

The appropriateness of the title “Papa” used within Neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Zimbabwe: A practical theological reflection¹

Vincent Farirai Fenga

Practical Theology and Missiology Research Association
of Stellenbosch University (PRACTEMUS)
vinfen2004@yahoo.com

Abstract

The article challenges the strict boundaries between mentorship and discipleship, advocating for a more integrated theological perspective inspired by Jesus Christ, who seamlessly fulfilled both roles. It places the “Papa” figure within the wider framework of African Cosmologies, drawing connections between prophetic leadership and the traditional role of ancestors as mediators between the divine and humanity. Additionally, the article links this spiritual paternalism to political traditions in Africa, where leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Robert Mugabe derived their authority from spiritual sources and were regarded as national patriarchs. By referencing Charles Wanamaker’s Theology in *Jesus the Ancestor*, the study further investigates the theological foundations of “Papa” and its continuity with messianic figures in the African Initiated Churches (AIC) tradition, such as John Marange and Isaiah Shembe. Ultimately, the article argues that the title “Papa” signifies a theological and cultural convergence of African ancestral mediation, biblical spiritual fatherhood, and centralised prophetic authority, prompting important questions about legitimacy, power, and spiritual accountability in contemporary African Christianity.

Keywords

Papa; authority; mediation; narrative

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Introduction

Since the early days of the New Testament Church, titles such as apostle, pastor, prophet, and evangelist have been crucial in defining Christian identity, leadership, and authority, as highlighted in passages like Ephesians 4:11. Fast-forward to contemporary Zimbabwe. We see the neo-Pentecostal movement giving rise to a new and unique title: “Papa”. This title has gained considerable popularity among spiritual leaders and their followers. Its roots can be traced back to the Roman Catholic Church, where “Papa” signified spiritual fatherhood and supreme ecclesiastical authority. However, within African Pentecostal contexts, especially since the surge of prophetic ministries starting in 2009, the title has taken on a fresh and significant meaning. Notable figures like Emmanuel Makandiwa and Prophetess Ruth from the United Family International Church (UFIC), Walter Magaya of Prophet Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PHDM), Apostle Tawonga Vutabwashe from Heartfelt International Ministries, and Uebert Angel, along with Prophetess Beverley from Spirit Embassy, have all played a role in popularising and normalising the “Papa” title. It’s more than just a term of respect; it symbolises spiritual legitimacy, hierarchical authority, and divine mediation. This article examines the theological, historical, and cultural significance of the title “Papa” within Zimbabwe’s neo-Pentecostal Churches. It explores the title’s origins, connects it to African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African Independent Churches (AIC), and examines how it shapes the self-perception of both prophets and their congregations. By engaging critically with these aspects, the article offers a thoughtful reflection on how the “Papa” phenomenon relates to ideas of discipleship, mentorship, and spiritual authority in contemporary African Christianity.

Narrative inquiry in Practical Theology

This study is rooted in the principles of practical theology described by Woodward and Pattison. As a reflective and interdisciplinary field, practical theology focuses on interpreting actions, issues, and events that carry

human and spiritual significance in today's world.² It starts not with abstract theological ideas, but with the real-life experiences of people, their words, actions, and beliefs in actual religious settings. This approach explores the relationship between divine revelation and human response, emphasising pastoral relevance, cultural engagement, and contextual authenticity. In this framework, narrative inquiry serves as the primary methodological approach. It sees human experience as something to be celebrated and aims to understand how individuals and communities derive meaning from their spiritual lives through storytelling. In the context of Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism, narrative inquiry provides a valuable perspective for exploring how the title “Papa” is understood, enacted, and theologically interpreted. These stories become a form of theological data, reflecting lived faith, symbolising spiritual connections, and expressing doctrinal beliefs in ways that resonate with the culture.³ This study treats narratives not as fixed memories but as vibrant, socially constructed expressions of faith that influence religious identity and church authority.⁴

This article employs narrative inquiry to delve into how theological meaning is woven into everyday language, metaphors, and spiritual experiences. The stories shared by spiritual leaders and their congregants are viewed as deceptive narratives and theological texts revealing underlying doctrines, relational dynamics, and power structures. For instance, the narrative surrounding the use of the title “Papa” in the conversation between Apostle Tavonga Vutabwashe and Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa is analysed to uncover how authority is built, communicated, and reinforced within charismatic networks. These narratives are interpreted

2 Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. (2000) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p. 8.

3 Bleakley, A. (2005). Stories as data, data as stories: Making sense of narrative inquiry in clinical education. *Medical Education*, 39(5):534–540. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2005.02112.x>

4 Michelle, B. (2015). A narrative approach to qualitative inquiry. *Clinical Laboratory Science*, 28(3):190–196. [Online]. Available: <http://hwmainst.clsjournal.ascls.org/> [Accessed: January 15, 2024].

as living expressions of faith that shape the community's understanding of spirituality and leadership.

To gather richer insights, we employ a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation and document analysis. This included everything from social media posts and church materials to theological booklets and personal testimonies, all aimed at triangulating our findings and enhancing the narrative. We paid closer attention to the performative aspects of religious disclosure, how titles, gestures, and language work together to reinforce theological claims in tangible ways. This multifaceted approach helped us identify symbolic patterns, theological themes, and power dynamics that are woven into everyday expressions of faith. While there is no one-size-fits-all method for analysing narrative data, our study draws on established interpretive guidelines from narrative researchers, such as those outlined by Clandinin and Connelly.⁵ We also draw on theological insights from practical theologians Elaine Graham⁶ and Richard Osmer.⁷ These frameworks enable a flexible yet thorough examination of the stories within faith communities. Some key questions we considered were: What kind of theological world is created or acted out in this story? How does this narrative shape ideas about fatherhood, divine presence, or spiritual hierarchy? What ethical and ecclesial implications arise from this account?

Ultimately, this methodological approach enabled us to interpret the religious significance of the “Papa” phenomenon not just as a doctrinal or institutional label, but as a lived theological expression deeply rooted in a specific African ecclesial and cultural context. Narrative inquiry, therefore, serves as a means of theological discernment, where story and doctrine, culture and faith, experience and authority engage in a meaningful dialogue. It offers a glimpse into contemporary religious practices, serving

5 Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p 49.

6 Graham, E. (2000). *Transforming practice: Pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. London: Mowbray, p. 106.

7 Osmer, R.R. (2008). *Practical theology: An introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p.5.

as a theological mirror that reflects how African neo-Pentecostals perceive their relationship with God, their leaders, and their spiritual community.

Etymological and theological origins of “Papa”

The title “Papa” in Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostal Christianity has rich etymological and theological roots that trace back to the early centuries of Christian history. It comes from the Greek word πάππας (pappas), which is a warm and affectionate way to say “father”. This term transitioned into Latin as papa and eventually made its way into English as ‘Pope.’⁸ In the early Christian church, especially within the Eastern Church, it was often used to refer to bishops and respected elders.⁹ By the 3rd century, it was already being used for notable figures, such as Pope Heraclas of Alexandria, who served from 232 to 248.¹⁰ In the Western tradition, it became a title reserved for the Bishop of Rome by the 11th century, representing the pinnacle of spiritual authority in Roman Catholicism. You can even find it in an old English version of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*.¹¹

8 Cross, F.L. and Livingstone, E.A. (2005). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 328.

9 Elwell, W.A. (1996). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. 2nd ed. Michigan: Baker Books

10 Davis, R. & Brother. (1833). *The ecclesiastical history of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea, in Palestine, in ten books*. Philadelphia: R. Davis & Brother, p.7 Heraclas is recognised as the first Patriarch of Alexandria to be addressed as “Pope” (in Greek, *Papás*), a term that originally meant “Father” and was used by numerous bishops. The earliest documented use of this title referring to Heraclas is found in a letter penned by the bishop of Rome, Dionysius, to Philemon: [I received this rule and ordinance from our blessed Pope, Heraclas.]. τοῦτον ἐγὼ τὸν κανόνα καὶ τὸν τύπον παρὰ τοῦ μακαρίου πάπα ἡμῶν Ἡρακλᾶ παρέλαβον.

11 Eusebius. (1926–1932). *Ecclesiastical History, Book VII*, Chapter 7:2 (K. Lake, J. E. L. Oulton, & H. J. Lawlor, Eds. & Trans.; Vols. I–II). London: Harvard University Press; New York; Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library.

In the context of the church, the term “Papa” or “Father” has long represented a sense of hierarchical authority, while also highlighting the theological and pastoral aspects of care, guidance, and spiritual connection. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that referring to clergy as “Father” is rooted in the role of priests as spiritual leaders who embody God’s fatherly relationship with the Church. This Fatherhood goes beyond mere symbolism; it’s considered sacramental, particularly in important roles such as leading baptisms, providing moral guidance, and fostering the spiritual development of the faithful.¹² As Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 4:15, “Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel,” which beautifully captures the essence of spiritual mentorship and responsibility.

This understanding of fatherhood has remained relevant across different traditions. In Eastern Orthodoxy, for instance, parish priests are often affectionately referred to as “Papa” or “Batiushka” (in Russian), which conveys both respect and a sense of familial closeness.¹³ These titles not only signify an ecclesiastical role but also reflect a deeply relational position grounded in community, wisdom, and continuity. In African contexts, particularly within Shona culture, the title “baba” (father) holds significant meaning.¹⁴ It embodies authority, respect, emotional connection, and a

12 Fr. Scott. (n.d.). *Why are priests called Father?* Mercy Home for Boys & Girls. [Online]. Available: <https://www.mercyhome.org/blog/sundaymass/reflections/priestsfather> [Accessed: August 11, 2023].

13 Tschlis, S. P. (n.d.). *Why are priests called Father in your Church?* Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church. [Online]. Available: <https://holyresurrectiontucson.org/articles/> [Accessed: November 12, 2023].

14 The Shona tribe, constituting Zimbabwe’s largest indigenous group with a population of approximately 9 million and culturally dominating over 80% of the population, is found in Zimbabwe, Botswana, and southern Mozambique in Southern Africa, bordering South Africa. This tribe speaks the Shona language, also known as Shona (Bantu). The Shona language, also known as Shona (Bantu), is spoken by this tribe, which comprises five main language groups: Korekore, Zezuru, Manyika, Ndau, and Karanga (Beach, 1980).

sense of community responsibility. Fathers are seen not only as providers but also as moral and spiritual guides. So, when Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostal congregations refer to their leaders as “Papa”, they’re not merely adopting a Christian title; they’re making it their own, blending it with an African understanding of kinship, reverence, and the role of ancestors. Additionally, this term “Papa” serves as a bridge between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christian Theology.

In ATR, ancestors are honoured as spiritual mediators who help maintain balance between the human and divine worlds. Spiritual leaders, often tied to ancestral authority, provide moral and ritual guidance. Therefore, the title “Papa” evolves into a theological blend, representing both the continuity of Christian pastoral traditions and the rich African perspectives on fatherhood, authority, and sacred mediation. In the context of Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism, “Papa” becomes a versatile term that not only affirms spiritual legitimacy but also reflects a deep ecclesiastical heritage, placing religious leadership firmly within the rich tapestry of African cosmologies.

Decolonising the Shona understanding of “Baba”

The call to rethink the term “Baba” (father) in Zimbabwe isn’t about dismissing its spiritual significance; it’s about reclaiming its true, indigenous meaning from the limited views often shaped by Eurocentric perspectives. In much of Western thought, fatherhood is usually viewed through the lens of individualism, emphasising roles such as providing for one’s family, disciplining children, and exercising authority. But for the Shona people, “Baba” carries a much richer meaning, deeply rooted in community, ancestry, spirituality, and moral duty.¹⁵

In traditional Shona culture, being called “Baba” means so much more than just being a biological father. This title comes with a set of responsibilities, as highlighted in the Shona English dictionary. It includes being a

15 Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Education Publishers. P. 65

provider, protector, mediator, nurturer, and spiritual guide.¹⁶ In both the Shona language, spoken by the Shona tribe in Zimbabwe, and the Yoruba language, used by the Yoruba people in Southwestern Nigeria, “Baba” is an honorific title that spans various social connections, extending to respected elders, wise leaders, and spiritual figures.¹⁷ It’s a term used by children, spouses, community members, and even subordinates to express respect and the depth of their relationships. This broader perspective shows that fatherhood is as much about responsibility and connection as it is about status or authority.

The title “Baba” carries a profound meaning of spiritual mediation. As Shoko points out, in Shona cosmology, the father is not just a progenitor but also a spiritual guide, acting as a vital link between the living and the ancestral world.¹⁸ He plays a crucial role in performing rituals, honouring ancestors, and protecting his family from both spiritual and physical dangers. This cosmic and intergenerational responsibility reflects the African perspective, which sees spiritual and social life as intertwined. Additionally, the father is tasked with ensuring the overall well-being of his family.¹⁹ Providing for their physical needs, being present and offering emotional guidance, and shaping their character and future socially.²⁰ He

16 Shona English Dictionary. [Online]. Available: <https://apkcombo.com/shona-to-english-dictionary/zw.co.digup.shona/> [Accessed: 08 November 2023].

17 Doke, C.M. 1932, Report on the unification of Shona dialects. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, University of London, vol. 6(4):1097–1099.

18 Shoko, T. (2007). *Karanga Indigenous Religion in Zimbabwe: Health and Well-Being*. Hampshire: Ashgate.

19 Tift, N. (2019). *A Father’s Place: The importance of Male Involvement in Early Childhood Development*, Partnership with Region 9 Head Start Association. [Online]. Available: <https://www.continued.com/early-Childhood-education/ece-ceus/course/father-place-importance-male-31566> [Accessed: 15 October 2023].

20 Jordan, L.C., & Lewis, M.L. (2005). Paternal relationship quality as a protective factor preventing alcohol use among African American

represents moral authority, not as a strict enforcer, but as a guardian of values, a teacher of discipline, and a role model of integrity.²¹ In Shona culture, a father's success is gauged by how well his household conducts itself and thrives.

Decolonising the concept of “Baba” means reclaiming this rich and nuanced African understanding, which emphasises kinship, spirituality, and communal responsibilities that are often overshadowed by Western notions of fatherhood. When we look at neo-Pentecostal leaders referred to as “Papa” through this decolonial lens, we can see that followers respect their authority and view them as spiritual mediators, protectors, and guides. These leaders take on roles akin to traditional patriarchal figures, entrusted with the care of their lineage and expected to defend, nurture, and spiritually support their communities. Therefore, in the context of Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism, “Papa” should be understood not only through ecclesiastical or biblical frameworks but also through the cultural and theological heritage of African fatherhood, which is communal, ancestral, and deeply relational.

Papa as Ancestor and Mediator: ATR, Biblical, and Political Parallels

The concept of “Papa” in Zimbabwe neo-Pentecostalism extends beyond being a spiritual leader; it embodies a profound connection to ancestral mediation and holds significant symbolic authority. This concept is rooted in African Traditional Religion (ATR), the notion of biblical spiritual fatherhood, and Zimbabwe's rich political history. In ATR, ancestors are viewed as more than mere memories; they are powerful spiritual entities that actively shape the lives of the living. They act as intermediaries between humanity and the divine, playing a crucial role in maintaining

adolescents. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 31(2):152–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798405274171>.

21 Wade, J.C. (1994). African American fathers and sons: Social, historical, and psychological considerations. *Families in Society*, 75(9):561–572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104438949407500902>.

social harmony and legitimising authority within the community. As John Mbiti points out, “The living-dead are still part of their families, interested in their affairs, and capable of helping or punishing them depending on whether they are remembered or forgotten.”²² This perspective resonates closely with the role of many neo-Pentecostal leaders in Zimbabwe, affectionately known as “Papa”. These leaders are believed to channel divine power and presence, offering protection, healing, and prosperity to their followers.²³

Wanamaker emphasises that, “Jesus as ancestor offers a way for African Christians to blend traditional African values with the teachings of the New Testament.”²⁴ This viewpoint infuses the title “Papa” with profound theological significance; it not only signifies spiritual fatherhood and mentorship in the Pauline tradition but also reflects the ancestral leadership model prevalent in African cultures. In this light, “Papa” emerges as a figure that beautifully intertwines cultural and religious elements, serving as both a source of charismatic influence and a revered spiritual elder whose authority aligns with African traditions of symbolic and moral leadership.²⁵

It’s essential to examine the African perspective on “Papa” in neo-Pentecostalism in relation to traditional African views on mediators between people and the spiritual world. Just as political figures in Africa, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Mobutu Sese Seko, and Robert Mugabe, who drew their authority from the spiritual realm, are often seen as chosen by national spirits to lead, neo-Pentecostal prophets are held in high regard for claiming spiritual legitimacy as divinely appointed mediators.²⁶ They

22 Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann, 82.

23 Adogame, A. (2010). *Pentecostalism and politics in Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan, 57–59.

24 Wanamaker, C.A. (2017). *Jesus the ancestor: Reading the story of Jesus from an African Christian perspective*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. p. 54

25 Bongmba, E.K. (2012). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 301

26 Kwame Nkrumah. (1999). *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970) in Terence Ranger,

act much like ancestors, having the ability to connect or sever ties between individuals and God, offering blessings or curses. This comparison highlights that neo-Pentecostal “Papás” are not just pastoral figures; they also hold considerable religious and symbolic power, reflecting traditional African structures of authority and mediation. This relationship warrants a thoughtful theological examination, especially given the risks of power abuse and manipulation disguised in spiritual language.²⁷

In Zimbabwe’s political scene, especially during the nationalist and post-independence periods, leaders often used paternal metaphors to bolster their authority, being referred to as the “Father of the Nation.” This blurred the lines between family, politics, and spirituality.²⁸ In a similar vein, Neo-Pentecostal “Papás” inhabit this symbolic space, often positioning themselves as moral guardians of both the church and the nations, echoing themes of messianic and ancestral significance. Their followers frequently perceive these leaders as having powers akin to those of ancestors, seeking their guidance, spiritual insight, and blessings through their influence. This dynamic resonates with biblical ideas of spiritual fatherhood, like the relationship between Paul and Timothy (1 Cor 4:15), where spiritual leaders are seen as nurturing figures who shape the lives and faith journeys of their spiritual children.

In the African context, the bond between spiritual fathers and the community is enriched by a cultural expectation that these figures, much like our ancestors, play an active role in enhancing the community’s well-being, offering protection, resources, and mediation. The reverence for “Papa” figures draws an intriguing parallel to political customs in Zimbabwe, where national leaders have often been bestowed with paternal titles. Take Robert Mugabe, for example, who was affectionately called

Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe. Oxford: James Currey. pp. 165–167.

27 Chitando, E. (2012). Prophets, profits and the Bible in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism. In M. R. Gunda & J. Kügler (Eds.), *Bible and politics in Africa* (pp. 75–90). Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.

28 Lan, D. (1985). *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe.* Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 197–200.

“Baba” father. At the same time, his wife was known as “Doctor *Amai*” mother, emphasising the familial roles they played in the country’s political story.²⁹ Successors like Emmerson Mnangagwa and liberation icons such as Joshua Nkomo have also embraced similar titles, reinforcing the connection between paternal designations and centralised authority. In this context, the rise of prophetic figures such as Emmanuel Makandiwa and Walter Magaya during times of economic and political strife marks a notable shift. As Ezra Chitando notes, “*Papa Makandiwa*” and “*Papa Magaya*” have emerged as alternative beacons of hope, stepping in to fill the spiritual gap left by the diminishing influence of political paternal figures, such as *Baba Mugabe*.³⁰ This shift doesn’t imply that these prophets took on political roles; rather, they have come to be viewed as new guardians of power, stability, and hope.

Thus, the title “Papa” in Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism carries a significance that transcends mere church affiliation; it weaves together spiritual, ancestral, and political authority. It encapsulates a rich cultural and historical narrative where leaders serve not only as spiritual guides but also as mediators of cosmic and community well-being. This deeper understanding of “Papa” highlights its theological richness and cultural importance within the Zimbabwean religious landscape, while also raising important questions about spiritual power, legitimacy, and the ethical duties of those who claim such authority.

Historical continuity: From AICs to neo-Pentecostalism

The intriguing concept of charismatic paternal leadership within Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism has its roots deeply embedded in the history and culture of earlier African Independent Churches (AICs). In

29 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2009). *Do “Zimbabweans” exist? Trajectories of nationalism, national identity formation and crisis in a postcolonial state*. Oxford: Peter Lang, p. 219.

30 Chitando, E. (2021) *Innovation and Competition in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism: Megachurches and Marketisation of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury Academy, p. 63.

these communities, religious authority often took on a messianic and familial character. Leaders like John Maranke, who founded the Apostolic Church of John Maranke, and Isaiah Shembe, the visionary behind the Nazareth Baptist Church, were not only seen as church founders but also revered as spiritual patriarchs, prophets, healers, and guardians of culture. People often referred to them using familial or honorific titles that highlighted their esteemed status and role as spiritual fathers.

John Maranke was regarded as a divinely appointed messenger, someone who “fulfilled a prophetic mission akin to that of biblical apostles.” His followers believed God sent him to bring true religion back to Africa.³¹ His influence reached far beyond the church services, encompassing rules of ritual purity, community organisation, and moral guidance, echoing the traditions of ancestral chieftdom and prophetic leadership. Similarly, Isaiah Shembe was viewed by his followers as more than just a religious teacher; he was seen as “the mouthpiece of God” and a “mediator between God and his people” his teachings and way of life reshaped Zulu cosmology within a Christian context.³² One of his early followers put it beautifully: “Shembe is not a mere man. He is the home of God among us”.³³ His leadership blended charismatic healing with rich, symbolic rituals, establishing him as a spiritual father figure who held both religious and cultural sway.

This model of spiritual fatherhood, which merges prophetic charisma, healing, and social leadership, serves as a foundation for many neo-Pentecostal leaders in Zimbabwe today who claim the title of “Papa”. Just as Maranke and Shembe were regarded as divinely appointed leaders who connected with the divine, contemporary prophets are also viewed as

31 Dillon-Malone, C. (1978). *The Korsten Basketmakers: A Study of the Masowe Apostles, an Indigenous African Religious Movement*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 48.

32 Hexham, I. & Poewe, K. (1997). *The African Initiated Churches: Independent Christianity in Africa*. London: Routledge, p. 56.

33 Brown, K.H. (1996). White robes for worship: The Umnazaretha of the Nazareth Baptist Church in South Africa. In *Sacred and Ceremonial Textiles: Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America* (pp. 1–8). Textile Society of America.

representatives of God, offering access to spiritual power, protection, and blessings. The miracles and supernatural events associated with them are understood as part of their divine nature. Therefore, everything that God can do is believed to be possible through these “men of God,” reinforcing the idea that where a man of God is present, God is close at hand.³⁴ The lasting appeal of such figures highlights a continuity in African perceptions of sacred authority, deeply intertwined with both indigenous beliefs and biblical traditions.

Neo-Pentecostal leaders such as Emmanuel Makandiwa and Walter Magaya are modern-day counterparts to the messianic figures often discussed. Their ministries are set against the backdrop of today’s media-driven world and are part of a larger global Pentecostal movement. Yet, the core spiritual and cultural elements remain remarkably similar. Just like their African Independent Church (AIC) predecessors, they are regarded as divinely chosen, miracle-working figures whose authority extends beyond pastoral duties, encompassing areas such as spiritual warfare, healing, prosperity, and protection. In these neo-Pentecostal communities, the term “Papa” has become a common way to refer to senior church leaders. This title, along with its female equivalent, “Mama”, establishes a spiritual hierarchy in which the pastor and his wife assume parental roles within the congregation. As Dube points out, the pastor’s wife often assumes the role traditionally held by an aunt for women and girls, which further strengthens the family-like bonds that characterise spiritual relationships in these churches.³⁵

The role of “Papa” often goes beyond that of just biological parents, highlighting a perspective where spiritual dangers are ever-present and the need for divine protection is crucial. The “Papa” figure acts as a shield against evil, much like a traditional father who safeguards his family from harm. He’s seen as more than just a human being; he represents a blend of mortal

34 Glover, N. 2006, Elijah versus the Narrative of Elijah: The Contest between the Prophet and the Word. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 30(4):449–446.

35 Dube, Z. (2018). Patriarchy reinvented? ‘Spiritual parenting’ within African Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 39(1):1–6. [Online]. Available: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1777>.

and immortal qualities, sharing in the human experience while wielding divine power and authority.³⁶ This concept resonates with broader African cultural traditions, where inheritance, authority, and spiritual strength are passed down through generations. The belief in spiritual lineage and mentorship is particularly strong in neo-Pentecostalism. For instance, Shoko points out that Prophet Walter Magaya of Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries (PHD) credits the growth of his prophetic and healing abilities to the mentorship he received from Nigerian preacher T.B. Joshua.³⁷ Initially, Magaya sought this guidance for business insights, but it blossomed into a deep spiritual apprenticeship that profoundly influenced his ministry.

In this way, the “Papa” title and its associated practices in neo-Pentecostalism reflect a continuation of African religious leadership traditions. These leaders serve not only as pastors but also as inheritors of a spiritual legacy that intertwines ancestral mediation, prophetic authority, and paternal responsibilities, all reimagined within a modern, global religious framework.

“Papa” as the title of charismatic authority

In Zimbabwe’s neo-Pentecostal churches, the title “Papa” has assumed a significant role, symbolising charismatic authority, spiritual protection, and prophetic legitimacy. Originally used in religious contexts to refer to God or priests, this term has evolved within Pentecostal circles to signify

36 Masiwa Ragies Gunda & Francis Machingura. *The Man of God. Understanding Biblical Influence on contemporary Mega Church Prophets in Zimbabwe*. In Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda & J. Kugler. *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe, Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg, 2013, p. 24.

37 Shoko, T. 2021, *Religion in a new era: Pentecostalism and innovation in the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries in Zimbabwe*, in Chitando, E. (ed.). *Innovation and Competition in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, Megachurches and Marketization of Religion*, Bloomsbury Academy, London. p. 77.

the senior church leader, typically a prophet or apostle, who acts as the spiritual father to the congregation. The Catholic Church first introduced and popularised the term “Papa” in the Zimbabwean Christian community. Still, it was the rise of neo-Pentecostalism around 2009 that truly elevated its status, with influential leaders like Emmanuel Makandiwa and Walter Magaya leading the way.

In this setting, “Papa” is more than just a title; it’s a profound identity marker that inspires both affection and submission. Believers proudly display stickers, wristbands, and clothing with phrases like “Ndiri mwana veMuporofita” (I am a child of the prophet) and “Ndiri mwana vaApostle” (I am a child of the apostle), showcasing their spiritual lineage and loyalty. These items are often seen as protective talismans against evil, further solidifying the prophetic figure’s role as a spiritual guardian.³⁸ Followers frequently credit their health, success, and safety to the presence and prayers of their “Papa”, even placing the prophet’s image in their homes for ongoing spiritual guidance.³⁹ One UFIC member, Nomatter Saungweme, shared, “I have “Papa’s” stickers and calendars in my house because he is my father, and I want protection from all evil things that may harm my family.”⁴⁰

The way authority is centralised creates a complicated relationship between leaders and their followers. This relationship is often described as mentorship, but in practice, it resembles more of a discipleship. A prime example of this can be seen in the popular “Sonship” talk show featuring apostle Vutabwashe and prophet Makandiwa. In this show, both men

38 Biri, K. (2012) The Silent Echoing voice: aspects of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism and the quest for Power, Healing and Miracles. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae: Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa*, vol. XXXVIII, no. Supplement, p. 37–55.

39 Biri K. & Togarasei L. (2023). ...But the One who Prophesies, builds the Church. Nation Building and Transformation Discourse as true prophecy: The case of Zimbabwean Pentecostal women. In Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda & J. Kugler. *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe, Festschrift for Ayns Masotcha Moyo*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg. p. 222.

40 Saungweme, N. *Interview*: Harare: 13 /05/2022.

openly express their commitment to their spiritual mentors: Makandiwa looks up to Prophet Boateng,⁴¹ while Vutabwashe respects Papa Kayanja.⁴² Phrases like “I submit to my papa, my life, my soul, and my ministry,” along with acts of tithing and deep reverence,⁴³ highlight this mentor-mentee relationship. However, this dynamic can easily shift into a sort of religious hierarchy, where followers show complete submission that almost resembles worship. Ogunseinde has cautioned that such an elevation of leaders can lead to them being viewed as quasi-deities, which distorts the biblical ideals of servant leadership.⁴⁴

The blurring of mentorship and discipleship

This blending of mentorship and discipleship necessitates a thoughtful theological examination. Both classical and modern perspectives view mentorship as a relationship founded on trust, the sharing of wisdom, and the empowerment of others.⁴⁵ A mentor acts as a guide rather than a master, nurturing the mentee’s growth without any personal agenda.⁴⁶ We can find biblical examples of this in the stories of Moses mentoring

41 Victor Kusi Boateng is a Ghanaian pastor, prophet, and founder of Power Chapel Worldwide in Kumasi.

42 Robert Kayanja is often called “Papa Kayanja” in Uganda. He is the founder and Senior Pastor of *Miracle Centre Cathedral*, based in Kampala, Uganda.

43 Vutabwashe T. and Makandiwa E. (2013) Talk Show. *Sonship: Heartfelt International Ministries*. Harare: 05/06/2013.

44 Korede Ogunseinde. *The Untouchable Demi-Gods called Pastors*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/untouchable-demi-gods-called-pastors-ogunseinde-korede/?trk=public> [Accessed: 24/11/23].

45 Cheatham, W.W. 2010. The Tradition of Mentoring Part I: Mentoring the Researcher. *Journal of Research Administration*, 41(2):55-60.

46 Mullen, C.A. & Klimaitis, C.C. (2019). *Defining mentoring: a literature review of issues, types, and applications*. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences.

Joshua, Elijah guiding Elishah, and Paul supporting Timothy.⁴⁷ However, these mentorships existed alongside discipleship, much like how Jesus trained his followers (Mt 28:19; 2 Tim. 2:2). Jesus managed to mentor and discipline simultaneously, showcasing humility and modelling servanthood instead of dominance. The conversation between Makandiwa and Vutabwashe mirrors the relationship between Elijah and Elisha.⁴⁸ They see this as a blueprint for spiritual inheritance and prophetic succession. They emphasise a non-biological form of spiritual fatherhood, depicting the mentor as someone who transmits spiritual power, much like Elisha receiving Elijah's cloak.⁴⁹ Yet, their interpretation raises some eyebrows. For example, Makandiwa's practice of sending service reports, including financial details and accounts of miracles, to his Ghanaian spiritual father, along with his acknowledgement of financially supporting that ministry, suggests a more complex form of spiritual patronage. Scholars like Shoko and Chiwara have questioned whether these practices truly reflect authentic mentorship or if they lean more towards a transactional spiritual hierarchy, possibly influenced by foreign prophetic traditions, such as those of the late T.B. Joshua.⁵⁰

At its essence, the title "Papa" establishes a structured, formative, and sometimes problematic relationship. It cultivates deep loyalty, influences the faith journeys of believers, and legitimises spiritual authority. However, it also runs the risk of creating dependency, hierarchical control, and

47 Blaitlock, E. (1972). *Bible Characters and Doctrines Jeroboam to Hosea*. Sydney: Anzea Scripture Union, p. 39.

48 Travis and Terri, Mentoring in the Old Testament: Elijah and Elisha. travissnode.com, Wikipedia. [Online]. [Accessed: May 29, 2020].

49 Vutabwashe T. and Makandiwa E. (2013) Talk Show. *Sonship: Heartfelt International Ministries*. Harare: 05/06/2013.

50 Shoko T, and Chiwara A. The Prophetic Figure in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Analysis of Prophet Makandiwa of the United Family International Church (UFIC) and the N'anga in African Traditional Religion. In Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda & J. Kugler. (2013). *Prophets, Profits and the Bible in Zimbabwe, Festschrift for Aynos Masotcha Moyo*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg, p. 222.

personality cults. The article suggests that we should view mentorship and discipleship as interconnected and overlapping, rather than categorising them as circular and sacred. Church leaders are called to avoid elevating themselves above others.

Misinterpretation and popular reception of the title “Papa”

While neo-Pentecostal leaders often use the title “Papa” to signify mentorship, many congregants adopt it in a way that reflects a discipleship framework, which might not be fully grasped in terms of its theological or pastoral meanings. For followers, this term often symbolises a spiritual connection with the prophet or apostle, leaning more towards discipleship rather than the reciprocal nature of mentorship. This confusion is highlighted in Tonderai Mwareka’s public defence of Zimbabwean prophets, where he affectionately calls prophet Uebert Angel “My Papa”.⁵¹ Mwareka’s choice of words shows a disciple-like loyalty, emphasising the blurred lines between mentorship and discipleship in public discussions. Meanwhile, leaders like Vutabwashe and Makandiwa frame their spiritual ties with their mentors, prophet Boateng and “Papa” Kayanja, as mentorship-based; however, the language and behaviours of their followers suggest a much more dependent, discipleship-focused relationship. When we discuss mentorship from a theological perspective, it’s typically viewed as a developmental relationship in which a seasoned guide assists another individual in growing in a specific area, often related to their vocation or spirituality.⁵² This kind of relationship is personal, focused, and centres on the growth of the mentee. You can find numerous examples in the Bible, such as Moses guiding Joshua, Naomi supporting Ruth, Paul mentoring

51 Mwareka T.M. (2012). Attack on Prophets in Zimbabwe Enough. Nehanda Radio.com. [Online]. Available: <https://nehandaradio.com/2012/12/18/leave-my-papa-uebert-angel-alone> [Accessed: 23/11/2023].

52 Cunningham, S. (1998). Who’s mentoring the mentors? The discipline dimension of faculty development in Christian higher education. *Theological Education*, 34(2):31–49.

Timothy, and Mark also helping Timothy.⁵³ These connections were typically small, usually involving just two or three people, and were characterised by a deep and intimate process of growth.

On the other hand, discipleship is a wider, Christ-centred calling that emphasises community involvement, commitment to spiritual practices, and a lifelong journey towards becoming more like Christ.⁵⁴ It's not about copying a leader's personality or influence; instead, it's about living out Jesus' teachings and helping others do the same (Mt 28: 19–20). Discipleship isn't focused on a human leader but is directed towards Christ, with pastors and spiritual leaders acting as guides rather than replacements on that journey. When the term "Papa" is used as a substitute for divine presence, which is becoming more common in Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism, it raises some serious theological concerns. Prophets are no longer just seen as teachers or guides; they are revered as spiritual sources, figures thought to embody divine power, protection, and blessings.

This misplaced reverence can lead followers to prioritise their loyalty to a prophet over their commitment to Christ, effectively substituting Christ-centred discipleship for a more human-focused devotion. As a result, the frequent use of "Papa" to describe the relationship between pastors and congregants, while often framed as mentorship, is rooted in a misunderstanding of what discipleship should be. This misinterpretation elevates religious leaders to a near-divine status and allows for the pursuit of personal agendas disguised as spiritual leadership. It's crucial to address this theological confusion to restore the integrity of pastoral leadership and refocus the church's mission on Christ, rather than on personality cults.

Spiritual warfare and military titles: Major and General

In Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism, the trend of prominent prophets and apostles adopting military titles, such as "Major" and "General", highlights

53 Ogden, G. (2016). *Essential Guide to Becoming a Disciple*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press. p. 2.

54 Rittenhouse R, & Ogden G. (2016). *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press. p. 1.

a theology that's heavily influenced by the concepts of spiritual warfare.⁵⁵ Drawing inspiration from biblical verses such as Ephesians 6:12, which states, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms," these titles symbolise the belief that spiritual leaders are divine warriors fighting for their followers.

Take prophets like Uebert Angel, for instance, who is often referred to as "Papa Major". This title not only positions him as a spiritual father but also as a high-ranking officer in God's army. The word "major" comes from the Latin term *maior*, meaning greater, which suggests a sense of importance and seniority. In military terms, a major typically leads specialised units and implements crucial strategies.⁵⁶ In the context of neo-Pentecostalism, this military metaphor is applied to prophets who are seen as having elevated spiritual authority, leading the charge against demonic forces. Followers like Clive Chitumba view Angel's title as a testament to his pioneering role in Zimbabwe's prophetic ministry, seeing him as the greater father who fights spiritual battles on their behalf.⁵⁷ Interestingly, the title "major" isn't just a Zimbabwean phenomenon; research by Kgatle in South Africa shows that local prophets are also adopting this title within new Pentecostal Churches. He pointed out, "In new Pentecostal Churches, "pastor" isn't the only common title; there are also others like Major 1 and Seer 1."⁵⁸

Similarly, Apostle Tavonga Vutabwashe is often referred to as the 'General', a title that draws from the military rank of lieutenant general, symbolising his command over large groups. Theologically, this title underscores a prophet's esteemed role within the spiritual hierarchy, where they are tasked

55 Glenn, Duker. *Spiritual Warfare in Pentecostal Theology: Confronting Forces of Evil*. [Online]. Available: <https://medium.com/@glennduker/> [Accessed: 26/11/2023].

56 Military-Ranks.org. 2023. Army Major. [Online]. Available: <https://www.military-ranks> [Accessed: 17/11/2023].

57 Chitumba, C. Interview: Harare, 13/02/2022.

58 Kgatle, Mookgo S. (2021). *Pentecostalism and Cultism in South Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p.6.

with ensuring the well-being and triumph of countless believers. Followers like Clarisse Chirenje⁵⁹ and Rodney Teya⁶⁰ share their experiences, describing Vutabwashe as their ‘General’ who battles and secures victories in the spiritual realm on their behalf. His words are seen not just as talk but as powerful acts in the spiritual realm on their behalf. These titles carry significant weight; they embody a perspective where spiritual warfare is viewed as a critical and ongoing struggle. This belief is reflected in the everyday faith practices of believers. Items like stickers, wristbands and headscarves featuring the prophet’s images and slogans serve as spiritual armour. These aren’t just products; they are worn and displayed as tools of faith, believed to protect against evil and misfortune.

Military language boosts the authority and significance of a prophet’s role. Followers see prophets like Angel and Vutabwashe as having already moved beyond the initial stages of spiritual growth and now leading the charge. These leaders, akin to majors and generals, are tasked with equipping their spiritual troops by promoting passionate prayer, engaging with scripture, and fully depending on the Holy Spirit. This idea is further supported by biblical calls to “put on the full armour of God” (Eph 6: 13–18), where leaders metaphorically guide their congregations through life’s battles, armed with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, and the sword of the Spirit.

Ultimately, the incorporation of military titles in neo-Pentecostalism underscores a belief in divine confrontation, implying an ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil. Prophets are seen not just as spiritual mentors but as commanders on the battlefield. Through their leadership, followers find divine protection, view suffering as a spiritual attack, and approach the world with a mindset of warfare and triumph. This perspective influences the religious language used and shapes how believers organise their spiritual lives, build their communities, and tackle the existential challenges that arise in a world filled with uncertainty and spiritual insecurity.

59 Chirenje, C. Interview: Harare, 16/04/2022.

60 Teya, R. Interview: Harare, 14/ 05/ 2022.

Conclusion

The title “Papa” in Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostalism goes beyond just being a term of respect or a title within the church hierarchy; it’s a rich tapestry of cultural, spiritual, and theological significance. This article has illustrated how “Papa” serves as a modern-day representation of ancestral mediation, charismatic authority, and prophetic leadership, all of which are deeply intertwined with African Traditional Religion, Shona views on fatherhood, and Zimbabwe’s political backdrop. By employing narrative theology and qualitative research, we’ve delved into the evolution of spiritual fatherhood, from early missionary encounters and syncretic expressions in African Indigenous Churches (AICs), where leadership often mirrored both biblical and ancestral roles, to its present form in neo-Pentecostal movements. In AICs and finally to today’s media-savvy, miracle-performing prophets, we can see how leaders like Emmanuel Makandiwa and Tavonga Vutabwashe embody this role in both their words and actions, shaping the religious identity and sense of belonging for countless followers.

By tracing the historical journey from the paternal language of Roman Catholicism to the prophetic leadership, the figure of “Papa” represents a continuity in African spiritual leadership. The article highlights that neo-Pentecostal “Papas” serve not just as pastors, but also as spiritual guardians, cultural fathers, and intermediaries between the divine and the human. They embody the roles of ancestors, apostles, generals, and fathers, figures who protect, bless, guide, and sometimes discipline their followers.

This topic warrants serious theological consideration. The blend of mentorship and discipleship, the use of military-style titles, and the almost divine respect accorded to prophets all raise important questions about where pastoral authority ends, what spiritual power truly means, and the potential for personality cults to emerge within African Christianity. If we don’t address this, the “Papa” phenomenon could skew the Christ-centred approach to servant leadership and shift spiritual devotion away from Christ and toward human figures.

To move ahead, we need to rethink what spiritual fatherhood means in African contexts. This means embracing the rich, indigenous meanings of Baba, which highlight moral responsibility, mediation, protection,

and community well-being, while also drawing on the biblical model of discipleship that focuses on Christ. By doing this, African neo-Pentecostalism can celebrate cultural identity and spiritual heritage without losing sight of the core principles of Christian theology.

Ultimately, the title “Papa” offers a fascinating perspective on African Christianity today, encompassing its aspirations, struggles, and the ongoing balancing act between ancestral traditions and prophetic insights. It’s a title that resonates with deep human needs for connection, safety, and purpose, needs that should always be shaped by the gospel, informed by thoughtful theological reflection, and rooted in the example of Jesus, our true ancestor and mediator.

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