CHAPTER 8

Gender and Pentecostalism in Africa

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African Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity has been perceived by African feminists as an inherently conservative force, which encourages the domestication of women and promotes the glorification of men as the natural leaders of home and society. In scholarship Africa’s Pentecostal and charismatic churches have been portrayed both as bastions of patriarchy (Mate 2002) and as instigators of revolutionary zeal (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Kalu 2008). In this chapter I will argue that African Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is not a guardian of the patriarchal status quo but nor is it a straightforward purveyor of gendered social change. The gender discourses and practices of Africa’s Pentecostal and charismatic churches are complex, fluid and sometimes contradictory. They can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. The chapter examines the role of the churches as agents of social change in conjunction with the paradoxical nature of much of their gendered rhetoric. By assessing the gender implications of one of Africa’s most dynamic religious developments the chapter reveals a series of complex disjunctures within Pentecostal and charismatic ideas about gender and illustrates the diverse ways in which born-again men and women respond to and utilise these ideas.

In the context of the global South, Pentecostalism’s potential to be an agent of gendered social change was recognised originally by scholars working in Latin America and their work has informed, to a greater or lesser degree, subsequent work on Pentecostalism and gender in Africa. This chapter begins, therefore, by looking at this work with a view to assessing its relevance to Africa in the conclusion. The chapter is then divided into three sections. The first considers the evolution of Pentecostal gender discourses in Africa and tracks important changes over time. The second section looks at the (de)construction of African masculinities in Pentecostal discourses on marriage and family life, and in the third section the issue of women’s leadership is examined by charting the rise of a powerful female elite in the fastest growing Christian sector in Africa. My intention in the chapter is to introduce gendered trends within African Pentecostal and charismatic religion contextualised within global Pentecostalism and illustrated with examples from my own research in Ghana.
Having provided the theoretical lenses through which Pentecostalism and gender have been viewed by scholars of African religion, the insights of scholars working on Latin American Pentecostalism and gender is a fruitful point of departure for a chapter on Pentecostal Christianity and gender in Africa. When Latin America began “turning Protestant” in the latter part of the twentieth century it soon became apparent that the main instigators of this religious change were women. Where women led men sometimes followed. Pentecostalism in Latin America is still a female-dominated movement; a pattern which is repeated in Pentecostal movements across the Global South and its Diasporas (Hyo-Jae 1985; Bayly 1994; Martin 2002). Where daily life is shaped so often by social uncertainty and domestic instability, Pentecostalism appeals to women in particular because of the opportunities it gives them to participate in networks of support and solidarity with other women. Latin American research shows that for poor women being members of home fellowships, prayer meetings and other, sometimes counter-hegemonic, groups offers some refuge from the hostilities of the outside world, whilst to the emergent female middle-class, Pentecostal association may represent opportunities for modest social and economic advancement through penny capitalism and a protestant work ethic (Gill 1990; Martin 2001; Martin 1996, 2002).

In Latin America Pentecostalism is also associated with changes in male behaviour and the reformation of the domestic sphere. Elizabeth Brusco’s influential research in Colombia suggests that where Pentecostalism places the home and family at the centre of women’s and men’s lives, it re-orient men towards household provision and away from drinking, gambling, extramarital sex and other forms of machismo (1993, 1995, 2010; Gooren 2010). In Pentecostal households economies improve and women benefit from the presence of a “new man” who is less typically male (Gill 1990). In this way Pentecostalism provides a space in which women can renegotiate gender roles and re-evaluate gendered expectations. Pentecostalism offers men the space to do this too. Latin American male converts to Pentecostalism often welcome an alternative way of being male, which is less violent and less painful than the traditional culture allows (Brusco 2010:89). Conversion may lead women away from their traditional roles too. Research from Brazil has shown that Pentecostalism re-directs women’s primary responsibility away from spouses and families towards God, which encourages individuation and “transforms women into active, responsible agents” (Mariz and Machado 1997:110).

Much of this brings to mind the links in the West between nineteenth-century religious change and the birth of Western feminism; the involvement