

Article

“Back to Sender”: Re-Visiting the Belief in Witchcraft in Post-Colonial Zimbabwean Pentecostalism

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Abstract: This paper is a critical analysis of the witchcraft beliefs in Pentecostalism in post-colonial Zimbabwe. While Pentecostals claim “a complete break from the past”, there have emerged new dimensions that show that the belief in witches and witchcraft is deeply entrenched among Pentecostals. It also brings to the fore the underlying aspects of the creativity and innovation that are informed by African spiritual or metaphysical realities. Research since 1980 (when Zimbabwe got her independence from the British) indeed confirmed the existence of witchcraft beliefs and practices, although it was heavily suppressed in the churches. This paper re-visits the belief in witchcraft activities in Pentecostalism through examining new avenues of expression in both older and newer Pentecostal churches. The newer Pentecostal churches, in particular, those founded after 2010, have demonstrated unique innovation in theology. Thus, the belief in witchcraft and witches warrants a fresh examination in light of these new developments. We, therefore argue that the emergence of diverse newer Pentecostal churches in the midst of strong older Pentecostal churches has opened new ways of negotiating the Bible and Shona culture.

Keywords: “back to sender”; witchcraft; post-colonial; Zimbabwean; Pentecostalism



Citation: Biri, Kudzai, and Molly Manyonganise. 2022. “Back to Sender”: Re-Visiting the Belief in Witchcraft in Post-Colonial Zimbabwean Pentecostalism.

Religions 13: 49. <https://doi.org/10.3390/re113010049>

Academic Editors: Chamamah Judex Kaunda and Tinyiko Sam Maluleke

Received: 16 December 2021

Accepted: 30 December 2021

Published: 5 January 2022

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1. Introduction

The earlier Western writers have narratives of witchcraft on the African continent. However, the publications have received widespread criticism on the basis of hegemonic tendencies that were fuelled by negative attitudes towards the African continent and the Africans. [Gbule and Odili \(2015, p. 99\)](#) argue that western scholarship on Africa presents a distorted and disoriented view of the reality of witchcraft due to their prejudice and bias regarding African cultural and religious practices. Such prejudice and bias has led some Western scholars to reject the existence of witchcraft. For example, Evans [Pritchard \(1937\)](#) dismissed the existence of witchcraft. He argued that such belief should be premised on Africa’s scientific backwardness which results in Africans attributing all misfortune to witchcraft. For him, witchcraft becomes a readily available scapegoat for those things that African cannot explain as causing their suffering. Many other scholars from the West held the same view. [Parrinder \(1981, p. 134\)](#) postulated that Western education, civilization and hospitals would make the belief in witchcraft fall away. Father Tempels’ book, *Bantu Philosophy* ([Tempels 1945](#)), however, is credited as a watershed that marked the beginning of a fair presentation of the African people and their belief systems. David Maxwell has paid a great deal of attention to witchcraft beliefs in Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe ([Maxwell 1995, 1998, 2006](#)), specifically focusing on the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God

Africa (ZAOGA). The dominating understanding is that the belief was always suppressed, as Pentecostals try to discard indigenous belief systems and live a new life that matches their perceived spiritual calling. This is better put forward by Birgit Meyer (1998) as an attempt to make a complete break from the past. However, this paper takes cognizance of new developments in Pentecostalism, ushered by the newer Pentecostal churches that continue to mushroom and grow. The emergence of new charismatic figures has ushered Zimbabwe into a new era of fresh ways of interpreting biblical verses in a way that is to a certain extent informed by indigenous traditions. It also offers new insights into how we can evaluate African Pentecostalism in terms of style, orientation and significance as a pace-setter in the development and growth of African Christianity. In dealing with the 'back to sender' approach, we utilized both sociological and theological perspectives. We should hasten to say that the title of this article was derived from a Zimbabwean gospel singer Sabastian Magacha's song "Back to Sender". The release of the song excited Pentecostal Christians in Zimbabwe to the extent that we are convinced that their approach to it warrants scholarly attention.

Music has dwelt much on celebrating the new life in Christ, but there has been a lack of adequate attention on how music by Pentecostal Christians rejects claims of a complete break from the past and how the emergence of newer Pentecostal churches/ministries has regenerated indigenous beliefs and practices. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that the music is a re-invention of the indigenous beliefs, albeit in new forms derived from biblical interpretation. The significance of this paper lies in its propositions on how the "back to sender" approach has multiple implications that infringe upon and impact certain social, political and economic developments. The "back to sender" approach should not be viewed and confined within boundaries of Pentecostalist discourses, but needs to be located within the broader spectrum of ways of negotiating indigenous spiritualities within the matrix of modern post-colonial political and economic developments. The power of Pentecostalism in pervading the political arena in Zimbabwe has not received adequate attention. This is despite the crises that have dogged Zimbabwe since the year 2000 as a result of political struggles. It is the contention of this paper that the belief in witches and witchcraft has political consequences that have negatively impacted the ethos of responsibility and accountability in both religious and political leaders.

The two researchers belong to different Pentecostal churches. Through participant observation in their own churches and through many years of research on Pentecostalism, they have gathered information on the new dynamics of witchcraft beliefs that have become dominant, not only in Pentecostalism but also in the political sphere. Information was gathered from discussions and Bible studies in different Pentecostal churches, from sermons and from popular music. There is an attempt to draw information from both older Pentecostal churches, including the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM) and the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa, (ZAOGA), as well as newer Pentecostal movements such as the United Family International Church (UFIC) and the Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PHD) church. The selection and enumeration of the churches is based on their popularity and influence, the availability of relevant material on witches and witchcraft, and an attempt to focus on the few and avoid generalisations. Available literature on both African indigenous religion and Pentecostalism was utilised. Scholarship focusing on African beliefs and practices has noted the resilience of the witchcraft belief among Africans. The belief has been perceived as outdoing Western influences of modernity and social change (Ally 2015, p. 25; Gbule and Odili 2015, p. 99). Van Wyk (2004) postulates that healing in African Traditional Religions has always struggled with the belief in witchcraft. On the other hand, Ally (2015) examines the violence that is associated with witchcraft accusations when alleged witches are punished for their "evil" misdeeds. She notes that the fear of being bewitched leads communities to mobilise in a bid to protect themselves at times through violence such as killings, banishment, and burning the witch, among other punishments. It is, however, important to note that witchcraft accusations are not always met with violence, since some communities and individuals may resort to appealing to

the supernatural realm for protection and to the use of medicines prescribed by African traditional healers. From Ally's analysis, a traditional healer may be consulted in certain instances so that he/she can counter the effects of witchcraft by sending the affliction back to those suspected for the misfortune being experienced. This analysis is important as it locates the "back to sender" approach within the broader sphere of what defines the African religious worldview, the fact belief evil powers arising from witchcraft can be manipulated to cause harm to the very person who intended harm on others. The section below gives a glimpse into the beliefs in witches and witchcraft activities among the Shona people (the dominant linguistic group in Zimbabwe). Certain Shona terms are translated into English. We are aware that some translations may not be very accurate and the intended meaning may be lost through translation. However, care is taken so that translations made do not deviate far from the original meaning.

2. Witchcraft Beliefs among the Shona

Gordon Chavunduka has studied witchcraft among the Shona people extensively. The Shona people constitute the largest tribal group in Zimbabwe and they comprise a number of divergent ethnic groups such as the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Budya, and Korekore, among others. Chavunduka (2004) points out that witchcraft is one of the most disdained practices among the Shona: the children of witches are mocked and have a difficult time finding a marriage partner. Witchcraft is perceived as one of the major causes of retrogression in every aspect of life. The religious practitioners (n'anga) were, therefore, at the centre of rituals that not only protect individuals, families and communities from evil but also get revenge by sending back the ills intended for the victims by witches. Revenge is perceived as the best way to teach the witches lessons by enabling them to taste their own medicine, and it is also seen as a defence mechanism by the intended victims. Some of the ills that are believed to be caused by witches include; loss of wealth, deaths, sickness, barrenness, bad luck and failure to get a marriage partner. Singlehood and celibacy are not celebrated in most African indigenous cultures because of perceived evil spiritual causation that prevents the most cherished institution of marriage and, subsequently, procreation.

If a family becomes vulnerable to attacks, rituals are carried out and incantations are made to the ancestral spirits. They confront the ancestral spirits, demanding protection (kutuka midzimu) (Gombe 1986). The traditional healer (n'anga) mediates in rituals for protecting the individuals and the home (musha) (kudzivirira musha). In some cases, they perform rituals to trap the witches (kuteya varoyi) in order to humiliate them and discourage them from the evil acts. The rituals vary according to families and places because the Shona are not a completely monolithic group, in spite of the commonalities that run through their beliefs and practices. It is important to point out that issues of singlehood and celibacy as important in Pentecostal theology, sermons and deliverance rituals due to the strong belief that bad spells could have been cast on the victim. This extends to marriage breakdown, infidelity in marriage, and anything that causes marital instability. These beliefs inform the popularity of deliverance sermons, sessions and artefacts such as bangles, posters, anointing oil, and seeding into the life of the man of God in order to get protection, deliverance and progress in life. This quest for deliverance, protection and progression is captured aptly in songs and it suffices to give attention to Pentecostal music as an expression of how this indigenous belief has captured the imagination of many.

3. Music

The role of Pentecostal music in affirming Shona indigenous belief systems has not received adequate attention. Pentecostal music affirms indigenous beliefs in witches and witchcraft in relation to ZAOGA. Music has become a significant aspect to interrogate the role of beliefs in witchcraft and how it shapes current Pentecostal theology and praxis. As noted by Sebastian Bakare (1997), music is a way of communicating in Africa as it captures their worldview. We adhere to a selective reference to three popular songs and bring out the dominant themes in the songs that relates to the belief in witches and witchcraft. The

song by Matthias Mhere, a pastor in AFM, brings out the belief and mindset of Pentecostals in relation to their worldview. The song “Idya Tafura” (Eat from the table) reveals strong beliefs in witchcraft, tensions and contentions in families. What is important in the song is that the believers have to show off their progress and victory in Jesus because, in spite of spells cast on them and the evil incantations to make women barren and poor, all have failed because of God’s love and protection. Charles Charamba of Rooted in Christ Ministries (RIM)’s song “Mombe ndedzemukaka” (cows are for dairy milk) chronicles traditional practices of witchcraft, and urges followers to completely discard practices including casting spells on others or on crossroads, using artefacts and animals to deter their progress. He also urges people to surrender their lives to Jesus, whose blood is better than witchcraft rituals. The fact that Charamba is a founder of his ministry shows that Pentecostal leaders strongly embrace, mediate on belief, preach and evangelise through song. They are aware of the rituals that are believed to have been performed by witches to deter progress and harm others. Sabastian Magacha’s “Back to Sender” song is derived from a sermon of the UFIC leader Emmanuel Makandiwa. As alluded to earlier, we derived the title from the song that captures the emerging popular views within the Pentecostal fraternity that revenge on witches is not a sin. The point of convergence of these three songs is that they acknowledge and denounce the existence of witches and witchcraft activities. Although they spell out acts of witchcraft, they are evangelistic in nature because they call people to repent and follow Jesus. However, they also seem to be confrontational because they rebuke and challenge witches by claiming the power of God over all witchcraft activities. The songs communicate the popular beliefs in society and are built on prevailing sermons and prayers that advocate the “back to sender” approach in dealing with enemies.

4. Sermons and Prayers

Teachings and sermons on witches and witchcraft are contradictory and have the capacity to confuse some believers. For example, Ezekiel Guti of ZAOGA teaches that he does not want people to accuse others of being witches. Instead, people should pray for the witches to abandon their evil acts. However, this should not be read as disbelief in witches and witchcraft, and raises questions about deliverance. Many accused persons might not be members of the church and alluding to the deliverance of such people is futile. This explains why some church members defy their teachings and pray for witches because the witches consistently cast spells on them and they cannot continue to endure the attacks. Guti is the son of a traditional healer and comes from one of the areas with strong beliefs in witchcraft. His teachings, therefore, can be read as an attempt to bring order to one of the oldest and prosperous churches as a way to ease tensions that centre on witchcraft accusations in families. Many believers accuse their relatives or family members of bewitching them. Instead, Guti urges congregants to pray for the witches. Scriptures for intercession are cited, for example, Jesus’ command to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). There is no room for resentment and revenge in the scripture. Hence, Guti’s intention is geared towards prevention of revenge and further schisms in families or society. It is an attempt to manage a crisis of division and hatred in the church.

The developments in Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe are not complete without factoring in the role and influence of Nigeria as a centre of spiritual power received from traditional diviners by the majority of Pentecostal leaders who have turned themselves into the spiritual fathers of the younger generation who have founded the New Pentecostal Movements across Africa, Zimbabwe included. The spiritual fathers are like mentors to the young Pentecostal leaders. Most of young Pentecostal leaders like Emmanuel Makandiwa of the United Family International Church (UFIC), Uerbert Angel of Spirit Embassy and Magaya have spiritual fathers in Ghana, Kusi Boateng and Nigeria, such as the late TB Joshua for Magaya. The quest for power, authority and the performance of miracles has driven quite a number of young Zimbabweans to visit Nigeria, allegedly to seek powers. While they visit spiritual fathers (popular Pentecostal leaders), those same leaders

are controversial leaders who are accused of initiating individual rituals for powers and protection using indigenous methods. They are believed to have power by indigenous spiritists. Testimonies and claims of such are viral on. It is believed that they source spiritual powers for nourishment and to combat witchcraft, heal and perform miracles. The testimony of Apostle Ggabenga from Nigeria in 2009 at the Celebration Church of Tom and Bonnie Deitschle is one example. He said; "I killed a witch who was giving me trouble. I prayed and judged him and he died". Such claims are controversial and raise questions of forgiveness, judgement and revenge. The significance of these and similar claims is complex. First, such claims suggest Nigeria is a hub of witches and witchcraft activities. Second, they also imagine men of God as powerful enough to easily deal with witches and witchcraft. Third, they market Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria as powerful individuals who have the power and solutions to confront witches and witchcraft. No wonder young pastors flock to Nigeria from all over the world. However, Guti has consistently discouraged his ZAOGA pastors to go to Nigeria. Guti's resistance to his ZAOGA pastors going to Nigeria seems to be an act of doubt and suspicion because of what is believed to take place in Nigeria.

One of the researchers is a member of ZAOGA and she did research on belief in witches and witchcraft and the rituals undertaken. In one of the pastors' meetings, Guti said:

I don't want any of my pastors to go to Nigeria, what is there in Nigeria which you do not have here? You have the word of God and the Holy Spirit. What are you looking for in Nigeria? (Taken from a sermon by Ezekiel Guti on 5 November 2011)

One of the pastors, whom the researcher spoke to, vowed to disregard the command. He claimed that he wanted to be anointed by TB Joshua for powers. This is a glimpse of the different underlying ideologies and approaches to ministry in Pentecostalism. While Guti is respected as the title maniac in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, he could not restrain his young crop of self-styled and acclaimed young pastors, apostles and prophets from flocking to Nigeria or engaging with popular West African Pentecostal leaders.

5. The Nexus of Religion and the Economy

Pentecostal churches intensified deliverance sessions during the crisis years, that is, from the year 2000 to the present. The focus on wealth and prosperity amidst a declining socio-economic reality requires attention. [Togarasei \(2011\)](#) aptly describes the focus on the prosperity gospel within the context of poverty in Africa. The resurgence of the prosperity gospel in recent years, marked by intense warfare prayers, songs and sermons against witches and witchcraft, gives us a glimpse of the nexus of poverty, religiosity and economic patterns in this nation (see [Attanasi and Yong 2012](#); [Bowler 2018](#); [Manyonganise 2018](#); [Compston 2019](#); [Bartelink 2020](#); [Lin 2020](#)). The grilling and intense poverty that has gripped Zimbabwe from 2010 to date seem to have intensified warfare prayers against evil spirits of retrogression. These prayers, sermons and songs defy the lived economic reality, including the corruption of political leaders and the closure of industries, that have grounded the economy of Zimbabwe. Hence, believers hold on to traditional introspection in response to the crisis to spiritually diagnose it. It is common knowledge that when a nation's economy crumbles, individuals cannot progress. Yet Pentecostals insist on the presence of demons and the need for deliverance for progression. [Gbule and Odili \(2015, p. 99\)](#) note that African Instituted Churches (AICs), the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal Churches and the Charismatics organise prayer revivals and deliverance meetings to counter the effect of witches and occult power. The reason being that members blame witches and witchcraft activities for their misfortunes. Witches are viewed as human agents of the devil, but at times are referred to as demons or the devil himself. While witches are human beings, the divide between the devil and witches is often fluid or overlooked because evil acts are read as devilish. Therefore, there seems to be no difference between the two, and it is common to hear witches referred to as devils. When "back to sender"

prayers are said, believers overlook the effect of the human sender (witch) but act as if they are returning the evil to the devil.

The popularity of the “back to sender” belief has produced critics who are vehemently against it. Those against “back to sender” insist on forgiving and praying for enemies, as they have a different interpretation of how to relate with perceived enemies. The centre of their contention on the interpretation of scripture is that no human being is an enemy even if he/she does evil. The devil is behind all evil, and therefore, “back to sender” prayers are a form of revenge, which is forbidden by Jesus, in disguise. The majority are attracted to “back to sender”. For example, most politicians are either members of Pentecostal churches or relate with Pentecostal leaders. There are cases of witchcraft claims in both politics and Pentecostalism because of the power struggles and suspicion that characterise the daily struggles throughout the nation. The former first lady, Grace Mugabe, openly castigated the Vice President Joyce Mujuru for visiting witch doctors to bewitch the first family in March 2015, and later Joyce Mujuru was expelled from her post. At the highest levels of authority, not only the fear of witches but also accusations and counter accusations of witchcraft activities are prevalent. The “back to sender” theology is received with much appreciation because many are bound by indigenous witchcraft beliefs. This also raises the question of development and progress, not only in individual lives but at national level. The call for prayers for economic recovery is informed by a worldview that places evil spiritual forces at the centre of the citizenry’s neglect of holding those in office responsible and accountable for their actions.

“back to sender” is, therefore, a form of escapism in individual lives and in the political space when people do not fulfil their duties or progress in life. It appears to be a psychological mechanism to protect the ego from the truth of failure to avoid the confirmation of a dwindling economy at national level, and also individual stagnation. The political and economic developments are conjoined to religious fervour to the extent that the religious impetus overshadows political ideology and economic development. This system creates breeding ground for the exploitation and abuse of national resources by political leaders because there lacks accountability for actions. In churches, men of God decree that members have to continue giving to shake away poverty. The excessive accumulation of leaders has to be understood within the matrix of the prosperity gospel. The effects of the prosperity gospel in stripping congregants of the little they have are often overlooked by critics. Yet, this practice has contributed enormously to the poverty of some members. Obvious [Vengeyi \(2011\)](#) describes poverty in Zimbabwe as man-made because of the neglect of social justice, corruption and greed, seeing it as reminiscent of the era of Prophet Amos in the Old Testament. While Vengeyi focuses on the political set up and developments, religious leaders accumulate excessively from their congregants. The prosperity gospel appears to be a form of capitalism, exploiting congregants under the guise of prosperity while the man of God at the pedestal, decrees offerings and calls for deliverance sessions to wade off spirits of poverty, stagnation and other ills in life caused by evil spirits.

The dysfunctional role of Pentecostalism manifests in its approach towards the belief in witches and witchcraft. The theology and praxis create challenges for development through a contradictory model marked by inconsistencies. It creates a dilemma and inevitably impedes development as believers dwell too much on the role of spirits in controlling and shaping their lives. The challenge of poverty, exploitation and oppression are not confronted because of the “back to sender” approach, which centralises strategic prayers of warfare. This becomes an excuse for inaction, enmeshing the masses in poverty. Vulnerability and poverty create strong myths of demonic activity. We do not overlook the contributions made by some Pentecostal churches, which include building hospitals, colleges and universities, and donations to the poor. However, the proceeds from church investments rarely benefit ordinary members of the church. The underlying measure of the success of Pentecostalism should be in how far it has empowered congregants in their socio-economic orientation. Most of the projects benefit leaders and not the majority.

The eradication of poverty through deliverance from demonic powers and the rhetoric of spiritual warfare (Adogame 2004) does not make much sense where the economy is grounded, lacking new economic formulations that will introduce the people to the market economy and innovative industries. The contradictory posture of Pentecostal churches is that on one hand, they are purveyors of economic growth, while on the other hand, some churches dwell too much on spirituality to the detriment of sound economic planning, hard work, and investments. As suggested by PLO Lumumba of Kenya, “African problems that require technology will not be solved by theology”.

6. Witchcraft, Prosperity and Progress

Ridj van Dijk (1995), utilising the Malawian example applicable to Zimbabwe, mentions how young men evade traditional obligations through claims of witchcraft and by running away from families. This enables upward social movement as they can accumulate wealth without sharing it with their extended family, inevitably creating social structures that challenge the traditional family set up. Malawi seems to be a good study of exploring the nexus of poverty, religiosity and witchcraft claims. A nation that has a stagnant economy and a high rate of poverty is immersed in beliefs in poverty and witchcraft. Only the elite benefit from the nation’s resources. The elite include both religious and political leaders. These few individuals accumulate wealth because the indigenous communal fabric of the society that provided checks and balances to those in power to regulate wealth accumulation and distribution was demonised and destroyed. The examples from Malawi, Nigeria/West Africa and Zimbabwe, different geographical areas on the African continent, show the generality and universality of the strong belief in witches and witchcraft held by many Africans.

We need not ignore that there are areas of resonance between African indigenous beliefs and the Bible. The Bible also alludes to witchcraft (Exodus 22:18, Lev 19:26, 31). However, as Kalu (2008) puts it, it is about how the “African map of the universe” is negotiated in Pentecostal beliefs and praxis that relate to witchcraft. The idea of rituals for revenge in songs, declarations and prayers, seems to be sourced from familiarity with indigenous rituals that send back evil to the sender. Hence, cultural socialisations and belief in witches and witchcraft open new ways of interpreting the Bible. We read this interpretation as a liberal method informed by cultural beliefs and oriented to deal with enemies effectively instead of surrendering and waiting upon God to execute judgement on enemies. This could be read in many ways. First, it shows the revitalisation of indigenous beliefs in the everyday life of Zimbabweans. The contemporary strength of these indigenous beliefs is testimony that the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1898 by the British colonial masters could not destroy them. The powerful resurgence of belief in witches and witchcraft in post-colonial Zimbabwe has opened avenues for neo-traditionalism. Jules-Rosette (1989) identifies four basic tendencies in new religious movements in Africa. These are: neo-traditionalism, or the myth of an ideal past and typically seeks to re-establish an authoritative religious tradition; revitalisation, which endeavours to introduce new concepts in order to regenerate older beliefs; explaining the sacred in both the old and new terms; syncretism, and spiritual technicalism. In newer Pentecostal churches, revitalisation and syncretism seek to outdo the older Pentecostal churches as they compete for members. The affirmation of indigenous beliefs and practices through music, sermons and prayers that wrestle with evil inevitably resuscitates indigenous beliefs. Hence, the emphasis on witches and witchcraft activities is central to the marketplace of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism because it is a calculated move of selling what appeals to the imagination of the people. This has greatly influenced and shaped the unique identity of African Christianity, has and it distinguishes it within the fraternity of global Pentecostalism.

One important question is whether or not “back to sender” is a deviation from the Biblical command of forgiveness. There is no universally acclaimed unanimity, because advocates of “back to sender” claim that God initiated the concept. Proverbs 26:27 says: “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it and one who rolls a stone, it will return upon him”

(NKJ). This passage is a justification of “back to sender” because God is perceived as God of justice who advocates reaping what you sow. The resilience of the belief in witches and witchcraft in different ways is a call to re-think African Christian theology. Locating Pentecostal theology within the matrix of African Christian theology raises the questions of the unresolved issues caused by the interaction of Christianity with African indigenous religions and cultures. Belief in witches, witchcraft, and the “back to sender” rituals to combat them and amplify one’s protection and prosperity continue despite the effects of Christianity, colonisation and the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1898. Critics of “back to sender” believe it does not conform to the demands of Christian ethos of forgiveness and not being vengeful. Hence, it is read as secularism: a transformation of a society from close identification with religious values toward non-religious values (Togarasei 2015, p. 58).

“back to sender” can be understood as a sign of frustration for lack of progress in life because of decades of economic meltdown. The ethos of forgiving and praying for one’s enemies seem to be overshadowed by a quest for revenge and a desire see the enemy fall immediately. Many cannot embrace the idea that bad politics and governance are the architects of the problems in Zimbabwe. Thus, witches are blamed for causing misery in people’s lives and this belief keeps the deliverance services functional. It could be argued that these are signs of poverty and psychological responses to the process of secularisation (Togarasei 2015). The quest for health and wealth and the discourse of the “back to sender” warfare prayers, songs and sermons make them a form of religious secularisation, where much concern is on the “proximate, this worldly and not ultimate, post mortem issues”. Apart from this, the issue of reading, understanding, interpretation and deployment of the Bible come to the fore.

7. “Back to Sender”: Interpretation and Deployment of Scriptures

One of the major controversies in Africa centres on the interpretation of the Bible verses and their deployment. The Bible is a living book in Zimbabwe. The lack of unanimity on the moral value of the “back to sender” approach unravels varied views and interpretations of biblical verses within Pentecostalism. From an economic perspective, we have pointed out that blaming witches and witchcraft is a form of escapism. Believers vent their frustrations on witches as causative agents of their misery and retrogression. This belief is crucial in measuring the level of empowerment and development within the community. It appears to be one way of avoiding responsibility and accountability by congregants, as they claim that miracles cause success. It negatively impacts not only social ties but also the economy. Young men and women affected by poverty attribute their success to the scriptures, but the economic environment does not provide opportunities for entrepreneurship and other gateways to success for many people, regardless of whether they are professionally trained. Yet, the decline of the economy has seen the mushrooming of churches and increase in church activities. The high rate of unemployment and the idleness of the youths equals unproductiveness and poverty. One would expect sermons to address the political ills, such as corruption, that have destroyed the economy. Instead, leaders insist on the spiritual diagnosis of the poverty as the acts of the devil and the consequences of witchcraft activities. Warfare prayers and songs mediate this strong belief. However, the belief in witches, witchcraft, and the “back to sender” approach seems to have disempowered believers more. Instead of confronting their lived socio-economic realities, they spend time wrestling with perceived spiritual forces.

8. Conclusions

Modernity, Western education and the forces of globalisation have failed to destroy indigenous spirituality among Pentecostals. The belief in witches and witchcraft activities has remained resilient. This has created avenues for widespread deliverance services in order to restore fortunes, progress in life and protect individuals. This is realised through the “back to sender” approach which has created controversy on how to interpret and deploy scripture. This led us to the idea of exploring the nexus between poverty, spirituality

and the interpretation of scriptures. However, the “back to sender” approach seems to have created contradictions and crippled the empowerment and economic well-being of the people, who do not take action and responsibility but feed on escapism. While approaches may vary with regards to the interpretation of the Bible, the “back to sender” theology not only remains a centre of controversy in biblical interpretation but it also has socio-economic implications. In this regard, we derive a number of conclusions from the way the “back to sender” approach has been utilized by Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches. First, we can conclude that new Pentecostal churches have used this approach in a way that removes the blame of economic collapse from the political establishment to place it instead on unseen enemies. The deployment of the approach does not point to specific enemies. Hence, when the “back to sender” prayers are made, no one really knows who is going to be affected. To a certain extent, this has prevented Zimbabweans from resorting to violent clashes with political authorities as the crises continue to deepen. Second, the belief in witchcraft and witches is not confined to those who are economically poor, but also to the highly educated and those who occupy the highest political offices in Zimbabwe. This is a clear indication that the belief is not only resilient, but also sustained through various strategies emanating from the fear of becoming a victim of witchcraft. Third, the “back to sender” approach reveals contradictions between the biblical themes of vengeance and forgiveness. Christian theology is brought to a crossroads, and must choose whether to emphasise the forgiveness of wrongdoers or their punishment, by making sure they drink their own medicine. The major question arising from such an approach is whether those taking revenge are not becoming witches themselves. Further research on this approach needs to establish its applicability within the broader spectrum of Christian communities beyond the rhetoric of sermons and songs. Conversations on this approach need to start as a way of understanding its usage by Christians in Zimbabwe, as well as its success rate.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.B. and M.M.; formal analysis, K.B.; investigation, M.M.; writing—original draft preparation, K.B.; supervision, M.M. and K.B., writing—review and editing, 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: Not applicable.

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

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