CHaPTer 7

Continuity, Change or Coevalness?
Charismatic Christianity and Tradition in Contemporary Tanzania

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One of the most fascinating puzzles for scholars of African Pentecostal-
Charismatic Christianity (PC/C) has been to unravel its complex and intimate
entanglements with what, for lack of better terms, we often refer to as African
traditional religion or traditional African culture. For sure this puzzle is not
confined to the study of PC/C as debates about continuity and discontinuity
between Christianity and existing religious and cultural traditions are equally
relevant and compelling for the study of mainline mission churches, and such
questions have concerned scholars and missionaries long before the boom in
the literature on PC/C in Africa. Thus a significant body of scholarship has
shown us how the history of the global spread of missionary Christianity is a
history of both cultural, social transformation and of contextualization and
enculturation on local premises (Beidelman 1982, Comaroff and Comaroff
1991, Hastings 1994). And yet, the relatively recent growth and expansion of
PC/C into most corners of postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of
the world seem to have brought new levels of intensity into the whole conti-
nuity/discontinuity debate. This is, I suspect, due to the intriguing paradox
that scholars tend to find both more continuity and more discontinuity with
existing religious traditions in PC/C than in mainline mission Christianity. On
the one hand the language and ritual practice of PC/C emphasize rupture,
renewal and distancing from the past. For Pentecostals/charismatics the deci-
sion to repent one’s sins and accept Jesus as a personal savior and become
born again is a deciding moment of rupture, which figures prominently in tes-
timonies of salvation—more often than not structured in terms of a dualism
between before and after this moment—and is continuously reenacted in
ritual life (Robbins 2004, Lindhardt 2009a, 2010). Breaking with the past
implies abandoning traditional practices such as ancestor worship and tradi-
tional healing. It also implies refraining from alcohol, tobacco and pre and
extramarital sexual relations. In some cases the abandonment and demoniza-
tion of local cultural practices result in—and provide an ideological framework
for legitimizing—a severance of ties with extended families (van Dijk 1992,
Meyer 1998, Newell 2007). Notions of renewal and change are, of course,
intrinsic to religious conversion in general, but born-again Christians tend to
be particularly harsh in their rejection of old ways and particularly dramatic in their ongoing ritualizations of rupture. This explains why evangelization efforts focus to a large extent on fellow citizens who are already Christians but who have not received Jesus as a personal saviour and, in the view of born-again Christians, have therefore not experienced sufficiently radical life transformations.

On the other hand, scholars have repeatedly stressed that the Pentecostal/charismatic emphasis on spiritual warfare provides a powerful link to existing enchanted ontologies (Meyer 1992, 1998, 1999a, Robbins 2003, 2004, Lindhardt 2009a, 2010, Asamoah-Gyadu 2005, this volume, Lado 2009, Gifford 2004). As José Casanova has aptly noted, Pentecostals differ, both from a traditional Catholic pattern of accommodation and condescending toleration of popular beliefs and practices and from the rational disenchancing attitude of ascetic Protestantism that denies the existence of local supernatural beings (2001:438). The Pentecostal/charismatic attitude to local spirit worlds is foremost one of diabolization and combat. The Christian Devil and more generally the realm of darkness provide a formula that allows PC/C to simultaneously attack local cultures and preserve their ontologies. As noted by Birgit Meyer, God’s counterpart forms a shady side of Christian theology. Because biblical tests detailing the world of demons and Satan are vague and sporadic, there is, consequently, plenty of room for speculation about their existence, social organization and actions in the world (1992:106). Thus, many African Pentecostals see witches, traditional healers, ancestral and other non-Christian spirits as players of the Devil’s team that need to be fought off through intense praying. But the very existence and spiritual potency of such beings are not questioned; PC/C merely offers new ways of dealing with them.

The continuity/discontinuity puzzle is often bound up with other classical theoretical pairs such as global/local, homogenization/differentiation, flow/closure and modernity/tradition. It is no wonder that the study of African and global PC/C has inspired scholars to engage in ongoing debates on the social and cultural processes, commonly associated with modernity and globalization (see Meyer 1999b, Cortén and Marshall-Fratani 2001). PC/C is now a truly global phenomenon, spreading like fire throughout the world. Without being insensitive to the dynamic and creative interplays with local cultural traditions, several scholars have emphasized both the uniformity of the conversion project (Marshall 2009, Lindhardt 2011b) and the global norms and standardizations of Pentecostal/charismatic ritual practices (Robbins 2003, 2011). These features, combined with other factors such as the extensive use of the mass media, contact and interaction between churches on different continents and the aggressive outreach of international Pentecostal superstars like Morris Cerrullo and Reinhard