

Article

Ritual as a Site of Struggle and Becoming: Gender, Power, and Identity in African Pentecostal Christianity

Mboni Collins Makamu *  and Lufuluvhi Maria Mudimeli

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Human Sciences, University of Venda, Thohoyandou 0950, South Africa; lufuluvhi.mudimeli@univen.ac.za

* Correspondence: 23039929@mvula.univen.ac.za

Abstract

African Pentecostal ritual is more than the preservation of religious tradition. It is a dynamic social and theological process through which gender, power, and identity are negotiated, reproduced, and sometimes transformed. This article examines Pentecostal ritual as an embodied and performative space in which continuity and transformation coexist. The study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach drawing on ritual theory, African feminist theology, gender performativity, and perspectives on relational power. Methodologically, it is a secondary-source study based on a purposively selected body of scholarly literature on African Pentecostal worship, healing, prophecy, gender, and funeral practices. The literature was subjected to thematic and hermeneutic analysis. Particular attention is given to communal liturgical practices, healing and prophetic rituals, and funeral rites. The examination reveals that ritual may reproduce validated gender and institutional hierarchies while at the same time establishing possibilities for women and other participants to exercise spiritual and charismatic authority. The article moreover contends that ritual is central to Pentecostal identity development because it brings Christian theological obligations into engagement with African cultural memory, communal belonging, and is expressed through religious experience. Instead of regarding ritual as fixing religious recurrence, the article conceptualises it as a site of negotiation, contestation, and becoming. The study contributes to African theological discussions by highlighting embodied and communal forms of knowledge while acknowledging the limitations of a study based exclusively on secondary sources.

Keywords: ritual; pentecostalism; gender; power; identity

1. Introduction

Ritual occupies a central place in African Pentecostal Christianity because it shapes religious meaning, social belonging, spiritual authority, and embodied participation. Pentecostal practices such as worship, communal prayer, healing, prophecy, anointing, testimony, and funeral rites provide contexts in which theological convictions are enacted rather than merely articulated. It is through such activities that members engage in different forms of religious life that relate to the body, community, spirituality, and identity.

As such, African Pentecostal rituals cannot be understood in terms of merely a representation of theological concepts. They are rather social activities through which believers come to understand their relation with God, their place within the community and the process of authority distribution. In other words, existing literature has shown that African Pentecostal rituals have much to do with issues of embodiment, spirituality, gender, and



Received: 17 September 2026

Revised: 14 October 2026

Accepted: 14 October 2026

Published: 16 October 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

identity (Kgatle 2020, p. 5; Wariboko 2014, p. 82). The ritual can reinforce the existing social order, but it can also open up new interpretations.

The relationship between ritual and gender is especially complicated. Pentecostal churches may reproduce patriarchal assumptions through ecclesial structures and gendered expectations while simultaneously providing women with opportunities to exercise authority through prayer, prophecy, healing, worship, evangelism, and other forms of spiritual participation. Consequently, gender should not be treated as a fixed category within Pentecostal ritual life. Rather, ritual provides a context in which gendered identities and expectations are repeatedly enacted, negotiated, and sometimes challenged.

This article asks: How do rituals contribute to the creation and transformation of concepts of gender, power, and identity in African Pentecostal Christianity?

The article makes two related contributions. First, it conceptualises ritual as a dynamic process of identity construction and reconstruction rather than simply as the preservation of religious tradition. Second, it contributes to African theological discussions by taking seriously embodied, communal, and lived religious practices as sites of theological meaning-making. The argument is not that every ritual is necessarily transformative. Rather, the central claim is that ritual has an ambivalent character: the same ritual practice may reproduce existing structures while creating possibilities for agency and reinterpretation.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1. Ritual

In this context, ritual can be understood to include the various religious activities that are carried out by societies and groups whereby communication, negotiation, and relations between the sacred and mundane are facilitated (Sharma and Rickly 2025, p. 13). Rituals involve activities such as liturgy, healing rituals, funeral rites, prayer assemblies, and religious body rituals.

A distinction between individual devotional practice and communal ritual is important. Personal prayer may be understood as ritual when it involves repeated, embodied, and meaningful religious practices through which an individual orders their relationship with God. However, the principal focus of this article is on rituals that have a significant communal or relational dimension, because these practices make questions of authority, gender, identity, and belonging particularly visible. Personal prayer is therefore not excluded from the broader category of ritual, but the analysis concentrates primarily on communal and socially consequential ritual practices.

This distinction also prevents ritual from becoming an excessively broad category. The concern of this study is not every religious action performed by a Pentecostal believer, but those patterned practices through which theological meanings and social relationships are publicly or communally enacted.

2.2. Gender

Gender can be defined as an entity constructed by repetition within social culture and religion (Unger 2020, p. 22). Another way to put it is that gender is not biologically given; rather, it is dynamic and negotiated through ritual performance and community interaction.

Gendered expectations become visible through patterns of participation, leadership, bodily performance, speech, dress, and religious responsibility. Ritual is significant because it provides repeated contexts in which such expectations are enacted.

Drawing on gender performativity, the article therefore understands Pentecostal ritual as a site where gender may be reproduced but also renegotiated. Women can play a role traditionally reserved for the leadership of the religion, while institutions can still give

preferential treatment to males as leaders. The conflict is key in examining gender and power dynamics in Pentecostal Christianity.

2.3. Identity

Identity is an ongoing process of relational construction of individual and collective belonging, involving historical, spiritual, cultural, physical, and social relationships (Ismail 2021, p. 222). In the African Christian context, the identity emerges from the combination of Christian theology, indigenous philosophy, collective memory, and rituals.

Ritual contributes to this process because it gives communities repeated opportunities to remember, embody, interpret, and transmit their understanding of who they are. Pentecostal identity is consequently neither purely inherited nor entirely new. It is forwardly negotiated through religious practice.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Ritual and Embodiment in African Pentecostalism

Literature on African Pentecostalism focuses on the issue of embodiment in religious practice. As Nel (2020, p. 5) argues, there exists the relationship between African Pentecostal spirituality, local cosmology, spiritual powers, healing and bodily experience. At that, Anderson (2019, p. 94) focuses on the significance of performative aspects, music, testimonies, and prophecy within Pentecostal and Zionist religious practices.

According to Meyer (2015, p. 29), there is a need for special attention to be paid to the significance of the sensual and embodied experience in African Pentecostal religious practices. That means that apart from agreeing with certain doctrines, Pentecostal rituals involve performing, listening to sounds, making movements, speaking, praying and body involvement.

The correlation between healing, prophecy, spiritual causality, and the African religious context is confirmed by Kgatle (2022, p. 14). These practices show that Pentecostal ritual may operate at the intersection of Christian theological convictions and African understandings of spiritual reality.

The literature consequently supports an understanding of ritual as embodied religious practice. However, this article extends that discussion by asking what happens to gender, power, and identity through such embodied practices.

3.2. Gender and Spiritual Authority

Gender remains a significant issue in African Christianity because the interpretation of scripture and the church hierarchy in a patriarchal manner has kept women from assuming leadership roles within the institutions (Diko 2023, p. 619). The approach of African feminist theology criticizes theological approaches that marginalize women's experience and underlines the significance of women's experience in the process of developing theology (Oduyoye 2001, p. 18).

The case of Pentecostalism seems to be rather complicated. In one regard, most Pentecostal churches continue to maintain male-dominated institutional structures. In another regard, the emphasis on spiritual gifts of Pentecostalism creates the possibility for women to exercise authority through prophecy, healing, prayer, evangelization, and other activities.

According to Yong (2018, p. 145), the spirituality of Pentecostals can subvert traditional institutional arrangements since spiritual gifts may provide authority independent of ecclesiastical position. This observation is important for the present study because it suggests that authority cannot be reduced to formal church position. Ritual perfor-

mance may produce forms of charismatic and relational authority that exist alongside institutional authority.

4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

4.1. Ritual Theory

The article draws primarily on Catherine Bell's theory of ritualisation. Bell (1992, p. 74) understands ritual as embodied social practice through which distinctions, relationships, and forms of authority are produced and negotiated. Ritual is therefore not simply an expression of an already existing social order; ritual practice participates in the construction of that order.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality is also useful. Turner (1969, p. 95) serves to show that rituals can offer examples of situations where social structures in the normal course of things are transformed temporarily. Such transformations make possible new possibilities of relating, identity formation, and participation.

The combination of Bell and Turner enables this article to maintain a balanced argument. Rituals can reinforce social structures through repetition, but at the same time, they create opportunities for transforming or rearranging such social structures.

4.2. Gender Performativity

Gender performativity, as explained by Butler, is important in explaining how gender identities are constructed during rituals. Butler suggests (Butler 1990, p. 179) "gender itself is not biologically fixed".

Applied to Pentecostal ritual, this perspective makes it possible to examine how preaching, praying, prophecy, healing, worship, and other practices repeatedly construct expectations concerning women and men. At the same time, repeated ritual practices may create opportunities for those expectations to be disrupted. A woman who publicly exercises prophetic, healing, or prayer authority may participate in a ritual role that challenges assumptions about who is entitled to religious power.

4.3. African Feminist Theology

African feminist theology is one of the contextual models through which the discussion about women's agency in African Christianity can be conducted. As Oduyoye (2001, p. 16) points out, theology should necessarily emerge from the experiences of African women.

This perspective is particularly important because women's ritual participation should not be interpreted only through the categories of institutional leadership. Women may exercise theological and spiritual agency through practices that are not always formally recognised by church structures.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach informed by theology, anthropology, gender studies, and religious studies. It is specifically a secondary-source qualitative study, rather than an ethnographic investigation (Bell 1992, p. 75).

The analysis has been conducted through research done by scholars on worship, rituals, healing, prophecy, gender, power, identity, and funerals of African Pentecostals through theological, ethnographic, and African feminist approaches (Kgatlhe 2022, p. 14). The selection of sources was based on their relevance to the research problem.

The study employed thematic and hermeneutic analyses to establish themes of ritual, embodied practice, negotiation of gender roles, spiritual authority, power, and identity (Butler 1990, p. 179). The study does not claim to have generated primary ethnographic data; it relies on insights reported in existing scholarship.

The absence of interviews and participant observation is a limitation, as the study cannot independently verify participants' lived experiences in specific congregations. The findings of the study are interpretative findings from the selected literature sources. Further research will need to complement these findings with ethnographic field studies and interviews.

6. Ritual, Gender, and Power in African Pentecostal Christianity

6.1. Liturgical Participation and Gendered Authority

The places of worship for the Pentecostal movement might reflect patriarchal values within African society as a whole. The males in this movement tend to bear official religious titles like senior pastor, bishop, or presiding elder, and, moreover, some theological concepts regarding headship and submission may reinforce male domination (Kgatlle 2020, p. 7).

Yet institutional leadership does not exhaust the question of religious authority.

Women participate in Pentecostal worship as prayer leaders, prophets, worship leaders, intercessors, evangelists, counsellors, and other ministry workers. Such participation demonstrates that religious authority may be exercised through ritual even where formal institutional recognition remains limited.

The difference between religious authority exerted through rituals and religious institutions is essential since women can exercise great influence without holding any senior official titles by means of prayer, prophecy, worship, and spiritual counsel. Nadar and Potgieter (2017, p. 111) similarly draw attention to the significant spiritual power women may exercise even within contexts where formal church leadership remains male-dominated.

From the perspective of gender performativity, repeated ritual participation can therefore have two effects. It may reproduce conventional expectations concerning women's roles, but it may also normalise women's exercise of religious authority in spaces traditionally associated with male leadership.

Ritual should consequently be understood as an arena of tension. It does not automatically liberate women, nor does it simply reproduce patriarchy. The importance of this is that there is the potential to both reproduce and transform existing expectations through practices performed repeatedly.

6.2. Healing Rituals and Spiritual Power

Another instance of how authority can be explored is through rituals of healing. Pentecostal healing practices take place within the realm of spirit power and can include prophets, healers, prayer leaders, and others whose authority comes through ritual action.

An understanding of power relations provided by Foucault is helpful here (Foucault 1978, p. 96). Authority can emerge through relationships, practices, discourse, and recognition rather than only through formal office.

Women may exercise considerable authority through healing, counselling, prayer, and prophetic practices. Such authority complicates the assumption that women occupy only marginal positions in Pentecostal religious life.

At the same time, ritual authority should not be equated automatically with institutional equality. A woman may be recognised as spiritually gifted while remaining excluded from particular forms of ecclesiastical decision-making. The relationship between ritual and institutional power is therefore ambivalent.

Healing ritual demonstrates this clearly: ritual may reinforce established structures of authority while simultaneously creating alternative forms of spiritual influence.

6.3. Funeral Rituals, Women, and Identity Formation

Funeral rituals deserve particular attention because they bring together religious belief, family relationships, community memory, gender roles, and cultural identity.

Within African Pentecostal contexts, funerals may combine Pentecostal liturgical elements with wider African understandings of death, communal belonging, memory, and continuity. Van Gennep's (1960, p. 147) mentions Rites of passage as a concept offers a useful approach since funerals signify important transitions both for the departed soul and for the living community.

The concept of gender becomes particularly apparent when considering funeral practices. Women play an important role when performing various tasks associated with mourning, taking care, welcoming people, preparation, consoling, and maintaining communal relations. Such duties could serve to reinforce traditional ideas about women's roles in society. Yet, considering them only as an indication of women's subordinate position would ignore their powers which come along with these duties.

There is much power in funerary spaces, power that comes from relations rather than official position in an ecclesiastical hierarchy. It may come from organizing people, caring for them, praying, consoling, arranging relations within a family and participating in rituals. In this case, women may be important figures in the processes of religion and society associated with death. They may not always be recognized within the official structure of the Church, yet the results of their work can be important for how the community interprets its experience of loss, memory, and faith.

The funeral ceremony is an excellent example of this ambivalence of the gendered religious practice. Practices that reproduce gender stereotypes of female caregivers also put women at the centre of the communal symbolic process.

Funerals also assist in the reconstruction of communal identity. Through them, the family or congregation has an opportunity to remember the departed individual, reconstruct collective memories, reinforce relationships and negotiate tension between the Pentecostal theology and the African cultural memory.

The relationship between Pentecostal theology regarding resurrection and the broader African cultural view regarding continuity and community also makes it evident that the Pentecostal identity is not created without taking into consideration the African cultural context, but that identity is the product of negotiating among the theological views, cultural memory and ritual practice.

7. Discussion

The analysis indicates that Pentecostal ritual should be understood as a site of negotiation rather than merely as repetitive religious performance.

First, ritual reproduces social structures through repetition. The gender roles, institutional hierarchies and authority structures may be reproduced through religious practices.

Second, rituals may allow room for transformation. As the woman repeatedly participates as prayer leader, prophet, healer, worship leader and counsellor, her participation might question narrow perceptions of who is supposed to possess spiritual authority.

Thirdly, ritual shows that power is multidimensional. Institutional power is but one kind of power. Charismatic, relational, embodied, and ritual forms of authority may also shape religious communities.

Fourth, ritual contributes to identity formation. Pentecostal identity is produced through the interaction of Christian theology, African cultural memory, embodied religious practice, and communal relationships.

Finally, ritual can be understood as a form of theological knowledge production. Believers do not only accept theological meanings but actively produce and interpret them using embodied communal practices.

This argument contributes to decolonial theological reflection by refusing to treat embodied and communal religious practices as secondary to formal theological discourse. Ritual practices constitute important sites through which African Pentecostal Christians interpret their faith and their social worlds.

Nevertheless, the transformative potential of ritual should not be overstated. A ritual that provides women with spiritual authority does not necessarily dismantle institutional patriarchy. Similarly, women's participation does not automatically translate into equality.

8. Findings

The analysis produces five interconnected findings.

First, ritual functions simultaneously as continuity and transformation. Pentecostal rituals create continuity but also provide avenues for reinterpretation and change.

Second, ritual is used to perform and negotiate gender. The gendered identities of individuals are performed and negotiated through ritual participation, ritual leadership, ritual bodily performance, and expectations for religious responsibility.

Third, spiritual authority goes beyond institutional positions of authority in an official ecclesiastical hierarchy. Charismatic, relational, and ritual spiritual authority can offer forms of religious influence to participants, especially women.

Fourth, ritual is important in the construction of Pentecostal identity. Pentecostals use worship services, healing, prophesying, and funerals to work through theology, African culture, community membership, and their spirituality.

Fifth, ritual is epistemological. Knowledge about religion does not only come from formal theological discourses and instruction. It also comes from embodied participation, communal memory, repetition, and lived religious experiences.

9. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The principal limitation of this study is methodological. It is worth saying that the article uses secondary literature and thus lacks any original interviews, observations, and field research. Therefore, it cannot give first-hand data on ritual experiences and perceptions of particular Pentecostal communities.

Certainly, using ethnographic and theological literature is an opportunity to access many important insights and interpretations, but it is not the equivalent of working directly with participants. Thus, the results have to be considered as interpretive synthesis rather than empirical data on the rituals of African Pentecostals.

It would be useful in the future to conduct ethnographic research on the functioning of ritual authority in particular congregations. Interviews of women engaged in prophesying, healing, worshipping, praying, and funerary rites would be especially useful. The role of participant observation would be to reveal how formal and informal authorities work in the process of ritual performance.

The comparative research among African Pentecostals could help to determine whether the identified patterns are universal or are characteristic of particular traditions.

10. Conclusions

This article has argued that ritual in African Pentecostal Christianity is a dynamic site of struggle, negotiation, and becoming. Ritual cannot be adequately understood as the simple preservation of religious tradition. It is through ritual that theological convictions

become embodied, social relationships are enacted, identities are negotiated, and forms of authority are exercised.

The examination of the liturgical role, healing, and funerary rites reveals the ambivalence of ritual, where ritual can reproduce patriarchal structures and hierarchy, while ritual can also be a medium through which women exercise spiritual, relational, and charismatic power.

The difference between institutional and ritual power is especially crucial here. The participation of women in prayers, prophecies, healing, worshiping, counselling, and funerary rites proves that religious power cannot be understood only in terms of institutional position.

Ritual is also important for constructing identity through the interaction of Christian theology with African cultural tradition and religious experience. In this sense, ritual becomes an important site for theological reflection and knowledge production.

The article's contribution is therefore not the claim that Pentecostal ritual is inherently liberating or inherently oppressive. Rather, its contribution is to demonstrate that ritual is contested and ambivalent. It is a space in which inherited structures are reproduced, but also a space in which participants can reinterpret religious meanings, exercise agency, and negotiate new forms of identity.

Because this study relies on secondary sources, its conclusions should be complemented by future ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the literature examined here demonstrates that ritual provides an important analytical lens through which gender, power, identity, and theological meaning can be understood within African Pentecostal Christianity.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft preparation, M.C.M. and L.M.M.; writing—review and editing, L.M.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Anderson, Allan. 2019. *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist Churches in South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Bell, Catherine. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Diko, Mlamli. 2023. Intersectionality and the Oppressive Incidents of Women in the Old Testament and the South African Context. *Old Testament Essays* 36: 612–34. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon, vol. 1.
- Ismail, A. Binti. 2021. Tradition and Social Identity Formation in Society. *Journal of Social Science Studies* 1: 221–26. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kgatle, M. Solomon. 2020. Pentecostalism and Gender Transformation in Africa. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76: 1–9.
- Kgatle, M. Solomon. 2022. *Prophecy and Healing in African Pentecostal Christianity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meyer, Birgit. 2015. *Sensational Movies and Religious Spectatorship in Ghana*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Nadar, Sarojini, and Cheryl Potgieter. 2017. *Liberating Masculinities*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.
- Nel, Marius. 2020. African Pentecostal Spirituality as a Mystical Tradition: How Regaining Its Roots Could Benefit Pentecostals. *HTS Theological Studies* 76: 1–10. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. 2001. *Introducing African Women's Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Sharma, Nitasha, and Jillian Rickly. 2025. Ritual and Tourism. In *the Encyclopedia of Tourism*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 881–82.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.

- Unger, Rhoda. 2020. *Representations: Social Constructions of Gender*. London: Routledge.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wariboko, Nimi. 2014. *The Charismatic City and the Public Resurgence of Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yong, Amos. 2018. *The Future of Evangelical Theology in Global Pentecostalism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.