Claffey 2007: 267).

Testimonies of Validation and Inspiration

Pastor Enoch Aminu’s rhetoric that what doctors may have diagnosed as the medical causes of barrenness are lies should not be misconstrued to mean he does not believe in scientific medicine and rational medical analysis. This is a pastor who has a graduate degree in economics. Rather the reference to ‘lies’ should be understood against the backdrop of how faith works in charismatic hermeneutics. The standard text is Hebrews 11: 1 where ‘faith’ is defined as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’. The doctors may have spoken, but the whole point of the program was that faith and miracles work against the flow of what may seem naturally and medically impossible. Thus, in a study of Spiritual churches, Christian G. Baëta observed that members were engaged in ‘a prodigious struggle to prove the reality of spiritual things in general and the biblical promises in particular, taking these in a fully literal sense’ (Baëta 1962: 135). The way to verify that things work in these circumstances is through the testimonies that were taken intermittently during the programs. All the charismatic churches, Gifford writes, ‘give considerable space to testimonies, not as optional extras, but as necessities’ (Gifford 2004: 50). A number of testimonies were received from women who...
had ‘conquered’ successfully as far as this ‘battle of childbirth’ was concerned. The most significant ones include:

i. A Nigerian lady testified: ‘my husband came from Ghana to marry me but fibroids nearly destroyed the marriage. Pastor Enoch Aminu assured me that the God of fire would deliver me. In October 2004, Daddy [Pastor Aminu] told me that God has assured him that my prayers have been answered and now here I am with the baby.’

ii. A woman who stood in the gap for another: ‘I came to stand in the gap for my elder son in Operation 10,000 Babies in 2005. I bought the magazine and placed it on his bed and today we are here to show you the results: a baby boy.’

iii. A lady who stood in for a friend: ‘Last year a friend stood in for me. She brought me the Pure Fire Miracle Ministry magazine and I kept it on my bed. I came to “the land of solutions” to pick a stone and here is the result: a baby boy.’

iv. Pregnant lady: ‘I came for Operation 10,000 babies last year and as I testify to you, I am pregnant with my first born after several years of marriage.’

The testimonies provided people with opportunities to relate how God had turned their lives and fortunes around to shame their enemies and the devil. Giving of testimonies was a critical part of the program in that it gave those present the assurance, hope and energy to pray.

There were several other things that the women attending these services were required to do. Whether these could also be classed as ‘indignities’ in a Christian context is not easy to judge. Each person had also been asked to bring, in addition to the bottles of olive oil to be used for anointing, a picture of their spouse, especially if the spouse was not attending the program. Many had complied with the directive and, during prayer time, they were required to hold the pictures and address the images directly. Pastor Aminu, interpreting the very fact of childlessness as a form of ‘harassment by evil powers’, directed the suppliants: ‘if your spouse is not here, stand in the gap; lift up the person’s picture and pray; your harassment stops at this moment; barrenness calls for violent prayer’, he said, and then burst out praying in tongues himself.

The prayer times I have witnessed at such programs and healing camps are tireless, very aggressive, serious and physically and emotionally draining. At the Church of Pentecost Canaan healing camp in Accra the women, as they prayed, had to run round the meeting premises as part of the spiritual exercises to bring the ‘walls of Jericho’ in their lives down. Here at the PFMM, suppliants moved out of their seats praying loudly, wailing, crying, shouting and asking or even pleading with God to deliver them from the evils blocking their desire for children. In such contexts the purpose of prayer ‘is to keep open the channels of God’s protective power to his congregation’ (Ray 1993: 276). One woman prayed so earnestly over the photograph of her husband that in no time the picture got blurred with saliva.
Broken Calabashes

Within the spiritually charged atmosphere, Pastor Aminu also received many of his revelations and he made these known, speaking through the microphone, as people prayed. Some of the revelations were personal in that they were about specific unnamed persons but others were general. Narrating the revelations amidst the praying seemed to provide added ‘fuel’ for people to pray faster and louder: ‘somebody is going to deliver two baby girls’, he loudly verbalized a revelation. The usual spontaneous response came from everybody: ‘I receive it’, as some stretched their arms to grab imaginary babies. ‘Somebody is also going to deliver triplets; God has just told me’; ‘barrenness must die’; ‘I command you to die’; ‘I deliver you from spiritual wives and husbands in Jesus’ name!’ It was in the course of this segment on the Saturday that Pastor Aminu saw a calabash crushing to the ground and breaking into pieces. There were other revelations including crabs and snakes fleeing from the wombs of women. The ‘crabs had been scratching the wombs’ and scraping off fetuses but now that they were fleeing, ‘you have been loosened up; wombs that were tied up have been loosened up in Jeeeeesus’ name!’

The implication of all this was that, once the calabashes—traditional symbols of witchcraft and evil medicines—were broken and the crabs had left, fruitfulness had been restored where previously there was little hope of childbirth. This reference to calabashes, snakes and crabs reveals the extent to which the spiritual exercises in search of children directly connect with the symbols of evil in traditional religio-cultural thought. In her work Jesus of Africa, for example, Diane Stinton, in discussing the issue of ‘Jesus as Healer’, talks about a Roman Catholic priest who describes parishioners, including some who saw snakes sent by others to harm them, coming to him with various requests for healing. They interpreted such ‘symptoms’ as ‘indicators of personal problems like jealousy and rivalry’ and that would obviously resonate with the cognitive processes of the African victims of supernatural evil (Stinton 2004: 86). Similarly pots and calabashes are indigenous receptacles that are common in rural African homes for holding liquids and in the case of the calabash for drinking water and liquor. If a potentially prominent individual becomes a drunkard in African societies, most traditional Ghanaians would usually explain the situation in terms of witches having placed a mystical pot or calabash in the victim’s stomach. Since the pot or calabash is mystical, it never gets filled up regardless of the amount of liquor consumed. The Ghanaian medical anthropologist Kofi Appiah-Kubi told the story of a victim of drunkenness at a traditional shrine:
A very well-dressed and handsome man in middle age was found in tears. His main complaint was that his kinsmen had put a barrel into his stomach and he had become an acute alcoholic. He spends all his time and money on alcohol. He cannot go for two hours without a drink. . . . At the time he came to the shrine, his entire family had left him because of his drinking habits. He could scarcely make ends meet. He had come to Afenasu shrine for cure and protection (Appiah-Kubi 1981: 65).

Such stories mean the victims of drunkenness continue in the habit until family members seek help either from the shrine or, increasingly, from a Christian healing camp, prophet or pastor with the requisite anointing for such purposes. Following the breaking of the calabash and the dispatch of the crabs and snakes in his revelations, Pastor Aminu then saw some blood that flowed like a river. The blood of Christ, this particular revelation meant, was cleansing people and repairing wombs. The references to crabs, sometimes to snakes, pots and calabashes, in effect serve to reinforce our thinking about the re-emergence of the primal imagination, especially the supernatural as causal explanations in contemporary African Christian rhetoric on misfortune. This is a worldview taken for granted and has reshaped religious thinking and practice in ways that are very innovative and appealing to indigenous religious consciousness.

**Pulling Down Evil Altars**

The invocation of traditional ideas of causality was even clearer during a session in which Pastor Aminu continued to draw from both traditional and biblical symbols in his exhortations. He told the congregation, ‘destroy local altars and escape’: ‘before enemies get you, they first raise an altar in your life’; ‘God cannot be the author of salvation and the author of barrenness’; ‘somebody has offered your womb on an altar and until the altar is destroyed, you cannot conceive’, and so on and so forth. Pastor Aminu explained that an altar is a place of sacrifice and usually such sacrifice entails the shedding of blood. This, according his exposition, explained why some women conceived but would have all kinds of bad dreams and by the time they woke up, they would have miscarried. Similarly the penises of some men have also been offered on ‘negative’ altars and so cannot function. Actually there are two types of altar, negative altars raised by the devil and positive altars raised by God. In one case he dealt with, Pastor Aminu related, he prayed and fasted for seven days. Following this intense period of ‘waiting on the Lord’, an elder sister of a childless woman he was praying for ‘came from the village to confess that she was the brain behind the younger sister’s barrenness.’ Apparently
she had collected a used menstrual pad of the victim and buried it somewhere in the village, thus spiritually preventing her own sister from conceiving a child. For others in the congregation, enemies and family members have collected their underpants, which have then been used to block their paths to the glory of childbirth.

The violent prayers offered by the worshippers were supposed to be backed by active faith, the type that, according to Jesus, moved mountains. As a demonstration that they possessed the requisite mountain-moving faith, suppliants were supposed to do various practical things. First, each person looking for a baby was supposed to bring to the meeting on Saturday a parcel of baby items—powder, oil, cloths, bibs and so on. Secondly, the items in the parcel were to be determined by the sex of the baby expected. Thirdly, after the prayer sessions, the parcel was to be kept for nine months. Fourthly, after the meetings each person, driven by this mountain-moving faith, was to choose a name for the expected baby: ‘if you are a woman and your husband is abroad, call him and ask him what the name of the baby should be’, Pastor Aminu instructed. Fifthly, each person expecting a baby was to purchase a special issue of the church magazine. We learnt from one of the testimonies above that one woman placed the magazine on her matrimonial bed and that enabled the process of conception. The magazine therefore served as a ‘charismatic talisman’ for members of the PFMM. Those couples who bought copies were supposed to leave the magazines on their beds until conception: ‘if a friend at home is looking for a child, buy a copy for her and you will see the results’, the congregation was told.

At the next meeting many of the worshippers, especially the women, came with parcels of all sizes and during the prayer time it was moving, even pitiable, to see women praying aggressively over the items. At one point during this particular session Pastor Aminu asked the women: ‘grip your womb and pray as if you are using a hammer to break evil altars down’. That is exactly what happened. Exercising faith is like ‘practicing madness’ he noted, and with this statement he ushered the congregation into another round of mass hysterical, expressive and emotional prayer time:

Lift up the parcels of baby items. Speak to the imaginary baby to come for his or her clothes, baby oil, baby powder, pampers and feeding bottle.

In the charged and frenzied atmosphere that had been generated the congregation burst spontaneously into the following chorus:
I am trading my sorrows
I am trading my pain
I am trading my shame
Yes, Lord, Amen.

Those who believed God was going to answer their prayers were instructed to remain standing as this chorus was repeated over and over again. The words of the chorus spoke directly to the issues we are taking up in this paper and that have been so well and movingly articulated by Amba Ewudziwa in her personal story. Childlessness, in both the traditional and Christian contexts in Africa, has been made the epitome of shame, pain and sorrows and the women who had come to this service had done so in the sincere hope that they could trade these evils for God’s glory. In this context ‘glory’ referred to the miracle of having one’s own children. Indeed in Ghana, it is common for an unmarried or childless woman to be spoken of as one whose glory has been removed by witches. The prayers of the suppliants made a very strong statement: they believed with their whole being everything Pastor Aminu told them.

Covenants of Fruitfulness: Goliath Hermeneutics

Every stage of this quest for babies involved references to the Bible, personal revelations and evil in Africa, especially as perpetrated by family members, as an objective reality. In response to the developments of evil in people’s worlds, the message of Pastor Aminu on the Sunday focused on the theme, ‘Goliath must die’. Employing the same Goliath hermeneutic that I have heard in such contexts several times over, he told the congregation, ‘there are people who cannot have testimonies until the Goliaths in their lives are killed.’ ‘Goliath’ here, as we have noted, refers to the symbols of evil in the lives of people as he himself charged: ‘any power or giant behind your infertile womb must die in Jesus’ name!’ Our Goliaths are different he explained but the stone we use in killing them is the same. It is the name Jesus. That name symbolizes the five smooth stones that David used to kill Goliath. The name of Jesus has five letters, he explained, and each stone David picked represents one of those letters. At this point ‘I will mention the name of Jesus and every womb that is closed must be open; your Goliath must die; your Goliath could be your friend, your mother and other people close to you. From now on, all your Goliaths must be put to shame.’ ‘Do you want your Goliath to live?’, he asked rhetorically, and the response was a unanimous ‘no!’ ‘Then Goliath must die by fire’ he added. The thought of God towards you is to carry your miracle baby, Pastor Aminu continued, as he explained what that meant in the context of Jeremiah 29: 11.
The Lord of hosts has proposed for you to carry a miracle baby: who is that power that can restrain the power of God? Jesus is still in the miracle business; remember Sarah; there is no hopeless situation before God; in God’s sight hopelessness becomes hopeful; Psalm 92: 14 says ‘they shall still bring forth in old age; God has so many spare human parts to replace wombs that are too aged to carry babies; Rebecca too could not conceive but God opened her womb and she carried two’. Rachel the wife of Jacob went through similar difficulties of barrenness. Even if your fallopian tubes have been removed Jesus is capable of planting new ones there for you. Hannah also delivered after a long period of barrenness, remember.

Pastor Aminu was clear that the only fulfillment a woman could have in this life is to have her own baby. Even an adopted baby was not good enough:

There is no way you can compare an adopted child with the fruit of your own womb. The fruit of your own womb is a sign of fruitfulness and fulfillment and you were created to be fruitful. All women who have been mocked because of barrenness ‘receive your babies now’. Establish a covenant with God. I am a covenanted man; no man can fight me and win or prosper. I will not curse the person; but the person will fall. I just got a vision: they are writing birth certificates for some people. Hannah became a mother to one of the most wonderful prophets that have ever lived. The baby you are going to have will be great; may you never see barrenness again in your life; who are those calling you a witch? The powers behind your case: may they fall in Jesus’ name. I see a snake following one of you but the head of the snake has been cut off. Delay is not denial; menopause or no menopause you will carry a baby. Those negative things like menopause exist in the books of doctors but not in the Bible: wherever you are sitting, I pray a miracle baby to locate you.

This has been a favored theme among charismatic preachers in Africa for a while now. A Nigerian pastor who lives in London, Leke Sanusi, has written a book, *Goliath Killing Prayers* that employs the same hermeneutic on Goliath as Pastor Aminu does. Pastor Sanusi writes in the preface to this book that ‘Goliath still exists’ although he was slain by David thousands of years ago. ‘His spirit lives on’ because ‘Goliath has children’. ‘The children of Goliath are the spirits he represents today and those spirits are the giants standing tall against you, desperate to deny you the fulfillment of your God-given destiny’ (Sanusi 2003: ix). In this particular context the destiny of the people was to have children.

**Anointing to Destroy the ‘Egyptians’**

It was now time during the last segment of these meetings to anoint worshippers so that the ‘Goliaths’, ‘Pharaohs’ and ‘Egyptians’ in their lives could be destroyed. As has become clear in the narratives, in these Pentecostal/
In charismatic prayer contexts, you do not pray for God to change your enemies as Jesus and St Paul recommend. If you know those causing difficulties in your life, you simply pray in accordance with the pattern in the Psalms that they may be destroyed. Sometimes you pray for them to live long not so much that they may also see God's grace but that they would be 'living witnesses' to your prosperity in spite of the evil schemes. As with Goliath, the 'Egyptians' symbolizes enemies that spiritually hold people captive because 'Canaan' is the Christian's God-ordained destiny and anybody or any circumstance that prevents one from reaching that land is 'Egyptian'. In keeping with this thinking, Pastor Aminu explained that 'the Egyptians are those going from shrine to shrine to destroy you'.

There are some people whose enemies have vowed not to rest until they are completely destroyed. The anointing about to take place was going to ensure that even if your name was taken to a shrine, the shrine would reject it: 'the oil will work wonders' he noted, adding, 'all the Egyptians working against you must fail by fire. I see cars, marriages, ministries and businesses coming out of “prison”. Every prison of the Egyptians, I command you to open.' Pastor Aminu makes reference to a sudden revelation in which a woman at the meeting has enemies of his household ganging up against her: 'you have supported them but in your dreams they bring you a gift of a casket in return.' That casket, Pastor Aminu declares, 'is broken in Jesus' name'; 'all Egyptian deposits in your life, I flush them out in Jesus' name!' After praying over the anointing oil people were now asked to drink the oil which was going to 'flush out the Egyptian deposits' in their lives. The seeing of visions and the employment of traditional religions and symbols of evil and witchcraft continued during the anointing session as well: there were visions of mothers coming from the village to destroy their own children at night. 'If you live in Africa and you are not convinced about these things, you are ignorant and you are dead!' There are many people with a Ph.D. in Africa but the witches have urinated on their certificates. For some these 'Egyptians' or witches have put human feces on their certificates and they cannot function. 'What will make you comfortable', the congregation was reminded 'the witches have taken away.' Those who wanted to know the extent of the Egyptian torment were encouraged to read Exodus, for 'until your Egyptians perish, you will never succeed.'

**Primal Imagination and Indigenous Christianity**

The point of reproducing these lengthy discourses from the PFMM 'Operation 10,000 Babies' program is to illustrate with representative primary data the very conscious way in which both biblical stories and personal experiences
are innovatively interpreted in terms of ideas that are familiar to African philosophical thoughts. We discover that in both the African religio-cultural and African Christian imaginations, witchcraft initially dismissed in mission Christianity as psychological delusions and figments of people’s imagination is considered very real and powerful. If they can render even Ph.D. certificates spiritually worthless, translating hard work into ineffectiveness in life, then the idea is that witches are also capable of removing wombs and making men sterile. This way of applying the Bible in combination with traditional worldviews of causalities makes very compelling arguments in African contexts. The cultural categories employed in interpreting the Bible and what is considered misfortune in the lives of people are very instructive: old women, extended families, villages, altars, pots and calabashes, reptiles, etc. These are things usually associated with the operations of witches and evil powers and, to translate them into modern cultural categories, underwear and menstrual pads are brought into it to show how personal things could be used to remotely control a person’s destiny. Explaining the meanings of some of the revelations, Pastor Aminu himself asserted that seeing things like pepper, pots and crabs in your dreams speaks of destruction: ‘this is Africa where we use local items to destroy the destinies of people.’

This understanding of destiny responds directly to Akan traditional belief that destiny, *hyebere/nkrabea*, is ordained by the Supreme Being. But in Akan thought destiny, in principle, cannot be changed. A sufferer of childlessness in traditional Africa could be told that ‘no evil has been at work’: his childlessness is ‘from God’ and is his destiny (*nkrabea*) (Field 1960: 121). We also understand from Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* that the birth of children in African societies ‘should be a woman’s crowning glory’ (Achebe 1958: 54). In typical African traditional fashion Ekwefi’s plight of losing her children at birth was linked to her *chi*, an unfavorable destiny, which, in the minds of members of the community, made her prone to be jealous and envious of her rival. She is portrayed in the novel as a ‘bitter woman’ because, as their husband did for Peninnah, the rival of the biblical Hannah, Okonkwo had lavished gifts on her rival who had borne him three sons, ‘all strong and healthy’. Hannah went before the Lord and we are told ‘she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, wept bitterly’ (I Samuel 1: 10). In African societies such bitter women exist in popular gossip as witches who ‘eat’ their own children. Childlessness, as our case study has shown, could be a bitter experience in Africa and has often driven women into schizophrenia. The story continues, making a direct connection between Ekwefi’s situation and her evil destiny. It is told from the point of view of her rival:
When she had borne her third son in succession, Okonkwo had slaughtered a goat for her, as was the custom. Ekwefi had nothing but good wishes for her. But she had grown so bitter about her own chi that she could not rejoice with others over their good fortune. And so, on the day that Nwoye’s mother celebrated the birth of her three sons with feasting and music, Ekwefi was the only person in the happy company who went about with a cloud on her brow. Her husband’s wife took this for malevolence, as husbands’ wives were wont to. How could she know that Ekwefi’s bitterness did not flow outwards to others but inwards into her own soul; that she did not blame others for their good fortune but her own evil chi who denied her any? (Achebe 1958: 54, 55).

The principle is close but not the same in Pentecostal/charismatic understanding. Here, in the Christian context, destiny is changeable and that is why testimonies have a central role in this type of Christianity. Jesus intervenes in unfavorable destinies in order to turn them around to God’s glory. Thus, discourses about destiny in Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in Africa speak frequently about a Jesus who turns around such evil chi or destinies in order to put a new song in the mouths of victims. The translation of cultural categories into Christian contexts means conception and procreation become the focus of intense prayer and fasting, Bible discussions, preaching and even locally composed Christian choruses. The lyrics of a popular Ghanaian chorus linked to fertility and often heard during healing sessions go as follows:

Adea w’aye ama Sarah; adea w’aye ama Hannah; adea w’aye ama Elizabeth; afei na edu me so. Ewurade meda w’ase; Ewurade me yi wo aye; Ewurade me kamfo wo; Alleluia.

What you did for Sarah; what you did for Hannah; what you did for Elizabeth; it is now my turn. Lord I thank you; Lord I praise you; Lord I honor you; Alleluia.

What did God do in the lives of these biblical women? He gave them children in the most unlikely of circumstances when all hope seemed lost. Sarah and Elizabeth gave birth when they were far past childbearing age and Hannah did so after a long period of barrenness. During the period Hannah endured ridicule from her rival and in her consternation took to much prayer for God’s intervention. She eventually gave birth to Samuel and dedicated him to God, as many parents do in Africa by dedicating their babies to deities that enabled them to take seed.² The connection that Hannah in her prayer of thanksgiving makes between ‘childbirth’ and God’s ‘salvation’ has made her a biblical icon in African Pentecostal/charismatic hermeneutics. Her prayer, ‘my mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation’ (I Samuel 2: 1) strikes responsive chords in traditional mindsets. Thus, as we saw in the use of the story of David and Goliath, the call was upon God to destroy all human
agents of evil who are believed to be the causes of barrenness and sterility in the sexual lives of those coming for prayer.

Conclusion: Prayer for Children as ‘Healing and Deliverance’

In this article, we have examined the religious implications of childlessness and the religious rituals developed mainly by independent indigenous Pentecostal/charismatic movements to deal with it. Carefully selected biblical passages have been developed into hermeneutical tools in order to problematize childlessness and deal with it in a Christianized environment. Childlessness obviously has social implications in Africa. However the line between childlessness as spiritual problem and its social implications is extremely thin. In dealing with the issue, I have shown that although passages may be solicited from the Bible to support both the worldview that it is mystically caused and that God has interest in helping his anointed servants deal with it, traditional ideas of how misfortunes are caused encroach upon the Christian interpretations of childlessness. The social and theological context of the ‘Operation 10,000 Babies’ program upholds worldviews that are solicited from both the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and African philosophical thought. In Christianity in Africa, Kwame Bediako establishes that primal religion, the indigenous faith of Africa, has proven a fertile soil for Christianity. One of the reasons is that ‘it is this life, this existence and its concerns, its cares, its joys which are the focus of African primal religions’ (Bediako 1995: 100). Childbirth fits into this worldview because it is an existential need and where there are spiritual obstacles making that biological function difficult, victims have to be taken through a process of ‘healing and deliverance’.

That the PFMM is a Pentecostal/charismatic church supports Meyer’s view that the AICs are not ‘the sole sites of successful, “syncretic” combinations of traditional religious and Christian elements.’ The Pentecostal/charismatic practice of dealing with childlessness affirms the traditional worldview that it is impossible for even Christians to escape from forces grounded and emanating from the local. In other words, Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity articulates its theology in relation to local concerns (Meyer 2004: 457). It is in doing justice to these local concerns and expectations that the broader theological picture of ‘supporting the weak’ is overlooked and fruitfulness and prosperity are interpretated only in terms of so-called biblical standards. In many cases, it has led to myopic interpretations of life, salvation and fruitfulness especially in relation to suffering and pain. This it would seem to me to be partly because of the strong orientation towards this-worldly ends in the religious discourses and practices of the newer Pentecostal/charismatic churches in particular. We have
seen how the personal story of Amba Ewudziwa helps to illustrate this lacuna in the theological mindset underpinning the hermeneutics and theology of independent indigenous Pentecostal/charismatic churches.

Reading her life story, which in fact sounds like a testimony, one does not get the impression that there is any attempt to suggest that childlessness should not be a matter for prayer. In fact when things did not work out the way society expected them to, it made no difference because she was already serving as mother to children born to other siblings. Thus to pursue a religious thought that looks for answers to such prayers solely from the perspectives of those who have had their own children overlooks the simple fact that this does not always happen, no matter how sincere people may be. It also undermines the popular African practice of providing a home for less fortunate children in the extended family. The PFMM rhetoric that ‘an adopted child is not your own children’ even sounds un-Christian if scrutinized in the light of Jesus’ words that what we do for others we do for him. Amba Ewudziwa’s conclusions are thus very revealing both religiously and theologically. Childlessness may be a shame in traditional thinking and now even within indigenous Christian thought, but worse shame she notes, ‘is that Christianity does not seem to have stories from which the childless can draw strength.’

There are stories of disabilities in the Bible but the focus on prosperity stories have blinded Pentecostal/charismatic pastors to these, leading to myopic interpretations of scripture. The hermeneutical principles applied by many Pentecostal/charismatic preachers rely too much on proof-texts. ‘Proof-texting’ in biblical hermeneutics is to hold a position on an issue and locate particular biblical passages to support it. If the Christian church in Africa has made the suffering of the childless more painful, it may perhaps be because the use of proof-texts has not allowed the church to do justice to pain and suffering by paying attention to the defining symbol of Christianity: the cross of Christ. The cross is a symbol of trauma and, having gone that way through to victory, a more balanced approach to childlessness would be to work with people so that, whether they have it or not, they can feel the empathy of Christ. The lesson from Amba Ewudziwa’s experience is that fulfillment and fruitfulness in this life encapsulates something more than just having children of one’s own. Nowhere must this be trumpeted more than in Pentecostal/charismatic churches that are now serving as ‘places to feel at home’ for many within the physically and spiritually precarious world that is Africa.
References


Notes

1. The crab for instance, he said, is neither male nor female so, when you see it, it represents neither a boy nor girl and that means you can never have children.

2. I have a colleague called Samuel Mponponsuo. His parents simply stayed true to both religious traditions—Christian and indigenous—by naming their son ‘Samuel’ in gratitude to God and ‘Mponponsuo’ in appreciation to the river deity that bears that name in their village.

3. The inability to work with the reality that some couples who may not be able to have their own children could still be fruitful and successful partly accounts for the events involving the self-styled charismatic archbishop, Gilbert Deya. The BBC has since 2004 been running a series of news items that have exposed this man and his wife as fraudsters involved in a child-stealing ring on behalf of couples looking for children. The ‘Miracle Babies’, reportedly born to hitherto infertile couples, were found to have been stolen from a maternity home in Kenya. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/p1lrl-12/hi/af ric/africa/6176863.stm. Published: 2006/12/13 15:37:07 GMT.