

# Prophetism in African Christianity: A Phenomenological Study of Prophet David Owuor

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**Abstract:** - This is a phenomenological study of one of the largest Neo-Prophetic Movements in Kenya. This movement known as Repentance and Holiness Ministry led by renowned Prophet Dr. David Edward Owuor, which has captured the public imagination and attention in Kenya. The paper examines the stages in the phenomenological method of inquiry as espoused by James Cox, before describing and explaining the phenomenon of prophecy as propagated by prophet Owuor and his movement.

**Key words:** Prophecy, Phenomenology, Miracle, Forth-telling.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Prophecy as a paradigm for ministry has gained popularity in African Christianity, and is upheld by Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches. No wonder today, prophets seem to be springing up from within various Christian persuasions either publicly or secretly, almost on a daily basis and everywhere. These prophets appear in all manner and characteristics, and sometimes their claims border on the absurd to the out rightly ridiculous. Writing for a Zimbabwean context, Hameno<sup>i</sup> says:

The prophetic activities that are reported range from the bizarre to the outrageous and sometimes immoral or even criminal. Bizarre claims of being able to make a person pregnant and deliver a baby in three days (“Harare Woman: I had a Miracle Baby,” 2013) or being able to produce miracle money which appears from nowhere and is found in one’s pocket or bank account (Nyoni, 2013) are the order of the day.

Other than the many claims they have been able to make, bizarre incidents have been reported around some of the renowned prophets in Africa. For example in Kenya, there were media reports at the beginning of this year of six people who had attended Prophet David Owuor’s crusade, ostensibly to receive miraculous cures from various ailments, only to end up dying of natural causes<sup>ii</sup>. In Nigeria, people from South Africa who were attending Prophet T. b. Joshua’s Synagogue Church Of All Nations (SCOAN) died when a building they were house in collapsed, killing seventy people.

This study utilized James Cox’s<sup>iii</sup> steps in the phenomenological method. Cox outlines a step by step process or method in applying the phenomenological method to the study of religion, based on the writings of leading phenomenologist of religion. He explains that the idea of this

methodology was introduced by Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, in his book translated to English in 1938 under the title *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. Cox expands Van Der Leeuw’s 5 stages in the phenomenological method to 9 stages; sequencing then to follows a logical progression. This paper will confine itself to only two stages. These are stage two; fostering empathetic interpolation, and step 5; naming the phenomena. These stages will be described at the outset, before proceeding to the phenomena itself.

## II. STAGES IN THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

### 2.1 Empathetic Interpolation

This process entails two things; empathy and interpolation. Empathy refers to a process of cultivating a feeling for the practices and beliefs of a religion other than one’s own, or a religion that does not originate in one’s culture or historical period. Interpolation means to insert what is apprehended from another religion or culture which might appear strange or unusual into one’s own experience by translating that which is apprehended into terms that one can understand.

This two tier process is what Husserl would call “inter subjectivity,” that is, the phenomenologist getting inside the mind of the other based on one’s own subjective experience. The “getting inside the mind” of the other is assumes possible due to the fact that the human cognitive processes operate according to shared patterns despite cultural variations. However, the getting inside the other is not easy due to barriers in the form of cultural differences, linguistic differences as well as unexplained symbols. This step of empathetic interpolation aims to turn the unfamiliar to the familiar by translating it into the researchers own frame of reference.

The limitations to this step is the fact that the researcher will only cultivate a “fueling for “the religious experience of the believer but can never experience precisely what the believer experiences, that is, this techniques only approximates of one’s own life and culture and this is subject to interpretation.

### 2.2 Naming the Phenomena

In this step, categories are created or named, and these categories, similar types of phenomena described in the previous steps are inserted. This is done in order to get the structure of that particular religion. These created categories or names must of necessity, not be offensive to the believers.

The categories could include doctrines, ethics, myths, rituals, experiences, institutions, religious practitioners, scripture, art, morality and beliefs. These categories can further be sub-categorized if and where necessary.

These categories need and should be compared to similar phenomena in different religious traditions even if they are historically unrelated. The phenomenologist should and must ensure that the names or classifications assigned to religious data must be related to specific traditions which operate within definitive cultures and which possess unique histories.

One unavoidable limitation however is the fact that it is impossible to create classifications without having formed some prior assumptions about their content based on knowledge already obtained. Therefore the phenomenologist must be cautious not to apply or create classifications based on his or her own cultural or religious background as opposed to the ones emanating from the phenomena under study.

### III. REASONS FOR THE RISE IN PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

There are several reasons as to why prophetic movements have increased in recent times. One of these reasons is the African worldview. The African worldview is replete with religious practitioners whose presence and significance still exists in contemporary African Societies. These African religious specialists still feature prominently in day today lives of the people.

For example medicine men and women have been licensed by some African government, like Kenya to operate herbal clinics where they diagnose and offer treatment for different diseases. The diviner's role is still relevant today especially in establishing the causes of illness, barrenness or any misfortune, they serve as fortune tellers in getting employment or passing examination, they also exorcise evil spirits. In major Kenyan towns and cities, one is likely to find posters and other forms of advertisement where traditional 'doctors' and diviners advertise their trade.

Prophets, seers, fore-tellers and exist simply because of humanities inherent interest in knowing the future, or at least, attempting to predict the events of the future. Whether this is due to fear of the unknown, in this case the future, or some other reason is subject to debate. However, human beings, since time immemorial have always attempted to foretell the future, either through reading of the stars and other heavenly bodies, or through religious means like prophecy. This desire in people to fore-tell the future has certainly not waned.

The other reason as to the rise in prophetic movements is the fact that Africa as continent faces many challenges. The contemporary context of Africa is that of a continent with a bleak future. Africa is ripe with poor governance, ethnic cleansing and genocide, pandemic diseases like HIV/AIDS and Ebola, economic meltdown creating endemic poverty, natural calamities like floods and drought, civil wars, terrorism among other issues. This has led to many people in

Africa facing desperate times and desperate times call for desperate measures. Therefore, people are interested in a way out of their dire situations and a hope that the future will not be as bad as the now.

Enter the prophets to fill this void. Many of the prophets who have emerged in contemporary Africa have appeared with all manner of claims as being able to cure diseases such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, Ebola among others, while at the same time prophesying to both individuals and the World in general. For example, the website of Repentance and Holiness Ministry of Prophet David Owuor has a link to a YouTube channel, where fulfilled prophecies, as well as the miracles; including healing and other phenomena, are broadcast. These prophecies and the ensuing events include earthquakes, floods, and accidents among others. These prophecies are presented as a warning to ensure that those who heed the message are kept safe.

### IV. THE PHENOMENON OF PROPHECY

Prophecy should be seen as a dialogue between an inspired individual (the prophet) and receptive people, and not a dialogue between the prophet and his or her divine source <sup>iv</sup>. Tumminia and Swatos go on to argue that the prophets, in uttering the word of the Lord, they are usually offering solutions to existing issues, or at very least, the issues that followers have been experiencing. In other words, prophets cultivate a climate, a prophetic milieu, where their predictions are not only encouraged, but also eagerly received by their followers <sup>v</sup>.

Amanze's <sup>vi</sup> research shows that modern features of prophecy, are akin to the prophetic traditions of the 9th century BC prophets in ancient Israel as seen in the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha. The prophetic ministries of these prophets were characterized by narratives of popular miracle stories. These narratives bring together real acts of power performed by both Elijah and Elisha. The narratives of these prophets show two aspects of their activities. In the first instance, they show the effect they had on the daily lives of people both within the circle of their prophetic guilds and the ordinary people with whom they came into contact. On the other hand they extend their horizon to include the authoritative figures of the political world of their time outside of Israel <sup>vii</sup>.

It should be noted that in popular prophetic tradition of the 9th century BC prophets such as Elisha and Elijah, there was a certain connection between prophecy and miracles. For example, both Elijah and Elisha displayed, to a certain extent, some miraculous powers in their prophetic ministry. Incidents such as reviving a dead soul by a ritual action (1 Kings 17:17-24); bringing down rain by supernatural powers (1 Kings 18:41-46); increasing little flour and cooking oil several times (2 Kings 4:1-7); helping a childless woman to bear a son (In 2 Kings 4:8-37); the recovery of someone's axe-blade which fell into the water (2 Kings 6:1-7) and the healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-14).

In regards to the above discussion, the prophetic phenomenon is characterized by several things including performing miracles, fore-telling, forth-telling, and having a level of authority, or control if you may, over political leaders. These characteristics are exhibited by many a modern day prophet like David Owuor of Kenya, T. B. Joshua of Nigeria among others.

## V. THE PROPHETIC PHENOMENON OF PROPHET DAVID OWUOR

Prophet David Owuor has been able portray himself an enigmatic figure and even cultivate cultic following. He is well guarded by armed police, and even uses chase cars wherever he goes. He is always dressed in a suit with a long coat, in most cases white in color, and sports a long beard which he says God ordered him not to shave until all of God's judgments on Kenya have come true. He is credited with prophesying numerous events, many of which are claimed to have come to pass. His followers too dress in a similar manner to him, with the women having long skirts and long coats that go way below the knee. The women also spot short hair. He is able to gather large crowds in his crusades and meetings, including members of the political elite, both in Kenya and beyond.

It is argued he demands absolute loyalty from his followers as he is the only person who speaks to God, that is all other pastors and prophets are therefore false<sup>viii</sup>. His followers are sometimes overzealous in showing their loyalty, for example, washing the streets of a town with detergent before he arrives, or kneeling down in front of him (see appendix 1). They would refer to him by the title: The Mightiest Prophet of the Lord.

### 5.1 Miracles

So many stories abound of the miracles performed by prophet Owuor. Healing testimonies dominates Prophet Owuor's meetings, which are sometimes broadcast live on television. There are numerous TV footage and YouTube videos showing disabled people surrendering wheelchairs and crutches, and the sick testifying that they had been healed through miracles performed by Prophet Owuor. Some of the people who testify say they had been cured of terminal diseases including HIV and Aids, and cancer, while others declared victory over physical disability, deafness, blindness and dumbness.

A blogpost<sup>ix</sup> gives the testimony of a young girl by the name of Shalin who was allegedly healed of leprosy. The blog claims that Shalin was taken to a three-day Christian revival meeting held in Kenya's Kakamega County from 31st August to 2nd September 2012, in a pitiful state. She was suffering from leprosy and could neither stand nor walk. Her skin was full of wounds and sores, and a stench came from her. When the servant of God, Prophet David Owuor walked into the stadium and declared that every sick person be healed in the name of Jesus Christ, Shalin was instantly healed. Her wounds dried up and she stood up, much to the amazement

and joy of those in attendance. Two weeks later, the evidence of her healing was astounding. Large chunks of her old diseased skin had already fallen off, and she was forming a new healthy skin. The blog is complete with photos of the young girl of before and after she was healed miraculously.

Prophet Owuor emphasizes healing because Jesus's earthly ministry cantered on curing people's illness and disease. See, for example, the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26) and the paralytic at Capernaum (Matthew 9:1- 8; Luke 5:18-26). Moreover, Jesus systematically cured ailments of various kinds, including demon-possession, fever, leprosy, epilepsy, physical disorders, and even injury (Luke 22:50, 51). Jesus also had the power to deal with serious psychiatric disorders; for example, he healed a madman who lived in the cemetery (Mark 5:15). He also had the power to raise the dead (John 11:44). As a result, prophet Owuor firmly believes that AIDS included, can be cured in the Church in the name of Christ.

### 5.2 Fore-Telling and Forth Telling

There cannot be a prophet, who in his or her element, lacks the ability or capability to fore tell future events. Indeed, the very word prophecy comes from the Greek verb, προφημι (*prophemi*), which means "to say beforehand, foretell." The element of being able to foretell the future has been a characteristic of prophets in all religions including African Traditional Religions. Prophets in the Christian milieu use it to authenticate their statuses as prophets as is indicated in Deuteronomy 18:22.

In the Old testament, prophecy often consisted of a conditioned warning by God of the consequences should the society, specific communities, or their leaders not adhere to Torah's instructions in the time contemporary with the prophet's life. Prophecies sometimes included conditioned promises of blessing for obeying God, and returning to behaviors and laws as written in the Torah, or calamities befalling those who chose to disobey God. People were warned to change their lives in accordance with the prophets' teachings or else God would punish them for disobeying him. Such punishments were meted in the form of natural calamities, wars, death among other things. This brings together the elements of fore-telling and forth telling in many prophetic ministries.

One of the key elements of Prophet David Owuor's ministry is his ability to 'accurately' predict the future. He frequently uses prophecy in the manner in which the 9th century BC prophets, Elijah and Elisha did in ancient Israel. It is always asserted that his prophecies are revealed to him by God and that whatever he predicts always comes to pass. This has made Owuor one of the most popular 'prophets' in Africa – something that attracts many people to his meetings today. The internet is full of prophecies, which, it is claimed, were uttered by Owuor and which, apparently, have been 'fulfilled'.

It is claimed that when Owuor prophesied about earthquakes in China, Chile, US's Mexico and California, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, Tanzania, Kenya's Nairobi among others, they were fulfilled. When he warned that floods would hit Australia, Malta, Kenya, etc, it happened. In all the revelations, God provides a way: "Repent from your iniquities for the mitigation of the impending effects of the wrath of Jehovah!"

## VI. CONCLUSION

What has made Prophet Owuor and his movement so successful and popular is his ability to pick up certain elements in Hebrew prophecy which have strong appeal to the African psyche and are able to fulfill the spiritual, social, economic and political needs of the people of Africa today. Prophet Owuor and his ministry seem to know what makes the African people tick. He is able to provide African answers to African problems. Such answers may require the use of magic-like supernatural powers as those that were exercised by the 9th century BC prophets in ancient Israel to the great delight of the people for whom they were called to serve.

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## ENDNOTES

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