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‘I Got the Call – Not Him’: Founding an African Initiated Church as an Act of Emancipation¹

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the call to found their own churches has allowed and enabled women to subvert and challenge prescribed gender roles. It focusses on African Initiated Churches including both African Independent and Pentecostal Charismatic churches. While the importance of women in these churches is widely acknowledged, less attention has been given to the question of how female church founders gain and maintain their leadership positions. Drawing on historical cases as well as on interviews with founders and church leaders conducted in South Africa and Nigeria, this paper shows how the charismatic authority and doctrinal independence women gain through the call not only legitimate their position but enable them to challenge social and doctrinal norms and thus emancipate themselves from traditional gender roles. Yet, it also discusses whether in some cases women did not fully use their authority in order to keep it.

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‘I Got the Call – Not Him’:

Founding an African Initiated Church as an Act of Emancipation

[R]eligions have created and legitimated gender, enforced, oppressed, and warped it but also subverted, transgressed, transformed, and liberated it.

— Katherine Brown²

Introduction

Following Katherine Brown’s assessment of the possible impacts of religions with regard to gender, this paper examines a religious experience that has allowed and enabled women to subvert, transgress, transform, and liberate prescribed gender roles: the call to found their own churches. It does so by focussing on female founders of African Initiated Churches. This term is used to refer both to traditional African Independent or Indigenous Churches as well as to African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches since they have all been *initiated* in Africa by Africans, without direct links to missionary churches (Pobee and Ositelu 1998; Turner 1967).³

Despite the fact that women form the majority in most churches regardless of denomination (Pew Research Centre 2016), they are generally less present in leading church positions worldwide (Sandstrom 2016; Hendriks et al. 2012). Thus, it is noteworthy that the importance of women and female church founders and leaders in particular is widely acknowledged with regard to African Independent Churches (Dube 2013; Hoehler-Fatton 2010; Moripe 1994), and Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (Parsitau 2019; Soothill 2015; Novieto 2013). Especially when early African Initiated Churches started to emerge during the early nineteenth century, they were often more open to women in leading positions than the contemporary mission-initiated churches (Hoehler-Fatton 2010; Hackett 1995; Kiernan 1995). However, the assumed openness to and empowerment of women in these churches has also been questioned in order to provide a more nuanced or ambiguous picture (Soothill 2019; Gundersen 2018; Mwaura and Parsitau 2012; Molobi 2008). Less attention has been given to the question of how female church founders gain and maintain their leadership positions (Mhando et al. 2018; Dube 2013).

This paper seeks to contribute to the topic of self-legitimation by taking a closer look at the call that pushes but also legitimates women to found their own churches. The call is understood as a divine order received through experiences such as visions or trance. As we will see, the spiritual experience of the call itself is often described as being composed of or reaffirmed by various spiritual experiences. While people speak of being called to positions inside and outside the church (Madimbo 2016), this paper explicitly focusses on women following the call to found their own church. It aims to discuss if and why the act of founding a church can be seen as an act of emancipation. Following Schieder, Meyer, and Lienemann-Perrin (2011), ‘emancipation is understood as a process of (self-)liberation from every possible dependency, whose ultimate goal is to usher in the acratric reign of freedom’. This self-liberation is needed since women in many African societies continue to face different, often intersecting, forms of discrimination based on gender, age, colour of skin, access to education, or income (United Nations Development Programme 2019; Mohamed Dawjee 2018; Madimbo 2016, 2015).⁴ However, I do not

² Brown (2015, 299).

³ For an in-depth discussion of the term and the reasons for its use see Öhlmann et al. 2020, Introduction.

⁴ According to the United Nations Development Programme (2019) *Human Development Report*, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of inequality between women and men compared to Arab States, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and South Asia.

intend to argue that African Initiated Churches, or more precisely their female founders, combat all these forms of discrimination, nor to claim that these forms of discrimination affect all – or only – women in African countries. Rather, the aim of this paper is to highlight how women manage to transform their often marginalised status in society into a status of charismatic authority, as defined by Weber ([1956] 1980). For this, I draw on literature on historical cases of female church founders, as well as on interviews conducted from 2016 to 2020 in South Africa and Nigeria with founders and current leaders of churches that were founded by women.⁵

The interviewees were Rev. Esther Madibe⁶ and Rev. Atinuke Abdulsalami, who founded their own churches in northern South Africa and Nigeria, as well as Most Rev. Daniel Okoh, the current general overseer of Christ Holy Church and grandson of the founder Agnes Okoh, and Lady Bishop Dorcas Maboe, who led a branch of the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa. This church was founded by Christinah Nku, and Lady Bishop Maboe was ordained directly by the founder's daughter. The presented cases differ in terms of time, location, and type of church. Notwithstanding the differences, recurrent aspects can be discerned. The spiritual experiences, and the charismatic authority women gain through these experiences, allow them to challenge social and doctrinal norms regarding gender roles. At the same time, especially in the early twentieth century, several female church founders did not take over full leadership authority. Drawing on Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism, the paper discusses whether in some cases not (openly) using their authority might have allowed women to keep it.

After an introduction of the term 'African Initiated Churches' and the concept of nego-feminism, the paper provides a short historical perspective on female founders of African Initiated Churches, focussing on the reputedly first recorded case of Kimpa Vita or Dona Beatriz in the Kingdom of Kongo, before introducing the four churches and their female founders based on interview material.

The concluding analysis highlights the emancipating aspects of the call and discusses how or to what degree women use them in their leading practice. Female church founders might not aim for an 'acritic reign of freedom' nor the liberation of all women 'from every possible form of dependence', as stated by Schieder et al. (2011). Yet it emerges that the most important independence women gain by founding their own church is the doctrinal independency from other (church) traditions. This independence enables them to challenge traditional gender roles not only through their living example but also through initiating new perspectives or traditions in their own churches.

African Initiated Churches

In this paper I use the term 'African Initiated Churches' to refer to both African Independent/Indigenous Churches and African Pentecostal churches. These types of churches may differ with regard to aspects such as their ways of worshipping or dress codes, for example in the use of specific garments or uniforms in African Independent Churches, as well as theological tenets such as the emphasis on being born again in the Spirit or the so-called Prosperity Gospel, which is preached in many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Notwithstanding the differences, three overarching characteristics can be identified as applying to most of them. The first is their institutional and financial independence from mission-initiated churches (Öhlmann, Gräb, and Frost 2020). Second, they share the aspect of contextuality as

⁵ I additionally refer to interviews conducted in Ghana in 2017 in two footnotes. The majority of the interviews used in this article were conducted within the framework of the research project 'Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development'. Funding by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) is gratefully acknowledged.

⁶ Name changed for data protection reasons.

their 'common origin and rootedness in colonial and post-colonial Africa' (Öhlmann, Gräb, and Frost 2020, 7). The third and most important aspect with regard to the topic under discussion is their spiritual worldview, the 'significance of the spiritual in their cosmology, be it the Holy Spirit, spiritual forces or healing' (Öhlmann, Gräb, and Frost 2020, 7). Even though Pentecostal and Charismatic churches usually reject aspects of African Traditional Religion that are integrated in traditional African Independent Churches' theologies, it is their emphasis on the impact of the spiritual on daily life that opens ways for women to assume leadership positions in both types of churches. As Mwaura finds: 'Women's involvement in the churches is prominent in churches with a pneumatic emphasis. Hence, their leadership and participation is mainly evident in the Spiritual/Zionist/Apostolic/Aladura AICs (i.e., African Independent Churches in the terminology used here), the Charismatic/Neo-Pentecostal churches and the revival movements' (2007, 423). Again, this is not to say that there are no differences between African Independent and Pentecostal churches. Thus, though the term African Initiated Churches is used as an overarching term, differentiations are made when it comes to individual churches while also acknowledging that the lines between the different types may often be blurred.

The Concept of Nego-Feminism

According to Brunell's definition in the Encyclopedia Britannica, feminism refers to 'the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes'. However, not all women felt included in or addressed by this concept. As Izgarjan and Markov summarise, 'Although at the start, the goal of feminism was to win equality and suffrage for women, already in the nineteenth century it became clear that there were two separate women's movements since white women refused to support the struggle of black women for their rights' (2012, 306). As a response to this lack of inclusion, Alice Walker coined the term 'womanism' in 1979, which she located within black matrilinear culture (Izgarjan and Markov 2012; Walker 1981). Her definition gained a lot of prominence. Hill Collins underlines that the idea of womanists being committed to the well-being of women *and* men speaks to 'many black women' who see feminism as a 'movement that at best, is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men' (Hill Collins 1996, 11). However, this concept did not remain uncontested. Oyèwùmí criticises that the term aimed to speak to all black women whether they lived in the United States or in different African countries, pointing out that a common 'pigmentation' did not automatically lead to a 'common interest' (2003, 162). Similarly, Hudson-Weems finds that the concept is still too close to western feminism and calls for an African term, introducing Africana womanism as an alternative (Hudson-Weems 1998).

Nnaemeka acknowledges the diversity of feminisms in the African context and consequently argues for the use of the plural. Against the background of this diversity, she proposes the concept of nego-feminism because she finds 'that a recurrent feature in many African cultures can be used to name the practice' (Nnaemeka 2004, 361). As she explains, nego-feminism is first 'the feminism of ne-gotiation [sic]; second, *nego-feminism* stands for "no ego" feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance' (Nnaemeka 2004, 377–378).

It is important to note that Nnaemeka does not intend to prescribe an ideal concept of how feminism *should* work. Rather, her concept refers to feminism as she has 'seen it practiced' (2004, 378). According to Nnaemeka, nego-feminism evolves from the space where academia and beyond academia meet. She thereby aims to respond both to those who see the need for theoretical thinking and analysis within the field of feminist argumentation and activism, as well as to those criticising existing theories for their lack

of grounding. Nnaemeka emphasises that she is 'building on the indigenous' with her concept (2004, 376). However, the indigenous, as she points out, should not be confused with the traditional in terms of traditional beliefs or mindsets but rather refers to the day-by-day experience of women and men. Following the aim of this paper to discuss the founding of an own church as an act of emancipation, Nnaemeka's concept is used as a lens to examine the leading practice of female church founders in the concluding analysis.

Women as Church Founders

Women have been founding their own churches on the African continent since at least the early eighteenth century. However, some of these *churches* are rather referred to as 'movements' in the literature (Gray 2011; Hackett 1995) due to their lack of institutionalisation. Similarly, not all women mentioned are referred to as pastor or reverend but rather as ma, mother, or captain. Thus, when I speak of women as church founders in this paper, the term does not necessarily imply the existence of an institution referred to as a church and, even less so, a church building. What is important here is that the portrayed churches or movements emerged around a female spiritual leader who the believers acknowledged as the founder. Some of these founders are portrayed below, starting with the reputedly first recorded example according to Hackett: the case of Dona Beatriz⁷ or Kimpa Vita (1684–1706) in the Kingdom of Kongo (Gray 2011; Hackett 1995).

Dona Beatriz and Early Church Founders – A Historical Perspective on African Initiated Christianity⁸

At the age of 20 Kimpa Vita, a woman of the local nobility⁹ who had been baptised as Dona Beatriz in the Catholic Church, was affected by a severe fever that nearly killed her. According to contemporary sources, she claimed that she was about to die when she had a vision of a man who told her that he was St. Anthony and had chosen her to preach to the people and bring about the restoration of the Kingdom of Kongo. St. Anthony entered her head and she immediately recovered and was resolved to accept her mission (Hoehler-Fatton 2010; Thornton 1998). Dona Beatriz had been trained as *nganga marinda*, as a medium concerned with problems in the community would be called in the local language Kikongo (Thornton 1998). *Ngangas* were said to be people in contact with the 'Other World' (Thornton 1998, 54). They could hear voices from or even be possessed by beings from this other world who would 'enter the *nganga's* head, and then use his or her vocal cords to speak' (Thornton 1998, 54). Thus, the assumption that an otherworldly being would enter her head may have been something that was normally part of Dona Beatriz's work. However, the fact that this being was a Christian saint shows how aspects of African Traditional Religion and Christianity merged together in this event. Despite her young age, she subsequently became the leading figure of the Antonian movement that formed around her between 1704 and 1706 (Gray 2011). This was not only the time of the Kongo Civil War (1665–1709) but also a time during which large numbers of people were captured and sent off as slaves from this region every

⁷ Also 'Dona Béatrice'; cf. Hackett 1995.

⁸ I only refer to some selected cases of female church founders in order to highlight recurrent characteristics of their histories. More examples can be found inter alia in Soothill 2015; Dube 2013; Phiri, Govinden, and Nadar 2002; Hackett 1995.

⁹ Belonging to this group translates into the fact that Dona Beatriz's mother did not have to work in the fields like all the other women in the village because the family had slaves who were responsible for the provision and preparation of food. However, as Thornton (1998, 19) summarises, 'Dona Beatriz' family were members of the highest group of the nobility, the Mwana Kongo or 'child of Kongo', although such a background did not necessarily mean either wealth or political importance'. According to him, it 'was more a source of pride than material or political gain' (Thornton 1998, *ibid*).

year. Since many of them were Catholic, some believers blamed the Catholic Church for being unable to protect its members.

Dona Beatriz engaged both politically and theologically. She called for unity among the fighting houses of the Kingdom of Kongo and 'told her followers that missionaries were denying the equality of all before God and claiming the supremacy of white folk over black folk' (Birmingham 1999, 321). Having a Catholic background herself, she attempted to 'organize an African church with black saints and an indigenous hierarchy' (Hackett 1995, 262), thus challenging the supremacy of the mission-initiated Catholic Church that was mainly led by Capuchin monks from Italy (Gray 2011). In early 1706 she announced that she would die every Friday in order to plead the cause of Kongo in heaven and to get new directions before coming back to life the next week (Thornton 1998). Later in this year she was captured and condemned by the king and the Capuchin monks and burned at the stake as a witch and heretic (Gray 2011; Mwaura 2007).

Several aspects of Dona Beatriz's story are exemplary of the way women have founded and continue to found African Initiated Churches. The most important one is the charismatic authority she gained from her spiritual experience. Referring to Weber ([1956] 1980), Renger defines charismatic authority as an 'authority deriving from a "higher source" – for instance a higher being or God' and which is 'often a means of overturning traditions and laws in favor of an entirely new order' (2015, 148). In many past and recent cases, spiritual experiences such as visions or states of trance, as well as spiritual gifts like the power to prophesise or heal, accompany the emergence of a new church (Hoehler-Fatton 2010) and legitimise the charismatic authority of the founders (Mhando et al. 2018; Dube 2013). As we see, the fact that charismatic authority is gained after or during a severe illness or linked to a near-death experience, as well as that the founder was called at a very young age, had been raised in a mission-initiated church, and was accused of witchcraft are characteristics that can be found in several other cases in countries south and north of the former Kingdom of Kongo.

Like Dona Beatriz, Mai (Mother) Chaza, a Shona prophetess from Zimbabwe, and Alice Lenshina Mulenga Mubisha, founder of the Lumpa Church in Zambia, were said to have had death and resurrection experiences following a long illness. Mulenga was baptised as Alice in a Presbyterian church and chose the name of Lenshina being the Bemba form of the Latin word *regina*, queen. Following her first visions in 1953 she established the Lumpa Church in 1954/1955, *lumpa* meaning 'to be superior' (Hinfelaar 1991, 99–100), 'highest' or 'best' (Hackett 2017, 247).¹⁰ Similar to Dona Beatriz's movement, it had anticolonial traits since it challenged British rule. Mai Chaza claimed to have been chosen by God as a new Moses (Hackett 1995). Even though she 'tried to keep the movement within the Methodist Church', according to Hackett (1995, 264), it broke away from the church in 1955 and became known as the Church of Mai Chaza.

Similarly, the founder of the first Independent Church in Nigeria, Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon, later referred to as Captain Abiodun by her followers, suffered from a severe sickness followed by a long trance during which she was 'taken to celestial regions by an angel and subjected to spiritual tests' before she met Moses Orimolade (Hackett 1995, 264). Orimolade, who was 'already well-known for his praying activities', (Hackett 1995, 265) cured her and in 1925 they jointly started a prayer group that is known today as the Cherubim and Seraphim (Oluwaniyi 2012; Hackett 1995; Turner 1967). Captain Abiodun was a member of the Anglican Church, and the prayer meetings were first intended as a supplement to church services open to members from different denominations. However, they became more and more

¹⁰ Different dates are reported here. Hackett (1995) cites 1954 as the year of foundation and Hinfelaar states that it was 'within the time-span of two years' after her first vision that the movement had 'established itself as an independent Church' (Hinfelaar 1991, 99). However, according to Hackett (2017, 247), 'the movement assumed independent status in 1959'. Also, her name was first rendered as 'Alice Mulenga Lenshina Lubusha' by Hackett (1995).

autonomous over time so that she eventually had to leave the Anglican Church (Hackett 1995; Turner 1967). Like Dona Beatriz and other female church founders, she was a very young leader. Hackett notes that Captain Abiodun faced male resistance to her leadership. After fundamental disagreements the co-founders split into two factions in 1929: the Cherubim and Seraphim Society of Captain Abiodun, and the Eternal Society of Cherubim and Seraphim (ESOCS) established by Orimolade. At the same time Hackett highlights that other women gained leading positions in the Cherubim and Seraphim Society and that characteristics like the church's name were implemented based on visions that women and young girls received. Apparently, this was especially due to Captain Abiodun's personal influence before the splitting, as Oluwaniyi summarises: 'With her departure, women's place in the ESOCS in broad sense, faded into subservience' (2012, 138). This shows how some female church founders used the authority they gained in their churches to provide space for spiritual expressions of other women. Yet this case also exemplifies the fact that only a few of them managed to establish a church structure that was inclusive for women in the long run (Hackett 1995).

With regard to the question of emancipation, it is important to note that several of these church founders 'were arguably social misfits', as Hackett (1995, 263) puts it. Both Marie Lalou, who first followed the prophet William Wadé Harris before she broke away and founded the Deima Cult in Ivory Coast, and Blé Nahi, who claimed to be Lalou's successor, were childless (Hackett 1995; Paulme 1962). This is noteworthy since Premack finds that even today it 'is not a stretch to say that, not only in Yorubaland but across sub-Saharan Africa, having children is often understood as the very best kind of prosperity' (2019, 180). A woman who does not have children is 'more likely to be accused of witchcraft' (Premack 2019, 180). In fact, like Dona Beatriz before, both Marie Lalou and Blé Nahi were accused of being witches and moreover to have hurt or killed their husbands (Hackett 1995). Hackett points out that they 'transformed and legitimated their socially unacceptable circumstances through spiritual means. They claimed status and were valued as ideal, spiritual mothers, who had renounced their roles as traditional mothers for the good of the community. This was unprecedented in the traditional context' (Hackett 1995, 264).

Also other recognised female founders lived in ways that were traditionally less acceptable. Mai Chaza had six children but was divorced and claimed to have been called to live a celibate life (Mwaura 2007; Hackett 1995). The reference to the divine call legitimates an otherwise socially less-accepted way of life. This aspect of fundamental transformation can still be found in more recent cases. An especially striking example is Ngozi Agbu, an Igbo prophetess from Southern Nigeria. While Captain Abiodun and other church founders condemned the use of witchcraft, Ngozi Agbu became known for fighting it in a most radical way (Harnischfeger 2003). In the middle of the 1990s she travelled from village to village together with a group of mainly young followers in order to destroy shrines, confiscate masks, drums, magical objects and fetishes, and to demand identified witches to confess their sins. She was divorced and had no children. Moreover, she was known as a '*madwoman*' who used to stray around half-naked in the streets of her hometown before she was called as a prophetess (Harnischfeger 2003, 135, emphasis in the original). Harnischfeger identifies different reasons for her Christian crusade against witchcraft. Most importantly, he notes that a woman in her situation would never have had the chance to gain social influence within the traditional Igbo religion and value system. Even more fundamentally than in the cases we have seen before, the spiritual experience of getting a call enabled her to transform her otherwise marginal status as a social outcast into a status of high authority as a Christian leader. It should be noted that in most cases other female founders would also not have been able to rise to positions of similar authority in their churches of origin.

Witchcraft continues to play an important role in many African societies (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Ashforth 2005, 2015; Harnischfeger 2003). As in the cases of Marie Lalou and Blé Nahi, especially widows and

elderly women are often accused of being witches (Kapuma 2012; Federici 2010).¹¹ In addition to accusations of and persecutions for witchcraft, especially widows often face financial problems because they may not inherit anything from their deceased husbands. In some cases, they may even lose the money and property they themselves worked for, and might be subject to practices such as widow inheritance or violent so-called cleansing rituals (Idialu 2012; Kapuma 2012).¹² Thus, it is noteworthy that some church founders openly denounced these and similar traditions. Alice Lenshina preached against 'widow inheritance and other practices that were inimical to women's wellbeing', which made her church particularly attractive to women (Mwaura 2007, 426). Her engagement led Hastings to qualify her church as 'a feminist church' because it was 'not only led by a woman but expressing feminine aspirations, a woman's view of the ideal society' (1996, 525). Similarly, Gaudencia Aoko, who co-founded the Legio Maria in Kenya in 1963, called for the 'liberation of women from repressive structures and practices' (Hackett 1995, 265).

While some of these churches or movements disappeared after a short period of time, churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim as well as St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission and Christ Holy Church, which is discussed in more detail in the following sections, still exist today. They may have experienced challenges and inner splitting but have grown into important churches in their founding country and even beyond.

Case Studies from South Africa and Nigeria

Having discussed the key characteristics of the founding of churches by women in a historical perspective, I now turn to in-depth treatment of two examples from the early twentieth century in South Africa and Nigeria, before moving on to two contemporary cases from the same countries. For these cases I draw on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2020 with current leaders of the respective churches or, in the more recent cases, with the founders themselves.

Christinah Nku – Church Founder and 'Real Prophet'

The first case I will introduce is Christinah Mokotuli Nku (1894–1988), the founder of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa. Similar to other founders, dreams and visions played an important part in Nku's life and the history of her church. She saw her first visions in 1906 at the age of twelve (Kgatle 2019; Landman 2006; Sundkler 1976) and several 'series of visions', often accompanied by illnesses or seizures and in two cases by death and resurrection experiences, marked the foundation process of her church (Landman 2006, 8). Sundkler describes how she was hit by a particularly strong 'crisis of ill health' in 1924 during which she 'was left unconscious for some time. In this state, she had a vision of a very impressive church with many doors; she was later sure that there were in fact twelve doors' (1976, 80). According to Sundkler 'this vision was her personal calling to build precisely this Church [sic] in South Africa' (1976, 80). In the same vision she was told to 'follow the baptism of John and Jesus'

¹¹ A pastor of a Ghanaian church explained that they even introduced a specific ministry for elderly people:

Because over here in Africa and in Ghana, once you are grown old, especially with the women, any bad thing, any misfortune that occurs, like untimely death [...] they associate it with a witch in the family and mostly they look at the women, the old, elderly women. We have some who have [been] sacked from [their] home, some who have been banished from their communities, some who have been physically abused because they believe that the poverty in the home or they believe that other mishaps in the family are due to these elderly women (Interview Ghana, 18 September 2017).

¹² Widow inheritance refers to the custom of widows having to marry the brother of their deceased husband. According to Le Roux's investigation on sexual violence (SV), this custom was named as one of the 'culturally ordained practices conducive to SV' by both male and female interviewees (Le Roux 2012, 54).

(Sundkler 1976, 80). Rev. Elias Nkitseng, a prophet of the Apostolic Faith Mission who was called for help, recognised that Nku 'was not ill, but under divine calling' (Landman 2006, 10). While she and her husband, Lazarus, whom she married in 1920, had been baptised and raised in the Dutch Reformed Church, they both left the church and were baptised again in the Apostolic Faith Mission. However, as Sundkler points out, 'even here, she experienced resistance against what she felt as her spiritual gifts' – especially from a male leading pastor (1976, 80). She eventually founded her own church in 1939 (Hackett 1995). Even though St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission had to overcome inner splitting in its early history, it grew steadily and is one of the largest churches in Southern Africa today (Kgatle 2019). In her portrayal of Christinah Nku and her church, Landman describes Nku as 'a pioneer, one of a few women who initiated independent African churches' (2006, 15).

The following assessment of Christinah Nku and her role in the church draws on the account of Lady Bishop Dorcas Maboe, who built up and led one of the church branches in Carletonville, close to Johannesburg together with her husband, until her death in 2021. She was one of only five female pastors who had been trained and ordained directly by Nku's daughter, Lydia August. This is even more noteworthy since it was August who introduced women's ordination to the church, but after her death in 1997 this practice was again stopped. When talking about the founder, Lady Bishop Maboe described Ma Nku, or Mother Christinah as Nku is also referred to by her followers, as a 'real prophet':

A prophet is just somebody who will tell you without opening a Bible, book and all that, just looking at you. And God will talk to him. [...] Ma Nku was a real prophet, because when you come in, she already knows that you are coming. The Holy Spirit told her that somebody will come with such a problem, you know?¹³

The influence of Ma Nku and her visions is still very perceptible. Different aspects of her church, such as the shape and place of her first church building, the restriction against eating pork, and the colours of the garments that are worn by the church members to this day were revealed to her in dreams (Kgatle 2019; Landman 2006; Sundkler 1976). The main colours are blue and white, and the uniforms include specific belts or ropes and in some cases specific collars for women. As Lady Bishop Maboe emphasised, 'everything' Ma Nku established 'was given by the Holy Spirit'. It was also the Holy Spirit who led her to use holy water during the church services as well as to throw salt and ash into people's homes to combat attacks of witchcraft. All these practices are still in place. As Lady Bishop Maboe summarised, 'everything we are using we took from Mother Christinah'. Besides being known for her visions and prophecies, Ma Nku was recognised for her healing powers. During her second near-death experience, Nku descended into hell and conquered Satan with the help of the archangels Gabriel and Michael, who afterward 'dressed and equipped' her 'with the symbols of a healer' (Landman 2006, 11). More than that, her spiritual gifts may have also had an influence on the growth of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the largest church in Southern Africa. According to Lady Bishop Maboe, some people say that Ma Nku and Engenas Lekganyane, the founder of the ZCC, knew each other. As she retold, 'Ma Nku blessed him. [...] So that's why Lekganyane, the church, is so big. Because he was blessed by Ma Nku'. What is worthy of note here is the amount of spiritual power and selflessness allocated to Ma Nku if one assumes that the growth of a church that is much bigger than her own was at least partly due to her blessing.

According to Kgatle (2019), 'Nku had full control of the church' as long as her husband, Lazarus Nku, was alive 'because he was her appointee'. While she was 'the effective leader of the church', her husband

¹³ All quotes from Lady Bishop Maboe taken from interview South Africa, 1 February 2020.

served as archbishop and 'constitutional head' (Kgatle 2019, 8). However, after he died in 1967 she appointed male bishops to assist her. As Sundkler and Steed note, she

was soon to find that these preferments led to her own ruin. One of these men, Bishop P. Masango, was as leader and healer a simpleton compared with Nku herself, but he managed, parrot-like to copy Ma Nku's gestures and phrases to the extent that he, a Zulu would – in Swaziland! – throw into his sermon formulae in seSoto, obviously borrowed from Ma Nku. The great annual Assemblies had no hesitation at all on this point: the visibility and the spiritual presence were those of the great Prophetess herself while the male bishops remained distinctly marginal straw-men. The movement owed everything to her. But in the Whites' court Bishop Masango managed to show that, officially, he was in charge and thus entitled to rake in the tens of thousands of pounds – the sum total of the happy offerings from the faithful given to her – which in the end were adjudicated to him (Kgatle 2019, 684–685).

In his research on Petros Masango's life and ministry and his aim to control the church, Masondo concludes that his story 'represents the failure of African Christianity to break away from the dominant western Christian paradigm when it comes to the subordination of women and according them equal status' (2015, 231). The fact that Christianity brought both opportunities and restrictions for women in different African countries and that similar 'gender paradox[es]' (Soothill 2015, 193) can be found in African churches initiated by women has been widely discussed in literature (Soothill 2015, 2019; Mwaura and Parsitau 2012; Mwaura 2007; Hackett 1995). In the following example from Nigeria the founder also left the leadership to men.

Agnes Okoh – A 'Wise' Leader

Agnes Okoh (1905–1995) founded the Christ Holy Church in Nigeria in 1947. Today the church has branches in various African countries. According to Kalu (2009), the 'church is interesting because: it grew under an illiterate woman; is located in Onitsha (in Igboland), the headquarters of Anglicans and Roman Catholics since 1854, where the African independent churches (AICs) made little progress before the Civil War (1967–1970); and its liturgy is charismatic and utilizes indigenous culture' (2009, 65). The marginal influence of African Independent Churches that Kalu highlights for this area makes it even more impressive that an illiterate woman with no theological education was able to establish a church there that would spread to the neighbouring countries within the next two generations of leaders. The current general overseer of the church, Most Rev. Daniel Okoh, also emphasised the fact that the church was founded by a woman. He is not only the current general overseer but also Agnes Okoh's grandson. His account provides an insider's perspective on how the founder and her engagement in the church are interpreted today:

Now what if you like is unique about my church is that this church was founded by a woman, at a time in the African history, when women were supposed to be seen and not heard. But then she received her calling in 1943. And by 1947, the older prophetess that prayed for her and converted her to Christianity actually had, saw a prophecy, had a vision and told her that the Lord said she should go and found a church, and mentioned the name of the town – Onitsha. So she went to that town, not having an idea of how to start a church. It wasn't fashionable as we find it today, you know, to start a church, and she, she just went

*there and obeyed the Lord because she was just healed by the Lord miraculously of a certain ailment. So she decided to follow Jesus Christ and so that was how she started.*¹⁴

He emphasised that Agnes Okoh faced many fundamental challenges at that time.

So, so many things challenged her because the husband had died and then at that time, she had only two children. And then few years after the husband died, the only daughter died. And so, because of the pain and the pressure, she fell ill, and that she couldn't get healing from, even orthodox medicine, herbal medicine and all that. A friend of hers introduced her to an itinerant prophetess, Ma Ozoemena. [...] And then she went to her, and she told her that, 'Well if you believe in Christ and put aside all other solutions that you got from the herbalist and all that, Christ will heal you'. And so she accepted Christ and she prayed for her. And she told me, because I met the founder, she died in 1995. She told me that the next morning she woke, she woke up and she didn't even know when it was day break because for months, she couldn't sleep. So when she woke up, she discovered she was healed, and so she took a decision, which she put in an African proverb that says that, 'she will follow Christ, and wherever Christ will, will stop His boat, that is where she will drop her paddle', because she is from the Niger Delta so, you know, from river land areas. So and what it means is that she will follow Christ till and wherever He stops, she will stop. And that was what she did. And she, because she was a woman, she gave opportunities to women to lead. But of course she was also being, she was very wise in pushing the women, not to push too much, because of the culture of the time.

Here it is noteworthy that he terms her attitude as 'wise'. This implicitly suggests that she decided to adapt to 'the culture of the time' while at the same time giving leading opportunities to women. I will come back to this aspect in the discussion. Agnes Okoh not only did not introduce women's ordination, but also 'never administered any sacrament' herself and would not enter the altar but sit next to it. At the same time, she is seen as a role model when it comes to preserving the integrity and financial independence of the church. As Okoh recalled:

Some American missionaries came [...] and they said we have heard about you and your ministry, we are moving around helping ministries to evangelise. Then, it was not too fashionable for African churches to organise a big crusade, and so they said to the founder, 'We can actually help you organise crusades, and then all the converts that we shall get, we give to your church, and then we move on'. And then they told us, 'but don't bother about the money, we are going to provide the money'. [...] So yes, she said okay, let me go and pray. So she now went in and prayed, and after some days she came back and told the white men, 'The Lord said we, we would go ahead with this, but we are going to provide the funds'. That God said, you keep your money. And they were very poor! So it was much later, few years ago, we were discussing this in a seminar, we said, the Lord was teaching our forefathers and foreparents how to be financially independent.

In more recent cases it is also the legitimising power of dreams, visions, or getting a call that pushes but also authorises women to break away from former churches and traditions to found new ones that will then be recognised by others. In the following accounts two church founders recount their founding stories.

¹⁴ All quotes from Most Rev. Okoh taken from interview Nigeria, 3 October 2017.

Esther Madibe – A Woman Who 'Got the Call'

Rev. Esther Madibe started her church in a small town in Limpopo Province in northern South Africa. She describes her church as a Bible-based born-again church. After having worked her whole life in the health sector, she received her call at the time she retired. Rev. Madibe recalls that her husband was 'pastoring the big Anglican Church' when she was called to become a leader herself.

[M]y husband was a pastor and I was just a pastor's wife. But when I got a call, I got a calling from the Lord, it was me, not my husband. I kept on and I didn't want to join this. I didn't want to be involved, I kept on pointing at my husband, saying, but Lord, he is your servant not me. And the Lord would say, yes, I know your husband is my servant but what about you? I want to use you.¹⁵

It is interesting to note that Rev. Madibe mentions how reluctant she was at the beginning so that God had to explicitly point out that he was calling her and continued his call. In the interview she explained that more and more people came to listen to her.

I didn't start as a pastor for the church first of all. I just had to go on praying and praying, wanting to hear the Lord, what He wanted me to do. So until I had to go and pray and fast even then when I came back I wasn't going to start a church. I just remained praying and praying to God. Then people started coming to me, seeking prayer and deliverance. I started getting busy with this and people were starting to become born-again because I started ministering to them without them knowing the Lord. [...] Yes, I had to pray to the Lord, what must I do with these people? I didn't know. I didn't have a church. Must I send them to other churches? But the Lord said to me, start a fellowship. So I started a fellowship and it grew bigger and bigger. We have a big garage at the back here for three cars and we started there. We were holding services there and the church was growing.

It was the persistence of the call with God explicitly telling her to start a church and the acknowledgement by others that eventually pushed Rev. Madibe to start her own church to preach to her followers. Finally, not only she but also her husband left the Anglican Church. He served as her assistant until he died.

An especially interesting example with regard to the reluctance to accept the call to found a church is the story of Rev. Atinuke Abdulsalami, the last case discussed here.

Atinuke Abdulsalami – A Muslim Church Founder

Rev. Atinuke Abdulsalami is the founder and leader of the Divine Salvation Bible Church in Nigeria. She did not have a Christian background but was born and raised as a Muslim before turning to Christianity following an out-of-body experience during surgery. She had already been in touch with Christian belief through the televangelist Billy Graham at a young age, but it was only during this experience in 1993 that she 'was saved in a personal encounter' (Abdulsalami n.d.,12). With regard to the type of her church, it is interesting to note that while she considers herself as being born-again in a literal sense, she qualifies her church as a 'white garment church' (Abdulsalami n.d., 30). She recounted her life and the formation process of her church not only during our interview but also in a booklet titled 'On Purpose for a Purpose', which is available from her church, as well as in a chapter on the 'Roles of women in African Independent and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria'.

¹⁵ All quotes from Rev. Madibe taken from interview South Africa, 3 March 2016.

Out-of-body experience, science calls it. For me it was the great encounter. I found myself on an entirely different plane. I could see people burning in a fiery furnace, wailing, crying and gnashing their teeth, no one was guarding the entrance but they could not escape! Second phase, I looked down from above and saw people weeping. The fat and the slim, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the pregnant and the barren, everyone was crying. I asked, 'Why is everyone crying?' The answer was that, 'The whole world will weep until they come to the knowledge of God'. At the third phase, I was taken to another sphere where there was void, no crying, no wailing, no hunger, no sickness, I wanted to remain there, but I was told, 'You have to work to be here'. Moving from these three planes, we arrived at a place they told me was the judgment seat! I had never heard of such a thing! And a mighty book was opened, I was curious at its size and I asked what it was about. I was told it was the book of life, where a record is kept of all my deeds. And a loud voice read aloud, 'On this date [mentioned] and this time [mentioned] you said to this person [name mentioned] that you will never forgive him'. It was true! But no one was there with us, it was a reaction, how did it get here? My mind flashed and began to race back to the hellfire I saw earlier; I am doomed! (Abdulsalami 2020, 110–111, square brackets in the original)

It was at this moment of great despair that she met the one who would save her from eternal suffering.

Where I stood, I felt the presence of something or someone extraordinary, please do not ask if it had a face or not. I could feel the presence, I was trembling and realised there was no escaping judgment, a gentle voice said to me, 'I am the advocate, I can set you free'. It was hard to believe who could save me from here. And I retorted, 'I do not even know you'. he answered, 'I knew you before you knew me'. 'If you believe in me, I will speak to Him [judge] and your records will be clean'. At that point in time, I desperately needed the offer of a new lease of life. I said, with every strength in me, 'I believe'. He said, 'Now that you have accepted that I can save you, what will you give in return?' Without much ado, I stuttered 'I will go and witness all over the world, that you are Lord and no one else'. 'I will fulfil my side of the covenant, if you fail your side, I will be back in four days', he said. And, in a jiffy, I was back where my body was laid; I had been saved! I entered the body and requested, 'Let my right foot move, so they know I live'. And so it was. I could hear the nurse calling my name like from afar. 'Hadiza [my Muslim name, which was the name of the wife of the Prophet Muhammad], are you here, can you hear me?' All I could mumble through it all was 'Jesus is Lord', repeatedly (Abdulsalami 2020, 111, square brackets and emphasis in the original).

Yet as she recounts in her booklet, Rev. Abdulsalami did not immediately found or even join a church after this incident. 'I just went back my way. I put all that behind my back' (Abdulsalami n.d., 18). It was not until she experienced another vision that she decided to tell 'a man of God' and became a member of his church (Abdulsalami n.d., 18). There she was baptised and ordained as an evangelist and, after a 21-day trance during the same year, as senior prophetess in 1994. According to her account, the primate told her that she would soon found her own church but she could not believe it. Again, it was not until she experienced two more visions that she finally decided to leave. In a dream she saw her 'boss' walking away from her. She urged him not to leave her alone but

He said, 'I will leave, because I have warned you several times that we need to change office and you do not seem ready, I have to move on'. I promised to go and pack up and move with him. I woke from the dream, I was confused I did not understand the least of it (Abdulsalami n.d., 20).

At the following Sunday service she planned to tell the primate about her dream. When she stepped out she heard the same voice warning her again:

I will leave you and never will I come back'. I recognized the voice, I listened again and it was repeated twice. There and then I got the message. I did not want to find out why, I immediately chose to be obedient. From that day, I never went to the church again. I decided to wait for the Master's [sic] direction (Abdulsalami n.d., 20).

Abdulsalami continued praying with her family until she was told by God to celebrate a seven-day revival in a specific street in Lagos. During this revival more and more people joined her and kept coming to pray and worship with her even after the revival was over. In 1995 they 'heard from God that, "on this rock I will build my church"' and started to build the church (Abdulsalami n.d., 21).

Her retold spiritual experiences legitimate her position as church founder and leader as well as the geographical position of her church building. More specifically, her personal encounter legitimates the fact that she is leading her church without a male co-leader.

I stand on the ground that I was the one who got the message, I was the one who encountered the Lord Jesus. I cannot tell somebody else to help me tell people how I encountered the Lord Jesus. It would not become a third-party thing. So why would I need a man to help me tell anybody how I met with Jesus? (Interview Nigeria, 9 October 2017)

Rev. Abdulsalami's statement exemplifies the emancipating power a call may have, and how it not only legitimates the woman's charismatic authority but can also affect the self-understanding of the woman who received it. Moreover, she offers a new reading of Paul's teaching that women should be quiet in the church (1 Cor 14: 34–35). 'Personally, I would want to opine that Paul the Apostle's idea of women keeping quiet was directed at the type of women that were present there. [...] Maybe in different circumstances he would have said, "Men, be quiet, let us listen to the Prophetess Hannah"' (Abdulsalami 2020, 114).

Also in her booklet Rev. Abdulsalami touches on her role in the church. Asked about her take on schools of thought that hold that it is wrong for a woman to minister or to head a church, she states:

God uses anyone He wills, simple. As far as I am concerned I am a witness. And I am not under any law (doctrine) so no one can stop me from speaking about what the savior has done for me and no one can stop me from asking anyone whom He sends me to, to come and meet with Him (Abdulsalami n.d., 33).

Here Rev. Abdulsalami grounds her leadership position both in her divine mission as well as in her independence from existing doctrines that gives room for other perspectives and interpretations.

The Emancipating Power of the Call

Following the presentation of different female church founders and their founding histories, I now turn to analysing the cases in order to identify commonalities and differences. As we will see, different recurrent patterns in the emancipating power of the call can be discerned.

Challenging Doctrinal Norms – Gaining Authority through Being Chosen by God

What all the women portrayed here have in common is the fact that they did not gain their legitimation and authority to found their own church through theological education or succession, but through

spiritual experience. Dube highlights: 'Through listening to the word of the Spirit, the AICs women offer a feminist strategy that breaks free from patriarchal and canonical constraints of biblical traditions. It allows them to claim divine empowerment and leadership despite their gender' (1996, 126; also quoted in Dube 2013, 336). Dube underlines the independence from existing doctrines and interpretation that women gain through the call. Following her assessment, already the mere act of founding a church based on a divine call can be seen as an act of self-liberation from patriarchal understandings of the Bible and thus as an act of emancipation.

Notwithstanding the fact that several founders were already known as mediums or prophetesses, many of them, such as Dona Beatriz, Mai Chaza, Captain Abiodun, Ma Nku or Rev. Madibe, initially belonged to mission-initiated churches in which they would not have had the chance to become important leaders. However, several of them did not intend to break away from their home churches at the beginning. Besides the importance of the call, a recurrent pattern of reluctance to accept the call can be discerned here. In many cases being called to become a church founder is described as a process that included recurrent signs that reaffirmed the divine calling. In her account of the history of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission, Landman recounts the various 'series of visions' that Ma Nku experienced before accepting her callings. She went through four series of visions until she accepted her 'calling as the founder of the church' and only after a 'fifth series of visions and near death experiences' did she accept the 'calling as a healer' (2006, 10).¹⁶ Thus, every new step or aspect of her leadership was spiritually legitimised. We find the same pattern in Rev. Madibe's founding story, and much more prominently in Rev. Abdulsalami's detailed account. She highlights the variety of spiritual experiences that finally led to the founding of her church, from her experience of 'transition' (Abdulsalami n.d., 24), as she puts it, to visions both in dreams and when awake, and a trance, to the point that God called and later even threatened her to make her leave the church. Additionally, the process of the call was accompanied and acknowledged by outsiders. In several examples these outsiders were not only the people who followed the founder and thereby acknowledged her authority, but also professionals in the religious field. Religious leaders such as the primate of the church Rev. Abdulsalami belonged to, or renowned prophets in the cases of Captain Abiodun, Agnes Okoh, and Ma Nku confirmed their calls. While describing the different stages of her journey Rev. Abdulsalami also recounts her reluctance first to join a church after she became a Christian, and then to leave the church in order to found her own one. Her narration points out that she did not become a church founder – or even a Christian – out of her own choice but because she was 'obedient' and followed God's guidance.¹⁷

More generally, through the emphasis on their reluctance to accept the call and the persistence of divine signs, the women highlight that they did not choose to become founders themselves but were chosen by God. The fact that the call is repeated again and again as well as confirmation through professional outsiders increases their credibility as chosen leaders and thus strengthens their authority. Similarly, many of them were not only called to found a church but continued to experience trances or visions or were gifted as healers or prophets, which can be seen as constant proof of their divine election.

¹⁶ This narrative of a multitude of signs emphasising the call can also be found in stories of male church founders. In his account of the history of the Church of the Lord (Aladura), Turner (1967) recounts the numerous visions Josiah Olunowo Oshitelu received in his dreams before he founded the church. Turner concludes: 'Even after a year of such experiences Oshitelu did not feel ready to commence the mission that so clearly lay before him' (1967, 43). He thus suggests that the fact that Oshitelu was called to found a church was obvious; only Oshitelu himself could still not believe it.

¹⁷ Accordingly, the first sentence of her book's preface reads: 'This book On Purpose for a Purpose, is not about Reverend Atinuke Abdulsalami, it is about the power of God's love in her life' (Abdulsalami n.d., 2).

Challenging Social Norms – The Power to Transform and Reinterpret Aspects of Life

The fact that Most Rev. Okoh underlined the circumstance that his grandmother founded her church at a time when women were supposed to be seen and not heard shows that this is not only an act of emancipation of doctrinal teachings, as Dube highlights, but more generally a challenge to socially prescribed gender roles – also outside the church. The charismatic authority gained through the process of the call and reaffirmed through spiritual experiences and gifts enabled the female founders to challenge traditional gender roles. The call transformed their lives and more specifically their status as they rise to positions of authority that would not necessarily have been available to them otherwise. Many founders received their call at a very young age, and some of them lived in ways that were socially less accepted or even disregarded. The call allowed them to change their situation. Some founders were able to reinterpret their childlessness or their celibate life through spiritual means. They thereby not only challenged but also reinterpreted social norms by their example. It is in these cases that the enabling aspect of the call is most perceivable and impressive.

Here it is also worth noting how many of the church founders received their call in a situation of great vulnerability. One of the striking recurrent aspects in the histories of female church founders is the fact that many of them were suffering from a severe illness when they received their call. It is important to note the impressive transformation of position that took place here. These women were ill to a point that they were about to die or, as we have seen in the cases of Dona Beatriz, Captain Abiodun, Mai Chaza, Alice Lenshina, and Rev. Abdulsalami, even said to have actually died and come back from the dead. It was in this moment of most extreme vulnerability that they received their call to rise to become powerful leaders. Moreover, their illnesses were often linked to spiritual experiences such as trances, visions, or near-death experiences during which they were taken to otherworldly spheres or received directions for their mission. Here illness, which would otherwise be associated with weakness and incapacity, becomes a way to access exclusive insight and knowledge.¹⁸

Furthermore, many of them were not only healed through the encounter with a saint or a powerful healer, but as in the cases of Captain Abiodun, Mai Chaza, Ma Nku, and many other female church founders, they rose to become powerful healers themselves (Kgatle 2019; Oduro 2007; Landman 2006; Hackett 1995). Also other founders such as Agnes Okoh, Alice Lenshina, and Marie Lalou were known for their gift of healing. Seeley (1984) underlines the dual importance the ministry of healing has for women specifically. The gift of healing allows them to achieve leadership positions, and women are the ones who profit most from it. Premack (2019) notes that especially women join churches in search of healing, particularly in cases of infertility. Besides the spiritual healing and rituals such as prayer or the laying of hands that are practised in many churches, she also points to the maternity centres and clinics that are established, especially by bigger Pentecostal churches.

However, regardless of this transformative spiritual experience and the charismatic authority that came with it, many of these women gave the formal power to lead the church to men.

¹⁸ It is also interesting to note that the founders' experiences resonate both with African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Referring to different African religions, Berger notes that a 'person's prolonged illness' might be interpreted 'as a particular spirit's signal of its choice of a medium' (1976, 163). At the same time, the death and resurrection experience of course also reminds us of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Negotiating Around Patriarchy – The Practice of Nego-Feminism

Similar to the examples of Captain Abiodun and Ma Nku, many other female church founders led with a male co-leader. It is important to note that female founders and leaders often faced scepticism and resistance from male members or leaders (Mwaura 2007; Hackett 1995). According to Mwaura, this 'dual arrangement was a convenient method used by several AICs to overcome traditional male resistance to women's leadership' (2007, 425). In her paper on women church leaders in Botswana, Dube elaborates that 'they face many constraints in a patriarchal world and they still have many hurdles to overcome, but they have also utilized many alternative spaces, opportunities and strategies to take up leadership in the church' (2013, 335). One of the strategies she discerns, 'especially among the AICs, is that of sharing power between genders. A number of the women church founders appoint men and husbands to the positions of bishops' (Dube 2013, 337).

One could argue whether 'this strategy represents the ideal. That is, the search for gender empowerment is, at the end of the day, really about the capacity to distribute and share power between women and men in our communities and all institutions' and whether these 'women AIC leaders, therefore, offer an excellent model of sharing power', as Dube describes it (2013, 337). Or whether 'the prominence of pastors' wives and the dominance of the dual-leadership model testifies to the continuing importance of conjugality and women's relative status to men', as Soothill puts it (2015, 213).

Regardless of the interpretation and judgement of the dual arrangement in church leadership, what is interesting to note is the tactical wording of 'method' and 'strategy' that both Mwaura and Dube employ in their assessments. This resonates with the fact that Most Rev. Okoh emphasised that Agnes Okoh was 'very wise' to give leading positions to women but not to push them too much in her church.¹⁹ Of course, it is clear that the range of tactical choice women have is small if they use dual leadership to respond to patriarchal hurdles that would otherwise not allow them to lead. In this context strategic action does not necessarily imply a deliberate and conscious choice. However, what both authors point out is that women find ways to navigate around these barriers they face in the church as well as in society. This is precisely what Nnaemeka describes in her concept of nego-feminism – 'the feminism of negotiation' (2004, 360).

Here, negotiation has the double meaning of 'give and take/exchange' and 'cope with successfully/go around'. African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. (Nnaemeka 2004, 378)

Nnaemeka does not explicitly refer to women in the religious field. However, the different cases suggest that negotiating around patriarchy is exactly what many female church founders were, and are, doing by leading together with a male co-leader, withdrawing from performing sacraments, and 'not pushing too much' while at the same time being recognised as powerful healers and prophetesses, introducing their

¹⁹ This attitude is not an attribute of the past. Mohamed Dawjee, a South African journalist, uses the same wording to qualify her mother's attitude in the volume *Feminism Is*: 'She chose to be a timid character while I was growing up, to maintain a degree of invisibility and reticence to challenge authority, in order to survive. This, in many ways was wise. Whether we choose to see it that way or not' (2018, 67). Similar to Nnaemeka, Mohamed Dawjee argues for a form of feminism that also acknowledges the more-silent struggle of women in their everyday life. 'My mother and other women like her might not be "free" radicals but they are definitely true radicals, working at the root of patriarchal control, day by day' (2018, 72).

own garments or rituals, empowering women, and denouncing harmful practices. Whether they felt that they had no other choice or they freely wanted to do so, we see that instead of claiming all leadership authority for themselves, many female founders accorded power and space to men. They thereby practiced negotiation in the double meaning of 'give and take/exchange' and 'cope with successfully/go around', as Nnaemeka explains it. Thus, many of them might not openly detonate 'patriarchal land mines', yet one can argue that they 'challenge through negotiation' in their day-by-day practice (Nnaemeka 2004, 378).²⁰

At the same time, it is noteworthy that this does not apply to all cases in the same way. While both Rev. Madibe and Rev. Abdulsalami explicitly pointed out how reluctant they were to follow their call and emphasised the divine choice over their own, they also underlined that they are the ones who got the call – not their husbands. In particular, the case of Rev. Abdulsalami shows that not all female church founders follow the scheme of nego-feminism in their practice of leadership.

Offering New Interpretations and Perspectives

In contrast to Christinah Nku, Agnes Okoh and other church founders, Rev. Abdulsalami did not try to negotiate around patriarchy but openly rejects the idea of appointing a male co-leader or minimising her leadership position, and refers to her spiritual independence and personal spiritual experience to legitimate her decision. Here she not only finds an alternative way around doctrinal norms by assuming leadership based on her call, but directly uses her doctrinal independence to provide a new perspective on them. Besides her personal understanding of the call and how it affects her self-understanding as a church leader, one might also consider the fact that the 'culture of the time' that Most Rev. Okoh referred to might be different in her case compared to earlier church founders. At the same time, this aspect makes it even more important to note that, as we have seen, already during the early twentieth century female church founders challenged traditional customs both through their living example and by explicitly denouncing them.

Conclusion

In her chapter on new religious movements that examines early and contemporary African Initiated Churches, Hackett summarises that 'the ultimate act of religious independency or self-determination is the founding of religious movement by women themselves' (1995, 262). This is not to say that female founders did not face resistance within and outside their religious community. However, as we have seen, their spiritual experience legitimated their gifts and charismatic authority as healers, prophetesses, and, most importantly, as church founders, and enabled them to challenge, transform, and reinterpret social and doctrinal norms. At the same time, especially in cases from the early twentieth century, female

²⁰ One especially interesting practice example was given by a female interviewee who leads the women's group in a church in Ghana. She explained how women should deal with the teaching that the man is the head in marriage by guiding their husband to a decision through a way of dialoguing rather than through imposition:

So if you think it's, you want to table out issues or you want your husband to take something that you think is good from you, if he's not trying to, there's a way to do it. For instance, you bring the issue and then you may ask, oh so sweet, 'What do you think about this, do you think it's okay we can do that?' Then the person says okay. Sometimes you let them, let the thing be as if they are bringing it on board, is not like you are imposing on them. When there's an imposition with our men, then it becomes an issue. But as much as possible you must find a way of dialoguing and then the person will come to accept. [...] The church makes us understand that, once this is the culture, how can we manage the culture, so that we can live amicably. That is the training that we do, that's the training (Interview Ghana, 16 September 2017).

founders often gave leadership to men, appointed male co-leaders or successors, and did not introduce women's ordination. One could argue that in these cases the founders did not emancipate themselves from their ascribed gender roles according to which women cannot lead or at least not lead alone. However, following the perspective of nego-feminism, these acts can be interpreted as ways to navigate and negotiate around patriarchy. Notwithstanding the question whether or not early church founders *chose* not to fully use the authority they gained through the call, the discussion shows how female church founders challenged traditional customs within and outside the church through their living example and through reinterpreting and openly denouncing them. Since women in many cases remain in marginalised positions both outside of and within many churches, these cases can be seen as remarkable examples of the emancipating power of the call. Referring back to Brown's statement at the beginning of this paper, one could say that in some cases women used their spiritual experiences and the authority they gained from them more to *subvert* traditional gender roles than to openly *transgress* and *transform* them, as other founders have done. Yet the liberating and thereby emancipating power of the call is perceptible throughout. Further research is needed in order to examine if and how more contemporary church founders will be able to establish and maintain hierarchies and succession patterns that are inclusive to women in their own churches in the future.

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